Mediating the Scottish Independence Debate

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In the six months leading up to the referendum vote on 18 September 2014 Scotland experienced a period of exceptionally heightened political discourse, a widespread form of political participation unusual in western liberal-democracies. For almost two years fundamental questions about nation, state and society that are routinely taken for granted were exposed to widespread public discussion and debate involving millions of individuals normally silenced by the political fetish. Instead, these became the subject of open, often heated, discussion and debate by wide layers of society, in workplaces and meeting halls, streets and city squares, shopping centres and job centres, bus stops and pubs, schools, and so on.

This process of self-representation meant that political discourse was forced to shift from the logic of political self-marketing as the neutral, technical preserve of small circles of networked state managers and media interlocutors. Such routine forms of representation express what Pierre Bourdieu (1991) referred to as 'political fetishism'. A fetish of political representatives ensures that 'isolated, silent, voiceless individuals, without either the capacity or the power to make themselves heard and understood, are faced with the alternative of keeping quiet or being spoken for by someone else' (Bourdieu, 1991: 206). Individuals are typically unable to constitute a political movement unless they delegate the right to communicate the collective symbolically to a 'representative' of the group.

This wider public discourse began to break the stranglehold of the political fetish in Scotland, most obviously in the political vertigo that continues to be experienced by the representatives of the Unionist parties and what might be called 'media Unionism'. A mass grassroots movement in support of Independence benefited from a changed and, in some ways, reinvigorated media field. Where television once threatened the authority of newspapers, social media now challenges the dominance of television and the press.

The press

Newspaper Unionism has been a central plank of the political fetish in Scotland since the eighteenth century. Every single day the press expresses its Scottish credentials on page after page. Banal declarations of Scottishness are routinely framed by the apparent permanence of the political Union. Until as recent as the 2007 Scottish elections, national titles in Scotland refused to endorse either independence or the SNP, despite the latter's increasing electoral support. With the SNP landslide victory in 2011 and the formation of the first majority government in the Scottish parliament, the politics of the press in Scotland began to look even more one-dimensional and non-democratic.

With the sole exception of the endorsement of independence by the *Sunday Herald*, the *Scotsman* supported a No vote, while the *Scottish Sun* and *Daily Record* refused to adopt an explicit position, although content analysis indicates a clear pro-Union bias. David Patrick's statistical and qualitative analysis of front-page articles, editorials and comment pieces found that much of the coverage was 'neutral'. However, for the remaining coverage headlines were four times more likely to be anti-independence and articles were three times more likely to be pro-Union, deploying a more pejorative use of language such as the 'Nats' (meaning the Scottish National Party) and the personalisation of the Independence campaign around a negative cult of Alex Salmond, leader of the 'Nats' (**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bYajHIcXMk**).

Any influence that newspapers may have over the politics of their readers has been diminished by its loss of dominance over a more crowded media field. Clearly the tabloids in Scotland did not want to alienate a large section of their mainly working class readerships. This readership was split down the middle, although working class readers in cities like Dundee and Glasgow proved more likely to vote Yes according to the post-referendum poll conducted by Tory peer Lord Ashcroft (**http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2014/09/scotland-voted/**).

This does not mean, however, that the press now exerts only negligible, if any, influence as some claim. News UK, owners of the *Sun*, *Times* and *Sunday Times*, for instance, claimed that survey research commissioned from pollsters YouGov showed that newspapers were more influential in determining how people voted in the referendum than either social media or the campaign groups (News UK, 2014). As evidence of the renewed political vitality of the press, Mike Darcey, CEO of News UK, could point out that it was a *Sunday Times* poll putting the Yes campaign narrowly ahead that panicked the No campaign into last-ditch promises about increased devolution of powers should Scotland vote to remain in the

An Informed Choice' it declared. As 'The Vow' itself boldly claimed: 'A No vote will deliver faster, safer and better change than separation [i.e. independence]'. Yet 'The Vow's' status as a sacred contract with the Scottish nation was soon the object of UK party political positioning and rivalry. Once the No vote was delivered 'The Vow' became ensnared in the self-interested political manoeuvring of the Unionist parties in England for the forthcoming General Election on 7 May 2015 and open 'civil war' inside the Scottish Labour Party, forcing the resignation of its leader Johann Lamont six weeks after 'winning' the referendum.

Broadcast Unionism and Independence

In such ways, the referendum put the credibility of media Unionism to a stern test, above all the impartial public service ethos of the BBC. This was revealed by the analysis and reaction to *Fairness in the First Year?*, a research report published in February 2014 by John Robertson (2014), professor of media politics at the University of the West of Scotland. This year-long content analysis of fairness in mainstream TV coverage of the Scottish independence referendum found that although both broadcasters gave significantly more favourable coverage to No than Yes statements, the BBC's *Reporting Scotland* coverage was more biased than STV news coverage, with a ratio of 3:2 for statements favouring the No campaign over the Yes campaign.

However, since both sides enjoyed a large presence on broadcast news the overall ratio proved rather less important than the structuring of reports and the subtle repetition of bad news, especially about the economy after independence. When the sequence of statements were examined, reports tended to be defined by a negative framing of the Yes campaign, who were then compelled to respond with a reactive and defensive posture, often concluding reports with a generally negative framing of the Yes position.

Despite the qualitative difference between the spontaneous discourse of the instant commentary that appears on blogs, newspaper editorials and opinion columns, including that of academic or independent experts, and the necessarily delayed discourse of sustained scholarly analysis, Robertson's findings were generally ignored by mainstream media while it went viral online. Rather than answer the claims of the study publicly in

Union, which itself was announced on the front page of the tabloid, *Daily Record*.

Yet, such a positive gloss on the influence of newspapers was disputed by Angela Haggerty (2014) for media analysts The Drum. She claimed that mainstream print and broadcast media coverage influenced the decisions of a mere 28 per cent of voters in the referendum. While many got information from TV and radio (71 per cent) and 60 per cent from newspapers and their websites (60 per cent), more than two thirds (68 per cent) said that mainstream media was not a decisive influence in forming their decision. Social media and websites appeared to exercise more influence (39 per cent) than newspapers (34 per cent), although TV and radio was the strongest source (42 per cent), while almost one third (30 per cent) had their decisions shaped by the Yes and No campaigns.

Newspapers therefore retain some influence over voter intentions but, as in

the case of the *Sunday Times* poll, they appear to have much more influence over the behaviour of the political establishment than their readers. This was graphically illustrated by the three political leaders of the Unionist parties agreeing to issue a solemn 'Vow' on the front page of the *Daily Record*. From quite different positions on the further devolution of powers, in the event of a No vote 'The Vow' promised a last-minute guarantee from the three political leaders of the UK parties for 'extensive' new powers for the Scottish parliament without the risks and upheaval of independent statehood.

'The Vow' was depicted by the *Daily Record* in the cliché style of an old historical document, with parchment curled at the edges. Under the banner 'Our Nation Decides' the *Record*'s editorial described 'The Vow' as 'a historic joint promise' offering the low risk option to independence and as a statement of final authority: 'Now Voters Can Make

an open democratic forum of experts, BBC Scotland's head of policy and corporate affairs raised serious objections about the methodology, accuracy and language of the report, and complained of 'corporate disrepute' directly to the Principal of UWS, an accusation that could have threatened the terms of Robertson's employment.

While the BBC publicly defended their coverage of the referendum as 'rigorously impartial and in line with our guidelines on fairness and impartiality', thousands of pro-independence supporters protested outside BBC Scotland offices against BBC 'propaganda' after its political editor Nick Robinson was accused of colluding with the Treasury on negatively misrepresenting economic prospects for an independent Scotland. Alex Salmond called the BBC's impartiality into question as the unthinking reflex of Unionism. As he told the *Sunday Herald* (14 September 2014): 'The problem with Nick . . . I mean, don't get me wrong, I like these folk, but they don't realise they're biased. It's the unconscious bias which is the most extraordinary thing of all. If the BBC were covering, in my estimation, any referendum, in any democracy, anywhere in the world, they would cover it impeccably, in a balanced fashion. What they don't understand is they're players in this'.

Mistaken for a politician

The referendum debate disrupted the already to hand points of reference of media Unionism. Mainstream journalists struggled to adapt to the challenge of thinking beyond the political fetish. One way that fast-thinking responded was to constantly re-frame political discourse in the more familiar terms of representation and away from the more fundamental questions raised by the referendum such as citizenship, democracy and equality.

One example of the collision of political fetishism with the wider political framing of the referendum was a television interview by the BBC political journalist Andrew Neil with Jeane Freeman of the Women for Independence campaign group. Freeman, a former special advisor to Labour First Minster Jack McConnell, was appearing for the non-party campaign group, Women for Independence.

Yet, as with many political journalists, Neil repeatedly returned to the routine fast-thinking of the political fetish by using personalisation to reframe the debate in terms of the First Minister, Alex Salmond,

and authorised political representatives, above all political parties. Neil insisted on framing the discussion in terms of the electoral positioning of the Labour party and the SNP and the personalities of political leaders, rather than fundamental problems of citizenship, democracy, equality and statehood:

Freeman: . . . I think Andrew that you are mistaking me for a politician, and an SNP politician at that. I have not asserted any of the things that you are suggesting. I represent Women for Independence ... Labour in Scotland is run by the United Kingdom, it is run by London Labour, and they are conflating a Labour versus SNP argument with an argument about Independence, which is about the decisions in Scotland being taken by the people who live and work in Scotland . . .

Neil: . . . even as things stand now you could increase tax, increase spending on health but you've chosen to do none of that.

Freeman: No. No. Not true. We're dancing on the head of a pin here.

Neil: Well, what taxes have you increased?

Freeman: Well, again Andrew, I am not an elected politician, so I don't get to increase or decrease taxes. You're mixing me up with somebody else. **(https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=23m6CukRUGM)**

A categorical failure to recognise that the referendum could not be contained by the fast-thinking reflexes of the political fetish was common to much London-based media. Few columnists for London-based titles showed much of a feel for the changing dynamics of the political game, notwithstanding rare exceptions like the *Guardian* and *Observer* columnist Kevin McKenna.

The fetish of televised debates
One forum where the political fetish was given unvarnished prominence was in televised debates arranged between individual representatives of the contending sides. An initial attempt by the SNP to stage a debate between Alex Salmond, SNP First Minister of Scotland, and David Cameron, Conservative Prime Minister of the UK, failed. Cameron was not only a Tory leader but was also associated in Scotland with the personalised baggage of an elite English millionaire, while Salmond hailed from

an ordinary family background in central Scotland. Hence the No campaign Better Together preferred to place Labour politicians to the forefront of their public profile, supported in a lower key by Liberal-Democrat Scottish MPs.

STV's news and current affairs programme Scotland Tonight staged an initial series of debates in late 2013 and early 2014. All of these involved the SNP deputy leader Nicola Sturgeon going 'head to head', as fast-thinkers put it, with politicians from rival parties: Michael Moore (Liberal Democrat MP), Anas Sarwar (Labour MP), Alistair Carmichael (Liberal Democrat MP), and Johan Lamont (Labour MSP). Discussion was broadened out by audience participation and the presence of journalists and celebrities on televised formats alongside established politicians. In the absence of a debate with the UK Prime Minister, Salmond debated with the figurehead of the Better Together campaign, Labour MP and former Chancellor, Alistair Darling, in two successive debates, the first broadcast on STV and the second on BBC in August 2014. It was generally reported that Darling 'won' the first debate and that Salmond 'won' the second one.

These debates were framed as personalised trials of strength. Politicians, journalists and commentators subscribe to the implicit rules of the contest, good speaking, formalities, turn-taking, how to re-frame the question, the moderator as proxy and referee, knowing when to interrupt and when to show restraint. Televised debates are spectacles whose object is to accumulate maximum rhetorical advantage. In reality, however, the televised debates failed to persuade audiences. While they were promoted as conclusive, winner-takes-all events, polling suggested that audiences generally supported politicians that echoed their pre-existing convictions.

Online Media

Changes in the relative importance of the old media mean that mediated events like televised political debates or political PR no longer monopolise political discourse but have to contend with a more crowded, less deferential and faster media field. In this complex of media spaces, attitudes and speed, the central focus traditionally given to the political fetish can no longer be taken for granted, even if television and the press continue to perform certain functions for the framing of politics.
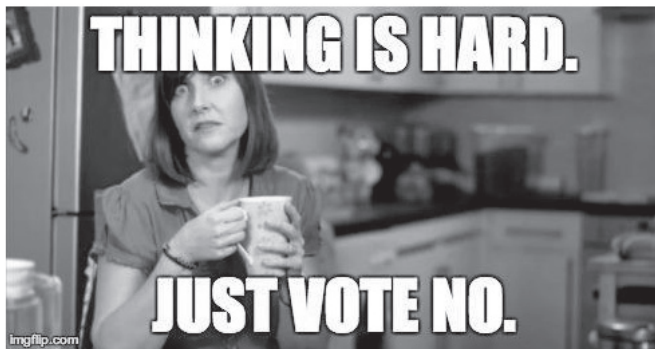
Screenshots from Better Together campaign video, 'The woman who made up her mind', broadcast on BBC and STV August 2014 and spoof version, 'Thinking is hard. Just Vote No'.

Some of the most active and influential websites include the National Collective, Bella Caledonia, Common Weal and the Scottish Review. Some of the same political and cultural commentators turned up to offer analysis and opinion across these sites, even while criticising the small networked political elite that run Scotland's institutions.

The National Collective website grew from a small coterie of cultural workers in Edinburgh in 2011 to more than 3000 members by September 2014 (**http:// nationalcollective.com**). Supported by crowd-funding, the online magazine Bella Caledonia was established in 2007 to create a space for an independent media

as a presupposition of an independent Scotland (**http://bellacaledonia.org.uk/**). Bella Caledonia claimed to have attracted up to one million unique users in August 2014. In 2013 the website launched a print journal, Closer, to take its arguments about Scottish democracy beyond the web. In the context of alleged pro-union bias of the mainstream media during the referendum campaign, ambitions for a more transformative public sphere in Scotland emerged. Amongst other initiatives, Bella Caledonia's founder and editor Mike Small's proposed a 'buycott' whereby subscription payments are redirected from large media corporations to support independent media in Scotland (**http://bellacaledonia.org.**

uk/2014/09/26/an-independent-media-for-scotland/**).

While not formally taking an Independence position, Common Weal represents a policy forum for academics and economists. It takes its name from an old Scots term for collective ownership of the nation's socially-produced wealth for the well-being of all. Starting from this radical perspective, Common Weal reports on all major aspects of public policy inform a much wider media discourse. Indeed their key idea for making 'the news media fit for a functioning democracy' indicates the continuing dependency of 'new media' on the news gathering resources of the 'old' broadcast media. Web-based journalism and commentary needs support if it is function as a credible news source. Common Weal propose that national broadcast media make their news content available as an 'open source' resource, like a news agency. By doing so, news media could provide a more vital and innovative service to democratic discourse: 'This could support a proliferation of small, independent news blogs which use a broadcasting service's content as their starting point but who can develop that further by seeking their own reaction quotes or giving it their own spin' (**http:// www.allofusfirst.org/the-key-ideas/a-media-fit-for-a-democracy/**).

In some ways, this is what political websites like Wings Over Scotland already attempt to do. It focuses on mainstream print and broadcast media as well as online and social-network communities while providing its own commentary and analysis (**http://wingsoverscotland. com/about/**). Wings Over Scotland also produced a popular, fully-referenced guidebook to the facts, *The Wee Blue Book*, some of which were fiercely disputed by pro-Union business blogger Kevin Hague (**http://chokkablog.blogspot. co.uk/2014/08/the-wee-blue-book-of-lies.html**).

As bloggers like Kevin Hague and others indicate, not all online media supported independence. Some tried to allow debate and discussion to flourish, although how far conflicting opinions challenged the existing preconceptions of readers can only be a matter of conjecture. For instance, Better Nation is a blog that while sympathetic to Scottish independence aimed to 'provoke fierce and intelligent debate', albeit in a 'nice' way, starting from the premise that 'Most in politics do have a genuine desire to improve how

their country runs, and we will try to give a fair wind to their intentions, even when we have to disagree profoundly with their methods' (**http://www.betternation.org/raison-detre-2/**).

Similarly, the online journal *Scottish Review* also published opinion pieces from a range of quite different perspectives. While critical of both sides of the debate, the veteran editor of *Scottish Review*, Kenneth Roy, argued that the activism of the Yes movement was often intemperate, encouraged by direct incitement from Alex Salmond, SNP First Minister, that left post-referendum Scotland a 'broken' country (**http://www.scottishreview.net/KennethRoy174.shtml**).

Network wars

It is not only political websites that helped shape public discourse, especially pro-independence discourse. Although often regarded as a source of malign influence and abuse, social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and so on helped to proliferate information and opinion, regardless of its reliability. Social media exposed the grip of political fetishism and demographic on Better Together's campaign, with the Yes campaign producing three times more positive Tweets and Facebook likes (Boffey, 2014).

Users were also altered by social media to the arguments heard at political meetings and debates and were exposed to the wide circulation of political satire. This acted as a counter-weight to the PR of the official campaigns, particularly the negative, sometimes apocalyptic, messages emanating from Better Together. Labelled 'Project Fear', businesses, bankers, economists, foreign politicians among others were mobilised to reinforce its main message that independence would spell disaster for the Scottish economy, welfare state, academic research, employment, currency, interest rates, retail prices, international relations, and so on.

Yet PR attempts to manipulate the political views of audiences now risk backfiring spectacularly. This was illustrated by the Better Together campaign video 'The woman that made up her mind', a counter-productive 'No Thanks' appeal to women voters. A female actor stands in her kitchen enjoying a cup of tea but fretting to the camera about the referendum that her husband is always going on about, even to the children over breakfast. 'There's not much time for me to make a decision and there's only so

many hours in the day', especially when independence 'sounds too good to be true', the woman ruminates, before suddenly deciding to vote No after all. It spawned an internet meme, '#PatronisingBTlady', that trended widely in various spoof versions, mocking the official campaign video as 'sexist' and 'patronising' to women voters, a message that one spoof framed as 'Thinking is hard: Just Vote No'.

Other examples of satire that went viral during the campaign included Lady Alba's 'Bad romance' video, based on the popular Lady Gaga song. In the week before the vote a video posted on YouTube of political street theatre by Empire Biscuits, 'Empire strikes back' also went viral. It showed dozens of suited Labour MPs arriving in Glasgow wheeling suitcases through the city centre being harangued by a man on a rickshaw. As the Darth Vader theme music blared out of a megaphone bystanders were informed, 'Your imperial masters have arrived! Bow before them!' When one politician in a suit tells 'Empire Biscuit', 'Don't be silly' he replies, 'Don't you be silly'. And so it went on for ten excruciating and hilarious minutes as the political fetish momentarily came face to face with political chutzpah.

Fast media and the referendum Pressures of the journalistic field, a pressure even more marked with 24-hour television news coverage, compress the time needed to think and brings forward the cultural phenomenon of what Bourdieu (2010: 27) called 'fast-thinking', alongside the acceleration of time in other fields like work, education, communication, economic exchange, and so on. Fast-thinking trades on the banal clichés of self-reinforcing communication duplicated by the same small, self-referential circle of political insiders.

In the final week or so of the campaign, when opinion polls signalled the seemingly remorseless progress of the Yes campaign, mass media was mobilised intensively by political insiders in both camps in an attempt to tip the balance in their favour. Yet traditional forms of mass media – print and broadcast – no longer dominate the public sphere, even if political commentators and journalists continue to speak as if it does. Social media became a subversive conduit for information, images and ideas as the political landscape rapidly evolved.

'New' and 'old' media appeared to stand in an inverse relationship to each other

during the referendum campaign. On the one hand, none of the semi-autonomous national newspaper titles in Scotland, with the exception of the *Sunday Herald*, supported independence. On the other hand, much of the social media landscape was captured, often in highly imaginative and informed ways, by the Yes campaign. Political websites, blogs and online magazines attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors while inspired online spoofs and videos went viral.

However, this is not a straightforward case, as sometimes claimed, of the 'vertical' communication of top-down 'old media' being usurped and democratised by the 'horizontal' communication of 'new' social media. Such a simplistic binary model of the media field needs to be tempered by accounting for the continuing role of traditional mass media in setting the parameters of official political discourse as well as registering the ways in which social media replicate the established patterns of political discourse as much as it threatens to dislodge them.

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