

Process Not Policy: Has The Media Ignored The Issues for the X Factor?

This post was originally posted on [Charlie Beckett's blog](#) on April 25th.

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The Labour Party and Gordon Brown in particular is furious at what it sees as an obsession with presentation instead of policy in the election coverage. [According to Nick Robinson's blog](#) they want to send a joint letter of complaint to the public service broadcasters (and Sky) but so far the Tories and Lib Dems have declined.



This is the text of the letter that Labour wanted the other parties to sign up to:

"...as we reach the final stages of the campaign we also share a common belief that the focus on the debates, both the process surrounding them, and the polling before and after which they have attracted, has dramatically reduced the amount of airtime dedicated to the scrutiny of the policies of the parties. This is particularly so in the case of the main bulletins which remain the main source of news for many people."



Is that right?

We have much more media than ever before around politics. There is more data and discussion on TV, radio, newspapers and online. But within that overall expansion, it is argued by some, there has also been a long-term trend away from covering policy matters during election campaigns in mainstream daily news. Look at the US Presidentials. It felt like a serious choice between two very different ideologies but McCain v Obama was covered like a talent show or a boxing match with most attention going to process not policies.

For UK 2010 the broadcasters have understandably got excited about the novelty of the TV debates which have helped turn this election into the most exciting for decades. But it's not the kind of excitement Gordon likes. He has been uncomfortable while Nick Clegg has used them as a platform to put his party ahead of Labour in the polls.

I have [argued that the debates are a good thing](#) because they have energised the campaign and allow the public to hear from the leaders directly without journalists or spin-doctors getting in the way. Sure they are rehearsed and some of the jokes are scripted, but the public can tell that and prefers the candidates who speak from the heart and without prompts. That hasn't helped Gordon.

The debates give the politicians a chance to talk about their own policies and challenge their rivals for three bouts of 90 minutes. The significant audiences show that the public appreciates a chance for some pretty serious political coverage. They can also form judgements about their values and character.

Yes, some of the coverage of the debates has been superficial and over-heated, especially on the news channels, but they have been vehicles for real political communication.

This is Labour's fear:

If the public are not exposed to the different policy details and arguments which we are presenting we are concerned that you will not be fulfilling your traditional duty of explaining and probing the plans of all the main parties. If the public don't hear the arguments we believe that, despite the impact of the debates, many will still be in the dark as to the differences between our plans and values.

I feel like I have seen a reasonable amount of policy coverage, too. Not just in the last few weeks but also over the months of the 'pre-campaign'. Thanks to online there is also a mountain of analysis and data on the broadcasters' websites.

This sounds like a classic case of Gordon Brown blaming anyone else but himself for the position the party is in. Firstly, it's unrealistic. Only party policy wonks care about the policy details. Secondly, the parties have not given us much firm detail to go on. For example, all of them are failing to be honest about the cutbacks they will all inevitably make. The talk of 'efficiency savings' for instance, has been particularly specious.

So voters rightly make judgements based on their experience and expectations of politicians – not a scientific analysis of the manifestos. If Gordon Brown wants a more deliberative democracy (and I think he does) then he has to accept that it requires politicians to act rationally and transparently as well as broadcasters and viewers to pay attention to policy.

I also think that Labour are missing the point about how the public view the political process. Yes, many will make up their minds on policy issues. Many more will make up their minds on how they think the policies may impact on them personally. But there is also a sense that people have lost confidence in the political system and want it changed. They don't believe the policy promises and the policy-makers. The TV debates have been symptomatic of and instrumental in addressing that.

The TV debates represent a chance (along with social media – I would argue) for a more direct relationship between politicians and voters. But of course that idea of a more interactive governance needs to be extended way beyond political media.

I am not sure that Gordon Brown (or the others) really embraces that idea. They want to keep to the top down, one-off deal where we vote a party in through a disproportionate system and then let them get on with it for four or five years. Despite all the evidence of disengagement and disaffection most politicians do not want to change their relationship to the citizen. So we have a diverse public, a more dynamic media and a static polity. That is the real problem, not the number of times that the BBC 10 O'Clock News mentions Child Trust Funds or Pensions.

I leave the final word to one of the comments on [Nick Robinson's blog](#):

| *How can the party that unveiled "Elvis" yesterday demand we focus on policy today?!*