

The role of the media in the 2015 election



The first social media election?

There has been much debate about whether the 2015 election was the first social media election. With over half of people in the UK belonging to a social network (compared to just over a third in 2010), Carl Miller, research director of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media notes that there were approximately 7 million tweets to politicians during the 10 weeks leading up to the election.

In addition, YouTube clips such as Russell Brand's interview with Ed Miliband, despite being generally negatively received by the traditional media, received over a million

views, and the Green Party's video parody of a boy band of mainstream politicians was the nearest a party came to a viral success. Indeed, for a brief moment, younger (mostly female) Miliband followers set off a Twitter trend with their 'Milifans' grouping.

However, the question remains whether social media actually had an impact on voters' behaviour. During the Scottish referendum in 2014, over 80% of tweets were supportive of the 'yes' campaign, despite only 45% of people calling for independence in the actual ballot. The fact is that social media remains largely the preserve of younger voters.

There is also the claim that this form of engagement only acts as an 'echo bubble', with people only interacting with those of the same ideological perspective. However, a study by *Science* journal (May 2015) found that individuals on Facebook who reported a political affiliation had on average more than 20% of friends on the site from an opposing party. It is therefore worth noting that social media may put people in contact with more opinions different from their own, compared to print media which is more likely to be a mere reflection of their pre-existing views.



Iain Duncan Smith discusses coverage of the election on ITV's *Good Morning Britain*, April 2015

The role of television

According to a survey by Panelbase, 62% of people believed that television was 'by far the most influential media source' in informing them about the 2015 election, with 38% noting that the leadership debates had had an impact in shaping their views. It is interesting to note, however, that the overall coverage and commentary generated by the leadership debates was much lower than in 2010. This may be due to the variety of debating arrangements and the seven-way nature of the first televised debate which made the events less newsworthy.

As opinion polls throughout the campaign had Labour and the Conservatives neck and neck, an issue which occupied much air time was the future shape of any coalition. Loughborough University found that this question gained increasing coverage and was above the economy as the most discussed topic of the final week of the campaign. The constitutional implications of a possible Labour-SNP coalition were highlighted frequently by the Conservatives. This forced Miliband to rule out any such agreement in the last *Question Time* television debate — a

pledge which only led to further debate of whether a Labour-led government without the SNP would be possible.

The traditional press

Newspapers in the UK have been traditionally highly partisan. Since the 1950s, the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* have never supported Labour, *The Times* has generally supported the Conservatives (except in the elections of 2001 and 2005) and the *Guardian* has backed the Lib Dems or Labour Party. It was famously claimed by the *Sun* that it was its plea not to vote for the Labour Party 'wot won it' for the Conservatives in the 1992 election.

However, it is questionable whether newspapers still carry the same influence as they did even 5 years ago, when their readership was 28% higher. In addition, it is hard to assess whether newspapers tend to reflect the prevailing public mood of their readership, rather than actually shaping these views.

What is clear, nevertheless, is that together the right-wing media has a much larger readership than the left-wing press. In April 2015, the combined readership of the *Daily*

Mail, *Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* was just under 4 million compared to just over 1 million readers for the *Guardian* and *Daily Mirror*. Newspapers are also taking novel steps to influence their readers — in an unprecedented move the *Daily Telegraph* used its marketing database to e-mail all of its readers to ask them to vote Conservative on the morning of the election.

Conclusion

It is difficult to measure the precise impact of the various different forms of media in the 2015 election. However, extensive discussion in the media of the constitutional implications of a possible Labour-SNP coalition and front pages such as that of the *Daily Mail* on 6 May, which warned that such an arrangement would 'destroy our economy — and our very nation' certainly helped to bolster Conservative support. Indeed, this could explain some of the critical differences between the opinion polls in the run-up to the election and the final outcome.

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