

In reply to Alastair Campbell – journalism and politics

Alastair Campbell has just given [two lectures in Cambridge](#) and I was part of [a debate](#) with some media professors that followed. Here are my notes for my talk.

AC started off his first lecture by saying he went to study at Cambridge and was rather chippy – I got rejected by Cambridge – so imagine how chippy I feel standing here.

I am going to concentrate on just one part of what Alastair said. The digital bit. People usually challenge AC's views on journalism by citing what he did in political office or by saying that he has become an irrelevant twitter celeb since his time with Blair. With respect to his views on social media and journalism I am going to try the novel approach of criticising AC by agreeing with him. Let me explain.

Motherhood and Apple Pie

I think a lot of what AC says in general about journalism is motherhood and apple pie – albeit often laced with acid. Yes, we want more intelligent, fairer, braver journalism and there are a lot of things out there working against that. I would also say that there is a lot more good stuff out there than you might think if you spend all your time only looking at the British mainstream press. I think the elite – especially the internationally minded elite – are super-served now with extraordinary access to extensive reportage, sophisticated expert analysis and diverse and intelligent commentary. Plus a whole range of expert information services from financial services data apps all the way to LSE public lecture podcasts. The real problem is with the capacity of legacy mass media. While I think we exaggerate their past quality when we talk about decline, there is definitely a problem in certain areas, such as local news.

So am I right when I agree with AC that our best hope is with what academics call the 'affordances' of the Internet? Do digital technologies, combined with Internet platforms or networks offer hope of a more diverse, informative, useful, challenging news media?

As a journalist, I am, like AC convinced that the new generation of journalists has a remarkable opportunity. The power of the tools, the potential of connectivity and the fact that they are working with a more sceptical, educated and information-hungry public must be positive. But what about the effect on the kind of public purpose for journalism that AC has been talking about in these lectures – and especially with regard to politics?

Who Trusts You?

Politicians may take comfort in opinion polls that show how little trust newspaper journalists enjoy and how the public back tougher regulation. Those same polls, however, show that politicians are trusted even less and that the public would like to see state control of things like food and housing costs, too. So be careful what populism you wish for.

Before we consider a strategy for journalism or politics let's remind ourselves of how the context for the relationship is changing. Both sectors are undergoing quite analogous changes:

disintermediation

This is the idea that the relationship between the state or community and the citizen can now become direct – you don't necessarily need the journalist to pass on information or create the forum for debate – likewise the politicians is superseded by an executive that can in theory deal direct with its users

scepticism

I always think that elites think it is good that they are sceptical but despair when the general populace feels the same. A more highly educated, autonomous citizenry with declining tribal attachments is creating a less stable,

more varied and critical audience for political information. Modern media accentuates this and modern politics has done nothing to ameliorate the trends. This is good.

globalisation

This may be less important for this UK-centred debate, but it is still vital to see that media resources are increasingly global. Not so much regarding content but in terms of who owns the media structures such as search or social networks and who controls the flows of resource for journalism. That can be someone like Murdoch but increasingly philanthropists such as Omidyar and networks such as Facebook as well as international players such as CCTV. National politics likewise is now emasculated by global forces such as international finance and trans-national bodies such as the EU.

This isn't always a bad thing.

personalisation/consumerism

People are able to tailor their media to reflect their changing lifestyles to suit, for example, new patterns of working and new roles for women. Likewise politics is increasingly issue based, value driven.

spectacle/empathy

As politics becomes less simplistically ideological the role of personality and emotion increases. Likewise in mediation where a whole range of organisations from M&S to Oxfam have realised that to connect with humans you have to talk a human language and show human interest. At it's most banal this tends towards hollow spectacle but routinely we see examples such as Jade Goody and cancer where it can connect much more powerfully than the formula of mainstream media and politics.

You can decide on the ethics of these trends but they are frequently misrepresented in moral terms that say more about the person making the judgement than the reality. I would cite the selfie phenomenon as something that captures this with regards to the last two trends of personalisation and performance/empathy. Selfies appear to be about narcissism – taking endless pictures of yourself – but actually they show a desire to connect because you put them into networks for people to respond to as an exchange of identity and recognition.

So that's what has changed and where we are now. What difference does it make in historical terms?

The Campbell Bracket

I don't really think the Gutenberg Parenthesis is particularly helpful, but on a smaller scale, it might be that there was such a thing as an exceptional age of mass media power that coincided with the last gasp of mass party political strength – in honour of the Gutenberg Parenthesis, let's call it 'The Campbell Bracket', though that's just a cheap joke because we can't really credit AC with its first half.

We could argue that 1974-2003 was an exceptional age of mass media power and mass party political strength. Newspapers and broadcasters had unprecedented resources thanks to advertising and economic growth combined with (largely pre-internet) technological advances in telephony, video and broadcast reach. At the same time the two main parties were still buoyed up by high election polling, large party membership and a concentration of power in Westminster. The resultant struggle between the political and press behemoths led to a period where the right-wing press could claim to have 'won' elections, of spin-doctors accused of duping the public into going to war; and an intensely competitive, arrogant culture on both sides that led to phone-hacking and MPs expenses scandals symptomatic of a deeper political cultural malaise.

This peaked at the very moment that the forces were emerging that would begin its decline through some profound shifts in the way that power is mediated in the UK. In that sense, the work behind the scenes of people like Bernard Ingham, Tim Bell, Philip Gould and Alastair were attempts to deal with structural social shifts in political mediation.

So, do I share AC's optimism that we are in a bright new era? To a large degree, yes.

I won't go on about the joys of digital journalism in detail. AC has already cited one of my favourite examples, the

Guardian/Iain Tomlinson case where the intrepid hack could simply not have got that story without help from the crowd of citizens.

For me the new networked journalism has some key qualities. It is connected, interactive, and involves public participation – at least potentially. It combines the functions and virtues of traditional journalism with new values such as sharing, openness, transparency and diversity. There are loads of good examples connected to mainstream media and plenty more independent.

These are all creating a new landscape of journalism production. There are new business models and new skill sets but most importantly a structural shift that puts the reader at the centre of the process, not the end.

Now – especially in relation to the mediation of power – this does not automatically mean a revolution in mediation – let alone politics. There is still a lot of uncertainty, some welcome.

Firstly, there are paradoxes:

- In the midst of digital TV news is still cited as the most influential political medium
- As politics becomes more centred around the idea of the 'authentic' it also becomes ever more managed and dependent on polling and presentation
- As openness becomes more possible, more resource is spent on control

Secondly, in the same way that the 70s to 2000 might have been exceptional as the golden age of Big Media and Big Politics – perhaps this first phase of digital has already peaked and we are in a period of consolidation, convergence, control.

Thirdly, getting full added value of this new environment in terms of political engagement may mean embracing some of the trends that AC has criticised. The role of personality or celebrity can be a good thing. Certainly, it's how more personalised media works. We trust information online because it comes from someone we are connected to.

Fourthly, the citizen doesn't want to do journalism all the time – there is still a growing role for journalist as reporter, investigator etc plus a richer one as curator, connector, moving from the fourth estate model to the joining the fifth estate of the public.

Fifthly, loss of control means just that. For AC at his most rational and committed that's probably the hardest bit . At it's extreme that means Greenwald and WikiLeaks. I would argue that they worked best when working with MSM – sharing responsibilities as well as rights. It means accepting that Leveson is last century's solution to last century's problem. It means allowing risks, mistakes and biases in journalism because the networks are better able to correct them than most state or industry regulator.

In the end people working in networks will improve journalism but perhaps you lovely people in Cambridge won't like a lot of it – perhaps sometimes AC won't like it – and that's great. Because – and this is a traditional value – journalism – including networked journalism – should be allowed to be partisan, risky, mistaken, and unfair.

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