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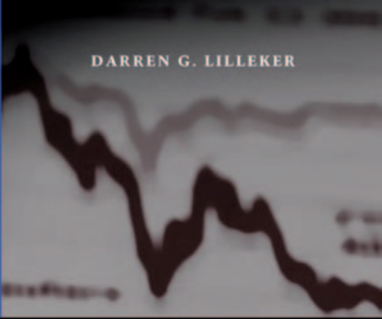

DARREN G. LILLEKER

Key Concepts in Political Communication

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DARREN G. LILLEKER

Key Concepts in
Political Communication

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preface and dedication

The idea for this book came from students at Bournmouth University taking the Political Communication option of a BA communication degree. They were new to politics, yet familiar with many of the terms and ideas, but what they lacked was a textbook that introduced the core concepts of the field of study in their context. I would like to thank them for the idea, and some of the 2004/5 cohort for reading through the concepts to ensure they serve their purpose. I would also like to acknowledge those who brought to discussions ideas that helped broaden my thinking on some of the concepts.

I owe gratitude to all the researchers in the field of political communication whose work has informed my own research and the work herein. I would also like to recognise the support offered by Jamilah Ahmed, Fabienne Pedroletti and Julia Hall at Sage; their enthusiasm for this project was hugely helpful throughout the process. Finally, I thank Teresa for her enduring love, support and patience.

I dedicate this book to my son Mark and my daughters Kayleigh and Yazmin; you were constant distractions throughout the writing process, but I love you all for that.

Darren G. Lilleker, Poole 2005

Introduction

Communication between the ruling organisations of a society and the people is central to any political system. However, in a democracy, political communication is seen as crucial for the building of a society where the state and its people feel they are connected. Political communication must, therefore, perform the role of an activator; it cannot simply be a series of edicts to society from the elite, ruling group but must allow feedback from society and encourage participation. While some may argue that a regular vote is sufficient for a nation to be termed democratic, this could also be described as a dictatorship with a finite term. Modern democracies need to be increasingly responsive to their publics, and at the heart of responsiveness is a dialogue. Classic definitions of political communication focus on the source and the motivation; political communication flows out from the political sphere and must have a political purpose. However, such definitions would not be completely appropriate for many modern states, particularly given the role of the media. Therefore modern texts focus on three actors, some of whom operate beyond the boundaries of any single state, each of whom produce political communication. These are, firstly, the political sphere itself: the state and its attendant political actors. Their role is to communicate their actions to society in order to gain legitimacy among and compliance from the people. Secondly, there are the non-state actors, where we would include a range of organisations with political motivations as well as corporate bodies and, of course, the voters. Each of these organisations and groups communicate messages into the political sphere, in the hope of having some level of influence. Finally, there are the media outlets, the media communicates about politics, influencing the public as well as the political spheres. In a free, open and pluralist society, on which the majority of texts concentrate, each of these communicates independently but synergistically with one another. In other words, they say what they want when they want but are influenced by one another and may well be led by one particular group when formulating arguments, opinions, policies, perceptions or attitudes.

Despite the academic study of political communication being a fairly young discipline; the actual practice is as old as politics itself. Just as Pope Innocent III ordered his minions in England in 1213 to nail what was known as a papal bull, a poster bearing the seal of the pope, to church doors informing the English of the excommunication of their king, John; modern politicians use all the available media to deliver messages to the people. The example of King John's excommunication is pertinent, albeit dated, as this was one of many times when there were forces competing for the support of the people. The Catholic Church used the best method for disseminating a message among faithful churchgoers, the majority of English society at that time, informing them that their king, and therefore kingdom, was no longer recognised by the Church: keep the king and go to hell was the inference. The message was also designed as a warning to King John that another, more suitable, ruler, Philip Augustus, king of France, was allowed sanction to invade. Such communication is prevalent across the world today, between states and within states, at the heart of which is persuasion: that the receiver should act in a way desired by the sender.

Within modern democracies the people elect a person, and usually their party, to run the country for a defined period of time, usually between four and five years. In order that the people can make the choice of who to elect, each competitor must communicate to them effectively. Each competitor tries to persuade the public that they, at what ever level they are standing, from national president to town mayor, are the best for the job. Subsequently, when one or another individual or party is elected, it is essential that they continue to communicate. Some would argue that this communication is central to encouraging democratic culture; it is the provision of information that is required by the people (Denton and Woodward, 1990). However, there are more cynical accounts which argue that the majority of communication from the elected is designed to retain support among the electorate for their policies, what has been termed as 'manufacturing consent' (Herman and Chomsky, 1998). Therefore political communication is often placed central to debates on the health and well-being of our democracy and the styles and levels of interaction are often used as a measure of the strength of public approval and engagement in the political system (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995).

In an ideal world scenario political communication is unproblematic. However, due to a range of developments in the political, social and technological spheres political communication has been forced to change, both in style and in substance. Furthermore, across all democracies, there are a greater number of political voices, both elective and non-elective, competing for the ear of the public. This makes political communication an increasingly complex business, not only as an area of academic study but also in the way it is practiced. This introduction will provide an overview of the types of political communication, their functions and the motivations of those who communicate political messages. The introduction introduces the key concepts explained throughout the book so allowing an understanding of how each concept fits with the context of political communication. Prior to this, however, it is useful to explain the context of democratic politics.

THE DEMOCRATIC STATE

Democratic states are defined by the institutionalisation of free, fair and regular elections that do not debar anyone from participating, whether as voters or candidates, on grounds that are unreasonable: in the 21st century these would include race and ethnic background, gender and political beliefs. Those we elect are our representatives; they use their political power, given by the people through the vote, on behalf of the people. This is the fundamental concept of a representative democracy: to ensure a broad range of people, and their views, are represented; made possible by both state and society supporting pluralism of views and access to the media. Pluralism allows power to be widely dispersed across a number of political groupings with contrasting views, all of whom have access to a largely neutral governmental machine. There are debates on the effectiveness of this system (see Heywood, 1997: 65–82); however, the twin principles of democracy and pluralism predominate in the world.

In a representative democratic state there are various tiers, or levels, of political power. Broadly speaking these can be separated between national and local; however, there are state differences. Some states have at the head of the political system a president, and beneath the president an elected chamber of representatives; these two levels should ensure power is not centralised. Other systems have a parliament led by a prime minister and cabinet government whose party holds power over legislation (lawmaking) but is responsible and accountable to a larger group of representatives, often from a range of other political parties. Below the national government there are a range of regional and/or local tiers of government. These are responsible to national government but are often also elected. Outside of the elected political structure are pressure groups representing those voters who share a single special interest; they can be representatives of workers in one industry, such as trade unions or professional associations, or they may be businesses or industrial representatives. These all compete for representation within the political system and can often be brought into the process of decision making (Grant, 1989). Communication from and between these groups is essential to the health of democracy, though the diffusion of power can mean that their views can remain marginalized and they may be forced to take action that gains them greater attention than they would normally be awarded: workers can withdraw their labour, interest groups can hold demonstrations, marginalized groups can resort to terror tactics. The latter can all be indications of a failure within the system of a pluralist, representative democracy and are a recurrent feature of the modern world.

One further powerful group exists outside of the political system: the broadcast and print media, collectively known as 'the media'. The media act both as the communicator of political views from all groups in a state and as a watchdog that calls political actors to account for their actions. Their role in society has been both attacked and defended by academics, politicians and journalists alike. Some argue the media is too powerful and promotes an agenda that can be contrary to the interests of a pluralist democracy (Entman, 1996). Alternatively, Norris (2000) argues that the media play an important role in upholding the democratic nature of a society and strengthening pluralism. Others take the view that the media can fall under political control, and so weaken pluralism through offering a biased perspective (Reeves, 1997; Wring, 2001). Finally, there is the view that the media report only what they feel is important, that through the selection of news values, framing and agenda-setting, the public fail to receive sufficient information on which to base their voting decision and some views become excluded due to their lack of fit to the media frames, agendas and values (Schlesinger, 1983; Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Said, 2000). What all these accounts agree on is the power of the media in determining what is communicated and what is not, what the public know and what they do not know; thus we hear of a media-centred democracy. The greater the independence enjoyed by the media does not equate to reductions in criticisms from all these perspectives, thus central to most studies of political communication, global or national, is a study of the media due to its centrality to the process of the dissemination of political views, information and knowledge.

It is within this context that these concepts will be explained. These are the individuals and groups we expect to be involved in the process of political communication and, based on their roles, we see a central concern among all actors with 'being heard': by each other, by select groups of actors or members of the public, by the mass audience, or by everyone within a society or indeed beyond.

THE HISTORY AND METHODS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Political communication is as old as political activity; it was a feature of ancient Greece and the Roman Empire as well as across diverse political systems in the modern age. It is hard to think of a time, under any political system, where political leaders have not had a requirement to communicate with other groups in society, or have not had to persuade the people to support them, often as opposed to rivals for their power and position. However, for much of human history political communication would have been a linear, top-down process from leaders to people. This is shown in Figure 1. We see the direction of communication being straight down, the majority being caught by the media and then channelled out once again, what is now referred to as the process of mediation; however little communication was to go from the bottom of society into the political sphere.

Democratisation of the majority of the political systems changed the nature of political communication and political activity moved into the public sphere. The people became involved in politics because they were expected to have a political role. Equally, with increased access to information and greater levels of education, came a demand for greater political involvement and influence. The voter was not content with the simple act of voting, the voter became an active citizen, one who could join an anti-state cause, the fight against apartheid in South Africa for example, as easily as a recognised political party. Communication between the various groups, electoral and non-electoral, became competitive; each vying for space in the media and the attention of the people. Thus we find more complex models for understanding modern political communication.

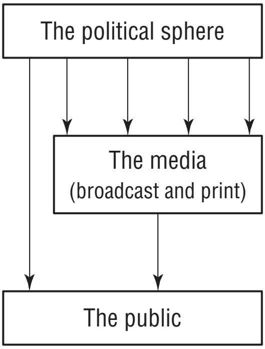

Figure 1 *A traditional view of political communication*

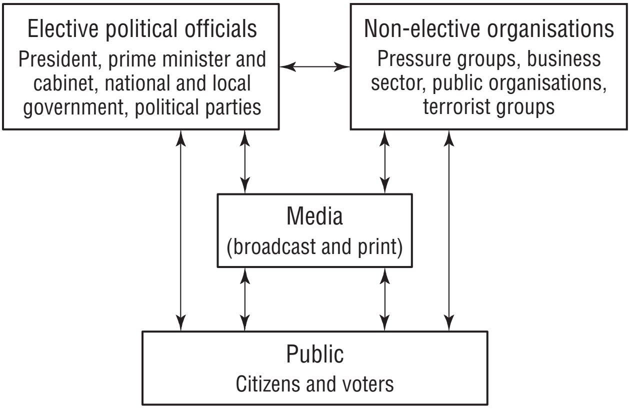
Elective political officials
President, prime minister and cabinet, national and local government, political parties
Non-elective organisations
Pressure groups, business sector, public organisations, terrorist groups
Media
(broadcast and print)
Public
Citizens and voters

Figure 2 *The Levels of Political Communication*

Figure 2 demonstrates the lines of communication that, theoretically, are open between each group. How communication is made may vary, and how audible the message is can be dependent upon the size of any group or level of support for a party, group or cause and the tactics used to get the message across. However, in a pluralist society, at least in theory, all groups will communicate among themselves and between one another and will be both learning from and competing with one another.

The greater the number of voices competing, the more intense the competition, the better communicators groups must be in order to be heard. Thus we hear of the professionalisation of political communication, that it has become better in some way in order to be heard by more groups and individuals (Mancini, 1999). Some attribute developments purely to learning from practice in the United States (US), others shy away from the Americanisation thesis; however, most agree that the process by which political communication is carried out has evolved, become more technically and technologically sophisticated and adopted techniques from the worlds of corporate advertising and marketing in order to compete in the modern information-rich society.

An early and effective form of direct, or non-mediated, political communication involved public meetings; political campaigners would go out and meet the workers and deliver speeches to them. It was using these tactics that movements like Lenin's Bolsheviks gained the support necessary to undermine Russia's tsar, Nicholas II; equally such meetings allowed the British Labour Party to become an electoral force. Elsewhere, public meetings, in church halls, cinemas or back rooms of hotels, cafes and drinking houses became a key way to meet the people; the memoirs of many democratic politicians, active in the 19th and early 20th century, recall such events during their early careers. The late, veteran United Kingdom (UK) Labour Member of Parliament (MP) Ian Mikardo recalls in his autobiography *Backbencher* a meeting in the canteen of the Miles aircraft factory at Woodley, just outside Reading, the constituency Mikardo successfully fought in 1945. Here he faced 6,000 workers, all worried about redundancies following the end of the Second World War. To secure their votes, Mikardo had to allay their fears while the workers tried to 'squeeze all they could out of the first opportunity they'd had in ten years to put some aspiring politician through the hoop' (Mikardo, 1988: 83). Such meetings are now few and mainly limited to countries where technology does not allow for the message to be delivered directly to homes: the only comparable types of event are the mass rallies held around US presidential elections, or mass meetings of party members.

Technology, however, not only effected political communication in the 20th century. The invention of the printing press allowed Thomas More to attack the inequality in 15th-century England. Since then, every political activist has published pamphlets and often delivered them by hand door to door or placed them in venues where the masses may be reached. While still the preserve of weakly-funded, often radical or underground movements, or those with little access to mass communication media, such activities still take place. Every election across the democratic world will see leafleting, and many argue that such activities are of ultra-importance in determining the result of elections (see particularly the research of David Denver (Denver and Hands, 1997; Denver et al., 2002; see also Johnston, 1987; Negrine and Lilleker, 2003)). But, largely, political communication has become an activity aimed at a mass audience using the mass media of television across the majority of the states in the world today. Hence direct political communication has become less of a feature in recent elections, despite research that indicates the importance of face-to-face interaction between politician and public (Jackson and Lilleker, 2004).

As communications technology allowed mass communication, communication necessarily changed. Many politicians took an instant dislike to the constraints of television: war leaders Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle found it hard to adapt their styles and appeared awkward and aloof in front of the camera (Scammell, 1995). They, and many politicians of their era, had learned how to use radio effectively. In fact, during the Second World War, a secondary communication war took place with national leaders transmitting to their own people, to rally support, while enemies attempted to undermine their efforts by broadcasting into other states. Consider the effect on the people of Sheffield, UK, when the Nazi-supporting broadcaster Lord Haw Haw would ask them to look out of their windows and see if 'the ten tall chimneys [of the British Steel factory] were still standing. Do you see them ablaze,' he would mockingly ask. The US-sponsored Radio Free Europe played a similar role when broadcasting into the Soviet bloc during the cold war. Broadcasts would discuss the oppressive nature of Soviet rule and try to encourage dissidence. Few political communicators still use radio as the main means of dissemination, though it still offers politicians potential to reach the people. In the modern age, politicians across the globe have adapted to television and use it in the same way as previous generations used mass rallies. During the 2003 Iraq War, the US government set up a dedicated Arabic-speaking television news service in order to gain support within the Middle East, as this was deemed the most appropriate way to reach this audience. Television, however, is independent in most democratic nations and so is able to mediate political communication, and the political communicator cannot ensure that their message reaches the public unaltered or without editorial comment.

The only groups who appear able to circumnavigate the editorial are those groups whose message is so shocking that the public receive it in such clarity that editorial is wasted. Hence it is appropriate to discuss direct action as the most powerful form of political communication. The crashing of two planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9 September 2001, which has become known as 9/11, demonstrated the power of direct action. The events, transmitted live as they unfolded, delivered the message of the terrorists to a global audience (McNair, 2003: 182–4) and spoke of the determination of a small cell of activists to make their voice heard, of the powerlessness of the global community to silence them, and brought to the fore debates surrounding US policy within the Middle East. While these events did not change politics in the US, apart perhaps from forcing a more right-wing approach to foreign policy, suicide bombers on a number of commuter trains in Madrid, Spain, on 11 March 2004 did affect a change of government in the subsequent elections. Such events surpass the marches organised by activists against nuclear weapons and a range of causes, the activities of pressure groups such as Greenpeace or the actions of the average terrorist. However, all these events rely on reaching a mass audience. Few in the world knew of the massacres exacted by Saladin against the crusaders during the 12th century, but television brings modern day equivalents into everybody's homes and lives. Thus the action is perhaps of lesser importance than the attention it draws from the media: it seems all too obvious to state that political communication is usually measured by its ability to receive the right media coverage by whatever means possible.

The media, thus, play an important role in political communication. Media outlet's editors not only choose what to broadcast as news, or how that is reported, but also choose the way it portrays groups in society. Popular culture not only reflects society but also has the power to shape people's political views. The portrayal of political institutions can inform; however, it could also undermine the political system, or one individual or group. Drama can portray the real-life operations of the White House in series like *The West Wing*; caricature the professional and family life of the UK Prime Minister, for example in *My Dad's the Prime Minister*; or follow a tradition of offering a satirical yet critical view of political events, such as in the BBC's *That Was The Week That Was* or *Have I Got News For You*. In an era when it is argued few pursue political information, the blending of politics and popular culture becomes an important source of political knowledge (Street, 1997; 2001).

In the age of mass communication via the moving image, many political actors, with a range of goals, have recognised the great potential that television offers. As film was used to make a political point, particularly in Nazi Germany and in the USSR under Stalin, as well as in many anti-Soviet war films produced in Hollywood, so television is used as a tool of political communication. Arguably this has changed political campaigning. Enabled by the Internet and 24/7 (twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week) news coverage, the public have greater access; they also appear to demand to 'look inside the souls' of those who compete for votes (Coleman, 2003). Rather than the talking head shots that were popular, and all that were possible, during the 1950s and 1960s, politicians now create elaborate montages of images to transmit not just a political message but an image to the public; politics takes on an aesthetic and emotional quality (Street, 1997; Pels, 2003). Equally advertising is used to great effect, particularly by presidential candidates both in the USA and in Russia, where it is used to promote the sponsor and undermine their opposition. Russia's President Vladimir Putin enjoyed virtual monopoly control over the largest broadcasting stations, and it is his ability to transmit his message through every element of television coverage that some look to when explaining his 1999 landslide victory and subsequent hold over political power (Belin, 2001).

Political communication has then moved from being a direct, personal, face-to-face, activity to being conducted indirectly via the media of mass communication. However, in many ways, the style of communication has come full circle. One British candidate for parliament recalled that people liked public meetings because 'when they asked an awkward question they liked to see if you sweated or not', he claimed, 'because on television everyone is very prepared and it's staged.' However, debates between US presidential candidates, programmes like the BBC's *Question Time* or the appearances of New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark on talk shows, provide the same scrutiny. Preparedness is seen as part of the 'professionalisation' of political communication, an issue that will be returned to when discussing many of the concepts; however, the public still appear to demand to see whether their would-be political representatives sweat. It is this battle over image that makes political communication a fascinating area of study as politicians attempt to use the media as a multifunctional political communications tool.

However, political communication, as noted in Figure 2, is not all top down. The political communication audience, defined often as both citizens and voters, is able to communicate to political groups, sometimes through membership or lobbying, and to and via the media. Direct action is one powerful method the public use, and in forming political groups to further causes increases the scope of pluralism. The Internet has allowed groups to communicate effectively, stage highly effective and visible events and so gain significant media attention (Rodgers, 2004). However, other and more ordinary methods are used. The letters to the media can lead an agenda as well as fit within the news values (Franklin, 2004: 168–9). But the most reported form of public political communication are opinion polls (Moon, 1999), which are used to gauge support for causes, political parties, groups and policies as well as predict election results. They are also used by politicians, to some extent, to determine what courses of action can be pursued and those that cannot.

THE FUNCTIONS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN CONTEXT

So, political communication is conducted through every channel and media available, it is multifarious and multifaceted, and it is inescapable. But what is the purpose of this continual bombardment of information, views, opinions and debates? At the most simplistic and obvious level, political communication is all about winning over others (Moloney, 2001). We know that electoral candidates want to win votes, but also dictators want to win the love of their people, cause groups and activists want to win attention; the public want a say, it is perhaps as simple as that. However, this can suggest a somewhat cynical view of politics and really means that all political communication is nothing more than propaganda. Political communication is reduced to ‘winning over’ or persuading others, and solely concerned with the acquisition of power: whether governmental power or power over the media agenda. Even so, there are a range of contextual factors that alter the role that the message plays.

If we firstly take the organisations seeking electoral support, the parties and candidates, their communication has a different role for different circumstances. If any group or individual seeking election could separate out groups of people in society, and talk to each group on an individual basis, electoral political communication would be simple. However, a speech by a presidential candidate in any country is transmitted to anyone and everyone. Therefore, that piece of communication must serve a range of functions: make the candidate appear in touch with the majority of voters; heal rifts between social groups or classes; show that groups will not be excluded; make the candidate appear to identify with the people. This means it cannot be purely cynically produced propaganda, particularly as the 21st-century voter in the majority of liberal democracies is a sophisticated political animal and cannot be fooled easily. Political communication is further complicated in nations where coalition governments are common. Party leaders in Germany, for example, find that a priority is to communicate the right message not only to their own supporters or voters but to potential coalition partners and their supporters and voters (Lees, 2005). This makes the above list of roles longer and, of course, the communication much harder to design.

These functions are appropriate within the confines of the state; however, communication is rarely locked within national borders. Austrian presidential candidate Jorge Haider capitalised on populist nationalism and opposition to immigration to openly campaign for repatriation of ‘non-Austrians’ during his 2000 election campaign. This won him a landslide victory, but following his election he found that relations were strained with Austria’s partners in the European Union and that leaders openly discussed whether economic sanctions should be placed against his regime. While the crisis for Austria ended without sanction, helped by (as well as helping) the Haider government’s quick collapse, this was caused by a lack of consideration for the international reception of communication aimed at one segment of the Austrian electorate. A translator employed by a European state during a state visit by Russian President Boris Yeltsin recalled an alternative example. Prior to Yeltsin’s arrival, and when he was not around, Yeltsin was referred to by the insulting moniker that roughly translated as ‘the drunken tramp’. In stark contrast every official statement commended his bravery during the demise of the Communist regime, his statesmanship and any other attribute that would nurture a long and friendly relationship between the two countries. The latter is a common form of interstate political communication of course: diplomacy.

While we can clearly see an argument for describing these examples as intending to gain support, there is an additional informative function. The public have to be informed of new legislation, how they are affected, and how they can comply. There are also a range of other forms of informative communication that come under the heading of ‘public information’, where the attention may well be to persuade but not for political motives. Here we include information regarding social benefits, health campaigns, public awareness of dangers and any communication designed to inform rather than influence politically. There is of course a blurring of boundaries here (Franklin, 2004). New legislation can be communicated in such a way that government also promotes itself, as caring, competent or proactive, hence we hear of the permanent campaigning of the public relations state (Davis, 2002). Similar comments can and are often made regarding public information; however, the key function of this form of communication should not be to gain support.

Of course any new legislation may be received differently by the range of audiences, both internal and external. Economic policy announcements by any member of the European Union, or the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), may well have repercussions upon partners within the organisations as well as trading partners globally. Thus such policies have to be communicated in a way that allays fears so avoiding a loss of economic confidence. Equally, as any government often operates within utilitarian parameters, constructing policies that will have the best long-term effects for the majority of citizens, these benefits must be communicated and again fears allayed, particularly towards stakeholder groups, whose support is important, but also to minority groups that may feel marginalized. All these contextual issues must be considered when communication is constructed, thus when we study political communication we have to consider all the intended functions across all the different audiences that will receive the message.

The different levels of politics, local, national and supranational, may compete for power and influence. The European Court of Justice has found member states’ governments to have acted unlawfully, causing competing claims for justice by state nationals on the one hand and debates regarding state sovereignty on the other. Equally, national and local governments can come into conflict over taxation powers for example; as can different arms of government. Nations where there are two houses, a bicameral system, both elected as in the USA, France or Russia, or one elected and one appointed as is the case in the UK and Israel, can find conflict between the houses. In the UK the House of Lords scrutinises legislation for problems or errors, it can demand amendments or block legislation, and this system can allow a democratically elected government to be undermined by a non-democratic group of ex-politicians and other elite figures. Both will then argue over their powers, both promoting themselves in order to gain supportive media coverage, and win over public opinion and opinion among the other wing of government.

Beyond the realm of government there are other various tiers in the political hierarchy, each of which communicate to the public. Regional levels of government, such as the German *Land*, the US State government, the UK local and municipal councils or the tribal councils across many African states, often use communication to promote their representative function. This function is also one that is important to members of parliaments who represent distinct geographical areas, such as UK MPs, or Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Their communication is designed to show that they fulfil a representative function; however, most communication from political actors shares one central feature: the direction of communication is one way from the political to the public. Evidence suggests that this is in contrast to the desires of the people. The global attraction of audience interest and participation in real-life shows has led some to argue that this is the kind of interaction the public want with the political sphere (Coleman, 2003): that they want to be able to shape governmental activity and have direct input to the legislature. This has led to discussion of the emergence of the political consumer, a voter who seeks to have their personal requirements and needs met by government before offering support (Lees-Marshment and Lilleker, 2005). This suggests moving towards a two-way style of communication favoured by public relations theorists (Grunig and Hunt, 1994; Jackson and Lilleker, 2004), where the organisation and the public have an open relationship founded on communication. This currently does not seem to be a function of much political communication.

But what of those who are outside the electoral political system? Pressure groups such as Greenpeace suggest that they talk for ‘the future of the world’, and their activities are designed to stop the current political and industrial sphere from destroying the earth. The function of their communication, whether direct action reported by the media, the press releases they send to the media or the direct mail or leafleting they engage