Political communication in the age of austerity: Unless you can claim genuine authenticity – like UKIP's Nigel Farage – then you will struggle to convince

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Charlie Beckett *explores the lessons in political communication illustrated by Nigel Farage and UKIP in the UK. In an age of scepticism, one value that the voters want – authenticity – is rendered undeliverable by a professional political class that seek to secure their power with risk-averse, non-interactive communication. Farage has been able to appeal to voters precisely because he is genuine and unrehearsed, and because UKIP exists outside of the political mainstream.*

In the not so distant past if we were discussing political communications trends we might talk about Facebook and Barack Obama, or Twitter and #IagreewithNick'. Today I want to look at Nigel Farage and the George and Dragon pub. [You can see the slides for this talk here]

There are thousands of media scholars out there analysing Occupy Wall Street and the impact of social media, but instead of always studying the formally avant-garde, marginal and the aberrant, perhaps we should also be looking at how the populist disrupters have stormed the mainstream with quite conventional tactics. The latter have been much more successful politically and are indicative of a wider series of trends around political communications. We are now in a digital environment of networked information flows. Yet despite – or because of this – the analogue and the authentic are more important than ever.

Mine's a pint of euro-scepticism

This is the big question:

Is this what happens to political communications when your economy is collapsing and the democratic system is seen as both out of touch and ineffective at delivering material security and political accountability?

My answer is 'Yes', but only if the system and circumstances allow it. The interesting outcome is not whether Nigel Farage will become Prime Minister but what impact UKIP might have on UK politics and, from my media centric point of view, what impact he – and others like Boris Johnson – are having on political communications.

[One interesting side-bar question related to this is 'where are the left populists?' Who is the next Red Ken? Why does being the Official Opposition preclude populism? Blue Labour and Maurice Glasman have not anything like Farage's impact – yet]

How Does It Happen?

In the case of UKIP, we know that the main issues that provoke this kind of populist movement are material: immigration, economic crisis (unemployment, income falls, household inflation, housing etc), crime and the power of the European Union. We also know who they are. They are generally, older, male, working and lower middle class, previously Tory-voting. But they are much more than a niche.

Beyond these issue-related concerns, the potential for this kind of populist political insurgency is enhanced by

familiar political structural trends in the UK: the decline of parties, the dilution of tribalism, increased scepticism about authority and the growth of more diverse identity and special interest politics. As we will see, criticism of the incoherence of their support missed the point that this is a coalition of imagined as well as real anxieties.

I can see that the electoral maths still favours a conservative response in the short-term for the three main leaders. All the debate about the reaction to UKIP has been in terms of how the major parties might respond tactically. But more generally, this kind of populist surge should be taken seriously for (at least) three reasons:

1. It is indicative that something is wrong with the system: so many people feel hostility to a political structure and a public sphere that fails to address their concerns, let alone deal with them.

2. It has the potential to shift policy outcomes: the other parties will feel obliged to react to the popularity of UKIP and the overall tenor of debate will be re-framed, to the exclusion of some other under-recognised demographics.

3. It has the potential to exacerbate potentially damaging structural trends towards democratic malfunctioning: it's quite possible that the other parties will actually retreat from the policy spheres that UKIP addresses and also fail to learn the lessons of citizen engagement.

So that is the political context but what is the significance for political communications?

First we should recognise that the conventional model of British liberal democracy and political communications is in the process of structural reorientation. The traditional idea was that the news media as fourth estate helped the flow of information from the governed and government – it created a space for deliberation that informed policy-making in a linear, predictable way. Those relationships are now in an unstable, networked relationship.

The internet as catalyst through social media and networked digital communications has created far more flows of information and deliberation that are less subject to control. This does not mean that populist movements are always born out of digital communications. The Five Star movement and Beppe Grillo were certainly facilitated by his blog and their use of social media to message and to mobilise, but the key to his success was physical demonstrations and success at elections. What gave Five Star impact on public consciousness was not its networked nature, but its charismatic leader who personified an alternative to the way politics is done in Italy. Nigel Farage is an English version of Grillo. Though as we shall see, with significant differences. Not least that he and UKIP are largely non digital.

Secondly, for Farage and Grillo to be successful they have to look and sound different. This is partly about what they talk about, but it is also down to NOT being like the Others. The professionalization of political public relations and its thorough-going domination of processes of policy generation, executive operation and electoral campaigning has created a corporately-staffed and corporate culture. This goes back many decades but has now reached its generational apogee with a PM from public relations. The recent coverage of Cameron's 'chumocracy' reinforces this, because it's true.

The other factor is the personalisation of political discourse – this is partly about presidential politics – emotional engagement – symbolism – but also by public who stress the perceived values not policies or class allegiances of the people or parties they vote for. Both mass and social media place high value on visual cues, key phrases, personality and appearance. Yet, the politicians are not actually very good at this kind of politics because they don't accept the logic that the medium is the message. Farage does. What you see is what you get.

Let's put this in a wider context of how people are now bombarded with the corporatisation of political ideology put into a personalised framework.

Ideology Goes Corporate

Let's have a look at a couple of videos.

Levi's Go Forth: This is clearly a film that seeks to take various visual tropes of youthful 'counter-culture' and appropriate them for clothing marketing. Note the number of views (3 million plus).

This version of the video [Go Forth Satire] makes this critique explicit. Note the number of views (a few thousand).

This jeans video in its commercial form is more political than any party political broadcast or NGO advertisement – although of course it seeks to de-politicise the very imagery and language it deploys. It is not surprising, therefore, that our research shows that the public are now universally sceptical of political or ethical marketing because it has become more like the commercial marketing that has, in turn, assimilated the personal and political communications space. The public are now in what my colleague Lilie Chouliaraki calls 'ironic spectators' in a 'post humanitarian' communications environment.

The Professionalization of political PR has got to such as thorough-going point that the public is unable to distinguish between commercial and civic communications. This is not just about politicians 'lying'. Though Nick Clegg has found out that taking a principled position that you don't believe in is not a thing that builds confidence. And his so-called apology actually only worked because it was satirised – humour made it more human than the original calculated communication.

Out Of Touch?

It is not simply about being 'out of touch'. As political journalist Steve Richards has pointed out, politicians are in fact 'neurotically' obsessed with keeping constantly in touch through focus groups and opinion polls. Instead, the problem might be better understood as about the distance and detachment of politicians from the discourse itself. Mrs Thatcher was a great example of a politician who could be manipulated in presentational terms – the voice lowered, the hair style softened, the phrasing tightened up – but in the end it was her ability to project her personality of ideological self-confidence and her political aggression on policy issues and ideological conflicts that won people over.

One response to this growing sense of 'discourse distance' has been the personalisation of political discourse both by politicians and public. The public want politicians who represent their feelings and instincts about ideology – not someone who represents a policy manifesto. Again historic social trends such as education, feminism, and individualism, have fostered this trend towards the personalisation of politics but both modern mass media and the development of social media have accelerated it, too. As we know politicians in the UK have been most successful when they respond to this: Thatcher, Blair – and less successful when they can't: Major and Brown.

Yet the paradox of contemporary political communication is that the professionalization of personalisation is counter-productive. In an age of scepticism the one value that the voters want – authenticity – is rendered undeliverable by a professional political class that seek to secure their power with risk-averse, non-interactive communication.

This is a message that even Conservatives think is a problem:

> *"I am afraid the Ukip leader has a style and a manner of speaking that connects with ordinary mortals much better than professional politicians.*
>
> *"He is unafraid to be filmed with a pint of beer and a cigarette in his hand when all of our media training tells us to eschew either image.*
>
> *"He also uses soundbites that appeal to Conservatives. I suspect many are unrehearsed – again something professionals are trained never to do.*
>
> *"You and George [Osborne], in particular, have been portrayed as public school toffs.*

But can Osborne and Cameron change? The reality is that they are detached so how can they argue the opposite? That's why Cameron and Clarke both made irretrievable mistakes by calling UKIP 'clowns' and 'fruitcakes'. Ironically, it was – for once – what they really think about these people.

That is why Farage works. His policies are incoherent but he has the personal ability to embody people's personal anxieties – on immigration, Europe, bankers, Etonians, corruption, etc. This is particularly impressive when you think that he is a private school educated city trader who is married to a German.

He is also (almost) totally analogue. He succeeds by being on TV and radio a lot as well as in newspapers. He is probably more successful because although he is an MEP, his party is firmly outside the mainstream. Of course, his popularity may well change as he and his party come under scrutiny. He does not seem to have a strategy for converting the protest vote into sustainable support. However, protest is becoming a permanent part of the British electoral make-up. UKIP does represent such a sizeable chunk of unrepresented public opinion that he remains a real challenge to the other parties and how they communicate.

How To Re-Connect?

So how to re-connect politics? The wonderful play This House at the National Theatre is about another pre-Thatcherite age when it was taken for granted that politicians spoke on behalf of their tribes of supporters. The disconnect that has followed has still not been factored into the make-up of the politicians, the parties and their communications systems. At the same time, the political class is made up of an ever-narrower group of people in terms of educational, personal and professional background.

As I suggested earlier, perhaps the main parties don't want to change. The Conservatives are anxious not to get dragged further down a euro-sceptical road while Labour and the Lib Dems are uncomfortable at the anti-immigration agenda. None of them have an economic answer that does not involve more pain and the perception that they are serving the interest of either a rich elite or 'scroungers'. Electorally it makes more sense in the short-term for the main parties to hope UKIP blows over and its voters return to the mainstream when faced with choosing a government not a council or MEP. This ignores the lessons of political communications that Farages teaches.

Networked Politics

Our research shows that politicians are now exploring new ways that combine the use of mass mainstream media and more personalised social networks. As Labour MP Stella Creasy has shown, these networks are useful catalysts for specific campaigns and overall provide new – albeit unrepresentative – channels for feedback and some limited debate. However, social media is not enough. Mainstream media is still the primary driver of political content on social media as well as the dominant provider of political information and influence to the public. The parties can use social media partly to realign their conversations with the public but in the end they must address their failure to take on board what they are hearing and their reluctance to engage with the debates and discourse. They must change who they are as well as how they communicate.

In this sense, it is a question of responding to wider shifts in the media environment – and the changing public attitudes to ideological communication – ideas such as that people assume interactivity, they expect transparency and they prefer open, sharable, social content. Mainstream legacy media is still the dominant force – it allowed UKIP and Farage to emerge – but it is within a communications and social context that makes political communications more complex and uncertain than ever before. Unless you have your values embodied in your communications – like Farage – and can claim genuine not fake authenticity then you will struggle to convince.

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Charlie Beckett is director of Polis, in the department of media and communications at the London School of Economics. He has 20 years of experience with LWT, BBC and ITN's Channel 4 News. He broadcasts and writes regularly on media and political affairs and is the author of SuperMedia: Saving Journalism So It Can Save The World (Blackwell, 2008). He teaches at the LSE and LCC. He tweets at **@charliebeckett**.

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