

Politicians should use Twitter to engage more, and broadcast less

By Democratic Audit

*Much has been written about social media's transformative potential with regard to the future of the democracy. But despite initial signs that both the Prime Minister and his Deputy were willing to embrace and facilitate this change, the Government seems to have fallen back into the familiar 'top down' method of political communication, albeit via new means. **Ali Stoddart** looks at where they've gone wrong.*



The Internet and social media platforms, most significantly Twitter and Facebook, have brought with them an apparent opportunity to transform the way citizens and politicians communicate with one another. Their rise to prominence could have the potential to end the old 'top-down' model of political communication, and help close our democratic deficit. But are our political leaders up to the challenge?

While the new media model of political communication has the *potential* to allow for increased dialogue between political representatives and the public and the opportunity to sculpt a more communicative and involving democracy, we are not there yet. A quick assessment of prominent political actors' use of social media suggests that politicians primarily use communication tools as instruments of broadcast and not generally in ways that could create a more engaging political communications environment.

Back in 2010 there were signs that an overhaul of political communication was underway. David Cameron even stated [that](#):

"A lot of people say that people... are not interested in politics... I think that is because it has all been... very top-down... Whereas, by laying out all the information and inviting people in... we are giving them the opportunity with Facebook... Normally if government wants to engage with people we would need to spend millions of pounds on our own website and with (Facebook's) help we are getting this public consultation for free."

Nick Clegg, has also previously spoken of social media's ability to help politicians "[connect with the next generation of voters.](#)" In fact, when in opposition, parts of his early social media strategy involved him carrying out [interactive exercises](#) with the public on Facebook that potentially helped shape Liberal Democrat policy and displayed an attempt at creating a more involving democracy.

Despite our political leaders commenting on the merits of social media and its potential to transform their relationships with the public, the reality of our political communications environment seems entombed within the old media model of top down and trivial correspondence.

The Prime Minister's Twitter feed is inundated with missives that simply outline his policy and provide no scope for public interaction or consultation. For example on July 15th he tweeted:



This seems a far cry from Cameron's 2010 claims. Rather than "inviting people in", it seems to simply report what has already been decided. Rather than using Twitter to establish a two-way dialogue which bypasses the media and provides a direct connection with citizens, Cameron merely reinforces the existing old media model of one-way communication and sound bites. It seems that the brevity of the 140 character tweet limit has meant that twitter is being used by politicians for little more than broadcasting sound bites.

It could be that the use of social media fails the challenge of government and the reality of effective resourcing. Cameron and Clegg's failure to follow through on their early promises to fully engage could also demonstrate a universal truth: once in power, politicians lose all motivation to meaningfully engage with the public.

When public feedback is ignored trust cannot be developed. Within the white noise of the Internet there will always be [unconstructive – even offensive](#) - replies, however there were a number of responses to Cameron's tweet which [questioned the wisdom of the policy](#) or [requested other strategies](#). This non-citizen-centric social networking strategy was recently confirmed by Number 10's head of digital communications who stated that twitter would be used to build relationships and have conversations with "[journalists, stakeholders and professional groups](#)" but *not* citizens. Recent [research](#) also confirms that only 28.7% of sampled MPs tweets were used to communicate with other users and a proportion of these tweets were to communicate with the non-citizen groups noted above.

Another of Cameron's twitter habits is commenting on non-political events, such as the Ashes or Andy Murray's Wimbledon victory. This is presumably done with the motivation of showing the Prime Minister as "normal", and accessible to the British public. This is all acceptable, however without the key aspect of dialogue or consultation with the public on real political issues these personalising and informal tweets are likely to come across as tokenistic and disingenuous, much like [the infamous picture](#) of the Chancellor enjoying a late night snack.

By continuing to use web 2.0 communication platforms in a web 1.0 manner political figures further frustrate an already disaffected public. When politicians continue to use a two-way radio as a megaphone the public will rightly feel ignored. So while politicians' tweets may be *informative*, they are certainly not *engaging*.

National consultation in 140 characters is a near-impossible task and the internet is not a panacea for our civic woes, but with politicians initially praising the impact of web 2.0 on our democracy, the least they could do is take social media and the public more seriously by using contemporary communication tools in a more engaging way.

Perhaps politicians should try and find a middle way between disengaging broadcast methods of communication and unrealistic notion of constant direct engagement. Perhaps, instead of providing links to press releases, politicians could provide links to consultation pages. Maybe representatives could make greater use of structured question and answer events in order to give the public a chance to have their say and highlight their particular concerns. Encouraging examples are emerging, such as The Education Select Committee asking the public on twitter for questions to put to Michael Gove using the hashtag '#askgove' and posting the subsequent evidence session on YouTube. Yet, this is not a regular occurrence and it highlights the untapped potential for a greater level of engagement.

Politicians are often not confident enough to use social media tools in an engaging way, perhaps because of a fear of losing 'message control'. The Inter-Parliamentary Union recognises both the potential and the risks, and their recently published [social media guidelines](#) for Parliaments tries to provide solid advice for dealing with the anxieties politicians may have. This even includes a response check list that ensures representatives can engage with the public in a manner that is practical and meaningful.

Politicians need to reassess the benefits of social networking and the internet for improving their relationships with citizens as part of their overall commitment to new forms of democratic and civic engagement. Manuel Castells [notes](#) that the problem lies "not with the Internet, but with the kind of polity our societies are generating." It is not the tool that changes things, but what you do with the tool that counts. In future it would be interesting to assess various political representatives' use of social media, from local councillors to MEP's, in order to glean examples of best practice for civic engagement.

Note: this post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our comments policy before posting.

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