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ICE 2015 Annual Conference special

- Electoral guerrilla theatre in the 2015 UK general election: Critique, legitimacy and incorporation in the news coverage of celebrity election campaigns – Jeremy Collins
- How the internet reduces journalists' chances to hold politicians to account – Nicholas Jones
- Digital agenda-setting: Measuring mainstream and social media influence during the UK 2015 election campaign – Martin Moore and Gordon Ramsay
- Michael Cockerell: The Boswell of the British political classes – John Mair

PLUS

- Astroturfing in online comment: An investigation – Murray Dick
- The Yemen and Crimean interventions in the ideological prisms of the 'liberal' Anglo-American press – Florian Zollmann

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EDITORIAL

Richard Lance Keeble

Looking beyond the corporate coverage of Corbyn

The annual conference of the Institute of Communication Ethics was timely in its focus on the media coverage of the 7 May UK general election. In this special issue of *Ethical Space*, we carry a selection of the papers presented – by Jeremy Collins, Nicholas Jones, Martin Moore and Gordon Ramsay together with an affectionate portrait of the keynote speaker, Michael Cockerell, by John Mair, chair of ICE. Together they indicate the breadth and depth of the many ethical issues discussed at the Frontline Club on 23 October.

But in politics time moves quickly – and the surprising election in September of Jeremy Corbyn to head the Labour Party, it could be argued, has radically altered the political landscape. Corbyn's long-standing opposition to US/UK militarism, his republicanism and anti-austerity policies have all-too predictably drawn the relentless wrath of Fleet Street. Indeed, research by the Media Reform Coalition shows how large sections of the corporate press attacked Corbyn in his first week as Labour leader with a barrage of overwhelmingly negative coverage.[2] Examining all eight national daily newspapers and their Sunday sister publications, the research found that out of a total of 494 news, comment and editorial pieces, 60 per cent (296 articles) were negative, with only 13 per cent of stories framed in a positive manner (65 articles) and 27 per cent taking a neutral stance (133 articles).

The activist, media monitoring website, medialens.org – run by David Cromwell and David Edwards – has also identified the glaring bias of the Corbyn coverage in a series of typically detailed commentaries. For instance, on 29 July, it carefully listed some of the many Fleet Street smears directed at Corbyn.[2] An editorial in the *Sun* complained:

> But to Jeremy Corbyn, the man who polls say will be the next Labour leader, Karl Marx is still a hero. He said yesterday: 'We all owe something to him.' Corbyn doesn't want to take Labour back to its Bennite years in the 1980s. He wants to turn the clock back to 1917 and the Russian revolution.

The *Sunday Mirror* joked: 'He is also a throwback to the party's darkest days when it was as likely to form the government as Elvis was of being found on Pluto.' Even the leftist *Guardian* could not summon the courage to support Corbyn, with its columnist Martin Kettle condemning his 'programme of prelapsarian socialist purity...' And so on.

It is clearly important that academic research focuses on the corporate media given its enormous ideological, social, political and cultural power. There is a significant school of academic researchers who concentrate on the alternative, activist, campaigning, non-corporate media. Recently, some of their important writings have been drawn together by Chris Atton, of Napier University, in his bulky *Routledge Companion to Community and Alternative Media*. But too often the academy and activist media watchers ignore or marginalise this alternative media. Here much of the Corbyn coverage has been serious, politically well-informed – and positive. To take a few examples: a feature in *Red Pepper*[3] argued:

> Jeremy Corbyn's election as Labour leader represents a massive rejection of the culture of politics as usual. While Corbyn's firm convictions, clear analysis and practical alternatives won him admirers as the campaign progressed, his leadership style is certainly not about the cult of personality. This is unlike many recent left breakouts, which have had an unhealthy dependency on a figure at the top. Think of Arthur Scargill and the Socialist Labour Party, George Galloway and Respect, or Tommy Sheridan and the Scottish Socialist Party and subsequently Solidarity. The emerging networks – both on and offline – of young people, grassroots campaigners and rank-and-file activists who have rallied to Corbyn's side have done so above all because they recognise the possibility of a different way of 'doing politics'.

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In a feature titled 'Why the attacks on "extremist" Jeremy Corbyn are doomed', on the citizen journalism website, the-latest.com,[4] Adam Bienkov commented:

> But Corbyn's success is also a sign of a wider shift in the public mood away from politicians who fit the overly-spun Tony Blair mould. The rise of populist plain-speaking politicians and parties both in the UK and around the world has until now largely left the Labour Party behind. The huge electoral success of Blair led to an entire generation of MPs who have tried and largely failed to recreate his style. The failure of their attempts is only too plain to see in this contest. Meanwhile the world has moved on and it is the Corbyns and the Salmonds of this world who are rising to the top, while the Burnhams and the Coopers of this world sink without a trace.

In the *Morning Star*, on 19 September,[5] Rabbil Skidar wrote:

> With a message of hope delivered with a tone of humility, Jeremy Corbyn has stunned the Establishment. It will retaliate. He has been met with a media firestorm. But Corbyn's strength is rooted in a grassroots movement that has stood strong against the abuse showering him. And even though politics is not about personality – certainly it shouldn't have been like that for Ed Miliband – it's unquestionable that it's not just Corbyn's policies which represent a departure from Establishment politics but also his personality. His dress code, his humble, quiet nature and the simple way he includes everyone in his talk.

An astute appraisal of the implications of Corbyn's success for the peace movement appeared in *Peace News*.[6] Ian Sinclair commented:

> Though many media commentators have dismissed Corbyn as a hard-left 1980s throwback who has no chance of winning a general election, some senior political figures are taking his rise more seriously. In a little-noticed interview with the *Huffington Post*, former Conservative chancellor Ken Clarke warned: 'Don't underestimate Jeremy Corbyn. … It's not certain he will lose an election. … If you have another recession or if the Conservative government becomes very unpopular, he could win.' Likewise, the media onslaught against Corbyn itself strongly suggests significant sections of the establishment see him as a real threat to their interests.

Along with the progressive movement's intellectual, moral and political integrity goes its essential internationalism. Significantly many excellent, critical analyses of Corbyn's rise have appeared in international publications (too often ignored by the academy) such as *counterpunch.org* and *wsws.org* (both US-based); *frontline.in* (India), *Crikey* and *New Matilda* (Australia); and *Le Monde Diplomatique* (France).

Looking beyond the mainstream, then, involves both ethical and political decisions. But such decisions can enliven the academy – and give us many reasons to be cheerful.

Notes

[1] See http://www.cpbf.org.uk/body.php?subject=journ&doctype=news&id=3300

[2] http://www.medialens.org/index.php/alerts/alert-archive/2015/797-corbyn.html

[3] http://www.redpepper.org.uk/after-corbyns-victory-time-for-a-new-kind-of-politics/

[4] http://the-latest.com/why-attacks-extremist-jeremy-corbyn-are-doomed#sthash.1kIWheDR.dpuf

[5] http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-9dc5-Labour-has-chosen-leaders-the-people-can-connect-to#.VoVkq_mLTIU

[6] http://peacenews.info/node/8125/jeremy-corbyn-and-peace-movement

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Jeremy Collins

Electoral guerrilla theatre in the 2015 UK general election: Critique, legitimacy and incorporation in the news coverage of celebrity election campaigns

The involvement of celebrities in politics raises issues of legitimacy and representation, and fuels concern over the impact on traditional or conventional political activity. This paper analyses the 2015 UK general election campaigns of the comedian Al Murray, who stood against UKIP leader Nigel Farage, and the artist Bob and Roberta Smith, who stood in the constituency of Conservative minister Michael Gove. Conceptions of public representation via Nancy Fraser's notion of subaltern counterpublics are considered, and definitions of celebrity politics are briefly explored. Each of these celebrity candidates displayed elements of theatricality in their campaign techniques, and the paper argues that while the campaigns could be seen as a form of electoral guerrilla theatre, the news coverage of the period leading up to the election suggests that neither campaign provided the kind of critical satirical edge that such a term might suggest. Consequently they were incorporated into the electoral process rather than providing any direct challenge to it.

Keywords: general election, electoral guerrilla theatre, celebrity politics, Al Murray, Bob and Roberta Smith

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to consider a particular aspect of the 2015 general election – the media coverage of the celebrity campaigns run by comedian Al Murray and artist Bob and Roberta Smith – in the context of a number of theoretical conceptions. Firstly, they can be seen as celebrities engaging in political activity, raising questions and concerns over the legitimacy of high profile individuals' attempts to engage in politics. Secondly, the issue of representation – on behalf of whom are the candidates standing and what social constituencies do they represent? – can be considered in terms of a civil society/public sphere model, and in particular via Nancy Fraser's concept of the subaltern counterpublic (1993).

Thirdly, given the candidates' backgrounds in entertainment and arts-based protests, can these campaigns be understood as examples of electoral guerrilla theatre, challenging the political – and electoral – *status quo* via satirically charged events and activities? Were these campaigns radical, progressive interventions, or were they incorporated into the conventions of electoral political activity? The news coverage of these campaigns provides a window into the ways in which they were understood and represented by the media: on the one hand they represent a potential threat to the election structures which to some extent the media rely on throughout the campaign, and more specifically to the ideological positions of many of the mainstream newspapers; on the other hand, the entertainment factor evident in celebrity engagement with politics could be seen as welcome to news outlets already in thrall to celebrity.

Celebrity politics, political celebrities

The interaction between politics and celebrity has generated a good deal of discussion and concern in contemporary political analysis. Douglas Kellner, for instance, has argued, following Guy Debord's *Society of the spectacle* (1967), that the public have come to see politics as a form of entertainment in which they are 'submissively consuming spectacles' rather than actively engaging in politics. For Kellner, media spectacle prescribes a culture of manufactured celebrity across every major social domain, including politics (Kellner 2003: 3, 5). Ralph Negrine similarly see politicians in the 'age of television' as being aware of the need to be 'part-politician, part-celebrity' (Negrine 2008: 139).

John Street suggests that a key aspect of the criticism is that celebrity politics 'undermines any claim to representativeness' by focusing on 'irrelevant gestures and superficial appearances'; this argument rests on 'familiar distinctions between the trivial (entertainment) and the serious (politics), and a concern about the infection of the second by the first' (Street 2004: 439).

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The celebrity politician (CP) has been analysed by Street as comprising two distinct variants. The politician who uses the tropes and artefacts of celebrity culture to enhance their image, or the celebrity whose background in entertainment leads to elected office, are what Street labels as CP1s. The second variant refers to those celebrities who use their visibility and status as means to publicise and support particular political causes and influence political outcomes. This might involve making speeches, attending conferences and protest marches, and other forms of activism. Crucially however, for our discussion, these CP2s engage in what might be understood as civil society politics 'without seeking or acquiring elected office' (Street 2004: 438). Examples in the UK include singer Charlotte Church and comedian Russell Brand[1]; both of these celebrities have made public intervention in political issues, but neither has sought any formal political position (with Brand at one point rejecting the political system as a whole before endorsing the Labour Party leader Ed Miliband (*Huffington Post* 2015)). This is an important point, because it suggests a gap in this analytical framework.

While CP1s include celebrities who then become elected politicians, these are usually elected via established party politics: Street mentions Arnold Schwarzenegger and Ronald Reagan in the US, and Sebastian Coe in the UK, to illustrate the category, all of whom achieved political office via mainstream political party structures. Other examples are linked in their political activities to established parties (Clint Eastwood and the Republican Party) or gained office as a candidate for a previously existing 'third party' (Jesse Ventura and Ross Perot's Reform Party) (West and Orman 2003: 64). The campaigns discussed here are, by contrast, not via established parties, nor are they in practical terms intended to lead to office, so cannot be easily classified as CP1s; but by engaging in the formal electoral process, they can be argued in a technical sense to be 'seeking' public office and, therefore, do not quite fall within the CP2 category. They are celebrities, but they are also political outsiders. This paradoxical position – of formally standing for office with no intention of taking up that position – is, in fact, a crucial element of what Bogad describes as electoral guerrilla theatre (2005).

Electoral guerrilla theatre

In his book *Electoral guerrilla theatre* (ibid), Lawrence M. Bogad begins by describing the documentary maker Michael Moore's campaign to get a potted plant elected to the US Congress, on the platform that in creating oxygen for humans to breathe, the ficus was at least as useful as the incumbent (and unopposed) member of Congress. Bogad sees the satirical electoral campaign as a relatively recent phenomenon, most often undertaken by representatives of disempowered or marginalised social groups (ibid: 2). Electoral guerrilla theatre is, therefore, a contradictory concept in that it involves both a conventional political route to change via electoral campaigning whilst also emerging from those who are marginalised and criticising the *status quo* in a tactical, 'hit-and-run' manner:

> Electoral guerrilla theatre is an ambivalent hybrid measure that merges the traditions and techniques of 'third party' electoral intervention with grassroots direct action and performative disruption (ibid: 3).

A further key example for Bogad is the campaign that Pauline Pantsdown ran against Pauline Hanson, who was the far right One Nation party candidate for the Australian Senate in 1998. Hanson was a working class single mother who had been previously expelled from the (right-wing) Liberal Party for anti-Aboriginal comments but was, nevertheless, elected as MP for the Oxley constituency in the suburbs of Brisbane. She founded the One Nation party in 1997, and in 2003 she was exonerated following a conviction for electoral fraud. After a period away, she is now the leader of the party, which campaigns against multiculturalism, immigration, Aboriginal rights and 'political correctness'.[2]

Pantsdown was the character created by performance artist Simon Hunt, and she protested against Hanson's anti-Aboriginal and anti-Asian cultural racism by mocking her party's bigotry. In particular, Pantsdown edited together clips from Hanson's speeches, rearranging them to mock and satirise her politics. The video for 'I don't like it', for instance, has Pantsdown lip-synching to Hanson's words:

> I don't like it, when you turn my voice about
>
> I don't like it, when you vote One Nation out
>
> 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 racist, rubbish, racist hate.
>
> Please explain, why can't my blood be coloured white
>
> I should talk to some medical doctors, coloured blood is just not right
>
> (Pauline Pantsdown 1998)

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Another 'mash up' of Hanson's speeches made by Pantsdown became the subject of successful legal action for defamation; the song again used Hanson's own edited words to make sexual innuendos and voice (implicitly satirical) anti-gay rhetoric (Bogad 2005: 176).

A key question for Bogad is how these performances relate to the 'respectable' or traditional forms of campaigning and electioneering that they seek to mock. Are the former seen as a legitimate form of political contestation, or an indulgent or cynical expression of disillusion? Does this kind of campaign provide a valid expression of political concern or does it merely provide a pointless if entertaining diversion from 'real' political activity?

We may also ask whether electoral guerrilla theatre can work in favour of establishment politics by providing a harmless entertainment which channels and diffuses legitimate political anger. The near oxymoronic term 'electoral guerrilla' suggests a contradiction, and the extent to which any campaign can work within formal electoral structures whilst also being a disruptive, resistant, guerrilla activity is central to the debate.

Bogad notes that winning is not the main goal; the intention is often to simultaneously deride and shame one group (the formal established political actors and institutions) while enthusing and organising activists and supporters (ibid: 4). This position, therefore, differentiates these electoral guerrillas from both of Street's CP1 and CP2 categories. The irony involved in these performances is aimed at those who, having previously experienced the frustrations of the 'system', are predisposed to the mocking of 'serious' politics and, therefore, 'get the joke', with the hope that it might also reach a more mainstream audience (ibid: 4). Elections provide a useful environment for satirical activity due to their formal structure, their public familiarity and the economical access they provide to mainstream media and thus to a wider audience than candidates might otherwise reach.

Bogad emphasises the importance of understanding the formal electoral structures, in terms of voting systems and institutional arrangements, within which specific examples must be understood as working (ibid: 7). His detailed case studies focus on examples from 1970s Amsterdam, the 1992 US presidential campaign and Australian parliamentary elections in 1998, but he suggests the UK's Monster Raving Loony Party as an example of the 'patently irreverent parties' he is discussing.

As Bogad notes, critics – often conventional politicians – have derided guerrilla campaigns as a frivolous waste of time and resources, an insult to the solemnity of electoral democracy in action, and this has even provoked attempts to legally restrict or limit such campaigns. These criticisms from elected and established politicians raise questions about the legitimacy of electoral guerrilla campaigns, most particularly in terms of contesting the extent to which they represent a constituency. Bogad argues that such campaigns can be seen as tactical hit and run strikes from disenfranchised sections of society, and enlists Nancy Fraser's conception of subaltern counterpublics in this regard (ibid: 6).

Publics and counterpublics

Fraser's argument is built on a critique of 'actually existing democracy', and more specifically of the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere, in which 'participants in public conversation ... come to a consensus about the great issues of the day through the force of rational argument' (Edwards 2004: 57). While Habermas located a limited historical version of this in the salons and coffee houses of 18th century Europe, the democratic normative ideal has been subjected to a range of criticisms, not least that in suggesting a single, liberal public sphere, it ignores, both in historical and contemporary terms, the range of competing spheres, public arenas and social spaces within which political and ideological debate routinely takes place and excludes a range of public voices. For instance, the 'masculinist' nature of the bourgeois public sphere in which the female-friendly salon culture of republican France was deemed 'aristocratic' and 'effeminate' led to the exclusion of women in public debate (Fraser 1993: 114). Fraser argues that there were, and are 'nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics, and working class publics' which exist alongside the liberal bourgeois public sphere emphasised by Habermas (ibid: 116).

These counterpublics, Fraser argues, continuously contested the 'exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public' by offering alternative political and discursive approaches. The relative social weakness of these publics renders them subaltern compared with, for instance, the sovereign parliament 'whose discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision making' via law-making positions it as a strong public (ibid: 134). The subaltern counterpublic represents a social space in which the disempowered and marginalised can debate and define their needs and interests. Bogad, therefore, suggests that electoral guerrilla activity can in one sense be seen as an expression of such interests, pro-

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jected into the formal mainstream of the liberal public sphere (op cit: 18).

The term 'civil society' can similarly be applied in the context of a critique of 'actually existing democracy' in that it emphasises the 'active participation on the part of citizens in egalitarian institutions and civil associations as well as in politically relevant organisations' (Cohen and Arato 1992: 19). In this view social movements – of which electoral guerrillas are a key part – are an important feature of civil society and citizen participation (ibid: 19). Electoral guerrilla theatre can, therefore, be seen as the legitimate exercise of democratic rights emerging from subaltern counterpublics establishing an opposition either to other 'strong' publics and their domination of electoral politics, or indeed opposition to the structures of electoral politics themselves.

In order to consider how these arguments apply to our case studies here, we need to clarify the contexts of the two electoral interventions represented by comedian Al Murray as the 'Pub Landlord', and the artist Patrick Brill who works using the pseudonym Bob and Roberta Smith. We will then be able to consider the response to these campaigns in the media coverage they generated.

The Pub Landlord: 'Glass of white wine for the lady'

Al Murray is a British comedian who is widely known via his alter ego, the Pub Landlord. In this character, Murray plays an archetypal brash English xenophobic nationalist with exaggeratedly traditional and socially conservative views. The catchphrase '…and a glass of white wine for the lady' illustrates, for instance, the character's outdated gender politics, and such views are satirised in a way which is arguably ambiguous.

In January 2015, Murray announced that he was to run as a candidate in the general election in the constituency of South Thanet in Kent, which was held by the Labour Party from 1997 to 2010 but was then held by a Conservative MP. Murray chose the constituency because it had also been chosen by Nigel Farage, leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) for his attempt to enter parliament. Farage's political persona could be seen as echoing that of the Pub Landlord in its beer drinking, 'common sense'-espousing English nationalism. Murray's campaign was immediately understood as a satirical challenge to Farage and UKIP; Murray's Free United Kingdom Party (FUKP) used an inverted pound sign in a clear reference to the UKIP logo, and coverage of the launch of the campaign was immediately reported as a challenge to Farage, even though the constituency was held by the Conservatives.

The FUKP manifesto listed a number of policies around issues of particular concern to UKIP, including employing Polish workers to 'brick up' the Channel Tunnel, leaving the EU before leaving the solar system, and (because unemployment causes crime) locking up the unemployed.

The theatrical element of the campaign resided primarily in the gap between Murray the comedian and his Pub Landlord alter ego. The distance between the two is evident in the contrast between Murray's aristocratic, public school background – he is reportedly a descendent of the Duke of Atholl and a distant relative of Conservative MP Sir Edward Leigh – and the working class cockney Pub Landlord. Murray's campaign, therefore, implicitly highlighted the constructed nature of political, and electoral, politics; all politicians are playing characters, adopting positions, acting.

Bob and Roberta Smith: 'All schools should be art schools'

Patrick Brill makes art under the pseudonym of Bob and Roberta Smith, and much of his work involves painted signs with slogans commenting on politics and popular culture. In a Tate Gallery-sponsored YouTube clip introducing his work, Smith describes his interest in signage by describing his artworks as 'props in a performance' in which the audience is invited to consider whether to act on the exhortations of the words they contain (Tate n.d.). In another clip, a trailer for his new film, *Make your own damn art*, he suggests that his attitude to political campaigning is 'slightly disingenuous' in that he does wish to see change in the world but is also aware that the political sphere is 'all nonsense' (Rogers n.d.). Smith has been involved in a number of political campaigns which have involved promoting the importance of art and creativity, and also plays guitar in the band, the Ken Ardley Playboys. In 2013 he organised the Art Party conference in Scarborough which was a response to the then-coalition government's plans to 'sideline' art education in schools (BBC News 2013). Smith can therefore also be seen as a performer, adopting both a persona and a political stance.

The platform which Smith stood on consisted in large part of an assertion of the importance of art education in general, and in particular with regard to recent changes in the school curriculum reducing the overall importance of art.

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Coverage, electoral theatre and serious politics

One of the key concerns for this study is the extent to which Murray and Smith were criticised as celebrities intent on self-promotion at the expense of 'serious' politics. Murray, in particular, was subject to attack from this perspective. During a press conference to launch his campaign held in a pub in the South Thanet constituency, Murray made a speech about democracy which was interrupted by a fellow minority party candidate challenging his legitimacy. In front of a large contingent of the UK media, including newspaper and television journalists, the Reality Party candidate, Nigel Askew, asked Murray why he was 'making a mockery of Thanet' and demanded that Murray state his 'real intentions' in standing. Askew emphasised that he was a 'real' pub landlord, and asked if the campaign was 'all about [Murray's] career'. Murray responded by emphasising that the campaign was about getting people to vote in the election – implicitly, therefore, suggesting an emphasis on electoral participation in liberal democracy.[3]

Similarly, Smith had previously been involved in the 'vote art' campaign which was organised by the Art Fund charity which works to promote and support museums and art galleries. The campaign was based around a number of artworks – all urging the public to vote – which were placed on 100 billboard sites around the country. The explicit intention to 'encourage people to vote' (Vote Art n.d.) again suggests that Smith, like Murray, saw his campaign as promoting political engagement at least as part of the more specific aims suggested above.

The initial response to Murray's campaign in Thanet was mixed; the outgoing Conservative MP, Laura Sandys, was quoted in a number of news outlets as saying that 'we have enough comedians standing already that we don't need another one' while acknowledging that he might represent some 'light relief' for voters (Press Association, 14 January 2015). The *Guardian* acknowledged this ambivalence by suggesting that rival candidates 'could do little else but claim to be entertained' (*Guardian*, 14 January 2015). Murray had planned to parachute into the constituency as a stunt, but made the most of the publicity gained when the stunt had to be cancelled as he was considered too overweight to attempt the jump. He announced to the press that he was the victim of 'health and safety gone mad', spoofing UKIP's concerns over EU-inspired regulation (*Observer*, 15 March 2015).

While Farage had initially accepted Murray's involvement ('the more the merrier'), he was later quoted as suggesting that the campaign was 'patronising' voters:

> 'He's really laughing at them and I think the joke is starting to wear a bit thin. I don't think the failure to parachute is the relevant bit. His failure to answer the question as to why he is here and what he is doing is more important' (*Yorkshire Post*, 16 March 2015).

> 'If he stood as himself and said: "I'm really very posh. I think you're filthy, common people and you should laugh at my comedy act," he might get a few more votes. People are taking it as an insult. They feel he is taking the piss out of them' (*Sunday Times*, 5 April 2015).

The implicit point here is the frivolousness of Murray's campaign, and the need to return to a more serious politics; Murray's campaign was an insult to voters and implicitly an insult to the UK electoral system more generally.

One of the key points of contention for critics of Murray was the contrast between the working class pub landlord and Murray's public school upbringing. The *Independent* noted a *Times* diary comment that 'Murray (Bedford School) is standing against Nigel Farage (Dulwich College). Really shaking up the establishment' (*Independent*, 15 January 2015). Murray was often referred to as 'Oxford educated' (*Daily Star*, 4 February 2015; *East Anglia Daily Times*, 3 March 2015; *Mirror*, 13 March 2015), and an *Express* feature, headlined 'A very posh Pub Landlord', described in some detail Murray's aristocratic heritage as the direct descendant of the 3rd Duke of Atholl.[4]

> The truth is that the baldheaded, beer-bellied, foul-mouthed Cockney landlord that we see on our TV screens is a world away from Alistair James Hay Murray, the well-spoken, public school-educated intellectual who is more often seen with a cup of Earl Grey rather than a pint of London Pride (*Express*, 5 February 2015).

This article was not explicitly critical of Murray, and set out the apparent contrasts relatively dispassionately; others, however, were more damning. Columnist Rod Liddle in the *Sun* explained how the election was 'one of the most important in our lifetimes' and argued Murray's joke policies were 'incredibly unfunny'. He then suggested that 'In real life, Al's

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another public school-educated (very) posh boy liberal Leftie', and told Murray to 'clear off and go home' (Liddle, *Sun*, 5 February 2015). Liddle's criticism is not so much that Murray's Pub Landlord character represents an attempt to mislead the electorate, but that politics is a serious business that has no place for (bad) jokes.

A more sophisticated criticism of Murray's campaign argued that it might drain votes from the parties opposed to UKIP, by positioning Murray as the 'anti-UKIP' candidate. 'And if that happens the only real winner is Farage himself – and, of course, Murray, who has staged a superb PR coup' (*Kentish Gazette*, 5 February 2015). In the *Guardian*, a report on the South Thanet election acknowledged that while some might enjoy the satirising of Farage and UKIP, Murray might …

> …further dilute the vote in an area of high deprivation, desperately in need of politicians who actually care. Murray is clearly all about Murray, his pint-toting, 'British moon on a stick' shtick a parody of Ukip's main man (*Guardian*, 28 March 2015).

Again there are two issues here, the first being that a 'comedy candidate' can potentially cause damage to the proper business of elections. The second is a linked criticism regarding Murray's 'PR coup' which is a pejorative swipe at the promotional aspects of his campaign. Certainly the reviews of his stand-up comedy during the campaign referred to his electoral activities, suggesting that it was providing a useful advertising boost (*East Anglia Daily Times*, 3 March 2015). By contrast, a columnist for the *Independent* argued that the Pub Landlord might take away votes from UKIP as he is 'appealing to the same anti-politics crowd as Farage's strand of stop-the-world conservatism' (*Independent*, 6 April 2015). While this was an unusual perspective, it nevertheless shares a similar concern with those who see Murray as helping rather than hindering UKIP – that it is a negative ('anti-politics') influence on the important business of elections.

Elsewhere, however, much of the coverage was receptive to the Pub Landlord's manifesto (a 'brilliantly bonkers satire') (*Guardian*, 16 January 2015), seeing Murray as part of an 'honourable tradition of protest politics' (*Independent*, 16 January 2015). Many newspapers seemed to enjoy the knockabout humour of the Pub Landlord (*Daily Mail*, 14 January 2015; *Daily Star*, 14 January 2015; *Daily Star*, 16 January 2015).

The coverage of Bob and Roberta Smith standing against Michael Gove was more limited, not least due to the relative seriousness of the issues and the tone of Smith's campaign. Much of it was largely positive (*Independent*, 3 December 2014; *Evening Standard*, 14 April 2015), with one supportive comment piece imploring Smith to 'avoid gesture politics' and draw up a 'sophisticated manifesto' which details the 'real casualties' of cuts to arts funding (*Independent* 5 December 2014). This illustrates the evident support for Smith's campaign, but can also be seen as a request to play within the rules of formal mainstream politics. The fear of 'gestures' clearly militates against the kind of irony and satire that are part of electoral guerrilla theatre. Smith suggests that while his appearance and some of his campaign materials were 'zany', his candidacy was received seriously, and indeed positively by many people in the constituency and outside.

> I have the accoutrements of the Raving Loony Party, because … I do dress in a slightly mad way … but I was trying to flag up this one issue of arts in schools (personal interview, 3 September 2015).

In particular, he noted that Conservative councillors privately agreed with his arguments, and that this would not have been the case with a more overtly satirical approach. This suggests that there was an emphasis on, and public understanding of, a clear policy message – unlike Al Murray's more ambiguous spoofing of UKIP. *The Times* noted that Gove seemed unconcerned about the challenge from Smith:

> Gove responds cordially to Bob's provocations. 'I enjoy his work and look forward to discussing with him the renaissance in creative and cultural education under this government,' he says (*Times*, 10 April 2015).

This, of course, needs to be understood in the context of the safety of Gove's seat – the Conservative candidate has achieved a 50 to 60 per cent share of the vote since its creation in 1997 (BBC News, 2001); Gove could afford to be magnanimous about Smith's intervention.

Niche media coverage – primarily in arts magazines and websites – was unsurprisingly supportive of Smith's campaign. One news website noted Smith's activism in campaigning against cuts to the arts (a-n, 2015), while another presented him as a 'vociferous critic' who in the unlikely event of victory, would be a 'vocal advocate [for the arts] in the House of Com-

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mons' (*Apollo* magazine 2015). A *Time Out* interview compared the 'engagingly quirky' Smith with Al Murray's South Thanet campaign by suggesting the former at least 'has a serious point to make' (*Time Out* 2015).

Discussion: Disruption, irony and incorporation

Celebrity political activists can be criticised from at least two different directions: either that they lack seriousness, and are simply protesting from the sidelines without the conviction to get involved, or that they are a serious threat to 'real' (non-celebrity) politics. While the former criticism can clearly be aimed at the kinds of protesting celebrity (such as Charlotte Church) who do not put themselves up for election, those who do stand for public office are perhaps more likely to be challenged on the basis of the latter criticism. In the case of Al Murray, we can see some minor evidence of this latter concern in relation to the effect the Pub Landlord's votes might have on the possibility of Nigel Farage becoming an MP. Nevertheless, overall, and certainly with regard to Bob and Roberta Smith, there is relatively little criticism of either kind, and I would argue this is because these candidates did not fit in to the categories of celebrity politics as discussed by Street – they were not CP1s who were ever likely to gain office (unlike, for instance, Arnold Schwarzenegger or Sebastian Coe), but neither were they CP2s, using their status to shout from the sidelines without any formal involvement. The limited position of standing while being destined for defeat meant that the campaigns could to some extent be seen as tactical in avoiding these criticisms, but it might also be argued to limit their own critical edge.

It would be possible to see Smith's campaign as reflecting the interests of what Fraser sees as a counterpublic, in that he brings to the wider public the concerns and interests of a particular section of society, articulating an alternative discourse (around the value of arts funding and education). Clearly, however, a key difficulty here is the extent to which this public can be understood as disempowered or disenfranchised. The liberal, middle class 'arts community' in a neoliberal democracy is likely to be marginalised in the drive for economic efficiency and public cost-cutting, but it also has a relatively privileged position in cultural terms and, therefore, the ability to engage via the media with a mainstream audience. This suggests that this particular counterpublic could not legitimately be understood as subaltern in Fraser's sense. The Pub Landlord in some respects might – potentially at least – more clearly be articulating the perspectives of a working class public routinely excluded from the bourgeois public sphere by satirising a party and a party leader (UKIP and Farage) whose reactionary policies have been (unfairly) valorised and legitimated by the mainstream media as reflecting working class values. Again however, this argument is weak, this time because Murray's intentions, and the power of any ironic or satirical critique, were undermined by an ambiguity in the delivery of the campaign.

Bogad notes that irony occurs 'within the space between ironist and audience', with the audience's interpretive agency militating against any certainty as to how the message might be received (Bogad 2005: 36-37). Unintended interpretations of the Pub Landlord's intentions (mocking the constituency and its inhabitants? promoting a stand-up comedy career? encouraging people to vote?) meant that any critique of Farage's xenophobic nationalism struggled to emerge.

In addition to this, I would argue that both campaigns ceded too much to the *electoral* to be considered as guerrilla theatre. Both Smith and Murray suggested in more or less explicit terms that a key part of their campaigns was to encourage people to vote. This assertion of the importance of voting as an expression of liberal democracy blunts any 'guerrilla' style critical resistance the campaigns might otherwise have evinced; while Bogad sees electoral guerrilla theatre as an attempt to destabilise and question the structures, as well as the outcomes of elections, the campaigns discussed here worked within rather than against the mainstream of political engagement.

Rod Liddle's criticism, in defending the 'serious' business of politics, represented an implicit acknowledgement of the potential for campaigns such as Smith and Murray's to become electoral guerrilla theatre in the sense that Bogad argues – a carnivalesque challenge to the pompous sanctity of politics as usual. However, I would argue that the limitations set out above meant this was unlikely to emerge.

Conclusion

There was some support for both Smith and Murray from a *Times* article which argued that 'If they get people talking about politics, when millions say they are fed up with bland platitudes, that can't be a bad thing' (*Times*, 10 April 2015). This takes the two campaigns at their word – that they were above all intended to persuade the public to get involved in the elec-

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tion. Tim Stanley, in the *Spectator*, applauded the fringe candidates who represented 'the best of British bloody-mindedness', suggesting that the sharing of the election night platform with '"serious" politicians' was a 'necessary corrective to their oversized egos' (*Spectator*, 11 April 2015). Celebrity politics from this perspective need not be seen as an unnecessary distraction from the important business of serious politics, but as a welcome addition to the election process. However, the extent to which Murray and Smith's campaigns were accepted as legitimate is, I would argue, a measure of their failure in terms of the disruptive, 'hit-and-run' tactics of electoral guerrilla theatre. The campaigns of Pauline Pantsdown and Michael Moore's ficus plant provide a contrast in their pointed challenge to discredited politicians and electoral systems.

This is not to say that the campaigns should be seen as failing on their own terms; each could be argued to have achieved whatever goals each candidate set themselves. Certainly Murray could argue that his spoofing of Farage's persona and policies was a small part of the reasons for his ultimate defeat, and others might suggest his profile as a comedian was enhanced; similarly, Smith might argue that his campaign raised awareness of the issues in a way that would not have been available to him at any other time, and laid the groundwork for a continued opposition to cuts in arts education. Nevertheless, in the terms set out by Bogad, the radical performative aspects of electoral guerrilla theatre were not realised.

Therefore, while there was some criticism of the two campaigns discussed here, particularly regarding Al Murray, overall there was an acceptance in the media of their electoral activities as part of an eccentric but essentially harmless sideshow to the 'real' issues. The calm response of Michael Gove to Bob and Roberta Smith's campaign suggests that such incursions can be safely managed; any radical critique that might have been generated through electoral guerrilla theatre was blunted and ultimately absorbed and incorporated into the mainstream electoral process.

Notes

[1] Brand's refusal to vote in the election because the political system 'served the needs of corporations' rather than the people (BBC News 2015), could perhaps be seen as the kind of disruptive approach suggested by Bogad; however, his refusal to engage in the electoral system – even in order to satirise it – means he cannot be considered as representing any kind of electoral guerrilla theatre in Bogad's terms

[2] About | Pauline Hanson's One Nation (n.d.). Available online at http://www.onenation.com.au/about, accessed on 13 November 2015

[3] See http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/real-pub-landlord-crashes-al-5329192, accessed on 7 December 2015

[4] A colleague has suggested that the simple noting of Murray's Oxford education could be read as an acknowledgement of his intellectual credentials and, therefore, his fitness for public office. However, given the ambiguity of his campaigning persona (taking on the Pub Landlord's bluff reactionary agenda) and the way it has elsewhere been used explicitly to suggest hypocrisy, it seems to represent at best a reminder of the contrast between actor and role, if not an implicit critique of Murray's disingenuousness

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Nicholas Jones

How the internet reduces journalists' chances to hold politicians to account

The 2015 general election presented an unexpected challenge for former BBC political correspondent and author Nicholas Jones. For his fifth general election book he had been commissioned to write* The election A-Z*, and although no longer reporting directly from the frontline, he was able to use his knowledge of the political beat to examine and assess the campaign on a thematic basis. Having to select a subject for each letter of the alphabet allowed him to explore topical election issues and techniques while at the same time reflecting on the changes he had witnessed during forty years on the campaign trail following party leaders and MPs. Jones was anxious to address the exceptional circumstances surrounding the 2015 election: the novelty of a peacetime coalition government; the introduction of fixed term parliaments; the unprecedented reliance on opinion polls; and the growing impact of social media. Online campaigning opened up new ways to influence voters, but Jones concluded that electioneering via the internet also led to a reduction in the opportunities for journalists to hold politicians to account.

Keywords: politics, media, elections, online campaigning

The daunting task of trying to work out how best to exploit the inexorable advance in the scope and reach of social media was one of the dominant challenges facing political strategists during the 2015 general election campaign. As had been the case five years earlier, each of the parties was determined to be a step ahead of its opponents in exploiting every possible online opportunity to influence, and then mobilise potential voters. In their post-election analyses, political propagandists, journalists and academics continued to disagree as to whether online campaigning was influential in securing votes, or whether, as in so many previous elections, it was the heavy, pro-Conservative bias of the popular press that had the greatest clout in helping to deliver the outright victory that had eluded David Cameron in 2010.

My conclusion was that while the ability of pro-Tory newspapers to manipulate and often dictate the news agenda far outweighed the political impact of a burgeoning online discourse, there was no doubt that the power and reach of social media did have a profound effect on the conduct of the 2015 campaign. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and a host of other inter-active services became the top destination for instant news and comment. Rolling news services on television and radio struggled to compete with the immediacy of the internet, but the furore that was sometimes provoked by fast and furious online debates rarely seemed to carry the equivalent weight, or have the same staying power, as the issues being reported and pursued by broadcasters and print media. The verdict of many seasoned observers was that political campaigning via the internet was often akin to an angry echo chamber: committed political activists argued it out with their often abusive respondents, but their dialogue did not necessarily shift votes in the electorate at large. If an issue went viral, and in their favour, campaigners believed they were winning the argument, but the mainstream news agenda was rarely blown off course by online excitement.

Nonetheless, the sheer dominance of social media as the leading platform for instant news lines and reaction did change the nature and conduct of the 2015 campaign. Political parties found that Twitter, Facebook and other online messaging platforms were so effective in reaching political correspondents that they were able to exercise greater control than in previous elections over the flow of information to news organisations. From a party perspective, a discourse via social media was far more preferable than the sometimes brutal interrogation that had previously taken place at daily election news conferences. By limiting the opportunities for the news media to capture the election agenda, political propagandists hoped to ensure there was less likelihood of their campaign messages getting derailed.

Becoming slaves to social media has left a democratic deficit

Political journalists complained that they had been deprived of the chance to question politicians with the thoroughness of previous elections, but in many ways they had been com-

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plicit in allowing the internet to become a pivotal channel of channel of communication. All too often correspondents and presenters had themselves become slaves to social media, jostling with each other in cyberspace in their clamour for attention. Gone are the days of newspaper reporters having to wait until the next edition to see the publication of their work, or of broadcasters being limited to a fixed schedule of radio and television news bulletins. As soon as journalists are sure of a story, they are expected to spread the word via the internet. Ownership of an exclusive has to be established immediately on a personal blog, and also promoted via social networking. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, BuzzFeed and a variety of other online platforms must be harnessed to drive the audience, to encourage readers to buy the latest edition of a newspaper or magazine, or to persuade viewers to tune into the next programme.

Where the online world of instant reporting so differed from my day was that the journalists had themselves become players on the enlarged political stage that the internet had created. Instead of simply reporting and analysing what the parties and politicians were saying, political correspondents were also having to compete with each other online. They offered their own comment and reaction, as well as providing hard news and factual information; competing story lines were being bounced around between them, and often changed quite dramatically in the light of online reaction. Some journalists complained that the time-consuming burden of continuous blogging and tweeting hampered their inquiries and subsequent analysis for press reports or news broadcasts, but they realised only too well that their online output was also being monitored constantly by their newsrooms. Woe betide correspondents who ignored the edict of their editors: social media was their friend, an all-important vehicle through which they could build their reputation and authority in print, on air, or on screen.

Staff at the main party headquarters made constant use of their Twitter feeds – sending out dozens of positive messages during the course of a day, as well as responding to news coverage and rebutting negative stories. Party leaders took advantage of Twitter to make policy announcements, react to events, and comment on the day's campaigning. All news outlets could be supplied instantaneously with the same information leaving no room for doubt, thus limiting inaccurate or damaging speculation. Any subsequent online conversation was usually far safer from a party perspective than having a leader run the risk of being grilled by journalists at a news conference that could so easily go awry.

Demise of daily election news conferences robbed electorate of vital safeguard

As the campaign progressed the routine became well entrenched. Each evening next day's policy initiative would be trailed in advance to print journalists ready for next morning's newspapers, and an outline of the announcement would be supplied to broadcasters in time for the late evening news bulletins. Photo-opportunities would be arranged for the day ahead to promote the policy in question; party leaders and leading politicians would use the occasion to deliver pre-prepared soundbites, and perhaps take a few questions. The three main parties adopted the same formula, and in so doing finally pulled down the curtain on the great tradition of election news conferences.

A daily round of early morning jousts between the press pack and the leading contenders had always been one of the great attractions of reporting general elections. Their eventual demise was a consequence of the fallout from the dramatic impact of the three televised leaders' debates of the 2010 campaign. Each confrontation between Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Nick Clegg dominated the news coverage for an entire week, an experience that was so unsettling for election strategists that they had no hesitation in arguing there was no need to subject the leaders to the added hazard of a daily grilling by journalists. In truth, campaign planners had argued for some time that the press conferences worked to their disadvantage. Political correspondents were well attuned to each party's weak spots, and despite the rivalries of their competing news outlets, reporters could on occasion work as a highly-effective pack, driving a story in a direction that did the politicians no favours.

Fleet-footed political journalists could get to all three morning briefings, and within a couple of hours or less, correspondents and commentators were abreast of what each party was offering. Every news conference was televised, available for instant use on the news channels or the main bulletins and programmes. For radio and television producers they provided an invaluable resource, a stock of on-the-record answers, like statements at the parliamentary despatch box that could be used to illustrate reports on controversial issues as the election progressed. Journalists had most to gain from the willing-

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ness of party leaders and their front-bench teams to subject themselves to the challenge of taking on all-comers at a crowded daily news conference where they could be forced to respond to a surprise initiative that might have been announced minutes earlier by one of their opponents, or perhaps find themselves on the back foot trying to explain an unexpected embarrassment or gaffe.

Almost without realising the full consequence of the shift that has taken place in campaign strategy, the news media, as well as the wider electorate, have lost one of the great safeguards of a UK general election. There is no longer a daily arena where political journalists can test almost to the point of destruction the policies that the rival parties are promoting. The impact of a Twitter storm pales into insignificance when compared with the sight of politicians hurriedly curtailing a televised news conference after their latest initiative has collapsed in front of them after being taken apart under relentless questioning from well-informed correspondents and commentators.

Carefully-controlled photo-shoots offered no chance to hold politicians to account

Competitive forces unleashed by the speed of online communication have rewritten the rule book for election reporting. Journalists were forced during the 2015 campaign to contend with another reality of the internet age: politicians had in effect found a way to bypass reporters and seize the agenda. A posting on Twitter could easily become 'breaking news', beating the news agencies and upstaging the story lines that had previously been determined by the mainstream media. Countless platforms provided what was, in effect, a vast digital market place for a continuous conversation between media outlets, political parties, pressure groups and the like. Rather like the trading floors in the City of London, this online political arena was the point where election news was traded, influencing not the price of stock and shares, but the headlines for that evening's news bulletins and next morning's newspapers.

Policy announcements followed the same pattern: overnight briefings for next day's newspapers; a taster of what was afoot for the late evening news bulletins; and these initiatives were then explained in greater detail during interviews on television and radio programmes the following morning, backed up by postings on Twitter and Facebook. The aim was to prepare the ground for a party leader who would make a campaign stop to expand further on the policy being proposed. All too often these launches would be in front of invited audiences of party workers and supporters at pre-arranged photo-opportunities. A few selected journalists usually had the chance to ask a handful of questions, but access was restricted, and these tightly-controlled events lacked anything like the rigour of a daily news conference. The party machines had succeeded in their twin aim of imposing message discipline and reducing the risk of hostilities with the media.

By the midpoint of the 2015 campaign the routine had become so predictable that some of the correspondents assigned to follow the party leaders began to expose the ploys that were being used; they criticised the exclusion of journalists without the correct accreditation and the absence of contact with un-vetted members of the public. A wide shot of David Cameron hosting a rally in a large warehouse in Cornwall revealed that the building was empty except for the band of supporters grouped together in one corner. Conversations during an unannounced town centre walk-about were not spontaneous. When the Prime Minister stopped to talk he was not engaging with casual bystanders but party members who produced Conservative placards once television crews and photographers were on the scene.

Each election tends to throw up new concepts and ideas, perhaps a fresh interpretation of well-worn photo-shoots or a chance to exploit a new fad or fashion. The overall aim is always to offer the media imagery that builds on the campaign themes. Cameron's perpetual refrain throughout the 2015 campaign was that the Conservatives were 'on the side of working people', and that if re-elected he would lead a government that would again be 'helping hard-working families'. These slogans were reinforced by repeated photo-opportunities in workplaces and schools across the country. Nurseries and play groups were a favourite: Cameron would often be joined by a high-profile colleague such as Boris Johnson and they would sit on small chairs at a table while the children engaged in hand painting or similar activities. Photographers, television crews and reporters would be corralled at some distance, but perhaps near enough to throw the odd question, although unable, given the close presence of small children, to get further than a few pleasantries. When visiting factories and building sites, Cameron and the chancellor, George Osborne, were rarely seen unless wearing high-visibility jackets or vests. At each location, chatting to production line staff or

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construction workers, they stood out in their orange or yellow attire, usually wearing hard hats as well. On the occasions when the Prime Minister was joined by his wife Samantha, she was kitted out in similar fashion, happy to smile for photographers once she had donned her safety helmet.

The monstering of Miliband: A grudge match with newspaper proprietors

While the press pack soon became bored by such repetitive photo-opportunities, the Conservatives' election strategists knew that their message was being reinforced every time the pictures were shown in television news bulletins, or appeared in next day's newspapers. Presenting a positive emphasis on the world of work strengthened the hard sell of the party's campaign, a pitch that the Tories constantly returned to. Labour and the Liberal Democrats offered a competing range of photo-opportunities, but their imagery lacked the consistency of the 'high-vis' approach of their opponents. Rather than try to match Cameron's formula of a walk-about and chat inside a workplace environment, the Labour leader Ed Miliband steered clear of situations that might have given photographers the chance to picture him in awkward poses that played to the weirdo image that he had been burdened with by the tabloid press. The pounding that he would be subjected to, from his election as leader in September 2010 to the general election campaign and its dramatic aftermath, was as vicious as the treatment previously meted out to Gordon Brown, Neil Kinnock and Michael Foot.

In many ways the pre-election monstering of Miliband went further than simply the trashing of his personality and the ridiculing of his political credibility. He found himself embroiled in what came to resemble a grudge match with a handful of proprietors who were determined to use the political reporting of their newspapers to bolster their attempt to prevent the election of a Labour government that they feared would impose an authoritarian press standards regime, and interfere with the conduct of their media interests. Unlike his immediate predecessors, Miliband did not hold back from combat at a personal level, repeatedly singling out Rupert Murdoch by name when reminding voters that as leader of the opposition he had stood up for the public against the scandal of phone hacking and the abuses of the big energy companies and bankers.

Murdoch fought back through the pages of the *Sun*, his largest-selling newspaper, which did not limit itself to the predictable mix of wounding personal attack and Labour scare stories. Reportage to the effect that Miliband was a weirdo, ill-suited to high office, had long been a regular feature of the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph*, but the *Sun* went one step further in the lead-up to polling day, presenting news reports about Miliband as if they were appearing in the pages of a comic rather than a newspaper. Instead of using news photographs to illustrate its political stories, he appeared in the guise of various cartoon characters, complete with fictional speech bubbles. Battle lines for the monstering that ensued were apparent from late 2013 when the press proprietors, who had rejected a press standards authority backed by a royal charter, started to prepare for the launch the following year of their own independent regulator. In the view of the *Daily Mail*, Labour had backed state-sponsored regulation that would 'end 300 years of press freedom'. From then on Miliband could expect no mercy; he and his family would have to endure the kind of onslaught that Fleet Street had inflicted on Labour and trade union leaders of the past, and the wounding 'weirdo' agenda would be exploited with the tacit support of the Conservatives.

Peter Brookes, *The Times*'s cartoonist, had already taken to presenting the Labour leader and his shadow chancellor, Ed Balls, as *Wallace and Gromit*, the toothy, absent-minded inventor accompanied by his faithful dog. Miliband's teeth were a gift for cartoonists. The depiction of him as a somewhat goofy geek had not gone unnoticed by the *Sunday Telegraph*, which had evidently read the mind of Conservative spin doctors. Alongside a cartoon of Miliband with tombstone teeth, its columnist Iain Martin could not resist posing the questions: 'Is this the Tories' secret weapon?'

Britain's cartoonists are often credited with being the first to associate a politician with a particular facial characteristic, quirky gesture, prop or perhaps item of attire, and for the press photographers Miliband's protruding teeth were about to become an example of life imitating art. Shortly before a photo-call in May 2014, Miliband was happy for the press pack to join him as he popped into a café at the New Covent Garden flower market for an early-morning bacon sandwich, not realising that his troublesome teeth would also be on the menu. As the Labour leader started struggling to eat his bacon butty, London *Evening Standard* photographer Jeremy Selwyn captured a moment that politicians dread, an image that

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would come to be associated with any mention of their name. The *Sun*'s savaging of Miliband intensified in the countdown to polling day and its eve-of-poll edition reprised the bacon sandwich photograph under the headline 'Save our bacon'. The story line harked back to Kelvin MacKenzie's infamous 1992 polling day front page of Neil Kinnock's head superimposed on a light bulb alongside the headline: 'If Kinnock wins today, will the last person to leave please turn out the lights.' The text was as partisan as MacKenzie's, but perhaps did not have quite the same bite: 'This is the pig's ear Ed made of a helpless sarnie. In 48 hours, he could be doing the same to Britain ... don't swallow his porkies and keep him out.'

Try as they might, the *Sun* and its Tory stablemates could not ignore the relentless tide of opinion poll predictions that the result would be so close that another hung parliament was almost a certainty. The bold headline on the *Sun*'s election-day front page said: 'Well hung' in capital letters over YouGov's 'knife-edge' forecast of a 34-34 per cent dead heat between Labour and the Conservatives. Speculation about the prospects for another coalition government had dominated the news agenda for weeks, prompting endless theorising about how the rival parties might line up, and their likely terms for a deal. Opinion polls became the prism through which the election was being reported; the pollsters' forecasts were so consistent they dictated the course of the campaign, influencing tactics to a far greater extent than had ever previously been the case. Eleven were published on the eve of poll, ten of which suggested there was only one point between Cameron and Miliband, but there had been literally hundreds of surveys commissioned during the 100-day countdown to polling day.

New players on the election stage: opinion pollsters join the political commentariat

A guessing game bolstered by the uncertainties being generated by the opinion pollsters suited the news media because the 2010 coalition government had deprived the lobby of what had hitherto been one of the mainstays of a journalist's life at Westminster. Generations of political correspondents had spent countless hours writing and broadcasting about the likely choice of polling day. By opting for the stability of a fixed parliament, and by deciding that Thursday 7 May would be the date of the 2015 general election, David Cameron and Nick Clegg had, at a stroke, deprived reporters of the great unknown, the one overriding uncertainty that could be relied upon to sustain months of pre-election reportage. Our previous pre-occupation with election timing had not been misplaced: until the 2010 coalition agreement, Prime Ministers had jealously guarded their right to choose the moment to go to the country and seek a new mandate. British political history has often turned on the timing of elections, and several post-war premiers have rued their choice of polling day. But journalists and pundits can never be accused of lacking inventiveness, and what better way to inject a sense of excitement into their coverage than to manufacture a timetable that would create interest and generate headlines for both newspapers and broadcasters alike. Almost without having been prompted, the news media made a collective decision in mid-January to start a 100-day countdown to the election, and journalists were soon busily engaged in exploiting another imponderable, the unpredictability of multi-party politics.

As a continuous flow of opinion surveys heightened the drama of the media's guessing game, raising in the process the profile of the polling companies, the pollsters were increasingly being called upon to interpret their own statistics. They found themselves elevated to the political commentariat, and were commissioned to write newspaper columns and supply regular punditry for radio and television programmes. Not content with simply conducting surveys and analysing the information they had obtained, the pollsters morphed into players on the political stage exploiting their predictions to help float competing scenarios around the possible make-up of a future coalition government. Their denouement was spectacular: a massive exit poll commissioned by BBC, ITV and Sky News was greeted with amazement when released on election night programmes at 10 pm. Against all the predictions of pollsters who had been calling the shots for so many weeks, a survey of 22,000 voters questioned as they left polling stations showed that Cameron was in a commanding lead. The Conservatives were predicted to be the largest party with 316 seats, well ahead of Labour on 238. When all the votes were counted their tally had increased to 331, an outright majority of 12, a result that Cameron declared was the 'sweetest victory of all'.

Election strategists said subsequently that if they had only known that the opinion polls were so misleading, they would have changed their approach and adjusted their daily programme of campaign events. Almost immediately the British Polling Council, supported by

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the Market Research Society, announced an inquiry to discover why 'all the pollsters underestimated the Conservative lead over Labour'. Two of the theories that attracted much attention were that the polling companies failed to reflect the significance of 'shy Tories', and that online polls used by companies such as YouGov tended to favour Labour. Miliband had been buoyed throughout the campaign by the predictions of a close result, and party activists claimed the weight of comment on social media was running heavily in Labour's favour. But the uncertainty of the outcome did work to the Conservatives' advantage because it assisted Cameron's election supremo Lynton Crosby as he pursued strategies aimed at peeling off wavering supporters from both Labour and the Liberal Democrats, and of also attracting floating voters.

Although Crosby considered opinion surveys commissioned by the newspapers had distorted news coverage, and created 'a wall of noise' that he feared might have destabilised the Conservatives' campaign, he acknowledged in post-election interviews that the polls made the public realise that their votes mattered: 'People looking for certainty and stability thought we must be careful with our vote.' Nonetheless the polls had been a distraction for Cameron's strategist because, to his annoyance, they sustained story lines that the Prime Minister could not win outright because of mistakes in the Conservatives' campaign. Newspaper pollsters, commentators and correspondents had, in Crosby's opinion, 'abdicated their responsibility' to find out what was going on because they had used the 'prism of the polls' to predict what would happen. 'A pollster relying on an online survey is like a doctor just taking a patient's temperature, but not telling the patient why the temperature is high or low. ... We build polls on a basis of knowledge and research, so we understand what truly drives voters, and how you can influence them.' Crosby's confidence from the start of the campaign that the Conservatives would gain an outright majority was based on a database built on the results of private party polls that contained details of 'tens of thousands of potential Tory voters who had been quietly monitored, and who helped Cameron return to Downing Street'.

Did 'the most dangerous woman in Britain' become Cameron's most effective recruiting sergeant?

Research data amassed by his campaign team at party headquarters prompted Crosby to devote considerable resources towards targeting Liberal Democrat constituencies, especially those in the south and south-west of England, where the Conservatives were convinced the sitting MPs were overstating their support, and were unlikely to benefit as much as they expected from being the incumbent. Pro-Conservative newspapers were on hand to assist, only too willing to promote a fear-factor agenda that worked to the party's advantage, helping to peel off Liberal Democrat waverers. Ed Miliband found himself locked in what for Labour became a deadly embrace with Nicola Sturgeon. The possibility of a coalition government in which the Scottish Nationalists finished up dictating policy at Westminster was a scenario that was presented in ever starker terms, and in the event, was said to have encouraged many undecided English voters to opt decisively for Cameron. Ms Sturgeon had no hesitation in pushing Miliband into a corner, urging Labour to work together with the SNP to 'lock David Cameron out of Downing Street', an appeal that provoked an all-too predictable response from newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph*: she had become 'the most dangerous woman in Britain'.

Crosby and his allies in the Conservative press went to great lengths to stoke fears that a Miliband-led coalition would have to be propped up by the Nationalists. According to Crosby: 'The SNP had two powerful leaders; Alex Salmond was seen as very cunning, and Nicola Sturgeon strong in terms of ability. They were such a contrast to the lack of clarity and weakness of Ed Miliband. Our data confirmed that voters sensed the political cunning of these two would outsmart Miliband, and that the electorate would pay the price.' The SNP were not averse to goading their tormentors: they understood the potency of being able to traduce unelected newspaper editors in what was once Fleet Street for fostering divisive and uncalled for interference in the affairs of Scotland. Tabloid abuse was, in effect, an ally in a campaign to reinforce the Scots' sense of identity.

When historians reflect on the momentous advance of Scottish nationalism they can hardly ignore the impact of unrelenting press hostility before both the 2014 referendum on independence, and then the general election seven months later. Divisions in the Conservative party under both Margaret Thatcher and John Major were similarly exacerbated by the undeviating negativity of the popular press towards the European Union. An anti-EU agenda had powered Nigel Farage's early success in build-

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ing support for the United Kingdom Independence Party. Voters' anger and disillusionment had been sustained by an endless diet of stories about unelected bureaucrats in Brussels inflicting change after change on the British way of life. Tory-supporting tabloids presented Farage, pint and cigarette in hand, as the 'friendly bloke next door', the one man prepared to speak up for the British public. After gaining most seats in the 2014 elections for the European Parliament, and winning by-elections after the defection of two Tory MPs, he seemed poised to lead a UKIP breakthrough in the general election. Farage's folksy image took a battering as polling day approached and the previously favourable tide of publicity turned against him. Nonetheless UKIP did secure 3.8 million votes, but to his great disappointment returned only one MP to Westminster. UKIP's achievement in gaining the third largest share of the UK vote, yet ending up with a lone voice in the House of Commons, was in sharp contrast to the SNP's electoral bonanza, a haul of 56 seats on a total tally of just 1.4 million votes.

Farage joined a chorus of criticism of the vagaries of first-past-the-post voting. A study by the Electoral Reform Society showed that the 2015 result was the most disproportionate in the history of UK elections. A winner-takes-all electoral system had piled up 7.4 million votes for UKIP, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens yet the three parties finished up with only 10 MPs between then. Nick Clegg's resignation within hours of the result, like that of Ed Miliband, was inevitable after the near annihilation of his parliamentary party, reduced from 67 MPs to a mere eight.

Cameron's rent-a-quote deputy needed an effective communications strategy

Clegg's five years as deputy prime minister had been a public relations disaster from the moment his party broke its 2010 election pledge to vote against any increase in student tuition fees. He finally apologised two years later, but had to suffer the humiliation of finding his words had gone viral at the hands of internet satirists. His party political broadcast explaining his U-turn in sombre tones was put to music, repeating 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry' over and over again.

In so many ways the 2010 coalition agreement had sown the seeds for the Liberal Democrats' virtual wipe-out. In dividing up the spoils, Clegg became Cameron's deputy and his party accepted five cabinet posts and fifteen other ministerial jobs. No thought seemed to have been given to the need for a long-term communications strategy: what would be the Liberal Democrats' pitch to the electorate five years later? I had expected Clegg to demand one of the top offices of state for himself, perhaps the role of home secretary, or perhaps education or health, a department and area of government that the Liberal Democrats would be able to declare their own, where he would be able to make a distinct contribution and have an impact that would be identifiable to the electorate. Instead, after the first flush of Conservative-Liberal Democrat co-operation, he came to be viewed by the public as no more than a glorified trouble shooter. Clegg relished the chance to present himself as an authoritative voice across government departments, second only to the Prime Minister, seemingly oblivious to the danger that he might come to be viewed as nothing more than a rent-a-quote deputy, whose eagerness to talk the talk would only encourage the news media to treat him as Cameron's aunt sally.

Clegg was unable to repeat his breakthrough of the 2010 campaign when a beleaguered Gordon Brown agreed to join Cameron in the first-ever series of leaders' televised debates. An even greater surprise was that Labour and the Conservatives accepted without hesitation that there should be a three-way split with the Liberal Democrats. Equal billing with the prime minister and Conservative leader in front of millions of television viewers offered Clegg the national recognition that his predecessors, David Steel, Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy had spent a lifetime establishing. 'I agree with Nick' became the catchphrase of the 2010 campaign, a stroke of good fortune that would not be repeated. From the outset, Cameron refused to participate in another round of head-to-head confrontations, and it was only after weeks of bad-tempered exchanges, and threats that his podium might be left empty, that he finally agreed to take part in one single head-to-head encounter, but only on condition that the line-up was extended to include other party leaders.

The resulting seven-way debate was another first for a UK election. While the inclusion of the leaders of UKIP, SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Greens had achieved Cameron's purpose of diluting the potential impact of Miliband or Clegg, he had inadvertently given electors a glimpse of what multi-party politics could offer, an illustration of how the custom and practice of British politics might be reshaped through electoral reform and a fairer system of voting.

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'Dawn of rainbow politics' was the front-page headline of the *i* newspaper above a picture of seven leaders standing behind their podiums.

Far from being able to reinforce his authority as Prime Minister as his advisers thought might be the outcome of a diffuse seven-way debate of Cameron v. the rest, he found himself facing a sustained assault from a trio of party leaders who had an agreed and co-ordinated approach. Nicola Sturgeon (SNP), Leanne Wood (Plaid Cymru) and Natalie Bennett (Greens) turned their fire from the Prime Minister to Miliband in a second five-way *Challengers*' debate that excluded Cameron and Clegg. Immediately it finished the three women were photographed smiling together in a group hug on the platform, an image that drew immediate comparison to Antonio Canova's celebrated statue *The Three Graces*.

Craze for selfies symbolised superficiality of election coverage

Safe in the knowledge that the debates were unlikely to allow either Miliband or Clegg the airtime that they might have hoped for, Cameron put greater effort into his set-piece television interviews, exploiting his well-practised ease in front of camera. From the start of the Conservative leadership election in 2005, he had relaxed the boundaries on media access to his private life, happy to be photographed and filmed at home with his wife Samantha and their children. He understood full well the political value of images of the Camerons *en famille*, and as the years went by he extended his in-vision repertoire of domestic duties, and was often filmed or photographed preparing breakfast for the children. He seemed to know instinctively that a must-see location of the 2015 campaign would be today's live-in kitchen, regarded by many as the hub of a modern family home. Under the influence of his culinary prowess, kitchens in Downing Street and his constituency home morphed into sets that could just as easily have accommodated the celebrity chef Jamie Oliver. Never before had a kitchen been the location for an epic political pronouncement, so there was amazement in Westminster and Whitehall when he startled the BBC's deputy political editor, James Landale, by declaring he intended to be a two-term Prime Minister: 'I am standing for a full second term. ... The third term is not something I'm contemplating.' Not to be outdone Miliband, Clegg and Sturgeon were interviewed in their kitchens, but it was Miliband's misfortune to be filmed in his 'functional kitchenette' upstairs, rather than the family's 'lovely' kitchen downstairs, prompting a mini tabloid frenzy about 'two kitchens' Miliband.

'Kitchengate' apart, the novelty act that had the greatest impact was the craze for selfie photographs. Initially Cameron blamed the 'curse of the selfie' for hindering his campaign, but the party leaders realised that stopping for photographs was a sure-fire way to enhance their street credibility. Instead of being harangued by un-vetted passers-by, or having to square up to a heckler, there was the soft option of trading on the celebrity status that leading politicians can acquire. Potentially difficult encounters could be defused in an instant by calling over by-standers waving smart phones. Ms Sturgeon, greeted like a rock star by her supporters, was judged the 'queen of the selfies': she knew instantly how to operate every camera phone on the market and precisely where to place her head for the best possible photo.

The craze for selfies symbolised the superficiality of much of the election coverage. A chance to capture on their mobile phone or tablet a picture of themselves with a politician they had seen on the 'telly' seemed to be a priority for many of those who turned up at political events, or who were swept along in the slipstream of a party leader's walk-about. Instead of the rigour of daily news conferences, or the chance to view sustained head-to-head debates between the Prime Minister and leader of the opposition, the electorate was short-changed, and voters could hardly be blamed for dismissing the campaign as boring and repetitive. Perhaps the next academic inquiry should be to discover the impact of selfies on voting patterns: do those who have photographed themselves with a leading politician end up giving that party their vote. On second thoughts, No. Political propagandists need no further tips on how to dumb down elections and avoid the scrutiny that the electorate deserves.

Note on the Contributor

Nicholas Jones was a BBC industrial and political correspondent for 30 years. He has written extensively on the relationship between politicians and the media, He was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Wolverhampton in 2005, and appointed an honorary visiting professor at the Cardiff School of Journalism in 2011. His latest book, *The election A-Z*, published in July 2015, is his fifth about a general election. Previous books include *Election 92*, *Campaign 1997*, *Campaign 2001*, and *Campaign 2010: The making of the Prime Minister*.

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Martin Moore
Gordon Ramsay

Digital agenda-setting: Measuring mainstream and social media influence during the UK 2015 election campaign

This paper examines the setting up and managing of 'Election Unspun', an experimental news content analysis project, and its main findings. In the end, the project collected every tweet from more than 3,000 political actors and influencers, analysed the national newspapers' coverage and websites of ITV News, Sky News and Channel 4 News and the UK versions of the* Huffington Post *and* Buzzfeed *Politics during the 2015 general election campaign in the UK. It concludes that, despite the plethora of media platforms available, 2015 was a top down, stage-managed campaign. From the statements, tweets and party political material published by the parties, the party leaders, and the candidates it was clear that both the Conservatives and Labour were eager to talk about the economy, and the press largely followed their lead.

Keywords: digital agenda setting, UK General Election, media content analysis

Introduction

On Tuesday 21 April 2015, George Osborne published an unusually detailed tweet for a Chancellor of the Exchequer: 'We will help fund road improvements in Eastleigh, including Chickenhall Link Road and Botley bypass, and junction 6 of the M27' (Osborne 2015a). A few days later he told his Twitter followers about 'Our plan for the West Midlands: £50bn in HS2 and extending Enterprise Zone to cover the regeneration area around Curzon St station' (Osborne 2015b). The following week he increased the number of his transport and infrastructure commitments and their specificity. 'We will improve junction 25 of M5, upgrade Devon link road, start planning new station between Castle Cary & Taunton,' Osborne tweeted on Tuesday 28 April, nine days before the UK General Election (Osborne 2015c).

Osborne's tweets in the fortnight before the general election were clearly not accidental. They appeared to be part of a carefully planned strategy to make direct infrastructural commitments to specific geographic areas. It is not known whether the local Conservative candidates then used these commitments on the doorstep, but Osborne certainly gave them concrete pledges with which to woo voters, and material for their local paper in the days leading up to the election. We also know, looking at the tweets from previous weeks, that these infrastructural tweets were anomalous. Before Monday 20 April, Osborne was, like most candidates from the leading parties, publishing general tweets only a handful of times a day.

We know about Osborne's tweets because we – the small team at Election Unspun – followed them. We did not just follow Osborne's tweets but all 68,974 tweets of the 497 Conservative candidates we could identify on Twitter from Monday 30 March to polling day on Thursday 7 May. We followed another 560 Labour candidates (and their 128,627 tweets), more than 1,300 other candidates from smaller parties, and over 700 political influencers on Twitter. In total this added up to more than one million tweets during the campaign.

Despite this vast number of tweets, Twitter was our secondary focus during the UK 2015 election campaign. Our primary focus was the mainstream media. From the websites of the national press, public service broadcasters, and major online news sites such as *Huffington Post* and *Buzzfeed*, we collected data on approximately a quarter of a million news articles, from across sixteen news outlets from the beginning of 2015 through to the May election.

We published the findings of our data driven analysis of media coverage of the UK election online at www.electionunspun.com and in two subsequent publications – *UK election 2015: Setting the agenda* (Moore and Ramsay 2015) and *Election unspun: Political parties, the press, and Twitter during the 2015 election campaign* (Moore et al. 2015).

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Martin Moore
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This paper explains how we set up and managed 'Election Unspun', an experimental news content analysis project using software we developed expressly for the purpose, and its main findings. It was a project conceived in the light of the enormous possibilities for large-scale news analysis offered by advances in processing power, data storage, analytical tools, and the explosion of information in a digital age. With a relatively small team, modest resources, and some programming expertise, it is now possible to undertake news analysis projects on a scale unimaginable just a few years ago. By explaining 'Election Unspun', we hope to show how new researchers might experiment with new methods of content analysis on large digital datasets.

Content analysis: Analogue to digital

News content analysis used to be, and in many cases still is, a very time-consuming process. In the days of print-only newspapers – and today still, in non-digitised archives – it could mean spending weeks in a newspaper library poring over kilometres of microfiche. Video or audio analysis could involve spooling through piles of VHS tapes, audio cassettes, or delicate (and sometimes disintegrating) reel-to-reel film. Before the use of spreadsheet and statistical analysis packages, results would need to be hand-calculated. The usual constraints of time and money ensured that such content analysis projects were either limited in scope, or very expensive and required a small army of researchers. More recently, print news content analysis has been made somewhat easier by the collections of commercial companies such as Factiva or Gorkana, but again large-scale analyses using these resources require a lot of manual counting and transferring of data to, for example, SPSS for analysis (Ramsay 2014). Access also requires expensive subscriptions. Though source material is far easier to collate using these techniques, analysis can still be extremely time-consuming.

There is something a little incongruous about manually counting digital information and going through several stages of gathering and preparing data to transfer to Excel or SPSS before even rudimentary quantitative analysis can be done. We set out to develop a more efficient and flexible way of doing news content analysis, building on our previous experience of creating digital tools such as Journalisted.com and Churnalism.com. Unable to find any equivalent open-source software to do the job, we built our own digital news content analysis tool, Steno. It was named in honour of Nicholas Steno (1638-1686), a 17th century Danish geologist who, amongst other things, discovered that fossils did not fall from the sky (as many of his contemporaries believed), but were instead the accretion of once-living organisms. As Nicholas Steno made discoveries in layers of rock laid down over millennia, so – our thinking went – Steno, the research tool, would discover patterns in layers of news articles laid down day after day.

Part content collector and part analytical tool, Steno can be aimed at news websites, from which it will collect every article published, as well as logging important metadata about each article – who wrote it, when it was published, the headline and URL, and so on. This content is then stored in a structured database for retrieval. Provide Steno with the dates you would like to analyse, and it will provide every news article published by your chosen news sources on each chosen date. A desktop application then allows researchers to perform queries on the resulting sample of articles.

Ultimately, Steno is intended for targeted analysis of news coverage of specific policy areas. However, since the 2015 general election campaign provided a unique opportunity to see whether a small research team using Steno could deal with the complexities of monitoring the entire range of party policy platforms, we decided not just to cover the election as a whole, but to analyse election coverage on an ongoing week-by-week basis, making all the findings and data available online (via www.electionunspun.net). Once we knew that our analysis worked on our sample of mainstream media outlets, we decided to add a Twitter analysis component and started collecting every tweet from more than 3,000 political actors and influencers.

Doing Election Unspun taught us a lot. For example, we learned about the dynamics of the relationship between parties, press, Twitter and broadcast news – particularly the intimate relationship Twitter has with broadcasting. We learned about the bizarre inefficiencies of online publishing – for instance, that a shortlink in a tweet can link to up to 10 different shortlinks before reaching the original URL. We also learned that, before we begin any future similar project, we need to answer five questions.

Question 1: What news content should we analyse?

In a world where everyone can do journalism and publish news – and many do – establishing the boundaries of digital news content analysis is the fundamental first step. Even when fast

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and easy-to-use tools make analysis of large datasets possible, a realistic and justifiable sample is essential.

We began by focusing on articles published online by national newspapers (*The Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Daily Mirror*, etc), but quickly saw that it would be insufficient to exclude the BBC's news website and – consequently – the websites of ITV News, Sky News and Channel 4 News. Conscious that the period between the 2010 and 2015 general elections has seen the growth of serious online-only news publishers, we added the UK versions of the *Huffington Post* and *Buzzfeed* Politics. We could have gone further; weekly journals like the *Spectator* and *New Statesman* were publishing election campaign news and opinion daily, as were spin-off election sites like www.may2015.com.

Selecting a sample of Twitter accounts to analyse proved a greater challenge. Generating representative samples is a key concern in any analysis of Twitter (Bruns and Liang 2012, Gaffney and Puschmann 2014). Given that we were interested in understanding the dynamics of political influence and agenda-setting, we decided to focus on a selection of political actors and political influencers. Of the two groups, political actors were fairly easy to identify. We followed all 2,412 parliamentary candidates with personal Twitter accounts. Identifying political influencers was more difficult. We used a combination of criteria – number of followers, number of profiles the account follows, Klout score, and the frequency and type of tweet content – to capture one group of general political influencers, and two groups of specialist policy influencers (Moore et al 2015).

Question 2: How should we collect the news content?

There are various ways to collect news content, some commercial and some non-commercial. We chose to develop software to do it ourselves by building Steno. This allows for the collection of very large amounts of information, and the subsequent analysis of that data through relatively straightforward tools. Steno is written in 'Go', an open source programming language developed by Google (it could just as well have been written in Python, Ruby, C++, Javascript or PHP). It consists of a server-side set of programs that collect the textual content and metadata from each URL, and a client-side graphical user interface (GUI) desktop application for performing analysis. The server-side runs continuously to collect news articles from a set of target sites. These articles are stored in a database, ready for later collection and analysis. Using the GUI application, the researcher can pull in articles (and/or tweets) from one or more servers. Once downloaded, the user can access and analyse them via a simple Excel-like window on the desktop. In the window are tools for tagging and untagging articles, and a simple scripting language to help automate this. The whole system is modular – different servers can be configured to collect different data, and the server Application Programme Interface (API) for extracting articles can be used by other tools, not just the GUI application.

Question 3: How should we index the news content?

The key to analysing bulk media content is applying effective methods of filtering and classification. For example, to find the proportion of news articles that contain references to political party leaders, one had to find all the articles that contain references to one or more leader. Steno does this by 'tagging' – in other words by adding descriptors to content to explain what it is or what it contains. Tagging is done through matching strings of text within articles, or on the basis of metadata attached to certain articles (i.e. text of byline or headline). Like keywords within news websites, each article could have a large number of tags attached.

Relatively simple tagging – marking all articles containing references to Nigel Farage, leader of UKIP, for example – was fairly straightforward. We used a 'party leaders' tagging script, which automatically tagged relevant articles according to whether it mentioned each leader. The 'Nigel Farage' script fragment was: '"Nigel Farage" OR Farage OR "Farage's" => TAG farage'. We also used more complex tagging, for example to study specific policy issues such as health or welfare. Basing our definition of policy issues on the Ipsos-MORI Issues Index, we separated out fourteen areas of public policy and wrote scripts to capture all references to each of these areas. For something like defence and foreign policy, we identified a number of recurring terms, such as 'Trident', 'Ministry of Defence', 'foreign office', to indicate that the article was about defence or foreign policy. Tags were not mutually exclusive; many articles referenced multiple areas of policy. For Twitter, we added abbreviations and hashtags to the tagging script. In this case, examples included #tridentrenewal and #scraptrident.

Question 4: Is the data clean?

No large data set will start out clean. Unexpected content will accidentally be included, and content incorrectly tagged. For our news content, we cleaned the data in two stages.

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First, we took out all the articles that had nothing to do with politics (sport, lifestyle, fashion, entertainment) by automatically tagging them, usually on the basis of URL content (e.g. /sport/), and deleting. This left us with the 'core' of political news articles that we conducted our analysis on, typically 7,000-8,000 articles each week. Second, we scanned through the lists of articles tagged for each policy issue to see if any had been tagged incorrectly. Some policy tags, we found, were highly accurate: immigration and housing, for example, could be tagged by a number of words and phrases that were fairly unambiguous. Certain other policy areas – particularly education and crime, policing and justice policy – were associated with more ambiguous terms (e.g. 'sentence', 'academy') that occasionally resulted in mis-tagged articles, which then needed to be untagged. This process took around 2-3 hours per weekly sample.

Question 5: What will the data tell us?

Large data sets, particularly of news content, can seem overwhelming. By developing hypotheses, and assessing the extent to which the data can provide the answer to these hypotheses, the initial stages of analysis become much more manageable. Having devised methods to collect, tag and clean the data we came up with a series of hypotheses to test. These were partly based on findings from previous studies of media and Twitter in election campaigns, and partly from our own experience of monitoring news sources and Twitter. For parliamentary candidates on Twitter, for example, we wanted to see if candidates used the platform for dialogue or, as found in previous studies, for broadcast (Graham, Jackson and Broersma 2014). We wanted to discover what political issues candidates were tweeting about and the extent to which they were 'on message'. We were keen to explore where candidates linked to from Twitter, and whether mainstream news media sources were their chief sources of authority.

What did Election Unspun 2015 discover?

Despite the plethora of media platforms available – or perhaps in response to the abundance of media – 2015 was a top down, stage-managed campaign. From the statements, tweets and party political material published by the parties, the party leaders, and the candidates it was clear what they wanted the campaign to be about. Both the Conservatives and Labour were eager to talk about the economy, and the press largely followed their lead.

Economy, economy, economy

Almost a third (31 per cent) of articles about any policy area, or 7,967 articles on national news sites, referred to the economy over the course of the official campaign from Monday 30 March up to Wednesday 6 May. This compares with just over 11 per cent of articles that referred to health (2,897 articles) and 10 per cent that referred to education (2,494).

Reports and commentary about the economy focused first on spending cuts (1,351), then on economic growth (921) and cutting the deficit (675). These were all issues about which the Conservatives spoke regularly and had consistent messaging. Less covered were some of the issues Labour wanted to emphasise, notably zero hours (445), mansion tax (339) and non-domicile status (322).

The economic agenda in national news outlets tended to follow the parties' lead, chiefly that of the Conservatives. On Monday 30 March, the first day of the official campaign, for example, *The Times* led with 'Labour will raise tax bill by £3,000, says Cameron'. This followed a claim first made by the Conservatives in a dossier released in January 2015, *A cost analysis of Labour Party policy* (Conservative Party 2015a) which was then re-released for the official campaign under the title *£3,028: Labour's tax rise for every working household* (Conservative Party 2015b). The Conservative claim also featured in the *Sun* and *Express* (Newton Dunn 2015; Little 2015).

It was symptomatic of Labour's difficulties finding supportive coverage in anything but a handful of papers, that on the first day of the official campaign they paid for an advertisement in the *Financial Times*. The full-page advert warned of the threat to UK business of a British exit of the EU. Labour would struggle for coverage of its economic proposals in the press throughout the campaign, with the exception of its non-domicile announcement. For the most part, the press seemed more willing to publish Conservative announcements, sometimes almost verbatim.

On Friday 10 April, *The Times* led its front page with the news that 'Tories freeze rail fares as Labour edges ahead'. The first sentence of the article reported the news as a party press office might have written it: 'Rail fares will be frozen in real terms over the next five years under Conservative plans to prevent more than 250,000 commuters being ripped off at the ticket office' (Paton and Elliot 2015).

On Wednesday 29 April, the *Telegraph* led its front page with 'Cameron's pledge: No tax rises for five years'. Again the first sentence read like a press office announcement: 'There will be no

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VAT, national insurance or income tax rises for the next five years under a Conservative government, David Cameron will announce' (Swinford 2015).

Other front page leads announcing or backing Conservative policy included: 'Osborne's housing revolution' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 5 April), 'Tories: Give £1m to your children tax-free' (*Daily Mail*, 12 April), 'Maggie's "right to buy" dream is back' (*Express*, 14 April), 'We are the true party of working people' (*Telegraph*, 14 April), 'Happy ever grafter' (*Sun*, 15 April), and 'White Van Dan: Cam's my man' (*Sun*, 28 April). Over the course of the campaign, there were 80 national newspaper front page leads that supported the Conservative position.

There were 30 newspaper front page leads that were sympathetic to Labour. These tended to be less overtly supportive than the Conservative leads, and were often linked to an interview. The *Guardian*, for example, led with an interview with Labour campaign adviser David Axelrod on 18 April: 'Tories are "panic-stricken" says top Miliband adviser'. The *Independent* led with 'Miliband's £7.5bn game changer' on Sunday 12 April, based on an exclusive interview with the Labour leader. The *Mirror* led with 'My pledge' on the day of the Labour manifesto launch, again based on an exclusive Miliband interview.

Of Labour's economic announcements during the campaign – on tax avoidance, the minimum wage, zero hours contracts, rent capping, tuition fees – only one gained traction across the political spectrum: the commitment to cancel non-domicile tax status. This led not just the *Guardian* and the *Independent* front pages on 8 April but also those of *The Times* and the *Financial Times*. In response, the Conservative MP and Secretary of State for Defence, Michael Fallon, wrote a personal attack on the Labour leader in *The Times*: 'Ed Miliband stabbed his own brother in the back to become Labour leader. Now he is willing to stab the United Kingdom in the back to become prime minister' (Fallon 2015). This bid to change the subject was ultimately successful. 'To be fair,' Stephen Tall tweeted, 'Michael Fallon's tactic of getting people to stop talking about non-doms has worked. At great cost to his cred, but still' (Tall 2015).

Health a distant second and immigration fifth

What was *not* being talked about was also interesting. Some 4 per cent of mainstream news coverage was about the environment. Low as this was, it was even lower on Twitter, where less than 3 per cent of tweets from political actors and influencers were about the environment. Not even the Green Party leader, Natalie Bennett, was closely associated with the environment. In the press, Bennett was associated with the environment less than she was with health, immigration, defence, or education.

Periodic focuses of attention towards the NHS and health were exceptions to the rule, even when the Labour Party sought to shift the agenda in this direction. In the week beginning Monday 20 April, Labour staged a series of events in an effort to push health to the top of the campaign agenda. The party launched a disability manifesto, participated in a King's Fund healthcare debate with Jeremy Hunt, Health Secretary since 2012, and Andy Burnham, then Shadow Health Secretary, and unveiled a new NHS poster campaign. The same week new and startling figures were released about visits to food banks. Yet during that week, coverage of health in the mainstream media actually fell. The number of articles on health published across the sixteen leading national news sites (including bbc.co.uk) dropped from 563 the previous week to 510 in week four.

On Wednesday 22 April, the Trussell Trust released figures showing the number of visits to food banks had increased by 19 per cent over the previous year to 1,084,604 (Trussell Trust 2015). The story did not feature in the print editions of some of the largest-selling national newspapers. According to left-leaning blog *Left Foot Forward*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Telegraph*, the *Sun*, the *Express*, and *The Times* did not cover the news in their print editions (though the *Daily Mail* did publish a story online) (Barnett 2015). When the story was covered by the *Telegraph* it was to highlight how the Trussell Trust had been forced to clarify its headline figures (Hope 2015).

By contrast, the news triggered much debate on Twitter and online, particularly amongst social policy influencers. The number of health-related tweets by social policy influencers – the issue they were already tweeting most about – rose by 10 per cent (from 4,266 tweets to 4,695) as coverage in mainstream media fell by the same percentage. In the absence of much mainstream news coverage, social policy influencers linked to the Trussell Trust statistics themselves, and to older tweets including the 'List of reasons people had benefits cut and turned to foodbanks', and to the tweet by Clare Gerada, medical director of the Practitioner Health Programme, of 28 March: 'Sadly, last week, I

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referred more patients to the food bank than I did to A&E. Something profoundly wrong with the way we live today' (Gerada 2015).

If coverage of health in the mainstream media was lower than expected, news coverage of immigration was even lower still. Across the news published in 16 national outlets, immigration was the fifth most referenced political topic, after the economy, health, education and foreign policy/defence. This despite being considered the most important issue facing Britain for four of the first five months of 2015, according to the Ipsos MORI issues index (Ipsos MORI 2015).

If the press were reporting immigration less than might have been expected, candidates from the two main parties were hardly acknowledging the topic on Twitter. Only 3 per cent of Conservative candidates' political tweets were about immigration, as were the same proportion of Labour candidates' tweets. Even when immigration became a subject of debate during the campaign the candidates did not comment on it on Twitter in substantially greater numbers.

In the fortnight from 13 April to 26 April, the UKIP leader, Nigel Farage, caused controversy during the TV 'Challengers' debate' by blaming foreigners for the housing crisis, Katie Hopkins triggered a social media storm by comparing immigrants to cockroaches in a column in the *Sun* on 17 April and a migrant boat capsized in the Mediterranean, killing hundreds and sparking a migration debate across Europe (Hopkins 2015). During this fortnight Conservative candidates published more than 4,000 tweets about the economy, each day on average. Over the same period they published just 197 tweets about immigration (14 per day). For Labour candidates the figures are 330 per day for the economy, and 16 per day for immigration. The number of tweets about immigration hardly moved despite Farage, Hopkins and the Mediterranean tragedy.

A partisan press

As in previous UK elections, most national newspapers had decided which party they wanted to win the election long before the official campaign started. Having decided many of them then chose to express their preference repeatedly.

From Monday January 5 to Sunday 3 May, there were 1,050 leader columns in the national press that expressed a positive or negative view of one or other of the political parties. Forty per cent of these expressed a view about the Conservatives (424 articles) and another 40 per cent a view about Labour. Yet, while more than half the leader columns that expressed a view about the Conservatives were positive (51 per cent), only 21 per cent of articles about Labour were positive. The majority of Labour-supporting leaders were published in the *Mirror* – 55 (out of a total of 87) in total between January and May. The *Guardian* and *Mirror* combined accounted for 85 per cent of positive leader articles about Labour.

The *Telegraph* was the most supportive of the Conservatives, publishing 55 leader articles in support. The *Daily Mail* followed this with 49, followed by the *Express* with 36, the *Sun* with 35 and *The Times* with 34.

When it came to negative leader articles about Labour, the *Sun* led the way with 102. This exceeded the *Daily Mail*'s 75 anti-Labour leaders, the *Telegraph*'s 67, *The Times*' 39 and the *Express*' 33. More than half the negative leader articles about the Conservatives were published in the *Mirror* (109), and 44 more in the *Guardian*. Overall, on the basis of leader columns, the *Mirror* was the most partisan paper, with 109 anti-Conservative and 55 pro-Labour leaders.

An *Independent* report claimed that Rupert Murdoch, frustrated that the *Sun* had not been critical enough of Labour, berated its journalists in late February 2015. 'Rupert made it very clear he was unhappy with the *Sun*'s coverage of the election,' the *Independent* reported. 'He instructed them to be much more aggressive in their attacks on Labour and more positive about Conservative achievements in the run-up to polling day.' The paper's partisanship intensified during the subsequent official campaign (Sherwin and Wright 2015).

Proportionally, the greatest opprobrium was reserved for the SNP. Over the course of the official campaign – from 30 March to 6 May – there were, in total, 59 leader articles in the national press which expressed a view about the SNP; 58 of these were negative.

Candidates on Twitter: Broadcast not dialogue

Parliamentary candidates used Twitter during the campaign, but not as a way of creating more openness and dialogue with the public. They used it as a broadcast campaign platform. Some 59 per cent of candidates' tweets were re-tweets, generally those by the party leader, the party press office or a senior party figure. When not re-tweeting, the candidates were telling followers that they were out campaigning: 'My

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pedometer says I walked 10.1 miles campaigning up and down in Islington and Battersea. Tired today *pours third cup of tea*', Emily Thornberry, Labour MP for Islington South and Finsbury, (@EmilyThornberry) tweeted on 22 April.

Tweets about political issues were generally consistent with top down messages. On 30 March, the Conservative incumbent for the Redditch constituency, Karen Lumley MP, tweeted: 'Only a Conservative government can secure a better future for families in Redditch County http://youtube/bLJo1tj7QZE [links to Conservative YouTube video]' (Lumley 2015). Tweets criticising opposition policy frequently linked to party posters – the following was tweeted by multiple accounts: 'The price of Labour: £3,028 extra tax for every working family – http://betterfutu.re/1MpbNT2 [links to sharing page for Conservative poster]'. Tweets about canvassing were positive, upbeat and bright: 'Out and about meeting people in East Brighton with my @bhlabour team,' Labour candidate Nancy Platts tweeted. 'Bright and sunny in Upper Bullington this morning,' Caroline Nokes MP told her followers (Nokes 2015).

On political issues, Conservative candidates appeared to be highly disciplined. Some 56 per cent of their tweets were about the economy (14,927 tweets). The next most tweeted about issue was health, at 13 per cent (2,492). Labour candidates also tweeted most about the economy (45 per cent of tweets), but were more likely to tweet about other political issues as well. Some 25 per cent of Labour tweets were about health and 9 per cent about education.

While the candidates were mostly restrained and cautious, the party press offices were noisy and antagonistic. The Conservative press office (@CCHQPress) was particularly prolific, tweeting an average of 92 times a day. Labour (@labourpress) was slightly less active, tweeting 57 times a day (perhaps because @UKLabour was also busy). The LibDem press office (@LibDemPress) was more reserved at only 34 tweets a day. Other parties tweeted from party rather than press accounts.

The Twitter feeds of the party press offices read like 21st century spin rooms. Throughout each day they pushed out positive messages about the party, negative messages about the opposition and links to those doing the same. The Twitter accounts were used for rapid rebuttal, to promote new election posters and videos, and to try to frame the language of debates.

Politicians in the press

Certain politicians came out of the media campaign better than others. George Osborne had a highly successful election in media terms. More than a thousand articles in the mainstream media referenced Osborne (1,069). Many, particularly those published by newspapers, wrote about the Chancellor and the economy over which he presided in glowing terms. In a *Telegraph* article entitled 'George Osborne's "housing revolution" election pledge', the paper asked: 'Does the Chancellor agree with Mr Cameron that he would make a fine leader of the party and PM one day?' (Ross 2015).

By contrast, Ed Miliband was lambasted and lampooned in much of the press. He was called a shameless hypocrite, a land-grabber, a tax avoider, a puppet of the unions and the SNP, and a flop, amongst other things. Some 5,374 articles were published in the mainstream press referencing Ed Miliband. Yet, there were also 46,756 tweets referring to the Labour leader, many of which reacted against the press coverage. Political influencers enjoyed and in some cases adopted the brief #milifandom craze and #JeSuisEd.

Broadcast and Twitter: A symbiotic relationship?

Beyond the politicking of the campaign itself, our data analysis also illuminated the relationship between different media platforms. By comparing the extent of coverage of issues over time, for example, it showed the symbiotic relationship between broadcast and Twitter. During each televised election debate, notably during the leaders' debate of 2 April, the challengers' debate of 16 April, and the *Question Time* of 30 April, political activity on Twitter shot up. The number of tweets published by political actors and influencers almost doubled on Thursday 2 April compared to the week previously – from an average of 23,000 to just under 45,000. Similar, if not quite as extreme, jumps happened on 16 and 30 April.

This intimate relationship between broadcast and Twitter is also apparent, to a lesser degree, on radio. When the Defence Secretary Michael Fallon re-asserted his claim that Ed Miliband would 'stab Britain in the back' over Trident on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme on Thursday 9 April, defence tweets more than tripled amongst political actors and influencers (2,034 tweets, compared to average 590 tweets per day).

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Conclusions

Twitter, while following rather than leading the campaign agenda, did to a large extent play a role in investigating factual claims by parties, news sources, and journalists. These observations have wide implications for British electoral politics for the next electoral cycle at the very least, and perhaps much longer. If social media continues to occupy a significant role in political communication, official claims by both parties and news outlets will be critiqued and – perhaps regularly – debunked, undermining trust and authority, but perhaps preventing the more transparent examples of spin. If political parties continue to view the expanded digital media landscape as necessitating damage-limiting and risk-averse campaigning, a long procession of dull campaigns may lie before the British electorate. Regardless, there will be a continuing need to monitor how politics, the media and the electorate interact in British politics, and emerging practices of digital news analysis – such as that we employed in the Election Unspun project – will play a vital role.

Overall, the data we generated during the Election Unspun project, as well as giving us concrete information on certain quantitative measures (mentions of parties and their leaders, policy issues covered, and so on), also allowed us to draw some broader conclusions about the 2015 general election campaign as a whole. First and foremost, 2015 was an extremely risk-averse campaign. Candidates on social media were on a very tight rein, and the major parties at various times restricted journalistic, never mind public, access to their walkabouts, photo-ops and factory visits. Second, the dominance of the economy as the main policy issue across all news outlets benefited the Conservatives, whose party messages (posters, interviews, official Twitter feeds) were very keen to remain focused on that issue.

During the course of the general election campaign we analysed hundreds of thousands of news articles and more than a million tweets. We could not have done this without digital analytics tools. The amount of digital content is only increasing. Whereas today we can justifiably still focus on national news sites and a sample of Twitter users, at the 2020 election there are likely to be many more platforms and channels we need to take into account.

We can build on our research model and start applying it to other elections within the UK and internationally, and specific policies, and other issues. How will the UK press cover the build-up to the UK's European referendum? How is the media and social media discussion of immigration evolving? Perhaps, if we can enhance the software in time, we could even take a shot at analysing the media and the November 2016 US election.

- The statistics referenced in this report were collected by the authors as part of the Election Unspun project and have been published in Moore and Ramsay (2015) *UK election 2015: Setting the agenda*, Policy Institute, King's College London; and Moore et al (2015) *Election Unspun: Political parties, the press, and Twitter during the 2015 UK election campaign*, London, Media Standards Trust.

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John Mair

Michael Cockerell: The Boswell of the British political classes

John Mair, chair of the Institute of Communication Ethics, draws a pen portrait of film-maker Michael Cockerell who gave the keynote at the ICE conference on political communication in October.

The film-maker Michael Cockerell, now 75, is a one-off. Single-handedly for the last two decades he has proved to be the (television) Boswell of the British political classes. Through a series of masterly documentary films for the BBC he has got behind their facades, under their skins and brought their arts, dark and light, to a wider audience. Cockerell is simply a public service genius.

His latest series *Inside the Commons*, broadcast in the spring of 2015, was a classic. After six years of negotiations, he and his team were able to get access to all areas of life in the House of Commons. The result – a wonderful mixture of the great and good and the not so great and good at work, some idea of the daily tensions and drama of being an MP and a fascinating picture of how the Commons works on a day-to-day basis. (Actually, it's a bit like a big public school.) What was most interesting was not just the motivations of the men and women who have that strange desire to be politicians and their world views but also the 'little people' who support them. One of my favourite sequences was of the workers who maintained and cleaned Big Ben: doing a vital job in the Palace of Westminster but doing it without much fuss or noise unlike those in the chambers. Without them, time might literally stand still.

The viewer was able to see some of the friendships that formed across party lines as well as the temptation to climb the greasy pole that is political office. One Tory rebel, Rob Wilson MP, quickly fell into line once offered the 'bag carrier' job of being a PPS to Chancellor George Osborne. Power, or the smell of it, really does corrupt. So much a fly on the Westminster wall did the Cockerell team become that they were subject to a quick aside from a passing David Cameron and a less swift attempt at sabotage in the chamber by MPs not entirely sympathetic to the project. Cockerell has remained tight-lipped on that member's identity.

Cockerell is hoping to follow *Inside the Commons* with *Inside the Lords*. He is currently in the tortuous negotiating ground rules phase of that project.

Documentary-maker *par excellence*

Cockerell is the political documentary-maker *par excellence* of the modern era. The genre is his. Nobody has come close in terms of access to, and sympathy for, the political classes. Many of his generation of reporters treat politicians with not so thinly disguised contempt (OK: think Jeremy Paxman). Cockerell does not and it gets him results.

He learned his craft in the hothouse atmosphere of BBC Lime Grove in the 1970s. That was an independent republic within the BBC. As Jeremy Paxman put it at a recent reunion 'The great thing about Lime Grove was that it was not Television Centre or Broadcasting House' i. e. they could hold two fingers up regularly to the BBC boss class and, indeed, the rest of the world.

The strand of programmes made in Lime Grove such as *24 Hours* and *Midweek* were like hamster exercise wheels for aspiring producers and reporters. Fast turnaround meant quick decision-making. Sometimes right, sometimes wrong, usually brave. In the Darwinian world of those terrace houses off the Goldhawk Road, the good made it to be barons on the flagship *Panorama*, then fifty minutes long in a Monday night prime time on BBC One. Cockerell sailed on the poop deck of that for 12 years with spells before and after on the commercial competitors, *World in Action* from Granada, and *This Week* from Thames TV.

I remember some of my favourite Cockerell magic moments. In *Love Tory* (1993), Alan Clark, the Boris Johnson of the Thatcher Years, mowing the ample lawns in his country pile

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with adoring wife Jane gazing on. In the same film, Clark's confesses his many mental and maybe physical adulterous indiscretions. His wife 'understood' it as part of the deal in the ways of the British upper classes. Just like Johnson's wife would later do so…

The producer of that film, David Pearson, told me that Clark came to see the final product, took copious notes, then went silent for a long time at the end before pronouncing it kosher.

Two decades later, I also recall in *Boris Johnson; The irrestible rise* (2013), 'Bojo' being subject to a light grilling by Cockerell so it was left to Eddie Mair (no relation) on *The Andrew Marr show* to give BJ a proper toasting – using the Cockerell film as his ammunition. I was there that morning. Boris did not stay for breakfast as is usual for guests. Being toasted once was enough for 'Bojo'. Michael is simply too polite or respectful of politicians to engage in hand-to-hand combat of the Mair sort.

Sleeping with the enemy

One of his great secrets is that he has spent a lifetime sleeping with the enemy. Of his three wives, at least two have been the progeny of great Tory families. First Anne Faber, the granddaughter of Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, then Bridget Heathcoat-Amory, the niece of the Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer (1958-1960), Derick Heathcoat-Amory. He is wired into the Tory ruling class but that did not stop him engaging with the New Labour elite when they emerged on top triumphant in 1997. His *News from Number Ten* (2000) had the blessing of the *de facto* deputy PM, Alastair Campbell, and went inside the belly of the Number Ten spin machine. In a clip from that programme, shown at the 2015 ICE annual conference, Cockerell even catches the great PM/PR man, Tony Blair, unawares at one point and does an off-the-cuff interview. Cockerell got away with it. He always does.

In recent years, Cockerell has widened his palette to examine governmental institutions such as the Foreign Office, the Home Office, the Treasury and even Whitehall itself in *The great offices of state* (2011) and *The secret world of Whitehall* (2011). One can only speculate at the sheer intensity of negotiations to get access to such hidden gardens.

In my view, Cockerell is best on the personal-political documentary. His filmed portraits of Margaret Thatcher (who liked him so much that he was 'allowed' to interview her for *Panorama*), Edward Heath, Barbara Castle, Roy Jenkins, Michael Howard and David Cameron will sit in the national film archives for many decades to come. What Cockerell is able to do each time is to build a personal relationship with the powerful (or wannabe powerful) and encourage them gently to open up and hopefully be indiscreet.

Note on the Contributor

John Mair, a former BBC producer, is the editor of sixteen 'hackademic' books. The latest three, *The BBC today: Future uncertain*, *Data journalism: Inside the global future* and *FOI: Ten years on*, were published in 2015 by Abramis.

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Murray Dick

Astroturfing in online comment: An investigation

This paper investigates 'astroturfing' (the creation of armies of 'sockpuppet' personae towards influencing public opinion) in online news comments. Concerns about this practice and its potential impact on public discourse have been voiced in the press, and across a range of disciplines; but it has been little studied in communications and journalism studies. How is online 'astroturfing' in contemporary online news and current affairs defined (operationally); how is it experienced, and what can be done to mitigate it? Given the difficulties attendant to normatively defining astroturfing, discussion shifts to how alternative frameworks in journalism ethics may help journalists challenge this new phenomenon.

Keywords: astroturfing, journalism ethics, online comments, online journalism, propaganda, user generated content

Introduction

Astroturfing is an acknowledged but relatively little understood problem in online journalism today. It has been discussed amongst the UK commentariat, particularly those on the left, in recent years (Johnson 2009; Monbiot 2010, 2011; Bienkov 2012). In May 2015, the word was included in dictionary.com (*PRNewswire* 2015); and, indeed, *The Oxford dictionary of journalism* includes an entry on the phenomenon (Harcup 2014). But beyond simple definitions, and in terms of how astroturfing may be identified, mitigated and challenged, there is little guidance in the literature; for example, the word does not even feature in any of the leading texts on journalism ethics (Harcup 2006; Frost 2014; Friend and Singer 2007). New technologies (such as 'persona management software') make the scale of online astroturfing campaigns potentially greater, and their reach potentially wider than their offline equivalent ('Happy Rockefeller' 2011). This may have consequences for the circulation of news and decision-making within the public sphere, especially given that uncivil comments beneath news stories have been found to change readers' interpretation of news stories (Anderson et al 2014).

This paper intends to establish a clearer understanding of astroturfing in online news comment via recourse to two connected strands of literature; a nascent (and in terms of disciplinary provenance, mixed) body of work concerning the practice of astroturfing, and the literature on online news comments (which sits within the wider literature on user-generated content in the newsroom). Interviews with the Readers' Editor (RE) and the Community Co-ordinator (CC) at the *Guardian* were undertaken towards better understanding astroturfing as experienced. Findings contribute towards a clearer understanding of astroturfing, which is then explored using alternative frameworks in the field of journalism ethics, towards bolstering normative guidelines and regulations in this field.

Literature review

Most recently, explorations of online astroturfing in the media have concerned its application in geopolitical positioning. In Russia, a secretive organisation known as the Internet Research Agency (Global Voices 2015) is believed to be behind the creation of astroturfing hoaxes across America (Chen 2015), while pro-Kremlin astroturfing has recently been exposed by a whistle-blower (Walker 2015). Alternatively the phenomenon (especially at a domestic level) often has a political-corporate aspect. For example, it has been explored in campaigns behind climate change denial (Dunlap and McCright 2011); and in the tobacco industry's backing of the Tea Party (Fallin et al 2013); and its undermining of local public health policy (Harris et al 2014).

In the academy, online astroturfing has been studied (and theorised) from a range of perspectives, including political science (Klotz 2007); business studies (Cho et al 2011); organisational studies (Kraemer et al 2013); information science (Zhang et al 2013); and critical linguistics (Gilewicz and Allard-Huver 2013). Experts in law have set out the bounds of commercial practices legislation in the EU with respect to astroturfing (Tigner 2009); while US scholars (e.g. Young 2009) and international anti-corruption groups (Mulcahy 2015) have questioned the robustness of regulation with respect to preventing astroturfing. In journalism studies, one of the few engagements with

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the phenomenon conceives it as a function of the pernicious, wider influence of public relations on news journalism (Davies 2008: 168-169).

Within the wider literature on the impact of user-generated content on modern networked news, there exists a sub-section with a particular focus on online news comment. Ethical considerations that influence the nature of moderation undertaken have been explored (Trygg 2012). Discussion 'below the line' has been found to be deliberative, and has been seen to contribute to journalists' practice in positive ways (Graham and Wright 2015), albeit the democratic potential has been found to be constrained by incivility (Collins and Nerlich 2014) and even hatred (Loke 2012). Anonymity in user commenting has been found to correlate with higher levels of incivility in online news comment (Rowe 2015). Competing perceptions of online news comment between journalists and the public create a paradox (Bergström and Wadbring 2015): while journalists acknowledge the importance of these spaces in fulfilling the democratic functions of news, they perceive this to be at the expense of damage to the news 'brand' (Canter 2013). This tension has elsewhere been theorised in terms of 'boundary work' (Robinson 2010); with the increasingly contested notion of privilege being seen to be grounded in the values and norms of professional journalism.

Research questions

In the context of reviewing these two sets of literature then, the following two, related research questions were formulated:

> RQ1 What is the nature of astroturfing in online news comments?

Given the lack of extant theoretical work in relation to this topic, a grounded theory approach to this problem was chosen.

> RQ2 How can astroturfing in online news comments be challenged?

Given the debate concerning the extent to which legal and regulatory frameworks offer adequate protection from astroturfing, I chose to move away from the normative, and towards consideration of different journalism ethics frameworks.

Methodology

Interviewing after the critical turn is defined by an historic, political and contextual boundedness (Fontana and Frey 2005: 695). The interview cannot be neutral, and any pretensions towards objectivity or scientific method have long lost credence; and in any case, my interviewees have very different experiences of the phenomenon at hand. I employed the 'social scientific prospector' (Holstein and Gubrium 2004: 116) approach, towards establishing validity in the data generated; and I sought 'thick description' of the operationalisation of astroturfing policy in the online newsroom.

In the absence of a suitable literature, or pre-existing framework in which to accommodate data about astroturfing in online news comment, it became necessary to ground interview design around the little that is known; and so questions arose during the process of analysing media sources on the phenomenon.

Two semi-structured telephoned interviews were carried out with the *Guardian*'s Readers' Editor (RE), Chris Elliott (8 July 15) and Community Editor (CE), Laura Oliver (24 July 15); lasting 40 minutes and 60 minutes respectively. In terms of sampling, my choice of interviewee was circumscribed by various factors; by the specialisms of those sought, and by access.

Findings

Definitions: theory and practice

> Q. How do you define astroturfing operationally?

RE alludes to an example from the *Observer*, in June 2015, concerning the UK branch of the Shugden Buddhist sect, and their plans to protest and disrupt a UK visit by the Dalai Lama. He said they were inundated with hundreds of emails and complaints (though not comments) from members of the cult and its supporters:

> I don't think they were astroturfing – I think they were all individuals, I mean individuals primed. When is it astroturfing and when is it not astroturfing? In Israel/Palestine, we've often had situations where lobby groups ... who believe profoundly in Israel's cause, and monitor us like mad and take exception and you will find maybe 20 complaints to the *Guardian* Readers' Editor that say the same thing, and it is quite clear that the person hasn't read it [the story], they've cut and pasted a sentence from some other site and dropped it in there. Now I don't know, is that astroturfing? It's similar to astroturfing, but ... whenever I think of astroturfing I thinking of a big secret operation that sets out to subvert and so on, but this is just a whole lot of people who haven't read the piece quite

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willing to believe that we've done something dreadful, and then just cut and paste a sentence. The effect is quite similar.

CC commented:

> It's hard to define sometimes the line ... but then where there are people obviously sharing links that appear to be politically organising, or they are repeating the same tropes and language found amongst other accounts. ... We have to see a critical mass of it. … The other difficulty with defining astroturfing on a site like ours is... we want to allow as broad a conversation as possible, we want to allow people to challenge what we say, what the *Guardian*'s own politics are. ... It can be very easy to very quickly say: 'Oh well, that's astroturfing,' when actually it's a lot of commenters disagreeing with a piece or the message we are sending out.

> Q. Is astroturfing a chronic problem, in your experience?

CC commented:

> It's not that serious a problem for us. ... I think there's two reasons for that; one is when it crops up it tends to be attached to particular issues; so we are slightly on the front foot. If it is a recurring pattern, then we'll know when to look out for it. It can happen around climate for example ... or we have had it around ... the Russian/Ukraine issue, so we can spot it that way. … We had it during the Indian elections [May 2014]... then suddenly, it wasn't something we'd experienced before, and ... we suspected that there was organised political astroturfing in favour of not so much individual candidates, but in terms of particular parties. It wasn't unique to us, it was happening a lot elsewhere... so that was a new one for us. But day to day it's not our top problem, it tends to cluster around particular issues.

Policy: Theory and practice

> Q. Do you have a policy on astroturfing?

RE says that while the term may not feature specifically, nevertheless the *Guardian*'s long established (last update in 2009) community guidelines and, in particular, guidelines seven and ten, provide a means of challenging the phenomenon: 'it is implicit that ... this is about people having a conversation, not groups subverting this by pretending to be someone else'.

> Q. Do you have any evidence of (or have you suspected) astroturfing attacks on *Guardian* comments other than the Russia/Ukraine issue (Elliott 2014)?

RE commented:

> I'm sure we've had it before ... we [speaking as Reader's Editor] will only reluctantly take on anything that comes out of moderation. We get maybe 18 to 20 people a week saying 'Why have you put me in pre-moderation' ... and we just don't have the resources to look into this. … We want this to be a safe place, a good place for people to come and talk. If you got taken over completely by astroturfers and I'm not saying that some haven't got through, I'm sure they have, but if we are to continue to have a reputation as being a safe place for somewhere to come for a debate ... I would be worried ...

> Q. Has astroturfing had a negative effect on your online community?

CC commented:

> Yes, around certain topics. ... Around three years ago we were live-blogging events in north Africa and then the Middle East [in connection with the Arab Spring] ... and we spent a lot of time in the first three months working with our commenting community, because there were people based in those countries contributing, and there was a real interest in the subject, and the spread of 'democracy' ... It was a great conversation, and had a lot of our journalists getting involved ... it was a really great community. The turning point was March last year [2014 – with the live blog still running] ... the conflict was then particularly about Libya, it reached a stalemate with terrible things happening on the ground (we could no longer get reporters into the country) ... information was very scant ... it was a difficult story to report … and the effect that had on the community was that they had no anchor ... it became a debate around whether the UK should intervene pro- or anti- the Libyan rebels, and those tropes began to take over... So when commenters off our site ... discovered we still had this space on our site to discuss it they decided to join, and they squeezed out all of those great commenters... and it was very difficult to keep those conversations on track once that set in ... It started to become organised (on both sides).

> Q. How satisfactory have you found the outcome of your investigations into astroturfing?

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CC commented:

> …with things like Russia the outcome was slightly unsatisfying. We do all that work …[but on the other hand] we identify new users, or patterns, or words to look out for, so it keeps us up to date, and we are able to spot future attacks. However, because there is no bulletproof technical solution, it still stops us getting totally ahead of the curve. So we may say: 'OK an attack has just happened, some Kremlin trolls were responsible, and because we'd had that we cannot guarantee we will no longer have an attack like that…' It's never going to be that watertight because they will crop up in a different place, on a different server.

Methods of detection

> Q. What is the basis of your analysis of astroturfing attacks (i.e. the methods used etc.)?

RE commented:

> The mods [comment moderators] have regular meetings at which they discuss these things, and things they've noticed. And they also have internal rules which we don't necessarily publish for all sorts of reasons, about how they work to try to find out whether someone is doing this.

CC said that they considered several factors; whether lots of new accounts had been set up around the same time, using similar names, the extent to which they commented around the same pieces:

> …we have a check-list of things we'd look through. And then we'd take a decision on whether we should take further action. … We have the email addresses of commenting users; so it's that sort of thing where we might look for patterns of emails being set up amongst new users, but that is a very manual process. We've looked into technical solutions... but there don't seem to be many out there, or at least not for an organisation of our scale or indeed purpose. There's lots for moderating for spam, or filtering profanity, but when it comes to dealing with difficult users or problematic discussions on a site that also promotes free speech...
>
> Our moderators and our community teams have access to our discussion back end. We don't share details publicly, and we are very careful internally of how we share information. ... We will try and jigsaw identify... and that's particularly useful in cases like this where we suspect astroturfing. Search the username. Is it registered elsewhere, and what is their behaviour there, and does it match up? We may search for their email address, or other identifying information, say for example if the same links are being used, or the same language is being used, just to see if these phrases are popping up elsewhere, and in what context. What we do with that information is difficult; but it just helps us build a picture of whether this is isolated behaviour, and whether it is unique to us … With astroturfing, if all the messages are originating from an IP address that appears to be linked to a company, we'll contact the company and ask them. ... We have to be careful about the routes we take, just in case we are landing on the wrong individual. … I'm always incredibly impressed by our moderators ... it might be that we've got a user who's gone rogue, and I'll often say 'Can you go and look into them', and they'll go into the backend of our moderation tool, look at their profile, look at their history, but ... the amount of information they also have at the back of their minds about the users and their passions is incredible ... It really helps, because then you do spot patterns.

Wider awareness in online news industry

> Q. Have you ever discussed astroturfing with other engagement/communities/journalists at other communities/media titles?

RE has not discussed this issue in the wider industry: 'I personally haven't … I don't remember being involved in that kind of discussion.'

CC commented: 'Not so much astroturfing; trolling and online abuse more so...' Trolling and online abuse are considered to be much more likely to lead to compromising the safety of discussion-space, and so are of higher priority. Similarly, because astroturfing is an occasional rather than a chronic problem, it is not prioritised.

> Q. Have you ever discussed astroturfing with regulators, or branches of government (e.g. GCHQ, the headquarters for Britain's signals intelligence)?

RE admits that, as the *Guardian* is not involved with the new press regulatory body, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), he does not know if the topic is being discussed there: 'No, not to my knowledge. There were no discussions about astroturfing with the PCC [the former regulatory body, the Press Com-

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plaints Commission].' With respect to GCHQ: 'I really don't know, but I would be absolutely staggered if we had. We barely talk to them at all unless at the point of a gun.'

RE doesn't think astroturfing equates to cyberwarfare necessarily:

> I wouldn't think about it in those terms – that's jacking it up and making it more important than it is. … I'm not suggesting that you couldn't have an example that wouldn't reach the levels to enable you to describe it thus, but I haven't come across it. If indeed, as we now strongly suspect, that Putin has had this ... does this amount to cyberwarfare?
>
> Q. Does it surprise you that the issue of astroturfing in online news comments is discussed relatively little in UK online media?

RE commented: 'There are websites who care less about astroturfing, they just let it all rip ...'

CC commented: 'We've invested a lot of time and effort in thinking about the positives and negatives of having comments on our site... we are very invested in commenting, we do a lot with it, it's a crucial part of being a lively and dynamic news site. With others, there is a temptation just to stick comments on ...'

> Q. To what extent do you think it likely that the lack of comment and coverage of astroturfing in online news comments in the UK may be because publishers fear that advertising income associated with high engagement may be adversely affected?

RE commented:

> Personally I don't believe that, I've never seen any evidence of it. I think there may be a fear of talking about astroturfing because ... it's such a loaded term, and it's quite hard to prove. And I think that's what puts some people off. I don't know this for certain, but sometimes I wonder if some people in the press really care – if they've got more comments it makes it look like they've got a livelier thread, and I wonder whether they think 'Well, it may be astroturfing, it may be not, but it looks like we've got 500 comments under the piece.' I think it's more likely that than not wanting to talk about it due to advertising issues.

CC commented: '…I doubt that there is as much of a thought process about it as that. Comments are much maligned and understandably journalists are concerned about engaging... I think there's more trepidation [than anything else].'

Discussion

Astroturfing is hard to define; some seemingly 'grassroots' organisations may behave very much like astroturfing campaigns. It can also be hard to detect; many technical factors may collectively point to a likelihood or probability of astroturfing, but there is no collective technical solution for the paradox of policing 'free speech' in an environment where free speech is seen as paramount. Difficulties attendant to the confidence in which judgements may be made about specific examples of astroturfing, mean that any normative attempt to deal with the phenomenon is in reality limited, and indeed the globalised nature of online media represents a further challenge to punitive regulation. The uncertainty associated with investigating the phenomenon has a dis-spiriting effect on investigators; conclusive proof is hard to establish.

Astroturfing is a less pressing issue in terms of online news community safety than other matters (such as trolling and online abuse), and communities play an important, active role in policing suspected astroturfing. It does not appear to be a chronic problem in news comments, and some manifestations are quite predictable. On the other hand, it can drive away valuable commenters and contributors, and some suspected astroturfing attacks appear quite unexpectedly. It is clearly important that a wider debate about the phenomenon (that might involve the sharing of best practice and case studies) is carried out across the wider media industry. This may, in turn, spark still wider debate amongst all stakeholders involved in this issue; educators, journalists, editors, proprietors, regulators and readers.

It is not necessary to define the phenomenon by name in community guidelines in order to challenge it. To this end, the application of alternative ethical approaches may allow journalists to accommodate good decision-making within existing guidelines that shape good community practice. By considering the wider ethical framework of action, it may also be possible to challenge unethical behaviour enacted in the process of following the letter of the law (regulation, or guidelines). Here I sketch out two possible routes towards addressing this problem by means of moral philosophy.

The first moral framework I would like to consider is existentialism. The application of exis-

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tentialism towards thinking about how journalists may view normative imperatives (like the duty to seek out truth, and report truthfully) is long established in the literature (Merrill 1974). More recently, it has been proposed that existentialism is a particularly useful tool in helping to address problems arising out of interactive, online journalism, for example concerning the disputed notion of truth; who is responsible for material carried in comment sections, and the nature of the relationship between media and audience (Singer and Ashman 2009). Central to this approach is the existential ideal of authenticity as something intrinsic, not something that may be acquired (Singer and Ashman 2009: 8); as something that may guide individual decisions and choices in turn.

An appeal to *authenticity* may, therefore, represent a means by which any journalist feeling pressured into permitting what they suspect as being an astroturfing attack in the comment section of their work (or in a comment section for which they are responsible) to remain, for the sake of additional comment, or advertising revenue. On the other hand, an overly-radical approach to existentialism (like Merrill's) may be criticised for its propensity towards moral double-standards. By foregrounding individual choice, authenticity demands tolerance of differences, which in turn undermines the moral absolutism and the notion of some choices being better than others; and yet this very approach valorises rebelliousness over 'going with the flow' (Holt 2012: 13).

The second moral framework to consider relates to virtue ethics, and more specifically, to the Aristotelean notion of *phronesis* or 'practical wisdom'. Various issues may cloud the reliable, positive identification of an astroturfing attack; from the prevalence of 'bots' (Gleik 2015) to rigidly-synchronised campaigning enacted by what may otherwise be described as 'grass-roots' organisations. To this end the verification of comments may comprise an analysis of many variables; linguistic tone (and possible use of rhetorical tropes); registration information, post timings (with corresponding timings of other posters), the nature of subject-matter posted on, and so on. But these factors no matter how indicative of likelihood, cannot help to definitively establish the authenticity of online community comment. It is proposed that only a much wider debate, informing a deeper immersion in the culture and experience of online comment; a wider understanding of the various (sometimes unpredictable) contingent factors and geo-political events, evinced through dialogue amongst journalists (and with the public) may lead to a more robust means of challenging the problem of astroturfing.

Conclusion

Future empirical research is needed to establish more detailed case studies of astroturfing: its manifestation, and the processes and protocols used to deal with it in online newsrooms. Such research would play an important role in informing corporate and regulatory policies throughout industry. Moreover, a more theoretically sustained consideration of astroturfing within the wider literature of frameworks in journalism ethics, than the introductory thoughts contributed here, may profitably inform a debate that is necessary for all stakeholders in news journalism.

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Florian Zollmann

The Yemen and Crimean interventions in the ideological prisms of the 'liberal' Anglo-American press

In their classic works, *The political economy of human rights* (first published in 1979) and *Manufacturing consent* (first published in 1988), Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky compared news media coverage of state violence conducted by so-called 'enemy' countries of the West (such as the former Soviet Union, Poland, North Vietnam, Cambodia and the former Republic of Yugoslavia) with coverage of comparable state violence by the US or 'friendly' client-states (such as Guatemala, Chile, El Salvador, Turkey and Indonesia). Herman and Chomsky (2008: 34) concluded that the news media 'consistently portray[s] people abused in enemy states as *worthy* victims, whereas those treated with equal or greater severity by its own government or clients will be *unworthy*'. These findings, they argued, result from dichotomised media selection choices: casualties of state violence are only *worthy to be covered* by the news media if victimisation meets 'the test of utility to elite interests' (ibid: 31). As a result, Western states and their 'clients' are shielded from public scrutiny, whereas so-called 'enemy' states are shamed until they are forced to integrate into the dominant order.

A paired example in which the news media reproduced such reporting patterns can be seen in Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen in 2015 and Russia's intervention in the Crimea in 2014.

Yemen

In February 2015, the Shiite Houthi rebels overthrew the government in Yemen led by President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. For more than ten years, the Houthis had fought for government power. On 26 March, a coalition led by Saudi Arabia, and supported by the US and UK governments, started a military intervention in Yemen during the course of which an economic blockade was imposed on the country. The Saudi coalition claimed that the goals of the intervention were to protect the Yemeni population and counter Iranian influence. Thus, the *Guardian*'s Dan Roberts and Kareem Shaheen (2015) published a statement by the Saudi Press Agency, according to which the coalition's aim was …

> … to protect Yemen … from the aggression of the Houthi militias which were and are still a tool in the hands of foreign powers that don't stop meddling with the security and stability of brotherly Yemen.

The Saudi ambassador to Washington, Adel al-Jubeir, was further cited by the *Guardian* (ibid) saying:

> Saudi Arabia launched the attack 'in response to [a] request from the legitimate Yemen government' and insisted it would be a limited operation 'designed to protect the people of Yemen and its legitimate government from a takeover by the Houthis'.

Yet, Hadi's status as the President of Yemen was questionable and he was arguably not in the position to request a Saudi military operation. For instance, Madeleine Rees (2015) wrote in a piece for *openDemocracy*:

> Basically the situation is this: a quasi legitimate president living in Saudi Arabia asks that state to go bomb and strafe his own country and his own people, and invokes collective security as justification. Yes, the Houthis have been targeting and killing civilians and controlling land with impunity. However, responding to violence with increased use of explosive weapons will only endanger more civilians and destroy civilian infrastructure – even when not directly targeted.

Joe Dyke (2015) added the following context in an article for *IRIN*: 'But having overstayed his term in office, resigned once and even fled the country, Hadi's legitimacy as ruler is shaky, legal experts say, placing the Saudi military action in murky legal territory.'

It could be argued, then, that the Saudi coalition rather than the Houthi militias engaged in what international law defines as aggression because it had invaded a sovereign country in violation of the UN Charter. A statement by international

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Yemen scholars published by *Counterpunch* (Yemen scholars 2015) actually makes the case that the Saudi campaign was conducted in violation of international law:

> The military attack by Saudi Arabia, backed by the GCC states (but not Oman), Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, the UK and above all the USA, is into its third week of bombing and blockading Yemen. This military campaign is illegal under international law: none of these states has a case for self-defence, and the UNSC has passed no resolution invoking Chapter 7 of the UN Charter.

And yet, the Anglo-American news media has largely failed to investigate the legality of the intervention. Indeed, a *Factiva* database search of newspaper articles between 26 March and 26 April 2015 which include the words 'Yemen and international law' shows only five items in the US and UK newspapers: *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Guardian/Observer*, *The Times/Sunday Times*, *Independent/Independent on Saturday*, and *Daily Telegraph/Sunday Telegraph*. Thus, the agenda-setting Anglo-American national press largely failed to scrutinise whether the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in Yemen may have been conducted in contravention of the UN Charter. In fact, in the rare instances when international law was mentioned, the press appeared to lend support to the Saudi-led coalition. Thus, the *Daily Telegraph* reported on 27 March: 'Mr Hammond [the British Foreign Secretary] said that the intervention was "perfectly legal within the norms of international law" because Mr Hadi had requested it as the "legitimate President of Yemen"' (Foster, Loveluck and Mojalli 2014).

In other instances, the Western newspapers tended to transport the official rationale thus further legitimising the actions of the Saudi coalition. For example, *The New York Times*'s David D. Kirkpatrick (2015) reported on 29 March:

> Many of the Arab nations, including Egypt, Jordan and most of the Persian Gulf monarchies, have thrown their support behind a Saudi Arabia-led campaign of airstrikes to counter advances by the Iranian-backed Houthi movement in Yemen; Washington is providing only intelligence and logistical support, but Saudi Arabia is leading the bombing while Egypt, with the largest Arab army, has pledged to send ground troops 'if necessary'.

It was of virtually no concern for the newspapers under review that, as the statement by Yemen scholars (2015) further pointed out, the intervention endangered a sovereign and vulnerable society:

> The targets of the campaign include schools, homes, refugee camps, water systems, grain stores, and food industries. This has the potential for appalling harm to ordinary Yemenis as almost no food or medicine can enter. Yemen is the poorest country of the Arab world in per capita income, yet rich in cultural plurality and democratic tradition. Rather than contributing to the destruction of the country, the USA and UK should support a UN Security Council resolution demanding an immediate, unconditional ceasefire and use their diplomatic influence to strengthen the sovereignty and self-government of Yemen. As specialists we are more than aware of internal divisions within Yemeni society, but we consider that it is for the Yemenis themselves to be allowed to negotiate a political settlement.

In fact, the World Health Organisation reported that by 17 April, 944 Yemenis had been killed and 3,400 injured (AFP 2015). According to the UN, 80 per cent of the population – 20 million people – are estimated to be going hungry (Reuters 2015). While the newspapers had reported some of these 'casualties', they failed to challenge the intervention that had caused them.

The newspapers also failed to highlight that Saudi Arabia hardly constitutes a benevolent and stabilising force. According to Amnesty International, Saudi Arabia has an 'appalling' human rights record (*Spiegel Online* 2015). In a report titled 'Ten ways that Saudi Arabia violates human rights', Amnesty International (2015) documents how, in Saudi Arabia, torture is used as a punishment, executions are on the increase, no free speech and no protests exist, women are widely discriminated against, torture in police custody is common, you can be detained and arrested with no good reason, religious discrimination is rife, migrant workers have been deported *en masse*, and human rights organisations are banned.

Despite this record, the rationale of Saudi Arabia's intervention and its effects have largely not been scrutinised by the Anglo-American press. Consequently, Yemeni civilians were treated as *unworthy victims*. This was useful propaganda service because it is of importance for Western geostrategic interests to keep Yemen in their sphere of influence (see Nezemroaya 2015).

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Crimea

This is in striking discordance with how the Anglo-American newspapers reported on the Russian intervention in the Crimea. In February 2014, the Ukrainian (and Russian-backed) President Viktor Yanukovych was ousted during the so-called 'Euromaidan' protests. An interim government was installed. The Russian majority population of the Crimea stood up against the interim government by occupying governmental buildings and starting a militant rebellion. The Ukrainian interim government consequently accused Russia of invading Crimea. It further argued that Russia had sent 2,000 soldiers in support of the rebels. For instance, Ukrainian interim President Oleksandr Turchynow had stated that the 'Russian Federation started a naked aggression against our country' (cited in *Bloomberg Business* 2014).

In the Crimea case, the news media examined the legality of the Russian intervention. Indeed, a *Factiva* database search of newspaper articles between 26 February and 26 March 2014 which include the words 'Crimea and international law' shows 172 items appeared in the US and UK newspapers: *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Guardian/Observer*, *Times/Sunday Times*, *Independent/Independent on Saturday*, and *Daily Telegraph/Sunday Telegraph*. Applying a different reporting standard than in their coverage of Yemen, the Anglo-American national press highlighted that the Russian intervention in Crimea (and potential Russian incursions into Ukrainian heartland) would be in contravention of international law. For instance, the *Guardian* reported on 1 March: 'After fresh US intelligence assessments of Russia's presence in the southern region, Obama said any Russian intervention would constitute a clear violation of international law' (Harding, Lewis and Traynor 2014: 4). The *Washington Post*'s (2014: A14) editorial of the same day argued in a similar fashion:

> PRESIDENT OBAMA made an unscheduled appearance before the press at the White House Friday to warn Russia against a military intervention in Ukraine, which he said would be a 'clear violation' of Russia's commitments to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity as well as of international law. But the President made no mention of consequences other than international 'condemnation' and unspecified 'costs' – and Russian President Vladimir Putin is unlikely to be deterred by that.

Note how the *Post*'s editorial also includes indignant statements about Obama's silence on potential counter measures (e.g. 'the President made no mention of consequences'). Such measures were soon to be deployed against Russia. In fact, it could be argued that the press played an important role in facilitating a Western elite discourse demanding punitive measures against Russia. Accordingly, on 7 March, the *Guardian* reported:

> The United States and the European Union last night unveiled sanctions to punish Russia for occupying Crimea, imposing visa restrictions on individuals and sharpening rhetoric in what has rapidly degenerated into the worst East-West crisis since the end of the cold war.
>
> In their first concrete response to Russia's move to wrest the Black Sea peninsula from Ukraine, Washington and Brussels also warned of further sanctions, such as asset seizures, if Moscow does not relent in the standoff.
>
> 'I am confident that we are moving forward together, united in our determination to oppose actions that violate international law,' Barack Obama told reporters in Washington. 'That includes standing up for the principle of state sovereignty' (Roberts and Traynor 2014: 1).

Similarly, the *Independent* reported on 7 March: 'Under pressure from events and a passionate appeal from Ukrainian politicians, EU leaders warned last night of "far-reaching" consequences if Russia fails to ease the crisis in Crimea' (Lichfield 2014: 12-13). *The Times* (London) wrote on 11 March: 'Officials from the EU will meet in London today to start drawing up a list of leading Russians to be hit with financial sanctions unless President Putin starts talks with the Ukraine Government' (Elliott and Loyd 2014: 1). *The Times* also quoted British Prime Minister David Cameron saying:

> In Europe we have spent the last 70 years working to keep the peace and we know from history that turning a blind eye when nations are trampled over stores up greater problems for the longer term. We must stand up to aggression, uphold international law, and support the Ukrainian Government and the Ukrainian people who want the freedom to choose their own future (ibid).

Press coverage displayed an ideological double standard: indignant statements about Russia's behaviour in the Crimea were highlighted while the newspapers did not transport similar state-

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ments in their coverage of the Saudi-led attack against Yemen. In the latter case, counter measures were neither discussed nor demanded and there was no concern about international law. Moreover, Western government officials' propaganda was transmitted in the news without substantive challenge. This is particularly striking as the US and UK governments have been involved in numerous interventions that were arguably conducted in violation of international law such as Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001) or Iraq (2003) (see Mandel 2005). Despite this record, the Western press tends to regard US and UK officials as credible commentators on issues relating to international law and state sovereignty.

Furthermore, important contexts were marginalised. While it could be argued that Russia's 'invasion' of Crimea was *de facto* in violation of the UN Charter, it has to be seen in the context of a Western engineered 'regime-change' in Ukraine as well as the greater expansion of Nato into Eurasia. As Seumas Milne (2014) highlighted in a comment for the *Guardian*:

> The US and European powers openly sponsored the ['Euromaidan'] protests to oust the corrupt but elected Viktor Yanukovych government, which were triggered by controversy over an all-or-nothing EU agreement which would have excluded economic association with Russia. …
>
> And contrary to undertakings given at the time [with Nato promising not to expand to Russia's borders], the US and its allies have since relentlessly expanded Nato up to Russia's borders, incorporating nine former Warsaw Pact states and three former Soviet republics into what is effectively an anti-Russian military alliance in Europe. The European association agreement which provoked the Ukrainian crisis also included clauses to integrate Ukraine into the EU defence structure. …
>
> Given that background, it is hardly surprising that Russia has acted to stop the more strategically sensitive and neuralgic Ukraine falling decisively into the Western camp, especially given that Russia's only major warm-water naval base is in Crimea.

Despite these facts, the Anglo-American press tended to depict Russia as the aggressor state. It is also of importance that the Russian intervention in Crimea had led to few civilian casualties in comparison to the Saudi-led intervention of Yemen. For instance, Tancredi (2014) writes 'that the effects of the Russian military intervention, if measured in terms of human casualties and material destruction, have remained circumscribed'. However, because Crimean civilians were regarded as *worthy victims*, Russian actions were put under the spotlight and scrutinised. Again, this was useful propaganda service: it has been of great importance for Western elites to integrate the former Soviet states into the 'Washington consensus' thereby curbing Russian influence in Eurasia. As this case comparison suggests, the 'liberal' Anglo-American press has supported these elite efforts through the 'selective emphasis of fact' which constitutes 'a very effective program of "atrocities management"' (Chomsky and Herman 1979a: 18).

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REVIEWS

The power of ideals: The real story of moral choice

William Damon and Anne Colby
Oxford University Press, New York, 2015 pp 217
ISBN 978 0 19 935774 1 (hbk only)

More than twenty years ago, husband-and-wife team William Damon and Anne Colby wrote *Some do care: Contemporary lives of moral commitment* (The Free Press, 1992) about what it meant to be a 'moral exemplar'. Collaborating once again they have just published this new text in which they have selected six historical rather than contemporary moral leaders as examples of ethical commitment.

It seems clear that the authors are not only upholding historical role models who were 'powered' by ideals, and examining the nature of their commitment to these ideals. They are also critiquing and countering what they deem to be the 'scientific' claims that moral behaviour is primarily biological, economic, and culturally created, thus determined by forces beyond one's control and relative to one's context. With their longstanding credentials at Stanford and Harvard, Damon and Colby are also continuing an academic conversation within the fields of moral psychology, education, and ethics about whether our human morals are motivated more by ideals and conscious choice or by, as determinists proffer, the more subconscious nature of our 'programming': genes, economic incentives, and cultural ancestors.

What has all his to do with media ethics? There has been a long line of criticism that media professionals primarily adopt 'cynical' approaches to the dominant issues of the day. Damon's and Colby's book and approach suggest that not only are ideals and idealism important, but that one can find 'moral exemplars' powered by vision and integrity throughout society. That vision would include media professionals as well. One thinks, for example, of Lord John Reith who promoted the BBC as a public service and Edward R. Murrow, who used CBS as a whistle-blower to challenge the corrupt and to confront bullies such as Senator Joseph McCarthy.

For those engaged by the question of the role of ideals, this is an important book because it both supplements and employs the mountain of research Damon, Colby, and colleagues such as Howard Gardner at Harvard have conducted assessing the motivation and character of moral conduct especially within Western cultures. In *Some do care*, Colby and Damon chose twenty-three living people. In this new text they highlight six well-known *historical* exemplars – Eleanor Roosevelt, Nelson Mandela, Jane Addams, Dag Hammarskjold, Abraham Heschel, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The six provide evidence of unflagging moral commitment driven by conscious choice and unbroken ideals, not just by factors of environment and programming. One imagines if they were to look at broadcasters such as Reith and journalists like Murrow, they would find similar patterns.

Within their examination of these 'exemplar' lives, the co-authors expand upon three key traits – truth, humility, and faith – which in combination provide the driving force for their six moral standouts. Importantly, these traits are not islands unto themselves. For example, humility catalyses open-mindedness, a key condition for making discoveries and avoiding authoritarian dogmatism.

Although Damon and Colby are not ideologues, they do affirm if not confirm that the idealist and the idea have played important parts within human history. While the debate about the cause of moral conviction remains open, the weight of human lives, two hundred pages of evidence, and the power of common sense bends in their direction.

Tom Cooper
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Dragon's voice: How modern media found Bhutan
Bunty Avieson
University of Queensland Press, pp 227
ISBN 9780702253577

Writing, quite uniquely, as an Australian journalist in Bhutan, a country in which a modern media system is only now emerging, Bunty Avieson does this with remarkable care and patience.

This is at times a deliberately strange work. We begin, as readers, witnessing a Buddhist ceremony, the coronation of a young Bhutanese king. Within a few lines, we meet yak herders streaming live commentary on the event on their mobile phones, we hear how crowded the rooms of those with television are, we can almost smell the 'air ... dense with incense' (p. 1).

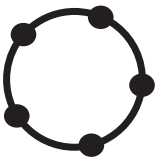
Everything in this coronation carries symbolic meaning: 'The foreign media have been issued with national costumes to ensure that we do not lower the tone of the day' (p. 4). Avieson's book is as much about her own life outside the media, living in Bhutan, as it is about her experiences 'at work'. So along with writing about the media and social change, we hear about the Bhutanese schoolmates of her daughter sniffing at Vegemite sandwiches; the fear of a neighbour during a break in, disturbing the almost pastoral idyll of their community; the smell of drying meat.

Avieson applies Western ethical principles to her reports on the activities of Bhutanese newsroom. She avoids harsh judgements, though her patience is clearly tested when she tells of deadlines missed, hours wasted, appointments not made. There are moments when the reader, too, is allowed to share her feelings: 'Needrup publicly scolds late reporters in news conferences. He is grave, authoritative and impressive. Their reaction? They laugh ... it doesn't mean disrespect or disregard. It's just the way Bhutanese react to disapproval' (p. 114).

Avieson finds the Bhutanese work ethic so different to her own that she is able to notice, in her own and the lives of others, the deeper respect and status given to spirituality, fun, and family. This deeper respect transforms the book from being simply an account of living in Bhutan and a study of its media into a celebration of the country's reverence for family – and for their spirituality.

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