

New Public Thinking

Towards a better public conversation

New Public Thinking and how not to do it – the death of Osama Bin Laden

May 2nd, 2011 → 8:36 pm @ **Keith Kahn-Harris**

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Last Thursday we had our first New Public Thinking meet up. It was a great evening, with a diverse range of NPT contributors and potential contributors enjoying an animated, free-flowing discussion on what New Public Thinking is/could/ should be. Although the conversation was deliberately unstructured and wasn't intended to come up with hard and fast conclusions or policies, there were areas where a kind of consensus was apparent. One of these areas was disenchantment with much of contemporary public discourse: Most of us agreed that too often political debate and commentary consists of predictable, rehearsed positions. Whatever New Public Thinking might be, it shouldn't be that.

I definitely share this desire to change public discourse, but I think it's important to understand how discourse gets 'stuck' in the first place. I also think that the predictability of public discourse can obscure the ironic and strange creativity that produces this predictability.

These thoughts occurred to me as I got up and checked the news on my iPhone this morning to find that Osama Bin Laden had been killed. Today is a public holiday in the UK and as a father of two smallish kids the day was spent in a flurry of outings and childcare. I didn't have time to read the news extensively and to check out what various commentators thought about the death of OBL. What I found myself doing for much of the day, in my childcare-filled cocoon, was imagining what the reaction would be from the US Republican conspiratorial right. The question kept coming up: OBL is (justifiably) a hate figure who needed to be killed by US forces, yet the killing happened on President Obama's watch – the very president who is at best weak on terrorists and at worst a secret Muslim. How would they manage this cognitive dissonance?

As I pondered this question it occurred to me that this was precisely the question that the US right would be facing at that very moment. Given the predictability of public discourse, could I anticipate what solutions would be found to their conundrum? As I played with my kids I dreamt up a number of possible responses along a rough continuum from reasonable to barking:

1. **Take it on the chin:** OBL was killed on Obama's watch. Acknowledge the fact and give credit where it is due.
2. **Emphasise credit due to others:** Acknowledge Obama briefly but then linger on the bravery of the troops, the CIA and other parties, perhaps even crediting Bush's role in beginning the war on terror.
3. **Keep quiet:** Simply don't mention it and keep your head down till the storm passes.
4. **Treat OBL as insignificant:** Argue that OBL is now longer much of a leader and emphasise other fronts of the war on terror – fronts where Obama is weak.
5. **Assassination of OBL as smokescreen for pullback:** Obama wants to get out of Afghanisatan and is weak on Pakistan – the killing of OBL could be a smokescreen to allow him to pull back.
6. **Argue timing is suspicious:** Why couldn't OBL have been taken out earlier? Did Obama wait until it was politically advantageous (maybe an attempt to score a double whammy after his takedown of Trump last week)?
7. **Argue execution is suspicious:** The statement claiming that OBL's body was treated in accordance with Islamic practice is at best unduly respectful to someone who doesn't deserve it and at worse a reflection of Obama's crypto-Islamism.
8. **Deny OBL is dead (or claim he was long dead anyway):** The lack of body means the assassination is unprovable. Bush's failure to get OBL was honourable – Obama disguises his failure with fraud.

I came up with these strategies in near-isolation from the facts of what the US right were actually arguing. At the time of writing (the evening of 2 May) I know a little bit more but still haven't managed to do any real research. As far as I can see, 1, 2 and 3 are the dominant strategies so far among senior Republican politicians. 7 might be getting some traction as Glen Beck and others were arguing that OBL's body should have been displayed and desecrated. I also noted that Hamas in Gaza condemned the killing, which gives

an opening to another angle of attack: Obama is soft on the Palestinians and the Palestinians support OBL. I haven't yet looked at conspiratorial websites but I imagine that 8 is probably fully in play by now, though not yet in the political mainstream.

My thought experiment was carried out in the emerging New Public Thinking tradition of doing our thinking in public – and in doing so sharing one's possible erroneous assumptions, one's ignorance and one's inaccurate predications. Even if I am partly or largely wrong, the exercise seems to suggest a few things to chew on:

First, with a bare minimum of information I was able to come up with 8 different strategies that US right wingers could take that are, I think, credible, actionable and plausible within that world. I opened up avenues for political discourse that were based not on sustained analysis or research but solely on imagined rhetorical possibility. The exercise reminded me of debating competitions at school where the challenge was to put an argument together not from conviction or research but from an exploration of the voluptuous possibilities of language. This is the thin ice on which much political and public discourse all too often rests – argument based on creative thinking rather than sustained thought. And from the evidence of my exercise, it's scary just how easy and fun it is to do.

Second, tracking the rapid emergence of the discursive responses to major world events seems to be a major research priority – but one that would be difficult to pursue in an academic setting. Major unexpected news events challenge engrained discourses to keep up with them and as such are an excellent way of looking at the mechanics of the discourse formation and perpetuation. You have to move fast though. In the case of the death of OBL, the stock responses will be formed within a day or two. With epochal events such as the 911 attacks, it would be fascinating to examine how and when conspiracy theories first emerged but such is the ephemeral nature of much discourse that it would be hard to do it entirely in retrospect. Ideally, a project to track the emergence of conspiracies etc would be set up within a few minutes of a conspiracy-friendly event's occurrence. The killing of OBL is not quite in this league but at some point *something* will happen where tracking the emergence of conspiracies and other reactions could and should be done in real time. Given the slow timescale on which academia works, universities and university researchers could not easily initiate such a project. What I propose is a group project that will lie dormant until the next big thing happens and then springs into action – around a blog probably – within minutes. Who's with me?

Finally, this exercise, in drawing on my long-dormant school debating skills, acts as something of a warning. It isn't just the US right whose reactions are so predictable that you can simulate them in a thought experiment – it goes right across the spectrum, right across the world. As someone who has dabbled in the commentariat, maybe I've sometimes fired off a reaction to an event that could have been written by anyone who knew by basic take on the world. Deep thinking is much less predictable. Arguments should emerge out of an immersion in the complexities of a given situation, not through force of argument alone. Events in the world should not be seen as a challenge to discourse that can be resolved through discourse alone. In short whatever new public thinking might or might not be, it should be engaged, surprising and substantial. If you can come up with eight possible responses to any given event, then you're not doing new public thinking, you're playing with words.

5 Comments → “New Public Thinking and how not to do it – the death of Osama Bin Laden”



Andrew Taggart

2 weeks ago

Dear Keith,

This beautiful piece merits a much longer response, but then time is of the essence. One avenue for new public thinking is thinking about old public thinking: the common opinions (doxa) of a certain group that seems to entail the plausibility of certain moves (in this case, you identify 8).

Another avenue could very well be casuistry. After an event, flying by the seat of our pants. Huh? Something like cunning. What? Yes, as if all options on the table were unsatisfactory but thinking-acting (thinking en actu) had to be done. No time for leisure (otium), no time for sitting back, and we can't rest assured that our current understandings (say, 1-8) will lead us toward something better. So, in displeasure, the displeasure of mental confusion, we fly by the seat of our pants. Casuistry; cunning; thinking-in-tandem; not knowing but following a hunch. Something like a miracle...

We could at least dare the perhaps.

[Reply](#)



Keith Kahn-Harris

2 weeks ago

Thanks Andrew for the kind words.

I think there is a really dilemma here: it's all very well to favour considered thinking, but some time circumstances demand a quick opinion. But how to thinking quickly without falling into the traps I outlined? I don't know the answer, but I think it's an interesting question...

[Reply](#)



Steve
2 weeks ago

This is a great idea! The obvious model is some kind of human cloud – put together a list of volunteers, define some basic parameters of what is likely to be a sufficiently interesting event and then, when one occurs, send out a “we are go!” message (probably on twitter, I guess, as that would immediately filter for connectivity and free time?!).

Whatever proportion of the list are free and in a position to start consuming media feeds could then get involved. I would certainly be keen but could in no way guarantee being available and/or plugged in at the time a major event happens, so this approach would allow for a reasonable drop-out rate.

Actually, I found out about OBL yesterday on a boat on a canal a long way from the electricity grid and/or phone lines, and only because someone else had an iPhone, on which they showed me a tweet saying “I can’t believe i found out Osama bin Laden is dead from twitter”. Once I realised this was not an obscure joke I was quite stupefied by the meta-ironies.

[Reply](#)



Keith Kahn-Harris
moments ago

Steve I never saw your comment until yesterday. Thanks for the backing for my idea. I’d like to find the time to set this up but it’s difficult. Perhaps when I have a spare moment I could set up a Poesterous blog and a twitter accopunt that could lie dormant until ‘something’ happened...

[Reply](#)



Keith Kahn-Harris
2 weeks ago

2 days on, Mother Jones has outlined the different approaches the US right have used. Some of them I predicted above, others I never saw coming!
<http://motherjones.com/mojo/2011/05/conservative-responses-killing-osama-bin-laden>

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