

The Village Cycle: how political news changes when it speeds up

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/09/07/the-village-cycle-how-political-news-changes-when-it-speeds-up/

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Doing the Shuffle

Danny Boyle might have shown it thus at the Olympic Opening Ceremony in one of his nostalgic tableaux of British history: A delivery boy in hobnail boots wobbles over the village green on a heavy framed bicycle, laden down with sacks of newspapers balanced precariously on his handle-bars. Citizens in tartan dressing gowns clutching mugs of tea lean down to their door mats to retrieve their copy of the *The Times* with headlines about the main changes in Her Majesty's Government's following the previous day's reshuffle.

News of the minor posts, the analysis and the revelation that the Prime Minister had been drinking Horlicks when interviewing victims in Downing Street would only emerge in the next day's editions. No one cried, of course.

Cut to The Present Digital Age and we could almost have a webcam

in Number 10. It's a political version of the Big Brother House, but with the public telephone voting replaced by Twitter babble. Does this make a difference?

I think it does, but I'm not sure whether it's of style or substance.

No Time To Think?

Politics and political commentary now happens instantly, constantly and interactively. Tony Blair has reflected on how the political news cycle has shortened drastically. He said that means that the time for political thought has almost disappeared. Any political 'event' such as a reshuffle is now swimming in a stream of 24 hour TV and radio news. 24 hour online newspaper websites update continually. Polling/analysis/reaction websites such as PoliticsHome, ConservativeHome, and LabourList provide endless reaction, data and deconstruction. And, of course, on Twitter journalists and political wonks think aloud and argue as it happens. (Facebook doesn't really count does it?)

To regain some control means Governments and political parties must put much more effort into pre-event spin and continual briefing. We saw that at the last budget (and how it can go horribly wrong).

Right Shift

I wrote [a piece on the morning of the reshuffle](#) in the middle of the sackings and appointments looking at the limits of maneuver for the PM. It probably missed the later spin effort to dress this up as a carefully calibrated shift to the Right. You can judge whether my instant judgement was in error, or whether it was more accurate because it didn't take that version of events into account (except through updated links to other people's pieces).

But more interesting than my effort was the way that political correspondents themselves were thinking aloud on Twitter and writing slightly different pieces as the process unfolded. The fact that journalists like @IainMartin1 blog as well as write for the paper edition of the *Telegraph* and comment assiduously on Twitter means that you see his workings. I assume he also reads other people's tweets.

In my 2008 book *SuperMedia* I quoted one political correspondent who said that even back then, pre-Twitter, new media and continuous broadcast news was replacing the traditional discourse of the Westminster Village. Instead of

gossiping with advisors, MPs and other hacks in corridors and bars, correspondents now went to the blogs. Now it's Twitter. This was partly because contemporary journalists are much busier, with less time and more outlets. News is on-demand. And their news editors demand it all the time.

Furry Bear

I think that one good consequence is that we get much more detail ("I broke off reshuffle to help my son with 'Furry Bear' Cameron reveals") and a kind of transparency. Just look at this brief extract from @IainMartin1's Twitter feed to see how he reacts to other people and sources as well as opining himself:



Iain Martin @IainMartin1 15h
@VictoriaPeckham I presume Spelman will do an interview at some point, with @JoeWatts_
[View conversation](#)

Iain Martin @IainMartin1 15h
@TomHarrisMP @JoeWatts_ She's part of the Sir George Young generation, apparently
[View conversation](#)

Iain Martin @IainMartin1 15h
@StephenKhan thanks, will quote at length. @Torcuil
[View conversation](#)

Iain Martin @IainMartin1 15h
Cameron told Spelman when he was firing her that she was "too old"? At 54... via @JoeWatts_
Expand

Iain Martin @IainMartin1 15h
@Torcuil Clinton speech goes badly off-beam for ten minutes, and then he gets it together again.
[View conversation](#)

The downside is that the occupants of the Westminster village may become even more caught up in their own chat.

A reshuffle is by its nature an insider event. Yes, some journalists did note that no-one outside W1 gives a stuff. But this comment under one article is probably more typical than we'd like to admit:



Wayne Kmcdob Kenny
09/05/2012 10:59 AM

ALL THIS IS GETTING EXTREMELY BORING - DULL - DEPRESSING - FGS CANT YOU JUST KEEP IT TO YOURSELVES - IT DONT MATTER WHAT HAPPENS IN GOVERNMENT - WHO GETS SACKED - WHO GETS PROMOTED - THE COUNTRY IS IN A COMPLETE MESS AS A SUCCESSION OF THE LAST 15 YEARS REGARDLESS OF WHICH PARTY

I wonder if the truth is that covering these political

process events is becoming much more fun for those embroiled in them, but might be putting off the general

audience even more? I would like to think that's not the case as the public join in via those same platforms like Twitter used by the political professionals, but I'm not sure. Thoughts welcome.

UPDATE

Here's one interesting reaction to this article from someone at the heart of the reshuffle, David Jones MP, a regular Tweeter, who became Welsh Secretary:



David Jones @DavidJonesMP

1m

Just goes to show what an unguided missile Twitter can be; consequently how potentially dangerous it is.

[Details](#)

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David Jones @DavidJonesMP

2m

One wrong call was response to my "darned" tweet (48 retweets). In fact, I wasn't told of appointment until 12 hours later.

[Details](#)



David Jones @DavidJonesMP

4m

Good piece by @CharlieBeckett on Twitter and the reshuffle: blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/09/... Frenetic 24 hrs. Many wrong, as well as right calls.

[Details](#)