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Exploring the Paradox of Liberal Democracy: More Political Communications Equals Less Public Trust

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There is now a well-ingrained popular view across the country that our political institutions and their politicians are failing, untrustworthy, and disconnected from the great mass of the British people. This last point cannot be stressed too strongly. We have been struck by just how wide and deep is the contempt felt for formal politics in Britain. (The Power Inquiry, March 2006)

I always ask myself 'Why is this lying bastard, lying to me?' (Jeremy Paxman, BBC TV interviewer)

How do you tell when a politician is lying? When you see his lips moving? (Stand-up comedians, too numerous to mention)

The Problem

In *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama asks 'is liberal democracy prey to serious internal contradictions, contradictions so serious that they will eventually undermine it as a political system?' The question this article poses is, could one of these 'internal contradictions' be the 'problem' of political communications?

The 'problem' can be summarised thus: democratic systems require that, in the interests of transparency, and ultimately, accountability, citizens should be kept as fully informed as possible by governments (and others). Hence, all political communications have, as their final objective, the accountability of politicians at the ballot box. As a result, all political communications have what can be described as 'above-' and 'below-the-line' content, with the above-the-line being the actual content of the message, and the below-the-line, the implicit one of 'think better of me and my colleagues, think worse of my opponents'. Thus, the 'political communications paradox', which is that voters want politicians to be honest and accountable but this very demand means that politicians (and their proxies), implicitly, have another agenda in operation when they communicate with the public, that of securing their approval and subsequent electoral support. This leads to communications that are produced largely to achieve a positive impact rather than public enlightenment, and this, over time, leads to the trust that is fundamental to the workings of a democratic system being undermined. This has two effects. First, governments make communications, rather than delivery, their real priority. Second, trust, not just in politicians, but in the political system as a whole, wanes. This in turn endangers the very system it was designed to underpin.

'Informed consent'

To function properly, representative democratic systems require 'informed consent'. This does not just mean the public receiving information (that they trust) from governments about what they have done, what they are doing and what they are planning to do. It also requires that opposition parties are given the space to communicate their

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views on the government's record, its future plans and their own alternative proposals. Without these activities there can be no transparency, no accountability and, ultimately, no democracy. Yet 'informed consent' is not an unproblematic concept. There are those—Herman and Chomsky for example—who argue that this 'consent' is artificial or 'manufactured' because in a capitalist system 'money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their message across to the public'.[1] As philosopher Onora O'Neill noted in her Reith Lectures, 'informed consent also presupposes that recipients will trust the information they receive—certainly not something that can be taken for granted in contemporary Western democracies'. [2]

Non-stop information

Thus we have the first of several of the 'problems' of political communication—namely that transparency, whilst in theory a *sine qua non* of democratic systems, might in fact be an obstacle. One explanation for this lies in the sheer quantity of information—spun or unspun—that the public, or their intermediaries (the mass media), have to process on a daily, and sometimes hourly, basis. Can there really be 'informed consent' when news is showered at us from ever thicker newspapers, from 24-hour news on television and radio, from blogs, websites, wikis, mobile phones and so on? In such a situation many people's instincts are to switch off, either metaphorically or literally, which is happening in ever greater numbers.

This growth in the sheer quantity of news now available to the public has coincided (perhaps caused) an increase in the flow of information from government to the media, and hence to the public. As just one indicator, before 1997 an average of around 400 press releases a month were issued to the media by Whitehall departments; that figure is now around 800. And there has been a concomitant rise in other aspects of the government's public relations and media operations: its total spend on advertising, marketing and public relations in 2007/08 was £391 million, compared to £111 million in 1997;[3] and the Government Communications Network tells us that there are now 'around 4,000 [government] communicators registered with the GCN website'.[4] This growth is indicative of a political communications system in which politicians feel obliged to fill all available media outlets with their initiatives for fear that if they don't, their opponents will move in to fill the vacuum. Hence, the more news spaces available, the more pronouncements politicians feel obliged to make and thus the more PR staff they need to employ who, in turn, go on to generate even more pronouncements.

Telling it straight?

However, it's not just a matter of the quantity of government information overwhelming the public, but there is also an issue of quality, specifically of the 'trustworthiness', or otherwise, of the information that is being disseminated. This is an issue that has been addressed by the Government Communications Network itself, which stipulates in its code of practice, that communications activities by government press officers should be 'relevant to government responsibilities . . . be objective and explanatory, not biased or polemical . . . and not liable to be misrepresented as being party political'. Yet the same set of guidance notes tells government press officers that they should 'present, describe and justify the thinking behind the policies of the minister, be ready to promote the policies of the department and the gov-

ernment as a whole and make as positive a case as the facts warrant'.

Taking the two instructions together, civil servants (mindful of the demands of the code, the wishes of their ministers and their own careers) are being asked to make daily judgements of Solomon. For surely it is problematic, at the very least, to urge government press officers to 'justify the thinking behind government policy and . . . help the public—by helping journalists—to understand the policies of the government of the day' without appearing to be anything other than cheerleaders for the government?

An additional problem flows from the very nature of the news production business. Politicians, and their proxies, are highly susceptible to both explicit and implicit media pressure. They want to maximise the positive, and minimise the negative; and in order to achieve this they have to 'play the media's game' by meeting the news media's own criteria as to what constitutes 'news'. This means presenting their information in ways that suggest that:

- it is 'new' (when many government initiatives are not);
- it represents part of a coherent 'narrative' (when, in the real world, many situations and processes are fragmented);
- it provides immediate and readily understandable solutions to recognisable problems (when, in fact, life is usually more complex); and
- it is 'dramatic' (when most processes of public delivery are not).

Good news only

These journalistic imperatives create a situation in which the authors of government press releases clearly feel obliged to present an almost non-stop torrent of good news, exciting initiatives and departmental triumphs. A flavour of this can be gleaned by sampling the press releases on the Department of Health's website. In the first three weeks of May 2008 we learnt, among other things, that:

'Old age is the new middle age'

'Dying patients and the bereaved to benefit from investment in hospital environments'

'Dramatic improvement in waiting times for tests'

'Health Secretary welcomes recommendations to improve GP access'

'Companies say "Breast Wishes" to mums for National Breastfeeding Awareness Week'

'Attitudes to mental health remain broadly sympathetic'

'£50m to double time nurses spend on patient care'

'£77 million to boost stroke services'

'Social Enterprise Fund open for business'

Nor was May an exceptional month; April, in anything, was even better. Department of Health press releases for that month revealed that:

'National immunisation programme continues to save lives'

'No deaths in under 19's last year from meningitis'

'Genetics progress embedding scientific advances into healthcare'

'Cornish children beat life odds thanks to 60 years of NHS care'

'New Biomedical Research Units announced'

'More independent sector treatment centre schemes'

'NHS staff survey shows significant improvement in hospital infection control'

'New NHS projects to improve occupational health for local businesses'

'Proposed three-year pay award is good news for staff, the NHS and patients'

'Health workers to tackle climate change'

'Health Secretary promotes greater NHS support for deployed armed forces'

'Millions to benefit from improved access to treatment, check-ups and health advice'

'£24 million boost for health and social care'

'Stronger voice and better care for patients'

'Vascular checks will prevent thousands of heart attacks and strokes'

The overwhelming message is one of almost unremitting good news. Hence, it is almost inevitable that press officers will find it difficult, if not impossible, to strike the right balance between delivering messages that 'justify government policies . . . and make a positive case' whilst at the same time being 'objective, explanatory and unbiased'.

At the same time that the public gullet is being stuffed with this non-stop diet of 'good news', the opinion polls show that levels of distrust in politicians and the media continues to grow. One small but significant barometer of this decline in trust can be seen in the credibility that the public gives to official statistics released by the government. Mori found that 65 per cent of those questioned believed that official figures were changed to support politicians' arguments.[5] And the Treasury Select Committee has reported that faith in official statistics had plummeted further, with only 17 per cent of adults in the United Kingdom believing the Office of National Statistics produces its data without political interference.[6]

So why this remorseless focus on 'good news' and the 'hard sell'? To state the obvious, representative democracy involves politicians getting themselves elected and subsequently re-elected. Nothing wrong with that—without a 'selfish political gene' that programmes politicians to survive and reproduce, or at least ensure that his or her party 'reproduces', there would be no effective democracy. Yet this means that for politicians, whether consciously or unconsciously, the next election (or their own personal 'legacy') is always at, or near, the forefront of their calculations; and this preoccupation inevitably extends to those working for politicians as well.

This state of affairs is encapsulated in the phrase the 'permanent campaign', which was first used by the American political journalist Sidney Blumenthal more than a quarter of a century ago. He employed it to describe a *modus operandi* that 'remakes government into an instrument designed to sustain an elected official's popularity'.[7] At first glance, the notion of a 'permanent campaign' might appear to be the negation of democratic practice, given that it seems to imply that the 'power of incumbency' should be used to cement the existing political elite in power, but, in another sense, 'the permanent campaign' can be seen to be representative democracy in its quintessential form.

Communications centre-stage

A key characteristic of the 'permanent campaign' can be found in the core statement on the United Kingdom's Government Communication Network's homepage, which states that: 'Communication is an integral part of government.'[8] Howell James, the Permanent Secretary of Government Communications, took this notion one stage further when he described his own primary function as 'to make the voice of the public heard at the policy table so that government develops and delivers services which reflect customer expectations and desires'.[9] This is an interesting way for the head of a government communication network to describe his role; it bears some striking similarities to the concept of the 'transmission belt' developed under communist regimes in which the Communist Party and the trade unions were seen as transmission belts shifting information between the government and the people. Yet whilst in authoritarian societies it is understandable that governments should see the need for mechanisms to keep

them in touch with public opinion, surely in a representative democracy this is the essential function of the 'representatives' (that is, those elected to speak on behalf of the people)?

The Howell James/GCN positioning represents an archetypal statement of a government and governing party that political marketing scholars would characterise as market-orientated; one that is tilted to what its 'customers' (that is, the voters) want, rather than 'sales'- or 'producer'-orientated parties that seek to 'sell' themselves and their policies to the voters in line with some overall ideological position.[10] In government, a market-orientated party has to keep itself focused on the 'customer'; otherwise it loses its direction and sense of purpose.

In such an environment, communications takes on an enhanced role; indeed, the 2004 Phillis Report into Government Communications (a report that was fully endorsed by the government) stated, as one of its over-arching principles, that: 'Communications should be an equal and equally respected third in the trinity of Government policy making, public service delivery and communications.'[11] This is a key concept in understanding the 'problem' of political communications, for it suggests, indeed it states, that communicating government policy is equally as important as developing and implementing it. This author was critical of this approach, writing at the time when the Phillis Report was first published: 'It is understandable how it [the notion that presentation is as important as policy] might appear that way in opposition, but in government, it should not be the case. For, while communications should not be an "afterthought" in the policy development process—this does not, or should not, mean that communications is as important as policy making or policy delivery.'[12]

Too much of a good thing?

It was Alastair Campbell, while still the Prime Minister's Press Secretary, who admitted that the way New Labour had practised communications had, in fact, become a hindrance to good government. He conceded that while winning and maintaining media support had been a major priority for Labour in opposition, it had remained so once they had achieved office and eventually cost the government dear in terms of trust. He wrote:

> We did make a concerted effort to get a better dialogue with some parts of the media where before there had been pretty much none. This was of course about reaching their readers. . . . But therein lay the seeds of spin. The consequences were greater than we anticipated. We appeared, and perhaps we were, over-controlling, manipulative. People stopped trusting what we had to say.[13]

This lack of trust is a more complex phenomenon than might first appear and did not vanish with the demise of Campbell. In the run-up to the 2005 general election the Labour party came across what it thought to be a very odd phenomenon.[14] All the factual indicators seemed to show that health and education—two of their key areas—were improving, yet their polling was demonstrating a paradox. Whereas people said they thought their own schools/hospitals *were* improving, they also thought they were exceptional (and lucky) and that nationally things were getting worse. One possible explanation was that people no longer believed what government was telling them (aided and abetted by some newspapers) and hence discounted their own personal experience precisely because it seemed to accord with a government line they were almost programmed to disbelieve.

Hence, we have the 'political communications paradox'. Democracy is based on trust; there is an implicit contract between voters and politicians—if voters elect a politician, she or he will do as they

promised. However, in the very act of communicating their willingness to try and abide by that contract, politicians risk losing that trust because they are communicating with electoral considerations uppermost in their minds. The more they communicate, the more they are doubted. Hence, the trust that is fundamental to the workings of a democratic system is constantly being undermined.

The death of democracy?

So is this an argument that democracy's Armageddon is fast approaching? The answer is 'not necessarily', because just like other organisms, democracies seem to exhibit some 'selfish gene' characteristics of their own, which can lead to self-renewal. It does this in a number of ways. First, we see the phenomena of the rise of new parties and/or leaders who portray themselves as 'new' and 'untainted', as 'trust-restorers'. In the United States, the emergence of presidential candidates who come from, or market themselves as coming from, 'outside the Washington beltway' is a common occurrence. Reagan, Carter and George W. Bush all laid claim to being outsiders, as does Obama. The same phenomenon can also be seen in the United Kingdom. The past two decades have seen the creation of the Social Democrats, their metamorphosis into the Liberal Democrats, the birth of New Labour and the emergence of David Cameron's new Conservative party. In terms of leaders, Thatcher, Blair and Cameron all campaigned for their respective party leaderships less on the basis of continuity, and more as 'trust-restorers' committed to making a fresh start. This is perhaps why Gordon Brown had such a hard time convincing the electorate that he was 'new' and 'different' because he made such a major issue of his continuity with the New Labour project—indeed, as one of its architects, perhaps he had little choice.

Yet it is not just the politicians and parties that undergo this process of renewal. There is also an almost balancing of the power relationship between politicians and the Civil Service in the communications field. Following the Phillis Report in 2004, the Civil Service reasserted its influence by ensuring that the new Government Communications Network was headed by a civil servant (Howell James) and also removed from Alastair Campbell's successor at Downing Street any executive powers over civil servants. This was a near-repeat of the pattern of events under the Conservatives when the Whitehall machine succeeded in ensuring that Bernard Ingham, Margaret Thatcher's powerful Press Secretary (who also headed the government's information service), was followed by a succession of career civil servants.

And the 'corruption' of communications that, as described above, results from the over-supply of information and the over-emphasis on the positive also gives rise to new forms of communication that by-pass the perceived institutional roadblocks. The past decade has witnessed a phenomenal growth in alternative sites of political information and discussion, including political websites, email discussion groups, message boards, newsgroups and the growth in 'citizen journalism'. Yet it is in the rise of the political blogosphere that we have seen the most exciting developments in terms of alternative forms of political communication. Whilst the United States has probably the most pronounced political blogosphere—with sites such as the Drudge Report and the Huffington Post becoming major media in their own right—it is also a lively space of political contestations in the United Kingdom. The magazine *Total Politics* in a new publication estimates that there are now around 1,500 political blogs currently active in Britain.[15]

Burying bad news

Finally, the whole process of corrupted political communications provokes a reaction, often from the very people who are part of it. The processes of 'spin' excite a great deal of journalistic interest and in exposing the politicians' communication methods (of which they are part), the media play an important role in undermining it. This increased coverage of the political communications process has made it that much more difficult for politicians to continue with 'business as usual' as far as their communication activities are concerned. A classic case of this came in December 2006 when Tony Blair became the first serving British Prime Minister to be interviewed by the police as part of a criminal investigation (into the alleged sale of political honours). The interview, many newspapers suggested, was timed by Downing Street to take place on the same day as the publication of the final report into the death of Diana, Princess of Wales; and the government also used the same day to announce it was dropping a major investigation into alleged corruption involving the Saudi government and British Aerospace. In addition, five other major policy announcements were slipped out that day.

However, if there was a plan to 'bury bad news', the newspapers were not slow to pick up on it—drawing comparisons with 11 September 2001, when a Labour media advisor, Jo Moore, suggested that the attack on the twin towers in New York made it a good day to 'bury bad news'. Newspapers headlines on the day following Tony Blair's police interview in December 2006 included:

'Honours police question Blair on a very good day to bury bad news' (*Daily Telegraph*)

'How they tried to bury bad news again' (*Daily Mail*)

'Cash for peerages; Blair questioned by police on day of "burying bad news"' (*The Independent*)

'Tony cops it; PM is accused of burying bad news over honours quiz' (*The Mirror*)

In conclusion

It would be easy, but fallacious, to conclude that the explanation for this breakdown in trust can be laid either at the doors of the government (in terms of the information flow discussed in this article), or the media. Major social trends do not usually lend themselves to simple cause/effect relationships. Hence, there is no sustainable argument for seeking to limit the flow of information passing from government (and others) to the public; nor to circumscribe how the media deals with this information; nor is it realistic to expect governments and others parties to take self-denying ordinances and not seek to put the best 'spin' on their pronouncements. However, there is a real problem and the health of our democracy requires more than simply waiting for the self-correcting mechanisms, described above, to assert themselves.

One proposal might to introduce some level of non-punitive regulation into the process. The Press Complaints Commission could be empowered to investigate complaints from organisations and individuals about newspapers' political coverage. The PCC's current Code of Practice states: 'The Press, whilst free to be partisan, must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact.'[16] Yet distinguishing between comment, conjecture and fact does not preclude newspapers from seeking to 'deliberately mislead'. Thus there could be an amendment to the Code that would allow the Commission to receive complaints under this rubric. They would also need to amend their rules so that they could receive complaints about political coverage from the general public, as currently they only entertain complaints from directly affected parties. As a result, they could be better enabled to hold

newspapers to account for their coverage of politics.

On the other side of the divide, an independent body could be established, appointed by and answerable to, members of the relevant select committees in the Commons and the Lords.[17] This body would have oversight of all publicity material emanating from government and other public bodies, and would be able to receive complaints about any perceived 'lack of 'fairness' in the way information was being presented. The body would have the power to make rulings and recommendations, but, beyond publicising its findings, would have no formal powers of sanction.

Neither of these two measures would amount to a 'cure'. However, given the possibility that (as noted at the beginning of this article) Fukuyama was right when he argued that liberal democracy might be 'prey to serious internal contradictions', these two proposals do represent a way of treating the symptoms of these contradictions—at least those caused by the political communications process—even if they do not represent a cure. Nonetheless, if they are effectively applied they should enable the body politic to continue functioning in a way that defies Fukuyama's final judgement that the contradictions inherent in democracies might be 'so serious that they will eventually undermine it as a political system'. In this, as in his other predictions, he might just be wrong.

Notes

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2 O. O'Neill, *The 2002 BBC Reith Lecture*. http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2002/lecturer.shtml (accessed 1 September 2008).
3 Figures from Conservative Party Press Release 'Labour Spin Continues', 28 August 2008. http://www.conservatives.com/tile.do?def=news.story.page&obj_id=146304 (accessed 1 September 2008).
4 http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/iam/communities/gcn.asp (accessed 1 September 2008).
5 Quoted in 'It is New Labour, as much as the public, that lacks trust', by P. Toynbee (*The Guardian*, 22 November 2005).
6 Toynbee, 'It is New Labour, as much as the public'.
7 S. Blumenthal, *The Permanent Campaign*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1982, p. 7.
8 http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/about/comms/index.asp (accessed 1 September 2008).
9 J. Howell, 'Crafting the message', *Whitehall & Westminster World*, 8 February 2005, p. 10.
10 See J. Lees Marshment, *Political Marketing and British Political Parties*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2008.
11 'Phillis Report', *An Independent Review of Government Communications Presented to the Minister for the Cabinet Office*, London, The Stationery Office, 2004, p. 31.
12 I. Gaber, "Alastair Campbell, exit stage left: Do the "Phillis" recommendations represent a new chapter in political communications or is it "business as usual"?', *Journal of Public Affairs*, vol. 4, no 4, 2004, pp. 365–73.
13 A. Campbell, 'Time to bury spin', *British Journalism Review*, vol. 13, no 4, 2002, p. 19.
14 Private conversations with Labour Party aides.
15 I. Dale, ed., *Total Politics Guide to Political Blogging in the UK, 2008–09*, Tunbridge Wells, Politico's Media, 2008.
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17 House of Commons' Select Committee on Public Administration and Culture, Media and Sport and the House of Lords' Select Committee on Communications.

