

## Marketing the Political Message: American Influences on British Practices

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### Introduction

**I**n the commercial world, the notion that the structure of a company and its strategy are interlinked and mutually dependent is long accepted (see Waterman et al., 1991). But such a proposition is more difficult to accept in the public sector, where the structure of the organisation, in this case a political party, is predetermined, inflexible and highly regulated. Writers have recognised the difficulties and peculiar nature of strategy development within public sector contexts (Ring and Perry, 2001; Lucio et al., 1997). Nevertheless, placing restrictions on political parties is good and proper as they could do untold damage to the national psyche as hawkers of ideology if given free reign to communicate with the electorate (*cf.* Nazi Germany). There are other significant influences on the direction of British electoral campaigning practice; an important source of which is know-how transported from America (see Scammell, 1997; Farrell, 1998; Plasser et al., 1999; Davies, 2003). This paper reconciles the notion that transatlantic political campaigning practice is useful to British political parties, particularly in relation to the development and dissemination of the campaign message, with the different contexts in which these campaigns should operate.

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## Political System and Electoral Law

The most important impact upon style of electioneering is the political system in operation, and its implications for political campaign practice (Kavanagh, 1970). First-past-the-post systems operate in both the UK and USA to ensure the *dominance* of a single party but favour two-party systems (Duverger, 1954). In preferential systems, the voter is given two choices of candidate (e.g., France and Australia), and there is less chance of splitting the vote for a left- or right-wing faction allowing in a minority party. Proportional representation is a system that allocates seats to parties on the basis of their vote-share (used in some EU member states) and tends to favour coalition government. At first sight, the political systems in the UK and the USA appear broadly similar, but there are major differences, in relation to electoral law, and the impact upon the development and dissemination of the campaign message.

In the UK, campaigning law centres on breaches at the constituency, rather than at national, level; a function of the Representation of the People Act's Victorian proposers (Rawlings, 1998:133). Spending limit regulations commence when candidates/agents initiate election spending. Third party expenditure in elections at the national level has long been allowed (see the Tronoh Mines case<sup>1</sup>), but has never given rise to the kind of third-party expenditure now common in America. In the UK, under the Elections, Parties and Referendum Act (2000), third parties must register themselves with the Electoral Commission. This contrasts with a ruling issued in June 1996 in the case of *Colorado Republican Federal Campaign Committee v. Federal Election Commission*,<sup>2</sup> which dictated that expenditure received by a benefiting candidate from US party organisations did not constitute expenditure. Subsequently, unlimited 'soft' money has been allowed to be donated by local and state party committees, particularly to Presidential campaigns.

Political fund-raising in Britain is different from that undertaken in America. A principal source of funding works on the basis of quotas set by the national party for each constituency according to the size, wealth and electoral strength of that constituency (Pattie and Johnston, 1997) and high-value fund-raising from wealthy patrons, although the size of sums donated must be declared to the Electoral Commission when they are over £5,000 to national party organisations and £1,000 to local party organisations. Conversely, in America, a large source of funds are stimulated through direct marketing methods, as federal law limits the size of a donor's contribution to \$1,000 per person and \$5,000 per PAC (political action committee) to a specific candidate (though not the party). In both countries, direct marketing activity is undertaken for message dissemination and for fund-raising purposes; the two practices being intertwined and mutually reinforcing.

## Organizing for Message Development/Dissemination

Message development and dissemination are, at least partly, based on the nature of the campaign organisation. In the UK, political campaigns are derived from members of the party executive, the parliamentary party, and sub-contracted agencies. In the US, campaign committees are built up of external political consultants, the candidate and a campaign manager. Most Western European political organisations have begun to understand the importance of having a marketing focus (Newman, 1994; Plasser et al., 1999). Yet, British political parties are not nearly as voter-oriented as their American counterparts perhaps because, or in spite of the fact that, American parties tend to sub-contract this marketing function. Greater reliance on outside professionals has been said to weaken parties (Bowler et al., 1996). We could infer, syllogistically, that a voter-oriented party creates a weakened party but this statement is difficult to justify as there are differing degrees of voter-orientation to which a party might aspire. Taken to extremes, simply to accede *the policy* development process to the electorate would produce a weakened party but this notion has never been advanced either in the literature (see Baines and Worcester, 2000) or in the interviews undertaken as part of this study. We refer here to the campaign *message*. Too often the policy development and message development processes are confused and combined in the literature and, particularly, in practice (Ingham, 2003).

British and American campaign organisations function differently. In the US, they adopt campaign managers supported by a general consultant with a myriad of other specialist consultants. The politician has the final say but focuses on raising finance and attending photo opportunities and press conferences. In the US, party input is more limited. British campaigns are run by senior politicians from the national parties who have a defining role in policy, and message, development and dissemination. British campaign organisations mainly comprise political party executives with sub-contracted agencies. Such agencies conduct polling, advertising and direct mail. Broadcast news and press organisations also disseminate the message as a mediated (filtered) service in direct contrast to the States where 'earned media' is comparatively less important. Table 1 illustrates the main differences in the organisation of the marketing functions between campaign organisations in the two countries.

Political marketing campaigns have previously been described as a dual marketing-political campaign hybrid process (Newman, 1994), as a policy communication campaign (Maarek, 1995) and as a coordinated national-local campaign (Maarek, 1995; Baines, Lewis and Harris, 2001). Various models have recognised the need for the definition of policies or appeals to the electorate and the importance of focused research in determining: the competition; the voters' wants and needs; segments of the electorate; the plan for the positioning of the party or candidate; and the need for planning and evaluating

**Table 1:** Political marketing organisation (UK, USA)

Marketing function	UK	USA
Direct mail (DM)	Party function for Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats	Typically sub-contracted to political DM specialists
Advertising	Sub-contracted by Labour and Conservative parties, party function for Liberal Democrats to advertising industry generalists	Sub-contracted to political advertising specialists
Polling	Sub-contracted by all major parties to public opinion pollsters	Sub-contracted to public opinion pollsters
Fund-raising	DM fund-raising sub-contracted by Labour Party, party function for Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives	Sub-contracted to political fund-raising specialists, particularly telephone-based
News management	Party function for all parties, with small rapid rebuttal units organised around document retrieval computer systems (i.e., speeches, newspaper articles, etc.)	Frequently sub-contracted to political public relations specialists
Opposition research	Small rebuttal units exist for both Labour and Conservative parties, Liberal Democrats rebuttal function not explicit But function different since opposition research material generally fed to news organisations	Sub-contracted to independent contractors  Generally used in political advertisements

the campaign. The models highlight, in particular, the importance of the message development and dissemination process, although none of them recognise the difference between the policy and message development processes. Newman's model best accounts for differences in the type of message conveyed to the electorate since this model specifically considers campaign foci: party, product, selling, and market approaches, and the resultant impact upon the message development and dissemination processes (though not specifically policy development processes as a separate entity).

### Message Development, Research and Dissemination: Content and Contextual Differences

The production of British party broadcasts and election news output is regulated, whereas, in the US, American media consultants have far greater latitude to develop broadcast content. Regulation in the UK includes a requirement to observe the law related to copyright, libel, contempt, obscenity, and incitement to racial hatred or violence; which is not the case in the US, where political messages are protected under the 5th Amendment of the American Constitution (freedom of speech). UK regulation provides that broadcasts cannot appeal directly for funding and must be labelled as party election broadcasts to avoid the risk of misleading the audience (ITC, 1999). There are major similarities in the electoral systems, but the methods of communicating policies and campaign messages to the electorate differ considerably. The situation is in flux too since British law must now correspond with the European Human Rights Act, so some legal constraints on political communication will now be

susceptible to challenge (Munro, 1997:247). In America, advertising tends to be disseminated through the use of spots on television and cable networks. In Britain, party promotion occurs principally through billboard and press advertising, and the publicity generated from media management.

The conduct of political marketing research differs in the two countries in relation to the extent to which the pollster is integrated into the message development and dissemination process. In the UK, 'the pollster is rarely part of the party's strategy team' (Kavanagh, 1996) unlike in the US where pollsters are intimately involved in campaign message development and dissemination (e.g., Stan Greenberg/Bill Clinton in the 1996 Presidential Election or Irwin 'Tubby' Harrison/Michael Dukakis in the 1988 Presidential Election). The Bush campaign team used focus groups to identify the "hot button" issues that were later used with devastating effect against Dukakis (Asher, 1995). Five or so years later, Philip Gould, a new Labour marketing consultant, and Democrat Party secondee in the early nineties,<sup>3</sup> would be a vigorous proponent of focus groups within the UK Labour Party to catalyse a modernising agenda although Bob Worcester had used them in the Wilson campaigns in the early seventies (Worcester, 1974).

What differs between the UK and US is the degree to which the two sets of political parties incorporate opposition research into policy and message development and dissemination processes. Bayer and Rodota (1989) define opposition research as "the compilation of facts about the opposing candidate's public record and statements" and cite its first use in the 1984 American Presidential Election as the Republican "secret weapon." Opposition research information is analogous to that collected through market intelligence exercises in the private sector. Shea (1996) classifies opposition research data into five types: public service information; media-derived data; prior campaign details; business and career data; and personal information. The extent to which these are used by the political parties in the UK has not previously been considered in the literature. It could be argued that business and career data are more likely to be covered by the press in the UK than by the political parties themselves, although such details are often judiciously leaked to them by opposition political parties. Public service information remains unavailable as no freedom of information law operates. Thus, British parties content themselves with media-derived data and prior campaign details, which include previous statements made.

A prominent Republican consultant<sup>4</sup> suggests that a strategy team should determine what their own message about themselves is (message 2), what it is about their opponent (message 1), what their opponent's message is about themselves (message 4) and what their opponent's message is about the subject strategy team (message 3). This approach requires envisioning future approaches to message development strategy from both the subject and its opponent (see Table 2), using a crude game theoretic approach to strategy development.

**Table 2:** A game theoretic approach to message development

Message focus	Message developer	
	Opponent	You
You	Message 3	Message 2
Opponent	Message 4	Message 1

## Research Methodology

### Research Objectives and Propositions

The current research study forms the third phase of a wider research project aimed at determining the extent to which political marketing planning processes differed between US and UK political parties. The results of the first two phases, which documented American campaign practice, are reported elsewhere (Baines and Egan, 1999; Baines, Scheucher and Plasser, 2002). The aim of this study was to satisfy the following research objectives:

1. To determine the inherent problems associated with transferring US political marketing methods to UK political campaigning and,
2. To outline a model of best practice message development and dissemination for UK political campaigning (modified based on US practice).

A mixture of British political party and agency executives were interviewed in a qualitative research study. Because opposition research in the UK is primarily aimed at broadcast news organisations (in the US it is used more in political advertisements), the sample includes respondents from third-party media organisations (e.g., BBC, ITC, ITN and Sky News). The research objectives were further reduced into a series of propositions for further consideration:

*Proposition 1* – US opposition research practices – commissioning research into the opposition party's voting record, statements made and speeches given, manifesto commitments and pledges – can be further adopted into UK political campaigning practice.

*Proposition 2* – UK party political broadcasts should be reformatted, specifically with the intention of generating greater audience attention and newspaper editorial coverage.

*Proposition 3* – Polling and message testing – the use of quantitative and qualitative research to formulate messages, policies and statements made to the press and public, especially the use of dial groups<sup>5</sup> – should be further adopted into UK campaign practice.

*Proposition 4* – US fund-raising techniques should be used to encourage donation and gain voter support.

The above propositions have been developed because they provide insight into areas in which UK political marketing practice differs markedly from its US counterpart (see Baines, 2001; O'Shaughnessy, 1990; Scammell, 1997).

### Sampling and Data Collection Procedures

Eighteen fully transcribed one-hour depth interviews were undertaken with UK political party executives and associated agency executives who corresponded with the marketing functions outlined in propositions 1–4 between May and September 1999. Letters requesting interviews were sent out to selected respondents. Where the respondent was not from a party (usually because the person associated with the marketing function was sub-contracted by the party), the names of respondents were obtained from accounts of the 1997 British General Election (for example, Butler and Kavanagh, 1997 and Crewe, Gosschalk and Bartle, 1998). In some cases, the respondents were referred to the interviewee by other respondents. This procedure was used because few population elements exist within the sample frame. Table 3 illustrates the sample frame used in this study. Representatives from all three UK parties were interviewed where possible; an exception is the polling function.

**Table 3:** Sample frame

Int. no.	Respondent	Company	Occupation	Area of investigation
1.	Executive F	ITC	Programme Officer	Broadcast media regulation
2.	Executive G	BBC	Political Advisor	Broadcast media regulation
3.	Executive A	Political Party	Direct Marketing Executive	Direct marketing
4.	Executive B	Sub-Contractor	Managing Director	Direct marketing
5.	Executive C	Political Party	Head of Direct Marketing	Direct marketing
6.	Executive O	Political Party	Director of Campaigning	Direct marketing, Opposition research, Message testing
7.	Executive P	Political Party	Head of the Elections Unit	Direct marketing, Opposition research, Message testing
8.	Executive D	Political Party	Direct Marketing Executive	Direct marketing
9.	Executive E	Political Party	Director of Corporate Fund-raising	Fund-raising
10.	Executive J	Political Party	Press Office Manager	Media strategy
11.	Executive N	Political Party	Deputy Research Director	Media strategy
12.	Executive M	Advertising Agency	Chairman	Media strategy
13.	Executive K	Political Party	Former campaign co-ordinator '92 general election, advertising agency account director '97 general election.	Media strategy
14.	Executive H	ITN	Broadcast Journalist	Opposition research
15.	Executive I	Sky News	Broadcast Journalist	Opposition research
16.	Executive L	Political Party	Press Officer	Opposition research
17.	Executive Q	Pollster	Research Director	Polling/message testing
18.	Executive R	Pollster	Chairman	Polling/message testing

## Findings and Results

### Infrastructure and Campaign Organisation

The message development process in the UK is similar to the US, but based more on ideology and developed more by politicians than by political consultants. This impacts upon campaign organisation, especially as the message is disseminated differently due to legislative influences and the media structure within the UK. The process of message development requires a degree of adaptation from the American model. Executive M, a CEO of an advertising agency, stated that the professionalisation of the Labour party's campaign function was *"very much attached to Peter Mandelson turning up in '85"* (Executive M). Executive K suggests that *"it is a general characteristic of parties that they are not particularly well-organised"* although he praises the 1997 Labour election campaign team which he states was *"run very much on private sector lines, everyone knew who was in charge [and] small groups of people took decisions at the right time."* Executive Q likens UK constituency parties to commercial franchise operations: *"the franchise is a good metaphor for it."* Conversely in the US, and in keeping with the concept of a more entrepreneurial model of political campaigning, *"people are making their own advertisements, doing their own sloganeering and their own thing"* (Executive Q), perhaps operating more like licensees, as national parties have little power over individual candidates but benefit from their association with the major parties.

It is unlikely that British political parties will take further advantage of the expertise within the marketing industry for the 2005/6 general election since constituency expenditure (outlined in the Representation of the People Act 1986) and national expenditure ceilings (as outlined in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000) rule out the conduct of sophisticated research and communication strategies within individual seats and expensive sub-contracted communication or research at the national level. In the US, no such ceilings exist. Regulation<sup>6</sup> impacts upon British campaigning culture as it bans foreign donations of £5000 or above and places a limit of approximately £20m expenditure<sup>7</sup> by national political parties for a Westminster general election. The organisation of the campaign function is particularly affected by the legislative environment in which British campaigns operate, as a leading pollster points out:

The Representation of the People Act, the application of constituency regulations, the embargo against political advertising on radio and television, means that we play amateur games [in Britain] by comparison [with the US]. (Executive R)

Such legislation drives British political campaign activity in-house with outside marketing expertise seconded, rather than hired, from external agencies.

The disclosure of donations at or above £5,000 seems to have lowered the number of large donations and increased the demand for direct marketing expertise within UK political parties to collect a larger number of smaller donations. So, British electoral law on campaign finance detracts from the use of many expensive American political campaigning techniques. Forthcoming draft legislation on the Freedom of Information Bill,<sup>8</sup> yet to be implemented, could shift Britain further into the use of opposition research in political campaigning. This information would then be fed into political information systems (i.e., PINS<sup>9</sup>) providing the basis for rapid rebuttal statements.

In the UK, opposition research focuses more on investigating the oppositions' policies than their messages and personalities. British political parties have a monopoly over the development of policy in comparison with US political parties, where consultants are involved in drafting policy, and so the British campaign management process is more producer (politician)-oriented than voter-oriented (as it is in the US). In both cultures, the message is formulated on the basis of synergies between voters, politicians and the campaign committee. What differs between the American and British message development processes is the extent to which policy is communicated (rather than simple messages or personal attacks on party candidates where the US predominates) and the integration of the voter in the determination of the message, and policy, through research (where the US predominates again).

There has been some movement towards a greater voter orientation in the UK, and the Labour party has even used an American pollster (i.e., Stan Greenberg) as a key advisor on message development strategy, which apparently impacted positively on the process.

We had a fairly limited reporting structure in '97 – which seemed to work very well because Stan [Greenberg] was effectively running the process. . . . (Executive Q)

British central party operations use direct mail for both fund-raising purposes and for voter persuasion (Executive D). They have started to use agencies, in the way American campaigns have for twenty years or more, to handle some of their direct mail on a trial basis in the late nineties, with some degree of success:

Direct mail is being used increasingly well by parties. We know that some of the Tory fund-raising direct mail, in the last election, was some of the most effective work that the party has ever done in terms of actual results delivered. . . . The parties are hiring professional, direct mail specialists to do that. (Executive K)

Direct marketing did successfully increase the Labour party's membership base from 350,000 to 400,000 at the last general election although *"the Tories*

were not particularly successful" (Executive B), and Labour are now having trouble maintaining this level after the 2001 election. The parties are pre-occupied with using direct mail for fund-raising purposes to "cover [their] costs and still come out with a profit" and parties will probably need to subsidise the direct marketing agency's costs if use of the technique is to increase substantially. This problem of outsourcing the direct marketing component of the campaign's activity is not without problems, as a Liberal Democrat campaign executive suggests:

I don't think [agencies] would sustain you for very long. We've done enough market testing ourselves to know that if you have no idea who the Liberal Democrats are to begin with, you don't generally make money out of the direct mailshot and we, of course, do the mail by hand delivery. Their costs [would be] much greater than ours . . . I don't think it would be a profitable exercise. (Executive O)

Sub-contracting marketing functions may increase slowly as parties learn to work with, and trust, the agencies employed, and as the agencies gain experience. Political parties and agencies frequently disagree on the message deployed, as the copy is easily misconstrued by the target audience "because the direct marketing agencies that we've got don't have that political nous, because they are not in the political arena, whereas, in America they are more." (Executive C)

### Research and Message Development

American campaigns are "obsessed" by polling because they wish to know their current share of the vote whilst British political parties are not able to do so, at least within constituencies, because they are constrained by the constituency spending ceilings (Executive Q) and, in any case, since British political party funding is seriously limited, "what's the point of spending loads of money on polling if we can't tell voters what we have found out from the polls?"

The use of quantitative polling in developing messages tested on groups of voters by the pollsters was developed as a practice that arose out of Labour's liaison with the US political consultancy group, Mellman Lazarus (Executive P). When testing the statements, the pollster anonymises them so that the voter does not know to which party the statement is attributed and, arguably, selects the party with the 'best' statements. Executive Q is less than impressed with this method: "I am very dubious of whether some of the American stuff would work here and whether it actually works in America" (Executive Q). Even if this exercise did provide the party with a picture of what policies and statements would be most popular with which groups, Executive O disputes its morality in British politics:

Use of market research to guide government? . . . I think there's a thin line between guiding government about what people think they want, to make it more democratic, and simply saying this is what they want, and then giving them it. (Executive O)

Political parties use limited polling and quantitative information for developing their 'product' (i.e., their message) but do not research into other areas of the marketing mix (see O'Leary and Iredale, 1976, Baines, Brennan and Egan 2003) for further discussion of the concept) such as promotion (e.g., are messages received by young people at the cinema likely to be more effective than when the same person is watching a party election broadcast?), distribution (e.g., determining the best method to distribute election manifestos) and price (e.g., how likely voters are to actually go out and vote based on different policies) as the quote below demonstrates:

You can use the research to drive your media strategy but I don't think people are actually saying, "well, if you changed from cinema advertising to newspapers, what would have happened?" I suspect they are probably doing that in the States but whether it's being done as well here, I don't know. (Executive Q)

Research is not conducted into the effectiveness of media placement, because in the UK, with billboard advertising, "there is less flexibility of changing around the pattern of spend" (Executive Q), although billboard advertising is tested "both at concept stage and after the posters have been put up" (Executive P). Parties do not focus on this in their research programmes: "in all honesty, we don't put a lot of spend into it" (Executive P).

American political consultants have adapted their focus groups, increasing their size and wiring respondents up to machinery that registers their reactions to political adverts. They call these groups 'dial groups' and refer to the process as 'people-metering.' This practice has not been fully adopted in the UK, at least not by the Conservative party, in 1999:

The PEBs [party election broadcasts] were intended to be part of the political strategy, heavily informed by research. We have on occasion, in recent years, done testing in advance but usually not. (Executive N)

One British pollster states that people-metering "only ever really works in a non-regulated commercial environment where you can buy as many advertisements as you want. I think we might see a bit more done but it would need the party itself to change the whole culture of making TV. They would have to turn it out fast, cheap and cheerful" (Executive Q). The alternative viewpoint could be taken that party election broadcasts actually lead the news agenda, and

there are few opportunities for advertising, so research into their effectiveness both before and after their placement is crucial.

British political parties use 'dial groups' to determine "the way our politicians come across when they are speaking in parliament or on the news" (Executive N). One respondent suggests that people-metering should be used to improve speeches:

If I were the party leader, I would have 4 to 5 set speeches and I would not go on with them until I had done them live to a people-metered audience. (Executive R)

The most important lesson learnt by Labour party campaigners is message discipline and "communicating that [same] message by different forms to voters" (Executive P). Other respondents suggest that "the first contribution of advertising to political campaigning is discipline" (Executive M) and to "lead the media agenda rather than delivering actual messages" (Executive K) (see Figure 1). For example, the 1992 Conservative 'tax bombshell' campaign, was successful because the media subsequently reinforced the message against the Labour Party:

I know that the budget was very low and hardly anybody saw the advertising. The impact of that advertising was to set the media agenda so that every front page, every news bulletin led on tax and simply by raising that issue, on which we knew we had a strong lead, we therefore transferred that into political gain. (Executive K)

Saatchi has been absolutely excellent at using advertising in a way which spins on [through the media]. (Executive M)

One respondent outlines the importance of raising the salience of an issue, stating that the aim of advertising "is not to persuade people that you are better or worse than your opponent on a particular issue, it should be to take an issue where [the electorate] already believe you to be better and simply persuade them

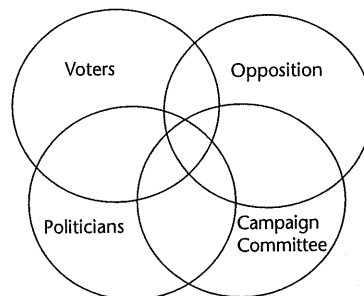


Figure 1: The message development quad

that its important" (Executive K). Despite this, using of the media to report on a party's policies can be difficult:

We get sick of the messages ourselves. The media do as well but it is only at the point that we and the media are sick of the messages that the electorate begin to take them in. (Executive J)

British political parties' limited communication budgets provide the need to tie in advertising strategy with the development of publicity through news management techniques. This requires a coherent and integrated communication strategy since "in order to stand out, you need to focus very clearly on one message . . . they should all work together" (Executive K), through an integrated marketing communications agency (Executive D). However, outsourcing any communication activity ensures the loss of control over the message (Executive B) by the "hierarchy of the party" (Executive D). The message is further diluted in the UK, as constituency associations send out their own direct mail. The difficulty, then, is ensuring that they stay "on-message" (Executive A).

### Party Election Broadcasting

A senior advertising agency executive suggests that the current party election broadcast format leaves parties "in limbo" because they are unable to find the expertise to produce the broadcasts; "Five minutes is too long for an advertising agency and too short for a playwright" (Executive M). American broadcast political advertising has a more persuasive and awareness-raising role. American campaign committees produce and place their advertisements on terrestrial, satellite and cable television and radio networks, at considerable expense.

The short, official, campaign period in the UK ensures that advertising has little real chance of persuasion although it could perhaps "confirm the prejudices of people who already believe whatever the message is" (Executive K) and "lead the media agenda" (Executive K, Executive M) so that "all the papers and the news bulletins and the radio . . . are dominated by an issue on which you have a lead" (Executive K).

The restrictions facing broadcast political communication in the UK are considerable for political parties and, consequently, their content is not largely viewed and their format is unpopular as the following comment demonstrates:

Party election broadcasts are as boring as hell and people rush to the kitchens when they are on. (Executive N)

The hybrid format of party election broadcasts (i.e., their mixture of party advertising and communication, and public service ethos) is enshrined in the following comment parodying their nature rather well:

I'm very keen to get out of these ghettos of party political broadcasts and get into thirty-second spots and have them allocated in the same way that broadcasts are and let politicians get directly to the population. I mean how would Heinz like it if they were only allowed to advertise in a programme, which is preceded by a statement saying that 'there now follows a statement from the Heinz company' and that was scheduled in your newspaper so that you were warned not to watch it! (Executive M)

Legal authority over the editorial process for party election broadcasts, under the 1990 Broadcasting Act, has "passed definitively to the broadcasters" (Executive F). They must inform the parties about how many they are going to receive and provide a choice of slots (Executive G) although "there is some confusion over whether political parties need to comply with everything that's in the programme code." Whilst it is difficult to ensure accuracy, because of the nature of politics, parties must adhere to the guidelines on taste and decency (Executive F). The issue of the design of election broadcasts is encapsulated in the following comment by a BBC executive:

Party political broadcasting . . . is supposed to be a service to the public, not a service for the parties. The parties see it as something that is theirs. . . . We see it as a public service but our duty is to our audience, not to the political parties. (Executive G)

A satellite media executive suggests that parties should be lobbying government to ensure that the satellite and cable industries are also covered by the Broadcasting Act (Executive I), to widen their audience in an increasingly "fractionating, multi-media environment" with more TV and Internet channel choices as has been the case in America for some time (Executive P). Encompassing the cable and satellite industries in such legislation would probably "provoke a huge row" (Executive F) since this "is completely out of kilter with anything else they are subject to." This might force parties to broadcast from outside Britain, especially if the ITC were to impose their authority on the broadcast of "moving pictures" on the Internet (Executive F), although this looks unlikely at present.

Restrictions on party election broadcasts act as a contextual constraint, derived from the public sector ethos in which political parties operate, and effectively precipitate the regulation of content. Although the theoretical limit on duration for a party election broadcast is ten minutes, the larger British parties have been producing broadcasts of under five minutes (Executive F), yet have still stuck with a "hybrid format despite using professional advertisers" (Executive I). The Labour party broadcast, at the 2001 British general election, used thirty second spots, with five spliced back-to-back as a form of "Labour ad. break" (Executive F). The Labour Party "went too far down the [route of] superficial American spots" (Executive J) although they wanted to go even further with "lots of 30 second slots . . . in the middle of popular programmes,

either side of EastEnders [and] Coronation Street" (Executive G). The suggestion that British parties were allowed to broadcast with a greater number of 30-second broadcasts as opposed to a smaller number of 2 minute 30 broadcasts appears somewhat distasteful to the broadcasters (Executive F) as the following quote demonstrates:

They can't say [they] don't want political advertising, [they] don't want to go with the American model and then want to go with the American model for free. (Executive G)

Although parties are free to produce broadcasts to target particular channels' viewers, the high cost of producing them (Executive K), and parties' limited funds, ensure that they do not (Executive F).

### News Management and Opposition Research

In the US, opposition research represents one of the newer political consulting techniques. Politicians use it to illustrate the faltering foundations of opponents' arguments. It is only recently that computerised databases – in conjunction with teams of researchers – have been deployed to deconstruct and monitor the oppositions' policies and statements.

Opposition research is "good for democracy" because it allows parties to inform the electorate about the weaknesses of other parties (Executive P), although making charges of hypocrisy against other parties is not always effective: "people do not care too much [if a politician] said something last week and then changed his mind" (Executive N). Opposition research can, nevertheless, still be used effectively in the UK: "we are not doing it in the same systematic way that they are in the States but we are not ignoring it" (Executive P).

Opposition research is less useful in the UK, although it allows parties "to turn quotes against your opponent [which] is clearly an effective way of winning an argument in a debating context but we don't really have that kind of debate and personal confrontation culture" (Executive I). American consultants use opposition research to inform political advertisements. These adverts can be made relatively inexpensively, and political dialogue develops as one party disseminates advertisements to counter opponents' attacks in previous advertisements. America is more media-based, and, so, "information has to be so much sharper, quicker, [more] competitive, punchy [compared to the UK]" (Executive P). Further use of opposition research is hindered by stronger defamation laws in Britain compared with the US (Executive L). In the UK, opposition research has tended to be used as "ammunition for Prime Minister's Question Time" (Executive H) where the debating scenario, that Executive I suggests is necessary for it to be effective, operates and where politicians are protected by parliamentary privilege.<sup>10</sup>



Opposition research in the UK has been hampered as MPs are 'whipped'<sup>11</sup> (Executive L, Executive J) and, as a result, the media knows the position of MPs on particular issues anyway (Executive H). "Of course Tory MPs voted in favour of the Poll Tax, they all did, there was not much point in attacking any individual Tory . . ." (Executive L). Opposition research can also be used to determine when a party shifts to a diametrically opposed policy position (as the Scottish National Party did with secrecy over foreign donations).

Opposition research was introduced into the Labour party around January 1996, just prior to the 1997 British General Election and that their first task was "to compile a database on every Tory candidate in the country" (Executive L). This task was facilitated when a media monitoring unit at Millbank was set-up later "to look at . . . what was being said in the regional papers . . . and every piece that came out of local Conservative parties and candidates and various right wing journals." The skill was the tacit knowledge (see Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) gained by press officers in knowing where to gather the material from (Executive L). Opposition research provided "quite useful material" for the story that subsequently hit the headlines as 'Labour's rotten boroughs' although there is limited impact upon the media: "it was a quite a little chess game for all of us but for the effort that went into it, it had absolutely no impact . . . on the journalists that I spoke to" (Executive N).

Broadcasters are subject to regulation of their news output, which significantly affects policy and message dissemination by British political parties. The BBC editorialising ethic "has now been enshrined in legislation which covers everyone, cable, Sky, the lot" whilst in the US "they can do what they like" (Executive G). This makes it even harder for UK political parties to get across their messages although "quite a lot of effort is put into monitoring and trying to pressurise the broadcasters" into covering new items (Executive N). During election time, the fairness rule (incorporating Section 93 of the Representation of the People Act 1986) states that "if any candidate is to take part deliberately in some programme or item about the campaign in a particular constituency, [then] all the others have to be given the right to appear and if one of them doesn't want to appear then they can veto it for all the others." However, this was suspended for the 1999 European Parliamentary Elections, and the Scottish and Welsh elections, because of the size of the constituencies under proportional representation (Executive F).

In the US, different editorial policies operate to ensure more flexibility in the preparation of material by political organisations for broadcast by media organisations. Sending audio-tape press releases ('radio actualities') into radio news stations is common practice. When this method was suggested to a BBC executive, it was instantly denounced:

We don't broadcast undiluted press releases. Everything that goes out has to go through our own editorial process. There is no way we would accept an audio press release. (Executive G)

## Direct Marketing and Fund-Raising

"In America, they go about [campaigning] in a very systematic way and we haven't yet got to that sophistication [in the UK]. It comes down to resources and we have to do so much more with so much less money" (Executive P). The fund-raising function is central to the whole ethos of US campaigning to pay for expensive television advertisements. With the benefits-in-kind that British political parties receive,<sup>12</sup> there is less need for funding. Even so, Britain does not have the sort of culture of donation to support political causes, so apparent in the US. Determining how to persuade British voters to give has caused parties considerable problems, particularly outside of election time. A British fund-raising director explains that there is "usually no benefit" in giving to political parties (Executive E).

Whilst the need for finance within British political parties is relatively less compared to American campaigns, British parties still need to raise large sums of money. This places considerable pressure on parties to find 'high-value' donors. High-value fund-raising is "relatively new" (Executive E) but this is debatable since UK politicians were selling knighthoods and lordships prior to the 1920s for this purpose.<sup>13</sup> There were apparently four major £1 million donors to the Labour party at the 1997 British General Election (Executive E), effectively representing over ten per cent of their campaign expenditure whilst the Tories received a single donation of £5 m from Stuart Wheeler – MD of city spread-betting firm, IG Index – prior to the 2001 British General Election.

The notion that parties should have commercial relationships with companies, especially for lobbying purposes, has caused controversy in the UK, unlike in the US where political action committees (PACs) were specifically designed to filter commercial money through to political parties, in return for policy concessions. When a British charitable subsidiary (the Political Animal Lobby) of an American-based PAC – the International Fund for Animal Welfare – gave money (reports of £1m) to the Labour party, to support the Labour Party's stance on fox-hunting, the media outrage was so vociferous that the Labour party returned the money (Executive E). The relationship with charities and commercial organisations has been further encouraged by parties in hiring out exhibition stand space at their party conferences, with a top price of around £25k per stand at the 2000 Labour Party Conference taken up by numerous multi-national firms (Osier, 2002:36).

British political parties take advantage of considerable voluntary support, in the same way that charities do, to reduce labour costs. To some extent, this gives British political parties an advantage over their US counterparts, "we have 400 thousand members many of whom are willing to stuff . . . envelopes and deliver to doors and that cuts down on the cost of doing that mechanically and paying the postage" (Executive P). The style of the copy used in American direct mail is "louder and brasher and more explicit and nasty," than would be appropriate in the UK (Executive B).

Although aggressive telephone fund-raising is very successfully employed by American political consultants in the US, it has not translated well into British campaigning culture. When American fund-raising consultants were used by the Labour party prior to the last general election, the public "hated it" (Executive C); it was "an absolute disaster" (Executive E). American fund-raisers develop lists of potential donors derived from personal information provided by the candidate. With a stronger culture of privacy, adopting this style of fund-raising causes problems in the UK:

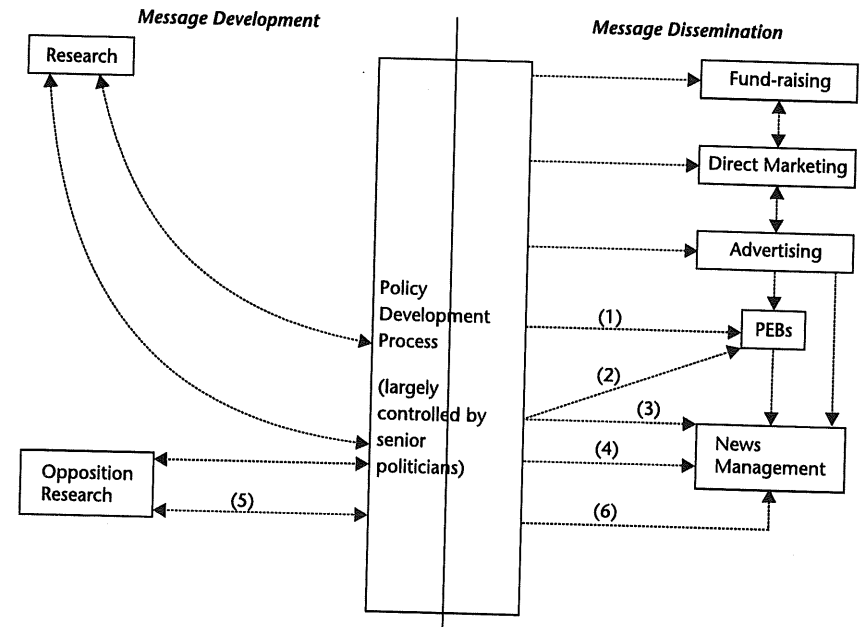
The British are not ready for [telephone solicitation] . . . I can't believe how few people we have who are not paid staff who would ask for money . . . I don't think even I would feel comfortable going through somebody else's wedding list. (Executive E)

Employing the telephone, or mail, for fund-raising is more efficient in voter targeting in the US since they "take advantage of the electoral register of the party" (Executive O) developed in order to allow US voters to select their candidates in primary election campaigns. In the UK, identification of supporters has traditionally occurred, with varying degrees of success, through telephone and door-to-door canvassing (Executive A), and relies more on voluntary voter participation than the compulsory registration procedures required for voting in the US.

### Message Development and Dissemination Model

The major differences between US and UK political marketing relate to the development and dissemination of the campaign message and the structure of the environment in which political parties operate. Whilst British political campaign messages tend to be more substantive and ideological, American political consultants research the effectiveness of their messages more to ensure a more receptive audience.

Figure 2 illustrates the inputs to message development in the UK and the process of its dissemination. It highlights the roles of opposition research, fund-raising, party election broadcast production and news management, which are generally conducted in-house by political parties in the UK. Direct marketing, because of its link to fund-raising, is generally conducted in-house too although the parties have flirted with sub-contracted external agencies with limited success to date. The functions that have tended to be sub-contracted are research and advertising. British political parties have adopted 'people-metering' to a limited extent for the purpose of news management and the use of opposition research taken from political information systems to inform press releases and rebuttal exercises. These trends look set to continue and increase. British political parties use opposition research material to inform and design their party election broadcast material, although they have not



The following numbered processes represent potential US-inspired message development and dissemination improvements:

- (1) the use of people-metering to determine voter reactions to party broadcasts
  - (2) the insertion of opposition research/rebuttal information into party broadcasts
  - (3) the feeding of rebuttal information to the broadcast and print media organisations
  - (4) the use of people-metering to voter reactions to news broadcasts
- And UK processes enhanced by use of American techniques:
- (5) the analysis of opposition policy and message
  - (6) the media monitoring process

Figure 2: British message development and dissemination process

tended to use dial groups to test their content and effectiveness, preferring instead to use focus groups to test billboard and press advertising content.

Figure 2 illustrates a number of processes that have been influenced by US practice including the opposition research process. British opposition research includes insertion of opposition research material into party broadcasts, feeding rebuttal information to the print and broadcast press and the use of people-metering to test voter reactions to news items. This contrasts with its American application to test reactions to broadcast advertisements. British party executives have not adopted widespread use of people-metering expertise to test voter reactions to party election broadcasts because they are seen neither as effective nor a research priority. British political parties monitor news output more so than their American counterparts to ensure fair coverage by broadcasters, since the Americans can rely on their own bought and paid-for broadcast adverts, they do not.

By dividing the British message development and dissemination processes into input and output, Figure 2 illustrates that it is from the inputs into policy

and message development where British political parties gain most from American campaign know-how. This provides the parties' research departments with a pivotal role in aiding the determination of the campaign message, though it informs their understanding of policy development less so.

## Discussion

Structural differences in the media and political systems or differences in the socio-political culture impede the use of many American campaign techniques in the message development process. The decentralised campaign function, run along private-sector lines in the US, is not easily replicated by British political parties operating along public sector lines. The greater frequency of elections in the US has precipitated the development of a class of professional political consultants and a political marketing industry not apparent in the UK.

Political communication differs in the UK; large-scale movement towards a political advertising model is both improbable and undesirable for many, because it requires considerable funding of production and broadcast costs. Yet, PEBs have a more important role than the parties have yet truly realised; they should be used to guide the media agenda rather than to persuade the electorate. News management techniques have risen to the fore in direct contrast with the US. American political consultants have much to learn from their UK counterparts in this area of campaign expertise.

Americanising the direct marketing function through greater use of targeted communication holds significant promise. British political parties can borrow heavily from transatlantic expertise although they have less to learn from the design of the content of these methods, principally because the process of message development is more producer (*viz.* politician)-led. People-metering could become an increasingly useful tool for British political parties to measure voter perceptions of news coverage and to gauge voter opinions on party election broadcasts.

## Conclusion

It is clear that neither US nor UK political campaign organisations conduct research into other areas of the political marketing mix and that campaign strategy tends to concentrate on message development (and to a lesser extent policy development) to the expense of everything else. It is perhaps in the broader aspects of marketing research that UK (and US) political parties can make the greatest inroads. If they can increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the communication, through research into policy development rather than message development, and the distribution (*i.e.*, determining which media vehicles the electorate trust most) of their policies and messages, they

could spend less on communication and perhaps restore content to their policies and trust with the electorate. Further research should be undertaken to determine how to produce more voter-oriented policy using marketing techniques, without compromising the democratic integrity of the content of the policy. Marketing then should be the mechanism by which citizens' views are incorporated into policy and message and the means by which political parties communicate, distribute and service what are essentially highly technical solutions to a nation's social and economic ills.

## Notes

1. [1952] 1 ALL E.R. 697.
2. US Supreme Court, No. 95-489, 26 June 1996.
3. See Braggins et al. (1993).
4. Interview conducted in January 1998 with senior republican, and former presidential, political consultant in Washington, DC.
5. 'Dial groups' involve groups of up to fifty people who rate various forms of advertising using rating scales and electronic equipment (referred to as people-meters).
6. Home Office (1999), "The Funding of Political Parties in the United Kingdom," Cm4413, July 1999, London: The Stationery Office, pp. 5-6.
7. This was the approximate figure for the 2001 British General Election.
8. See Home Office (1999), "Freedom of Information: Consultation on Draft Legislation," July, Cm4355, London: The Stationery Office.
9. Labour's political information system was codenamed 'Excalibur' whilst Tory system was known as 'broadsword.'
10. In the UK, members of parliament are protected from defamation law whilst speaking in the House of Commons. This 'parliamentary privilege' is intended to ensure that matters of legitimate concern can be raised without fear of legal repercussions.
11. British political parties require their members to vote for their bills and/or amendments and operate a system of carefully organising and checking whether or not a party's own members have supported the leadership line.
12. Essentially, one free election address to every elector, the use of public facilities (*e.g.*, schools) for the holding of meetings, and free broadcasting time for party broadcasts.
13. The Political Honours Scrutiny Committee exists to oversee that honours are not simply provided to 'high-value' party donors.

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