

Notes on Britain's Spring Revolution

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The view from Bilbao

These are some notes on the British election, social media and mainstream journalism that I used for a presentation in Spain. It is an attempt to start understanding what happened in media terms during the campaign and what it tells us about the new political communications environment.

Much of the presentation was about graphs and video but here's the gist of what I was talking about.

The UK election of 2010 was the most extraordinary in post-war British history for a number of reasons – they were very close, unstable, dynamic – the media had a critical role as did the individual politicians – and the result has created an opportunity for a change in the political culture at least – and possibly the political system.

Because it was an exceptional election – and very specific to the UK context you might wonder what possible lessons can be drawn for a wider understanding of how political change can be effected through election campaigns in modern western liberal democracies.

But I would argue that what happened in Britain's Spring revolution was actually a reflection of much deeper and longer trends – and in political communications terms it was conditioned by a shift to networked mediation that is, in its diverse expressions, a universally-evident phenomenon.

There were two versions of what was going to happen in this election: new media conditions were either going to change everything or that the parties would be so defensive that nothing new would happen. Both were wrong.

The TV debates were the central dynamic. Although it is an established format, the live, direct channel they provided to the voter was new and significant. Especially for Nick Clegg and the Lib Dems.

The newspapers were struggling to find a role. They were under-confident and so reverted to old tactics instead of embracing new paradigms for connecting to their readers. They probably did not have a decisive impact and more generally felt out of touch with both campaign events and the general mood. This was summed up by the Sun's Obama/Cameron final front page 'Hope' which appeared not to resonate with anything in the campaign or the public mood.

New media platforms amplified certain aspects of the campaign (see the hundreds of versions on YouTube of Bigoted Woman) and helped condition the attempts by the parties to impose a 'broadcast' campaign (see the MyDavidCameron poster site). Millions more people saw the approved messages than the satirical versions or the Tweets. But the citizen-generated/accessed social media messages will have had far deeper impact per person per message.

Most importantly, the social media context accelerated the impact of events and the terms of perception.

Take Nick Clegg. Here's the media paradox. He is now deputy prime minister. He won the campaign in the mainstream media and on social media. Yet he effectively lost the election getting fewer seats and proportionally no more votes. Worse still – he was streets ahead and he blew it.

I think the only way to view Clegg is that he was a deserving beneficiary of a mediated public desire for a different kind of political process. People saw him as a suitable vehicle for their frustration with Old Politics. He embodied the promise of a more personal, pragmatic, independent, responsive political process.

But when it came to conferring power on him and his party, the Lib Dems were not able to offer people a coherent narrative around delivery. They wouldn't say how the new politics would work in practice. So they nearly blew the chance that they gained after the election thanks to Cameron, to set out that narrative in the Downing Street Rose Garden.

The Labour Party campaign was actually a success in saving the party from third place and locally there were surprising triumphs. This was partly because of a strong grass-roots campaign working on and off line. It was all despite Gordon Brown.

The significance of Brown in this context is not his presentational limits or the lack of any positive policy offering. The problem of Brown in the campaign was that in his body language, speech, and performance he represented the top down, aloof, separate, self-serving, mechanistic political discourse of old politics at its worst. 'Bigotgate' was not a one-off gaffe, it was symbolic of the Labour leader's whole campaign.

You don't have to swallow the idea that the Coalition is an idealistic venture designed to forge a new consensual politics to see that it does offer a break with the past. Even if it does not last, it suggests some important political communications ideas. The critical point is that these are born out of the lessons of the campaign and what has gone before – they are not some post-May 6th revelation:

- The promise of different process is as important as different policies
- The display of different behaviour by political leaders is as important as media performance
- To tap into the desire for more personal, value-orientated, pragmatic, performance by politicians is more than just campaign communications – it fosters public engagement and builds trust

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