

Coulson had to go: now the ethical dimension of political communication must be restored

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/02/01/coulson-resignation-ethical-political-communication/?pfstyle=wp>

February 04, 2011



The resignation of David Cameron's Director of Communications came as a surprise to few, and questions are now being asked as to whether or not he should ever have been hired given the allegations that have clouded his tenure. [Bart Cammaerts](#) finds that murky ethical boundaries in political communications are nothing new, and that this may have to change if the public is to have any trust in the government's 'spin doctors'.

It was written in the stars that Andy Coulson – Cameron's spin-doctor – had to resign. The News of the World [hacking story](#) was just not going away, and with good reason. Nobody with any knowledge of how politics, the media and the newspaper business works could be in any doubt that Coulson, as editor-in-chief of the newspaper, could not have known that one of his editors and a private investigator had been hacking into the mobile phones of royal officials. Last week the tables were irreversibly turned when Cameron's spokesperson *became* the news story and a liability for rather than the spokesperson of the Conservative party.

In the pre-New Labour era, 'spin' was not part of the popular vocabulary in politics. Up until then, spokespersons had operated in the background briefing journalists on political developments. Increasingly the media gave the spokespersons *themselves* a voice in the public space which propelled them into becoming political actors in their own right. The label spin-doctor was born, with conspiratorial or Rasputin-like overtones; [Malcolm Tucker](#) being the ultimate caricature of the political master of ceremony. Their growing number and influence reflected politician's desperate urge to get their messages across, 'look good' in the media and control the way in which policy is being framed in public discourse.

The further professionalization of media management, pushed by the current over-saturated media environment, both off- and online, combined with a highly fragmented and volatile electorate, has increased the risk of hiring 'professionals' with a 'dodgy' past before they became the eyes, ears, and mouthpiece of a political master. The obsessive way in which political actors attempt to manage the media can also lead to transgressions. In 2009 prime minister Gordon Brown's spin-doctor overstepped ethical boundaries in a [smear campaign](#) on leading Conservative politicians. In politics and political campaigning the ends should not necessarily justify all means. There is an ethical dimension to political communication that needs to be strengthened in order to rebuild the trust in public communication that 'spin' destroyed.

It is precisely because of the seriousness of the News of the World allegations and the ethical issues they raise that Coulson should have resigned much earlier. But Coulson is not the only spin doctor, media manager, communication director- however you want to call them- who 'plays within' rather than reports on politics. Ideally, spokespersons should provide a dynamic interface connecting our political representatives and their actions with the public and the reality of everyday life, and vice versa. The media should stick to its role as carrying the strategic messages of political elites while at the same time challenging and critiquing them, sometimes fundamentally. The spin doctor, for all of his or her flaws, faces an almost impossible task in taming the media, which Tony

Blair famously described as a [feral beast](#). He is therefore a tragic character, to some extent reminiscent to Don Quixote, intrinsically bound each time again to fail in their ultimate goal.