

University of Leicester 50th Anniversary Celebration
Convened by
Department of Media and Communication and Department of Sociology

Does Digital Democracy Exist?

As part of the ongoing celebrations linked to the University of Leicester's 50th anniversary, the departments of Media and Communication and Sociology are jointly convening a debate about 'digital democracy'.

This event will take place on 19th May 2008 from 5.00pm to 6.30pm at Lecture Theatre 1 in the Ken Edwards Building on the University campus.

The emergence of interactive communications technologies, and most especially, the internet, has opened up many new opportunities for people to find out information about virtually anything from the comfort of their own homes, to keep in touch with each other, and to conduct a wide range of business and consumer transactions. Its potential has also been recognised by governments and political parties as a platform to promote policies and developments and perhaps more importantly, to engage with citizens and electorates and cultivate a greater sense of awareness and involvement in civic and political affairs. As such, these technologies could be used to counter an apparently growing political malaise that has been observed in the United Kingdom and other mature democracies, and manifest most acutely in diminishing voter turnouts in major political elections.

Central and local government organisations across the UK have adopted the internet as a central platform for the promotion of civic engagement on the part of citizens. Ordinary people can now go online and find out information about the services of their local councils and all major central government departments. Trials have also been run in online voting. How successful, though, have these activities been? Are they actively engaging people? Have they generated more enthusiasm for political involvement among citizens? Or have they only enjoyed modest success or even been a waste of time and resources? If a primary objective of adoption of new digital technologies by government and political organisations is to generate more democratic interest, has such 'digital democracy' emerged?

At this event, three speakers – leading thinkers in the field – will present their views on digital democracy and then engage in a debate afterwards in which members of the audience will also have an opportunity to raise issues.

- Professor William Dutton, Director, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford
- Professor Richard Sennett, Professor of Sociology, London School of Economics
- Professor Stephen Coleman, Professor of Political Communication, University of Leeds

The event will be moderated and presented by John Florance.

Event Presenter - John Florance

John Florance has been presenting programmes on BBC Radio Leicester for over 25 years. He can also regularly be heard on BBC Radios 2 and 4. Outside his work, he is President of the Shires Branch of the Betjeman Society and of the Leicester Gilbert and Sullivan Operatic Society. John is also an author and has published books on various subjects. Last year he edited an anthology of poems called *Poems to Live By*. He makes an appearance in the most recent Adrian Mole book by Leicester's own Sue Townsend, interviewing the hero about the love of his life Pandora Braithwaite MP at the studios of BBC Radio Leicester. John says that this has assured his immortality.

Speakers

Professor Stephen Coleman is Professor of Political Communication and Director of Research at the Institute of Communication Studies, University of Leeds. His research interests included e-democracy, democratic theory and political representation, political efficacy, forms of deliberation and decision making, reality TV formats and popular representation, modes of media interactivity and legislative institutions. He co-directs the Centre for Digital Citizenship, an inter-disciplinary research centre which conducts research into the changing nature of citizenship and governance in a networked society, questions the broad range of theoretical and rhetorical claims made by proponents of e-governance and e-citizenship.

Professor William H. Dutton is Director of the Oxford Internet Institute, Professor of Internet Studies, University of Oxford, and Fellow of Balliol College. Before coming to Oxford in 2002, he was a Professor in the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California. In the UK, he was a Fulbright Scholar 1986-87, and was National Director of the UK's Programme on Information and Communication Technologies (PICT) from 1993 to 1996. In addition to directing the OII, Professor Dutton is Director and Principal Investigator of the Oxford e-Social Science Project, a node within the UK's National Centre for E-Social Science, and Principal Investigator of the Oxford Internet Surveys (OxIS), a key resource on the use and impact of the Internet in Britain, that is linked to the World Internet Project, comprising over 20 nations. His recent publications on the social aspects of information and communication technologies include *Society on the Line* (Oxford University Press, 1999), and *Transforming Enterprise*, co-edited, (MIT Press, 2005).

Professor Richard Sennett is Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His most recent book, *The Craftsman* (Penguin 2008), takes up, in part, the conflict between participation and aspirations for quality which appear in online forums like those which develop open-source technology like Linux. Professor Sennett has been awarded the Amalfi and the Ebert prizes for sociology. He is Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Royal Society of Literature, the Royal Society of the Arts, and the Academia Europaea. He is past President of the American Council on Work and the Former Director of the New York Institute for the Humanities.