Title: **Evaluating Communication in the British Parliamentary Public Sphere**

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Abstract: This article begins with a re-evaluation of political communication research based on Habermas's theory of the public sphere (1989 [1962]). It presents Habermas's (1996) alternative framework for assessing communication in contemporary 'actually existing democracies'. The model is then tested with a case study of the UK parliamentary public sphere based on 95 semi-structured interviews with political actors (politicians, journalists and officials). It concludes that Parliament today operates rather better, according to public sphere norms, than the public sphere described in Habermas's accounts of 18th and 19th Century England. Such a finding, on its own, is clearly at odds with public perception. The research accordingly offers two explanations for this disparity and the (perceived) crisis of political legitimacy in UK politics.

Key Words: Communication, Parliament, Public Sphere

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Evaluating Communication in the British Parliamentary Public Sphere

Introduction

This piece begins with an evaluation of work in political communication that employs Habermas's theory of the public sphere. It argues that most engagements with public sphere theory remain too closely based on outdated political models or accounts of democracy that Habermas himself has rejected. The article then explains Habermas's alternative description and set of evaluative norms with which to observe political communication in contemporary democracies. In this he describes a 'centre-periphery' model, in which multiple public sphere fora formulate and relay opinions from 'weak' publics to the parliamentary centre. It is at this centre that such inputs are absorbed and deliberated upon, by 'strong' publics and according to public sphere norms, to then be transformed into publicly-legitimated law. A parliament operating in a mature democracy, in effect, is now to be treated as the most significant public sphere component of a linked network of public fora. Such a model places greater emphasis on communication within interest groups and associations in civil society, within the institutions of parliamentary bodies, and the communicative links between them. This, in turn, has strong implications for the way media and communication, operating in democracies, are documented and assessed.

The discussion is followed by a case study evaluating communication in the British parliamentary public sphere according to the framework offered in Habermas's more recent work. The study, based on 95 semi-structured interviews with political actors (politicians, journalists and officials), is presented in two parts. In the first, it concludes that the UK Parliament at Westminster, in several respects, operates rather better according to public sphere norms than the public sphere described in Habermas's accounts of 18th and 19th Century England. However, clearly such a conclusion does not match with general public perceptions of institutional politics. The second part accordingly engages with the reasons for this disparity and offers two explanations for it. The first regards the impeded transfer of that public 'opinion- and will-formation' from parliament to government. The second relates to the faulty means of 'critical publicity' by which the process of governance is relayed back to ordinary citizens via the mediated public sphere. As such, even if the UK Parliament is legitimately linked to, and adequately deliberates on, public 'opinion- and will-formation', it fails to transmit that, either upwards to government, or downwards to its citizenry.

Public Spheres and Mediated Democracies: Shifting Perspectives

For many scholars, the significance of Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (*STPS*, 1989 [1962]) was its identification of the important part played by the 'public sphere' in the evolution and sustenance of democracy. The earlier emergence of such a sphere, operating in the space between the state and private individuals, worked to establish public opinion and link it more directly to governance. The ideals on which it operated (for example, reducing the influence of social status, opening up of subject agendas, rational deliberation on the public good, the application of critical publicity) still remain issues of concern for contemporary democracies. The English translation of *STPS* (1989) was thus readily adopted by many in media politics and political communication. Several challenged the historical accuracy and idealised account of the earlier public sphere (see collection in Calhoun, 1992, or summary in

Goode, 2005). However, they also declared that, in spite of its flaws, *STPS* offered a clear and robust set of conceptual terms and normative ideals with which to measure the health of modern public communication.

Much of the work that has followed has taken two divergent pathways, choosing to engage with either the first or second part of the book. The first has taken a starting point that looks back at those idealised elements of the earlier bourgeois public sphere, particularly its inclusive democratic values. Thus, several have attempted to assess the direct, participatory and deliberative potential of public communication spaces at the local, transnational and digital levels (Coleman and Gotze, 2001, Dahlberg, 2001, Sparks, 2001, Coleman, 2005, Polat, 2005, Wikland, 2005). The second pathway has focused on the mass media; the assumption being that that is what constitutes the most significant component of the public sphere in large, modern democracies. For many, earlier public sphere ideals are used to assess and/or proscribe changes to current mass media systems (Dahlgren and Sparks, 1992, Hallin, 1994, Schudson, 1995, McNair, 2000, Curran, 2002). Other work here has chosen to take issue with Habermas's overly-pessimistic, Frankfurt School-inspired account of 20th Century mass media. They have questioned his over-emphasis on inclusive, rational and participatory public dialogue in an era of large-scale, representative democracy. For these scholars (Thompson, 1995, Hallin, 1994, Dahlgren, 1995, Kellner, 2000, Crossley and Roberts, 2004, Goode, 2005, Butsch, 2007) the mass media may still make many positive contributions to the contemporary public sphere.

However, at base, many such engagements with *STPS*, suffer a fundamental flaw; one that is often alluded to in several of the more sophisticated accounts mentioned. This involves applying a set of political and communication ideals, derived from 18th and 19th century political circumstances and philosophy, to 20th and 21st century polities. Parliaments, electoral systems, institutions, and a thriving civil society have all evolved to reshape democracies and, consequently, public spheres and their relationships to the state (or transnational institutions) (Calhoun, 1988, Fraser, 1997, Curran, 2002, Garnham, 2007). In effect, the use of ideals, identified in *STPS*, to evaluate contemporary communication environments, relies on a set of now questionable assumptions.

The first of these is that direct, participatory democracy is the evolutionary end point to aspire to in democracies. However, direct democracy has never existed outside of small, usually exclusive and exclusionary, collectives; a description which applies to both the ancient Athenian polis and 18th Century bourgeois public sphere. Thus, representative forms of democracy appear, as yet, to be the only practical models to use in large, complex societies. Second, there is a tendency to treat the state as a single monolithic force, and to merge the three estates (executive, legislature and judiciary) into one. In contemporary polities the three estates are expected to divide and balance state power (even if many would argue that they are far too closely interconnected and/or directed by the interests of capital). Third, there is a continuing assumption that there exists a general, unitary public sphere that occupies a space between private citizens and the state. Of course, civil society has since evolved a plethora of organisations, associations, institutions and communication forums. These (counter) public spheres frequently have contrasting memberships and 'public good' requirements. They may remain distanced from *the* 'public sphere', instead choosing to remain at the local level and/or directly engage with state institutions (Ely, 1992, Fraser, 1997, p81). By the time

the English language version of *STPS* was published Habermas was already aware of these deficiencies (1992, p443):

> The presumption that society as a whole can be conceived as an association writ large, directing itself via the media of law and political power, has become entirely implausible in view of the high level of complexity of functionally differentiated societies.

At the same time he was not satisfied with the directions public sphere and related democratic theory was going. For him, accounts initiated media and communication-oriented discussions on the basis of two contrasting but problematic views of democratic systems. In the first, representative and mass mediated forms of democracy are seriously flawed. Solutions require much higher levels of formal political participation and deliberative engagement which, to date, have proved impractical. In the second, representative and mass-mediated forms of democracy are an accepted, if flawed, reality. However, this approach, despite its critical stance, is based on and gives credence to a rather limited model of democracy, public debate and participation. In this, citizens weakly relate to a unitary, mediated public sphere (or linked spheres), are vaguely (mis)informed and participate minimally in politics on the national scale. For Habermas (1996) these accounts, however critical, fall into either an idealist, 'republican' advocacy of direct, participatory democracy, or, a limited, 'liberal', rational choice model of representative democracy. Both fail to engage with the shape and direction of politics in 'actually existing democracies'.

By the 1990s, Habermas's had spent several decades exploring the central questions and ideals associated with *STPS* but in relation to contemporary democracies generally and post-war German politics specifically. In 1992, while in dialogue with his *STPS* critics, he was already formulating an alternative model for evaluating the communicative links between citizens and polities in democracies. In this the normative basis of his enquiry was broadly similar: (1992, p448-9):

> The question remains of how, under the conditions of mass democracies constituted as social-welfare states, a discursive formation of opinion and will can be institutionalized in such a fashion that it becomes possible to bridge the gap between enlightened self-interest and orientation to the common good

Thus, although his political concerns and normative ideals had changed little, his account of 'actually existing democracies' in practice and the means to evaluate them had. In *Between Facts and Norms* (*BFN* 1996), he then proceeded to outline a description of how contemporary democracies operated and how, ideally, they should operate. Several authors (Van Schonberg and Baynes, 2002, Goode, 2005, Garnham, 2007) indeed trace his lines of thought on these issues from *STPS*, via *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1987) to *BFN* (1996).

In *BFN* what is described is a 'two-track' system that channels the multiple spheres of civil society through to legislative bodies which then deliberate and produce law. Acknowledging his conceptual debts to Bernard Peters and Nancy Fraser, a core-periphery model with 'strong' and 'weak' publics is described. Civil society is made up of 'weak' publics which identify issues, agendas and solutions through local,

deliberative and non-deliberative forums, both formally and informally. Parliamentary bodies, made up of political representatives, then formally deliberate on these issues and their solutions according to established procedures and rules. The law-making and its enforcement, which follows, is thus legitimated, being tied to 'public opinion- and will-formation'. In this two-stage 'procedural concept of democracy' (Habermas, 1996, p308) 'Deliberative politics thus lives off the interplay between democratically institutionalized will-formation and informal opinion-formation'

Clearly elevated in this account is a more complex and institutionalised account of civil society and its links to proceduralist state complexes. Here, far less emphasis is put on individual relations with 'the public sphere' or indeed the generalised, mass-mediated public sphere itself. Instead, far more is put on citizens participating in multiple, overlapping spheres, in which shared interests and values are identified informally, to be channelled more formally to the parliamentary centre (Habermas, 1996: 354-6):

> The core area as a whole has an *outer* periphery that … for different policy fields, complex networks have arisen among public agencies and private organizations, business associations, labour unions, interest groups and so on … [which] belong to the civil-social infrastructure of a public sphere dominated by the mass media. With its informal, highly differentiated and cross-linked channels of communication, this public sphere forms the real periphery.

At the same time, at the heart of this model, much greater weight is put on legislative assemblies, their constitutions, administrations and law-making. Now, parliamentary bodies are to be viewed as the most significant component of the contemporary public sphere. For as Fraser explains (1997: 170-1):

> the issue becomes more complicated as soon as we consider the emergence of parliamentary sovereignty. With that landmark development in the history of the public sphere, we encounter a major structural transformation, since a sovereign parliament functions as a public sphere *within* the state. Moreover, sovereign parliaments are what I shall call *strong publics*, publics whose discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision-making.

If we take this alternative model of democracy and political communication as our starting point where does that leave critical enquiry? What should scholars be looking at and what normative ideals need to be applied in any evaluative process of media and communication in 'actually existing democracies'? Research needs to be done on those intermediary spheres that engage 'weak publics' at the 'periphery', on those 'strong publics' at the 'centre', and the links that form between them.

This Study and Methods Employed

The empirical study here chose to explore these questions through an investigation of communication processes in and around the UK Parliament. It thus employed the conceptual framework offered in Habermas's 1996 account. In this, the UK Parliament and the actors, practices and institutions contained within, were assumed to operate as

the core public sphere component of Habermas's two-track model of democracy. Rehg and Bohman's (2002) interpretation of Habermas's schema offers four specific evaluative criteria: i) a vibrant and inclusive public sphere with inputs into legislative bodies, ii) the composition of legislative bodies must be representative of society, iii) there must be 'real deliberation' within parliament, and iv) there must be parliamentary mechanisms to ensure equal deliberation of participants and that self-interest and external power is appropriately countered. The ideal conditions for 'real deliberation' in a public sphere include: 'the reciprocal critique of normative positions', 'reflexivity', 'ideal role-taking', 'sincerity', 'discursive inclusion and equality' and actor 'autonomy'.

The research sought to evaluate these criteria through a series of 95 semi-structured interviews with, and limited participant observation of, political actors working in and/or close to Westminster. Findings here focus in particular on interviews with 50 Members of Parliament and ten Members of the House of Lords (30 of the total had had senior (shadow) ministerial experience). Each politician was asked a very similar set of questions with variation according to their position and experience. They were all asked in detail about the information sources and deliberative processes they used when informing themselves about and responding to political issues.

Clearly, the research has a key limitation. Judging the representativeness and effective operation of Parliament, based on interviews with politicians working there, suggests that findings may have a positive bias in favour of MPs. The research design tried to compensate for this in two ways. First, politicians were not told the specific research objectives or asked to evaluate the democratic operation of Parliament per se. They were instead asked a series of questions about their own daily cognitive and behavioural processes. Second, the research attempted to aggregate, cross-reference and triangulate interview material from a range of oppositional and sometimes antagonistic observation points. So, potentially opposed cross-party and back-bench/front bench views were sought. Similar questions were also put to other sets of actors which included 20 political journalists and 15 parliamentary officials and civil servants. Conclusions were thus drawn from aggregating interview findings from a mix of sources.

Communicative Action in the Parliamentary Public Sphere: A Positive Evaluation

The overall conclusion is that the UK Parliament in the 21st Century, in many respects, operates far better according to public sphere norms than the bourgeois public sphere of 18th Century England. There are many shortcomings in what exists. However, as a political institution, open to a wide variety of public inputs, and enabling rational and reflexive deliberation on those inputs and possible legislative solutions, it is rather successful.

Starting with the obvious flaws, MPs cannot be said to be demographically representative of society. In the current Parliament (2005-) only 20% of MPs are women and 2.3% are from ethnic minorities (Norton, 2007). A far higher proportion of MPs went to private, fee-paying schools and/or have a university education than the average. Thus Rehg and Bohman's second evaluative criteria remains unfulfilled. Second, the strength of the party system, means that MPs feel constrained by external considerations in their voting behaviour if not their deliberations (the fourth criteria).

Although, clearly it would be difficult for any legislative assembly to ever fully adhere to either of these criteria in terms of participants being completely socially representative, equal and autonomous. A third obvious hindrance to rational, critical debate was the sheer number of issues and scale of information which MPs needed to engage with. Many stated that they could not meaningfully address more than 10-20% of the issues and legislation passing through Parliament. They therefore concentrated on a handful of subject areas, attempted to be generally informed across a range of issues, and frequently relied on the guidance offered to them by the party or a trusted colleague.

Despite these clear obstacles Parliament, in many ways, offers much to foster and facilitate the type of ideal conditions equated with public sphere norms. This begins with the physical conditions and institutional structures, especially those developed during recent waves of modernisation. The new Portcullis House offers a large central courtyard area full of cafes and restaurants and ringed by meeting rooms and offices. In the public areas many MPs are to be seen meeting visitors or colleagues and then discussing issues in the open café areas. During Parliamentary sessions, at the main entrances (Portcullis House, St Stephens) daily lists of public meetings and venues are displayed and large numbers of visitors are to be seen queuing up. Although Westminster remains exclusionary in several respects, there is also a strong impression of a vibrant, communicative café culture, similar to that described at the centre of Habermas's (1989) earlier bourgeois public sphere.

During interviews with MPs two key themes were explored: the information links between MPs ('strong publics') and those at the periphery ('weak publics'), and, the cognitive and deliberative conditions under which MPs came to conclusions about political issues. 45 of the MPs were asked 'What are your main sources of information when it comes to informing yourself about, and deciding where you stand on policy and legislative issues?' 11 types of source were mentioned, six by half or more of respondents. The top six, all listed by half or more, were: News Media, Party Whips/Briefing Material, Interest Groups, Party Colleagues, the House of Commons Library, and Constituents/the Constituency.

Table One Here

Table One: Information Sources Used by Back-Bench MPs for Evaluating Policy/Legislation

Further analysis of the responses and questioning of interviewees at the time revealed more details. External information sources, outside Parliament, were used more frequently than internal, party ones. The Constituents category was most often identified first, closely followed by the News Media. Both were seen as a means to identify and select issues to follow up. What came through repeatedly was how important, above all else, constituents and constituency information/opinion were regarded by back-bench MPs. Several stated that they actually selected policy areas to specialise in on the basis of constituency significance.

> (Michael Jack) As a backbencher, the issues you become involved in, either superficially or in-depth, can be anything and everything. But your focus is on those matters which are of greatest relevance to the constituency … the

biggest employer in my constituency is BAE Systems so, anything to do with military aerospace, then I'm straight into the detail of that in case it's going to have an immediate effect on employment opportunities in the constituency.

At a later stage in the interview just over half of MPs were asked how they gauged 'public opinion'. Three quarters of respondents replied through direct contact with constituents and activities in the constituency. Further discussion about their information gathering and evaluation processes often gave the impression that party loyalty did not mean MPs simply followed the party line unthinkingly. Few spoke positively about information from party briefings which were used generally for direction on 'standard' voting and procedural issues. Party lines, when in conflict with obvious constituency needs and desires, was the most frequently mentioned dilemma for MPs when deciding how to vote:

> (John Thurso) Well, the main source of information for voting is the Whip … And, for most of us, we are content that our colleagues get it right and therefore we follow into the lobby like sheep in whichever direction the Whip's pointing us … There are issues where you do go against the grain of your constituency but it's not a thing you want to do too often because then you don't get re-elected. And you want to do it when you've thought it through.

Clearly, evaluating the responsiveness of politicians to their constituents, when based primarily on interviews with politicians, is problematic. The finding does however tally with other independent studies (Healey et al., 2005, Power Report, 2006). These have noted that individuals, who have attempted exchanges with their local MP, are much more likely to be positive about the MP than about politicians and institutional politics generally.

The other main information sources noted (Interest Groups, Library, Colleagues, Party) were all more likely to be mentioned in terms of specific policy information-gathering terms. In each case, there was a strong sense of trying to get information that was considered expert, objective and from multiple, politically-balanced sources. Many would go to the House of Commons Library to get a briefing and almost all spoke positively of this resource in terms of its neutrality and authority. When dealing with interest groups there was a general assumption that such sources took partial positions and that this was countered by gaining a pluralist mix of groups and evaluating the group alongside its information and arguments:

> (Peter Kilfoyle) It can be both for and against an issue. Say on Trident, I got lots of stuff from shop stewards who want to see more submarines built at Barrow-in-Furness. At the same time I'd have information from CND. They don't want nothing built in Barrow of that sort … If they're making an argument, I use my own wits to assess the merits of the argument. If it's factual information I seek, I tend to seek corroboration of one sort or another … In other words I'm not going to take somebody's word for anything.

A further attempt was made to assess the institutionalised deliberative process at the group level in terms of the ideal criteria listed above. As an institution, the Parliamentary public sphere is organised around a plethora of formal and informal

committees and groups, supported by extensive clerical and research services. For example, in 2004-05, 44 government bills and 95 private members' bills were discussed by 421 standing committee meetings. There were 1,286 select Committee meetings and an average of 16 EDMs (Early Day Motions) tabled each day (all figs. HoC, July 2005). 303 all-party groups and 116 country groups also met on a less formal basis (Norton, 2007, p436). The research focused in particular on the conduct of select committees. A quarter of MPs, including nine current and recent committee chairs, were asked further questions about the selection of information sources, committee procedures and the group deliberation process. Four senior clerks, experienced in select committee organisation, were asked the same questions.

Procedures for all of these committees seemed very established. All committees were fairly autonomous being able to set their own enquiry agendas and timelines. Government departments had an obligation to respond to committee reports and requests. In terms of information sources there were three key categories mentioned by all: Clerks, Interest Groups and Academic Experts/Research Institutes. Half also mentioned the importance of one's own general expertise in an area and the importance of external site visits. So, whereas MPs, as constituency representatives, looked to a general spread of sources beginning with constituents and news media, as select committee members, they focused more on interest groups and experts. Clerks acted as intermediaries between the two in that they drew up lists of potential advisors, interest group representatives and experts, as well as putting together the source information supplied.

All interviewees spoke very positively about their experiences on select committees. For many it was an educative experience with members given first-hand access to experts in the field as well as more tangible visits to sites on the ground and individuals involved. They also spoke of the unusual 'luxuries' of time, administrative support and relative political autonomy. The general attitude towards information gathering came across as pluralist, deliberative, expert-oriented and evaluative. Witnesses were presumed to take a certain stance and their evidence evaluated and questioned on that basis. Opposite stances were consciously sought out for balance. In almost all cases there was also a strong sense of many 'ideal' forms of communicative action taking place, including: 'discursive inclusion and equality', 'reflexivity' and a 'reciprocal critique of normative positions'. This seemed apparent in the way committee agendas were agreed and enquiry issues were deliberated on and, usually, appeared to overcome traditional party divides:

> (Donald Anderson, Labour Chair) when we came to enquiries, I asked colleagues on the Committee what they thought was important and to make their case … the consensus one, was the one we did … And genuinely I pride myself that over the, whatever it was, eight and a half years that I chaired the [Foreign Affairs Select] Committee, there were only two reports which were not unanimous … The committee then might have three or four long sessions discussing amendments raised by members of the committee, and there may be votes, and we do our very best to reach a consensus. When a Conservative colleague, Sir Patrick Cormack, was on the Committee, I always used to praise him because he was a great guy for finding a formula to bridge any differences within the Committee.

Many of these observations and interviews tally with Philip Cowley's work (2002, 2005, see also Power, 2006). For Cowley, the popular image of passive back-bench MPs, simply following party orders, presents a distorted picture of the day-to-day deliberations and negotiations that take place during the legislative process. Much is altered before voting takes place. Rebellions, of varying sizes, are a frequent occurrence. In the 2001-2005 Parliament he lists 47 occurrences where over 15 Labour MPs defied party policy and government whips. 14 of these involved between 40 and 139 MPs defying the party.

Thus, in many ways, the Westminster Parliamentary public sphere of the 21st Century is a significant advance on anything described by Habermas as existing centuries before. This conclusion is reached because for many (including Habermas) the account of the public sphere described earlier was idealised and based on limited historical accounts. The bourgeois public sphere excluded a majority of the public, was frequently irrational and was entirely ad hoc in its social organisation, choice of subject matter and deliberations (see collection in Calhoun, 1992, or summary in Goode, 2005). In the intervening centuries, the conditions for 'democratically institutionalized will-formation', centring on Parliament, have been firmly established. Clearly there are several shortcomings. But as a system the UK parliament is very much oriented around public sphere ideals in both its institutional formation and the cultural norms and values adopted by the politicians within.

Communicative Breakdowns in the Parliamentary Public Sphere

Obviously, this glowing assessment of the Parliamentary public sphere would seem bizarre to the many citizens and political observers who have detected signs of 'crisis' in the formal political process. Indeed, the majority of interviewees questioned recognised the existence of some form of crisis in UK politics. In the UK, as in many post-industrial countries, there has been quite a strong decline in support for mainstream political parties and national legislative bodies. Party memberships, electoral support, conventional party ideologies, and faith in politicians and the electoral system has gone down as support for social movements and single issue politics has gone up (Norris, 2000, Bromley et al., 2004, Todd and Taylor, 2004, Hay, 2007). According to Cowley (2005, p x) 'one of the paradoxes of modern British politics is that we currently have the most accessible parliamentarians we've ever had – and probably the most professional and hard-working, too – and yet we hold them in lower esteem than ever'. This being the case either the above assessment is wrong or there are other fundamental problems with the parliamentary system of government.

The research also attempted to explore the causes of this disparity. Several explanations have been put forward in other works (see above references). Two in particular emerged during the interviews and found support in related public studies. The first of these revealed that there is a pronounced separation between parliament and government in terms of communication with the periphery. Parliaments may be very good at centrally absorbing opinion- and will-formation from weak publics at the periphery but governments may not. If government is the dominant partner in the legislative process that follows this is a potentially significant flaw. Such a problem, was identified as fundamental by Scheuerman (2002), when commenting on BFN, and acknowledged by Habermas (2002).

It is also a problem apparent in the UK case. The UK Executive, as a source of opinion- and will-formation, operates on a different basis to the UK Legislature. This begins with the physical, social and cultural environment. As soon as MPs become government ministers they take up an office in their Whitehall department. Rows of offices and medium-sized meeting rooms replace large open spaces, conference rooms and debating chambers. Civil servants and fellow departmental ministers replace back-bench party members as colleagues. Many former ministers interviewed stressed the importance of keeping in touch with the party and constituents but, at the same time, acknowledged the difficulties involved:

> (Estelle Morris) That's one of the great changes, in that when you're a backbench MP, or you're in the opposition, physically your working life revolves around the Houses of Parliament. The minute you get to be a minister physically, geographically your life revolves around the department … it's quite weird. All of a sudden, the people you mix with everyday are not your own people, they're civil servants … I really felt that quite strongly when I became a minister.

16 of the interviewees with former senior ministerial experience were also asked about the information sources they used in developing policy and legislation within their departments. All 16 stated their main source was civil servants and all 16 prioritised them as the first or second most important source.

Table Two Here

Table Two: Information Sources Used by Government Ministers for Evaluating Policy/Legislation

Other information sources were mentioned; such as Government Colleagues/The Manifesto, Academics/Advisors and Interest Groups; but rather less often. Unlike parliamentary clerks, who took an intermediary position between politicians and periphery sources, civil servants were involved more fundamentally. Government departments had large numbers of internally-employed expert personnel that were likely to be at the centre of the policy process: The Cabinet Office had 1410 full-time staff, the Treasury 1130, DeFRA, 3950, Health, 2290, Transport, 2120 (all figs. ONS, 2007). Opinions on the quality and balance of that material were mixed but all admitted a high level of dependence on it:

> (Frank Dobson) the bulk of the information and briefing material I received was from the official briefings … Certainly, for instance, when I arrived at the Department of Health as Health Secretary there was briefing material this deep … No wonder people never got a grip on an issue if their information system was like that.

What also became clear was how focused on their departmental policy areas ministers became. Instead of general news consumption ministers tended to be given daily clippings files consisting of coverage of their own department and related issues. A mixture of 'collective cabinet responsibility' and time and resource constraints, meant that ministers rarely strayed into other policy territory except when there was an obvious overlap with their sector.

The picture that emerged, from both politicians and civil servants interviewed, was one where government ministers adopted policy directions from manifesto commitments and senior party leaders/advisors. Thereafter it was civil servants that were the predominant information sources. The policy consultation and legislative process that followed then emerged with inputs from a range of experts, special advisors, interest groups and other stakeholders. The inputs of constituents, general media and general external sources was greatly reduced. Clearly, the information gathering and deliberation process of senior government civil servants is of some significance. Recent studies of Whitehall (Marsh et al., 2001, Smith, 2003) suggest that, despite many outward-facing reforms, policy is still dominated by department civil servants and limited sets of interest group representatives in 'fairly closed networks'. These observed distinct civil service cultures that, while following norms of integrity, neutrality and objectivity, also regarded the public as ignorant and 'public interest' as being of minor concern to the policy process. Thus, the level of connection between government departments and the periphery of 'weak' publics varies but certainly appears rather weaker than that encountered in Westminster.

These differences become significant when one looks at the power relationships between the UK Executive and its Legislature. In the UK case there does appear a widespread view that the power of the Executive is too great in relation to the Legislature (see Marsh et al., 2001, Brazier, 2005, Cook and Maclennan, 2005, Power, 2006). The combination of a system of strong cabinet government, and an electoral system that regularly produces large party majorities, results in 'executive dominance of the legislature'. Attempts at modernisation since 1997 have managed to improve the efficient running of Parliament while failing to address the key issue of power imbalance. This has left the UK Legislature being less able to transmit public opinion- and will-formation from the periphery to the legislative process because of the its powerful Executive. This flaw was identified by several back-bench MPs themselves when asked, at the end of the interview, to assess the causes of the (perceived) crisis in UK politics:

> (Jeremy Corbyn) The biggest problem is the confusion over the role of parliament and the role of government. The Prime Minister requires a parliamentary majority to form an administration … but also [Parliament] is the body that holds the Prime Minister to account. And this is where the enormous powers of the Prime Minister, which are mainly unaccountable to Parliament, come into play and … that reduces the power of MPs.

The second explanation for the public perception of crisis in the UK parliamentary public sphere relates to the failure of its Legislature to adequately convey its deliberative processes back to the periphery. In the UK case, the critical mass media eye has come to focus on government and political party competition rather than parliament. The work of most MPs, as constituency representatives and deliberative actors within Parliament, has become minimised. That, in turn, has become a cause of public cynicism about, and distrust of, institutional politics.

Several media scholars have further built on Habermas's (1989) pessimistic account of the refeudalised public sphere. They have chosen to focus on either party/government attempts at media management (Herman and Chomsky, 2002, Miller, 2004), or news

media's general misrepresentation of politics as personality, scandal and soundbite (Hallin, 1994, Franklin, 2004, Thompson, 2000, Barnett and Gaber, 2001). However, an issue, only partially addressed in these critiques, is the fact that, in the UK case at least, the Legislature and it deliberative processes have become largely omitted from the mediated discourse about politics more generally. This is significant as it means the information gathering and deliberation process, at the heart of law-making in parliamentary democracies, is itself not publicly revealed (open to 'critical publicity' in Habermas's terms). Over time this symbolically delegitimises parliamentary activity and, consequently, contributes to public cynicism and distrust of politics per se.

The conditions of this state of affairs became increasingly apparent as the research progressed. Parliament, as an institution distinct from government or individual political parties, has always attempted to restrict journalists and shield its activities from the outside media (see Reid, 2000). Since the 1980s news organisations have been less inclined to cover Parliament in mainstream news fearing lack of consumer interest. These failings have been identified by a number of recent enquiries within Parliament (HoC, 2004, HoC, June, 2004, HoC, Dec 2005) and the Hansard Society (2005). The 2006 Commons Business Plan (HoC, Dec 2005, p20) identified, as 'a primary objective' the need to improve information to the public and to establish the identity of Parliament 'as distinct from government', a body that is 'holding government to account' and 'welcoming to citizens'. The reports recommended a range of strategies to improve public information outputs such as an improved website and the employment of dedicated press officers to promote the work of Parliament itself. At the time of the research, only a handful of such posts existed (none did before 2000)

In contrast, it was also clear that the machinery of political publicity is driven by government departments and the competing leaderships of the main political parties. In 2006, for example, the Prime Minister's Office employed 24 'information officers', the Cabinet Office 35 and the Treasury 31. The larger government departments, such as the Home Office or Department of Health, had over 100 such staff (Figs. in COI, 2006). Party leaderships also employ teams of public relations staff and/or special advisors with communication skills. Consequently, the public projection of UK politics by political actors is directed by the goals of government, the civil service and the competing political party leaders. The majority of MPs may spend much of their time interacting with constituents, and engaged in positive deliberation over policy and legislation, but that is not the symbolic image of politics projected. Presentational and conflictual politics, oriented around party competition for voters, is what drives communication activity.

Interviewees frequently voiced frustration at the long-term failing of Parliament to promote itself and its activities, as well as general media disinterest in reporting policy matters and deliberative processes. A majority of politicians and officials expressed their concerns in this area and/or condemned the general shape of news coverage of Westminster.

> (Robert Wilson) the unmentionable is the disillusion of both people here, and people outside … the overall strategy here, is to make people aware of the role of Parliament, that Parliament isn't just a legislation factory for the Government, it is also a watchdog of what the Government does, and indeed a challenger of what they do

(Greg Clark) I don't think there's a terribly strong interest in the media for policy debates you know. Newspapers are about news and policy isn't really news. It's events that are news, so policy comes into the news when the consequences of policy create a news event, such as we've seen with the failure to deport foreign prisoners.

Interestingly, approximately half the 20 political journalists interviewed admitted similar levels of frustration at their role in this. They regretted the fact that their editors emphasised the need for personality-oriented rather than policy-oriented stories. Others, even if uncritical of journalism per se, saw their role in terms of reporting politics rather than policy: i.e., party competition, conflicts and personalities involved in politics. Policy analysis was something left to specialists in other news sectors:

(Philip Webster) We've contributed, the media have probably contributed by giving more attention to those kind of personality-driven stories than highlighting the policy stories, focusing on the good work, maybe that politicians do at Westminster and in their constituencies. That may well have contributed to the sort of general public malaise about politics.

Most interviewees thought that, whatever the reasons, media coverage had given a very false impression of what took place in Parliament and the political process in general. Ultimately, media and citizens (at the periphery) have a significant input into the parliamentary public sphere but this is not reciprocated. Instead, strategic communication emanates from state apparatus and political parties which, coupled with news media values and practices, exclude and mask the positive deliberative policy process within parliament itself. Coverage also fails to apply 'critical publicity' to the processes of information-gathering and deliberation at the stronger centres of legislative power in the civil service and government departments. In consequence, whether or not the legislative process is sound, its symbolic presentation fails to present to the public those core elements of legitimacy that do exist.

Conclusions

At the heart of this piece is a desire to move critical debates about politics, communication and citizenship into new territory. This means engaging with 'actually existing democracies', contemporary media environments, and what that means in terms of evaluating communicative processes. This translates to observing engaged political actors and political processes within collectives (networks) in civil societies and parliamentary bodies, and evaluating media and communication accordingly.

Ideas and arguments have been applied to the UK Parliament which, to all intents and purposes, constitutes in institutionalised form the core component of the contemporary public sphere. Applying the evaluative schema directly to this sphere it was found to operate surprisingly well. Political representatives at the centre are very well connected to those at the periphery, individually, via media and through interest groups. Institutionalised procedures, as well as the cultural norms of participants, encourage deliberative forms of dialogue and evaluation. Public opinion- and will-formation lies at the heart of the UK Parliamentary public sphere.

The process falls down for several reasons. Two are identified here. First, the UK Executive is both too powerful, in relation to its Legislature, and less linked to the public periphery. Thus, public opinion- and will-formation is not necessarily adequately transferred into legislative outcomes. Second, even when the legislative process operates 'legitimately', such a process is not publicly visible. Government and competing party communication strategies dominate the mediated symbolic presentation of politics to the detriment of parliamentary processes. Since political systems must not only operate legitimately, they must be observed to operate so, this adds to the public perception of crisis in UK politics.

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Lord Donald Anderson, Labour MP 1966-70, 1974-2005, 31st January 2007

Rt Hon Frank Dobson, Labour MP for Holborn and St Pancras, shadow minister and cabinet minister 1983-97, government cabinet minister 1997-99, 29th March 2006

Greg Clark, Conservative MP for Tunbridge Wells, advisor and Director of Conservative Policy Unit, 25th April 2006

Jeremy Corbyn, Labour MP for Islington North, 24th April 2006

Rt Hon Michael Jack, Conservative MP for Fylde, government minister 1992-97, shadow minister, 1997-98, chair select committee 2002-, 12th June 2006

Peter Kilfoyle, Labour MP for Liverpool Walton, opposition whip and spokesperson 1992-94, parliamentary secretary 1997-2000, 20th March 2007

Estelle Morris, government cabinet minister 2001-02, government minister 2003-05, 8th March 2007

Lord John Thurso, Liberal Democrat MP for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, shadow minister 2003-, 7th December 2005

Philip Webster, Political Editor of the *Times*, 9th August 2006

Robert Wilson, Principal Clerk of Select Committees, 3rd May 2006

Information Source	Total (45)	Priority (1st/2nd)	Capacity
Media	**24** (1)	**11** (2)	General, Not Detail
Party Whip/Briefs	**24** (1)	5 (4)	Specific Voting
Party Colleagues	**23** (3)	**9** (3)	Specific
Interest Groups	**23** (3)	5 (4)	Specific
HoC Library	**22** (5)	5 (4)	Specific
Constituents/Local	**21** (6)	**12** (1)	General & Specific
Own Knowledge	12 (7)	4 (7)	General & Specific
Internet	11 (8)	4 (7)	General & Specific
Academic/Res/Advisors	11 (8)	0 (10)	Specific
Externl/Personl Netwks	10 (10)	3 (9)	General & Specific
Govt Material	7 (11)	0 (10)	Specific

Table One: Information Sources Used by Back-Bench MPs for Evaluating Policy/Legislation

Information Source	Total (16)	Priority (1st/2nd)	Capacity
1. Civil Servants	**16**	**16**	Specific
2. Media	8	0	General, Not Details
3. Cabinet Colleagues/ Manifesto	7	4	Specific
4. Academic/Res/Advisors	7	4	Specific
5. Interest Groups	7	1	Specific
6. Own Knowledge	6	4	General & Specific
7. Govt. Material/Existing Legislation	5	0	Specific
8. Externl/Personl Netwks	4	1	General & Specific
9. Constituents	2	0	General
10. Other	2	0	General & Specific

Table Two: Information Sources Used by Government Ministers for Evaluating Policy/Legislation