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Same Campaign, Differing Agendas: analysing news media coverage of the 2005 General Election¹

Abstract:

This analysis of the 2005 general election focuses on the way the formal campaign was reported, in their different ways, by national and local broadcasters and newspapers. Having assessed how much attention the various news media devoted to the election, Norris et al's (1999) tri-partite distinction between the so-called 'stop watch', 'agenda' and 'directional' balances is applied to explore the relative prominence and positive/negative attention given to competing actors and issues. The analysis also compares how the major respective broadcasters and newspapers covered the campaign from their national (UK wide, Scottish and Welsh) and local (East Midlands) perspectives. There is further discussion of how the rival sectors (i.e. 'popular', 'mid-market' and 'quality' press, radio and television) reported the election in quite distinctive ways for their particular audiences. Various other themes, notably the 'presidential', 'soundbite', partisan and gendered nature of the coverage are considered. It is demonstrated how certain news media promoted the issues of 'Iraq', 'Immigration and Asylum' and 'Impropriety' onto the agenda at different stages during the campaign. By comparison other important policy areas were largely neglected. The conclusion discusses whether it is still possible to conceive of a singular 'media agenda' during a general election campaign.

Keywords: General Election, Media, Journalism, News Agendas

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Introduction

The 2005 general election was fought in the aftermath of a major public debate over the level of public faith and engagement in the political system. This earnest appraisal as to the state of Britain's democratic health had begun with Labour's comfortable victory in 2001 and had focused on the reasons for the dramatic decline in turnout then. Politicians, including Tony Blair and his then chief spokesperson Alastair Campbell, had voiced grievances over the way certain news organisations had reported the government as well as that campaign. The media and the BBC in particular responded by reviewing the quality and quantity of its political and electoral coverage with a view to understanding how Britain's apparently increasingly diverse population of voters might be better served in the future. The parties (especially Labour) in turn responded by consciously reorganising their publicity strategies in ways they believed that might help them to communicate more effectively with the electorate. Although soliciting favourable coverage from the various national news media remained a priority, some effort was made to cultivate what were perceived to be the less cynical political journalists working outside of the 'Westminster bubble' (Wring, 2005). Underlying this was a feeling that this more consciously regional approach might help the parties to reconnect the public with political debate, albeit of a more local kind.

Blair's thesis that Westminster based journalists had played a major role in fostering voter cynicism was most vocally articulated by one of the Prime Minister's staunchest media allies, John Lloyd, in a trenchant book length critique that was widely reviewed and discussed in the lead-up to the election (Lloyd, 2004). Lloyd's intervention was particularly concerned with the alleged failings of public service broadcasting and most especially the BBC over aspects of its investigations into the case the government had made for supporting the invasion of Iraq. The repercussions of this debate resounded throughout parliament and the wider country and raised, at the very least, major questions over the relationship between politicians and journalists. Iraq, as will be demonstrated, also appeared as an issue in the coverage of the 2005 campaign and was, implicitly and explicitly, linked to a media fuelled critique of the government's ongoing use of 'spin' in its attempts to manage both the news agenda and public opinion. The term spin had first entered the mainstream British political lexicon during the 1992 general election (Billig et al, 1993), both as a term of abuse

and as a ‘unscientific neologism coined by journalists to describe the complex processes of intensifying political public relations and political marketing’ (Esser *et al.*, 2001: 26). A focus on this concept together with other aspects of what is termed ‘electoral process’ has been a marked feature of campaign coverage since then and will be investigated here and compared with the attention devoted to the more substantive policy related matters.

Aside from assessing how certain policy issues did and did not impact on the news agenda, attention will be devoted to the coverage afforded the rival politicians and whether this was negative or positive, markedly more ‘presidential’ and noticeably gender inclusive amongst other things. Consideration is also paid to whether the different media (i.e. ‘quality’, ‘mid-market’ and ‘popular’ newspapers as well as broadcasters) reported on the campaign in their own distinctive ways. Furthermore given the parties’ acknowledgement that the sub-UK wide news media differ from their national counterparts, analysis is devoted to establishing whether and how the former covered the campaign differently from their London based rivals in terms of both the actors and issues they focused on. From this vantage point it is then possible to ask whether it is still fruitful to conceive of a singular ‘media agenda’ at an election time.

Level of coverage

Compared with the previous two elections there was less certainty about the outcome of the 2005 vote, but it took some time for national coverage of the election to gain cumulative momentum from the commencement of the campaign on 5 April. **Figures 1 to 4** outline the amount of election related coverage produced in all national media, on a week-by-week basis during the total sample period.²

² The most recent 2005 study began on Monday 4 April and ended on Friday 6 May (respectively, the day preceding the formal announcement of the commencement of the campaign and the day after polling). The broadcasting sampled included the following news media: BBC 1 10pm News, BBC2 Newsnight, ITV 10.30pm, Channel 4 7pm, Channel 5 7pm, Sky News 9pm, BBC Radio 4 Today 0730-0830 and BBC Radio 1 Newsbeat 1745-1800. The entire national newspaper market was also covered: ‘quality’ titles refers to *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Telegraph*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Financial Times*, *Independent*, *Independent on Sunday*; ‘mid market’ covers *Mail*, *Mail on Sunday*, *Express*, *Sunday Express*; and ‘populars’ means *Sun*, *News of the World*, *Mirror*, *Sunday Mirror*, *People*, *Star*, *Star on Sunday*. With the broadcast media, all items that made any reference to the 2005 election campaign were included in the analysis. With the print media, all election related items that appeared in the following sections of the newspapers were coded

- The front page

Figure 1: Amount of national daily press coverage (4 April - 6 May 2005)

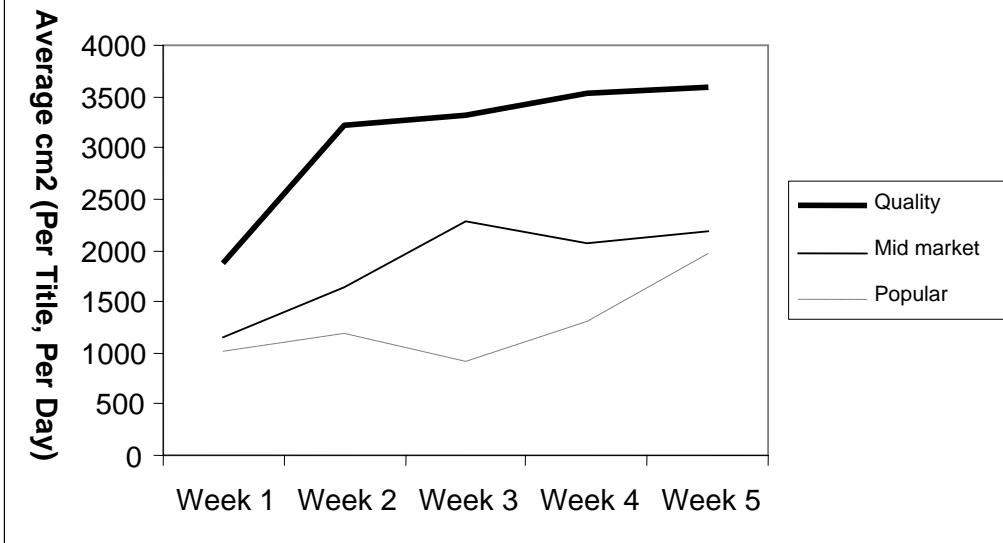
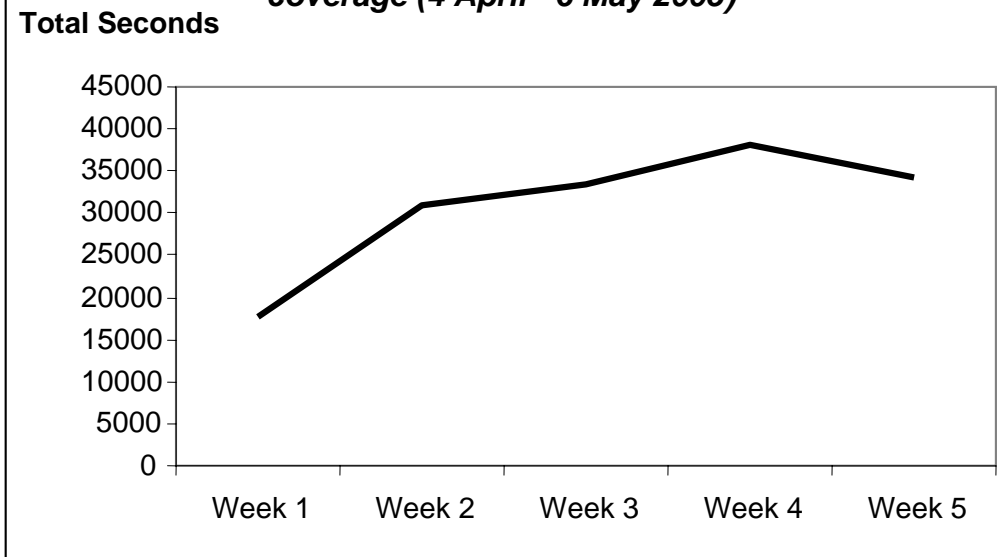


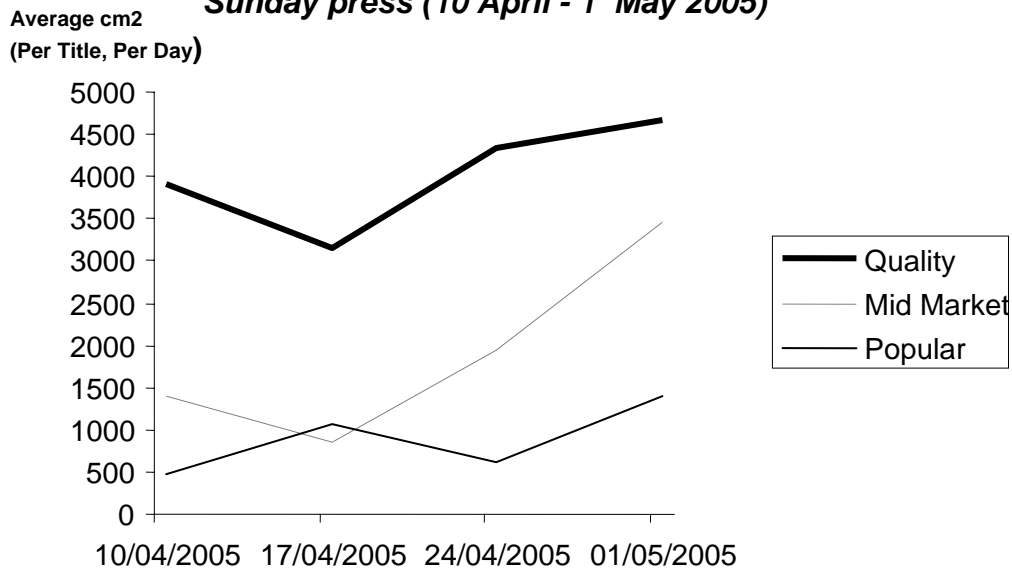
Figure 2: Amount of national TV news coverage (4 April - 6 May 2005)



- The first two pages of the domestic news section
- The first two pages of any specialist section assigned to the coverage of the campaign
- The page containing and facing papers' leader editorials.

The rationale here was to concentrate our analysis on the prioritized news arenas in the press.

Figure 3: News coverage in national Sunday press (10 April - 1 May 2005)



From the above figures it is evident that levels of coverage in the first week of the campaign were low when compared with subsequent weeks. This can be explained, at least in part, by the two other significant news events that coincided with the announcement of polling day– the death and burial of the Pope and the Royal wedding between Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles. Consequently in the national ‘quality’ daily press³, levels increased significantly in the second week and steadily increased thereafter. The ‘mid market’⁴ equivalents’ coverage peaked in week 3 and then slightly reduced during the last fortnight of the election. For the popular dailies⁵, attention to the election only significantly increased in the last week of the campaign (nb. aggregate levels of coverage in this sector were slightly lower in week 3 than in week 1; see **Figure 1**). National broadcast media⁶ levels of coverage increased steadily through the first four weeks of the campaign, but then reduced slightly during the last week (**Figure 2**).

The amount of coverage in the national weekly press was far more volatile and variable, at least during the early stages of the campaign (**Figure 3**). In both the

³ *Guardian, Financial Times, The Times, Independent and Daily Telegraph.*

⁴ *Daily Mail and Daily Express*

⁵ *Mirror, Daily Star and Sun*

⁶ National broadcast includes BBC1 10 pm News, ITN 10.30 News, C4 7pm News, BBC2 Newsnight, C5 News, Sky 9pm News, BBC Radio 4 ‘Today’ (07.30-08.30), BBC Radio 1 ‘Newsbeat’ (17.45-18.00)

national ‘quality’⁷ and ‘mid market’ press⁸, the amount of coverage reduced between 10th and 17th April, whereas for the ‘popular’ titles, it increased during this period and then fell back on 24th April. Levels then rose across all three sectors for the remaining period prior to polling day on 5th May. **Table 3** provides further insights into how the ‘popular’ newspapers engaged with the campaign. Significantly only 1 in 5 of the available front pages in the popular and mid market press contained any election related news.

Table 3: Front page leads in mid market and popular newspapers

Title	Frequency (in 33 days)	Percentage
<i>The Sun</i>	7	21
<i>The Daily Mirror</i>	5	15
<i>The Star</i>	3	9
<i>The Daily Mail</i>	11	33
<i>The Daily Express</i>	8	24

Aside from the death of the Pope and Prince Charles’ wedding, other non-electoral news items which received considerable attention during the campaign included the allegations made by a former employee about the relationship problems of celebrity couple David and Victoria Beckham. The Beckham story broke during the penultimate week of electioneering, and coincided with the final publication of Lord Goldsmith’s confidential advice to the UK government about the legality of engaging in military action against Iraq. Whilst the latter disclosures attracted considerable comment in some media sectors and brought this issue to the forefront of the election agenda (see below), they drew scant attention from the popular press. **Table 4** compares the coverage afforded the Goldsmith story with the more considerable space given over to the Beckhams’ marriage in popular and mid market newspapers, with the exception of the anti-government *Mail*.

Table 4: Popular and mid market newspaper coverage of the Beckhams’ marriage versus the leaking of Lord Goldsmith’s Iraq advice

⁷ *Observer, Sunday Telegraph, Independent on Sunday, Sunday Times*

⁸ *Mail on Sunday, Sunday Express*

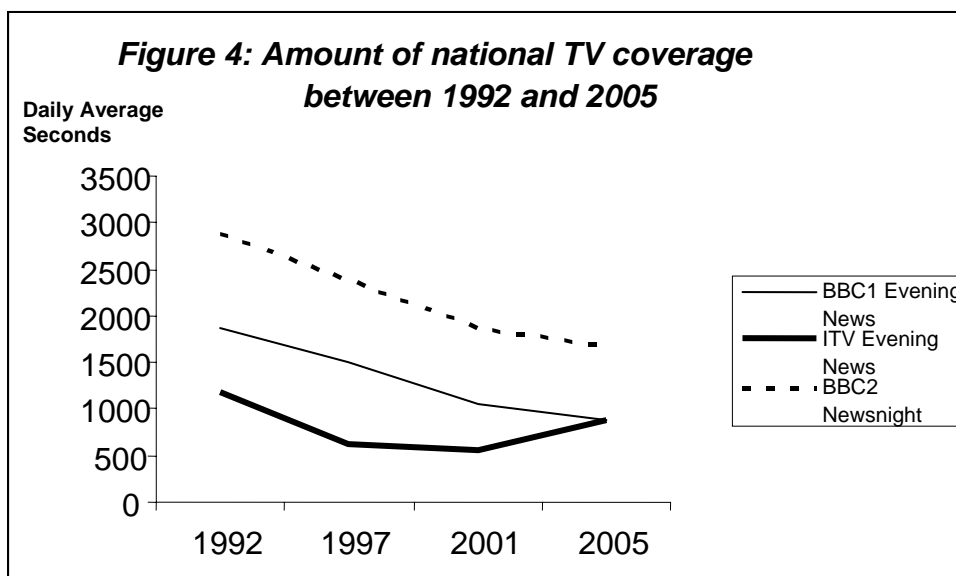
	Beckham, 25 April	Goldsmith, 28 April
<i>Mirror</i>	2146 cm ²	204 cm ²
<i>Star</i>	2269 cm ²	864 cm ²
<i>Sun</i>	2141 cm ²	72 cm ²
<i>Mail</i>	2069 cm ²	3577 cm ²
<i>Express</i>	756 cm ²	1577 cm ²

The longitudinal perspective

The Loughborough University Communication Research Centre has analysed national news reporting of each UK general election since 1992. Although separate studies, these projects enable some comparisons to be made as to how journalistic practices may (or may not) have changed. The data collected suggests that at least certain sections of the national UK media had comparatively little initial or sustained interest in the 2005 campaign. This raises the question as to whether this detachment was unique to this election or indicative of a longer term process of political disengagement.

Figure 4 compares the amount of election related coverage in three flagship television news programmes over the last four UK general elections⁹. It would appear there was a sharp decline in the amount of election related coverage on both the BBC1 main evening news and BBC2 Newsnight between the 1997 and 2001 election campaigns. The trajectory of this decline is reduced with the 2005 campaign, but remains on a downward trend. By contrast, the amount of coverage on the main ITV evening news bulletin has revived from a low point in 2001. Moreover, the clear gap that was evident between BBC1 and ITV news over the course of the previous three campaigns has now disappeared. A major reason for this closure was the latter's decision to broadcast three comparatively lengthy interviews with the main party leaders as part of their bulletins.

⁹ It is not possible to conduct an equivalent comparison in levels of national press coverage from 1992-2005, due to differences in the sampling and measurement procedures adopted in the four studies.



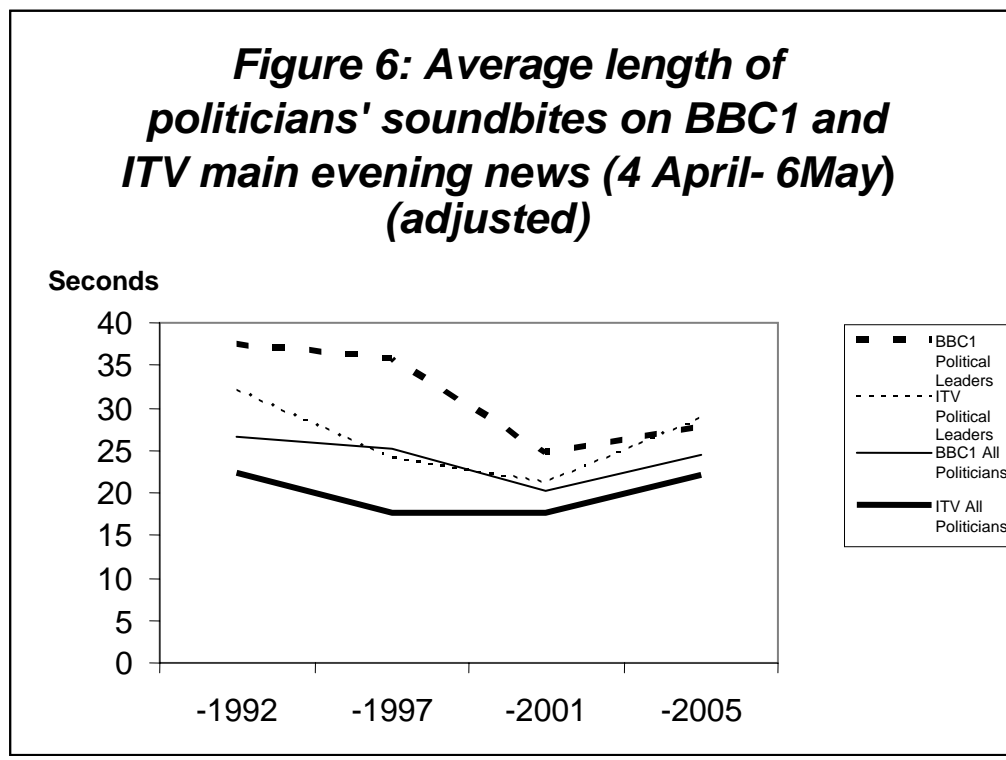
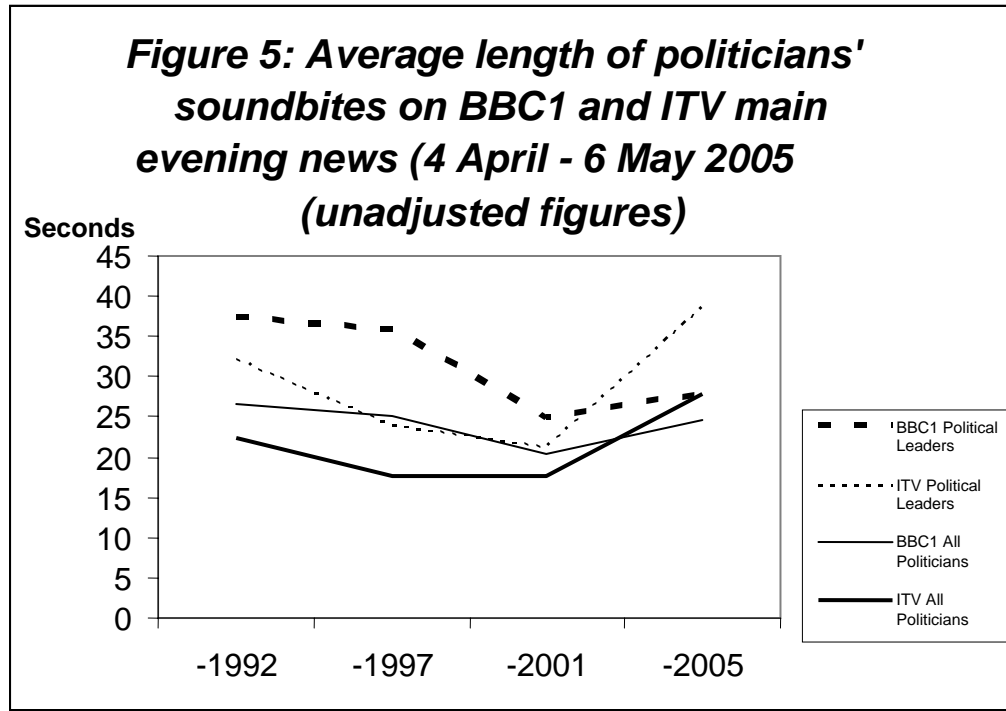
nb: daily averages were calculated by dividing the sum of all coverage by the number of days sampled.

A 'soundbite' political culture?

Analysts, particularly in the US and UK, have frequently remarked upon the emergence of a 'soundbite' political culture. It was been commonly noted from the 1980s onwards how politicians, adapting to the logic of media formats, sought to organise their public communication around brief, pithy and memorable phrases. One US study found that the average amount of time TV news allowed political candidates to speak uninterrupted declined from 43 seconds in 1968 to just 9 in 1988 (Hallin, 1992). **Figures 5 and 6** compare the average length of quotation of actors in the two flagship national news programmes since 1992 (i.e. BBC1 and ITV main evening bulletins). The results indicate there was an election-on-election compression in the average speaking time of a politician between 1992 and 2001 but that this was reversed to a certain extent in 2005.¹⁰ This change was most dramatic for the ITV evening news where, for the first time, the main leaders as well as all other political actors enjoyed a higher average speaking time than they did on BBC1 news (see **Figure 5**). Here it should be noted that some if not most of this change was caused by ITV's inclusion of its three lengthy interviews with the main leaders in their bulletins. **Figure 6**, however, provides the averages with these three outlying values excluded;

¹⁰ The averages presented here cannot be simply compared to those derived from US studies because these figures represent the total amount of speaking time a specific individual had in a news item and are, in many cases, based on the aggregation of soundbite time rather than individual speech acts.

with this calculation a gap reappears between BBC1 and ITV in quotation time for political sources. Overall all though these adjusted data indicate that average quotation times were less compressed in 2005 than they in 2001.



The remaining sections of the paper each examine a particular aspect of the coverage in more detail. The initial three sections adopt the tri-partite distinction made by Norris *et al.* (1999: 20) between: *Stop Watch Balance* – the relative prominence given to competing political actors in news reporting; the *Agenda Balance* – the relative prominence given to the various issues that are associated with a particular topic or event; and the *Directional Balance* – the amount of positive and negative coverage given to various political actors and issues. The fourth and final section offers a regional perspective by examining the Scottish, Welsh and East Midlands media coverage and how this compared with their UK wide counterparts.

Stop watch balance.

Stop watch balance concerns the degree of parity in the airtime or space devoted to political competitors by the news media. Two measures were used to assess this coverage: (a) the frequency with which party representatives appeared as ‘active participants’¹¹ in election related items; and (b) the amount of time or space allocated to them in those appearances where they were directly quoted¹². The former measure assesses *news presence* (i.e. which sources are the most frequent subjects and participants in routine news coverage), and the latter assesses *news access* (as a general principle, the extent and frequency with which a source is quoted is an indication of their news status and credibility). **Table 5** compares these two measures of ‘stop watch’ balance in National UK coverage (by media sector)

Table 5: Stop watch balance in national coverage: frequency of appearance and amount of direct quotation of party actors according to media sector (4 April to 6 May 2005)¹³

	Broadcast		‘Quality’ press		Mid market		Populars	
	Appea r	Qu ote	Appea r	Quot e	App ear	Quot e	Appea r	Quote
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%

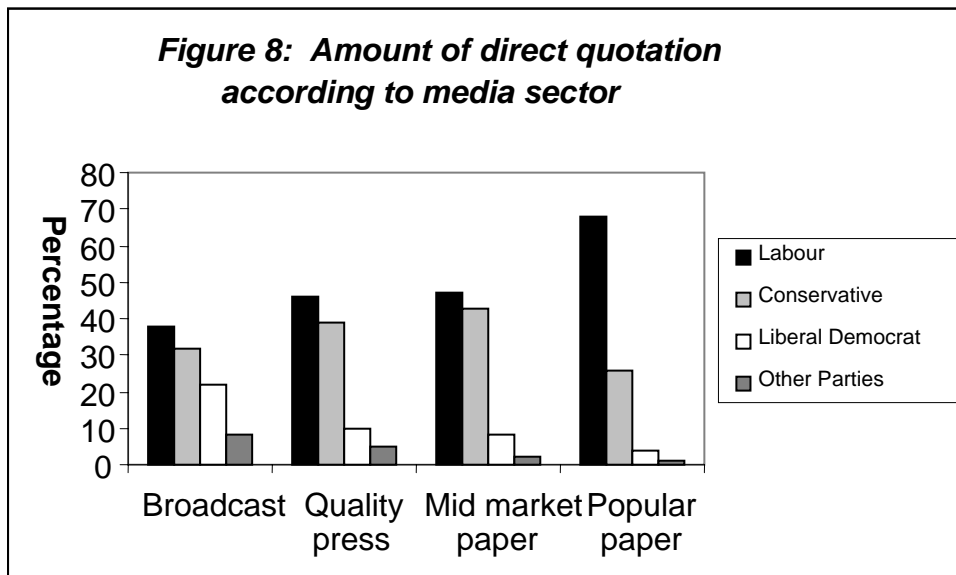
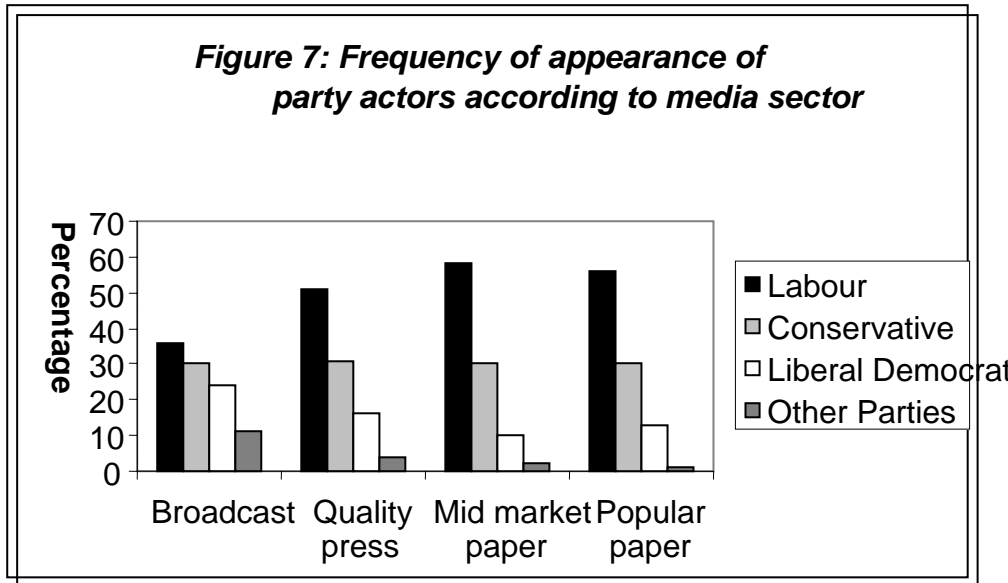
¹¹ An ‘actor’ was defined as an individual or institution whose actions, opinions or existence were directly mentioned in a news item. But this was not the sole test. The individual/ institution mentioned had to have some independent status within the piece, i.e. they had an active presence and their views and actions were not simply mentioned or discussed by another actor.

¹² Quotation time for broadcast coverage was measured in seconds and for press coverage in the number of directly quoted words.

¹³ Up to 5 political actors could be coded per item.

Blair	12	14	15	7	20	18	21	39
Brown	3	2	7	8	5	4	7	5
Other Labour	21	22	29	31	33	25	28	24
Howard	13	13	10	19	13	28	13	19
Other Conservative	17	19	21	20	17	15	17	7
Kennedy	9	9	6	6	4	3	5	2
Other Lib Dem	15	13	10	4	6	5	8	2
Other Party	11	8	4	5	2	2	1	1
(Base N)	1441	46 39 3 (se cs)	2505	5633 7 (wor ds)	506	1441 9 (wor ds)	765	20967 (words)

The strength of association between the measures of *news presence* and *news access* varied across media sectors. The strongest correlation was found for broadcast content (0.964), followed by the ‘quality’ press (0.847), mid market papers (0.805) and then the popular titles (0.786). There were two noticeable discrepancies between these measures: in the mid markets Tony Blair appeared more frequently than Michael Howard (20% to 13%, respectively) although Michael Howard was quoted more extensively than the Prime Minister (28% to 18%). Among the populars whilst Blair accounted for 21% of the political appearances coded, he secured nearly 40% of the direct quotation space for all election related sources. Allied to this Labour party sources received higher levels of coverage than their party opponents across all national media sectors in terms of: (a) the frequency with which they appeared (**Figure 7**); and (b) the extent of their quotation (**Figure 8**). The differences were smallest in broadcast coverage, and greatest for the mid market and popular print media. Furthermore there was a noticeable two party ‘squeeze’ in all of the national press coverage and this obviously marginalized the Liberal Democrats not to mention the other minor parties.



There was a marked ‘presidentialisation’ in all of the national coverage – i.e. a significant proportion of airtime and space focused on the main party leaders to the exclusion of everybody else. This trend was most evident in the election reporting of the popular newspapers where Blair, Howard and Kennedy accounted for 39% of all appearances by politicians and 60% of the space given over to direct quotation. The next most leader-orientated coverage could be found in the ‘mid market’ titles where the three main actors comprised 37% of appearances and 49% of quotations. Next was broadcast reporting where the respective figures were 34% and 36% leaving the quality press as the least ‘presidential’ of all with 31% given over to the leaders’

appearances and 32% to quotations from them. **Table 6** (derived from recalculating the results in **Table 5**) compares the three main leaders' prominence compared with the aggregate coverage devoted to their respective parties. These results indicate that coverage of the main opposition parties tended to be slightly more leader-focused than coverage of the Labour incumbent.

Table 6: Leaders' prominence as part of their parties' total coverage

	Broadcast	'Quality' press	Mid market	Populars
	Appearances	Appearances	Appearances	Appearances
Tony Blair	33%	25%	34%	38%
Michael Howard	43%	32%	43%	43%
Charles Kennedy	35%	38%	40%	38%

Turning to compare the 'stop watch' balance results for 2005 with those of the 1992, 1997 and 2001 general elections it should be borne in mind that, as was previously noted, Labour actors appeared and were quoted on more occasions than their opponents across all media sectors during the 2005 campaign. Newspapers are not of course required to provide rival parties with equivalent reporting space but such expectations are required of television and radio. Changes to the Representation of the People's Act 2000 have, however, shifted the emphasis towards self-regulation by broadcasters with an expectation that 'over a reasonable period of time, a proper balance of different viewpoints is achieved' (Home Office guidelines quoted in Deacon *et al.*, 2001: p.669). This begs the question as to whether these changes provide the incumbent party with an advantage in terms of media presence¹⁴. **Table 7** compares party stopwatch balance data for the 1992, 2001 and 2005 general election (both in relation to the parties' frequency of appearance and total quotation time).¹⁵

Table 7: Parties' total number of appearances and quotation time in media coverage of recent General Elections

¹⁴ Of course it is not always the case that more media presence offers political advantage. There is also a need to consider the nature of coverage. See Miller, 1991 for a fuller discussion of incumbency advantage in coverage terms.

¹⁵ Unfortunately data for the 1997 are not available

Quotations

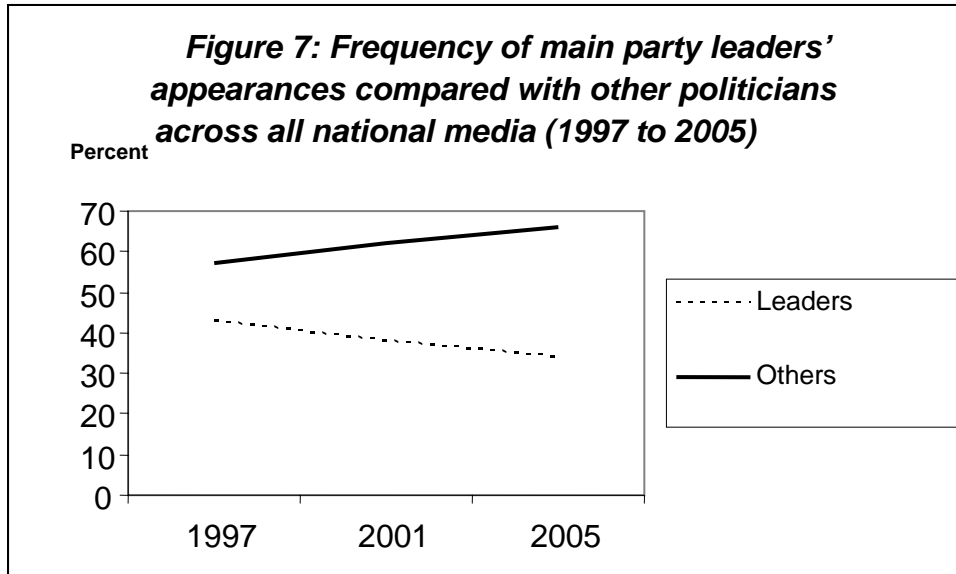
	1992	2001	2005
Labour	36	43.61702	41.30435
Conservative	41	38.29787	34.78261
Lib Dem	23	18.08511	23.91304

Appearances

	1992	2001	2005
Labour	33.3975	41.30435	40
Conservative	41	38.04348	33.33333
Lib Dem	25.98653	20.65217	26.66667

The figures in **Table 7** suggest that the apparent advantage in broadcast quotation time for Labour in 2005 was less than their lead in 2001 (41% compared to 44%). Their appearances were broadly similar for the two campaigns. In 1992 the Conservative party, who were then in power, had higher levels of quotation time and appearances than their political opponents in broadcast coverage terms. Moreover, these differences were almost exactly equivalent to those identified for Labour in 2005. Although levels of coverage in 2005 for the Conservatives were down on those identified in 2001, it was the Liberal Democrats rather than Labour who have benefited from this reduction. However, their levels of national media exposure in 2005 were not unprecedented, being broadly equivalent to those achieved in the 1992 campaign.

The ‘presidentialisation’ of election reporting has been a recurrent feature of recent campaign analysis. **Figure 7** compares the extent to which the main party leaders dominated coverage for the last four General Elections. Interestingly, the results suggest that although the leaders still command a very considerable presence, electoral coverage has become *less* leader-orientated on an election-by-election basis since 1992.



nb: to ensure comparability across the different sample sets, these figures only relate to the three most prominently quoted party sources in election related news coverage for the 1997, 2001 and 2005 General Election Campaigns (nb. for 1997 only the three most prominent actors were coded)

Non-party actors

Of course politicians are not the only actors during elections and the onset of a campaign attracts contributions from various interest groups, citizens and public commentators seeking to influence and adjudicate upon the political debate. **Table 8** lists the prominence of such individuals and institutions across each media sector.

Table 8: Media presence of non-formal party actors (4 April – 6 May 2005)

	All national media	Broadcast	Quality press	Mid market	Popular
Actor	%	%	%	%	%
Politicians' families	0.4	0.1	0.4	0.7	0.5
Foreign politicians	1	0.4	0.8	2.2	2.2
Quangos ¹⁶	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.2
Media	3.2	6.9	1.7	1.9	1
Pollsters	1.6	1.5	1.8	1.2	1.6

¹⁶ 'Quangos' are executive and advisory non ministerial Government departments and Next Step Agencies

Voluntary sector	1	1.2	0.8	1.3	0.7
Academics	1.6	2.2	1.4	1.9	0.8
Public sector	3.1	2.2	3.6	5.1	1.6
Corporate	1.3	0.7	1.8	1.3	0.7
Trade unionists	0.1	0	0.2	0.1	0.1
Faith communities	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.4
Private citizens	7.3	10.5	5.5	4.6	8.4
Other	0.2	0.4	0	0.1	0

nb: % refer to all party and non-party actors identified in coverage

Approximately 1 in 5 of all the actors (including the party representatives) who appeared in 2005 election related news coverage were not directly linked to any of the parties. Members of the public ('private citizens') were the most prominent category of non-party actors across all news sectors. Their relative prominence was greatest in broadcast coverage (10.5% of all coded actors) and in the popular press (8.4%). Journalists and other media-related actors were far more prominent in broadcast coverage than any of the print media categories (6.9% compared with a range of 1 to 1.7 % for the latter). Academic, corporate, voluntary and quasi-governmental sector representatives received little coverage, but the most peripheral actors were trade unionists and representatives from the faith communities. Neither foreign politicians nor the families of UK politicians commanded any significant levels attention from our media sample¹⁷.

The gender agenda

Concerns have long been expressed about the gender imbalances in election reporting and the role these may play in entrenching, or even increasing, broader inequalities in participation and representation. In considering this matter, Lovenduski highlights the need to differentiate between 'women's issues' and 'women's perspectives':

'Women's *issues* are those that mainly affect women, either for biological reasons (such as breast cancer screening and reproductive rights) or for social

¹⁷ The low percentage recorded for 'politician's family' may seem surprising, given the news of the birth of Charles Kennedy's baby son Donald during the early stages of the campaign and the regular appearances of Sandra Howard alongside her husband at Conservative campaign events. However, as explained earlier, to be coded as actors, individuals needed to have an active presence in a news item. Simply being pictured without being referred to, or being mentioned in an incidental way by a journalist, would not normally provide a sufficient basis for being coded as an actor.

reasons (sex equality or child-care policy). Women's *perspectives* are women's views on all political matters' (Lovenduski, 2001: 745)

In the 2005 campaign, women's Issues barely registered on the media agenda, with only 19 items (0.5 percent of all news coverage) making any substantial reference to them. Two measures were used to appraise the extent to which women's perspectives were included in mainstream coverage: (a) the sex of the reporters of election related items and (b) the sex of actors covered. **Table 9** demonstrates that men were far more likely to write or present election related coverage than women. Gender imbalances were most evident in the quality and mid market press, and least evident in broadcast coverage.

Table 9: Election journalism: a gendered perspective

	All media	Broadcast	Quality press	Mid market	Populars
Female	23	29	19	19	24
Male	77	71	82	81	76

nb: these data exclude instances of joint female/ male authorship and cases where the gender of the author was unclear.

Table 10 compares the proportion of male to female actors found in the coverage for the 2001 and 2005 elections.

Table 10: Coverage by actors' gender

		Female	Male
		Row %	Row %
All media	2001	14	86
	2005	14	86
Broadcast	2001	16	84
	2005	17	83
Quality press	2001	12	88
	2005	14	86
Mid market	2001	14	86
	2005	13	87
Populars	2001	16	84
	2005	14	86

nb: these data exclude instances of joint female/ male authorship and cases where the sex of the author was unclear.

Consequently across all national media, male actors outnumbered females by a ratio of more than 6:1 in coverage of the 2005 election. Furthermore there was no significant variation between sectors as to the amount of coverage given the same women. The gender differences identified in this campaign were remarkably consistent with those for the 2001 election. **Table 11** breaks down the results of **Table 10** by 'actor type'.

Table 11: Gender by type of actor across all media

	Females (Row %)	Males (Row %)
Party political	9	91
Foreign politician	9	91
Politicians' family	92	8
Quangos	17	83
Media	25	75
Pollster	13	87
Voluntary sector	31	69
Academics	9	91
Public sector	12	88
Corporate	5	95
Trade unionist	0	100
Faith Communities	0	100
Private citizens	45	55
Military	22	78

nb: these data exclude instances of joint female/ male authorship and cases where the gender of the author was unclear.

The gender gap for coverage of politicians (domestic or foreign) was even more accentuated (91 to 9%). In both cases, male politicians appeared ten times more frequently than their female colleagues. This differential considerably exceeds broader inequalities in the British parliamentary system¹⁸. Across most of the other categories, male presence considerably exceeded that of females (see, in particular, the results for faith communities, corporates, trade unionists and academics). The only actor category where females and males achieved a near parity of presence was that of ‘private citizens’, i.e. lay persons/voters, although even here males appeared 10% more frequently than females. The only category where female presence exceeded that of males was that of ‘politicians’ family’ which is not surprising given

¹⁸ 18% of MPs in the UK are female (see http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Campaign_Politics.htm); note also that just under 30% (i.e. six members) of the last Cabinet of the 2005 parliament were women.

the main leaders' spouses are all women (though it should also be noted most of their children are not).

The agenda balance

This section examines the interpretative aspects of the 2005 coverage– i.e. what were the most prominent news topics during the campaign? ¹⁹ **Table 12** presents the main and secondary themes across and within in each sector.

Table 12: Top 10 election themes in UK national news media

	All media	%	Broadcast	%	Quality press	%	Mid market	%	Populars	%
1	Electoral process	44	Electoral process	42	Electoral process	49	Electoral process	28	Electoral process	46
2	Political impropriety	8	Iraq	10	Iraq	8	Political impropriety	17	Political impropriety	6
3	Iraq	8	Asylum/immigration	8	Political impropriety	7	Iraq	10	NHS	6
4	Asylum/immigration	7	Political impropriety	8	Asylum/immigration	6	Asylum/immigration	9	Crime	6
5	Taxation	5	Crime	4	Taxation	5	Taxation	7	Asylum/immigration	6
6	NHS	4	NHS	4	Economy	4	NHS	7	Education	5
7	Crime	4	Taxation	4	Education	3	Crime	5	Economy	5
8	Economy	4	Education	3	NHS	3	Education	4	Iraq	4

¹⁹ If necessary, three items could be coded for each election related news item: one main theme and up to two subsidiary themes. Where more themes were evident in a story, the three most prominent were coded. These judgements were made according to the following criteria: a. amount of space discussion of the theme occupies in the article (whether measured in seconds or column cms); b. prominence given a theme in an article; c. use of headlines or studio introduction to highlight the most salient topics of the piece. We were not interested in coding subtle, imputed or passing references made by journalists, or the sources they quote, to potential themes. To be coded, a theme had to occupy at least TWO FULL SENTENCES in a printed article, or 10 SECONDS of broadcast time.

9	Education	3	Economy	2	Crime	2	Social Security	4	Social Security	4
10	Social Security	2	Social Security	2	Europe	2	Economy	3	Taxation	4

Coverage of the electoral process itself (i.e. the actions, strategies and prospects of the participants) was the most prominent topic in election coverage by a considerable margin. **Table 13** breaks this category down further and shows that the main issues in this grouping concerned (a) open discussion of the parties' campaigning strategies (19 % of all themes) and (b) opinion poll and focus group evidence (8%). 'Political Improprieties', 'Iraq' and 'Asylum and Immigration' were the next most prominent themes. There then follows a sharp tail-off in the prominence given to other items further down the list. When added together, the supposedly 'bread and butter' categories of 'Taxation', 'Education', 'Crime', 'the Economy', 'NHS' and 'Social Security' amount to just 19% of the total themes coded.

Table 13: Sub-categories within the 'electoral process' theme

	Percent
Discussion of campaigning strategies	19%
Opinion polls, focus groups, 'horse race'	8%
Passing references to the chosen daily topic agendas of the parties	3%
Political tensions and infighting within parties and defections	2%
Party spin/news management	2%
All other themes in this category	10%

nb: % of all the themes coded in category (i.e. they add up to 44% in total).

There were many themes absent from the list that were to prove considerably newsworthy in the immediate aftermath of the campaign. These included:

- debates about the financial structure of the EU and the future of its Constitution ('Europe' only accounted for 1.3% of coded themes of all items).

- prospects for the peace process in Northern Ireland in the wake of the rise of the Democratic Unionist Party and the IRA's declared cessation of armed activity ('Northern Ireland' achieved 0.6% of all items).
- proposals for taxing car usage as a means of alleviating chronic road congestion ('Transport' had scored just 0.3%).
- attempts by the UK government to secure international compliance to the Kyoto agreement as a means of tackling global warming ('Environment' had gotten 1.4% of the total).
- plans for reducing international debt among developing nations (during the campaign, 'Foreign Policy [aside from Iraq and excluding 'Europe']' equalled only 0.4%).
- concerns about the threat posed by terrorism and how to deal with it ('Terrorism policy' accounted for 0.2% of all coded themes)

There was some variation in the prominence of themes across different sectors. Most noticeably, the categories 'political improprieties' and 'asylum and immigration' were far more evident in the mid market newspapers' coverage than elsewhere. Iraq was conspicuously less prominent in 'popular' press coverage: 4.5% of the themes coded for the *Sun* concerned Iraq, compared with 4.7% for the *Mirror* and 1.2% for the *Star*. With the *Star* the absence of coverage is reflective of a general disengagement with covering the political substance of the campaign. The *Sun*'s relative inattention to the issue may at least be partially explained by its enduring support for the Government's actions in invading Iraq, a stance reiterated in several of its election editorials. The *Mirror*'s relative neglect of the issue is more intriguing, given its trenchant criticisms of the government's actions on Iraq during 2003-4 but can be explained by the departure of the editor concerned and a desire not to embarrass Labour, its favoured party. **Table 14** breaks down the category of 'political improprieties' into sub-themes. Across all sectors, the most common set of issues in this category related to the personal integrity and trustworthiness of candidates, and here the dominant focus of this debate was the Prime Minister, Tony Blair. For its part the mid market press paid more attention to concerns about the integrity of the new postal voting arrangements than other media. These titles also gave higher levels of coverage to

debates about Blair’s personal integrity (more than 1 in 10 of all the themes coded in mid market coverage were concerned with this matter).

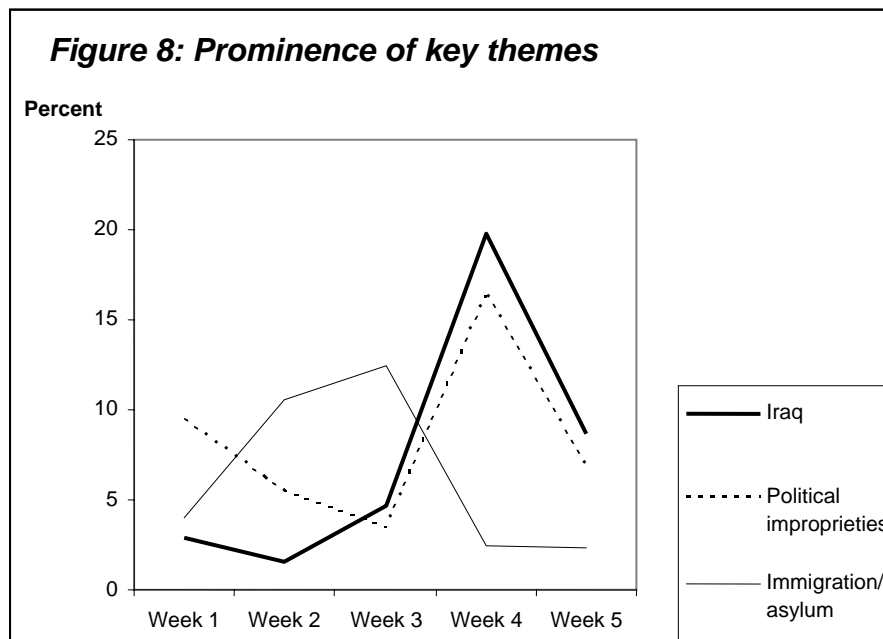
Table 14: Sub-themes (main and secondary) within ‘political impropriety’ category

	Bcast	Quality	Mid market	Popular
‘Concerns about Postal voting by demand’	2.2	2.6	4.7	1.5
‘Other Electoral Fraud concerns’		0.1		
‘Integrity of leaders – questions of trust - Labour’	5.3	3.6	10.4	2.0
‘Integrity of leaders – questions of trust - Cons’	0.2	0.1		0.7
‘Integrity of leaders – questions of trust - LibDem’	0.1			
‘Integrity of leaders – questions of trust - Other’		0.1		
‘Integrity of leaders – questions of trust – Various’	0.1			0.4
‘Integrity of other politicians – questions of trust - Labour’			0.5	0.2
‘Integrity of other politicians – questions of trust - Cons’		0.1		0.4
‘Integrity of other politicians – questions of trust - LibDem’				
‘Integrity of other politicians – questions of trust - Other’				
‘Integrity of other politicians – questions of trust – Various’	0.2	0.3		
‘Sexual exploits of politicians’		0.1	0.2	0.7
‘Other issues concerning standards corruption scandals sleaze’		0.1	0.2	0.2

nb: % of all the themes coded, rounded to 1 decimal point

The prominence of these particular themes varied considerably during the campaign period. **Figure 8** shows the week-by-week prominence of the top three substantive themes found in the election coverage analysed (respectively, ‘Political improprieties’, ‘iraq’ and ‘immigration & asylum’). The salience of ‘Iraq’ and

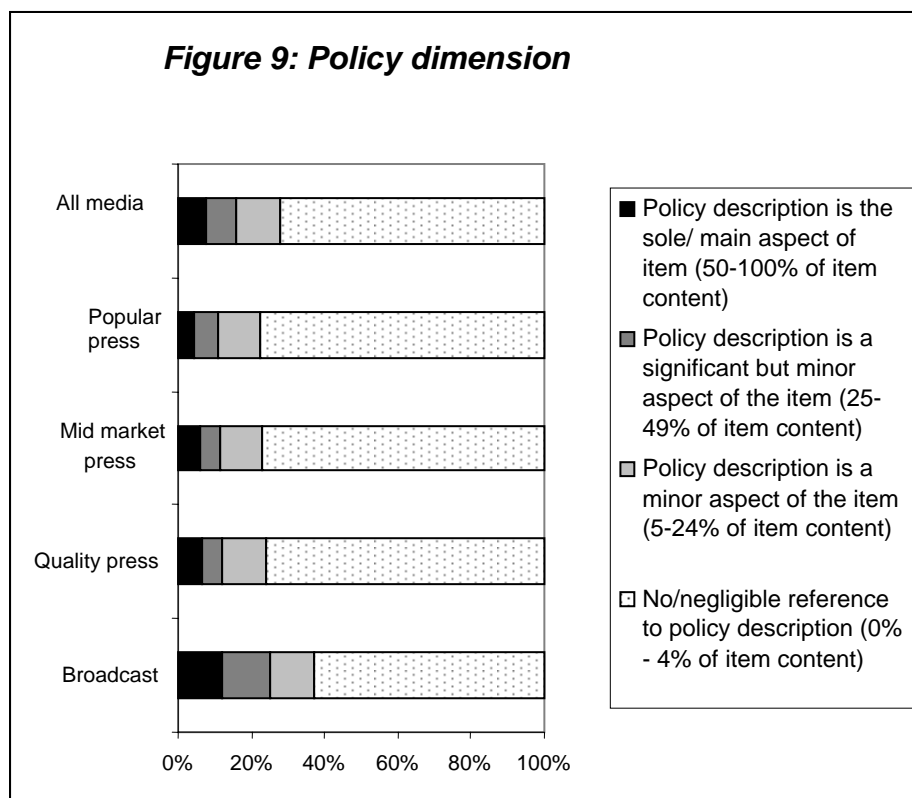
‘Immigration & asylum’ increased greatly towards the latter stages of the campaign. After the third week ‘Asylum & immigration’ issues fell away from prominence.



Policy versus process

It is often claimed that election reporting is more concerned with reporting the process rather than substance of a campaign²⁰. The marked dominance of coverage of the conduct of the election itself during the 2005 campaign seems to lend weight to this interpretation, and is consistent with trends identified in previous UK general elections (see Golding *et al.*, 1992; Deacon *et al.*, 1998 and Deacon *et al.*, 2001). To interrogate more closely the relative balance of ‘policy’ and ‘process’ coverage during the 2005 campaign an ordinal scale was used to appraise: (a) which items contained information about substantive policy issues and choices; and (b) the extent of this descriptive material relative to the overall length of the item. The results are presented in **Figure 9**.

²⁰ For example, in the 2001 campaign, Tony Blair lamented the national media’s failure to deal with ‘real issues’ and Alistair Campbell criticised journalists’ obsession with ‘policy rather than process’ (Deacon *et al.*, 2001: 670)



The results show that the majority of items across all sectors contained either no or negligible descriptive policy-related information (i.e. this content constituted less than 4% of the entire length of the item). The broadcast media produced a higher proportion of items containing at least some descriptive policy information than all sections of the print media. There were no major differences between national press sectors in the extent of their policy reporting (37% of broadcast items contained some policy description, compared with 24% of the ‘quality’ press, 23% of the ‘mid market’, and 22 percent of the ‘populars’).

Directional balance

‘Directional balance’ is the most contentious and problematic aspect of media coverage to assess, as it relates to the evaluations made by news producers about political actors and issues. This is commonly referred to as ‘bias’, but this is a term to be preferably avoided both because of the implicit accusations of cynicism and un-professionalism that it evokes and also given the assumption that there is some completely value neutral position from which the media accounts, wittingly or

unwittingly, depart. The study employed two measures to assess directional balance across the media sample. The first was used in relation to the thematic categories described above. Each time a theme was identified an ‘adjectival’ code was attached to it that indicated whether the theme:

- Was mainly or solely ‘good news’ for a particular political party
- Was mainly or solely ‘bad news’ for a particular political party
- Had both negative and positive implications for a particular political party (‘mixed news’)
- Had no clear evaluative implications for a particular political party, whether positive or negative (‘descriptive news’)
- Was either ‘good news’, ‘bad news’, ‘mixed news’ or ‘descriptive news’ for more than one particular party, or for politicians in general

The second measure for directional balance involved applying a further adjectival code to each political actor identified in election coverage. These codes indicated whether the reported actor was:

- Mainly or solely describing or presenting their policies and opinions
- Mainly or solely defending themselves from attack from their political opponents
- Mainly or solely attacking the views, actions or policies of others

An additional code was also included for those occasions where it was not possible to attribute any of the above to the actions or views of a reported actor (‘no stance’).²¹ This close attention to the evaluative aspects of the components of a news story provides a much more detailed, reliable and valid measure of directional balance, not least because it corresponds more closely to the discursive features of news reports, in which views and issues are often deliberately juxtaposed and it is not always possible to discern any single, unitary narrative strand. **Table 15** presents the results from the adjectival codes linked to the themes identified in news coverage.

²¹ Adept politicians will often seek to do several or all of these things in an individual media appearance. Therefore, it was often necessary to make an on-balance judgement between these choices. To do so, the coding team concentrated on identifying *the initial reason for an actor’s inclusion* in an item.

Table 15: Directional balance of coverage

		All media	Broad-cast	Quality press	Mid market	Populars
		% of all Themes	% of all Themes	% of all Themes	% of all Themes	% of all Themes
Labour	<i>Good news</i>	6.3	2.4	5.5	1.0	20.9
	<i>Bad news</i>	18.8	9.9	17.6	61.2	9.8
	<i>Mixed</i>	16.9	18.8	18.4	8.8	14.3
	<i>Descriptive</i>	3.5	1.8	3.7	2.3	7.0
Conservative	<i>Good news</i>	3.0	1.5	3.0	7.0	3.1
	<i>Bad news</i>	6.7	3.4	7.2	1.3	15.9
	<i>Mixed</i>	6	9.4	5.8	2.8	2.0
	<i>Descriptive</i>	0.8	0.4	1.2	0.5	0.9
Lib Dem	<i>Good news</i>	0.8	0.7	1.0	0.8	0.2
	<i>Bad news</i>	1.0	0.2	1.0	0.3	3.7
	<i>Mixed</i>	2.2	4.1	1.8	0.3	0.9
	<i>Descriptive</i>	1.1	1.8	0.7	0.5	1.1
Other Party	<i>Good news</i>	0.1	0.2	0.1	0	0
	<i>Bad news</i>	0.8	0.6	1.0	0.3	0.7
	<i>Mixed</i>	1.1	2.2	0.9	0.3	0.2
	<i>Descriptive</i>	0.9	2.1	0.5	0	0.2
All/ Several Parties	<i>Good news</i>	0.4	0.3	0.5	0.8	0.2
	<i>Bad news</i>	1.7	1.5	2	0.8	1.7
	<i>Mixed</i>	22.9	31.8	23.3	10.0	12
	<i>Descriptive</i>	5.1	7.0	4.8	1.0	5.0

nb: all figures are rounded to 1 decimal point. Percentage totals may not add up to 100.

A remarkably high proportion of the themes reported in the mid market national press had negative implications for Labour (61%) and only a very small minority had any positive implications (1%). However, this emphasis on ‘bad news for Labour’ did not translate into much coverage of ‘good news for the Conservatives’ (7%). In the

popular press, there were higher levels of ‘good news for Labour’ (20.9%) and the extent of ‘bad news’ for the Conservatives exceeded that for Labour (15.9% to 9.8%). In their coverage the ‘quality’ print and broadcast media themes more frequently displayed ‘mixed’ or ‘general’ implications which is to say they raised positive and negative issues, or were not associated directly with any single political party. Themes related to the Liberal Democrats were most evident in the broadcast media and popular media sectors. In the former case, few had unequivocally positive or negative implications for the party. In the popular press, however, the largest Liberal Democrat related category focused upon the ‘bad news’ aspect. **Table 16** provides an overview the results of the second measure of directional balance concerning the stances of the political actors in coverage.

Table 16: Party actors presenting, defending and attacking in news media coverage

		Labour	Conservative	Lib Dem	Other
All Media	present	41%	30%	40%	56%
	defence	21%	12%	5%	3%
	attack	22%	44%	40%	21%
	no stance	16%	14%	15%	20%

Labour actors more frequently appeared in a defensive stance than their opponents. The Liberal Democrats were the least defensive in their’s. Labour and Liberal Democrat actors were more frequently reported presenting their policies than the Conservatives. Conservative actors were twice as likely to be presented attacking their opponents than Labour. The Liberal Democrats also displayed a more aggressive posture than Labour, which may seem surprising in light of Charles Kennedy’s claimed aversion to negative campaigning. Two points need to be borne in mind. Firstly, this high percentage figure is in part due to the marginalization of the Liberal Democrats in a lot of coverage (particularly press coverage). Put simply, there was not always a lot of room for them to present themselves in a more constructive manner. Secondly, these raw figures do not capture the evident qualitative differences in the nature of the attacks being made by the main parties (disdaining the negativity of other parties’ campaigning is itself a form of political attack).

Table 17 disaggregates the data in **Table 16** by national media sector. Levels of ‘presentation’ for all parties were greatest in the broadcast sector (with the sole exception of ‘Labour presentation’ in the popular press sector). Although Conservative actors were uniformly more attacking than defensive in their stance across all sectors, the difference between these measures varied. In the mid market press coverage their ‘attack’ exceeded ‘defence’ by 65%, in the popular press and the broadcast media the difference was 21% and 26%, respectively.

Table 17: Stance of party actors by sector

		Labour	Conservative	Lib Dem	Other
Broadcast	Presentation	35%	35%	47%	63%
	Defence	26%	11%	6%	3%
	Attack	21%	37%	35%	16%
	No clear stance	17%	17%	12%	18%
		Labour	Conservative	Lib Dem	Other
Quality press	Presentation	44%	30%	36%	55%
	Defence	18%	12%	3%	3%
	Attack	22%	45%	45%	24%
	No clear stance	16%	14%	16%	18%
		Labour	Conservative	Lib Dem	Other
Mid market press	Presentation	27%	23%	15%	0%
	Defence	38%	3%	7%	0%
	Attack	22%	68%	74%	67%
	No clear stance	13%	6%	4%	33%
		Labour	Conservative	Lib Dem	Other
Popular press	Presentation	48%	26%	31%	11%
	Defence	13%	21%	11%	0%
	Attack	24%	42%	29%	44%
	No Clear Stance	16%	12%	29%	44%

Notes: Percentages= Column percentages for each media category

Election Coverage in Scotland, Wales and Locally

This section compares the trends identified in UK wide election reporting with coverage produced in more specific national and regional contexts (respectively, Wales, Scotland and ‘locally’, i.e in the East Midlands of England²²).

Stop Watch Balance

Table 18 compares the prominence of party political actors across the different sampled regions. The following main points emerge:

Table 18: Frequency of Appearance of Political Actors by Media Region

	UK ²³	Welsh	Scottish	Local
Tony Blair	16	5	10	11
Labour MP	26	19	26	13
Labour Other	6	10	4	13
Michael Howard	11	5	8	9
Conservative MP	8	5	3	4
Conservative Other	11	15	14	16
Charles Kennedy	6	4	5	9
Liberal Democrat MP	2	2	3	1
Liberal Democrat Other	8	13	11	14
Alex Salmond	0.4	0.3	5	0
other SNP	0.3	0	5	0
Ieuan Wyn Jones	0	1	0	0
Other Plaid Cymru	0.4	13	0.1	0
Ulster Unionist	0.3	1	0.1	0
DUP	0.3	0	0.1	0.2
Sinn Fein	0.3	0	0.2	0.2
Social Democrats and Labour	0.2	0	0	0
Respect	0.8	0.5	1	1
BNP	0.2	0	0	0.5
Greens	0.3	0.5	1	1.3
UKIP	0.5	1	0.2	3
Veritas	0.3	0.3	0.1	3
Scottish Socialists	0.1	0.2	1	0
Other politician	1	5	1	1

Note: all Percentages above 0.51 are rounded to the nearest full number. Percentages 0.5 and below are rounded to 1 decimal point.

²² Scottish news media sampled were BBC1 Scotland 6.30pm, ITV1 Scotland 6pm, BBC Radio Scotland 7.30-8pm, *The Scotsman*, *Daily Record*, *Sunday Mail* and *Scotland on Sunday*. The Welsh category includes BBC1 Wales 6.30pm, ITV1 Wales 6pm, Radio Good Morning Wales 7.30-8pm; *Western Mail*, *Wales on Sunday*. Local refers to the following media, all of which operate in the East Midlands: BBC1 East Midlands Today 6.30pm, ITV Central News 6pm, BBC Radio Nottingham 7.30-8am, *Derby Evening Telegraph*, *Nottingham Evening Post*, *Leicester Mercury*, *Lincolnshire Echo*. The region was selected for this purpose because it contained many of the key marginal seats that determined the national outcome.

²³ Nb. this refers to only those media available UK wide- see note 2 for further details.

- Plaid Cymru and the Scottish Nationalist Party gained far more prominence, respectively, in the Welsh and Scottish news media than they did in the UK wide media.
- The leaders of the main political parties tended to attract lower levels of coverage in Welsh, Scottish and local coverage. The one exception was coverage of Charles Kennedy in the latter case, where his proportional presence exceeded levels found in national coverage.
- The other minor parties were comparably marginalised across all four sectors. It is noticeable, however, that UKIP and Veritas achieved more coverage in the local news media sample (3 percent each)²⁴.
- MPs were the most frequently coded actors for the Labour party, across all four media categories. With Conservative and Liberal Democrat party appearances, however, other party actors commanded most coverage (i.e. local councillors and other party activists)
- Figure 6.1 compares the distribution of actors' appearances of the 5 most frequently reported parties. The results show that Labour achieved most appearances across all media categories, but that their prominence was less evident in Welsh, Scottish and local coverage.

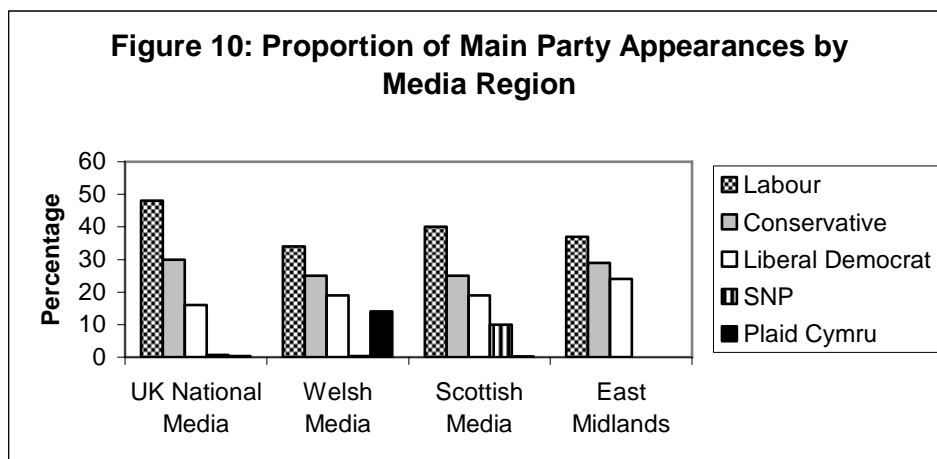


Table 19 compares the gender balance in election reporting in UK wide media with those in other national regional and regional media. Once again, men dominated the show. The under-representation of women was worst in Scottish coverage, and although the female presence was slightly greater in Welsh and local coverage, women still only accounted for 1 in 5 of the actors identified.

Table 19: Gender of Actors in Media Sectors

	All UK	Welsh	Scottish	Local
Female	14	20	13	22
Male	86	80	87	79

²⁴ This can be largely explained by the presence of Robert Kilroy Silk as an election candidate in the region and the relatively strong presence of UKIP in parts of Lincolnshire.

Note: As percentages are rounded, totals may exceed 100

Agenda

Balance

Table 20 compares the most prominent themes found in Welsh, Scottish and East Midlands election coverage. The following main points emerge:

Table 20: Top Ten Themes by Media Region

	UK	%	Welsh	%	Scottish	%	Local	%
1	Electoral Process	44	Electoral Process	49	Electoral Process	44	Electoral Process	52
2	Political Impropriety	8	NHS	8	Political Impropriety	9	NHS	7
3	Iraq	8	Political Impropriety	6	Iraq	9	Crime	6
4	Asylum/ Immigration	7	Constitutional Issues	5	Asylum/ Immigration	6	Asylum/ Immigration	6
5	Taxation	5	Iraq	5	Constitutional Issues	5	Iraq	4
6	NHS	4	Local Govt	4	NHS	4	Education	3
7	Crime	4	Education	3	Economy	4	Political Impropriety	3
8	Economy	4	Economy	3	Taxation	4	Taxation	3
9	Education	3	Social Security	2	Social Security	3	Economy	2
10	Social Security	2	Taxation	2	Other Military/ Defence	1	Social Security	2

- Levels of coverage of the electoral process were similarly high to those found in UK wide news and current affairs coverage. Levels were highest locally (52 percent) and lowest in Scotland (44 percent).
- There was some degree of independence in the interpretative agendas of these other national and regional media. In Welsh coverage, ‘the NHS’ was the second most prominent theme category and ‘local government’ was sixth on the list (the latter category did not appear as a top ten issue in any other context). ‘Asylum/ Immigration’ did not make the top ten themes in this context, unlike all other media categories (the issue was the fourth most prominent theme in Scottish, local and UK wide media coverage). Locally ‘NHS’ and ‘Crime’ were the second and third most frequently reported themes. Finally, ‘Constitutional Issues’ attracted higher levels of attention in the Welsh and Scottish media (these matters did not make the top ten themes for either UK wide or local media.)

Table 21 breaks down the macro-category of ‘Constitutional Issues’ into its component elements. The results show that coverage of these issues in both Wales and Scotland concentrated predominantly upon the responsibilities and operations of

their respective legislative bodies (the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament). More general or abstract constitutional matters received scant attention (matching their marginal presence in national media debates).

Table 21: Comparison of Specific Constitutional Issues in Welsh and Scottish Election Coverage

	Welsh	Scottish
'Electoral boundary concerns or issues'	0.3 %	1.3%
'Voting reform'	0.2%	0.4%
'Welsh assembly – operation/responsibilities'	4.4%	0.1%
'Scottish Parliament – operation/responsibilities'	-	3.1%
'Other Devolution issues'	0.2%	0.1%
'Reform of parliament'	-	0.1%

Directional

Balance

Table 22 presents the results of a comparison of the first measure of directional balance discussed in section 5 by media region (i.e. the adjectival codes applied to the themes identified in election coverage).

Table 22: Directional Trends in National News Themes

		All UK	Welsh	Scottish	Local
		% of all Themes	% of all Themes	% of all Themes	% of all Themes
Labour	<i>Good News</i>	6.3	1.4	5.4	3.7
	<i>Bad News</i>	18.8	9.9	8.6	5.6
	<i>Mixed</i>	16.9	18.2	21.1	8.6
	<i>Descriptive</i>	3.5	1.4	2.7	0.7
Conservative	<i>Good News</i>	3	0.2	0.4	1.3
	<i>Bad News</i>	6.7	3.9	7.4	0.7
	<i>Mixed</i>	6	5.8	4	9.1
	<i>Descriptive</i>	0.8	1.4	1.4	1.3
Lib Dem	<i>Good News</i>	0.8	0.7	0.9	1.5
	<i>Bad News</i>	1	0	1	0
	<i>Mixed</i>	2.2	2.8	2.1	4.9
	<i>Descriptive</i>	1.1	1.4	2.1	0.8
Other Party	<i>Good News</i>	0.1	1.4	0	0.5
	<i>Bad News</i>	0.8	0.5	2.1	0.2
	<i>Mixed</i>	1.1	1.6	3	1.7
	<i>Descriptive</i>	0.9	1.8	3.3	0.7
All/ Several Parties	<i>Good News</i>	0.4	0	0	1
	<i>Bad News</i>	1.7	2.5	3.6	0.3
	<i>Mixed</i>	22.9	39.6	26.2	45.5

	<i>Descriptive</i>	5.1	5.5	4.3	12
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The following main points emerge from this comparison:

- Welsh and local coverage tended to focus more upon the mixed political implications of issues for more than one political party. In Scotland, there was more discussion of the mixed implications of reported issues for the Labour Party.
- Across all three sample regions, levels of ‘bad news for Labour’ were far lower than those identified in UK wide news coverage. However, levels of ‘good news for Labour’ were also comparatively lower.
- Levels of ‘bad news for the Conservative party’ in Scotland exceeded those found for all other media sectors.

Table 23 provides the results of the second test of directional balance discussed earlier (i.e. the distribution of the reported stances of political actors featured in news coverage.)

The following main points emerge from this comparison:

Table 23: Stance of Political Actors by Media Region

		Labour	Cons	Lib Dem	SNP	Plaid Cymru	Other
UK	Present	41%	30%	40%	69%	82%	52%
	Defence	21%	12%	5%	3%	-	3%
	Attack	22%	44%	40%	24%	12%	22%
	no stance	15%	14%	14%	3%	6%	23%
Welsh	Present	53%	46%	61%	100%	36%	57%
	defence	10%	12%	8%	-	4%	5%
	attack	27%	32%	13%	-	49%	26%
	no stance	10%	10%	18%	-	12%	12%
Scottish	present	50%	34%	50%	49%	-	67%
	defence	13%	9%	4%	5%	-	-
	attack	29%	52%	39%	45%	100%	23%
	no stance	8%	5%	7%	1%	-	10%
Local	present	66%	65%	62%	-	-	55%
	defence	7%	5%	7%	-	-	4%
	attack	13%	18%	14%	-	-	14%
	no stance	15%	11%	17%	-	-	26%

- Labour actors were most frequently presented in a presentational stance across all media sectors. However, their stance was less defensive in Scottish and

local coverage compared with UK wide coverage, and more aggressive in Wales and Scotland.

- The stance of Conservative actors in Wales was less aggressive in Welsh Media, compared with UK wide and Scottish Media (i.e. they were most frequently reported in a presentational mode).
- In Welsh coverage, Plaid Cymru were more frequently reported as attacking others than presenting their positions and policies (49 percent: 36%). In Scotland, the SNP 'presented' more than 'attacked' (39 percent: 50 percent)
- Political actors from all the main parties were more frequently reported in a presenting role than either attacking or defending in local coverage.

Discussion.

The 2005 general election was noteworthy for the limited coverage many news media organisations gave the campaign. Their approach was encouraged by the dramatic fall in turnout in 2001, a clear indication that a significant minority of voters and therefore audiences were not especially interested in formal politics. Whilst the response of popular newspapers was to relegate the election as an issue to be covered, other media sought to reassess how they might cover the campaign and make it relevant to a diverse population. Yet they too recognised this was something of a challenge given the proliferation of a healthy market in rival publications and channels vying for public attention. More commercially minded news organisations will be fearful elections are not good for business and this has potentially major implications for the way elections will be covered as national events in the future. Reflecting on 2005 there are indications that change of a sort has already happened with a decline in the amount of overall media attention devoted to the campaign. Furthermore evidence presented here suggests this coverage was tailored to make it more palatable for specific audiences with the result that different news organisations prioritised their own agendas. And even then this information was presented in ways in which it was forced to compete with other perhaps more engaging, entertaining if less critical news stories. Consequently the 2005 general election may be remembered as the campaign when journalists and politicians finally awoke to the realities of living in a diverse, multi-channel age. Arguably some of the voters also did by switching off and turning over. This ‘declinist’ trend has long been predicted (see, for example, Scammell, 1990) and it will be interesting to see whether it becomes an institutionalised feature of general elections to come.

The displacement effect of other news events may signal a growing media disengagement with the formal political process. Although disconnection from the election was most evident within the popular press, longitudinal comparisons also reveal an election-by-election decline in the amount of election coverage for the BBC flagship news and current affairs programmes between 1992 and 2005. Levels of coverage slightly increased for the main ITV news programme in 2005, from a considerable low in 2001, thereby closing the gap noted in previous elections with BBC 1 coverage. The steep reduction from levels of BBC1 coverage since 1997 is mainly explained by the Corporation’s decision not to lengthen their flagship news

bulletins in 2005, as in 2001. But this decision alone may be taken as indicative of the emergence of a more 'pragmatic', news value based approach to electoral reporting in the UK, in which the campaign must compete for prominence, rather than command it as of right. Having said this, the results from 2005 suggest one important reversal of respect previous trends in media presentation. For a number of years analysts have been claiming that the media have been trivialising politics and that one example of this has been the sound-bite culture of presentation. However, in this election, for the first time since 1992, the average length of politicians' sound-bites increased in mainstream TV news coverage.

In the 2005 election, the Labour Party received more national press and broadcast coverage than their political opponents. This difference was greatest in the national press, but also evident in national broadcast content. There is no evidence, however, that this situation was unique to this election or the by-product of the recent change to a regime of self regulation by the broadcasters in their monitoring of the amount of coverage given to the main political parties. Comparisons with elections since 1992 show that the incumbent political party has consistently commanded higher levels of media attention, and that the political prominence of Labour in 2005 exactly mirrored that achieved by the Conservative party in 1992 (see also Miller, 1991).

In previous elections analysts have commented upon the trend towards 'presidentialisation', or the focus by the media on the party leaders. As with previous elections, a large proportion of national election reporting in 2005 fixed upon the comments and activities of the three main party leaders. Interestingly, however, levels of presidentialisation in the national media appeared lower than those found in the 1992, 1997 and 2001 campaigns. One area where there was no change was in the amount of coverage given to women and women's issues. Female candidates were an even more marginalised presence in coverage than they were in the actual election process itself, and few of the other elite opinion formers reported were women. Women most frequently appeared as members of the public or as familial associates of (male) politicians. Writing in the mid 1980s, Patricia Holland remarked that news coverage routinely presents women:

 '...either as an anonymous example of uninformed public opinion, as housewife, consumer, neighbour, or as a mother, sister, wife of the man in the

news... Thus not only do they speak less frequently, but they tend to speak as passive reactors and witnesses to public events rather than as participants in those events' (Holland: 138-9)

Twenty years later, it offers an excellent summation of the situation in the 2005 campaign.

'Iraq', 'Asylum and Immigration' and 'Political improprieties' were the most prominent substantive issues addressed in national coverage. However, as with previous elections, the biggest election story was the electoral process itself (party campaigning strategies and activities, opinion polls, etc). Moreover, national media tended to avoid providing manifesto and policy details in their coverage, focusing more on political impressions than information. There were some striking differences in the specific news agendas of different national media. For example, the mid market tabloids (which both declared their support for the Conservatives) gave more coverage to 'Iraq' and 'political improprieties' than other national media, concentrating much of the latter discussion upon the personal integrity of the Prime Minister. In contrast, Iraq was considerably relegated in the popular tabloid agenda. Overall, the national media agenda was restricted to a limited range of topics, and many issues that became big news stories in the immediate aftermath of the campaign were sidelined during the election (most noticeably, 'Europe', 'Transport policy', 'the Environment', 'Northern Ireland', 'Terrorism' and 'Foreign policy [other than Iraq and Europe]').

Looking specifically at the election coverage in Scotland and Wales it is noteworthy that the Scottish Nationalists and Plaid Cymru gained some media presence in their own countries' media but that the major UK wide parties still dominate the same news

agenda. As with UK-wide media, the Labour party commanded most coverage in the Scottish, Welsh and local (i.e. East Midlands of England) media, but the coverage gap was not as great in the latter cases. Reporting of the electoral process itself commanded the greatest proportion of coverage in Scotland, Wales and the locally. Beyond this aspect, however, there were some noticeable interpretative differences across these regions. In Wales and Scotland, constitutional issues concerning devolution were considerably more prominent in the news agenda. 'Asylum & Immigration' did not feature highly on the Welsh media agenda, but issues concerning the 'NHS' attracted a higher proportion of press and broadcast attention in this context. Locally the 'NHS' and 'Crime' featured particularly prominently. Measures of directional balance suggest that Welsh and local coverage had a more diffuse and less partisan focus than Scottish and UK wide news reporting.

Overall the coverage tended to present Labour political actors in a more defensive posture than their party opponents in national coverage and when the media followed issues that were directly identified with Labour, the reporting tended to emphasise the possible negative electoral consequences for the party. Broadcast and 'quality' press coverage were the most directionally balanced – tending to focus upon the 'mixed' and 'general' party political implications of themes reported. In contrast, coverage in the national mid-market press was the most hostile to Labour and the most receptive to the Conservatives. This tendency was reversed to a more limited extent in the populist press, where 'bad news' for the Tories exceeded negative coverage of Labour. Any suggestion that these data may suggest that the national popular press are re-embracing the strong political partisanship so evident in the 1980s is tempered by closer analysis of their editorial declarations (see Deacon and Wring, 2002).

Although opprobrium of the government was widely evident, so were reservations and qualifications about the political alternatives on offer.

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