How can we use media to get people more engaged in politics?

This was my submission to the Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee inquiry into 'Voter Engagement'. My paper was focused, of course, on the role of media. I am trying to convince politicians that they need to emulate the way that journalism has fostered engagement with the public, but go further, for example not just using twitter to promote their own propaganda. In the end, people will care about democracy when politics gives them a real voice and a genuine influence on how the authorities deliver real choices that have impact on their lives and communities. Media can help facilitate that, but it's ultimately down to the people in power.

I worked as a senior journalist at places like the BBC and ITN's Channel 4 News for 20 years before joining the LSE to set up Polis, the LSE's journalism and society think-tank in 2006. I have written books on the effect of changes in the news media on politics and society[1] and I am currently involved in an LSE research project on the 'mediatisation of government'. The Polis Journalism Conference[2] this year will be on news media and elections. This submission will mainly address the impact of journalism on voter engagement, though the definition of journalism is broad.

Executive Summary

- Engagement has to be seen in the wider context of the increasing role of media in all aspects of our lives, as individual citizens and for government.

- Media is increasingly important as a source of information, a forum for deliberation and a channel for political activism.

- As media becomes more networked there are new opportunities to improve interactive flows between those in power and the governed and for autonomous activism in civil society.

- Potentially, as it becomes more networked, mainstream news media are more accountable and give the public a greater voice.

- As political communications becomes 'disintermediated', politicians, business and civil society also have direct, 'independent' channels to the public sphere.

- New institutions are emerging that are reshaping the mediatisation of engagement: platforms, social networks, and campaign organisations. They are energised by a new social 'economy' that works most effectively through interactivity, transparency, trust, and personalisation.

- There are examples such as the 'Kony 2012' campaign of high levels of online engagement that do not deliver real change because they are based on a false political premise.

- There are other examples of campaigns that have engaged the public and achieved specific goals. Though these sometimes appear narrow or transitory they might have wider resonance when seen collectively.

- There are examples of politicians or activists who use new social media to engage in a range of positive ways but expectations for engagement should be tailored to the limits imposed by factors such as information overload, distraction, disproportion and distortion.

- We do not know enough yet about the longer-term outcomes of engagement in this networked process of the mediated relationship between citizen and state in terms of issues such as polarisation, filter bubbles and behavioural economics.

- It is safest to say that networked media has definitely made engagement easier for the 'already-interested' and marginally easier for the occasionally active. There may be negative effects for the wider population such as disillusion, dysfunction and lack of delivery.

- Government and political parties need to learn the lessons of successful engagement in mainstream media and by informal neo-political entities such as Mumsnet.

- There needs to be an element built into all policy-making that promotes 'media citizenship'.

- We need better media literacy through education and through government policy around data. Anyone creating political media needs to build in engagement literacy.

- The philosophical or sociological idea of 'agency' – enabling the individual to act in the world – can be facilitated best through media if it is made an aim of policy instead of leaving it to chance.

The wider context of media and engagement

1.0 'Engagement' is a key media buzzword at the moment. It is used by media practitioners to mean 'how you get consumers to do more than simply click on your website or glance at your newspaper or TV programme.' The struggle waged by the news media for the attention of the public and the efforts made to get them to take actions such as sharing content or paying for services has parallels with the efforts being made by the political classes to promote political engagement. There is much that both can learn from each other about that process. Both are facing a crisis caused by declining public interest in their work when it is done in traditional formats.

1.1 People's lives are increasingly 'mediated'. Leisure, finances, employment, travel, health, education and personal relationships are increasingly made possible and carried out through new digital media technologies. How we think about ourselves and how we relate to other people in our families, communities or even internationally is increasingly done through media.

1.2 These media are undergoing radical technological transformations that interact with other profound social changes such as growing individualism, the empowerment of women, higher levels of education and increased longevity. Unless political engagement is put in this context then any attempts to influence the degree to which voters understand or are active in a political way will be likely to fall short. For example, there is no point lowering the voting age unless you think about how politics is mediated around young people and how they articulate their political views in new ways using novel networks and devices.

1.3 There is evidence that mainstream media help frame political attitudes and have some influence on the general levels of political interest. There are also many recent cases where people have used new media technologies (usually in relationship with mainstream media) to shape agendas, attract attention to causes and to catalyse action.

1.4 Despite my own professional and academic media-centrism it is important to resist the myth of direct media power so often peddled by both media practitioners and those they affect. Media effects are generally difficult to define precisely. They are either very short term and transitory or long term and marginal. They are best understood as a catalyst or a context. Media are a set of tools not the machine itself. They rarely give 'control' over public opinion or actions. In the end, levels of political engagement will be driven by economic and social forces, not media.

The new networked journalism context for engagement

2.0 Mainstream media are now thoroughly 'networked'. Journalism is present in all sorts of networks for newsgathering and dissemination. The public is often involved in the production of news at all stages from content creation to dissemination. However, there are many more alternatives to mainstream news and to journalism in general that are just a click of a mouse or remote control away. In the face of an economic slump and a business model crisis news media is desperate to attract attention, to sustain the consumer's engagement and to build 'communities'. It has made radical changes in how it works and how it relates to the public. Politicians should do the same.[3]

2.1 There is now a far wider range of sources for the public and many more ways to access them. These may

depend on access to platforms (so access to the Internet), or charges (e.g. pay walls or subscriptions) and the sources may be provided by self-interested groups or by public relations companies. But overall, there is more data available than ever before and it is accessible instantly, globally and on-demand.

2.2 Mainstream news media has always sought to provide a forum for deliberation. Radio phone-ins are an old and still-popular example. The new technologies allow for debate that is more led by the public and that allows interactivity between discussants. It provides the opportunities for multi-layered storytelling that links background analysis or comment to breaking news through live blogs, for example.[4] This model is different to the linear concept of influence in 'old' media and 'old' politics where gatekeepers controlled access to information and governed the space and flows of deliberation.

2.3 As websites such as The Guardian's 'Comment Is Free' shows, moderation of these fora is problematic if the aim is a coherent exchange of views. [5] But as the parenting website *Mumsnet* has shown, they can raise political issues that are previously neglected and reach key demographics that were previously ignored.[6] The aim of this kind of engagement is not necessarily to arrive at a conclusion or consensus, but to air opinions and bring different perspectives and experiences into the debate.

2.4 Mainstream media at its most traditional, such as the BBC, can foster engagement. In the past the BBC has taken a patrician view of engagement inviting the public to be part of debates where it has defined the parameters. As the BBC has conceded, this might be why it was so behind public sentiment on issues such as Europe and immigration. More recently it has shown more innovation around social media as engagement. One example is 'BBC Trending' which picks up stories from around the world that are trending on social media. It then fact-checks them, provides background and promotes interactivity with people around that subject. The result is good BBC journalism that follows the public's interests in topics that might not fit the normal BBC agenda and so provide fresh perspectives on issues that are in the mainstream spotlight. Politicians and civil servants also have potential access to this kind of grassroots 'crowd sourcing' but there is little evidence that it is made part of policy-making systems.

2.5 This new networked news media is evidence that if you are transparent, trustworthy and interactive then you will get more engagement from the public. Instead of creating top-down broadcast products, networked media sees itself as a service industry that seeks to curate existing conversations as well as add specialist value – such as verification – to existing debates. Journalists have an interest in promoting this engagement even though it might result in criticism of what they do and a degree of loss of control over the production process. Politicians need to accept that, too.

2.6 Many other organisations apart from the news media now have access to the public to provide information and promote debate. In that sense, political communications have become 'disintermediated'. Spending on public relations media is increasing as companies and interest groups realise they can go direct to the citizen or to other audiences. However, the evidence is that even charitable organisations that do this purely to market themselves can face increasing public scepticism if not handled well.[7] Part of the journalist's task now is to help filter this special interest information so that the public can make judgements about how it might influence their judgements and engagement. It might help engagement if the political classes saw that as their role, too.

What is effective engagement through media?

3.0 In the new networked engagement 'economy' the currency is trust. Companies or individuals who act badly are more vulnerable to discovery and risk reputational damage. So it pays to engage in a way that aligns one's declared ethics with the actual practice of an organisation. In other words, what you say you do must be what you do.

3.1 Politicians have a poor public reputation for not managing this because they have to spend so much time trying to bridge the gap between unrealistic public expectations and a brutal reality that is rarely in their control. Before, they could rely on deference and tribal political loyalty to sustain trust, but those are both in decline. That is

probably a very healthy trend. Scepticism is a virtue. So now politicians need to share the difficulty of their difficult and vital task more with the public, in the same way that journalists have to admit what they don't know or can't understand.

3.2 There are countless examples of people being 'found out' on social media networks. The mistake is to see it as a presentational error or unfair criticism when it usually indicates a more fundamental problem. So social media can be a useful indicator of why you are not achieving engagement as well as a way to foster it.

3.3 If you want engagement then it is good to speak like a human. Or at least, how humans speak in social media. 'Human interest' is not a derogatory description when it refers to finding connections at a personal level between issues and individuals. Too much political communications assumes an interest in conventional politics, rather than taking the politics to the places where conversations are already happening. How many political professionals have ever been on *Pinterest* or *Reddit*?

3.4 New technologies allow politicians and political media to tailor and target a message to the personal circumstances of each citizen. However, if you do not engage with integrity and strategic purpose that includes some kind of reciprocal relationship, then the engagement will be shallow and potentially self-defeating as you are entering their personal space.

3.5 An example of immensely successful engagement that led to negative outcomes for the above reasons was the *Kony 2012* campaign by US NGO Invisible Children.[8] It used an online video to create a viral social media campaign to try to persuade the American government to intervene to arrest the Ugandan warlord and human rights abuser Joseph Kony. It achieved more than 100 million downloads within a record short time and mobilised thousands of people for a day of action. However, it failed completely in its declared objective and was criticised for perpetuating misrepresentations of Africa, advocating ridiculous policy objectives and letting down its supporters. It failed to turn clicks into meaningful action. This was because it became obsessed by the process of instead of the purpose of the engagement and did not have structures in place to cope with the interest it provoked.

3.6 An example of a different and more sustainable model for creating engagement with real world results is Change.Org, an American-founded online petition site that allows people to create their own campaigns.[9] It hosts, advises and promotes those citizen initiatives. One of the most successful was the campaign by Caroline Criado Perez to have a woman on the new bank note. It achieved its very specific goal but it also created a wider campaign around feminism online that went beyond Change.org.

3.7 Another example of a gender-related online campaign that has created a model for engagement is Laura Bates' #EveryDaySexism project. This has grown from a twitter meme that went viral to a small organisation that has published a book and now advises organisations such as London Transport on how they can reduce offence and harassment of women. It has raised consciousness and had real world impact.

3.8 There are a whole range of horizontal 'peer to peer' support forums that act independently of mainstream media or politics providing advice, solidarity and a forum for debate and a platform for activism on subjects ranging from Consumer advice to School governorships.[10] Some are focused on geographical areas such as the very busy http://www.sheffieldforum.co.uk/

3.9 Where these cases of engagement are successful it might be because they are *not* part of conventional politics. By their very nature they may be transitory. Parties have struggled to replicate their success but they should pay more attention to their methods and to the lessons they teach about how to communicate about politics online.

How politicians or government can engage

4.0 Government has made significant steps forward in terms of open data. This was a huge logistical achievement but from the citizen point of view it is still a bare minimum. In the digital age all contact between the citizen and public services should be available online in ways that facilitate access but also reuse, sharing, adaption and social and economic enterprise. Government needs to use digital platforms proactively to foster engagement

combined with offline tactics like the Shetland Islands Council Building Budget Project.[11]

4.1 Politicians have also made an effort to catch up with the realities of web 2.0. In a report written for Polis as a backbench MP Stella Creasy showed the exciting potential for politicians offered by social media to communicate in new and effective ways.[12] However, she also showed how its limits, disadvantages and special characteristics. Some of these are logistical – mainly time. However, there were also dangers of distortion as digitally savvy constituents demand more attention than analogue voters.

4.2 Inevitably, different politicians have to adopt varying approaches to engagement via social media. Perhaps we don't want the Prime Minister to be tweeting his personal feelings during a phone call with Vladimir Putin. For a radical backbencher like Douglas Carswell MP it is relatively easier to be personal, interactive and outspoken. However, in his book he is right to identify that politics conducted online by the public is something that MPs need to tap into rather than control.[13] He shows how it must connect to offline outcomes. His best cases are local but surely that is where engagement should start?

4.3 As our new research project is investigating, government in the broadest sense is now increasingly conditioned by media[14]. Politicians and civil servants across government and at all levels tell us that this is a key factor in their work and yet little attention is paid to the influence and affect of media within and around what they do. This is partly about the prioritisation of party political presentation in policy-making. There are increasing demands to fit communications to suit political 'spin', partly as party political communications becomes more professionalised and partly as a way of coping with the increasing pressures of 24/7, multi-media political journalism oversight.

4.4 There are many dangers to good governance in this process but in the context of this submission I would point out the paradox concerning engagement. The point of message management is ultimately supposed to be to satisfy public opinion. Yet, real engagement that might promote genuine understanding or deliberation around policy-making is an almost non-existent factor in civil service or political media planning. One simple but interesting exception was the Chancellor's crowd sourcing for ideas for the 2011 budget. You only have to look at party conferences to see how any real interactivity or engagement – even with party members – has been excluded.

4.5 As well as asking how the political classes might engage it would be useful to think more practically about fostering 'media citizenship' in general. The Informed Societies Council of the World Economic Forum drew up a charter for media citizenship that called for a structural shift that would put engagement at the heart of all policy-making relating to civil society.[15] It recognises that you cannot see any aspect of engagement in isolation when media is so interconnected. It called on governments, business and civil society organisations to:

- Commit to transparency and to communicating pertinent information to stakeholders.
- Build media literacy into education systems.
- Support independent media.
- Foster connectivity and open, competitive media markets.
- Protect media freedom, intellectual property and the openness of the Internet.

Inevitably these maxims aimed at a global audience of policy-makers are too general but they remain a useful benchmark aspiration for policy-making that impact on communications.

4.6 You do not have to believe in government by e-petition to realise that engagement without influence is a waste of time for the public. It is a question of power. Debates around 'authenticity' are more about style than substance. Engagement may be fostered by script less speeches and a saloon bar persona, but it will only be sustained by a more open kind of politics. We do not need a new generation of costly consultants to create expensive voter engagement exercises. It is time for those involved in politics to accept that we live in a multi-source, multi-party, multi-campaign world and to adapt institutions accordingly

Recommended Actions:

Push forward with even more open data from all parts of government to shift civil service from culture of information containment to culture of engagement

- Invest resources into using social media and other data to understand the dynamics of public sentiment rather than passive opinion polling
- Give more funds to members of parliament to provide proper media engagement facilities
- Improve media literacy resources
- Create an 'engagement' standard for all public organisations including a media literacy or media citizenship kite mark.
- Political parties to reform their engagement processes – from lecturing to listening.

[1] Beckett, C (2008) SuperMedia, Blackwell

[1] Beckett, C (2012) WikiLeaks News In The Networked Era (Polity)

[2] Details of last year's conference here: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2013/03/27/schedule-for-the-polis-journalism-conference-april-5th-2013/

[3] For more on networked journalism see Beckett, C, 2008, *SuperMedia* (Blackwell Wiley)

[4] For more on the value of live-blogs as fora for debate see this Polis report:

[4] O'Mahony, k (2014) As It Happens: Live Blogs And THeir Future (Polis, LSE)

[4] Accessible here: http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/Polis/documents/As-it-happens.pdf

[5] See Polis report on the moderation of online news websites accessible here:

[5] http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/01/19/is-comment-free-new-polis-research-report-on-the-moderation-of-online-news/

[6] See lecture by Mumsnet founder Justine Roberts accessible here: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2013/10/28/the-mumsnet-story-how-to-engage-with-online-communities-polis-lse-media-agenda-talk-preview/

[7] See report by Dr Shani Orgad on public attitude to NGO marketing accessible here:

[7] http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/06/13/who-cares-challenges-and-opportunities-in-communicating-distant-suffering/

[8] For more on the Kony2012 campaign and how to use online media for campaigns see Beckett, C (2012) Connecting To The World (IBT) Accessible here: http://www.ibt.org.uk/documents/reports/connecting-to-the-world.pdf

[9] For more on Change.Org see this: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2013/07/12/stories-for-change-is-online-campaigning-the-new-politics-or-just-noise-guest-blog-polisss/

[10] More on peer to peer fora here: http://talkaboutlocal.org.uk/?p=2883&preview=true

[11] http://www.shetland.gov.uk/news-advice/buildingbudgets.asp

[12] Creasy, S (2011) *Perpetual Engagement* (Polis,LSE) Accessible here: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/06/04/perpetual-engagement-the-potential-and-pitfalls-of-using-social-media-for-political-campaigning-a-new-polis-paper/

[13] Carswell, D, 2012) The End of Politics And The Birth Of iDemocracy (Biteback)

[14] Led by Dr Damian Tambini of the LSE Media POlicy Project http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mediapolicyproject/

[15] Accessible here http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/10/07/media-citizenship-a-new-charter-for-an-informed-society-world-economic-forum/

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