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Professionalization: Of What? Since When? By Whom?

Darren G. Lilleker and Ralph Negrine

Professionalization and related words have become the normative way of describing developments in political campaigning and communication in recent years. Reflecting on recent articles in *Press/Politics*, the authors assert that the use of such terms are confusing and provide little detail as to the actual changes in the nature and conduct of campaigning, when these changes took place, and what forces drove the changes.

In the recent issue of *Press/Politics* (Volume 6, Number 4, 2001), three articles dealt with the role of what they describe as professionals in modern political campaigning. These articles offered interesting and highly perceptive analyses of the changing nature of political campaigns and of political communication. However, the more the literature focuses on the way political campaigning and communication have become professionalized, the broader the definition of the process of professionalization becomes. This brief commentary, based on research currently being carried out in Britain, seeks to question whether the use of the word *professional* and its derivatives—*profession*, *professionalization*, *professionalism*—is helpful in explaining the nature of change in processes of political communication and whether different, more specific terms should be employed.

Contemporary literature in the field of political communication introduces readers to recent developments through such phrases as a “professionalization of politics” (Mancini 1999), “source professionalization” (Blumler 1990), “campaign professionalization” (Gibson and Rommele 2001:40), the “professionalization of media relations” (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994:67), and even “the smoothness, slickness and all-too-evident professionalism of recent campaigning” (Watts 1997:142). While there are attempts to define the tools of a professional campaign, of which Gibson and Rommele’s (2001) is a highly effective example, these essentially describe a process whereby many tasks, formerly ascribed to

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party members, are given over to outside agencies. The differing definitions of professionalization illustrated above present the reader with some confusion over the use of the term: Is professionalization a process of making communication more effective through updating and enhancing the modes for delivering a political message? Alternatively, is professionalization related to the employment of professional communicators—public relations experts, image consultants, data analysts, and so forth—to manage the campaign (Mancini 1999)? Furthermore, should the term also be applied to elected representatives?

It is clear that much of the current literature conflates these processes into the catchall term *professionalization*. For example, political marketing models of campaigning introduce the reader to a process that combines specialist roles with effective delivery (Farrell et al. 2001; Lees-Marshment 2001; Scammell 1997). These stress the role played by a professional campaign team in analyzing the market, advising on policy, creating effective vehicles for transmitting messages, and training those directly involved in the campaign on style, image, and communication. The marketing literature also ascribes a prominent role to nonprofessionals who, although guided to varying degrees by the campaign team, are responsible for campaign communication. But this account of the process of professionalization differs markedly from the discourse of professionalization, which suggests that as political campaigning becomes professionalized, all those involved in campaigning will be or will become professionals within their ascribed roles.

Clearly, this assertion is not an accurate description of British political campaigning. If we compare leading party political figures, we find varying abilities to effectively communicate, a factor that is often translated into the way they are portrayed by the media. New Labour Minister Robin Cook (now Leader of the House) has been described as “resembling a garden gnome” (Jones 1996:9), while Conservative Ann Widdecombe (now Shadow Home Secretary) was said to be “uncharismatic” and “a harridan” and described as “sporting a Beatle haircut” by the U.K. tabloid press, yet both are described by colleagues as consummate professionals when dealing with the media. This indicates that the term *professionalization* is multifaceted, often highly subjective, and not fully able to describe the nuances in the complex nature of political communication.

There are other difficulties with using the term. While political scientists, by and large, link the professionalization of politics, and particularly of members of parliament, to the ways in which politics have now become a full-time paid career (see Rush 1989), writers on political communication, as we have seen, use the phrase much more loosely. Not only is it used to refer to those individuals employed by political parties for their expertise and skills in dealing with the media, but it can also be used to identify any individual, whether an employee or an elected representative, who has a “basic competence in news management techniques” (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994:84). To act in a professional way, and

to be a professional, is thus to display a range of skills in handling the media and an ability to use modern communication facilities (see Gould 1998). When used in these ways, the phrase inevitably highlights its direct opposite: amateurism. As Blumler (1990) has observed, those “who are less attuned to the media sphere are discredited as amateurs out of touch with the modern world’ (p. 104). In other words, those who are not professional are, by dint of their mistakes, amateurs or novices. But in what ways can political actors be said to be professionals, to act in a professional way, or to have become professionalized?

One problem in trying to understand these questions is that the use of words such as *professional* often makes sense only in relation to the activities and to the requirements of the media. Does being a professional mean any more than simply systematically providing the media with the sorts of information and in the form that they need? Are such activities and skills both media specific and temporally located? Under what circumstances does the professional and skilful use of the media prove counterproductive and lead to accusations of excessive control and manipulation? Another problem is that these words take on a different meaning and importance when placed within a broader party political context. With the modern political party seeking to centralize and manage all its communication processes, its elected members are inevitably confronted by a set of restrictions and expectations that are almost a requirement of membership: They should not dissent or create controversies, they should toe the party line, and so forth. In this context, is professionalism little more than accepting and acquiescing to the wishes of those at party headquarters? Conversely, is dissent unprofessional?

What emerges quite clearly from the above brief discussion of professionalization is that the word *professional* is perhaps more often used to describe degrees of specialization related to the development of new knowledge or new skills. For example, elected representatives learn how to deal with the media in a professional way; political consultants build up expertise, which they can apply in different circumstances and in different conditions. Pollsters, too, apply basic skills in different environments. In contemporary media-centered democracies, such skills and specialized techniques are undoubtedly invaluable additions to the party machine, particularly when the need to persuade volatile voters is paramount. This goes a long way toward explaining the phenomenon surrounding the growth and deployment of political marketing techniques (Wring 1998) as well as the emergence of associations that seek to legitimate the role of the political consultant as that of a professional (see Plasser 2000). Interestingly, both the creation of associations between politics and the world of the communication specialist and the certification of consultants in the field of public relations and related professions are characteristics of occupations seeking to exercise professional authority. They “must find a technical basis for it, assert an exclusive jurisdiction, link both skill and jurisdiction to standards of training, and convince the

public that [this professional class's] services are uniquely trustworthy" (Wilensky 1964:138).

By contrast, elected politicians, who are by the very nature of their occupation generalists, can nevertheless acquire levels of expertise in their media-handling skills that would permit them to be described as professional. This, however, is not addressed effectively in the literature on professionalization. In fact, judgments about professionalization and professionalism are being made in the abstract and without an appreciation for the evolutionary process that has taken place in respect of the conduct of political campaigns and the way in which that change is related to specific technologies, practices, and knowledge. In other words, the process of professionalization should be examined in its historical context. Moreover, such research should examine the practice of elected political actors when campaigning to assess whether we can attach the label *professionalization* for the sake of argument to the activities of members of parliament and candidates who sought election thirty or more years ago. If we can, then the term itself would only describe the way technology is employed skillfully; it would not explain the process of change itself.

The use of terms such as *professionalization* and *professionalism* often hinders attempts to explain how the political campaign and the nature of communication have changed in recent decades. What is needed is a multilayered approach, which explains not only how the campaign has become more centralized but also how this process has affected the campaign at the local and the individual level. One can then talk about the specialization of key roles within the campaign and the increased use of modes of delivery that require skills that traditional party employees and volunteers may not have. Furthermore, then one can also discuss the ways in which political communication has become more slick, media-friendly, and tailored for media coverage. But can all of these be attributed solely to the introduction of specialists or "professionals" into the campaign?

Clearly there have been technological advances and changes in the way in which politics is covered by the media that have forced a response from political parties and individuals who seek election to office. This pattern of technological change has always been a feature of political life and predates the introduction of electronic communication. The introduction of national newspapers, of radio and later of television as forms of mass communication altered the ways politicians sought to communicate with the public, in the same way that the Internet will alter practices in the future. In many ways, political campaigning has, therefore, always been in a state of constant evolution. We need to be able, therefore, to place these sorts of changes accurately within their proper historical context, and to assess more precisely what changes have taken place, their causes and the responses to them. The real problem with discussing all of these changes beneath the umbrella term of professionalization is that much of the nuanced and multi-

faceted nature of change is lost; consequently, the term fails to stand up to the task ascribed to it. We would wish to argue, and our present research lends support to this assertion, that the term professionalization needs to be more carefully defined and, when explaining certain aspects of a process of evolution, abandoned in favor of more specific and more accurate phrases such as *specialization of tasks*, *the increased use of experts* and the *management or centralization of the campaign*. Otherwise, we are only left with the normative conclusion that political campaigns have become “more professional,” which still begs the questions: more professional than what, since when, and on whose part?

Note

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Biographical Notes

Darren G. Lilleker completed his Ph.D. at the University of Sheffield in 2001 and is currently a research assistant in the Centre for Mass Communication Research at the University of Leicester.

Address: Centre for Mass Communication Research, University of Leicester, 104 Regent Road, Leicester, LE1 7LT, United Kingdom; telephone: (+44) 116 252 3864; fax: (+44) 116 252 3874; e-mail: dgl4@leicester.ac.uk.

Ralph Negrine is a senior lecturer in media and politics, the director of the Centre for Mass Communication Research, and the dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Leicester.

Address: Centre for Mass Communication Research, University of Leicester, 104 Regent Road, Leicester, LE1 7LT, United Kingdom; telephone: (+44) 116 252 3863; fax: (+44) 116 252 3874; e-mail: rxn@le.ac.uk.