Disruptive Communication

Measurement, evaluation and insights in the Age of Change

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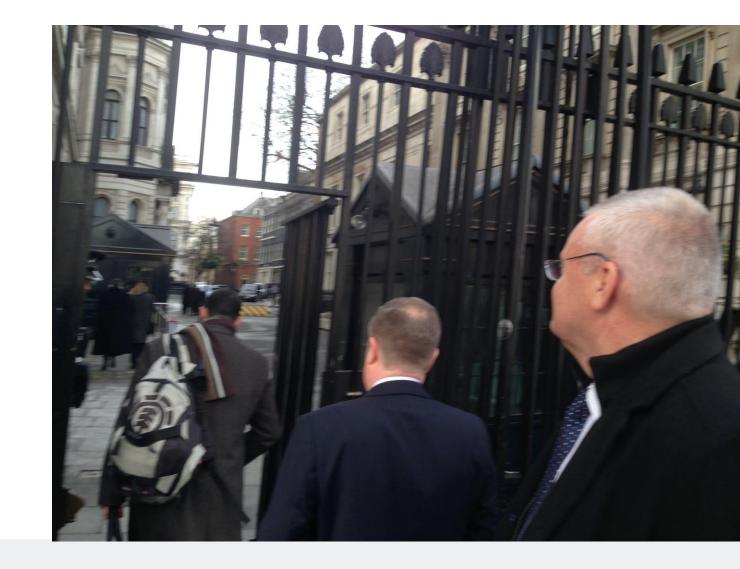
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How 'Brexit' Brought Insights and Evaluation Into the Global Spotlight

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B-Day; T-Day?

- **23 June 2016**
- **8 November 2016**
- **8 June 2017?**

Why Study the UK Government?

- Reputation for best practice in public communication and **evaluation**

- UK Government Communication Service (GCS)
  - A central professional service (formerly GCN) – 4,000 members
  - Annual strategic plan
  - Major professional development program
  - Extensive use of research – 'Evaluation Champions' across government
  - Evaluation Council

- Government elected with an increased majority in 2015

- But warning signs
  - Scottish Referendum 2014
  - Rising public concern re immigration and National Health Service (NHS)

'Brexit'

- **£142 million** cost

- A massive failure of the **'Remain'** campaign led by the Government

Disruptive communication

- The UK Prime Minister, David Cameron resigned

- A new UK Prime Minister, Theresa May, appointed

- 13 Ministers resigned or their portfolios reshuffled

- A new department created at Number 9 Downing Street
  - Department for Exiting the EU (DEx EU)

- Public acknowledgement that "we do not understand the British people"

- Call for insights and research to inform strategy

Key issues

1. Importance of **formative** research (pre), not only summative (post)

2. Over-reliance on **quantitative** research, particularly **polls**

3. Lack of appropriate **data analysis tools and skills**
   - Social research (surveys, focus groups, interviews)
   - Public consultation
   - Correspondence
   - Complaints

4. Lack of a central **insights centre or database**

5. Lack of **outreach**
   - Listening to the wrong people/insufficient people

Long before the Brexit boil-over

The signs were there …

- **Declining trust** in government (and in business, media, Wall Street, etc.)

- **Declining engagement** in civil society and the public sphere

- Rise of **extremism** – e.g., Alt.right; radicalization

- **Declining customer and employee loyalty**

- **BUT WHY? What is driving these trends?**

- **Lack of listening and engagement** (Macnamara, 2016)

The signs were missed … ignored

- Brexit was not a vote to leave the EU – it was a vote against the Government and the way government was being managed in the UK (Macnamara, 2017)

- " … the referendum was not just a vote to withdraw from the EU. It was about something broader … a sense … that many people have today that the world works well for a privileged few, but not for them"(Theresa May, 2016, paras 38–40)

- Brexit was "a revolution in which millions of our fellow citizens stood up and said they were not prepared to be ignored anymore" (Theresa May, 2016, para. 19)

The Trump phenomenon

- The election of Donald Trump was more a vote *against* traditional US politics – the Democratic and Republican parties and Washington DC – than it was a vote *for* Donald Trump as president

- Polls got it wrong
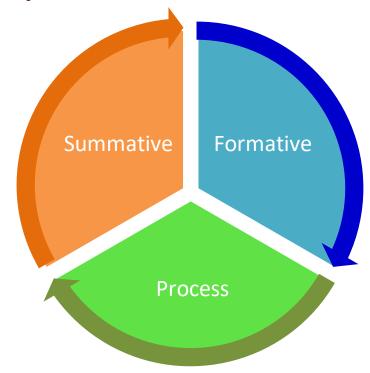
1. Three types of evaluation

- **Formative** (*ex-ante*) – understanding stakeholders and publics

- **Process** – checking if you are on track to achieve objectives

- **Summative** (*ex-post*) – did you achieve the stated objectives

"It is clear that the Government does not understand the concerns of the British people."

Theresa May, Prime Minister of the UK
In a statement shortly after the Brexit vote

Summative   Formative

Process

2. Polling and surveys

- Polls are based on **small samples** (1,000–2000)

- Use **quota sampling** method in many cases
  - Fixed quotas by gender, region, etc. – not random or statistically representative

- Ask **one or a few questions** only – shallow and narrow

- Results depend on **what you ask**?
  - Do you believe the UK should remain a member of the European Union? – YES
  - Will you vote to support the Government's recommendation to remain in the EU – NO

- Publication of poll results is a form of **push-polling**
  - Media reports of predicted 'remain' vote encouraged 'leave' and protest votes

- **Quantitative** research (e.g., surveys) – "not everything that counts can be counted" (Albert Einstein / William Cameron, 1963)

3. Data, but what does it mean?

- Lack of **data analysis tools and skills**
  - Social research (surveys, focus groups, interviews)
  - Consultation
  - Correspondence
  - Complaints

Examples of lost opportunities

- NHS 2015 public consultation
  - **127,400 submissions** – over 1 million pages of comment
  - No software or skills to analyse this volume of unstructured (textual) data

- Correspondence
  - Up to **100,000 letters a year** to the PM
  - Individual responses sent
  - But no analysis to identify key themes, main issues, trends, geolocation patterns

Licensed **Method52**, a machine learning text analysis application developed by DEMOS and the University of Sussex; trained staff; and analysed the submissions, discovering seven major findings.

4. Data, data, everywhere …

- **Vast volumes of data**
  - Hundreds of social research studies commissioned each year
  - Millions of pages of public consultation feedback
  - 50,000–100,000 letters a year to the PM and most departments
  - Hundreds of thousands of complaints
  - Subscription of numerous public studies (e.g., *British Social Attitudes Study*)

- But held by different departments on locked servers

- **No central research/insights database or data centre**

- **Information and insights not shared**, not compared, not triangulated

Current project in the UK Cabinet Office to establish a central insights centre/research database and share relevant non-private data across government.

5. Outreach – beyond the 'usual suspects'

- "Knock on almost any door in almost any part of the country, and you will find the roots of the revolution laid bare"(Theresa May, 2016, para. 42)

- But we don't knock on doors

- Stakeholder engagement, public consultation, and feedback are **passive**
  - Call for submissions (who writes submissions?)
  - Engage with the 'usual suspects' (big industry organisations, large lobby groups, etc.)
  - Listen to those who fill our surveys (junior employees or children)
  - Have faith in auto-generated data analytics
  - PR and communication overly focussed on media

Beware big data syndrome and hype

- Current approaches to big data analysis of social trends and political sentiment failed to predict two global events, the election of Donald Trump as US president and *Brexit*. Contributing social forces underpinning these events have been ascribed to a protest vote from disaffected groups within society. This suggests that current forecasting tools lack connection to marginalised communities and reinforce, from a methodological perspective, structural social exclusion.

Dr Alexia Maddox
Digital sociologist, Deakin University

Living in the 'bubble'

- Politicians live in bubbles – the 'Westminster / Washington / 'Brussels bubble'
    - **Political parties** – membership of 3 major UK political parties = 1.6% of eligible voters
    - **Traditional media/press** corps (play to the media – *mediatization*) – shrinking audiences

- Do corporations also live in 'the big business bubble'?

- Are PR agencies and evaluation service providers also in a 'bubble'?

The bubble can burst

The bubble can burst

Conclusions

- Put a lot more effort into **formative research**
  - Understand stakeholders and publics
  - Early intelligence and insights

- Learn to use and invest in **in-depth qualitative research**
  - Understand the emotional dimension – not just numbers
  - Probe unspoken concerns, fears, etc. – beyond the 'tick the boxes'

- Develop or hire **advanced data analysis tools and skills**
  - Capability to analyse unstructured data (e.g., text from feedback, complaints, consultation)
  - Capability to analyse and make sense of large data sets

- **Integrate and triangulate** data sets – combining and sharing data builds a body of knowledge

- Get out of 'the bubble' – **outreach**
  - Reach out to disengaged groups, the 'silent majority'

Conclusions

- **Formative research** – audience understanding and insight

- **In-depth qualitative research** – deep insights, emotional and rational

- **Advanced data analysis tools and skills** – unstructured and structured

- **Integrate and triangulate** data sets; share data

- **Outreach**

Report and full findings

- Research report from the UK – Macnamara, J. (2017). ***Creating a Democracy for Everyone:*** *Strategies for Increasing Listening and Engagement by Government*. London, UK and Sydney, NSW: The London School of Economics and Political Science and the University of Technology Sydney.

  - https://www.uts.edu.au/node/230356

- Macnamara, J. (2018). ***Evaluating Public Communication: Exploring New Models, Standards, and Best Practice***. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

  - www.routledge.com/9781138228573

Thank You