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Abstract

The article designates certain current key features of British political communication, contrasting them with their counterparts two decades earlier. It specifies some systemic sources of those developments, which may be common (or becoming so) in other competitive democracies. It argues why this matters: A Machiavellian view of political communication is increasingly emerging, so emphasising an instrumental pursuit of power that citizenship is in danger of becoming little more than a form of noncommercial consumption. Finally, it proposes some institutional changes intended to counteract these disturbing latter-day trends.

Keywords

political communication, citizenship, Internet, civic commons

For over half a century, the political communication system has been written about as if it were a natural order, with each of its three groups of actors performing ontologically given parts. Politicians send messages intended to reach potential voters, attempt to discredit their rivals, and seek to manage their own visibility through various media strategies. Journalists hold politicians accountable and interpret changing political conditions, while endeavoring to maximize audience attention, maintain relationships with political sources, and achieve a competitive edge over their rivals—sometimes through sensational exclusives. Citizens do their best to find reliable and meaningful information, observe the political show in the hope of being able to arrive at a sensible judgement, and participate occasionally, mainly through voting in elections.

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As with other systems, relations between these three sets of actors can become destabilized. Over a decade ago, Blumler (1995: 215) termed the latest phase of this instability “a chronic state of partial war.” And in our recent book (Coleman and Blumler 2009), we have reiterated our view that there is a crisis of public communication that is sapping the vitality of democratic political culture. Thinking of this crisis as resolvable within the framework of a political communication system regarded as a natural order is a position that we now reject. Only by thinking beyond the traditional terms of engagement and, indeed, transcending the systemic limits of the current arrangement can we hope to arrive at a media ecology in which democracy can be better served. In support of this argument, we turn to recent, dramatic developments in British politics. In some ways, these are atypical developments, embedded within a particular national history and narrative, but we suggest that they may well be characteristic of liberal-democratic political communication systems globally by emphasising how a toxic relationship between journalists and politicians can leave citizens experiencing increasing unease, confusion, and skepticism; and by illustrating the current state of media flux in which actors from each of the three groups are turning to untried communication strategies, but too often failing to connect constructively with one another.

The British Case

Not much more than two decades ago, a comparative, Anglo-American election communication study brought out certain characteristic features of the British political communication system at that time (Semetko et al. 1991). Compared with the U.S. system, Britain’s was noticeably more substantive (less game oriented) and afforded more scope for parties and politicians to set the campaign agenda, relative to journalists’ discretion to do so. These content features seemed to reflect more systemic ones. Again, compared with the United States, the British political culture was more attuned to “politics as such,” some British journalists had a “sacerdotal” rather than “pragmatic” attitude to political news, the professionalization of party publicity and news management was less advanced, parts of the media system were less competitive in their race for audiences, and perhaps above all, Britain had a sizeable public broadcasting sector, imbued to some extent with a civic mission (Semetko et al. 1991).

In this article, we revisit British political communication aiming, first, to designate certain key features that have manifested themselves in recent years (approximately since Gordon Brown’s elevation to prime minister in 2007); second, to specify some systemic sources of those features, which we suspect are nowadays common (or becoming so) in most competitive democracies; third, to say why we think all this matters (very much indeed); and finally, to propose some institutional changes intended to counteract disturbing latter-day trends.

Since his election to the leadership of the Labour Party, following Tony Blair, Gordon Brown’s premiership has been surrounded by media speculation as to his ability to run a government and maintain popular support. His early prevarication about

calling a general election led to widespread criticisms from political journalists of Brown's apparent indecisiveness. The subsequent actions of his media adviser, Damien McBride, in sending a leaked e-mail to another adviser proposing a campaign of defamation against political opponents, led to McBride's dismissal from Downing Street and questions in the media about Brown's approach to publicity, political judgment, and style of governing. But these deteriorations in Brown's media standing were nothing compared with the outpouring of condemnation following his more recent handling of the expenses scandal of members of Parliament (MPs). Once journalists gained access under freedom-of-information legislation to the unorthodox record of expense claims by MPs from all parties represented at Westminster, a seemingly enduring stain upon the entire political class grew as public indignation exploded, while the government of the day was blamed for being slow to have taken action to address such wrongdoing.

Demands for action took a number of forms, from the angrily punitive to the constructively reformist. An editorial in the right-wing *Daily Mail* articulated the populist indignation of the moment:

A few scapegoats aren't going to restore the reputation of this rotten Parliament. We need a comprehensive reshuffle to sweep away the miscreants followed—as soon as the Prime Minister can bring himself to call it—by an early, and desperately needed, General Election.¹

The call for an election, in which virtually every MP would be forced to prove that he or she was not a "miscreant," and in which charges and countercharges of corruption would be a huge distraction from some of the most serious issues facing any recent government (economic crisis, war in Afghanistan, terrorist threats, flu pandemics, climate change), would have done little to resolve the problems facing British democracy. Purges rarely do lead to clearer waters.

A second response to the crisis was a call for reform of the political system. It was widely argued that the expenses scandal was not an isolated problem, but a symptom of a political system that remains constitutionally unmodernised and far too exclusive. This led the prime minister to declare, "I take responsibility for making sure that by the time we get to the election, we have a system that people can say: 'He's cleaned up.'"²

Similar pledges were made by the leaders of the other main parties. More or less everybody seemed to be in agreement that a relationship problem exists between politicians and citizens. But then almost all the proposed reforms were directed toward changes in Westminster: how the workings of Parliament might be improved, MPs selected (primary elections were mooted), and voting conducted (various forms of proportional representation were discussed). Important as these might be, they address only half of the situation, leaving aside any consideration of the part that citizens themselves should play in tackling the issues of the day. The characterization of citizens as occasional voters and little more remained untouched by these proposals to change the system.

Even when proposals for system reform were replaced by seemingly more ambitious calls for cultural change, as in David Cameron's insistence upon "a serious culture change among ministers, among Whitehall officials—and beyond,"³ any reference to political communication was conspicuously absent. And, even if mooted, any such reference would need to go beyond criticizing the media as a substitute target for the politicians. Whatever the system or the culture may be, it surely comprises more than one culpable player. Matthew Taylor, the former chief strategic adviser to Tony Blair, came closest to acknowledging the breadth of the systemic malady when he wrote,

Every politician knows the system is bust, every politician wants to engage the public more honestly, but every political party would rather win on a 20% turnout than lose on an 80% turnout. We need political leaders who ground their appeal on a citizenship democracy rather than a consumer democracy. This means moving from an us-and-them politics in which we the people—egged on by a media that is little more than a disorganised conspiracy to maintain the population in a perpetual state of self-righteous rage—make impossible demands.⁴

We want to argue here that the system that is "bust" is a communication ecology that is unsuited to the democratic needs of contemporary society. The problem highlighted by the British expenses scandal was less high-level corruption than a confirmation in the public mind of the routine disrespect that elected politicians have for those who are outside the citadels of power. The object of representation—literally, re-presentation—is to make present the voices, values, hopes, and anxieties of those who cannot take part in the day-to-day decision making of the polity. Political representation has come to be an act of ventriloquism in which the public is left feeling like inanimate dummies, spoken for and sometimes spoken to, but rarely spoken with. The demos have become outsiders, some gaping at the political show through the prism of an increasingly cynical media that appears to be run by a clique of entrenched insiders, others firmly turning their backs on it in varying degrees of distaste. If a manifest crisis of confidence is historically the right moment for radical juncture and renaissance, the British case has set the scene well.

Systemic Sources of the Crisis

In emphasizing the political communication system as a key to the ills and limitations of contemporary political democracy, we are not suggesting that the reform of politics should give way to reform of the media. On the contrary, it is by conceiving of both of these as elements within a communications ecology, comprising intricate interrelationships between politicians, journalists, and citizens, that we propose to move beyond naive and superficial strategies for reform. The systemic entanglements of all actors are so complex and inseparable that only at an integral level can effective remedies be

implemented. The most egregious failings of the current political communication system can be traced to five principal roots:

1. *The ever-increasing adversarialism of political reporting.* We refer here to what has become a default position of much political journalism that politicians are out for themselves, that political mechanisms are cumbersome and ineffectual, and that if one wants to exert real influence, this is best done through the media than within existing constitutional structures. In its most extreme form, this amounts to a populist belief by political journalists that they deserve democratic legitimacy because they speak directly to “the public,” while politicians are all closed off and incapable of understanding the preoccupations and priorities of real people. But even when it does not take quite such an audacious form, there is a pervasive sense that elected politicians are dependent for their survival upon the judgments of media pundits, who increasingly adopt a celebrity guise, as their judgments and aspersions take precedence over the story. The consequent capacity of political journalists to generate media hypes and pick off politicians for sustained denunciation places them in a powerfully unaccountable position.

2. *An ever-increasing emphasis upon politics as a game.* The horse race metaphor, which has long dominated election campaign coverage, has now become a permanent feature of politics, resulting in an incessant narrative of who is in and who is out, accounts of political credibility based upon often-flimsy poll data, parties devising policies with more than one eye on the media as their principal judges, and an incestuous turn toward political metanarratives where reporting and analysis become matters of journalists commenting on what other journalists have said about what politicians have said privately about what other politicians have said to other journalists. The wheels within wheels of this metanarrative not only are confusing to citizens, who have neither the time nor access to get to the bottom of all of these rhizomic connections, but too often convey a picture of politics as amounting to little more than a pursuit of reputation and connection, rather than any kind of effective social intervention (Patterson 1993).

3. *The double-competitive whammy among and between politicians and journalists.* Political communication is embroiled in what we are calling a double-competitive whammy, with politicians engaging in a permanent struggle to shape public perceptions of themselves, their parties, and their immediate messages through the media. They are not squeamish about the strategies they use to spin their stories, even resorting at times to Machiavellian strategies designed to discredit opponents and achieve contingent goals. Meanwhile, the media system is ever more competitive for patronage and revenue, pushing journalists to almost any lengths to break a story, however irresponsibly. Political communication is increasingly shaped by competition, reducing news holes for politics and placing a premium upon arresting stories rather than the cultivation of civic knowledge. One consequence of this is the creation of a particularly bouncy news agenda: What is “the story” one week (sometimes, one day) is superseded by a different one the next week, leaving citizens with an impression of politics as a succession of ephemeral and inconclusive scandals, mishaps, and suspicious circumstances.

4. *A burgeoning undergrowth of political news and opinion sources.* The Internet has expanded the range of political sources. On the one hand, agenda setting is no longer a politician–journalist duopoly; on the other hand, the commentariat is no longer an exclusive club. This cannot be ignored by political elites, who are increasingly engaged in efforts to monitor the blogosphere, control the content of wikis, and make their presence felt in unfamiliar environments, such as Facebook and YouTube. As well as needing to respond to the unmissable buzz of media interactivity, political actors are increasingly aware of the possibility that their messages will be modified once they are launched into media space. The digital media environment does not respect the integrity of information; once it has been published online, others are at liberty to remix content, in much the same way as music fans are able to reorder and reconstruct beats, melodies, and lyrics. For political communicators, long used to attaching value to their capacity to manage the flow of information, the Internet poses an immediate threat and a longer-term opportunity. For political journalists, it represents a further competitive pressure, compelling them to produce their own online content and seek to influence the online news agenda.

5. *The emergence of a postdeferential culture in which “the political” has come to exceed the official sphere of politics.* As traditional social hierarchies have declined, the political elite can no longer expect readily to gain the attention of citizens; they are compelled to fight for it. The public itself has become less deferential, more culturally fractured, and volatile in its media consumption and electoral choices. The notion of a singular public sphere, dominated by codified standards of civility, can no longer be relied upon, resulting in pluralistic interpretations and enactments of citizenship. A key feature of this is a popular redefinition of what constitutes a political issue, event, or story. Politicians are increasingly expected to comment on popular cultural issues, such as racism within *Celebrity Big Brother* or the fate of a contestant on *Britain’s Got Talent* who had learning difficulties. Neither political journalists nor politicians are particularly comfortable with this expansion in the terms of the political, but all are now under pressure to present themselves as being in touch with the cultural zeitgeist and flexible in spotting and exploiting opportunities to relate to proliferating agendas that they were once free to ignore. One effect of this has been a tendency to present political narratives as popular dramas (soap operas, perhaps) dominated by character-driven story lines and an absence of anything resembling an ideologically derived position.

Added to these five trends, which are to some extent universal (though probably varying so—and are certainly descriptive of more than the British case), there are two features of political communication that particularly characterize the British situation. The first of these is that in Britain, there has long been a close integration between media and political elites, both in terms of socialization (same schools and universities) and everyday culture. Despite the adversarialism of which we have written above, the two actors have come to rely particularly heavily upon one another, framing their messages and responses in ways that seem largely concerned with

making an impression within the narrow circle that they both occupy. Citizens feel left out and irritated by the extent to which narratives, language, and values remain untranslated and opaque (Blumler and Gurevitch 1975). In a postdeferential political culture, this alienates people from both actors, with politicians and journalists vying with one another for the bottom spot in the opinion polls on least trusted occupations.

A second characteristic of the British case has been a gradual dilution of the civic mission of the public service broadcaster, the BBC, which has adopted many of the news-reporting techniques of its commercial rivals: the creation of celebrity reporters, preoccupation with the slippery slopes of political fortunes, an obsession with sensational rather than analytical accounts, and a downplaying of a specifically civic discourse. This has not necessarily been a planned policy by the BBC, but a cumulative effect of absorption in a chase for ratings and a diminution of resources devoted to serious political analysis. At times when the press, other channels, and the blogosphere are caught up in a frenzy of sensation seeking and even scandal mongering, one should be able to look toward the public service broadcaster for a more sober account, framed in terms that pay more attention to democratic values than political exigencies.

To speak of a political communication system in crisis suggests that first, each of these sources of failure is indivisibly related to the others, and second, that any effective remedy to this crisis must address all rather than some of these failings.

Why All This Matters

Basically, politics can be perceived through two types of lenses: as a game in which the attainment and retention of power is the goal or as a civic forum in which issues and policy proposals are debated and discussed on their merits. No competitive democracy in the real world operates on only one or the other of these terms. But the more power oriented the approach, the less scope for average citizens to become involved, for they are reduced to spectators or pawns. Only if the civic forum has prominence can non-power holders play a part in considering, perhaps helping to determine, the issues of the day. The British system is tending to converge on a Machiavellian view of political communication, placing so much emphasis upon the instrumental pursuit of power that citizenship is in danger of becoming little more than a form of noncommercial consumption.

Three aspects of this enervated conception of citizenship are particularly detrimental to political democracy as a normative model of governance. First, it limits citizens' capacity to act upon the world by turning them into mere onlookers, awaiting the next crisis to be agitated about, scandal to be angry about, or complex policy to ignore. In a complex, risky world, confining public experience and expertise to such impotence, while minority elites engage in endless power games, wastes human energy and breeds frustration. Citizens experience increasing efficacy as shoppers, service patrons, and interactive media users, making the experience of inefficacious political citizenship all the more vivid. A consequence of this sense that politics is a game played by insiders

has been mass disengagement from participation (voter turnout being a major casualty) and a widespread belief that all policies, even when motivated by sincere values and long-term vision, are mere stunts in a Machiavellian theater. A democracy that leaves the demos to such a fate is more likely to experience public outrage rather than constructive engagement when things go badly awry, as they have recently in the British case. In the worst scenario, this can lead to voters' "punishing" the political elite by turning to dangerous, extreme parties, such as neofascists, whose fortunes have improved greatly in recent European elections.

Second, a conception of politics that undervalues civic engagement is likely to miss out on the benefits of public deliberation. The discussion of potential for change in perceptions of interests, preferences, and values is a fundamental normative requisite of democracy. Without it, politics is reduced to counting heads, regardless of what might be in them. Political elites might argue that they "do deliberation" within parliaments and other legislative assemblies. But in an instrumentally driven political system, there is rarely room for genuine parliamentary deliberation: Politicians are too scared to think aloud or critically lest this be seen as a sign of weakness, party splits, or political disloyalty. And even if deliberation does take place within the confines of parliamentary chambers and official committees, this will amount to little if it is only ever communicated through headlines and sportlike commentaries intended to identify winners and losers in the power game. If citizens are able to be engaged in the deliberative process—not constantly, but when they want to be—there is much more chance that they will seek political knowledge, develop more nuanced views, recognize the difficulties of making complex policy decisions, and support well-conceived ones. The alternative to a more deliberative democracy is what Matthew Taylor has referred to as a "perpetual state of self-righteous rage" whereby the public is whipped up by the media into an endless succession of impotent outbursts of impotent fury.⁵

A third reason why it matters if citizenship is reduced to mere spectating from the sidelines is that this is wholly at odds with developments in the media ecology, which afford unprecedented opportunities for citizens to seek, produce, circulate, and comment upon political news. As we have argued elsewhere (Gurevitch et al. 2009: 175), the era in which politics was mediated by a small number of broadcasters, supported by the press, is passing:

While television remains as a principal constructor and co-producer of political messages, the systemic entanglement between journalistic and political elites is threatened by new players in the media game who are very much outsiders. This "fifth estate" (Dutton, 2007) sees itself much more in the position of the eighteenth-century fourth estate: reporting, scrutinising and commenting from a critical distance, rather than entering into the portals of institutional power.

Any attempt to reinvigorate democratic political communication must start, therefore, by acknowledging the shift that has taken place from industrially centralized to

postindustrially distributed media technologies. That is to say, where once politicians had to manage their visibility before a relatively small number of known media organizations, innovations in cheaply available, simple-to-use communication technologies, such as mobile phone cameras, Webcams, blogs, and YouTube, have vastly widened the field of potential visibility. The public are no longer only voters to be seduced, but potential witnesses to be managed. Politics is now played out within a new frame of visibility that does not conform to the rules of the old political communication system:

Whether they like it or not, political leaders today are more visible to more people and more closely scrutinized than they ever were in the past; and at the same time, they are more exposed to the risk that their actions and utterances, and the actions and utterances of others, may be disclosed in ways that conflict with the images they wish to project. Hence the visibility created by the media can become the source of a new and distinctive kind of *fragility*. However much political leaders may seek to manage their visibility, they cannot completely control it. Mediated visibility can slip out of their grasp and can, on occasion, work against them. (Thompson 2005: 35)

Having argued that the current political communication system, far from being a natural order, is bad for democratic efficacy, antipathetic to public deliberation and out of tune with the fast-evolving media ecology, the question that must now be addressed is whether it is beyond repair. Is there a different way of doing political communication that is both desirable and feasible?

Is There a Way out of This Rut?

With the emergence and evolution of the Internet, in its many shapes and guises, there has been a range of hopes and speculations about its redemptive potential. If the media ecology is no longer so fully dominated by centrally placed, well-resourced, professionally staffed institutions, might the unedifying and routinized roles that have for so long been performed by politicians, journalists, and citizens be transformed? Is there scope for the establishment of forms of mediated citizenship that transcend the toxicity of current relationships?

One conspicuously redeeming feature of online communication has been an expansion of free expression. People having something to say to somebody else, be it their friends, the government, or distant communities, can now do so with greater ease than was ever previously the case. Various institutions, enterprises, and citizens have unprecedented opportunities to share information, challenge officialdom, form social networks, set agendas, and, occasionally at least, penetrate the portals of power as consultees, message senders, or protesters. An important manifestation of this increased communicative freedom has been the rise of citizen journalism, which, at its best, offers counternarratives to those of the mainstream media and uncovers events

and situations that might otherwise be hidden or purveys fresh perspectives on them. This may force politicians to become more broadly accountable and diminish the gatekeeping monopoly of editorial elites.

While the Internet has certainly afforded impressive scope for public opinion giving, event tracking, and emotion expressing, we are not convinced that it possesses more than a vulnerable redemptive potential. That is to say, if the Internet is to be a reinvigorating force in political communication arrangements, not merely a supplementary one, three significant obstacles need to be overcome.

First, there is the tendency of online communication to be most energetic, productive, and satisfying across horizontal lines of interaction. Vertical interactivity, between citizens and governments, parliaments, local councils, or global bodies, tends to be underdeveloped, blighted by institutional blockages or one-way streets, and generally frustrating. Where political institutions do interact with citizens online, such initiatives are usually top down, with elites setting the rules, framing agendas, designing spaces that reflect their own terms of engagement, and above all, feeling free to ignore inconvenient public input. So, while on the horizontal level peer-to-peer practices have adapted creatively to the informal, acephalous, nonproprietary, unbounded logic of the network, much vertical online communication seems to replicate the worst aspects of the established political communication system, with politicians running blogs that look like old-fashioned newsletters, parties producing YouTube content that looks like TV election broadcasts, newspapers publishing the same old stories online, and citizens as disheartened as ever by the serial failures of politicians to engage with them dialogically.

Second, much of what passes as political discussion online reflects a failure to appreciate that policy problems almost always involve trade-offs. The Internet is good for letting people say what they would like to see happen and what they do not like, but has thus far developed few constructive mechanisms for helping people to determine effective solutions in the face of scarce resources. For example, e-petitions, in which citizens can call for government to fund particular projects or advance new laws, are all very well as ways of promoting grassroots agendas, but useless as a means of deciding who gets what, when and how. Politics entails competitive decisions about the allocation of values. How can such decisions be made if each demand, protest, or debate occupies its own cybersilo, with no capacity to engage or compromise with other equally forceful demands? The consequence of this is the intensification of demand-driven politics and personal interest-centered citizenship, which is already a depressing feature of mainstream media debate.

Third, much online discourse is characterized by a tilt away from informed argument and extended rationalism. While diverse forms and styles of online communication are an attractive reflection of new opportunities for people to speak not only for but as themselves, unless narratives of personal experience and expressions of affective sensibility are somehow harnessed to strategies of policy formation and decision making, they risk becoming marginalized. There is a real danger that online forums become a new version of the echo chamber phone-in show, easily derided and ignored by elites.

(There is plenty of evidence of this in the high-profile U.S. health care debate, both online and offline.)

Overcoming these obstacles to the democratic realization of the vulnerable potential of the Internet is the most pressing policy challenge facing those seeking to escape the rut in which the political communication system now finds itself. Meeting that challenge calls for institutional innovation of a radical kind. As we have aimed in this article to address specific, though possibly generalizable, trends within British political communication, there is an obvious historical precedent worth reflecting upon: the response of the British state to the emergence of mass broadcasting in the 1920s.

There were some commentators who regarded radio, and later, television, as being inherently civically enriching, observing that it reduced the threshold of access to useful public information. Others took the view that mass broadcasting would inevitably vulgarize civic communication, reducing it to the level of the lowest common denominator. In Britain (and Europe generally), the view was taken that a degree of public regulation and institution building was needed if the new medium was to play a civic role at all well. Out of this instinct came the BBC. (In the United States, the public service instinct was resisted, and the subsequent broadcasting ecology has been very different.) The BBC as an institution, and public service broadcasting as an ethos, were not inevitable products of the new medium of radio. They were contingently constructed policy interventions based upon theoretical assumptions about the politico-cultural significance of mass broadcasting and its influence on society at large. For all of its weaknesses as an institutional model, the BBC's embeddedness within values of public service has led to profoundly civilizing consequences. Entrusting a publicly funded broadcaster with the task of nurturing democratic citizenship, encouraging pluralistic expression, and providing for minority tastes that might not be commercially acknowledged was an extraordinarily bold and progressive policy decision, one that we would argue has (so far) protected public communication in Britain from some of the worst features of other countries' media. The BBC now has a very substantial online platform, the influence of which spreads far beyond its national boundaries. But generally speaking, little has been done to develop this platform as a forum for a new kind of interactive, inclusive, deliberative political communication. Where creative innovations have been attempted, as in the iCann project (discussed in Coleman and Blumler 2009: 121–26), they have been left to flounder in isolation from any meaningful connection with the decision-making mechanisms of the local, national, or supranational state.

The scope for civic reconnection and political reinvigoration remains a challenge that calls for the creation of a new kind of public institution—an online civic commons—that does for democratic citizenship in the digital age what public service broadcasting did for analog democracy. We propose that this new public agency should be designed with a view to forging fresh links between communication and politics and connecting the voice of the people more meaningfully to the daily activities of democratic institutions. It should be publicly funded, but would be independent from government. Its tasks should be to elicit, gather, and coordinate citizens' deliberations upon and reactions to problems faced and proposals issued by public bodies (ranging

from local councils to parliaments and government departments), which would then be expected to react formally to whatever emerges from the public discussion. This should encourage politicians and officials to view the stimulation of increased participation not as mere "citizens' playgrounds" but as forums in which they must play a serious part.

The institutional innovation that we are arguing for (Blumler and Coleman 2001; Coleman and Blumler 2009) would not, however, in itself solve the crisis of political communication. For this to happen, there needs to be no less than a reconfiguration of the seemingly natural relationships between actors within the political communication system. If democracy is to amount to more than a strategic game in which the most successful politicians are those with the capacity to outsmart and beguile by any means necessary, the most prominent journalists are muckrakers and populists, and citizenship is reduced to long stretches of inert disappointment, punctuated by irregular acts of voting, then the opening up of discursive space must be complemented by a new commitment to meaningful public communication. This would involve each actor in a renegotiation of its relationship to the other two, based perhaps upon an acknowledgement that their better civic selves are continually thwarted by the existing arrangement. This reconfiguration represents neither a utopian wish nor a pious aspiration, but a strategic way out of an existing pathology that simply cannot sustain the dynamics of effective democratic politics. What precisely would this entail for politicians, journalists, and citizens, respectively?

For politicians, who, in the British context at least, seem to be the most incontinent of the three groups of actors, there is now a pressing need to move on from an us-and-them politics by grounding "their appeal on a citizenship democracy rather than a consumer democracy."⁶ This means abandoning the idea that success is principally measurable in terms of delivering a service to voter-consumers and persuading them that it is exactly what they wanted. Instead, it means engaging with the principles of political coproduction whereby a deliberative public is invited to help make difficult decisions and work through their consequences. Given the range of global environmental, economic, and cultural challenges facing contemporary society, how else could politicians possibly hope to achieve public consent for complex and often risky policies?

This reconfigured role for political actors is likely to meet resistance from political parties, which are now so geared toward market-based policy delivery that the very idea of letting politicians off their leashes and encouraging the kind of public deliberation in which unexpected answers might triumph is somewhat daunting. As the public realm becomes more expansive, fragmented, and interconnected, professional efforts to manage the political agenda are likely to fail more often than they succeed. With the proliferation of Web sites, blogs, e-mail lists, and online networks in which political messages and records are monitored, discussed, and criticized, governments and other political actors are forced to deal with more spaces of mediation than ever before. Whereas in the relatively recent past, political communication strategists had a limited range of press, television, and radio bases to cover, they are now involved in multidimensional impression management. To cover the broad, dynamic, and often

unpredictable media environment in which they now operate, political actors are compelled to adopt elaborate cross-media strategies, which may amount to little more than keeping up with the incessant flow of relevant information and hoping to spot embarrassing media content before it damages them. It is a Sisyphean task that political elites cannot hope to accomplish without becoming so absorbed in the work of representing themselves that they lose touch with the business of representing the interests, preferences, and values of citizens.

A reconfigured role for politicians entails a new perspective toward mediation. In place of their long-standing image of the media as an obstacle to be negotiated and manipulated, and their more recent adventures with new media, conceived rather naively as a channel for direct publicity, without the inconvenience of journalistic scrutiny, politicians need to enter into a mature, coproductive conversation with the people they claim to represent. The indirect methods of representation that came to characterize representative political regimes in their formative decades can only now be seen as a poor compromise between the ethos of democratic governance, with its principles of universal inclusion, deliberative reflection, and agonistic resolution and the feudal ethos of power exercised through public display, exclusive confabulation, and the cultivation of mass consent. These two conceptions of representation are incompatible and now clearly at odds. A move toward direct representation entails regarding mediation as a collaborative communicative process in which, by making problems, aspirations, and experiences public, the representative's role is one of working through, talking over, listening to all sides, and facilitating best possible outcomes. A cynical media is likely to depict such a new relationship in derisive and even destructive terms. Some journalists will see a move toward more deliberative political communication as an injury to their narrative of permanent suspicion. That is why journalists also need to embrace a reconfigured role, not least because without one, they are in real danger of being sidelined.

Journalism as it has been practiced for the past hundred years is no longer sustainable. Commercially, it is rooted in an industrial model based upon selling news to a consuming audience. Politically, it has come to mirror the routines and rituals of the political center, alienating much mainstream news production from events, relationships, and networks that are inherently political, but easily overlooked because they are peripheral to traditional centers. Culturally, it is overoriented toward vertical, top-down flows of message dissemination, paying scant attention to the burst of horizontal communicative energy, creativity, and collaboration that are characteristic of Web 2.0. The most obvious manifestation of this loss of status is the failure of many newspapers to remain afloat. But equally troubling has been a sense that both journalists and politicians are part of the same "charmed circle" (Thompson 2005) that has access to insider information and the levers of decision making.

A new role for journalists is as facilitator of public debate. That entails their traditional function of making available pluralistic information and holding the powerful to account, while at the same time creating opportunities for citizens to act upon information and challenge power holders. For example, the BBC currently has a dedicated

channel and a comprehensive section of its news site relating to the proceedings of Parliament. It also has a very active "Have Your Say" discussion forum in which people are invited to comment, among other subjects, on the proceedings of Parliament. What is lacking is any connection between the account of what happens, the diverse responses of the public, and feedback from those responses to parliamentarians and back again. What is offered at the moment is interactive technology minus an interactive political culture. The BBC Web site could have hundreds of thousands of people not only posting comments, but talking with one another and with their elected representatives. In the case of the MPs' expenses scandal, for example, we might have seen something more than the spectacle of journalists stirring up public indignation, politicians ducking journalists' tricky questions, and citizens talking to themselves on Web sites that leave them wholly disconnected from MPs.

A newly embraced mission to connect (Coleman et al. 2009) would place journalists in a key mediating role between politicians and citizens, not translating one into the language of the other as if they were distant tribes, but helping both to recognize what the other has to endure. In relating to politicians, that involves ensuring that public experience is conveyed to them in ways that are not distorting, condescending, or nullifying. In relating to citizens, it involves insisting upon the necessity of mature politics in which trade-offs are inevitable and procedures cannot be wished away. In relation to both citizens and politicians, however, journalists could have an important moderating role, allowing deliberation to take place in ways that avoid the pitfalls of expert domination, merely expressive distraction, and historical amnesia. Such a role for journalists has two merits. First, it provides a socially valuable function for them at a time when the business case for their survival is not apparent. Second, it disentangles them from their asphyxiating embrace with political elites and returns them to something closer to the norms of a democratic public sphere.

Finally, we turn to the reconfiguration of citizenship. The new roles that we have identified for politicians and journalists would be of little value unless they are accompanied by a willingness on the part of citizens to play their part differently. For various reasons, the British public has been moving for some time away from mainstream politics and media. If the reaction to the MPs' expenses scandal has demonstrated anything positive, it has been a widespread appetite for a change in the accountability of representatives to the represented.

Those who have for a long time written about the political communication system as if it were a natural order have been particularly dogmatic in their belief that the democratic role of the public must, as a matter of ontological necessity, be extremely limited. The assumption has been that most people have little energy for collective action, have neither appetite nor capacity for deliberative discussion, and can at best be offered low-energy cues that might persuade them to cast occasional votes. We argue that these are, at least in great part, *effects*, not causes of the way that the political communication system currently operates. Citizens are disincentivized; politics is presented to them as spectacle; the frustrations of participation are likely to demoralize all but the most enthusiastic. We believe that the changes we have proposed—a new space for institutionally connected public communication, new roles for politicians

and journalists—would unleash a degree of public energy that is currently diffused within social networks, local community projects, single-issue campaigns, and everyday talk about the latest news (Bennett 2003; Papacharissi 2003; Schneider 1996; Shah et al. 2005). The objective here is not to initiate a utopian republic in which earnest citizens participate fully, deliberate earnestly, and always arrive at a harmonious consensus, but not to perpetuate its opposite either: a polity in which civic disengagement becomes a default mode, there are few chances to deliberate and lots of opportunities to join a media-led chorus of ranting, and partisan dissensus and mutual blame are the norm. Creating an environment for something in between those positions should not be dismissed as an unrealizable ideal, even though its accomplishment will not be easy, given the forces of institutional inertia and political resistance that meet most proposals for cultural change.

If the kind of agency we are proposing were to be created, it would need to become a champion for citizenship, something that our political system has hitherto lacked. It could not be (must not be) preachy. It could not be (must not be) pushy. If it is to stand any chance of success, it must be open to the open-ended networks, the porous thematic boundaries, and the versatile playfulness that characterize Web 2.0. In taking up the challenge of reinvigorating public discussion, it would at least stand a chance of unleashing and fruitfully realizing those better civic selves that are so heavily suppressed in how we “do” political communication at present.

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Notes

1. Editorial, *Daily Mail*, May 29, 2009.
2. Gordon Brown on Sky News, 1 June, 2009, downloaded from <http://news.sky.com/skynews/Home/Politics/Gordon-Brown-Insists-Im-Staying-On-And-Rejects-Calls-For-A-General-Election/Article/200906115292482?chooseNews=videos>.
3. David Cameron, ‘A new politics: We need a massive, radical redistribution of power’, *The Guardian*, 25 May, 2009.
4. Matthew Taylor, “A New Politics: Citizens not Consumers,” *Guardian*, June 3, 2009.
5. Taylor, “A New Politics.”
6. *Ibid.*

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