

***The North East Regional Assembly***

***Campaign:***

***A Media Content Analysis***

**by the**

**Loughborough University**

**Communication Research Centre**

**for the**

**Electoral Commission**

***28<sup>th</sup> January 2005***

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## **Executive summary**

This comprehensive audit of local and national newspaper and broadcast coverage of the referendum for a Regional Assembly in the North East points to the following main conclusions.

Despite the major nationwide constitutional implications of the proposals, the referendum campaign did not excite intensive and sustained media interest throughout the campaign period, nor in the months preceding it. Not surprisingly, levels of media attention were higher in the local media based in the North East than in the national media. However, there were also significant differences across the North East media in the amount of copy- dedicated to the topic. Levels of press coverage in Durham, Teeside and Northumberland were lower than those found within Tyne and Wear. Furthermore, there was a considerable variation within the Tyne and Wear area, where Newcastle based news organisations gave appreciably greater prominence to the devolution vote and debate than others in the region.

The most news-worthy moment for the referendum in national media terms came 'after the fact', when a spate of news items recorded the outcome of the vote held on 5<sup>th</sup> November and considered its implications for the political career of the proposal's main ministerial advocate, and for the 'devolution dream' in general. The North East may only be a five and a half hour drive from London, but for national journalists it remained a world away.

Three measures were used to assess the degree of balance in local and national news coverage: (1) *stop watch balance* (the amount of news space given to competing views), (2) *agenda balance* (which issues were given greatest prominence in news discourse), and (3) *directional balance* (the amount of positive and negative coverage given to various political sources and topics). In 'stop watch' balance terms, political sources connected with the Yes campaign were more frequently and extensively quoted overall than those associated with the No campaign. The principal reason for this imbalance was the amount of coverage that featured senior government sources, in particular, the sponsoring minister, John Prescott. Representatives from other political parties received comparatively little coverage.

However, any conclusions that might be drawn on this basis that Labour's incumbency had delivered a major advantage to the party in media terms, needs to be set against the findings on the directional balance of coverage across local and national media sectors. Although most broadcast media coverage items did not clearly orient to either Yes or No frames, in the local and national press, scepticism about the Regional Assembly abounded and political evaluations more frequently favoured the No position (whether overtly, through editorial declarations, or covertly, in the kinds of issues they emphasized in their reporting). The letters pages of the local press, in particular, proved to be a highly

significant forum for the articulation of negative views on the referendum proposals at local level.

These distributions in directional balance clearly suggest that what might originally be construed as an advantage for the government, was to some extent a measure of their disadvantage, as a considerable amount of coverage presented them on the back-foot, dealing with the debris of a derailed keynote policy.

With regard to 'Agenda Balance', the highest proportions of themes in coverage in all sectors focused on issues associated with the conduct of the campaign (which we term *process coverage*) rather than substantive issues about what the proposals might mean for the North East in political and economic terms. Process themes were most evident in the local media, where, as the qualitative analysis shows, considerable attention also focused on the personalities involved in the contest. However, this was to a large extent indicative of the higher overall levels of coverage in the local press. Moreover, when coverage did address the potential implications of establishing a new Regional Assembly in the North East, local news media focused more attention on the policy ramifications, whereas national media were more concerned with the party political fall-out.

Having said this, local media discussion of the policy implications focused on a relatively narrow range of concerns. For all the claims made by its proponents about the radical and progressive impact a Regional Assembly would have in the North East, and the new devolutionary era it could herald, media discourses concentrated on a relatively narrow and precise range of fiscal and practical concerns: how will it affect businesses? What might it mean for transport? And, crucially, how much might it cost for local tax payers?

Ordinary Citizens had a presence in media coverage of the referendum, but it was a marginal and essentially passive one. As with the reporting of all important public ballots, a lot of media coverage prior to the ballot speculated on the likely direction of public thinking (who would win, and by what margin?), and, after the event, conjectured on the reasons for the proposals resounding rejection by public vote. But a recurrent and associated theme throughout the coverage concerned the extent to which the public had either understood or engaged with the issues at stake in the referendum.

## **Introduction**

The Electoral Commission commissioned an analysis of media coverage during the referendum campaign on the proposal for a Regional Assembly in the North East of England in November 2004. The Communication Research Centre of Loughborough University (LUCRC) was awarded the tender to the design, conduct and analyse this research.

The referendum campaign for the proposed Assembly culminated on 4<sup>th</sup> November in a substantial vote 78% against the change. It is likely that the process will be the first and probably last of its kind and therefore offered a unique opportunity to gauge public and media attitudes towards English devolution as a practicality rather than theory. The process also afforded a province of the country the opportunity to debate and express opinions on the importance and meaning of national, regional and local identities within the United Kingdom.

The design of the research ensured all of the issues listed in the tender document were addressed. The quantitative content analysis consisted of an extensive sample drawn from local, regional and national broadcast and press outlets and involved manual coding procedures. Although this approach was more time-consuming and costly than analysis based on quick on-line searches of media archives such as LEXIS-NEXIS, it enabled the amassing of a series of results with a far greater validity and reliability than would otherwise have been the case with an inferior electronic based method.

The collated material enabled the team to rigorously consider quantitative measures of:

- The extent of media coverage of the campaign
- The commissioning and reporting of opinion polls by the media
- The balance of media coverage of process versus issues versus personalities
- The issues and themes most frequently occurring in media coverage of the campaign
- The nature of coverage of the campaign, in particular its positivity/negativity
- The extent and impact of editorial comment about the campaigns, looking in particular at comment on participation and turn out
- The extent and nature of media appearances by campaign/party leaders
- The extent and nature of media appearances by other campaign/party representatives

In addition to the above analysis, the research also included a more qualitative component designed to generate some understanding of how the referendum was covered in the North East as well as nationally. Consideration was given to how different mainstream media appropriate, constructed and articulated national, regional and local identities in their reporting. Particular attention was

devoted to gauging if and how the potentially agenda-setting regional press covered or otherwise commented upon the referendum debate. Interviews were conducted with editorial staff, on an off the record basis, from most of the newspapers in the locality.

**Main elements and timings of the work profile.**

<i>Design</i>	<i>Data Collection</i>	<i>Analysis</i>	<i>Report Writing</i>
<b>12 October:</b> Management team convened to commence design of coding schedule	<b>12-15 October:</b> Collation of all 'contextual information' regarding media composition and distribution requested in the invitation to tender	<b>12 October-8 November:</b> Preliminary analysis of quantitative data commenced	<b>17 December:</b> Delivery of 2,500 word Interim report to the Electoral Commission
<b>12 October:</b> Arrangements began for collection of broadcast and print media during the campaign period	<b>18 October:</b> Quantitative content analysis of regional and national broadcast and newspaper coverage commenced	<b>12 October-26 November:</b> Qualitative content analysis of newspapers.	<b>28 January 2005:</b> Delivery of final report on media coverage of campaign to the Electoral Commission
<b>12 October:</b> Recruitment of the coding team completed	<b>18 October:</b> Qualitative content analysis of newspapers' declarations commenced	<b>12 November:</b> Completed preliminary quantitative data analysis	
<b>13-14 October:</b> Training began. Research design and organisation continued	<b>8 November:</b> Quantitative content analysis of broadcast and newspaper coverage completed.	<b>26 November:</b> Second stage quantitative data analysis (more detailed exploration of data trends)	
<b>15 October:</b> Completion of all issues related to the design of the research instruments	<b>30 November:</b> Qualitative content analysis of official newspaper declarations completed		

Tapes of all broadcast programmes and copies of every newspaper contained in the sample were obtained for detailed research and analysis by the team. The campaign was taken to mean the latter stages of the referendum debate, i.e. 18<sup>th</sup> October through to 8<sup>th</sup> November. 928 separate items of newspaper (front page, other news, editorials, letters, diary, etc) and broadcast coverage (news, interviews, discussion) were found. An agreed coding schedule was developed and used throughout the project except for the survey of pre-campaign reporting and the website monitoring. Unlike the other aspects of the project, these tasks were explicitly approached from the perspective of a lay voter seeking to access and read on-line material using standard search tools. Consequently during the campaign the web pages of the two official campaign groupings as well as the various local news organisation included in the sample were periodically accessed for information.

Aside from the practicalities of doing the research, the project was driven by two broader perspectives that have emerged and been developed in the team's previous studies of major political campaigns, specifically the interplay between 'agenda-setting' and 'framing'. Broadly speaking the more quantitative based analysis helps understanding of what issues/themes dominated the news agenda during the campaign (see especially sections 1-5). This in turn is complimented by consideration of the way the various reports are framed in that a judgement is made as to how if at all a feature can be interpreted as biased towards one or other person, organisation or idea (see 6-11).

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Charlotte Knell  
Loughborough University Communication Research Centre  
January 2005**

## 1. Results of the Quantitative Content Analysis

This section of the report presents the findings of a quantitative content analysis of news related coverage of the referendum for a Regional Assembly in the North East in a range of local, regional and national news outlets.

### 1.1: Sample Details

The sample period for the media analysis began on 18 October and concluded on 8 November 2004. Table 1 details the specific news media included in the research sample.

**Table 1.1: News Media Sampled (with circulations)**

	<b>Tees Valley situated Media</b>	<b>Durham South West Situated Media</b>	<b>Tyne and Wear Situated Media</b>	<b>Northumberland Situated Media</b>	<b>North East Regional Media</b>	<b>National Media</b>
<b>Daily Newspapers</b>	1.Hartlepool Mail (20873) 2. Teeside Evening Gazette (60415)	1.Northern Echo (57061)	1. Newcastle Chronicle (91553) 2. Newcastle Journal (43259) 3. Shields Gazette (21502) 4.Sunderland Echo (48691)			1.Guardian, 2.Times, 3.Telegraph, 4.Independent, 5.Mail, 6.Express, 7.Mirror, 8.Star, 9.Sun
<b>Weekly Papers</b>	1.Whitby Gazette (12139)	1.Darlington & Stockton Times (30337)	1.Sunday Sun (80382)	1.Berwick Advertiser (8105) 2.Morpeth Herald (3064) 3.Northumberland Gazette (11147) 4. Hexham Courant (17828)		1.Observer, 2.Ind. on Sun. 3.S. Telegraph, 4. S.Times, 5.Mail on Sunday, 6.S. Express, 7. S. Mirror, 8.News of 9.World, 10.People, 11.Star on Sunday
<b>Television</b>					1. BBC1 'Look North' 18.30-19.00, 2. ITV1 North East News 18.00-18.30	1. BBC1 6pm News, 2. ITV1 News 18.30-19.00, 3.BBC2 Newsnight, 4. C4 News 7pm, 5. C5 News 7pm
<b>Radio</b>	1. BBC Radio Cleveland 7.30-8.00am		1.BBC Radio Newcastle 7.30-8.00am			1.BBC R4 Today 07.30-8.00



The entire editorial content of these news media was scrutinized manually for all items that made any reference to the Regional Assembly proposals and/or the referendum. Once a media item was identified as falling within this remit, a range of themes and elements were coded within it.

## **1.2: Presentation of the Research Findings**

The presentation of the results below is organized into four sections. The first compares the extent of RA related coverage across the sampled media. The next three sections examine this coverage in more detail, utilizing a tri-partite distinction suggested by Norris *et al.* (1999: 20) between:

**Stop Watch Balance** – the relative prominence given to competing political actors in news reporting.

**Agenda Balance** – the relative prominence given to the various issues that are associated with a particular topic.

**Directional Balance** – the amount of positive and negative coverage given to various political actors and issues.

### **2.1: ‘Was it News?’ : The Amount of Regional Assembly Related Coverage**

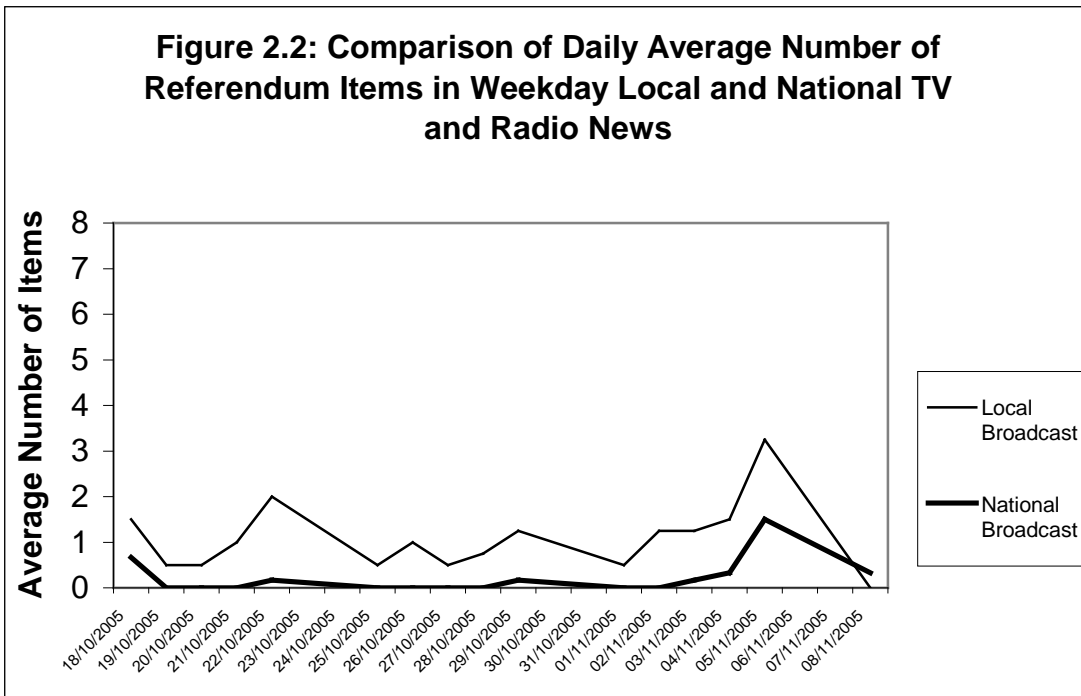
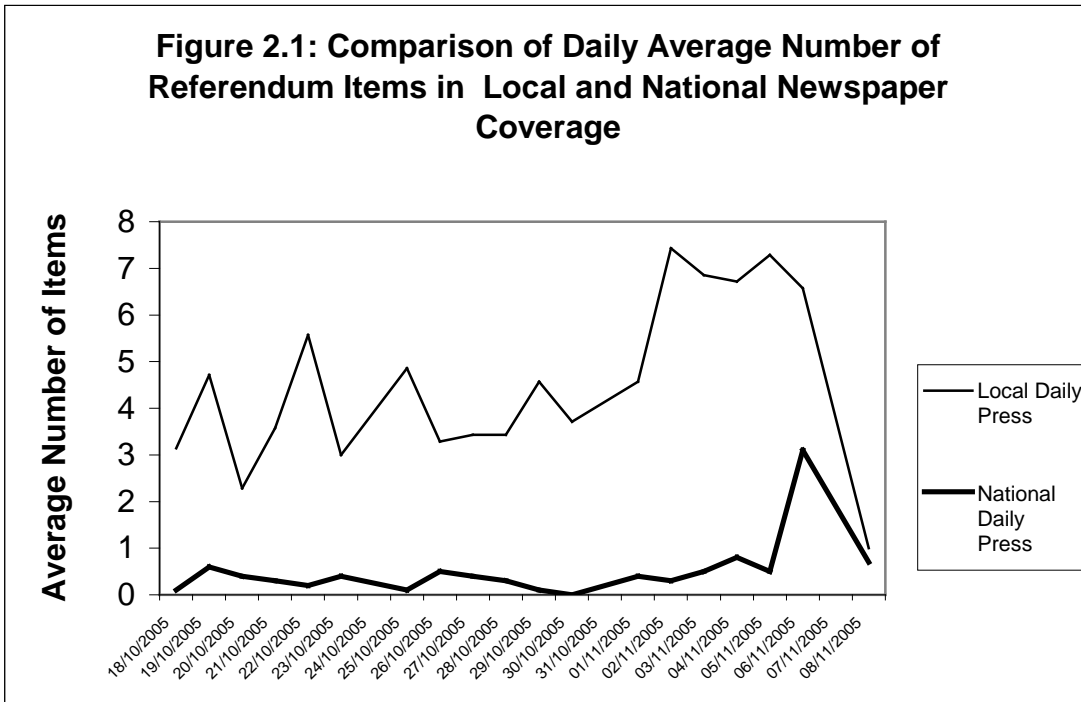
The sampling period covered the last critical weeks of the NE Regional Assembly election campaign. As we discuss later, we recognize that some media debate on this topic predated this sampling period. Nevertheless, there are legitimate reasons for viewing the final three weeks of the campaign as the critical discourse period for the issue. During this time concerned political actors were most actively promoting their views, and, with the imminent prospect of a decisive political outcome with national ramifications, the regional assembly debate was at its most potentially news-worthy. Furthermore, some poll data suggests there was a considerable degree of volatility in public opinion during the latter stages of the campaign. On the basis of this evidence, it is not possible to prove that the media exerted any significant influence on public perceptions and attitudes, but one cannot ignore the possibility that they may have had some impact in this highly changeable context.

In total, 928 RA related items were identified and coded for the entire media sample. Figures 2.1 and 2.2 compare the daily average number of RA Related Items presented during the sample period<sup>1</sup>. Table 2.1 provides more detailed

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<sup>1</sup> To ensure an appropriate comparison, the local and national average figures for the press relate solely to daily newspapers. The broadcast figures only relate to weekday programmes. The averages were calculated by dividing the total number of news items coded for a particular day by the number of titles or programmes coded for each media sector.

breakdown of the precise number of RA Related Items found for each media included in the investigation.



**Table 2.1: Number of RA Related Items Coded Per Newspaper Title/ News Programme**

	National	Local	Regional
<b>Television</b>	BBC1 10 pm News (n=4)	-	BBCLook North (n=21)
	BBC2 Newsnight (n=5)	-	ITV North East (n=15)
	ITV 10pm News (n=2)	-	
	Channel 4 News (n=2)	-	
	Channel 5 News (n=2)	-	
<b>Radio</b>	BBC R4 Today (n=5)	BBC Cleveland (n=15)	
		BBC Newcastle (n=18)	
<b>Daily Press</b>	Daily Mirror (n=8)	Newcastle Chronicle (n=121)	
	Daily Star (n=1)	Newcastle Journal (n=190)	
	The Sun (n=4)	Northern Echo (n=111)	
	Daily Express (n=6)	Shields Gazette (n=64)	
	Daily Mail (n=8)	Sunderland Echo (n=50)	
	Daily Telegraph (n=14)	Teeside Eve. Gazette (n=51)	
	Financial Times (n=21)		
	Guardian (n=17)		
	The Times (n=16)		
<b>Weekly Press</b>	The Independent (n=8)		
	News of the World (n=0)	Morpeth Herald (n=14)	
	Sunday Mirror (n=0)	Northern Gazette (n=24)	
	People (n=0)	Whitby Gazette (n=1)	
	Mail on Sunday (n=1)	Berwick Advertiser (n=23)	
	Sunday Express (n=2)	Darl/ton-Stockton Times (n=37)	
	Sunday Telegraph (n=2)	Hexham Courant (n=21)	
	Ind. On Sunday (n=1)	Sunday Sun (n=13)	
	Sunday Times (n=1)		
Observer (n=0)			

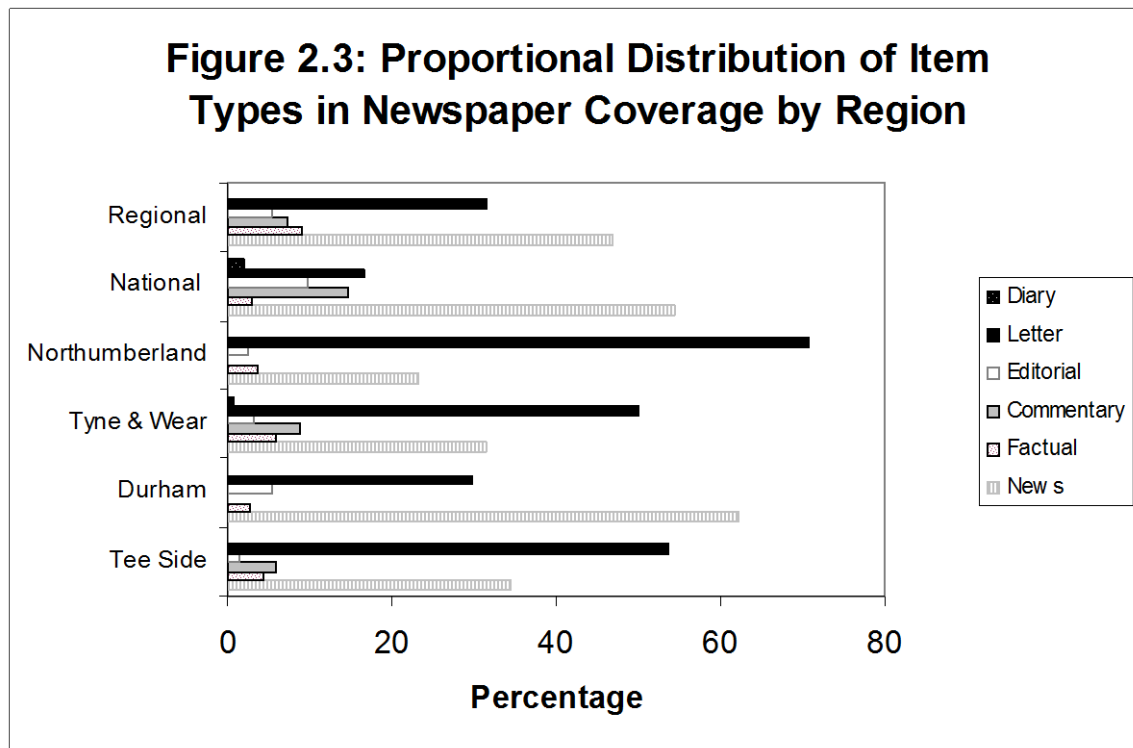
These findings reveal:

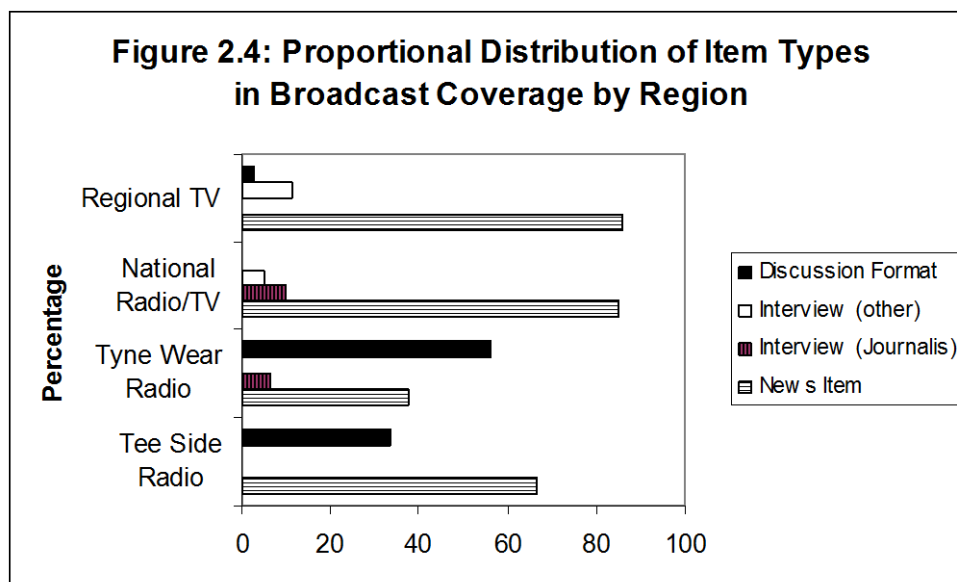
1. The referendum and the Regional Assembly proposals barely registered on the national news agenda before the vote on 4<sup>th</sup> November 2004. It was only in the immediate aftermath of the vote that the topic attracted any significant coverage in this quarter.
2. This marginalization at national level was most evident among the media with the least available news space (i.e. TV News bulletins) and those that demonstrate the least routine attention to public affairs (i.e. the popular press). Even so, the RA referendum also failed to attract much sustained consideration within national broadsheet press coverage. For example, the total number of items published on the referendum in four of the seven weekly local papers exceeded the sum of articles printed in the daily national broadsheet found to have most coverage (*The Financial Times*).
3. In terms of local and regional coverage, the RA referendum received more coverage on a day-by-day basis in the press than broadcast media. This can in part be explained by the more limited news-space and greater

competition for access that regional broadcasters have to contend with. However, it is interesting to note that the local/national disparity is less evident with broadcast media than it is with newspapers. Despite the manifest region-wide significance of the vote, regional broadcasters seem to have struggled to sustain similar levels of attention on the matter.

4. Levels of press coverage across the North East region varied according to the specific regional location of a title. Levels of media attention to the issue were appreciably higher in Tyne and Wear than the other three areas that comprise the North East (Northumberland, Teeside and Durham).
5. The intensity of press coverage also varied considerably within Tyne and Wear. For example, the two Newcastle based daily newspapers published more than twice as many RA related articles than those based in Sunderland, Tee Side and South Shields.

Figures 2.3 and 2.4 provide a breakdown of the different types of items that appeared on the Regional Assembly. The most significant point to note from these results is the high percentage of readers' letters among the local press items. We consider the role of readers' letters in local coverage in a later section of this report.





### 3. 'Who's Talking?' : Stop Watch Balance in Regional Assembly Coverage

'Stop watch balance' is the first and most obvious question to ask about the equity of the media in their political reporting. With broadcast media in the UK, there is an established expectation that during formal campaign periods the main political parties receive a parity of presence (dependent on their parliamentary status)<sup>2</sup>. With newspapers, such regulations neither exist nor can be imposed readily. As a consequence, it has long been recognized that patterns of partisanship across the press sector can deliver considerable advantages in terms of media presence for the parties favoured by particular papers. However, an element of unpredictability in this respect has gained momentum over the last decade, as traditional press alignments and affiliations have altered. Indeed, there is persuasive evidence to suggest that since the arrival of Tony Blair, press allegiance at national level has not so much *realigned* (in Labour's favour) as *dealigned* (see Deacon and Wring, 2001). Political analysts have long been accustomed to discussions of voter volatility, but it is only recently that questions of press volatility have entered the frame.

These various considerations make questions concerning stop watch balance between the political parties interesting for the Regional Assembly referendum. In particular, because:

- There was a clear party political division on the proposals, with Labour, the Liberal Democrats and several minor parties endorsing the Assembly,

<sup>2</sup> Until the 2001 General Election this was inscribed in electoral law, and was said to have fostered a rather inhibited 'stop watch' culture in national newsrooms. In 2001, there was a move towards self regulation, nevertheless an expectation remained that 'over a reasonable period of time, a proper balance of different points of view is achieved.' (Home Office, 2001).

and the Conservative party and other minor parties opposing it. However, other non-party aligned sources also had an overt and active interest in the outcome (for example, representatives of public and private sector organizations), and the campaign was organized around formally convened and funded ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ campaign teams. To what extent did journalists – and broadcasters, in particular – seek or manage to achieve parity of presence in this more complex political *mélange*?

- The Labour Party had both electoral interest in, and executive responsibility for, the implementation of the referendum. Previous research has noted the advantages in media presence that incumbency can deliver to parties in power (e.g. Miller, 1991), and we were interested in assessing whether this trend was evident for this referendum.

In assessing ‘stop watch balance’ we focused our coding solely on political sources that were directly quoted in coverage. This excludes those occasions where journalists report political sources’ activities or opinions but do not quote them. Our rationale for doing so was two-fold:

1. This method achieves the highest level of inter-coder reliability (when sources are not coded using such clear criteria, decisions as to who to include can sometimes be too reliant on subjective interpretations).
2. It is important to differentiate between news presence and news access. The former merely measures the frequency with which an individual or institution is the *subject* of media comment. The latter assesses the frequency with which a political actor is an active *source* of reportage – i.e. their actions and views are directly related in news related coverage. Appearance as an ‘accessed voice’ in coverage –being permitted to speak in one’s own words - represents the most reliable and significant indicator of news access and authoritativeness (Hartley, 1982).

Whenever a quoted actor was identified in RA related coverage, their total amount of quotation in the item was measured (for newspaper, this was measured as the number of words quoted, for broadcast, this was measured as seconds of direct speaking time). Up to five sources could be coded for each individual item.

Figures 3.1 to 3.4 provide a general overview of the amount of quotation time given to open advocates and other accredited witnesses in RA related news coverage<sup>3</sup>. The categorization of the actor groupings was organized in the following way

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<sup>3</sup> n.b. Source variables were not coded for letters, commentaries or editorials.

1. **'Yes Camp'** – (a) All officials and overt supporters of the 'Yes Campaign' (e.g. celebrities and representatives from the business and trade union communities); & (b) all Labour<sup>4</sup>, Liberal Democrat, Green and Pro-RA Independent politicians
2. **'No Camp'** – (a) Officials and formal representatives of the 'North East Says No' and 'North East No' Campaigns, (b) Opponents from the Business sector, (c) Politicians from the Conservative Party, UK Independence Party, British National Party and Senior Citizens Party
3. **'Vox Pop'** – Members of the public
4. **Other** – All other non-aligned individuals and institutions not covered by the preceding categories.

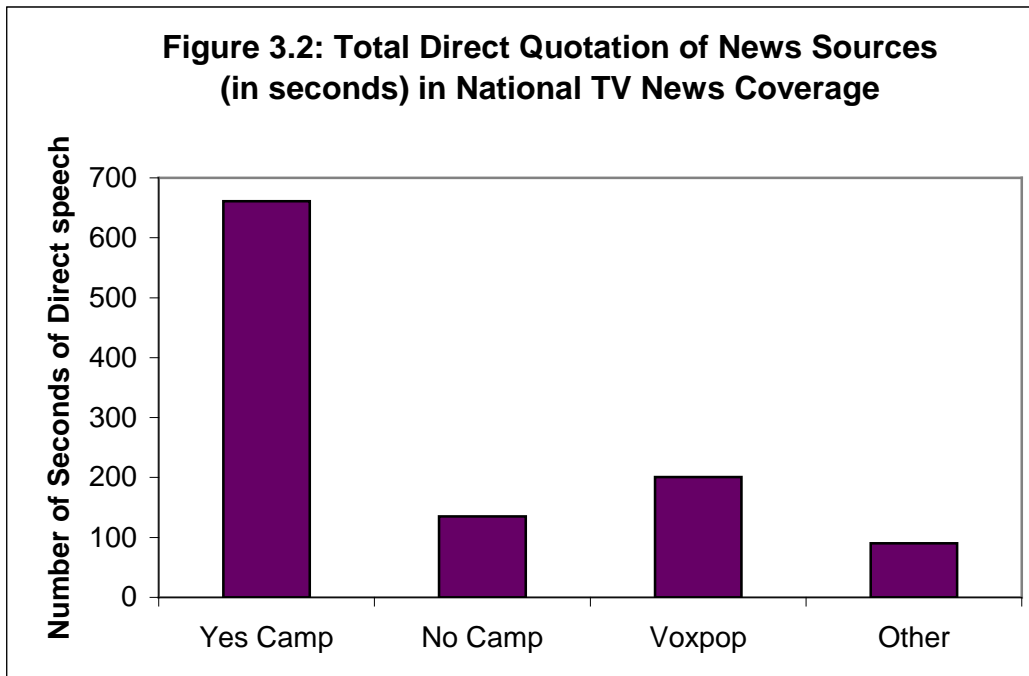
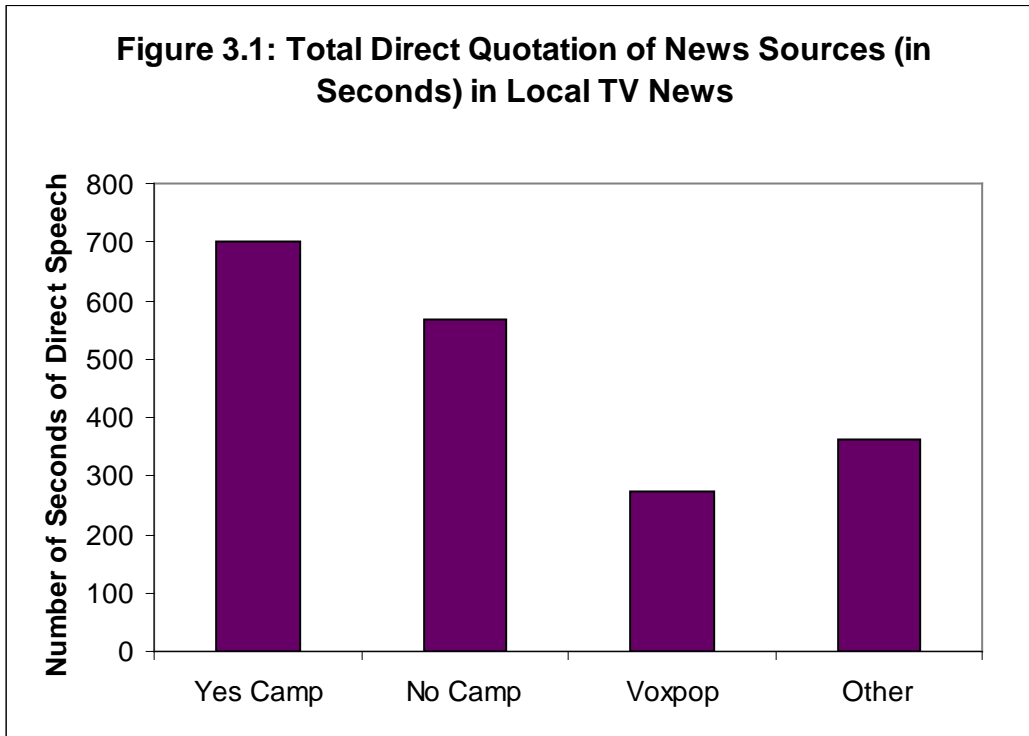
Several points are worth noting from this basic aggregation of the amount of quotation allocated to different political sources:

- Across all media sectors, 'Yes Actors' were cumulatively quoted more than 'No Actors'.
- The greatest disparity between 'Yes' and 'No' camp quotation was in national broadcast coverage, with quotation of the Yes Camp exceeding quotation of No Camp sources by a ratio of 4.9 to 1. Although this imbalance may seem surprising (given traditional expectations of broadcasting balance), one needs to bear in mind the small total number of RA related items found in national broadcast coverage and that form the basis of this calculation. Such a relatively small numerical basis creates the potential for far more dramatic variation in the relative values due to the presence of one or two outlying values.
- The smallest disparity between Yes and No Camps was in local Broadcast coverage, with Yes Camp voices exceeding their opponents by a ratio of 1.2 to 1.
- The voices of ordinary citizens were comparatively marginalized in reporting across all news sectors. In all but one media sector (National broadcast coverage), lay quotation was the least prominent category.
- In proportional terms, direct quotation of citizens was least evident in local rather than national media. Once again, this may to some extent be an artefact of the greater amount of coverage identified in local media sectors (in actual terms, the amount of direct quotation of lay

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<sup>4</sup> With the exception of the Labour MP Graham Stringer, who openly opposed his Party's support for the Regional Assembly proposals

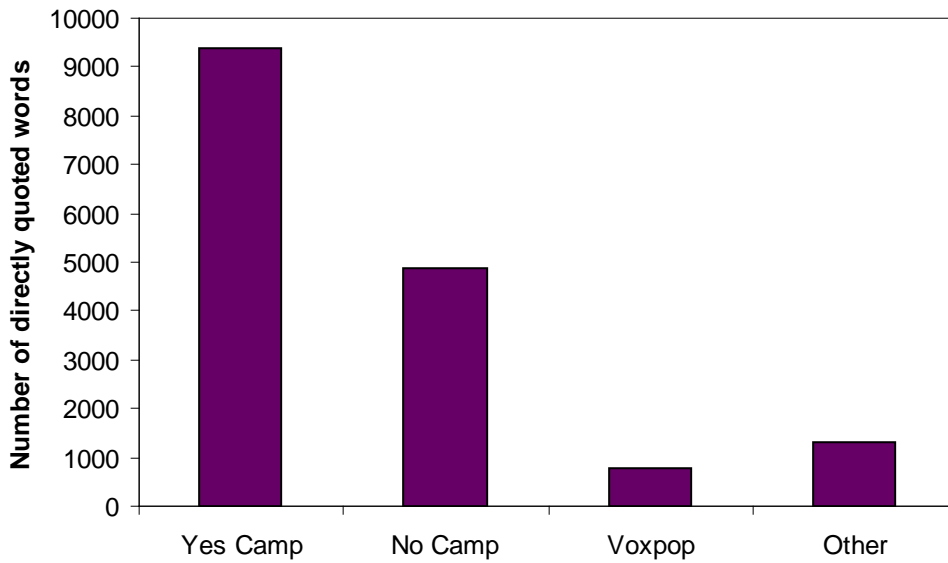
voices in the local media exceeded comparable levels in the national media)<sup>5</sup>.



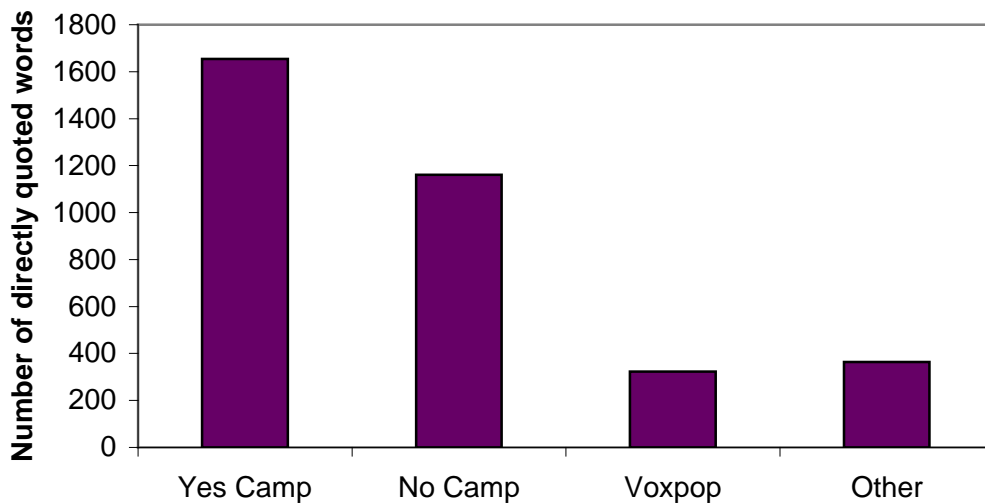
<sup>5</sup> Note: The Voxpop category for all of these graphs may include citizens who expressed support for, or opposition to, the RA Plans in their quoted appearance. However, as these sources were not formally presented as being aligned to either campaign, they have been not included in the 'Yes/' 'No' figures.



**Figure 3.3: Total Direct Quotation of News Sources (in words) in Local Press News Coverage**



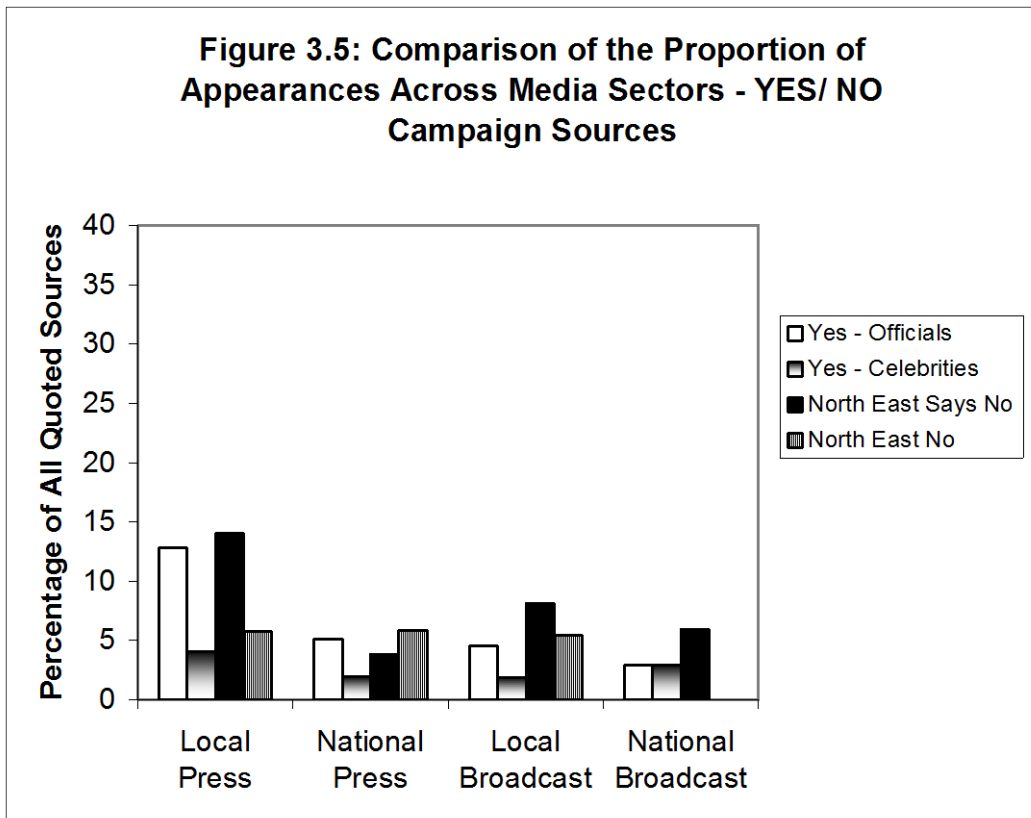
**Figure 3.4: Total Direct Quotation on News Sources (in words) in National Press News Coverage**



As noted, these figures represent a crude calibration of the stop watch balance in 'Yes' /'No' campaign coverage, and beg questions as to (a) which elements within each of the respective camps received the highest levels of media attention? And (b) did these distributions vary across media sectors?

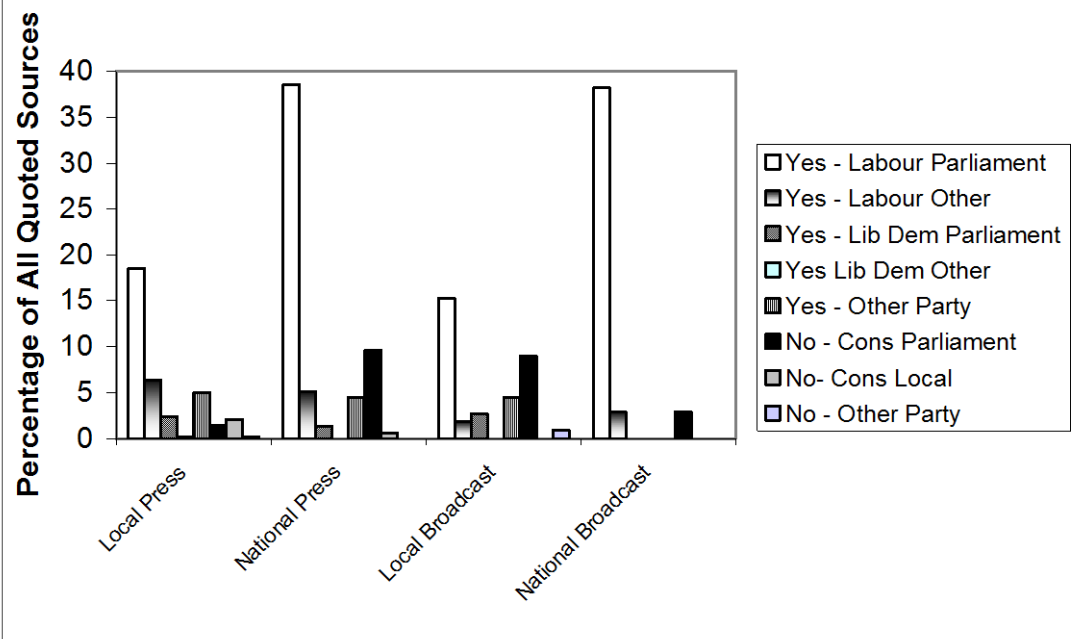
Figures 3.5, to 3.8 calculate 'stop watch balance' in a different way: quantifying the proportional presence of news sources across different media sectors for the entire sample period. Although the column percentages in each of the graphs are derived collectively from one overall calculation<sup>6</sup>, these have been separated into different graphs to facilitate a more direct comparison of the frequency with which different participants in the referendum debate were directly quoted in coverage (e.g. figure 3.9 provides a direct comparison of the amount of occasions business sector voices were quoted as supporting or opposing the Regional Assembly proposals).

Table 3.1 breaks down further the results for the appearances of Labour Party sources by media sector.

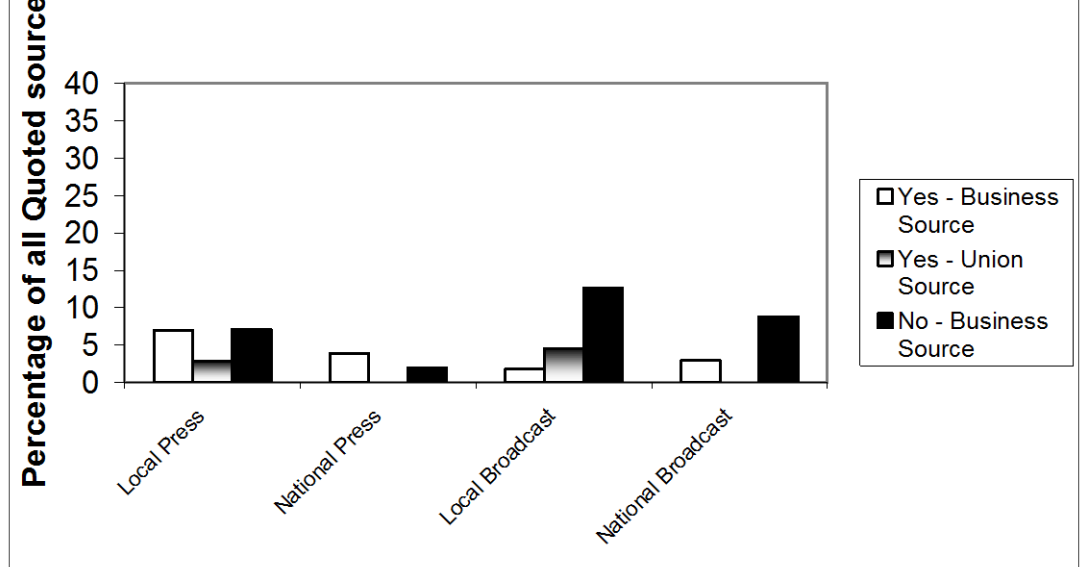


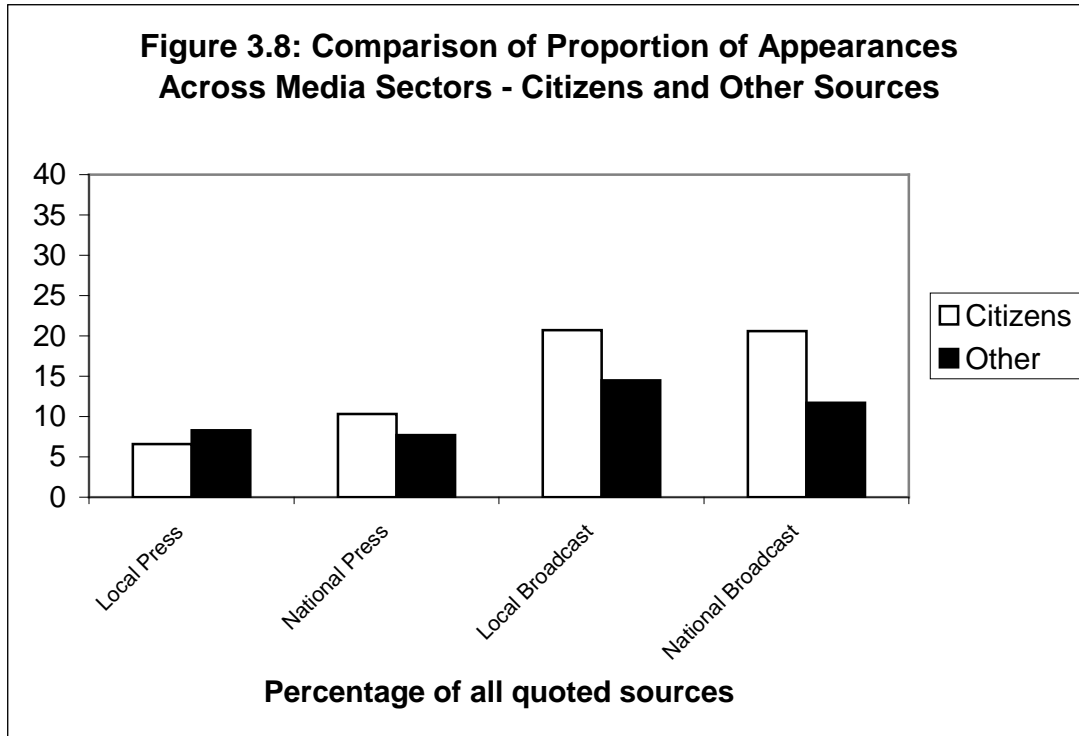
<sup>6</sup> i.e: The column percentage figures for each category of each media sector in Figures 3.6-3.9 add up to 100.

**Figure 3.6: Comparison of the Proportion of Appearances Across Media Sectors - Political Parties**



**Figure 3.7: Comparison of Proportion of Appearances - YES/NO Business & Union Sources**





**Table 3.1: Which Labour Sources Were Quoted in Coverage by Media Sector**

	Local Press	National Press	Local Broadcast	National Broadcast
John Prescott	37%	59%	32%	57%
Other Cabinet Member	16%	13%	32%	21%
Scottish Parliament/ Welsh Assembly	5%	1%	10%	-
North East Labour MP	10%	1%	5%	-
Other Labour MP	2%	9%	-	14%
NE Labour Councillor	13%	-	5%	-
Other Labour Councillor	8%	4%	11%	-
Other Labour	9%	12%	5%	7%
Total Number of appearances of quoted Labour sources	105 = 100%	68 = 100%	19 = 100%	14 = 100%

Several key points emerge from these data:

- The results reveal major variations in the sources accessed by different news media sectors in their reporting of the Regional Assembly referendum (and which were masked by the aggregated calculations presented in Figures 3.1 to 3.4). The most dramatic difference is in the quoted presence of Labour Parliamentary sources. In national press and broadcast coverage these appearances constituted 38.5 per cent and 38.2 per cent of all quoted sources, which far exceeded those found in local newspaper and broadcast coverage (18.5 Per cent and 15.3 Per cent, respectively).
- Across all media sectors, the frequency of quoted appearance of national representatives of the Labour Party exceeded those found for local politicians and party activists. Further disaggregation of these data in Table 3.1 shows that although John Prescott was the dominant Labour presence across all media sectors, he loomed largest in national news coverage.
- In Party Political terms Labour sources were by far the most dominant figures on the stage across all media sectors. In national and regional broadcast coverage, total Labour presence exceeded that of the Conservative party by a ratio of 13 to 1 and 19 to 1, respectively. For the national and local press, these differences were 4 to 1 and 10.2 to 1, respectively. Other political parties were also significantly sidelined in coverage, or in the case of national broadcast coverage, completely absent.
- There was greater parity in the frequency of quotation of the formal representatives of the 'Yes' and 'No' campaigns (see Figure 3.6), indeed, across all media sectors, 'No' campaign sources appeared slightly more frequently than those from the 'Yes' campaign.
- Formal representatives from both campaigns were more frequently quoted in local coverage than in national coverage.
- The marginal advantage for the 'No' Campaign in terms of media presence was reinforced by the frequency with which voices from the Business community were quoted as opposing (rather than endorsing) the proposals for a Regional Assembly (see Figure 3.7). (The sole exception was in National Broadcast coverage.)

If the balance of local and national coverage of the referendum was solely measured in terms of the amount of coverage given to proponents and opponents of the Regional Assembly elections one might be tempted to conclude

that the Yes campaign enjoyed a significant advantage in media terms. However, such a conclusion cannot be safely made on such a limited basis. The amount of access allocated to news sources is an important starting point, but one must then move on to consider the nature of that access. To address this question, the following sections compare the agenda balance and directional balance of the coverage included in the sample.

#### **4. 'What's It All About?': Agenda Balance in the Referendum Coverage**

'Agenda balance' refers to the *interpretative* dimensions of news coverage, i.e. what is an issue seen to be about? What aspects of the policy are transmitted into the public domain? (Golding, 1990: 97).

To assess this vector of news coverage, an extensive list of potential themes related to the referendum was drawn up. There were two levels to this aspect of the coding:

- 936 micro-themes were included in the final thematic coding list.
- These detailed theme codes were then collated under broader headings ('Macro Themes') to identify general interpretative trends in news coverage.

Up to three themes could be coded for each RA related item.

#### **4.1 Findings**

Table 4.1 compares the distribution of macro themes across the media sectors sampled. Tables 4. 2 & 4.3 provide detailed breakdowns of the frequency of appearance of the most prominent micro themes contained within the two most prominent macro themes.

**Table 4.1: Macro Themes in Assembly/ Referendum Coverage by Media Sector**

	All Local Newspapers	All National Newspapers	All Local Broadcast Media	All National Broadcast Media
	%	%	%	%
Background to the Proposals and Referendum	8	25	5	48
Organisation/ Operation of Proposed Assembly	19	10	12	14
Constitutional Implications of the Assembly	13	10	19	7
Policy Implications of the Assembly Proposals	10	8	7	0
Party Political Implications of the Assembly Proposals	5	16	1	7
Campaign Conduct and Organisation	35	27	54	21
Other Political Responses to the Referendum and Proposals	9	5	3	3
<b>Total Number of Themes Coded</b>	1576	147	108	29

Notes: Figures relate to all Assembly/ referendum related items. Up to the three themes could be coded per item. As all column percentages are rounded totals may not add up to 100.

**Table 4.2: Top 5 Micro Themes Within ‘CAMPAIGN CONDUCT RELATED THEMES’ by Media Sector**

<b>All Local Newspapers</b>	<b>All National Newspapers</b>	<b>All Local Broadcast Media</b>	<b>All National Broadcast Media</b>
<b>Opinion Polls/ Public Opinion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 13.5 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 5 % of all themes</li> </ul>	<b>Voter Turn Out</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 25 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 7 % of all themes</li> </ul>	<b>Voter Turn Out</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 24 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 13 % of all themes</li> </ul>	<b>Postal Ballot Issues</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 33% of themes in this category</li> <li>• 7 % of all themes</li> </ul>
<b>Voter Turn Out</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12.9 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 5 % of all themes</li> </ul>	<b>Party Links of Yes/ No Campaigns</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 13 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 3 % of all themes</li> </ul>	<b>Postal Ballot Issues</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 21% of themes in this category</li> <li>• 11 % of all themes</li> </ul>	<b>Voter Turn Out</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 33 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 7 % of all themes</li> </ul>
<b>General Campaign Conduct</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 4 % of all themes</li> </ul>	<b>General Campaign Conduct</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 13% of themes in this category</li> <li>• 3 % of all themes</li> </ul>	<b>Other Voting Procedures</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 6 % of all themes</li> </ul>	<b>Public Knowledge of Issues</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 17 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 3 % of all themes</li> </ul>
<b>PR/ Spin</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 4 % of all themes</li> </ul>	<b>Opinion Polls/ Public Opinion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 2 % of all themes</li> </ul>	<b>General Campaign Conduct</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 6 % of all themes</li> </ul>	<b>Other Issues related to Voters (demography etc)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 17 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 3 % of all themes</li> </ul>
<b>Party Links of Yes/ No Campaigns</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 4 % of all themes</li> </ul>	<b>Postal Ballot Issues</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 2 % of all themes</li> </ul>	<b>Citizen Participation in Referendum</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 7 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 4 % of all themes</li> </ul>	<b>(No Other Micro Themes coded for this Category)</b>

Note: A Micro Theme had to be coded more than once for it to be included in this table



**Table 4.3: Top 5 Micro Themes Within ‘CONSTITUTIONAL IMPLICATIONS’  
by Media Sector**

All Local Newspapers	All National Newspapers	All Local Broadcast Media	All National Broadcast Media
<b>Democratic Accountability of RA</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 29 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 4 % of all themes</li> </ul>	<b>Links to Europe</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 29 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 3% of all themes coded</li> </ul>	<b>Reorganisation of Durham Local Government</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 14 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 3 % of all themes coded</li> </ul>	<i>No Micro Themes in this category were coded more than once</i>
<b>Reorganisation of Northumberland Local Government</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 17 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 2 % of all themes coded</li> </ul>	<b>Links/ Parallels with Scottish Parliament</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 21 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 2 % of all themes coded</li> </ul>	<b>Democratic Accountability of RA</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 2 % of all themes coded</li> </ul>	<i>No Micro Themes in this category were coded more than once</i>
<b>Reorganisation of Durham Local Government</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 2% of all themes coded</li> </ul>	<b>Other General Implications for NE Region</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 21 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 2 % of all themes coded</li> </ul>	<b>Reorganisation of Northumberland Local Government</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 2 % of all themes coded</li> </ul>	<i>No Micro Themes in this category were coded more than once</i>
<b>Links to Europe</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 2% of all themes coded</li> </ul>	<i>No further Micro Themes in this category were coded more than once</i>	<b>Enhanced Role for Local Government</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 2 % of all themes coded</li> </ul>	<i>No Micro Themes in this category were coded more than once</i>
<b>Diminished Role for Local Government</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 2% of all themes coded</li> </ul>	<i>No further Micro Themes in this category were coded more than once</i>	<b>Reorganisation for Tyne &amp; Wear Local Government</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10 % of themes in this category</li> <li>• 2 % of all themes coded</li> </ul>	<i>No Micro Themes in this category were coded more than once</i>

Several key points emerge from these data:

- Themes related to the conduct and organization of the referendum were in all but one case the most prominent aspect of media coverage (the sole exception being the national broadcast media). This conforms with an established trend in the reporting of politics in nations like Britain, where considerable amounts of media attention are devoted to the process of politics, rather than to substantive policy issues (e.g. Deacon et al, 2001).
- Interestingly, levels of such 'process' coverage were higher in local than national coverage.
- There was some variation between media sectors in the amount of attention given to specific themes related to the conduct and organization of the referendum (see Table 4.2). The regional and national press gave most attention to 'horse race' issues, in particular opinion poll evidence as to who would win the ballot. This was not a prominent concern in either regional or national broadcast coverage. Voter turnout, by comparison, was recurrently addressed across all sectors. Debate about the role of public relations and 'spin' in the campaign only registered to any significant extent in local press coverage.
- In proportional terms, local media coverage focused less attention on the historical background to the referendum proposals than their national counterparts. This may reveal an assumption on the part of local journalists that people in the North East already had a higher degree of received knowledge about the history to the referendum and therefore had a lower need for orientation than citizens from other parts of the country.
- When addressing the implications of the creation of a Regional Assembly, national media coverage most frequently considered its political implications in party political terms (e.g. the extent to which it might improve or undermine various parties' political fortunes at regional and national level). In contrast, Local media discussion of implications focused more on the actual or potential impact of the proposals on various aspects of public and economic policy.
- With regard to 'Constitutional Issues', local media concentrated more coverage on issues related to the democratic accountability of the proposed Regional Assembly than the national press (this matter did not appear in the top 5 'Constitutional' micro themes for either of the national media sectors).
- Local coverage in this category also paid more attention than the national media to the practical implications of the proposals for the reorganization of local authorities' powers and responsibilities. Where national media

coverage of constitutional matters did group together to any significant extent, a proportionally higher level of attention was given to the implications the proposals held for existing devolution in Scotland and Wales and for relations with Europe.

Cumulatively, these findings reveal a degree of variation in the interpretative dimensions of national and local coverage of the referendum. The high level of interest in reporting ‘the politics of politics’ rather than the substantive policy issues raises concerns about to what extent media coverage provided a full overview of the history, substantive detail and policy implications of the proposal. Take for example the amount of discussion in media coverage of the actual or potential policy implications of the proposals for public administration and the private sector. As is shown in Table 4.1, this was not a prominent concern in the overall distribution of media attention. Table 4.4 adds further detail to this observation, by specifying the number of times that any micro themes under this heading were (or were not) identified and coded.

**Table 4.4: Number of Appearances of All Micro Themes Related to ‘ACTUAL/ POTENTIAL POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF THE REGIONAL ASSEMBLY’**

Area	Number of Occasions Micro Theme Appeared in All Media Items
General reference to Public Service Provision	23
Business/ Economy/ Private Sector	50
Crime/ Law & Order	3
Culture/ Arts/ Sports	4
Education	2
Environment	-
Fire and Rescue	-
Health	2
Housing	9
Planning	6
Rural Policy	8
Taxation – Businesses	-
Taxation – Local Citizens	35
Tourism	
Transport	22

These data suggest that even when media attention addressed the policy implications of the RA proposals, discussion tended to congregate around a limited range of topic areas. The implications for local businesses and the regional economy in general were most prominent, followed by the impact the change may have for local domestic taxation levels. The only other specific policy area to attract any substantial attention was ‘Transport’. In other coverage related to public service provision, discussion of the implications tended to be more abstract and general in character.

It could be argued that these results have some considerable significance when appraising the broadly the success or otherwise of certain policy actors in inspiring and managing media – and by extension, public – discourse on the Regional Assembly proposals. Many advocates of the plans spoke of their radical and wide ranging potential: devolving power from Whitehall, stimulating cultural activities, promoting regional coherence and identity, and so on. Here, the radical, democratic promise of the devolutionist dream is reduced to a constricted range of precise fiscal and practical concerns: how will it affect businesses? What might it mean for transport? And, crucially, how much will it put on local domestic taxes?

## 5. ‘In Whose Favour?’: Directional Balance in RA related Coverage

In lay terms, ‘directional balance’ is commonly referred to as ‘bias’. This is a term we prefer to avoid, firstly because of the implicit accusations of cynicism and unprofessionalism that it seems to evoke, and secondly because of the assumption that there is some completely value neutral position from which the media accounts depart, wittingly or unwittingly.

We prefer instead to describe directional balance as relating to the *evaluative* level of coverage; i.e. the extent to which particular issues, individuals or institutions are treated positively, negatively or descriptively. These judgements are not necessarily dependent on identifying overt examples of editorializing on the part of news professionals themselves. They may often be determined by the focus of an item, its implicit frame or the relative distribution and quotation of political advocates that form its basis.

For each RA related item identified, a judgement was made as to the overall frame of the piece. This variable indicated the extent to which an item could be seen to favour either supporters or opponents of the Regional Assembly proposals, by virtue of the context, implicit or explicit, within which the report was couched. The coding categories distinguished between:

- **Articles that were Solely/ Mainly consonant Yes Campaign Frame** – based on either (a) open editorializing by the item’s author, (b) prominence given to ‘Yes’ Advocates and their views, (c) the evidence or issues presented.
- **Articles that were Solely/ Mainly consonant No Campaign Frame** – based on either (a) open editorializing by the item’s author, (b) prominence given to ‘No’ Advocates and their views, (c) the evidence or issues presented.
- **Unclear/ No Evident Inclination either way**

Table 5.1 compares the distribution of items with an overt ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ campaign frame across different media sectors. Not surprisingly, there was a higher percentage of items in both local and national newspaper coverage that revealed a clear ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ orientation. But across all media sectors, items with a ‘No’ frame of reference exceeded those with a ‘Yes’ Frame. With the exception of local broadcast coverage, these disparities were quite considerable.

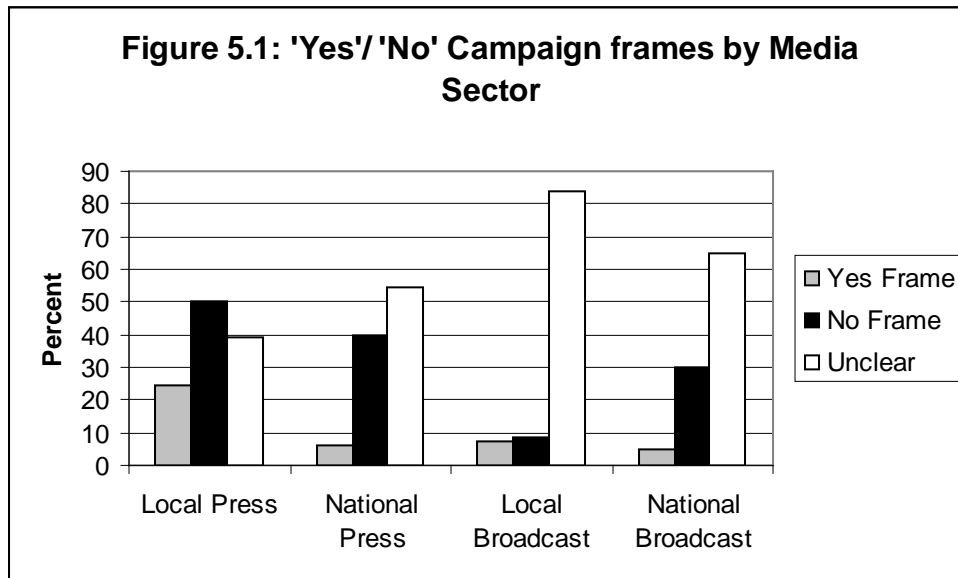
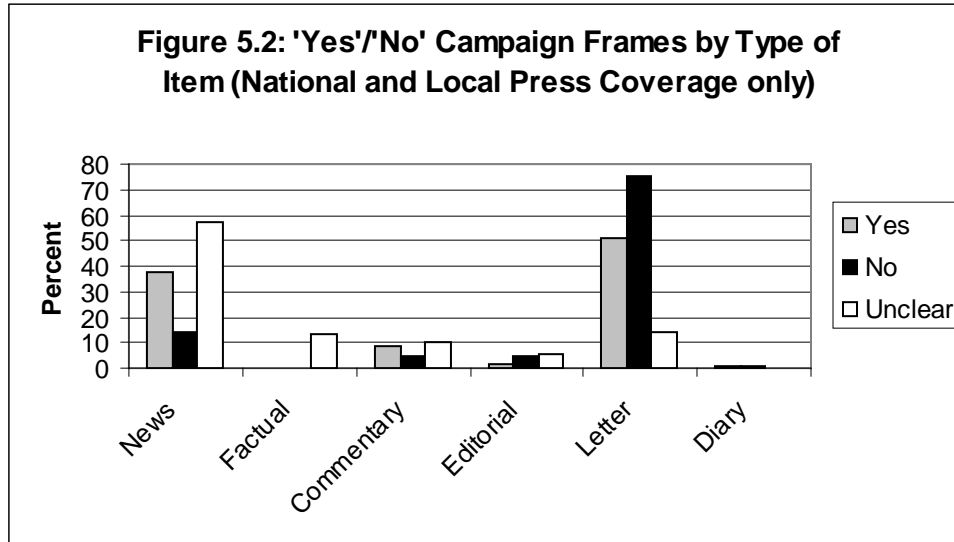


Figure 5.2 links the distribution of ‘Yes’/ ‘No’ campaign frames in national and local press articles in relation to the broad item type. These data show that, with respect to ‘hard’ news items, a higher proportion of pieces displayed an orientation to the ‘Yes’ campaign frame. The overall advantage to the ‘No Campaign’ in framing terms was achieved on the back of a considerable imbalance in the proportions of published letters that opposed the Regional Assembly. As mentioned earlier, we return to the significance of published letters later in this report, but it is pertinent to note here that in local newspaper coverage it was non-journalistic voices that most frequently voiced articulated opposition to the proposals.



As a means of corroborating the conclusions derived from this straightforward assessment of the 'frame' of each item, a further element was built into the Thematic coding outlined in section 4. For each micro-theme identified, it was indicated whether the specific issue being addressed had either;

- (a) Unambiguously positive implications for the Yes Campaign,
- (b) Unambiguously positive implications for the No Campaign,
- (c) Mixed, unclear or no implications for either camp
- (d) Unambiguously positive implications for the success of the referendum itself (i.e. these evaluations had no direct link to the political outcome of the vote or advocates involved in the contest)<sup>7</sup>
- (e) Unambiguously negative Implications for the success of the referendum itself (i.e. these evaluations had no direct link to the political outcome of the vote or advocates involved in the contest)
- (f) Mixed, unclear or no implications for the success of the referendum itself (i.e. these evaluations had no direct link to the political outcome of the vote or advocates involved in the contest)

This provided an even more nuanced measure of directional balance, as it allowed us to code the presence and prominence of positive and negative themes *within* each item.

Table 5.1 compares the proportional distribution of these categories by media sector.

<sup>7</sup> An example of a theme that would be coded in this way would be a discussion of the likelihood of a high turn out for the referendum vote, or of the high level of public interest in, and engagement with, the campaign.

**Table 5.1: Comparison of Individual Theme Evaluations by Media Sector**

	Local Press	National Press	Local Broadcast	National Broadcast
<b>Positive for the Yes Camp</b>	27%	7%	8%	0%
<b>Positive for the No Camp</b>	42%	54%	20%	44%
<b>Mixed/ Unclear</b>	16 %	15%	32%	28%
<b>Positive News for the Ref.</b>	2%	2%	3%	3%
<b>Negative News for the Ref.</b>	10%	5%	9%	3%
<b>Mixed/ Unclear</b>	3%	17%	27%	21%

These results confirm the findings of the ‘frame’ analysis:

Themes with positive implications for the NO campaign appeared more commonly than positive themes for the YES campaign.

Similarly, negative themes related to the general conduct of the referendum campaign received more prominence than positive themes.

Having noted this, most directional themes were related to the political sources involved in the contest, rather than relating more generally to the referendum process.

Directional imbalance was appreciably less evident in local broadcast news than other media sectors. The prominence of positive themes for the ‘No’ campaign in the national broadcast coverage can be explained by the fact that a considerable percentage of RA related coverage in this sector was broadcast after the vote had been undertaken (see Figure 2.2). By that stage, even the most impartial of broadcasters would have struggled to put a positive spin on the referendum outcome for the ‘Yes’ Campaign.

## **6. Coverage in the ‘Pre-campaign’ Period.**

A review of the national and regional press from the announcement of the referendum on the 24<sup>th</sup> July and up to the issuing of ballot papers on the 18<sup>th</sup> October suggests some continuity in the issues and personalities featured both before and after the beginning of the formal campaign. Coverage of the Assembly was, however, understandably more limited in the earlier period. In the national dailies and Sundays there were 61 mentions (i.e. stories that mentioned both the ‘North East’ and ‘referendum’); in sum there was not much reporting of the issue. Where national journalists did dwell on the devolution programme they tended to focus on the process and personalities rather than the proposals themselves. Several commentators dismissed the pursuit of the

English devolution programme as a personal vanity project of John Prescott. It was perhaps inevitably that the more right-wing titles like the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* that presented the Deputy Prime Minister in a less than flattering manner.

If the overall national press coverage of the Assembly was limited what little there was also made troubling reading for the government. Several reports interpreted the cancellation of the planned referenda in the North West and Yorkshire as a personal setback for Prescott and, perhaps more ominously, there was the implication that the North East was being burdened with a process other regions neither wanted or needed. The tenor of the reporting suggested the proposals were a threat rather than an opportunity and this continued with coverage of the news that the referendum would take the form of an all-postal ballot. The recent experiences of this procedure in the European parliamentary elections had proved highly controversial, and the prospects for such a vote on the Assembly were viewed with alarm by some media commentators.

### **6.1. National newspapers.**

Aside from the mundane reports of announcements and other non-controversial events, relatively few national titles featured any substantial commentary or analysis on the North East Assembly or the devolution experiment more generally. Exceptions in the period 24<sup>th</sup> July-18<sup>th</sup> October were the reasonably balanced and informative guide to the two rival camps in the *Guardian* (15<sup>th</sup> September) and the various interventions by veteran anti-European Union campaigner Christopher Booker of the *Sunday Telegraph*. Booker attacked the referendum, believing John Prescott would manipulate it to ensure a Yes vote (19<sup>th</sup> September) and was less than flattering about a process he dismissed as a 'soap opera' (26<sup>th</sup> September, 3<sup>rd</sup> October and 17<sup>th</sup> October). It was somewhat ironic that the subsequent ballot delivered such a resounding victory to those of the *Telegraph* journalist's persuasion.

### **6.2. Local press.**

The local newspapers examined in the pre-campaign period was, on the whole, more circumspect and straightforward in reporting the Assembly referendum. The coverage by the *Evening Chronicle* (45 mentions of 'referendum'), *Evening Gazette* (38), *Newcastle Journal* (86) and *Northern Echo* (53) was also similar in content if not size and scope to that which followed during the formal referendum campaign. The reports included various commentaries from the respective camps, analysis of the proposals as well as some assessment of the main players' party political backgrounds. Mention was made, for instance, of the quickly assembled North East Says No organisation's contentious replacement of the anti-European Union activist Neil Herron's longstanding, similarly titled group as the officially recognised campaign against the Assembly for the purposes of the referendum (*Northern Echo*, 14<sup>th</sup> September).



The choice of industrialist John Elliott to lead the anti-devolutionists meant a business perspective formed a key dimension of the subsequent debate, a potential group influence reinforced by the publication of surveys by the regional Institute of Directors (17<sup>th</sup> September) and Chamber of Commerce (24<sup>th</sup> September) indicating strong opposition to the Assembly among their memberships. The No campaign attempted to build an early momentum on this and other support by launching its 'white elephant' motif. According to spokesperson Graham Robb the logo, which appeared in giant inflatable form, offered 'a symbol for the regional assembly. It's unwieldy, cumbersome and serves no useful purpose at all and is full of hot air' (*Northern Echo*, 12<sup>th</sup> October). The Yes counterattack involved photo-opportunities designed to attract media attention with local celebrities such as opera singer Suzannah Clarke, business leader Sir John Hall and a selection of ministers including Alan Milburn and Gordon Brown (on these see figure 3.6).

## **7. Internet Presence.**

The Assembly referendum campaign was not an Internet based event in any meaningful sense. Throughout the latter few weeks of the process the websites of the official Yes and No camps were monitored together with those of BBC Tyne and Wear and the two major regional newspaper groups, Trinity Mirror and the Johnston Press as well as the independents.

### **7.1. Key on-line actors.**

The BBC Tyne and Wear on-line coverage of the referendum was fairly unresponsive to events as was the official Yes and No web presence. The sites did not appear to be major priority for any of those responsible, although the BBC's site did maintain a good archive search facility. The failure of either of the major camps to update their sites during the crucial weeks prior to the result highlights the degree to which political strategists (in Britain at least) have not systematically embraced the Internet as a means of communicating with the public or even their own supporters (Gibson et al., 2003). Arguably the referendum process might have marginally benefited from a more vigorous on-line presence aimed at voters across this physically large constituency comprising millions of voters. Such an approach may have also appealed to the more technically literate if less politically minded younger sections of the electorate.

### **7.2. Local media sites.**

In terms of on-line media presence the Johnston Press (which owns the *Hartlepool Mail*; *Shields Gazette*; *Sunderland Echo*; *Berwick Advertiser*; *Morpeth Herald*; *Northumberland Gazette*; and *Whitby Gazette*) provided little coverage of the campaign or related issues, nor were there visible links to information about

the process. This continued after the referendum, the result of which would have been hard to come by for the casual viewer accessing this group of sites. By contrast the Trinity Mirror owned titles (*Newcastle Chronicle*; *Newcastle Journal*; *Teeside Evening Gazette*; and *Sunday Sun*) were all linked to a comprehensive central server providing extensive news of the campaign, an archive of related articles and links to external sources including both of the official Yes and No homepages. The joint on-line provision offered by the *Northern Echo* and *Darlington and Stockton Times* replicated that of the Mirror Group in style if not exactly the same degree of substance. The only other independently owned title, the *Hexham Courant*, offered a similar level of service. Following the conclusion of the referendum the Trinity Mirror group titles, apart from the weekly *Sunday Sun*, featured the result of the vote as the main story on their front pages and maintained a link offering further information. The Courant did likewise, as did the regional BBC site.

## **8. Local Broadcasting.**

Leading campaign organisers such as the Labour minister Douglas Alexander have long indicated that they increasingly view local rather than national news journalism as the key vehicle for communicating their message to the public, especially in the run up to the forthcoming Westminster general election. To use former Speaker of the US House of Representatives Tip O'Neill's phrase, Alexander and likeminded strategists increasingly appeared to subscribe to the view that 'all politics is local' (Alexander, 2002). Consequently sub-national broadcasting is seen as particularly important because regional journalists are perceived to be less confrontational and more interested in the substantive issues as they relate to their audience. The findings from the quantitative content analysis provide something of a mixed picture on the matter. As noted, 'process coverage'- discussion of 'the politics of the politics'- was most evident in local rather than national coverage (see section 4). However, this is to a large extent a measure of the greater amount of coverage given to the referendum in the local reporting. Furthermore regional media paid less attention to the party political ramifications of the vote, and provided more discussion of the policy implications of a new Regional Assembly. Local radio and television news and current affairs programming are also bound by rules that oblige them to provide impartial coverage of rival parties and, in the case of a referendum, the opposing sides. In the case of the North East Assembly referendum the main television magazine formats BBC Look North at 6.30pm, its rival ITV1 North East News at 6pm and both BBC Radio Cleveland and Newcastle breakfast shows, all played some role in providing the public with a studiously neutral perspective on the campaign.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> As we have seen in the measurement of stop watch balance in section 3, local broadcast coverage revealed the least disparity in the amount of quotation of Yes and No orientated sources. Furthermore the marginal aggregated difference is mainly accounted for by coverage of the Labour government sources at national level.

### **8.1. Radio ‘coverage’.**

The major BBC radio stations, Newcastle and Cleveland, are located in the main urban centres of population but serve a wider constituency throughout the North East region and, in the latter case, beyond. The monitoring of their morning outputs during the referendum proved useful even if their coverage of the campaign was somewhat elusive. This is because the relative absence of commentary about the Assembly from either the presenters, their guests or listeners on these talk based formats demonstrates something in a way the other media formats could not, that there was a distinct lack of public engagement or interest in the devolution proposals. Both breakfast shows on BBC Newcastle and Cleveland consist of a similar mix of discussion involving the hosts discussing various topics with a range of local notables drawn from business, religion, sport and other professions. It was, then, striking that from the 18<sup>th</sup> October onwards there was hardly any mention of the referendum and its implications (see figure 2.2).

It should be noted that both radio shows were not averse to covering politics, as they demonstrated by giving over airtime to the tragic predicament of British born Iraqi hostage Margaret Hassan or the controversial redeployment of Black Watch troops in Basra. Equally, there was also space to discuss less grave matters such as how to make a good pudding, or the sending off a footballer belonging to a local team the previous evening. If anything the radio broadcasters’ hard news agenda appeared to be more heavily influenced by national, even global concerns, and had a noted preference for covering the major stories breaking in the London based press and that often dominated the breakfast programme’s newspaper review. Consequently the media provoked furore over MPs expenses was, in the context of the Assembly proposals, one of the more relevant stories featured on these shows during the referendum campaign. And although it was perhaps understandable that the two stories were not linked for fear of upsetting the Yes side, the relative prominence given over to an essentially Westminster based item like this rather than a regional issue such as devolution is possibly suggestive about the relevant editors’ attitudes towards the process.

### **8.2. The main television bulletins.**

The BBC local evening news magazine Look North featured the referendum throughout the duration of the formal campaign. The programme also tended to report the story in the earlier half of its schedule, often leading on it or at the very least having it as second or third in the running order. Assorted items and features covered the various proposals on offer as well as the key daily events and incidents. The rival ITV1 North East News provided a similar service, albeit to a lesser extent and routinely reported the story at the middle or towards the end of its programme. Other items about murder, crime and local political developments were often prioritised over the Assembly, as were the kind of less

serious features that are normally thought of as the hallmark of regional news broadcasting.

Once the referendum campaign had been formally launched both channels devoted at least one major feature to the two rival camps on successive nights, thereby giving each side the opportunity to get their message across to a large audience consisting of those who, by definition, were more obviously interested in regional affairs and therefore probably more likely to vote. ITV chose the day of Tony Blair and Charles Kennedy's joint visit in support of the pro-Assembly side to focus on the Yes campaign whereas their No opponents' equivalent airtime reiterated its core message about the inadequacies of the proposals. The contrasting broadcasts on the two campaigns highlighted the way in which, rather than advancing the cause, the appearance of prominent supporters such as Blair and Kennedy together with a host of other national politicians and 'real' celebrities may have actually hampered those making the case for change by focusing on the personalities rather than the substantive issues. The approach seemed more suited to a parliamentary by-election (such as the one recently fought locally in Hartlepool) where character rather than a ballot proposal is at issue.

### **8.3. Photo (missed) opportunities.**

The highly personalised coverage devoted to the Yes cause appeared to militate against the campaign's aims and its ability to make any determined response in the face of the growing momentum behind the No organisation. This raised a particular problem in a public service broadcasting context where coverage in the lead up to a major vote tends to be governed by the need to demonstrate a degree of impartiality in the quality as well as quantity of coverage afforded either side (see section 3). This arguably had greater implications for the (Yes) side that had the more complex case to promote. And even though the pro-devolutionists received disproportionately more airtime because of their various highly newsworthy initiatives (see figures 3.1 and 3.2), much of the subsequent coverage was devoted to photo opportunities or soundbites involving famous supporters that tended to detract from and dilute the message as to how the North East would materially benefit from the establishment of a regional government. This was continually reflected in the regular broadcast 'vox pop' interviews with voters complaining that they understood or knew little of the proposals. By contrast the No campaign, with relatively few core spokespeople or an extensive supporting entourage, was able to continually get across its simple message that it stood for the defence of the status quo.

The No message was not particularly sophisticated, but was well served by the kind of visual metaphor that played well on television. Their rhetorical attacks continually focused on the Assembly as 'a talking shop' and 'white elephant', a large model of which routinely appeared in several features on both the ITV and BBC evening news programmes. It was also the kind of straightforward claim

which rival independent No campaigner Neil Herron was happy to reiterate in his not infrequent broadcast appearances (figure 3.5). The presence of Herron, a prominent United Kingdom Independence Party supporter who had publicly criticised his nominal allies in the official North East Says No organisation, had had the potential to dilute the anti-devolution message, but in the end this threat never materialised. Rather it was the Yes campaign that appeared to lose its way. Its shortcomings were symbolised in the way their reactive and somewhat esoteric response to the 'white elephant' appeared in the form of a large rat with a sign explaining the acronym meant 'Rather Arrogant Toff Southerners'. This image relied on the audience having a prior knowledge and belief that the No campaign was being run by incomers from Londoners, itself a somewhat dubious argument for a cause supported by central government to pursue. Like the other, earlier Yes campaign stunts featuring celebrities, local broadcasters dutifully reported the photo opportunity but it is questionable whether it made much sense to potential voters.

#### **8.4. The major set piece debate**

The Yes organisation's considerable task had been demonstrated on the opening day of the formal campaign (18<sup>th</sup> October) in a televised Look North debate involving the leaders of either side, Newcastle University's Professor John Tomaney and the Bishop Auckland based businessman John Elliott. Both were accompanied by the more seasoned media politicians Ray Mallon and Graham Robb. That said, none of the audience questioning, which was mostly ignored, succeeded in deflecting the four guest speakers from delivering their core message in a debate that gave some insight into what was to come. John Elliott's argumentation and particularly his reference to the flaws and shortcomings in a somewhat abstract (devolution) 'Bill' was less memorable than his other contention that the Assembly would be a white elephant. The success of former Conservative parliamentary candidate Robb in promoting this message was one reason why Mallon, the former senior police officer turned independent Mayor of Middlesbrough, subsequently and controversially personalised his attacks on what he alleged were the 'two bit' Tories behind the No camp. Mallon's theme had, of course, informed the Yes camp's 'RATS' device, but his more controversially partisan declaration was interpreted as a desperate attempt to appeal to the region's strong Labour identities.

#### **9. National Broadcasting.**

If the North East Assembly was mentioned at all in the national broadcast news media during the later stages of the referendum process it was usually as a brief descriptive item near the end of a bulletin. A prime example of this was at the very outset of the formal campaign (18<sup>th</sup> October) when BBC Four's Today programme, BBC2 Newsnight and Channel 5 News all featured the forthcoming vote but did so for less than a minute in the other news headlines' section of their programmes. On the same day the ITV1 News and Channel 4 failed to mention

the referendum at all and the only substantial piece appeared towards the end of the BBC1 6 O'Clock News. Furthermore the items tended to focus on the all-postal ballot system being used, and thereby remind potential voters of the controversy there had been when this particular method had been used earlier in the year during the European parliamentary elections.

### **9.1. Anything but the Assembly.**

The overwhelming impression given by the national news broadcasters was that their coverage of the referendum was perfunctory and that the matter had marginal interest to them and their audience (see also figure 2.2). There were other important events at the time that deserved and attracted attention, notably the controversial redeployment of British troops within Iraq. This news reporting was often linked to the US presidential race, another story that ran throughout the period of the referendum and which featured in many news bulletins. The prominence given to the American campaign limited the amount of airtime for other 'formal' politics at the time and this was to the detriment of those involved in the referendum. The relative lack of airtime given over to the referendum may also have also been conceivably influenced by an expectation that the North East was about to vote No, thereby setting back the government's plans for English devolution and with it the need for any serious debate over the subject. It was nevertheless striking how little even the most self-conscious public service broadcasters made of the referendum's implications until (and then only briefly) the day the result was announced (5<sup>th</sup> November; see also figure 2.2). Then there was some late recognition that the vote did, after all, have potentially momentous consequences for the North East as well as for the North West, Yorkshire and other English regions where the prospect of regional government had been seriously discussed.

### **9.2. The personal touch.**

When the North East vote was featured in national news broadcasting, journalists tended to focus on the personalities involved. ITV1 News (22<sup>nd</sup> October), for instance, first covered the referendum campaign when Tony Blair and Charles Kennedy made their rare joint appearance on the same platform in a visit to the region in support of the Yes campaign. Ironically the same item made pointed reference to the apparent lack of public knowledge about the devolution proposals but did not really attempt to enlighten voters, some of whom featured in 'vox pop' items edited in a way to reinforce an image of northerners as 'jocular' characters. Furthermore the choice of the Prime Minister's own Sedgefield constituency as the location for these interviews reinforced the personalised dimension to the reporting. The nature of the coverage was most obvious in the extensive coverage afforded John Prescott, by far the most prominent person featured across this and all news media during the campaign (see table 3.1).

Scarce as it was in the national broadcasts, much what referendum reporting there was mentioned John Prescott and, on the occasions this was elaborated upon, the items tended to focus on the consequences of a No vote him rather than for the region or its citizens. A good example of this was the way the Deputy Prime Minister's career prospects featured prominently in an eve of poll BBC Radio 4 Today programme item (3<sup>rd</sup> November) involving himself, North East Says No spokesperson Graham Robb and presenter John Humphrys. Having engaged in a combative interview with Robb about the substantive issue, Humphrys proceeded to concentrate his searching questioning of Prescott on the damage a No vote would have on his personal reputation and future. The personalised nature of this and other campaign related news clearly deflected attention from the matter in hand. More widely it has been precisely this kind of political journalism, for which the Today programme is particularly renowned, that has fuelled the recent criticism of the way the media is perceived to be failing democratic debate in Britain (see, for instance, Lloyd, 2004).

### **9.3. A rare perspective.**

It has already been noted how critics of the media reporting of politics have been especially concerned about the perceived lack of detail and context in mainstream news coverage (see section 4). Consequently it is interesting to consider the contribution made by the most extensive broadcast feature on the referendum that might be interpreted as an attempt to combat journalism's detractors. The piece in question, by Michael Crick, a freelance contributor to BBC2 Newsnight (29<sup>th</sup> October), revisited some familiar campaign themes such as the lack of public knowledge about or enthusiasm for the proposed Assembly. The film also dwelt on the personal implications of a negative vote for John Prescott, and had Crick visiting a factory owned by John Elliott and conducting an interview on the shop floor with the North East Says No leader. The location, remote as it was from the general public, suggested the campaign had been a less than dynamic experience.

Crick's feature was one of the few to acknowledge the important role played by unelected Quangos in the region as well as the potential effects of a Yes vote on local government reorganisation in Northumberland and Durham. The piece underlined how some people living in more northerly locations such as Alnwick and Berwick near the Scottish border viewed the possible reconstitution of their local councils as an issue of more pressing concern than the proposed new Assembly. It is also noteworthy that the Newsnight feature followed another extended report on economic problems and social disintegration within the region over the last decade. Perhaps frustratingly for the Yes campaign, the story made no explicit reference to the Assembly and its potential as vehicle for the regeneration of the North East.

## **10. The Local Press**

Analysis of the evaluative position in the reporting of British politics has understandably focused on the press. Unlike their broadcasting counterparts, newspapers are not subject to the same legislative restrictions requiring due impartiality in their news coverage. Consequently during the campaign over the proposed North East Assembly it was arguably the local print media that had the greatest opportunity to shape and frame the agenda due to their local expertise, credibility and popularity. Nonetheless regional newspapers have always been, in the main, regarded as less likely than their national colleagues to take a strong ideological approach to politics for fear of alienating municipal elites, any section of their readers and potential or actual advertisers. Many local journalists have developed mutually beneficial working relationships with a range of political organisations within their area and this can limit the partisan nature of the coverage (Franklin, 2004). The proposed new Assembly was something of an unknown and presented an opportunity to establish whether the print media in the North East saw themselves as primarily representing their borough (and were therefore perhaps more likely to vote No) or as being part of a wider community of interest seeking to join forces to find ways of advancing the whole region (presumably by voting Yes).

### **10.1. Durham says Yes and No.**

In section 2 the amount of local press engagement within the Regional Assembly question was measured. This showed a marked degree of difference in the amount of space given to the matter. However, these statistics reveal nothing about the tone and nuance of press opinion. When we look at this detail it is clear that, collectively the region's newspapers were circumspect about declaring their allegiance during the referendum campaign. It is noteworthy that only one title, the *Darlington and Stockton Times*, adopted a more strident tone more in keeping with the style of one of its more obviously partisan national rivals. The first edition during the formal campaign featured the banner headline: 'Say No to the Assembly' and reproduced the official 'Vote No' logo inside and along side its further coverage of the referendum (22<sup>nd</sup> October). The paper, an independently owned publication, was critical in its reporting of Yes campaigners such as Mayor of Middlesbrough Ray Mallon and gave prominence to ridiculing him when it was revealed that he not personally read the devolution bill that had led to the Assembly vote being called. Similarly the criticisms of the No camp's motivations by local MP and Cabinet minister Alan Milburn were summarily dismissed (22<sup>nd</sup> October). This evaluative position was in further evidence in material that dutifully reiterated the anti-devolutionist message, notably in one feature that consisted of a list of reasons for not supporting the Assembly proposal but gave no visible right of reply to the other side (22<sup>nd</sup> October). The vehemence of the position was reinforced by the selection of stories like the overwhelming 65 to 1 vote No following a debate hosted by the relatively small and exclusive Country Landowners' Association in Hexham, a venue considerably to the north and therefore not even neighbouring the title's own circulation area (22<sup>nd</sup> October). It



was noticeable that the *Hexham Courant*, the relevant local newspaper for this story, gave considerably less attention to the Landowners' meeting, preferring to concentrate on a similar public event where opinion was more evenly divided, albeit 91 to 54 against the proposals.

There was a sharp difference of opinion between the *Darlington and Stockton Times* and the other principal Durham newspaper, the *Northern Echo*, a paper that was owned by the same proprietors. Arguably the *Echo*, even more than the Newcastle based *Journal*, would have been the newspaper that stood to gain most from the establishment of an Assembly in the Durham area and therefore near its own circulation area. Although the paper's coverage was reasonably balanced it, like its *Times* rival, employed a banner 'A Voice for the North' which conveyed the sentiments contained in one of its editorials: 'If we have faith in the North-East, pride in the North-East and confidence in the North-East, then we have to support an assembly which, for all its faults, can mark the beginning of the road to greater self-determination for the North-East' (18<sup>th</sup> October). On the final day of the campaign another editorial explained the *Echo's* by now more noticeably tepid endorsement of a Yes vote: 'it will be the only opportunity it (the region) gets for a long time' (4<sup>th</sup> November). This less than convincing endorsement was unable to state the case for the Assembly from any apparent position of strength and this theme was returned to following the vote in another editorial that blamed the government's vague proposals for helping to ensure the region 'missed an opportunity' to embark on a serious constitutional experiment (5<sup>th</sup> November).

### **10.3. Concerned of Northumberland.**

The North East Assembly vote incorporated a further ballot on local government reform in Durham and Northumberland which somewhat complicated matters in those two areas. Broadly speaking the coverage of this topic was a secondary issue in the Durham titles mentioned above whereas there appeared to be a greater parity of space in the more northerly papers, one of which, the *Northumberland Gazette*, was the only other besides the *Darlington and Stockton Times* to formally declare against the devolution project. In a relatively considered and informed comment piece, *Gazette* editor Andrew Smith personally set out his reasons for opposing devolution and focused on what he believed were the potentially detrimental consequences. Smith expressed particular concern about the possible marginalisation of north Northumberland in the event of an Assembly being established (21<sup>st</sup> October). This did not however noticeably colour the reporting of the debate. The *Gazette's* neighbouring publication the *Berwick Advertiser* expressed similar reservations but stopped short of formally endorsing either side (21<sup>st</sup> October). Given its readership and base in the most remote part of the region, an editorial aired its fears that a Yes vote might further isolate the town. Other news coverage was reasonably balanced although the eve of poll edition gave prominence to the official No campaign's white elephant photo opportunity (28<sup>th</sup> October).

The two other Northumberland papers followed a pattern established by their local colleagues in offering a reasonably balanced news service combined with a tentatively sceptical editorial tone. The *Morpeth Herald* chose not to formally comment on the issue and gave over the most prominent opportunity to do so to the deputy leader of the local council who was sympathetic to the Assembly (28<sup>th</sup> October). He nevertheless expressed a concern that in areas throughout the region such as his own the vote as well as the issues had been overly complicated because of the ballot on local government reorganisation (28<sup>th</sup> October). Similarly the *Hexham Courant* avoided making a declaration on the Assembly but did suggest the project had 'shaky foundations' and the plan it was based upon was 'light on substance' (22<sup>nd</sup> October). The paper's coverage was again reasonably balanced and objective and gave similar prominence to a visit by the former athlete Brendan Foster as it did to the anti-devolution vote by the Country Landowners' Association which, as was noted above, attracted rather more attention from the *Darlington and Stockton Times*.

### **10.3. Little to report from the Tees Valley.**

The *Darlington and Stockton Times* does as the latter part of the title suggests, serve a part of the Tees Valley although the bulk of the readership could be found in the southern Durham and North Yorkshire areas. The other Tees papers were, like most other North East local papers, less than enthused with the debate and even more parsimonious in their coverage (see table 2.1). The *Hartlepool Mail*, for instance, barely featured the referendum at all. This may have been an editorial decision influenced by the recent high profile Westminster by-election in the town caused by the departure of Peter Mandelson. The campaign, unusually close for Hartlepool, had inevitably been a major feature of the paper for its duration. Mandelson's eventual successor, the new Labour MP and Yes supporter Ian Wright, duly began a column and provided the only *Mail* comment piece to offer a view on the Assembly (19<sup>th</sup> October). Elsewhere in the paper there appeared to be a preference for non-political news stories during the subsequent referendum debate and even where such matters did find their way into print it seemed to be about anything other than the referendum. A prime example of this was featured columnist Alan Wright's examination of veteran Stockton Labour MP Frank Cook's somewhat idiosyncratic (and in the circumstances perhaps distracting and ill-timed) suggestion that the area needed a new Teeside City (30<sup>th</sup> October).

Throughout the campaign successive *Mail* editorials made no mention of the Assembly, even one that explicitly talked more generally about joblessness and dependency throughout the North East (20<sup>th</sup> October). If there was message it appeared to be sympathetic to change, although after the result a subsequent comment piece, the first to mention the vote, derided the devolution proposals as little more than a 'public whitewash' (5<sup>th</sup> November). There was obviously no lament for the Assembly idea but neither had there been any clear position on

the subject beforehand. The *Teeside Evening Gazette* took a similar approach to its *Mail* neighbour and eschewed commentary on the debate for the duration of the formal campaign. Only after, and fairly cryptically, did it comment 'Simplicity won the day' (6<sup>th</sup> November). The *Gazette* did, however, feature more coverage than the *Mail* and provided space to the Liberal Democrat constitutional affairs spokesperson and London MP Edward Davey and a corresponding column in a later edition from a local noteworthy intent on rebutting the politician's pro-Assembly arguments (28<sup>th</sup> October and 4<sup>th</sup> November).

Predictably the *Gazette's* coverage of the referendum was very much geared to the activities of the high profile local Mayor Ray Mallon who emerged as a passionate supporter of devolution. He however was not spared embarrassment when the *Gazette* reported his perceived mistake in attacking his No opponents as 'two bit' Tories (1<sup>st</sup> November). Mallon took the rare step of clarifying his remarks by explaining himself in a published contribution, but the episode inevitably deflected readers' attention from an issue that had previously attracted scant coverage in the paper (4<sup>th</sup> November). Coverage in the other paper that nominally serves a corner of the Tees Valley, the *Whitby Gazette*, was restricted to a report about people living outside the North East being mistakenly contacted with an automatic telephone message from John Prescott (5<sup>th</sup> November). It should also be mentioned that the *Darlington and Stockton Times* and *Northern Echo* both had a modest but healthy readership within the area.

#### **10.4. Tyne versus Wear.**

Within Tyne and Wear four daily titles serve the largest concentration of population within the North East. As noted in section 2 the *Shields Gazette* and *Sunderland Echo* gave the Assembly markedly less attention than their Newcastle rivals. The overwhelming majority of comment on the referendum in the *Gazette* could be found on the letters' page. Elsewhere in the paper news of the Assembly was scarce and restricted to the policy implications of devolution framed from both a No position (e.g. 'Report rubbishes better wages claim', 2<sup>nd</sup> November) and Yes perspective ('Firms back Assembly', 21<sup>st</sup> October; and a story on travel pass proposals, 4<sup>th</sup> November). No editorial comments were forthcoming before the result (although there was a fairly anodyne and neutral one afterwards) but space was given over to the regular columnist and pro-Assembly local MP David Miliband (20<sup>th</sup> October) as well as the official Yes campaign leader John Tomaney (4<sup>th</sup> November).

The *Sunderland Echo* coverage of the Assembly was similar to that of the *Shields Gazette* in terms of the space devoted to the issue, but the substance of this could not have been more different in that most of the items involved news reports from journalists rather than letters (not to mention editorials). There was no apparent evaluative preference within the coverage although prominence was given to several of the Yes campaign's key claims and personalities including the assertions that the Assembly would bring cheaper travel (19<sup>th</sup> October), could

help reduce crime (23<sup>rd</sup> October) and that the No campaign was being run by Londoners (18<sup>th</sup> October). Furthermore the pro-devolutionist public relations initiatives, involving visits to this often neglected and impoverished area by high profile figures such as Gordon Brown, John Prescott and Rhodri Morgan, the Welsh First Minister, all guaranteed headlines. The appearances promoted the Yes cause and the publicity and speeches that followed offered a different approach to that pursued by the less cerebral anti-Assembly campaigners such as unofficial No activist Neil Herron, who was Sunderland based and had earlier to come to prominence there as the small business 'metric martyr' seeking to retain imperial weights and measures against European directives. Herron duly appeared in his local paper, notably in one prominent story featuring him questioning the integrity of the referendum in light of his having been sent four referendum ballots (*Sunderland Echo*, 21<sup>st</sup> October).

*Echo* editorials revealed the paper's frustrations and antipathy towards the devolution project on more than one occasion (19<sup>th</sup> October and 1<sup>st</sup> November). After the referendum the paper made the relatively rare (for this campaign) but telling observation that a No vote should be welcomed because it amounted to a rejection of an essentially Tyneside centred scheme (5<sup>th</sup> November). This acerbic tone had been evident earlier during the formal campaign in a couple of prominent articles highlighting the various ways in which the process had apparently slighted Wearsiders: the first indicated none of the sizeable group of Yes business supporters were from Sunderland (22<sup>nd</sup> October) and the other criticised the Electoral Commission for suggesting Newcastle was the largest North Eastern city in some of the educational materials it distributed to schools throughout the region (25<sup>th</sup> October).

#### **10.5. Much news from Newcastle.**

Aside from the *Sunday Sun*, the Newcastle titles were easily the newspapers most interested in the campaign (figure 2.3). The *Sun* barely featured coverage of the Assembly, although paradoxically it did emblazon its front cover with 'Show you give a damn' and continued this extended editorial inside by setting out the arguments for and against devolution, but in a way that suggested, though not overtly, sympathy for the Yes position (24<sup>th</sup> October). This tendentious approach was replicated in columnist Ken Oxley's admission that he had been in 'two minds' about the debate and was likely to endorse the changes, albeit with reservations about them. Another regular commentator Ian Robson, the self-styled 'Victor Meldrew' of the North East, was far more blunt and rehearsed the familiar case against the Assembly (24<sup>th</sup> October).

Like several other papers in the region, Newcastle's *Evening Chronicle* left much of the contentious debate to its letter pages rather than offering its own opinionated commentary. This neutral stance was continued throughout the formal campaign and only slightly modified in an editorial after the vote that hinted at pro-devolutionist sympathies in its lamentations for a 'lost opportunity'

(5<sup>th</sup> November). There was however space in her *Chronicle* column for local celebrity columnist Kathy Secker to make one of the more passionate media appeals for a Yes vote (2<sup>nd</sup> November). News coverage in the paper given to the various visiting dignitaries and the greater space given over to Yes campaigners like Tony Blair, Charles Kennedy and Mayor of London Ken Livingstone only reflected the frequency and volume of such visits. It may have been a factor in the subsequent prominence afforded one of the few appearances anywhere in the region by the comparatively low profile Conservative leader Michael Howard (19<sup>th</sup> October; see also figure 3.6).

The most news reporting of the campaign was provided by the *Evening Chronicle's* sister paper the Newcastle based *Journal*. The *Journal* dutifully reported on every aspect of the debate and, at the outset of the formal proceedings, published a highly informative guide setting out the two sides' positions (reprinting 100 reasons for voting Yes and the same number for No), details of the Assembly's proposed powers and institutions, and historical material on the development of the devolutionist agenda (18<sup>th</sup> October). The *Journal's* commitment to the issue and promotion of itself as a regional rather than just metropolitan publication was underlined by its hosting of four public meetings around the North East during the formal campaign (see, for example, the report on 27<sup>th</sup> October). The *Journal's* comprehensive coverage and analysis enabled the paper to explore various aspects of the campaign and debate in a way many of its rivals either could or would not. The reporting was noticeable for its attention to details including the potentially divisive rows between and within the rival camps. Neil Herron was, for instance, quoted as dismissing his fellow, albeit official No colleagues as Conservatives (20<sup>th</sup> October) whereas the Yes organisation's director Ross Forbes used the paper to claim Herron's campaign had been hijacked by a London based right-wing think tank executives linked to sections of the US Republican party (29<sup>th</sup> October).

Editorials in successive issues of the *Journal* returned to what was consistently identified as the major issue which was, as one instalment put it, that the proposals were 'Simply not good enough' (2<sup>nd</sup> November; see also columnist Huw Lewis, 8<sup>th</sup> November). Earlier in the debate the paper had warned rejection of the Assembly could be counter-productive and further marginalize the North East from the Westminster agenda (18<sup>th</sup> October). A subsequent editorial returned to the same theme when it called for indications that central government was willing to improve the settlement on offer (1<sup>st</sup> November). The latter proposal, a Liberal Democrat initiative, was given more attention than it arguably might have a decade ago not least because of the party's noteworthy electoral advances in the region and capture of the once Labour dominated Newcastle City Council. Elsewhere rival columnists set out the cases for and against the Assembly with Willy Poole (21<sup>st</sup> October) reiterating the No case and Huw Lewis tentatively setting out the Yes argument and the debate's complexities (18<sup>th</sup> October).

## **11. Representations of Public Opinion.**

Local newspapers invested in a variety of means to determine the balance of public opinion over the Assembly during the formal campaign. Most obviously the *Northern Echo* commissioned a MORI poll at the outset indicating the No camp were leading by 7% and that of those certain to vote this advantage widened to 23% (18<sup>th</sup> October). Other papers preferred cheaper, less reliable methods of gauging the public reaction, perhaps in the knowledge of the *Echo* survey's suggesting support for change was ebbing away. Some editors monitored local debates within their area and the wider region and as noted above one title, the *Journal*, even hosted some of these to gauge the public mood (e.g. 27<sup>th</sup> October). These sessions and the one reported in the *Northumberland Gazette* (21<sup>st</sup> October, which may have been one of the *Journal* events) suggested the public was roughly about 2 to 1 against the plans. As previously noted the most anti-Assembly newspaper, the *Darlington and Stockton Times*, gave prominence to a convincing vote against the Assembly by a meeting of the Country Landowners' Association in Northumberland (22<sup>nd</sup> October). Ironically that area's own title, the *Hexham Courant*, mentioned the debate but appeared more interested in the views of its own 'vox pop' (22<sup>nd</sup> October). The paper reported the feedback had indicated 'mixed views' but most of the handful of people featured in the item expressed hostility or scepticism towards the Assembly.

### **11.1. A war of words: the correspondence pages.**

By far the most common as well as cheapest way of representing the views of the public were the newspapers' own letters pages and a few hundred such contributions were published during the formal referendum campaign. It would be wrong, however, to suggest the debate was the dominant or even a prominent aspect of this press feature in the lead up to the vote on the Assembly, given some papers failed to publish any related correspondence on certain days. This could have been because there was insufficient or no correspondence but it may also have been motivated by a reluctance to print submissions from what several editorial staff believed were activist groups rather than lay individuals.<sup>9</sup> It should also be noted that there was a marked variation between different newspapers: the *Sunderland Echo* published little if any Assembly correspondence but still reported on the debate, yet coverage in the neighbouring *Shields Gazette* could be found in the letters page and hardly at all within its news section.

The kinds of letter that appear in newspapers, and particularly in local ones where they are perceived to have more agenda-setting potential than at national level, have been the subject of increased academic interest (Richardson and Franklin, 2004). It has been suggested such correspondence offers a potentially useful insight into public attitudes on a given issue and, perhaps more importantly, an opportunity for a more self-conscious editor to try and discreetly

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<sup>9</sup> Interviews

influence a debate through the privileging of certain viewpoints. In the North East context, editorial staff interviewed claimed there had been a modest increase in letters during the referendum campaign and that most of these had come from No sympathisers (see 5.2). Most of the 300 plus letters that were published featured only once in a single paper. There was, however, a more determined group of writers who succeeded in appearing in print at least twice in the same title or, more commonly, in different papers and sometimes with the same item.

### **11.2. Beyond the ‘usual suspects’: the letter writing campaigns.**

Another noticeable trend within the letters was the involvement of several contributors from outside of the region. While there were submissions from what were routinely termed the ‘usual suspects’ by those receiving them, the editorial staff also believed some of the correspondence, including that from non-North East sources, had originated from groups of activists on both sides who were actively involved in attempts to target voters through the letters pages.<sup>10</sup> Most of the same journalists did, however, question the efficacy of such activity by claiming their general readerships were not especially interested or engaged in the referendum debate. The exceptions to this were the more northerly newspapers, all of which suggested the various communities they served, especially in the more rural areas of Northumberland, had taken a noticeable interest in the Assembly and the related issue of local government reform.

Of the letter writers who had more than one letter published during the campaign, twice as many were likely to be against the Assembly than for it, although it should also be noted that a good proportion of the individual correspondents were similarly hostile (see also general results in figure 5.2). The *Shields Gazette*, which had neither a firm view on devolution nor a very stringent policy on letters, became a frequent publisher of the more prolific authors, particularly on the No side such as the Chairman of UKIP’s Somerset branch and a Dr Cooper from Maidenhead. Like some of the local writers, they were motivated by a distrust of an Assembly they suspected would be a precursor to further European integration. Others, notably some Welsh and Scottish contributors to the Newcastle *Evening Chronicle*, warned that devolution would be an expensive and bureaucratic waste of resources. There were also similarly worded letters from anti-devolutionists living in both the North West and Yorkshire.

By comparison with the No contributors, Yes letter writing campaigners were uncommon and those with more than one letter published were particularly scarce. The latter correspondent’s ‘prominence’ during the campaign could in itself be interpreted as a sign of the weak support for the Assembly given most papers appeared interested in maintaining a semblance of balance on their letters’ pages but lacked sufficient material from the pro-devolutionist side. It is noteworthy that only the committed anti-Assembly *Darlington and Stockton Times* appeared unwilling to publish submissions supporting the Yes cause and

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<sup>10</sup> Interviews

even then relented on one occasion. Among the most prolific writers, Tony Bone of Gateshead had essentially the same letter setting out the case for devolution published in the *Berwick Advertiser*, *Teeside Evening Gazette* and *Shields Gazette*. Somewhat bizarrely the Shields paper also re-published the letter a few days later. The other high profile Yes correspondent was Dr Gordon Adam, an undisclosed former Member of the European Parliament and prominent Labour member, who appeared in the same papers as Bone as well as the two (*Northumberland Gazette* and *Darlington and Stockton Times*) that had formally declared against the Assembly. The *Shields Gazette* and *Teeside Evening Gazette* were obviously susceptible to these kinds of entreaties because both also reproduced letters from two Dudley based correspondents calling for a Yes vote in the expectation that it would ease the way forward to devolution in the West Midlands. They were not, however, the most exotic Yes supporters as the campaign even gained an endorsement from a letter sent to the *Berwick Advertiser* from Australia.

## **12. National Press**

If the national quality press gave considerably less space to the referendum than their regional counterparts, the popular titles devoted virtually none (see figure 2.1). The story did not appear to be that important to the metropolitan based media in spite of the implications it had for the rest of England if not necessarily London, which had obviously already established its own (much commented upon) system of regional government. More ominously for the pro-devolutionists was the limited nature of the coverage that did appear and which tended to be negatively framed and assume the proposals were about to be defeated: 'North East voters likely to reject assembly' (*The Times*, 19<sup>th</sup> October; see also table 5.1). The ensuing story cited poll evidence indicating the public knew little or nothing about the Assembly and used this, rather than research about voting preferences, to support its contentious headline. An article in the same day's *Daily Telegraph* reported the MORI poll commissioned by the *Northern Echo* suggesting a swing to the No vote to back up its assertion that a rejection of the proposals was imminent and two days later returned to the story with an editorial formally endorsing this position (21<sup>st</sup> October). Similarly the *Independent on Sunday*, a paper more sympathetic to constitutional change, reported 'Prescott's regional dreams in tatters' (31<sup>st</sup> October) and predicted a No vote without mentioning clear evidence of why this was the case.

### **12.1. A dearth of North East perspectives.**

The overwhelmingly expectation of a No vote reinforced the scorn for a referendum some newspapers attacked as wasteful and unnecessary. Consequently comparisons using familiar government rhetoric about spending on schools and hospitals were deployed to suggest what could and should have been done with the resources invested in the process (see, for instance, 'Doomed assembly poll to cost £10.5m', *Sunday Express*, 31<sup>st</sup> October).



Underlying this criticism was distrust of a devolution programme that some, including an anti-Assembly editorial in the *Financial Times*, feared could be used to justify the reallocation of resources away from other geographical as well as budgetary areas (21<sup>st</sup> October). Allied to this was the contentious assumption on the part of these observers that the relatively small North East was a fairly homogenous area with a clear, united identity (the few notable exceptions to this included the *Society* section pages of the *Guardian*, 27<sup>th</sup> October; and Simon Jenkins' discussion of Northumbrian heritage in *The Times*, 22<sup>nd</sup> October). Little by the way of comment, however, was forthcoming from representatives of the region itself (figure 3.6).

In the national press as a whole, anti-devolutionists sentiments tended to appear more frequently than those of their opponents but the views of neither side were featured that much. Similarly comments from or about the general voting public were also largely absent from these titles and noticeably so in letters pages which when they did run items on the Assembly came from correspondents living outside the North East such as the South West English UKIP MEP Graham Booth (Daily Telegraph, 6<sup>th</sup> November). Like the journalist Christopher Booker, No campaigner Neil Herron and assorted local paper letter writers, several of these contributors criticised the Assembly by arguing the proposals were part of an elaborate scheme to further advance the country's integration within the European Union. As the *Daily Mail* triumphantly put it following the defeat, the vote against had forestalled 'the Balkanisation of Britain' (6<sup>th</sup> November).

The North East business elites fared slightly better than the region's general public in gaining opportunities to represent themselves and their views on the Assembly. This was partly because their own divided loyalties provided an interesting dimension to the campaign and was a reason why the *Financial Times* took a particular interest in the Assembly and went on to offer the most comprehensive coverage of any national (20<sup>th</sup> October; and an in-depth analysis that appeared on 23<sup>rd</sup> October; see also figure 3.7). Generally, however, the national newspaper coverage and commentary repeatedly focused on John Prescott, and he was by far the dominant figure in the nationals' coverage if judged by his repeated appearance in print and photograph. By contrast even the most high profile regional notables supporting the Yes campaign such as entrepreneur Sir John Hall and his acquaintance the former footballer Paul Gascoigne struggled to attract anything like the same amount of attention.

### **12.1. Blame Prescott.**

The trait towards personalisation in the coverage of the referendum was not restricted to the more popular titles, as the *Independent on Sunday* demonstrated when it dismissed the Assembly as the personal vanity project of the Deputy Prime Minister (31<sup>st</sup> October). Similarly the Daily Telegraph could barely conceal its agenda in a piece headlined 'There's a No in the post, say critics of Prescott's assemblies' (1<sup>st</sup> November). This trend continued into a post-mortem that

concentrated on the Deputy Prime Minister's political longevity and rather overlooked other implications of the decisive No vote. Little analysis was forthcoming about the Yes campaign, the devolution programme or the wider consequences for the government including Tony Blair.

Aside from commenting on the scale of the defeat, the remaining coverage was dominated by criticism of Prescott and cited anonymous calls for his resignation including one from an unnamed MP, presumably belonging to his own party ('Bungling Prescott urged to resign', *Daily Express*, 6<sup>th</sup> November). The highly negative tone of the reporting was reinforced by contributions from tabloids whose editors now belatedly embraced the story if only to use it as a means of attacking a favourite political target. The *Daily Mirror*, for instance, headlined on: 'Deprezzed: Blow for Blair No.2 as voters snub assembly' (6<sup>th</sup> November). The *Daily Mail* on the same day was even less forgiving with its 'Is this the end for two Jags?' and suggested Prescott's own high profile in the Yes campaign may have actually derailed a once popular and promising enterprise.

## Conclusions

This comprehensive audit of local and national newspaper and broadcast coverage of the referendum for a Regional Assembly in the North East points to the following main conclusions.

Despite the major nationwide constitutional implications of the proposals, the referendum campaign did not excite intensive and sustained media interest throughout the campaign period, nor in the months preceding it. Not surprisingly, levels of media attention were higher in the local media based in the North East than in the national media. However, there were also significant differences across the North East media in the amount of copy- dedicated to the topic. Levels of press coverage in Durham, Teeside and Northumberland were lower than those found within Tyne and Wear. Furthermore, there was a considerable variation within the Tyne and Wear area, where Newcastle based news organisations gave appreciably greater prominence to the devolution vote and debate than others in the region.

The most news-worthy moment for the referendum in national media terms came 'after the fact', when a spate of news items recorded the outcome of the vote held on 5<sup>th</sup> November and considered its implications for the political career of the proposal's main ministerial advocate, and for the 'devolution dream' in general. The North East may only be a five and a half hour drive from London, but for national journalists it remained a world away.

Three measures were used to assess the degree of balance in local and national news coverage: (1) *stop watch balance* (the amount of news space given to competing views), (2) *agenda balance* (which issues were given greatest prominence in news discourse), and (3) *directional balance* (the amount of positive and negative coverage given to various political sources and topics). In 'stop watch' balance terms, political sources connected with the Yes campaign were more frequently and extensively quoted overall than those associated with the No campaign. The principal reason for this imbalance was the amount of coverage that featured senior government sources, in particular, the sponsoring minister, John Prescott. Representatives from other political parties received comparatively little coverage.

However, any conclusions that might be drawn on this basis that Labour's incumbency had delivered a major advantage to the party in media terms, needs to be set against the findings on the directional balance of coverage across local and national media sectors. Although most broadcast media coverage items did not clearly orient to either Yes or No frames, in the local and national press, scepticism about the Regional Assembly abounded and political evaluations more frequently favoured the No position (whether overtly, through editorial declarations, or covertly, in the kinds of issues they emphasized in their reporting). The letters pages of the local press, in particular, proved to be a highly

significant forum for the articulation of negative views on the referendum proposals at local level.

These distributions in directional balance clearly suggest that what might originally be construed as an advantage for the government, was to some extent a measure of their disadvantage, as a considerable amount of coverage presented them on the back-foot, dealing with the debris of a derailed keynote policy.

With regard to 'Agenda Balance', the highest proportions of themes in coverage in all sectors focused on issues associated with the conduct of the campaign (which we term *process coverage*) rather than substantive issues about what the proposals might mean for the North East in political and economic terms. Process themes were most evident in the local media, where, as the qualitative analysis shows, considerable attention also focused on the personalities involved in the contest. However, this was to a large extent indicative of the higher overall levels of coverage in the local press. Moreover, when coverage did address the potential implications of establishing a new Regional Assembly in the North East, local news media focused more attention on the policy ramifications, whereas national media were more concerned with the party political fall-out.

Having said this, local media discussion of the policy implications focused on a relatively narrow range of concerns. For all the claims made by its proponents about the radical and progressive impact a Regional Assembly would have in the North East, and the new devolutionary era it could herald, media discourses concentrated on a relatively narrow and precise range of fiscal and practical concerns: how will it affect businesses? What might it mean for transport? And, crucially, how much might it cost for local tax payers?

Ordinary Citizens had a presence in media coverage of the referendum, but it was a marginal and essentially passive one. As with the reporting of all important public ballots, a lot of media coverage prior to the ballot speculated on the likely direction of public thinking (who would win, and by what margin?), and, after the event, conjectured on the reasons for the proposals resounding rejection by public vote. But a recurrent and associated theme throughout the coverage concerned the extent to which the public had either understood or engaged with the issues at stake in the referendum.

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