



**EuroPCom 2015**  
**Session 1 report**  
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### **Under pressure: how politicians respond to public pressure**

**Per Schlingmann**, advisor and communications consultant, former secretary of state, chief strategist and secretary of the Swedish moderate party, gave a keynote speech and shared his thoughts on the modern political communication landscape, taking cues from experience in his native Sweden. Moderated by Berlin-based blogger and consultant **Jon Worth**, the session looked at recent changes in the media landscape, the challenges now faced by politicians and how they might best respond to these, as well as public pressure.

With only a quick assessment of the political communication landscape, one can easily highlight vast changes, even in just the last two and a half years. The rise of social media has changed the communication paradigm from one of mass communication to a multitude of conversations that must be listened to, understood and engaged with.

While these changes present a number of challenges, the technological advances that drove them mean politicians (and companies) have never been better positioned to understand individuals and public pressure, although the multitude of communications also means there is a much lower threshold for influencing public discourse. The challenge for politicians is that they must assess how and who to interact with.

Central to responding to this new reality, **Per Schlingmann** argued, is a clear long-term strategy, which provides a framework around which a politician can make decisions. It also helps determine which pressure groups to interact with, by analysing the pressure group's goals and their long-term implications.

Furthermore, a strategy helps define whether a politician is an opinion leader or follower, although whatever the case, it is important to listen to public opinion, including following popular music and television. Intuition plays an important role here and politicians must have an intuitive grasp of public opinion, in order to navigate the uncertainty of politics.

While each politician will most likely find their own way of listening, if they are proactive enough, they can also find a way to have a dialogue. By being reactive in digital media a politician will also strengthen their image, either by being seen to care about an issue or by creating a genuine emotional connection with the public that sees them as more than just a politician. Indeed, the time has never been better for a politician to define their own media.

So too, the rise in digital engagement means that face-to-face meetings become less frequent, though following the rules of supply and demand, their value increases. The flip side to more digital engagement is greater vulnerability to crises; **Mr Schlingmann** can count five to ten that have resulted from careless tweeting...

In choosing which pressure groups to listen to (and which path to follow), there is a clear difference between public opinion and the implied policy. The choices that are made must reflect what a politician would like to achieve in the long term.



**Mr Schlingmann** quoted the example of the Swedish government's response to public pressure to bail out a Swedish car manufacturer during the height of the debt crisis. While he expected strong fallout from the decision not to bail out the car maker, he actually found that it met with little resistance. For him, this underlined the difference between acting to be loved in the short term versus being respected in the long term.

However, the importance of listening to public opinion was also underlined for him by the 2006 election when their opposition had a better policy in one area and many inside his party argued that this must be addressed. In the event, he listened to what was happening outside the party; public discourse was focusing on other issues. No change in their policy was needed and the lesson was to not only listen to whoever is at your door at the time.

He also noted a particular strategy for listening to public opinion, that of the Swedish Prime Minister during his time as Secretary of State of Communication for the Prime Minister. Fredrik Reinfeldt decided that one day a week would be set aside for travelling around Sweden to meet with the public. At first, this looked set to be a major headache but their team soon realised it could be a major asset. These visits became themed, structured and valuable for both the Prime Minister and those he met. The time with the public also allowed their communications team to find the right words and phrases to connect with the general public.

From the point of view of a pressure group, there are a number of ways to improve their chances of success. Firstly, pressure groups should provide politicians with solutions, not just criticism. Secondly, their campaigns should be timely; it's difficult to influence the news cycle and 90% of pressure groups try to push their message at the wrong time. Thirdly, the message must be framed as more than just self-interest. Only when action is in the public interest will a politician be able to get on board.

The session closed with the following issues: while public opinion is still a very abstract term, the modern political communication landscape offers politicians plenty of opportunities to influence it. Creating a movement is no longer about saying 'I'm right' but 'we have common values'. For politicians, this means selling their 'unique improvement point': being clear on what they want to accomplish but open to the tools to achieve it. A further benefit of the new reality is that although engagement with traditional media remains important, digital engagement allows a politician to be both open to different perspectives and able to frame an issue to suit their own ends.