

“What is a referendum?” How we might open up pre-vote TV debates to genuine public scrutiny

ISE blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/01/15/what-is-a-referendum-how-we-might-open-up-pre-vote-tv-debates-to-genuine-public-scrutiny/

15/01/2016

*The 2015 TV election debates proved their civic value – as they had in 2010, write **Stephen Coleman** (left), **Nick Anstead**, **Jay G Blumler**, **Giles Moss** and **Matt Homer**. But in these edited extracts from a University of Leeds report, [Democracy on Demand?](#), Dr Anstead questions whether Twitter is – as some media organisations seemed to imply – representative of public opinion. The authors also urge the media to experiment with the format of any TV debates during the EU referendum campaign to make them more responsive to the public’s questions and reactions.*



The seven-way leaders debate on ITV on 2 April 2015 (the one ‘true’ election debate broadcast, in the sense that it featured all the major political actors on the same stage at the same time) saw 1.5 million debate-related tweets being published. This compares with an overall viewing audience of 7.3 million people. These figures, though, disguise the fact that individual social media users might tweet on multiple occasions during the course of a debate. In actuality then, the 1.5 million debate related tweets were produced by just 278,000 unique users – that is, just 3.8 per cent of the programme’s viewers ([Twitter.com](#), 2015).

While not an insubstantial figure, these numbers should make us wary of trying to make statements about audience opinion based on Twitter data, not least because other academic research has suggested that even within the minority of viewers commenting online, the production of content is very unevenly distributed, with a small number of individuals accounting for a huge proportion of the social media posts appearing (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2011; Hindman, 2008).

Coverage drawing on social media to talk about public reaction highlighted a few important points about social media and election debates. First, and as earlier research on the 2010 election noted (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2015), social media data were used in three distinct ways to illustrate public reaction to the debates. The first of these was the simple citation of individual tweets as illustrative of a particular strand of public opinion, a sort of ‘electronic vox pop’. Often the posts cited were [humorous or mocking in tone](#). A second approach to employing social media was simply to quote the quantity of posts appearing on specific topics, containing particular hashtags, or even what political content was ‘trending’ online.

‘Semantic polling’

The most sophisticated attempts to link social media data and public opinion during the debates involved what has been termed ‘semantic polling’ (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2015). This essentially involves machine reading large bodies of social media data and trying to convert it into a numeric sentiment value. Drawing on work produced by Demos and the University of Sussex, various news outlets quoted data and produced graphics examining the Twitter reaction to the first TV debate on 2 April. The language used in these stories was carefully caveated to limit the claims being made. Channel 4’s story on the data was clear that the numbers only related to ‘[who won Twitter](#)’, while the Daily Telegraph concluded its article on the subject by [noting](#) that ‘People who use Twitter aren’t representative of the public of course, and the algorithms sometimes get it wrong, but overall this is a new window into British politics in the digital age’. Welcome though they were, these caveats were overshadowed by the quantitative authority lent to the stories by the statistics included and the accompanying graphics. The presentation of the data gave a clear message: social media analysis is scientific.

It was much rarer to find serious attempts to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the method being employed

(Adam Fleming's [BBC article](#) is one exception to this pattern). Second, when mainstream media cited social media as reflective of public opinion, this almost inevitably meant Twitter data were being used. Twitter is not the pre-eminent social network in the UK (it has 11.9 million users, as opposed to Facebook's 35.1 million (Ofcom, 2015)). However, the data it produces are widely accessible and have created a cottage industry of consultancies, think tanks and academic research units producing analysis. It is also a popular tool with journalists. Another virtue of this type of research (at least from the perspective of the organisation doing the commissioning) is that data and analysis are relatively cheap, especially in comparison with organising traditional representative sample polls.

'What is a referendum?'



On occasions, online sources other than Twitter were used in inventive ways to make statements about public reaction. Google search trends, for example, were widely commented on after the 2 April debate, with [popular searches](#) reflecting the public's attempts to grapple with the complexities of the election ('Can I vote SNP' and 'What is austerity?') and also an interest in the superficial ('how tall is Nigel Farage?'). Google searches taking place during the debates offered at least two interesting insights. The first of these is an important reminder of just how confused some members of the public are about the political process, and the effort required on the part of both politicians and journalists to make it comprehensible to them. This is perhaps most evident in the fourth most asked question during the ITV debates, 'What is a referendum?'

This can be interpreted in two ways. We might view it with concern. After all, can citizens with such limited knowledge really make informed decisions when they exercise their right to vote? The alternative reading is more optimistic. Despite their limited knowledge, not only have these citizens watched an hour and a half long political debate programme, but they have also undertaken additional research using Google with the aim of becoming better informed. Second, it was notable that the statements being made in the TV debates seemed to influence the searches being undertaken.

TV debates and social media: more imagination needed

Before the next general election in 2020, the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU will take place. This is the kind of complex political issue that calls for one or more TV election debates. Learning from 2015, we think that such debates should be pluralistic in their formats. One area in which there is scope for experimentation relates to digital communication. There is no evidence to suggest that putting the TV debates online or running election debates as online events (as YouTube and CNN have done in recent US presidential elections) makes much difference to their reception.

The valuable possibilities raised by digital communication are twofold. Digital communication could (1) turn the

debates from spectacles in which the debaters speak monologically to or at a remote audience to a more dialogical and interactive event and (2) extend opportunities to scrutinise and evaluate the arguments and policies of the leaders in the period following the debate. As for interactivity, we have found a sizeable number of people use social media to discuss the debates and seek the views of others and this social media commentary is referred to in media coverage, but the influence of audience participation on the events themselves is limited. We would like to see the broadcasters, newspapers and social media companies – as well as civic entrepreneurs – continue to experiment imaginatively with ways to make the events more interactive.

What about the post-debate period? The online content relating to the debates produced by broadcasters and newspapers in 2015 was largely explanatory: this is who the debaters are; this is what to expect from them; this is how to interpret their body language. With the exception of a few fact-checking sites, voters were offered few opportunities to analyse and interrogate the debates for themselves while they were happening or shortly afterwards. Two of the authors (Stephen Coleman and Giles Moss), working with colleagues at the University of Leeds (Paul Wilson) and the Open University (Anna De Liddo and Brian Plüss), have developed a new method for generating instant audience feedback ([‘Democratic Reflection’](#)). Accessed through a web app on a computer or mobile device, Democratic Reflection allows viewers to provide feedback to the debates in real time using twenty statements related to the five entitlements. As such, it goes beyond the feedback generated by ‘the worm’ by showing how different moments of the debate relate to the needs of audiences as democratic citizens.

The same team are developing a [digital tool](#) (Democratic Replay) that allows people to replay the debates and scrutinise the claims that politicians make. Users are able to search for particular moments, themes and strategies in the debate; the ways in which the leaders use language to persuade or manipulate; the extent to which their arguments are consistent – and relate to what other politicians are saying; the differences between the principles and policies set out by politicians; and how other people have responded to particular moments and statements. Based on a combination of technologies, this tool will be launched before the forthcoming referendum on European Union membership.

This is only one tool, designed to enable citizens to carry out a certain range of actions that were unavailable to them in the past. We hope others will design more tools and platforms that will allow citizens to realise their democratic entitlements before, during and after future TV debates.

Sources cited:

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This article represents the views of the authors and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the London School of Economics.

The full report, [The 2015 Televised Election Debates: Democracy on Demand?](#), is published by the University of Leeds.

