Introduction

When people think of politicians and communications, most expect a discussion about the art of spin – how political parties communicate messages for narrow tactical advantage. Spin is about the use of the 'non-denial denial', the attempts to control what is published and circulated. It is the practice of people who have gone into folklore as manipulators. As one fictional example, Malcolm Tucker once said:

'I'm a man of principle, I like to know whether I'm lying to save the skin of a tosser or a moron.'

I could spend the rest of this paper quoting from *The Thick of It*[3], and I'd probably be more popular. But instead I want to talk about something different, and I hope more interesting: the challenges facing those of us in the public realm in communicating and engaging with citizens, and how these are evolving. What I'm especially interested in is how media can be platforms that help deliver social change. Ultimately most of us join political parties and become politicians not to change governments but to change lives. So I want to do three things in this paper. Firstly, to set out what I believe are the pressures on political communications and media engagement in contemporary politics. Secondly, to set out where I believe the future lies in finding ways to move from campaigning to engagement. And finally to consider what that might mean in future.

Malcolm Tucker speaks to a caricature of what political communications can be at its worst. We should acknowledge that the desire within any form of campaigning to set the terms of the debate and what people talk about is not new or somehow underhand. For nearly a century there have been people whose role it is to oversee how politicians communicate with voters. Bernard Ingham was a notable example for Margaret Thatcher, Joe Haines did the same job for Harold Wilson. The first specialised press secretary was George Seward, who dealt with Ramsay Macdonald's communications in the 1930s. There has been someone in Downing Street dealing with press for as long as there has been press. Gladstone's son, Herbert, did the job in the mid-19th century.

This approach to what was termed 'media management' was based on the principle that it was important and possible to be consistent and 'on-message' by co-ordinating and repeating messages across the range of mediums available. Through both print and broadcast, of course, but also through leaflets and latterly, online. This model was also only really possible in an era in which there were limited mass communications channels, and limited mass communications technologies with which to connect and engage voters and citizens.

Fast-forward to 2011 and things are very different. As politicians we are communicating both locally and nationally in an environment with a multiplicity of voices that help define the public realm. The take-up of media technologies and the rise of the blogosphere means no longer is this one-way traffic: a thousand voices can be heard shouting as to what is the issue of the day. There were about 66 TV channels available across the UK in 1997, while there are now more than 400. The Sun famously claimed to have 'Won It' back in 1992 but at the last election its change of support from Labour to the Conservatives was less significant. The era of the dominance of a single platform, which can define the terms of the debate, is over.

So as politicians we also have to recognise it's no longer the case that you win or lose elections in press, on camera or online alone anymore as a political party – although you might as an individual candidate. For many, the main media story of this election past in the UK was the introduction of the leaders' debates. 37 per cent of the total audience in

the whole country watched the first discussion – yet this did not translate into electoral advantage in the way many predicted as we saw in the results of the election itself. There is strong evidence to suggest the supposed jump in the Liberal Democrats' poll ratings from the first leaders' debate was actually in the works weeks before. Nearly all the fieldwork for ICM's poll, which put the Liberals on 27 per cent two days after the debate, was actually conducted before the debate.

Yet aside from the breakdown in national swing and local results, there were some more interesting trends in this election that are worth reflecting on in the use of media. A survey conducted by Orange[4] found 61 per cent of the public had received information about the election from online sources and 12 per cent of them had had emails from candidates or parties. In 2005 only 8,000 people bought the Labour party manifesto; in 2010 130,000 people viewed it online in an accessible format and 200,000 downloaded it or read the document online. There is no doubt too that some of the newer forums such as Mumsnet were influential both in terms of generating media content and providing discussion points. However, it is not clear how these were linked to actual voting – after all, the demographic group most likely actually to vote, pensioners, doesn't hang out on YouTube.

1. The political challenge

To believe that only the kinds of formats we could use to communicate has changed in the last fifteen years or so is to ignore the elephant in the room of the changing nature of the British public realm itself. As politicians we have to recognise we are no longer the only ones with the ability to set the terms of debate. And we're no longer competing just with other political parties but other political movements and single-issue campaigns. This isn't something that's suddenly appeared over the last 10-15 years but it is has sped up in that time, fed by a growing cynicism with politics and frustration with the status quo.

Hansard Society[5] research shows that in just the last six years, the percentage of

people who see Parliament as one of the top three institutions that have the most impact on their lives has fallen from 30 per cent to just 19 per cent. You should note that in the same period, the perceived influence of the media has risen by 9 per cent. In the same very brief period, the percentage of people who thought our system of government works well dropped from 36 per cent to 28 per cent.

We know the public aren't apathetic. They are political in the broadest sense. We also know they are active. Nearly 40 per cent of Britons participate in voluntary activities once a month, giving nearly 12 hours of their time. Crucially, according to the Citizenship surveys[6], 37 per cent of non-voters are members of campaigns or community action groups.

Between the early 1980s and the early 2000s, four of the leading environmental NGOs tripled their collective membership while membership of political parties plummeted. This competition for campaigners isn't just national – there are over 1,000 local Amnesty International groups, and over 100 local Greenpeace groups for instance.

The consequences for our democracy of this detachment from formal political representation as the vehicle for political opinions and actions are immense. According to YouGov[7], just 36 per cent of the public have either a great deal or fair amount of trust in their elected parliamentarian – something that has fallen even further since 2007. This sense of a lack of efficacy is also shared by those who are supposed to be 'in the know'. YouGovStone's Think-Tank[8] panel of 'influential people' shows that two out of three (68 per

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cent) believe MPs and newspaper journalists alike frequently exaggerate the truth or lie to forward their own agenda – though only 35 per cent think broadcast journalists frequently do so.

This paper is not about these social trends, and nor do I yearn for a mythical era of deference to elected representatives. However, in the context of the subject it does mean that the challenge of using media for campaigning doesn't happen on a tabula rasa in which your status as a representative means you are automatically given airtime.

The examples I have given so far show the beginnings of something new, as well as the limitations of a traditional 'media management' approach to campaigning. The mediums that were effective on voter turnout and in campaigning at the last election were those that didn't come from this media management approach. They were those which recognised that a one-way delivery of content – where politicians speak and voters imbibe – doesn't chime with a public that wants to have its own say. Namely that people want a conversation, not a broadcast. That same Orange survey[9] found 80 per cent of people declared themselves 'interested' in the campaign – that this didn't translate into votes suggests to me all the more that the ways in which political parties talked to voters didn't always work.

2. The medium is not the message

So we have to be better at understanding in a world where no one appears to want to hear what you have to say. We have to not just say things differently but also to say and do different things.

This leads me to the first argument I want to make which is that the future of using media for campaigning lies not in just focusing on the medium. In that sense, Marshall McLuhan got it wrong. It's the message that matters, not the medium. But the way that we communicate that message does have an influence on how people will respond. Social media gives us the opportunity to move on from the sterile debate of message versus medium. To do so, we need to better understand how the medium and the message interact with each other and how, in turn politicians like me interact through these new media with voters

This question of the purpose of communications is especially true for newer forms of media. Too often political parties and political candidates have used online platforms without a clear sense of how this helps them either win elections or progress their ideals. Consider some examples from the recent election. The Conservative Party's video website, Webcameron[10] was launched four years ago with a fanfare but was not a viral hit. There were 287 videos. Most of them got no more than a few thousand hits with the more popular ones being of Boris Johnson and Samantha Cameron rather than David!

Contrast this with Barrack Obama's use of media. Just one example, the 'yes we can' video featuring Will.i.am got 5.4 million YouTube views in its first month alone. I would argue it's not just that Cameron is no Nelly or Justin – it's that the Tories thought it was enough to produce a video without understanding how this would be used. Thus Obama in one month managed to get the attention of around 2.5 per cent of the American population, whilst Cameron got up to the giddy heights of 0.33 per cent for the party political broadcast.

The principle of asking what the purpose of political communications is should also hold true outside of election time.

As the Government learnt with its own 'Spending Challenge' website[11] which called for money-saving suggestions from the public, if you are not clear why you are talking to people either on or off line then it's not likely to be a happy experience. The site was immediately swamped with racist diatribes, and suggestions like diverting the welfare budget to fund nuclear weapons or selling off the unemployed

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after six months on benefits. It wasn't all bad though. Apparently someone posted an excellent and very popular recipe for beef and vegetable casserole.

The changing ways of engaging also highlight trends outside formal party politics and how single-issue campaigns work in this context. It is striking that the opportunity for a range of organisations to do what 527s – and indeed the Tea Party – have done in America has yet to really emerge here because our culture of communications is still one-way. Some campaign organisations are better than others at being engaging – not just with supporters but also with politicians. But swapping old forms of communication – letter writing – for new forms of the same approach – email blitzing – doesn't make the quality of engagement better. It just makes it online.

The online activist group 38 Degrees[12] does some important campaigning work. They have a gigantic mailing list, and software that can track how many people are clicking on the 'engage' button in order to write directly to their MPs. But as Micah White has set out in his critique of 'clicktivism'[13] there is a danger these organisations could end up actually reducing activism to clogging an MP's in-box rather than encouraging any meaningful debate and discourse.

Successful examples of media engagement during the election used technology to organise and mobilise towards having a genuine impact rather than for the sake of it. #mobmonday was a great idea whereby Twitter was used to organise Labour supporters to call voters using the party's virtual phone banks at the same time each Monday and use Twitter to share their experiences. When they did this for me one night they made 400 contacts in two hours.

Using these technologies effectively is vital for political parties to stop them wasting money on campaigns and platforms that don't do anything to help them win. This is a problem for all political parties because no communication is better than bad communication: witness the 'fire up the Quattro' advert[14] that was created by the Labour Party. Not only did the message support our opposition, it also deterred the party from further exploring how such technologies could be used to engage with voters.

3. Perpetual engagement: examples

Not focusing on the purpose of communication in politics misses the potential of communications to help organise and mobilise individuals and communities for common cause. As a progressive politician that isn't just about getting voters to turn out for elections, it's about how we achieve our ambitions for the UK. The problem with the model of communicating for the permanent campaign is that you focus on election-winning, not effecting change. The future of political communications lies not in the permanent campaign, but the perpetual process of engagement.

I believe one of the challenges for political parties here in the UK is to move beyond the Obama myth. No one can doubt Obama created the biggest data management machine in living political history – very centralised in its operation but very clear on its ambitions. It set out state-by-state what supporters and activists were doing either online or offline in communicating with voters, finding their preferences and then converting this into votes, participation in campaigning and fundraising. In doing so, the Obama campaign compiled
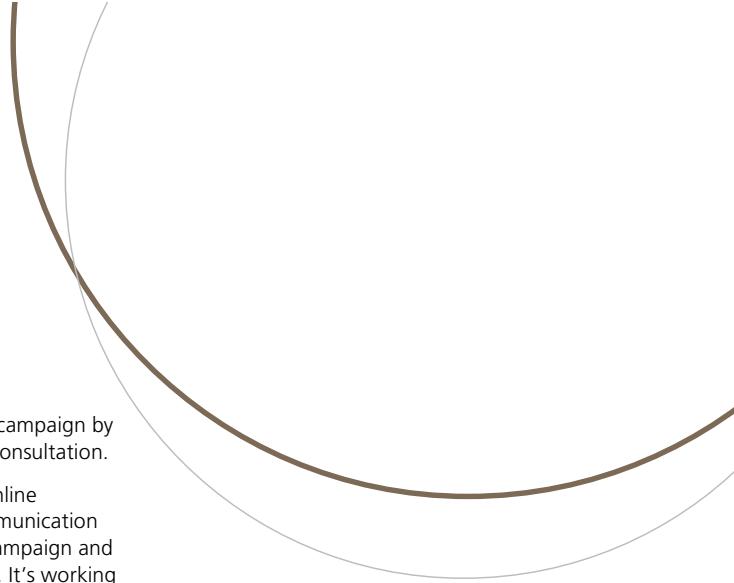
an email list of 13 million activists. He had more than two million American supporters on Facebook; McCain, just over 600,000. Three million people made 6.5 million donations online, adding up to over half a billion dollars. Six million of these donations were of less than $100. It was a phenomenal achievement.

Yet one of the biggest criticisms you can make of Obama now is that his machine was time-limited. He built something that was connected to millions of Americans but two years on, it has not been as effective as a model for either long-term electoral success or social change.

What does it mean to do things differently? I want to give you an example of the way in which I'm trying to move from campaigns that have a beginning, middle and an end to perpetually engaging local and national agencies in pursuit of shared objectives. I give them not as templates but as experiences of the pros and cons of such an approach. I certainly do not claim to be the only person doing this kind of work.

I am currently promoting a piece of legislation to tackle legal loan sharking. This has been fed by a local and national campaign. Locally we are working with the Movement for Change and community organisers. We have demonstrated outside the high street premises of loan sharks to highlight the credit union as an alternative. We hold action planning meetings with local residents to share intelligence about their activities and we have encouraged the council to pass motions restricting their premises locally.

Nationally, using Facebook and Twitter we have been able to mobilise MPs to support my bill by drawing together supporters and then asking them to help engage MPs in the issue, and to get other campaigning organisations like Citizens UK, the Co-Op and Compass to help support the bill and so amplify the discussion. The hashtag #vote4credregbill on the days of the debates about the bill has so far been used 500 times and the story has now been covered by the *Mirror*, the *Independent* and the *Guardian*, as well as the MoneySavingExpert.com forum which has seven million users. Most crucially, we've persuaded the Government to rethink its plans and include the interest rates legal loan sharks use in their call for evidence on rate capping. To turn the tables a little, I've emailed everyone who emails me in Walthamstow using 38 Degrees

to ask them to support this campaign by writing to the government consultation.

It's this mix of offline and online engagement – not just communication – that is helping drive this campaign and therefore collective activism. It's working not because I've picked this issue up, but because these communications are mobilising people to mobilise others and join in with raising the issue. In brutal terms, no action in this campaign is for show. Every action has to increase the pressure we need to bring to bear on the government to address this concern or it must increase the numbers of people involved. Otherwise it is wasted effort.

It's also a principle I try to use on a more micro basis. Each week approximately 3,500 people in my constituency get a weekly update from me about issues of interest to our local community. The e-newsletter isn't about me but the thing we have in common – a passion for Walthamstow. In the last two and a half years that I've been building this list I've generated activists for the loan shark work, for the local night-shelter, school governors, supporters and activists during the election. I've also used this list to organise community meetings and discussions melding the online and the offline ways of working.

The opportunity to use online and offline forms of communication and interaction to mobilise sustainable social change is immense. But it requires a different philosophy to underpin why you would interact with the public – both offline and online. There is a difference between having a web presence which is static or self-indulgent and developing resources which are useful and productive. That's why I don't really blog. It feels a bit like standing in the street with a megaphone. Instead, I am looking to develop a hyperlocal site bringing together all that local information and concern to help local residents in Walthamstow navigate how, if they want to, they can work

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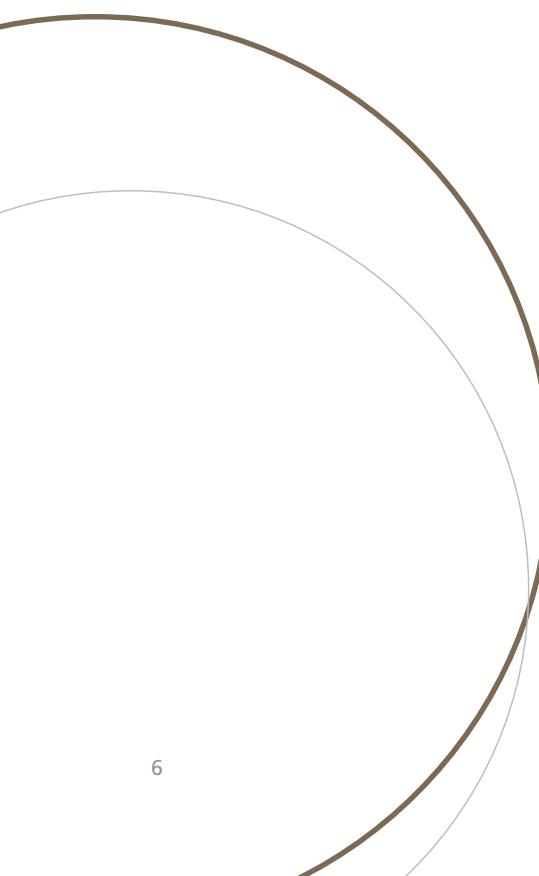
with others to achieve change. A good example of this is the London SE1 site.

4. Perpetual engagement: pitfalls and potential

Having set out this example I want to explore with you some of the pitfalls and potentials that arise from this way of working.

First and foremost, it's extremely time-consuming. The nature of formal political structures and of demanding casework already puts a high level of pressure on the ability of any MP to breathe, let alone make time for the engagement process. I received 22,000 emails in the first five months of being an MP. That's before you include letters and phone calls. I also spend six hours a week in the Public Accounts Committee. Each time we speak in a debate we are expected to be in the chamber for the length of the debate – which can be up to seven hours or more. I'm not complaining because I love this job but real engagement with the public is a time-intensive process.

I am also conscious of the need not to rely on any one medium, like emails. If you're trying to interact with a range of people then you need a range of ways of doing it. I have tried to build my office to be able to support this work through ensuring my staff get community organising training so that action is not dependent on me but my staff already have a high level of casework and calls coming into my office.

New technology ups this pressure rather than reducing it. There is a tipping point on the numbers of Twitter followers any of us can truthfully and meaningfully engage with. Tom Harris, who was a very popular and enjoyable blogger as well as a thoughtful MP, decided to end his blog because it was creating too much work for him and so hindered what he saw as his proper work as an MP.

So as these newer technologies stand, their intensity and presumed immediacy could push representatives back into less not more interaction. 211 MPs are now on Twitter. Naturally, front-bench MPs will have the most followers – Ed Miliband has 38,755 – but they also have even less time than backbenchers to engage meaningfully. I have over 4,000 followers, making responding to and reading every tweet increasingly difficult. Having said that I do try to use the technology available to help me keep discourse going. You can tweet but not make phone calls in the chamber of the House of Commons, for example.

The model of perpetual engagement ultimately seeks a different role for the representative. It's a move away from the old customer complaints desk model of communications: I tell you how great I am, and you tell me when you're cross. This is about moving beyond just asking how we are held accountable to asking how we can work together.

Generating social change means changing people's expectations of the kind of communications – and relationships – they should expect with their representatives. And it will take time for this different way of working to be effective for both sides. Just as deliberative methods of participation took years to bed in within local government, so too it will take a generation to build the relationship between politicians and the public which is defined by progressive collaboration rather than a service contract.

I felt this not least on the weekend when I held my first 'question time' session as a local MP. It was a mixed experience with one member of the public determined that I had the power to tell the Olympics what to do and that I worked 'for not with' people so I should do as I'm told.

New media makes addressing this point all the more urgent as new forms of technology allow greater level of contact and communications but not necessarily engagement.

This leads me to my final concern. As a way of working this inevitably creates a greater level of direct communication and so automatically personalises political debate. We have seen on a national level political communications being increasingly 'presidentialised'. This creates a smaller and smaller space in which to have a private life. At a local level I can no longer have family arguments in public and at a national level I know the label in the back of Samantha Cameron's dresses. It also undermines the ideological foundation of my work. I stood as a political representative, not in a popularity contest. I will always be wary of a changing culture in which my political values and my ability to deliver to these is not the metric on which I am judged.

At the same time the personal information that we can give about why we do what we do is the key to detoxifying political motivations. It helps the public address the question I know many have: 'why would you be a politician in the first place?' So the dilemma facing all of us is how to have political, not personal

engagement in a world where politics is increasingly showbusiness for ugly people.

On a very basic level this kind of perpetual engagement also means politicians experience a level of abuse I don't believe was thrown at previous generations. As a politician it seems to me that Googling your own name is a form of self-hatred. I have several local bloggers who seem to border on fetish with the amount of bile they throw at me. Whilst a thick skin is necessary in any form of public life, it does raise a concern about how to attract 'normal' people to do this job. Having said that I should also say I think we can be more confident that this can be overcome as technologies become more mainstream. Offline communications can be as brutal as anonymous bloggers. My hope is that the online realm's capacity for self-regulation will expand to create a more civil space.

5. Engagement – the electoral imperative

So if online engagement is so problematic – why do it? Frankly, it is where the future of elections will be won or lost. If the last election shows us anything, it's that the national election communications are less and less influential to local results. Of course every politician is still vulnerable to a national trend. But increasingly we're seeing that local campaigns can make enough of a difference to swing results either way. I'm basing this assertion not on the big upsets – the Redcars, the Tattons – but the swings and outcomes that are about a couple of hundred votes or a few thousand. For example, Gisela Stuart in the highly marginal constituency of Birmingham Edgbaston kept the swing from Labour to Conservative down to half a percent, and therefore won by 1,200 votes. Most of the neighbouring constituencies were seeing four, five, six and seven per cent swings. The only reasonable explanation is that Gisela ran an energetic and engaged campaign. The number of so called 'supermarginals' where majorities are in three or just four figures means this is only going to be more important in future.

That means there is merit for political parties in trying to understand how these ways of engaging will evolve. Indeed I would argue the technologies and ways of communicating that will define the next election haven't been taken up yet. I think that's the case for both offline and online communication. The advent of doorstep recycling is the death knell for the focus leaflet or Rose newsletter.

6. Engagement – future trends?

Certainly as old and new forms of engagement merge there are some odd clashes. For example, reproduction of tweets in papers takes them out of context – as I found recently when my local paper printed my concerns about Wagner's fortunes in X-Factor!

This means we need to understand what formats and trends are 'sticky' as well as offer opportunities for engagement. As the use of technology to communicate and interact with citizens becomes more commonplace it will also raise the bar. It was an open goal for me to have no opposition working in this way in Walthamstow and therefore I was the novelty factor for the hundreds of local residents who I interacted with on Twitter. However, I can't guarantee that will always be the case. There is, thus, a race to be the first not only to sign people up, but give them information and actions of interest to them.

So as people are offered more and more formats and more and more information, the filter point will be critical – the moment at which people select what they will read, what blogs to RSS, what platforms to use or not use. I don't use LinkedIn despite requests – or friend feed, preferring to focus on Facebook and Twitter for now. Facebook is, wisely I think, trying to evolve to become a platform to make it the go to place for networking to get ahead of these trends.

It's also why I'm not as yet convinced about Foursquare and Plancast – technologies to show people where you are and what you're signed up to. These require a lot of effort to keep current. Tungle is something

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I might be interested in as it allows me to share my diary. I currently do this long hand with my e-newsletter and if meetings get changed or cancelled it's hard to share updates. However Facebook are right to look at how they can integrate with other formats to strengthen their usability. Thus really new tools like Weeplaces.com's best chance of survival comes not because they are good on their own, but because they allow you to integrate them into your website/blog and work with other platforms such as Facebook Places and Gowalla.

This question of interest and usability is also why I think hyperlocal sites are the future for local grassroots engagement. The most popular page in my website is my personal list of things to do in Walthamstow and places to eat. I also think the stickiness of these forums and their use in political engagement will be dependent on authenticity – which raises some questions in itself. Whilst lots of politicians are increasingly putting together snazzy websites, their lack of time question means it's unlikely to be them actually creating the material. I think the public are quite wise to that and dislike things that smack more of media management than engagement.

Another driver for stickiness will be a technology's usefulness in raising money. This reflects a more American tradition of giving money to political campaigns than we have here but it is changing. Charlie Elphicke a Tory candidate and now MP was able to offer supporters text donating.

It's not just about how MPs or single-issue pressure campaigns use forums. The mainstream news media itself will also play an important role in defining where we go next because of their status as trusted sources of information. This will be at a basic level in how they use links. For example, the BBC recently changed its policies to allow YouTube videos to be used and linking to sources in their reporting, thereby incorporating blogger methods in traditional media articles. The mainstream media also drives integration. For example, the *Daily Mail* online, which is now the UK's largest newspaper website, gets 10 per cent of its traffic generated by referrals from Facebook.

These kinds of crossovers will create all sorts of opportunities – and challenges – to political parties in how they communicate and interact both at a local and a national level with voters and activists. Yet ultimately if the message isn't right, the medium won't work – and

that means wasted effort and money as well as wasted potential for collaborative action.

Conclusion

My belief – and limited experience – is that using communications both off and online to engage people in shared activities is both electorally effective and offers the opportunity to secure outcomes beyond the reach of conventional campaigns. We are In an era when we must recognise that many of the progressive ambitions we have such as social mobility, ending poverty, or tackling climate change require us to learn how to engage, and not just communicate, with the public. It is vital to secure not just their support but also their active participation in our political ambitions. That we have many new forms of media that can make such engagement easier, cheaper and quicker should provide a moment for progressives to be excited about. That we too often don't consider the purpose of communication in this context is one of the problems facing progressive politics as it looks to the future.

Stella Creasy

[1] This paper is a slightly edited version of a speech given by Stella Creasy MP at the POLIS Media Dialogue on November 16th 2010 at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

[2] Stella Creasy was elected MP for Walthamstow at the 2010 UK General Election.

[3] A BBC satirical political comedy http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Thick_of_It

[4] http://newsroom.orange.co.uk/2010/05/05/2010-digital-election-attracts-a-new-generation-of-voters/

[5] http://hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/publications/archive/2010/05/05/what-s-trust-got-to-do-with-it.aspx

[6] http://www.esds.ac.uk/support/E33347.asp

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[8] http://www.yougovstone.com/

[9] http://newsroom.orange.co.uk/2010/05/05/2010-digital-election-attracts-a-new-generation-of-voters/

[10] http://www.conservatives.com/Video/Webcameron.aspx

[11] http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spend_index.htm

[12] http://38degrees.org.uk/

[13] http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/12/clicktivism-ruining-leftist-activism

[14] http://community.brandrepublic.com/blogs/redyellowblue/archive/2010/04/05/69753.aspx