

LIZ KENDALL MP

“NEW MEDIA, POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY”

SPEECH TO LEICESTER LITERARY AND PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

20th February 2012

INTRODUCTION

I'm absolutely delighted to be here this evening.

I consider it a real privilege, and honour, to be giving this lecture.

Not only because it is sponsored by the Leicester Mercury - which is clearly the best local newspaper in the country. But because of the eminent speakers who have addressed this society over your 177 year history.

I'm not in the same league as the professors, poets and writers who've previously given speeches to the Lit. and Phil.

But I hope to say something at least vaguely interesting about the subject for tonight's lecture - which is the implications of new and social media for democracy and the political process.

WHY I USE SOCIAL MEDIA

I think the reason why Keith Perch, the former editor of the Mercury, first approached me about the possibility of giving this lecture is because of my interest in new media.

I'm on Facebook and have my own website: lizkendall.org. I'm also an avid user of twitter.

I regularly tweet - as @leicesterliz - to let people know what I'm doing and thinking directly, rather than through the prism of someone else's interpretation.

I use it to highlight issues I'm concerned about, get stories out there – even if they're not on the more traditional media's agenda - and to challenge what I believe to be incorrect claims.

And I use it to build direct relationships - sometimes with constituents but more often than not, with the individuals and organisations I work with as a local MP and member of Labour's shadow health team - and to have a dialogue with them about the issues both I and they care about.

Of course social and new media isn't the only way I communicate with people. I know most of my constituents aren't on twitter or Facebook, and many never will be.

So I regularly use traditional media - like my fortnightly Mercury column and interviews on BBC Radio Leicester. I have weekly roving surgeries in different parts of the constituency and in my office on the Narborough Road. I conduct local community surveys and produce a regular email newsletter. And I never forget the political basics of public meetings, leafleting and knocking on doors.

However, twitter can be a really useful way of getting information out quickly to an increasing number of individuals and organisations.

It's also a great way to keep up with what's happening in Westminster and the media. Twitter is a fantastic source of instant news - which is vital for any politician now we live in a 24/7 media culture.

Twitter also helps me in my role as Shadow Minister for Care and Older People and a member of Labour's front bench team.

I use it to communicate with patient groups, professional bodies, individuals working in the NHS and social care, think-tanks and academics. Keeping up to speed with the latest research and policy debates, in this country and internationally, is particularly important as Labour thinks afresh about our policies and priorities for the future.

If used well, twitter is a great way to link different worlds. In the past, the health policy world has been quite separate from the world of Westminster, by which I mean political journalists as well as MPs. Bringing these different spheres together has been particularly important with the current controversy surrounding the Government's Health and Social Care Bill.

It is not just at the national level that social media can bring these benefits. The 'Amplified Leicester' project has shown that social media can help bring people from different backgrounds together to find out what's happening locally, enhance people's skills and share ideas - 'amplifying' their influence both individually and collectively.

One thing I briefly want to mention is the debate about whether MPs should be allowed to tweet from the Chamber or Commons committee rooms.

I understand why some people think MPs shouldn't tweet, because they think it will prevent them from concentrating on debates.

You could equally argue MPs shouldn't bring any papers or correspondence into the chamber, or that blackberries and phones should be banned to stop MPs being distracted by emails and texts.

We obviously need to be sensible about this and show respect during Parliamentary debates. But overall, twitter can help promote awareness of what's happening in the chamber and on parliamentary committees.

Most people don't watch the parliament channel or read Hansard, and reporting of Parliament in the national media has all but disappeared. So if twitter can help get information out about what's happening in the Commons or the Lords, that can only be a good thing.

And I am delighted to say we are now - officially - allowed to tweet from the Chamber and Committee Rooms, although not to tweet photos...at least not yet!

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLITICIANS AND DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

But does new and social media have wider implications for politicians and the democratic process?

I believe it does, but that we should be wary of over claiming what social media can achieve.

Re-inventing social activism?

There are many people who believe social media is reinventing social activism, making it easier for the powerless or less powerful to co-ordinate and give voice to their concerns. Some commentators claim achieving social change is now more about social networks and ordinary people, than political change driven by traditional elites.

The most high profile example given for this argument is the role social media played in the Arab Spring.

There have been many column inches written on how social media helped organise Demonstrations and carry messages about freedom and democracy across Africa and the Middle East, raising both the expectations and likelihood of the revolution's success.

Other commentators say the facts tell a somewhat different story.

One study found that 75 per cent of people who clicked on twitter links relating to the Arab Spring uprisings were from outside the Arab world. Another analysis found that those tweeting about the demonstrations in Iran in 2009 were almost all in the West - in other words there was no twitter revolution inside Iran.

Malcolm Gladwell - author of "The Net Delusion" - wrote a very interesting article about this for the New Yorker in October 2010.

He claims the popular wisdom that social media was central to the Arab Spring is essentially about the West emphasising its own contribution to events in the Middle East. In other words, the Arab Spring wouldn't have happened without Facebook, which was invented in the US.

Gladwell also correctly reminds us that fast growing, mass movements are nothing new. He cites the sit-ins during the American civil rights movement - a period I studied at university as part of my history degree.

These began when four students refused to move from the lunch counter at Woolworths in Greensboro, North Carolina when they were told "negroes can't be served here."

Within a week, their number had swelled to 600. Within a month there were sit-ins throughout the South, stretching as far West as Texas. 70,000 students eventually took part, and the sit-ins became central to the civil rights movement - without an email, text, Facebook group or tweet in sight.

People involved in any new campaign or movement tend to over emphasise its strengths. Golnaz Esfandiari - a correspondent for Radio Free Europe who has written about the role of social media in the Arab Spring - says: "Innovators tend to be solipsistic. They often want to cram every stray fact and experience into their new model."

That's one reason why people who emphasise the role of social media tend to downplay or ignore the years of work spent building the local organisations and networks of support that were crucial during the Arab Spring.

I'm not an expert on the Middle East. But the changes in this region have been facilitated, and to some extent accelerated by the power of social media, which acted as an important catalyst for change.

Young activists, skilled in using new technology, helped give birth to a new movement dedicated to spreading democracy. They used non-violent action in the real world, and social networks in the virtual world, building on and amplifying decades of local resistance.

Risks of new media displacing social action?

One concern I share with social media sceptics is the risk that social media ends up being seen as a substitute for other vital forms of action, at the local, national or even international level.

Don't get me wrong. As a constituency MP, I know from my inbox the power of mass email campaigns. They can make a real difference in encouraging MPs to raise issues in Parliament, demonstrating the scale of public support for or against an issue, and shaping the priorities, views and votes of MPs.

But there's a risk that people end up thinking signing an e-petition or sending an email is sufficient to make change happen, or the sum total of necessary political engagement.

The really big challenges - the entrenched social, economic and political problems we face as a society - can't be solved by signing up to a Facebook group or joining an email campaign alone.

For example, the issue I'm working on nationally – improving support and care for older people – will require fundamental changes in the way services are provided and funded. This will require relentless focus and commitment and sustained action over a long period of time.

Social media may be very effective in stopping something from happening – like the Government's proposed sale of the forests – or getting rid of a problem. It is not yet clear whether social media can be effective in putting something better in place.

Impact on politics and the political process

And social media will never replace face to face discussion and debate, which will always be at the heart of democracy and the democratic process.

As a politician, I know the most powerful form of contact remains talking to people directly. This is as important to me as an MP as it is to my constituents.

It's interesting that whilst social media played a role in facilitating the uprisings in the Middle East, the enduring image of the Arab Spring remains the demonstrations in Tahrir Square - a solid, real world place where people physically came together to show their solidarity.

For all the opportunities and benefits of virtual networks, people still want to experience real, human contact. Indeed, the increasing use of social media may be fuelling this yearning for a shared physical experience. This isn't just happening in the political world. For example, at the same time as people buy or listen to music online, we're seeing a growing market for live concerts and events.

However, social media is bringing about huge changes in the way people communicate and interact with one another.

It's not just how we use Facebook and Twitter to keep in touch with our friends. Digital and new media are changing the way we buy goods and interact with whole range of other organisations.

And these communications go beyond mere transactional relationships - the ability to order what you want at a click of a button, and have it delivered where and when you want.

People increasingly want to make their views and voices heard. Again, this isn't just about voting for the X Factor, Big Brother, or I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here.

People can create their own songs and films and put them on My Space or YouTube; they can write blogs about anything they're interested in and find a like-minded audience. Some people even achieve fame, acclaim or notoriety as a result.

The opportunities new media offers for 'unknown' people to break through traditional elites are a very powerful motivator.

Of course, these break-throughs aren't always quite what they seem. Some 'new media' music stars turn out to have been promoted by record companies all along. In the political world, some of the best known bloggers are in reality traditional Westminster insiders - lobby journalists or former political advisers.

And whether it's in the music business or the political business, people often only really break through when the traditional print and broadcast media pick up their work.

Yet - for all these caveats - politicians, Governments, businesses, public services and civil society must all adapt to a world where digital and social media play an increasingly important part in people's every day lives, enabling them to communicate and express their views and opinions in very direct and immediate ways.

This presents a real challenge for political parties. If we base our organisations on traditional party meetings alone - with their opaque language and often archaic rules - we risk alienating today's 20 year olds, even more than we did when I first got involved in politics more than 20 years ago.

People want to get politically involved in different ways, at different points in their lives. Some people love face to face discussion and debate. Some want to make a difference in their local community, by getting involved in their local school or voluntary groups. Others want to join local, national or international online campaigns – and not always through the prism of Party politics alone.

Ultimately what brings people together is shared values, interests and goals. At its best, politics helps meet the deep rooted desire within many of us to belong, and be part of something bigger than ourselves.

Political parties must recognise this and engage with people in different ways – not force them into a one size fits all model, particularly if that model is stuck in the past.

Impact on traditional media

I want to finish with some thoughts about an issue that's far more difficult to address, which is the effect new media is having on traditional print media and in turn on the democratic and political process.

New media challenges - and some would say ruins - the business model for traditional print media.

Fewer people are buying newspapers, particularly young people, and instead getting their news from a variety of sources, including online. Advertising revenue from newspapers is declining. Even if a paper builds a big online readership, people don't spend as much time reading online so advertisers won't pay as much for their space.

Declining revenues from sales and advertising mean many newspapers are losing money, cutting staff, reducing their size and in some cases closing altogether.

Papers are attempting to address this problem in different ways. Some, like the Times and FT, are now putting up pay walls and charging for their content. Others, including the Guardian and Mail, are seeking new and bigger audiences, including overseas, to boost their advertising revenues.

These changes set the context within which politics and the democratic process are taking place.

We have a highly competitive 24/7 media which constantly needs to be fed. Many people believe newspapers are becoming increasingly 'sensationalised' in order to retain readers and attract a bigger audience.

Producing comment is cheaper than investigative journalism, so we're seeing more 'views' than 'news' with the line between the two increasingly blurred.

At the same time, hard edged reporting and investigative journalism frequently is increasingly giving way to 'softer', more personal pieces and lifestyle features.

This in turn puts pressure on politicians: to reduce our opinions to soundbites, produce a running commentary on events, and reveal more of our personal lives.

Yet I sense there is still a real – and possibly growing desire for straight, robust news and reporting. That's one reason why the broadcast media, and the public service broadcasting remit of both television and radio, is becoming increasingly important.

My real concern, however, is about the future of local media, particularly local newspapers.

It is hugely important that we retain a strong, and vibrant local media. People want to know what is happening in their local area. Local newspapers and radio help shape our sense of community and identity, and are a vital counter point to the London-centric nature of many of our national media outlets.

And without local papers and radio stations, we simply won't have proper coverage of the work of local councils - whose services have a huge and direct impact on people's daily lives.

But the future of local newspapers is at risk because they aren't making the money they used to. As a result, some experts warn that half of all local and regional papers could shut by 2015.

I don't know what the solution to this problem is. Far more experienced and knowledgeable people within the newspaper business are grappling with this issue and struggling to find an answer.

But I'm sure that retaining a vibrant, local media is vital to retaining a vibrant, local democracy.

I wonder whether this could be a subject for a future Lit and Phil lecture? Its certainly one I'd be keen to attend.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion.

We live in a world where people can build virtual networks and campaigns that span different communities, countries and even continents.

A world where people can express their views by the click of a mouse, and where the public can use new and social media to put issues on the political agenda, and pressure on the political process, in ways unimaginable even a decade ago.

Social and new media are already having a real impact on the way we all communicate.

Yet on its own, social media won't deliver the real political, economic and societal changes we need. And it will never substitute for the face to face contact, and engagement that our constituents want and deserve.

But there's no going back. We must all embrace and adapt to this change.

This is a challenge I relish.

Thank you for listening to me, I look forward to taking your questions.

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