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Time for change: government gets to grips with social media 24/05/2010

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The 2010 election was one like no other before. We saw the parties embracing social media to spread their campaign. So what does this mean for the future of the new government? How can the new government continue the trend and utilise social media techniques?



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2010 election - like no other

Election 2010 set many precedents. It saw the first (and second, and third) airing of a live TV debate between three political leaders. It fueled speculation about a hung parliament (which has since become a reality). It saw the first coalition agreement in seventy years. And it saw a marked rise in interest in politics among the younger generation.

None of this would have been possible without the prevalence of the biggest precedent of all: and that was the part social media played in election reportage before and after. PR departments everywhere realised the power of social media as an effective campaigning tool, just in time for the election.

Social media - making people engage with politics

Social media as a tool for spin and promotion has been gaining momentum over the last year and the May general election saw it used to its best advantage. Naturally, there were avoidable mistakes during the course of the campaign (and what campaign would be complete without them?) like the Twitter postal vote scandal where Labour candidate Kerry McCarthy revealed the Results of a postal vote just weeks before polling day, or the Scottish student candidate who used Twitter to vent his hatred of various politicians (therefore discrediting him as a serious candidate for his area).

Yet crucially, the popularity of social media has meant that more people than ever before are starting to engage with politics. It has meant that younger people who wouldn't ordinarily be interested have started to engage, from re-tweeting a comment or news headline, to making sickly Youtube videos about David Cameron like thecamerongirls.

Making a noise with social media

It was through social media that news of the polling scandal spread, where polling stations up and down the country were turning people away from casting their vote because the queues had taken too long or the ballot papers had run out.

The last-minute Youtube campaign launched by the Conservatives which targeted every Youtube user with a promotional video was a stroke of genius and it quite possibly earned them a few seats. In contrast, the anti-Clegg smear campaign launched by the Murdoch Empire in newspapers and online news sites had an even bigger impact thanks to the social media revolution.

What does this mean for the future of central gvt?

For the first time, central government has realized the power of social media and they have experienced first-hand the impact it can have on public opinion. In some ways, it's bitter sweet. Reputations can be made and broken in a matter of seconds. But embracing this tool can be key if central government are to move with the times and break away from the traditional, sluggish and out-of-date mould of Whitehall.

In some ways, the social election campaign was the acid test, and one in which can be built on and developed. Brown's government even had their own PR photostream on Flickr, for instance. Certainly, at Central Government level, they embraced social media and PR tools long before those at Local Government level. Many councils now use twitter regularly, but many do not, but even so, Twitter seems to be the full extent of the social media experience.

Other mediums such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Reedit and online forums are all waiting to be utilized and central government are slowly waking up to the Benefits. But whether it's resisted or not, social media will drag the politics of central government kicking and screaming into popular culture, making it culturally accessible. And when that starts to happen, the average person will start to engage much more, because Whitehall – afterall - is only a tweet away.



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