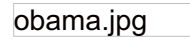


# Alpha Dogs: how the consultants corporatised campaigning (Book Review)

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2008/07/08/alpha-dogs-how-the-consultants-corporatised-campaigning-book-review/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2008/07/08/alpha-dogs-how-the-consultants-corporatised-campaigning-book-review/)

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 As [Barack Obama's](#) campaign moves from its grass-roots to its general election phase you can sense his spin-doctors tightening up on the rhetoric and the policy. But who makes the adjustments to a campaign like that? do they really know what works? do they care about the ends as well as means?

[James Harding's](#) book [Alpha Dogs](#) is a highly topical history of Sawyer-Miller, a firm of American political consultants who started as a small group of liberal pr and campaigners who ended up involved in power struggles from the Philipines to Peru. (They end up morphing into [Weber Shandwick](#))



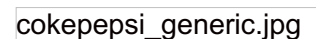
The former FT Washington correspondent and now [Times editor](#) puts this trend in to the overall context of globalisation:

*"More people eat , wear, and do the same things than ever before. Globalisation has homogenised the sonsumer. It is likely to do the same to the voter".*

Harding is clear that exporting these American tactics beyond the USA brought short-term political success but long-term problems:

*"...the disintegration of political institutions, the impact of new technologies and the emerging dominance of personality politics".*

Harding tells some wonderful stories of the black arts of public relations in both the political and corporate field. The whole story of Coca-Cola's failed attempt to reinvent their brand as "New Coke" back in the late 80s is symbolic of how to (mis-)manage change. The polling data and tests told the company that people would love the new recipe. But when it came to the reality of brand-change they rejected the new product on grounds of culture not taste. In a sense Sawyer-Miller reduced all politics to a battle between Coke and Pepsi.



## New technology

Sawyer-Miller used polling data, strategic planning and new technology to mastermind dynamic campaigns. In the 1960s-90s that new technology was not the Internet, it was television. But David Sawyer made the important point that to exploit the technology you have to understand the people who use it:

*"Something is happening in politics called the electronic democracy. And something is happening in the world and it ain't politics in any form know before and it's gonna change everything. Everything has to be reinspected. What was generally thought of as a powerful medium, isn't. It's not television, it's people".*

## The British are coming



There's plenty of British interest in *Alpha Dogs*, too. We all knew that Blair's chief public relations strategist Phillip Gould was deeply influenced by American methods. He pops up in the midst of those formative campaigns for the new centre-left in the early 90s. It is all in Gould's book from 1998, *Unfinished Revolution*. That book should be read alongside Harding's if you are at all interested in learning about the future of political campaigning from its past.

I hadn't twigged to the fact that our current Foreign Office Minister [Lord Malloch](#)

[Brown](#) (our Minister for "Africa, Asian and the UN") had been quite so deeply involved in Sawyer-Miller. He was central to their legendary campaign for [Cory](#)

[Aquino](#) in the Philippines, for example. This was before the former journalist went on to work for the World Bank and UN. It's clear that Malloch-Brown was an inspired but pretty ruthless campaign consultant who now feels some remorse (in hindsight) for the precedent his company had set:



*"I am appalled by our legacy. I see it as a complete vulgarisation of what we sought to do...it moved much more in the direction of vanity consulting on both sides"*

### More power online

And what is to come? Harding points out that the Internet now gives the campaign consultants even more data about voters. It may be that New Media gives the spin doctors even more power:

"On the Internet people are even more revealing when they type in what they are looking for on Google; they declare their interests and values, their hopes and fears. The search engine forecasts that in a few years it will be able to put together profiles that identify an individual's professional ambitions and private aspirations. Political professionals are only just beginning to imagine the political uses of knowing the electorate, voter by voter, in such details"

*Alpha Dogs* is an intelligent and lively narrative of a fascinating aspect of global political life. It manages to be accessible without indulging in those dreadful scene-setting details ("He put out his third Marlborough as his Chrysler limo approached the Starbucks outside the Pentagon...").



The book reveals Sawyer-Miller to be typical of the contradictions of so much of America political life: idealistic and yet money-grabbing; passionate and yet professional; courageous and committed and yet ultimately deeply compromised by the corporate.

*Alpha Dogs* by James Harding (Farra, Strauss, Giraud)

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