International trends in political communication

Political soap opera Ideal for the consumer-citizen

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It is universally recognised by scholars of political communication that the process by which political parties interact with the voters has become professionalised and so revolutionised over the last two or three decades. One can look at the contrasts in two ways. Firstly, there has been a shift from face to face interaction to highly mediated and mediatised communication employing many channels and forms of popular culture. Secondly, the strategic targeting and employment of sophisticated techniques to communicate to those voters deemed important by parties when seeking to win electoral contests either locally or nationally. The reasons for this political communication revolution lie in structural changes within the relationship between party and voters, as well as the increasingly complex media environment professional communicators face. Voters are now much more disloyal than they once were; research by Kayser & Wlezien (2005) found party membership is on average 15% of the population across all established democracies and at only 40% [?] within the newer democracies of Eastern Europe. Electoral contests globally are more volatile; Mair (2005) discovered over half of elections held since 1989 have been unpredictable with voters switching allegiances between the main contenders. Furthermore this dealignment and voter volatility is compounded by a global rise of mistrust of elected politicians (Stoker, 2006, pp. 32-46), and, perhaps even more fundamentally, a deepening antipathy towards government in general (Levine, 2004). While these are reasons enough to suggest communication requires greater strategic input, the rise of 24/7 news, the more intensive market-orientation and fragmentation of the media, and increased use of the internet for information mean that communication can no longer be viewed as a simple two-step or three-step process where parties communicate directly or via the media to voters. Like their corporate counterparts, political parties find they must make complex judgements in locating the right message, messenger and media to have any chance of successfully exercising their persuasive power. This intensive communications management is moreover continuous (the ‘permanent campaign’).

These shifts in society and in information and communication technology have led parties to think in highly strategic ways about communication and to employ professionals from the world of advertising, marketing and journalism in order to get the strategy right. This process has been described as professionalisation or Americanisation, due to the spread of American practices globally, but also as the marketisation, consumerisation or corporatisation of political party behaviour, even if the term ‘political marketing’ is rejected by some of those involved. While there are debates surrounding the extent of Americanisation, and indeed over the meaning of professionalisation, the fact that parties are increasingly borrowing the tools of corporate organizations in order to reach voters

seems accepted. Communication is designed for maximum impact, usually involving advertising professionals at every stage of the process; the electorate is segmented according to potential voting behaviour; and communication is designed to speak to the desires, needs and fears of the segmented public. Advertising is skilfully deployed to undermine opponents, such as characterising John Kerry, US Presidential hopeful, as a flip-flop unable to make up his mind; or warning UK voters that not voting Labour could result in 'waking up with Howard' (Michael Howard, then Conservative Party leader). There is often a focus on denigrating the opposition, rather than providing informative material about the sponsor of the ad. There is also evidence of a de-ideologisation of politics, and an emphasis upon courting the political 'middle ground' through offering managerialism above vision. This lack of ideology and focus on the ability of the leader and their team leads directly to a personalisation of campaigns and to parties employing emotionally appealing heuristics rather than requiring voters to make a rational choice based on detailed information.

These trends have rightly been the object of much concerned and critical commentary. However there are other accounts which also see positive potential in recent trends. These accounts tend to derive from 'culturalist' approaches to politics, those which focus on politics as culture and on its place in broader cultural contexts. An important early work in this vein was John Street's 'Politics and Popular Culture' (1997), which analysed the overlap and convergence between these two domains. Street noted that the relationship between the two, though becoming closer for various reasons including the marketing pressures, was based in the fundamental element common to both which is their ability to tap into deep passions. This convergence brings politics into more deliberate effort in the aesthetics of presentation, from party logos to the televisual presence of leaders, as part of the broad '*aestheticisation*' of contemporary life, characteristic of postmodern consumer culture. It also foregrounds new concerns with *authenticity*, in keeping with preoccupations with expressions and assessments of the 'real', inner person in today's emotionalised, therapeutic culture (as seen, for example, in much 'reality TV'). While these trends put politics at risk of incorporation into a manipulated world of pseudo-authenticity, they also open up possibilities for closer scrutiny of politicians as claimants of trust, and for more affective and effective communications with voters. To the charge that politics is being reduced to 'soap opera', it has been replied that this is precisely what it needs, because some key emotional narratives underpinning everyday subjectivity and identity are powerfully articulated in some soaps. Liesbet van Zoonen (2005, p.147) concludes: '..citizenship can be entertained through the popular vocabularies offered by personalisation and dramatization'.

Emerging from these perspectives (reviewed and developed in the collection of essays edited by John Corner and Dick Pels, 2003) is the understanding that political communication is now an aesthetic *performance*, a *dramatisation, narrativisation* or *styling.* It has to combine an increased visibility of the person of the politician and an enhanced address to the consumer-citizen. Continued declines in electoral turnout , however, suggest that these trends have not yet revitalised electorates or regenerated trust, and whether they create increased space for demagogic forms of populism remains to be seen.