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The Professionalization of Political Communication

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ABSTRACT

Professionalization has become a self-defining, catch-all buzzword employed to explain the recent changes in political communication. However, because of the catch-all or blanket explanatory quality of the term 'professionalization', its use within the literature on political communication and campaigning obscures multifaceted shifts in the methods by which political actors communicate through the media. Drawing on a number of interviews with former and current UK members of parliament and prospective parliamentary candidates, the authors argue that much of what is referred to within the discourse of professionalization is linked more to responses to technological change. They propose, therefore, that more care should be taken when describing all modern political communication as professional, otherwise there is a danger of inferring that the practices of the past were amateurish; a conclusion that does not stand up to rigorous research.

Key Words British politics, media strategies, political campaigning, political communication, political parties, professionalization

Arguably the most formative development in the political communication process of present-day democracies, the professionalisation of political communication is the near-universal response of political parties . . . to the dissolution of previously more firm anchorages of political attitudes, the increasing centrality of television and the proliferating demands of

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> multiple news outlets for constant comment and appearances. (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995: 207)

It has become an accepted truism that the communication techniques employed by political parties and their elected members have now become professionalized. This is quite explicit in the opening quote (from a section titled 'The Thoroughgoing Professionalisation of Political Advocacy'), although the phrase has a much wider currency when one opens up the debate about the nature of political communication in modern democratic systems. Phrases such as the 'professionalisation of politics' (Mancini, 1999), 'political marketing' (Maarek, 1995; Lees-Marshment, 2001), 'campaign professionalisation' (Gibson and Rommele, 2001: 40), the 'packaging of politics' (Franklin, 1994), 'designer politics' (Scammell, 1996), 'source professionalisation' (Blumler, 1990) and even the 'professionalisation of media relations' (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994: 67) are often used to describe some of the ways in which the present arrangements of political communication are seen to differ markedly from those in some distant period in the past.

Another way of highlighting the differences between the present and the past has been through the use of contrasting, and sometimes distinct, campaigning methods or time periods: between, say, the modern and the postmodern campaign (Norris, 2000), or the modern campaign and the contemporary 'professional campaign' (Gibson and Rommele, 2001). Jay Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh, by contrast, identify 'three ages of political communication', with the 'second age' – roughly the 1960s – being the age in which 'the core features of the professional model of modern campaigning emerged' (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999: 211–12). Pippa Norris, although not being specific about actual dates, is also able to write readily of distinct periods. As she explains, today's political parties in Britain have changed considerably from their predecessors in 1945. They have 'been transformed by the gradual evolution of the permanent campaign in which the techniques of spin-doctors, opinion polls, and professional media management are increasingly applied to routine everyday politics' (Norris, 2000: 173). Finally, Farrell et al. (2001), who are happy to slice up the last 50 years under headings such as 'the Newspaper Age, the Television Age, and the Digital Age', provide a neat, albeit perhaps simplistic, summary of the impact of these changes in the following way:

> The basic trends can be summarized as having involved a gradual shift from electioneering as essentially a localist, largely amateur, part-time affair directed at party loyalists to the permanent campaign of today that is

> personified by a focus on slick presentation, the prominent role of campaign consultants, and an emphasis on marketing of image and campaign consultants. (Farrell et al., 2001: 12)

But if there has been a change in practices, as these authors suggest, what particular aspects of those changes are distinctive enough to permit one to describe with any degree of confidence a process of 'professionalization'? Furthermore, how do we make sense of the process of the 'professionalization' of political communication within the historical context of permanent technological, social and political change? Put differently, does the discourse of professionalization do any more than highlight the growth of specialized knowledge and techniques around newly introduced communications media, or does it actually point to both a qualitative and quantitative shift in the communication of politics in the last half-century?

The aim of this article is, then, to revisit the idea of 'the professionalization of political communication' within a broader historical context by drawing on primary evidence from interviews with past, sitting and prospective members of the British parliament.[1] In doing so, we wish to argue three main points:

1. That the meaning of 'professionalization' has been inadequately theorized;
2. That a discussion of the professionalization of political communication must take account of processes of professionalization both at the level of the constituency and/ or individual campaign and at the level of the national campaign. Unless one explored both these levels – the micro and the macro – there would be a danger of assuming that changes at one level can be generalized across all levels;
3. That the labels given to different periods, eras or ages, of political communication, while illustrative, are generally unhelpful in understanding a process of longer term change.

The argument that we wish to present here, very briefly, is that 'electoral innovations' and the 'modern model of campaigning' (Swanson and Mancini, 1996: 250, 249, respectively) – and here one must include the growing awareness of the need to 'professionalize' political communication, as well as the rise of the 'professional' political communicator – may be little more than the longer term process by which political systems and political actors adapt to the emergence of new media of communication and to the increasing specialization of tasks common in modern

societies. It is not a process of professionalization as would be commonly understood in the sociological literature (see, for example, Macdonald, 1995). What remains at issue is not the fact that there have been obvious changes since the mid-1940s, but how we come to understand and explain that change.

This article is divided into three main parts. The first part explores the use of such words as professionalization in the political communication literature; the second examines the media-handling skills of MPs and prospective parliamentary candidates in order to identify continuities and discontinuities over time, and the third examines the basis upon which some authors have created a typology of political communication periods.

Understanding professionalization

Professionalization, as we have seen, is often introduced through a discourse of fundamental change and one that sets off the present from the past. Yet it should be self-evident that change in any society and its practices is continuous, and that one of its consequences is that at each stage of the process, there is a realization that things have to be done differently and in a more 'modern' ('professional'?) way to cope with more 'modern' times. A good, and pertinent, illustration of this comes from the late Julian Critchley's memoirs, *A Bag of Boiled Sweets* (1995). Recalling his selection as a prospective parliamentary candidate, Critchley tells the story of how he was interviewed by the Conservative Party's vice-chairman in charge of candidates. In what turned out to be a fairly chaotic process – the vice-chairman confused this Critchley's parents with another's – Critchley was put on the party's list of candidates without any particular or further scrutiny. Reflecting back on his experiences, Critchley noted that in today's climate:

> . . . someone in my shoes would be obliged to spend two hundred pounds of his own money in order to attend a weekend 'course' . . . where he would be put through his paces. I went on one such undertaking in the early eighties. . . . Fifty aspirants were obliged to write essays, debate among themselves, deliver five minute speeches on unrelated topics, and display a command of table manners. (Critchley, 1995: 65)

The point of this tale is not to bemoan the passage of time or to hark back to an age of 'gentlemen', but to illustrate how the process of change – admittedly in response to the 'modern' demands placed upon the

contemporary parliamentary candidate – leads to the foundation of practices which, in their own time, become superseded. 'Modernity', according to Keith Macdonald, 'involves a level of knowledge and expertise that was undreamed of in the past, and a division of labour that puts control into the hands of specialists' (Macdonald, 1995: 182). This may, in fact, be an apt description of what we are seeking to explore: a process of change over time that brings forth new ways of doing things to suit new times, and a growing division of labour as different forms of knowledge are applied to ever more areas of life.

As we show presently, it is possible to trace a growing specialization of roles in political communication from the immediate postwar period that is closely related to the development of the new medium of television. Such degrees of specialization – presenters, journalists, producers and so on – are common in organizations that are created around new technologies and the application of new techniques. They can also develop in circumstances where new forms of knowledge and their application become legitimate: pollsters develop skills and those skills are then applied to the condition of political parties; political consultants acquire knowledge and that too is applied to the condition of particular political parties and candidates, and so on. The real question, at least as far as this article is concerned, is whether such a specialization and application of knowledge and techniques is synonymous with 'professionalization', *however understood*.

One obvious problem is that the word 'professionalization' is used very freely and in different ways in the political communication literature. Even in this article so far, the word 'profession' and its derivatives – professional, professionalization, professionalism – have been used in different ways: the professionalization of political communication, source professionalization, the professionalization of politics, professionalization of media relations, the professional model of modern campaigning, professional advisers, to note but a few. At times the word is used as a description of a process of change, but at other times it is used as something that is particular to a practitioner, e.g. professional adviser (but what, pray then, is an 'un-professional' adviser?). Despite the fact that the word 'profession' is of immense sociological complexity (Macdonald, 1995), signifying the existence of systematic theory, ethical codes and self-determination (see, for example, Friedson, 1970), its application in the political communication literature, as we have seen, is much looser, so leaving considerable room for misunderstanding and elision of meanings.

The absence of clarity with respect to its precise meaning and use is compounded by four other difficulties that become apparent when examining the relevant political communication literature. The first difficulty is that unlike political scientists who link the professionalization of politics, and particularly of MPs, to the ways in which politics has now become a full-time paid career (see Rush, 1989, 2001), students of political communication use the phrase relatively loosely. Not only is it often used to refer to those *employed* or *used* by political parties for their expertise and skills in dealing with the media (Mancini, 1999), but it can also be used to identify any individual – whether an employee or an elected representative – who has a 'basic competence in news management techniques' (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994: 84). To act in a 'professional' way, and to be a 'professional', is thus to display a range of skills in handling the media and an ability to use 'modern' communication facilities (see Gould, 1998). When used in these ways, the phrase inevitably highlights its direct opposite, amateurism. As Blumler has observed those 'who are less attuned to the media sphere are discredited as *amateurs* out of touch with the modern world' (Blumler, 1990: 104; emphasis added).

In this context, 'professionalism' may only make sense in relation to the activities, and the requirements, of the media. Does being a 'professional' mean any more than systematically providing the media with the sorts of information, and in the form, that they need? Are such activities and skills both media and temporally specific? And under what circumstances does the 'professional' and skilful use of the media by so-called 'spin-doctors' prove counterproductive and lead to accusations of excessive control and manipulation, i.e. un-professionalism?

The second difficulty is that these words take on a different meaning and importance when placed within a broader party political context. With the modern political party seeking to centralize and manage all its communication processes, its elected members are inevitably confronted by a set of restrictions and expectations that are almost a requirement of membership: they should not dissent or create controversies, they should toe the party line, and they should remain 'on message'. In this context, is professionalism little more than accepting and acquiescing to the wishes of those at party headquarters? Conversely, is dissent 'un-professional'?

There is an additional, third difficulty in relation to the use of the word in the context of a description of the practice of political communication at the macro-level. As we have seen, one often quoted characteristic of the more modern/professional campaign is the level of

centralized control exercised over essentially local constituency contests. However, and as contemporary accounts also show, the level of control and organization that is actually exercised varies enormously from constituency to constituency, and from party to party. In practice, there is a high level of central direction when a particular constituency seat is deemed as either 'strategic' or 'target' (Seyd, 2001; Denver and Hands, 2000; interviews 2001, 2002 – see note 1); when the contested seats are neither, prospective parliamentary candidates are usually left to their own devices (interviews, October 2001, January 2002). At the constituency level, then, the campaign can take on many forms ranging from a highly organized, heavily resourced campaign through to one where the candidate is left on their own, and offered few resources and a minimum of support. Does a description of a campaign as professional refer to the national campaign, the local campaign or both? (One could argue that exercising a choice as to which constituency to fight in a 'professional' way is itself a sign of professionalism. Others might see it as simply common sense and a case of matching resources to potential gains; something commonly practised anyway [see Holt and Turner, 1968].)

The fourth difficulty is that the use of the word implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, labels earlier practices as un-professional or amateurish without reference to the actual level of skills employed in the past, or today. Similarly, the contemporary ('professional', 'postmodern') election campaign is readily contrasted with its opposite, the pre-modern/modern (less professional) campaign. Yet if one were to explore, for example, the media-handling skills of British members of parliament in the 1960s or 1970s, one would be struck by their skilled use of the media. To label their media-handling as amateurish (*pace* Farrell et al., 2001) or part of a pre-modern era (Norris, 2000; Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999) is to fail to analyse the levels of skills used at any particular moment in time and in respect of particular media, and to replace historical analysis with a view that the present is, in essence, simply more 'modern' and more professional than the past. In reality, changes or adaptations to practices are always taking place and these are (nearly) always incremental; crucially, there is no end point because each facet of each campaign can be 'improved' and superseded. A good example of this comes from the current practice of the political parties offering media training to all prospective parliamentary candidates. In the past, as Critchley (1995) testifies, none was offered. But sometime in the 1960s and 1970s, the political parties began to offer training, particularly in relation to television interviewing. This change in practice could be

interpreted as a sign of professionalization among political parties and their elected members. However, as more and more targeted training is offered, the training that had previously been offered looks fairly crude and, arguably, less than professional. This process continues in a never-ending process of change and adaptation.

What emerges even from this brief discussion of professionalization is that the word is perhaps used to describe, more often than not, the application over time of new knowledge or new skills in different circumstances: elected representatives learn how to deal in a more skilled way with the media; political consultants build up expertise which they can apply in different circumstances and in different conditions; pollsters, too, apply basic skills in different environments. Yet, and crucially, each stage of the process becomes no more than a step to another one. So, the changes made by Peter Mandelson to the Labour Party in the mid-1980s (Macintyre, 2000; Shaw, 1994) become a template for other parties (interview, January 2002). These then become the basis for further change, and so on.

In contemporary media-centred democracies such skills and specialized techniques are undoubtedly valuable, particularly when the need to persuade volatile voters is paramount. This helps to explain the growth and deployment of political marketing techniques (Wring, 1999) as well as the emergence of individuals and associations that seek to legitimate the role of the political consultant as that of a professional (see Plasser, 2000). Indeed, both the creation of associations and certification are characteristics of occupations seeking to 'exercise professional authority'. They 'must find a technical basis for it, assert an exclusive jurisdiction, link both skill and jurisdiction to standards of training, and convince the public that its services are uniquely trustworthy' (Wilensky, 1964: 138). It is unlikely, though, that any of the key figures populating the world of political communication would be able to make any such claims. Yet?

Given these terminological difficulties, it is still unclear why the discourse of professionalism is so commonly used and what it is in modern-day practices that would allow one to label some as professional and others as un-professional or amateur. One way of testing the premise that there has been a professionalization of political communication is by comparing the media-handling skills of members of parliament from the 1960s and 1970s with those of prospective parliamentary candidates from the late 1990s. Such a comparison would identify the sorts of changes that are germane to any discussion of modern political communication. This comparison forms the basis of the next section.

Old politicians and new practices, new politicians and old practices

> When Michael Foot went out to the people in 1983 he was seen as a dinosaur, when Asquith did it he was seen as a revolutionary. (Interview, November 2001)

Certain key features contribute to the idea of a 'modern' or 'postmodern' campaign and these are fundamental to running a better organized, more centralized campaign: with pollsters, analysts, spin-doctors, advisers, communication and public relations specialists all coordinating their activities within the 'war room'. The 'war room' then coordinates activities for external media consumption. With the availability of information and communications technologies, the tentacles of the 'war room' reach out to the individual constituencies: prospective parliamentary candidates become locked into a well-coordinated, well-oiled machine.

This image is an adequate description of the election campaign in the modern era. But it is only adequate. As we have indicated, there are very distinct differences between the campaign that is conducted in a marginal/targeted constituency and the campaign that is run in a seat that is not likely to be won. As one of our interviewees pointed out:

> . . . the techniques that we're using can be seen as more professional, but in may respects the things that I was doing [in 2001], as a non-target seat candidate, were things that have been done for decades: using the local media, knocking on doors, producing my own material, just obviously using more hi-tech techniques. If you were a target seat, you would be just bowled over by the professionalism. It was a hive of activity with targeting, concentration of resources, the messages. It was wonderful. (Interview, October 2001)

Such comments can be repeated over and over again and they illustrate the fact that a proper analysis of any election campaign must look at both the national level and the more local level. Indeed, what may be seen from the outside as part of a supremely well-organized national campaign, may be quite the reverse when seen from the perspective of the candidates, the local media and local voters. This is no more true than when applied to the stream of emails, press releases and notices that are sent to prospective parliamentary candidates to help them gain publicity in their own areas. 'We were all on email', explained a prospective parliamentary candidate,

> . . . and everyday there was a minimum of three and a maximum of 12 daily bulletins. That tended to be about what the key figures in the party

> were saying. To be honest, only about 1 percent of them were useful. . . . A good candidate will appeal to the electorate. Candidates who went out and press released only what was produced by the centre did not have much appeal. (Interview, October 2001)

As one local journalist pointed out, identical press releases 'can give the impression of lobotomized politicians. Now statements are increasingly customized and personalized' (interview, September 2001).

The overall national campaign may be more orchestrated and better organized, more 'professional' to use the language of political communication, but it is a form of professionalism that is constantly changing and redefining itself. If the 2001 British general election campaign run by the Labour Party displayed all the hallmarks of the professionalized campaign with its high level of coordination and centralization, one would have expected subsequent elections to build on this winning formula. To continue using, in other words, the professional model that put down roots from the mid-1980s onwards (Shaw, 1994). Yet, the reverse seems to be happening: the low turnout (59 percent) and the general lack of interest in politics, caused, it is believed, by the political parties' electioneering practices that effectively excluded the participation of individuals in favour of set pieces, has sent the 'professionals' scurrying back to their drawing boards to rethink their strategies. According to Douglas Alexander, the coordinator of Labour's 2001 general election campaign, 'Labour should never run another centralized election campaign. . . . Instead it must find new ways to communicate directly with the electorate, reviewing its old techniques such as poster campaigns, battle bus tours, photo opportunities and question and answer sessions' (The *Guardian*, 8 February 2002). While all campaigns benefit from periodic reviews, the shifting basis of the advise and expertise must raise questions about the constancy of the advice offered by the professionals and the basis of their willingness to redraw the paradigms of electoral campaigns.

If Alexander is to be believed, future election campaigns will see greater attention paid to local campaigning, though it is unclear what is meant by that as there are different 'models' of local campaigning. It could involve greater targeting of constituents, for example, or it could lead to more localized 'pavement politics' as a means of building up support over a longer period. The former could be seen as a modern departure from past practices if it was to involve a greater level of targeting based upon detailed scrutiny of electoral returns, personalized phone contacts, emails, and the like. The latter is in a tradition of local candidates building up their local profiles by working in their

constituencies over long periods. Both models – and there are countless variations of these – involve the local media, principally the local press, as a key tool in getting the candidate and the message across to the voters. What is interesting here is that the basic methods used to get the message across to local voters have changed little over the last 30 years, contrary to the idea that we now have a greater professionalization of political communication.

Politicians have usually sought the most effective ways of getting their messages across to the public at large. If there has been a professionalization of political communication in the post-1945 period, one should be able to identify the ways in which practices have changed, improved or become more 'professional'. But as one begins to look at media-related practices over time, one occasionally comes across instances which have a very 'modern' or 'professional' ring to them. One such case comes from Nic Jones's book on 'spin-doctors'. Jones relates how Enoch Powell learned to use the local media to publicize his views on race in Britain in the mid-1960s. Powell, according to Jones,

> . . . was dissatisfied with the way his speeches were being handled by the party machine and my father [editor of the *Wolverhampton Express and Star*] instructed him on how best to short-circuit Conservative Central Office. His advice was that a Saturday afternoon was perhaps the most opportune moment to deliver a hard-hitting political speech. . . . Powell was meticulous in following my father's advice, both on the overall strategy and on points of detail, such as the need to highlight on the front page of the press release the two or three most important sentences from the speech. (Jones, 1999: 4–5; see also Seymour-Ure, 1974)

The aim, then as now, was to obtain the most favourable coverage, both in terms of frequency and slant, and there can be little doubt that Enoch Powell managed to do both (Seymour-Ure, 1974) in the context of a media system that was not particularly diverse. At the time, and up to the early 1970s, it is worth recalling, Britain had only three national terrestrial television channels, limited regional variations on television, a multitude of local and national newspapers, and local radio was only just emerging. There were no fax machines or computers (and related and converging technologies), no pagers and no mobile phones. The potential for effective and speedy communication was thus circumscribed by the available means of communication yet, we would argue, the *practice* could still be deemed of a professional quality, i.e. demonstrating a skilful use of the medium in question. This is precisely what the Powell example illustrates, as do the following extracts, taken from a selection of interviews with former members of parliament. In each case, our

interviewees were asked to describe how they worked with the media and whether they saw their skills as those of the professional:

A: I was [professional] in the sense that most of the stuff I sent to the press was published with little subediting. I quickly learned how to do it. I learned how to present them with articles that would be useful to them. You've got to learn to say something very precisely.

. . . I was disciplined about it. Every . . . Monday morning and Monday afternoon were given over to compiling 10 press releases. I had about five papers to feed, some of them I could give all the press releases to. But it used to take me four or six hours a week and I regarded that as a top priority . . . to me it was the most effective way I could be seen to be active. (Interview, October 2001; first fought seat in 1970)

B: I would always publicize anything that made it appear that I had done something for the city. I visited every weekend and arranged a photo opportunity by visiting schools, hospitals or factories . . .

I would phone the news desk . . . of the papers nearly every day. I knew the journalists by name. They would invite me round for a drink from time to time. I kept well up with the radio presenters. (Interview, October 2001; first fought seat in 1974)

C: One would know the editor, or the reporter . . . and one just sent them press releases and tipped them off when one was going to be doing something and they just reported it. If it was something local they nearly always report it. . . . What really mattered I believed all along was strong local exposure. (Interview, October 2001; first fought seat in 1970)

Question: Were you professional at handling the media?

D: No! I don't think it was thought about in that way. If you had something to say it would be reported, not automatically, but often the BBC would ring me up and ask me to come on this or that programme. I always tried to make comments, ask questions, that had a hook on which a journalist could hang a story. I was very conscious of that. I know what is capable of capturing attention. (Interview, October 2001; first fought seat in 1966)

What are the common themes running through these quotes? Leaving aside the belief in the importance of the local press – something that resonates with contemporary politicians – three stand out. The first is the importance of getting press releases, and other information for publicity, out to the local press; the second, is the importance of setting out the information in an appropriate, usable form; the third, is the importance of maintaining contacts with journalists.

These three themes describe ways of working with the media that are not foreign to contemporary politicians and would not be out of place as advice on how to handle the media. The practices described, in other words, have the hallmark of the 'professional' about them. Admittedly, these practices were being used in relation to the local press but this reflected the lack of interest that both the national daily press and national television showed in the routine work of individual non-ministerial MPs. In a real sense, the situation is no different today.

If MPs from three decades or more ago had skills that their counterparts today have, where did they learn these skills? As today, those who stood for parliament had a wide range of backgrounds some of which familiarize them with media practices or media-handling skills. Such backgrounds would include those occupations such as journalism or the media industry that permit the transfer of experiences, but others would be so very different as to allow no such immediate transfers. In those cases, however, skills could be developed either 'naturally' – 'I knew how to handle the press' (Interview, October 2001) – or MPs employed a degree of common sense in recognizing the importance of the media: 'I used to send out a massive amount of press releases' (Interview, October 2001). Alternatively, some recall learning from agents, other MPs, journalists or others familiar with media practices. There is no single pattern that emerges from our interviews with past MPs and one can therefore identify a variety of ways in which knowledge and skills could be acquired in the 1970s. Significantly, the process of skills acquisition has become better organized with the introduction of formal training courses. Although not all the prospective parliamentary candidates (from the 2001 election) interviewed in the course of this research took part in such training courses, there is now an expectation from the political parties that candidates selected to contest 'target' constituencies would take part in such courses. Alternatively, if weaknesses in media-handling were to be identified by the central organization of the party, prospective candidates would be encouraged to attend such courses. These courses would generally include sessions on handling the media and covering both press (e.g. writing press releases) and television (e.g. television interviewing). Given the number of our interviewees who were critical of the general nature of these sessions, it is arguable how effective they are. Nevertheless, it is probably true to say that a prospective parliamentary candidate today would be more familiar with the range of techniques that could be used to attract media attention. And, as always, some would be better at using the media than others. But are these media-handling skills qualitatively and quantitatively better than they were 30 years ago? Our

evidence suggests that this is not the case and that there is a great deal of similarity and continuity between those practices employed today and those employed some 30 years ago. In which case, does the word 'professionalization' adequately capture the situation and the change or does it simply mystify a longer term process of skilling?

Accounting for change – pollsters and professionalization

If certain media-handling practices today are not very dissimilar from those in earlier decades, are there other factors that could be used to support statements to the effect that modern election campaigns have become professionalized and that those practising within such campaigns are more professional? One such factor would be the greater use of specialist advisers in political campaigns. As Pippa Norris writes, 'the move from amateur to professional campaign was marked by more frequent use of specialist consultants . . . influencing decisions formerly made by candidates or party officials. . . . The new professionals were essentially "hired guns" external to the party' (Norris, 2000: 146).

While it is undoubtedly true that the use of such advisers has increased in recent years, the history of their employment in political communication is not new, with roots going back as far as the 1950s. Reviewing their use in the US, Kathleen Hall Jamieson has noted that George Gallup gave information to the 1952 Eisenhower campaign on the public's views of the issues and on those issues that 'were most important to the American people' (Jamieson, 1992: 86). Just over 10 years later, in 1963, Louis Harris observed that 'during the 1962 (elections) . . . over two-thirds of the men running for the US Senate had polls conducted for them, probably three-quarters of the candidates running for Governor employed polling from a professional organization' (Harris, 1963: 3). The more significant point that Harris makes is that these professional polling organizations were being used in quite different ways than previously and that they, and their clients, were becoming ever more sophisticated in their methods and their use of the data. Specialist firms were also developing rapidly. In 1957, there were '41 public relations firms that offered campaign services', although none were exclusively in that business. But by 1972, there were 60 firms specializing in political campaigns and a further 200 others that offered some help with campaigns (Jamieson, 1992: 36). As Louis Harris predicted in 1963,

> As we develop pollsters who better understand the mechanics, language and Gestalt of politics, and as we develop candidates who are better

> informed about polls and social science research, inevitably the mating of the two professions will become more frequent and relations will be closer. (Harris, 1963: 6–7)

In Britain, the art and science of polling was relatively undeveloped in the immediate postwar period compared with the US, though even here by the mid-1950s there were already signs that things were changing. David Butler (1952: 75–8), writing about Britain in 1952, offers a description of a country that had still not come to grips with what one would now recognize as basic sampling surveys and even in 1955 one could still claim, as he did, that 'the 1955 election offered ample evidence of the general ignorance of politicians, journalists, and academic students about the motivation of the British voter' (Butler, 1955: 4). But this was not because such polling was not being carried out. Attempts to provide such information to politicians had proved unsuccessful. The polling expert Mark Abrams noted that in the period between 1948 and 1951, the Conservative Party was not really or seriously interested in the polling information collected by their advertising company, Colman, Prentis and Varley (CPV). That was still true in 1955. It seems, however, that the Conservative Party's setbacks in 1958 did encourage an interest in opinion polls. 'In addition to the surveys carried out by [CPV], the Party also used Nielsen's . . . and National Opinion Polls. . . . From this abundance of private surveys Mr Poole's [chair of the Conservative Party organization] judgment seized upon one consistent finding and determined to build the whole of his Party's propaganda round it' (Abrams, 1963: 12). There were also early incursions into the dark arts of polling by the Labour Party. Abrams cites two 'small experimental survey[s] concerned largely to measure voters attitudes toward the major issues facing the political parties and, to a lesser extent, to assess the party's "image" carried out in 1956 and 1957' (Abrams, 1963: 14).

In the US, then, the 1950s provided a test bed for the use of polling in elections. Although the adoption of such practices in Britain lagged behind the US, one can still trace their development back to the 1950s and 1960s. One could plausibly argue, therefore, that the use of professional consultants is not particularly new, although the frequency of their use and their role within election campaigns may have changed in recent years. Whether this transition is a sufficient reason to describe one form of election as amateur and another as professional is clearly open to question: there is no neat break to allow that sort of demarcation. As it is, the use of outside professionals merely confirms that the organization

of election campaigns has changed and now calls for greater input from a variety of skilled people. But, to return to an earlier set of questions, how do we understand that change and what brought it about? As we have argued, one cannot use the development of better media-handling skills as a criterion, nor can one use the employment of skilled professionals as a defining characteristic. Are there any other possible factors that need to be explored?

One way to better understand accounts of change is to strip away the generalizations about causes in order to retain those elements that can be used as explanatory factors. What remains, we would argue, is an account of change brought about by the onset of new forms of communication – television, and subsequently, the Internet. One can see this very clearly in the accounts of change provided by both Norris (2000) and Blumler and Kavanagh (1999). In explaining the transition from a pre-modern to a more modern campaign, or from the first to the second era, both implicate the onset of television as the motor of change. Although these statements include references to other factors that might account for change, none of these can stand up to close scrutiny as germane to particular periods. Norris, for example, writes that:

> . . . the critical shift towards the modern campaign developed *with the rise of television* and the regular publication of opinion-poll results during the 1950s. [And that] . . . *following the rise of television*, parties increasingly developed coordinated national and regional campaigns with communications designed by specialists skilled in advertising, marketing, and polling. (Norris, 2000: 144–6; emphasis added)

A similar interpretation can be placed on the work of Blumler and Kavanagh. In the second age:

> . . . a new era dawned in the 1960s when limited-channel nationwide television became the dominant medium of political communication, while the grip of party loyalty on voters was loosening . . . *to cope with the demands of a new medium*, its large audience, and a more mobile electorate, the parties had to work harder and learn new tricks. (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999: 212; emphasis added)

It was television, in other words, that brought about significant changes in the way communication was organized.

So, where does the next stage come in? Once again, the onset of new forms of communications tips the balance into the new era. According to Norris, 'the defining features of postmodern campaigns in both countries (US and Britain) are the professionalization of campaign consultants, the

fragmentation of the news-media system, and the dealignment of the electorate' (Norris, 2000: 178). Yet not all these can be defining features since dealignment is rooted in the 1960s, and professionalization – however defined – is in evidence from the 1970s onwards. As with Blumler and Kavanagh (1999), we are left with the fragmentation of the news media as a feature that is not present in earlier periods. Once again, it is technological change that accounts for the major changes in political communication, not a generalized idea of professionalization.

Where is the 'professionalization of political communication'?

This article began with a consideration of the lack of critical scrutiny that the idea of the professionalization of political communication has received in the past. It used evidence drawn from a series of interviews to illustrate how there are very significant continuities in media practices across the last four decades of the 20th century. Had there been a professionalization of political communication, so our argument goes, we would have been able to identify significant discontinuities and differences over time. As we could not do so, we remain uncertain about what professionalization actually means in the context of the political communication literature.

Without doubt, media practices and skills have developed over the period under review and the structures of political parties have also changed. For the Labour Party, the change can be located around the 1985/6 period with the greater centralization of communications activities. But, significantly, should we understand that change as a response to the travails of the Labour Party in the 1970s and early 1980s or as a sign of professionalization of political communication? Or are elements of both implicated in different measures? Answers to such questions are important because they impact on how we understand political change and change in political communication. Typologies of different campaign systems are bound to be of limited value because they focus on only a part of the bigger picture. Furthermore, because they are designed to offer contrasts, they simplify complexities, emphasize those things that are different and play down those things that are similar.

We do need to have a better understanding of those things that make contemporary political communication practices and campaigns different from those in the past. But we should avoid using descriptors – such as professionalization – that do not in themselves explain a great deal but only raise a whole series of questions in their wake.

Notes

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A much earlier version of this article appeared in Negrine (2001).

1. A total of 44 interviews were conducted in the course of this research: five with current MPs (including two who had sat from 1997 but lost in 2001); 17 with MPs first elected in or before 1974; 18 with prospective parliamentary candidates who had stood in 2001; two with full-time party employees and two with political editors representing local newspapers.

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