

## **Too much of a good thing: the 'problem' of political communications in a mass media democracy**

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### **Abstract**

Francis Fukuyama asks: “...is liberal democracy prey to serious internal contradictions, contradictions so serious that they will eventually undermine it as a political system?” This paper argues that one of these 'internal contradictions' is the political communications process and it can be sufficiently serious to undermine the democratic system - but such an undermining is not inevitable. The problem can be described as follows:

Democratic systems require that citizens are kept fully informed by governments (and others) in the interests of transparency and ultimately accountability. Hence, all political communications have, as their final objective, the accountability of politicians at the ballot box. Thus all political communications have what can be described as 'above' and 'below' the line content. The above the line is the actual content of the message, the below the line is the implicit one of “think better of me and my colleagues think worse of my opponents”. Consequently, no matter how personally honest and open an individual politician might be the democratic system requires her or him to be always thinking about securing a successful result at the ballot box. Thus we have the 'political communications paradox'. Voters want politicians to be honest and accountable but this very demand means that politicians, implicitly, always have to have another agenda in operation when they are communicating with the public i.e. securing their approval and then their support. As a result the trust which is a fundamental to the workings of a democratic system is constantly being undermined. This has two effects. First, that governments are obliged to make communications, rather than delivery, their real priority and second trust, not just in politicians but in the political system as a whole, tends to wane over time, which in turn endangers the very system it was designed to underpin. But this decline is not inevitable because the system has some in-built self-correcting mechanisms. These include: the rise of new parties and/or leaders who portray themselves as 'new' and 'untainted' - New Labour, New Conservatives etc, an almost regular 're-balancing' of the power relationship that exists between politicians and the civil service, particularly in the communications field, the rise of new forms of communication that seek to by-pass the institutional roadblocks that are perceived as being the cause of the problems and finally increased coverage of the political process - of 'spin' - makes it more difficult for politicians to continue with 'business as usual' as far as their communication activities are concerned.

**Keywords:** media, politics, democracy, spin, government communications, government press officers, government news releases

## Too much of a good thing: the 'problem' of political communication in a mass media democracy

“ .... 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<sup>1</sup>**

"I always ask myself 'Why is this lying bastard, lying to me?'"

**Jeremy Paxman BBC TV interviewer<sup>2</sup>**

"How do you tell when a politician is lying? When you see his lips moving?"

**Stand-up comedians (too numerous to mention)**

In *The End of History and the Last Man* the American scholar Francis Fukuyama asks “ ..is liberal democracy prey to serious internal contradictions, contradictions so serious that they will eventually undermine it as a political system?”<sup>3</sup> This paper asks, could one of these 'internal contradictions' relate to the 'problem' of political communication? In this context political communication is taken to refer to the two-way flow of information between government and government bodies (at all levels) and politicians (of all parties) and the public? And is this 'problem', in part, related to the fact that whereas, with non-democratic political systems, the key issue is that of there being too little political communications, whilst in modern democratic systems, and specifically in the UK in the 21st century, the 'problem' appears to be one of over-supply?

The other question to be addressed is whether this 'problem' of political communication is so serious that it has the potential to undermine democracy? Or do liberal democracies develop feedback, and self-correcting, mechanisms that ensure the system's continuing survival?

To some extent what follows is 'Hamlet, without the Prince' for this analysis examines the flow of political communications, in terms of the originators i.e. the Government etc. and the public and largely ignores the very large question as to the extent to which the mass media add their own intentional and/or accidental distortions to this flow. This is a major issue which has been addressed by many scholars in recent years, including by this author<sup>4</sup>.

The 'problem' of political communications can be summarised thus:

- Democratic systems require that citizens be kept fully informed by governments (and others) in the interests of transparency, and ultimately, accountability.
- 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. The above-the-line being the actual content of the message, the below-the-line, the implicit one of “think better of me and my colleagues, think worse of my opponents”.
- Thus, the 'political communication paradox' - 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 i.e. securing their approval and subsequent electoral support.
- This leads to communications which are produced largely to achieve a positive impact rather than public enlightenment, and this, over time, leads to the trust which is a 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 which in turn endangers the very system it was designed to underpin.

Representative democratic systems require 'informed consent'. In other words, for the system to work effectively, citizens should be equipped with the knowledge that will enable them to properly to carry out their electoral obligations. 'Informed consent' does not just mean the public receiving information (that they trust) about the activities of governments (and others) about what they have done, what they are doing and are planning to do. It also requires that opposition parties are given the space to communicate their 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.

But 'informed consent' is not an unproblematic concept. There are those, Herman and Chomsky in particular<sup>5</sup>, 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."<sup>6</sup> And, as philosopher Onora O'Neill noted in her 2002 Reith Lecture, 'informed consent' also presupposes that recipient's will trust the information they receive - certainly not something that can be taken for granted in contemporary Western democracies. O'Neill points out, that transparency, far from enhancing trust among the general public can itself be damaging, she writes:

" ..complete openness and transparency has done little to build or restore public trust. On the contrary, trust seemingly has receded as transparency has advanced. Perhaps on reflection we should not be wholly surprised. It is quite clear that the very technologies that spread information so easily and efficiently are every bit as good at spreading misinformation and disinformation. Some sorts of openness and transparency may be bad for trust." <sup>7</sup>

Thus we have the first of several of the problematics 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, faced with the vast quantities of information that daily confront us, most people's instincts are to switch off, either metaphorically or literally?

It is instructive to look at how this flow of information has increased since 1997. Two years before Labour came into power, government departments issued an average of 476 news releases a month; in 1998, the first full year of New Labour, that figure doubled to 858<sup>8</sup> and that flow has continued unabated - in 2004 it was running at 807 a month. The details are as follows:

**Government Press Notices Issued January to October 2004<sup>9</sup>**

Department	Total Release s
Attorney General's Office	24
Cabinet Office	81

Department for Constitutional Affairs	467
Department for Culture, Media and Sport	179
Department for Education and Skills	141
Department for International Development	20
Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs	1065
Department for Transport	599
Department for Work and Pensions	255
Department of Health	396
Department of Trade and Industry	1492
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	597
HM Treasury	197
Home Office	458
Ministry of Defence	349
Office of The Deputy Prime Minister	854
Prime Minister's Office	95
TOTAL	7269
Monthly Average	807

Table 1

And issuing a press release is not an end itself. Most releases result in a stream of follow-up inquiries from journalists. The Home Office Press Office was monitored for a six-week period in 1999. That monitoring found that the weekly number of telephone calls coming into its press office was as follows

**Telephone Calls Received by the Home Office Press Office April/May 1999:**<sup>10</sup>

Week	26 Apr	3 May	10 May	17 May	24 May	31 May
Phonecalls	2378	2226	2648	3146	2422	1912

Table 2

This is a staggering amount of traffic for a single press office to handle. At the time the Home Office had 21 press officers (not all of whom were 'front line' staff handling media

inquiries).<sup>11</sup> The average number taking calls at any one time was 12. This meant that on any one day each press officer was handling more than 40 calls.

There is a further, perhaps more profound, problem than simply one of the amount of information being generated by government and that relates to the difficulties the Government's own guidelines create for civil servants supposedly putting out 'neutral news'. These guidelines, issued by the Government Communications Network, are made publicly available and the relevant section reads

"The following basic criteria have been applied to government communications by successive administrations:

it should be relevant to government responsibilities;

it should be objective and explanatory, not biased or polemical;

it should not be - or liable to be - misrepresented as being party political"<sup>12</sup>

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 government as a whole.

Do make as positive a case as the facts warrant."<sup>13</sup>

This might sound simple in theory but in practice it is complicated. Taking the two instructions together, career 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[ing] the public - by helping journalists - to understand the policies of the government of the day', without becoming cheer-leaders for government.

An additional issue 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'. What this means in practice is meeting journalists' criteria as to what constitutes 'news'. This requires them to present 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 and non-chronological)
- it provides immediate and readily understandable solutions to recognisable problems (when, in fact, life is usually more complex)
- and that it is 'dramatic' (when most processes of public delivery are not).

A review of all the news releases issued in the first half of 2006 by two of the Government's biggest spending, and highest profile, departments - Education and Health - provides a graphic example. To read through the 286 releases issued by these two departments one gains a picture of a seemingly non-stop round of initiatives, announcements and achievements.

#### ANALYSIS OF PRESS NOTICES ISSUED IN FIRST HALF OF 2006<sup>14</sup>

Type of News Release	Dept of Education	Dept of Health
Initiatives	35	52
Announcements	12	41
Visits/launches	9	14
Policy statements	12	21
Reviews/consultations	10	10
Statistics	8	53
<b>Total</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>200</b>

Table 3

The Department for Education and Skills issued 86 releases in this period - an average of 3.3 a week. Of these 86 almost half - 35 - were about new initiatives being taken by the Department; a further 12 involved announcements, covering new appointments, the implementation of new rules and regulations and so forth; and nine involved launches of new programmes, centres etc. It is significant that in this period the Department announced a further 10 reviews and consultations, indicating that this level of almost frenetic activity' was going to be ongoing.

Activity, at least in terms of the issuing of news releases, was apparently even more frenetic in the Department of Health. In the first six months of 2006 no fewer than 200 releases emanated from the Department - an average of 7.7 a week, or more than one

every working day. Admittedly a significant number - 53- were statistical news releases which the Department is obliged to issue, but almost the same number - 52 - contained news of new departmental initiatives; and a further 41 were announcements of new appointments, new measures etc.

A flavour of these releases can be gleaned just by taking one day at random. On April 7th 2006 the Department of Health website displayed the following press releases: <sup>15</sup>

- Dozens of new doctors surgeries and health centres this year
- New GP contract combines better patient care and good value for money
- GPs encouraged to tackle more long-term conditions, including dementia, depression, kidney disease and obesity
- New era begins for NHS dentistry
- Waiting lists continue to fall despite winter pressures

The overwhelming message appears to be: "It's all good news - and it's happening here and now at a surgery near you." In such a situation it is almost inevitable that press office staff will find it difficult to find 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"<sup>16</sup>.

One of these news releases is worth examining in a little more detail, exemplifying as it does, the dilemma outlined above. The opening sentence' of the release, headlined "New era begins for NHS dentistry", reads:

"Claims of a mass exodus of dentists from the NHS proved unfounded as the great majority of dentists have signed up to new dental contracts, announced health minister Rosie Winterton today."

This related to a controversy that followed a claim by the British Dental Association, the body representing the majority of dentists, that the Government was offering its members

new contracts on terms that were less favourable than those they had previously worked under. As a result the BDA warned that thousands of dentists would refuse to sign up. Irrespective of the rights and wrongs of the BDA's claim, the release on the day of the new scheme began, clearly took a highly partisan position by leading on, what the Department of Health, saw as its 'victory' over the recalcitrant dentists.

It has to be said that the Department's own assessment of the 'success' of the new scheme did not appear to be shared by the national press which headlined their stories:-

"Million patients lose NHS dentists"  
"2,000 dentists quit NHS rather than sign new contracts"  
"Dentists pull out"  
"3 million patients left without NHS dentists by Labour"  
"1M Dumped by Dentists"  
"One in 10 dentists refuses to sign contract"<sup>17</sup>

Nor were the press office's heroic efforts to put a positive spin on their story helped, when their own minister, Rosie Winterton, when she described the figures as "quite gloomy"<sup>18</sup> All of which raises the question as to the extent to which, in this instance, the Department of Health press officers were fulfilling their duty to provide information that was "objective and explanatory, not biased or polemical"<sup>19</sup>

However, this is to argue in terms of the 'letter of the law' as opposed to common sense. Governments are large organisations that need to communicate what they are doing. It would be a strange world indeed in which press officers employed by the Government sought to act like independent journalists, making news judgements about the Government's programme - supporting that which they approved of and opposing that which they didn't - and basing their news releases on these judgements. This would clearly be a world of fantasy democracy. However, that is the burden that is apparently placed upon them by the guidance notes they work under - notes that require them to publicise what the government of the day is doing in 'positive' terms, whilst at the same time working:

"to secure an impartial and objective presentation of the case that avoids inaccuracy, inconsistency or bias"<sup>20</sup>

There is clearly a need for a healthy dose of realism to infect this particular part of the body politic. A recognition is required of the fact that government press officers are not

objective purveyors of neutral information, they are, to use a term that they themselves reject 'spin doctors' <sup>21</sup>. In evidence given to the Phillis Inquiry, which looked into the whole process of Government Communications, <sup>22</sup> this author argued:

"I have always believed that the British civil service tradition of impartiality is a critical element in the success of governance in this country. I maintain this view. However, as a result of the developments I have outlined in my book (*The Westminster Tales: the 21st century crisis in political journalism* <sup>23</sup>) I believe that we are now moving into an era in which civil servants working for the government in an information capacity have to operate with different rules from those pertaining to their colleagues elsewhere in Whitehall.

I believe that the attempt to distinguish press officers - as neutral purveyors of information - from 'spin doctors' is fallacious. It is hard, if not impossible, to distinguish between being positive and upbeat in one's presentation of government information and 'spinning'. Basically, both are the same process of presenting the government of the day in the best possible light. This extends not just to accentuating the positive but also to minimising the negative.

For example, a couple of years ago I was advising a research organisation (which had central government as one of its main clients) about how they might best maximise their positive media coverage. What I found was that when their findings reflected well on government then the government press release announcing these findings would be 'trailed' and, often enough, accompanied by a ministerial statement either in the House or in the media. If however the findings reflected badly on the Government then the press office would issue a lengthy technical release, often at 5pm on a Friday, with no accompanying ministerial statement. There is nothing wrong with this process except that it indicates that the dividing line between 'press officers' and 'spin doctors' is artificial. <sup>24</sup>

Thus we have a situation in which politicians, and civil servants, operate under an almost constant pressure to be seen to be presenting new and ever-more exciting solutions to major problems that are presented as almost immediately soluble. This explains why politicians and their press offices, sometimes against their better judgement, 'spin'. Unfortunately this remorseless diet of 'good news' has been accompanied by growing levels of public distrust.

One particularly concerning barometer of this decline in trust can be seen in the credibility that the public gives to official statistics released by the Government. A Mori survey undertaken for the Office of National Statistics in 2005 contained the alarming findings that of those questioned, 65% believed that official figures were changed to support politicians' arguments; 59% thought the Government used them dishonestly and 58% thought official figures were politically interfered with. <sup>25</sup> By July 2006 the situation had worsened. The House of Commons Treasury Select Committee reported that faith in official statistics had plummeted even from its 2005 low, with only 17pc of UK adults

believing the ONS produces its data without interference and only 14pc thinking the Government used the figures honestly.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps of even greater interest was the Committee's revelation that British Government ministers got more time to consider how they should publicise (or 'spin') official statistics than any other politicians in the western world. In Britain, ministers received data 40 hours before the public, while in the US the corresponding time was only half an hour. In France and Ireland, ministers received the numbers only an hour in advance, while in Australia they only get three hours.

Newspapers reported Michael Fallon the MP, who headed the investigation, as saying:

"The chief statistician in Canada told us nobody else operates like that. This kind of leeway means the Government can put out a press notice in advance of publication; it means they can put out different figures, covering the embarrassing statistics with another announcement...." <sup>27</sup>

In passing it is worth noting that this emphasis on the upbeat and positive in government communications is in marked contrast to what happens during election campaigns. An analysis of the news releases issued by the three main parties during the last general election campaign reveals that for all three parties' attacks on their opponents was the biggest single category of topics covered in their news releases. For Labour this accounted for 33% of their releases during the campaign (in second place was general pro-Labour messages at 15%); for the Conservatives attacks on the other two parties accounted for 37% of their releases (with crime in second place on 9%) and for the Liberal Democrats 28% of their releases were attacks (with the economy in second place at 12%)<sup>28</sup>

So why, in government, this 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, resulting as it does (to misquote scientists Richard Dawkins) from a 'selfish political gene'. In other words politicians find themselves acting in ways that are analogous to Dawkins' concept of the 'selfish gene' - " ..a predominant quality to be expected in a successful gene is ruthless selfishness".<sup>29</sup> Dawkins was talking about the role of the individual gene in the process of evolution, but a similar notion can be applied to the individual politician who is programmed to survive and reproduce (or at least ensure that his party 'reproduces'). Hence for politicians,

whether consciously or unconsciously, the next election (or their own personal 'legacy') will always be at, or near, the forefront of their calculations - they wouldn't be democrats if it weren't. And this preoccupation extends to those working for politicians - their communications staff.

This state of affairs is encapsulated in the phrase the 'permanent campaign' - first used by the 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".<sup>30</sup> On 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 so-called 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 represent representative democracy in its quintessential form. The Blumenthal definition of the 'permanent campaign' is particularly sharp, perhaps not surprising coming from someone who went on to advise President Clinton. A more rounded definition is provided by the American scholars Ornstein and Mann in *The Permanent Campaign and its Future* who wrote:

"Any democratic political system is based on the idea that what happens in government is related to people's electoral choices. Elections and their attendant campaigns are not a thing apart from, but integral to, the larger scheme of democratic government, both in guiding responses to the past election and in anticipating reactions to the next."<sup>31</sup>

But Ornstein and Mann point to the dangers of the 'permanent campaign' mindset:

"...the permanent campaign is something different from government's perennial need for public support. Every day is election day in the permanent campaign. Such campaigning is a non-stop process seeking to manipulate sources of public approval to engage in the act of governing itself....In the long run, without good-faith promise-making in elections and promise-keeping in government, representative democracy is unaccountable and eventually unsustainable.... The more that campaigning infiltrates into governing, the more we may expect the values of a campaign perspective to overrule the values of a steersman perspective."<sup>32</sup>

A key characteristics of the 'permanent campaign' can be found in the core statement of values on the UK Government Communication Network's Home Page, where the focus of government communications is described as being:

" ... to provide a continuous dialogue between the government and the public. Its members bring the voice of the public to the heart of policy making and service delivery, putting the government in touch with all who are affected by its policies and actions."<sup>33</sup>

Howell James, who was appointed the first Permanent Secretary of Government Communications in 2004, 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."<sup>34</sup>

This is an interesting way for the Head of a government communication network to describe himself - it bears some striking similarities to the concept of the 'transmission belt' developed under communist regimes in which organisations, such as the Communist Party and the trade unions, were seen as two-way transmission belts shifting information between the government and the people. But whilst in authoritarian societies it is understandable why governments should see the need for mechanisms to keep them in touch with public opinion, surely in a representative democracy that is the essential function of the 'representatives' i.e. 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 which is orientated towards what its 'customers' (i.e. 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.<sup>35</sup> In government, a market-orientated party has to keep itself focussed on the 'customer' otherwise it loses its direction and sense of purpose.

In such an environment communications takes on an enhanced role within government.

Howell James describes it thus:

"Communications is now centrally positioned, feeding into the three departmental core functions: policy advice, operational delivery and corporate services."<sup>36</sup>

This is a restatement of the position first enunciated by the Mountfield Report (established by the Labour Government shortly after coming to power in 1997) which argued:

"Any Government needs modern and effective relations with the media. The effective communication and explanation of policy and decisions should not be an after-thought, but an integral part of a democratic Government's duty to govern with consent."<sup>37</sup>

The position was hardened-up in the Phillis Report into Government Communications (a report that was fully endorsed by the Government in 2004) which 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." <sup>38</sup>

This is a key concept in understanding the 'problem' of political communication as it has evolved, for it suggests, indeed it states, that communicating government policy is equally as important as developing and implementing it. When the Phillis Report was first published this author wrote:

" 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, working out how policies should best be communicated ought to be integrated into that process - this does not, or should not, mean that communications is as important as policy making or policy delivery. It is precisely because of this mindset that that both New Labour and the New Labour Government have found themselves facing the current morass" <sup>39</sup> [this referred to the difficulties the Government was then facing with regard to Iraq's 'weapons of mass destruction']

It was Alastair Campbell, while still the Prime Minister's Press Secretary who publicly laid bare that the way communications was practised by New Labour had, in fact, become a hindrance to good government. He conceded that while winning and maintaining media support was rightly a major priority for Labour in opposition, but it 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...."<sup>40</sup>

This lack of trust is a more complex phenomenon than it might first appear and did not disappear 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. 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, that they were almost programmed to disbelieve.<sup>41</sup>

Hence, we have the 'political communications paradox'. Democracy is based on a trust - i.e. that there is an implicit contract between voters and politicians (i.e. that if voters elect a politician s/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 foremost in their minds. The more they communicate, the more they are doubted. Hence, the trust which is a fundamental to the workings of a democratic system is constantly being undermined.

So is this an argument that democracy's Armageddon is fast approaching? The answer is not necessarily, because just like other organisms, democracy does seem to exhibit some 'selfish gene' characteristics of its own which can lead to self-renewal in the wake of these negative forces. It does this in a number of ways.

First, we see the phenomenon 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 a presidential candidate who comes from 'outside the beltway' is a common occurrence - Reagan, Carter and George W Bush all laid claim to being outsiders to Washington.<sup>42</sup> But the same phenomenon can also be observed in the UK. Over the past two decades we have seen, in the eighties, the creation of the Social Democrats metamorphosing into the Liberal Democrats; in the nineties the birth of New Labour and now the emergence of the 'Cameroonian' Conservatives. In terms of party 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.

But it is not just the politicians who undergo this process of renewal. There is also an almost regular 're-balancing' of the power relationship between politicians and the civil service, in the communications field. Most recently we have seen the civil service reassert its influence by ensuring that the Government Communications Network was headed by a civil servant (Howell James) and by removing 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 Margaret Thatcher's powerful press secretary (who also headed the Government's information service), Bernard Ingham, was followed by a succession of career civil servants.

The corruption of communications which, 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 seek to by-pass the institutional roadblocks that are perceived as being the cause of the problems. Over the past decade we have seen, as alternative sites of political discussion, email communications, message boards, newsgroups and, most recently the explosion of blogsites ( these played a significant role in revelations surrounding Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott) becoming alternative sites of political news both for the media and more directly for the public as well<sup>43</sup>. And the development of 'so-called 'citizens' journalism' - i.e. the use of mobile phones and other new technologies to communicate text, audio and video information either between users or directly from users to the mass media, is becoming an important addition to the contemporary informational environment.

Finally, the whole process of corrupted political communications provokes a reaction, often from the very people who are part of it. Journalists have both an insatiable curiosity and a complete lack of self-awareness, so that the processes of spin etc. (of which they are part) excite a great deal of journalistic interest. In exposing the politicians' communication methods (of which they are part) the media play a major role in undermining it as well. In fact a snapshot of coverage of the term 'spin doctor' suggests that media interest was at its height during the years of when Alastair Campbell was Tony Blair's media advisor. Thought that is not to suggest that these activities have necessarily diminished, only that media interest in them appears to have done so.

Mentions of term 'spin doctor/s' in The Times 1990 - 2006<sup>44</sup>

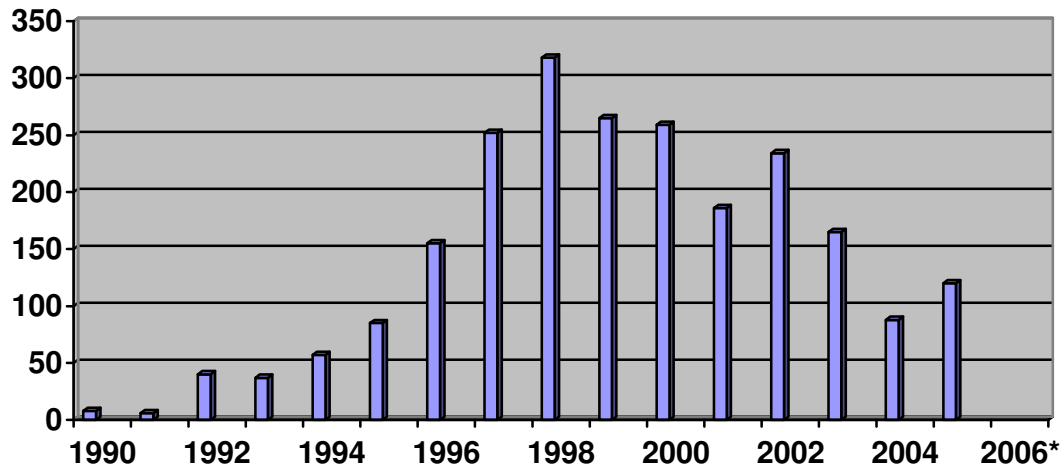


Figure 1 (source Lexis Nexis Professional)\*

This increased coverage of the political communications process has made it increasingly difficult for politicians to continue with 'business as usual' as far as their communication activities are concerned. In recent years Jo Moore, Charlie Whelan and Alastair Campbell - un-elected 'spin doctors' - have, for a time, occupied the centre of the national political stage, a phenomenon that would have been inconceivable just 20 years ago. In addition academics, and authors, can also claim some credit for bringing their own light to bear on politicians' communication activities, thus making these activities more transparent.<sup>45</sup>

None more so than two of the pioneer academics in this field - Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch. Their landmark 2005 study - *The Crisis of Public Communication* - opens with the words "This book appeared at a time of increasing concern about the ways politics is communicated to the public"<sup>46</sup> and they concluded, seeing both grounds for pessimism and hope:

" It is as if, more than a century after the lamentations of the prophets and theoreticians of 'mass society', some of the ills of that oppressive social structure are visited upon us again. Today they are reflected especially in the professionalization of politics and associated attempts to manage and control public communication for manipulative purposes, with the resulting alienation of many citizens. A real basis for hope arises, however because that very process appears to have incited a several-sided disgust and spurred new forms of communication, admittedly often imperfect and raucous, but pointing tentatively in the

\* The 2006 figure is based on the first six months of the year

direction of democratic values. Mass democracy may be a contradiction in terms - but *both* parts of that equation persist, albeit in contention, in the political communication system of the mid-1990s"<sup>47</sup>

A decade on it is possible to see a heightening of the trends identified by Blumler and Gurevitch. As indicated in this paper, the flow of government information has continued to grow. But it would be naïve to suggest that more political information emanating from government results in more political coverage in the mass media. Indeed, the opposite might well be the case. It is indisputable that on the positive side of the balance sheet there has been a huge growth in terms of the quantity of news media reaching the British public since 1995. One thinks of 24-hour radio and TV news channels (in their infancy when Blumler and Gurevitch were writing) the growth in the size (if not the sales) of newspapers and the explosion in political websites.<sup>48</sup> However, the 'quality' of the political information, and the breakdown of the audiences it is reaching might suggest a less than optimistic scenario.

Three snapshots indicate that the more pessimistic outlook might be more appropriate. As far as the audience for news is concerned, an ITC/BBC research report in 2002 concluded:

"The findings of the study confirm that there has been a significant decline in audiences for television and radio news and current affairs, along with a well-logged decline in the use of newspapers. Television news is less effective than it used to be at reaching young people and has severe difficulties among some sections of Britain's ethnic minority communities. In the last three years, television news has also weakened its hold on viewers from social groups C2DE."<sup>49</sup>

From the content side research in 2000 revealed that between 1975 and 1999 there had been a significant reduction in the amount of political coverage being broadcast by the main terrestrial channels. The main percentage of stories devoted to politics on the main BBC TV news bulletin declined from 25.6% in 1975 to 14.6% in 1999; on ITN the decline was from 22.25 in 1975 to 15.3% in 1999 and on Channel Four News from 17.6% in 1985 (the channel only began broadcasting in 1982) to 15.8% in 1999.<sup>50</sup>

<b>% of stories devoted to politics on BBC, ITV and Channel Four Main bulletins</b>
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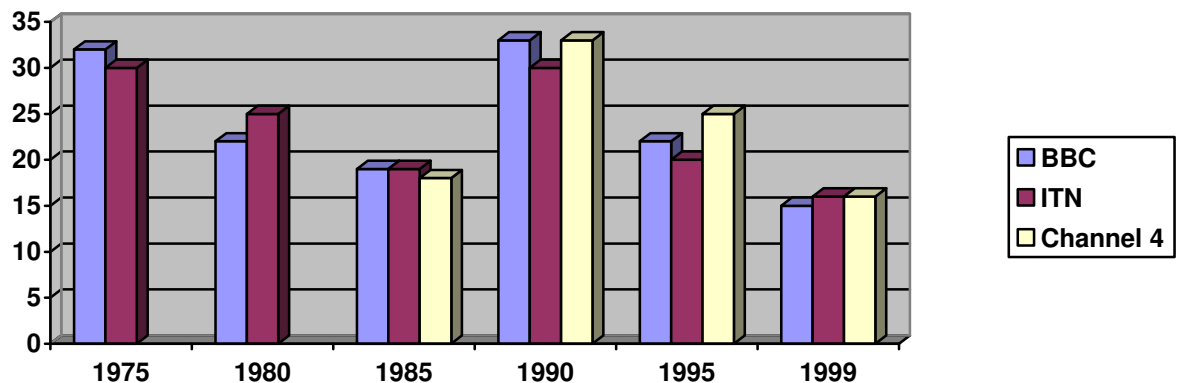


Figure 2

And further research in 2002 reported that the apparent decline had continued with figures for percentage of political news in the main evening bulletins being reported as BBC 14.7%, ITN 13% but Channel four bucking the trend on 22%.<sup>51</sup>

The third 'snapshot' relates to the decline of the reporting of parliament in the mainstream media.<sup>52</sup> Whilst it is true that political aficionados can now access parliament through the BBC's Parliament channel, the truth is that very few do. In the two months of June and July 2006, BBC Parliament was one of only a handful of digital channels that failed to record a single week when its total audience reached 100,000; in other words it failed to record a national average daily viewership of more than 14,000.<sup>53</sup> And there is no compensation to be found in the pages of national daily newspapers, in fact the situation has continued to deteriorate, with not one title now having a daily page devoted to covering the previous day's parliamentary proceedings.

However, more germane to this discussion, and a fertile area for future research, would be an analysis of political coverage in the media that sought to distinguish between the ebb and flow of daily politics (akin to the category of election news that researchers have dubbed the 'race horse' elements - whose up, whose down, strategies and tactics, personalities etc.) and the ebb and flow of daily governance; the type of news that would be most likely initiated by a government press release or a ministerial briefing.<sup>54</sup> Until such an analysis has been completed one has to rely on anecdotal evidence and the

impression garnered from a close observation of the UK media over the past two decades, that lead, this author at least, to conclude that there has been a rise in the former and a decline in the latter.

Although one significant trend has to be taken into account when forming such judgements, and that is the rise of the 'specialist', Hence, in the past stories about government initiatives in the education or health arenas, for example. might have been covered by the political staff they are now covered by the health or education correspondent. Consequently, any attempt to measure changes in overall political coverage would have to take cognisance of this change.

However, one change in the political environment, since Blumler and Gurevitch concluded their study, is indisputable; and that is the decline in electoral participation. When they wrote about "the alienation of ... citizens' it was a time when average turnouts at general elections was 77%. However since then we have seen participation fall; in 1997 to 71.4% in 2001 to 59.4% and in 2005 to 61.4% (and most, if not all of this small rise, could be accounted for by changes that made postal voting considerably easier). Thus, in terms of 'trust' - the cement that holds the democratic system together - there can be no more devastating proof its absence, than these figures on voter participation.

It would be easy, but fallacious, to conclude that this breakdown in trust can be laid entirely at the doors of either the government (in terms of the information flow discussed in this article) or the more popular explanation, the media. Major social trends do not usually lend themselves to simple cause/effect relationships. However, in terms of the way that the UK political system is currently functioning one can at least conclude with a satisfactory null hypothesis. Namely that is there is no evidence that increasing the flow of political communication from government to electors does anything to enhance trust and electoral participation. Indeed there is some evidence that this enhanced information flow might, in terms of the democratic system, be counter-productive and that the fears about the long-term stability of liberal democracies articulated by Fukuyama might indeed have some credibility.

ends

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<sup>1</sup> Power Inquiry p. 28

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in the *Observer* August 2, 1998 the *Observer* Profile: Jeremy Paxman, national monument: Paxo Britannica by John Naughton

<sup>3</sup> Fukuyama F. (P ?

<sup>4</sup> See Barnett & Gaber and Franklin (2004)

<sup>5</sup> Herman and Chomsky

<sup>6</sup> Ibid p. 2

<sup>7</sup> O'Neill O. 2002 Reith Lecture 4 viewed 14 July 2006 at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2002/lecturer.shtml>

<sup>8</sup> Barnett & Gaber p. 121

<sup>9</sup> Detailed figures obtained by Pete Wishart MP in a parliamentary question for the number of press releases issued in the period January to October 2004

<sup>10</sup> Gaber & Underwood

<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that currently (July 2006) the Home Office website press section lists 42 named press officers capable of handling media inquiries.

<sup>12</sup>

[http://www.comms.gov.uk/public\\_website/guidance/propriety/government\\_communications.aspx](http://www.comms.gov.uk/public_website/guidance/propriety/government_communications.aspx) viewed 10 July 2006

<sup>13</sup> Press Office Dos and Don'ts

[http://www.comms.gov.uk/Public\\_Website/guidance/propriety/politicians/dos\\_donts.aspx](http://www.comms.gov.uk/Public_Website/guidance/propriety/politicians/dos_donts.aspx) viewed 10 July 2006

<sup>14</sup> Department of Health Press Release library viewed 14 July 2006

<http://www.dh.gov.uk/PublicationsAndStatistics/PressReleases/PressReleasesLibrary/fs/en>

Department for Education and Skills Press Notice library y viewed 14 July 2006

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/newslist.cgi>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid viewed 7 April 2006

<sup>16</sup> GCN Guidance notes op cit

<sup>17</sup> 8 April 2006 *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Star*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mirror* and the *Guardian*

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in *Daily Telegraph* 8 April 2006 Million patients lose NHS dentists P 1

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<sup>19</sup> GCM Guidelines op cit

<sup>20</sup> ibid

<sup>21</sup> This author conducted a series of focus groups in 1999 with staff in the Home Office Press Office and was left in no doubt that staff there did not view themselves as 'spin doctors' and vigorously rejected the term.

<sup>22</sup> Phillis

<sup>23</sup> Barnett & Gaber

<sup>24</sup> Evidence submitted to the Phillis Inquiry.

<sup>25</sup> "It is New Labour, as much as the public, that lacks trust" Polly Toynbee the *Guardian* Tuesday November 22, 2005

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> "Pressure grows for refiguring of ONS" by Edmund Conway, Economics Editor *Daily Telegraph* 26/07/2006

<sup>28</sup> See Gaber (2006)

<sup>29</sup> Dawkins p. 2

<sup>30</sup> Blumenthal p. 7

<sup>31</sup> Ornstein & Mann p4

<sup>32</sup> Ibid pp. 15 - 17

<sup>33</sup> [http://www.comms.gov.uk/Public\\_Website/about/role.aspx](http://www.comms.gov.uk/Public_Website/about/role.aspx) viewed 14 July 2006

<sup>34</sup> Howell James 'Crafting the Message' in *Whitehall & Westminster World* 8 Feb 2005 p. 10

<sup>35</sup> See Lees Marshment J (2001) p 1

<sup>36</sup> James op cit

<sup>37</sup> 'Mountfield Report' p. 4

<sup>38</sup> 'Phillis Report' P. 31

<sup>39</sup> Gaber (2004) p 368

<sup>40</sup> Campbell p. 19

<sup>41</sup> Conversation with Phillip Gould, Labour's election strategist, January 28 2005

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<sup>42</sup> Reagen was presented as a former Hollywood actor, Carter was a 'peanut farmer' from Georgia' and George W. Bush plays the role of 'a good ol' Texas boy' - despite his East Coast upbringing.

<sup>43</sup> Among the most lively of the political blogs are  
Conservative-supporting: Guido Fawkes <http://5thnovember.blogspot.com/> and  
Iain Dale's Diary - <http://www.iaindale.blogspot.com/>  
Labour-supporting: Labour Home <http://www.labourhome.org/> and  
Recess Monkey <http://www.recessmonkey.com/>  
Liberal Democrat supporting: Liberal England <http://liberalengland.blogspot.com/> and  
Lynne Featherstone MP <http://www.lynnfeatherstone.org/2006/07/blogging-politicians.htm>

<sup>44</sup> Lexis Nexis count for mentions of 'spin doctor/s'

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
8	6	40	37	57	85	155	252	318	265	259	186
2002	2003	2004	2005	2006							
234	165	88	120	114 (57 in first 6 months)							

<sup>45</sup> In particular the books of former BBC correspondent Nicholas Jones (see references) have played an important role in exposing the activities of government spin doctors.

<sup>46</sup> Blumler and Gurevitch p. 1

<sup>47</sup> *ibid* p. 221

<sup>48</sup> Norris P (2000) pp 13 -16

<sup>49</sup> Hargreaves and Thomas p. 5

<sup>50</sup> Barnett, Seymour and Gaber p. 15

<sup>51</sup> Hargreaves *op cit* p. 91

<sup>52</sup> See Franklin 1996

<sup>53</sup> Audience figures from the British Audience Research Bureau website  
<http://www.barb.co.uk/viewingsummary/monthreports.cfm?report=monthgmulti&requesttimeout=500> vied 25 July 2006

<sup>54</sup> See Norris (2000) and McNair (2000) for arguments that suggest that modern political communications assist the democratic process and Franklin (2004) for the counter view.

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