

# Lynton Crosby and the Dark Arts of Democracy

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Lynton Crosby's model of political campaigning poses a threat to democracy. Or so I suspect. In this chapter, I will attempt to make this case.<sup>1</sup>

Who is Lynton Crosby? He is an Australian political strategist, perhaps best known for a couple of manoeuvres: dog-whistles and the dead-cat strategy. I will say something about these manoeuvres, but for the most part, I want to discuss his broader approach, which involves focussed polling and targeting of swing voters, and the avoidance of debate.

I will begin by outlining the basic contours of his approach (§1), before considering what I think is problematic about it (§2). I contend that Crosby *manipulates* the electorate, through unconsciously influencing voters, and that he looks to avoid debate. I lay out both these features of his approach and make the case that there is something anti-democratic about them. I end by offering some general remarks about democracy and the media (§3).

Through doing all of this, I hope to draw attention to Crosby's methods, and to bring out what is worrying about them.

## I. Research, Strategy, Results

Crosby's main partner is Mark Textor, an exceptional pollster. Together they run the Crosby Textor Group, whose tag line is "Research, Strategy, Results". Let's begin with their research.

### I.1 Sultans of Swing

Crosby and Textor run lots of focus groups and polls. They are interested in what they call 'soft' swing voters – those who are politically undecided, uninformed and indifferent.<sup>2</sup> They use polls and focus groups to find a way to leverage these soft swing voters towards their candidate.

I first encountered this strategy in New Zealand, where Crosby and Textor ran a divisive, but effective campaign for the right-wing National party in 2005. They ended up losing that election, but won the next three using similar methods. They have also helped win multiple elections in Australia and the 2015 and 2017 general elections in the UK.

In this section of the paper, I will use the 2005 election in New Zealand to illustrate their approach, in large part because there is an excellent resource for this. A lot of what Crosby and Textor do is kept behind closed doors. However, in 2005 some members of New

Zealand's National party felt uncomfortable with (amongst other things) Crosby and Textor's approach, and leaked numerous key documents to an investigative journalist, Nicky Hager.<sup>3</sup> Hager's book *The Hollow Men* provides a detailed account of Crosby and Textor's strategy, and in what follows, I want to relay some of that.

Crosby and Textor look for things they can leverage from soft swing voters. In 2005, the incumbent Prime Minister of New Zealand (Helen Clark) was much more popular than their candidate (Don Brash). They asked soft swing voters the following question:

[...] regardless of your overall view of Helen Clark, what would you acknowledge are her weaknesses at the moment, even if they are slight or begrudging weaknesses?  
(Crosby/Textor in Hager (2006: 163))

These voters typically liked Helen Clark. Crosby and Textor set out to find if there was *anything* that could be used against her. The thought is that, once found

[...] even slight and 'begrudging' feelings, that only came to mind 'once probed', could potentially be sown and cultivated more widely (Hager 2006: 163)

And of course, *something* is bound to show up. Here is what they found:

One of the new learnings from this wave of qualitative research is an emerging perception that Helen Clark is too busy with "minorities" and "other people" to worry about the concerns and pressures on "working families". (Textor and Dominatrik in Hager (2006: 163))

But, as Hager (2006: 163) remarks "they did not pretend these were strong feelings." The report states:

It must be stressed that this sentiment is embryonic and must be consistently demonstrated and leveraged if it is to be effective [...] These perceptions will not exist and mature on their own. (Textor and Dominatrik in Hager (2006: 163))

## 1.2 OneVision

Crosby then puts this to work.<sup>4</sup> He forges a simple narrative based upon these polls and focus groups. This narrative will cultivate and sow these negative sentiments about their opponent (or positive sentiments about their own candidate). With Helen Clark, they pushed the idea that she was "focussed on the "noisy" minorities at the expense of hard working New Zealanders" (Hager 2006: 164).

Crosby is famous for insisting that everyone sticks to his chosen narrative. Other issues are unhelpful distractions – what he calls "barnacles on the boat".<sup>5</sup> It is important to not get distracted by other issues, or to engage in debate. What matters is repeating this narrative, over and over again, using it to leverage soft swing voters his way. Crosby is notoriously strict on this, and will send furious text messages to anyone who deviates from his line. But apparently he has a lighter touch too, playing Queen's One Vision in the campaign room to reinforce his strategy.<sup>6</sup>

Earlier, I noted that the tag line for the Crosby Textor Group was “Research, Strategy, Results”. We’ve now seen the first two: they run polls and focus groups to determine how they could sway soft swing voters; construct a narrative around this; and then get their party to focus on repeating this narrative over and over again. As for *results*, what Crosby wants is a short-term reaction from soft swing voters – just long enough to get their votes. And he is good at this.

## 2.A Threat to Democracy?

I already laid my cards on the table with the first sentence of this paper. I suspect there is something anti-democratic about this approach. Here’s a first stab at what this might be: Crosby’s techniques seem to *manipulate* the electorate. The basic thought is that democracy involves respecting peoples’ values, beliefs and interests, and in manipulating the electorate, Crosby threatens this.

This is my worry. At this stage it remains fairly vague. In the next few sections, I want to consider a few responses to this worry, and in doing so, I hope to draw out what is specifically problematic about Crosby’s approach.

The responses that I will consider claim that there’s nothing wrong with what Crosby does: (§2.1) he merely plays for the other team; (§2.2) if anything, his methods are ultra-democratic; and finally (§2.3) what he does is just regular political advertising.

### 2.1 The Other Team

Let’s begin with a very basic response to my worry:

There’s nothing wrong with Crosby’s research or strategy, you just disagree with his results. And this is because you are on the other side of the political spectrum. What if a left-wing party researched what could sway swing voters to them, constructed a simple narrative around this, and used it to get into power? Surely you’d be delighted! And this goes to show that your objection is not with Crosby’s research or strategy, you’re just jealous of his results. You don’t like the fact he plays for the other team.

Of course there is nothing wrong with polling swing voters and attempting to construct a narrative that will get them to vote for you in itself. However, Crosby does more than this. The worry is that his strategy involves manipulating voters, and that is problematic and could be undemocratic, no matter which team employs it.

Here it is worth noting that, as a matter of fact, it isn’t only supporters of the other team who object to Crosby.<sup>7</sup> As noted earlier, Nicky Hager received most of his material for his book through various leaks from members of the National party in New Zealand, who felt uncomfortable with Crosby/Textor and their methods. And we have recently seen similar things in the United Kingdom. Tim Montgomerie, for instance, claims that:

Crosby's political recipe might be enough to beat Ed Miliband. It's not enough to build a Conservative party that deserves to win elections or to stop the decline of faith in our political system. (Montgomerie 2015)

## 2.2 Ultra-democracy

How can I claim Lynton Crosby is anti-democratic, you might ask? If anything, it appears the opposite. Crosby finds out what matters to voters, and with his excellent polling, perhaps manages to do so better than anyone else in history. This isn't anti-democratic, it's *ultra-democratic*!

As an example, consider Crosby's own account of the 2010 and 2015 elections in the UK. Labour published a 35-page report on why it lost the 2015 UK election, which identified "failure to shake off the myth that we were responsible for the financial crash and therefore failure to build trust in the economy" as a key reason for their defeat.<sup>8</sup> Here's Crosby himself on this:

Now, I think that's quite an arrogant thing to say, [...] It's arrogant because it deliberately ignores what voters have effectively said at two consecutive general elections.

They weren't saying that Labour overspending caused the failure of the global financial system. What they were saying is that Labour overspending meant Britain wasn't well equipped when the financial crisis hit.

The point is, the voters have spoken and they have made their judgment – not once but twice – and in a democracy their view is the most important (Crosby in Sparrow 2016)

Crosby presents himself as an advocate of democracy here. What matters, he says – what is most important – are voters' views.

Hager disagrees, not about the importance of voters' views, but about Crosby's respect for democracy.

The defining character of these techniques is that they attempt to get voters to act in ways that might not be in accord with their interests or even beliefs. The aim is not good policy, or leadership that unifies a country; the objective is manipulating enough voters, at the right time, so that their clients can achieve power.

These techniques show little respect for the citizens concerned. The research sets out to unearth 'prompted perceptions', 'embryonic perceptions' and even just 'hesitations' that can be turned into ways to influence them. The aim is not to understand what these people might believe in and hope for. It is purely and openly about manipulation. (Hager 2006: 164-65)

Hager is right. Indeed, this is precisely how Crosby and Textor sell themselves. Recall the following:

It must be stressed that this sentiment is embryonic and must be consistently demonstrated and leveraged if it is to be effective [...] These perceptions will not exist and mature on their own. (Textor and Dominatrik in Hager (2006: 163))

That's why you hire Crosby and Textor!

In the 2015 election, they found that certain soft swing voters (in key marginal constituencies) could be leveraged to mistrust Labour on the economy. They then associated Labour's supposed over-spending with the unrelated financial crash, whilst also emphasising that the Conservative Party had a *long-term economic plan*.<sup>9</sup> This was the narrative they ran with, and they repeated it relentlessly, until they managed to get this to leverage certain soft swing voters. This is not respect for voters' voices. This is manipulating voters to voice a specific claim, and then claiming respect for voters' voices.

### 2.3 Mad Men

So far, I have claimed that Crosby manipulates voters, and that this makes his approach undemocratic. In this section, I want to go into a little more depth on this, through considering another available response. The response is that what Crosby does is essentially just advertising. Advertising often works to influence people, and often does so in ways that the audience is unaware of.<sup>10</sup> And the use of advertising techniques is commonplace in politics.<sup>11</sup> So maybe Crosby does manipulate voters, but perhaps this is commonplace and not a threat to democracy.

I want to address this through considering some of Jennifer Saul's recent work on dog-whistles. Dog whistle politics, at their most basic, involve acts of communication that contains two distinct messages: one that comes from taking the act of communication at face value, and another that does not. This can be used to say two different things through one act of communication, and typically includes saying unpalatable or offensive things that do not appear at face-value (and thus can be disavowed), but which are also picked up by the relevant targeted audience. An example is the use of 'inner city' in political discourse in the United States. As Saul notes:

In the United States, 'inner city' has come to function as a dogwhistle for *black*. Thus, politicians who would be rebuked if they called for harsher measures against black criminals can safely call for cracking down on inner city crime. (Saul 2018: 367)

There is a lot of interesting philosophical and linguistic analysis being done on dog whistles, and the subtle differences between the different ways in which they operate,<sup>12</sup> but I will not consider this further here. Instead, I want to look at the implications of dog-whistles and Saul's analysis of them for Crosby's strategy more generally.

Goodwin and Saward (2005) have explored the democratic significance of Crosby's use of dog-whistles. They argue that, that in using dog-whistles, Crosby undercuts any democratic mandate he might secure. Here is their key claim:

In order to secure a mandate to implement any policy in particular, candidates must first tell people what specific policy or policies they propose to implement if elected. Only then can they claim to have some special mandate to implement that policy in particular (as opposed to 'rule' more generally), [...] Politicians engaging in dog whistle politics are doing almost the opposite of that. They are not telling everyone what specific policies they propose to implement if elected. Instead, they tell one group of voters one thing, while allowing (and indeed, encouraging) another group to believe another. If they win the election on the basis of such mixed messages, what does their victory add up to in substantive policy terms? Nothing, we suggest. (Goodwin and Saward 2005: 472-73)

Saul considers the general thought that unconsciously affecting voters' choices might undermine democratic mandates. And she writes the following:

Human psychology being what it is, being unaware of one's reason for making a voting decision is surely widespread. People are unaware of the extent to which, for example, their decision of which socks to buy is based on the location of the socks on the table.

It stands to reason that people would be unaware of the degree to which they are influenced by music in a commercial, subtleties of tone or body language, being reminded of a loved (or hated!) one, and so on. If such lack of awareness of influences were enough to undermine democratic authority, we would need to give up all hope of democracy. (Saul 2018: 379-80)

Her thought is that a lack of awareness of influences is part of the human condition, and thus by itself, cannot be enough to undermine a democratic mandate. She then turns to the specific case of (what she calls) *covert dog-whistles*:

In covert dogwhistle cases, people make decisions on the basis of reasons that they would reject if they became aware of them—as we know from what happens when they are raised to consciousness. Moreover, they do this as a result of being deliberately manipulated. This looks, on the face of it, much more like a threat to democratic mandates. (Saul 2018: 380)

However, she still resists the thought that this would undermine a democratic mandate. She writes:

But if this is sufficient to undermine a mandate, then once more there may in fact be no mandates. What voter, after all, thinks that they *should* base their vote on music played during a campaign commercial, or on a candidate's physical appearance? And yet, all that we know about psychology suggests that factors like these are sure to impact voter choices. And all that we know about the running of campaigns (and about advertising more generally) tells us that things like this are bound to be used by campaign operatives to deliberately manipulate the voters. Being influenced by factors that we don't think should influence us is, it seems to me, an inevitable part of the human condition. And, since this is relatively widely known, using such factors to influence others will also be a standard feature of human life. If this is sufficient to undermine democratic mandates, then there are no democratic mandates. (Saul 2018: 380)

Saul suggests that our being manipulated and influenced in ways we are unaware of is inevitable, and not in itself sufficient to undermine democratic mandates. Now if Saul is correct, then maybe I would have to retract my opening statement. I may not like him, and there might be other grounds on which I could object to his techniques, but perhaps Lynton Crosby is not a threat to democracy.

I think there are roughly two ways in which I can press on with my initial charge. The first would be to find something about what Crosby does that is different *in kind* from advertising in general and pinpoint *that* as the threat to democracy. The second would be to claim that what Crosby does is not different in kind, but different *in degree*, and to such a degree that he *is* a threat to democracy.

I am tempted to opt for both responses. I'll begin with the second.

## 2.4 Influence and Inevitability

We can formulate Saul's position as follows:

**S:** If lack of awareness of influences is enough to undermine a democratic mandate, then (because covert influences are inevitable) there are no democratic mandates.

Saul claims that some (covert) influences are inevitable. And given this, we shouldn't think that lack of awareness of influences is enough to undermine democracy. Indeed, if that were the case, human beings – being susceptible to influence in the ways that we are – would be incapable of democracy.

This seems correct, but I want to add a simple suggestion: these things are a matter of degree. There are degrees of influence and there are also degrees of democracy.

We can then offer the following variant on her claim:

**SI:** If lack of awareness of *some* influences is enough to undermine a democratic mandate, then (because *some* covert influences are inevitable) there are no democratic mandates.

I agree with Saul that this seems false. But consider the following variant:

**S2:** If lack of awareness of *widespread major* influences is enough to undermine a democratic mandate, then (because *widespread major* covert influences are inevitable) there are no democratic mandates.

I want to say two things here.

Firstly, while *some* influences are inevitable, that does not mean that we should accept *any* degree of covert influence as inevitable. Indeed, we should look to safeguard ourselves against this. It might be inevitable that we are susceptible to *some* covert influences, but we

don't need to accept it as inevitable that our political system will be heavily determined by such things.

This happens to be the upshot of Hager's analysis:

The Crosby/Textor-style campaign tactics may be manipulative but, as John Howard's four wins in Australia demonstrate, they can work, by producing a short-term reaction from the so-called soft voters that can swing elections. So, does this mean that we must accept this type of political manipulation as an inevitable part of politics? The answer is no. (Hager 2006: 167)

Hager then goes on to outline two ways in which we could resist it:

The first response should be publicity and criticism. If enough people recognise and understand the tactics, naming them for what they are, they can be counter-productive and backfire. No one likes being obviously manipulated. Second, people within parties can insist on higher standards and take a long term view. (Hager 2006: 167)

We saw something like this in the 2017 election in the UK, where Theresa May's "strong and stable" soundbite was itself put into the spotlight, to the extent that the Tories' constant repeating of it seemed to be counterproductive.<sup>13</sup> This is one way of responding to Crosby's approach. But the more general point is that we do not need to take Crosby's kind of politics as inevitable. (I will say something more about this in the final two sections of this paper.)

Secondly, returning to the second variant of Saul's claim:

**S2:** If lack of awareness of *widespread major* influences is enough to undermine a democratic mandate, then (because *widespread major* covert influences are inevitable) there are no democratic mandates.

As I have just argued, I don't think that we have to accept widespread major covert influences as inevitable. However, I think that *if* these influences *are* major and widespread, then they *do* pose genuine threats to democracy.

Part of what makes democracy special is that it is government by the people. We are not just governed, in some sense we govern ourselves; we determine and consent to the laws that govern us. This is the ideal of collective autonomy. But in order for this consent to be valid, it needs to be informed. In order for us to be collectively autonomous, we need to know what we are voting for such that we can make an informed decision in line with our values, interests, and beliefs.<sup>14</sup> And Lynton Crosby poses a threat to this. Recall Hager:

The defining character of these techniques is that they attempt to get voters to act in ways that might not be in accord with their interests or even beliefs. [...] the objective is manipulating enough voters, at the right time, so that their clients can achieve power. (Hager 2006: 164)

If Crosby's techniques influence us to such an extent that we are no longer making informed decisions in line with our values, interests and beliefs, then he does pose a threat to democracy.



Sadly, I think we live in something close to this world. As such, I am tempted to bite on the antecedent of the previous conditional: there are widespread major covert influences to our decision making, and they do pose a threat to democracy.

## 2.5 Democracy and Debate

I also think that some of the strategies that Crosby employs might be different *in kind* from general political advertising. In particular, I suspect that Crosby's approach to debate is anti-democratic.

Crosby is not interested in debate. He is interested in winning, and he thinks the best way to do that is to repeat the same focussed message that he hopes will stick in soft swing voters' minds. This is what Crosby insists on – One Vision. And he actively discourages debate when it distracts from this, or in general, when it counts against his candidate.

Here are two examples. The first is a now relatively well-known passage from Boris Johnson:

Let us suppose you are losing an argument. The facts are overwhelmingly against you, and the more people focus on the reality the worse it is for you and your case. Your best bet in these circumstances is to perform a manoeuvre that a great campaigner describes as “throwing a dead cat on the table, mate”.

That is because there is one thing that is absolutely certain about throwing a dead cat on the dining room table – and I don't mean that people will be outraged, alarmed, disgusted. That is true, but irrelevant. The key point, says my Australian friend, is that everyone will shout “Jeez, mate, there's a dead cat on the table!”; in other words they will be talking about the dead cat, the thing you want them to talk about, and they will not be talking about the issue that has been causing you so much grief. (Johnson 2013)

Crosby and Johnson know they will sometimes lose arguments, that the facts are sometimes against them, “and the more people focus on the reality the worse it is for you and your case” (Johnson 2013). Not to worry though, they have techniques for avoiding such things – throwing a dead cat on the table!

Here's Sam Delaney on how this played out in the 2015 election in the UK:

On 9 April 2015, 10 days into the election campaign, defence secretary Michael Fallon launched a brutal attack on Labour leader Ed Miliband. Suggesting that Miliband would scrap the Trident nuclear deterrent in order to strike an electoral deal with the Scottish National party, Fallon told the Times: “Miliband stabbed his own brother in the back to become Labour leader. Now he is willing to stab the United Kingdom in the back to become prime minister.”

Until this point, Labour's campaign had been gaining momentum: some polls had them narrowly ahead of the Tories and Miliband's pledge to crack down on nondomicile tax avoidance was dominating the headlines. Fallon's attack seemed crude and uncalled

for. Many commentators suggested that it would backfire. They were wrong. (Delaney 2016)

Delaney continues:

For the next 24 hours, media attention switched away from Labour's clampdown on tax loopholes and towards Fallon's outburst. The veterans at M&C Saatchi, the Conservative party's primary ad agency, were increasingly impressed by their new campaign boss. (Delaney 2016)

The dead cat strategy, as Johnson tells us, is openly about avoiding debate. And it can be effective.

This is something that parts of the right have come to excel at. Often, they do not want to discuss policy. They know that their opponents' policies are often more popular with the electorate, and so instead they look to distract people from these policies, if need be, with dead cats.<sup>15</sup>

Here is another example from the 2015 election in the UK. It was reported that Crosby wanted to keep Cameron out of the leaders' debates. Here's an unnamed source on Crosby's view:

The public think Ed Miliband is weird so why give him a chance to dissuade them of that opinion through the debates. Miliband might even be quite good at them – surely much better to have weeks of pictures of Cameron on industrial sites and factories talking about economic growth. (Boffey 2014)

People saw Cameron as prime-ministerial and didn't view Ed Miliband this way. As such, Cameron had little to gain from the debates, and Crosby did his best to keep him out of them. And he did a similar thing with Theresa May in 2017. Part of this is a strategy to make his leaders look strong and prime-ministerial, above the squabbling of the other parties (the coalition of chaos).

This disregard for debate makes Crosby's practices different *in kind* from general political advertising. It's not just that he is trying to unconsciously influence voters, it's that he's also willing to bypass debate, an important element of the democratic process.

Why is debate an important element of the democratic process? In his work on democracy and public deliberation, Cristiano notes that public deliberation embodies a number of fundamental values. These include the following:

[...] the process of public deliberation is a public realization of equality to the extent that the process is reasonably egalitarian. Citizens' abilities to receive hearings for their views are not undermined by a skewed distribution of wealth or power. (Cristiano 2008: 190)

We live in a world marked by gross inequalities of wealth and power, and debate can help can help safe guard against this. Elsewhere, I have argued for the following fairly simple claim: the healthier the discussion of political parties, advertising and campaigns, the healthier the democracy.<sup>16</sup>

What does this mean? In brief, a healthy democracy would involve political advertisements and campaigns being discussed and debated, in a way that is informative to citizens. This would involve transparency, with the political media tracking, challenging and fact-checking political advertisements and campaigns. Such a democracy would allow voters the chance to authentically form and shape their values, interests and beliefs, and to vote according to them. In actively seeking to avoid political debate – and instead insisting upon the repeating the same brief message over and over again in an attempt to leverage soft swing voters – Lynton Crosby poses a threat to this.

In summary, there are two anti-democratic elements to Crosby's strategies. The first involves an unhealthy *degree* of unconsciously influencing voters. The second concerns Crosby's propensity to avoid debate. The first prevents us from realising goals that we explicitly or consciously will, whereas the second prevents us from authentically forming our values, interests and beliefs in the first place.<sup>17</sup> And both of these pose threats to democracy.

### 3. Democracy and the Media

Over the course of this chapter, I have argued that Lynton Crosby poses a threat to democracy. In this final section, I want to end by briefly saying something a bit broader about democracy and the media.

Earlier I mentioned that democracy comes in degrees. A healthy democracy would involve an informed educated citizenship rationally discussing policies, with the power to implement them.

A healthy democracy would also involve something like *equal political power*. At its most basic, we each only get one vote. Democracy requires this equal political power. And to maintain this, we need safeguards. We can't allow votes to be bought or sold. That wouldn't be a democracy. If we allowed votes to be bought or sold, then inequalities in wealth could translate into inequalities in political power; and given the inequalities in wealth that we have in the world, we would have an oligarchy. Unfortunately, I think we live closer to this world than we should.

Consider the role of the media in a democracy. Amongst other things, the media should inform citizens and facilitate reasonable debate. As we just saw, Cristiano claims that:

[...] the process of public deliberation is a public realization of equality to the extent that the process is reasonably egalitarian. Citizens' abilities to receive hearings for their views are not undermined by a skewed distribution of wealth or power.  
(Cristiano 2008: 190)

If we allow the media to be privately owned and do not appropriately regulate it, then we allow for the possibility of inequalities of wealth translating into inequalities of power when it comes to informing citizens and facilitating debate. Citizens' ability to receive hearings for their views then could be undermined by a skewed distribution of wealth and power.<sup>18</sup>

This is not just an idle worry. Think of Rupert Murdoch, for instance. Over his life, he has owned several newspapers and media outlets. And it's clear that he has had *much* more political power than me, or you, or probably our families, friends and all of these people combined.<sup>19</sup> He has been able to bring issues to the public's attention, hide issues from the public's attention, shape how we view things, and even influence elections.

I want to make a couple of simple points about a free press:<sup>20</sup>

1. Freedom from government is a necessary, but not sufficient condition of a free press
2. A genuinely free press would also require independence *from the influence of money*

We do not have this. And as such, there are reasons to think that we don't live in a healthy democracy.

How does this relate back to my worries about Lynton Crosby? These may seem like unrelated issues. And in a sense, they are conceptually distinct. But unfortunately, they are intertwined in the actual world, and that is part of the problem.

In her work on dog-whistles, Saul talks about *amplifiers*.<sup>21</sup> And the media is a big amplifier for Crosby. Polling, focus groups and a simple narrative don't win elections on their own. Crosby needs these messages to be repeated, over and over again. And parts of privately owned press are often all too happy to oblige. If we are to install safeguards against Crosby's worst strategies, we might also need safeguards against the worst elements of the private press.

## Conclusion

Crosby and Textor offer "Research, Strategy, Results". They conduct polls and focus groups of small portions of the electorate. They then form narratives, which will leverage these people to vote for their candidate. In doing so though, Crosby is happy to manipulate voters, and to circumvent debate to get the result he wants. In this, he poses a threat to democracy.

I hope to have made that case here. Of course, even if this is convincing, we still need to figure out how to stop him. And on this crucial issue, much more needs to be said – and done. But there is some hope. Here's Crosby reflecting upon the Tories less than stellar performance in the 2017 election:

[Crosby] warned that the rise of third-party campaigning for Corbyn had a "significant influence" on the campaign. He made specific reference to the Momentum grassroots group, describing the trend of growing third-party campaigns, particularly from the left, as a "warning sign" for politics in Australia and the business community.

"I think that was a very important influence on the campaign," he said.

"You can have all of the money in the world, and you can have all of the techniques in the world, but at the end of the day ... you've got to get people out to vote, which means having people out on the ground, knocking on doors." (Knaus 2017)

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the audience at our conference on media ethics at the University of Leeds for a very helpful session discussing this paper, especially given that it was a hot summer day and we could not figure out how to operate the air conditioner! I also am very grateful to Charlie Crerar, Megan Kime, Carl Fox, Jessica Begon, Martin Sticker, Rob Simpson, and Jenny Saul for reading earlier drafts of this paper, and helping my attempts to think through the issues involved.

<sup>2</sup> See Hager (2006: 160).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Hager (2006: 15-17).

<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I will focus on Crosby more than Textor; Textor seems to be in charge of the research, and Crosby the strategy, which as we will see, is what I find primarily problematic.

<sup>5</sup> Watt (2013).

<sup>6</sup> Ross (2015).

<sup>7</sup> One source of objection to Crosby is his use of what is known as 'wedge' politics, where he focuses on divisive issues (such as immigration), using them to drive a wedge between his opponent's party and their core support.

<sup>8</sup> Mason (2016).

<sup>9</sup> There is a video on YouTube, 'Car Crash Interview', where George Osborne refuses to answer Andrew Marr's question about where his proposed funding for the NHS will come from, 18 times, instead talking about his long-term economic plan.

<sup>10</sup> For a helpful overview of the ethical issues involved in advertising, see Dow (2013).

<sup>11</sup> See Delaney (2015).

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Saul (2018) and Saul's chapter on immigration in this collection.

<sup>13</sup> See Mason and Asthana (2017).

<sup>14</sup> Of course, what exactly our interests, values and beliefs are is complicated. For a thoughtful discussion of false-consciousness, see Lorna Finlayson's chapter in this collection.

<sup>15</sup> For an extensive account of such strategies, see Hager's latest book, *Dirty Politics*, where he outlines the New Zealand National parties "persistent attacks on Labour Party politicians, attacks that consciously set out to distract, wear down or demoralise them rather than trying to debate issues or win a political argument" (Hager 2014: 13).

<sup>16</sup> In this other chapter, I consider the importance of public debate in relation to dark online political advertising; see Saunders (forthcoming).

<sup>17</sup> Thanks to Carl Fox for suggesting this helpful difference.

<sup>18</sup> Fiss (1986: 1412) argues that this dynamic is not exclusive to capitalism *per se*, but instead will occur under any regime where social power is unequal. This seems correct. Fiss (1986: 1412) also claims that we should not reduce social power to mere economic power. Once more, I agree, but will leave the additional complexities of social power aside here.

<sup>19</sup> For a brief but illuminating account of his influence, see Kevin Macnish and Rob Lawlor's chapter in this collection.

<sup>20</sup> Of course, I am not the first person to make these points; for a classic discussion of the ways in which we ought to rethink our approach to a free press along these lines see Fiss (1986: 1413-21).

<sup>21</sup> See Saul (forthcoming).