An angry or informed society? (guest blog) #polis11

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This blog by Mariam Cook reflects on the debate about an Informed Society at our Media and Power Journalism Conference. Embracing the angry society needs people. Lots of us.

If our political establishments are locked into restrictive, exclusive modes of discourse, how can this generation of communications professionals help publics smash into it?

This is the natural question for me that bubbles up from this year's POLIS Media and Power conference, where the 'informed society' session left a few pungent themes hanging in the air. Firstly, the human efforts required at participatory 'points of arrival,' secondly, the tone of digital debate and thirdly, the tangible effects of internet interactions.

What happens as the masses arrive in online conversations? This was evocatively illustrated by Guardian journalist John Harris – conjuring images of writing an article and then spending an equal amount, if not more time, up all night in discussions beneath. Exposing a fundamental shift in the nature of employment for 'social' journalists – and highlighting the need for attention to work patterns and loads.

A second point was the tone publics use toward powerful politicians, journalists and corporate representatives. This led to references to comments written in green ink – impassioned diatribes which were fair game for a bit of a snigger from both panel and audience. Yet here John gave pause to consider the domination of 'metropolitan liberal elites' in online conversation –and remind us of the rampant social inequality that is the background to enthusiasm about digital participation as leveller.

Bringing us neatly to the third point – the result. Robert Phillips from Edelman colourfully brought to life influxes of people into corporate territory. He speculated on a soon-coming 'Tahrir square moment' in the business world – an event where the weight of online rhetoric brings down a profit-making enterprise. Robert contextualised this with a persuasive argument on public relations as key to helping lead the transition towards a fairer world.

So what of the human commitment and resources required at the receiving end? It is all well and good having an 'informed society' – but who is listening? How can they listen? The crowd is rude and difficult and angry. Why wouldn't it be when societies are more unequal than ever and language, education, media literacy and cultural understanding exclude on multiple levels? As a Guardian commenter once wrote to me:

"Before on-line communities the discourse was limited by, and to the language of the established institutions. Even the so-called anti-establishment was firmly embedded within the same institutions…. The grammar of on-line political communities is the grammar of outsiders. It's the gypsy language spoken in the wastelands beyond the palace walls."

As people engage online and see their views have impact, tones do adapt (improve, if you like). But – once and for all, can elites get away from despairing over getting the rabble to talk their language? They can't right now, nor do they have the luxury of time to craft elegant prose.

This new world of adaptive social business, government and media requires a philosophical openness and practical reflexivity to the crowd. Most importantly it needs appropriate investment in people at the coal face – individuals to embody that openness.

When computing swept the industrialised world many despaired over machines replacing people. But what we now find is bringing the world into products and services, bringing the citizenry into policies … requires endless listening, responding and yes, arguing over the web… meaning a massive human resource requirement.

Sophisticated listening tools can aggregate sentiment and analyse conversational flows, but accurately gauging the nuances of human feedback and interacting in a way that make sense must be done by people.

Unfortunately for those of us who love seeing our names in lights… this may not look very elegant, nor be the stuff of great headlines. We just have to get over this. The 'active' society comes to life only as online interaction sways journalists, government and corporations towards just policy and products people really want… bringing the 'informed society' towards its rightful place at the core of participatory democracy and sustainable economies.

Chris Brogan has previously said that social media puts the 'market' into marketing and the 'public' into public relations… we may also add that it puts the 'demos' into democracy. For this to happen, every industry needs to pour resources into the people required to have all those conversations properly.

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