

Edinburgh Napier University to study online commentary

Study to chart rise of 'e-pundits'

Online commentators' impact on society explored

The rise of the online pundit is to be explored by Scottish researchers at Edinburgh Napier University.

Communications experts will look at how the influence of newspaper columnists is being eroded by bloggers and other online voices – a phenomenon they have coined 'epunditry'.

The project is part of a wider three-year study called ['Informing the Good Society'](#) (InGSoc), which will examine the role played by information in society and how it can act as a positive force.

"With fewer and fewer people buying newspapers, the reach of traditional columnists is falling while blogging and other forms of online expression are experiencing phenomenal growth," said Dr Alistair Duff, a Reader in Information and Journalism at the university's Institute for [Informatics and Digital Information](#).

"The project will tackle this shift, and examine whether electronic modes of commentary have replaced the traditional 'op-ed' and what the implications might be for the social role of the pundit, and for both the press and its supposed successors."

Dr Duff pointed to Westminster blogger Paul Staines, aka Guido Fawkes, who was recently signed up as a Sunday Sun columnist, and to Instapundit in the US as examples of increasingly influential online commentators.

He added: "While the Leveson Inquiry has returned standards of news reporting to public attention, the question of the quality of political opinion-writing is also one that is of major significance for a healthy, informed democracy. That then leads on to wider questions about where expertise lies in an information-saturated society."

Funded by a £200,000 Arts & Humanities Research Council grant, the study will also look at how population censuses are coping with the transition to a paperless society – as well as their ethical and political ramifications.

A case in point, said Dr Duff, was the use of a British subsidiary of C.A.C.I. International – under fire for its alleged complicity in torture at Abu Ghraib prison – in the recent Scottish census.

The third thread of the study will address information issues facing modern democracies – such as freedom of information rights, internet governance and the digital divide – from a philosophical perspective.