

# Reputation And Accountability: Where Are The Checks And Balances With Social Media?

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2013/10/21/reputation-and-accountability-where-are-the-checks-and-balances-with-social-media/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2013/10/21/reputation-and-accountability-where-are-the-checks-and-balances-with-social-media/)

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Tim Burt at Polis LSE

How have changes in the media landscape have affected the practice of reputation management? [Public Relations Executive Tim Burt](#) says that the proliferation of social media has greatly limited the amount of editorial control that can be exercised over the dissemination of information. Burt argues that social media have eroded the system of “checks and balances” that historically governed the reporting process, a development that has (unsurprisingly) led to high levels of anxiety among CEOs. It has made it more difficult for Burt to manage the reputations of his corporate clientele, but he is also cautiously optimistic regarding how a diffuse media environment might increase democratic accountability. Polis Intern Kyle Bowen takes up some of the issues that emerged from the latest [Polis Media Agenda Talk](#).

The concept of checks and balances has been of seminal importance in Western political thought for centuries. Yet as

the recent shutdown of the American government makes abundantly clear, systems of checks and balances can sometime fail to yield the desired results. This is also true of the traditional checks and balances that previously conditioned the reporting of news.

## Information Pipeline

Burt deployed the metaphor of a pipeline to explain the function of editorial discretion in the context of mass media. The flow of information was unidirectional – from a media outlet to an audience, and editors could decide what stories to cover and how these stories would be framed; they could open and close the value, as it were. The role of the editor is to filter out frivolous or spurious information and report only important, “newsworthy” stories.

However, in recent years a number of notable cases have exposed the limitations of this traditional model of journalism when it comes to serving the public interest. In the American context, one of the best examples can be found in the coverage of the lead up to the War in Iraq.

A thorough review of the journalistic chicanery that accompanied the Bush Administration’s push for war is far beyond the scope of this article; suffice it to say that several major media outlets routinely failed to contextualize or critically appraise the assertions of government officials, thereby painting a misleading picture and precluding the public from making informed decisions about an incredibly consequential issue. In 2004, the editorial board of the *New York Times* [effectively conceded this point](#), wistfully lamenting its deferential posture: “Looking back, we wish we had been more aggressive in re-examining the claims as new evidence emerged — or failed to emerge.” Here is case in which the traditional model of journalism – and its corollary system of checks and balances – failed to fulfil its proper function.

## Traditional shortcomings?

How can the new media environment attenuate the shortcomings of traditional journalism? The key lies in a reconfiguration of the linear conduit of information evoked by the pipeline metaphor. In other words, social media

has enabled public discourse to assume a more dynamic and interactive form, which has made it much more difficult to propagate misinformation – or to conceal important facts. As Glenn Greenwald [explains](#):

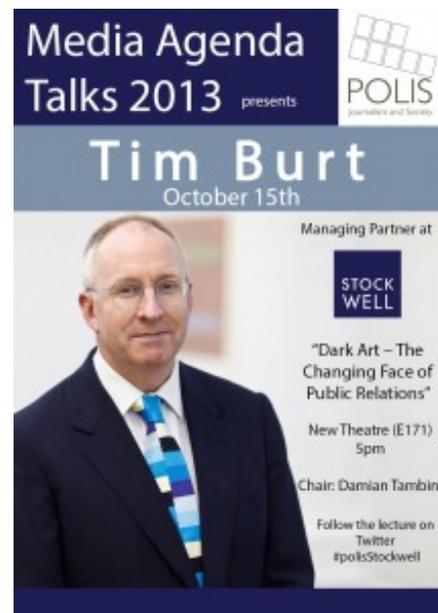
*“The voices are far more diversified, the scrutiny is far more rigorous, the feedback is much more rapid, and the process is much more democratized.”*

It is important to avoid overstating the point here: social media does not represent a panacea for the myriad issues confronting journalism today, and the blogosphere is indeed replete with frivolous twaddle. Yet as a wide range of contemporary events makes clear – from the [revolution in Tunisia](#) to the [disclosures of Wikileaks](#) – the contemporary media ecosystem can certainly be utilized to hold powerful individuals and organizations to account. Put more simply, the anxiety CEOs feel in this “age of accountability” need not trickle down to the public at large.

This article by Polis reporter Kyle Bowen

Full details of our weekly [Media Agenda Talks here](#) – free every Tuesday at 5pm

*Polis reporter Clare Sheehan caught up with Tim Burt, the second speaker in Polis’ Media Agenda Talks lecture series, for a quick questionnaire on what’s trending in the world of contemporary media.*



### **What is your favorite social media platform and why?**

Twitter. I think it’s the one which is emerging as the go-to place for influencers talking about market-moving stories.

### **Where do you get your news?**

Mainly through the digital versions of traditional media outlets. [WSJ.com](#), [FT.com](#), Bloomberg, Reuters. The mainstream networks and their digital sites.

### **Is this different from where you get your political news?**

All at the same place.

### **What is one thing you wish you could change about the media industry?**

The risks that journalists are now taking to be first, and therefore have exclusives, which lead to inaccuracies that they then try and pass off as part of a broader story narrative. I’d like to see more checks and balances.

### **Do you think social media is making us smarter or dumbing us down?**

Well it’s this issue of the whole, “Does Google make you stupid?,” in that it’s knowledge-long, wisdom-short. So people can become expert in a subject with relatively little internet research, but does it give you the ability to transact? Does it give you the ability to say something really informative and contextualized about any subject? So I think it’s a great emancipator of information, but the use of that information is not always made better by it.

### **What news stories are you currently following intently?**

The U.S. budget issue, the future of media regulation in this country, the rise of the BRICs, and particularly China. Will China as a marketplace compensate for the stuttering growth that we're seeing in the US and Europe?

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