

Local Politics for Local People: why communicating at the local level can reconnect the public with government

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Abstract

If, as the adage indicates, all politics is local, and that the public need to feel that political communication is relevant to their lives before they engage with the message (Clarke et al, 2004); it would seem to be a safe assumption that localised campaigning and communication would be prioritised. In fact the reverse is often the case. The professionalization of political communication (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Mancini, 1999; Norris, 2000) has led to greater centralisation of strategic management and for a perceptual distance to open between government and the governed. While some lay the blame at the door of the increased use of persuasive communication (Davis, 2001; Franklin, 2004); actually the use of persuasive mass communication is a natural corollary of centralisation and so is part of a much wider trend than critics suggest. What is clear is that at the same time as many corporate communicators are developing ways of narrowcasting targeted messages to individual publics, political communicators seek to find common denominators to aim towards the masses.

Research indicates that this is ineffective (Lilleker & Negrine, 2003; Negrine & Lilleker, 2003). Voters are more likely to engage with political debates centring on shared points of reference, a local hospital, rather than abstract concepts such as the National Health Service; the latter may be an iconic signifier but decisions on its operation are largely beyond the comprehension of the average person in the street. Thus public debates, in open forum, or employing the Internet, are welcomed; equally the constituency service role of an MP is awarded with support. Drawing on empirical studies of communication use and voting behaviour during the 2004 local elections and 2005 General Election, this paper puts forward the case for the localisation of political debate offering evidence that suggests that only by understanding the way in which voters process communication can parties engage their publics.

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