David Runciman - From the University of Cambridge this is ELECTION, a weekly politics podcast. My name is David Runciman and we are going to be coming to you each week here from my office in the Cambridge Politics department to talk about this election, the campaign, what might happen, what does happen and we are going to keep going until Britain has a new government, however long that takes.

This week my guest is John Naughton, a chronicler of the Internet from the very beginning and one of Britain’s leading analysts in the political and social implications of the tech revolution; everything from the Snowden revelations through to the dominance of Facebook and Google. John’s going to be telling us what he thinks is absent from this campaign.

John Naughton– You could say that in the British election at the moment the Internet seems to be missing; full stop.

David Runciman - And he’s going to be talking about some of the disruptive forces at work in British politics.

John Naughton – Is Ukip an example of a disruptive innovation? And the answer is; it depends what you regard as disruptive. If by disruption you mean irritation yes Ukip is a disruption.

David Runciman - It’s a fascinating conversation between the uneasy mix between democracy and technology. Stay tuned.

Discussion part 1:

Before that we discuss this weeks current events, this is the fourth of our weekly podcasts and listening back to the previous three, I’ve been struck by how easy it is to sound despairing about modern British politics. All of our guests have been a little gloomy perhaps with the exception of last week’s Martin Jakes but he was cheerful about China, he wasn’t cheerful about Britain. So I thought maybe it was time to start looking for some good news, and to see if we can find anything positive to say about this campaign or about British democracy.

I am joined by our regular panel - Helen Thompson who is an expert on economics, Finbarr Livesey on public policy and Chris Brooke on political theory. And we are going to be talking about what they think is good about the current campaign either for the politicians or for the voters.

Helen Thompson – One of the things that’s interesting about this campaign is that there’s an awful lot of negativity about it, but you look at it from the point of view of the main governing party, the conservatives, they are fighting the election from the point of view of any other governing party probably in the G20, certainly in the European Union, looks like a very strong hand. The economy by all the short term macro economic indicators is doing rather well it’s performing better than pretty much any other economy in the EU with the possible exception of Denmark and Austria, compared with the United States. Most governing parties would die for having this kind of economy to fight the election with in the current economic context.

David Runciman - So there is good news about the economy and the conservatives are failing as politicians because they cant turn good news into poll numbers and votes?

Helen Thompson - I think that’s certainly true in the sense that it’s a failure of the politicians. I think it also just says something about the times in which we live and that people don’t actually trust that things are going well even though on the surface it looks like they are, there’s a pervasive sense that something is wrong.

David Runciman - Because there is also a story here, which is that, the conservatives are polling better, far outpolling labour on who people trust around the economy and they are also far outpolling labour on who they think offers the better leadership. But you would think that you score on the economy, you score on the leadership, you win?

Helen Thompson – Absolutely, and that’s one of the most interesting things about the campaign that at the moment is not translating into a clear apparent victory for the conservatives. But I suspect it actually says something about the labour party rather than the conservative party.

David Runciman - Now we are drifting back into negativity again, Finbarr can we pull it back? We are looking for the good news about the campaign?

Finbarr Livesey – Well there’s an interesting sense that the voters are more engaged. There’s an on going survey of the likelihood to vote that’s been done in Essex since 2004. And you see that tick up and up and up as you get closer to a general election. And the current survey is indicating a likely turnout of around 70% plus, much higher than 65%-64% the last two general elections. That must be a good thing more people are engaging with the election, more people are likely to vote.

David Runciman - Do you think this is a spill over from the Scottish referendum, which of course we know was the recent democratic event that had the highest turnout in modern history 85%

Finbarr Livesey – I think its partly that, but I think also people care more about politics again in a way that it directly hurt them so much in the last decade. Not to go back to negativity, but people have seen what happened with the financial crash, people have seen a coming together of issues that they think they can effect through the ballot box, they are more likely to vote.

David Runciman - And that’s one of the stories about democracy the good news and the bad news sometimes go together one reason the turnout is high is often because the stakes are high and when the stakes are high its because people really mind about the outcome partly because they fear what could go wrong. But its also the case that if people are engaged in this election politicians must be engaging them in some sense. So Chris what are the politicians doing right do you think in this election?

Chris Brooke – We can see in the recent tuition fees announcement, I think e can see, the labour party playing a very difficult hand quite astutely with the promise to cut tuition fees from £9000 to £6000. Its not obviously great public policy, its no obviously great economics, because it will have a tendency to increase austerity in the near term, and its not obviously great for students because most students will in fact as far as I can tell end up paying more or less the same amount back over the course of their working lives

David Runciman - But, I think there’s a but coming here because we have just had 3 negatives. But it’s good politics?

Chris Brooke – But they’ve managed to get the headline figure down from £9000 to £6000.They’ve managed to tell a plausible story about how they are going to pay for that in a context where everyone especially young people want to see fees coming down. They’ve got the headline and I wouldn’t be surprised if we see younger voters, student voters bringing to drift a bit more firmly into the labour column. I think its clever politics; I think they’ve played a tricky hand well.

David Runciman - Fibarr do you agree with that?

Finbarr Livesey - I completely agree, its terrible public policy, fantastic politics. The snap polls from UGov say that 75%-80% of likely voters agree with the policy. And we have to be careful, we are in a university talking about university tuition fees saying that its not good public policy but in terms of a play to get a headline and to get that much of a reaction positively towards a single statement, fantastic.

David Runciman - So in the sense you’ve got 2 stories here. So the story that Helen told us, which, is that the Tories, whether you want to call it public policy, have got a good underlying story to tell about actual outcomes but the politics isn’t working. And then labour have a less plausible story to tell about what might actually happen but the politics, the dynamics of the politics are much better. So Helen if good policy and bad politics collide with bad policy and good politics where does democracy come down in that conflict do you think?

Helen Thompson – The question about whether it is good politics is a matter of dispute because at the heart of this issue is a distributional question. Whose side do you take in generational conflicts of interests between younger voters and older voters? But just an importantly its where do you put the balance of good politics to use that category in terms of young people who go to university and young people who have no desire to go to university. And so I somewhat disagree with Chris and Finbarr in this respect; I don’t think there’s a monolific group of young voters who can be shifted into labours column by this policy. And in one sense I think it reinforces a negative image around Miliband of his academic “geek” kind of style, that he’s stuck his neck out about this particular issue of all things.

David Runciman - We are drifting back into negativity again, I’m going to say what I think is positive about this election and you can agree with me or disagree with me, which is that’s it is an election. And its traditional view that as you get closer to poling day it does somewhat sort out some of the claims that politicians have been making. And it starts to put them under the kind of scrutiny that they don’t get during the regular run of the mill of the 5-year cycle. This is the traditional story that’s told about democracy, which is that you get a lot of froth in between elections but elections do focus people’s minds. And my sense of this election is that it is starting to focus people’s minds. That some of the fringe parties are having some of their wild acclaims put to the test. That’s part of the role in the media in an election like this and the media is playing that traditional role. And I don’t think, it’s a bit like a job interview, I don’t think that you end up picking the person that you want to hire on the basis on this kind of stuff, but often you do reject someone that you think you probably don’t want to hire if they are not so good at answering these kinds of questions. And I think we are starting to see that, and I think that’s broadly positive as we get close to poling day I think it will get more and more pronounced. It does mean there will be a drift back to the two main parties, probably, and again I’m not sure that’s a bad thing. Maybe that’s a dangerous thing to say in this climate. Does anyone want to disagree with me about that?

Helen Thompson – I agree with you David that there is going to be a move back towards the two main political parties, in part, because the other parties, particularly the Greens and Ukip are going to put under more intense scrutiny. I think though that in the context in which this election is taking place that will have a negative consequence as well as the one that you said, and that voters will in the end, resent this force back into this bipolar choice. Of saying, “Do I really have to choose between Ed Miliband and David Cameron to be prime minister”?

David Runciman – And so that is the story, I think this is the story of democratic politics; the good news and the bad news do always go hand in hand?

Helen Thompson – I guess yes.

David Runciman – Thanks to Helen, Finbarr and Chris. We will be talking to them more later in the show. Before that, I spoke this week to John Noughton, chronicler of the Internet from its early days and the author of the book From Gutenberg to Zuckerberg: What you really need to know about the Internet. We started by talking about the fact that this is only the second Facebook election and maybe the first one in which social media could actually make a difference to the outcome. So I asked John, did he think that Facebook might actually decide this election?

Interview:

John Naughton – It could be, the interesting thing from experiencing in the United States in the last congressional election was that Facebook could have, did have, a small but measureable impact on voter turn out, in some cases because they did an experiment and it did show an apparently significant but small increase in voter turnout so in that sense you could say there might be a Facebook effect.

David Runciman – Given it’s an election where a very small margin could decide it one way or the other?

John Naughton – Yes, in this particular case, in some seats it might be quite critical. But what would make it really critical I think is if Facebook were able to encourage more younger voters to turn out, because that could have a significant impact on the coming election. In the last election I think only 51% of young people voted, when they do vote I think statistically they tend to vote labour more. The only joker in this pack this time would be that quite a lot of younger voters I think are going to say that they will vote green. That’s a bit of a puzzle but Facebook did use the same technique as they use in the US, which is to put on some people’s pages ‘I Voted’ button and have say pictures of 6 of their friends who had also announced that they had voted, that’s what had an impact in the United States, and who knows that might have an impact here, and if the impact where on younger people I think it might significant.

David Runciman – And we call it an experiment, it’s a kind of typical Facebook experiment, in that it’s a way of trying to see what kinds of behaviours can be changed by what kinds of devises. And on the one hand it sounds like it’s great for democracy because more people will turn out to vote because you’ve put the I Voted button on there, on the other hand it’s not obviously democratic to be running these kinds of experiments on the voters often without them knowing it.

John Naughton – Democracy is an optional extra with social media

David Runciman – Particularly Facebook

John Naughton – It would be disastrous for them if they got caught in some kind of controversy about whether or not they were actually really interfering in electoral politics. But on the other hand it’s clear that they are capable of exercising some kind of impact on the behaviour of people who use that service. That could be creepy. There is another example from another Facebook experiment in the United States, where they demonstrated there was a social contagion effect, which is that they could, it seemed, have a small but measureable impact on the emotions of users. Basically there were able to manipulate some peoples news feeds so that they saw upbeat or downbeat messages from their friends and that had apparently had a measureable impact on the people who were the subject of the experiment. And so there’s a sense in which that you could argue that social media could spread some kind of emotional contagion.

David Runciman – And when you use words like manipulation and contagion it doesn’t sound so sunnily pro democratic as just getting the votes out.

John Naughton – Well exactly, but the point about social media, especially Facebook, but it probably applies to some of the others as well is that everything that Facebook users see in their news feed is manipulated in one way or another. Usually the manipulation is outrhythmic because it’s trying to produce things in their news feeds that will encourage them to possibly buy things or to pay attention to advertising. So there is no such thing as a raw Facebook newsfeed.

David Runciman – So there’s two stories really that you can tell about technology in this election campaign. There’s the more familiar one which is what we’ve been describing where we started out, which was how could social media encourage more people to vote? How can politicians use social media to get their message across? And then there’s the other story which, is this deeper story about we now live in a world where forms of manipulation and coercion that we might not even be aware of, are happening under the radar and politicians aren’t talking about that at all. And there’s almost no discussion of technology in the campaign there’s just discussion at what impact technology could have on the campaign. Where are the arguments about the power of Facebook and how Facebook can manipulate us?

John Naughton – As far as we can see those arguments don’t exist at the moment. You could say that in the British election at the moment the Internet seems to be missing full stop. One of the things that really puzzles me, is why given that say fundraising for political parties is such a controversial issue and a toxic issue here. Why haven’t the labour party in particular, why haven’t they used the Obama technique using the net for fundraising because it really works for that as Obama showed - but they haven’t. And the other thing that is interesting is that despite the fact that the political parties seem to ignore the net more or less, there’s a lot of quite interesting stuff about the election on the net. For example, many many people use reddit, and there’s a lot of interesting and thoughtful stuff about the election. But as far as I know, no party leader has offered or perhaps even thought about doing an AMA session on reddit, that is to say an Ask Me Anything session.

David Runciman – I think the thought of ask me anything makes them a little bit anxious, they kind of do it on mumsnet surprisingly

John Naughton – They’ll do it on somewhere where they may think

David Runciman – They think it won’t be anything

John Naughton – But the other thing is that all the discussion about debates has been about TV debates, which reflects I think my perception at any rate that this is a very dated kind of election campaign. Its still entirely focused on old style mass media. It does the same tricks as we have seen for the last 25 years, the phoney photo opportunities, the sight of politicians who have never had a job in their lives in factories where people do real work, the stage release of manifesto pledges

David Runciman – The billboard advertising campaigns

John Naughton – all that stuff, it’s as if the Internet didn’t exist, and when they start talking about a public debate, its all about a TV, but the idea that they might have discussions, real discussion, with real people in a dangerous environment like reddit has not crossed their minds, or if it has they have immediately erased it.

David Runciman – And then something else that probably will be true, is that if these debates happen and they’ll happen on TV, and they’ll be consumed in this traditional way, within the debates they wont be talking about this stuff and there will be some big gaps. Now you have spent quite a lot of time over the past 18 months talking about what the world looks like after Edward Snowden told us how the world works in way none of us knew or understood, and we’re only beginning to understand the implications of huge new forms of surveillance, the way the information is shared, the way that national politicians are subject to these international pressures. And yet, in an election, which we are told as we are with every election is the most important one for a generation, no one is talking about what might be the most important issue?

John Naughton – This is really weird, its all this case of important dogs that aren’t barking in the night, and of course for me surveillance is the top one. But other ones that are not talked about much are inequality’s not talked about much, and it definitely isn’t talked about much in the sense where it is politically toxic for at least one of the big parties and perhaps two, which is that if you look at the Tory campaign it is clearly focused on the older voters, towards my generation of babies boomers basically because a) they vote, where as younger people don’t. And the main issue of course in relation to this generation is the way in which we (my generation) have accumulated wealth in a way that our children and grandchildren have been disadvantaged and that’s a really serious issue in my opinion, and its nowhere in the debate. It also explains why if somebody could actually get the younger voters out, it might make a difference.

David Runciman – So unless your children or grandchildren are lucky enough to work in the tech industry where there are small pockets of vast wealth but

John Naughton – That’s what I mean, that’s a reflection

David Runciman – That’s part of what is not being talked about

John Naughton – We are not talking about that, we are not talking about the fact that these new industries do not in general create jobs for other people, they create jobs for the small elite who are very well paid and very well rewarded. And they generate a great deal of wealth for their shareholders and that wealth is not in general shared out

David Runciman – Because another thing that might be discussed in a campaign as in any electoral campaign where employment is a key issue and politicians make various pledges about employment not quite maybe the way they did in the past given mass unemployment doesn’t quite have some of the features they did in the 80’s. But we are possibly on the cusp of a new technological age in which various traditional ways of earning a living will disappear. There’s some hyperbolic stuff about this and we don’t have to buy into the whole story to believe that machines may replace human beings in some fields and the entire employment landscape might change over electoral cycle or two, and yet electoral politics does not seem to be geared up in anyway to talking about those kinds of questions.

John Naughton – No, and in so far as it is geared up to talk about it, it talks about employment in a older mass employment context, but what is most likely to happen, and as you say, you don’t have to buy into the who hyperbolic about this, but what is most likely to happen is that the next categories of jobs that will in fact be eliminated by relatively modest computerisation are what we would call white collar jobs. That’s where the next wave of unemployment comes from, and it comes in job categories, which, we have traditionally and in the political system still do, regard as relatively secure. And that’s not being talked about at all.

David Runciman – Can you imagine the circumstances, in which this stuff rises up the political agenda, because Snowden was a scandal, and scandals come and go, and people forget them, they remember the names but the issues didn’t quite filter through? We’ve recently had a scandal with Malcolm Rifkin who happened to be chair of the relevant parliamentary committee that was looking into some of this stuff, we remember the scandal about Rifkin. Are we talking about the things that his committee where investigating? No we are not.

John Naughton – No we are not

David Runciman – So scandals don’t do it, what would trigger a political argument within an electoral system about the impact of the new technology upon peoples jobs, personal freedom, their privacy, anything?

John Naughton – The only that might change it is if one of the political parties focused on the reality of these things, I mean, for example, the prevailing mantra about technology and progress is that although there is some collateral damage when we move to a new faze, the collateral damage being people who lose their jobs and so on, nobody actually really looks into that in a serious way. And the most recent case I’ve found where somebody has looked into it is Rochester, which was a company town owned by a big and very profitable and very dominant, globally dominant company called Kodak. Kodak as a company has been eliminated basically because of digitally technology.

David Runciman – Which it helped to create

John Naughton - Which it helped to create, ironically. It was in Kodaks’ research lab that the digital sensor was first evolved. But Kodak was this fantastically dominant company and invented this stuff and didn’t pay attention to it and in the end wiped out. Okay, Kodak employed 145,000 people worldwide, of whom something like 60,000 lived and worked in Rochester and if you go to Rochester now what you see is a really struggling urban environment. But more importantly what you find is about 55,000 people whose pensions have evaporated. Now, that’s what this stuff does and on the one hand you can hyperbolic about the prospects for a silicone valley or for a silicone roundabout as the government talks about in London or whatever. And its great stuff, but actually the collateral damage that this technology will do and is doing is colossal and it doesn’t figure in anybody’s manifesto.

David Runciman – And its disruption in action but it does happen in pockets here and there, you don’t get a wave, it’s a bit like the mass employment unemployment story. You don’t get waves of this stuff sweeping whole electorates; a lot it can happen under the radar and the people in Rochester they are suffering but they are not rioting presumably there’s a sort of bedrock sort of prosperity underpinning this gradual well sudden decline, but disappearing living standards over time. So what we’re not seeing is the traditional triggers for political change, which is mass experience of a particular phenomenon in the kind of time frame that makes politicians sit up and notice.

John Naughton – Yes, the Internet is global, but its impact can be local. In the context of Britain and Europe, the differences of say Britain and indeed Ireland, and Greece and Spain, are instructive because in Greece and Spain the austerity regime has been so severe that it has triggered a really powerful insurgent political response. We haven’t seen that here, and interesting questions would be why? I remember putting out a tweet, who is the Syriza of the UK? I got back a lot of interesting answers but the consensus was, if there one it’s the Green Party. That’s not convincing

David Runciman – That means there isn’t one

John Naughton - That means there isn’t one. And the question is, why not? The answer could be the fundamental welfare net in Britain has been more resilient and more supportive than it has been in Greece and in Spain, in which case, things, although they’re bad have not got quite to the level where people really really are desperate in sufficient numbers to evoke some kind of political response. So what we have instead in a kind of mini response, very patchy as expressed in things like Ukip but I think that all it is, there’s nothing in terms of youth agitation in Britain as there are in some other continental countries.

David Runciman – And you could say the other difference say Spain and Greece and Britain is that this is a very very longstanding democracy with political parties that have been around forever. Even the labour party has been one of the main two parties for nearly a century; Greece and Spain are by history known as young democracies. There’s a real memory of pre-democratic order but there’s also a sense that a lot of this stuff is quite fragile. And again using the language of the Internet age that your so familiar with, I’m sure your sick of it, what is that disrupts these established well entrenched institutions that feel that they can’t fail and you could describe the two main British political parties as falling into that category, they’ve been around long enough that they think that they can withstand almost anything, and some of that feeds through to the voters themselves, you just get overly familiar with this stuff. So there’s also just a question, never mind whether it’s on the Greek or Spanish model, but what would disrupt in a two party system essentially a first passed the post in a two party system. What would disrupt it and would the technology play a role in that do you think?

John Naughton – well before we get to whether the technology will make a difference lets come back to your description to what we’ve got. We have is a two party system, which is now being stretched to try and accommodate a six party reality. The second thing is that the two big parties in 1951 for example had 97% of the vote. Between them they shared a colossal proportion of the vote and now each of them is struggling to get 30%. So at that level they are not like they were, they are wasting away somehow. In terms of party membership its quite dramatic in the 1950s the Tory’s party had 3million members, it now has maybe 150,000. I don’t know what has happened to labour membership but my hunch is that it has gone down as well. So they exist in name, they appear to be, they profess to be similar to what they were, but they’re completely different enemas they’re wasting in fabled giants in a strange way and protected I think up to now by the first passed the post system. So if you wanted to think about what would disrupt this, one thought is lowering the voting age would make a difference. I thought that was very striking about the Scottish referendum which was that they did give the vote to younger people and they played a part in that discussion, in that discourse. I mean, it might not make any difference but if 16 year olds had the vote throughout the United Kingdom it might be a hell of shock to the system.

David Runciman – Do you think, is it stretching it too far to say there might be analogies here between these lumbering political parties and say Kodak or the equivalent which is they have been around for a while, they had this dominant position, in a way they created the thing that may lead to their own destruction, its not as if they haven’t been implicit in this. And they can vanish almost overnight, or do you think those kind of political market analogies fall down at a certain point?

John Naughton – I think the analogies are instinct but they are not perfect. One of the things that prevents it from catastrophic collapse from the point of view of the big parties is the electoral system itself. So that’s a constraint that would stop a truly dramatic collapse happening. You might have it in a proportional representation system.

David Runciman – And it might happen in Scotland, it is possible.

John Naughton – It is possible in Scotland, yes

David Runciman - Maybe Scotland will be the Kodak in this election.

John Naughton – In terms of trying to apply the theory of industrial disruption tour politics, you know for example, the question people have asked me, which is, Is Ukip an example of a disruptive innovation? And the answer is; it depends what you regard as disruptive. If by disruption you mean irritation yes, Ukip is a disruption. But in terms of, is it a disruption in the sense that digital technology was for Kodak, I don’t think so but because the characteristics of disruptive innovation in technology at any rate is that you have corporations that are doing really well and they do what they do really well and then along comes an insurgent with a new idea which actually is very inferior to what the existing outfits do and they ignore it because it doesn’t seem to be a threat, there is a small group of early adopters in the market place who see this new thing, even though its largely imperfect, often flaky, as being really interesting so its much cheaper than the standard offering. And then the process starts and by the time the encumbrance realise that they’re really going to be in trouble, they’ve had it. And that’s the way it works in the technology industry as far as we know, I mean this process was laid out a long time ago but Clayton Christensen in that book The Innovators Dilemma (1997). But within the political frame I cant see it happening that way because I mean Ukip doesn’t have serious offering, they may have a flaky offering, but its not a serious governors option

David Runciman – No, they are probably claiming to be cheaper, but even that nobody really buys.

John Naughton – Yes, and the other thing, Ukips’ early adopters are not necessarily demographically likely to be in the long run a good market. So I think it’s an interesting thought, at the moment, I can’t see within the rouse context any plausible insurgent

David Runciman – So Ukip is not UBER?

John Naughton – I don’t think so, no. Well in the sense that the British public have been taken for a ride, perhaps but otherwise no, I can’t see it happening that way.

David Runciman – Not least because Ukip are nowhere near having their product tested, which would happen if they were in government, the difference between being an irritant because you’re able to offer a vehicle for people who want to complain, and offering something they will then test by well it performs; we are a mile off that.

John Naughton – We are a mile off that, I mean the interesting thing about UBER is that it has a product in that people who use it find very attractive

David Runciman – And it works

John Naughton – And it works. I know lots of my friends and colleagues use UBER and rave about it but it has very disruptive effects and there’s a fair amount of destruction going on as well as creation, and that makes it so controversial. In fact I think in the case of UBER the problem is that so many of the people who use it actually feel somehow ashamed or worried that they do. The other person who votes Tory and is ashamed of it, there’s that kind of ambivalence about it, which is what makes it such a thorny subject for so many people.

David Runciman – And in a way it’s the other way round to politics in that the product works but we don’t much like the people who are providing us with the product, where as in politics whether we like the people who are providing us with the product is often the absolutely deciding factor in whether we

John Naughton – It is the deciding factor, yes

David Runciman – We choose that product or not

John Naughton – That’s true

David Runciman – Just to come back then to a subject that I touched on and we didn’t pick up which is; where is Edward Snowden? Well we know where he is, but where is he in this election campaign? One of the parties that’s clearly got a difficult pitch to make this time round are the Liberal Democrats. Which means that there isn’t a party really, that you can associate with the freedom side of some of these questions, the traditional ‘small l’ liberal side of these questions, to do with our privacy, the ways we might be being surveilled, the reach of the state – particularly the reach of the secret branches of the state, that is missing. Does that worry you that we don’t have a party standing up for ‘small l’ liberal values?

John Naughton – It worries me that there isn’t a serious public discourse about this, because I think in the long run this is likely to be the biggest challenge to our democracy. We have blundered into, as a species, we have blundered into a technology built by my generation, which, seemed at the beginning to be wonderfully empowering and liberating and so on, and also turned out to have some other affordances which are much more sinister, the main one being that it is a tool for comprehensive surveillance of everything that happens. And in those circumstances the only way a democracy could deal with that, I think, is by having really muscular oversight of it, because there is no question, for example, there’s no dispute that the Internet, in addition to being a wonderful technology is also an extremely dangerous one. The levels of cybercrime for example on the net, I would say, are unconsciousable and nobody is talking about it. It’s colossal and so the same goes for cyber espionage and for all kinds of other stuff. So there’s a lot of really really bad stuff on it. So any democracy needs to be able to find a way of defending itself and at dealing with this. There’s no questions about that that means it needs organisations like GCHQ and the NSA, again, no question. And it needs those organisations to be effective, to be well resourced, to be staffed with really bright and inventive people and all that. Nobody disputes any of that. But the overarching question is given that you have to create such a surveillance apparatus in order to protect democracy, to protect your society, you have to have some way of making sure that it doesn’t go rogue, that it doesn’t engage in mission creep, that it doesn’t do things that fundamentally undermine the values that it’s supposedly is protecting. And the only way to do that is by having really muscular oversight and by that I mean oversight that is run by people who are politically and socially credible and obviously the electorate really has to believe these are really independent, untainted, incorrupt people. Secondly, the have to be resourced with the kind of technical expertise that is at least as good as what the agencies have at their disposal, and it has to be sceptical. I think it’s possible to do that, but you would have to be very serious about it, you would have to take it very seriously, it would be a very big undertaking and you’d have to make sure that it was both supportive of the security apparatus but also sceptical about it. That’s what we need.

David Runciman – And we absolutely haven’t got it

John Naughton – What we have is oversight theatre. The big question from my point of view is given this stuff doesn’t surface in the electoral campaigns, how are we ever going to get to it? How are we ever going to get away from oversight theatre into real oversight? In which case, we can start to rest easy in our beds, and that’s nowhere discussed anywhere in this election.

David Runciman – And part of the problem of course, and this is just a fact to democratic life, is that these elections are themselves the species of theatre.

John Naughton – Yes

David Runciman - And electoral theatre and oversight theatre in a way go together.

John Naughton – They do

David Runciman - But it’s also true that muscular oversight does require public engagement, as it were, secret overseers of the secret state isn’t going to cut it. The thing that gives it muscle is the fact that the public are involved and that’s why politicians have to play a role in this. You can’t have muscular oversight in the absence of public debate. Which is why the absence of public debate is a real gap in our democracy at the moment.

John Naughton – That’s what really worries me about this, I think the fact that it doesn’t figure in our debate, to be fair to the Germans, I think it does figure in their electoral

David Runciman – Because they have a very different historical memory of how oversight, to put it mildly, can go wrong.

John Naughton – They have

David Runciman – Not just oversight but surveillance

John Naughton – Surveillance. I mean they had comprehensive analogue surveillance run by the Stasi, so they had some idea, at least half of the people in Germany had some experience of this including Angela Merkel. In this country it’s different, one of the things that really puzzles me is why is why is the British Public so relaxed about this stuff. One hypothesis that I sometimes think about is that, is this something to with Bletchley Park? Because the Bletchley Park story is unquestionably a good story, it’s the question of a society facing an existential threat and deploying human ingenuity in order to deliver an amazing kind of breakthrough in combating that evil.

David Runciman – Cuddly mathematicians and we know they are all cuddly. The Hollywood version

John Naughton - The Hollywood version, yes. But the point is the Bletchley Park story is really good, and I’ve never met anybody who didn’t think it was a good story. GCHQ came from two huts in Bletchley Park. So GCHQ actually sprang from Bletchley Park and sometimes I think the people in this country are so relaxed about it is because GCHQ comes trailing clouds of enigma glory as it were. That may be fanciful, I don’t know, but I can’t think of any reason why people should be so relaxed about it. Maybe the other reason is of course, they may have bought the ‘if you have nothing to hide then you have nothing to fear’ mantra. It’s quite interesting in the context of the current election and the last few days, the way in which Malcolm Rifkind who was the chief overseer of the home security services suddenly discovered that things that he was doing that were perfectly legitimate, absolutely legitimate in private, they didn’t look so good when they were exposed. So I have been wondering what Malcolm Rifkind now thinks about ‘if you have nothing to hide, then you have nothing to fear’.

David Runciman – I imagine he is thinking again

John Naughton – Basic to see

David Runciman – Thanks to John Noughton for some fascinating insight though maybe we’re still being a little gloom. Now back to our regular panel.

Discussion Part 2:

David Runciman - Chris you were an early adopter of new technology and you’re an inveterate tweeter. What do you think this technology has to offer democracy?

Chris Brooke – I’m not sure, I joined Twitter in 2010 because the media was talking a lot about how the previous election had been the blogs election and this I going to be the Twitter election and I wanted to see what it looks like from the inside and then I liked it there so I stayed. But one of the senses I have is that the politicians have never quite worked out how to exploit this medium for their own gain. The jokes everyone makes on Twitter all the time is that the politicians simply go on and on about a fantastic reception they are getting on their doorstep. It’s very easy to parody the way MP’s tweet, that’s not to say I think it’s irrelevant from the point of view of democracy, it’s a great place where people can have the kinds of conversations they want to have, which means, repeating party slogans or shouting at people they disagree with or in fact having more quieter, low key conversations with people around the world or around the country of matters of mutual interest. That’s what Twitters great for, whether that has an impact on how people vote, I don’t know, I suspect some of what celebrities with large followings do, may have an impact. Famously, Andy Murray on the morning of the Scottish election came out as a nationalist, as a pro independence voter, and I wouldn’t be at all surprised if that energised some, not that many, but some Scots to change their votes at the last moment, he’s a very popular figure in Scotland. But beyond that kind of thing, this still seems to me like complicated and confusing terrain.

Finbarr Livesey – Unfortunately, most of the social media from the parties has been completely sanitised. They don’t know how to engage with it, in an effective, natural way and so standard message boards; message windows are driving what’s happening on most of the social media channels. You don’t get that feeling that you’re seeing something that you won’t get from a standard speech, or a standard interview. We’ve been talking about having more online engagement; we’ve been saying the last election and the election before were the first Internet elections, in this country that’s just not true. It is a huge gulf when you look at the type of engagement you see in America and you see the type of operation that’s been driven to produce engagement and to produce voting behaviour and produce an understanding of message that is far beyond what is done here. The speakers just ran a commission of human democracy

David Runciman – The speaker of the House of Commons

Finbarr Livesey – The speaker of the House of Commons, and the report came out. It had too many recommendations; it had 26 recommendations, which is a silly idea. Of them got all the headlines which is we should be able to vote online by the time of the next general election. Whether that’s a good thing or a bad thing is beside the point. The rest of the report was essentially trying to update parliament, to actually make sure people knew what parliament did. Nothing to do with online, so even when they try to do online; they miss the mark completely.

David Runciman – And do you get any positive vibes coming off the new technology for this election?

Helen Thompson - Not particularly for this election, I think there was some creative uses of it in the Scottish election, in terms of giving alternative voices. And it think an important part of what went on in the Scottish election was the way in which the narrative emerged about the mainstream media which represented as far as many Scottish nationalists were concerned, the establishment view. And that it was important to be able to break out from that and have their own voice and that social media and blogging actually in this case as well, was a crucial element of that. I also suspect democratic politics can bring out the worst aspects of the Internet. And I think the election which I think probably was the first social media election which was the 2008 US presidential election did that because what it did more than anything was reinforce peoples tribal identity both in terms of the struggle between Clinton and Obama during the democratic nomination process and then thereafter. That it almost became about people getting their fix of who politically they were, by the way in which they engaged with the internet. That just reinforces tribal aspects of democratic politics, but I think that we should, in the interest of being positive as well as negative see that it does have the potential for having wider political discussions than what relying on the mainstream media allows.

David Runciman – And even just to offer a defence of tribalism, sometimes to go back to where we started this discussion before we spoke to John Noughton, we have to remember that tribalism itself is one of the things that drives voter turnout. If more people are going to vote it may be because more people are feeling a bit tribal about it.

Helen Thompson – Tribalism does drive some people to turn out but I think it also drives other people not to turn out and I think it’s a mistake to think that in democratic politics that everyone belongs to a tribe. There are a lot of voters who don’t and they get put off by the tribal aspects of politics. So again, we are back to a positive and a negative story, tribalism helps the tribalist but it doesn’t necessarily help the rest of us.

David Runciman – That’s all we have time for this week, thanks as always to our contributors Helen Thompson, Finbarr Livesey and Chris Brooke. Our special guest John Noughton and for production Hannah Critchlow, Francis Dearnley and Lizzie Presser. Join us again next week, when our guest is going to be Claire Jackson, the historian and TV presenter whose acclaimed series last year on The Stuarts told the dynasty, the first united England and Scotland and was broadcast on the BBC on the run-up to the Scottish Independence Referendum. And I’ll be asking Claire how long she thinks the Union can survive. My name is David Runciman, this has been ELECTION – The Cambridge Politics podcast.