

Transforming audiences, transforming audience expectations?

Interviewer: Margot Buchanan
Stirling University, UK

Interviewee: Fiona Hyslop
Minister of Culture and External Affairs, Scottish Parliament, UK

Keywords: social media, digital communication, constituents, online campaigns

This essay results from an interview with Fiona Hyslop, Minister of Culture and External Affairs that was conducted in January 2013. The Scottish Parliament has placed great emphasis on both Parliament and its members being easily accessible to the public, since it was re-established in 1999. As part of this policy, it has developed an active website while many of its ministers make full use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, to communicate with their constituents and stakeholders. Ms Hyslop, Minister, is one member of the Scottish Government who makes extensive use of both Facebook and Twitter, in order to keep both her constituents and stakeholders informed of her governmental activities.

Digital communication platforms render spatial and temporal restraints irrelevant, enabling politicians and their audiences to communicate at will. Thompson notes that new communication platforms have led to the creation by users of, “New forms of action and interaction which have their own distinctive properties” (2005: 32, emphasis original). These properties may also, however, lead to the development of greater expectations on the part of audiences as they employ social media platforms to communication with their political representatives.

The COST Action is researching the impact on audiences of the new media landscape. The political sphere is one in which digital media have opened up new channels of communication between politicians and their audiences. In what ways do these

developments impact upon the relationship between yourself as an MSP and Government Minister, and the electorate?

One of the big challenges of social media and Twitter is that someone can contact you instantaneously and they expect an instantaneous response; they demand stimulation. However, I have to also service the needs of people in their 80s who carefully write a letter, put a stamp on it and post it. Why should I deal with an electronic query before the letter? It was the same with email when that developed – it raises expectations. Electronic media was meant to make things easier for us; they actually generate more activity.

Do you find this creates new levels of activity?

Yes. It's not displacement, it's another level of communication that creates more work and therefore means that more of my time is spent on communication than in previous years. People want to be dealt with instantly and this can only be managed in certain circumstances. Social media creates new routes for expressing opinions, but people are unlikely to use social media if they want to get problems resolved. For important matters, they will email or phone me.

Do you feel social media has improved communication between you and your constituents?

Yes, but it's challenging because it is difficult to manage. Unlike many other people, I don't sit at my desk at a computer, I am very busy actually meeting people, constituents and my mobile is frequently on silent because of other things I am managing. I therefore have to create space and time to manage social media.

Do you respond to these communications via social platforms personally?

I frequently have to ask my staff to deal with them. Questions that require a ministerial answer are subject to the same process, applicable for questions received through other media forms, such as email. If the question comes in a different format, it does not mean the process can be changed. I may respond instantly if possible, but if figures are involved I need to be accurate; people do not want to be misled. People now check the accuracy of what you say and accountability is a significant factor.

Correspondence is a real challenge and I could spend all day answering individual online queries, but I would not be doing my job; serving the public, making decisions and making things happen. I have to manage expectations and if a query is complex, I encourage people to email and it goes through the official system.

In what other ways do social media impact on politicians?

They also enable politicians to challenge things that are inaccurate very quickly. There is quite a lot of [media] activity much earlier in the day; you can see the news cycle and agenda developing much earlier. Social media allows politicians to see if a story is running that is inaccurate and issue a rebuttal if necessary. Previously, we would need to issue an official response, distribute a press release and send it to all media before they carried the story. Another issue is online campaigns. I am very careful; I don't engage much in debates. Apart from time restraints, there is no point, particularly with someone who is opposed to you as they are never going to change their mind. I know people who have stopped using social media after receiving malicious communication. Some people become quite malicious and they are quite different behind the anonymity of a computer screen.

On social media platforms, anyone in the whole of Scotland can contact me and I have no idea what their motivation is; if they want something they can hold against me, or if they are genuinely interested. There is not just one audience online, there are lots of different audiences with different beliefs and expectations. On Twitter, I sometimes get one line provocations as opposed to genuine queries. If people are going to the trouble to send a query, they are best to send an email than use Twitter. If people are tweeting just to share, then what is their motivation to share their communication to me?

Does this make you more cautious in regards to communication via social platforms?

I need to know if people who contact me are constituents, because of Parliament rules, I can only help my own constituents. If they are not, then it would be a waste of taxpayers' money; they may have contacted other MSPs; I may not have their proper names, their addresses or whereabouts in Scotland. The taxpayer is paying me to do two jobs: to serve my constituents and as Government Minister for Culture. If I am doing anything else, I am not being good value for money for the taxpayer.

Managing social media is a challenge. I would not say on Twitter anything that I would not say publicly, that I would not mind being reported or filmed. Communication via social media platforms is easier, but 'social' gives it a false connotation. Social makes it sound soft and cuddly. It is not. If you are operating in the political sphere, it is as political as anything that is an interview or an article and it is naïve to think otherwise.

Do you feel that social media have improved relations between political actors and their constituents?

Yes, because it is not all about politics. I post things and respond to things that are not political, and I sometimes receive a vast number of responses to something that people are interested in. If I post messages as Culture Secretary, people are interested in the issue; other posts are personal, that allow me to portray parts of my personality in a way that I

could never do in a written article or in an interview.

Do you consider that social media enable to project yourself not only as a politician, but as an individual?

I do not use my children's names as I respect their privacy, but I talk about them because I am a mum. I am not much different from anyone else and that is important. I collect my children from school and I go to the supermarket and chat to people, I am not stuck somewhere else. People may think of politicians as 'them', while they and their friends are 'us', but we are not detached as people think. It is important to break down these barriers and I think social media is good for that. They are good for access and participation, and challenge feelings of disengagement. If we can and do respond to the public, we narrow the gap and people will feel it is worthwhile getting in touch.

Do you consider that social media encourages people to cross the boundary between simply consuming the media you use, to send your message to active participation?

I detect a certain level of empowerment. As an example, a young mother in my constituency set up a Facebook page to gather support in her attempt to save a local nursery from closure. It was a very good campaign, and it used the techniques available. Working mums might be able to go online for a few minutes, while they could not go to a public meeting. It is a good way that people can organise campaigns, and it is also good for politicians, because we can see what matters to our constituents.

You said you were not keen to discuss your role as Minister of State for Culture, but if you post things online in connection with Scottish culture, your message must reach people who perhaps were not previously interested in the subject?

Yes, there is a great deal of activity on Facebook and Twitter by the cultural community because they tend to work individually since they are artists. Like the young mums in my constituency, it helps people who otherwise might not physically be in the same space at the same time to organise themselves. It offers a new way of organising campaigns etc., and enables politicians to reach people who may not be interested in certain areas.

Do you believe that face-to-face interaction is more important than social media in the drive for a greater level of engagement within the political sphere?

Yes, in terms of building relationships, I prefer to see my constituents face-to-face if at all possible; it is important because relationships are built on trust and co-operation. These are not always communicated via electronic and digital media exchanges. I can reach a lot of people very quickly, and they can re-tweet and distribute the message. But I still prefer one-

to-one interaction. A politician can never have one-to-one interaction with everybody, but if it was to be a purely digital relationship, it would like having a cyber MSP. Why would anyone want a cyber MSP?

Email Address: m.a.buchanan@stir.ac.uk.

References

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