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# Just Public Relations or an Attempt at Interaction?

British MPs in the Press, on the Web and 'In Your Face'

■ *Nigel A. Jackson and Darren G. Lilleker*

## ABSTRACT

■ It is no longer sufficient for a British Member of Parliament to represent a particular party and be in a safe seat to guarantee re-election. Arguably the MP has to prove that they not only represent the party but also the constituency, and increasingly they feel under pressure to prove they take the latter aspect of the job very seriously. Therefore we find them engaging in various activities which can be described as profile building or public relations, activities which we recognize as being more consistent with the PR activities of charities and/or pressure groups. They act as campaigners, building themselves a profile through the local media, they are also increasingly using the Internet to promote themselves, their activities and a number of causes important to the MP and a section of the constituency. PR theory, especially Grunig and Hunt's continuum and Ferguson's relationship management theories, help explain the possible motivations for MPs using these various strategies. The question this article asks is whether this is just PR or is there a less cynical motive for this activity. In other words is it simply about vote winning, which clearly is a key aspect, or is there also a desire to increase interaction between the local electorate and their parliamentary representative. ■

**Key Words** constituency service, e-communications, political communication, public relations, UK politics

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## Introduction

Public relations (PR) has been linked with politics since the early 20th century (Baines et al., 2004). As early as the 1920s the father of PR, Edward Bernays, recognized that PR could be used by political actors to shape public opinion (Bernays, 1955, 1961). While this related more to rhetoric and propaganda, in recent years there has been increasing interest in the similarities between the political and corporate spheres. Often this is subsumed beneath the broad headings of political marketing (Bowler and Farrell, 1992; Lees-Marshment, 2001; O'Shaughnessy, 1990; Scammell, 1995) or the older term of reference, political communication (Franklin, 1994; McNair, 1999; Negrine, 1994; Norris et al., 1999). It is perhaps more appropriate to separate out many of the tools currently employed, in the same way as we would when studying the communication of corporate enterprises. Thus it is appropriate to discuss the ways in which politicians employ advertising, marketing and public relations in order to communicate to, or perhaps with, the electorate.

Within the academic spheres of political science, political communication, or psephology little attention is paid to local political campaigning or communication. In the UK, the focus of this article, the traditional view is that a candidate's local performance is worth around 500 votes (Butler and Collins, 2001: 1030). However, an increasing body of literature is arguing that the constituency is of growing importance and that a candidate's activities can effect his or her electoral performance. This is a particular feature of the UK political system. Each member of the UK parliament is elected as the sole representative of an area, the constituency, on a first past the post ballot. Their role as MP is then to represent all voters in that constituency within the House of Commons. While this does not mean that they seek constituents' approval on matters of state – here the party leader is dominant – the promotion of constituency interests and redress of grievances is a central function of the modern MP, one that is increasing in importance (Rush, 2001). Recent studies by Denver and colleagues (Denver and Hands, 1997; Denver et al., 1998, 2002) conducted during the 1992, 1997 and 2001 General Elections have studied the link between voting patterns and the level of resources put into the campaign. Their conclusion was that: 'local constituency campaigning during general elections has a clear effect on electoral outcomes . . . [though] the strength of the local campaign is only among a number of variables which effect election outcomes' (Denver and Hands, 1997: 318–19). We would argue that the permanent campaign is one of those factors, and would posit that an extended period

of sustained campaigning activity must accentuate the effect of a 'strong election campaign'.

The requirement for a sitting MP to develop a proactive strategy is to earn what is referred to as the 'incumbency factor' (Krasno, 1994). This results from the fact that a sitting MP is able to build up a high personal profile within a constituency, whereas a challenging candidate often has little more than two months in which to make a name for themselves. The modern MP must fulfil a constituency role effectively, and they must balance this against the other roles required by both party and parliament (Power, 1998).

This activity is best described using Butler and Collins's (2001) concept of 'constituency service'. They argue that by becoming involved in continuous constituency-focused activity an MP is often able to buck a national electoral swing. This importance has been recognized by MPs and the majority now records this as their priority, over and above serving nation and party. Findings from research carried out by Rush tell us that 78.6 percent of MPs in 1999 ranked helping constituents as their top priority. MPs record that they are responsive to requests from their constituents and attempt to voice their concerns from the floor of the House of Commons. The only element of Rush's survey where the constituent is given a low ranking is over the question of who influences their parliamentary voting. The majority of MPs say that party leaders have the greatest influence, with their personal opinions ranking second (Rush, 2001: 215–23). Rush discusses his findings in terms of conflicts. The constituency service role is often seen as separate, an adjunct of parliamentary life but with a distinct character. As he notes though, it is a role that is drawing MPs away from both parliamentary and party duties and one that is having greater influence over their work.

The area where the constituency enjoys most influence is that of an MP's communication activities. MPs who do not hold ministerial office see the majority of their communication aimed at, and probably only important to, those they actually represent. Therefore, the MP must design communication in a way that ensures the message will reach the constituents in the form intended. The importance of this should be exacerbated among those in marginal constituencies. MPs in marginal, target constituencies may well be supported in their campaigning by all the resources of their national party, however, it is equally important to have shown loyalty to the constituency over an extended period of time. Thus, as is the case with many corporate and not-for-profit enterprises, maintaining a strong, permanent public profile is of high importance. Thus PR exercises become the force underpinning the constituency

service role of an MP. The need for positive publicity causes a large percentage of MPs to be constantly considering how to raise or maintain their profile. However, while a primary concern is with vote winning, MPs also seek to serve the constituency effectively and the vote is therefore simply a byproduct or reward for their work. PR theory allows us to understand and explain these motivational concerns and to re-examine the activities of MPs in comparison to models of behaviour usually seen as relevant for not-for-profit or indeed corporate enterprises.

### The role of public relations for MPs

In a competitive world MPs' PR activity is driven by two related factors. First, the positive benefits such as a raised profile, and second, the fact that rival candidates could use PR, so ignorance may bring penalties. Even in a safe seat an MP must recognize that PR is necessary, whether the organization or individual likes it or not (Jefkins and Yadin, 1998; L'Etang and Pieczka, 1996; White and Mazur, 1995). An MP, therefore, has only one real option – to employ PR techniques. Developing the technical skills of promoting the MP locally is not all that difficult, there are after all myriad training courses and 'how to' books. But for MPs to master PR, developing their personal PR skills is insufficient, it also implies developing a sensitivity to PR strategies and the reaction of others.

Any MP considering the appropriate technique faces one significant conceptual problem, namely what actually *is* PR? Rex Harlow identified 472 definitions (Harlow, 1976), implying that while there may be agreement that PR exists, there is no clear consensus as to what it means. For example, the IPR (IPR, 1999, cited in Harrison, 2000) stresses reputation management; Cutlip et al. (2000) view it as a management function; and the Mexican statement 1998 (cited in Harrison, 2000) sees it as part social science and part art. For some, PR has a negative connotation, in part due to its historical association with manipulation and propaganda (Harrison, 2000), but it can also be explained by the concept of 'the public relations state' (Deacon and Golding, 1994) whereby the government seeks to actively persuade its citizens in order to manufacture consent. An MP in their role as ambassador for the government and their party may actually encourage this negative perception, but when acting as a constituency ambassador they are promoting the case of constituents, which should result in a more positive reaction. Therefore constituency-level PR may not just promote

the MP, but also the political system. To be effective in their use of PR, an MP needs to think and act strategically.

While the lack of any clear definition hampers PR, we can identify six clear tenets to guide an MP. First, there is near unanimity that specifying your objectives for using PR is essential (Gregory, 2002; Grunig, 1992; Jefkins and Yadin, 1998). Second, identifying who you need to reach in order to realize your objectives is deemed vital. Third, clarity of the desired change you want within your target audience and how communication can achieve change. Fourth, deciding how to best reach your target audience: should an MP use media relations, the Internet, public speaking or a combination? Fifth, choosing the messages most likely to bring about the change you desire in your target audience: suggesting that what you say is as important as how you say it. Sixth, there is also unanimity about the importance of how you assess how successful you have been (Cutlip et al., 2000; Gregory, 2002; Jefkins and Yadin, 1998). For example, if an MP extensively uses local PR and their percentage vote and/or the turnout decreases more than the national trend, *ceteris paribus*, this suggests that their approach to PR is not working and needs to change.

It is easy for the unwary to fall into the trap that PR equates to media relations, but PR includes a wide array of techniques (Baskin et al., 1997; Cutlip et al., 2000; Macnamara, 2000). PR is in essence concerned with communication (Cutlip et al., 2000) and this can be either mediated or unmediated. While the 19th-century origins of PR were indeed heavily (though not exclusively) based on media relations, the history of PR throughout the 20th century is an evolution of a new discipline, adding new functions, not all of which are mediated (Kitchen, 1997). As a result PR has frequently been engaged in turf wars (Newsom et al., 2000) with other disciplines for control of these new functions. The Internet, in the form of both websites and the use of email, is a recently contested technique which has been added to the PR toolbox. However, choosing the appropriate technique is not enough, MPs must also develop the appropriate strategy (Seitel, 2001). To best achieve this a PR practitioner needs to play a boundary spanning role (Grunig and Hunt, 1984), with one foot within the organization and one foot outside. In other words, an MP will need to understand the relationship between him- or herself, their party and parliament, and with their environment, primarily their constituency. Therefore, an understanding of the mediated and unmediated outlets that are most appropriate, and their respective audiences, is vital to MPs' PR success.

Probably the most dominant approach to PR in the UK is that outlined by Grunig (in collaboration with a number of others) in several books and articles since the 1980s. He originally identified four models to explain PR practice (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). The first, press agency, is the use of media relations to generate publicity which can be criticized for being based on manipulation and encouraging half-truths. The public information model plays an important role in democratic society by providing citizens with accurate information; however, while truth is important the communication is one way, from sender to receiver. MPs who use either of these two models may be promoting their own interests, but they will not necessarily be enhancing the reputation of the political system. Grunig and Hunt referred to the third and fourth, two-way models as the asymmetric and symmetric. In the asymmetrical model power lies with the sender, and the purpose of feedback is to help them target their messages more effectively. The symmetrical model, however, is based on dialogue between sender and receiver, where both parties can change their opinion and behaviour. Politics is often seen as offering the most potential for the two-way symmetrical model. The ability to listen and adapt to what constituents say through PR helps MPs promote their own, and the system's, legitimacy.

The four models are subdivided by two key variables, the direction and the purpose. The direction refers to whether the communication is one-way from sender to receiver or is two-way. The purpose refers to why one is seeking feedback, either asymmetrical or symmetrical. Grunig and Hunt originally believed that the most desirable model is the two-way symmetrical. Communication from MPs has been criticized for being one-way (Jackson, 2003) but they are more likely than the commercial sector to practise symmetrical communication. MPs do promote their ideas, campaigns and policies to constituents, but they may alter the substance, and not just the presentation, if the feedback is overwhelmingly critical. This is not to say that this is a frequent occurrence, rather to argue that politics is currently one of the few fields where this ideal is achievable.

The original Grunig and Hunt model received criticism from a number of quarters. For example, Murphy (1991) believed that there were situations when the one-way or two-way asymmetric approaches were the most appropriate. Grunig and Hunt accepted a number of the criticisms and reconceptualized their framework (Dozier et al., 1995). First, they developed the idea of 'craft' and 'professional' public relations with the former being technique oriented and the latter strategic in outlook. Second, they introduced the idea of a mixed-motive model

which accepted that asymmetrical communication could be a legitimate approach. An equilibrium, or win-win zone, was required between the sender and receiver of communication. MPs, therefore, are faced with the choice of concentrating on putting out press releases and having an Internet presence to merely generate publicity, or to develop a strategic approach. That PR should help with conflict resolution (Heath, 2001; Dozier et al., 1995) strongly suggests that to fully engage their critics and supporters MPs should endorse the latter.

The mixed motive model (Dozier et al., 1995) implies that the choice of approach to PR is determined by the power relationship between the sender and receiver of a message. Table 1, however, shows that the direction and purpose of an MP's PR also depends on which role she or he is playing, so that the perceived balance of power is not the sole determinant of approach. When an MP is communicating a government (if applicable) or party message, they are acting primarily as a spokesperson and so will only use one-way communication. While they want constituents' support, they are acting on behalf of someone else and so do not want to encourage feedback. When they are representing their constituency, they are only interested in communicating what their constituents feel on an issue rather than engaging in dialogue with non-constituency audiences. However, when they are acting as a personal ambassador or an ambassador for the political system, or undertaking casework, they will use two-way communications. This is in part because they want to maximize personal support, but it is also their job to represent their constituents and to do this effectively requires dialogue.

While there has been most focus on Grunig and Hunt's continuum, the idea of relationship management (Ferguson, 1984) has also gained

**Table 1** The position of MPs on the Grunig and Hunt (1984) continuum when performing PR to its full potential

<i>Role of MP</i>	<i>Press agency</i>	<i>Public information</i>	<i>Two-way asymmetric</i>	<i>Two-way symmetric</i>
Ambassador for the government	X	X		
Party ambassador	X	X		
Constituency ambassador	X	X		
Constituency service			X	X
Personal ambassador	X	X	X	X
Ambassador for the political system	X	X	X	X

support. Ferguson posits that the most important aspect for understanding PR is interpersonal relationships and what has been referred to as using relationships to build equity (Regester and Larkin, 2002). People do not necessarily act rationally, rather they are open to prejudices so the PR practitioner can build up a 'favours bank' (Schneider, cited in Ledingham and Bruning, 2000) through informal and formal contacts and networks. For the MP, PR is not just a mechanical practice of putting out press releases, opening schools and running a website, rather it is a process of actually developing a relationship with those communicated with. This implies that feedback and responding to that feedback is essential. Relationship management may be a means by which two-way symmetrical communication can be achieved.

Relationship management is believed to help PR practitioners in a crisis (Bridges and Nelson, 2000) because it offers solutions for when an organization is faced with an opportunity or threat. Coombs (2000) suggests that a crisis should be viewed as a breakdown in the relationship between an organization and its key audiences. Therefore, the driving force during a crisis should be to repair these relationships. Nearly all MPs at some time face a crisis, no matter how minor or parochial, and their 'favours bank' built up over a number of years will help maintain or re-establish their legitimacy. MPs who are most successful in using PR to develop a network of relationships are more likely to survive a crisis.

So if developing two-way communications and building relationships is the desirable way of utilizing PR, what do we surmise is the purpose for an MP in undertaking PR? The very cynical would suggest only vote winning, and this may be the most important, especially for those in marginal seats. PR, however, is also part of how an MP establishes themselves as a proactive representative and possibly, when necessary, buck the national electoral trend. This, we would argue, underpins an MP's activities; however, this does not mean that this is the only reason why MPs act as constituency representatives, or that vote winning explicitly motivates them to fulfil all their constituency functions. There are four alternative and complementary possible motivations (in no order of priority). First, as Heath (2001) points out, PR only has a value so far as it helps an organization establish its legitimacy. PR by an MP can help cement the legitimacy of the political system in the minds of constituents. Second, PR can help conflict resolution between activists and organizations (Heath, 2001). MPs can use PR as the means of bringing together, not pushing further apart, different interests within their constituency. Third, local PR can encourage local activists, which helps MPs establish a core of loyal



support. Finally, PR can help organizations position themselves in relation to their environment (Everett, 2001). Therefore, MPs can define themselves clearly against other constituency actors. For an MP, PR can play a vital role in vote winning, but it would be a mistake to see that as PR's sole *raison d'être*. While three of the purposes are indeed related to electoral campaigning, two certainly are not. We argue that PR also plays a critical role in helping MPs effectively conduct their constituency work and so can reinforce representative democracy.

## Methodology

To explore MPs' media relations we chose a sample of recently elected MPs; those who had won their seat in the period since the 1997 General Election. The completion rate was 48 questionnaires returned (from a sample of 76). The questionnaires addressed the importance of coverage in the local and national media, frequency of contact with the media, the purpose of contact and the content of press releases. The questionnaire results were reinforced through 24 interviews with selected MPs from the sample as well as 14 interviews with prospective candidates who had stood, unsuccessfully, at the 2001 General Election. A further 17 interviews were carried out with veteran MPs of 30 years' service or more. The MPs' responses to questions on the frequency of sending press releases were cross-checked with average coverage within the local press over a period of one month. This allowed us to correlate coverage against swings at the 2001 General Election. This was carried out across those MPs who had held their seat prior to the General Election and who we could determine had been proactive from the time they entered parliament. Where there were several MPs covered by one newspaper, for example the *Birmingham Post*, we were able to compare proactive MPs' coverage, and their swings, against those who did not feature in the press as often and who we were told, or we inferred, were less proactive in seeking media coverage.<sup>1</sup>

To fully understand the impact of the Internet on MPs' communication strategies it was necessary to study their use of both websites and email. Given that MPs' websites are in the public domain, the first part of the study was a content analysis of all 186 MPs' websites accessible via [www.parliament.uk/comms/lib/alms.htm](http://www.parliament.uk/comms/lib/alms.htm), up to and including 31 March 2002. In addition there were 41 sites listed which could not be accessed or were holding pages.

Email is essentially a private communication medium so the second tranche of research data is based on an email survey of 100 MPs carried

out in June/July 2002, plus follow-up interviews. It is worth noting that some 10 percent of respondents had initial difficulty with the technology in terms of returning their completed questionnaire. Although all MPs are issued with an email address, the survey was limited only to those politicians (412 out of 658) whose email address was publicly available (accessed via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk)), as it was assumed these members actively encourage email. MPs are notoriously poor responders and the response rate of just under 25 percent was considered sufficient to allow meaningful statistical analysis. Indeed, several MPs commented that their normal policy was *not* to respond to questionnaires, but given the subject matter they made an exception.

While we accept that the findings rely on accurate self-reporting of media relations by MPs, we did attempt to corroborate our findings through a study of the local press and content analysis of MPs' websites and e-newsletters.

### **Media agency: just propaganda production?**

While classical PR theory talks of press agency, it is perhaps more correct to talk of MPs' activities in terms of media agency. They employ all media, both mediated (e.g. press) and non-mediated (e.g. websites, email), though they concentrate on the mass media as a communication tool. The transition of the media from a deferential observer to watchdog has been explored elsewhere (Barnett, 2002), but for the average politician, the media remains a tool for gaining publicity: somewhere to place their communication. However, MPs are increasingly finding that the national press pays little attention to everyday politicking (Negrine, 1999) and are only interested in controversial stories (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Nossiter et al., 1995; Stanyer, 2001). In response, governments and political parties have attempted to control the news agenda (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995), a practice that in its most extreme form sees the use of 'spin' as a tool for gaining positive coverage (Jones, 2002). This has led to the development of a vicious circle: where journalists increasingly seek to undermine politicians and governments, while the politicians seek to control the press agenda through tight control over communication and spin (Lilleker et al., 2002). Within this atmosphere many politicians feel reluctant to have contact with the national media and so have grown more dependent on the relationships they can establish with local media journalists (Negrine and Lilleker, 2003).

Beyond a few exceptions (Franklin and Parry, 1998; Franklin and Richardson, 2002a, 2002b; Lilleker and Negrine, 2003; Negrine and Lilleker, 2003), the relationship between politicians and the media serving their constituencies is academically unexplored. However, if an MP wants to communicate to, or with, constituents, and to demonstrate their commitment to constituency service, the local media is seen as the most appropriate and most accessible method of communication. Within this section we discuss the way in which MPs attempt to gain a media profile, the media they use to achieve this and their aims for building a high media profile. In particular, we correlate their responses in interviews and to questionnaires with the model set out earlier, specifically asking whether vote winning is seen as a result of feeding propaganda out to the media, or if there is a more subtle and complicated explanation for MPs deploying public relations within their constituencies.

### *Getting in the news*

You cannot just do your work, no-one will know, you must be seen to do your work. I remember back in the '60s if I raised a constituent's complaint . . . it had a good chance of hitting the parliamentary pages . . . by the '90s I had to find the paper, write the damn words and then I still couldn't guarantee anyone would touch it, and that's the local rag, the *Times* and those papers don't care unless you drop your trousers. (Interviewee, 2002)

While amusing and anecdotal, two serious points can be drawn from the above quote taken from an interview with a veteran MP. The first is the enduring requirement to be in the news for carrying out those tasks that can be categorized under the heading 'constituency service'. The second concerns the increased difficulties that MPs face when attempting to publicize their activities. The majority have a negative view of national journalists arguing 'they're all bastards out to make us look like idiots or traitors'; 'they wait 'til you trust them, they'll ask you your personal opinion and next day you're in the shit with the Whip's office'. A more moderate voice, but no less distrustful, argued:

They expect you to go on in a minute's notice and comment on all sorts of policies. Recently I went onto the radio to talk about fox hunting . . . as soon as I went on air I was being asked about the resignation of John Bercow. He's not from my party and frankly I don't care, but I couldn't say that. That's the way modern journalism works and quite frankly I refuse to play their game. (Interviewee, 2002)

**Table 2** Media listed as priority for an MP (in percentages)

<i>Media of first choice</i>	<i>%</i>
Local newspapers	38.1
National newspapers	5.4
Local radio	34.5
National radio	3.1
Local/regional TV	15.7
National TV	3.2

*Note:*  $N = 48$ , all marked as a percentage of total.

Therefore, it is towards the local media that the majority of backbench politicians focus their attention. To provide some quantification of responses in the study, and to aid comparison, the proportions of different media use are presented in Table 2.

MPs said that if they could choose their ideal medium, and the way in which they were presented, then national television would be their clear favourite. However, when talking about their realistic strategies, they recognize that in excess of 80 percent of their media activity is targeted specifically at the local or regional media.

Interviews with MPs and journalists show there is a quid pro quo relationship, supporting the adage that; 'editors want copy, MPs want fame' (interview, 2001), and so MPs are increasingly strategic in the methods used for gaining coverage.

Table 3 records the responses to the question, 'In the majority of your media work, particularly press releases, what techniques do you use to ensure receiving coverage?' The responses shown were the four most common, none of our sample of MPs responded that they did nothing.

**Table 3** Methods for gaining media coverage (in percentages)

	<i>Yes (%)</i>	<i>No (%)</i>
Copied journalist's language	66	33
Used sound bites in speeches and press releases	72	28
Target words or articles to media and their audiences	61	39
Focused on local issues not national politics	88	12

*Note:*  $N = 48$ , all marked as a percentage of total.

Therefore, we can suggest that MPs are strategic about getting in the news and prioritize their media-related activity carefully, so ensuring that they have a high local profile and maximize their potential for receiving a personal vote.

### *Picking the media*

As highlighted earlier in the article and elsewhere (Negrine and Lilleker, 2003), the modern media–politics relationship leads the majority of backbench MPs, not to mention some ministers and junior ministers, to build relationships solely with the local media. One would expect, bearing in mind the research which has proven the extent to which the advent of television has impacted upon political communication (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995), that newspapers would no longer be the prime target for MPs' communication. However, MPs find a whole range of gatekeepers throughout the media that exclude them from publicizing their constituency service.

There is naturally some variance in accessibility. If you are an MP with links to a television station, such as Austin Mitchell, or a celebrity, a status former athlete Sebastian Coe enjoyed, or conversely you are one of a small number of MPs with a television company covering their region or city, you can gain a greater level of coverage. These circumstances are, however, unusual. Therefore it is local newspapers and radio that are seen as the easiest way to reach constituents.

The local newspaper, and in particular the free press that are distributed weekly across a growing number of areas, could encourage interaction. MPs read editorials and the letters pages and respond to these when possible. Table 4 demonstrates why the local press is singled out as the most important medium for MPs and what forms of communication are used.

Here we see that the largest proportion of press communication leaving MPs' offices, and subsequently published in local newspapers, relates to constituents' concerns. The remaining 39 percent of activities are the product of the MPs scouring their constituency for campaigns in which they can become involved or, where possible, ones they can lead. This allows them, as one MP put it, to assume the role of 'local hero'. This involves all aspects of constituency life: mundane issues such as traffic problems; faulty street lighting; or graffiti; or crime and anti-social behaviour. Mundane they may be, but it is clearly an example of two-way symmetrical communication.

**Table 4** The content of MPs' local PR efforts

<i>Type of communication</i>	<i>Percentage per week</i>
Party political statements	2
Personal campaign messages	5
Publicizing casework	27
Proactive constituency campaigning	39
Responses to editorials in newspapers	11
Responses to constituents letters in the newspapers	16

*Note:* Sample: 10 MP's press releases over a month and press coverage of 34 MPs across eight newspapers.

Local radio is a further forum that may allow symmetrical communication with an MP. As one MP pointed out:

I rarely visit the constituency, due to my duties here [in Westminster] it is impractical. But I have a weekly phone-in show, the DJ plays a few tunes, constituents ring in, and they are constituents as the station doesn't go out beyond the constituency, and I chat to them. If they raise an important issue I'll throw that into a debate in the House and will feed it back next week. They've even started to let me choose the music. (Interviewee, 2003)

We thus see MPs strategically targeting the media, and the media's audience, proactively obtaining news stories and seeking coverage.

### *Conniving or serving?*

The central question is whether MPs communication is simply one-way, a form of selling themselves using the tools of PR, or whether there is a more symmetrical function for this strategic communication. The first place to look is to the comments made by MPs. A lot of comments follow the general theme of:

If constituents don't know who you are, what you do, even what you stand for, there is no reason for them to support you. I think if you ensure they recognize your face, know you are active on their behalf and know you are fighting their corner, you can make some positive impact on your vote. (Interviewee, 2002)

So clearly vote winning is important, perhaps obviously, and a clear motivation force for MPs to be proactive. This, many argue, is

particularly the case as the electorate casts their vote with more consideration than in earlier decades of high partisanship.

Closer investigation supports the importance of a perception of vote winning. Although the number of marginal seats (defined as per *Finer et al.*'s [1961] classification) was low, the activities of MPs were correlated with the marginality of the seat. We found a correlation between marginality and the amount of media coverage attained in an average week at .661, though there is a significant degree of difference across the MPs, and so significance was calculated at the .399 level. In real terms, we find that 80 percent of MPs in marginal seats were on average 20 times more proactive than their counterparts in safe seats; there were, however, 20 percent who demonstrated a lower level of proactivity.

Arguably the proactive MPs are correct in their approach, and are rewarded for doing so. There is a high correlation of .945 between the level of media coverage and the swing in votes, weighted for low turnout and national swing. This suggests that the higher the level of coverage, the greater the swing in an MP's favour, although there were differences that were due to other local factors, which caused a level of significance at the .36 level.

These figures could present us with the conclusion that media agency is an activity motivated purely by a desire to win votes.

However, beneath the surface are more positive signs. One MP, who monitored the letters pages of his local newspaper, commented:

I need to be relevant to the people I represent. They need to know I am concerned about them and listen to them. Yes I read their letters, yes I am attentive to everything they say, yes I place feedback into the press, but yes I do act on their words. Basically if they say jump I say how high, and to be honest if it is a choice of following the Whip or following constituency opinion, the constituency wins every time. (Interviewee, 2000)

A similar theme emerges from the comments made by the MP who uses radio phone-ins to communicate.

I don't need to do this. No one offered it to me, no one else did it before, I recognized my inability to be there physically and wanted to be there in spirit and action. I provide a service, that is that. (Interviewee, 2003)

Another MP likened herself to a bank, linking in with our earlier comment of MPs building a 'favours bank':

I see a vote as the same as savings. They give it to you and say we trust you with this. All you can do is serve them wisely. That means doing what they want. If a bank loses your money, you don't give them any more. If you don't represent the constituency, you don't get any votes. But it isn't just

about winning votes, it's about trust and service as well. I would prefer to think they vote for me because of the way I represent them than think well I sold myself well, that worked. (Interviewee, 2002)

MPs communication then is clearly two-way. The majority of this activity is designed to improve the standing of the MP and to produce a positive view of the political system in terms of representiveness, they largely lack any intention to allow constituents to inform their policy-making. An MP may use letters pages or the comments of participants in radio phone-ins as a barometer for opinion, particularly among constituents, but often they use these as forums to defend the government. This indicates that the communication is asymmetric, from MP to constituent and then back and in reverse, but seldom is further symmetrical communication encouraged.

Therefore, we must enquire whether MPs are exploiting alternative, and potentially more successful, methods for constructing symmetrical dialogue with their constituents. These are offered by online communications; this new forum for PR is being exploited by nearly every corporate enterprise, political organization and pressure group. If MPs are also interested in developing meaningful dialogue then they should also become e-literate and interactive using the worldwide web.

### **New technology – are MPs responding or resisting?**

Web technologies have created a political paradox. Nearly all MPs are media agents, but only a few, so far, have demonstrated an ability to become proficient in using the Internet. This is surprising as the Internet offers unmediated communication and potentially enables an MP to speak directly to their intended recipient. This is not to say that online communication will replace local media relations, rather it can be complementary. The Internet offers an enhanced capacity for MPs to engage in direct communication with constituents outside election campaigns.

It is the ability to encourage interactivity which has excited a number of commentators and politicians (Coleman, 1999; Cook, 2002; Holmes, 1997). Set against a backdrop of apparent voter apathy in the UK there is a belief that e-democracy can help revitalize politics. The Labour government is promoting the idea of a 'knowledge economy' (Blunkett, 2000; Stedward, 2000) which, along with the idea of e-government (Cook, 2002), is fuelling societal use of web technologies. MPs exist in an environment which is encouraging ever-greater use of direct two-way communications via the Internet. Within this section we



discuss the ways in which MPs use their own websites and email to communicate with constituents. We approach this in terms of two different motivations, first reinforcing representative democracy and second as part of their long-term electoral campaigning.

*Websites – enhancing the body politic*

Analysis of MPs' websites shows that the vast majority see Internet communication as primarily one-way, to give website visitors information on themselves and what they are trying to achieve. David Jamieson (Labour) is typical in stating on his home page: 'This site is designed to give the people of Plymouth Devonport information about the work I am doing on their behalf as their MP.' Far fewer take the view of Jean Corston (Labour): 'This website has been set up to allow Jean's constituents to pass on their views about issues of the day.' Table 5 shows that feedback tends to be a secondary function to that of using their website as an electronic brochure.

Clearly the potential interactivity of MPs' websites is not yet being fully utilized. Some 37.7 percent of websites appear to have no form of online interactivity at all, and those that do are not particularly innovative in encouraging dialogue. For example, the most popular form of interactivity used is the passive act of placing their email address on their website. Just a few pioneers have tried to encourage more feedback. For example, only 7.1 percent provide opinion polls and 4.3 percent surveys. Shona McIsaac (Labour) uses these two sources of feedback as part of her overall strategy: 'Most of the electronic polls are backed up by old-

**Table 5** Key features of MPs' websites

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Percentage of MPs</i>
MPs biography	81.7
Contact details	71.5
Press release	64.5
Links	57.5
Constituency	55.9
Surgeries	43.0
Speeches	41.4

*Note:* Total list includes 32 identified features.

style phone work and letter writing. The methods complement each other.' But the questions raised in polls and surveys are controlled by the MP, online discussion forums give far greater opportunity for two-way symmetrical communication. However, only 1.6 percent of MPs' websites provide this function and one MP commented, 'Sadly to date it has as a forum been greatly underused.'

The picture, however, is not all negative. It is quite clear that MPs, in using their website to support their constituency role, are trying to promote not just themselves but also the political system. For example, nearly a quarter of websites (22.6 percent) try to educate constituents as to what they can do for them. Those such as Harry Barnes (Labour) who provide an online surgery are taking the concept of constituency casework one stage further. Some, such as Alan Beith (Liberal Democrat), try to use their website as a community resource whereby they promote local events. A few see themselves developing a role beyond party politics or their constituency and directly view their website as part of the debate about democracy.

#### *Websites – a successful campaign tool?*

MPs have not been that keen to have their own website. In 2000 there were 97 accessible (IEA, 2000), by 2002 this had only risen to 186. The single most important factor in encouraging MPs to create a website appears to have been the 2001 General Election. This might suggest that MPs thought having a website might be a vote winner. This is reinforced by the fact that after the election at least 33.9 percent of websites became effectively dormant and were not updated for at least six months. Many are created to avoid being left behind; few show an intrinsic belief in the impact of the new technology, perhaps because most MPs' websites receive only a few hundred visitors a month.

If the aim of PR is to help get an MP elected then we would expect those with the closest electoral contests to use all of the techniques available to them. In fact, of the MPs with an operating website, marginal seats were slightly underrepresented. This perception of a website being of limited electoral value is particularly acute among the 10 smallest majorities, where only one MP had a website.

In the business world, electronic communications have quickly been utilized successfully. Apart from a very small minority of pioneers, MPs have not yet taken up the Internet with the same enthusiasm. Generally they have failed to use their websites as a PR tool. For example, some 31.2 percent of websites contain no obvious form of party branding such

**Table 6** When were MPs' websites last updated?

<i>How often</i>	<i>All MPs (%)</i>
Within the month	51.5
Within three months	8.1
Within six months	6.5
More than six months	33.9

as logo, colour, fonts or strapline. Only 18.8 percent of sites encourage visitors to join the party or volunteer for help, and only 3.7 percent have a mailing list people can subscribe to. At present MPs' websites are generally not used as effective campaigning tools.

'Stickiness' is the key to building, developing and nurturing relationships, in other words building a relationship by encouraging people to visit your website repeatedly. For MPs, typical features used to encourage repeat visits are updated press releases, diary dates and opinion polls. However, only 51.5 percent of MPs updated their websites monthly (see Table 6), the rest are unlikely to build the necessary long-term relationships required for preparing an election campaign.

#### *Constituency email – enhancing the body politic?*

Email is cheap, easy to use and very convenient. It is of no surprise that estimates for its use continue to grow (Gunther, 2003). This means that MPs exist in a world where email usage is the norm, and more specifically a wide cross-section of their constituents will consider it the norm. MPs will have to respond or risk being out of touch with society, which will make them, as part of the political institution and not just as individuals, appear outdated to many. Therefore, adaptation to email is part of how MPs can defend the very 'relevancy' of politics to everyday life.

The Internet, and email in particular, opens up the potential for Grunig's fourth model, two-way symmetrical communications, becoming readily attainable. The interactivity of the Internet offers a more transparent means of achieving feedback. Not only is it easier to write an email than a written letter, more importantly your potential options are greatly increased. For example, instead of just responding to an issue, a constituent could forward to an MP a news story they had seen to back up their own point of view. This is a very neat link between traditional media relations and the use of new technology. There is no reason why

MPs cannot turn this on its head and use it to their advantage, such as include favourable media e-clippings in their e-newsletters.

*Email – a successful campaign tool*

Email has been heralded as a ‘killer app’ (Downes and Mui, 2000), which in this context means that it could potentially revolutionize the way MPs approach re-election. Certainly, Sir George Young (Conservative) claims that email campaigning could add 5 percent to an MP’s vote by the next election (*Guardian Unlimited*, 2001). This would further strengthen the incumbency factor. However, evidence suggests that there has so far been fairly limited strategic use of email. Email may be leading more to evolutionary than revolutionary change.

An effective marketing tool used in the commercial sector are ‘signature files’ (Ollier, 1998). This enables an organization to publicize, at the bottom of an email sent out to recipients, particularly ‘newsworthy’ ideas. Signature files can be applied to all emails sent out, so not only when an organization is proactively sending out emails, but also when it responds to emails it has received. Therefore, a simple acknowledgement of receipt of an email from a constituent can contain a campaigning/marketing message. However, only 12 percent of respondents use this simple and easy to administer technique. This suggests that MPs are not actively searching for, or using, those peculiarities of the Internet that might help them promote their key ideas.

Furthermore, the commercial sector has realized the importance of collecting email addresses and using these for direct mail purposes (Collin, 2000; McManus, 2001; Ollier, 1998). The response from MPs to the opportunity that email represents suggests that, as a collective body, they have not recognized its potential. Only 33 percent actually collect constituents’ email addresses. Moreover, collecting the emails of constituents is only the first stage, the more important task is sending out regular emails to constituents to build up online relationships. As Table 7 shows, there is only a very small number of MPs who believe that the amount of hard work required to collect and update constituents’ email addresses and send out regular emails will have beneficial electoral consequences.

The Internet, in the form of both websites and email, fits very neatly with both Grunig’s aspiration of two-way symmetrical communication, and Ferguson’s central importance of PR in building relationships. There has certainly been an increase in unmediated communications from MPs to their constituents as a result of web technologies. However, this

**Table 7** Information regularly sent by email to constituents

<i>What information sent</i>	<i>Percentage of MPs</i>
Changes to website	7
Speeches/press releases	5
Details of campaigns	8
Regular newsletter	4
Party policies	2
Election campaigns	8
Appeals for help	10

communication is primarily one-way and so can be identified within the press agency and public information models. Only a few pioneers attempt some form of two-way communications, the vast bulk of which is asymmetrical. Therefore, there is a growing democratic credibility gap between what electors want and what MPs are, as a whole, providing.

### **Conclusion: the uses of PR among MPs and their motivations**

We argue that the practice of MPs suggests two refinements to Grunig's theory of PR as they apply to the political sphere. First, the terminology of media agency is more applicable to MPs' PR approach than press agency because the former implies a much wider range of techniques than the latter. Second, the mixed-motive model is not just based on the power relationship between sender and receiver; for politicians the role they are playing is also an important factor. However, as Table 8 demonstrates, Grunig and Hunt's continuum is, with these amendments, a useful tool for explaining political PR. When developing their constituency role, MPs appear most likely to utilize asymmetrical communication. Such feedback can lead to improvements in presentation without the need to change policy stances. The only area where MPs are likely to encourage symmetrical communication with constituents is on those limited areas where neither their party nor they themselves have fixed opinions. However, given that the potentially most symmetrical communication tool, the Internet, remains underused by most MPs, very few constituents have yet influenced policy in this way.

Table 9 suggests that MPs do not just use PR to win votes. The only motivation which is applicable to all PR techniques is that of establishing political legitimacy, which cannot be said for any of the three election-

**Table 8** How MPs use PR

<i>PR tools</i>	<i>Media agency</i>	<i>Public information</i>	<i>Two-way asymmetrical</i>	<i>Two-way symmetrical</i>
Local press	X	X	X When feeding info back only	
Letters page monitoring			X	X Limited
Phone-in participation	X	X	X	X But, rarely used
Email	X	X	X	Potentially, but underused
Website	X	X	X	Potentially, but underused

winning motivators. However, this must be balanced by the fact that the Internet has yet to be seen as a real vote winner. If MPs' websites reach critical mass or email becomes an effective political weapon in the near future, then this balance may tilt towards using PR primarily for vote winning.

**Table 9** Purposes for MPs using PR

<i>PR tools</i>	<i>To win votes</i>	<i>Establish legitimacy</i>	<i>Conflict resolution</i>	<i>Encourage party activists</i>	<i>Position selves in relation to environment</i>
Local press	X	X		X	X
Letters page monitoring	X	X	X		X
Phone-in participation	X	X	X	X	X
Email	Potentially but underused	X	X Among a few only	Potentially, but underused	
Website	X Short-term	X		X	X

Table 10 How PR is used to build relationships

<i>PR tools</i>	<i>Build formal and informal networks</i>
Local press	Limited usage
Letters page monitoring	Limited
Phone-in participation	Rarely used
Email	Potentially, but underused
Website	Potentially, but underused

If Grunig and Hunt's continuum is a useful tool in explaining MPs' PR, what of the concept of relationship management? Table 10 suggests that building formal and informal contacts seems less of a PR motivator for MPs. Unlike the mixed-motive model, relationship management cannot exist through asymmetrical communication, MPs need to not only encourage feedback, they also have to respond to that feedback. To build and maintain relationships there must be a sense of equality between MPs and their constituents; the clearest evidence for such an equality is symmetrical communication. If the constituents feel inferior in the relationship, that their concerns are not addressed and they are unable to influence policy, then Ferguson's model is inapplicable to political PR. The fact that communication is largely asymmetrical, not symmetrical, and that the equity in the 'favours bank' has not been maximized by MPs, suggests their disinterest in building symmetrical relationships. However, the fact that the Internet offers the best opportunities for symmetrical communication and that, largely, MPs are unable to effectively harness the potential of e-communications may suggest that there is also a technical barrier currently obstructing symmetrical communication.

Encouraging greater interaction, whether asymmetrical or symmetrical, between the local electorate and their MP carries an inherent danger. The Burkean view is that an MP's first duty is to vote according to their conscience, not what their constituents think. A slightly alternative view, that equally plays down the role of the voter, is Michel's Iron Law of Oligarchy, whereby policies and political campaigning are dominated by party elites and not MPs. However, given the evidence that voters are becoming increasingly motivated by their perception of their MP, and the level of service they offer, we would suggest there is a greater demand for symmetrical communication. Currently, most MPs are not encouraging this style of communication, thereby failing to exploit the

full potential of the PR tools available to them. Instead, they are largely talking at, rather than with, their constituents. Evidence suggests that in the 21st century corporate PR has abandoned its propagandist heritage in favour of two-way symmetrical modes of communication; it appears the constituent is demanding a similar shift in behaviour from their MPs.

## Note

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