

How far is too far in public-private cooperation?

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In the competition between cities for visibility and new facilities, the 'age of austerity' brings new pressures to involve private capital in sponsoring new interventions and activities, especially those that promote strong urban leaders. Yet [Bart Cammaerts](#) sees dangers in the incremental erosion of the public sphere via corporate badging of public services linked to political personalities.



It is no secret that, as many other parts of the public sector, cities have professionalized their external communication and their efforts to market themselves, and London is certainly no exception. These city-branding strategies increasingly take on sophisticated forms, using professionally designed logos, hiring consultants, attracting and hosting high profile events, inviting specialized journalists for a visit all included, etc. Despite the success of some of these strategies for some cities, in many cities a distinct link can be observed between the promotion of a city and the promotion of the greater glory of the Mayor. Furthermore, increasingly the private sector is getting involved and seeking positive exposure by associating themselves to popular events or schemes. Is this a positive evolution?



Image Credit: Tim Bradshaw - <http://www.timbradshaw.net/>

While some of this exposure does promote London as a thriving, cosmopolitan, tolerant, cultural and sportive city, it is often also perceived by many as an effort to build the image of the London Mayor, Boris Johnson (though the same has also been said of his predecessor, Ken Livingstone). However, this can still be understood in the present media-age where image, the need to be identified with and 'seen to be seen' is pivotal, and there is a strong drive for politicians to be seen doing new things.

What is less understandable to many commentators, however, is the increasing and more visible involvement of private companies in the sponsorship of events organized by 'local' authorities or actively supported by them. Two recent examples are Boris Johnson's Barclays Cycle Hire [scheme](#) and to a lesser extent the Mayor of London and transport for London ads promoting a [Sky Ride](#) event in London early September.

Should a public official associate the office he was elected to by a part of the London population, or the public services he wishes to develop, with private companies such as Sky and Barclays? It is notable that many other cities that have introduced a bike scheme did this without overt sponsorship and often even free of charge, so choosing to associate the scheme with a commercial brand and charging a considerable amount for it is not inevitable, these are ideological choices.

In the era of the new 'Big Society' promoted by the government, will we see an increase in the association of public offices, and the services that they wish to develop, with private companies? Might we see the Waitrose primary school, the BP soup and bread distribution for the homeless, or maybe even ... Virgin 'public' transport?