

Socrates, tabloids and trust: how to preserve the flies in the ointment (guest blog)

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This article by Polis Summer School student Fritz Brouwer



A dead gadfly

Socrates may well have been a wise man. The leaders of fifth century BCE Athens, however, did not exactly appreciate his incessant stream of questions and rewarded him with the death of a martyr – a rather violent solution that all but put an end to gadfly mavericks in ancient societies.

It all sounds like discussions about media and politics today. In the Athenian democracy leaders emerged from a focus on the individual. Likewise, in today's age of declining adherence to the classic ideologies of socialism, liberalism, and conservatism, the need to establish oneself as a trustworthy personality has become vital to the election of politicians again.



A dead gadfly

In times of economic turmoil people elect those who come across as highly stable, and yes, even a bit dusty. Former Dutch PM, Jan Peter Balkenende, counts as a shining example of this movement – although his trustworthiness may have been enhanced by his outward similarity to Harry Potter.

Scandal Journalism

As Party attachment is decreasing, so the importance of trustworthiness of individual politicians continues to rise. This trustworthiness is reported on and manipulated by both new and traditional media in new forms of scandal journalism.

Twitter, for instance, not only allows politicians to share their personal opinions and bring themselves closer to the audience, but also forms a dramatically fast spread various kinds of rumours that are not necessarily positive.

The implications of this shift in political emphasis for Great Britain might be worth considering. Growing away from ideology-based politics towards trust-based politics requires the release of close social class-related ties.

Class Bound Britain

However, social mobility is comparatively low in the UK. This is confirmed by the OECD's 2010 Going for Growth Report, according to which Britain is more class-bound and has a much lower degree of social mobility than other Western democracies of similar economic and democratic standards.

In the words of Paul Zak, "nearly all political choices depend on trust – or a lack thereof." Yet, this year, a ComRes poll trust in politicians to have plummeted to a 10%. Journalists are not much better off, with only 13% believing them to be trustworthy mediators of the truth (whatever that may be in a post-modern, relativist world).

Is the partiality of populist British tabloids a part of the cure or is it part of the disease? Reporting negatively on the misdemeanour of politicians, highlighting scandals and emphasizing corruption problems definitely belongs to the role of the gadfly – which Oxford scholar Bent Flyvbjerg identifies as the 'identification of abuse of power'. But the tabloid culture is prone to blowing issues out of their proportion, so creating a larger distance between priggish

politician and victim voter.

Machiavellian Makeover

Would it not be more beneficial to the stability of the political system if national media would go easy on their leaders to ensure a higher degree of trust? Should politicians, like Machiavelli advised craft their image carefully?

But it is exactly this that has been prevented by a media that has the ability to tap and hack phones, break into all sorts of private conversations, and find out all about the human within, concealed by political masks.

Live And Let Lie

It is a sheer matter of living and letting live, really. The wisest thing might just be to follow Socrates in his 'apologeia', when he gracefully advised the Athenian government to not kill him for the reason that his death would whip the crowd into a fury. In the utopia of a pragmatic world, both politicians and journalists should be as trustworthy as possible.

In effect, a politician should be either completely trustworthy or present a carefully crafted image – just like Machiavelli's prince. And journalists – well, journalists should just speak the truth, however scandalous that may be. 2500 years after Socrates's condemnation for being a gadfly, politicians may at least be expected to have grown up a little.

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