

Politics, PR the media and trust: rules for a new road?

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Politics, public relations and the news media are supposed to have a mutually hostile relationship. And yet we have so much to learn from each other. And we have at least one thing in common: we have all lost the trust of the public.

The Internet and its associated technologies offer a chance for all three sectors to reinvent their relationship with the citizen. In the process, politicians, PR people and journalists will have to think much harder and deeper about what they do and how they do it. It may not be time to love each other, but we should certainly swap thoughts on how to cope with the digital age.

In [What Would Google Do?](#) Jeff Jarvis suggests that Public Relations people, like lawyers, are beyond the democratising, collaborative reach of the Internet. But he still feels that they should their work differently because of new communications behaviour online:

"It should be the job of PR advisors to convince clients that it is in their interest to be transparent and honest now that obfuscations and lies can be so easily exposed online"

PR is communications driven by naked market forces and so has learnt the practical online lessons quickest. It has been developing online marketing tools for some years. But has it really got to grips with the deeper changes involved? Yes, PR can use everything from Facebook to YouTube to plug products and ideas. But do the political spinners and policy lobbyists really understand the new relationships they are getting into?

British journalism, too, has woken up to the threat that Online search and publishing poses to its business model. Make no mistake, outside of the BBC, British broadcasting and newspapers are in serious crisis. This is part of a long-term trend. But the recent explosion of online news sources, added to the current economic recession, means that the current mainstream platforms for communicating political information and holding MPs to account are looking very shaky. The fact that the Daily Telegraph's revelations about MPs' expenses could bring Gordon Brown's Government down only serves to disguise the threat to the news media's watchdog role.



In the UK the private sector media has invested heavily and imaginatively in 360 degree newsrooms, 24 hour websites, and non-stop blogs. It has used video, audio, TV and mobile phones to go both hyperlocal and global in an effort to find new editorial communities. Quintessentially British newspapers like The Daily Mail and The Guardian now have more readers outside of the UK than here. However, the news media still struggles to make money out of all this activity. Meanwhile, its audience attention is draining away down the digital plug-hole.

Youtube if you want to

And as for politics in Britain. Yes, most MPs have desultory websites that tell an apathetic public how hard-working they are. New Labour created a Downing Street website with E-petitions and Gordon Brown started making videos for [YouTube](#). But most of this political new media effort has been wasted.

Well, go and watch that Gordon Brown [YouTube video](#) and weep. Why? Well, it's not just the false smile and the awkward gestures. It's the whole patronising, lecturing, one-way communicating thing. It is self-serving, top-down and driven by short-term tactical goals. It is using new media tools to fix an old and decrepit political machine.

It was the amateur political blogger [Paul Staines, aka Guido Fawkes](#), who broke this year's first big political scandal when he exposed how the Prime Minister's chief aide was plotting to spread libellous rumours about opponents on a specially created website. It was the classic example of how Old Politics failed to understand New Media.

Expense of shame

The independent MySociety website [They Work For You](#) has been providing non-partisan data on what MPs are doing for years, run by volunteers. Earlier, this year it created a [Facebook campaign](#) site to force the government to reveal the details of MPs' expenses.

The story had originally been set running by freelance journalist [Heather Brooke](#) who had tried to get details of MP's expenses through the new Freedom Of Information powers created a few years ago by this Labour Government. Among the northern Continental states you are familiar with the concept of open government but this is a novelty in the UK. The system resisted Brooke's requests and, indeed, MPs were on the verge of ruling against transparency on the details of their claims. The MySociety initiative played a critical part in reversing this policy of secrecy by revealing this manouvere which had been largely ignored by the mainstream media.

Now the Daily Telegraph has paid for the CD-Rom which gave them all the details anyway. The story has exploded from a small but significant online campaign to a massive media story that threatens to bring down this government and has undermined faith in the whole parliamentary political system. That, my friends, is what I call [Networked Journalism](#).

That is the new and complex reality of British political communications. If you want political influence you have to understand these new dynamics.

Data dictators

Britain has always had a peculiar constitutional settlement that governs how political communications operates. It is partly about the way our government is set up with two very strong parties who control MPs' behaviour. These parties alternate national leadership with almost dictatorial centralised powers. This is very different to the PR, coalition, federalist models of many Continental political systems.

Perhaps that is why that in the UK we have a vibrant political media which has both partisan and powerful newspapers and a dominant but balanced public service broadcasting system. The history of political communications in the UK is the history of how the media and the party machines have battled to control the public agenda.

Over the last 20 years that has meant a professionalisation of political communications. This was largely in response to the irresponsible and reckless abuse of press power by over-mighty media barons seeking to protect their business interests and personal political agendas. Governments (especially of the left) had to become better at using information to control the terms of political debate. Hence, the sterility and brutality of political communications under New Labour's Alastair Campbell. Unlike most people, I see him not as evil, but as a brilliant and brutal outcome of the failure of democratic political discourse in the UK.

From Newsnight to Netmums

Now, however, new media and new social forces are changing the way that people communicate. We, the citizen, now control our own information. We chose our media. Sometimes we even create it. We share it and interact with it. We mix it up. We are on Facebook while we watch TV. We link to blogs from newspaper websites. We are listening to the news while we order something on Amazon and post pictures of our friends on Flickr. We are more likely to talk politics on [Mumsnet](#) than [Newsnight](#). We are in charge.

This is not how politicians, journalists and PR were used to doing business with the public. So how do we get their attention and their trust back?

We all have to accept that we must share power with the people. We must all try to be where the public is instead of expecting them to come to us.

Power shifts

Don't ask the citizen to participate in your politics. Change your politics so that it reflects their lives.

Don't ask why the citizen doesn't want your version of the news. Change your news so it is relevant to their lives.

Don't tell the citizen why your product is so good, or why your idea so wonderful or why your service is cool. Show them, share it with them, offer something first.

Anyone involved in any aspect of political communications could learn from any of those maxims. This does not mean that there is no difference between politicians, PR and journalism. I think that it is important to have some robust, critical scepticism between all three. But we all three inhabit a networked world.

I have written about how this will transform journalism and politics in my book [SuperMedia](#). I think that it could create a much richer, more useful kind of news media. But it also applies to all social communication disciplines.

All organisations are becoming media organisations. In an Information Age the public expect us to be transparent and responsive. This is what we can do through new media technologies and practices. The public has shown immense enthusiasm for a networked world, it is about time the rest of us joined in.

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