



UK Election Analysis 2015: Media, Voters and the Campaign

Early reflections from leading UK academics

Edited by:
Daniel Jackson and Einar Thorsen



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Upon embarking on this project we were generally met with remarks along the lines of “great idea but I think you are mad!”. Turning around 70 articles within one week of the election was always going to be a challenge, and one we knew we would not be able to take on alone. We would therefore like to thank a number of colleagues who helped put this publication together.

Firstly, the “great idea” is something we cannot take credit for. Here, we took inspiration from our colleague, Dr Roman Gerodimos, who compiled a collection of ‘first thoughts’ for the Greek election of January 2015.

Second, we are very grateful to a number of Bournemouth University colleagues who have supported this project. The project received generous funding from the members of the Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community; and Politics and Media Research Group at Bournemouth University.

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Finally, we are most grateful to Auguste Janutaite and Ana Alania for their tireless and inspired work on formatting and design; and Rob Munday for applying his web design magic to our project website. Thanks to all three for putting up with our (Einar’s) obsessive quest for perfection...

Contents

Introduction	8
<i>Daniel Jackson and Einar Thorsen</i>	

1

Media Reporting

1. The ‘horse-race’ contest dominated TV news election coverage	11
<i>Stephen Cushion and Richard Sambrook</i>	
2. News media performance in the 2015 General Election campaign	12
<i>David Deacon, John Downey, James Stanyer and Dominic Wring</i>	
3. Broadcasting: at the centre of the most managed election campaign	14
<i>Charlie Beckett</i>	
4. The right man for the job: the gendered campaign	15
<i>Emily Harmer</i>	
5. What citizens are entitled to expect from TV election debates	16
<i>Stephen Coleman and Giles Moss</i>	
6. Girls on top, who knew? The unpredictability of pollsters and publics	18
<i>Karen Ross</i>	
7. Why can’t I vote for a female MP?	19
<i>Heather Savigny</i>	
8. Immigration coverage and populist cultural work in the 2015 General Election campaign	20
<i>Kerry Moore</i>	
9. Winning and losing the ‘Battle for Number 10’: a linguistic analysis of the Paxman vs Cameron/Miliband election interviews	22
<i>Sylvia Shaw</i>	
10. Hot Dog Politics: Why comfort food makes politicians uncomfortable	23
<i>Marcel Broersma</i>	
11. The kitchen as the new campaign battleground: changing notions of masculinity	24
<i>Karin Wahl-Jorgensen</i>	

2

Voters, Polls and Results

12. Lies, damned lies and opinion polls	27
<i>Mick Temple</i>	
13. How could the polls have been so wrong?	28
<i>Suzanne Franks</i>	
14. Using social media to predict the General Election?	29
<i>Mark Shephard</i>	
15. Can trends in social media explain why the opinion polls got it wrong?	30
<i>Richard Fletcher and Steve Schifferes</i>	
16. Mediating the ‘civic imperative’	32
<i>Julian McDougall and Mark Readman</i>	
17. Liars, bullies, confused and infantilised... and that’s just the electorate: the roles ascribed and the portrayal of members of the electorate in election TV coverage	33
<i>Richard Scullion</i>	
18. Bringing out the youth vote? Young people and the 2015 General Election	34
<i>James Sloam</i>	
19. A transitional parliament	36
<i>Roman Gerodimos</i>	

3

Political Communication and Image Management

- 20. Extraordinary election, political communication as usual** 39
Margaret Scammell
- 21. Symbolising Britain** 40
Russell Foster
- 22. Standing behind the leaders** 41
Rutherford
- 23. Political consultants, their strategies and the importation of new political communications techniques during the 2015 General Election** 42
Andrew Mullen
- 24. There now follows a party election broadcast** 43
Matt Walsh
- 25. The slow shift to the digital campaign: online political posters** 44
Vincent Campbell and Benjamin Lee
- 26. Online persuasion at the 2015 General Election** 46
Nigel Jackson
- 27. Marketing the 2015 British General Election: the invisible campaign?** 47
Janine Dermody
- 28. 'Oh what a circus': reflecting on the 2015 UK General Election as an event** 48
Ian R. Lamond
- 29. Six weeks of separation: the campaign rhetoric of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats** 49
Judi Atkins
- 30. Did the Green Surge make any difference?** 50
David McQueen
- 31. Ordinariness and authenticity in the 2015 General Election campaign** 51
Frances Smith

4

The Nations

- 32. Scottish nationalism in the 2015 UK General Election** 53
Michael Higgins
- 33. From the Scottish Referendum 2014 to the General Election 2015** 54
Margot Buchanan
- 34. One nation and two messages: how Scotland has become a problem for British journalists and the Labour Party** 55
Steven Harkins
- 35. Northern Ireland in the 2015 General Election** 56
Jennifer Thomson
- 36. Wales: Plaid Cymru and Labour's media message fails in target seats** 57
Ifan Morgan Jones
- 37. Blot on the landscape: how Brighton and Hove kept the progressive dream alive** 58
James Morrison

5

Campaigning and Civil Society

38. Election news coverage and civil society 61
Jen Birks
39. 'A storm of groans and shouts': the media and hustings 62
Phil Chamberlain
40. Tweeting for social change: the dilemma of non-profits campaigning during the 2015 General Election 63
Tobias Bürger
41. Data journalism and the 2015 UK General Election 64
Paul Bradshaw
42. Zombies on the high street: 38 degrees and the 'Save Our NHS' campaign 65
James Dennis

6

Social Media

43. The politics of social media 67
Alec Charles
44. Was this the 'social media election'? We don't know yet 68
Nick Anstead
45. Citizen engagement in the dual-screened election campaign 69
Andrew Chadwick and Cristian Vaccari
46. The battle for the online audience: 2015 as the social media election? 70
Darren G. Lilleker
47. Passive and active social media engagement 72
Steven Buckley
48. Twitter response to televised political debates in Election 2015 73
Sarah Pedersen et al.
49. Why so few female tweeters before #GE2015? The gendering of public discourse on Twitter 74
Mary Mitchell
50. UKIP Facebooking the Tories in General Election 2015 75
Anthony Ridge-Newman
51. UKIP: The web's darling? 76
Filippo Trevisan and Paul Reilly
52. Social sharing, mobile media and the Buzzfeedisation of news 78
Nic Newman

7

Popular Culture

53. After Miliband: Russell Brand and the politics of celebrity politics 81
Jane Arthurs and Ben Little
54. Celebrity endorsements and activities in the 2015 UK General Election campaign 82
Mark Wheeler
55. Celebrity interventions in the election campaign and party affiliation 83
Nathan Farrell
56. Legitimacy and the celebrity single-issue candidate 84
Jeremy Collins

57. It's the neutrosemy, stupid!: fans, texts and partisanship in the 2015 General Election	86
<i>Cornel Sandvoss</i>	
58. Britain's Got Tories: Yank scholar on UK lifestyle politics	87
<i>Brad Gyori</i>	
59. #RegisterToVote: picturing democratic rights and responsibilities on Twitter	88
<i>Katy Parry</i>	
60. The 'most unlikely' or 'most deserved cult': citizen-fans and the authenticity of Milifandom	89
<i>Matt Hills</i>	

8

Media Influence and Interventions

61. Four reasons why a partisan press helped win it for the Tories	91
<i>Steven Barnett</i>	
62. Media policy, power and politics	92
<i>Natalie Fenton</i>	
63. Election 2015: it's the press wot won it?	93
<i>Des Freedman</i>	
64. The 'Tory Press' rides again	94
<i>Ivor Gaber</i>	
65. The festishization of the 'fiscal deficit': a media discourse	96
<i>Chris Roberts</i>	
66. 'This is cloud cuckoo': radical alternatives to public debt	97
<i>Lee Salter</i>	
67. Immigration and the 2015 election: the banal, the racist, and the unspoken	98
<i>Aristotelis Nikolaidis</i>	
68. Nigel Farage: celebrity everyman	99
<i>Neil Ewen</i>	
71. When the readers' pen is just another sword	100
<i>Iñaki Garcia-Blanco</i>	
72. Political discourse on the digital economy fails to reflect the concerns of the electorate	101
<i>Andrew White</i>	
73. Media policy as an election issue: ever present, yet absent	102
<i>Jonathan Hardy</i>	

Introduction



Daniel Jackson

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With all the polls pointing to a hung parliament and the possibility of a myriad of potential coalition outcomes, the UK General Election of 2015 was widely tipped to be the most unpredictable election in a generation. Indeed, in some ways it was, but not in the way most of us predicted. In the end, the polls - consistent throughout the campaign - had been wrong, and a gleeful David Cameron returned for five more years in Number 10.

In the lead up to the 2015 election campaign, much of the talk focussed on the (seemingly endless) negotiations over the leaders' TV debates, with Cameron refusing to engage in a live televised debate with Labour leader, Ed Miliband. In the end, the messy compromises consisted of a grilling from Jeremy Paxman on Channel 4 for Cameron and Miliband, a BBC Question Time special featuring the three main party leaders, and a seven-way leaders debate on ITV. The latter was notable for its inclusion of three women on the panel, who provided an empowering presence for women at the pinnacle of UK political parties.



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Part of the reason that negotiations over TV debates became so complicated was because of the rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in England, and the Scottish National Party (SNP) north of the border. In the end, UKIP struggled to set the campaign agenda in 2015, and failed to make the electoral breakthrough they had hoped. In contrast, the SNP made spectacular gains, winning 56 of 59 seats in Scotland. This represents a seismic shift in the UK electoral map and the dynamics of our party politics.

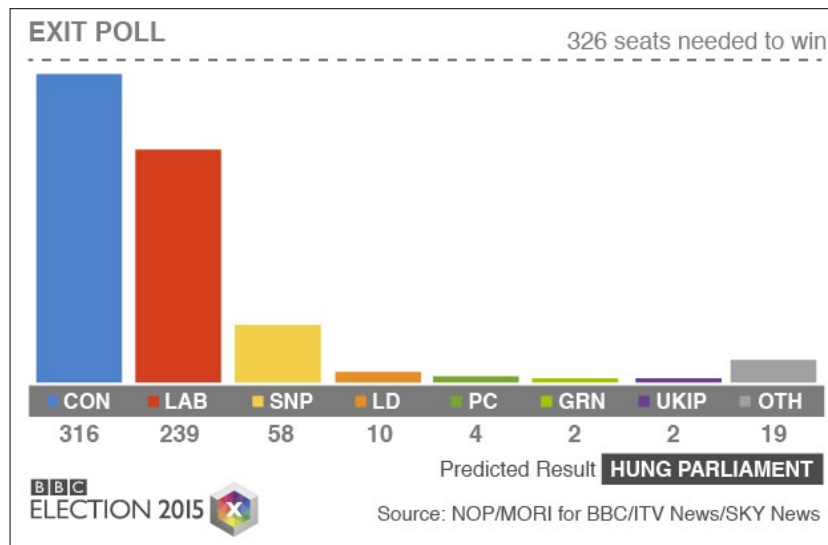
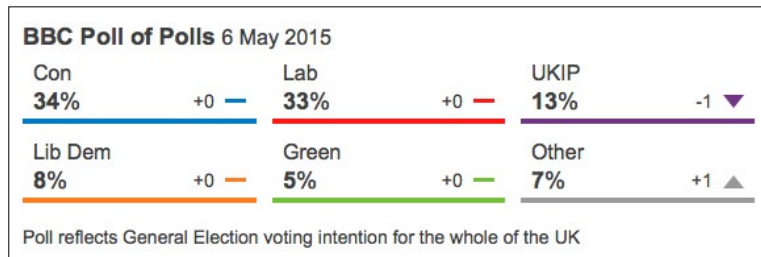
Of course, the SNP landslide was one thing the polls had correctly predicted. As such, the SNP - and their potential partners in any future government coalition - became a major ongoing story of the 2015 election campaign. Here, the Tories saw an opportunity to represent the SNP as an insurgent force who would hold a potential Labour government to ransom. Ultimately, the fear of this prospect may have swayed many English voters away from Labour, in a late surge not picked up by the opinion polls. Here, many of the left might feel a particular bitterness towards parts of the right-wing press for their role in the campaign. As well as stoking the fire of the fallout of a potential Labour-SNP coalition, they also pursued an intensely vicious personal campaign against Ed Miliband. If the power of television (through the televised leaders debates) provided a major talking point of the 2010 election, then in 2015 we may reflect on the return of the press to electoral prominence.

But this is a complex process. For example, social media provides a platform for citizens to push back against press agendas. General Election 2015 was notable for memes such as 'Milifandom' and #JeSuisEd, which were citizen-led campaigns to counter press power through parody and self-effacement.

The outcome of the 2015 General Election has led to renewed calls for the first-past-the-post electoral system to be reformed. A comparison between UKIP, Green Party and SNP share of votes against seats illustrated in a clearer way than we've ever seen before then inequities of the system. Future constitutional challenges await post 2015. Alongside calls for electoral reform, the UK will face the prospects of a redrawing of electoral boundaries, a referendum on membership of the EU, increased devolution and, maybe, a potential second Scottish independence referendum.

Whilst there is undoubtedly an eventful Parliamentary term ahead, in this report we pause to look back at the 2015 General Election campaign. The aim of this publication is to capture the first thoughts, reflections and early research insights of leading scholars in media and politics in the UK; and to use this to contribute to public understanding of the 2015 election whilst it is still fresh in the memory and the issues are still alive. Here, we are particularly interested in what ways different forms of media, journalism and political communication contributed to people's engagement with the democratic process during the election - and crucially the relationship between media, citizens, and politicians.

Contributions are short - at least by academic standards! We have encouraged contributors to bring out their expertise - through research findings or new theoretical insights - in their analysis of the campaign; to bring readers ways of understanding the election that may not have been available through other sources.



UK results

after 650 of 650 seats

	SORT BY	SEATS	GAIN	LOSS	+/-	VOTES	VOTE SHARE	+/-%
Conservative		331	35	11	+24	11,334,576	36.9	+0.8
Labour		232	22	48	-26	9,347,304	30.4	+1.5
Scottish National Party		56	50	0	+50	1,454,436	4.7	+3.1
Democratic Unionist Party		8	1	1	0	184,260	0.6	0.0
Liberal Democrat		8	0	49	-49	2,415,862	7.9	-15.2
Sinn Fein		4	0	1	-1	176,232	0.6	0.0
Plaid Cymru		3	0	0	0	181,704	0.6	0.0
Social Democratic & Labour Party		3	0	0	0	99,809	0.3	0.0
Ulster Unionist Party		2	2	0	+2	114,935	0.4	0.0
Green Party		1	0	0	0	1,157,613	3.8	+2.8
UKIP		1	1	0	+1	3,881,099	12.6	+9.5
Alliance Party		0	0	1	-1	61,556	0.2	+0.1
British National Party		0	0	0	0	1,667	0.0	-1.9
Cannabis Is Safer Than Alcohol		0	0	0	0	8,419	0.0	0.0
Christian Party		0	0	0	0	3,205	0.0	-0.1
Christian Peoples Alliance		0	0	0	0	3,260	0.0	0.0
Class War		0	0	0	0	526	0.0	0.0
English Democrats		0	0	0	0	6,531	0.0	-0.2
Monster Raving Loony Party		0	0	0	0	3,898	0.0	0.0
National Health Action		0	0	0	0	20,210	0.1	0.0
Respect Party		0	0	0	0	9,989	0.0	-0.1
Socialist Labour Party		0	0	0	0	3,481	0.0	0.0
TUSC		0	0	0	0	36,368	0.1	+0.1
Traditional Unionist Voice		0	0	0	0	16,538	0.1	0.0
Workers Party		0	0	0	0	2,724	0.0	0.0
Yorkshire First		0	0	0	0	6,811	0.0	0.0
Others		1	0	0	0	164,822	0.5	-0.3

After 650 of 650 seats
Change compared with 2010



1 | Media Reporting

The ‘horse-race’ contest dominated TV news election coverage

Two main conclusions can be drawn from the way the news media reported the 2015 general election campaign. First, that traditional media still count and determine much of the campaign agenda. Second, that polls shaped much of the campaign narrative – which is a particular problem when they turn out to be wrong.

The evidence clearly shows the Conservative press was very anti-Labour during the campaign – even more so than in the 1992 election – undermining Ed Miliband’s character, with regular and prominent front page attacks against him. But whilst readers might see through the obvious partisan influence of right wing newspapers, there were occasions when newspaper coverage shaped the wider media agenda, including the evening bulletins – still overwhelmingly the primary source of information for most voters. It would appear the Conservatives won the election on their handling of the economy – the most prominent issue reported in TV news. In contrast, Labour’s biggest vote winner was the NHS, but this issue was barely covered on the major TV bulletins.

Much TV coverage focused on “horse-race” aspects of the campaign, with the dominant narrative shaping the election – that it was neck-and-neck between Labour and the Conservatives and a coalition deal was the most likely electoral outcome – supported by polling. In hindsight, this was a significant distortion of campaign coverage.

Cardiff University conducted a systematic content analysis of evening TV news bulletins over the “short campaign”. We examined bulletins on Channel 5 at 5pm, Channel 4 at 7pm and at 10pm on BBC, ITV and Sky News in order to assess which issues, parties and leaders dominated the news agenda and how.

Across the first five weeks of the campaign, less than half of election news airtime on all five main broadcasters centred on policy, with the BBC dedicating the most time – 48.6% – compared with Channel 4’s 43.8% and ITV’s 40.2%.

Sky News spent just 34.8% of its election news covering policy matters, while less than a third of Channel 5’s airtime – 31.1% – was based on issues such as health and the economy.

The Conservatives arguably had the stronger showing on TV. Channel 4 and Channel 5 gave Conservative party voices about a third of election coverage airtime in their main news bulletins in the first 19 days of the campaign. Both the BBC and Sky News featured Conservative sources speaking for longer than those from other parties on their flagship news shows.

However, ITV featured Labour sources slightly more often, 26.9% compared with 25.1% for the Conservatives.

Channels 4 and 5 gave far less time than other broadcasters to the SNP. On both channels the SNP accounted for 2.5% or less of time given to party sources speaking. In contrast, BBC, ITV and particularly Sky News granted the SNP a far greater share of coverage – between 13.7% and 18.5% of airtime.

By the second half of the campaign, the party fight rather than policy truly dominated. Between 30 March and 24 April, 43.4% of election news items on the major evening bulletins that gave airtime to a party source saw them attacking a rival’s policy or personal character. In contrast, 38.2% of soundbites were about politicians’ own policy agendas.

By week five of the campaign almost a quarter of all election TV news – 22.7% – focused on the likely “winners” and “losers” in the contest, while possible coalition deals became a more prominent theme from 13 April onwards.

Perhaps most striking is the minimal coverage paid to the NHS. According to Guardian/ ICM polls more than two-thirds of the electorate rate the NHS as the single most important issue. But despite receiving some attention in the second week of the campaign – 10.7% of all election TV news – the NHS has barely registered on the agenda of the main evening bulletins before or after then, making up between 0.7% and 1.1% of total election coverage.

Similarly, education – ranked fourth in issues most concerning voters – did not even make it into the top 10 topics addressed by TV news bulletins. Other key policy areas – such as the environment, pensions or transport – have also been marginalised.

So it’s clear that “horse-race” coverage and predictions of a hung parliament marginalised discussion of wider policy issues through the campaign. And extensive discussion of coalition deals and permutations may well have influenced how people voted. Just as the Polling companies must review their performance in the campaign, broadcasters should reflect on the impact reporting, what turned out to be misleading, polls had on their coverage and how informed – or misinformed – it left audiences before voting day.

Research by Richard Thomas, Allaina Kilby, Marina Morani and Sue Bisson.



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News media performance in the 2015 General Election campaign



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For most voters the campaign remains a media event and one primarily viewed through the traditional media. Despite the advent of social media and changing viewing habits, television news and the press remained a key outlet for mass appeals by parties and the main source of political information for voters. Given this it is important to critically assess the media's performance, asking searching questions about its campaign coverage. So for example, how balanced was news coverage? Did television coverage favour the main parties? Given the size of the Tory press, how biased was newspaper coverage? What issues did the news media focus on? Were important substantive issues overlooked in favour of the campaign itself?

To address these questions Loughborough University Communication Research Centre conducted a content analysis of national campaign news from March 30th to May 6th (see our blog for more details about this project). The rest of the article seeks to address the above questions.

Looking at the quotation time given to the rival political actors first, Figure 1 shows the dominance of the two main parties and the three main party leaders on television news. Not only were the three main leaders quoted most often but so were other actors in their parties. This contrasts with the smaller parties where the party leaders were quoted less often and were almost the only actors that appeared for their parties.

In press coverage, Figure 2 shows there was a clear quotation gap between the Tories and the rest. David Cameron and his party benefitted from a Tory supporting press in away the other leaders did not.

Next we focus on the extent to which each news item had positive or negative implications for any of the political parties in the press (see our blog for more details).

Levels of positive Conservative coverage remained stable during the campaign while levels of negative Labour coverage reduced in the final days, but still remained high. There was an appreciable increase in the negativity of SNP coverage in the final stages of the campaign. The Liberal Democrats started to register some degree of negative coverage in the last sample period (see Figure 3).

Finally, we turn to the proportion of coverage focused on a specific issue. Table 1 shows that the electoral process itself dominated coverage. In terms of substantive issues, the economy dominated television and the press followed not too far behind by taxation. Constitutional issues, particularly concerning devolution and its discontents, gained proportionally more coverage on

television than the press but were not as visible as might have been expected, nor were 'immigration/ migration/ race', the NHS, and Europe. Several other significant issues of public concern registered very little attention, in particular education, foreign policy [excluding EU], and the environment.

In sum, the press support of the Blair years had evaporated for Labour with coverage favouring the Tories and being hostile to the other parties and their leaders. Although, less skewed, television coverage favoured the two main parties and the three main party leaders. As with previous campaigns substantive issues were overlooked in favour of the campaign happenings and issues likely to dominate the next five years, such as Europe, were virtually absent. Overall, the big winners of the media coverage were the Conservatives. They gained the most quotation time, the most strident press support, and coverage focused on their favoured issues (the economy and taxation, rather than say the NHS).

Figure 1: Quotation time in national TV news (seconds)

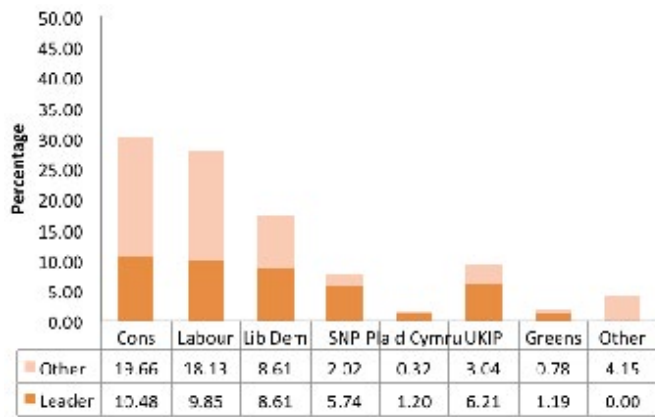


Figure 2: Quotation space in national press (words)

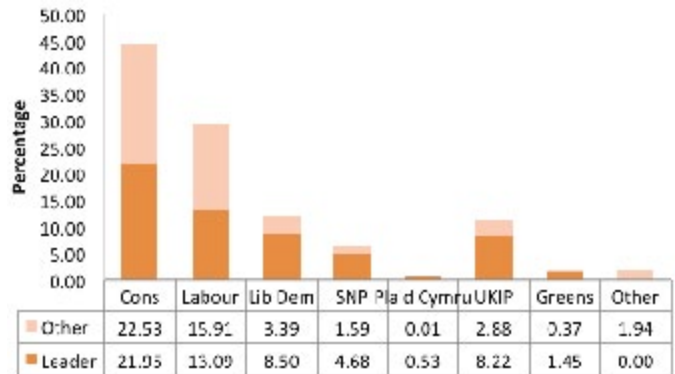
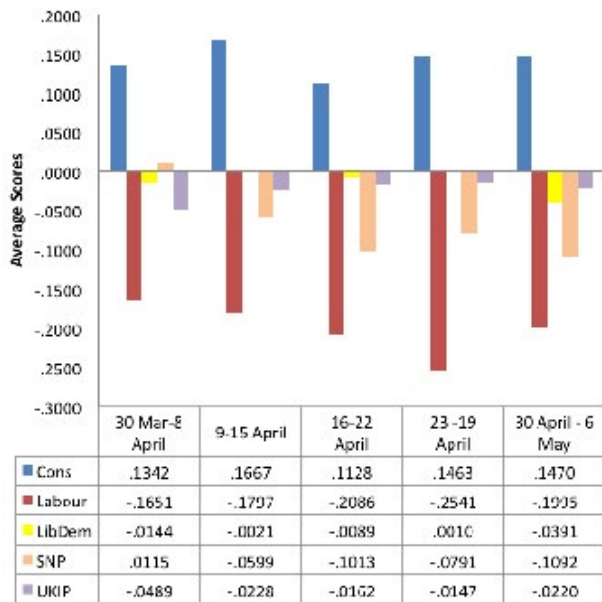


Figure 3: Positivity and negativity of party coverage (average scores weighted by circulation)



*Positive news items for a party were given a score of +1, negative -1, no clear evaluation coded 0

Table 1: Themes in national television and press coverage (30 March - 7 May 2015)

TELEVISION COVERAGE			NEWSPAPER COVERAGE		
Rank	Theme	%	Rank	Theme	%
1	Election process	45.9	1	Election process	44.5
2	Economy	8.1	2	Economy	10.5
3	Constitutional issues	6.2	3	Taxation	6.5
4	Taxation	5.4	4	Standards/ corruption/ sleaze	3.8
5	Employment	4.4	5	Constitutional issues	3.7
6	Immigration/ Migrants/ Race	3.7	6	NHS	3.7
7	NHS	3.5	7	Immigration/ Migrants/ Race	3.5
8	Business	3	8	Europe	3.4
9=	Social Security	2.4	9	Employment	2.9
9=	Europe	2.4	10	Business	2.6
11	Housing	2.3	11	Social security	2.3
12	Defence	2.2	12	Housing	2.2
13=	Standards/ corruption/ sleaze	2.2	13	Defence	2.2
13=	Women's issues	2	14	Women's issues	1.4
15	Media	1.1	15=	Education	1.1
16	Education	0.9	15=	Media	1.1
17	Higher/ Further Education	0.7	17	Arts/ Culture/ Sport	0.7
18=	Environment	0.6	18	Public services	0.7
18=	Arts/ Culture/ Sport	0.6	19	Transport	0.6
20=	Foreign policy	0.5	20=	Higher/ Further Education	0.5
20=	Transport	0.5	20=	Health	0.5
22	Information technology	0.5	22	Environment	0.4
23	Northern Ireland	0.4	23	Crime/ law enforcement	0.3
24	Public services	0.3	24	Foreign policy	0.3
25	Local government	0.1	25	Farming/ Agriculture	0.2
26=	Health	0.1	26=	Information technology	0.1
26=	Crime/ law enforcement	0.1	26=	Local government	0.1
26=	Rural affairs	0.1	27	Rural affairs	0

Notes: Percentages=(number of themes/total number of themes)*100. Up to three themes could be coded per item. Percentages are rounded.

Broadcasting: at the centre of the most managed election campaign



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This election campaign was almost irrelevant to the fundamentals of voting intention. Full of sound and fury it signified nearly nothing. The voters who for months and years before have said they trusted the Conservatives on the economy and leadership ended up turning out for David Cameron on the day. The widespread views that Miliband was not trusted and Clegg not believed were borne out despite conventional wisdom during the campaign to the contrary.

The fact that the pollsters got that wrong was not only unhelpful. The way that the daily opinion polls showed a close race gave the false impression that Labour's (and the Lib Dems') message was resonating. It meant that voters were treated to a false narrative by the news media.

Indeed, the way the campaign was conducted and reported was a distraction from any serious attempt to have an honest argument about the deficit, welfare state, growth and the nature of British society.

It is very simplistic to separate out the different news media because they are all networked into each other. However, clearly social media was the worst offender in creating a self-referential bubble, especially on the Left. In a mirror image, the right-wing newspapers who were panicked by an apparently close race redoubled their efforts to drive home the horrors of Ed, Nicola and Nigel.

TV was a key broker in this campaign of mistaken premises. On the one hand the broadcasters did try much harder than the newspapers and social networks to cover a broad range of topics and they did deliver an unprecedented slew of information and balanced analysis. But on the other, they went along with the banal theatre of the tightest, most sterile, stage managed campaign ever.

Studies of broadcasting in this election, including by my team at the LSE, indicate that there was a valiant attempt to provide facts and debate. But as the campaign wore on the broadcasters increasingly focused on the 'horse race' as the polls appeared to show how close the parties were.

Certain narrative threads played into this creation of a false sense of drama. The most high-profile was the way that Ed Miliband increased his personal ratings after a series of appearances where he outperformed expectations. His interview with Jeremy Paxman in the first major broadcasting set-piece where the yelp of 'Hell, yes!' was interpreted as a sign of his inner passion and courage coming to the surface.

For journalists this was a self-affirming story-line that then played into the following 'leaders debate'. Again, because Miliband did better in the post-programme polls than expected it was

seen as a triumph for Labour. But it was Cameron who came out on top and Nicola Sturgeon who emerged as the most popular new voice.

This pattern repeated itself through the challengers' debate where Cameron and Clegg were absent, and the final BBC Question Time where the three main leaders engaged with the public in what was easily the most dramatic and politically-charged of all the election broadcasts. Again, Cameron came out on top in tests of audience reaction but because the national polls had the parties tied, commentators tended to ignore his clear personal lead.

Despite the vast volume of broadcast material this was the most stage-managed election campaign ever and the broadcasters (and the newspapers to a degree) were almost entirely compliant. Perhaps they were exhausted by their struggle to get the (non) 'debates' to happen.

Perhaps it's just too logistically convenient to go along with the endless bland photo-opportunities in factories or fenced off warehouses with activist audiences and camera-ready angles of party-coloured sets, placards and balloons.

It was the TV and radio that produced the few rare examples of off-script insight. The James Landale kitchen confession from David Cameron that he would only serve one more term, for example. The 'car crash' Natalie Bennett interview with Nick Ferrari. And the ridiculous charade of the Miliband's second kitchen. But the essential triviality of these moments proves how closed down this campaign was.

He was not alone, but Channel 4 News' Alex Thomson deserves credit for trying to peek behind the PR props, while Sky News' Adam Boulton and the BBC's Andrew Neil also railed against the tight-lipped, cardboard cut-out campaign.

This was the election where TV dominated the space, newspapers harangued voters and social media amplified chat, but where virtually no-one, including the pollsters, called it right and barely anyone landed a punch or opened the debate.

The right man for the job: the gendered campaign

Jeremy Paxman's question whether Ed Miliband was "tough enough" to handle foreign policy matters was an early indication of the personalised and masculinised campaign to come. Cameron and Miliband dominated the news coverage, despite the presence of three women leaders, Nicola Sturgeon, Leanne Wood and Natalie Bennett. Political leadership is often imbued with traditionally masculine characteristics and traits such as personal strength, competitiveness and ambition. Many of these traits sit awkwardly with expectations about femininity, and women candidates often struggle under such conditions.

Masculine stereotypes were often called upon in the news coverage of the campaign to lend credence to, or question, the male leaders as credible and suitable political leaders. The scrutiny given to the spouses of Cameron, Miliband and Clegg is not only a means assessing their normality, but also a way of emphasising their virility, and with it, their masculine credentials. Various references hinting at their sexual attractiveness and virility, or lack thereof, also pervaded the popular press in particular. The most obvious examples were *The Sun's* 'Oops, I've just lost my election' headline after the leaders' debate, and the emergence of the #Milifandom phenomenon on twitter. Emphasising fatherhood can also be seen as an attempt to portray the leaders as caring, strong patriarchs who are able to protect and defend the powerless. Cameron, in particular, called upon these ideas to deflect criticism of his commitment to the NHS by controversially referring to his late-son's health problems.

One leader who was especially presented as a masculine figure was Nigel Farage. The frequent depiction of him in the pub, with pint in hand, plays into his desire to present himself as an 'ordinary bloke' who is a politically-incorrect and straight-talking politician who dares to challenge the establishment. Whether or not this is a desirable way for a party leader to behave is perhaps questionable, but it seems unlikely that such an approach could be successfully adopted by a woman. Calling on masculine stereotypes has its risks, for example David Cameron's inability to remember which football team he supports perhaps undermined his masculine credentials (at least with some sections of the public).

Presidential and masculinised campaigns are fraught with danger for women leaders. The double-binds associated with women in politics are well discussed by feminist schol-

ars and partially explain the domination of politics by men. The televised leaders' debates, much like Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons, are often seen as highly masculine competitions, where leaders can pit their intellectual strength and wit against one another. It therefore surprised many that Nicola Sturgeon was deemed by many commentators to have been the most successful performer this time around.

The Loughborough Communication Research Centre's analysis of the national coverage showed Sturgeon was the most prominent woman in the campaign coverage, appearing in 24.1% of news items by the third week, helped by her unique role as potential 'kingmaker' (the term itself denoting the extent to which politics is still considered a masculine sphere). Despite an increasingly hostile national press which sought to portray her as a threat to British unity and English sovereignty, Sturgeon had a strong campaign. Conversely, Wood and Bennett struggled to make an impact on the national media, appearing in just 3.3% of items by the same point in the campaign. Other prominent women politicians, like Theresa May, Nicky Morgan and Yvette Cooper were also marginal to the campaign coverage. Other voices which ordinarily puncture the campaign coverage, such as voters and various 'experts' were also dominated by men. The only category where women were prevalent was the category of 'politicians' relative'.

Nicola Sturgeon's successful negotiation of a personalised and male-dominated campaign seems to defy the usual narrative of British electoral coverage, whereby women are significantly marginalised. The mediated representation of men and women generally, however, serves to reinforce the fact that politics and news coverage of it, continues to be dominated by men.



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What citizens are entitled to expect from TV election debates



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The BBC Question Time programme on 30 April was applauded by commentators for finally letting the public into the election campaign. Jonathan Freedland writes that, “After a campaign lamented for its sterility, vacuum-packing the leading candidates in airless rooms a safe distance from the voting public, the BBC Question Time special forced the men who would be prime minister to face the electorate at last”. But for some time it wasn’t clear whether televised debates involving the leaders or similar programmes would go ahead at all, as the broadcasters and political parties wrestled over the details of the debates in a series of private negotiations. When debates are presented as an opportunity for the public to hold their political leaders to account, it seems perverse that it is up to political leaders to decide whether the debates go ahead and on what terms. But then if election debates were to be designed from the perspective of the public, rather than political parties or indeed media organizations, what might they look like?

Building on a study of the 2010 debates (see *Leaders in the Living Room*), we’ve been conducting research to examine what citizens themselves want from televised debates and how effectively their needs are being met. Through a series of deliberative focus group with voters ahead of the election, and drawing on the capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, and others, we’ve identified five key democratic capabilities that we argue citizens are entitled to expect televised debates to enhance (see *What do Viewers Want from Televised Election Debates?*). Citizens want election debates to be designed in ways that can help them to: (1) be rational and independent decision-makers; (2) evaluate political claims and make informed decisions; (3) be part of democratic cultural events; (4) communicate with and be recognized by the political leaders who want to represent them; and (5) make a difference to what happens in the political world. In two concurrent studies, we’re examining the extent to which these democratic capabilities have been enhanced by the 2015 televised election debates and exploring how they could be strengthened in future.

Our first study investigates the views of the public about the 2015 election debates through three surveys with representative samples of voters. Like the 2010 study (*Leaders in the Living Room*), the aim is not to determine ‘Who Won?’ (the question which dominates much journalistic commentary), but to evaluate the systemic implications and effects of the debates for voters as democratic citizens. In particular, the study will assess how effectively the debates measure up

against our five key democratic capabilities and explore disparities among groups. Our findings will be published later this year and we expect to have interesting things to say about the different ways in which those aged under 30 watched the debates compared with other viewers.

Our second study is exploring how the democratic capabilities can be enhanced through the imaginative use of digital media. We’ve assembled a multi-disciplinary team of researchers from the University of Leeds and the Open University, involving specialists in information science and design as well as political communication, to develop a platform to replay the debates that allows both citizens and political analysts to experience and evaluate the debates in new ways. *Democratic Replay* includes a range of forms of data analytics and visualization, from fact checking and argument maps to social-media analytics. We’ve also designed a new app for citizen feedback called *Democratic Reflection* (see screenshot opposite), which we tested with a panel of voters during the televised election debates, which asks respondents to evaluate the debates in terms of their democratic capabilities and so provides a more sophisticated way of judging the democratic quality of the debates than blunt instruments such as ‘the worm’.

This was an election campaign characterized by a plethora of televised debate formats. The question of how far these media events shaped public thinking and enhanced democratic capabilities is our key focus for research. According to David Cameron, the 2010 debates ‘sucked the life out’ of the campaign. It will be interesting to explore whether the 2015 debates added to the sterility and risk-aversion of the stage-managed campaign that Cameron seemed to want - or breathed some democratic life into it.



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¹ This project is being undertaken in collaboration with Professor Jay Blumler at the University of Leeds.

² This project is being undertaken in collaboration with Dr Anna De Liddo, Dr Brian Plüss, and Harriett Cornish at the Open University and Dr Paul Wilson at the University of Leeds.



DEMOCRATIC REFLECTION

STOP

33 users currently logged on

Your Reflections

Just speaking to us honestly	18:36:20
Speaking fairly and to the point	18:36:19
Just speaking to us honestly	18:36:18
She's speaking honestly because she's me	18:36:18
This is informative	18:36:17
She's giving us some convincing evidence for this claim	18:36:17
This is for everyone	18:36:17
I'm losing interest	18:36:15
I'm understanding my situation, which is why I'm not speaking to people like me	18:36:15
Speaking to people like me	18:36:15
She's not offering us a real choice at all	18:36:15
She's not speaking to people like me	18:36:15

HOW THEY SPEAK TO YOU

Do you think they are speaking to you, or do you think they are talking to you? Do you think they're being honest or are they just talking?

She's speaking to us honestly

She's speaking fairly and to the point

She's just saying what people want to hear

She thinks we're stupid

MAKING SENSE OF WHAT THEY SAY

Do you think what they are saying is helpful and convincing? What do you know from this information and evidence to evaluate their claims?

This is informative

She's provided convincing evidence for this claim

She hasn't provided convincing evidence for this claim

It isn't consistent with what she's said in the past?

BEING PART OF THE DEBATE

Is it engaging and interesting? Do you think it's a good use of your time for spending your time with people like this?

This is for everyone

This is getting interesting

I'm losing interest

This is for political insiders

RELEVANT TO YOU

What do they have to say about you? Are they speaking to you? Do they suggest they don't understand the situation and perspective of people like you?

She's speaking up for people like me

She's showing that she understands people like me

I think she understood my situation, but she wouldn't say this

She's not speaking for people like me

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Are they offering you a real choice that could lead to real change? How do they say in order to make any difference?

She's offering us a real choice

I don't think saying that could really make a difference

Even if she says she's saying here I don't think anything will change

It doesn't matter what she's saying at all

Girls on top, who knew? The unpredictability of pollsters and publics



Prof Karen Ross

Professor of Media at Northumbria University and the foundational editor of *Communication, Culture & Critique*. She continues to serve on its editorial board as well as on the boards of a further five journals.

If a week is a long time in politics, five years is Mars One and back, passing go but without the T-shirt. I mention T-shirts because for a fantasy moment on the day after the first leaders' debate when Nicola Sturgeon was regarded by a number of media commentators as being the unexpected victor, I imagined some wag would have parlayed the surprise hit of 2010 into 'I agree with Nicola' tees to celebrate her impressive performance. Despite Richard Littlejohn's (*Daily Mail*) signature misogyny in his assessment of the women leaders in the first debate, the inescapable fact was that there were now seven leaders on the platform and three of the four newbies were on the distaff side. Given Natalie Bennett's much-publicised 'brain fade' during that LBC interview in February, and the mostly unknown quantity that is Leanne Wood (Plaid Cymru), both managed to score some policy points - and, together with Sturgeon, demonstrated that given half a chance, the girls are as good (or otherwise) as the boys, and sometimes considerably better. Happily and a little surprisingly - challenging decades of research including my own - news coverage of the women leaders in that first debate was mostly gender-neutral. The disastrous twin peaks of women politicians' media coverage have traditionally been either invisibility or trivialisation but their early public performance on the leaders' stage meant that all three achieved name recognition from the get-go. Sturgeon in particular must have been very pleased to know that "Can I vote for the SNP?" was the sixth most common question on Google during the first leaders' debate, according to Google's own analytics.

The second week of the election campaign ran rather more to type with both Bennett and Wood being disappeared by the political newsboys and Sturgeon's media glow heavily tarnished by a harsh assessment of her performance in the two Scottish Leaders' debates. Week two also witnessed the odd spectacle of an LBC radio show marketed as the first ever 'Women Leaders' Debate' but which, perversely, excluded the three women who actually do lead their parties. Instead, listeners were treated to the views of Harriet Harman (Lab), Nicky Morgan (Cons), Lynne Featherstone (LibDem) and Diane James (UKIP). In principle, it's a brilliant strategy for the media to *not* always focus on the party leaders since the politics-as-beauty-contest mostly focuses on personality traits, leaving the electorate no better informed about actual policy positions - but surely none of these participants could really be described as political leaders? On the other hand, it was an interesting debate,

made even more so by an element called 'Ask Me Anything' in which each participant had to answer one (obviously tricky) question put to her by each of her three challengers. It was an imaginative tactic and one which could have served the electorate well had Auntie Beeb had the courage to face-off the actual party leaders using the same strategy.

Fully into week three came the third leaders' - or what was described as the 'challengers' - debate, providing an interesting platform party with the three women centre-stage, bookended by the two guys. Once again, a number of media commentators deemed Sturgeon the best performer although there were also plaudits for Wood's bold dig at Farage and Bennett was crowned the sweetheart of Twitter, polling the highest proportion of positive tweets posted during the debate. Week four saw the media all over Sturgeon, again, but mostly not in a good way. So compelling have been her performances every time she gets to her feet, that the Tory press and the Tories themselves began to run very scared of Sturgeon, hoping to put the same Presbyterian fear of God into the electorate. One Tory poster showed her puppet-mastering Miliband; the *Sun* photoshopped her face onto the body of tartan bikini-wearing Miley Cyrus astride a wrecking ball; Boris Johnson described her as Lady Macbeth in a piece for the *Telegraph*; and Piers Morgan described her as the most dangerous wee [sic] woman in Britain in the *Daily Mail*. In response to the latter, Sturgeon said that was the nicest thing the *Daily Mail* had ever said about her. The final weeks of the campaign continued to be largely a woman-free zone apart from Sturgeon's singular song although to be fair, hardly any politicians other than the Dav/Ed/Nige combo received much in the way of visibility, such was the Presidential tenor of media coverage.

And finally, the day of reckoning, a resounding SNP victory due in no small part to Sturgeon's stellar performances, 29% of MPs returned to Westminster are now female, including the youngest MP since 1667, 20 year-old Mhairi Black, and women also took over as Party Leader for Labour (Harriet Harman Acting) and for a few fleeting days, Suzanne Evans (UKIP). We're not there yet by any means but the direction of travel towards gender equality is onwards and onwards. Go, girls, go.

Why can't I vote for a female MP?

When I went to vote, I had a 'choice' of five men representing national parties; I could not choose to vote for a woman (So I spoiled my ballot paper and wrote SNP). But why were there no female candidates available for me to choose from? Is politics still a 'man's game'? And how complicit are the media in shoring up masculine political power?

Where previous election coverage has focused attention on leaders' wives sadly, not much changed in this election. Our research shows that wives of male political leaders were viewed as more important than female politicians: Samantha Cameron still received more coverage than Harriet Harman and Teresa May. And monitoring by Loughborough showed that women politicians featured in less than a fifth of coverage.

Where press coverage of female politicians was inevitable, for example, following the leaders debates, we saw a reversion to form: *The Metro* reported that 'Sexy' Leanne Wood has Twitter swooning with her accent; Nicola Sturgeon was subject to repeated sexist comments and reviled by the *Daily Mail* as 'the most dangerous woman in Britain' and had her face superimposed on a Miley Cyrus in a tartan bikini with the headline 'Tartan Barmy' by *The Sun*. Is this really how we talk about our female politicians? As sexist coverage dominates, we perhaps need to stop and ask questions about the kind of gendered politics that is being conducted. Would we see a headline with 'Sexy' Osborne has Twitter swooning with his pecs? Or a picture of Cameron's head superimposed over fictional character Ross Poldark's abs? And if we think that sounds ridiculous in respect of a male politician, then why position female politicians in this way?

This issue matters because, not only can this kind of coverage put women off voting, and standing for office, but it also obscures the ways in which women's issues are repeatedly marginalised. While economic coverage was the second most prominent issue in the campaign far less attention was paid to the 88% of cuts that have fallen on women; these women's voices and their interests are drowned out.

It is easy to point fingers solely at the media; and indeed commentators have made a point of calling the media on their coverage and not all media outlets can be tarred with the same brush as the *Daily Mail*. However, what has been less widely commented on in this context is the way in which political parties also play a role in what media cover. Extensive analysis of the ways in which politicians manipulate

the media seems to go out of the window when it comes to this kind of coverage. Politicians go to great lengths to manage media appearances: so why are politicians allowing media to get away with this kind of behaviour and leaving it to journalists (independent and professional) and campaigners such as the #viewsnotshoes campaign to monitor this kind of coverage? Rather than challenge media stereotypes, politicians themselves have played into them. Labour's 'pink bus' was a publicity stunt aimed at attracting women voters, yet analysis shows that actually there was a 1% gap between men and women in the turnout at the last election. Gendered stunts are not necessary. We do need however: 1) proactive strategies to recruit women in to political parties; and 2) for those parties to represent women's issues and 3) for media outlets to focus on the policies promoted by female politicians not their appearances. These are just three necessary conditions to improve women's descriptive and substantive representation in politics.



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Immigration coverage and populist cultural work in the 2015 General Election campaign



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In the 2015 General Election campaign immigration was a key battleground issue. It featured strongly in each of the main parties' manifestos and attracted a steady volume of news media coverage. Immigration was firmly on the national electioneering agenda as if this were a matter of 'common sense'. Perhaps this should not be surprising. The increasing significance of immigration at the polls certainly seems clear according to successive IPSOS MORI opinion poll data. When asked during the 2015 campaign, 'Looking ahead to the next General Election, which, if any, of these issues do you think will be very important to you in helping you to decide which party to vote for?' asylum and immigration was 3rd most cited - apparently as critical an issue as education and outranking previously stalwart areas such as law and order/crime. In the more general Issues Index poll, immigration consistently ranks in the top 5 - overtaking the NHS as the 'most important issue facing Britain today' in March 2015. However, this 'common sense' public profile of immigration is neither 'natural' nor guaranteed, but rather, I argue, the product of populist cultural work to which the main political parties and the press contribute.

During the 'short' election campaign, national newspapers mentioned immigration daily, although policy was not necessarily always the focus of reports. Polls played an important role in shaping press narratives (assessing public trust in each party, support for policies and voting forecasts). Celebrity endorsements, policy guides and games aimed at informing voting decisions also featured. Coverage trailing the televised leadership debates and assessing performances was significant, including UKIP's accusation of BBC leftist bias in the composition of debate audiences. Manifesto and campaign launches featured strongly early on with headline-grabbing policy announcements, especially from UKIP. Labour policy was represented as defensive with Miliband's assertion that having 'got it wrong in the past' Labour would now be 'smart' on immigration.

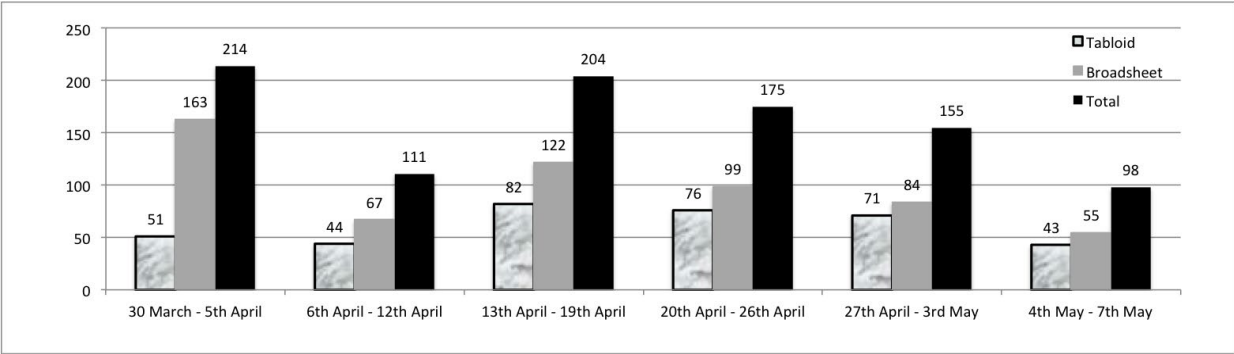
Negative campaigning also formed part of the narrative with Labour accusing Tories of breaking promises over reducing net migration and border exit cheques, Tory claims that Ed Miliband didn't care about immigration, the SNP condemning UKIP's David Coburn's views as 'absolutely utterly disgusting', and Cameron's urge to UKIP voters to 'come home'. Editorials encouraging voters' allegiance to particular parties were also common. Controversies such as internal party anxieties over Labour's 'controls on immigration' campaign merchandise mug, and stories about UKIP candidates' far right associations or

homophobic/racist comments were highlighted.

On rare occasions comment pieces did critique the demonization of migrants. Other unusual stories included a voter survey reporting people no longer believed a 'liberal elite' disallowed talk about immigration, a protestor adding 'welcome mats' to UKIP immigration posters, and a Polish Prince challenging Farage to a sword duel in Hyde Park. Coverage of the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean featured too, focusing on the likelihood that the UK would be asked to accept a migrant quota and Miliband's suggestion (largely reported as an outrageous 'smear') that Cameron's policies were partially responsible for the crisis. Other comments argued the boat tragedies exposed the parochialism of UK election campaigning on immigration. However, overall dominant negative narratives were not challenged. Most articles worked to reinforce the 'common sense' notion that political parties simply respond to democratic demands and that 'the issue' should simply be taken seriously rather than critically interrogated or challenged.

Arguably, the meaning of immigration's prominence is not so settled as it might appear from opinion polls. Unlike the NHS or the economy, it is not an issue with which the majority of people living in the country necessarily have a direct material experience. Its significance does not only come from concerns about current global migration flows or EU migration politics. It is always already culturally loaded and racialised, concerned with the division of political space between people 'who belong' and those who do not, and comes woven through with previous eras' social anxieties and cultural antagonisms. The parameters of 'the issue' have long been largely fixed, framed within a dominant discourse holding that stronger border controls and more punitive restrictions upon migrants are almost always a 'good thing', with the already settled population (the British electorate) justified in feeling hard done by. The noisy 'debate' on immigration is not about these ideas, but about parties positioning and defending their political identities within a populist mainstream. The rise of UKIP has brought this struggle into sharp relief, which partially explains the extraordinary media attention they have received. With other parties seeking to neutralize UKIP's populist appeal this political ground is protected from question or disrepute - there is rarely an accusation of anti-migrant scaremongering or racism in the mainstream. The main parties fight very carefully on this terrain to protect themselves, but also to avoid compromising it with the national press largely complicit in this populist cultural work.

Figure 1: Immigration Election National Press Coverage 2015*



*Nexis UK search of national newspaper headlines, lead paragraphs and indexing using search terms: immigra! Or migra! Or asylum or refugee! And election Not Clinton or Vikto or Burundi or Le Pen or Netanyahu or Tony Abbott or South Africa or Puerto Rico or Obama or Dafur or Eritrea or Malaysia or Kashmir or Republican or Rajapaska or Buhari.

Winning and losing the ‘Battle for Number 10’: a linguistic analysis of the Paxman vs Cameron/Miliband election interviews



.....
Dr Sylvia Shaw
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.....

On the 26th March 2015 the first television interviews of the UK 2015 General Election with David Cameron and Ed Miliband were conducted by Jeremy Paxman, the notoriously savage veteran political interviewer. The media accounts of the interviews and the subsequent question-answer session with the studio audience inevitably searched for a winner and a loser, with *the Guardian* ICM poll putting Cameron as the narrow winner with an approval rating of 54% in comparison to Miliband’s 46%. Accounts of the interviews varied, but some held that ‘Cameron survived an intense grilling’ and that he was ‘mauled’ by Paxman.

A detailed linguistic analysis of the Paxman interviews is revealing, not least because commentators tend to make two assumptions about this event that are not borne out in the interactional detail. Firstly, that Paxman is equally combative in his treatment of the politicians, leading to the second assumption that the interviews are comparable and allow a fair assessment of the politicians’ performance. However, on examination of the interview transcripts the differences between the interviews are striking. Cameron takes 42 speaking turns in his 18 minute, 26 second interview. The average length of these turns is 70 words and the longest turn is 244 words. In contrast, Miliband takes 78 speaking turns in his 16 minute 45 second interview, the average length of these turns is only 29 words and his longest turn just 96 words. Overall, Cameron utters 2,944 words in the interview and Miliband 2,290: Cameron speaks 22% more than Miliband.

In the political interview the inquisitorial role of the interviewer dictates the interactional pressure on the interviewee. In the Cameron interview Paxman takes 46 speaking turns and makes 25 interruptions but in the Miliband interview he takes 83 turns and makes 32 interruptions. This allows an assessment of the intensity of interrogation or degree of the ‘cut and thrust’ of the interview by dividing the number of interviewer turns by the total length of the interview. Using this measure, the intensity of interrogation in the Cameron interview is 2.5 turns per minute while in the Miliband interview it is considerably higher at 5 interviewer turns per minute. It is clear that Miliband copes well under this intensity of interrogation. He retaliates by interrupting Paxman’s questioning turns 12 times (Cameron only interrupts twice), and he gains the upper hand by reversing the roles and asking Paxman questions. He asks Paxman whether he reads media articles about himself, whether Cameron

was the ‘man on the tube’ who doubted Miliband’s effectiveness as a leader, and he questions Paxman’s authority in predicting the outcome of the election “You may be important Jeremy, but you are not that important” which elicits laughter and applause from the audience.

The ‘Paxo treatment’ is famously adversarial and there are extremely confrontational personal attacks in both interviews. However, the most personal attacks on Cameron are mitigated or softened by Paxman. Just before questioning Cameron’s involvement with ‘rich people’ he asks “I’m going to be personal if I may for a second” to which Cameron sanctions “you may”. Later in the interview Paxman uses an apology and a polite formula to launch an adversarial attack on Cameron when he says: “I’m sorry, I don’t want to be rude but do you know and you are not telling us or do you not know?” Although the apologetic preface to the question can be interpreted ironically, there is no evidence that these deferential, polite and mitigating moves are duplicated in his personal attacks on Miliband who is confronted with a forthright “the thing is they see you as a North London geek” and “they look at you and they think ‘what a shame it isn’t his brother’”. Paxman also accuses Miliband of using ‘likely’ as a ‘weasel word’, mocks his use of the word ‘consequentials’ and mirrors Miliband’s phrases in order to ridicule him. Paxman intervenes when Miliband introduces new topics in his responses by saying “you are asking yourself questions” but allows Cameron to equivocate with more freedom, as evidenced by his comparatively long speaking turns.

This analysis shows that while both politicians are subject to Paxman’s persistent and adversarial questioning, Paxman allows Cameron to speak more and defers to his authority. Miliband is permitted to speak less and is ridiculed and undermined more aggressively. It is perhaps unsurprising, given the impressions fostered by these differences, that Cameron ‘wins’ the approval ratings. However, the metaphor of winning and losing seems particularly misplaced when the competitors are facing such different interactional obstacles.

Hot Dog Politics: Why comfort food makes politicians uncomfortable

Whether it's David Cameron eating a hot dog, Nick Clegg tucking into a mince pie, or Ed Miliband attacking a bacon sandwich, British politicians have a deeply troublesome relation with comfort food. More than in any other country, the symbolic power of eating habits seems to have become an essential ingredient of election campaigns. How politicians deal with the awkwardness of slippery wieners, greasy fingers, oozing fat or ketchup is in Britain a strong marker for class awareness. Who on earth would eat a hot dog with 'FORK and KNIFE' as the 'posh' prime minister did at a BBQ in Poole, Dorset? Why is Labour's leader that uncomfortable when putting away a typical 'working-class' sarnie? In this campaign, the food gaffes of both David Cameron and Ed Miliband have been extensively discussed in the press, exploited for political reasons and made fun of on social media and the internet.

How politicians consume snacks thus becomes a criterion for political position and competence, but also for reliability and authenticity. Although poor Ed Miliband argued that the "issue of eating bacon sandwiches, honestly, really and truly, is not what politics is about", the incident haunted him like a ghost. The Sun's front page the day before the elections was the climax of the affair. A dazzling word play culminating in "SAVE OUR BACON. Don't swallow his porkies and keep him OUT" accompanied the already notorious full-page picture of Miliband clumsily tucking into his sandwich. It conveyed a message of clear incompetence. "This is the pig's ear Ed made of a helpless sarnie. In 48 hours he could be doing the same to Britain." Hot dog politics at its best.

The entanglement of comfort food and politics might to a large extent be a typical British phenomenon, just as the open and even malicious political campaigning of the (tabloid) press. However, the gaffes also reveal a profound reshuffling of the communication and information infrastructure. Five years ago, *the Guardian* already made a call for the 'first social media elections' and while this was considered exaggerated back then, many expected that social media would have a leading role in the 2015 campaign. But when the smoke had cleared, commentators like BBC's Rory Cellan-Jones concluded, referring to another notorious *Sun* headline, that "it wasn't social media 'wot won it'" and that Twitter and Facebook had not "become vastly more influential than newspapers in spreading election messages". It tempted Rupert Murdoch too – ironically – tweet: "UK poll explodes myth of social media power. Great time for competitive free press".

This binary thinking of isolated media

spheres misses the point. What is far more interesting is the interplay between legacy media like *the Sun* and what happens on social media. While publishers and journalists still mainly think in terms of who produces the news, it might be more revealing to analyse how news users go about it. News use is increasingly social. The majority of the traffic to news websites comes via social media and news outlets are increasingly dependent on citizens pushing their news through social networks. Journalists ever more find their news on social media, always willing to exploit a politician's gaffe on Twitter (just ask Labour's Emily Thornberry), while citizens engage with legacy news online. The pictures of Cameron eating a hot dog and Miliband struggling with his sarnie have had a large circulation on Twitter and Facebook, and have been turned into influential memes. This works both negatively, for example when citizens Photoshop 'bacon Ed' in famous film scenes, and positively, as became clear when tweeps started posting pictures of themselves struggling with comfort food, using the hash tag #JeSuisEd.

Spiral of Conformation

So, what are the lessons to be learnt for politicians from these food gaffes and what are the consequences for political communication? The most obvious one is to stay away from consuming comfort food in public. It might get candidates into trouble, whether they eat it with cutlery or with your hands. Spin doctors will most probably advise them to find other ways to engage with the public and expose their authentic selves. After all, there will always be a photographer around, either from a professional news organization or a random citizen who uses his smart phone to quickly catch an awkward moment and put it online. As we have seen in the past, these 'funny' pictures run like wildfire and it quickly becomes impossible to control the message and minimize political damage.

However, the most damaging effect for democracy in this destabilized power structure of political communication is that slowly but surely politicians get trapped in a spiral of conformation. The main aim of election campaigns then more and more shifts from conveying political views and persuading citizens to engage with clear ideological visions, to avoiding gaffes and clear positions. When trivial sayings and awkward incidents have severe unforeseeable and uncontrollable political effects, avoiding spontaneous situations and saying as little meaningful as possible might be the most effective strategy for politicians.



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He has published widely on the impact of social media on both journalism and politics. Most recently: 'New platform, old habits? Candidates' use of Twitter during the 2010 British and Dutch general election campaigns' (New Media & Society, 2014) and 'Tipping the Balance of Power. Social Media and the Transformation of Political Journalism' (to appear in The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics).

The kitchen as the new campaign battleground: changing notions of masculinity



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She is the author or editor of five books, and is currently finishing 'Emotions, Media and Politics' for Polity. During the election, she has written a regular column for *The Conversation*.

In this election the fiercest battles have been staged in the most unlikely of places: the kitchen. This trend started when Ed Miliband became widely known as 'Two Kitchens Ed' after it emerged that the kitchen in which the Milibands were filmed for a BBC interview on March 10 was one of two in their home. Sarah Vine – Michael Gove's wife – quipped in the *Daily Mail* that the kitchen was "bland, functional, humourless, cold and about as much fun to live in as a Communist era housing block in Minsk." It subsequently emerged that the second – and superior – kitchen was mostly used by the live-in nanny.

David Cameron added insult to injury by giving *The Sun* exclusive access to his gleaming Downing Street kitchen. The paper filmed the prime minister making a sardine sandwich with a dash of mayonnaise, and subsequently eating it in style. A blow-by-blow account in the *Independent* described how he "flawlessly takes a bite, masterly holding the slice while controlling his jaw muscles, his eyes focused on the task at hand."

Subsequently, the main scoop of the campaign was delivered in the kitchen. In an interview with the BBC's deputy editor James Landale, carried out largely in David Cameron's constituency home kitchen, the PM dropped the bombshell that he would not be seeking a third term. Cameron talked about the 'very high testosterone' atmosphere of Prime Minister's *Question Time* while chopping up lettuce, the attention of the camera squarely on the high-end salad spinner, with some lingering glances at his absolutely massive fridge. The message: he knows how to make love and war. And a simple ham salad for dinner. Of course, Cameron has a long-standing track record of using kitchen appearances for moments of heightened political drama. He famously opened his Webcameron videolog series doing the washing up after a porridge breakfast.

Finally, Ed Miliband struck back by taking to alternative news channels to advance his message, in the face of what was often relentlessly negative coverage in the mainstream media. He did this by agreeing to an interview with Russell Brand for his YouTube show, the *Trews*, in his kitchen. Following on from the interview, Brand endorsed Labour and encouraged his viewers to vote for the party, going against his long-held opposition to electoral politics – a decision he later came to regret.

So, how do we make sense of this emerging kitchen politics? First of all, it seems, politicians are hell-bent on showing off their culi-

nary skills and sparkling appliances. Secondly, however, in an era of increasingly personalised politics, the kitchen as campaign battleground signals access to the domestic, intimate and private spaces the politicians inhabit; away from the cynical and calculating world of politics. Seeing politicians scrape porridge off breakfast plates, in other words, makes them appear more authentic – more truthful and sincere, less performed and rehearsed.

The flurry of politicians in their kitchens demonstrates broader shifts in the norms of masculinity. Politicians are now not only required to show themselves as decisive leaders, but also loving fathers and husbands who contribute to domestic work, including cooking and child care.

It would have been unthinkable to see Winston Churchill doing battle with the dirty dishes, but today's successful leader has to demonstrate peak performance with a kitchen sponge. According to this new paradigm of political masculinity, hard work in the private sphere of the kitchen is entirely compatible with victory in the public sphere of politics.

For today's male political leaders, the terrain on which elections are fought is more likely to be their kitchen than the House of Commons. That is because the former gives them more of a chance to show off their fine-tuned masculinity than the latter. Now more than ever, the personal is political.

SARAH VINE: Why their kitchen tells you all you need to know about the mirthless Milibands... and why there's nothing to suggest that Ed and Justine are not, in fact, aliens

By SARAH VINE FOR THE DAILY MAIL
PUBLISHED: 01:10, 12 March 2015 | UPDATED: 09:47, 12 March 2015

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Very rarely do I feel sorry for Ed Milliband, but seeing him standing there in his forlorn little kitchen, staring into the middle distance while sipping from a stripy blue-and-white mug, part of me wanted to rush home from work, sling some jolly painted crockery in a bag and head over there with a tin of home-made brownies.

Surely that can't really be Ed and Justine's kitchen? All that lovely huge, fancy house, and that is where they do their cooking?

I hope for their sake that it's actually their utility room, and that some bossy spin doctor has shoved them in there to make their £2 million-plus townhouse in North London's trendy Kentish Town look less fabulous and to bolster Ed's man-o'-the-people image.

Scroll down for video



Seeing Ed Milliband in his drab kitchen made me want to bring him over some fresh Brownies



If the kitchen is the heart of the home, then Ed Milliband's needs an urgent transplant

Justine Milliband believes ridicule of Ed will only get worse



Or perhaps it's simply that, mindful of his own promise to introduce a mansion tax if he wins the General Election, Ed is keen to impress upon HM Revenue and Customs the modest nature of his own circumstances.

Either way, if it's true that the kitchen is the heart of the home, then this one — and possibly its owner, too — requires an urgent transplant.

There's nothing wrong with having a modest kitchen, of course. My own is ten years old, has several uninvited furry residents and a wooden worktop that would almost certainly not pass any health and safety inspection.



2 | Voters, Polls and Results

Lies, damned lies and opinion polls

Given the blanket media coverage of national politics before, during and after 2015's unexpected parliamentary election result, the proverbial visitor from Mars could be forgiven for missing a perhaps equally important set of elections that took place. But before looking at the English local elections I have to commit the same sin as the national media and concentrate on the 'big' election. The result was just so surprising.

Who'd have thought it? When I saw my former academic colleague (and PhD supervisor) Colin Rallings open that exit poll envelope on ITV I simply refused to believe the contents. I was not alone; the massed ranks of politicians and political analysts on all channels scoffed in collective disbelief. And one branch of "political science" is going to have to take a hard look at its methods following the failure of the opinion polls in the six months before this election. Anything that weakens Peter Kellner & Co's influence must be a good thing. For far too long, the polls have dominated popular coverage of electoral politics to the detriment of the things that really matter.

I was covering the election for the local BBC radio station and spent the weeks beforehand commenting in all the local and regional media. One requirement of this sort of coverage by academics is the fiction that one is 'unbiased', so a certain detachment needs to be cultivated. It isn't hard for me, by the way. My wife was a candidate in these local elections, which seemed to concern the BBC more than it did me. Unlike (as far as I can tell) virtually all of my friends and colleagues in the political studies community, I have no allegiance to any party, although Conservative political scientists seem thin on the ground. It's always fun to watch colleagues going puce at the mere mention of Michael Gove. I duly delivered a relatively dispassionate analysis in the studio all night.

But attending the local count the next morning gave me a radically different perspective.

The voyeuristic nature of the process is similar, but the closeness to (especially) political failure really brings home the sickening thump which rejection by the electorate delivers to politicians. There's a certain degree of sadistic pleasure in watching Ed Balls or Esther McVey lose their seat on the telly; this disappears when directly contemplating the distress of hard-working Labour and LibDem councillors losing their seat largely because of national factors. Tears were not uncommon, as was the realisation that their much-touted "personal vote" was a chimera.

In Stoke-on-Trent, where Labour votes are generally taken for granted, local Labour politicians were quite clear when talking to me. They

laid the blame for their loss of control of Stoke's unitary council firmly on two factors. Firstly, the electorate's judgement of Ed Miliband as lacking leadership qualities and, secondly, the fear of a Westminster minority Labour government being ruled by the SNP's anti-English hordes.

On the other hand, the Independent councillors who made gains were keen to stress local issues, and the unpopularity of Labour's leader and his chief executive after a number of contentious and costly decisions were mostly cited. As ever, the truth is more complex than such snap judgements allow for.

Overall, the local election results broadly reflected the national mood, but there were differences across the country, which demonstrates that maybe our conventional view of national issues dominating local elections needs reappraisal.

Multi-party, fractionalized and regionalised politics has rendered Robert McKenzie's simple swingometer redundant. And it may be that the electorate are becoming increasingly likely to split their vote when national and local elections are held on the same day. In the south-east and the midlands the Tories made gains but Labour won control of Cheshire West and took a clean sweep in Manchester. Of course, everyone gained from the LibDems.

Brighton most clearly suggested a more tactical electorate. The Greens held on to the parliamentary seat while losing their minority control of the council to Labour.

But to conclude with the opinion polls. There will be an "independent inquiry" into how they all got it so wrong. We might hope that one consequence will be our media become less obsessed with the horse race and more concerned with examining the respective claims of the parties. But don't hold your breath.

Here's my advice to the electorate - and look away now Kellner, Curtice, Rallings, Thrasher, *et al.* Let's make a national sport out of lying to the pollsters about our views and voting intentions. With no idea who is 'ahead', we might not only have equally exciting election nights every time: we might also get parties not cravenly tailoring their wares to the supposed wishes of the undecided voter.



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How could the polls have been so wrong?



Prof Suzanne Franks
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Watching the results in 2015 felt like 1992 all over again. A consistent pattern of polling throughout the campaign was completely overturned at 10pm on election night, when the exit poll results were revealed. Far from the tight and equal contest that had been predicted for weeks, the projection was suddenly one of Tory triumph, which of course the unfolding results later confirmed. Peter Kellner, the President of YouGov and responsible for many of those 'dead heat' predictions, spent much of the night eating his words. How could this error have happened?

After 1992 there was much talk about 'shy Tories' - voters who supported Conservative candidates in the privacy of the polling booth, but who were coy about admitting they were going to support what is often seen as the 'nasty party'. This tallies with another familiar concept in social science - the 'spiral of silence theory' - where certain groups will not voice openly opinions that they fear might be seen as unpopular. The argument went that expressing preference for a party associated with selfish individualism, as opposed to one that supported increasing taxes for the wider public good, might be perceived as embarrassing for some voters. So when asked about voting intentions those people instead told pollsters that they were 'don't knows' - even though they were highly likely to vote Tory when the moment came. A very similar thing happened in 1970, long before the days of sophisticated exit polling. Throughout the campaign the pollsters were uniformly predicting a Labour victory, but the reality on the morning after was Conservative Party leader, Edward Heath, in Downing Street.

In the years that followed 1992 the pollsters discussed the 'shy Tory' problem and claimed that they were able to correct for it in their modeling and analysis. There was still a general tendency to underestimate Conservative support (as in 2010) but this remained within the margins of error. Now in 2015 Shy Tories have again become a major distortion and overturned expectations. Interestingly this is a phenomenon observed internationally where support for Conservative and right wing parties is underestimated in polling. In the recent Israeli elections the pollsters repeatedly predicted a dead heat between the two largest parties, Labour and Likud, just like they did in the UK. But on election night Binyamin Netanyahu received a decisive lead of 6 seats over his Labour rivals. In the post-match analysis the pollsters pointed to the problem of voters who refuse to

answer, frequently because they are ashamed to admit who they are voting for, another version of 'shy Tories.' Crucially, the usual rule in polling and surveys, that people who *don't* answer behave the same as people who *do* answer, does not apply in politics. 'Don't know' may be a cover for something else. This makes political polling much more tricky and is a reason why some polling companies stay away from politics entirely and stick with commercial customers. It is much easier to ask questions about kinds of soap powder.

One further lesson that pollsters need to digest from 2015 is the disparity between online and telephone polling. The vast majority of the (inaccurate) polls were done online, consistently predicting a dead heat for the main parties. There were far fewer telephone polls, but they in the end were much closer to the correct result. In the final weeks face-to-face and telephone polls were predicting a steady 3% lead for the Conservatives. Online polling is obviously much cheaper and easier but on this occasion it has failed to capture an accurate picture.

Using social media to predict the General Election?

While public polls showed the two main parties consistently neck and neck in the run up to the 2015 General Election, social media suggested a more divided level of support. In this short piece, I look for patterns in an admittedly retrospective-fitting and cherry-picked selection of online data to show how we might have otherwise better predicted the General Election outcome.

The traditional method of predicting votes and seats: public opinion polls

The BBC's Poll of Polls on the 6th May 2015 (the day before the election) had Labour on 33 per cent and the Conservatives on 34 per cent. The actual share of the vote was 36.9 per cent for the Conservatives and 30.4 per cent for Labour. Although seat projections varied a little more than vote percentages for the two main parties (partly due to the ups and downs of support for smaller parties like UKIP), pre-election forecasts typically suggested a hung Parliament with the Conservatives marginally ahead of Labour in terms of seats. Election Forecast, for example, predicted that the Conservatives would have 278 seats compared with 267 seats for Labour (545 seats combined). In short, there was much prediction of a close vote, and a close fight for seats between the Conservative and Labour parties.

An alternative social media method of predicting votes and seats: Facebook interactive metrics

Facebook calculate an engagement metric that considers levels of interaction (a compendium measure including likes as well as more engaged activities such as posting, sharing, and commenting). Between 1st January 2015 and 1st May 2015, analysis of this Facebook compendium metric showed that there were 12.2million interactions involving the Conservative Party compared to 9.7million interactions involving the Labour Party. Compared to each other, the Conservatives received 55.7 per cent (12.2m/21.9m) of the total two-main party interactions on Facebook, while Labour received 44.3 per cent (9.7m/21.9m). If we contrast this with the two-main party vote share (Conservative and Labour ratio only), we find that the Conservatives ended up with 54.8 per cent of the two-party vote ratio share (36.9 per cent/67.3 per cent combined share) and Labour 45.2 per cent (30.4 per cent/67.3 per cent combined Lab/Con share). The contrasts suggest that Facebook interactive metrics were within plus or minus one per cent of the actual ratio of vote share for the two main parties.

If we follow the same logic for seat share for the two-main parties (again, Conservative and

Labour ratio only), we find that the Conservatives ended up with 58.8 per cent of the two-party seat ratio share (331 seats/563 seats combined Lab/Con share) and Labour 41.2 per cent of the two-party seat ratio share (232 seats/563 seats combined Lab/Con share). If we then contrast this with the Facebook metrics (55.7 per cent for the Conservatives and 44.3 per cent for Labour – see above for calculations), we find that although the data is only just beyond the plus or minus three per cent typically considered the acceptable margin of error in polling it was arguably a better predictor than many predictions derived from opinion polls. If we contrast this with Election Forecast pre-election predictions (see above), for example, we see that their ratio was 51 per cent Conservatives (278/545) and 49 per cent Labour (267/545).

As for activity on Twitter, while Nicola Sturgeon came out on top, of the main parties fielding candidates across Great Britain, David Cameron received more mentions than Miliband (and Clegg and Farage). Although the majority of these were negative, Cameron received more positive than negative tweets (compared with Miliband, Clegg and Farage).

Health warnings

Am I saying that social media causes election results? Not with this data, but patterns in figures might be useful to help us predict, particularly if patterns hold true over a number of cases. Am I retrospectively fitting the data? Yes. Am I cherry-picking? Yes. For instance, the model does not hold for many of the other parties at all. Facebook data reveal that UKIP, for example, had the largest online presence at 15.6 million interactions. While the plurality election system might explain why this did not translate into seats, other interpretations might explain the lower vote share, possibly that not all of these interactions were positive or supportive in tone.



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Can trends in social media explain why the opinion polls got it wrong?



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One of the most popular journalistic narratives to emerge following the election has been the failure of almost all opinion polls to correctly predict the result. The polls typically predicted that Labour and the Conservatives would get about 32-35% of the vote each, that UKIP and the Liberal Democrats could expect around 13% and 8% respectively, and that the Greens and the SNP would return around 5%. Much of this, including the predicted vote share for the Liberal Democrats and UKIP, actually turned out to be correct. However, on the crucial question of who would win the election, the polls predicted a hung parliament rather than a Conservative majority. Unsurprisingly, it is this that most journalists have focussed on.

A number of things could have caused the polls to get it wrong. There could have been a last-minute swing to the Conservatives that the polls were unable to detect because their field-work had already stopped. The polls could have been distorted by the responses from so-called 'shy Tories' – a form of social desirability bias that results from people being embarrassed to admit they might vote Conservative when asked. Or, there could be another as yet unidentified flaw in the underlying survey methodology.

Together with researchers at the University of Warwick and the Centre for Research and Technology, Hellas (CERTH), we also tried – with similar levels of success – to predict the result. However, our approach, which was based on the automated identification, collection, and analysis of around 160,000 tweets per day, also allows us to paint a more detailed picture of the election than the national polls imply. It allows us to spot the more subtle fluctuations that averaged national polls might have papered over, as well as giving us a window onto what just before the election when much traditional opinion polling had stopped.

What does this data reveal? During the early part of the election period, the Conservatives were more commonly referred to than any of the other parties, with around 40% of all tweets about the election referring to them in some way. Labour were in second place with around 30%.

This pattern held until the beginning of May, when Labour overtook the Conservatives for the first time. As our charts show, this shift coincided with the broadcast of the BBC's *Question Time: Election Leaders Special*, and occurred shortly after Ed Miliband was interviewed by the comedian and activist Russell Brand. At the time, we thought that this might lead to a late swing towards Labour, but as we can see, this surge disappeared before polling day. What's more, by

May 6th the trend showed signs of going in the opposite direction, and thus appears to chime with the 'last-minute Conservative swing' theory.

Of course, parties can be referred to in both a positive and negative sense, so just looking at the number of tweets may be misleading. Using an approach based on automated sentiment analysis, we are also able to look at just those tweets that express positive sentiment.

If we do this, we see that the rise (and then fall) in the total number of tweets mentioning the Labour party was driven by positive sentiment towards them. This appears to have been a genuine Labour surge. In contrast, the number of positive tweets mentioning the Conservative party remained fairly steady. This suggests that if there was a late surge towards the Conservatives, evidence for it probably can't be found on Twitter. What seems more likely is that the greater salience of the Labour Party in the last week of the campaign ultimately led to a decrease in positive sentiment towards Labour. So it could be that differential turn-out, a reduction in Labour supporters who actually turned up at the polling booth, might be a better explanation of the result. Although social media can provide clues to the final share of the vote, there is clearly the need for further investigation of why the polls got it so wrong, and how more detailed analysis of social media trends could help improve the precision of any election vote-share predictions.



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Figure 1

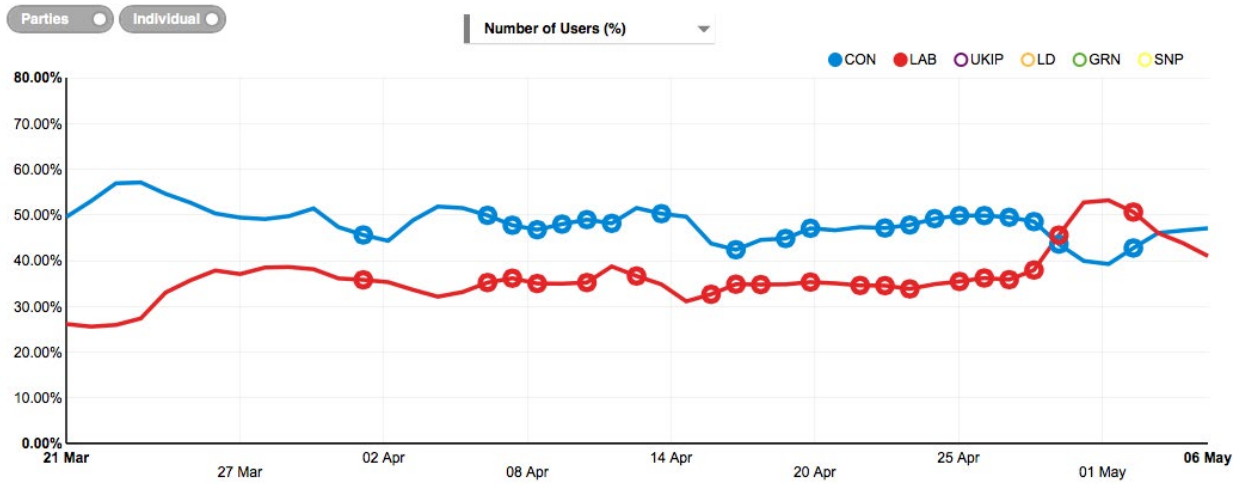
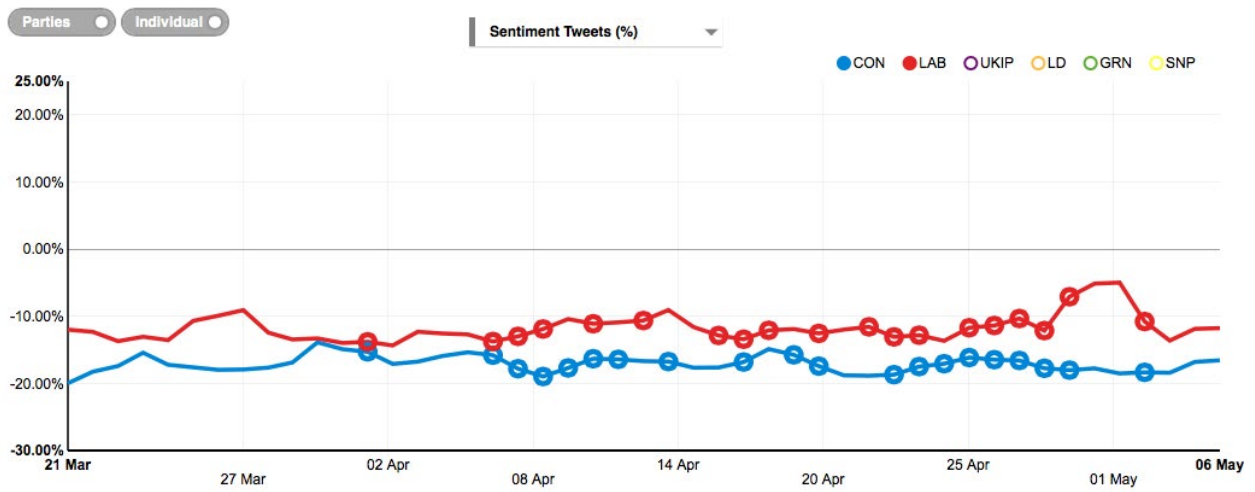


Figure 2



Mediaptating the ‘civic imperative’



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Engaging young people is a perennial theme of UK elections, updated for the social media age but carrying long-standing assumptions. How ‘youth voice’ is articulated in specific practices, and on whose terms, is complex, especially in the ‘micropolitical’ social media age, but there is little space or time for this in either party campaigning or ‘old media’ analysis.

The BBC debate with young voters in Birmingham covered the given ‘core issues’ – immigration, the NHS, the ‘economic plan’, focused on pertinent aspects (eg teenagers’ mental health) but failing to go beyond the campaign discourse. *Apathy or Antipathy?* mused The Guardian in a feature on under 25s’ feelings of alienation. Owen Jones tried harder, guest editing *The Big Issue* and co-opting Paloma Faith, Cat Boyd and the archetype of radical disengagement Russell Brand – “I’m just calculating what I would like to endorse”. Joylon Rubin-stein satirized the “silent war on the young” to call on first time voters to take arms at the ballot box. Brand’s later calculated endorsement of Ed Milliband followed a more frivolous credibility endowed by the ‘Debate me’ vine and ‘Millifandom’.

On the day, the voting intentions expressed by under 25s in the YouGov data – predicting almost 40% of first time voters for Labour, were as misleading as the rest of the poll.

So, what of the ‘civic imperative’? Jamal Edwards, ‘Youtube mogul’ and Bite the Ballot campaigner, gets closer to the complexity of the socio-cultural framing of public sphere practices for young people – “It’s a cultural shift, you’re trying to say to people, you’re a citizen before you’re a consumer”. Hoping to impact on this, our *Spirit of 13* project – supported by Sixteen Films, the BFI and Media Education Association, invited under 25s to make short films responding to Ken Loach’s documentary about the welfare state, to ‘give voice’ to their generation’s views on contemporary issues of social justice. A screening event at the British Film Institute featured a panel of the young film-makers, Loach and people appearing in his film. Elsewhere, we have applied the ‘civic’ strand of Unesco / EU Media Literacy frameworks to the outcomes and we’ve theorised them as a ‘third space mediaptation’ (whereby media and educational practices are ‘dual adapted’). But eighteen months on, we re-connected with the participants to find out if they voted and to look for evidence of any broader ‘democratic engagement’ around the election fostered by their involvement.

With a small sample, we’re hesitant to

overstate the impact of this project, but our participants revealed a degree of engagement in political/civic issues that they were able to relate to the *Spirit of 13* project, although they didn’t necessarily formalise this engagement in conventional terms. The fact that only half the respondents voted was a negative indicator of engagement, but the reasons tended to be logistical, for example, failing to register for a postal vote or being overseas on the day. Similarly, most respondents resisted the self-definition of ‘politically active’, some simply answering “no” to that question, and others recalibrating the term to include “discussions about politics”. Despite this apparent avoidance of an explicit ‘political identity’, there was evidence of enthusiastic engagement with political issues via social media: “Most of what fills my news feed is recommended articles and videos about political issues that my friends have ‘liked’” said one respondent. Another said “Social media helps me to understand what my peers think about a certain political issue. It’s also the fastest way to get hold of news (Twitter)”. The reverse was true of traditional media, with most respondents suggesting that the press, TV and radio played a minor role, if any, in their media diets, which suggests that, for this generation, there is, at least, a correspondence between new technologies and political engagement. Regarding the project itself, we elicited some clear statements about the relationship between filmmaking practice and political awareness: “Gave me the framework to express already existing political ideas and provided the opportunity for a short discussion with younger students I wouldn’t have otherwise met to discuss social issues”; “*Spirit of 13* opened my eyes to how much of everyday life is politics and how some of it is controlled”; “Making films is going from thought and theory to action in a way that resembles field research”.

This data was generated with some urgency for this piece – we re-connected with the participants on the morning after the election and gave them the weekend for a response. It’s possible to claim, tentatively, that *Spirit of 13* provided a stimulus for a constituency of young people to explore stories and issues to promote reflection on the meanings of politics and social engagement. But the conversion of such reflexive ‘mediaptation’ to direct civic action – at the polling station – appears to have slipped away.



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Liars, bullies, confused and infantilised... and that's just the electorate: the roles ascribed and the portrayal of members of the electorate in election TV coverage

As early talk of abolishing the Human Rights act begins, this piece takes a look at the anomalous mass that has been referred to as 'the electorate' and 'the public' in the last six weeks. My specific interest is in briefly examining how members of the electorate were portrayed in election coverage and what this might tell us about contemporary democratic politics in the UK.

Based on close observation of the major broadcasters coverage of election news, I detect five dominant strands that characterise how the electorate were used and given a role.

Firstly, reminiscent of black & white footage of elections in the 1950's, there was a climate of reverence; only now this was afforded to potential voters rather than those standing for office. Being rude to candidates might have been 'par for the course' but no matter how illogical, how poorly articulated or how factually incorrect the voice of the electorate, they were showered with shallow veneration.

Secondly, out of the unwarranted deference came an infantilising (at times I wondered if I was watching CBBC), soft questions verging on the juvenile, little follow up to seek justification of comments made and an absolute absence of interrogation of the expressed views elector's expressed no matter how self-contradictory they were.

Third, reinforcing this idea of the electorate as gullible was the patronising 'help' offered in the form political games. This took several forms including 'pin the policy to the party' and a version of matchmaking of party leaders (with an emphasis on 'matches' made in hell rather than heaven).

A fourth powerful characteristic of how the electorate were used in election media coverage was as pliable audience in a national beauty contest. There is little new in this assertion as it has been part of the personalisation of politics and presidential approach to elections noted for over twenty years. Two points worthy of note here; the audience no longer questions the appropriateness of adopting this role – the leaders personalities *do* matter as they *are* expected to perform as 'Presidential Prime Minister'. Expressed emotional attachment (or its lack thereof) *felt* by members of the electorate towards the leaders, was far more easily expressed, captured and thus reported on; they frighten me, they fill me with loathing, I like her... is sufficient to be the story.

Finally, this is of course like no other beauty contest; when individual members of the electorate are offered the 'privilege' of

direct mediated dialogue with the contestants a powerful sense of altercating is introduced to frame dramatic effect. Thus in the set-piece leadership debates a somewhat cleansed 'bear pit' mentality pervades where the electorate act to object, disagree, boo, stick to their original point (however narrow and 'context light' it might be) and avoid at all costs, entering into open minded dialogue or being reflective.

The overwhelming traits observed when members of the electorate were included in the election coverage illustrate well that are of course talking about human beings. Thus there was much inconsistency and contradiction, little grasp of the detail and a sense of permission to drift in and out of being bothered or taking it that seriously. Rather than being challenged about this state of affairs, they were treated like 'minor royalty' - allowed to 'get away' with uttering the first thing that came into their head, no responsibility being ascribed for their limited and limiting contributions.

One outcome of this depiction of the electorate 'as seen on TV' suggests we need to rethink the point and purpose of asking the electorate to 'tell us what they think' during election campaigns. This initially seems counter intuitive, anti-democratic even. However, *if* current practices help create liars, and bullies, and *if* existing modes of coverage brings out child-like qualities in the electorate (such as not being asked to take responsibility for their star of confusion or their poorly justified opinions and actions), and *if* the electorate's main role in this Media spectacle is to be infantilised, then I argue there is merit in calls for a reappraisal of the place afforded to individual members of the electorate in election coverage.



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Bringing out the youth vote? Young people and the 2015 General Election



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One of the prominent features of recent general elections has been decreasing rates of turnout amongst young voters. Turnout among young people (here, 18-24 year olds) has fallen from over 60% in the early 1990s to an average of 40% over the previous three general elections (2001, 2005 and 2010). My own research finds that the youth turnout rate in the UK is the lowest of all the 15 members of the old European Union. Voters aged 18 to 24 in Sweden turn out to vote at double the rate of their peers in the UK.

This disillusionment extends to public policy, where young people have borne the brunt of cuts in public spending: from the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance, to the tripling of university tuition fees, to the removal of housing benefits for young adults, to the closure of local youth centres. However, young people in the UK are active in many alternative forms of civic and political engagement that have meaning for their everyday lives, including: volunteering for community projects; signing petitions; and, participation in demonstrations and occupations.

In this context, it is worth considering the extent to which political parties tried to connect with youth politics in the 2015 general election. How was this reflected in their political platforms (as laid out in their manifestos)? What were the outcomes in terms of party support amongst 18 to 24 year olds?

The manifestos paint an interesting picture. A brief content analysis, searching for the term 'young people', ranked the parties in the order shown in Table 1.

The Green Party manifesto included a bespoke section on youth issues providing a number of key pledges, including: free higher education, free local transport, votes at 16, and investment in youth services. Youth issues were integrated into all parts of the Labour Party manifesto, for example: education (vocational training), employment (zero-hour contracts, apprenticeships), and constitutional reform (votes at 16). Outside the main manifesto, Labour also produced a youth manifesto and a promise to reduce student tuition fees to £6,000. The Conservative manifesto was clearly less youth-oriented, and focussed on the issues of apprenticeships and youth involvement in the 'big society'.

Why did the Greens focus so much on young people and UKIP so little? Party strategists knew that Green supporters were more likely to be young whilst UKIP supporters were more likely to fall into the older age brackets. Perhaps, the lack of Liberal Democrat focus on young people reflected an unwillingness to concentrate on issues that could highlight their U-turn on universi-

ty tuition fees.

Therefore, the Greens and Labour were the two parties with a clear focus on bringing out the youth vote. How was this reflected in the vote itself? Despite the advent of the Individual Voter Registration system that saw 800,000 people – disproportionately young people – fall off the electoral roll, turnout amongst the 18 to 24 year old age groups increased significantly from the 2010 election – from 52% to 58%. The closeness of the election and voter registration drives by organisations such as [BitetheBallot](#), and possibly the Green and Labour focus on the youth issues (remember the [MilliBrand](#) interview!) all probably had an impact. According to [Lord Ashcroft Polling](#) on 7th May: see Table 2.

Although it is true that parties focus their policy appeals on parts of the electorate where they are already strong, it is still interesting that the parties that paid most attention (in policy terms) to young people also scored better amongst that group. It is also interesting to note the large increase in young Labour voters (+10), the decrease in young Conservative voters (-6), and the collapse of the LibDem youth vote (-22) since the 2010 general election.

Political parties target certain segments of the population to win votes, but age is a unique phenomenon. Young voters will become older voters. And, research tells us that voting habits are likely to stay the same (so the increased turnout rate is encouraging), and there is a better than good chance that their party affiliations will also remain. The second point will hopefully give political parties and policy-makers food for thought. Within our ageing population, bringing out the youth vote should be a key long-term strategy.

Table 1:

Green Party	35 mentions
Labour Party	30 mentions
Conservative Party	21 mentions
Liberal Democrats	11 mentions (adjusted downwards due to length of manifesto)
Scottish National Party	9 mentions (4 for 'young people', 5 for 'young Scots')
UK Independence Party	5 mentions

Table 2:

	Vote (all ages) (n=12,253)	Youth Vote (18-24 year olds) (n=676)	Youth Vote versus Overall Support
Conservative	33%	24%	-9
Labour	30%	41%	+11
UKIP	14%	10%	-4
LibDem	9%	8%	-1
Green	5%	10%	+5
SNP	5%	4%	-1

A transitional parliament



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Despite a relatively uneventful campaign, the May 7th election both signifies and facilitates a series of profound shifts in Britain and in Europe. The result obviously constitutes a huge win for the Conservatives, however this will not necessarily be a 'One Nation' government as David Cameron proclaims he wants it to be. His party is still fundamentally divided – not just on Europe but on other issues, too – and right-wing voices have been hard to control at the best of times. With a slim majority in the Commons, backbench MPs will also play a crucial role in the stability and direction of the government so this may prove to be a tough balancing act of the 1992-97 type. We should not be surprised if we see a string of hard-right policies balancing some more 'one nation' ones.

It will now also be interesting to compare the new Government's legislative agenda to the coalition Government's track record. The fact that the Conservatives will be governing alone will give us some indication about any impact that the Liberal Democrats actually had in containing the more radical right-wing elements within the Tory party. In the long term this could work in the Lib Dems' favour: if the Conservatives go ahead with a radical agenda, they could then present that as evidence that they did in fact play an active role in stopping that from happening in the previous parliament. However, the Liberal Democrats have been electorally obliterated at a national level and in the short term will have to find ways of surviving as a noticeable and relevant political party. While the swing against them was mostly fuelled by opposition to Nick Clegg personally, and to the party going back on key promises such as top-up fees, it may also have a profound effect on the reach and influence of local councillors and grassroots organisations.

The election was determined by the two factors that almost always determine elections in the UK: the economy and the personality of the leader, and Labour lost on both counts, and they lost massively. The fact that Ed Balls lost his seat means that Labour now have the opportunity to draw a line in the sand and have a clean break from the past – a past which they seem to not have properly reflected on or made their peace with. The Labour Party seems unsure about which things it got right and wrong in the past and this is actually the case with other centre-left or social-democratic parties in Europe. They have not come up with a convincing alternative to austerity and have failed to cultivate a new generation of dynamic and ambitious leaders that are in touch with key demographics. By favouring mass participation in the selection of the party's leader,

and by creating complex and inflexible processes of leadership challenge, they have made leaders less accountable, not more, and have undermined the organic checks and balances that operate within party elites.

Beyond party politics, this election is an indication of tectonic shifts both domestically and in Europe. It is a de facto recognition of an increasingly inevitable break-up of the Union. What will the legitimacy of the British government be in an SNP-dominated Scotland? And what will the relevance of SNP MPs be in Westminster debates? This feels like a transitional parliament and this is partly due to the main UK parties having legitimised this division over time through piecemeal but symbolically important actions, such as creating separate Scottish-branded parties.

Finally, in conjunction with a belligerent and disorganised Greek government that in its present form is not willing or able to pass and implement reforms that can adequately restore Greece's position in the Eurozone, the fact that the UK will hold a referendum about its future in Europe, means that the EU has now itself officially entered a transitional phase. Whatever the outcome in either country, it is quite clear that the EU of 2020 will be very different from the EU of today. My bet – and at this moment one can only guess – is that we will eventually see a core of western European countries integrating further, while various configurations of integration and disintegration emerge depending on perceived national interest and domestic pressures. This may prove to be inadequate to address complex and pressing global challenges (insecurity and conflict, climate change, immigration, Russia's attitude, energy, organised crime, terrorism, global governance deficits etc) so the fact that, rather than talking about these issues and how to overcome them in a committed way, we will be discussing whether the UK should be part of the EU in the first place, certainly weakens the EU itself regardless of the referendum's actual outcome.



Former Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls makes a speech after losing his Morley and Outwood seat to Conservative Andrea Jenkyns by 18,776 votes to 18,354 - a majority of 422 - after a recount. (Picture by: Dave Higgins / PA Wire/Press Association Images)



3

Political Communication and Image Management

Extraordinary election, political communication as usual

Opinion poll failure and the unexpected Conservative majority revived memories of the 1992 election for many commentators. But, from the perspective of political communication, 1987 is a more useful comparison.

Then, as now, the centre-piece issues were economic competence (Conservative) versus trust to run the NHS (Labour). Then, as now, Labour was led by a young, new leader, regarded by the Tories as a fatal weakness, but who managed to spearhead a surprisingly impressive campaign. Then, as now, the election ended in crushing defeat for Labour following a blitz of fear messages from the Conservatives and their battering-rams in the press. Ed Miliband endured the kind of Tory tabloid brutality not seen since Neil Kinnock led Labour.

There is at least one significant twist though. The 1987 campaign marked the emergence of Peter Mandelson, and the start of the professionalisation of Labour campaigning, culminating under Tony Blair with the most sophisticated and thorough political marketing seen in Britain yet.

By contrast, Miliband's tenure seemed almost contemptuously disregarding of modern campaign wisdom: emotional connection with voters, clear political branding, and the importance of news management and instant rebuttal. For almost five years it had been tough to work out what Labour's national communication strategy was, or even if one existed. Occasionally, some messages seemed to gain traction for a while - one nation, the "squeezed middle" - and now and again individual Labour proposals briefly captured the agenda. Miliband had his moments, he occasionally flared with a bright light only to descend back to darkness for long periods. Weeks, sometimes months, seemed to pass with scarcely a memorable intervention from any Labour spokesperson as the coalition provided both the government and the opposition.

Above all, Miliband's team seemed not to have learned the key lesson that Kinnock's campaigners drew from 1987; that oppositions have no chance unless they can engage governments in at least a relatively close fight on the question of economic competence. Team Miliband did little to rebut the accusation that Labour had created the deficit crisis and left the Tories to clear up the mess. Neither did it present a clear and coherent strategy for growth. It was never clear if a Miliband government would be willing to borrow or not, and if not how would growth be achieved? The kind of opinion-former, media, academic and business

endorsement so important to building perceptions of New Labour competence were almost entirely absent for Project Miliband. Instead, as Owen Jones put it (*Mirror*, May 9) "random policies were flung into the ether" only to land as "incoherent mush" - "people didn't know what Labour stood for".

In the end, it was Labour in the squeezed middle; assailed as Tory-lite by the boldly anti-austerity Scottish Nationalists, and as Red Ed reckless big spender by the Conservatives. Miliband had been bullied by the Tories, said Nicola Sturgeon; he would be bullied by SNP, said the Tories. Sturgeon captured the mantle of the 'progressive' political brand, and the Conservatives held the badge of competence. Miliband's flurry of policies, despite some revival of New Labour slogans, offered too little, too late to create identity.

It seemed possible on the morning of May 7 that Ed Miliband might be the next prime minister. Had that happened this piece would have been more intriguing to write because the normal rules of campaigning communication would have been shattered. It would have been a paradigm shifter. A sign that the usual channels of brand-building and news management had been supplanted by new, different and perhaps Arnie Graf-inspired direct means of community engagement.

By Friday morning, it seemed that the old rules still applied. The Conservative campaign, straight from the tried and trusted Lynton Crosby textbook, combined relentless attack on Labour's weak points with strong core vote messages. It was not pretty and it lacked the warmth of David Cameron's modernising, compassionate conservatism of 2010. Even if it looked desperate at times, the basic underlying focus on economic competence and fear of Labour, propped up by the SNP, was consistent, comprehensible and apparently resonant. Across the country the political tectonic plates may have shifted, but this was political communication as usual.

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Symbolising Britain



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Confucius once opined that “signs and symbols rule the world – not words nor laws”. Nowhere is this more true than in contemporary electoral campaigns.

Symbolic language has always been a part of public political life, but recently its importance has multiplied. The 2015 General Election was saturated with symbolic constructions of nationhood and identity, expressing and appealing to imaginations of what it does and does not mean to be “British”. In recent decades this symbolic construction of nationhood has been confined to fringe nationalist groups with limited media exposure and appeal, but the recent Election demonstrated a growth in definitions of community which are expressed through symbols. These symbols increasingly express an ominous concept returning to British political discourse: ethnic nationalism.

Political communication – posters, pamphlets, the occasional bit of flag-waving – has of course always involved symbols, but under decades of a dominant two-party system these symbols focused on mundane economic and political elements of life: symbols, images, and text endlessly repeating the old mantra of schools, hospitals, and wages. Yet the 2015 campaign was markedly different due to two developments.

First was the surge in expressions of nationalist identity, either pro-independence or pro-Union, surrounding the Scottish independence question. The old symbolic paraphernalia of ethnic nationalism – flags, anthems, emotional appeals to a collective glorious history as independent Scots or unified Britons (collective histories which never really existed) – was dusted off by both sides and triumphantly returned to public spaces. This surge in nationalist sentiment carried on into the Election, influencing the symbolic communications of parties across the UK in an electoral campaign more reminiscent of Victorian populist jingoism than twenty-first century apathy.

The second development was the shift towards digital democracy in the form of the televised Leaders’ Debates; not quite new, but groundbreaking in that for the first time we saw equal mass exposure in the Election for the Greens, UKIP, SNP, and Plaid Cymru. And with the exception of the Greens, whose logo of the entire planet communicates a vaguely transnationalist ideology, these smaller parties preach the virtues of what Benedict Anderson identified as an imagined community: appeals to a national identity which does not really exist but which is constructed and communicated (often fiercely) through symbolic language sodden with expressions of who does and who does not, and who should and who should not, belong.

The consequence of these two developments

was a seismic shift in symbolic communication from the traditions of two main parties denouncing each others’ dry manifestos to campaigns in which parties appealed not to rational policies but to irrational, emotional identities. While Labour simply recycled used images, other parties appealed to nationalist emotions. Conservative leaflets showed crudely-doctored images of Ed Miliband and Alex Salmond embracing outside Downing Street. SNP posters unconvincingly changed the upholstery in the House of Commons from drab green to gaudy tartan. UKIP posters awkwardly juxtaposed the White Cliffs of Dover with escalators, while Plaid Cymru pamphlets brazenly detached the map of Wales from the rest of the UK altogether (for recent party literature, see Electionleaflets.org). The party propaganda of 2015 appealed directly to symbolic constructions of nationhood, expressing who does and does not belong to these various imagined communities which are defined not by any chosen affiliation but by inherited ethnicity. Fostering nationalism is a dangerous game to play, yet such is the power of symbolic communication that it has been recklessly deployed to appeal to our hopes and fears, swaying voters from policies to feelings. For the very power of nationalist symbolism is its appeal to raw emotion.

The Referendum and Election have provided a foundation for ethnic nationalism to creep back into British politics under the guise of progressive politics, ostensibly legitimised through association with established parties. Those same parties are already preparing for the next test of nationalist sentiment – do we want to be ‘European’, and yet again, do the Scots want to be ‘British’? These campaigns will see an even greater surge in the symbolic language of flags, emblems, manufactured histories, and fierce visual rhetoric surrounding our ethnic identities; enflaming and appealing to emotions which inevitably overwhelm rationalist thought in a tsunami of ethnic symbolism.

As we approach new referenda in which we are asked to choose our national identity/ies, symbolic language will become even more significant. When the next leaflet is pushed through your letterbox, gaudily decorated with flags and icons and pithy proclamations that we must stay together or we must go our separate ways, don’t be too quick to display it in the window or toss it in the bin. Consider the power that those symbols have over your emotions, your identity, and ultimately your choice of vote. What exactly about it stirs your feelings? Is it the words and policies, or signs and symbols? Perhaps Confucius was right after all.

Standing behind the leaders

The two inter-linked aspects of this election campaign I found most noteworthy were i) the extent to which the main parties, particularly Conservatives and Labour, insulated (protected) their leaders from direct contact – including depictions in the media – with members of the public, and ii) each parties' success in avoiding the central questions about their policies upon which an informed choice depended.

In an effort to avoid the kind of 'Gillian Duffy moment' that sank Gordon Brown, this time around, the main parties went to great lengths to ensure that, whenever and wherever party leaders Cameron, Miliband and Clegg appeared in front of photojournalists and television cameras, they were seen in carefully controlled and stage-managed settings against a background of smiling supporters enthusiastically waving party signs and placards.

The backdrop or 'set' against which a politician is seen has a subtle – but powerful – influence on our perceptions and therefore on our interpretations of the event (have you noticed, for example, how often automobile advertisements are filmed in natural and idyllic surroundings – rather than in traffic jams or suburban sprawl?). Employing many of the same visual communication strategies used to shape audiences' attitudes towards consumer products, the organisers used these 'pseudo-events' to symbolically suggest the leaders' popularity among the various ages, social and ethnic groups represented by the assembled crowds of Conservative supporters, Labour supporters, and Liberal Democrat supporters.

And of course, through the careful selection of those in close proximity to their leaders, the parties were also able to ensure that their leaders were not pressed – especially in the presence of cameras and journalists – for answers to the questions (to the Conservatives: Where will the promised £12b reductions in social spending be made? To Labour: What is the projected cost of your spending programmes?) they consistently refused to provide and which voters required to make an informed choice about the direction and priorities of UK society.

By carefully controlling the way in which the leaders were presented to the media, the parties made use of an insight offered by Walter Lippmann (1922) on shaping public opinion:

"In order to conduct a propaganda [sic] there must be some barrier between the public and the event. Access to the real environment must be limited [in order to control] where they look, and at what. [...] It is often very illuminating, therefore, to ask yourself how you got at the facts on which you base your opinion."

Comparing the various photographs made from different vantage points of a Conservative rally in Wadebridge, Cornwall Isabel Hardman

writing in the *Spectator* ably demonstrates a basic principle of 'visual syntax' regularly used by newspaper photo editors: that when a photograph is tightly framed around a small group, it gives the impression of a much larger crowd.

The Conservative party's Australian strategist, Lynton Crosby has clearly learned valuable lessons from American image consultants such as Michael Deaver whose work for US Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush included orchestrating scenes for televised events that left powerful symbolic images in people's minds. According to *The New York Times*, Deaver was responsible for "Reagan's most memorable photographic backdrops for public consumption".

Reporting on the use of such visual stagecraft to shape US public perception of President George W. Bush's economic plan, Elisabeth Bumiller of *The New York Times* wrote:

"The White House has stocked its communications operation with people who are experts in lighting, camera angles and the importance of backdrops. At a speech promoting his economic plan, White House officials [asked] people in the crowd behind [the President] to take off their ties [...] so they would look more like the ordinary people the president said would benefit from his tax cut."

Now, how many of us had naïvely assumed that, shown against a background of supporters while making his (certainly scripted) plea for the chance to carry out the next step of the Conservatives' economic plan, Cameron appeared with rolled up shirt sleeves only because he was 'pumped up'?

With ever greater control exercised by image consultants over the increasingly stage-managed appearances by politicians – whose public personas are already mediated through television and photojournalism, and whose every utterance will soon be vetted by continuous response measure ('worm graphs) and focus groups – we will increasingly find (or worse, not notice) that we can no longer have confidence in the bases on which we make judgements about the character of those standing for office.

Coupled with the refusal to engage with the questions to which the public desperately wanted answers, these trends will only further exacerbate both the real and symbolic 'distance' between us and the politicians who claim to understand and represent our interests. Regrettably, these trends are likely to only gather momentum in future campaigns. *Caveat emptor*.



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Political consultants, their strategies and the importation of new political communications techniques during the 2015 General Election



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Political consulting – part of a global, multi-billion dollar political communications industry – is an integral part of contemporary election campaigning. While overseas consultants, mainly from the United States, have assisted the Conservative and Labour parties in British general elections since the 1980s and 1990s respectively – helping them to shape campaign messages, strategies and tactics – the 2015 General Election witnessed them playing a much more prominent role.

The Australian Lynton Crosby was engaged by the Conservatives in 2012 and was joined the following year by Jim Messina from the Barack Obama campaign team. Crosby directed the Conservatives' unsuccessful 2005 General Election campaign and Boris Johnson's successful 2008 and 2012 London Mayoral election campaigns. The American David Axelrod – who, along with Messina, engineered Obama's successful 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns – was hired by Labour in 2014. The Liberal Democrats employed the South African Ryan Coatzee in 2012 to serve as special advisor to Nick Clegg and, in 2015, strategic director, while Ruwan Kodikara, from the Quiller consultancy, assumed the role of head of media and branding.

The Conservative campaign, tightly controlled by Crosby, communicated three main messages: that Labour had 'crashed the economy', that only the Conservatives had a 'long-term economic plan', and that Ed Miliband was not a credible alternative. These themes were enthusiastically amplified by much of the British press – evidenced by the Loughborough University Communication Research Centre and Open Democracy-Avaaz. Furthermore, a negative, highly personalized and sustained attack on Miliband was launched which surpassed that inflicted upon Neil Kinnock in 1992. Crosby's 40-40 strategy involved targeting 40 seats, particularly those held by the Liberal Democrats, and defending a further 40 seats against Labour. Crosby conducted private polling in these 80 constituencies, providing candidates with detailed information, while Messina, drawing upon the successful Obama model, used this information to construct a new database and voter profiling system. For much of the campaign, opinion polls failed to show a Conservative lead and the Crosby approach was widely criticized. Having presciently advised masterclass students to 'ignore the opinion polls', the expression of such doubts may have been a controlled and diversionary tactic to suggest that the campaign was failing when, in reality, there was a 'Team 2015' force of 100,000 volunteers assisting constituency activists in the target seats. The Conservatives deployed another

effective tactic, known as wedge politics, which involves finding an issue that can be exploited to prise off your opponent's traditional supporters. Towards the end of the campaign, the Conservatives warned that a vote for rival parties would deliver a coalition or a minority government that was dependent upon the Scottish National Party. This would threaten the future of the union and would result in higher public spending and debt. The deployment of fear was effective and the Crosby strategy was an unexpected success; the Conservatives gained 28 seats and secured an overall majority of 331.

The Labour campaign, assisted by Axelrod, communicated two key messages: that Britain only succeeds when working people succeed – the so-called economic recovery having failed to solve the cost of living crisis – and that the Conservatives constituted a threat to the National Health Service. Minimalist in nature, the Axelrod strategy was predicated on mobilizing Labour's core supporters and thus gaining the 35 per cent of the popular vote deemed necessary to deliver a majority. The party targeted 106 marginal seats with an army of 300 paid activists who helped to achieve Labour's objective of five million doorstep conversations; effectively used its Contact Creator database and new Nation Builder software to organize and support these activists; and, drawing upon the Obama model, attracted 149,000 donations during the campaign as part of a £2.7 million crowdsourcing operation. Although hailed as the victor in the 'ground war' to encourage voter turnout, the party was ultimately defeated. The Axelrod strategy was an unmitigated disaster; Labour secured only 232 seats (24 less than in 2010).

The Liberal Democrat campaign, devised by Coatzee, emphasized their record as part of the Coalition Government and communicated three main messages: that the Liberal Democrats, as Coalition partners, had moderated Conservative excesses, that the Liberal Democrats had, and would continue to, deliver economic competence and stability, and that the Liberal Democrats offered a centrist alternative to their rivals who were lurching to the left and right. This strategy, of splitting the difference, was predicated on defending existing Liberal Democrat seats. Tactically, the Liberal Democrats neglected to convey their liberal vision and instead presented themselves as a potential future coalition partner. The Coatzee strategy was an unmitigated disaster; the Liberal Democrats won only 8 seats (49 less than in 2010).

There now follows a party election broadcast

For decades there has been a warning for viewers that it's time to switch channels or to go and make a cup of tea.

From Anthony Eden batting away rehearsed questions, to John Major visiting his childhood home, and Tony Blair: *The Movie*; the messages were cosy, bland and uninspiring. They rarely made an impact unless as objects of derision.

However, for this election the political parties have reinvented their use of video and sought inspiration from the much maligned staple of US Presidential elections: the attack ad.

Political advertising is forbidden under the UK's broadcasting laws but by using YouTube and social media the parties have transmitted video messages to millions of people.

The Conservatives set the pace. One of their key theme was the danger of allowing the SNP to prop up a weak Labour government. On March the 22nd, just before Parliament was dissolved, they published a polished animation showing Alex Salmond returning to Westminster to make Ed Miliband dance to his tune. It was short, smart and targeted – and, at the time of writing, it has been watched more than a quarter of a million times on YouTube.

The Tories have clearly learned lessons from their use of poster and billboard advertising. A single strong image dominates their most successful video, the delicate mechanism of a clock being smashed by a sledgehammer. A heavy handed metaphor for Labour wrecking the economy but it has been viewed more than 400,000 times on YouTube.

In general Labour's tone was more positive. There were highly produced celebrity endorsements by actors such as Steve Coogan and Martin Freeman, and motivational videos extolling the virtues of voting Labour. These were similar to the traditional PEB although, perhaps, with higher production standards. But Labour also made use of short, sharable videos for social media. One that was particularly effective showed interviews with several Conservative ministers being evasive about plans to cut the top rate of income tax.

The parties' video themes can broadly be broken down into three categories: attacking your opponents, positive message reinforcement, and endorsements – from both celebrities and “real” voters. Humour, as ever, played well. The Greens' “Change the Tune” film featuring the other party leaders as a boy band racked up nearly 900,000 views on YouTube and more than 9,000 likes.

The use of Facebook and Twitter is allowing politicians to get their message straight to

voters, cutting out the media middle-man. David Cameron's Twitter account has more than a million followers. A huge audience for videos such as the one he tweeted showing Alex Salmond joking he would write Labour's budget speech – that was retweeted more than a thousand times.

Why is this happening now? It's the conjunction of several things: high levels of smartphone use and ease of access to video editing software, the extensive reach of YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, and the change in copyright law to allow humorous or satirical mash-ups has created a more permissive environment.

With the unexpected success of the Conservatives at this election, all the parties will want to draw lessons from a campaign that effectively delivered both positive and negative video messages directly to voters.



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The slow shift to the digital campaign: online political posters



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In the 2010 election, despite some minor forays into emerging social media, the predominant tool of choice for the parties was the by-then distinctly old-school e-mail. UK elections have clung to traditional campaign tools like Party Election Broadcasts, and have seemingly been reluctant to fully embrace new developments like televised debates. The inclusion of online campaigning into the electoral toolbox has been gradual and one of many techniques entering the mix has been online political posters.

Posters in one form or another have been a feature of election campaigns in the UK and elsewhere for over a hundred years. During this time their significance has shifted from being a tool of direct persuasion and mobilisation to one of media agenda setting. Conspiring to have billboard images reproduced on television, online news sites and in newspapers for free is a more cost-effective way of getting the message out than paying for pricey billboard sites. In the 2015 campaign posters were seemingly even less prominent, leading to claims of the death of the campaign poster. But while wide scale traditional print posters might be less attractive, the idea of the poster as a campaign tool has not disappeared and has re-emerged online, particularly through party presences on social media. So far, the use of online posters has not drawn widespread attention, aside from the brief furore surrounding Grant Shapps' "beer and bingo" poster published on Twitter in the wake of the 2014 Budget. Nevertheless, they have quietly become a routine part of party communication over social media.



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Online political posters offer a potentially fruitful communication channel for parties, being comparatively cheap to produce and quick to distribute compared with traditional posters. The potential for online posters to go "viral" through social media, spreading exponentially as they are shared between users, is likely a big draw for political parties. Online posters often include explicit invitations to like and "share if you agree". Although online posters are sometimes straight digital reproductions of existing billboards, or heavily influenced by traditional poster styles, they also have their own forms and styles. Most common are photographs, often of party leaders, combined with simple slogans or statements; infographic images with charts also feature, as do images with text-only slogans. A series of online posters based on Ed Miliband's response to Jeremy Paxman's Channel 4 interview question of whether he was tough enough to be Prime Minister, proclaiming "Hell Yes, I'm voting Labour", were a feature of Labour's Facebook page up to and including polling day.

We have been tracking online political posters on Facebook since September 2013 up to polling day as part of an ongoing study focusing on the main three parties plus UKIP, the Greens, Plaid Cymru and the SNP. From September 2013 to polling day the parties released collectively approximately 2400 posters; 1018 of these were posted between 1st March 2015 and 7th May 2015 alone. On just one day (2nd April 2015) Plaid Cymru published over 80 posters in English and Welsh. Trends around the Scottish Independence Referendum and 2014 European Elections were less pronounced. Nonetheless, the permanent campaign is a reality online with online posters appearing nearly daily, even outside of election periods and with a distinct increase before the General Election.

Despite party efforts, both in implicit poster designs and through explicit appeals to share, we found little evidence so far that online posters frequently go viral, with shares in the thousands at most. Interestingly it has been online posters from UKIP and the Greens that have done best, averaging significantly more likes and shares than the traditional parties. Whilst still not a level playing field, to a degree some of the minor parties are outperforming the major parties on social media (if not at the ballot box).

The purpose online posters serve in contemporary digital campaigns remains unclear. Their failure to spread widely suggests they do not contribute much to persuading undecided voters. However, the continual presence of online posters, even outside election periods, suggests they do play some kind of ongoing role. They may be tools for agenda setting through message repetition over time, in a way not possible with traditional posters. Alternatively online posters could be more inward looking, communicating messages to strengthen the identity of existing supporters. At a time when online supporters are rivalling and even outstripping the numbers of traditional party members, online posters may offer a tool for parties to communicate ideas quickly and simply with supporters, as well as a convenient way for supporters to express their own politics over social media by sharing party content. In that sense, online posters may have less in common with billboards and more with the humble constituency campaign window poster.

HELL YES
I'M VOTING
LABOUR
TODAY



THIRST FOR CHANGE?

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Green Party
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Promoted by and on behalf of the Green Party at Development House, 56-64 Leonard Street, London, EC2A 4LT

Online persuasion at the 2015 General Election



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This was the fifth UK General Election campaign at which the Internet has played a part, and given the proliferation in social media use since 2010 many commentators expected it to play a key role. The consensus of most research has suggested that the role of web technologies has been primarily to offer information about the candidates and parties. One respected web campaigner once said to me the Internet would not deliver the Holy Grail of winning votes. So does this mean that party websites do not seek to change voting behaviour? I looked at 42 party websites to see if they deliberately sought to use their website as a persuasive tool, to change behaviour, or merely to inform.

In recent years commercial companies have started to look at the application of gamification, namely to apply aspects of gaming to enhance relationships with web visitors. In the 2015 UK general Election gamification played no role with one important exception, the Conservative Party. They operated a points scheme, *Share the Facts*, designed to encourage interaction with their campaign. The scheme encourages supporters to share posts with others, those who sign up get points when they share posts, others click on their posts and if people react to their posts. Every fortnight the top twenty point scorers on their leader board win a prize. Turning the campaign into a game with a competition and rewards is designed to convert their supporters into online active campaigners enhancing the Party's official online campaign. Gamification has clearly not taken off yet, but it will be interesting to see if this one example becomes the norm for parties as they seek a competitive edge, or is largely forgotten?

Another example of where parties have sought to apply the latest trends has been crowdfunding. In October 2014 *The Green Party* announced that it was working with Crowdfunder to raise money from small donations to secure £50,000 to 'bankroll' 75 candidates. By the beginning of the election campaign they had raised nearly £75,000. In March 2015 the Scottish National Party (SNP) similarly announced that it was turning to crowdfunding to support 21 election 'projects', including Alex Salmond its previous leaders' campaign to win a seat. Both parties are seeking to capitalise online in the surge of interest and support offline.

A different approach to persuasion was provided by the Labour Party. I received an email about halfway through the campaign which included the following:

"I've just put together a list of everything our organisers will need to expand their operations.

By my calculations, they need £111,300 for the penultimate week — and we need to raise that by midnight on Thursday if we're going to get the money out to the organisers in time.

Nigel, if there ever there was a time to join the 20,388 others who've donated this month, this is it. Do your bit to help our campaign win as many votes as possible in the final two weeks of this neck-and-neck election — it takes two minutes to donate."

This appeal features a number of well-used persuasion techniques. By using a very precise figure, £111,300, they are implying very clear costings, and also pique my interest. They provide a very short timeframe suggesting an urgency to act. And then they use social norms with 20,388 already donating. This suggests that I will not be alone, rather following something many others have already done and so these numbers encourage compliance as something normal. Looking at this appeal as a whole I see a very clear persuasive message: there is a real problem, that there is a solution, that I can help to solve it and there are few barriers to stop me doing so.

Of course these reflections of the 2015 General Election campaign are only a snap shot of the process of online persuasion, they cannot offer an assessment of what their effect has been. However, I would argue that UK political parties have sought to deliberately apply at least some persuasion theory to how they use their online presence, typically to mobilise supporters rather than change voters' minds. I would expect this trend to increase in future campaigns.

Marketing the 2015 British General Election: the invisible campaign?

Writing this as the election contest closes and the results are announced, we might be forgiven for asking if the election campaigns have actually launched yet, or if the leaders will ever address the problems facing our country?

And so to the 2015 election marketing campaigns. At this point I click for my folder of campaign materials. This is normally bursting with content. This time the folder is anorexic. I am even struggling to remember the election marketing messages. The 2015 campaigns represent everything that is wrong with the marketing-politics marriage. Not because of the underlying tensions between the use of the marketing to sell democracy; but simply because marketing was so inexpertly applied. You would think that the parties' campaign advisors would have a very good understanding of marketing. Some of them – such as David Axelrod and Lynton Crosby – were brought in from abroad for their strategic acumen. But as far as the application of marketing goes, they fell well short.

Marketing politics is not like selling soap powder, it is different. Would detergent manufacturers launch their offerings on fuzzy strategy or hide or sideline their key offerings from consumers (voters)? Would they launch key marketing messages and rapidly hide them on social media – away from enquiring minds of 'normal' consumers? Actually, would they learn how to (effectively) use social media first? Would they aim to shrink the marketplace to gain competitive advantage, rather than focus on convincing consumers they are 'the best'? Would they premise their marketing on who consumers should distrust the least, rather than whom they trust the most? If this is unlikely for soap-powder, why it is deemed effective for the more cerebral choice-making of voting?

Of course we all expected the respective campaigns to be digital. This election should have showcased expert and effective use of digital technology to engage all creeds within the electorate. We should not have had to hunt for party campaign messages. And this raises another problem - the lack of thought given on how to encourage the electorate to visit these digital sites to interact with the messages; if indeed this was wanted, given demobilising opponent's voters is a key strategic priority and not trust-(re)building as claimed.

Considering the campaign advisors attached to each party, and the predictions surrounding this election, we should have witnessed a more innovative and strategic use of this technology to convey rapid-fire reflexive, credible and visible messages that offer hope for the future.

We saw shades of this in the party's ad executions on their digital TV channels, particularly from The Conservatives, but also in the PEBs from Labour and their pre-leadership debate ad accusing David Cameron of hiding.

While many commentators argue advertising is no longer useful or relevant to election campaigning, it can crystallise fundamental messages and leader persona in a way that no other communication technique can, thus setting the mood of the campaign. It was this clarity of message that was invisible in the 2015 campaigns. Instead the campaigns were very noisy with debates, interviews and media commentary. The central election issues were hijacked by peripheral concerns; they were 'slow' and 'off-message'. Of course there were attempts to present these distilled messages, for example:

Conservatives: "Your worst nightmare... just got worse. The SNP would prop up Ed Milliband meaning chaos for Britain".

LibDem: "£825 tax cut delivered to working families. Promise kept. Look left, look right, then cross."

There were few examples of simple single sentences that said "this is who we are, this is what we stand for, this is what we offer and this is why you should vote for us". So the core messages remained hidden.

The 2015 campaigns will not become part of each party's mythology. "Demon Eyes" and "Labour isn't working" still rule as magnificent examples of the unique contribution of advertising. The spoof election ads and the art student's election ad poster competition illustrate there is a rich talent available to create the inspirational campaign messages of the future.



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'Oh what a circus': reflecting on the 2015 UK General Election as an event



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It is not common those interested in the study of 'events' to cast their attention towards elections. Common fare for their considered gaze tends to be large scale sporting, nation branding or cultural occasions such as the Olympic Games, Global Expos and the European Capital of Culture. That may be, but general elections are highly significant events. They are, or at the very least should be, the defining event of a representational democracy. So how was this one?

As an *event* it was one that had a clearly anticipated scheduled performance. Following the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 we could all see this one coming from a long way off. More recently the provision in the Electoral Registration Administration Act 2013, brought into force in April last year, to dissolve parliament earlier, extended the joy of the campaign by more than a week.

The campaign itself was very slick. Great election faux-pas of the past were relegated to history in what was a smoothly delivered piece of extended performance art. In place of the staged baby-kissing of previous years, and party leaders' slightly awkwardly choreographed manoeuvres with the public, generating the slightly less awkward but mostly twee photo-ops by which we have previously been entertained, we were given selfie; social media savvy, viral marketing opportunities combined with the odd sprinkling of grand gesture posing.

For the Conservatives the event opportunities began early, a good year before the election, with David Cameron challenging the media's previous election debate proposal, which was planned to mirror their 2010 election coverage. The to and fro of that debate with broadcast media only reaching agreement on the 21st March, five days before the first television debate. Cameron's continuing brinkmanship doing a wonderful job of keeping media attention on his party, with subtle resonances of the Conservatives being a party that could call the shots. Such pseudo-events, events that take place purely for their capacity to have their message reproduced, were to prove to be a central element of this campaign.

Writing this on the day of the election, the first TV debate's title, 'The Battle for Number 10', which was watched by around 3 million viewers in the UK, now seems hollowly ironic - though at the time it felt slightly anachronistic as the media maintained a strong narrative that Britain was now in an era of coalition government. Apart from the Question Time special on the 30th April the other debates sustained the rumour that the future government would be more patchwork than single hue.

That impression of precarity was not helped by party gestures towards line in the sand pseudo-events. The Liberal Democrat's red lines being the first off the starting blocks, but quickly followed by the Conservatives declaring legislation to lock-in various manifesto pledges. Gesture politicking hit some strange kitsch high, or is that low, with Ed Miliband's stone tablet and its 6 carved commitments. Whether you see that piece of limestone as some form of biblical metaphor or, as I did, an obscure reference to the monolith in 2001 *A Space Odyssey*, it was possibly one of the most surreal events of the campaign.

Crucially what was missing from the election was solid content. One could argue the headline 'acts' were too similar. What few bursts of colour there were came mainly from the supporting 'bands'. Elections, as I suggested at the start, should be the defining events of a representational democracy, they are the opportunity for a political organisation to articulate a coherent and singular vision for how to address the issues they consider key to the future of the nation and its people. However, the campaign was less event and more pseudo-events; beyond gesture it contained little by way of coherent vision and argument. Macbeth's comment that life is "but a walking shadow [...] full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" comes to mind. The form of argumentation that dominated was of the abductive variety; y will happen if you vote x - if you don't want y, vote z. Such retro-reflexivity may make for a memorable rhetoric, but it is at the expense of policy exposition.

As the final result is announced the Conservatives have a working majority of just 12 MPs, around a quarter of that which John Major had in 1992. It would appear, that this defining event of our representational democracy has a closing ceremony that is far from over.

Six weeks of separation: the campaign rhetoric of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats

How do the former partners in a coalition government defend their record and, at the same time, reassert their distinctive identities? This process begins months before the general election, of course, but it intensifies during the short campaign and requires considerable rhetorical skill – especially for the smaller party, whose influence and achievements are often less visible to the public.

David Cameron's campaign rhetoric centred on the choice between competence and chaos. Drawing on the Conservatives' reputation for sound economic management, he argued that his government's policies were "getting the country on the right track". Cameron marshalled factual evidence to support this, claiming they had created two million jobs and halved the deficit while maintaining investment in the NHS. He also invoked the narrative of the "fiscal mess" the government had inherited and expressed his eagerness to "finish the job that we've all started". Here Cameron recalled the "we're all in this together" mantra, with its echoes of the 'Dunkirk spirit', and so sought to unite the public behind his party in a shared mission. He thus projected an image of governing competence and strong leadership, while his acknowledgement that "it's been a very difficult time" implies that the sacrifices made to secure the recovery must not be allowed to go to waste.

Alongside this display of competence, Cameron fuelled fears of a minority Labour government held to ransom by the SNP. Again drawing on the deficit narrative, he warned of a "coalition of chaos", with "the SNP acting as the chain to Labour's wrecking ball, running right through our economic recovery". Indeed, he continued, "it will be you who pays the price [...] with job losses, with massive tax rises, and an economy back on the brink of bankruptcy". The destruction metaphor heightened the emotional impact of Cameron's words, and so enhanced the persuasive power of his claim that only a Conservative government would ensure the recovery continued. While the Party was criticised for a lacklustre campaign, the fusion of its economic narrative with the 'politics of fear' enabled it to confound expectations and win an overall majority.

The Liberal Democrats, meanwhile, emphasised their centrist credentials and their achievements in government. Thus, Nick Clegg expressed concern that the economic recovery would be threatened either by the Conservatives' "ideological cuts" or by Labour's allegedly irresponsible borrowing, and argued that "we need to remain anchored in the centre ground so that we can finish the job of balancing the books, but

do it fairly". To demonstrate the efficacy of this approach, he reminded the electorate that the Liberal Democrats had, for instance, raised the income tax threshold and introduced the Pupil Premium, and so had helped to "create a stronger economy and a fairer society". Indeed, if given the opportunity to act as kingmaker in a subsequent coalition, the Liberal Democrats would "add a heart to a Conservative government and a brain to a Labour one". Rather like the Wizard of Oz, Clegg's party would give their potential partners the qualities they needed to govern well, but which they currently lacked.

Although the Liberal Democrats' belief in fairness was at the forefront of their 2010 campaign, it was soon subordinated to the Conservatives' deficit reduction strategy. In 2015 the Party revived this commitment in a bid to re-establish their distinctive identity, while appealing to their audience's sense of justice. To this end, they prioritised deficit reduction on the ground that it is unfair to burden future generations with the debt, and sought to distance themselves from the Conservatives' approach. In particular, Clegg criticised their proposed £12 billion reduction in welfare spending as "very unfair", asking Cameron: "What are you going to do? Who are you going to hurt? Who's going to bear the pain?". However, this attack failed to convince due to the Liberal Democrat leadership's capitulation to the Conservatives' austerity programme, while Clegg's efforts to present himself as a principled politician sat uneasily with his U-turns on tuition fees and the 'bedroom tax'. These apparent contradictions gravely undermined the Liberal Democrats' credibility and were surely a key factor in their crushing defeat on 7th May.



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Did the Green Surge make any difference?



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.....

From the vantage point of May 8th, the ‘Green Surge’ seems to have evaporated even more quickly than it appeared. Green Party membership began to increase in April 2014 in the run up to the European Parliamentary election and then spiked in three waves between October 2014 and January 2015, spurred on by the broadcasters’ initial plans to exclude the party from the TV debates. An Ofcom consultation published on January 8th denying the Greens major party status appeared to annoy sections of the public enough to massively boost applications from new members, who signed up in their thousands the following week, at one point at a rate of one every ten seconds. As well as putting Green Party membership ahead of that of UKIP and bringing much needed campaign revenue, public support climbed to new heights with an opinion poll in January putting Greens on 11 per cent, demoting Liberal Democrats to fifth place. The ‘What are you afraid of boys?’ poster campaign of 19th January clearly touched a nerve amongst broadcasters and political opponents with the smiling faces of Lucas and Bennett used to mock the ‘old boy’s club of Westminster’. Within four days, the seven party TV debate had been announced, paving the way for two of the most ideologically varied and gender balanced leader debates yet seen in UK politics.

However, while the Green vote on May 7th was the highest ever at over 1.1 million - a fourfold increase on 2010 - the party still only polled enough to win one MP, with just 3.8% of the national vote. Indeed there was relief when Caroline Lucas held her seat (with a hugely improved majority) in Brighton Pavilion. While all the polls were over-optimistic about anti-Tory parties’ levels of support (a trend which pollsters seem unable to learn from), Greens will be wondering what happened to the promise of an electoral breakthrough.

The media have made much of two poor media performances by Natalie Bennett. Her ‘brain fade’ on LBC radio, in particular, stood out and dogged her ability to shape the agenda positively. YouGov polling had identified a decline in support by March after these interviews and many Green supporters no doubt mourned the lack of a more seasoned and charismatic party leader, such as Caroline Lucas who stood aside in 2012. However, Lucas had been modest enough to know she could not take on the

task of holding on to her Brighton seat, whilst leading a membership drive that involved touring the country and constant media attention. Indeed, the Green Party has been grateful to former *Guardian Weekly* editor Bennett for the Party’s leftward turn towards clearly articulated social justice and anti-austerity positions which sucked support from disaffected Liberals and Labour supporters. Bennett showed that the Greens were not *just* about the environment, a perception that had been widely prevalent, especially amongst young voters. In fact, Bennett’s conscious strategy to challenge this led some scientists to hit out at the Greens in the final weeks of the campaign for not saying *enough* about climate change.

The Greens will learn from the election campaign, especially around the need to prepare for tough media interviews. They now have more natural allies with the SNP and Plaid Cymru in the Commons and may help to form a stronger, more vocal anti-austerity block. They clearly stand to benefit from any further drift to the right by Labour and by the collapse of the Liberal Democrats, and may be able to inflict more serious damage to both Parties at the next election.

Ordinariness and authenticity in the 2015 General Election campaign

The Conservative Party's wholly unexpected election victory invites us to take stock of the two significant competing structures staged in the 2015 General Election campaign: those of ordinariness and authenticity.

In one of his last campaigning events as leader of the Labour Party, the BBC Party Leaders' Question Time (April 30th, BBC1), Ed Miliband referred to his Conservative counterpart, David Cameron, as "the other bloke." Amid a performance peppered with glottal stops, this was clearly an attempt by Miliband, a man known principally for his "weirdness", to sound ordinary. Tellingly this use of the term "bloke" was echoed by the self-styled revolutionary, Russell Brand, who exhorted his followers to vote Labour stating "this bloke will listen".

The delicate tightrope of ordinariness is perhaps best demonstrated by the brief furore that ensued around Ed Miliband's kitchen in March this year. At first, the Miliband decor was derided by the Daily Mail's Sarah Vine as a "mirthless" vision of utilitarian drab that foretold the Stalinist intent of any potential Labour government. However, when it emerged that the kitchen in question was the smaller of the two in his Kentish Town household, the same newspaper was quick to deride "two kitchens Miliband". In stage-managing the photo shoot to portray the less opulent of these rooms, the former Labour Leader was, they claimed, hypocritical in purporting to represent the interests of "working people", yet seeming to enjoy a considerably more comfortable existence than most.

The Conservative party, too, have attempted to construct themselves as the "true party of working people." Despite widespread public knowledge of David Cameron's privileged past, the Prime Minister has sought in some fashion to portray himself as "one of us". This has included name-checking West Ham as his football team of choice, when he supposedly favours the other claret-and-blue squad, Aston Villa, and getting pink-faced about how "pumped" he is about his chances at the ballot box. In turn, George Osborne was despatched around the country to visit a series of businesses, typically relating to engineering or low-level manufacturing. Fortuitously, these premises typically require their visitors to don fluorescent jackets and hard hats, allowing for a variety of photo opportunities of Osborne briefly assuming the identity of the hard-working folk whose interests he claims to represent.

Haunting the ordinary, of course, is its brasher cousin, the authentic. The former, particularly when it goes awry, can be seen as a patronising attempt to debase oneself, to be "just like you." By contrast the authentic creates a sense of being what one appears to be, where the image presented accords with public knowledge of that person's life experiences. In this regard Boris Johnson, the current Mayor of London, and now also elected Member of Parliament for Uxbridge and South Ruislip emerges as among the most "authentic" of politicians. Thus, when he accompanies Osborne on one of his factory jaunts, his unease in the requisite fluorescent apparel, and bluster makes clear that the high-vis jacket has never found its way to the Johnson wardrobe.

The tug-of-war between ordinariness and authenticity that has occurred throughout this election campaign bespeaks two different conceptions of the role of Prime Minister. With the UK's (duly opulent) constitutional monarchy, ordinariness is built into the role of Prime Minister. Considered the first among equals, she or he sits in a House of Commons, while the ermine-clad Lords recall Britain's feudal past in more lavish surroundings. In contrast, authenticity is the modus operandi of celebrity, wherein the celebrity's sole offering is the force of their personality and the fraught labour of "being themselves."

As television election events gain in importance, politicians are increasingly required to assume the role of authentic celebrities who are also sufficient ordinary to maintain credibility. For Labour and the Liberal Democrats, licking their wounds as they assess their losses, they will need to track down an authentically ordinary figurehead.



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4 | The Nations

Scottish nationalism in the 2015 UK General Election

While one of the great mythologies of recent Scottish political identity has been its ideological difference from the rest of the UK, few elections can have been so sharply divided along national lines as this one. Much of this stemmed from the claims and accusations around nationalism – Scottish and English, civic and otherwise – that permeated the various party campaigns. Such discourses gathered impetus from misplaced predictions of a minority administration, with the attending threat of a resurgent Scottish National Party holding the balance of power over Labour, or a minority Conservative administration at the mercy of UKIP. A longer analysis would attend to the role of Plaid Cymru in Wales, but within the space and scope of this short piece, I offer the suggestion that 2015 gave us two discrete campaigns, one centred in England and another in Scotland, and these were joined in their fixation with the Scottish National Party. So how did the prominence of the SNP impact upon the campaign, and are there lessons we can draw?

Several pieces of interim research are significant in understanding the place of the SNP in this election. One major election study, being undertaken by Loughborough University Communication Research Centre, reports that coverage of the SNP in UK-wide media was significant in volume and generally negative in tone. Much of this UK-wide coverage confirms recent expectations on the personalisation of politics, and points to the agenda-setting capacity of the televised leaders' debates: attention has centred on leader and Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, who polls suggested performed strongly in the televised debates, even drawing clichéd comparisons with Margaret Thatcher. While she was high in public esteem, the representation of Sturgeon as a powerful leader was interpreted less approvingly across much of the UK newspaper coverage, producing contrasts such as that between UK *Sun* newspaper's mock-up of a tartan-clad Sturgeon on a wrecking ball, against the Scottish edition's later portrayal of Sturgeon as Star Wars heroine Princess Leia.

Another timely piece of marketing research looked at levels of political engagement within Scotland. This study, from the Keller Fay Group, found that the SNP inspired significantly more public conversation than other parties. Even removing the SNP and their Sturgeon factor, this research found that those in Scotland were more likely to be discussing politics than elsewhere in the UK. This was borne out by the voter turnout rates at the election itself: just over 71% in Scotland, compared with under 66% in England and Wales. Other findings, written up by Green

and Prosser of the British Election Study, further propose that this engagement was shaped by the Scottish independence question, contributing to arguments that issue-based politics may bring their own forms of alignment, and that these may be every bit as entrenched as the tribal party politics to precede them.

In sum, this one-time focus on Scotland across the UK can be explained by the erroneous anticipation of a hung parliament, coupled with the novelty of Sturgeon. But in just what ways do the intensive levels of participation in Scotland result from last year's independence referendum?

There is, of course, a residual and substantial commitment to Scottish independence: the "emphatic rejection" of unionist political rhetoric amounted to 45% support. But more than this, across social media, and to a lesser extent in party campaign communication, the incongruous 2014 party alliances of "Better Together" versus "Yes Scotland" continue to colour individual and party profiles. The chief victims of this have been Scottish Labour, who, amongst their target electorate, suffered gravely from their association with the Conservatives. The political discourse of Scotland has a tradition of such malign associations – the SNP as "Tartan Tories" and Labour as the "Red Tories" – and while a genuine Labour/Conservative pact was an unusual alliance, the mutations of political pragmatism cast up by referenda may yet emerge in different forms over the parliament to come.

As well as tracking the impact of issue politics on party perception, research into this and future elections might look more at the division of the election at the sub-state level. One compelling distinction has been the divergent formations of nationalism, articulated with the political right in England and the political left in Scotland and Wales, making vivid the contrasting conditions within which strands of discussion may be interpreted and translated into political affiliation. To account for localised formations more fully, future accounts should certainly extend research across and within the nations of the UK to include a more sophisticated account of regionality: continuing the process of devolution within political communication itself.



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From the Scottish Referendum 2014 to the General Election 2015



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7th May 2015 was the second time in just over seven months that the people of Scotland visited the polling booths. The General Election rapidly followed the Scottish Referendum on *Independence*, which was held in September 2014 and in which the majority of voters rejected the notion that Scotland should be an independent country. GE2015 saw a huge swing to the SNP, leaving the three unionist parties, The Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties, with only one Scottish seat each.

The General Election Campaign was as robust and rigorously discussed on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter – indeed it was the most discussed topic on these platforms in the approach to 7th May – as Scottish *Independence* had been a few months previously. Social media have much to offer politicians as they enable the political parties to control their representation and campaign messages in a way that is not possible on offline platforms such as television and newspapers. They also have much to offer voters, particularly a means of connecting not only to the parties, but also fellow voters – and not only those who share support for the relevant party.

Both the Scottish Referendum and 2015 General Election campaigns saw politicians and political parties make great use of page and account visitors by inviting them share posts and to adopt party and campaign logos as their personal profile image thus encouraging them to become online canvassers. The adoption of political logos and sharing of campaign posts ensured that these political messages reached wider audiences through Twitter and Facebook user's networks of friends and followers, including those who were not perhaps politically engaged. As Castells (2007) notes, information no longer flows only vertically, but also horizontally on new media platforms.

As such, social media can be a double-edged sword for political campaign. For parties, activists and engaged citizens can do much of the 'work' of persuasive communication on their behalf. But a campaign also can lose control of the message when in the hands of the public. My on-going analysis of the Facebook and Twitter accounts of the political parties in General Election 2015 found that they were not only home to messages of support, but also of trolling, condemnation and abuse from supporters from the various other political parties contesting the General Election. On the SNP page, much of this abuse was based on the election campaign messages from opposing parties. For example, some claimed that Scotland is financially dependent on the rest of the United Kingdom and therefore 'ungrateful' to their union masters. Others pleaded solidarity:

that as a progressive party the SNP would split the Labour vote in Scotland, and that votes for the SNP would result in a Conservative government. These comments were representations of the focus on the SNP by the three main opposition parties, whose campaigns were heavily critical of the nationalists. While this could be expected, the unionist parties' and supporters' campaign messages bore a close resemblance to the Better Together Campaign in the approach to the Referendum vote. Whilst these messages did enough to keep the union together in the 2014 Referendum, they utterly failed in 2015.

Party Facebook pages thus allow for more unfettered access and interaction between rival political activists. Here, we see some perhaps predictable trends. Alongside the parroting of key campaign messages, we also see citizens talking past each other (much like party leaders do). But party pages are intensely political spaces. Move beyond these and you begin to see less heat and more light. Studies of political behaviour on Facebook demonstrate that political discussion, engagement and action can emerge here, but often between the cracks of political spaces and everyday ones. The key for political campaigns is to master the latter.

One nation and two messages: how Scotland has become a problem for British journalists and the Labour Party

For many months before the election those of us surveying the political scene in Scotland had stopped asking if there would be an SNP surge and had instead, been asking how big it would be. On the night of the election the biggest exit poll predicted 58 seats for the SNP, *Telegraph* editor Alan Cochrane said he would be 'astonished' if this was the outcome and even the SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon tweeted that the exit poll needed to be treated with 'HUGE caution'. Scotland is a traditional Labour Party heartland and the decimation of their contingent of 41 MP's seemed scarcely believable.

On the night, the Labour Party in Scotland was reduced to a single parliamentarian. Ian Murray who was defending one of the slimmest majorities in the election emerged victorious in Edinburgh South. Murray, now the Labour Party's sole representative for Scotland in Westminster for the Labour Party, has previously broken ranks with his Party on the issue of Trident renewal, which, like his SNP adversaries, he opposes. Stopping the renewal of Britain's nuclear deterrent is a key issue for the SNP and the political slogan 'Bairns not Bombs' resonates with the Scottish electorate.

As the election night unfolded the SNP won 56 of the 59 available seats in Scotland, an incredible result which left only a single MP for the Labour Party, Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats. The real losers on the night were Scottish Labour and their demise was ultimately underpinned by a growing lack of trust in the media and political classes which has been exacerbated by conflicting messages as journalists and politicians tailor their arguments to differing electorates in Scotland and England.

During last year's Independence referendum Alistair Darling the leader of the 'Better Together' campaign, argued that the NHS was not in danger of privatisation and that not even Margaret Thatcher would dare to go so far. Meanwhile in England, Shadow Health Secretary Andy Burnham was campaigning against the privatisation of the NHS by the Coalition Government. The NHS was portrayed by the Labour Party as being safe in Scotland yet under threat of privatisation in England. This background meant that Ed Miliband's strategy of 'weaponising' the NHS was greeted with incredulity by many voters north of the border during the General Election campaign.

This pattern of conflicting messages from the Labour Party continued throughout the general election. As the polls looked increasingly desperate, Scottish Labour leader Jim Murphy attempted to fight the SNP from the left by

promising to protect Scotland from spending cuts. However when this topic was broached in England, Chuka Umunna, the shadow business secretary, responding to fears about the potential influence of the SNP in a Westminster coalition, stated plainly that 'the leader of the Scottish Labour Party will not be in charge of the UK budget'. Labour attempted to appear fiscally responsible to English voters while promising Scottish voters that they would oppose spending cuts. These mixed messages emphasised a fundamental breakdown in trust between the Labour Party and the Scottish electorate, particularly amongst 'Yes' voters who had not forgiven the Labour Party for campaigning with the Conservatives during the referendum.

This breakdown in trust also extended to the pro-Unionist media, during the referendum Alan Cochrane, the political editor of the Scottish *Daily Telegraph* was asked by Alistair Darling to spike a story which might damage the 'No campaign. Cochrane argued that 'It's not really good journalism but what the hell does journalism matter? This is much more important'. This blatant partisanship amongst journalists also led to mixed messages North and South of the border. The English edition of the *Daily Express* warned during that referendum campaign of a 'Pension shock for millions' while the Scottish edition tweaked the same story under the amended headline 'Pensions safer within the UK'.

During this election campaign *The Sun* has also produced contradictory campaigns arguing in Scotland that the SNP will safeguard Scots interests while insisting in England that the SNP would force England into 'five years of misery'. This partisan campaigning by the press has led to a situation whereby:

'Half of Scotland has simply stopped believing anything they read in the papers, even if it is true'.

This partisan coverage has also driven the rise of a counter movement of pro-Nationalist media in Scotland. However this is equally partisan, one columnist for *the National*, the new pro-Independence newspaper in Scotland was one of the 56 newly elected SNP MP's. This raises some serious questions about journalists' failure to provide voters with a 'fourth estate' and strategic questions for the Labour Party about how they can tailor separate campaigns to both the Scottish and English electorate in the age of social media.



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Northern Ireland in the 2015 General Election



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With the unprecedented surge in support for SNP, and Plaid Cymru leader Leanne Wood's strong performance in televised media debates, Scotland and Wales received a great deal of attention in the 2015 election. Less so Northern Ireland: left out of the leader's debates, and largely under the radar for most of the campaign, the province's parties also failed to be of interest to any potential coalition given the ultimate Conservative majority.

For the vast majority of Northern Ireland, it was business as usual, with only two of the 18 seats changing hands. On the unionist side, an election pact between the UUP (Ulster Unionist Party) and the DUP (Democratic Unionist Party) saw only one candidate fielded from the two parties in each of four constituencies – North Belfast, East Belfast, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and Newry and Armagh. This appears to have worked well, with Tom Elliott winning the UUP Fermanagh and South Tyrone from Sinn Féin's Michelle Gildernew.

Elsewhere, the DUP lost South Antrim to the UUP but regained East Belfast from Alliance to ultimately retain 8 Westminster seats. A popular MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly at Stormont), Danny Kinahan UUP, scored a narrow victory over the DUP's Rev. Willy McCrea, to win South Antrim for his party. This is a strong showing for the UUP and now puts them back at Westminster, having lost their one potential MP in 2010 following her defection from the party to stand independently.

Alliance's sole MP, Naomi Long, fondly referred to in her tightly fought election campaign in East Belfast as the "Ginger Ninja", won her seat in 2010 from Northern Irish First Minister and (then) DUP MP, Peter Robinson. Robinson, whose private financial affairs led to him being referred in the press at this point as a member of the "Swish Family Robinson", was punished at the ballot box by an electorate that saw him as out of touch. This was a bitter defeat for the DUP, and winning back East Belfast was a key target for their campaign this time around. Former Belfast mayor, Gavin Robinson of DUP, now represents the constituency.

Nationalist politics were generally quieter. The loss of Fermanagh and South Tyrone for Sinn Féin will smart, but as the party traditionally do not take their seats in Westminster, it is less of an issue for them. The SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party) retained their three seats. Lead-

er Alisdair McDonnell's victory in South Belfast means that there will now be a by-election for his MLA seat in the same constituency, as parties' commitment to ending double jobbing (acting as both MP and MLA) is phased in.

Despite one or two upsets, Northern Irish politics look set to continue as normal. There are some interesting points, however, which will be important for the larger British parties to note. Cameron's majority is slim, and DUP/UUP votes could help him on certain policies; equally, DUP Eurosceptics could team up with rogue Tory backbenchers to cause him problems. Whilst the Scottish lion may indeed have roared, it is important to think about what this might mean for nationalism (of various hues) in Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin are currently set to make big gains in the Irish Dáil elections within the next year: if they do well, will that embolden the party to make calls for a referendum on the constitutional question in Northern Ireland? Equally, with the UUP back at Westminster, is this a sign that moderate, centrist unionism might be making a comeback in the face of a long period of DUP dominance? As in Scotland and Wales, next year's election for the devolved Assembly at Stormont will be a key litmus test.

BBC coverage of election night failed to make substantive reference to any Northern Irish parties, largely lumping them all together in the category of 'Other'. Had the polls been correct, and Labour and the Tories been neck and neck in terms of seats, then perhaps more interest might have been paid to the DUP's fortunes, and Northern Ireland more generally. As it is, the province's MPs look set to remain largely irrelevant to mainstream arguments and central votes in this parliament. For the province, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

Wales: Plaid Cymru and Labour's media message fails in target seats

As in the rest of the UK, both the left-wing parties' own data and media messages failed to properly gauge the mood of the voters in Wales before Election Day.

It had been expected that Labour would possibly gain three seats, with Arfon, Cardiff North and Cardiff Central all in the mix.

As it happened, they gained Cardiff Central due to the Liberal Democrat collapse but fell further behind in the other two, as well as losing both the Vale of Clwyd and Gower to the Conservatives.

It wasn't simply that seats these seats changed hands, but rather their symbolism – particularly on the Gower, which had been under Labour control for over 100 years.

In terms of the actual share of the vote, there was little movement on five years ago, apart from a large swing towards UKIP and the Liberal Democrat collapse.

Unlike in England, YouGov's generic polling was within the margin of error in Wales, but inclined towards slightly the Conservatives on Election Day.

It seems rather that it was within the parties' own internal data, regarding where these votes would go, that the failure to predict the outcome was most acute.

Labour attacked unwinnable seats when they should have been on the defensive. Plaid, too, got it wrong, ploughing resources into increasing already healthy majorities in Arfon and Carmarthen East and Dinefwr in the belief that they were being threatened by Labour.

They also spoke with confidence of gaining Llanelli and Ceredigion, while never coming close, while striking a more pessimistic tone on Anglesey where they came within 200 votes.

This confusion regarding where to best deploy their resources suggest neither are making best use of the voter identification data now available to them.

The Conservatives, in the meantime, launched their campaign on Gower – a seat most media commentators considered beyond them – and prospered.

In the meantime, the election will throw up further questions about the importance of social media and the mainstream media as ends in themselves towards ensuring election success.

Plaid Cymru have long bemoaned the fact that they have not received as much coverage as their competitors, a situation partly rectified this year by leader Leanne Wood's inclusion in the leader's debates.

They were also inordinately busy on social media; their candidate in Ceredigion, Mike

Parker, produced slick Facebook videos for each of the communities he had visited. Their combined efforts produced less than a percentage point rise in the vote on the last election.

Labour also struggled in this regard. Their general, UK-wide messages about the bedroom tax and incomers increased already huge majorities in the valleys, but did not have the desired effect in their relatively prosperous target seats.

The popular leader of Welsh Labour, Carwyn Jones took a back seat, while unfamiliar rising star Owen Smith, MP for Pontypridd and the shadow Welsh secretary, lead the campaign.

Perhaps both parties will come to the conclusion that it is what they say and how they say it, rather than how many people it reaches, that matters in the long run.

For the result of the Wales has challenged many assumptions as to where the country stands on the political spectrum.

The Conservatives may well use their modest triumph to argue that Wales and Scotland are a different kettle of fish - between them the Conservatives and UKIP managed 40.8% of the vote.

Tuesday morning's (12th May) *Western Mail* front page – 'Home rule out' says Welsh Secretary Stephen Crabb – suggests that may well be the case.



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Blot on the landscape: how Brighton and Hove kept the progressive dream alive



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It was a tweet from a local woman at 9.45am on Friday 8th May that best captured the scene: “A multicolour city retaining its multicolour reputation...green, red and blue!”

In the end, Brighton and Hove’s Left couldn’t manage its hoped-for clean sweep. On a night when Labour’s UK-wide trouncing defied all predictions, the city’s easterly constituency, Brighton Kemptown, clung tenuously to the Conservatives. Yet none of this stopped its two other seats, Brighton Pavilion and Hove, delivering a defiant two-fingered salute to the Tory tide engulfing the rest of southern England.

The distinctive three-marginal nature of Brighton and Hove had made it a focus of Labour’s ‘ground-war’ in the months running up to 7 May. Given the city’s status as Britain’s leading Green stronghold (until 48 hours after the general election, it boasted the party’s only council), Labour always faced a tricky tactical voting mission, as it sought to portray a Green vote as an expensive luxury in Kemptown’s tight two-horse race. Indeed, on Albion Hill – a ‘muesli mountain’ street sliced down the middle by the constituency’s northern boundary – there was evidence of confusion among some residents and campaigners right up to polling-day, with ‘Vote Green’ posters endorsing Caroline Lucas (incumbent Pavilion candidate) being pushed through letter-boxes, and decorating some windows, even on Kemptown’s side of the road. With YouGov’s UK Polling Report quoting ground intelligence from UKIP signalling its growing popularity among ‘disgruntled Labour voters’ in working-class Whitehawk, Labour’s approach to addressing any misunderstandings about electoral boundaries (and margins) became ever-more unorthodox. On 28 April, stalwart Labour warrior Tom Watson tweeted a photo of himself and his party’s Kemptown hopeful, Nancy Platts, promoting ‘Green voting Labour’ posters they had printed to recruit anti-Tory voters determined to advertise where their true loyalties lay. More controversial was the initiative shown by one over-zealous Labour volunteer, who was publicly disowned by Platts for posting letters through the doors of Kemptown homes displaying Green Party posters warning them that ‘Greens and Lib Dems split the left-leaning vote’ in 2010, allowing Conservative insurgent Simon Kirby to win, and ‘only Labour’ had ‘a realistic chance’ of clawing the seat back. Yet no amount of effort could prevent Kirby clinging onto Kemptown, a patchwork constituency fusing the cosmopolitan ‘pink pound’ terrain of Kemptown Village with a strip of true-blue coastal suburbs – albeit with his lead over Labour halved to 690. That this gap

could so easily have been compensated for by the 857 extra votes the Greens gained on 2010 or the 6.6% jump in share that delivered UKIP a boost of 3,062 only rubbed salt into Platts’ wounds.

Labour’s crumb of comfort in the small hours came from Hove, where it defied the script steadily being inked in through defeats up and down England to stick to the earlier draft prepared in the long months when polls placed it neck-and-neck with the Tories. The departure of single-term Conservative MP Mike Weatherley, combined with anecdotal evidence from YouGov that 2010 Liberal Democrat defectors were returning to Labour, inched Peter Kyle to a slender 1,236-vote victory.

But the biggest story, as ever, came from Brighton Pavilion: Britain’s sole existing Green fiefdom and the city’s signature seat, carving a swathe from the seafront up through its northern and western suburbs. Back in the days when Labour still enjoyed a steady six-point lead in UK-wide opinion polls, this was one of its targets. With Brighton’s ‘super-Thursday’ looming closer (the vote to re-elect or remove its increasingly unpopular Green council set for the same day), the two-way ground-war seemed to have entered a confused final phase. On residential streets close to the city-centre, some voters’ conflicted intentions were all-too evident: a common sight was Labour and Green posters displayed side-by-side in the same front window. In one, a scribbled note explained that the householder(s) supported Lucas but backed the reds ‘for the council’. Lucas herself – boosted mid-campaign by an open letter of endorsement signed by, among others, Joanna Lumley and Sir David Attenborough – could be found until Wednesday evening canvassing outside schools in her Hanover heartland (which duly returned two of the Greens’ eleven surviving councillors). And a home-made cardboard sign propped against a chair on one local street urged passers-by to re-elect Lucas – reminding less-informed citizens they had four votes, not one, on polling-day. By Friday, it had been replaced by a similarly makeshift affair thanking locals for delivering her ‘increased majority of c.8,000’.

What ‘multicolour’ Brighton and Hove has told us, then, is that, politically, it is unlike anywhere else in the South. By Sunday, an image was going viral on social media depicting the city as a stubborn red-green stain on an otherwise unblemished blue carpet. As one (much-liked) poster joked on Facebook: “You are now entering Brighton and Hove. Please have your passports ready.”



Green Party leader Natalie Bennett (left) with Brighton Pavilion parliamentary candidate Caroline Lucas during the launch of the Green Party billboard campaign in Brighton. (Picture by: Steve Parsons / PA Wire/Press Association Images)



5 | Campaigning and Civil Society

Election news coverage and civil society

Civil society is generally not *party* political (with the exception of the trade unions and arguably the growing nationalist movement), but addresses political *issues*. News coverage of election campaigns, in contrast, has long, though perhaps increasingly, been focused more on the horse-race than the political substance. What's more, voting is assumed to be individual, and therefore predominantly a pragmatically self-interested act. There would seem to be little room, then, for organised citizens taking action to express a public opinion (acknowledging multiple publics and not just a simplistic aggregation), or to place pressure on parties to accommodate those concerns in their manifestos. Instead, election reporting is dominated by opinion polls and voter panels constituted to be representative of a local – but not a policy or issue-based – constituency and are asked only to respond to what they are offered by the politicians and to judge their performances.

However, over the course of the previous parliamentary term, civil society organisations, associations and protest groups have been credited with some policy influence: notably Citizens UK over the end to detention of immigrant children and UK Uncut on the introduction of a General Anti-Abuse Rule to tackle corporate tax avoidance. Protests during the campaign similarly opposed specific policies of the previous government and demanded their reversal, such as ending the bedroom tax and other public sector cuts, more social housing, and more effective tax avoidance measures.

Nonetheless, protest was given predictably little attention during the campaign, and rarely portrayed as an expression of public opinion on formal politics or policy proposals. In the rare instances where the press made reference to the anti-austerity movement it was as an alternative form of engagement with politics, contrasted to voting. For instance, UK Uncut were mentioned just three times during the election, despite a relatively popular social media campaign. In one, Armando Inannucci reports how he urged young people at a school event not to reject voting in favour of single-issue politics, in a second *Guardian* columnist Zoe Williams is criticised for suggesting in her latest book that, since the mainstream parties are locked in a fight for the centre ground, we should look to civil society for political change. Owen Jones, however, makes a more specific argument that both those who say that protest doesn't work and those who say voting is pointless are wrong, arguing that activists won Labour Party commitments on tax avoidance, the bedroom tax, zero-hours contracts, and reversing privatisation in the NHS, which

were both testament to the power of protest *and* reason to vote Labour.

Indeed, in as far as the anti-austerity agenda was prominently addressed in the media, it was overwhelmingly via politicians, not least in relation to the leader debates – but it was the minority parties that made these representations, and SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon's invitation/challenge to Miliband that drew all the attention. Of course the Green Party has *emerged from* civil society, and yet further in the margins, other civil society organisations fielded candidates, including the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition and even anarchist Class War, though only *The Daily Politics* interviewed them.

Where protest *did* make headlines, it was as part of the 'SNP threat' newsframe, using the aggressive heckling of Scottish Labour leader Jim Murphy by nationalist campaigners to smear the party by association. However, it is in the wake of the result that the conservative press has returned to traditional delegitimisation of protest. Despite giving UK Uncut some credit for raising the issue of tax avoidance, and displaying begrudging tolerance of Occupy LSX, the *Daily Mail* now warns of "left wing fanatics", "rabble rousers" and "extremists", the latter apparently referring to all 45,000 people who have joined the Facebook event page for The People's Assembly anti-austerity protest.

The more formal and sober Citizens UK, however, did receive some favourable attention (25 newspaper articles) though mostly in *The Guardian*, *Observer*, *Independent* and *Mirror*. Since Cameron's refusal to take part in an election debate with Ed Miliband was a big story before the formal campaign had even started, his refusal to take part in a Citizens UK hustings event attended by both by both Clegg and Miliband fitted the news agenda, much as in 2010 when the same event attracted attention for hosting Gordon Brown's first and only well-received speech of the campaign. However, the discussion format was rather different from the TV debates, with politicians asked to respond to the policy agenda set by Citizens UK's member organisations (mostly faith groups, trade unions, schools and university departments), followed up by working parties tasked with developing policy proposals, whilst others provide testimony of the issues at hand. This subtle challenge to the way election politics is done was given more recognition this time round, and may be one to watch in 2020.



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‘A storm of groans and shouts’: the media and hustings



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In Charles Dickens’ *The Pickwick Papers* (1836), a hustings in Eatanswill between the indefatigably opposed Buffs and Blues is conducted among “a troubled sea of heads [...] from whence arose a storm of groans, and shouts, and yells, and hootings that would have done honour to an earthquake.”

Having contested two Parliamentary elections I have taken part in many hustings. None have been so riotous that “an uproar reduced him to the necessity of expressing his feelings by serious pantomime” as one candidate is forced to do in the book.

In his history of hustings, Jon Lawrence (2009) says that despite efforts to tame politics, the election meeting flourished with lively encounters, particularly during the Edwardian period. After the First World War, while technology allowed candidates to be better heard, meetings also became more ordered.

The hustings I have participated in have all been organised and taken place in churches; so are naturally sober. The opinions expressed may be vehement and booing and heckling does happen, but there is no loss of control.

The ritual at these events is the same. The candidates shake hands and exchange pained jokes. They are given the rules by the chair and asked to abide by his (it is always a he) command. A selection of questions submitted in advance are read out and each candidate given a couple of minutes to answer. From the sitting MP to the pub landlord who stood as an afterthought, everyone is treated equally. The audience is packed with supporters but also with genuinely interested residents.

This is Habermas’ public sphere in operation. The rules in these hustings are simple because underlying them is a complex set of unspoken social norms and moral guides.

Consider instead the 2010 leader debates which were ordered by a 76-point document that addressed everything from audience selection to cutaways.

Similarly, if less comprehensive, the last of my hustings had been organised by Malmesbury Abbey and was then chosen to be recorded by the local BBC radio. The BBC arranged for former Channel 4 political editor Elinor Goodman to chair.

Candidates were emailed, without debate, bullet points on procedure. Among its requirements was: “If you wish to interject, ensure you make this clear to our presenter – talking over each other will not work on radio.” We were also told that we may be cut short if we spoke more than others and therefore breached BBC guidelines.

Meanwhile people could not just turn up but had to apply for tickets in advance and state their political allegiances.

The questions themselves were interspersed with a “quick fire section”. A woman who was just about to turn 18 had the burden of representing the first time voter. She picked out questions from a hat which we had to answer in one sentence.

One question was: “Does social media help freedom of speech?” and Goodman asked me why I “looked as if I was sucking on a lemon”. I pointed out that as a journalism lecturer we’d spend more than a sentence considering such a question – but I stilled bowed to the demands of the event. This appears to be the very notion of the colonisation of the political sphere by the media sphere.

The hustings, an arena where politicians are neither filtered or screened, has been reduced to a pseudo event. It masqueraded as a public meeting. When I asked if I could respond standing up as I normally do, the BBC production team were horrified. The microphones would not pick me up I was told. This in a building designed a thousand years ago for public addresses.

And most irritatingly; it was the most informative hustings I attended. Primarily this was because Goodman chaired it very well. She probed candidates who made superficial comments. Rather than let each person respond with a shopping list of promises she elicited a range of answers to draw out political and ethical ideas.

Just as media logic dictates leader debates are now part of the general election ritual, hustings may be going the same way.

Tweeting for social change: the dilemma of non-profits campaigning during the 2015 General Election

When David Cameron took office in 2010, the new government introduced a change of direction by proclaiming a new relationship between the state and voluntary organisations and charities which was promoted as the 'Big Society'. While the initiative had been described as being visionary by some, other critics claimed that the idea was not new at all. Five years later, a report published by the think tank Civil Exchange acknowledged that the 'Big Society' project had failed to deliver most of its promises. A survey carried out in June 2014 found that, overall, charities appeared to be 'disillusioned' with what politicians and the 'Big Society' had brought them. Another study claimed that four in five voluntary sector workers are of the opinion that charities have not been given enough attention in the run-up of this year's election.

The bottom line here is that this election is exceptionally important for charities who want to speak out on behalf of the people they work for and demand policy changes for the future. Campaigning and advocating are important ways for non-profits to raise awareness of the issues that are essential to them. However, major barriers had been put into place in January 2014 that significantly affect non-profits' ability to carry out both activities.

The 'Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014', better known as the 'Lobbying Act', was imposed to restrict campaigning of charitable organisations on regulated activities, such as political campaigning for policy change, in a constituency during a regulated period. The act has by some been named the 'Gagging Law'. It sparked outrage amongst charities which felt that this could have a 'chilling effect' on their campaigning activities. Charities also feared it could make it impossible for them to build coalitions to tackle larger issues such as climate change because the act remains somewhat imprecise as to what falls within its legislation, making an unintended infringement of the law more likely.

What did charities do during the general election? Using social media such as Twitter was vital for charities in this year's election. Making social media an integral part of campaigns allowed them to directly engage with the public and parliamentary candidates and make their issue the subject of discussion and debate. Charities were able to raise awareness and strengthen their visibility by using clever ideas. By jumping onto the #GE2015 hashtag bandwagon and sharing pictures and videos, charities created a buzz around their causes which made some of those campaigns tremendously effective and suc-

cessful. And there are some exceptional examples of how to do this best. For example, the '100 stories in 100 days' campaign by Scope UK used #100days100stories in combination with #GE2015 to give a voice to disabled people. By letting them tell their own stories, the campaign encouraged people without disabilities to better understand them. Another example is the 'Hear my voice' campaign of Mencap UK, which had already been running for a few months with the purpose of drawing attention to people with learning disabilities. The campaign, which spread via #hearmyvoice, allowed people to contribute their own stories but also gave them the opportunity to email their MPs. As a result, a remarkable number of parliamentary candidates have signed up to the campaign thus far. This year's best-practices for campaigning have also seen a squirrel called Bob standing for election as part of an attempt to advocate the protection of wildlife. To date 1,098 politicians have signed Bob's petition and 120,819 supporters have voted for him - a stunning victory for a small squirrel.

What are the effects of these social media campaigns? Of course, they only work if politicians stick to their pledges. Therefore the election could only be the beginning for social change, and charities and the public will have to hold politicians accountable if they don't keep their promises. Given the vague interpretation of the act, this will not be a simple task. Early analysis of the consequences of the Lobbying Act revealed that some charities have toned down their campaigns thus curtailing the debate on marginalised issues. Others, however, did not roll back from their proactive approach. What is certain is that the new legislation has fuelled uncertainty over the extent to which certain activities are allowed and has also increased bureaucracy for charities. With a new Conservative government ruling Britain for the next five years, it is unlikely that the Lobbying Act will be revoked soon, which leaves charities unsure about the possibilities for their campaigning strategies in the aftermath of the election. Nevertheless, social media sites such as Twitter allow charities to speak up in favour of those not able to do so - both during and outside of election periods. Therefore, charities should be able to advocate for their causes and thus make the 'Big Society' more responsive, prolific, and engaging.



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Data journalism and the 2015 UK General Election



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Unlike the US – where Nate Silver became a poster boy of data journalism during the last election – the genre has had minimal impact on UK election coverage. Instead, it could be argued that the biggest impact has come from outside journalism: the ‘civic tech’ movement of MySociety, Tweetminster and Democracy Club.

Although MySociety tools were used by Channel 4 as early as the 2005 election in 2015 dozens of Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) have had a significant presence inside and outside of news coverage across the board. Matthew Smith, creator of the VAA Fantasy Frontbench, believes the 2015 election campaign has been “the first where Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) have reached a level of maturity where their use can no longer be said to be insignificant.”

Many of the tools built by users of Democracy Club – a mailing list for civic coders – have built the foundations that journalists and publishers then used in their coverage, including formal partnerships between VoteMatch and Verto with the *Telegraph*, *Huffington Post* and *Independent*.

Trinity Mirror’s ‘Find My Seat’ widget, for example, allowed readers of their regional titles to find out their local candidates and swing needed to change MP – but also facts on the local economy, cost of living, immigration, health and pensions.

Data journalism has also proved an irresistible method for explaining the complexities of coalition-building to audiences: the BBC, *Guardian*, FT and Sky all created interactives or calculators for users to ‘build their own majority’.

Social media itself has been a key source of data in a number of news organisations: *The Mirror*’s Tweetometer showed the top performing tweets from politicians’ accounts, Sky’s ‘Social Election’ tracker monitored a range of metrics, and the ‘Twitter Worm’ was used by *the Sun*, LBC, ITV, BBC and others. All of these raise concerns about how representative Twitter users are of the wider population, how accurate sentiment analysis is, and how well news organisations are communicating these issues to users.

In 2010 the only branded factchecking operation was Channel 4’s FactCheck but in 2015 it was joined by the *Guardian*’s Reality Check and the BBC’s identically-named project. Notably this was integrated into the corporation’s live online coverage of the leaders’ debates and Question Time. Elsewhere the Media Standards Trust’s Election Unspun, and FullFact played key roles.

Trinity Mirror’s establishing of a central data unit in 2013 has been pivotal, providing the resources to create innovative data driven coverage at a local level such as the My Manifesto project and data-driven reporting on key claims, gender

representation, campaign spending. *The Guardian*’s hiring of Alberto Nardelli from Tweetminster to run its data team was a significant move and has contributed to particularly sophisticated (both editorially and technically) election coverage from the newspaper. And in the broadcasting sector a combined data and visual unit has helped to position BBC as a leader when it comes to interactive election coverage.

Elsewhere the influence of Nate Silver on political and financial publishers such as the *New Statesman*, *Economist* and FT has been striking, with many shifting to a more informed analysis rooted in data, alongside tools that are useful to its audiences.

So was this the data journalism election? No. Instead the emphasis has been largely on social and mobile. In that sense, it has been the ‘social media election’. Perhaps next time, with the coders firmly in place, we will truly see the first data-driven election.

Zombies on the high street: 38 degrees and the ‘Save Our NHS’ campaign

Life as a Member of Parliament can be a dangerous business. Not only do our elected representatives have to deal with their demanding constituents, while avoiding the wrath of their party whip, but they also have to repel thousands-upon-thousands of zombies. These are not the undead looking to feast on the flesh of parliamentarians, but members of the political activist movement, 38 Degrees, who Simon Burns MP accused of “frightening people and getting them, almost zombie-like, to send in emails”.

This critique, made in response to their campaign to halt the reorganisation of the National Health Service (NHS) in 2011, has stuck to 38 Degrees. Widely known for their use of mass email and online petitions, the movement is often dismissed by journalists and politicians as being ‘online only’. Oscar Rickett has argued that these seemingly easy and low-cost forms of engagement are largely ineffective. They create an illusion that one is having a meaningful political impact without bringing substantive policy change. However, as their activism during the general election campaign shows, this is a misinterpretation.

In January the staff at 38 Degrees launched an online poll, asking for the input of their members into the formation of their campaign strategy. Over 135,000 members took part. The results underlined the NHS as the most important issue for their membership in the upcoming election. Rank and file members were also involved in tactical decision-making, highlighting that efforts should be concentrated on raising voter awareness on these important issues.

What became known as the ‘Save Our NHS’ campaign took a number of forms. As is typical for the movement, the internet played an integral role in its strategy. For example, two videos were shared on social media, one which featured the actor Michael Sheen, and the other amplifying 38 Degrees members’ own experiences of the NHS. With over 900,000 views, these viral videos were an effective way of both encouraging people to register to vote whilst also sharing the priorities of 38 Degrees. An e-petition was also created for each of the 650 constituencies. These localised e-petitions marked a key turning point in switching the spatial focus from the national to the local-level.

Through the use of an online election hub, members were given the tools to organise meet-ups and plan campaign activities within their constituencies. While the central

team provided videos and materials to assist in the formation and running of these groups, they were otherwise independently managed and autonomously run. On April 25th a national day of action was held. While the majority of 38 Degrees activists did take part from the comfort of their computer screens, over 11,000 members took to high streets the length-and-breadth of Britain to advocate their cause. The staff of 38 Degrees intentionally design their campaigns in this staggered manner to enable members to select their level of involvement based on their own personal context.

The organization also used phone-banks to talk to voters in marginal constituencies. Volunteers were recruited, online and offline, with emphasis placed on involving those with links to the health services. Members were not canvassing for candidates, given that the movement is nonpartisan, but instead were informing voters about what different parties stood for on key issues related to the NHS.

Therefore, it is important to recognise that 38 Degrees is not an *online-only* campaigning organisation. Given their success in mobilising citizens online, they are labelled as such. But this reductionist approach masks the real-space actions that the movement organise. The ‘Save Our NHS’ campaign illustrates how digital communication supports a diverse repertoire of political actions. With a network of over 2.5 million disaffected ‘zombies’, expect 38 Degrees to play a prominent role in opposition to the Conservative government and in politics more generally over the next five years.



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6 | Social Media

The politics of social media

The Independent heralded 6th May 2010 as ‘the people’s election’ – the election which would exploit media platforms to return democracy to the people. It is not clear this was achieved. On 7th May 2015 the same paper, less ambitiously, went simply with ‘Over to you’.

Hansard’s 2014 Audit of Political Engagement noted that only seven per cent of Britain’s electorate felt social media offered ‘an effective means of holding politicians to account.’ Nevertheless, key interests in the 2015 campaign argued that social media would revitalize popular democracy. On 2nd November 2013 Labour strategist Douglas Alexander had told *The Guardian* that social media would represent a ‘priceless’ tool in the campaign; seventeen days later BBC News had suggested that social media might make 2015 the ‘first really digital general election in the UK’ – a message the corporation echoed on 10th February 2015 when they asked if Britain was about to witness its ‘first social media election’. This would (as *The Guardian* had said four days earlier) be ‘the first election when social has reached higher user penetration within the UK than traditional media.’

The following month, Twitter’s Head of News, Government and Elections announced this would be the UK’s first ‘Twitter election’ – predicting three-quarters of young tweeters would vote. As *The Guardian* reported, Twitter’s data suggested that ‘one in three 18-to-34-year-old users changed their vote from one party to another based on what they’d seen on the site.’ It was unclear, however, whether these shifts in political allegiance would persist as far as the ballot box. The previous October Darren Lilleker had reminded *The Independent* that (if the election were, as the paper had suggested, ‘the first to be dominated by social media’) we might note the paucity of ‘serious political comment’ in Twitter responses to political events.

In February 2015, Saatchi & Saatchi’s chief strategy officer supposed the political impact of social media was ‘massively overrated’ and the following month YouGov’s founder declared social media strategies remained woefully monological: ‘parties are using social media to deliver leaflets.’

So why the hype? Why, as reported in February, were the Conservatives spending £100,000 a month on Facebook – especially when, as the Chairman of Public Affairs at Weber Shandwick told Total Politics, ‘it looks a bit like the johnny-no-mates big political parties looking to buy friends?’

Had this emphasis on social media come from those in the media, politics and political

marketing who stood most to benefit by the notion that elections would be won on Twitter? In considering the impact of social media upon the election (and in the absence of quantitative data as yet uncollated, unpublished and undisputed) it seems worth pausing to note some of the headlining social media stories of the campaign.

April 2015 saw UKIP’s Steve Latham describe Islam as an ‘evil cult’ on Facebook – but that seemed par for the course for a party whose glitterati had over the previous year tweeted that Westminster Cathedral was a mosque, that Islam bore comparison with the Third Reich, that Muslims were ‘devil’s kids’ and that immigrants in general were ‘scum’. The day before the poll, however, it became clear that UKIP candidates did not need social media to disseminate views as damaging as racially motivated death threats against a potential future Prime Minister.

The #BBCdebate hashtag was used more than 400,000 times on the night of the opposition debate – making it briefly Twitter’s trendiest topic. By then, the SNP’s hashtags had proven the most popular in Twitter’s elections streams, a popularity barely dented when David Cameron tweeted footage of Alex Salmond boasting he would write Labour’s budget.

A senior Scots Labourite caused embarrassment when he tweeted that Labour voters should vote tactically for other parties. Nick Griffin bolstered SNP support when he tweeted a photo suggesting they favoured black Scotsmen wearing kilts. Ed Miliband’s popularity was boosted when *Sun* columnist Katie Hopkins tweeted she would emigrate if he were elected, and when, amidst other hashtag confusions, teenaged girls took #milibandom viral. By the end of April David Cameron had achieved the honour of beating social media celebrity Cameron Dallas to being Twitter’s most mentioned Cameron, allegations had arisen as to a senior Tory’s Wikipedian shenanigans, and Nick Clegg’s wife had revealed her family’s secret cookery blog on Mumsnet.

With #DogsAtPollingStations trending above #Democracy, what difference did all this trivia make? Four days before the election the BBC’s Brian Wheeler suggested that ‘the ceaseless torrent of updates on social media’ had made ‘it more difficult to focus on the bigger picture.’ Had social media fostered interactive nation-building consensus or merely trivialized, personalized, fragmented and negativized the deliberations of public sphere? As the BBC’s Nick Robinson blogged the day before the poll, ‘it wasn’t meant to be like this...’



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Was this the ‘social media election’? We don’t know yet



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There were some notable social media events in the election of 2015. Party election broadcasts such as the Green’s ‘Changing the Tune’ or the Labour Party’s ‘What’s the Choice in this Election?’ gained significant second audiences online. There was also the rise of ‘Milifandom’, which – depending on your perspective – was slightly peculiar cult of personality around Ed Miliband or a serious critique of the bias of the traditional print media’s coverage of the Labour leader. Additionally, Labour was able to use the web to raise relatively large sums of donations from supporters.

These examples and others that could be cited point to a couple of important issues about the role of social media in the 2015 election. First, as Andrew Chadwick has argued on his work on media hybridity, the idea that this was to be a social media election to the exclusion of other forms of media is misplaced. Rather, old and new media co-exist, feeding off each other. Older formats, such as Party Election Broadcasts, find a second life online, while online phenomenon such as Milifandom are turbocharged by television and newspaper coverage.

A second point is perhaps the most obvious one, given the ultimate outcome of the election: throughout the campaign, Labour seemed to have a significant dominance in the online space, at least in terms of the very crass metrics employed by some marketing firms. On April 27th for example, *Media Week* said “The Labour Party is winning the social media election battle with its policymakers broadcasting nearly double the number of posts as Conservatives.” However, such efforts did not, as it turned out, transform into any kind of electoral success (although it should be noted that the story was rather different in Scotland, where the SNP’s landslide was underpinned by a vibrant online effort. Even here though, it is not clear to what extent this changed the course of the election).

The *Media Week* quote points to a significant problem with election-related social media metrics – companies, organisations and researchers producing this work invariably have “skin in the game”, and are often seeking to raise the profile of products they want to sell to the private sector or government. Thus they have a vested interest in talking up the “social media election” narrative. Furthermore, since the analysis is frequently done using proprietary datasets and tools, the methodology employed is rarely transparent and subject to external examination.

There is also a broader epistemological problem with social media monitoring. Very little consideration has actually been given to what is

being measured, and how it fits into theories of public opinion. It may be, as Ben O’Loughlin and I have argued in a recent article, that analysis of social media environments such as Twitter should not be treated like polling data that can be divided into percentages indicating support. Rather, there needs to be much more thought as to what the unit of the analysis is (whether it is individual comments, individual users or conversations?). Historic parallels provide useful ways of thinking about social media data, which might be less like opinion polls and more akin to older manifestations of public opinion, such as town hall meetings or the mass observation survey. An important next step to thinking in this way is to consider what the results of social media monitoring means for an election. It may not – as appears to be the case in 2015 – be a good way of predicting the result. But it might offer us other, equally valuable types of insights.

However, we should not dismiss the role of social media in the election. Like an iceberg, we would be misled if we only assessed what is visible. In contrast to our knowledge about very public online activism (especially that organised by Labour), we know far less about so-called micro-targeting. Micro-targeting involves identifying very specific sections of the electorate required for overall success and then communicating with them in a highly personalised way. Conservative victories in the South West, for example, where what was once a Liberal Democrat stronghold was completely overrun, suggests a highly effective targeting of resources.

In order to practice micro-targeting effectively, political parties need to combine huge amounts of data. As well as their legacy canvassing databases, they will also, if they can afford it, purchase corporate databases such as Mosaic. Additionally – also at a cost – they now have a powerful new source of information: data harvested from social media sites. Combining these datasets creates a potent tool for segmenting and targeting the electorate. There will need to be a lot more research to find out exactly what role such analytics played in the outcome of the election. But it is possible, in this way at least, that it really was a social media election.

Citizen engagement in the dual-screened election campaign

Citizens' engagement with politics is evolving due to the growing popularity of dual screening: the bundle of practices associated with using an internet-connected device, such as a laptop, tablet, or smartphone, to access social media, particularly the popular microblogging platform Twitter, to find out about and discuss live broadcasts. Over the last five years dual screening has become widespread across a range of television genres but it is most significant during what Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992) once termed "media events": live broadcasts of culturally-resonant, ritualistic, defining moments in the evolution of a national or transnational community. Today, the analysis of how audiences experience political media events such as televised candidate debates and high profile interviews must incorporate discrete media but also their hybrid articulations and recombinations.

Dual screening is an unusual and still emergent set of social practices in which publics combine consumption and commentary, so explaining its significance for political behavior requires methodological innovation. During the 2014 European Parliament campaign and the 2015 UK general election campaign we conducted fieldwork focusing on television as the "primary" screen and social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook, as the "second screens" in a dual screening context. For the 2015 general election, we developed a unique research design organized around the most significant of the party leaders' debates—ITV's unprecedented live two-hour show on April 2 involving all seven party leaders. Our approach combined the extraction of a large dataset of tweets ($N=516,484$) containing hashtags related to the televised debate with the identification of a sample of Twitter users whom we recruited to a custom-built, two-wave panel survey ($N=2,352$ for the first wave, with the second wave still in the field at the time of this writing). Using a range of quantitative and qualitative techniques, we will explain how, why, and to what extent the affordances of dual screening, particularly the interactions between broadcast media and Twitter, might reconfigure how citizens engage with politics.

Our overall aim in this study is to locate dual screening's position in the complex array of enablers and constraints on individuals' political engagement in a system where interdependencies between older and newer media logics now decisively shape political outcomes (Chadwick, 2013). Dual screening is an important part of what we term hybrid media events—classic broadcast media events whose significance for media professionals, politicians, and citizens is being reconfig-

ured by the growth of social media. We conceive of dual screening in a relatively expansive sense: it is a bundle of practices that all involve integrating and switching across and between broadcast media and social media. For example, individuals may use social media platforms to read about a broadcast as it unfolds. They may go one step further and comment on social media about a broadcast. They may also be exposed to information about broadcast events on social media in advance of the broadcast and then switch across to the broadcast when it occurs, even in the middle of a show. It is possible that many individuals, especially those who are relatively uninterested in politics and who would choose not to watch a broadcast of a political debate, might encounter information about the debate serendipitously while using social media for other purposes, such as entertainment or catching up with friends. No existing academic or commercial survey data captures this bundle of dual screening practices as they relate to political engagement, which is why we designed our own.

As we conduct our analysis and publish our results in the coming months, the big picture here is how and under what conditions dual screening practices might become drivers of political engagement. We are guided by the hypothesis that there may be something unique to the media affordances involved in the hybrid mix of broadcast media and social media that leads to greater levels of engagement and/or different forms of engagement. Thus we are concerned with dual screening practices both as forms of political engagement in themselves and as potential drivers of other forms of political engagement that may be expressed with and within digital media as well as in face-to-face settings. Our data will allow us to explore how citizens behave within this hybrid environment and how this might affect the styles and intensity of their political engagement.

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The battle for the online audience: 2015 as the social media election?



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All major parties promote their social media platforms and encourage supporters to join so they can be targeted with a range of mobilisation requests. As such their social media performance represents a means to gauge how each channel was used and the reach the parties gained. The data, supplied by SoTrender (sotrender.com) provides insights into usage, audience size and audience activity which we can explore for parallels with electoral support of each party.

YouTube has become a free television channel where parties upload promotional videos that can be shared within viewers' networks. The data from YouTube (Table 1) shows the amount of videos uploaded during the campaign, number of subscribers and reach (views of main or most popular campaign video).

The data shows the Liberal Democrats and Green Party produced a vast amount of videos, Labour, Plaid Cymru an average amount and UK Independence Party and British National Party going for a few, clear position videos. The Greens managed to produce the single viral video of the campaign, parodying the four male party leaders (Cameron, Clegg, Farage and Miliband) as a boy band and calling for voters to 'Change the Tune'. The Conservative's negative 'Its working, don't let them wreck it' video also gained significant popularity across the online network while Miliband's biopic did reasonably. The other main finding is though that the Liberal Democrats struggled to gain followers or reach. Plaid Cymru, a party standing in only 40 of the 650 constituencies and courting an electorate of 3.064 million gained more views for their campaign video despite the Liberal Democrats standing across England, Scotland and Wales.

Twitter is used to push messages out and create momentum through retweets. Table 2 shows the number of tweets, follower numbers and change in follower numbers over the campaign, and an interactivity index score that shows relative levels of follower interaction (tweets x retweets) over the period of the campaign.

The headlines here are that there is little overall change in followers, and most parties send around 30 tweets per day. The Liberal Democrats tweeted most but did not get the best return. Labour, UKIP and the SNP had the highest interaction suggesting they have the most engaged followers, though the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Greens are only slightly behind in this respect.

Facebook is a key battleground, with greatest numbers of fans and a greater propensity for interactivity between followers and the party. We display data (Table 3) for number of posts, replies by the party, number of fans and change during the campaign, an interactivity index (party

posts x likes, shares and comments) to indicate potential reach and the percent of engaged users (those who performed some activity within the profile during the campaign).

All parties post reasonably frequently, from the verbose Labour to the more parsimonious Liberal Democrats. Replies are less frequent; the Greens and SNP excel, the Conservatives and UKIP perform poorly. Despite this, the Conservatives and UKIP have most fans, and earned the most during the campaign, but Labour, Greens and SNP all gained also. Of the national parties the Liberal Democrats perform worst. In terms of earning a highly engaged audience, we find Labour outstrip their opponents, followed by UKIP and the Greens. This data might suggest that these parties were destined for good results in the contest.

Breaking down the forms of engagement, SoTrender categorises the engaged as Occasionals (lurkers who interact very rarely), Likers (who only like), Debaters (who comment only and may include trolls), Writers (who comment or publish only) and Activists (who like, share and comment and may be ambassadors). The data (Table 4) shows percentages of engaged users who fit each category.

While the numbers do not differ significantly per party, the most interesting finding is that UKIP has the highest percentage of activists 2.75%, representing 7,025 people, their closest rival is Labour with less than half of that. If some Debaters are trolls then the Liberal Democrats would seem the biggest target, they also languish behind the major parties in gaining activists. The Scottish and Welsh Nationalists gain the least Debaters.

Comparing online performance with results suggests two things. Firstly social media is only a partial microcosm of the broader electorate; here we can see the collapse in Liberal Democrat support only. Secondly it may reflect the commitment of activists, and which parties successfully mobilise, but this cannot secure victory in itself. Despite the scale of visible support online, UKIP made a net loss in the election campaign, though the scattered support gained across the UK may be reflected online. Similarly the Green's reach may have contributed to the increased vote share but could not overcome tactical voting and they flatlined. The conundrum is Labour. Despite their highly engaged activist base, 'Millifandom' (young women proclaiming love) and the '#JeSuisEd' meme (pictures of ugly eating) that demonstrated connection and sympathy, the party did badly in vote share and seats. Labour won the battle online overall, but it seems this battleground is far removed from the battle that secures electoral victory.

Table 1: The YouTube campaign

	Videos uploaded	Subscribers	Views
British National Party	11	6,709	23,251
Conservative Party	42	14,281	416,867
Green Party	113	7,340	859,989
Labour Party	49	11,591	97,029
Liberal Democrats	101	4,504	5,348
Plaid Cymru	43	676	12,160
Scottish National Party	28	private	11,312
UK Independence Party	10	23,265	47,549

Table 2: The Twitter campaign

	Tweets	Followers	Change +/-	Interactivity Index
British National Party	350	9655	+13	22,215
Conservative Party	2,291	157,590	-1	282,335
Green Party	1,032	137,057	+70	222,322
Labour Party	1,675	215,578	-16	443,841
Liberal Democrats	4,808	95,722	+10	238,736
Plaid Cymru	2,183	18,802	+11	169,855
Scottish National Party	1,315	94,088	+36	350,405
UK Independence Party	1,427	103,744	-19	354,653

Table 3: The Facebook campaign

	Posts	Replies	Fans	Change +/-	Interactivity index	Engaged users %
British National Party	236	13	181,040	+1,758	1,057,774	15.75
Conservative Party	205	0	480,955	+112,162	4,171,734	31.84
Green Party	221	79	215,955	+51,136	2,638,966	53.81
Labour Party	491	31	304,875	+77,315	8,600,334	61.42
Liberal Democrats	89	27	113,126	+5,862	190,533	10.08
Plaid Cymru	293	32	18,223	+3,440	153,743	39.75
Scottish National Party	187	79	203,883	+14,392	1,171,707	37.79
UK Independence Party	165	2	462,672	+110,766	6,668,586	55.25

Table 4: Differential engagement on Facebook

	Occasionals	Likers	Debaters	Writers	Activists
British National Party	45.75	38.40	11.38	3.13	1.35
Conservative Party	35.66	39.80	19.55	3.47	1.53
Green Party	42.50	41.91	11.23	3.09	1.27
Labour Party	43.08	34.90	16.68	3.68	1.65
Liberal Democrats	32.72	37.01	24.72	4.40	1.16
Plaid Cymru	43.46	43.43	9.33	2.68	1.10
Scottish National Party	43.48	44.43	7.69	3.46	0.94
UK Independence Party	34.12	48.43	11.06	3.64	2.75

Passive and active social media engagement



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This election cycle there have been some good examples of traditional and new media synergising in an attempt to get young people engaged. People are increasingly using multiple screens at the same time: watching a show on TV, whilst tweeting along on their phone, and occasionally checking their tablet for news updates. For a number of years now, TV shows have prompted viewers to use specific hashtags so that they can interact with the show. This election we have had a deluge of political programming and the TV channels aimed to link the old with the new, both in terms of platforms and demographics. This election, there was a clear distinction between two types of social media engagement with TV.

There were many examples of programmes that promoted their own hashtags. BBC Daily Politics had #BBCdp, for example, and the ITV Leaders' Debate had #BattleForNumber10. These however, can be seen as a somewhat passive engagement with the audience. Whilst the shows were keen to know what their viewers were thinking, it did not drive or alter the content of the shows. Having people talk about your show is good for publicity and in terms of the formal debates, gave journalists and academics something to analyse and talk about. Real social media engagement with traditional media could only be found on a handful of political TV shows, that were created specifically with the notion of social media engagement in mind.

Channel 4 staged an *If We Ran Things* event in which young people were able to express their views regarding their own priorities in the country both in studio and via the hashtag #IfWeRanThings. The live event, which was run in partnership with Twitter, provides evidence of the coming together of old and new media in a more active, agenda setting way that other TV programs did not have during the election.

On BBC 3, as part of their Free Speech series, they were encouraging use of the hashtags like #AskUkip and #AskATory for their audience to put questions towards their various panels. This is clearly an active relationship between social media and TV in that the questions being asked on Twitter were being put forward to the guests on the show. However, in using such hashtags, there is a danger of summoning the online satirists. As one of the shows panellists asked on Twitter before the show, "What could go wrong?" During the program, the hashtag was flooded with questions like "What's the best way to clean the moat around my duck house?". This, among

many other examples highlights how hashtags that are designed with a purpose always run the risk of being commandeered by cynics and satirists, thereby rendering the purpose of the hashtag moot.

To mis-quote the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, the life of a hashtag is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. This should not discourage TV in future elections from attempting to use social media in a more active way. It just means they will have to plan and think more carefully about when and where they choose to passively or actively engage with the social media audience.

Twitter response to televised political debates in Election 2015

The advent of social media such as Twitter has revolutionised our conversations about live television events. In the days before the Internet, conversation about television programmes was limited to those sitting on the sofa with you and people you met the next morning – so-called ‘water-cooler conversation’. Now, however, it is possible to discuss events on the screen in real time with people all over the country – three out of five UK Twitter users tweet while watching television (Nielsen, 2013). Thus it is not surprising to find that the General Election’s television events generated debate and discussion on Twitter.

A team at Robert Gordon University is running a longitudinal study investigating Twitter response to televised political debates, including both the Scottish Independence Referendum and the 2015 General Election (Pedersen et al. 2014). For the General Election we collected and analysed tweets sent during the ITV debate between seven party leaders on 2 April 2015 and the BBC debate on 16 April between the five challengers. The tweets collected were those containing the hashtag promoted by the two programmes – #leadersdebate and #BBCdebate. We then conducted preliminary qualitative analysis, investigating the issues and leaders that stimulated the most activity on Twitter and the geographical spread of tweets.

Looking first at individual leaders, it will come as no surprise to learn that the name of Nigel Farage dominated our sample’s discussion during the first debate. In particular, there was a peak of Twitter discussion directly after his statement that ‘health tourists’ with HIV and AIDS were coming to the UK for treatment. His name also dominated in the first half of the second debate, with another peak after his attack on the studio audience. Thus Farage’s policy of inflammatory statements led to his name dominating Twitter discussion. However, in the second half of the Challengers’ debate, discussion of the UKIP leader declined and instead our sample’s focus turned to Nicola Sturgeon and Ed Miliband after Sturgeon’s challenge to Miliband to agree to work with her and other progressive party leaders.

Throughout both debates, Twitter discussed ‘the women’ – the three leaders, Nicola Sturgeon (SNP), Leanne Wood (Plaid Cymru) and Natalie Bennett (Greens). Whilst it was only Sturgeon’s name that occurred with high frequency in our sample, Twitter was stimulated by the sight of three female party leaders, with words such as ‘civilising’, ‘transforming’ and ‘refreshing’ recurring throughout. As far as UK General Election debates were concerned, this was the first time that any women at all participated – in 2010 even

the moderators of the debates had been male – and so it is not surprising that this stimulated discussion. In addition, this would have been the first time many outside their own countries saw the leaders of Plaid Cymru and the SNP. In particular, there was a peak in tweets after Sturgeon suggested that they were breaking up the old boys’ network at Westminster and both Sturgeon and Wood saw peaks in the use of their name after they criticised Farage. It should be noted, however, that not all in our sample saw the inclusion of three women in the debates positively and at least one tweeter complained that ‘three women agreeing with each other’ was not a debate.

Finally, it should be noted that, despite not taking part in the second debate, David Cameron’s name was still discussed by our sample throughout the debate, although that of Nick Clegg was mostly absent. As far as geographical spread of tweets is concerned, initial findings suggest that the majority of leaders’ names were discussed throughout the country during the two debates. However, during the first debate, Ed Miliband’s name appeared very infrequently in tweets geo-tagged as from Scotland, which may be connected to the problems Scottish Labour faced during the campaign.

This is an ongoing project that will continue to analyse the data collected, in particular focusing on the role of women politicians in the debates; humour and cultural referencing; information sources; and direct comments and abuse on the subject of the leaders’ personalities, appearances and personal lives.



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Why so few female tweeters before #GE2015?

The gendering of public discourse on Twitter



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It is a mistake to assume that public discourse can ever be gender-neutral. Although Twitter is sometimes held up as an inherently inclusive participatory tool for self-expression in reality it perpetuates the same gender dynamics and silencing of women that has existed since the Odyssey, when Telemachus informed his mother that “speech will be the business of men,” as classicist Mary Beard reminded us after facing gender-motivated abuse on Twitter.

The gendered nature of political public discourse was highlighted this April when BBC Trending released research showing a disparity between the numbers of men and women engaging with the General Election on Twitter based on instances of the use of hashtags associated with each of the main political parties. An analysis of the hashtags #Libdems #Libdem #UKIP #Conservative #SNP #Labour #Plaid-Cymru #Greens among UK users revealed that 75% of tweets were by men, while 25% were from women - a damning indictment of the neutrality of the platform.

Although it is possible to argue that the lack of engagement in political discussions on Twitter is representative of women’s disengagement with politics more broadly, this perspective overlooks the wider context of mysogyny and sexist trolling (abusive language from strangers) on Twitter which has resulted in many women being afraid to voice their opinions. The horrifying abuse JK Rowling received on Twitter after the election from UKIP and SNP supporters as a result of her pro-Labour stance is for many women a warning to not engage politically on the platform.

It’s no secret that women have been disproportionately affected by trolling on Twitter and that there has been a failing by the company to adequately respond. In a leaked memo, Twitter CEO Dick Costolo admitted “We suck at dealing with abuse and trolls on the platform and we’ve sucked at it for years... it’s nobody else’s fault but mine, and its embarrassing” after a staff member questioned Twitter’s response “as a collective of human beings” to cyberbullying.

Twitter has since introduced measures to respond to gender-based abuse including partnering with Women, Action and the Media in November 2014 to investigate harassment against women, and it released policy and product updates last month to ensure “voices are not silenced because people are afraid to speak up”. It’s likely that these reforms were at least partly influenced by its engagement with a team of researchers at Lancaster University working on the ESRC funded project [The Discourses of Online](#)

[Misogyny](#). Will these measures be enough or will social media remain trapped in discussions of freedom of self-expression vs. preventing online abuse? Will the anonymity of Twitter prevent it from ever escaping the misogynist culture that it finds itself in, where people voice threats they would never express in real life?

The results from this election will see the UK’s highest number of female MPs in office, although still under-represented at 29%, and as they engage and feature in public discourse there’s hope that they will encourage more women to express themselves politically online. However this achievement needs to be celebrated alongside a recognition that safer spaces for women to engage in online dialogue need to be created. The social media platforms where debate takes place, not incidentally male-dominated tech companies, need to work harder to take gender into consideration if we are to see more equal online engagement with politics in the run-up to #GE2020.

UKIP Facebooking the Tories in General Election 2015

The rise of populist parties has played a significant role in public discourse in the run-up to General Election 2015 (GE2015). Fuelled by misleading polls, the GE2015 campaign narrative focused on coalition politics; and predictions about the impact that parties like the UK Independence Party (UKIP) could have on post-election negotiations.

In 2010, the presence of the smaller parties was more muted and less pronounced. In the run-up to GE2015, UKIP appeared to be capitalizing on the splintering of disaffected Conservative Party participants and supporters. This phenomenon was being exhibited online in interesting and observable ways, especially in Facebook networks.

Facebook functionality is rooted in connecting 'friends' in its online venue. The social network actively and prominently promotes 'friend suggestions' to its users. This has little to do with whether one user knows another in the offline world. It has much more to do with the number of mutual Facebook friends two users might share.

In political Facebook networks, it has become increasingly likely that Facebook friends either will have had their first meeting online rather than offline; or not met in the offline world whatsoever. In 2008, it was more likely to be the reverse. The Conservatives have been actively growing political networks on Facebook since that time (Ridge-Newman 2014).

The manner in which Facebook connects people is highly useful for political networking. Political participants are increasingly using their Facebook profile photo to symbolize their association with a particular party or cause.

The more one's friend networks grow within the Facebook community of a political party, the more Facebook will suggest friends from that political network to the Facebook user. The party symbols displayed on profiles makes it easy for the user to identify potential new Facebook friends associated with their party's political network.

Between 2010 and 2015, Tory participants in the larger political networks on Facebook might have observed more and more of their once Tory-affiliated friends decorating their social media pages with the purple and gold branding of UKIP, often with prominent displays (profile and cover photos) of UKIP symbolism – especially the pound sterling sign (£) and images of Nigel Farage, the UKIP leader in GE2015.

Moreover, in the run-up to GE2015, Conservative Facebookers experienced an increasing frequency of friend requests from participants

exhibiting prominent UKIP symbols on their profiles. Therefore, a number of questions arise from this observation. For example, was there a UKIP strategy to target Tory participants, or other political participants, in social networks; or did this behaviour develop organically at UKIP's online grassroots? Furthermore, what impact did UKIP's social media activity have on the significant national GE2015 vote for UKIP?

Although the British electorate voted decisively for a majority Conservative government, UKIP increased its share of the national vote by 9.5%, with 3.9 million votes and 12.6% vote share.

This significant support for UKIP resulted in one UKIP Member of Parliament (MP), Douglas Carswell, being returned to the House of Commons. In contrast, 56 Scottish National Party (SNP) MPs were elected with 1.5 million votes and 4.7% vote share.

In researching this article, it would appear that some Ukippers have been left feeling bruised and disheartened by their GE2015 outcome. It has led some to call for electoral reform and others to seek a route back to the Conservative Party.

One informant explained that there are those in UKIP who feel they would like to 'return home' to the Tory fold. However, they fear they are now viewed as offensive and discriminatory individuals, and feel, therefore, that they would not be accepted as Tories by existing Tory participants.

Facebook activity has demonstrated that there is a reasonably strong familial relationship between UKIP and the Tories in social networks. Therefore, Facebook might act as an online bridge, providing a route back for some Ukippers (those that were once disaffected Tories) and facilitate their subtle reintegration into the Conservative fold – especially if David Cameron's delivery of an EU Referendum results in increasing political redundancy for UKIP.



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UKIP: The web's darling?



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One of the defining characteristics of the 2015 UK General Election was the use of social media to build support for the Conservatives and Labour in the run up to what was widely (and inaccurately) predicted to be the closest electoral contest for decades. This consisted of both positive messages, such as the use of #Miliband to indicate support for Labour Leader Ed Miliband, and negative ones, such as the US-style attack ads suggesting that the Scottish National Party would exert undue influence on any Labour-led coalition that emerged after the election. There was also some evidence to suggest that online media might disrupt the established broadcast and print journalism during the campaign. Most notably, Ed Miliband's interview with Russell Brand for *The Trews*, the comedian and activist's YouTube channel, was viewed more than 1.2 million times in the week before polling day. This prompted much debate in the news media about whether such "alternative" online platforms might help the main politicians reach out to young people who often choose not to vote and consume media in very different ways from older generations.

Smaller parties are likely to benefit from online exposure, especially given that they often lack visibility in the traditional news media. Besides social media, search engines such as Google have a crucial role in this process as they represent the primary channel through which people in the UK access online content (Dutton and Blank, 2013). We used Google Trends to explore the level of interest among British Internet users in the populist United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which had finished in first place in the 2014 European Parliament elections and looked set to build on this landmark result in 2015. We analysed the search trends between February and May 2015 for UKIP and its leader, Nigel Farage. These trends were then compared to those relating to the three main parties (the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats) and their leaders¹.

While UKIP received much less coverage in traditional broadcast and print media than the other parties, Farage's party dominated Google searches, consistently generating more search queries than all the other parties and their leaders throughout the campaign (Figures 1 and 2). This would appear to validate Farage's post-election claims that the party was a social media force that had "suddenly [become] the party for the under 30s," a group that is perhaps best reached online. Moreover, while TV debates continued to influence Google searches in elections (especially on 26th March, 2nd and 16th April), most search

peaks did not appear to be directly related to such mass media events. One interpretation of this finding might be that a more independent-minded electorate is emerging that sets its own information agenda instead of simply following traditional news coverage. However, the protracted negotiations over the number, format and composition of the TV debates almost certainly played a part here too.

Crucially, UKIP appeared to generate more interest amongst British Google users than any of the party leaders, including Farage. Although this focus on UKIP as a group may seem at odds with a political system that is increasingly leader-focused, as well as with Farage's own flamboyant style, it suggests that UKIP's strength among Internet users lies in its collective "brand." For example, Google searches for UKIP at the time of the BBC leaders' debate (26 April) far outnumbered those for its leader. This suggests that UKIP may be slowly shedding its tag of being a "personal party," unlike other populist and euro-sceptic forces in Europe such as the Five Star Movement in Italy. This was further illustrated by UKIP's performance in the 2015 General Election. Despite delivering only one seat due to the first past the post system (which incidentally also shows how Google Trends data may be a very poor predictor of election results), the party received 3.8 million votes across the UK and achieved 119 second places in England. This best ever performance in a Westminster Election did not prevent the resignation of Farage as leader shortly after his failure to win in Thanet South, although he has since refused to rule out running for the leadership again. Yet, irrespective of the identity of the next leader, UKIP's focus on issues such as Europe and immigration looks likely to resonate with wired voters (and non-voters) in Britain.

References

Dutton, W., and Blank, G. (2013). *Cultures of the Internet: The Internet in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute.

¹ Due to the need to exclude election day from the data given its nature as a potential outlier, this analysis covers the period up to 4th May 2015.

Figure 1:

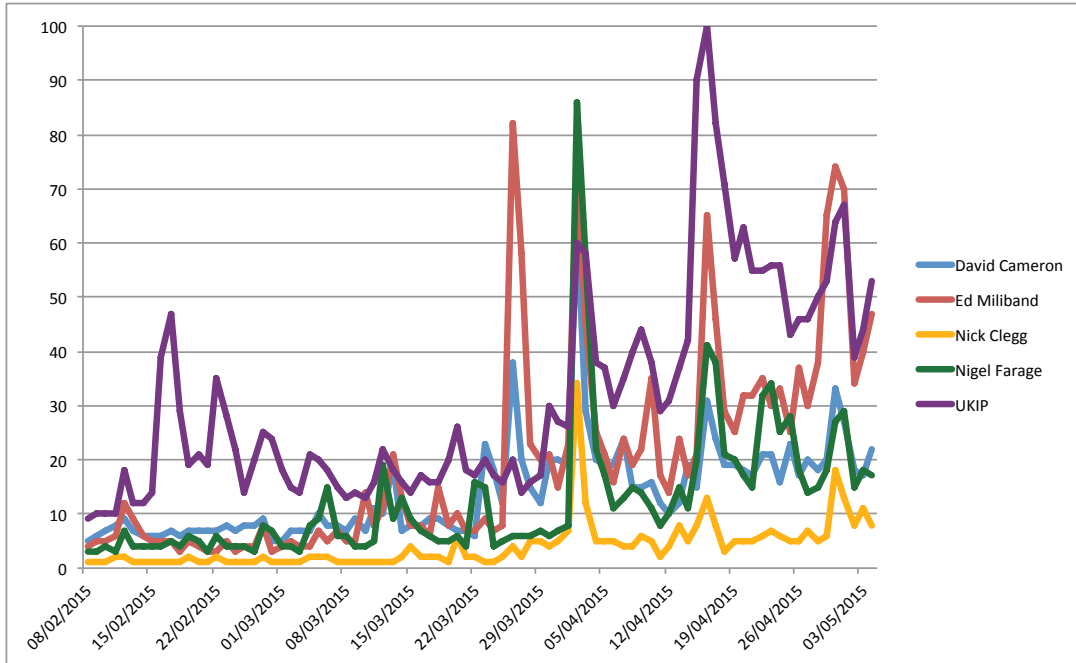
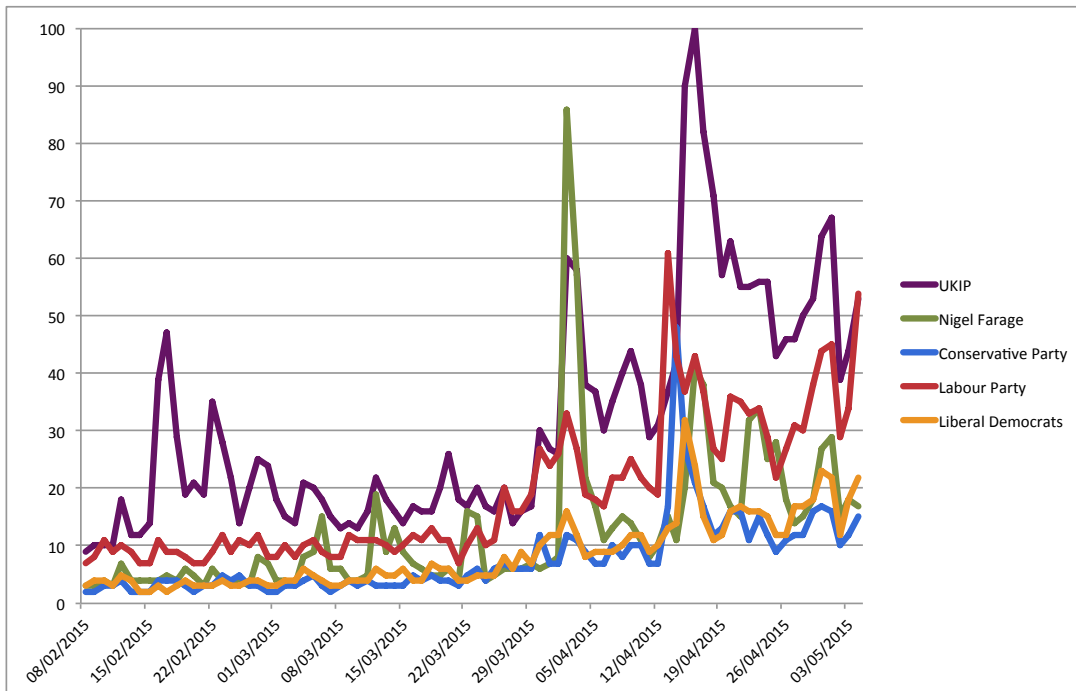


Figure 2:



Social sharing, mobile media and the Buzzfeedisation of news



Nic Newman

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This election saw a host of new digital-born websites making their presence felt for the first time. BuzzFeed, *the Huffington Post* and Vice News now have significant UK based news operations that weren't around in 2010. Home-grown new kids on the block include UsVsTh3m and Amp3d from Trinity Mirror and i100 from *the Independent*.

These brands do not need printing presses, trucks or newsstands but are powered instead by the virality of the social web and by young creative journalists armed with new tools for a digital age. They have pioneered the use of new visual formats like games, lists, gifs, data-viz, vines, boos, and raw videos to connect and engage with young people wherever they are.

Changes to distribution, formats and discovery

By way of background all this is now possible because the web itself has changed fundamentally over the last five years – with a new emphasis on mobile, social and visual media.

In this election many publishers reported more than half of traffic to online election stories from mobile phones and tablets – much higher for sites like BuzzFeed aimed at young people. Our Reuters Digital News Report 2015 shows that going into the election more than two thirds (70%) of under 35 were using smartphones for news on a weekly basis – a huge uplift on 2010.

Equally significant is the growth in social discovery. Half (49%) of under-35s use social networks like Facebook and Twitter to access political news compared with around a quarter (26%) four years ago. For young people in particular Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have become new gateways to the internet bumping into news that appear in their feeds and networks.

Coverage

Capitalising on these trends a number of digital newcomers set out to shake up what Vice UK has called the 'dull stranglehold' of mainstream media coverage in this election. Partly by design, partly by necessity these companies looked to avoid the predictable press conferences, battle buses and stage-managed photo-calls and to focus instead on something fresh that might engage a younger audience.

Vice offered a series of hard-hitting films on issues of concern to young people like housing, food banks and student debt and backed this up with a range of satirical reports from the campaign trail. This was reporting with a viewpoint and felt fresh and different – in part because the reporters were young, in part because digital born companies are not bound by Ofcom's requirements for political balance.

For BuzzFeed, which has doubled its audience in the UK over the past year, stories had to be 'different, funny or shocking', according to Deputy Editor Jim Waterson in an interview with the *Press Gazette* just ahead of the campaign. With limited resources at their disposal there was little point writing up manifesto launches or covering the set pieces. An irreverent webcast with David Cameron set the tone while former *Sun* political correspondent Emily Ashton focussed on original reports such as the story behind Liam Byrne's infamous note about how the money had run out. But the weight of BuzzFeed coverage remained its trademark skills of capturing and repackaging the best bits of the social web.

Curating the conversation was the *Huffington Post's* key focus – capturing as many page views as possible along the way. *The Huffington Post* appeals to a much wider audience than BuzzFeed and its well-honed mix of blogs, videos and roundtable discussions consistently produces the most shared content on Facebook.

A more partisan approach came from the Mirror's UsvTh3m – brought into the heart of the main website for the first time for this election. An honourable mention too for Politico, which only began publishing in Europe as the campaign began, and ran excellent on the ground pieces such as the story of Ben Judah's terrifying encounter with supporters of George Galloway and excellent post match analysis on the implications of Brexit.

Impact and the future

In terms of audience numbers, money spent and weight of reporters on the ground, traditional media outgunned digital newcomers by a country mile. But the central narrative of mainstream media coverage - that this was a deadlocked race with a coalition to follow - turned out to be plain wrong. Digital born sites were able to think differently and apply their considerable wit and ingenuity to engage with less engaged voters in a way that the BBC and broadsheets have always found hard.

The fact that turnout amongst the young was the highest for years may be a co-incidence – but new digital sites played their part in registering new voters and keeping them interested through a long campaign. Political correspondents and reporters in their twenties may not have the gravitas of David Dimbleby but they have left their imprint on this election and on the media landscape for years to come.

TONIGHT: Watch VICE's Alternative Election Night Coverage from 10PM

May 7, 2015

by VICE UK

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POLITICS

How One Hastily Scrawled Note Came To Haunt Labour In The Tightest Election In A Generation

"I'm afraid that there is no money," wrote a departing Labour minister in 2010. Five years on it's still a talking point. BuzzFeed News explains how a one-sentence letter helped shape the election.

posted on Apr. 29, 2015, at 11:24 p.m.

Emily Ashton
BuzzFeed News Reporter

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When Liberal Democrat MP David Laws became Treasury chief secretary in May 2010, his new private secretary handed him a sealed envelope. "Here's something your predecessor left for you," the civil servant said. Laws opened it with interest. "Dear Chief Secretary,"

USVSTH3M #NOVOTENOVOICE



17 amazing reasons you should vote Labour today

07 May 2015 12:00 PM Rob Manuel

On the 26th of March 2015 Katie Hopkins made a solemn promise to our country - she will leave if Ed Milliband becomes Prime Minister. Here's not 1, not 2, but 17 reasons why you should make your vote count

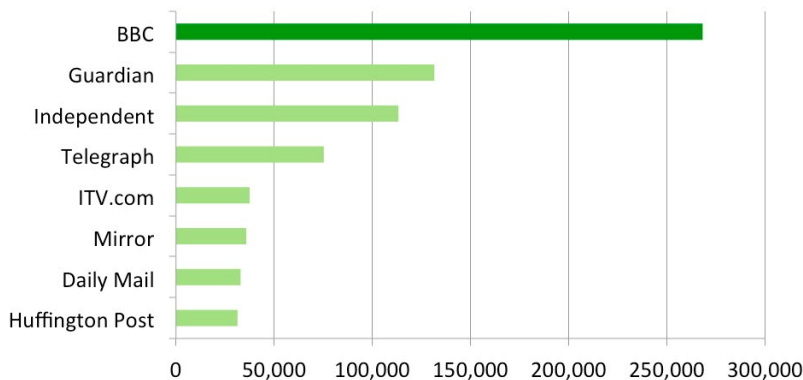
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Data NewsWhip





7 | Popular Culture

After Miliband: Russell Brand and the politics of celebrity politics

It is perhaps a little unfair that *The Spectator's* Brendan O'Neill labelled Russell Brand the biggest loser of the general election. As a late convert to Miliband's cause, Brand's change of heart over whether or not to vote in this election came as an endorsement for Ed Miliband announced on his YouTube channel *The Trews* on May 4th. Within 24 hours more than 600,000 people had watched this video, while double that number had seen his interview with Ed five days earlier.

To give Brand's critics their dues, it did seem an odd thing to do for a man who, back in November 2013, had provoked a media controversy by insisting to Jeremy Paxman on *Newsnight* that he wouldn't vote, had never voted, and saw it as irrelevant to a genuine democracy. Paxman's response ('You are a trivial man' he declaimed) encapsulated how Brand's political opponents denigrate him, a sentiment echoed by David Cameron who dismissed him as a 'joke'.

What makes Russell's story interesting for students of both politics and the media is how he repurposed a sophisticated fame machine for radical political ends. Contemporary celebrity is a key implement of capitalist propaganda selling the myth that anyone can "make it". Through a series of interventions across a number of media platforms, Brand turned this logic on its head, not only by highlighting that most people do not find wealth and fortune by working hard and instead many struggle under modern capitalism, but also by arguing that celebrity itself is hollow, a false aspiration. Brand did this through the very logic of celebrity: he consciously harnessed the mythic tropes of celebrity culture through a powerful personal narrative of rise and fall, redemption and transformation; he exploited his publicity apparatus of agents, fellow celebrities and understanding of what is "newsworthy" to gain mainstream media coverage and then funnelled those audiences to his YouTube channel, films, books and twitter feed to convey, guru-like, his pedagogic message of grassroots organising and revolution from below.

The most striking thing about the Miliband-Brand interview is that they both make a visible effort to listen and learn from each other. Away from the full glare of a hostile media in the more intimate space of Brand's Shoreditch flat and fixing Ed with his gaze, Brand leans forward to find out whether he is a man he can trust, acting as a proxy for his followers and frequently reverting to monologues on subjects that he wants Miliband to respond to – unethical banks, inequality, housing, confronting the powerful corporate interests. Miliband listens and meets Brand half way where he can, committing to working

with communities and responding to their concerns rather than imposing top-down policy initiatives. But in response to Brand's assertions that politicians are powerless to bring about change, Ed says: "You're wrong, you are just wrong"... How does progress come? It comes from people pushing and politics responding". The following endorsement suggested that Brand was persuaded – he has learnt something new from his mate Ed and then shared this learning with his followers.

But if Russell and Ed demonstrated an admirable ability to listen and learn from each other, so too were both unable to cope with their dismay once the results came in. Just as Ed immediately resigned the Labour leadership rather than overseeing a smooth transition to the next leader, so too did Brand in his post-election *Trews* abdicate any further role in electoral politics having been falsely persuaded that his influence was such that he could swing the election for Labour. Just as Miliband is grossly undervalued (by himself as much as the rest of his party) for his ability to hold together a fractious and back-biting parliamentary Labour party, so too has Brand's political significance been misunderstood. It is not in defeat but in the creation of a new political alternative that must surely follow it that the success of Brand's interventions must be judged. His shame is misplaced.

One of the more rapidly circulated responses to the election result came from public intellectual Dougald Hine who claimed on the morning after the election result that Brand understands the key thing that was absent from Miliband's campaign, that politics is a 'battle for the soul'. Hine looks to EP Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* to suggest that Brand may be the contemporary equivalent of the narcissistic and influential 18th century firebrand William Cobbett and as serious a threat to the status-quo. Ed Miliband may have lost his campaign, but Russell Brand's compassionate revolution may have only just begun.



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Celebrity endorsements and activities in the 2015 UK General Election campaign



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*Celebrity Politics: Image
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Celebrity politics have become common-place in UK elections. In 2015, the Labour Party secured the endorsements of Eddie Izzard and Ben Elton who appeared with *Coronation Street* actress Sally Lindsay at a rally in Warrington. Izzard campaigned in over fifty constituencies and was confronted by Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) activists with the 'Scot Lab' leader Jim Murphy. Ed Miliband also received the backing of Stephen Hawking, Paul O'Grady, Sir Ian McKellan, Matthew Horne, Robert Webb, Charlotte Church and Delia Smith. The former *Eastenders* star Ross Kemp canvassed his home constituency of Ilford North, while Steve Coogan spoke in targeted marginals including Bermondsey and Old Southwark and Hornsey and Wood Green.

Coogan, Jo Brand and Ronnie O'Sullivan starred in Labour Party Election Broadcasts (PEB) concerning fairness and the National Health Service (NHS). Moreover, *The Hobbit's* Martin Freeman appeared in the party's first PEB (with a voice-over by David Tennant) to promote social justice. However, Freeman received the approbation of the right-wing media due to his affiliation with Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party and his son's private education. In tandem, the Scottish actor Brian Cox transferred his support to the SNP.

Such difficulties meant that the Conservative Party shied away from celebrity endorsers. In 2010 it had trumpeted Sir Michael Caine and Gary Barlow (who was later castigated as a tax dodger) as supporters. Conversely, in 2015, with the exception of Andrew Lloyd Webber, Simon Cowell and Sol Campbell, the party's endorsements remained limited.

Moreover, when *The Sun* columnist Katie Hopkins tweeted that if the Labour Party won she would leave the country, some argued that her intervention would be a vote winner for Miliband. In the event, she may well have been more attuned with public opinion.

Sir David Attenborough, Joanna Lumley and Billy Bragg were among forty signatories who called for the re-election of the Green Party's Caroline Lucas while avoiding any endorsement of the party. To demonstrate that she had no partisan bias, Lumley backed the Liberal Democrat MP Lynne Beaumont with whom she had worked with in the Gurkha Justice Campaign. It was reported that the Liberal Democrat Party leader Nick Clegg enlisted John Cleese to play a version of the United Kingdom Independence Party's (UKIP) Nigel Farage in TV debate rehearsals. However, Colin Firth and Daniel Radcliffe turned their backs on the Lib-Dems.

Well-known black figures including Campbell, the actor David Harewood, the musician Tinie Tempah and the television presenter Ade Adepitan 'whited up' for Operation Black Vote. Addition-

ally, Harewood starred in a video appealing for minorities to register to vote. In tandem, Armando Iannucci, Michael Sheen and Christopher Eccleston supported public registration campaigns. The geneticist Richard Dawkins informed his 1.15 million Twitter followers that Liberal Democrats should vote tactically to form a 'Left Coalition', while Damon Albarn, Irving Welsh and Massive Attack signed an online petition against Trident. Pop singer Will Young condemned the 'First Past the Post' electoral system.

Some celebrities facilitated a populist response to the parties' leadership. The anti-corporate comedian Russell Brand, who had decried voting, interviewed Miliband on his YouTube channel *The Trens* with its 1,000,000 subscribers. The Labour leader spoke to Brand about the inequities of global capitalism, the protection of working rights, media owners and the lasting value of voting. When David Cameron castigated 'Milibrand' as a joke, the Labour strategists misguidedly hoped that Brand's endorsement with his 9.5 million Twitter followers could provide a conduit to young, disengaged voters.

ITV signed up the reality television star Joey Essex to appear in a programme wherein he met the leaders (with the exception of Cameron) to give his 'insights' on the election. Having already shared a 'selfie' with Miliband ahead of the campaign, Essex met Clegg who he mistook for 'Leg' and called the leader of the 'Liberal Democrats' while tweeting that Clegg was an 'honest guy.' Subsequently, he appeared with Farage in Grimsby harbour and described him as being 'reem' (cool). To protest against Farage in his failed bid to become MP for Thanet South, the comedian Al Murray stood as an independent candidate under the moniker of the 'The Pub Landlord.' Murray's Free the United Kingdom Party' (FUKP), with its outlandish manifesto written on the back of cigarette packet, was a play on Farage's 'ordinary bloke' image.

The electorate's consumption of celebrity campaign politics has grown due to the rise of 'infotainment' styles of news coverage and viral social media discourses. In the UK, this has meant that the parties gave some credence to celebrity engagements. However, despite the Labour Party's celebrity endorsements, they had little impact on the electoral outcome. Consequently, it appears that the British public remains equivocal in its judgment upon the worth of such a mobilization of celebrity supporters.

Celebrity interventions in the election campaign and party affiliation

In a manner largely consistent with recent trends in election campaigns, the lead up to the 2015 UK General Election was marked by a range of interventions from those who came to public prominence through their work in the entertainment industries – celebrities. While certain established traits of celebrity involvement in election campaigns persisted, new features have emerged which suggest both the changing necessities of parliamentary democracy and the means by which celebrity can be used to serve such needs, while illuminating new potential relationships between celebrity, power and the role of the individual in political discourse.

In many respects the 2015 election campaigns resembled on-going patterns in British parliamentary politics as the three ‘mainstream’ neoliberal parties (Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat) continued their long-standing trajectory of consolidating or acquiescing to private power. In a similar fashion, some of the most prominent celebrity spokespeople who routinely profess strong party allegiances continued to endorse their chosen party. For example, the actor, comedian and broadcaster Tony Robinson called upon the electorate to vote Labour in a move that signalled his continuing support of the party for which he once served on the National Executive Committee. Robinson was present during the election campaigns of a number of Labour candidates, including those in the constituencies of Stroud and North Swindon. Such unequivocal party allegiances from the likes of Robinson sat alongside statements of party endorsements from Robert Webb, Jo Brand and Martin Freeman (for Labour) or Peter Stringfellow (for Conservative), among others.

However, this type of party endorsement among celebrities did not seem as common in 2015 as previous elections, particularly considering the Blair years. This is interesting as celebrities are becoming increasingly politicised. That said, this roughly reflects trends among the wider population who are also increasingly turning away from political party membership. This, coupled with the expectation for a relatively low voter turnout and the possibility of a hung parliament, caused concern for much of the corporate media, as it potentially questioned the validity of the type of representative democracy practiced in the UK, and the legitimacy of the governing party and centres of state and corporate power with which it is bound. In relation to this need of the political orthodoxy, celebrity-inclusive campaigns emerged which sought to engage apparently disenfranchised members of the electorate with the democratic process.

In distinction to, and often as a response to, Russell Brand’s arguments in favour of turning away from the current frameworks of representative democracy in favour of direct action – campaigns encouraging voter registration and promoting party membership sought to undermine Brand’s anti-establishment ethic by framing party membership as a quasi-rebellious act. In this light, comedian Robert Webb announced he had rejoined the Labour Party as a reaction to Brand’s guest editorial of the *New Statesman*. Celebrity support was also elicited to engage on an emotional level with the 18-24 demographic and encourage voter registration among that group. For example, actor Christopher Eccleston implored the public to “trust their own instincts and listen to their own heart” and simply “believe in the process”. This, and similar campaigns, allowed celebrity endorsements to come to the service of the political system more generally, legitimising it as a system of governance while circumventing specific allegiances.

Other celebrities used the election to highlight key issues and, in doing so, encouraged engagement with ‘the system’ not as a general safeguard of public interest, but as something through which individual issues could be contested and individual people promoted. This was perhaps put most eloquently by Bez who opined, “I could have joined the Greens but I didn’t want to be restricted by party politics. I wanted to have a free hand to say what I wanted and do what I wanted really”. In a similar vein, a group of well-known public personalities, including David Attenborough, Joanna Lumley and Billy Bragg, signed a statement of support for incumbent Green Party MP Caroline Lucas. For these celebrities, Lucas’s inclusion in parliament was a vital component of plurality within the House of Commons. Importantly, this statement did not endorse the Green Party in general, but rather Lucas personally. Moreover, the signatories added their names in a personal capacity. This suggests an emphasis on the individual – cleaved of institutional and professional affiliations – as a political agent and shows a consistency with the increasing prominence of single issue political campaigns and online petition groups such as 38 Degrees (the founder of which was a signatory of the statement endorsing Lucas). Additionally, it also demonstrates how the 2015 General Election represents a key moment when the celebrity political endorser – as an icon of individuality – became engaged with the political process while being noncommittal to party politics.



.....
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Legitimacy and the celebrity single-issue candidate



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While news coverage of General Elections can be argued to 'crowd out' other topics of public interest in the public sphere, some saw the election as an opportunity to attract publicity to a cause. The artist Bob and Roberta Smith stood in Michael Gove's Surrey Heath constituency in protest at the coalition government's changes to the education curriculum downgrading the importance of art. While the comedian Al Murray's 'Pub Landlord' candidacy in South Thanet was presented, perhaps more ambiguously, as a satirical criticism of fellow candidate Nigel Farage (the initials of Murray's 'Free United Kingdom Party' (FUKP) illustrating the blunt nature of any ironical intent). Murray's manifesto pledged to brick up the channel tunnel using British bricks and Polish workers; Smith's platform was built around placing art at the centre of the curriculum.

Towards the end of the campaign, and notwithstanding the final outcome, legitimacy - in the sense of the various potential parliamentary combinations of the main parties - became a key media topic. To what extent was the legitimacy of candidates such as Murray and Smith questioned?

Mainstream media coverage of Smith was limited, but some supportive niche media emphasised his artist-activist credentials. This is perhaps partly due to the 'safe' seat he was contesting, which was never likely to change hands; he could not be argued to be disrupting 'legitimate' electoral politics. The campaign was also constructed around a positive, niche single issue - the importance of art education both culturally and in economic terms - which could be treated by other candidates and the media as a legitimate (but marginal) topic. One profile piece compared the 'serious point' of Smith's campaign compared with Murray's, and Smith was acknowledged as a 'vocal advocate' for the arts, debating with Gove in constituency hustings.

On twitter, Smith's supporters tweeted images of his artworks, in particular those linked to the 'vote art' campaign intended to encourage voter registration. By contrast, Murray attracted (and often engaged with) criticism primarily from UKIP supporters attacking his motives in standing (for publicity and personal or commercial gain).

The announcement of the Pub Landlord's manifesto in January generated substantial media coverage, in part as an amusing alternative (a 'brilliantly bonkers satire') to the dry limitations of the main party campaigns, and further coverage was generated by stunts such as a failed attempt to parachute into the constituency.

There was also some criticism of Murray. While some saw him as part of an 'honourable

tradition of protest politics', others considered the possibility, in a three way marginal constituency, of the FUKP and its logo acting as a 'spoiler' for those misreading the ballot paper while attempting to vote UKIP. The Press Association reported the comments of the outgoing Conservative MP that the constituency should not be 'taken lightly' and that Murray was 'trivializing' the contest.

Newspapers emphasised Murray's privileged boarding school and Oxford background, in order to suggest a deceptive hypocrisy in the pub landlord's man of the people character. He was accused of running 'at the expense of people's futures', hijacking the democratic process for publicity purposes and 'mixing up satire with the reality of a ballot', while the Green candidate was quoted as fearing that such irony can inadvertently lend credibility to its intended target. Online critics suggesting he was trying to resurrect a failing career were pointed in the direction of the webpage offering tickets for his upcoming Royal Albert Hall appearance.

The performative aspects of both candidates' campaigns could suggest they were involved in electoral guerrilla theatre, making parodic incursions into the liberal democratic electoral process. The interpretive agency of the audience for irony means however that it can be taken in multiple ways, and these candidacies could be interpreted as a vindication of a liberal electoral system which allows anyone, however misguided or eccentric, to stand for office. In any case, Smith's Art Party campaign, in its emphasis on policy change and educational opportunity was perhaps more earnest than playful, more modern than postmodern.

Both campaigns could have been entirely presented as risible self-publicity, but neither was denigrated as such. Instead, while Murray was largely welcomed as an entertaining sideshow (with some concern around the impact on the South Thanet election in particular and political debate in more general terms), Smith was considered a worthy if marginal addition to the democratic process.

Both candidates lost their deposits - Smith winning 273 votes, (behind five main parties and the Christian Party), Murray gaining 318, (beating all the other single issue/protest candidates) - but the resulting publicity may well be seen by both candidates as a vindication of their respective electoral strategies.



Ukip Leader Nigel Farage (left) and FUKP candidate The Pub Landlord, listen to the Conservative candidate Craig Mackinlay (right) receive his declaration results for the South Thanet Constituency at the Winter Gardens in Margate, Kent. (Picture by: Gareth Fuller / PA Wire/Press Association Images)

It's the neutrosemey, stupid!: fans, texts and partisanship in the 2015 General Election



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In the 2015 General Election fans of politics moved to the centre of campaign coverage through the emergence of ‘milibandom’ (see Wahl-Jorgensen’s article in *The Conversation*, 2015). Yet, those who interpreted the popularity of Ed Miliband among social media savvy teenagers as a premonition of electoral success were soon to be disappointed. And yet, I want to suggest that Fan Studies have a case for stepping on psephology’s toes in offering explanations of the 2015 General Election result.

In voting, as elsewhere in the consumption of popular culture, we are asked to make choices; choices which we make through a mixture of consideration and affect. Such affect, in turn, is rooted in the appropriation of texts and on fans’ ability to make a given text their own, to rework it into a space of immense textual significance, a transitional object, or a space of self-reflection. The more polysemic given texts, the greater the number of fans with varying appropriative needs – i.e. backgrounds, experiences and beliefs – it can attract.

In football the global appeal of super-clubs such as Manchester United or FC Barcelona lies in the fact that as textual formations they are polysemic to an extent that they become almost ‘neutrosemic’, freed of any meaning in and for itself (as I have written elsewhere). It is this absence of a denotative core in varying social and regional reception contexts that allow these clubs to become focal points of partisanship, as illustrated in fans’ talk about their clubs which promptly shifts to their own identity and values articulated through their reading of the club.

Much as sports, parliamentary democracy also calls for such singular, partisan identification; and as in sport such partisanship commonly draws on exiting lines of social distinction, with few (still) more prevalent than nationality. It was such partisan nationalism with its simplistic ‘us versus them’ dichotomy that allowed UKIP to attract 3.8 million voters. However, in mediated, indirect democracies – especially of the First Past the Post (FPTP) variety – electoral success is dependent on constructing such partisanship through the greatest degree of polysemy. UKIP’s failure to win more than one seats reflects the too clear connotative core of the party. It too clearly signifies certain ‘values’ to the electorate – values, the large majority of voters in the UK reject.

The successful fan texts – or, as political advertisers would have it, the successful ‘brand’ – is one that is as neutrosemic as possible and thus functions as a space for reflection for as many potential voters’ aspirations. It is thus that the strategy and success of the Conservative Party in

this election is less surprising. The winner of the much anticipated television leaders’ debates was the man who wasn’t there – desperately seeking to stay above the fray in the first debate and not participating in the second. Indeed, David Cameron, to use Robert Musil’s highly fitting title, as ‘man without qualities’ succeed in the Merklarian art of ‘asymmetric demobilisation’ in England, while the spectre of nationalism was successfully employed by the Conservatives in shaping many English voters’ reading of a Labour party potentially working with the SNP as a party of ‘them’, not us. While Labour had itself irrevocably, and from its viewpoint catastrophically, positioned as part ‘them’ to many Scottish voters.

All such readings, of course, reflect the particular horizon of experience and expectations of individual voters and the way in which they construct texts / party brands of the vast textual fields of political coverage. Those who are fans of politics, who are most familiar with political discourse and whose affective attachments to given political parties are the deepest, will find the suggestion that, for example the Tories stand for little in and for themselves as absurd as committed football enthusiasts are aware of, for instance, the history of Barcelona FC as a bastion of Catalan culture and independence aspirations. But much as it isn’t fans, but the casual viewers, who decide the fate of television shows, those whose affective investments in politics is the most fleeting, are most likely to decide elections.

Whatever we make of the election results, fan studies thus remind us of two obvious, but rarely addressed issues of mediated, indirect democracy. Firstly, the blunt measure of a singular vote fails to capture the vastly different investments in the political process by different voters and, indeed, non-voters. Secondly, while the legitimacy of democratic, parliamentary representation is based on a sense of parties as intersubjectively recognised, connotatively unambiguous texts, it is the very opposite form of near neutrosemic textual formations that promise electoral success.

Britain's Got Tories:

Yank scholar on UK lifestyle politics

As a recent transplant from the US, I must confess that I'm still suffering from an inferiority complex that plagues many of my countrymen. When it comes to cultural matters, we yanks dutifully genuflect at the feet of the mother country, seduced by her voluptuous soft power and posh accent. Hell, white Americans didn't even value black American music until we heard it sung with a British accent. In many respects, we just can't resist aping British culture. High, low, it doesn't matter. We even secretly think your flag looks cooler than ours. So when it comes to the pernicious spread of lifestyle politics, one has to accept that the mother country is once again leading the cultural dance and, in this instance, to an especially tawdry tune.

This is not to suggest that UK and US politicians pander in quite the same way. In British lifestyle politics there are less guns, and more pints, less God, more Queen. In a sense, the reality show that US politics has devolved into is a dumbed down knock off of the more absurd and delightfully ruthless British version. Consider the morning of May 8th when the leaders of three British parties resigned in rapid succession. Milliband, Clegg and Farage, out the door with no cab fare home. Worse, they had to conduct their awkward walk of shame before a phalanx of reporters and photographers. Now that's good television!

Some Brits mistakenly believe that Americans don't get irony, but actually we're drowning in it. What we don't get is whimsy, and British politics is full of that. In the US, the fear mongering tends to be rabid and humourless. Whereas in the UK, reactionary louts like Nigel Farage mug for the cameras and gleefully play the fool. Best photo op of the UK 2015 election: two members of the Monster Raving Loony Party flanking Boris Johnson as he accepted his parliamentary seat, bedecked in ribbons and badges with outsized hats that even gave Johnson's silly yellow fright wig a run for the money. The Loony's had just one campaign policy: a call for the abolition of gravity. As absurd as that sounds, at least it was a clear legislative agenda that they were all too happy to discuss, unlike the other candidate who spent most of the election staying on message and far away from concrete details.

But enough about that. What really matters is who's hotter, Cameron's wife, or Milliband's? I have to go with Cameron's. Not that I would ever vote for her husband. Still, I have to say, he's my kind of right-winger, none of this cracker barrel good ol' boy billionaire nonsense that's such a hit with US republicans (see George

W. Bush). No, the Tories like their conservatives to act like actual conservatives. If Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, had a heart, he would wear it on his velvet sleeve and it would be full of contempt for the unwashed masses. Osborne doesn't hide the fact that he comes from an old aristocratic family and that his haircut cost more than your house. He doesn't have to. In the US, such an obvious elitist would struggle to get elected. The illusion of a classless society acts as a cloaking device that populist greedheads hide behind, while struggling to conceal their ivy league pedigrees and dropping the "g's" from the ends of enough words, as in, "I'm just bein' a regular guy, soundin' more salt of the earth 'n' such, y'all." Impressively, and somewhat depressingly, UK lifestyle politics has a more pragmatic dimension.

There is a sense of resignation that old money will inevitable rule, so it only makes sense to vote for the posh twit with deep pockets and entrenched connections to steer the ship. Forget rustic charm, Brits want polish. That was the big objection to Labour leader Ed Milliband after all. The press didn't fixate on the fact that he was an atheist raised by an outspoken Marxist. They were more concerned that he didn't seem statesmanlike. Such is the occasionally high tone timbre of British lifestyle politics. In the US, politicians steep their speechifying in so much holy-roller rhetoric, they often sound like they're running for pope, and even the word "liberal" is considered a smear. If you call someone a "socialist," you might as well accuse them of mugging old ladies and stealing their pensions, not that old ladies deserve pensions. That would be socialism! Such nuances explain why it's easy to mistake British lifestyle politics for actual politics, but don't be deceived. The absence of bible thumping, gun-toting rhetoric merely masks an even more pernicious brand of political pandering based on a tacit acceptance of the class-bound status quo.



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#RegisterToVote: picturing democratic rights and responsibilities on Twitter



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When considering election campaign imagery, we tend to think first of the politicians' attempts to manage their image and how we as voters 'see' them through various mediated lenses. This election has certainly involved carefully choreographed party campaigns with the resulting, mostly bland, imagery dispersed in a fragmentary manner across media platforms, formats and genres. So where are the memorable images of the campaign?: The group-hug of the female party leaders following the opposition leaders' televised debate; the #Milifandom meme on Twitter; or, for frequency if nothing else, the dependable photo opportunities involving farm animals and fish markets.

During a period when politics is at its most tribalist and combative, it might seem counter-intuitive to focus on the images from a concurrent campaign that actually brought together political parties, civil society groups, media commentators and interested members of the public. Truly democratic in scope and ethos, I refer here to the campaign to encourage those not yet registered to do so before the 20 April deadline. The move to Individual Electoral Registration (IER) in 2014 requires each eligible elector to personally register to vote, rather than relying on a single person to register the entire household. In February 2015 it was reported that ignorance of the new system had possibly disenfranchised around 1 million people, with the young, some ethnic minorities, and people who rent or move house frequently particularly vulnerable to falling off the register. The old system certainly required modernisation, but was IER the best system, and were local authorities given enough time and resources to implement the changes?

The 5 February National Voter Registration Day provided a small boost, but the cross-media campaign in the run-up to the 20 April deadline appeared to mobilise the nation for a common democratic cause and saw almost half a million people register on that final day; almost three times the amount of those who signed up on National Voter Registration Day.

This was a campaign encompassing all types of media – television, magazines, newspapers, advertising – and which saw numerous groups promote the meaning of the *right* and *responsibility* to vote – including various unions, the citizen's advice bureau and the woodcraft folk, to name a few. Clearly this short piece cannot consider all elements, but it takes one of these fragments and explores the striking imagery of the #RegisterToVote campaign as observed on Twitter. The message is direct, has urgency and participatory power at its very core – the kind of appeal that

fits perfectly with the qualities of social media. But what kinds of images were created and shared to convey this message visually, and what might their design reveal?

One striking aspect was the prominence of the female vote. Women were central to this phenomenon at individual and collective levels: they led the sharing of images; women directly addressed other female voters, especially with the statistic that 9 million women had not voted in 2010; and the pictures tended to depict women. In contrast to the misstep of the Labour Party's 'Woman to Woman' pink bus, and the militaristic style of the *Daily Mirror's* 20 April front page ('Your country needs you....TO VOTE'), the campaign on Twitter enabled a multi-vocal (or rather multi-visual) creative expression to emerge. Amongst the infographics, humorous memes and personalised messages, photographs of suffragettes featured heavily. The black and white pictures of arrests and force-feeding emphasised the radical and violent nature of their struggle but one very different image appeared again and again. A photographic portrait of Emily Davison – beautiful, pensive and feminine. In the portrait, she looks over her shoulder, a classic formal pose that accentuates her profile and hairstyle whilst encouraging a downward, thoughtful gaze. In sharing such an image, Twitter users perhaps hoped to associate the virtues of this old-fashioned elegance with themselves and their followers. The image conveys something which would not easily be supplanted by words: an ideal of beauty, bravery and dignity.

There were other historical reference points – such as photos of voting queues in South Africa's first multiracial election of 1994 – but the favoured remediations of the past placed the dignity and sacrifice of the suffragettes pictured alongside the casual disenchantment of young women today. In addition to asking people to remember the past, other tweets implored people to imagine what they'd *feel* like when they couldn't vote on 7 May. Through vivid imagery, emotive appeals, and evocations of the past, present and future, both citizens and institutions rallied many to register at the very last moment. This participatory and creative fervour arguably gives us something to celebrate, but questions remain on whether these latecomers actually voted, and the wider consequences when certain groups in society remain less likely to be registered at all.

The ‘most unlikely’ or ‘most deserved cult’: citizen-fans and the authenticity of Milifandom

The emergence of Milifandom suggests something important about the 2015 General Election. Sufficiently integrated into mainstream media coverage for Ed Miliband to namecheck it in his resignation speech, Milifandom represented its own moment of mainstreaming – one where the languages and experiences of fandom definitively collided with political awareness and enthusiasm.

The hashtag #Milifandom was reinvented by 17-year-old Abby Tomlinson during the campaign, taken up by BuzzFeed and conveyed into the wider media ecology. Interviewed by *The Guardian* after Ed’s resignation, Abby argued – contra the man himself – that “Milifandom was (and still is) the most deserved cult of the 21st century”. For Abby, despite being too young to vote herself, Milifandom was a way of challenging extremely negative Miliband representations produced in Murdoch-owned newspapers.

Scholarship has wrestled with the relationship between politics and fandom for a while: Liesbet van Zoonen notes parallels between fan communities and political constituencies in *Entertaining the Citizen*. Jonathan Gray observes that fandom may not be “a magic tonic for citizenship [...] but [...] a constitutive element of it.” And Cornel Sandvoss has explored ‘political fandom’ in studies of Barack Obama and Lib Dem supporters. Yet there is an implication in Sandvoss’s work that ‘political fandom’ belongs somehow to transient support – these are voters caught up in an emotional hope for ‘change’, who then punish their fan object when it fails to live up to expectations (Cleggmania seems a long time ago).

All these academic perspectives share something with the UK media’s bemused and often implicitly mocking coverage of #Milifandom – namely that politics and fandom are incongruous bedfellows, and hence that a case specifically has to be made for conceptually integrating them. Fandom does not, according to much political media coverage, allow for ‘proper’ engagement with politics; it is blinkered rather than open to debate, and allegedly hysterical rather than rational, especially where teen girls’ fandom is concerned. It is this still-powerful discursive separation of ‘fans’ and ‘citizens’ that made Milifandom newsworthy. Here was something that seemed to violate deeply held cultural categories. ‘Fan likes Ed’ was a variant on ‘man bites dog’, a quirky story that could break up the monotony of predictable, professionalised media-controlling spin, and a locked-down election campaign. But as politics becomes ever more mediated, if not mediatized, then perhaps it should not be surprising that fandom emerges as one response. And not

fandom analytically imposed as a scholarly label/metaphor, but self-branded Milifandom, emergent in a social-media-ready and memetic form. What struck professional pundits and satirists – from *This Week* to *Ballot Monkeys* – as a rich source of comedy, could instead be interpreted not as human-interest oddity or ‘improper’ female teen sentiment, but rather as a marker of authenticity in an often inauthentic election.

Milifandom wasn’t pre-programmed and focus-grouped. Nor was it about tribal politics cleaving along predetermined lines of nationalist or party-based affective investment (surely also kinds of ‘political fandom’ that deserve the name as much as shorter-lived performances of trust and hope). Instead, Milifandom felt emergent, contingent and *authentic*, unlike the ‘West Ham question’ regarding which football team David Cameron actually supported. Cameron knew that fandom was useful, but seemingly only as a tool to instrumentally manipulate others. Milifans also knew that fandom was useful, but within a wholly different structure of feeling and generational logic of practice – one where fandom and politics were not alien territories, and could start to become seamlessly connected and productive. This isn’t only grassroots empowerment, boosting youth-cultural engagement with politics and speaking back to media and political elites. More specifically, it challenges the very separation of fandom and politics taken for granted by an older generation.

As an outlier and an incongruity – as a challenge to the discursive power of ‘common sense’, rationally debated politics – Milifans demonstrate that ‘political fandom’ can be much more than an academic category, and that fan-citizens can perform their identities and their ‘affective intelligence’ via social media in ways that have left the old(er) guard uncertain whether to interpret all this as ironic, earnest, or semi-ironic. Milifandom’s authenticity and unpredictability have opened the door to future coalitions between political commitment and fandom, and perhaps even to new ways of thinking about how politics can occupy the terrains of popular culture. ‘Political fandom’ is an argument for taking seriously the lived experience of citizen-fans who no longer see any meaningful distinction between how they consume and engage with media, and how they consume and engage with mediatized politics. #Milifandom may be a joke to some, a moment of levity for seasoned broadcasters, and an apparent gift to satirists, but it also potentially indicates a tipping point in the emergent structure of feeling linked to a new generation – one who, next time, will be old enough to vote.



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8

Media Influence and Interventions

Four reasons why a partisan press helped win it for the Tories

Barack Obama's hugely experienced aide David Axelrod – who advised Ed Miliband on his campaign – was unequivocal about the press hostility which he faced in the run-up to this election: “I've worked in aggressive media environments before but not this partisan.” He pointed in particular to the manner in which national newspapers served as ciphers for party propaganda. While Fox News in the US is notorious for its conservatism, “there isn't a kind of lockstep between them and the Republicans”.

It is indisputable that the right-wing press went to town during this election campaign, not only in launching a furious, brutal and very personal vendetta against Ed Miliband, but in relaying Conservative Party messages with an almost fanatical zeal. Raucous partisanship has always been an integral element of British newspaper campaigning at the red-top end, and the *Daily Mirror* was every bit as partisan as *The Sun*. But this time, it was more relentless and more one-sided. One study by the Media Standards Trust concluded that *The Sun* was more virulent even than in 1992, with 95% of leader columns anti-Labour (mostly vilifying Miliband personally) compared to 79% in 1992.

This virulence also infected the previously less tainted broadsheets. Apart from daily reminders in the Sun, Mail, Express and Star of the “chaos” that would ensue from a Miliband government propped up by a “far left” SNP – a message emanating directly from Tory HQ – *The Telegraph* regularly feature front pages (such as the letter from small business leaders) which were masterminded by Tory strategists. This was accompanied by an unprecedented letter from editor Chris Evans to all those registered on *The Telegraph's* marketing database urging them to vote Conservative.

But did they really influence the electorate? The conventional wisdom is that newspapers have little or no influence, as evidenced by apparently flatlining polls throughout the campaign. We now know the polls were wrong, possible from the very beginning, which raises an interesting question: did they miss a slow but steady drift amongst unaligned or uncertain voters, partly dictated by the barrage of adverse headlines from the press?

We will never know because any kind of voter “effects” research is notoriously questionable. But to those who insist that rapidly declining newspaper circulations mean waning influence in a digital environment, we can point to at least four contrary factors. First, through their online sites, these news brands reach vastly more voters than their hard copy readership. According to

2015 data from the National Readership Survey, the *Daily Mail's* monthly readership is well over 23 million, followed by the *Daily Mirror* on 17 million, *The Telegraph* and *Guardian* on 16 million and the Sun on nearly 14 million (relegated to fifth place because its online offering is behind a paywall). There is a major issue about whether an online “view” counts as readership, but these reach figures are astonishingly high.

Second, the reach of individual newspaper columnists who have a licence to be raucous and opinionated is magnified again through social media, especially through their huge Twitter followings, and reinforced by their appearances on broadcast panels, press review shows and political programmes. While the left have capable and passionate advocates, the right's print columnists such as Littlejohn, Kavanagh, Staines, and MacKenzie are more numerous, more aggressive, and have access to more high-reach online platforms because of the preponderance of right wing publications.

Third, while broadcast media are bound by strict impartiality rules, the sheer weight and ferocity of press comment places enormous pressure on them – and particularly the BBC – to follow the press agenda. This was confirmed by Media Standards Trust online analysis during the campaign, and the broader principle was endorsed both by the BBC's Robert Peston and Sky News' John Ryley in speeches last year.

Fourth, while social media offers new approaches to distribution and communication, most analysts now accept that they operate more as an echo chamber for like-minded people. They still cannot compete with the sheer collective power of the traditional mass media's one-to-many model. In the UK, this is exacerbated by the structural of our national media, in particular a national press which is almost unique in large democracies in terms of its reach, ubiquity and one-sidedness – even allowing for circulations halving in the last 20 years.

Despite all the predictions about the demise of the press and grand statements about a “truly social media election”, the UK national press therefore still dominates Britain's national conversation and was instrumental in setting the campaign agenda. Its influence operates in inchoate and intangible ways which defies empirical measurement, but I have little doubt that it played a significant part in determining the electoral outcome.



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Media policy, power and politics



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Maybe it should come as no surprise that in the aftermath of the Hacking scandal and the Leveson enquiry that followed media policy was to be an election issue. Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Green party pledged substantive media reforms in their election manifestos. Not that you would have known it from the media. The Loughborough study noted that the media as an election topic received only 1.1% of coverage across broadcast and press and when it did appear it continued in the vein of post-Leveson hysteria whereby implementing Leveson's recommendations became 'sinister state censorship' (*The Sun*).

Media owners made no attempt to disguise their political allegiances in election coverage that has been called the most partisan since 1992. Opinion rather than news dominated. On the 21st April *the Independent* newspaper reported that Murdoch had told journalists at *The Sun* that if Miliband got into power then the future of the company was at stake. He then directed them to be more aggressive in their attacks against Labour and more positive about the Conservative Party.

Since 1979 no British government has been elected without the support of Rupert Murdoch but this does *not* mean it was the "sun wot won it". However, politicians *fear* that the power of the popular press *may* be decisive and therein lies the problem. In this election however, the Leveson enquiry gave Milliband the confidence to stand up to the likes of Murdoch. And when he did his popularity soared. Plus, this time Milliband had nothing to lose – his vilification by certain sections of the press had been relentless: he is weird looking; a geek; clumsy; is terrible at eating bacon butties; his Dad was a Marxist; he did one over his brother and he even had the temerity to have other girlfriends before he got married – what a cad.

There will be much analysis over whether the massively pro-Conservative/anti-Labour press influenced the outcome of the General Election. These investigations will likely be inconclusive – it is too complicated a matter to whittle down to a simple correlation. But we should not only be looking at the few weeks immediately preceding the election for answers.

Early indications suggest that people voted Conservative largely on economic grounds – they felt the financial crash was partly due to an incompetent Labour Party that was now being cleaned up by Tories; that getting the deficit down is the route to economic recovery not Labour's spending plans. Legitimacy of particular political-economic approaches does not happen over weeks but years. Paul Krugman notes that the austerity ideology that everyone believed five years ago as the means to economic recovery has

collapsed almost everywhere. Everywhere that is bar the Conservative Party in the UK and most of the British media. He points out that on the very day the Centre for Macroeconomics announced that the great majority of British economists now disagree with the notion that austerity leads to growth, the *Daily Telegraph* published a letter from 100 business leaders on its front page, declaring the opposite.

So it would seem it is still "about the economy, stupid" whereby massive global media corporations are very much part of and who stand to benefit from an approach that preaches deregulation, privatization and taxation that supports their interests. It is not the "sun wot won it" but the culture of press-politician mutual interest in which media executives and party leaders work together to 'push the same agenda' in the words of our Prime Minister, that gives powerful corporate media interests excessive influence over and inappropriate interference in the political public sphere.

Meanwhile, despite the desire of the Government to put the issue of press regulation to bed we still have a Leveson framework in place with a Press Recognition Panel (PRP) ready to receive applications from potential regulators this Autumn. The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO – the old Press Complaints Commission with fresh lipstick) will not apply for recognition but another potential regulator, IMPRESS probably will. If a relevant publisher joins IMPRESS then financial incentives for others to follow will kick in. The PRP have a year before they must report whether or not the system for regulating the press has failed. So somewhere around Autumn 2016, if nothing has changed, then Parliament will have to decide what to do next. The Conservative's slim majority may not be enough to kick an issue with large cross-party support and huge public backing, into the long grass yet again.

It is also worth noting that while the Conservative vote increased by 400,000 (0.8%), Labour's went up by 800,000 (1.4%) – increasing their vote for the first time since 1997. Issues of media reform did not lose Labour the General Election but without it on their agenda they may not win the next.

Election 2015: it's the press wot won it?

Heading into the 1992 election, polls pointed towards a hung parliament. *The Sun* turned up the heat on election day with a front page asking that: 'If Kinnock [the then Labour leader] wins today will the last person to leave Britain please turn out the lights.' The Tories duly won the election with 42% of the popular vote leading Britain's best-selling title to boast 'It's the Sun Wot Won It'.

Within two years Labour had a new leader, Tony Blair, and a totally new approach to the right-wing press: appeasement, not confrontation. Blair immediately went on a charm offensive to make peace with proprietors like Rupert Murdoch who were, in turn, equally keen to impress on Blair the need to scrap Labour's manifesto commitment to a monopolies and mergers investigation into media concentration (which, naturally, the party agreed to).

Are we set for a re-run of this story and is there any truth to the idea that Murdoch has 'won it' again for the Conservatives?

First, the argument that Labour's defeat in 1992 was due to tabloid hostility has been decisively rejected. Leading electoral researchers including Professor John Curtice 'found no support for this theory'. Backing for the Tories fell amongst readers of pro-Tory newspapers and rose slightly amongst readers of the Labour-supporting *Daily Mirror*. Pro-Tory press bias was, in the end, seen to be less significant than a more generalized fear of a Labour victory, helped by LibDem voters switching to the Tories to keep Labour out.

Second, seeking the support of billionaire media moguls is a dangerous and often counter-productive game. True, New Labour was able to count on the support of the Murdoch press for its pro-business stance and its rush to war in Iraq in 2003, but this is hardly a stable base on which to build a left of centre party.

Third, it was a wider distrust of Labour and a confusion about its political soul that explains the party's inability to significantly increase support in this election. It cannot be that anti-austerity politics are an electoral liability given the SNP's astonishing landslide in Scotland but it may well be that many voters were simply turned off by a Labour campaign that combined support for 'austerity-lite' with occasional promises to ameliorate the worst excesses of the Tory government.

Confusion and fear do, however, need to be transmitted somehow and a pro-Tory press – still setting the broader news agenda despite repeated claims of its imminent demise – set about its task to demonise both Labour and the

SNP with palpable zeal. While the *Daily Mail* raged about Nicola Sturgeon as the 'most dangerous woman in Britain', *the Sun* was obsessed by the threat of 'Red Ed' and ran an even more partisan anti-Labour campaign that in 1992 with some 95% of its editorials attacking Labour and Ed Miliband. Overall, Labour won support from 11% of the national newspaper market in contrast to the Tories' 57%.

Of course, one of the motivations for the Tory press' sustained attack on Labour was the latter's decision to back independent press regulation and to 'protect the principle of media plurality, so that no media outlet can get too big'. Indeed, on the day of the election itself, an editorial in *the Sun* referred to a 'witch-hunt into tabloid journalism' led by Labour and accused the party of wanting to protect 'left-wing politicians from criticism in the tabloids'.

Partly in response to this negative coverage and following the catastrophic election result, we are now hearing calls for a return to Blairism – and to New Labour's accommodation to right-wing media proprietors. This would mean dropping any commitments to media reform and to challenge to the power of vested interests inside the media.

But Labour – and the Green Party – were absolutely right to make manifesto commitments to tackle media concentration and it would be a huge mistake to backtrack on these promises. You do not turn attack dogs into watchdogs simply by continuing to feed them.

This was an election in which the political views of billionaires and corporations continued to set the agenda. Yet public opinion seems to be hardening up in its attitude to the abuse of media power. A recent opinion poll conducted by YouGov for the Media Reform Coalition found overwhelming majorities in support of action to protect editorial independence from proprietors and to place limits on concentrated media ownership.

For many years, politicians have remained cowed by the ability of some of our largest media organisations to decide on what issues we should discuss and what parties we can trust. It's more important than ever that we continue to campaign for a media that confronts power instead of simply bowing down before its representatives. Without this, parliamentary elections will continue to be pallid reflections of real democracy.



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The 'Tory Press' rides again



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Before entering academia he was a political journalist during which time he reported and produced programmes for BBC TV and Radio, ITN, Channel 4 and Sky News.

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Well there was one reason, at least, why we should have all been grateful to Tony Blair.

For the 20 years or more since he took over the Labour reins, that angry beast 'the Tory press' – red (so to speak) in tooth and claw – has lain dormant in its lair. Some of us might have thought that it was dead, but it wasn't, merely sleeping only to be awoken by the nightmare that we were about to be engulfed by a Labour victory.

I guess we shouldn't have been surprised by its resurrection, but even seasoned press observers, well this one at least, were taken aback by the sheer ferocity of the 21st century incarnation of the beast – had it all not seemed so ludicrously, even comically, dated.

The *Daily Mail* had been frothing at the mouth about 'Red Ed' for the past two years or more. One had to hand it to the paper for its sheer determination in trying to plant the concept into the mind of the general public at every opportunity – Lynton Crosby eat your heart out. But the failure of the campaign to find any sort of resonance among the man or woman in the pub, wine or coffee bar, was one of the more edifying aspects of the election campaign.

The *Sun* was equally ridiculous with its 'Save our Bacon' front page on the eve of the election – reprinting for the umpteenth time the picture of Miliband struggling, and failing, to eat a bacon butty with dignity.

Perhaps it's me, but I didn't find that front page particularly funny, at least not compared to the laugh I got a few days before when the *Sun* in England and Wales told its readers to vote Tory, on exactly the same day as the *Sun* in Scotland told its readers to vote SNP.

The Times presented a very mixed bag. Its coverage of the campaign had been very comprehensive and fair, especially its special 'Red Box' section which contained additional coverage for subscribers, not found in the newspaper or website. But then, two weeks before polling day, coincidentally following reports that Rupert Murdoch had instructed its sister paper the *Sun* to put the boot into Mr Miliband, *The Times* changed. Its 'news reports' suddenly became tainted with a strong dose of Tory bias and its choice of front page leads, all based on unnamed sources, became risible – such a pity.

But when it came to besmirching the reputation of a once-proud newspaper, no one did it better to itself than the *Daily Telegraph*, perhaps because the paper had not one angry proprietor but two, the Barclay brothers; although one might have hoped that there were enough decent journalists left at the paper to stand up and say 'Up with this we will not put' – evidently not.

In particular the *Telegraph* ran two front page 'stories' – and I use that word advisedly – that were essentially advertisements (but not paid for) on behalf of the Conservative Party, containing the names of business (mostly) men from large and small companies alike, expressing their fear of a Labour Government. Worryingly, the first of these front pages was run as a major story by the broadcasters for the following 24 hours, the second was ignored.

Front pages such as these, in essence party propaganda pure and simple, were once the exclusive preserve of the *Daily Mail* – which has an ignoble tradition along these lines, stretching from the forged Zinoviev Letter of the 1920s to the fictional 'twelve Labour lies' used to undermine the Labour Party of Neil Kinnock 70 years later.

Telegraph journalists always used to boast that whilst they were clearly a Tory-supporting newspaper, they were fastidious in separating their news coverage (which was generally seen as fair) from their comment pages (which were not). Those days have clearly gone, which coincidentally or not, coincides with the Barclay Brothers proprietorship of a once proud newspaper.

The extent to which this venomous avalanche actually affected the result, remains to be seen but there is no doubting that the traditional Tory press still has the means, and the will, to continue to dominate the election news agenda.

But let me conclude this avalanche of brickbats with one bouquet for the Tory-supporting press. For despite arguing in its editorial columns for a continuation of the current Conservative-led government, the *Financial Times'* election coverage was superb. Every day it ran a voluminous array of election articles, interviews and analysis and, having subjected them to my special bias-detecting algorithm, I have come up with a zero reading.

THE Sun 40p
 Thursday, March 26, 2015
 BRITAIN'S BEST-SELLING PAPER



This is the pig's ear Ed made of a helpless sarnie. In 48 hours, he could be doing the same to Britain

SAVE OUR BACON

Don't swallow his porkies and keep him OUT

Sun SAYS

ELECTION SPECIAL

Daily Mail
 Daily Mail COMMENT

For sanity's sake don't let a class-war zealot and the SNP destroy our economy – and our very nation

How YOU can vote tactically to keep out Red Ed

THE DOCTOR WILL SEE YOU IN A MONTH!

GPs' waiting times warning to patients

By Sophie Barker

FRIGHTENED will inevitably be warning not to a month to see a GP by this time next year, family doctors are warning.

THE DOCTOR WILL SEE YOU IN A MONTH!

GPs' waiting times warning to patients

THE Sun 40p
 Thursday, April 23, 2015
 BRITAIN'S BEST-SELLING PAPER

BORN THIS DAY: THE SUN'S 2015 ELECTION VERDICT

REASON 1
 Keep UK economy on track

REASON 2
 Stop SNP running the country

REASON 3
 Guarantee referendum on the EU

IT'S A TORY!

After fears of hard Labour and a long, painful delivery, the news the nation's been waiting for

Sun SAYS

TODAY, after a grilling the year will end an appalling Labour. The Sun is proud to deliver our choice for the election a week from now.

It's the Tories. The Tories who rebuilt the economy wrecked by Labour – and transformed lives. The Tories who alone are committed to an EU referendum.

The Sun will do all we can to prevent a nightmare Labour Government, propped up by the votes of the SNP.

WHY THEY GET OUR VOTE

PAGES 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 & 7

THE Sun & THE SCOTTISH Sun 40p
 Thursday, April 23, 2015
 SCOTLAND'S BEST-SELLING PAPER

MAY THE 7TH BE WITH YOU: WHY IT'S TIME TO VOTE SNP

Sun SAYS

A SHORT time ago in a parliament far, far away...

Forces gathered to keep the Union together. Scotland voted No, but there can be no doubt the Referendum changed the nation.

And today The Scottish Sun urges our readers to continue that change and vote for Nicola Sturgeon's SNP in May 7.

We believe the SNP will fight harder for Scotland's interests in Westminster, offering a new hope for our country. Nicola has been the star of the election campaign north and south of the border. She's a Commander for us.

STAR WARS

A NEW HOPE

The fetishization of the ‘fiscal deficit’: a media discourse



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Post 2008, electoral politics and the 2015 election itself, was always bound to be dominated by debates about ‘the economy’. However, what we manifestly lacked was a debate about ‘the economy’ to be replaced instead by a discursively limited narrative about the fiscal deficit in which economics is assumed to be the equivalent of accountancy.

Since 2010, the national economy has been almost entirely narrated via the ‘we maxed out the credit card’ analogy. However, like all analogies, what they gain in (apparent) clarity and ease of explanation, they lose in precision or accuracy. What remains important in political communication though is their ‘use-value’. It is a use-value that has served the Conservative Party well.

The election campaign officially began on 30th March 2015, but the main parties had been establishing their electoral position way in advance of any official start. Boosted by the power of incumbency, Osborne – the most ‘political’ of chancellors – always had his eye on the prize of the next election and had, for five years, been carefully crafting the ‘clearing up the mess left by Labour’ message. Beginning with the ‘Business Leaders’ letter to *The Telegraph* and culminating in the challenge of Ed Miliband on the final BBC Question Time debate the urgency of ‘cutting the deficit’ – blamed on ‘Labour overspending’ – dominated the 2015 election political economic discourse.

Why was this never challenged by a) the Labour opposition? b) the political media? The first question (a) might be partly explained by the post-2010 search for a new leader of the Labour party. The four-and-a-half-month gap between the installation of the coalition Government and the election of Ed Miliband left a vacuum at the heart of the official parliamentary opposition. Given the centrality of ‘the economy’ said vacuum was easily filled by the coalition Government with willing (or unwitting) support from political media. Save for one Ed Balls speech in August 2010, the Labour opposition were unwilling to challenge this narrative too fully. Having embraced the neoliberal economic project, Labour effectively ceded the political and economic narrative to neoliberalism’s ‘natural’ Conservative Party bedfellows. In so doing, the epistemology of ‘the economy’ and the discourse of ‘Labour overspending’ were established. The Labour Party thus locked themselves into fighting the 2015 election on economic territory established by their opposition.

The second question (b) though requires more critical interrogation. Why did this imprecise and inaccurate explanation, this narrow discourse of the ‘fiscal deficit’ gain momentum? How was it so easily established and seamlessly reproduced in the media narrative? How was it that ‘cutting

the deficit’ became the only economic question; the only frame through which ‘the economy’ was ‘narrated’? Political editors, and economics correspondents may rightly claim that if the Labour opposition are not challenging the discourse, then why should they? It is, after all not the job of journalists to be the de-facto opposition. But this narrative and discourse, even if only by way of an adherence to economics expertise (they really ought to know better the workings of the national economy) and professional obligations (scrutinising the accuracy of public statements by elected officials) ought to have been challenged. That it was not, went some way to effectively sealing the election narrative, and, perhaps, the election itself.

“I was leaning towards Labour...but then when I heard Ed Miliband, in the Question Time debate, unwilling to admit that Labour overspent when in Government, I just knew then I couldn’t trust him on the economy. So I voted Conservative for economic security”
(BBC Television Election night live coverage; 05:40am 08/05/2015).

While the ‘fiscal deficit’ is fetishized, the real financial time-bombs, the national current account deficit; chronic productivity problems; and perhaps most alarming, the unprecedented, increasing levels of private household debt remain unexamined. What coverage appeared – in the financial pages – was dislocated from the election coverage. It was, to coin the phrase of my own academic specialism, beyond the discursive formation. But with private unsecured debt rising by £1.25b per month the prospects are alarming. Further, when one adds in the Government backed scheme to re-inflate the asset bubble – via the ‘Help-to-Buy’ scheme, and the – hardly radical – OBR predicting that household debt will rise to 182% of income by 2019 we have an eerily familiar scenario unfolding. The ‘message discipline’ imposed by Lynton Crosby meant that the Conservative Party were able to focus attention exclusively on the least pressing economic conditions and scenarios. Oriented around an economic message of ‘fiscal credibility and security’ The Conservatives returned to office. The possibilities of the next enormous, even fast-approaching economic crash remains unexamined. The neoliberal project accelerates. While the fiscal deficit might be cut, society must be sacrificed, the population must be financialised, so that capital may flourish. Our political media must take some share of the blame.

‘This is cloud cuckoo’: radical alternatives to public debt

It was clear from 2009 that the Big Lie about the economic crisis would gain hegemony. The transmogrification of the financial crisis into a debt crisis is one of the most successful propaganda campaigns in history. Capitalists mobilised their resources to convince publics around the world that it was they, not capitalists that caused the crisis.

Approaching the election, capital, the state and their media servants would allow no challenge to the Big Lie of a debt crisis. There Is No Alternative. So effective has been the prior 30 year Great Moving (Far) Right Show that on one of the very few occasions that the BBC allowed broadcast of an alternative – Greg Philo’s fully costed one-off ‘wealth tax’ that would enable a tiny proportion of the population to pay a small amount of tax to clear the national debt, a proposal supported by ¾ of the population – it was laughed out of the studio: “this is cloud cuckoo” the presenter informed him.

Should there be talk of another option, whether represented by Philo, the Greens, Russell Brand or of course any of the plethora of protest movements, it would be at best ignored, at worst ridiculed and discounted as if reflective of some kind of mental instability.

We know from history that under conditions of crisis, elites close ranks – consent precedes coercion through discursive closure. One is minded of Burke’s analysis of Hitler’s rhetoric:

“People so dislike the idea of internal division that [...] their dislike can easily be turned against the man or group who would so much as *name* it, let alone proposing to act upon it. Their natural and justified resentment against internal division itself, is turned against the diagnostician who states it as a *fact*. This diagnostician, it is felt, is the *cause* of the disunity he named.” (1939/1984, pp. 70-71)

It was relatively safe for diagnosticians such as Paul Krugman to question the lie of a debt crisis to a small number of *Guardian* readers. But the majority of the population was to be insulated from such alternative explanations. Russell Brand’s treatment by *The Sun* was clear evidence of this.

Such was the acceptance of the public debt lie that on one of the few occasions where Ed Milliband noted that there was a global financial crisis that started in the sub-prime housing market in the US and spread, he was told off by the audience members who effectively accused him of rewriting history. No amount of short-term campaigning would overturn 7 years of full-spectrum propaganda.

Despite the hegemonic grip that the Big Lie has gained, a significant number of oppositional movements had grown in communities, represented by parts of the trade union movement, the People’s Assembly network, Left Unity, UK Uncut, Occupy, a plethora of direct action groups, and of course, the Green Party.

Despite the talk of the progressive potential of a social media election, there is little evidence that such mediations change people’s vote. Indeed, it is more likely an echo chamber for the left and right, but for the latter it is far more extensive as it feeds off hegemonic preoccupations of the corporate media and political system.

Just as Murdoch had so successfully turned the frustrations of the working class against itself, so now years of priming enabled UKIP to be presented as the radical alternative. The party of the City trader, backed by business and the far right of the corporate media, came to be positioned as the anti-establishment party! A postmodern perversity that would have had the Mad Hatter bemused.

Despite left activists responding to laments about the corporate media with ‘but we’ve got YouTube/Twitter/Facebook’, beside the continued dominance of corporate media online, UKIP has 17 times the number of followers as the People’s Assembly, and Britain First more than four times the number.

Insofar as there was a radical election alternative, in England at least, it was the Green Party. It was the Greens rather than Labour that became the main rallying point for many of the anti-austerity activists. This was in large part because the Green Party remains somewhat anti-bureaucratic and retains something of a non-hierarchical and open structure, with deep roots in activist circles.

At the same time, however, and given the geographical distribution of support for the Greens, its success might reflect middle-class disillusion with Labour more than anything else: middle class professional members of the party outnumber working class members by almost 2-1. The only significant party with majority working class support was in fact UKIP, the party backed by and working for the wealthy.

If the former *News of the World* journalist Graham Johnson is right in suggesting that Murdoch’s project has been to confuse the working classes into self-hating bemusement, the election was clear evidence that his victory is complete.



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Immigration and the 2015 election: the banal, the racist, and the unspoken



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The day after the election, just hours after the Conservatives secured a majority of seats in parliament, an email message was sent out by Kate Allen, director of Amnesty International UK, stating that “with the election results now in it is likely that the Human Rights Act will be under threat like never before.” The Tory pledge to scrap the Human Rights Act has since been confirmed, with the stated aim being to restrict the appeal rights of those facing deportation. Such wide political implications for the institutional fabric of democracy, however, have hardly been a major subject of the immigration debate staged by the mainstream media during the election campaign.

This case signals a much bigger and rather persistent problem with regard to the coverage of immigration issues – the narrow spectrum of opinions it tends to include, its largely exclusive and elite-orientated agenda, and, most importantly, its common-sensual, or, perhaps more accurately, banal character, in the sense of Michael Billig’s discussion of the media role in the construction of nationalist attitudes (*Banal Nationalism*, London: Sage, 1995). In what concerns the immigration debate, a newspaper with the journalistic status and left-of-centre credentials such as *The Guardian*, for example, may critically report the strong anti-immigrant rhetoric and stunts put forward by the Conservatives in the aftermath of Ukip’s rise in the European election; and yet, at the same time, uncritically reproduce the term ‘illegal immigrants’, despite the latter’s rejection by academics and NGOs alike.

This type of banal endorsement of politically problematic concepts in the context of the election campaign may be exemplified by Jeremy Paxman’s persistent questioning of Ed Miliband on Channel 4 with regard to controls on immigration; unsurprisingly, Labour also endorsed such a policy under pressure stemming from Ukip’s success. Paxman’s exclusively pragmatic focus on specific ‘figures’ and ‘numbers’ was sustained by an interplay between, on the one hand, his openly performative facial gestures and vocal tonality, and, on the other, interpolating shots of members of the audience laughing, nodding and exclaiming in a compliant fashion. The infotainment style and post-democratic flair (Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity, 2004) of this programme constitute the visual and discursive components of an underlying consensus over immigration controls. In other words, it is immigration that was in effect being given the full-on panto villain Paxman routine; the

only remaining question is the degree of the entrenchment of restrictive measures.

On the other hand, the case of Katie Hopkins, whose rhetoric dehumanized migrants in a fashion disturbingly reminiscent of Nazi propaganda, is evidently an example of overt, rather than inferential racism, if we are to revisit Stuart Hall’s classic distinction (*The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media*, in Alvarado, M. and Thompson, J. O., eds., *The Media Reader*, London: BFI, 1981/1990, 7-23). As such, it was effectively criticised by major humanitarian and journalistic figures. Susan Moore’s argument, in particular, that the language of genocide has thus entered the mainstream is to the point; and yet, what remains unspoken in both far right and liberal arguments is that the migrant population, from Lampedusa to Yarl’s Wood and Harmondsworth, has long been entrapped in what Giorgio Agamben addresses as the realm of bare life: their rights, as well as their very lives, have become expendable (*Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998; and *State of Exception*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

The inflammatory anti-immigrant rhetoric of the far right, illustrated in this case by Ukip’s populism, may then be seen as constituting an unsurprising contribution to the discursive definitions that accompany the policies producing migrants as the contemporary *homines sacri*. The entrenchment of such policies is similarly guaranteed by the alarming electoral rise of the far right in many European countries, so effectively pointed out by Michael Löwy. Apparently the mainstream media have been too occupied with the conventional distribution of seats to notice that Ukip, despite the – temporary – resignation of its leader, has now consolidated itself as the third biggest party in Britain.

Nigel Farage: celebrity everyman

“I don’t break my word, so I shall be writing to the national executive in a few minutes saying that I am standing down as leader of UKIP,” said Nigel Farage, on learning of his failure to win election as MP for South Thanet. The announcement of his resignation didn’t come within ten minutes of losing, as he had promised during electioneering. But it was close enough. Even in failure, Farage was intent on cultivating his straight talking, man-of-the-people persona.

It turned out, however, that this was merely the build up to the big punch line: “I intend to take the summer off, enjoy myself, not do very much at all, and then there will be a leadership election for the next leader of UKIP in September and I will consider over the course of this summer whether to put my name forward and do the job again”. This piece of theatre was typical of Farage’s *modus operandi*: at once rhetorically positioning himself as distinct from the average, slippery career politician, while simultaneously acting like the average, slippery career politician.

This kind of tactic has been key in the rise of his celebrity status over the last few years. Farage has been almost unique in the contemporary political landscape in manipulating the media into sympathetic representation, and eliciting a range and depth of emotional responses from the public. Aside from Boris Johnson, who is similarly savvy to the affective power of eccentric performance, no other recent English politician – perhaps since Tony Blair in the mid to late 1990s – has been so successful in this regard.

While Johnson’s performance of buffoonery sets him apart from the Westminster automatons in managing to convince a significant number of people that he is funny and/or cute, it is largely in keeping with idiosyncratic habits of the landed classes who have a long history of power and leadership in Britain. By contrast, Farage’s performance of the Everyman has little tradition in this country, and is more in keeping with right-wing politicians from America, such as George W. Bush. As such, the excessive performativity of his pint-swilling, cigarette-smoking populism is interesting on a number of levels. While it is clearly historically and culturally specific, framed within the wider UKIP rhetoric of anti-EU English nationalism, its more fascinating aspect is its appeals to ‘authenticity’. In this sense, as everybody knows Farage’s background as a wealthy commodities broker, it is less to do with masking the ‘real’ Nigel Farage, who is clearly not your average punter, than a performance of class solidarity that allows him to voice the feelings and opinions of disenfranchised ‘real people’: some of which are controversial, and which other politicians are

not permitted to articulate within the frame of acceptable political discourse.

As a self-styled anti-establishment figure working within the establishment, Farage has thus far proven highly adept at working the system. But, as time passes, the vulnerability of his, and his party’s, position is becoming more obvious. This is clear in three key ways.

First, Farage’s celebrity – and to a large extent, UKIP success – depends on the mainstream media’s complicity. And, as the election campaign showed, this is an unbalanced relationship. Having been used as a means to sell papers, boost viewing figures, and act as a mouthpiece for values shared by the Tory-supporting press, Farage had the rug pulled out from underneath him in early April 2015 when the notion took hold that UKIP votes may cost a Conservative victory at the General Election.

Secondly, as the election itself illustrated, the FPTP electoral system is stacked against UKIP (as it is the Greens). While UKIP harvested a single seat from nearly four million votes spread across the electorate, the SNP acquired 56 seats from less than half the number of UKIP ballots. The new government’s proposed boundary changes will surely only serve to entrench this situation.

Finally, although Farage had been adept at professionalizing a ragtag outfit comprising what David Cameron once famously called “a band of fruitcakes, loonies, and closet racists”, while managing to mobilize the support of a mass of the disenfranchised electorate – developments outlined expertly in Ford and Goodwin’s *The Revolt of the Right* (Routledge, 2014) – the announcement on 11 May that his resignation as leader had been rejected by UKIP members unleashed a torrent of discontent from factions within the party, much of which focused on Farage’s style of leadership and the cult of personality on which it is based. Therefore, while UKIP has for the moment ensconced itself as a “legitimate” political force in UK politics, with over 12% of the popular vote, depending on his fate we might get a better sense over the next few months to what extent the party’s success has been down to the charismatic celebrity Everyman, Nigel Farage.



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When the readers' pen is just another sword



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A wealth of data dissecting the coverage of the electoral campaign has punctuated the run-up to the election. The weekly reports released by Cardiff University, Loughborough University and the Media Standards Trust have consistently documented the centrality of party leaders, the focus on strategy over policy, and the overreliance on polls (together with the related debate around the possible coalition deals around the election) that have dominated the coverage.

These findings somehow indicate the subsidiary part played by citizens in the coverage, particularly in a moment in the political cycle when citizens should arguably play a central role. The role played by social media in the campaign has generated some media attention, although the coverage focussed more on how parties used these tools, and on 'best social media bits'. Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, in three different posts for *The Conversation*, analysed how citizens were represented in the news (mainly through voxpops), the energising potential of #Milifandom, and the powerful role played by citizens in the special edition of *Question Time*.

But citizens were also represented in letters to the editor. Although scholars have previously discussed whether this genre can be considered a forum for public debate, it could be expected for letters to the editor to constitute a platform for citizens to advance debates and engage in the discussion of electoral policies and proposals put forward by parties. A systematic analysis of the letters to the editor published in British national newspapers in the run-up to the election, however, shows a rather different picture. Consistent with the partisanship and the negativism of the newspaper coverage, the published letters constituted yet another bastion urging readers to support the very party endorsed by each newspaper. This was done through the publication of letters explicitly asking for the vote, advocating for tactical voting, ridiculing and vilifying candidates and opposing some of their policies too. Instead of the homogeneous discourse put forward by most newspapers, a slightly more diverse range of political options could be found in the letters published by *The Independent* and *The Guardian* (including explicit opposition to *The Independent's* endorsement of the Liberal Democrats and the Coalition government). Newspapers published letters by prominent political figures David Blunkett (*The Sun*, 4th May), Caroline Lucas, or Nigel Farage (*The Times*, 6th May). This effectively reduces the only newspaper space reserved for citizens to proactively express their political aims and aspirations.

Letters published in *The Guardian* and *The*

Independent after the 8th May tried to find an explanation to the results obtained by Labour and the Liberal Democrats. In contrast, the policy debate intensified after the election in the letters to the editor published in the newspapers that had endorsed the Conservative party. In addition to the numerous letters celebrating the Conservative victory, there was a plethora of letters trying to influence the agenda of the newly elected government. The main proposals included negotiating with Brussels so that a referendum on the British membership to the EU could be held before 2017; reforming the constitution (so that only English MPs can vote on English laws), and reforming the electoral system (so that the anomalies generated by the first past the post system could be corrected).

It is to a certain extent revealing that newspapers showing such a monolithic support for the winning party (including stories and tools promoting tactical voting in their coverage), and exercising such a degree of editorial control in the selection of reader contributions during the campaign, started publishing letters to the editor pushing some policies eminently championed by UKIP during the campaign as soon as the Conservative victory was confirmed. One wonders what prevented these newspapers from using letters to the editor during the campaign as a means of advancing the debate around the policies that any government should develop after the election: What was the risk? Why did they wish to limit the exposure of their readers to a wider range of ideas and policy proposals?

Whilst some respected commentators argue that the market somehow regulates the partisan nature of newspaper coverage, my analysis shows an imbalance between the editorial logics followed by *The Guardian* and *The Independent* and the editorial strategies of other national newspapers, at least when it comes to letters to the editor. On the one hand we have something resembling a marketplace of ideas. On the other, an attempt to restrict supply with the aim to dominate the market.

Political discourse on the digital economy fails to reflect the concerns of the electorate

Discussions on the digital economy were marginal to this election. Insofar as the digital economy was referred to, it was in overwhelmingly positive terms. This reflects the common disposition among the UK's leading politicians that this type of economy and its associated industries are where wealth creation will be mainly concentrated in the future. But, if it is a commonly held belief that the digital economy is so important, then why did it not feature more prominently in the election campaign?

Part of the answer must surely lie in this uniformity of the political class's thinking, which means that there is little to debate on many of these issues. For example, the manifestos of the Conservative, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats all emphasised the importance of continuing broadband roll-out to the point where all households have good access, a position that has not changed since the 2010 election. On digital skills too, all parties agree that the universal provision of formal training will transform the UK's citizens' use of digital technologies.

But there are, nonetheless, significant points of departure between the parties as well as ambiguities in their respective policies that deserved a fairer hearing in this election. The Labour Party's independent review of the creative industries released just over a month before election day included an observation that there is a significant degree of monopolization in many digital markets and a recommendation that competition authorities should be given powers to address this. However, despite highlighting in its campaign the need to address widening inequality, no commitment to tackling digital monopolies appeared in its manifesto. After David Cameron's suggestion earlier in the year that the security services should be able to read encrypted communication was widely ridiculed, this measure was absent from the Conservative manifesto. However, while recommendations to prevent 'extremists' accessing the Internet is consistent with the views of a party whose leader mused after the 2011 London riots that he wanted to do the same to rioters, it is at odds with the Conservatives' deregulatory and libertarian instincts elsewhere, as well as its former coalition partner's pledge to introduce a digital Bill of Rights.

Even the seemingly least controversial matters on which all three parties agree are not free from contention. In a House of Lords select committee report on the digital economy released earlier this year, most of the experts consulted on digital skills argued that cognitive

skills, including basic literacy and numeracy, are much more important in enabling people to adapt to rapidly changing software and platforms. This is reinforced by experts like author and entrepreneur Martin Ford who argue that acquiring new digital skills alone is unlikely to prevent one from being a victim of the increasing automation that the House of Lords report recognises is an ongoing central feature of the digital economy.

After the Conservative victory, concerns about monopolization of digital markets and of citizens' rights to privacy are unlikely to be at the top of the government's agenda. All the more reason why the UK's media and communication scholars should continue to be at the forefront of debates about the digital economy and of economic activity, like the creative industries, dependent on it.



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The article builds on some of the themes Dr White explored in an earlier piece for The Conversation during the election campaign:

<https://theconversation.com/you-could-lose-your-job-to-a-computer-so-why-isnt-the-digital-economy-an-election-issue-39015>

Media policy as an election issue: ever present, yet absent



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A newspaper proprietor donates £1.3m to UKIP, and his paper, the Daily Express, carries eleven leader columns supporting the party. The paradox of media policy is that issues are never more palpable than during elections yet discussion is peripheral. For campaigners trying to make the media an election issue, the results in GE2015 were predictable, laced with the unpredictability of a more mobile media scene. The prize for the most impactful airing was arguably Russell Brand asking Miliband: 'Can't you just go, right, I am Prime Minister now, we are passing some legislation that means that monopolies are going to be significantly broken up... so Rupert Murdoch, it's been great but now you can only own 10 per cent or 15 per cent of total media. Is that kind of thing a possibility, because people want it?' With Miliband promising to act, their 90-second exchange featured in an online interview accessed 1.2m times, 500,000 in the first 24 hours. So, if it was Brand wot won it, second prize might go to John Cleese and Steve Coogan, or rather the successful mobilisation of celebrities by Hacked Off to prise open even hostile papers to report their call for action on the stalled Leveson agenda. Alongside, there was online campaigning and petitioning by groups like Avaaz, while the Media Reform Coalition and Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF) secured modest coverage for their *Media Manifesto* and a poll showing 71 per cent public support for media ownership controls.

Set against a highly partisan daily press, backing the Tories by a margin of five to one, public service discussion of media policy, outside Radio 4's *The Media Show*, was negligible, with no questions in the set-piece election debates. Yet the BBC faces an existential threat from Conservative policies to top-slice the licence fee and tackle the BBC's 'monopoly'. During the campaign the Tories, UKIP and the DUP (furious about exclusion from TV debates) all alleged BBC bias, flailing flak, with Culture Secretary Sajid Javid telling the *Daily Mail* he wanted BBC bias addressed in the Charter renewal process.

The other standout Manifesto issues were press regulation and ownership, both prominent amongst the list of Labour policies opposed by press magnates, and many of their higher salaried staff. Murdoch berated journalists on the *Sun* for not doing enough to stop Miliband. A *Sun* editorial (24th April) attacked Labour as 'sworn to use the law to dismantle News UK if it wins power', describing this as 'Sinister State censorship'. Yet, media policy

barely featured in newspaper election coverage, with no substantive mention of the term itself. Between 30th March and 7th May, 36 newspaper stories featured 'Leveson' with 'regulation' but most were in *The Guardian/ObsERVER* (15), *Mail* group (4), or regional titles, with only one each in *The Times*, *Sun* and *Mirror*. Media were mobilised against Labour, as the excellent analyses by the Media Standards Trust, Open Democracy and others show, but rarely engaged directly with media policy issues to do so, except for attacks on the BBC. Nevertheless, press partisanship was back, showing how media owners act against reforms to create a more diverse and democratic media that their behaviour makes so necessary. *The Mirror's* pro-Labour partisanship might soften concerns for some, but it is worth noting that it gave negligible space to media issues. *The Guardian/ObsERVER's* coverage was extensive but included Peter Preston's twin-barrelled assault on Labour's plans for press and ownership reform.

The new Conservative government will park Leveson, supporting IPSO as a resurrected PCC. It will create a minimalist system to monitor media plurality, seeking to neutralise demands that strengthened over the last five years. It will freeze, cut and shift the BBC licence fee to benefit commercial providers, shrinking the BBC towards American PBS-type marginality. All these policies will serve the media megaphones mobilised on their behalf, although that unstable bloc may divide too, notably if the Conservatives grant Murdoch full control of BSkyB before GE2020. These policies will be opposed; the SNP, for instance, seeks devolved governance of broadcasting and greater funding for BBC Scotland. Yet Labour may heed those advocating Blairite accommodation over confrontation with dominant media groups, massaged into policies to stimulate Creative Britain. New media have aided and rallied counter-narratives but the core demand for meaningful plurality across the most influential public-facing media remains more important than ever, even if further out of reach.

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