

Doing the Great British Class Survey

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Abstract

This paper introduces the Great British Class Survey and describes how it came to be, providing an insight into the work that has led to this special issue on the contemporary British elite. We discuss initial work with the BBC Lab UK team, the construction of the web survey and its launch. We also consider the response rate and how an additional face-to-face nationally representative survey was then commissioned to deal with sample skew. The way in which subsequent analysis addresses this challenge is also addressed, along with how this ‘problem’ has provided rich, granular data on the most privileged and powerful in UK society. We reflect on a piece of research which enjoyed considerable attention, and how we might interpret this in terms of public engagement. We also acknowledge some of the immediate academic responses to this innovative collaborative adventure. Finally, we indicate how the GBCS team will be developing this work in the future, before outlining how the papers in this special issue offer insights into the anatomy of power and privilege in modern Britain.

Keywords: social class, capitals approach, web survey, innovative methods, citizen science, public engagement

The Great British Class Survey (GBCS) has already, in less than a year, become one of the most widely discussed sociological studies ever undertaken. With nearly nine million people completing the notorious ‘class calculator’ it has certainly been the most effective piece of digital public sociology ever launched. In this paper, we tell the story of ‘doing’ the GBCS to introduce this special issue of *The Sociological Review* on the contemporary sociology of power and privilege. This collection of papers uses the rich, granular data of the GBCS sample, skewed towards the well-educated and affluent, to consider the educational, occupational and geographical profiles of the most advantaged in contemporary Britain. Given the extent of public and academic interest in the GBCS, the aim of this paper is to put on record our account of how the GBCS was developed, and to reflect on its strengths and weaknesses as a piece of ‘public social science’.

The GBCS was an experiment in new ways of doing social science research with a non-academic partner, the publicly funded British Broadcasting

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The Sociological Review, Vol. 63, 240–258 (2015) DOI: 10.1111/1467-954X.12282

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Corporation (BBC). The project originated as part of the BBC's Lab UK programme, designed to involve the public in (social) science, as well as, of course, generating media content. For the GBCS academic team, this was an opportunity to try new digital tools including a web survey for data generation and interactive online tools for communicating the findings. The huge response to the survey publicity demonstrates, if anything, that the GBCS got people *talking about class*. Much of this is thanks to working with the BBC, who could mobilize their huge audience and valuable resources.

This was not just an exercise in generating public debate, however. The GBCS aimed to develop knowledge of the contemporary class structure of the UK through an inductive approach to class analysis. It was an opportunity to develop a view of class relations that took a 'capital, assets, resources' approach (Savage *et al.*, 2005) rather than a model based on employment relations. The initial findings, published in a paper for the journal *Sociology* in April 2013 (Savage *et al.*, 2013), provided an overview of this new model of social class, highlighting both polarization between the top and the bottom of the class structure and fragmentation around the middle based on differences in volume and type of economic, social and cultural capital. For this special issue we concentrate on the group with the highest levels of all forms of capital: the elite. In this introductory paper, we describe the work that went into this innovative and controversial project to introduce how the interrogation of the British elite explored in this issue was made possible. Our approach is not to explore the methodology of the GBCS in depth¹ (see Savage *et al.*, 2013 for a summary), but rather provide a flavour of the research process and reflect on working with such a high-profile partner. First, we describe the initial impetus for the survey, its development, and the nationwide launch in 2011. Secondly, we outline the data analysis and the publication of the findings in Savage *et al.* (2013) including problems of sample skew that had to be overcome. Thirdly, we discuss the launch of the results, the publicity surrounding the GBCS and the debates that were generated, and reflect on this 'experiment' with public engagement. Fourthly, we acknowledge the key issues in the immediate academic responses to the survey findings. Finally, we indicate how the team will be developing this work in the future, before outlining the articles examining the anatomy of power and privilege in this special issue.

Initial work and development

The Great British Class Survey was a collaboration between an academic team,² BBC Lab UK and BBC Current Affairs. The BBC has produced online experiments since 2001, and launched the BBC Lab UK website to host these 'citizen science' projects in September 2009 (BBC, 2013a). One of the unique features of the BBC Lab UK surveys was that survey respondents received an identifier that they would then use to log in to subsequent surveys. This means

that surveys can be linked together to create an 'uber-dataset', a valuable resource for further analysis (BBC, 2013b). Utilizing the BBC Lab UK platform to explore social class was initially proposed by Phillip Trippenbach, then an Interactive Producer at the BBC. He approached Mike Savage, as a prominent figure in the field of class analysis in the UK, with the idea of a large-scale class survey in 2010. Fiona Devine then joined Mike Savage in leading the GBCS research, in keeping with the BBC's rule of working with more than one academic on Lab UK projects. For Trippenbach, understanding the British class system was of public concern, but difficult for BBC Current Affairs to report as a 'story', as it is a large complex system rather than an event (Trippenbach, 2011). Instead, Trippenbach saw social class as a prime candidate for interactive methods to engage the BBC audience with the class system. Trippenbach's idea was for a survey that people would complete to learn more about class in Britain, including their own position in the system, while also providing valuable data in line with the aims of BBC Lab UK (Trippenbach, 2010). This was the first BBC Lab UK project to involve BBC Current Affairs in this way.

The BBC's proposals also aligned with the academic team's view of the need for sociologists to innovate and utilize technological developments (Savage and Burrows, 2007). Moreover, for the academic team, the GBCS offered an opportunity to undertake a large-scale survey that approached the question of class from an alternative perspective to the dominant model of measuring social class via the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) categories. Developed from influential work by John Goldthorpe and colleagues, which takes a deductive approach to class based on a hierarchy of employment relations usually associated with occupations, NS-SEC categories are based on an 'employment aggregate' approach to class relations (Crompton, 2008). With the GBCS, the team sought to build a model of class that recognized the contribution of Bourdieu to understanding the multidimensional aspects of class based on economic, cultural and social capital, along with subsequent work in 'cultural class analysis' (see Savage *et al.*, 2013 for an overview of these debates, as well as the earlier work of Devine, 2004; Bennett *et al.*, 2009; Le Roux *et al.*, 2008). GBCS presented a way of undertaking a national research project that asked questions on cultural and social capital, which are rarely addressed in contemporary large-scale surveys, alongside measures of economic capital. The design of the survey therefore aimed to capture the interplay between economic, cultural and social capital in order to map class divisions in the UK.

Mike Savage and Fiona Devine worked with Philip Trippenbach and the BBC's Lab UK team to design the questionnaire and develop the online platform. The final survey included over 50 questions, and was designed to take around 20 minutes to complete, so that respondents were able to provide fairly detailed information without the task being overly arduous. The questions on economic capital asked for household income; household savings; and the value of owner-occupied property. Economic capital was therefore based on household measures of both income and assets. In asking questions about cultural capital, GBCS drew on the Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion (CCSE)

project (Bennett *et al.*, 2009) and its sophisticated, detailed investigation of class and cultural participation. This survey influenced the GBCS questions about the respondents' cultural activities, including questions on their leisure interests, musical taste, media use and food preferences. The development of the social capital questions was influenced by Lin's (2001) position generator, which measures the range of respondents' social ties. The CCSE survey had also included position generator questions, which members of the research team had previously used to explore the relationship between social capital and social mobility (Li *et al.*, 2008).

In addition to the questions on economic, cultural and social capital, the survey also gathered basic demographic information on gender, marital status, dependents, ethnicity and disability, along with education, occupation and family background. Moreover, respondents were also asked about political efficacy and trust, and their subjective views of opportunities and social divisions. The sheer range of questions asked in the GBCS present a number of exciting opportunities for future analysis. In line with the BBC's interactive approach, respondents received a report, designed by the BBC, on completion of the survey. This provided an automatically generated capital 'score' that could be compared with the rest of the UK using benchmarks from the aforementioned CCSE survey. They were also given a personalized 'coat of arms' based on their answers on cultural activities, also automatically generated (for example, if respondents answered that they liked video games, one quadrant of their badge would be a graphic of a video game controller). This could be posted to Facebook to enable respondents to share an image of their cultural profile, and also served to publicize the GBCS among their social networks.

The GBCS was launched with an appearance by Mike Savage on *The One Show* (BBC 1, 7 pm, 25 January 2011). Audience figures for this episode were 4.78 million.³ The launch was accompanied by two BBC films on political elites and class advantage in occupations: *Posh and Posher: Why Public School Boys Run Britain* (2011) and *Who Gets the Best Jobs?* (BBC, 2011b). Fiona Devine appeared on the Allan Beswick show on BBC Radio Manchester on 26 January 2011, Mike Savage gave several radio interviews, and Richard Cable (the executive producer for the BBC) gave 27 interviews for BBC regional radio (Trippenbach, 2011). This coverage was accompanied by articles in the national press and industry press, including *The Guardian* (Hill, 2011), *The Mirror* (2011), *Broadcast* (Farber, 2011) and *journalism.co.uk* (Gunter, 2011). The GBCS also had a significant social media presence, including a YouTube video of *The One Show* appearance and a YouTube playlist of 17 videos that asked BBC journalists, presenters and actors about the class system. Working with a high-profile partner like the BBC meant that news of the survey reached an unusually large audience. The outcome of this publicity was that huge numbers of people completed the survey. By July 2011, the survey had 161,400 responses. The GBCS also had an 89 per cent completion rate: the vast majority of people finished the survey once they started it, suggesting a level of engagement with the process. In July 2011 the responses were collected and downloaded, so that

Table 1 Proportions in occupational classes: GfK and GBCS

Occupation type	% GBCS (web) sample	% GfK (national) sample	Ratio of GBCS to GfK
Senior manager	13.0	6.3	2.1
Traditional professional	17.9	4.8	3.8
Modern professional	31.5	18.2	1.7
Middle/Junior manager	8.1	6.7	1.2
Intermediate	11.0	14.7	0.8
Technical craft worker	2.4	10.6	0.2
Semi routine worker	4.9	15.3	0.3
Routine worker	3.2	14.5	0.2
Never worked	7.9	8.3	0.9

Note: As noted in Savage *et al.* (2013), the occupational class measures described in this table are not NS-SEC classes but the occupational categories of the NS-SEC self-coding procedure that was used on the online survey.

the process of analysis could begin, although the survey remained live until June 2013.

Analysing the GBCS

The team then turned their attention to exploring this large and rich data set. The academic team working on GBCS were not in receipt of any funding for the work and, with no dedicated research staff attached to the project, had to fit this in alongside other commitments. The BBC put forward the idea of a documentary film on the survey findings to be prepared just three months after the survey launch, but it was simply not possible to produce such quick results. Instead, it was important to find an appropriate way to deal with this valuable data. When looking at the basic demographic profile of the respondents, it immediately became apparent that there was a bias in the sample, with an over-representation of well-educated social groups. On one level this was to be expected, given trends in the completion of self-selection surveys, but it did pose a problem of sample skew. It was decided that the most effective way to address this was the commission of a nationally representative sample survey, funded by BBC Lab UK. Conducted in April 2011 by the reputable research company GfK, an additional sample of 1,026 respondents were asked the same questions as the web survey. To provide an indication of this sample skew, we can compare the proportions of respondents in occupational classes in the nationally representative GfK sample with those of the GBCS web sample.

Table 1 indicates that those from the traditional professions were over-represented in the GBCS sample by a ratio of nearly 4:1. Senior managers, modern professionals and middle managers were also over-represented. Conversely, those from routine occupations were under-represented in the GBCS

Table 2 Distribution of the seven classes

	GBCS (%)	GfK (%)
Elite	22	6
Established middle class	43	25
Technical middle class	10	6
New affluent workers	6	15
Emergent service workers	17	19
Traditional working class	2	14
Precariat	<1	15

sample. This skew is compounded by the profile of these respondents when compared with those from the Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion project (Bennett *et al.*, 2009). Those people in the GBCS sample who were in working-class occupations had relatively more cultural and social capital than would be expected in comparison with the patterns evident from the CCSE data. Consequently, the GBCS data set could not be weighted to address the sample skew. Instead, the data from both surveys was combined so that the nationally representative data from the GfK survey could be used to map the distribution of the classes while retaining the valuable educational, occupational and geographical profiles generated through the GBCS. Moreover, the types of respondents who completed the GBCS mean this is an exceptionally rich data set for exploring elite groups who are notoriously difficult to capture in national surveys. Precisely because the sample was weighted towards the upper echelons, we have a large, detailed data set which makes this special issue possible in its analysis of the dynamics of power and privilege in contemporary Britain. Not only did the GBCS provide a staggering amount of data that needed careful, complex analysis, the survey also yielded some ‘messy’ data, as the respondents were asked to write in their occupations and the university they attended (if any).

Another vital collaboration that assisted the project was the agreement from BBC Lab UK that the data would be archived with the UK Data Archive (UKDA) at the University of Essex. In return, the UKDA cleaned up the occupational and higher education responses so that the data set was fit for purpose. The analysis of the data was an inductive process and it took some work to settle on the most appropriate variables to construct the measurements of the three capitals, and how to combine the GBCS and the GfK datasets.

As discussed in Savage *et al.* (2013), the survey questions on assets and income, cultural activities and social ties were used to produce standardized measures of economic, cultural and social capital.⁴ Latent class analysis was then used to group people from the web-based GBCS into classes using these measures. Table 2 reports the distribution of these classes in both the GBCS and the nationally representative GfK survey. Working with the BBC certainly seemed to have an influence on who completed the GBCS as the profile is

skewed towards those groups who are over-represented in the BBC audience (and thus more likely to both consume BBC products and be more receptive to such endeavours). Table 2 indicates that 22 per cent were in the elite group; 43 per cent in the established middle class; and 10 per cent in the technical middle class. Taken together, these three clusters comprised three-quarters compared to only around one-third of the nationally representative sample (6 per cent elite; 25 per cent established middle class; 6 per cent technical middle class).

There were two striking features of these findings: the polarization between the top and bottom classes, and the fragmentation in the middle. Even on their own, the results provide important indications of the lines of stratification in contemporary Britain. However, the team has only just begun to draw on the potential of the GBCS to understand these multidimensional class divisions in the UK. The 'problem' of the skew means that the GBCS generated an extraordinarily large and rich sample of well-educated, professional groups. The empirical articles in this volume, which focus on this elite, indicate the potential of the GBCS to explore class formation in relation to spatial divisions (Cunningham and Savage), higher education (Wakeling and Savage), social mobility (Friedman, Laurison and Miles) and political efficacy (Laurison). The sheer size of the sample means that it offers many additional possibilities for data disaggregation to focus on particular groups. Cunningham and Savage (this volume) explore this skew in more detail through comparison with representative datasets in the 2011 census, with spatial and statistical overlaps between the GBCS elite and social class geographies in the GBCS census. Wakeling and Savage (this volume) also consider the over-representation of graduates from particular institutions, benchmarking this against data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency.

A version of the GBCS model that the team was happy with emerged in Autumn 2012, and a paper based on the initial findings was drafted. One of the drivers of BBC Lab UK was to produce research that was rigorously peer-reviewed and naturally this was also important to the academic team. It was submitted, peer-reviewed and accepted in the British Sociological Association's (BSA) journal *Sociology*. Once accepted, it was agreed that it would be published to coincide with a sub-plenary talk by the GBCS team at the BSA Annual Conference on 3 April 2013.

Collaborating with a non-academic partner did present a number of issues, including organizational change, resourcing and extended timetables. There was a series of personnel changes at the BBC over the course of the project. This included Phillip Trippebach, who had been the impetus and a key contact for the GBCS team and left shortly after the survey was launched; and Richard Cable, the Editor at BBC Lab UK, who also left for a position in Northern Ireland. Michael Orwell, the BBC Lab UK Producer, remained a valuable contact throughout. For this collaboration to succeed required both parties, with the assistance of the UKDA, to persevere and find solutions to problems not anticipated at the outset. It also meant that the academic team had to fit the GBCS in with other commitments and work on the project in their spare

time. From survey launch to releasing the results therefore took just over two years, which we think is an excellent pace of work. These extended timelines are somewhat normalized for academic research teams but non-typical for the BBC. Compromise and patience was required to produce desirable outcomes for both parties.

Despite some of these practical issues, it was a remarkable opportunity to work with an organization with the standing and reach of the BBC. Essential to the continuation of the project was the valuable role played by some key members of the BBC.⁵ The BBC also respected the academic team's autonomy. They did shape how the research was framed in headlines (particularly the focus on seven classes as new), but did not try to influence the outcomes or encourage a narrative that was not there. Bastow *et al.* (2014: 238) suggest that the GBCS, while not strictly 'citizen social science', 'moved a long step towards the co-production of social science with mass publics, assisted by strong media organization involvement'. We now turn to describing the launch of the GBCS findings, and reflect on the extraordinary public engagement – and particular, what kind of publics might be engaging with the research.

Public engagement

In April 2013, initial findings from the GBCS were published in *Sociology* (Savage *et al.*, 2013). The paper was presented in a sub-plenary session at the BSA Annual Conference; launched on a dedicated section on the BBC News website, which explained the project's rationale, methods and findings; and discussed on *BBC Breakfast*, featuring an interview with Fiona Devine. Stories about the survey appeared in national and international newspapers, including *The Daily Mail* (Doughty, 2013) *The Independent* (O'Brien, 2013), *The Guardian* (Jones, 2013) and *The New York Times* (Lyall, 2013); and further appearances on local, national and international broadcast media, including BBC Radio 4's *The World at One* (2013) and National Public Radio (NPR) in the USA (*All Things Considered*, 2013). It was agreed with the publishers of *Sociology* that the article would be made open access so that anyone who was interested in the story could read a detailed discussion of the findings.

As well as opening up the academic paper, members of the GBCS team worked with the BBC to find ways to communicate the results to a wide audience. The result was a visualization of the GBCS findings that was produced by the BBC News Visual Journalism team and the agency Applied Works. Initially, Applied Works attempted to replicate the GBCS model but to do this accurately would have basically required asking all of the questions on economic, cultural and social capital, which was not deemed to be realistic when designing a public engagement tool. Instead, the academic team was asked for a set of some of the most discriminating telling questions which placed respondents in specific classes. Named the 'Class Calculator', it asked just five questions to give people a quick idea of where they fitted into the model. The design of the Class Calculator was very much a BBC product, made as an

engagement tool. Given its design, this was a simplification of the class model, with substantial numbers of its respondents placed in different of the seven classes to those that they would have been assigned by latent class analysis, but it still encouraged the public to engage with ‘the politics of classification’; and indeed, by playing about with the categories – increasing economic capital, or selecting fewer social contacts – users could consider the links between the volume and quality of capital, or critique the boundaries of classification, rather than being presented with a ‘true’ picture of where they fit.

The interest that the GBCS received was gratifying but also provoked a critical response by some who thought that it damaged public sociology. The research was both popular and controversial. There are numerous indicators of the reach of the study: the Class Calculator received 6.9 million page views in its first week; the *Sociology* paper received online attention that puts it in top 5 per cent of all articles shared, according to Altmetric,⁶ and *The New York Times* article on the GBCS was its most shared world news story at the time. Thanks to the publicity, an additional 183,119 people completed the survey, more than doubling the sample between April and June 2013, and the GBCS team are working on incorporating these additional responses into future research. Clearly, something about the project ‘hit a nerve’. We are, of course, mindful of the collaboration with the BBC playing a major role here. Yet we can also look to the UK political context. As Dorling (2013) identified, class was a pertinent topic in the week following the launch of the survey results.⁷ The reaction to the GBCS highlights there is much at stake in making interventions in public debates about class and inequality. Payne (2013: 3) suggests that the reaction to GBCS is an indicator that class is not dead: ‘it was more the case that “Class is dead” is dead’.

The response to the GBCS illustrates the satisfactions and frustrations of public engagement. The media response was impressive, although it tended to focus on the idea of there being a seven category model of social class, when in fact the official ONS class measure also has seven classes in its most usual incarnation. The results were used to stoke particular fires. Dorling (2013) gives an example of a *Daily Mail* article which made claims about social mobility that were not presented in the findings. A range of cartoons and parodies followed the publication of the results, some which lampooned the research. On the other hand, much of the media commentary was balanced, and even favourable. The discussion thankfully did not talk about an ‘underclass’, for example, which had been one of the team’s concerns and which drove the decision to use the term ‘precariat’. Public interest in the findings did not usually go beyond the BBC Class Calculator, and many even assumed that this was the basis of the study. People complained they had been placed in the ‘wrong’ class, and consequently dismissed the validity of the study. It is an example of the difficulties of translating complex models into media friendly formats. Asking people to consider their own position in relation to the rest of the UK raises very important questions of privilege and power – of their own, and of other people’s – and how this is bound up with the politics of classification

Table 3 Proportions in occupational classes: GfK, GBCS pre- and post-April 2013

Occupation type	GfK (%)	GBCS 1, pre-April 2013 (%)	GBCS 2, post-April 2013 (%)
Senior manager	6.29	13.0	15.6
Traditional professional	4.78	17.9	17.1
Modern professional	18.15	31.5	33.2
Middle/Junior manager	6.73	8.1	7.2
Intermediate	14.73	11.0	9.5
Technical craft worker	10.63	2.4	3.3
Semi routine worker	15.32	4.9	4.2
Routine worker	14.54	3.2	3.2
Never worked	8.29	7.8	6.2

(see Savage *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, the discussions surrounding the Class Calculator and all of the media attention led to huge interest in the *Sociology* paper. In many ways the BBC Class Calculator was a success. It helped to place social class in the centre of public debate and won a Data Journalism award (BBC, 2013c).

One critic suggested that the GBCS was not a good example of public engagement, however, as the public were not asked to debate but offered an explanation and ‘an invitation to play at putting yourself in boxes’ (Bell, 2013). Yet playing with the Class Calculator, for example by changing the answers to find out how this changed the resulting class, was a way to explore how classification works through grouping. Was the interest in class position centred on an individualized concern with people’s own classification, rather than connecting to wider ‘public issues’? This, in and of itself, is sociologically interesting considering debates surrounding class identities and dis-identification which suggest a marked decline in the collective ties and sense of belonging associated with identifying with a particular social class (see Savage, Silva and Warde, 2010 for an overview). Questions remain over the profile of the public engaging with the research, however. The sample skew from the initial findings was also replicated in the additional respondents who completed the survey after the launch of the results. Table 3 compares the occupations of both sample sets (pre- and post-launch) with the nationally representative GfK.

Similarly, a latent class analysis of the second sample of respondents completing the survey demonstrate that even more people in the elite and middle classes were engaging with the research (Table 4).

It seems that those advantaged groups who initially completed the GBCS were the same who were prompted to do so following the widespread publicity surrounding the findings. This is, again, sociologically interesting – is it the professional middle classes who are most reflexive about their social position, and consequently wish to engage with such research? Or is this an outcome of a

Table 4 Distribution of the seven classes: GfK, GBCS pre- and post-April 2013

	GfK (%)	GBCS 1, pre-April 2013 (%)	GBCS 2, post-April 2013 (%)
Elite	6	22	26
Established middle class	25	43	42
Technical middle class	6	10	6
New affluent workers	15	6	6
Emergent service workers	19	17	17
Traditional working class	14	2	<1
Precariat	15	<1	<1

project conducted in collaboration with the BBC? The detailed data gathered in the GBCS also means that we can look at the geographical spread of who was completing the surveys. As Cunningham and Savage (this volume) show, GBCS participation was skewed to the south-east of England, and central London in particular. Rates of participation were around 10 per cent lower than would be expected in Scotland, around 25 per cent lower in Wales and 50 per cent lower in Northern Ireland. This can be compared with research on audience perceptions of BBC performance, which also highlights national variations. Audiences in Northern Ireland and Scotland are significantly less positive about how much the BBC offers and the value for money offered by the licence fee, although Wales is the most positive UK nation (Scott and Morrell, 2013). We can only speculate on the impact of calling this the *Great British Class Survey* in terms of national identities. Partnership with the BBC resulted in considerable public engagement with the GBCS, but this did mean that the sample reflected the profile of a BBC audience.

We see the GBCS experience as an example of the benefits and challenges of collaborating with non-academic partners. The considerable resources of the BBC helped to successfully launch the web survey with a media presence that resulted in an exceptionally high response rate. The high-profile of *The One Show*, for example, is directly reflected in the peak in responses following its coverage on 26 January 2011 (Figure 1). Similarly, there was a remarkable spike in survey completion following the high-profile coverage of the initial findings on 3 April 2013 (Figure 2).

Interest in the GBCS has continued since the launch of the findings, with at least 5,000 page views of the Class Calculator per week. Figure 3 shows the BBC's page views from the week after the launch of the GBCS to a year later. There were notable surges in page views when the Class Calculator won the Data Journalism award in June 2013, and again following the debate surrounding Ed Miliband's comments regarding the 'crisis of confidence' affecting the 'squeezed middle classes' in January 2014 (de Castella, 2014; Monaghan, 2014).

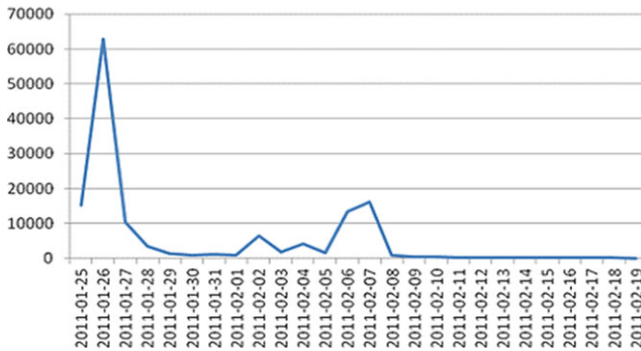


Figure 1 *Distribution of GBCS responses by day (25 January 2011–19 February 2011)*

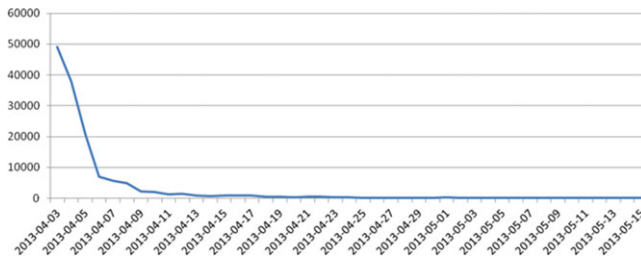


Figure 2 *Distribution of GBCS responses by day (3–15 April 2011)*

Media coverage of these events referred to the GBCS findings, renewing public engagement with the Calculator.

One particularly interesting response to the GBCS was from the ‘Space Hijackers’, a group describing themselves as a ‘group of Anarchitects . . . dedicated to battling the constant oppressive encroachment onto public spaces of institutions, corporations and urban planners’ (Space Hijackers n.d.). This movement drew on one of the class categories from the GBCS to hold an ‘Emergent Service Workers Party’ outside Google’s offices in central London. The ‘party’ was a protest against the poor pay and long working hours of service workers which, while fun and playful, had a serious message. At the CRESC Annual Conference, the GBCS team invited a member of the Space Hijackers to speak about the Party, along with the sociologist and blogger Alice Bell. Bell (2013) asks if the GBCS academic team would be claiming this protest as impact for the Research Excellence Framework (REF), and suggests that this illustrates how research outputs are taken up and adapted in ways that cannot be predicted. While Bell presents a critique of the form of public engagement presented by the GBCS as a ‘top-down approach’ (Bell, 2013), we would suggest the Emergent Service Workers’ Party is evidence of how the findings have generated an ironic engagement with research which is highly productive of

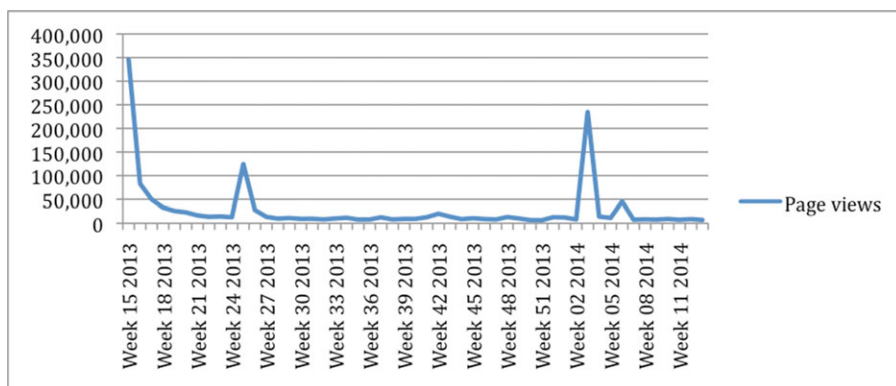


Figure 3 Distribution of GBCS class calculator page views by week (Week 15 2013–Week 13 2014). Note: Week 15 2013 was 7–14 April 2013; Week 13 2014 was 24–30 March 2014.

wider public reflections about the nature of classifications in general, in ways which actually suggest that the concept of ‘emerging cultural capital’ which the team developed in their analysis of the GBCS might indeed have some resonance. In addition to this considerable public engagement, the GBCS has been part of extended academic debate. Although the GBCS team has published a more detailed response as part of an ongoing debate in *Sociology* (see Savage *et al.*, 2014), we now acknowledge and reflect on some key criticisms, and how this special issue may go some way to demonstrate the considerable value of the GBCS as academic sociological research.

Generating academic debate

An indicator of the impact of the GBCS is the immediate responses it generated from the academic community. Following the huge interest in the GBCS, critical letters were sent to broadsheet newspapers and responses published on web-based platforms. For example, Standing (2013) wrote to *The Guardian* to protest the use of the term ‘precariat’ which he sees as a growing group of those whose lives are increasingly insecure due to labour market insecurities. Another target was the Class Calculator, which many felt was an oversimplification. In an article for *Statistics Views*, Dorling (2013) argued there was too much focus on the Class Calculator in the media debates surrounding GBCS, and not enough on the study itself. For Dorling, this meant that the debates around the GBCS were appropriated to meet the interests of commentators. A more substantive issue for Dorling was the picture of stratification that emerged. Dorling argued that the GBCS does not place enough emphasis on the vast inequalities in wealth and income in contemporary Britain. The struggles of the poor are not confined to a small group of ‘precariat’, and

insecurity is a characteristic for more than half of the UK population, according to research cited by Dorling. Dorling (2013) claimed the GBCS does not address the extent of material disadvantage in the UK, although the public debate exposes the politics of classification and comparison that allow this to continue. Dorling offered some interesting commentary on the classification work that surrounded the response to the GBCS. However, as the papers in this special issue show, we are able to use the survey's rich and detailed dataset to take advantage of the opportunities for much more nuanced work that Dorling's critique suggests.

An additional issue with how the GBCS was reported were the stories that focused on how the survey 'uncovered' a picture of social class as no longer being based on a three-class model. In another letter sent to *The Guardian*, Rose and Harrison argued the survey did not recognize the established and widely used eight NS-SEC social classes (Rose and Harrison, 2013). The BBC's framing of the press release to accompany the findings rested on this issue as a way to engage people with the story, and the extent that this was picked up by the media was surprising. This was an unintended consequence, and exemplifies both how control over the central message of findings when working with a partner like the BBC may mean that the nuances of sociological research may be lost. Rose and Harrison (2013) also disagreed with the way class was operationalized. There has been an extensive debate between the 'employment aggregate approach' (Crompton, 2008) and 'cultural class analysis' (see Savage *et al.*, 2013 for an overview) which we do not have space to rehearse in depth here. Essentially, critics such as Mills (2013) and Rose and Harrison (2013) argue that class is grounded in employment relations, and consequently the established NS-SEC categories are more appropriate as they do not involve the conflation of class with other factors. Using measures of economic, social and cultural capital, for Mills (2013), is not actually engaging with issues of class at all. Rose and Harrison (2013) argued that the GBCS looks at class divisions from an incorrect causal model: class determines outcomes such as consumption patterns, but these patterns are not a determinant of class. We would, however, note that there are different ways of approaching class analysis. The GBCS rests upon a class formation perspective which is concerned to consider the wider social and cultural coherence of classes (see Savage, 2000; Savage *et al.*, 2005). For these purposes, the GBCS fitted the bill: our analysis of the GBCS offers a way of mapping the ways that different forces intersect to produce contemporary social divisions. We would also stress that the GBCS class categories were not designed to replace the NS-SEC in national surveys but to provoke new ways of thinking about class which were better able to address their social and cultural dimensions.

The final points of critique we wish to acknowledge are those which centred on the methods employed. Mills (2013) suggested that the publicized findings were based solely on the GfK survey. Mills, along with Lambert and Griffiths (2013), argues that the seven class model is an artefact of the latent class analysis of the small GfK sample. Ideally the nationally representative sample would

have been larger, but as we have argued elsewhere (Savage and Devine, 2013; Savage *et al.*, 2014), the strategy adopted was a pragmatic one, which allowed us the best opportunity to deal with what we have always recognized to be a skewed GBCS web survey. The data is now available via the UK Data Service (Savage and Devine 2015).

The anatomy of power and privilege in Britain

The papers here represent examples of the potential of the GBCS which move the debate beyond the initial findings (Savage *et al.*, 2013). Reactions to the survey have been fascinating and present a unique insight into the politics of class and classification in the UK. In the first paper, Mike Savage argues that class politics in Britain has historically been focused on the working classes. In contrast, he presents a case for class analysis to turn its attention away from the 'problematic of the proletariat' towards the elite. As noted in the initial GBCS findings (Savage *et al.*, 2013), Savage argues that the GBCS supports the case for a fundamental division not in the middle of the class structure, but at the top. This is in contrast to much of the class research of the 20th century, which was involved in a project of classification to identify the size and boundaries of the working class. By paying attention to the advantages of the elite, and how these advantages are pursued and secured, class analysis is not only able to identify widening inequalities, but also explore the interplay between economic, social and cultural capital in processes of class formation.

In considering these processes in terms of geographical variation, Cunningham and Savage make a timely intervention in ongoing discussions regarding the relationship between London and the south-east of England, and the rest of the UK. They also map out the spatial dimensions of the GBCS skew towards the most advantaged. The elite are distinctly concentrated in London and the south-east, with the highest levels of economic capital. Cunningham and Savage also unpack the spatial, social, cultural and economic complexity of the UK elite, exposing regional variations in capitals and different clusters of elites within London itself. They suggest London is an elite metropolitan 'vortex' forming a range of elite groups, with micro-geographies of patterned cultural engagement and opportunities for social connections to be made and maintained. Geography thus plays a central role in elite class formation.

Yet another advantage of this large, granular data set is that graduates from all UK universities are represented in the sample, with hundreds of respondents for each institution. Despite the influence of Bourdieu in the sociology of education, there has been little examination of the relationship between specific universities and particular class destinations. Wakeling and Savage address this in their paper through their analysis of higher education and entry into the elite. They explore the capitals of graduates from the Russell Group in particular and the institutions which are associated with elite membership, finding considerable variation. Geographical differences can be seen once again, with graduates from London universities disproportionately likely to enter the

elite. While a considerable number of the British elite do not have a degree, attending a prestigious institution is now a more prominent marker for the elite than in the past.

The unusually large sample of those in high-status occupations in the GBCS provides Friedman, Laurison and Miles with a unique data set to explore upward mobility into, and distinction and differentiation within, elite occupational groups. Social closure differs between sectors, with the traditional/managerial professions more exclusive compared to the technical/emerging occupations. Friedman, Laurison and Miles suggest there is a 'class ceiling' for those who are upwardly mobile, concluding they have a relative lack of economic, cultural and social capital compared to those who come from more advantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, the upwardly mobile tend to have consistently lower incomes than the intergenerationally stable. The paper makes a significant contribution to the field of mobility studies in considering trajectories after the point of entry into occupational categories, which suggests that social mobility strategy needs take account of the effect of inequalities beyond access to the professions.

Laurison provides a consideration of influence and power in the British elite, exploring differences in political involvement across the UK (drawing on the GBCS questions on contacting public officials) and subjective understandings of political efficacy (drawing on the GBCS questions regarding subjective feelings of influence). He shows that this is not just based on levels of absolute skills and resources in terms of income, education and working in a non-routine occupation. While those with these attributes are, indeed, more likely to be politically engaged, Laurison argues engagement is a *relational* phenomenon based on stocks of economic, social and cultural capital. Participating in high-brow cultural activities and knowing members of high-status occupations are strongly associated with political engagement. Consequently, Laurison suggests the higher an individual's social position, the more likely they are to feel they can influence decisions that affect the UK and contact government officials or political representatives. Inequalities in cultural and social capital thus manifest in inequalities in political mobilization.

In the concluding chapter, Savage presents the overall picture of the contemporary British elite offered by this special issue. He considers how the various papers utilize the detailed, granular GBCS data to provide insights into the dimensions of elite class formation, and revisits the sample skew (and micro-skews) which are, themselves, of sociological interest. Savage highlights four key arguments. First, the elite is a group which is distinct from a larger service class; secondly, that this elite is differentiated in terms of occupations and professional sectors; thirdly, that a corporate/managerial elite group dominates, although this is less exclusive than the traditional professions; and finally, that elite practices can be observed such as attending particular educational institutions, spatial concentration in London and the South-East, and predispositions to certain cultural activities which are, in turn, associated with other advantages such as political efficacy. In doing so, Savage demonstrates how the

Great British Class Survey is an exceptionally valuable resource in mapping the anatomy of power and privilege in modern Britain.

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to the GBCS team for their comments on an earlier version of this paper, especially Niall Cunningham, Mark Taylor and Mike Savage for their contributions and insights.

Notes

- 1 As discussed later in this paper, the GBCS data is deposited in the UK Data Archive and is available via the UK Data Service. The accompanying documentation provides additional technical details about the GBCS methodology.
- 2 The initial Great British Class Survey team were: Mike Savage, Fiona Devine, Niall Cunningham, Mark Taylor, Yaojun Li, Johannes Hjellbrekke, Brigitte Le Roux, Sam Friedman and Andrew Miles. They have been joined for the papers in this special issue by Daniel Laurison, Helene Snee and Paul Wakeling.
- 3 Viewing figures for the broadcast are available at: <http://www.barb.co.uk/viewing/weekly-top-30?>
- 4 For the sake of brevity, and to concentrate on some of the broader issues we wish to raise, we have not reproduced details of how these capital measures were derived in this article. Instead, we refer the reader to a fuller explanation and the distribution of the various forms of capital in Savage *et al.* (2013).
- 5 Some people in particular made a massive contribution to the GBCS along with Philip Trip-penbach, including Richard Cable (former editor at BBC Lab UK) and Michael Orwell (BBC Lab UK producer).
- 6 The Altmetric 'score' for the article is available at: http://www.altmetric.com/details.php?citation_id=1335525
- 7 In the week the GBCS findings were released, a controversial debate around 'benefit culture' centred on remarks made by the Chancellor George Osborne regarding the Philpott case, in which an unemployed father of 17 was jailed for manslaughter following the death of six of his children in a house fire. Osborne made the case for welfare reform and suggested that the state should not be subsidizing the 'lifestyle' of large families in receipt of welfare benefits. This was shortly followed by the death of the former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, leading to reflections on her impact on the British working class in particular.

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