The Professionalization of Political Marketing –
A Detriment to the Democratic Process?

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INTRODUCTION

This essay will examine whether the ongoing process of professionalization in the field of political communication is detrimental to the democratic process in the United Kingdom. Political communication has a number of subdivisions, political marketing and political public relations among the most pertinent. The focus will be placed on political marketing since the concept of political public relations is seldom made use of in scientific literature (Jackson, 2010: p. 1). Hence, this paper will discuss, successively: defining characteristics, professionalization, negative and positive aspects of political marketing.

DEMARCATING POLITICAL MARKETING

A Two-sided Definition

At first sight, political management would seem a viable synonym for political marketing. However, politicians avoid using the label due to its manipulative connotations (Moloney, 2004: p. 2). Political management is a rather one-sided process, from internal control of political entities to the monitoring of the appeal of messages amongst various stakeholders (Lilleker, Jackson & Scullion, 2005: pp. 2-3). A more appropriate, two-sided, approach would be to conceive of political marketing as a political entity's use of opinion research to manufacture and advance a competitive offering which will not only meet organizational aims, but also anticipate and satisfy the requirements of political consumers (Lilleker, 2007: p. 7; Wring, 1997: p. 653). In other words, to conceive of political marketing as an exchange of political entities' influence (Sansom, 2008: 1.2.1), meeting the needs and wants of the political consumers, for stakeholders' political support (votes, commitment, funding, and resources) (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2008: p. 603).

Classification of Political Marketing

Classifying political marketing is not an easy endeavor. The field is interdisciplinary (Lees-Marshment, 2003: p. 4), tangling "communication, political science, history, psychology, sociology," and management science (Miller & McKerrow, 2010: pp. 61-62). Moloney

suggests that from the 1980s onwards, a number of marketing concepts and terms were transferred to politics, "e.g. positioning, product, targeting, service delivery" (Moloney, 2004: pp. 1, 10), and to these can be added image crafting, selling, branding, product design and segmentation, which are now part of a discourse describing the behavior of political entities (Lilleker, 2009: p. 5).

Processes and Instances of Political Marketing

Political marketing consists of a number of processes. It starts by gathering market intelligence and designing a preliminary product before targeting and adjusting messages to specific consumer segments (Kolovos & Harris, 2005: p. 3; Lilleker, 2007: p. 2; Lees-Marshment, 2004: p. 3; Moloney & Colmer, 2001: p. 958; Newman & Perloff, 2004: p. 18). A political entity has to engage in medium and long-term communication to maintain a market orientation and to deliver upon its promises (Lees-Marshment, 2004: p. 3; Lilleker, Jackson & Scullion, 2005: p. 235).

There are several proponents of political marketing. Simply put, it may 1) be used by political actors to achieve their objectives, 2) addressed by non-politicians to political actors, or 3) consist of media discourse about political actors. There is a "substantial degree of mutual interdependence" between the three (Musialowska, 2008: p. 13). A concept introduced by Lees-Marshment, 'Comprehensive Political Marketing,' applies political marketing, previously confined to party politics, to all instances of political behavior: "interest groups, policy, the public sector, the media, parliament and local government as well as parties and elections" (Lees-Marshment, 2003: pp. 1-2, 11, 13; 2004, pp. 1-2, 4). This concept bodes well since non-party groups have increasingly been seeking to drive public opinion and advancing their goals (Newman e.a., 2004: p. 18).

Techniques of Political Marketing

Political marketing utilizes several social science tools, predominantly focus groups, surveys and polls (Lees-Marshment, 2003: p. 11; Lees-Marshment, 2004: pp. 1-2) to test voters' attitudes towards campaign material in advance (Kaid e.a., 2008: p. 657). Focus group research, the most important of the techniques, requires a limited number of people to discuss political ideas together in a room (Newman e.a., 2004: p. 21).

Political marketing reaches out to individual political consumers using innovative means, such as computerized databases, direct emails, telemarketing as well as social networks on the web (Gibson & Roemmele, 2009: pp. 2, 7; Lees-Marshment, 2004: pp. 1-2). Specific tools used for macro campaigning are advertising, pseudo events, media appearances, and websites; tools used for micro campaigning are "direct mail, canvassing, community events, street advertising, e-newsletters[, and] social networking" (Lilleker, 2009: p. 25).

PROFESSIONALIZED POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The Appearance of Professionalization

Since the 1990s, when technical experts and campaign advisors swept the marketplace (Doolan, 2009: p. 10), professionalization of political marketing has been gaining momentum. Political entities use the services of news communication experts for the knowledge those have of communication techniques and platforms – knowledge that can be useful for maintaining control over the messages received by political consumers (Louw, 2009: p. 249).

Americanization of Political Marketing

Americanization, a synonym for professionalization, has a negative connotation. Scholars and journalists using it usually mean to criticize the watering-down of political content (Kaid e.a., 2008: p. 32). Synonyms describing the professionalization of strategies and tools in Western democracies are Post-Fordism (Gibson e.a., 2009: p. 2), "McDonaldization, Hollywoodization, Coca-Cola[,] and Mickey Mouse Culture" (Kaid e.a., 2008: p. 32). "The Americanization thesis rests on the assumption that there is a ... directional convergence towards U.S.-style campaigning worldwide" (Musialowska, 2008: p. 16; Kaid e.a., 2008: p. 33). American techniques and strategies of political marketing are, to that effect, trans-nationally implemented (Doolan, 2009: p. 6). Of particular concern are poll-driven, media-centered and negative campaigns, personalization, and de-politicization (Kaid e.a., 2008: p. 32). Worldwide homogenization tendencies are in part due to the employment of American consultants abroad (Scammell, 1997: p. 3).

Hybridization: American Techniques Meet Indiginous Factors

Whether marketization is synonymous with Americanization is often dubious, as U.S. tactics are not always applicable to other national frameworks (Lilleker, 2009: p. 22). There is a hybridization going on. Even within the scholarly 'shopping' model, whereby techniques and organizational routines of marketing are imported from the U.S., these "are modified and implemented taking the national context of political competition into account ... Structural filters (electoral laws, party systems, media systems, governmental make-up) as well as cultural restraints limit the Americanization trends" (Gibson e.a., 2007: pp. 18-19; Schafferer, 2005: pp. 6-7). The UK, for instance, possesses a strong "party and parliamentary system," is marked by tight media regulation and sometimes considered to be resilient to American marketing methods (Scammell, 1997: p. 17). On the other hand, British parties largely resort to negative campaigning (ibid). As a general rule, American methods are most likely to be incorporated in countries where political conditions are similar to the U.S. (Scammell, 1997: p. 16).

CRITIQUE OF PROFESSIONALIZATION

Party De-Alignment and the Downgrading of Ideology

By the 1990s, at the latest, political parties ceased to be mass organizations of integration for members and supporters. These used to comprise a core constituency, entrenched in socio-political cleavage structures. The parties have become catch-all entities, seeking out individualized voters across the whole population (Kavanagh, 2003: pp. 1-2) and regardless of their long-term commitment (Denver, 2003: p. 124; Kavanagh, 2003: p. 2). Identity-establishing ideology has since been substituted "by peripheral cues to aid voter choice" (Lilleker & Lees-Marshment, 2005: p. 237). The phenomenon of weakening affiliation and mobilization of voters to political parties has been labeled de-alignment (Kaid e.a., 2008: p. 657). It has led to more competitive strains among political entities, to less distinction between their offers (Henneberg, 2004: p. 8) and to electoral volatility (Lilleker, 2009: p. 9; Musialowska, 2008: p. 18).

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On the other hand, an ever decreasing number of "party activists thrive in the inner-directed party" (Kavanagh, 2003: p. 2), and with cause: even now, "agreement at all party levels are required for a party to maintain cohesion". A core ideological product "is required to anchor the party within an ethical framework" (Lilleker e.a., 2005: p. 220). Activists lay an emphasis on appeasing traditional supporters and would not sacrifice the political entity's principles or internal democracy, while political marketers' primary goal is to win elections and to reassure potential converts (Kavanagh, 2003: p. 3). The marketers are gaining leeway, for instance in the neo-liberal rebranding of initially working-class British Labour, which, on the downside, brought about a demise of the party's internal vitality (Kavanagh, 2003: p. 5). In general, there is a risk of severe loss of long-term loyalty and credibility (Lilleker, 2009: pp. 19-20) when "brand values are not translated into the style of government," as happened when, "after their success in the 1992 election, the Tories under John Major failed to deliver" on many promises (Lees-Marshment, 2003: p. 18).

Marketing processes can also effectively block campaigning. Scammel (1997: p. 17) warns not "to assume that campaigners' ideas ... are [always] played out smoothly in practice." Political leaders may, for instance, be antipathetic to the suggestions and undue influence of 'outsider' marketing professionals (Sansom, 2008: 1.4.2) who enjoy direct access to decision-makers and require "speedy clearance for their proposals," factors which hardly blend with internal party democracy (Kavanagh, 2003: p. 2), even more so because the new elites often have but a short-term or marginal connection with the parties (Kavanagh, 2003: p. 4). Thus, in 1996, deputy Clare Short gave an interview articulating her dislike of New Labour's communications specialists and called them "the people who live in the dark" (McNair, 2003: p. 115). The personal style of William Hague also obstructed political marketing. "Hague remained unconvinced about the need for the intensively personality marketing [and] preferred instead to focus on discussing his political beliefs" (Sansom, 2008: 6.4.2) such as Euro-scepticism (7.2.2).

Image *in lieu* of substance

Louw (2009: p. 248) makes the alarming statement that the professionalization of political marketing has led to "thin democracy," or democracy without citizens" (Louw, 2009: p. 248). For a number of analysts, the overwhelming role of marketing is dangerous insofar as substance is forfeited to salesmanship and as political ideas and principles are eclipsed by

image building (Corner & Pels, 2003: p. 47). Research findings suggest that political news releases taking account of personal information are covered more frequently by the media than releases mentioning issues (Stroembaeck, Mitrook & Kiousis, 2010: p. 83). And indeed, political campaigns today are "characterized by a high degree of personalization" (Gibson e.a., 2007: pp. 20-21). Political leaders enjoy a large autonomy in their policy-making (McAllister, 2005: p. 11). Some analysts have been warning of a 'presidentialization' of British politics in the face of television formats featuring "larger-than-life characters as leading players in the unfolding political drama" (Blumler, 1996: p. 20), such as former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who liked to "handle" stakeholders in order to govern successfully (Louw, 2009: p. 249).

"Arguably[, today], what is most important is how marketing helps the parties to meet their objectives, as opposed to parties ... focusing on how marketing can serve democracy" (Lilleker, 2009: p. 18). Critics of the principle of quasi-commercial profitability (Kaid e.a., 2008: p. 605) insist that the occurrence of soundbites and televised pseudo events do not enhance the political discourse (Sansom, 2008: 1.4.2). Substance, they say, must surpass image and style (Hadjimanolis, 2010: p. 99; Kaid e.a., 2008: p. 605; McNair, 2003: p. 147) for political marketing not to be associated with manipulative propaganda. Otherwise, they fear, citizens will be denied the right to choose between alternative offers and be stripped of their sovereignty (Hadjimanolis, 2010: p. 99).

Political marketing has been reinventing the UK's three major parties. Marketing strategists think that parties need to be centralized, have short lines of communication, and be leader friendly (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999: pp. 214-15). Political candidates in the UK today are being established as easily recognizable brands (Lilleker, 2009: p. 19) to prepare them for winning votes (Kavanagh, 2003: p. 1), since the image contributes decisively to electoral choice (Musialowska, 2008: p. 21). Leaders have become the parties' image (Allan, 2005: p. 90) via the use of stereotypes (Newman e.a., 2004: p. 20), emotional appeals (Lilleker e.a., 2005: p. 235) as well as the coverage of private life (Musialowska, 2008: p. 21).

Gradually, leaders have become autonomous from internal checks and balances (Kavanagh, 2003: pp. 1-2). The intra-party flow of power has become top-down (Kavanagh, 2003: p. 1). Dispute, or anything potentially weakening the leader, is discouraged by parties (p. 4). Accordingly, conferences organized by the Conservatives in the 1990s were "little more than expressions of adulation for the leader, even when the leader was John Major, a man

manifestly unpopular with his party members" (McNair, 2003: p. 142). With the leaders holding a individual rather than a party mandate, the decline of political parties is likely to be exacerbated (McAllister, 2005: p. 11).

Simplification of Media Messages

"Politicians are now primarily judged [based] on their media performance" (Louw, 2009: pp. 248-49). Increased competition in the media sector as well as high-speed internet and satellite communication cause editors to seek more stories without delay, which forces politicians to adjust themselves (Moloney e.a., 2001: p. 958). Media commercialism has it that political communicators come under pressure to shorten their messages or make them more appealing to audiences (Blumler, 1996: p. 10; Blumler e.a., 1999: p. 218), for instance by harking back to "golden phrases" when holding speeches (Blumler, 1996: p. 20). Even public service media such as the BBC state that their "political programs are entering a period of hyper-competition" (Blumler e.a., 1999: p. 217). Thus, increasingly, citizens are being adressed about political issues in an exhausting way (Blumler, 1996: p. 30). Politics are being presented as a "horse race" (Blumler e.a., 2010: pp. 143-44) and post-election duties of government are being devoted less time to (Blumler, 1996: p. 31). Media outlets have been drifting towards a trivial, dumbed-down coverage, effortlessly digestible by their audiences (Blumler e.a., 1999: p. 224; Lilleker e.a., 2005: p. 233). Along with simplicity, we have seen a homogenization of political products (Musialowska, 2008: p. 16). Differences between parties are reduced "to short, memorable sound-bites analogous to advertising slogans" (p. 31). Hence, the choices audiences make are crude, masking "a range of complex political ideas" (p. 24).

Media and Citizen Cynicism

Politics being portrayed as a game "may fuel a cycle of cynicism" among citizens. A number of researchers have concluded that negative campaigning is alienating voters from politics and making them lose trust (Blumler, 1996: p. 20; Kaid e.a., 2008: pp. 34-35; Musialowska, 2008: p. 23). In spite of that discovery, British election campaigns have become spectacles, made up of pieces of attack-oriented publicity (Blumler, 1996: p. 31; Blumler e.a., 2010: p. 152; Gibson e.a., 2009: p. 5). This has led to media criticism for parties' lack of principles (Lilleker e.a., 2005: p. 214). Political communication seems to be overly focused on strife, to be too

scripted, too recurrent, and lacking credibility (Blumler e.a., 1999: pp. 216-217). For example, New Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown's methods at some point backfired. "While the broadcasters were initially willing to recycle ... [his] YouTube announcements, his performances were [subsequently] derided as inauthentic and ... became the focus of negative coverage." Of particular concern was the practice of negative campaigning during the 2009 'Smeargate' affair, which revealed a secretive plan to "establish an ostensibly independent website ... which would contain personalized attacks on leading Conservatives and their families" (Chadwick & Stanyer, 2010: p. 24). The exposure of the plan proved damaging to the reputation of Brown (p. 30).

Valuing their autonomy, journalists tend to mediate campaigns in order not to be made the mouthpiece of political communication consultants (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha 2008: p. 32). They focus on meta coverage, reporting the tactics and presentation of electioneering (McNair, 2004: p. 332), turning away from the substance of politics and towards the processes (p. 333). Hence, political journalism today is often devoted to the critical deconstruction of political marketing (McNair, 2004: p. 332): manipulation is revealed (Blumler e.a., 1999: pp. 216, 217), pseudo-events are being treated sceptically (McNair, 2003: p. 144), and spin, in general, is being demonized (Brissenden & Moloney, 2005: p. 1009). The coverage of the 1997 British election campaign demonstrated this impulse (Blumler e.a., 1999: p. 215): after two landslide elections, New Labour was accused of manufacturing consent (McNair, 2004: p. 326). The professionalization of communications maintained by the party was perceived as a threat to the media's fourth estate role. In the eyes of many journalists, political marketing consultants have been developing an undesirable fifth estate, whose very existence might undermine editorial integrity (McNair, 2004: pp. 325-332).

The result of this, process journalism, runs the risk of replacing substantive coverage of policy by trivia (McNair, 2003: p. 144). Media reports, here and there, create stereotypes of standard politicians as machiavellic leaders, obsessed with "power and personal advancement" and uncaring about the everyday problems of citizens (Blumler, 1996: p. 31). This increases the perception of what has been called a "degeneration of political journalism" (McNair 2004: p. 332). Journalism's critical representation of politics fuels public cynicism (Lilleker e.a., 2005: p. 217). "The public is left feeling like inanimate dummies, spoken for and sometimes spoken to, but rarely spoken with" (Blumler e.a., 2010: p. 142).

Consumerism and Citizenship

Audiences, exposed to political marketing, have become political consumers (McNair, 2003: p. 44) rather than citizens in the traditional sense of the word (Scammell, 2003: p. 24). In the UK, a consumerist society, promotional culture is encouraged by governments obstructive towards a debating public (p. 21). Instead of citizens ethical and cooperative in their political endeavors, we observe self-interested and individualistic "shoppers" (Lilleker e.a., 2005: p. 4; Scammell, 2003: p. 14): mere onlookers, waiting for the next crisis or scandal to be agitated about, or intricate policy to ignore (Blumler e.a., 2010: p. 145). Political consumers vote with their wallets, making short-termist judgements about politics (Lilleker e.a., 2005: p. 321). In a fragmented digital environment, civic engagement and public deliberation are undervalued, and politics is being "reduced to counting heads, regardless of what might be in them" (Blumler e.a., 2010: p. 146). In the worst case, then, disenchanted voters punish the political elite by choosing extreme parties or by abstaining from their votes (ibid).

According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), citizens under high involvement and motivation engage in central processing of political ideas – "sometimes with thought and objectivity, other times in a biased fashion, guided by [predetermined] values." Conversely, citizens with low involvement engage in peripheral processing, choosing simple messages, and their attitudes derive from whatever information is accessible (Newman e.a., 2004: pp. 32-33). While the informed and self-efficace demonstrate citizenly qualities, those of the electorate feeling uninformed and powerless adopt a 'consumption-think consumption-behave' mindset (Lilleker e.a., 2005: p. 233). Much of society is being educated to a self-mobilized public today (Musialowska, 2008: p. 19), however most of the voters "remain reactive consumers" (Lilleker e.a., 2005: p. 235).

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF PROFESSIONALIZATION

Re-Alignment

There is also evidence that, following de-alignment, re-alignment has been taking place in the UK (Lilleker e.a., 2005: p. 206). Citizens' political interests have shifted away from parties towards "cause-related and transient" loyalties (Lilleker, 2009: p. 9). Voting has become

opinion-led, structured by economic prospects, principles, and opinions towards political leaders, aspects varying from election to election; the modern electorate can be considered to be judgemental (Denver, 2003: p. 124).

Soft-Edged Ideology and the Citizen Consumer

Coleman states that ideology has not completely vanished, and that new modes of "softer-edged" values are on the rise (Coleman, 2007: p. 184). This tendency is long-standing. While the 1997 New Labour campaign was criticized "as the triumph of spin over substance," in reality, Labour "had never been anything other than a social democratic party of the Bernsteinian type, committed ... to the reform of capitalism rather than its replacement" by a Marxist system (McNair, 2004: p. 330). After 1994, the core values of the party persevered, however the early 20th century collectivist language was abandoned in favor of information economy speak (ibid).

Some "authors [prefer] to talk about party change rather than party decline as a result of professionalization." Indeed, the uptake of political marketing must be a mindful move, involving extensive intra-party decision-making and organizational remodeling (Gibson e.a., 2007: p. 11). "Without first making an emotional connection with ... voters [and party members], a politician will not have the opportunity to speak to them about issues" (Newman e.a., 2004: p. 24). In designing a campaign strategy, consultants must, at the outset, establish the core values of the target audience, which then serve to sell the organization (McNair, 2003: p. 150). After a candidate's election, the same values put forward in electioneering must be applied to governing and delivery (Newman e.a., 2004: p. 23).

To regard political processes as mere "commercial transactions seems inappropriate" (Egan, 1999: p. 495). In fact, there is a certain overlapping of citizenship and consumption (Lilleker e.a., 2005: pp. 2, 321, 234). True 'citizen consumers' blend consumerism with citizenship, while mere "consumers operate in impersonal markets, where they can make choices unburdened by guilt or social obligations" (Lees-Marshment, 2004: p. 11). Citizenship requires an amount of responsibility.

Party Polling

As has been shown, the electorate is volatile and constitutes an unpredictable market (Sansom, 2008: 1.5.1). Political marketing is suited to reduce these uncertainties to a certain degree (Sansom, 2008: 1.5.1), and even to give a greater role to the majority of voters, as it puts its focus not on the elites but on the masses. Political marketing, thus, has a democratic function (Blumler e.a., 2010: p. 150; Lees-Marshment, 2004: p. 11), improving information flows from the electorate to political entities and making the latter more responsive to publics' needs" and demands (Kolovos e.a., 2005: p. 7; Lees-Marshment, 2003: p. 28; Lilleker e.a., 2005: p. 219). Opinion polling is an example on how a party can prove that it listens to its constituency, thus enhancing its overall image (Sansom, 2008: 1.5.1). Gibson and Rommele even consider the modernization of campaign strategies to be essential for the "future survival and relevance of political parties" (Kolovos e.a., 2005: p. 12).

Advantages of Third-Age Journalism

The media have long been a "major player in the political process" (Musialowska, 2008: p. 22). Their engaging in process journalism has enriched political communication. Audiences can, henceforth, factor in knowledge about spin and the like into their voting decisions (McNair, 2004: p. 334). Certainly, process journalism is cynical. However, without it, the non-elite strands of society would remain unaware of political marketing (2004: p. 334). A necessary counter-point to the negative impact of political marketing would be lacking (McNair, 2004: p. 332). For instance, television has been penetrating segments of the electorate otherwise difficult to reach (Musialowska, 2008: pp. 14-15, 19): in 1994, the three candidates for the leadership of Labour debated live on BBC (McNair, 2003: p. 138). Since Blair's ascent, television documentaries have been made inside Downing Street (2004: p. 335), and Blair participated in several live interviews (2003: p. 139). In 2001, he broke new ground by pioneering the televised media conference (2004: p. 336).

In short: the media have a bridging function, reducing "a complex political world to manageable proportions." Distant and difficult developments are being brought in reach of the average person. "Viewed in this light, the crowd-pulling appeal of journalism, the tendency to dramatize, [and] the projection of hard-hitting conflict," are enticements to become more interested in political matters (Blumler, 1996: pp. 29-30). Cynical forms of journalism,

deplored by some, could also be seen as the media wising up (Lilleker e.a., 2005: p. 233), and what we observe in " talk shows, phone-ins, discussion programs, citizen juries, and cyber politics," could be considered a popular voice in the media (Blumler e.a., 1999: p. 226).

CONCLUSION

Along with the demise of ideology, traditional political distinctions have decreased (Corner & Pels, 2003: p. 46). There has been "a shift from the politics of loyalties towards the politics of choice" (Apospori, Avlonitis & Zisouli, 2010: p. 117). Those of the citizen consumers who are well-informed are aware that it is them who pay for political services and "believe they have a right to determine the nature and quality of those services as well as question the professionals who run them" (Lees-Marshment, 2004: p. 7). The overall political process has become consumer-led, rendering politics more responsive to cursory, image-driven mass requirements. In conjunction with this, it has thinned out, overriding substantive judgements by the majority of citizens (Lees-Marshment, 2003: p. 3).

Mass media will remain central in carrying political messages. Paradoxically, process journalism, unfavorable to political marketing consultants, will compel political entities to seek assistance from professional consultants even more (Blumler e.a., 1999: p. 213).

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