

Exit Velocity: The Media Election

Dominic Wring and Stephen Ward

The previous campaign of 2010 produced electoral firsts in media terms (the televised leaders' debates), drama and unpredictability ('Cleggmania'), and memorable moments (Gordon Brown's 'bigoted woman' comments) all of which disrupted the parties' planned scripts. Arguably, the 2015 election seems to have been its very antithesis. The plodding six week campaign has been widely portrayed as dull, stage-managed, narrowly focused and lacking in surprise moments, but with a dramatic ending on election night, as the broadcasters announced the shock exit poll. The disbelieving former Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown declared 'he would eat his hat' if his party suffered the losses predicted by the forecast; in fact the result was even worse. Ashdown like so many of his fellow commentators, whether of the traditional offline or online media varieties, was stunned by the apparent failure of the opinion polls to foresee the Conservative victory. What followed was the political equivalent of 'exit velocity' in the aftermath of a plodding election, with frenetic, intensive debate over the future of the UK sparking the kind of passion lacking in the preceding campaign.

The 2015 campaign as reported in the media was predicated on the assumption that the outcome would be another hung parliament and, possibly, coalition government. This was constantly reinforced by a stream of experts and opinion-formers fixated on what might happen after the election rather what had just happened in the previous parliament. This augmented the potential power broking role of emerging 'challengers' such as UKIP, the SNP and Greens at the marked expense of the Liberal Democrats, clear beneficiaries of the added exposure they had received in

2010. Yet if the campaign differed in terms of its focus on these growing political parties it was also reminiscent of the previous one with its similar emphasis on polls and other aspects of the 'horse race'. This will be explored in more detail together with an evaluation of the role played by broadcasting, particularly the leader debates, as well as the partisan press. Consideration will also be given to the influence of social media platforms during the campaign and their place as both a source of additional election news and commentary as well as communication for parties keen to exploit their strategic potential.

The Traditional Media Campaign: Issues and Personalities

The Conservatives' successful campaign was directed by Lynton Crosby, the strategist who helped guide John Howard to power in their native Australia. Crosby subsequently worked for the Tories in the 2005 General Election before overseeing Boris Johnson's successful campaigns to be Mayor of London in 2008 and 2012. The earlier Johnson triumph was set against the backdrop of a rapidly worsening financial crisis that would undermine the then incumbent Labour government. During the 2015 General Election Crosby aimed to exploit continuing voter anxieties about this economic trauma.

The Conservatives ran a focused campaign that remorselessly promoted the substantive issues that would come to dominate the news agenda: the economy, tax and constitutional matters (see Table 14.1).

Table 14.1 here

By contrast policy areas that might have been more problematic for the Conservatives, such as Labour's favoured theme of the NHS and UKIP's equivalent issue, immigration, received less journalistic attention. Furthermore there was the now established media fixation with electoral process, particularly the apparent closeness of the two major parties in the opinion polls. Crosby was himself scathing about the proliferation of commentators who viewed the election as 'entertainment'.¹ Yet their speculation helped reinforce a key Tory claim that dominated the narrative especially in the closing stages of the election: the fear of Labour taking office with SNP support.² This was supported by an advertising campaign that depicted a diminutive Ed Miliband as being either in the pocket of or having his strings pulled by the SNP leader.³ By contrast there was relatively little media commentary on the possibility or consequences of a majority Conservative government beyond the Labour supporting *Daily Mirror*.

Media speculation as to the likely nature of a minority or coalition led government reinforced the already considerable news interest 'minor' parties whose leaders received unprecedented levels of publicity with Nicola Sturgeon and Nigel Farage among the top five most high profile politicians during the campaign (see Table 14.2). If the attention devoted to Sturgeon underlined the electoral significance of the constitutional issue, the presence of George Osborne and Ed Balls in the top ten reflected the importance of the economic debate. Tony Blair even made a significant re-appearance warning against the threat of the UK leaving Europe and helping ensure this debate was not dominated by UKIP.

Table 14.2 here

The election campaign itself was a series of largely anodyne, staged for camera events usually featuring the party leader that were managed by spin-doctors keen to exert control over the news agenda. Sympathetic audiences of supporters assembled for visiting politicians' speeches, press conferences and photo-opportunities in marginal seats. Popular locations for these events included the kinds of factories and schools populated by members of the 'hard working families' that had become such a clichéd part of the political narrative. Chancellor George Osborne made frequent appearances of this kind kitted out in the requisite high visibility jacket and safety hat in his attempts to identify with what he termed the 'strivers' over the 'skivers'.

There was a dearth of the type of unexpected encounter that so spectacularly derailed Gordon Brown's campaign in 2010 following his meeting with Gillian Duffy. There were however a few newsworthy gaffes. In one speech David Cameron expressed support for West Ham and later apologized to his fellow Aston Villa fans, but this was not a career defining moment for a Prime Minister who had already established his leadership credentials. In contrast, Ed Miliband appeared less self-assured, notably when he partially stumbled whilst leaving the stage of the final live broadcast debate of the campaign. His subsequent unveiling of a huge tablet of stone with six campaign pledges on it, the so-called 'EdStone', provoked considerable mockery compounded when the Vice Chair of Labour's campaign, Lucy Powell, appeared to suggest to BBC Five Live's Peter Allen that the promises could be broken.

The Televised Debates

In contrast with 2010, negotiations over the format of the leader debates were protracted and nearly ended in failure. This was mainly because David Cameron wanted to avoid participating in the kind of events he claimed had ‘sucked the life out’ of the previous campaign. The Prime Minister did ultimately participate, but on his own terms with six other party leaders involved. UKIP’s case to be included in the leader debates for the first time had been substantially enhanced when broadcast regulator Ofcom afforded them ‘major party’ status in the aftermath of their 2014 European election triumph and support in the opinion polls.⁴ Cameron and his media adviser, Craig Oliver, subsequently tried to minimize rather than challenge Farage’s right to participate in the debates through insisting the Greens must also be present on the platform. This forced the broadcasters’ to abandon their original joint proposal for three encounters in which Farage would appear once, Clegg twice and Cameron and Miliband throughout. What ultimately emerged was a substantially different series of programmes.

The most watched broadcast debate was the ITV programme on 2nd April, seen by 5.88 million viewers, the seventh most popular item on the channel that week.⁵ Seven party leaders featured, including Cameron in his only face-to-face appearance alongside his rivals (Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, UKIP, SNP and Plaid Cymru). The SNP had threatened legal action after being excluded from the 2010 debates but entered the 2015 negotiations in a stronger position following the previous year’s Independence Referendum. The SNP’s inclusion strengthened the ultimately successful claims of Plaid Cymru leader, Leanne Wood,

for involvement. The broadcasters did however refuse the Northern Irish parties' attempts to participate.

Leanne Wood was prominent in one of the more newsworthy exchanges of the ITV debate. Wood reprimanded Nigel Farage for his criticisms of 'health tourism' involving migrants with HIV coming to the UK for treatment. But it was Nicola Sturgeon who appeared to gain most momentum when she was judged to have performed well and even 'won', albeit by a small margin, in one of the post-debate polls. Sturgeon appeared in the other face-to-face encounter on 16th April between the opposition 'challenger' parties that attracted 4.35 million viewers.⁶ Controversially the Conservatives' refusal to have the Prime Minister participate in another such encounter also led to their negotiators' insistence that the Liberal Democrats should not be allowed a platform that should be the preserve of opposition politicians.⁷ In Cameron's and Clegg's absence, the key exchange occurred when Miliband categorically refused to entertain Sturgeon's proposition that they could lock the Tories out of power. Farage courted more controversy when he criticized the BBC over what he alleged was its selection of a disproportionately 'left-wing' audience. The debate concluded with the three female 'progressive alliance' leaders (Sturgeon, Wood and the Greens' Natalie Bennett) collectively embracing in what proved to be one of the most memorable images of the campaign.

The two leaders' debates were sandwiched between a pair of live programmes that featured leaders making separate appearances. The first of these was a joint venture on 26 March, *Cameron and Miliband Live: the Battle for Number Ten*, involving Sky and Channel 4 that effectively started the election campaign and attracted 2.60 million viewers.⁸ This hybrid format had former BBC Newsnight presenter Jeremy Paxman and audience members interrogating the two main party

leaders in separate sections of the same broadcast. Paxman appeared to unsettle Cameron with questioning about food banks and zero hours contracts. In contrast Ed Miliband was judged to have performed well, albeit starting with low expectations borne out of poor poll ratings. Miliband memorably responded ‘hell yes’ when asked if he was tough enough to be Prime Minister.

The final live leaders’ event was a BBC *Question Time Special* on 30 April involving the Coalition and Labour parties seen by 3.77 million.⁹ David Cameron opened the proceedings and came through relatively unscathed whereas Miliband’s subsequent denial that the previous Labour government had spent too much money in office provoked an audible groan from the audience. The incident highlighted the extent to which the Conservatives’ had successively established their view as the dominant economic narrative.

The understandable media focus on TV programmes featuring the leaders overshadowed the range of broadcasts involving other party spokespeople. The BBC’s *Daily Politics* hosted a series of debates with five of the relevant portfolio holders discussing key policy areas such as the economy, education and welfare. The latter programme featured particularly animated exchanges between Iain Duncan Smith and his Green opponent. The involvement of this and the other challenger parties helped guarantee they were represented in an election campaign to an unprecedented degree.

Broadcasting

Throughout the campaign politicians made concerted efforts to try to connect with specific groups of potential voters. While the recent proliferation of niche channels and the fragmentation of audiences may have exacerbated this tendency the

trend stretches back further. Party strategists have long prioritized less formal discussion based formats as a means of engaging viewers believed to be less interested in politics but nonetheless likely to vote. Examples of this in the lead-up to and during the 2015 were appearances by the main leaders on ITV's *This Morning* and by party representatives on the same network's daytime talk show *Loose Women*.

Broadcasters devoted significant airtime to audience-led discussion based election programming.¹⁰ Most obviously this included familiar strands such as such as BBC *Question Time* and Radio 4's *Any Questions*. There were also several newer innovations. BBC2 and ITV1 used the campaign to launch two new shows hosted by Victoria Derbyshire and James O'Brien respectively. More niche outlets provided features tailored to their specific audiences. BBC Three TV and Radio 1 *Newsbeat*, for instance, aired question and answer sessions for young people that were more interactive and often livelier, unpredictable affairs than the more staid and formal debates between the party leaders.

The leaders continued to participate in familiar broadcast rituals such as the BBC series of interrogations by Evan Davis, but other less formal interviews appeared to garner more newsworthy material. A news feature by BBC journalist James Lansdale on David Cameron aired just before the formal campaign elicited the admission that, in the event of a Conservative victory, his next term in office would also be his final one. The BBC ran a corresponding profile of Ed Miliband who could not have predicted the ensuing controversy provoked by the number of kitchens in his house.

Daily Mail columnist Sarah Vine, wife of Chief Whip Michael Gove, described the Labour leader's kitchen as 'bland, functional, humourless, cold' and the Milibands as 'alien'.¹¹ Vine struggled to defend her insults on BBC's *This Week*,

particularly when it transpired - as she herself had speculated in her article - that the space was in fact a utility room. Ed Miliband's 'real' kitchen and him cooking in it featured prominently in another informal profile for ITV's *Tonight* by political editor Tom Bradby. Bradby's was part of a series that gave particular prominence to the leaders' spouses, reinforcing a trend established in the 2010 campaign.

The leaders of the SNP, Plaid and the Greens were profiled by ITV's Julie Etchingham to provide further insights into the personalities of these prominent women including a relaxed Nicola Sturgeon who was shown at home talking about herself and her background. The Green leader Natalie Bennett also fared much better in her appearance in stark contrast to an awkward pre-campaign interview with LBC radio after which she admitted to having felt 'devastated' after failing to explain her party's housing policy.

The Press

The campaign experienced the kind of hostile print media coverage of Labour not seen since the 1992 General Election. By 2010, *The Sun* had returned to the Conservative fold with a positive front-page endorsement of Cameron. Ed Miliband's highly publicized criticisms of *Sun* owner Rupert Murdoch during the hacking scandal of 2011 further soured the already poor relations between the party and the newspaper culminating in the still best-selling paper devoting the front page of its 2015 polling day issue to ridiculing Miliband based on an infamous 2014 photograph of the Labour leader struggling to eat a bacon sandwich. Accompanied by the slogan 'Save Our Bacon', the *Sun* strongly urged readers to endorse the Conservatives as the way to avoid disaster. Table 14.3 provides a guide to which parties were supported by which newspapers

Table 14.3 here

Although newspapers have seen a decline in their paper sales they still appear confident in their own ability to shape the wider news agenda. Roy Greenslade believed this was a decisive factor on polling day:

‘I am sure that the relentless ridicule over the six-week campaign may have played some part in the voting decisions of the floating voters who buy the *Sun* and the *Mail* (and yes, there are plenty of them).’¹²

The *Sun* and other members of a ‘Tory press’ that dominates the national newspaper industry (see Table 14.3) published numerous anti-Labour stories during the campaign. Attacks on Miliband were frequent and his adviser David Axelrod, former strategist for Barack Obama, called the British print media more partisan than even his native US television networks.¹³ The *Daily Mail* tried to insinuate that a leader it routinely called ‘Red Ed’ had enjoyed a complex love life when, on its own evidence, this was far from the case.¹⁴ The *Sun* also questioned Miliband’s character when he agreed to a high profile meeting with Russell Brand, who had previously used his huge social media presence – including around 10 million Twitter followers - to strongly criticize the newspaper and its veteran proprietor Rupert Murdoch.

The centre-right ‘quality’ newspapers took a more cerebral approach in their reporting of the campaign. But they nonetheless appeared keen to help Cameron. A letter from 103 business people supporting the current government’s economic

policies was originally printed on the front page in the *Daily Telegraph* before being recycled by the major broadcast news outlets. Furthermore *The Times* and even the normally anti-Conservative *Independent* endorsed the continuation of the Coalition as the best electoral outcome. The possibility of a minority Labour government being ‘propped up’ by the SNP led the *Daily Mail* to use its front-page to suggest Nicola Sturgeon was the ‘Most Dangerous Women in Britain’. Intriguingly while the London version of the *Sun* took a similar line to the *Mail* regarding Sturgeon and her party, the Scottish edition enthusiastically endorsed the Nationalists and campaigned for their victory north of the border. UKIP also secured a notable first with formal endorsement of the party by the *Daily Express*, a longstanding opponent of the European Union.

The Internet and Social Media Campaign

If the broadcast and newsprint media campaign followed traditional patterns then the internet and social media was expected, in some quarters, to produce something different. Yet reporting about internet campaigning superficially also followed a familiar pattern. The news media once again posed a straw man question of whether this would be an internet or social media election even though there was little sense of what a social media election might mean.¹⁵ As with the 2010 campaign, ‘the internet election narrative’ enabled the news media to hype up the potential of social media often then to dismiss its importance and usefulness as the campaign progressed¹⁶. However, it was not simply a case of history repeating itself. There was clear evidence this time of considerable activity around popular Twitter and Facebook platforms such as #GE2015. Aside from the nebulous question of whether it was a social media election, broadly three areas of interest emerged around the 2015

campaign and internet technologies: First, was the internet/social media challenging traditional campaign styles and becoming a crucial tool for parties? Second, which parties were most active in using internet tools and where? Third, did internet activity and competition have much impact in terms of mobilising support or influencing the behaviour of electors and could social media data be used to predict electoral outcomes?

Internet Campaign Style

As early as the 2001 General Election, pundits and politicians such as Labour's campaign strategist Douglas Alexander were predicting the end of the so-called command and control election campaign.¹⁷ Technology it was suggested would open up more interactive and conversational elections where voters would no longer be passive spectators but could challenge and take a more active role in campaign.¹⁸ One other less highlighted aspect of Internet era campaigns was the continued growth of data gathering exercises to identify and target key voters with more individualised messages (narrowcasting). Yet, despite these possibilities, the growth of the social media audience and a tidal wave of noise online, the standard response to the 2015 campaign was that it was another dull, stage-managed, risk adverse election both on and offline.¹⁹ Criticism of party online campaigns followed a familiar pattern: that they had failed to exploit the channels available and, even when they did so, they (re)produced unimaginative content. For example, most parties restricted themselves to a narrow range of social media channels. Only Labour had an Instagram account (to limited effect) whilst the Greens were the only party to use Reddit. Although the Conservatives dabbled with BuzzFeed it was hardly ground-breaking content. The result was a standard media style interview with David Cameron that generated

minimal excitement. Indeed, commentators pointed out that much social media content simply documented campaign events, re-stated basic pledges or attacked opponents rather than necessarily producing anything fresh.²⁰ There were little or no attempts from leading politicians to interact in online dialogue with voters. In short, social media was deployed as just another broadcast tool with little focus on the social. The idea that the parties did not get it was also underpinned by lack of focus on digital issues in the campaign.²¹

Disappointment with the parties' internet campaigns has become a recurring theme since 1997. It has some validity but arguably provides an oversimplified portrayal of online electioneering. First, criticism tends to be technology-driven based on what technology can do rather than how it is shaped by the electoral and political environment. Second, it tends to be focused on concerns about stimulating wider democratic conversation and participation, (although laudable aims), sometimes ignore the harsh reality of campaigning from a party perspective. Third, critiques are concentrated mainly on the most public aspects of the online campaign at the expense of the private, data-crunching, drier aspects of modern campaigns.

Whilst the output of the campaign might not have matched idealistic democratic notions of a 'conversational democracy', it is clear that parties were deploying technologies to greater extent than previously and in some cases with much greater level of internal scrutiny. Party campaign officials have subsequently claimed that their parties pursued digital strategies much more seriously than in 2010. In an interview with Channel 4 News, the Conservatives Creative Director noted the change from the last election campaign:

[In 2010] We didn't actually stop, we didn't really measure the stats we just did things that we thought would be interesting and exciting at the time... Now there's a completely analytical approach to it.²²

Overall, no single Internet campaigning style emerged amongst the parties despite the two main parties both hiring heavyweight specialists from the Obama campaign team, (Jim Messina for the Conservatives and David Axelrod for Labour). The Conservatives' campaign could be characterised as a more top-down, data-driven, targeted marketing approach – spending significant sums of money on Facebook advertising and data mining.²³ Leaked documents to the BBC suggested the Conservatives were spending over £100,000 per month on Facebook and up to £3,000 per month in key constituencies in the run up to the campaign. This contrasted with a reported figure of less than £10,000 per month by Labour.²⁴ Social media videos and posters were then used to drive home Conservative Party messages particularly about the threat of the SNP. Some critics likened these to negative US style attack ads not allowed on UK broadcast media. Perhaps more crucially, the advertising was also combined with a strategy of micro-targeting notably in key marginal seats in South-West England held by the Liberal Democrats. Online data, particularly from Facebook was mined and combined with private polling and focus groups to identify the concerns of undecided voters and target them with personalised communication through a range of methods (phone, email, letter, in person).²⁵

Labour strategy by contrast tended towards a more grassroots, core audience approach seemingly investing much effort in gaining traction through Twitter conversations and mobilising supporters on the ground. Similarly, with regard to Facebook, one party insider was quoted as suggesting that 'we're targeting people we

know are Labour supporters... to get them to donate and volunteer'.²⁶ In part, therefore, the differences in approach reflect the state of both the party campaign resources but also their overall campaign strategies. Matthew McGregor one of Labour's key digital advisors commented on the parties' internet campaigns:

The fact they [the Conservatives] are outspending the Labour Party many, many times over because of the support from millionaire donors is going to have an impact... [but] That's something the Labour Party can respond to by out-organising the Conservatives.²⁷

That parties adopted different approaches to technology and social media underlines the point that party context is at least as significant as the technology itself in shaping their campaigns.

Whilst much of public content on social media was undoubtedly safe, occasionally parties did try something different although it is not clear that it had much impact or was conducted with much confidence. The Greens' YouTube election broadcast 'Change the Tune' did gain some coverage with over 886,000 views, more than all the mainstream party broadcasts. The most high profile social media event of the campaign was Ed Miliband's meeting with comedian Russell Brand streamed through Brand's Trews YouTube channel. Given Brand's potential audience (around one million) this might be seen as useful means of reaching out to people beyond mainstream politics, although Brand's subsequent endorsement of Labour came at such a late stage in the campaign, (the week before polling) that it negated much of its potential impact. Brand's intervention also allowed Conservative newspapers and

opponents to accuse Miliband of trivialising the campaign, being obsessed with celebrity and underlining his lack of Prime Ministerial gravitas.

Despite, and perhaps in response to, the supposed dullness of the official election an alternative online campaign sphere of memes, viral videos, photo shopped posters and satirical hashtags again emerged. Some of these were non-partisan and had minimal political intent. For example, the #dogsatpollingstations, where people took photos of their dog at polling booths, proved to be one of the more popular hashtags on election-day. However, many do have more serious intent and are directed at the stage-managed nature of modern campaigns, by targeting and attempting to subvert and ridicule the campaign messages and images of parties. One of the most popular was the Twitter response to Ed Miliband's pledge stone. #EdStone led to a rash of photo shopped images of Miliband with an array of parodied pledges. Whilst the growth of this type of social media content can be seen as a reflection of voter discontent and cynicism with politics, it also targets the way politics is portrayed through the news media. This was first noted in 2010, with the #NickCleggtoblame hashtag responding to Conservative newspaper attacks on Nick Clegg. In 2015, similar hashtags emerged, notably the rather unlikely #Milifandom where the audience expressed their support (even love) for Ed. Behind the celebrity fan tone was a serious message about countering and ridiculing the negative newspaper attacks on Ed Miliband. As one of creators of [#Milifandom](#) argued: '[it] is not a joke. It's young people angry at the distorted presentation of Ed, trying to correct that + make themselves heard.' Similarly, #Dollgate was partially used as a response to the Sun's strident attack on Nicola Sturgeon.

Whilst technology might have enabled some voters to move beyond passive spectating, as yet there often appears minimal connection between the official

campaign and the lively alternative, satirical campaign sphere. Parties find it difficult to involve themselves with these trends with good reason – as formal rather staid organisations it is difficult for the major parties to capitalise on the informal and satirical without both appearing to lack authenticity and also opening themselves up to further attacks from news media about credibility, therefore distracting from serious messages of their campaign.

Competition and Impact Online

A persistent election sub-theme was attempts to declare a winner of the social media battle and try to translate social media activity into electoral outcomes. This raises the question of whether the Internet enables smaller or outsider parties to become more competitive. Further interest was generated by the idea that younger voters, who are traditionally the least likely to vote, could be reached more effectively via social than by traditional media. In the run up to the 2015 campaign, a MORI poll suggested that up to a third of younger voters had claimed that social media would influence their voting behaviour.

Looking for winners and losers online, however, proved somewhat confusing, as nearly all the main players in the election were at some point declared to have won something. Labour was repeatedly said to have had the dominant presence on Twitter²⁸ whilst the SNP's Nicola Sturgeon was declared to have been the most talked about leader on that medium. UKIP and the Conservatives were said to have led the way on Facebook with 15.6 and 12.2 million interactions respectively (compendium measure of likes, postings, shares and comments) compared to 9.7 million for Labour. It was also suggested at various points that UKIP and Nigel Farage achieved high prominence online particularly through the high volume of Google searches.²⁹

Perhaps the only relative media consensus was a suggested under performance of the Liberal Democrats across the board. This is a significant reversal of traditional patterns of online campaigning where the Liberal Democrats have often been seen as punching above their weight.

More elaborate analysis from the 2015 campaign does suggest that social media allow certain smaller parties a greater competitive presence. Analysis of Twitter data suggests that the SNP outperformed the rest not simply because they had all their candidates using Twitter but that their reach was significantly expanded by the fact that their tweets were mentioned many more times. For example, 100 tweets from SNP candidates generated 10 times more mentions than the same number from the Liberal Democrats.³⁰ Smaller parties (particularly the Greens and UKIP) also performed well in terms of sharing and likes of online campaign posters leading Campbell and Lee to argue that ‘while still not a level playing field to some degree some of the minor parties are outperforming the major parties on social media’.³¹

Following the election, Nigel Farage has claimed that social media was responsible for expanding the party’s appeal, enabling it to reach new audiences and changing the party image from one of retired colonels to a younger more female demographic. He stated:

What is really clear is that the pickup in vote has been due to our success on social media and it's now under 30s that are beginning to vote for UKIP in significant numbers.³²

Whilst some of this might be hyperbole, UKIP undoubtedly improved its online position from 2010, where it tended to lag in terms of social media presence. Similarly, the SNP has also claimed it reached new audiences in rural Scotland and

projected itself beyond Scotland's borders through partly through their well-established online presence.

Nevertheless, although the online world allows some minor players greater presence exposure and potential competitiveness, it is not a straightforward level playing field. Those minor parties able to compete and benefit were often amplified by their appearance in televised leadership debates and mainstream media coverage. Moreover, in the case of SNP, it is hardly a minor party in the Scottish context and capitalised on their mobilisation success in the independence referendum eight months earlier. This underscores two potentially key elements in the use of Internet campaign tools. Firstly, the importance of building longer term relationships online in a variety of contexts, (not just social media but email also), rather than merely trying to stimulate last minute mobilisation during short election campaigns. Secondly, the separation of Internet from other media formats is increasingly an artificial divide. Online media, broadcast and newsprint campaigns are increasingly intertwined and interdependent.³³

The eventual Conservative triumph led to suggestions that social media activity and social media metrics were as inaccurate as the opinion polls in terms of predicting outcome or mobilising voters. For instance, one high profile project combining Twitter and survey data (which had previously correctly predicted the outcome of Greek elections) mirrored almost exactly the inaccurate predictions of most opinion polls. Moreover, as noted above, Twitter, in particular, exaggerated Labour's levels of support and mobilisation. Indeed, post-election day, Twitter seemed awash with left of centre voters expressing their shock and outrage at the result.

‘Echo chambers’, ‘amplification effects’ and the potential polarisation of media audiences were themes that received increased attention straight after the election. One intriguing analysis of Twitter during the campaign argued that relatively small numbers of partisan voices from the so-called ‘political twitterati’ (journalists and party campaigners) can dominate and amplify certain arguments and sentiment. During the televised leaders debates a relative handful of Labour and SNP Twitter accounts, in particular, were successful apparently dominating response providing a potentially misleading picture of strength of voter sentiment when magnified by newspapers uncritical response to social media data.³⁴

Disappointment that social media did not provide clear cut answers to questions of mobilisation or support is perhaps not surprising given the relatively dubious or superficial way that much social media data was reported. The simple use of metrics such as likes or re-tweets is a crude and possibly misleading measure of performance. For example, whilst the number of Google searches might provide a basic indication of levels of interest, a look at the content of the searches makes it difficult to understand the significance of numbers. For instance, a snapshot (on 21 April) of the most popular Google search questions about party leaders seemed to indicate that the British public has an obsession with height and age of its party leaders, along with wanting know who their spouses were. Google data also indicated that over the campaign whilst Cameron was the most searched for politician, the most frequently asked questions about him were whether he was rich, married, dead, left-handed or, indeed, a Labour politician.³⁵

If use of raw numbers is problematic, further concerns surround those producing such data. Social media analytic companies with products or services to sell are unlikely to take a sober assessment of social media performance.³⁶ None of

this means that social media analytics in general is worthless but a more considered analysis of the wealth of data generated in the campaign is required. This is likely to take considerably longer but could generate potentially more interesting findings than trying to answer questions about who won or was it a social media election. Wider consensus is needed both on techniques and how to interpret data. Similarly, such analyses will need to be married to more traditional survey data questions about the role and impact of the social media.

Conclusion

After the 2010 televised leaders' debates, electoral campaigning in the UK was supposed to have undergone a seismic shift. Yet in some respects 2015 took us back in time. The televised debates, whilst still major campaign events, did not dominate as they had at the previous campaign. Whilst they were key features of the early part of the campaign and brought the novelty of multi party campaigning into focus, their impact declined as campaign dragged on. Indeed, the supposedly moribund newsprint media, have latterly been seen as playing an important role in agenda setting and magnifying the 'horse race' aspect of the election. Cumulatively, and driven by a surfeit of polling data, they helped forge a consensus that this was an election race too close to call with one quality newspaper editorial even declaring, without any hint of doubt, that: 'A hung parliament is certain this week'.³⁷ This widely held assumption was shared by online as well as broadcast commentators who were in fact the same opinion-formers whatever the media platform. These were also the pundits who David Cameron's strategist Lynton Crosby dismissed for having treated the campaign as more of an entertainment than critical news story. Publication of the exit poll on election night was a sobering moment, not least

because the surprise confirmation of a Conservative lead had echoes of the not too distant 1992 campaign denouement.

Lynton Crosby and his Conservative colleagues were focused in their campaigning and exploited the supposed threat of a possible Labour-SNP coalition government to raise serious questions of Ed Miliband and his party's economic record. These themes found a ready echo in the once again decidedly 'Tory press' so that Miliband's more distant rather than Cameron's recent record in government appeared to dominate media coverage, particularly in the closing stages of the campaign. This reinforced the Conservatives' internet campaigning which though supposed to disrupt the style of modern electioneering by fostering new participatory activism was arguably most successfully used by the party for a professionalized, top down marketing approach. This strategy rehearsed their twin campaign themes of economic competency and fear of Scottish nationalism. The latter of course was recognition of a new trend where the 2015 election did differ from previous ones, specifically in the increased media exposure for some of the minor parties. Whilst traditional media is still skewed towards the main parties and their leaders, some minor parties do now appear to have got their foot in the door. This is even more the case in the social media world, which whilst not a level playing field, offers a more accurate reflection of the multi party nature of British politics.

Table 14.1: Top Ten Campaign Issues, by percentage of television and radio coverage (30 March - 7 May)³⁸

TV	%	Rank	Press	%
Election process	45.9	1	Election process	44.5
Economy	8.1	2	Economy	10.5
Constitutional	6.2	3	Taxation	6.5
Taxation	5.4	4	Standards	3.8
Employment	4.4	5	Constitutional	3.7
Immigration/Race	3.7	6	NHS	3.7
NHS	3.5	7	Immigration/Race	3.5
Business	3	8	Europe	3.4
Social Security	2.4	9	Employment	2.9
Europe	2.4	10	Business	2.6

Table 14.2: Top Ten personalities by media (TV and press) appearance³⁹

(30 March-7 May)

Rank	Name	%	Party
1	David Cameron	15.0	Cons
2	Ed Miliband	14.7	Labour
3	Nick Clegg	6.5	Lib Dem
4	Nicola Sturgeon	5.7	SNP
5	Nigel Farage	5.5	UKIP
6	George Osborne	3.8	Cons
7	Ed Balls	2.5	Labour
8	Boris Johnson	1.7	Cons
9=	Jim Murphy	0.9	Labour
9=	Tony Blair	0.9	Labour

Note: % = number of individual against all individual appearances

Table 14.3 National daily newspaper declarations and their readerships

Title	Party	Unique browsers	Circulation
<i>Guardian</i>	Labour	7.2	0.18
<i>Times</i>	Conservative/Lib Dem Coalition	Paywall	0.39
<i>Telegraph</i>	Conservative	4.00	0.49
<i>Financial Times</i>	Conservative/Lib Dem Coalition	Paywall	0.21
<i>Independent</i>	Conservative/Lib Dem Coalition	2.33	0.06
<i>Mail</i>	Conservative	13.64	1.63
<i>Express</i>	UKIP	0.78	0.44
<i>The Sun</i>	Conservative	Paywall	1.86
<i>Mirror</i>	Labour	3.74	0.88
<i>Star</i>	None	0.51	0.42

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulation

¹ Peter Dominiczak (2015) 'Lynton Crosby: Betrayal of British Voters', www.telegraph.co.uk, 15th May.

² Dan Sabbagh (2015) 'How the Tories won the general election air war', www.theguardian.com, 11th May.

³ For more on the poster campaign see Benedict Pringle's blog, www.politicaladvertising.co.uk

⁴ Ofcom (2015) *Review of Ofcom list of major political parties for elections taking place on 7 May 2015*. London: Ofcom, 8th January.

⁵ www.barb.co.uk, data for week ending 5th April.

⁶ www.barb.co.uk, data for week ending 19th April.

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- ⁷ Rosa Prince (2015) 'Nick Clegg shut out of television debates as Labour join minor parties', www.telegraph.co.uk, 21st March.
- ⁸ www.barb.co.uk, data for week ending 29th March.
- ⁹ www.barb.co.uk, data for week ending 3rd May.
- ¹⁰ That the General Election would occur on 7th May enabled broadcasters to commission topical comedy programmes to coincide with and thereby satirize the campaign. Examples of this include BBC's Have I Got Election News For You, ITV's Newzoids and Channel 4's Ballot Monkeys.
- ¹¹ Sarah Vine (2015) 'Why their kitchen tells you all you need to know about the mirthless Milibands... and why there's nothing to suggest that Ed and Justine are not, in fact, aliens', www.dailymail.co.uk, 12 March 2015.
- ¹² Roy Greenslade (2015) 'Yes, rightwing newspaper coverage did cause Ed Miliband's downfall', theguardian.com, 11th May.
- ¹³ Michael Goldfarb (2015) 'The Axelrod Exit Interview', Politico.eu, 6th May.
- ¹⁴ Andrew Pierce (2015) 'Red Ed's VERY tangled love life', dailymail.co.uk, 9th April.
- ¹⁵ See for example: *Channel 4 News*, 'Is this the first social media campaign?' 6 May, 2015; *BBC News*, 'Will 2015 be the UK's first social media election?' 10 February 2015.
- ¹⁶ David Fletcher (2015), 'Welcome to the Social Media Election that never was', *Guardian*, 27 April.
- ¹⁷ Ward, S and Vedel, T. (2006) 'The potential of the Internet revisited', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 59 (2), pp.210-25.
- ¹⁸ See, for example, Norris, P. (2000) *Virtuous Circle*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ¹⁹ Beckett, C. (2015) 'Broadcasting: at the centre of the most managed election campaign', In: Jackson, D. and Thorsen, E (eds.) *UK Election Analysis 2015: Media, Voters and the Campaign*. Bournemouth: Bournemouth University Centre of the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community.
- ²⁰ Fletcher, 'Welcome to the Social Media Election that never was'.
- ²¹ Martha Lane-Fox (2015) @marthalanefox, 23 April 2015.
- ²² Channel 4 News (2015) 'The ruthless reality of the election 2015 digital campaign', 23 May.
- ²³ Data mining encompasses the collection, automated searching through, and analyzing a large amount of data in a database, as to uncover patterns or relationships.
- ²⁴ *BBC News Online*, 16 February 2015.
- ²⁵ Tim Ross (2015) 'Secrets of the Tories election war room', *Daily Telegraph*, 16 May; Jacob Aron (2015) 'Could smart search for votes swing UK general election?' *New Scientist*, 30 April 2015; 'Jim Messina interview: how the pollsters got it wrong and why Labour lost' *The Spectator*, 12 May 2015.
- ²⁶ Robert Cookson, (2015) 'Parties hope their digital push will click with Britain's voters'. *Financial Times* 29 April.
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- ³⁰ Oxford Internet Institute, (Eve Ahearn, Jonathan Bright, Scott Hale, Helen Margetts, Taha Yasseri) *Elections and the Internet*, <http://elections.oii.ox.ac.uk/uk-election-2015/>
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