THE ELECTRONIC FACE OF GOVERNMENT IN THE INTERNET AGE
Borrowing from Murray Edelman

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Abstract

The issue of legitimation by political elites has been a central concern of political scientists for many years. This article draws upon the work of Murray Edelman who was instrumental in analysing this relationship between rulers and ruled, the relatively powerful and relatively powerless, through an understanding of language, symbolism and the manipulation of information. It concludes with the contention that the Internet offers the prospect for governments to create new 'electronic faces', which act to support a symbolic architecture of power.

Keywords

Internet, legitimacy, legitimation, government, prime minister, president, politics, elites, elite theory, symbolism, language, Murray Edelman

For most men most of the time politics is a series of pictures in the mind, placed there by television news, newspapers, magazines, and discussions. The pictures create a moving panorama taking place in a world the mass public never quite touches, yet one its members come to fear or cheer, often with passion and sometimes with action. . . . Politics is for most of us a passing parade of abstract symbols, yet a parade which our experience teaches us to be a benevolent or malevolent force that can be close to omnipotent. Because politics does visibly confer wealth, take life, imprison and free people, and represent a history with strong emotional and ideological associations, its processes become easy objects upon which to displace private emotions, especially strong anxieties and hopes.

(Edelman 1964: 5)

INTRODUCTION

Political scientists have long sought to explain how political elites maintain themselves in power. This inevitably raises questions to do with legitimation. Even in liberal democratic states, which may have substantial variations in power structures and societal contexts, there is the problem of democratic control; of the relations between rulers and ruled, the relatively powerful and the relatively powerless. Over the last forty years or so, while the discipline of communication

studies blossomed, there have been surprisingly few political scientists who have sought to understand and explain political legitimation with reference to language, symbolism and the manipulation of information; Murray Edelman (1919–2001) is one of them. My aim in this paper is threefold. First, I map out Edelman's eclectic theoretical influences and analytical framework with the aim of demonstrating how it fits the typically interdisciplinary mould of writing on the information society that is true of the other authors in this series. Second, I tease out its central themes and principal objects of analysis: language and symbolism. Finally, I translate some of these themes and assess their relevance for understanding political legitimation in the age of the Internet through an empirical analysis of executive branch web sites in Britain and the USA. It is my argument that the Internet allows for a new 'electronic face' of government which has previously been unavailable. This is controlled by government itself and is subject to the central demands of early twenty-first-century politics, namely presentational professionalism in the form of attention to imagery, symbolism, language use and genre – all processes to which Edelman's work draws our attention.

ABOUT MURRAY EDELMAN

Murray Edelman was born in Nanticoke, Pennsylvania, in 1919. He took an undergraduate degree from Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania in 1941, and an MA from the University of Chicago in 1942. Six years later he was awarded his PhD from the University of Illinois, where he stayed until 1966, before moving to a post in the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He remained there until his retirement in 1990, when he was awarded the title of George Herbert Mead Professor Emeritus. As we shall see below, this was in recognition of one of his main intellectual influences.

It is fair to say that Edelman's work is more widely known in his native USA than in Europe, although it is probably the case that his first major book, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (1964), while it does not feature at the top of the charts in the *New Handbook of Political Science* (1996), is one of the most frequently cited works of its kind in the post-war period (Goodin and Klingemann 1996). Curiously, for a writer who enjoyed such a long career, Edelman's approach remained remarkably consistent. Although touched by the critical influence of Marxism and post-structuralism in the 1980s, his principal works stemmed from essentially the same intellectual paradigm – a mixture of elite theory, social psychology and symbolic interactionism, all of which informed *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* back in 1964. His rather eclectic theoretical approach meant that he

was never destined to fit with the dominant behavioural and rational choice tendencies of the US political science establishment. Indeed, many political scientists have long been puzzled by his approach, likening it to social anthropology or psychology rather than conventional political analysis. Murray Edelman died in February 2001, at the age of 81.

EDELMAN'S THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: A SKETCH

Extracting the components of a writer's theoretical framework is fraught with difficulties. Not least of these is the problem of contradicting a writer's own views of his/her intellectual debts. To take a relevant example, the suggestive fluidity of Edelman's writing led to condemnation of his 'relativism' by reviewers of his work in the late 1980s (Edelman 1989; Kraus and Giles 1989). To complicate matters, in common with many other political scientists who have nonetheless made major contributions to the discipline, Edelman generally eschewed overtly self-conscious public reflection on how his writings fitted into his intellectual 'biography' in a developmental sense. Thus, the approach I have adopted here derives from the essence of academic writing – that it is the published work of a writer which should stand as a record of their approach. My method has been to examine Edelman's work for its stated and unstated intellectual reference points. In my analysis there are seven distinct yet intersecting and overlapping sources of inspiration for his work that have implications for our understanding of politics in the 'information age'. They are: elite theory; philosophical pragmatism and symbolic interactionism; the social psychology of communication; social anthropology; neo-Marxist theories of ideology; post-structuralism; and aesthetics. While all of these were present from his early writings, the influence of neo-Marxism and post-structuralism largely date from one of Edelman's most important books, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (1988).

The early stages of Edelman's career were, in many respects, the heyday of political science in the USA. While most writers shared in the dramatic growth of the discipline during the 1950s and 1960s, there were, nevertheless, crucial differences of emphasis. Before Western Marxism exerted its influence on US campuses, there was a critical alternative to the mainstream pluralism of writers such as Robert Dahl (Dahl 1956), and it came in the form of 'elite theory'. Edelman's writing during the 1960s and 1970s can be situated within the set of problems identified by such writers as C. Wright Mills, William Kornhauser and E.E. Schattschneider (Mills 1956; Kornhauser 1959; Schattschneider 1960). The modern elite theorists sought to explain the supreme paradox of liberal

democratic politics: why citizens tolerate inequalities in political influence and how elites manage to convince ordinary citizens that this state of affairs is desirable. Mills's *The Power Elite* is particularly important here, not only for its theoretical sophistication, but also for its bridging of the divide between theory and empirical evidence. At the same time, Kornhauser's interpretation of modern politics as based on a division between a knowing elite and an anomic 'mass' – without the mediating civil societal structures identified by pluralists – features strongly in Edelman's writing. But the novelty of the latter's approach lies in its relatively sophisticated elaboration of how symbolism and imagery contribute to elite domination. Mills and others tended to sketch out connections between various sections of the elite – military, social, political administrative or business. Edelman, however, spent little space discussing the empirical detail of elite networks, preferring instead to mix theoretical reflection with observations about language use and symbolic imagery in 'everyday' political contexts, such as bureaucracies, courtrooms and the mass media.

Edelman's understanding of precisely how political support, or 'acquiescence', as he termed it, is manipulated and maintained by elites, has its basis in pragmatism, whose principal figures were John Dewey (1859–1952) and George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). Mead's theories of mind and the self are widely regarded as the foundation of symbolic interactionism (Mead 1930). As Edelman put it, in *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (1964), Mead's insight 'was his discovery that through a "conversation of gestures" man creates his own world. How people act, which symbols become significant and what they signify, and what there is for men to act upon are not hard "givens", but are created for individual selves through role-taking' (Edelman 1964: 185). Edelman appropriated these abstractions and applied them directly to the symbolic domains of the political in order to understand how meaning and identity is socially embedded through mutually reinforcing acts of communication. Much of this has been given a pessimistic bent, but provides an explanation of how the 'powerful and the powerless cooperate . . . to solidify each other's positions . . . ' and how 'symbolic interactions complement economic and social inequalities' (Edelman 1988: 97).

Analysis of how symbolism may be manipulated by political elites to play upon the hopes and anxieties of a mass audience can, in the twentieth century, be traced back to the influence of the British Fabian socialist, and early Professor of 'Political Psychology', Graham Wallas, whose argument about the non-rational basis of politics proved controversial, but undoubtedly influential (Wallas 1908). Edelman also borrowed and adapted reflections on the ubiquity of symbolization from Suzanne Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), as well as Lev Vygotsky's Marxist theorization of the role played by language in the construction of the self in society

(Vygotsky 1962 [1934]). However, the most immediate sources were Harold Lasswell's groundbreaking work on the social psychology of political communications of the 1930s and 1940s (Lasswell 1977 [1930]) and Freudian psychoanalysis. Not only did politicians aim to use the means of communication to play upon irrationality and emotion among the public, argued Edelman, both elites and mass were caught up in the inevitability of imperfect communication. Politicians behave in ways that ensure their political survival, and this does not usually mean communicating policy content, but instead rests upon the deployment of symbolic resources and rhetorical strategies. Yet it is political elites who benefit most from the system, since they are able to manipulate mass irrationality for their own ends. From Freudian studies of communication Edelman adapted the notion that individuals crave some kind of sensual and emotional fulfilment from politics once they have lost faith in 'the rationality of social processes'. Thus, when social scientists seek to understand symbols, they must place them in the context of human weakness. In *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (1988), Edelman wrote that symbols 'play their parts only within the context of the hopes and the fears of specific social situations. They reinforce, condense, and reify perceptions, beliefs, and feelings that grow out of such social relations as dominance and dependency, alliance and hostility, anxiety about threats, or anticipation of future well-being' (Edelman 1988:89). Thus, the weak accept their subordinate social position and adopt the values of their superiors to ensure a form of social 'safety'.

Central to these processes are political myths. In *Political Language: Words That Succeed and Policies That Fail* (1977), Edelman drew upon anthropology, especially the structuralist approach developed by Claude Levi-Strauss. This provided an explanation of how social policy was dependent upon mythical constructions of the behaviour of 'recipient' social groups, such as the poor, ethnic minorities and women. A mythical 'cognitive structure', the reproduction of which takes place in the mediated public domain, was a central reason for the failure of much social policy. Programmes designed to help those in poverty as a result of unemployment or sickness were bound to fail owing to the pejorative labels applied to such groups by politicians, administrators and the mass media. However, this cognitive structure was crucial for justifying the 'status, power and roles of the middle class, public officials and helping professionals' (Edelman 1977: 8). Edelman argued that political scientists should seek to understand the structured frameworks of meaning which provide the context of policy formulation. This requires sensitivity to how symbolic resources are deployed in institutional power struggles.

Although I have mentioned that Edelman's inception came at a time when the main division in political science was between pluralism and elite theory, by the late 1970s Marxism in its 'neo' or 'western' guise had exerted an influence. There

are obvious affinities between his analyses and the theorists of distorted communication and its contribution to social and political inequality, such as Antonio Gramsci, Jurgen Habermas and Noam Chomsky, though, curiously, there are no direct linkages with the Gramscian turn in British sociology driven by figures like Stuart Hall at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s. By the time of *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (1988), Edelman was drawing upon Gramsci's theory of hegemony, with its theorization of the dual pillars of state legitimacy in capitalist society: coercion and consent (Edelman 1988: 103–19). Nevertheless, there was always a central ambivalence in Edelman's treatment of Marxism. There are, to my knowledge, no quotations from Marx in his writings, and the references that do exist are often rather oblique, suggesting unease with an economic determinism that does not sit comfortably alongside his socio-psychological emphases.

This unease perhaps explains Edelman's attraction to post-structuralism in the 1980s, by which time it is evident that writers such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Michel Foucault had become significant for his work. In particular, the instability of meaning, the ambiguity of texts and the attention to the creative use of language in power struggles all lent themselves to Edelman's pre-existing disposition towards an anti-realist epistemology (derived from pragmatism) which denied the possibility of a 'world of events distinct from the interpretations of observers' (Edelman 1988: 95). Post-structuralism also provided Edelman with a critique of rational choice theory and other positivist influences in mainstream political science, especially in voting studies and public opinion polling. By this stage Edelman was drawing attention to the ways in which positivist social science in the form of opinion polling was converging with news-as-entertainment. This constituted an intensification of the elite-driven politics he had delineated in his earlier works. He did not go so far as to argue that reality could not be divorced from language, but instead argued that the relationship between language and 'the real' was dialectical, and always dependent upon the context of use (Chadwick 2000). Giving meaning to events through 'labelling' inevitably involved power mechanisms which, in part, shaped language use, but those mechanisms were, in turn, shaped by language itself. In Foucault's approach, individual agency is restricted by the structure which language imposes. This parallels Edelman's view of 'role taking' derived from symbolic interactionism (Edelman 1988: 112), but, as with neo-Marxism, there is little evidence that the broader 'linguistic turn' in cultural studies, particularly in its British variant, exerted a direct influence on Edelman's work. In many respects, Edelman's last book, *From Art To Politics*, was his biggest departure from the political science/ public policy framework (Edelman 1995). It borrowed much from aesthetic

theory, especially the work of Walter Benjamin and Nelson Goodman, in its exploration of how artistic categories influence public life. It is concerned with how genres derived from the world of art influence political perceptions, sometimes in emancipatory fashion, but more often in ways that (again) ensure the dominance of the political elite. Yet the most striking contribution here is the discussion of political 'settings' – the architecture and symbolic lexicon of public and private government buildings, which evoke authority and deference. This built upon an article written for the *Journal of Architectural Education* in 1978, but by 1995 it had been integrated into Edelman's theory of the links between the aesthetic and the political to produce what I consider later on to be a highly suggestive approach to the representation of politics in the symbolic domains of hypermedia. Before that, however, I want to explore Edelman's two enduring objects of analysis in more detail.

LANGUAGE AND THE SYMBOLIC DOMAINS OF POLITICS

Given his long career and eclectic theoretical underpinnings, the objects of analysis in Edelman's work remained remarkably constant. His work always focused on two distinct but interrelated areas, both of which have important implications for the analysis of politics in the Internet age: language and symbolic representation.

Since most of us experience politics in a mediated form most of the time, this inevitably introduces the role played by language in shaping perception. While this has always been the case, the intensification of mediated communication caused by the emergence of the Internet raises interesting questions about how political actors may be able to make new and different uses of political language. As a form of communication (at least until the widespread adoption of broadband connectivity) the Internet places huge burdens on the communicative power of the written word. The main emphasis in political communications literature since the 1960s has been on exploring the impact of television on citizen perceptions and cognition. The grand narrative, although obviously contested, has been about the displacement of older, supposedly superior forms of text – especially newspapers – by the over-simplified, image-centric medium of television. The curious nature of the Internet – with its mixture of words and images – points towards a new, more complex system of political mediation in future, not only because it will co-exist with existing forms of media for some time, but also because it might ultimately mean the convergence of existing media forms. In short, it requires us to bring language back in – to see its use

and manipulation in a potential digital 'meta-media' as fundamental to future political communication.

Edelman offers us a useful critical tool kit. He begins from the premise that 'it is language about political events rather than the events themselves that everyone experiences' (Edelman 1977: 142). Thus, 'political language is political reality; there is no other so far as the meaning of events to actors and spectators is concerned' (Edelman 1988: 104). It follows that political scientists must pay attention to the ways that language constructs political reality in different contexts.

In his earlier work, Edelman focused on different linguistic styles and their deployment by political, administrative and judicial elites. Making a distinction between 'hortatory', 'legal' and 'bargaining' styles, he argued that each plays a part in maintaining political support. I have discussed elsewhere how hortatory language is useful for understanding the role of rhetoric in maintaining popular support. The key point here is that linguistic content and form combine to reassure the public that they are being 'consulted' on policy. Hortatory language style – the most common form of political rhetoric, with its use of hyperbole, personalized narratives and appeals to a large audience – serve to construct meaning. The 'meaning' of hortatory political language can be found simultaneously in its substantive content, which varies from case to case, but more importantly in its conveyance of the idea that the public are being appealed to and consulted on matters of public concern; that they are not being marginalized but are central to the political process (Chadwick 2000: 297–8). As I will illustrate below, this language style, albeit in a modified form, is rapidly becoming characteristic of the 'electronic face' of government in the UK and the USA.

These ideas were further developed in Edelman's later work. In *Political Language* (1977), he drew attention to the public's need for reassurance that their political leaders are 'coping' with difficulty: 'This psychological process explains why every regime both encourages public anxiety and placates it through rhetoric and reassuring gestures' (Edelman 1977: 147). The language used by state officials gives the appearance of help, but may be disciplinary and restrictive. The long-term result was policy failure masked by the appearance of policy success (Edelman 1977: 146).

These themes were given a firm empirical grounding in an analysis of political news, which appeared in 1988. By this stage, Edelman had been influenced by post-structuralism, and although he does not use the term, it is the 'intertextual' nature of news which features strongly. Using this anti-realist approach, it is argued that news is based upon multiple layers of interpretation:

For any audience, then, an account is an interpretation of an interpretation. An adequate analysis would see it as a moment in a complex chain of interpretations, each phase of the process anticipating later interpretations and helping to shape them. Ambiguity and subjectivity are neither deviations nor pathologies in news dissemination; they constitute the political world. To posit a universe of objective events is a form of mysticism that legitimises the status quo because the interpretation that is defined as objective is likely to reflect the dominant values of the time.

(Edelman 1988: 95)

The political spectacle, as mediated by news, is dialectical. It both incorporates and excludes. It is at once a vehicle for maintaining popular support and a reminder of the powerlessness of the public, who only occupy the role of spectators. Similar in function to religious ceremonies, which convey the inaccessible might of the deity, news evokes a sense of political importance through strategic use of language. As Edelman puts it:

A set of frequently used terms also helps induce an acquiescent posture toward the acts of public officials. Words like 'public,' 'official,' 'due process of law,' 'the public interest,' and 'the national interest' have no specific referent, but induce a considerable measure of acceptance of actions that might otherwise be viewed with scepticism or hostility.

(Edelman 1988: 98)

The extent to which power relationships in politics emerge out of the symbolic properties of particular sites of interaction, or 'settings', as Edelman termed them, has often been ignored in mainstream political science. Other disciplines, such as anthropology, cultural studies and geography, to name a few, have not shared this neglect. If political scientists are to make sense of the impact of the new ICTs, they need to analyse how the new symbolic domains actually work in shaping meaning and perception. Edelman's theory offers us some useful pointers here, but it requires that we borrow some of his observations about the 'physical' worlds of public space, architecture and the ceremonial and apply them to the domain of computer-mediated communication. One might refer to the latter as the 'virtual', as a means of counter posing it against the 'real'. However, it is my argument that if we pay attention to the symbolic characteristics of politics in hypermedia, then we are essentially conducting an examination of the same dynamics in both domains. In other words, the symbolic representation which occurs in the form of political settings in the 'physical' world of buildings and ceremonies also occurs in the explicitly political zones of the Internet. Similar processes are at work in the 'face' of government in the 'virtual world' as are at work in the 'physical world'. As citizens increasingly come to interact and participate via electronic means (alongside established physical means), the

legitimizing role of government's 'electronic face' will assume great significance. But how can we begin to make sense of this phenomenon?

Drawing upon the work of Mead, Langer, Freud and Lasswell, Edelman argued that political life was based in large part upon condensation symbols. In other words, symbols have no intrinsic meaning but come to have significance as a result of what people believe; they condense a range of hopes, fears and emotions. The symbolic settings of politics are, for Edelman, never neutral; they organize and structure the types of action that it is possible for participants to pursue. These symbolic domains condition expectations about how one ought to behave in certain contexts. Thus,

> The courtroom, the police station, the legislative chamber, the party convention hall, the presidential and even the mayoral office, the battleship or chamber in which the formal offer of surrender in war is accepted all have their distinctive and dramaturgical features, planned by the arrangers and actors in the event and expected by their audiences.
>
> (Edelman 1964: 95)

Political settings are usually staged, contrived and even artificial. They often have a 'heroic quality', and are designed to signify 'massiveness, ornateness, and formality' to a large audience (Edelman 1964: 96). This allows them to function as extraordinary, dramatic spectacles which are constructed as intrinsically important, though their outcomes may lack any significance for substantive policy. Nevertheless, there must be a conjuncture between political actions and their contexts for such symbolism to work effectively. For example, the symbolic resources required for a court to function – robes, the bench, chambers, hushed tones and scholarly language – differ radically from those required in a battlefield, where urgency is conveyed by inattention to such ceremonial matters. Individuals are expected to behave differently in different symbolic contexts. Settings also influence individual psychology. Grand architectural imagery evokes in individuals a sense of belonging, of being part of a long-standing, stable order (Edelman 1964: 109). At the same time, however, the symbolic features of the large bureaucratic structures in the modern state act as a barrier to welfare claimants and those seeking information and help (Edelman 1964: 111). If political elites are successful in using such symbolic resources they are able to legitimize their actions.

The most useful and elaborate expression of this approach came in 'Architecture, Spaces and Social Order', published in 1995 as an expanded and updated version of an essay which originally appeared in the *Journal of Architectural Education* (Edelman 1995, 1978). These processes are most acute if we consider the symbolism that surrounds political executives. The architectural spaces

within which executive actions are carried out are typically grandiose enough to symbolize 'clarity, order and predictability', 'the power of the presidency and its reflection of the public will . . . reason, merit, or science' (Edelman 1995: 75). They symbolize continuity in a world of flux. Their (literally) 'monumental' character makes them different from their typical surroundings, indicating to their spectators that the inhabitants are inherently powerful, and indicating to their inhabitants that they are marked out as different from the outsiders. Thus, monumentality provides sustenance for both elites and non-elites.

Yet there is a dialectical element to this phenomenon. As Edelman contends, while public buildings demarcate, they also include. We are taught to believe in 'legislative halls, courtrooms, executive mansions, and even administrative offices as symbols of government by the people and equality before the law' (Edelman 1995: 77). It is also crucial to distinguish between the different 'faces' of the state. While the Supreme Court may evoke justice and fairness, the massive headquarters of the FBI symbolize – again dialectically – the need for a large state security apparatus to fend off internal subversion, or, for the more critical, the unaccountability and arbitrariness of the modern US federal government (Edelman 1995: 84). While public buildings present themselves in these ways, the internal processes of modern bureaucracies are themselves symbolic representations of the efficiency and remoteness of the government machine. The use of information technology to process information about individuals creates a perception of humans as 'data' to be circulated and manipulated at will. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the welfare system (Edelman 1995: 86).

Finally, Edelman's thinking about symbolic representation dealt with the ways in which electronic media contribute to a politics based upon images and narratives taken from other, often 'entertainment-led' genres, such as films, novels and art. Artistic genres are seen as short cuts to political understanding. They create and manage audience expectations, reducing the amount of 'work' texts have to perform. While art has an influence on how we view politics, at the same time, political elites use references to artistic genres as a legitimation strategy. For example, in *From Art To Politics*, Edelman discusses the impact of kitsch in evoking nostalgia and sentimentality (Edelman 1995: 29–33). As we shall see below, government's web presence is not insulated from this form of communication.

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THE ELECTRONIC FACE OF GOVERNMENT IN THE INTERNET AGE: TWO EXAMPLES

Having outlined the principal features of Edelman's contribution to understanding the role of language and symbolism in politics, I now want to suggest briefly how some of these ideas may be used to illuminate recent developments in 'e-government'. I have chosen to analyse what is arguably the most important component of the electronic face of any government: the website of its executive branch. One of the earliest and most successful examples (judged in terms of user numbers) is the US presidential site (http://www.whitehouse.gov). When Internet use began to take off in the USA during the mid-1990s, the White House site rapidly emerged as a first port of call for those seeking information about government. Its perceived ease of use and quasi-portal characteristics proved attractive. By contrast, it was not until relatively recently that the UK Prime Minister's site (http://www.number-10.gov.uk) began to assume the same functionality and popularity. The site was completely redesigned in 2000, and given an intriguing 'brand identity', which I discuss below. It has now emerged as one of the most popular government sites in the UK, and offers a much wider range of content than its US counterpart. It is curious that we often refer our students to executive websites as an information resource, but there has been relatively little critical analysis of their form and content. Much more energy has been spent to date on party websites and election campaigning. But given the symbolic (and very real) power of the executive, even in the most self-consciously liberal democratic political systems such as the USA, an examination of their electronic face reveals some potentially significant aspects of how political legitimation is reinforced through new ICTs.

At the time of this research, the US presidential site was undergoing a period of reconstruction owing to the arrival of Bush. It is likely that the site will soon develop along the same lines as its British counterpart, though the structural and constitutional differences between the two states mean that the presidential site is always likely to be less of a focal point than the British equivalent. In the USA, despite the monumentality and continuity conveyed by the White House site, the separation of powers also carries some symbolic weight. It is perhaps fitting, therefore, that the executive branch site is less ambitious. In Britain, where the new Labour government's intensification of the pre-existing tendencies towards spin-doctored, sound bite politics is now such a taken-for-granted part of national life that it is hardly commented on at all, the Strategic Communications Unit controls the executive's web presence, and it shows.

The White House home page is presented in terms that draw upon the established appeal of the architecture of the 'real' building (see figure 1). A large,
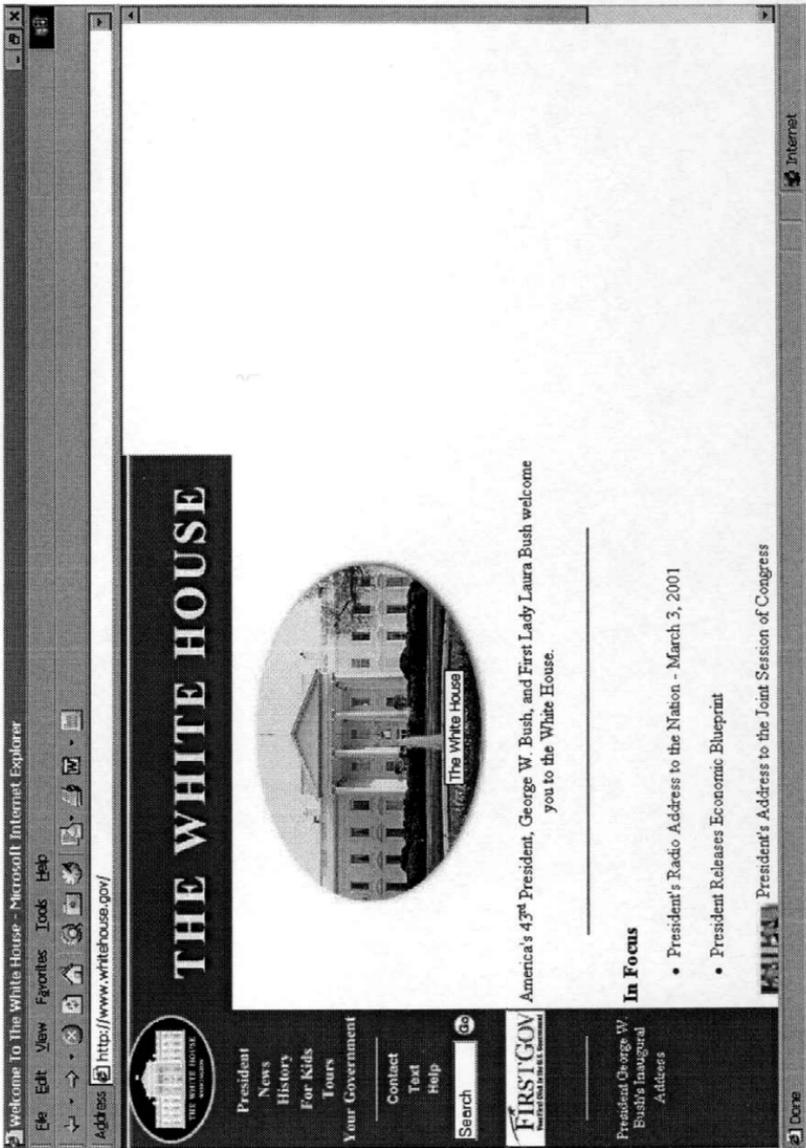
Figure 1 http://www.whitehouse.gov (5 March 2001)

oval-shaped photograph of the front of the White House, obviously the subject of simple three-dimensional graphics manipulation to make it stand out, is the most prominent feature of the page, indeed, of the whole site. Underneath is the phrase: 'America's 43rd President, George W. Bush, and First Lady Laura Bush welcome you to the White House'. Traditional colours from the US flag serve as the scheme for the site, with dark blue predominating over red and white. In this case the government's identity is established by reference to long-standing motifs: the monumentality of the building itself, the recognizable colours. These are all artefacts from the pre-web, even pre-photography era. While the overall feel of the site is uncluttered and 'clean', it is certainly not influenced by the genres of hypermedia 'modernism' that inform the design of many corporate sites, and, by way of contrast, the British prime minister's site. The element of tradition provided by the building photograph, and the more obviously official logo, which bears the inscription 'The White House, Washington', is also reinforced by the use of the Times New Roman font (which is coded to override a browser's default font) – a typeface which, though much-used on the web, first appeared in *The Times* newspaper in 1932, and has its origins in the late sixteenth century (Adobe Systems Incorporated 2001; MyFonts.com 2001).

The site is divided into seven main sections: 'President', 'News', 'History', 'For Kids', 'Tours', 'Your Government' and 'Help/Contact'. There is also a prominent link to George W. Bush's Inaugural Address, and a logo link to Firstgov, the US government 'portal' launched in 2000. The latter is again branded in blue, white and red, although a visitor to that site would soon notice a radical difference of style, with Firstgov having a much more consumer-oriented, quasi-corporate design. For the White House site, a sense of contemporaneity, but, crucially for my analysis, executive competence, is provided by a series of news bullets, which appear under an 'In Focus' heading. The audience is invited to click to the full stories, which appear with carefully selected action photographs. Full texts of selected speeches appear, as do audio streams. These stories, at the time of writing, narrate the President acting in some way – either ceremonially through the attendance of the events, or in more concrete terms as the initiator of tax reform policy in one case ('President Releases Agenda For Tax Relief – February 8, 2001'). Some of these are, in Boorstin's classic terminology, 'pseudo-events', but their status is more complex if we consider that the website's strategy, which, as we shall see, differs markedly from the equivalent in Britain, is to legitimize the presidency through reference to long-established motifs and actions 'in the real world' (Boorstin 1961). What we are seeing here is a further layer of mediation being added to previously mediated events. Here are Edelman's themes of intertextuality, monumentality and the need for public reassurance that

government is actively 'doing something' delivered in the electronic face of the US government. Also much in evidence is the use of 'hortatory' language. Although this comes in the form of reported speeches delivered at external events rather than as direct content designed for the site itself, it is also there in the form of appeals for feedback. Hortatory language forms convey the idea that the audience is being listened to, is being incorporated into the political process, irrespective of their content.

Images of the President do not appear on the site's homepage. An obvious location would be in place of the image of the White House building, but this would detract from the sense of historical continuity built up by the page, and would also undermine the distinction between office and person which is central to political legitimation in liberal democracies. The site signifies that presidents occupy the White House as a symbol of their status and power, but their position is contingent. The audience 'enters' the White House by clicking on links, and 'finds' the President 'within'. Presidential power, history and tradition are therefore condensed in the symbolic representation of the White House itself. The site's domain name reflects this. After all, why not choose 'president.gov'? Upon linking to the president's page, the audience is presented with a colour photograph and an extraordinarily detached mini-biography, narrated in the third person, which tells of Bush's political career before becoming President. Policy and beliefs feature, but are not particularly prominent. The narrator describes how Bush is 'ushering in the responsibility era in America'. The detached written style of the page again reinforces the distinction between occupant and role, and the notion of the White House building as symbolic of continuity and the website as a symbolic extension of that theme. Similar pages exist for the Vice President, Dick Cheney, and for the First Lady and wife of the Vice President, Lynne Cheney. All are narrated in the third person. Monumentality, continuity, tradition and executive competence are thus conveyed through the form and content of the site.

An examination of the British prime ministerial site, http://www.number-10.gov.uk, reveals similarities and some important differences (see figure 2). The distinction between occupant and role is similarly maintained, with the prime minister's official residence forming the leitmotif. The audience encounters the prime minister sitting within the cabinet section of the site – a nod in the direction of collective leadership.

The established symbolism surrounding 'Number 10' is invoked, with a recurring image of the building's famous front door, complete with a smiling police officer. This obviously symbolizes the authority and stability of the state, but it is combined with a 'friendly' smile – a strategy of mixing genres which may
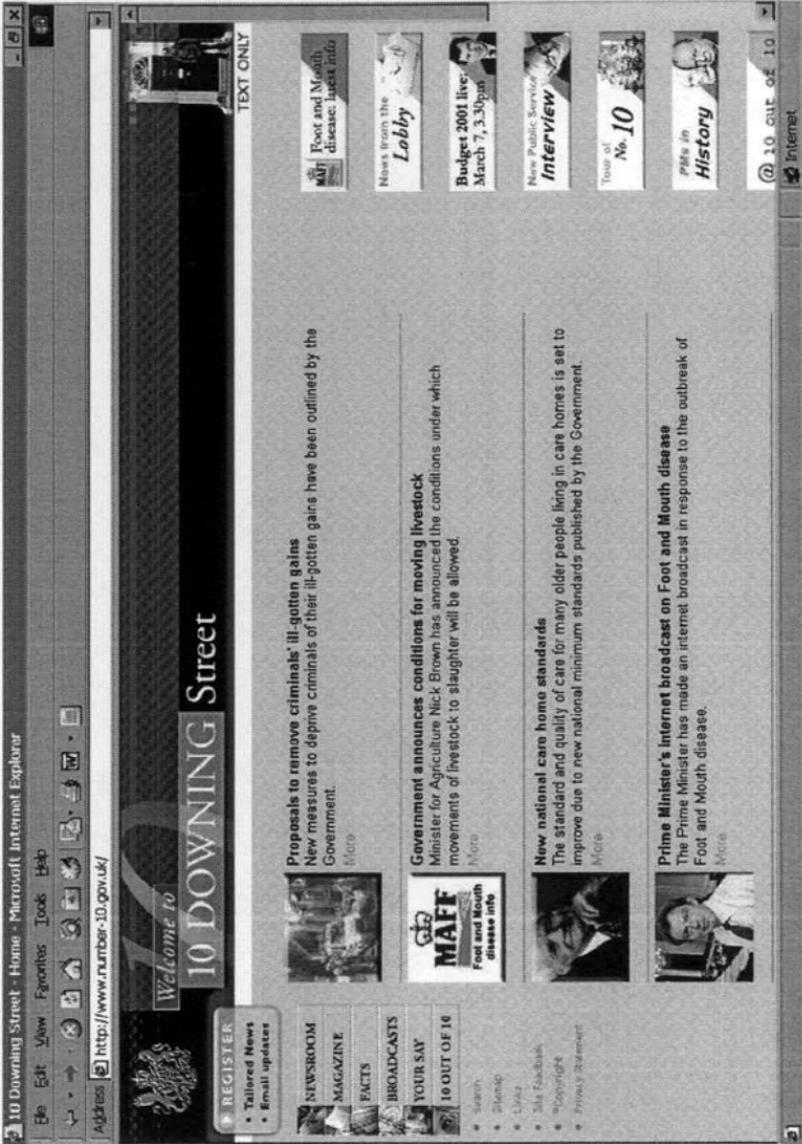
Figure 2 http://www.number-10.gov.uk (5 March 2001)

also be found on many corporate websites. The traditional symbols of the British state, the lion and the unicorn, are transformed into a logo which appears at the top of each page, while the inscription 'Welcome to 10 Downing Street' appears in Times New Roman – the font of familiar historical authority.

Yet these indicators of history, authority, power and status, sit alongside forms and content of a rather different kind. The redesigned Number 10 homepage is the entrance to a hugely expanded collection of different types of content. The main sections are 'Newsroom', 'Magazine', 'Facts', 'Broadcasts', 'Your Say' and a children's section, '10 out of 10'. The style of the site is eclectic, and has obviously been much influenced by contemporary web design, particularly with its use of small, iconic images, animated buttons, different types of font and an overall colour scheme which is not a reference to established, easily recognizable national colours, such as the red, white and blue of the British flag, but a mixture of black, beige, white and green. In other words, the site, though it makes reference to established 'real world' symbols, appears as a distinct entity in its own right; as a product of some reflection on what the web as a distinctive medium can provide rather than the 'brochureware' approach of the White House site. In all, Number 10 is a 'slicker' production, but it is also one that is the product of an obsession with presentation and 'modernization' that has emerged as a key component of the 'new' Labour government's strategy. Indeed, the site's 'look and feel' borrows heavily from the hypermedia modernism that is characteristic of 'cutting-edge' web design. Contemporary colour schemes, which differ from section to section, iconic 'lifestyle' representations, and clean lines and well-spaced presentation convey an image of vitality and modernity.

Nevertheless, Number 10 is less overt in its portrayal of executive action and competence than the White House. News bullets feature prominently on the Number 10 homepage, but they cover a more diverse range of activities and policy areas, and, at the sample time of this research, none of the stories portray the prime minister 'acting alone' in the same manner as his US equivalent. Instead, a variety of policy initiatives featuring a range of cabinet ministers are highlighted. The verbal style of the news stories is, at first glance, akin to the pillar of British public service broadcasting – BBC News. But linking deeper into the stories themselves soon reveals that they are little more than government press releases, with their characteristic features: 'The Government has unveiled its vision for a modern, efficient criminal justice system'; '£35 million pilot for pupil learning credits'; 'Courts to get new powers to tackle persistent juvenile offenders'. Thus, executive competence is reinforced, but the collective leadership of the cabinet system is the dominant approach. Competence is demonstrated through coherence and co-ordination; the Number 10 site is therefore an important

element in producing an image of government unity.

Clearly the aim of the news bulletins is also to ensure contemporaneity. Indeed, the portal characteristics of Number 10 make it appear to have been designed as a user's browser 'home page'. This may be an excessively optimistic assumption on the part of the prime minister's press office. However, its significance should not be underestimated. The wide variety of audience experiences available on the site make it much more likely that users will click around rather than click through, as is likely to be the case with the White House site. Governments have always been in the business of self-publishing, but the web makes it much easier to reach a mass audience with news items that would otherwise have to be channelled through the media. The site offers a customized e-mail update service for users who register, and, at the time of this research, provided a quickly updated information section on the farming crisis caused by the outbreak of 'foot and mouth' disease. Government engaging with 'ordinary' individual web surfers as a direct information provider is a new development, and one that is more likely to be achieved with Number 10 than with the White House as it currently stands. Hortatory language styles predominate on Number 10, just as they do on the White House site.

Both of these executive sites do, of course, feature elements that are electronic translations of the average tourist experience. The White House site has its historical essays on the building and its previous incumbents; Number 10 has similar sections. Visitors to the 'real' buildings would be treated to the same thing. However, what is striking, particularly about the British site, is the extent to which 'lifestyle' content, most of which borrows heavily from 'glossy' magazine genres, is intertwined with political forms and content. Thus, the 'Tour Of The Rooms' at Number 10 is reminiscent of an aspirational 'interiors' magazine, and even provides 'panoramic' technology which allows the audience to 'look around' the rooms. Yet the aesthetic description of the rooms is mixed with selected historical observations about their former occupants, safely sanitized down to the level of building materials, but still symbolically powerful. Consider this extraordinary paragraph taken from the description of the Cabinet Room:

> The 23 chairs are the same ones used by Gladstone and Disraeli in the reign of Queen Victoria. Of the set, only the Prime Minister's chair has arms. Some of the silver on the table was presented to the house by President Ronald Reagan. A solid gold sword, presented by the Emir of Kuwait, rests near the window. Those windows are now made of glass three inches thick – a precaution taken following the 1991 mortar attack which shattered the glass.

The '1991 mortar attack' was conducted by the IRA, and came at the depths of

the Northern Ireland crisis of the early 1990s. The White House makes similar cultural raids upon established 'lifestyle' and entertainment genres, but it is less pronounced, and mainly revolves around the children's section, 'For Kids'. Nevertheless, the portrayal of the assumption of stable family relationships permeates the site, and constitutes awareness that many adults may be shown the site by their more net-literate children. In both cases, what can be observed here are classic instances of entertainment genres bleeding into political genres, in much the same way as Edelman describes in *From Art To Politics*. The overall effect is to deflect attention from the reality of executive power and channel the presentation of government into 'safer' areas.

If entertainment genres help to produce a sanitized version of government, then this is only intensified by the presence of the kind of kitsch that can be found all over the Internet in 2001. The cult of the family homepage, with its ubiquitous sections on household pets, is very much alive and well in the electronic face of government. Visitors to Number 10 are invited to find out about its famous animal occupants, past and present. As for the White House, the Clintons' celebrity cat, 'Socks', has been replaced by the Bush's rather less charismatic creatures. Taking pleasure in self-publication has long been one of the most popular uses of the Internet, and government is not immune from its characteristic practices. The former British 'e-envoy', Alex Allan, when briefly in charge of Labour's e-government drive, was happy to link from his government pages to his and his partner's 'personal' homepage (http://www.whitegum.com), with its 'Grateful Dead Song and Lyric Finder', Holly the dog, and picture of him windsurfing on the River Thames.

The executive websites of two of the most advanced countries (in terms of Internet use) reveal the potential for governments to become self-publicists in ways that have previously been unavailable. Disintermediation in the economy is being mirrored in politics. The symbolic architecture of a government's Internet presence is likely to be just as important in the future as it has been in the past, but the emerging techniques point to a more complex relationship between rulers and ruled, one that will be based upon immediacy of contact, a more direct appeal to lifestyle concerns and entertainment values. It has often been argued that the Internet will empower citizens by providing access to information, and there is no doubt that the sheer volume of government information now available online is immense. But aside from structural issues like the 'digital divide', the underlying dynamics of elite driven politics are not going to change overnight, if at all. 'Hortatory' language, for instance, characteristic of political leaders seeking to establish a link with their audience, is both intensified and curiously modified in the electronic face of government, because the citizen actively seeks

information. The relatively (though never completely) passive consumption of political language is replaced by a process in which the citizen becomes an active pursuant. Yet there must be information to pursue, and this is controlled and filtered by government itself. Citizens are brought 'closer' to government through their online 'discoveries', but their interactions with its electronic face are very much on government's own terms.

These sites, especially the British prime minister's, are also typical of the 'infotainment' genres which are fast becoming the stock-in-trade of the more commercial frontiers of the web. That governments are now able to exploit audience recognition of such genres is indicative of the dialectical nature of legitimation identified by Edelman. We are at once in awe of government, and are keen to see the symbolic representation of its power and competence. But we want government to be 'ours' and 'like us'. We want our lifestyle interests reflected and our craving for information and entertainment satisfied by government websites in much the same ways as we would any other site.

CONCLUSION

The Internet has spawned a new electronic face of government, but one which exhibits many of the features identified as central to political legitimation by Murray Edelman. My analysis of the symbolic forms and content of the UK prime minister's site illustrates a likely future direction for e-government. The rather amateurish, patchy and utilitarian websites of the last three or four years are quickly being replaced by a more professional approach, which ties in with broader government communications strategies. This is undoubtedly a product of the general increase in Internet usage among electorates, but it also represents an increasing awareness of the properties of the web as a medium and how this may contribute to the symbolic dimension of government activity.

The explosive growth of the Internet during the last five years has undoubtedly had an impact on the conduct of politics. But we are only just beginning to appreciate the inevitable balance between continuity and change. Governments will always need support, and the maintenance of support is not always dependent upon rational calculation and the electoral mechanism. Legitimation is a process. It is ongoing, and elite strategies mutate over time. It has been my argument here that much of what Edelman has been writing about for the last forty years or so is highly relevant for the Internet age. This is not, however, to state that there is 'nothing new under the sun'. Equally, I am not arguing that the content of legitimation strategies are constant, and that it is only their forms that have changed. This would be to miss one of Edelman's central points – that form and

content cannot be separated in some arbitrary fashion. The Internet is a new medium, with properties which undoubtedly draw upon other media, but which, when melted together, make up something rather different. Edelman's work, if suitably 'borrowed', informs us that the Internet offers political elites many opportunities to intensify and diversify the ways in which they sustain themselves in positions of power. The challenge for social scientists is to interpret and explain how these trends may undermine attempts to use new media to reduce political inequality.

One of the more curious features of Edelman's writing was his relative inattention to the structural determinants of communication and how the coming together of technological and economic forces condition the forms of political mediation. This is an obvious criticism of his work, and one that could easily be made by those working within a political economy paradigm. Undoubtedly Edelman's neglect of economic structures means that he had relatively little to say about the historical development of technological forms, nor did he write explicitly of the domination of corporate structures in contemporary media. It is, however, possible to turn this kind of criticism around, and argue that the major weakness of 'materialist' analyses of technology and the media is their relative inattention to the fine-grained psychological, symbolic and linguistic forces which must be understood if we are to assess the importance of any communication process. Indeed, it is possible to go further still, and defend Edelman on the grounds that his work may be situated within broadly the same problematic as the British writer, Raymond Williams, whose 'cultural material-ism' speaks of a world in which economic, cultural and ideational entities all have material consequences (Williams 1977). Borrowing from Murray Edelman to understand politics in the Internet age certainly requires some work of translation. But doing so, in the manner I have demonstrated here, makes it possible to imagine that even in cyberspace there will always be a symbolic architecture of power.

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