

Political Communication in Transition: Mediated Politics in Britain's New Media Environment

Andrew Chadwick
Royal Holloway, University of London

James Stanyer
Loughborough University

Abstract

Since the mid-2000s, Britain's political communication environment has undergone rapid change. During the 2010 election campaign, television continued its dominance as the most important medium through which the British public acquires its political information, as Britain's first ever live televised party leaders' debates received saturation coverage for almost the entire campaign. But over the previous half-decade the growing mainstream popularity of the internet has started to undermine some broadcast-era assumptions regarding strategic news management, both in government, and on the campaign trail. This new, hybrid, environment, one characterised by a complex intermingling of the "old", the "new", and the "renewed" creates particular uncertainty for "old" news media, established politicians, and political parties. The old media environment, dominated by media and political elites working in traditional television, radio, and newspapers, remains significant for British politics, but politics is increasingly mediated online. The internet is creating a more open, fluid political opportunity structure – one that increasingly enables the British public to exert its influence and hold politicians and media to account. The origins of this current hybridity can be traced back over the last couple of decades, but since the mid-2000s, the pace of change has quickened, and the stage on which the drama of British politics unfolds is in the process of being redesigned, partly by political and media elites, and partly by ordinary citizens. This paper provides an overview of this changing political communication environment and its consequences for British politics. The first part draws on the latest data to illustrate key developments in new media usage in Britain. Part two explores the way in which news, so central to an informed citizenry, is changing. Part three examines the parties' news management strategies and how they have sought to use a blend of old and new media to boost their popularity. The paper then moves on to explore the role of media during the momentous 2010 general election campaign.

Prepared for delivery at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting,
Washington, DC, September 2–5, 2010.

Please ask the authors' permission before citing or quoting from this paper.

andrew.chadwick@rhul.ac.uk

j.stanyer@lboro.ac.uk

Since the mid-2000s, Britain's political communication environment has undergone rapid change. During the 2010 election campaign, television continued its dominance as the most important medium through which the British public acquires its political information, as Britain's first ever live televised party leaders' debates received saturation coverage for almost the entire campaign. But over the previous half-decade the growing mainstream popularity of the internet has started to undermine some broadcast-era assumptions regarding strategic news management, both in government, and on the campaign trail. This new, hybrid, environment, one characterised by a complex intermingling of the "old", the "new", and the "renewed" creates particular uncertainty for "old" news media, established politicians, and political parties. The old media environment, dominated by media and political elites working in traditional television, radio, and newspapers, remains significant for British politics, but politics is increasingly mediated online. The internet is creating a more open, fluid political opportunity structure – one that increasingly enables the British public to exert its influence and hold politicians and media to account. The origins of this current hybridity can be traced back over the last couple of decades, but since the mid-2000s, the pace of change has quickened. The stage on which the drama of British politics unfolds is in the process of being redesigned, partly by political and media elites, and partly by ordinary citizens.

This paper provides an overview of this changing political communication environment and its consequences for British politics. The first part draws on the latest data to illustrate key developments in new media usage in Britain. Part two explores the way in which news, so central to an informed citizenry, is changing. Part three examines the parties' news management strategies and how they have sought to use a blend of old and new media to boost their popularity. The paper then moves on to explore the role of media during the 2010 general election campaign.

Contemporary British political communication: old, new and renewed media

In common with all of the advanced democracies, Britain's political communication environment is now a hybrid, contradictory, mixture of old, new and what Hoskins and O'Loughlin have termed "renewed" media (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2007, 17). Old media, primarily television, radio and newspapers are still, given the size of their audiences and their centrality to the life of the nation, rightly referred to as "mainstream", but the very nature of the mainstream is changing. While old media organisations are adapting, evolving and renewing their channels of delivery, working practices, and audiences, genuinely new media outlets, driven primarily by the spread of the internet, are achieving popularity and becoming part of a new mainstream. Politicians, journalists, and the British public are simultaneously creating and adapting to these complexities (Chadwick, forthcoming).

Despite declining audience share, traditional media organisations continue to play a pivotal role in British politics, as we saw, for example with the *Daily Telegraph's* initiation of the MPs' expenses scandal during 2009. The media professionals at the heart of these organisations remain deeply embedded in the routines and insider networks of Westminster, Whitehall and the major metropolitan centres. They interact with politicians and senior civil servants on a daily basis. Politicians still stage their interventions to coincide with the rhythms of the newsrooms, which remain the main route to a large audience and maximum publicity, as minister for work and pensions, James Purnell, revealed when he resigned from the cabinet on the day of the European Parliament elections in June, 2009. Purnell sent his resignation email to two national newspapers several hours before he called the prime minister, realising that this would have the biggest impact on the evening television news bulletins (Stratton and Wintour 2009).

Outside what is traditionally understood as the mainstream, genuinely new media players such as political bloggers now make more frequent interventions in the political arena (Dale 2008). They sometimes shape the political agenda through their commentary and, less frequently, their investigative “scoops”, but they are still more often parasitical upon old media for their content. As the case of the revelations involving Number Ten adviser Damian McBride in 2009 illustrates (discussed later in this paper), even when a leading blog lands an exclusive it is dependent upon traditional news organisations for taking these stories to a truly mass audience. This dependency is mutual: news organisations increasingly capitalise on new media as a resource, tapping into the viral circulation of online content and weaving it into their news genres and production techniques (Chadwick, forthcoming). The new news media outlets are in the process of being integrated into the mainstream digital political news system in a journey that is likely to continue for many years. In this hybridised system, the old media organisations are currently still king: they have the collective financial and organisational resources to “outscoop” exclusively new media upstarts, and to leapfrog new media outlets with the launch of expensive new initiatives, such as online television delivery and ever more elaborate web environments, which combine editorial authority with popular participation.

An excellent example of how politics now plays out in this hybrid digital media environment is the furore over MPs’ expenses in 2009 – arguably Parliament’s most serious crisis since the emergence of British democracy. The huge quantities of data on expenses were leaked from Parliament in digitised form on CD-ROM discs. The *Daily Telegraph* took the initiative, with its decision to purchase the discs and run an extended series of revelations, both online and offline, spanning almost three weeks in May, 2009. The *Telegraph* employed a team of researchers to sift through the data to extract the most damaging items and it carefully staged each day’s new releases to cause the maximum impact on other media. Frequent television appearances by the paper’s political columnist, Benedict Brogan, were a

key part of this. Broadcast news and political blogs engaged in a sustained feeding frenzy, as, day after day, MPs' expenses were the top story across all news outlets. This was an example of "old-fashioned" investigative journalism, but with a difference: the hybrid media environment accelerated and amplified events and distributed the information across all platforms. As the *Telegraph* released information online and in printed form, other news organisations were able to pick up the new revelations and run their own stories. And, in a final twist, some weeks later, when Parliament officially released the data, which ran to more than 458,000 pages, the *Guardian* started its own "crowdsourcing" campaign to publish yet more revelations. In a response to Parliament's censoring of the files, the paper published the entire database on their website and invited ordinary readers to identify, log and discuss claims. By July 2009, its readers had reviewed 201,000 pages (The Guardian 2009). This twist reveals the growing importance of the internet, not just as a channel for the communication of information, but also as a mechanism of organisation and collective action in the creation of news, a point that we explore further later in this paper.

New media use in Britain: new opportunities, continuing divisions

By any measurement, the British public's use of the internet has grown at a remarkable rate over the past decade. Seventy per cent of households now have access, up from 58 per cent in 2003. Just as significantly, 96 per cent of all households with the internet go online using a broadband connection (OXIS 2009, 4).¹ The diversity of means by which individuals can access information online has also increased. The internet is no longer predominantly a static,

¹ The most robust and up-to-date British data we have in this area come from four main sources: the Oxford Internet Institute's *Oxford Internet Surveys* (OXIS), which have been conducted every two years since 2003; the UK Office of Communications' (Ofcom) annual *Communications Market Reports*; the Office for National Statistics (ONS) periodic *Internet Access* reports; and a special report published by Ofcom in 2009, entitled *Citizens' Digital Participation*.

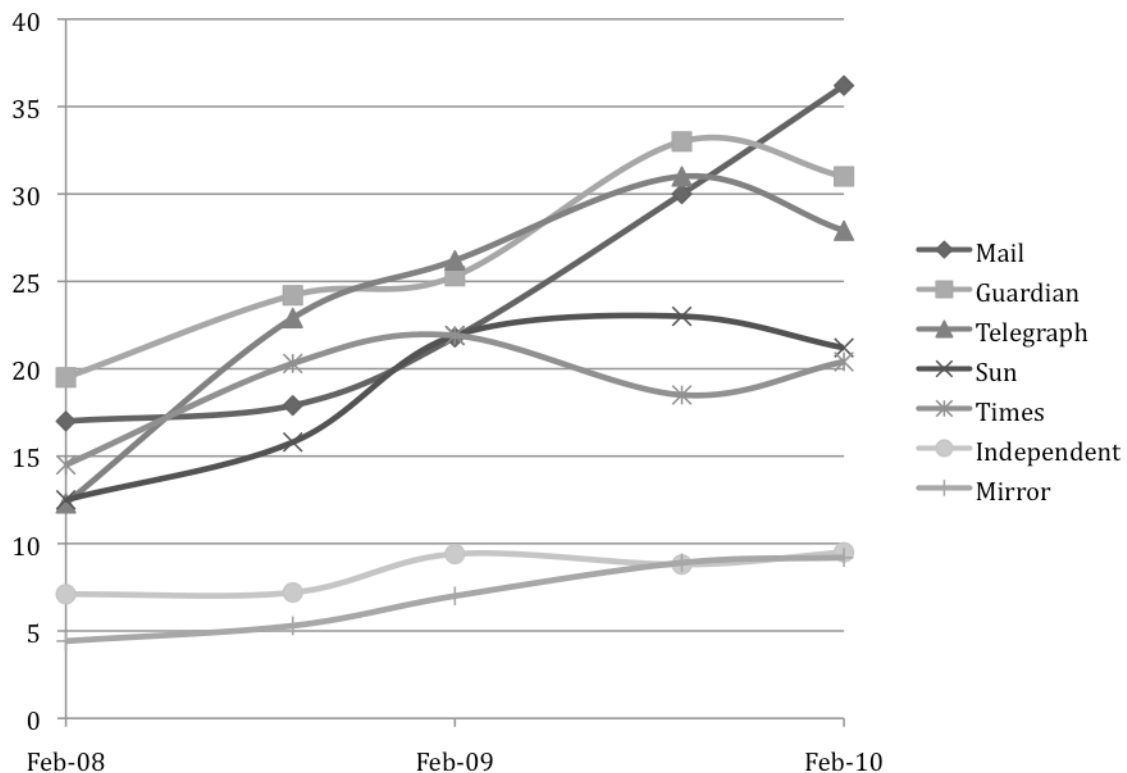
computer-based medium. Mobile access has grown in popularity during recent years: 20 per cent of internet users own a mobile smartphone (such as an Apple iPhone) or a mobile broadband device that they plug into their laptop computer (OXIS 2009, 9). Mobile phone adoption more generally has reached extraordinary levels: in 2008, there were 74 million mobile phone accounts for a population of just 60 million (UK Office of Communications 2008). This new diversity of opportunities for internet access also plays an important role in creating multi-tasking lifestyles in multi-connection households. Around a quarter of those with digital or cable television use it to access the internet, while 32 per cent use a mobile device while in the home – a figure that has trebled since 2005, reflecting the popularity of wireless handheld devices with built in web browsers, email, and messaging software. Seventy-one per cent of internet users now report “doing more than one activity while online, such as listening to music, watching TV, or using the telephone” (OXIS 2009, 12, 36).

The changing face of news consumption

News consumption habits among the British electorate are shifting. In 2007, the number of internet users who reported that they read a “newspaper or news service” online stood at 30 per cent. In the space of just two years, this number almost doubled, to reach 58 per cent (OXIS 2009, 32). More generally, 75 per cent of internet users now report reading news online, including non-newspaper sources such as blogs (OXIS 2009, 20). However, can we detect any audience preferences? Do internet users go to “alternative” sources of news? The evidence suggests that the majority of those online tend to access the websites of the main news outlets, either directly or via news aggregators, such as Yahoo, AOL, and Google (Stanyer 2009).

Most strikingly, the growth in online news consumption contrasts starkly with the decline in print edition circulations of the same outlets. Here we compare data for seven national daily newspapers with their online brands. While it is difficult to determine precise levels of traffic, and it is clear that overseas readers are a huge presence in these data, figures provided by *ABCe* give a good idea of the overall visitor numbers for the major newspaper websites. Figure 1 shows overall growth in visitor numbers. The 2010 figures represent a large increase on 2007 and show that main newspaper organisations are a hugely important presence for news online.

Figure 1: Monthly unique readers of national newspaper websites, 2008-2010 (millions)

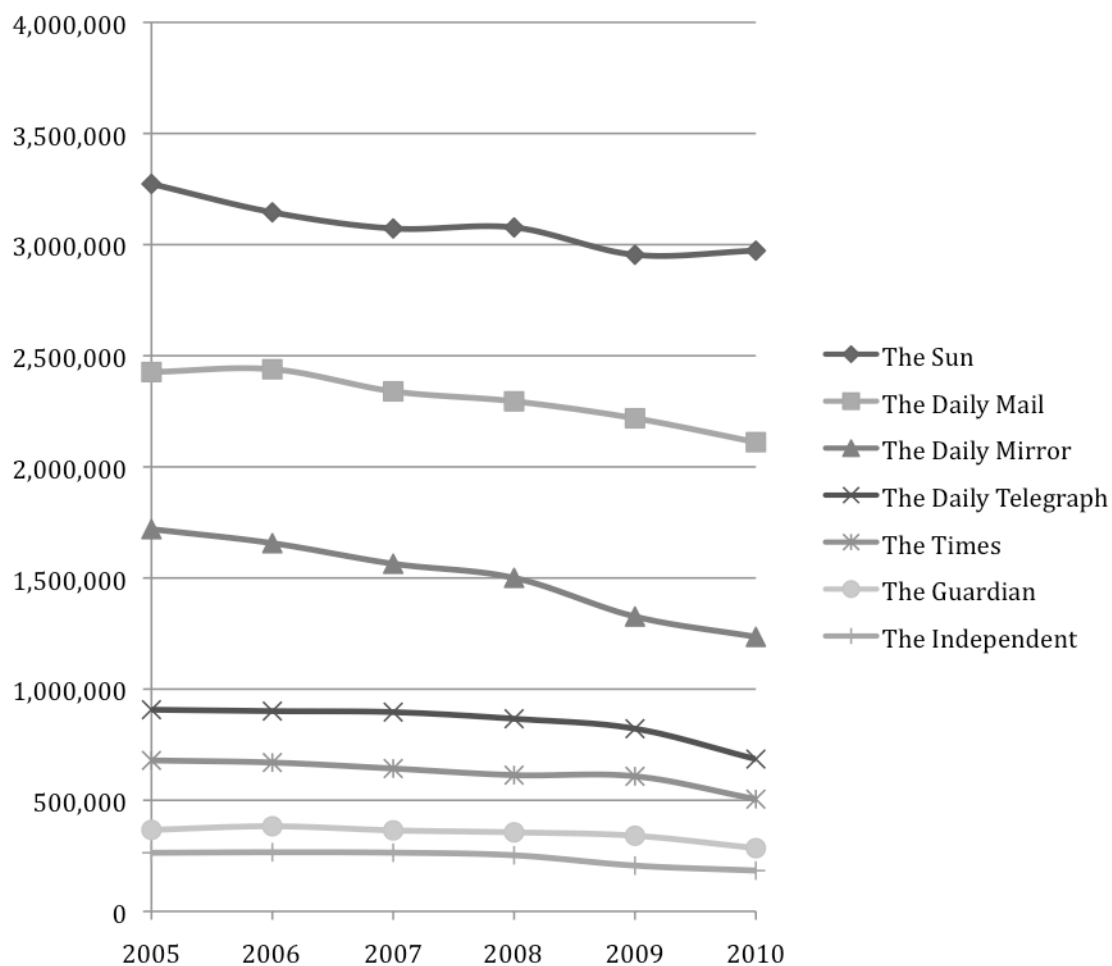


Note: Data points are February and September of each year. Independent did not make ABCe figures public until May 2008; the February 2008 figure is therefore taken from May 2008. Mirror not part of ABCe until March 2008; the February 2008 figure is therefore taken from March 2008.

Sources: ABCe; Kiss 2007a, 2007b, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Luft 2008.

The picture is completely different for print edition circulations. According to data from the UK Office of Fair Trading, from 1987 to 2007, copies of national newspapers sold per year declined by about a third. Between 1998 and 2007 sales fell for all the nationals, apart from the *Daily Star* and the *Daily Mail* (UK Office of Fair Trading 2008). The pace of change has accelerated since 2008 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: National newspaper print edition circulations, 2005-2010



Note: Includes bulk sales.

Source: The Guardian 2010, which uses data from ABC.

While newspaper brands are big hitters online, this is not to say that alternative online news sites cannot secure significant audiences. Some high profile blogs attract a relatively large readership. For example, Paul Staines' Guido Fawkes blog attracted nearly 350,000 unique visitors in April 2009 and regularly averages 100,000 daily page views. Also popular are Conservative-supporting blogs such as Iain Dale's Diary and Tim Montgomerie's Conservative Home. In May 2008, Iain Dale had a 1.9 per cent share of overall blog visitor numbers and Guido Fawkes a 2.3 per cent share; small beer when compared to blogs on the BBC and the *Guardian*, which had a combined 33 per cent share of blog traffic over the same period (See Table 1). Again, however, things are not as straightforward as they might appear. If we set aside the BBC and Guardian blogs, the presence of alternative online news looks remarkably competitive. Dale and Guido Fawkes are not too far behind the mainstream newspaper blogs of the *Times* and the *Telegraph*.

Table 1: Top ten British blogs by internet visits for May, 2008

| Rank | Website | Market share (per cent) |
|-------------|--|--------------------------------|
| 1 | BBC blog network | 20.2 |
| 2 | Guardian Unlimited blogs | 12.7 |
| 3 | Times Online Comment Central | 3.5 |
| 4 | Telegraph blogs | 3.4 |
| 5 | News of the World Extreme Showbiz blog | 2.5 |
| 6 | Guido Fawkes' blog | 2.3 |
| 7 | Gizmodo UK | 2.2 |
| 8 | Neave.com (computer games) | 1.9 |
| 9 | Iain Dale | 1.9 |

| | | |
|----|-------------|-----|
| 10 | Tech Digest | 1.6 |
|----|-------------|-----|

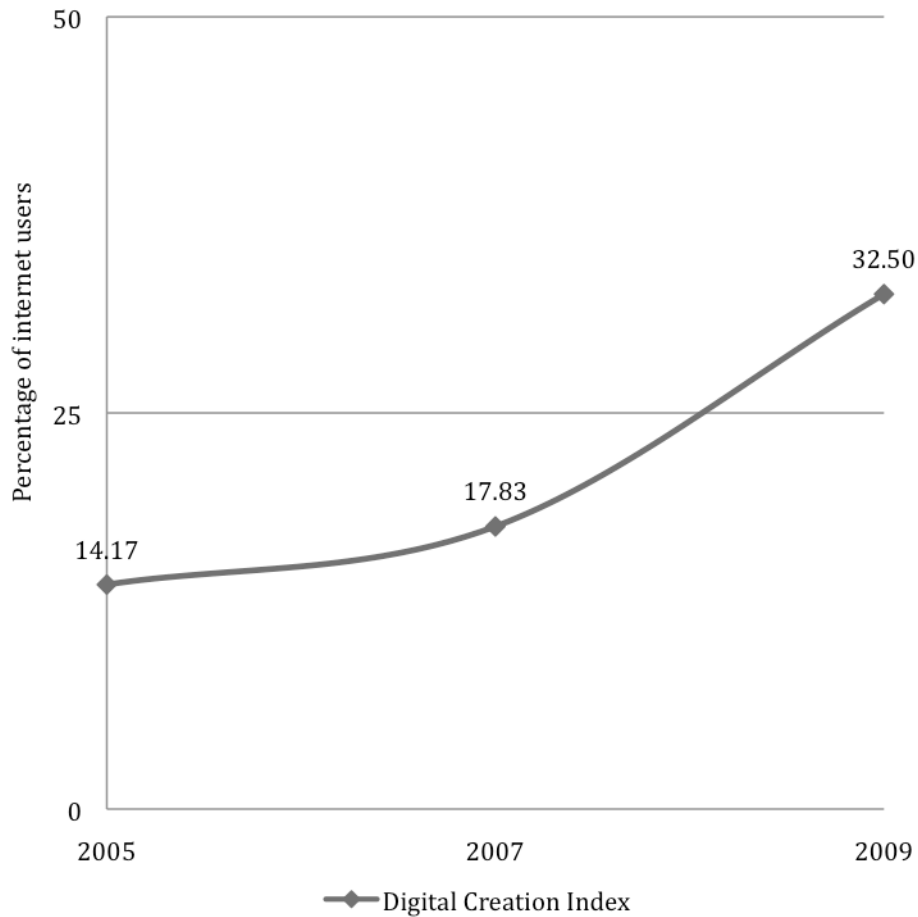
Source: Goad 2008.

From consumers to producers?

Perhaps the most startling shift since the mid-2000s comes in the form of mass participation in the creation of online content. This has been fuelled by the growth of web 2.0 services such as blogs, online social network sites, such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter, collaborative production sites such as Wikipedia, and news aggregators and discussion sites such as Digg, Yahoo Buzz and the BBC's Have Your Say sections (Chadwick 2009).

According to the OXIS surveys, almost half (49 per cent) of British internet users maintain a profile on an online social network site, more than a fifth (22 per cent) update a blog, and more than a quarter (27 per cent) participate in online chat rooms. Older online communication forms such as instant messaging (64 per cent of users) and email (97 per cent) are now ubiquitous in British society (OXIS 2009, 21) (See Figure 3).

Figure 3 Growth of online user-generated content in Britain, 2005-2009



Note: The Digital Creation Index is a composite mean value generated by the authors from measures in OXIS (2009, 28). Questions were “How often do you use the internet for the following purposes?: Update or create a profile on a social networking site; Post pictures or photos on the internet; Post messages on discussion or message boards; Use a distribution list for email; Write a weblog; Maintain a personal website” 2005: N=1309; 2007: N=1578; 2009: N=1401.

Source: Authors’ analysis and adaptation of data from OXIS, 2009.

One nation, digitally divided

These trends are impressive, but equally important is the persistence of Britain’s digital divide. Thirty per cent of the population are still without internet access in the home. In

Britain the strongest predictors of not using the internet have remained constant: age, educational attainment, and socio-economic status (Chadwick 2006, 49-80; UK Office of Communications 2009, 3). Thus, while the internet has achieved mainstream popularity and is now an important source of political information for the British public, there is still a significant proportion for whom it is largely irrelevant. These individuals principally rely on broadcast media for their political information, and if they do participate in politics, they are compelled to do so through what can often be more time consuming and cumbersome methods.

The extent to which the stratification of internet use matters for politics is a subject of ongoing scholarly debate (Brundridge and Rice 2008; Boulianne 2009; di Gennaro and Dutton 2006; Gibson et al 2005; Norris and Curtice 2007). Participation studies since the 1960s have continually revealed that those from more educated, wealthier sections of society are more likely to become politically engaged than those from less educated and poorer backgrounds (Parry et al 1992; Verba et al 1995). It could be argued, therefore, that those who are likely to engage politically online are *already* online, and that those who are currently offline are, in any case, unlikely to become engaged once they do adopt the internet. This raises the question of whether new media are having a positive effect on citizen engagement, and how and among which groups in society that effect may be being felt most strongly, a theme to which we return below.

There are signs that internet use is displacing time previously spent by the British public on other media. For example, non-internet users spend an average of 25 hours per week watching terrestrial television, but internet users spend only 15 hours per week. More significant, perhaps, are the different usage patterns that appear to be opening up between the internet and television. Thirty per cent of those who use the internet perceive it to be their most important source of access to information, generally defined – ahead of television (11

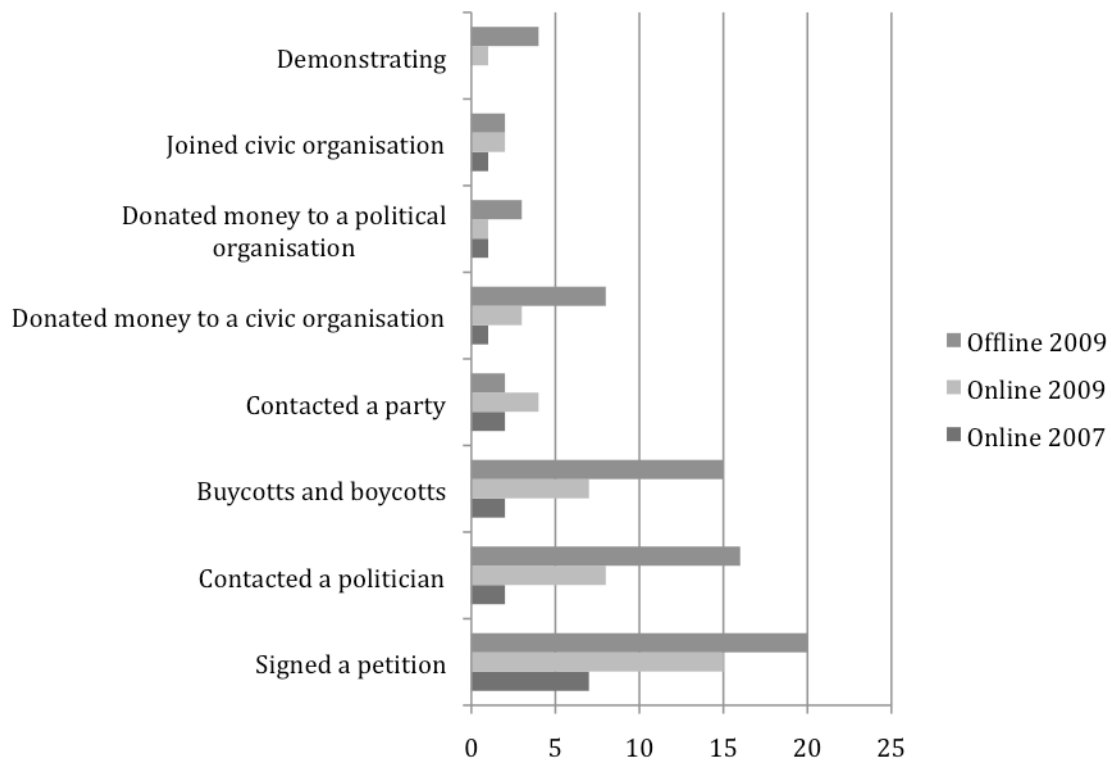
per cent), newspapers (seven per cent) and radio (six per cent). At the same time, non-internet users naturally report that terrestrial television is their main media source of entertainment, but they also report that television is much more *important* to them for entertainment content (OXIS 2009, 33). This may have implications for the future communication of politics. There may be a growing divide between, on the one hand, those who are increasingly turning away from television and towards the internet for what they see as their “hard” news and information, including, of course, political news, and, on the other hand, those without the internet, whose media diets consist mostly of entertainment deemed more important than informational content. In the final analysis, though, all statements in this area are to some extent speculative, especially given the blurring of the lines between “television” and “internet” content now that all of the major news providers have mobile applications featuring regularly updated video bulletins.

Changing media, changing political behaviour?

Recent data on the relationship between online and offline political behaviour reveal some identifiable trends, but also contradictions and uncertainties. Though rates have increased since the mid-2000s, the internet still remains under-used as a means for finding specific types of political information. For example, the 2009 OXIS survey found that only 13 per cent of internet users looked for “information about an MP, local councillor, or politician” online; this was up from eight per cent in 2003. At 33 per cent, activity levels are somewhat higher for seeking “information about central government services”, but these data suggest important sub-plots in the evolution of the internet as a tool for political engagement. As Figure 4 shows, online politics remains very much a minority pursuit, just as it is offline. Some types of online political engagement have become very popular in recent years,

including signing petitions, contacting politicians, “buycotting” and boycotting, and, to a lesser extent, contacting political parties. But two features of Figure 4 stand out: first, even among internet users, *offline* political engagement remains of greater importance than online engagement; and second, some types of engagement, such as donating and joining, seem stubbornly resistant to the impact of the internet.

Figure 4: Online and offline political engagement by British internet users, 2007-2009 (OXIS data) (Percentages)

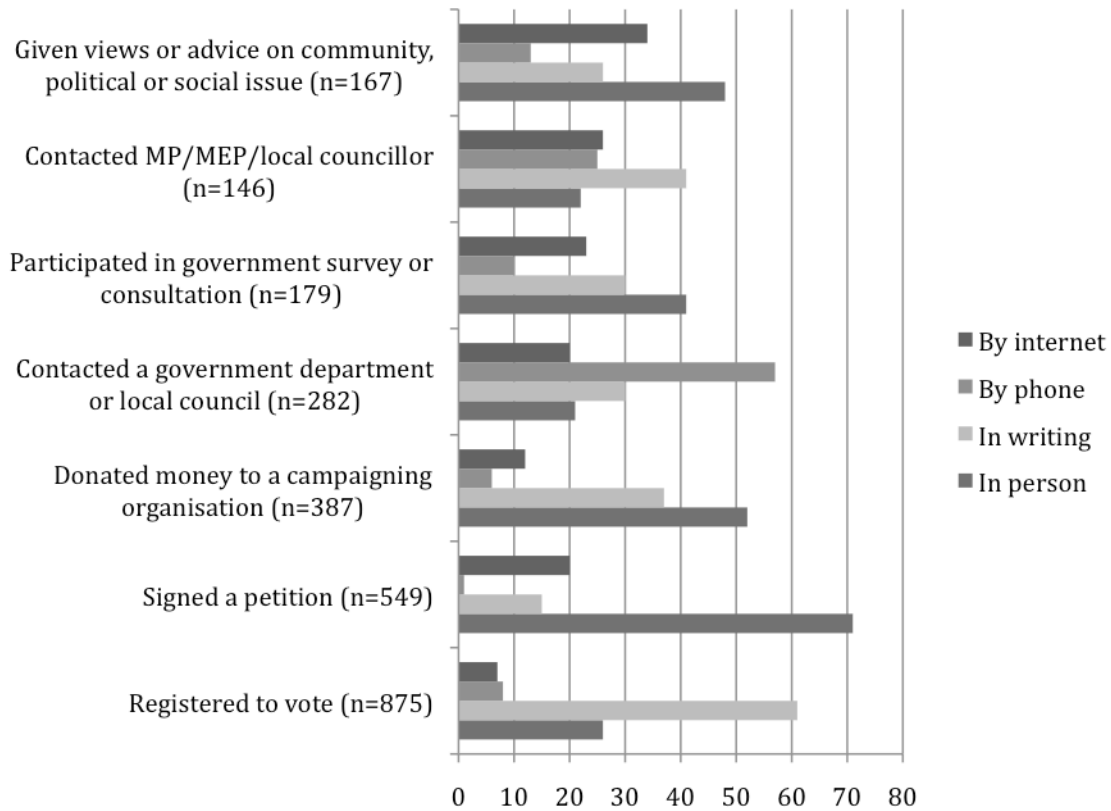


Note: 2007: N=1578; 2009: N=1401. Source: OXIS 2009, 47.

But is this the whole story? An equally reliable and up to date survey – OFCOM’s report on *Citizens’ Digital Participation* – seems to contradict the OXIS findings about new

media and political engagement. OFCOM's approach is intriguing due to its novel method, which compared a face-to-face survey of a nationally representative sample of the public with an online survey of a representative sample of internet users and a subsample of adults residing in Britain's most deprived areas. Contrary to OXIS, the OFCOM research finds remarkable levels of political engagement online among the general population, with 13 per cent of the British public having used the internet for citizen participation and 42 per cent having used it for what OFCOM defines as a "citizen-related activity": completing government forms, finding out information about government, and so on. Those with the internet at home are on average more likely to engage online, with 17 per cent reporting citizen participation activity and 55 per cent reporting citizen-related activity (OFCOM 2009, 3). While offline mechanisms are clearly still ahead, Figure 4 reveals the surprising extent to which the British now conduct their political lives online, with 26 per cent having contacted their MP, MEP or local councillor, 34 per cent having given views or advice on an issue, and 23 per cent having participated in a government survey or consultation.

Figure 5: Online and offline political engagement among the British population, 2009 (OFCOM data) (percentages).



Note: Nationally representative sample of 2069 adults aged 16 and over. Source: OFCOM 2009, 32.

The OFCOM survey also reveals how online and offline political engagement are often stratified according to age, education, and social class, but it is also evident that having access to the internet at home softens some aspects of this stratification by providing older, less educated and lower income groups with more opportunities to become politically engaged (OFCOM 2009, 3). It seems clear, therefore, that hybridity is a growing characteristic of citizens' political engagement.

Old news and the new media environment: quality under pressure?

The rapidly changing media environment has generated difficulties for traditional news media organisations and this may well have consequences for the quality of political information available to the British public. Multi-channel digital television now reaches 80 per cent of British households and in several areas of the country, such as Scotland and the north west of England, penetration rates are much higher (UK Office for National Statistics 2009, 4). Television news channels continue to proliferate and a panoply of different news genres now exists in the television environment, from short bulletins and soft infotainment content on the entertainment channels (or at least those that run news), relatively detailed “serious” coverage on BBC Radio Four, through to round-the-clock treatments on channels such as Sky News, the BBC News Channel, Euronews or even BBC Parliament. There is no shortage of political news but audiences are scattered across the channels, the schedules, and the non-scheduled “time shifting” environments of Sky Plus personal video recorders, the BBC’s web-based iPlayer, or mobile video applications. This process of fragmentation has important implications for the business models of the large media organisations and it has serious consequences for news output.

Expensive, high quality news is becoming increasingly difficult to produce because advertising revenue is now spread more thinly across multiple outlets and advertisers have been moving their money online. By the mid-2000s, the internet had eclipsed the printed press in terms of UK advertising spend and it is now almost on a par with spending on television advertising. Local television news is in particular trouble, as was demonstrated in 2009, when ITV lobbied successfully to cut back on some of its public service obligations regarding local and regional content (Sweeney 2008). Conditions are also tight at the BBC. The organisation was forced to shed 3000 jobs in 2008 as a result of a relatively stringent

licence fee deal and it is fighting a proposed top-slicing of the licence fee to subsidise ITV local news. In early 2010, the BBC announced plans to potentially halve the number of pages on its websites and to discontinue two of its radio stations: 6Music and the Asian Network.

Revenue earners such as premium-rate phone-ins have been adversely affected by a number of “fakery” scandals in which shows were found to have been fabricating competition results (for example, ITV’s *Richard and Judy* and the BBC’s *Blue Peter*, among others). There have also been general concerns over the less regulated areas of satellite and cable TV, such as the numerous quiz channels that occupy the obscurer reaches of the channel listings. According to the OXIS survey of 2007, levels of trust in the internet as a source of information are now higher than they are for both television and the printed press.

Wither the British press?

Television viewing and radio listening both declined from the early to the mid-2000s (UK Office of Communications 2007), but nowhere have the pressures of Britain’s changing media environment been felt more strongly than in its newspaper industry. The British press are in the middle of a painful transition towards new business models. Readership of print editions across all newspaper sectors has been in decline for several decades due to competition from television and now the internet. As we saw in Figure 2 above, the period since 2008 has seen a precipitous decline in the circulation of newsprint. While Britain awaits the first major casualty of this new environment, the signs are that it may not be too far away. In 2010, the billionaire former Russian KGB spy, bought the struggling *Independent* and the *Independent on Sunday* for a nominal sum of £1 and a follow-on deal worth just £9.25 million to the paper’s Irish parent company, INM (BBC News Online 2010b).

The press's initial reaction to the internet in the 1990s was to ignore it in the hope that it might prove to be a fad. This was followed by a strategy of placing the content of the printed version of a paper onto a website in the hope of attracting sufficient "eyeballs" to generate advertising revenue. Some papers, such as the *Financial Times*, experimented early on with subscription based models, only to scale back due to a lack of subscribers and the lure of the advertising model during the economic boom of the 2000s, before once again attempting to make the pay-per-view model work in the late 2000s. Many local and regional papers either lacked the resources to develop their own websites or stayed out of the game entirely for fear that they would cannibalise their print offerings. The annual circulation of local and regional newspapers fell by almost 40 per cent between 1989 and 2009 (UK Office of Fair Trading 2009, 12). It seems clear that the pay-per-view model can be made to work online where an outlet has a distinctive niche, as is the case with the *FT*. It remains to be seen whether more general news outlets can also make it work. In June 2010, two of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation online news sites, the *Times* and the *Sunday Times* will be placed behind an *FT*-style "paywall". At the time of writing, none of the other national newspapers have chosen to follow suit. Even the *Daily Mail*, whose online offerings have soared in popularity over the last few years, remains wedded to the advertising-and-eyeballs model – for now (DMGT 2010).

In common with the situation in other countries, particularly the United States, the British printed press are currently caught in a trap. Declining paper circulations, increasing online readerships, competition from free online news providers and blogs, shrinking and more thinly spread advertising revenues, and the economic recession of the late 2000s, have all taken their toll. Advertising and search company Google now dominates the online advertising market, but online the revenues per reader are substantially smaller than the revenues per reader for traditional classified advertising, and ceding in-house control over

advertising mechanisms to an external company with a quasi-monopoly is unattractive for newspaper proprietors. At the regional and local levels, where 80 per cent of papers' income comes from advertising, the press have long relied upon classified small ads to sustain themselves, but revenues from these have almost halved since the late-1990s, due to competition from online outlets such as eBay and Craigslist (UK Office of Fair Trading 2009, 10).

The main news organisations have responded to this changing environment by finding new ways to appeal to audience loyalty. A key development is online social interaction. During the last half decade, interactive commenting spaces have flourished online. Space for reader participation is now much less tightly restricted and the visibility of audience members' messages is much less reliant than it once was on the decisions of editorial gatekeepers. All of the major British news sites now have well established interactive features, such as op-ed columns with comments, message boards, chat rooms and email. The major newspapers' and the BBC's message boards receive hundreds of thousands of comments per month. Readers are encouraged, and sometimes paid, to submit video footage and other material to news sites. National news organizations are also attempting to position themselves as online social networking hubs, where, in addition to reporting and debating political developments, readers post pictures, socialise, choose a date, and create their own material. The websites of the *Daily Express*, the *Star* and the *Daily Telegraph* now allow their readers to set up their own blogs. The *Daily Telegraph*'s "My Telegraph" had an estimated 20,000 registered users in 2008 (Dodson 2008) – a reasonable success, though some way short of the 26 million UK users of Facebook (CheckFacebook 2010).

While the adaptation of news organisations to the digital media environment is creating new opportunities for citizens to engage in political debate and express their opinions, it has inevitably led to cost cutting. Timely, relevant, and challenging political

journalism is an expensive business, especially if it involves an investigative element. However, the revenues to support this kind of activity have been falling for several years. Almost all commercial news organisations have seen deep cuts and radical restructuring of staff and budgets (Davies, 2008). Writers and editors, in what were once powerhouses of in-depth reporting and commentary, such as the *Observer* and the *Sunday Times* now sit side-by-side with upstart individual or group blogs, most of which have a keen awareness of niche interests and very short news cycles. Many top political bloggers regularly produce articles that are indistinguishable from those published in the op-ed sections of newspapers. They have low overheads and some have large readerships and therefore self-sustaining advertising revenues (see Dale 2008). Freed from the bureaucracy of the professional newsroom, some bloggers are also able to conduct background investigations. An example was Paul Staines' long-running series of exposés about Peter Hain during 2007, culminating in damaging revelations about the origins of donations to Hain's campaign fund for the deputy leadership of the Labour Party. These were partly instrumental in the Hain's decision to resign his ministerial post in January 2008. This was widely reported as the British blogosphere's first political "scalp". Despite such developments, one of the key criticisms of bloggers is that they are "amateurs" who lack the professional training of journalists (Keen 2007). They have also been accused of being less discerning in what they publish, and as likely to disseminate unsubstantiated political gossip as much as genuine political news.

Yet it now seems clear that television's monopoly on "breaking news" is loosening, not only because online news sites are more prepared to take risks by publishing stories without the standards of verification usually required of professional journalists, but also because the viral nature of online communication makes it much more likely that news will spread across interpersonal networks often before official press releases. Some big political news stories now break first online and are picked up by television and print journalists who

obsessively follow their email, Twitter and blog feeds in the hunt for new leads. At the same time, however, some television and newspaper journalists, for example, the BBC's Political and Business Editors, Nick Robinson and Robert Peston, have cottoned on to this, and now often release their own "scoops" online, well before they officially file their stories or go into the newsroom to record a broadcast package for the evening news (Chadwick, forthcoming). It must also be borne in mind that the large, dedicated news organisations, particularly the BBC, but also Sky News, share vast amounts of content internally across their web and television divisions. This provides them with an ongoing structural advantage when it comes to breaking news.

While the British press and commercial broadcasters are certainly under pressure, the BBC is in a stronger position, largely as a result of the licence fee. Despite complaints of unfair competition, the BBC continues to build a sophisticated web presence which regularly gains 18 to 19 million monthly unique visitors. It has adopted many of the features used by other news organisations, such as columns with comments, message boards, chat rooms and email, and it also seeks to integrate citizen produced video into its news narratives, especially during exceptional events, such as the London tube bombings of 2005 or the G20 protests during 2009. In an era of cost cutting and downsizing in commercial media, the BBC may well come to play an even more important role as a source of news.

Transforming media management

A top-down model of political communication has tended to predominate in the UK. Indeed, the communication operation of the Blair administration (1997-2007) could be seen as the apotheosis of such an approach, with its aggressive strategy to market government and its

policies in the best possible light (Stanyer 2007). Yet this model has been gradually undermined by a series of spin scandals, by a press disenchanted with it as a method of media control, and by an audience increasingly fragmented and distrustful of government and its messages. During the closing stages of the Blair premiership in 2007, the then prime minister sought to distance himself from accusations of spin and “control freakery” and attempted to lay the blame on the news media’s neglect of policy and its obsession with political gossip and “feral” personal attacks (Blair 2007).

When he took over as prime minister, Brown, in an attempt to reconnect with voters, sought to capitalise on early momentum by seeking to establish what was heralded as a new communication strategy based upon the factual presentation of policy. Periodic attempts to publicly demonstrate that government communication had moved away from the era of spin were a key feature of the Brown premiership, as a series of high profile new appointments were presented to a largely sceptical audience of journalists and citizens. This metacommunication concerning how Downing Street went about repackaging its media operation was combined with what appear to have been genuine attempts to harness the power of new media, largely in response to David Cameron’s and the Conservatives’ growing success in experimenting with online video and social networking. But the merciless way in which the news media, old and new, exposed what it saw as Gordon Brown’s character flaws and the behind the scenes realities of the Number Ten media operation were constant themes.

The end of spin, or just more?

One of Brown’s first acts on taking office was his announcement of a shake-up of government media operations (Osborne 2007). Under Blair, Downing Street news management was a long-running story, despite Blair’s belated attempts to alter matters, and

by the time Brown took office, government communications were seen as untrustworthy by press and public alike (Phillis 2004). Perhaps the most significant act in Brown's revamp concerned the Downing Street media operation itself. Overall control was placed in the hands of a civil servant, Michael Ellam, and not a political appointee, as his predecessors, Alastair Campbell and David Hill, had been (UK House of Lords Committee on Communication 2009).

Ellam's appointment performed an important symbolic function. With him at the helm, Downing Street could claim that it had moved away from the worst excesses of the Blair years to a more neutral approach. However, the reality of Brown's media operation turned out to be rather different. During the spring of 2009, the leaking of an email exchange between Gordon Brown's special advisor, Damian McBride, and former Blair adviser turned Labour blogger, Derek Draper, shed an unflattering light on Downing Street's approach. In addition to the front-of-house widely publicised media management activities, there was a below stairs shadow operation, run by McBride. If the former was aimed at addressing the image of government communications, the latter was focused on ruthlessly attacking opponents in and outside government.

"Smeargate", as it became known, revealed a plan by Damian McBride to establish an ostensibly independent website called Red Rag, which would contain personalised attacks on leading Conservatives and their families. The fall out from this revelation and the earlier "Statsgate", when Number Ten and Home Office claims about falling knife crime were condemned by the UK Statistics Authority as misleading, merely served to reinforce the image of government communications as a continuation of the worst excesses of the Campbell years. In the aftermath of the McBride email scandal an ICM poll for the *Guardian* found that only 13 per cent of those surveyed said Brown had succeeded in restoring trust in government; 82 per cent thought that he had failed (Glover 2009). A poll for the *Sunday*

Telegraph found that a majority of the public thought the Brown government “more likely to resort to spin and dirty tricks than Blair’s” (Hennessy 2009).

The Draper-McBride affair is another good example of the interaction of old, new and renewed media. It involved a right wing blogger, Paul Staines, whose website, Guido Fawkes, in being predicated on innuendo, gossip and rumour, emulates tabloid journalism. But Staines’ “scoop” led to his being fêted as a beacon of truth by more mainstream Conservative bloggers. Draper and McBride’s misguided attempt to emulate the success of Staines’ approach by seeking to establish the Red Rag gossip site refracted new media through the lens of 1990s-style sleaze attacks and spin, and both individuals entirely neglected the broader point about right of centre blogs such as Conservative Home’s success in engaging and mobilising the Tory grassroots. Finally, it is important to stress that Staines did not publish the contents of the emails on his blog, but instead handed them to journalists in national newspapers: it was the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sunday Times* which publicly broke the stories, not the Guido Fawkes blog.

The Conservatives on the offensive: from communications to online social networks

David Cameron’s election as Conservative leader in December 2005 heralded a new strategic approach to communication for the party. Though widely ridiculed by television and newspaper journalists when it was launched to coincide with Cameron’s first speech to the party’s annual conference in September 2005, the Webcameron website established the new party leader’s informal, conversational approach to media. It also signalled to a growing community of online Conservative activists that the new leader was attempting to move the party away from a membership model to a supporter network model. The Conservative

blogging community continued to expand, and Conservative Home, founded in 2005, now acts as an important venue for interaction between the party elite and the rank and file.

Cameron’s approach was not, however, solely focused on new media. On winning the leadership election, his team, headed by marketing professional, Steve Hilton, undertook a major public relations offensive, rebranding the Conservative party in order to demonstrate to the media that it had been transformed from an uncaring “nasty party” as it was once described by former party chairman, Theresa May. The old party logo was ditched in favour of a green and blue oak tree to signify the party’s new green credentials. The new policy agenda was promoted in a series of high profile photo opportunities, including one which planted Cameron in the Arctic Circle to highlight the party’s stand on global warming. The Cameron team also assiduously sought to promote the leader’s personal characteristics to the British public. Talk-shows have been a key plank in this strategy, as table 2 reveals. While Cameron mostly featured on political talk shows, he also targeted popular entertainment formats, which reach far beyond the usual audiences for political programmes.

Table 2: Party leaders’ appearances on television talk shows, 2007-2010

| | Show | Type | Appearances | Year |
|---------------|------------------------------|----------------|-------------|------------|
| David Cameron | Alan Titchmarsh Show | Entertainment | 2 | 2009, 2010 |
| | Parkinson | Entertainment | 1 | 2007 |
| | BBC Breakfast | Breakfast News | 1 | 2008 |
| | GMTV | Breakfast News | 1 | 2009 |
| | Various political talk shows | Political | 10 | 2007-2009 |
| Gordon Brown | Piers Morgan’s | Entertainment | 1 | 2010 |

| | | | | |
|--|------------------------------|----------------|---|-----------|
| | Life Stories | | | |
| | BBC Breakfast | Breakfast News | 1 | 2008 |
| | GMTV | Breakfast News | 4 | 2008-2009 |
| | Various political talk shows | Political | 8 | 2007-2009 |

Source: Authors, compiled from Internet Movie Database and other sources.

The press have been an important target for the Cameron team. In 2007, to boost existing media operations, Cameron employed former *News of the World* editor Andrew Coulson. Coulson, once described as an “old fashioned Fleet Street bully” (Osborne, 2007), was hired for his popular news instincts and communication skills, as well as his contacts within the Murdoch empire. Stories of lavish Notting Hill dinner parties at which Cameron and Murdoch were guests hint at the Cameron team’s attempts to gain the support of the Murdoch press (see Osborne 2007). The Cameron operation has been helped by largely favourable coverage in the press, especially when compared with the treatment of previous Conservative leaders, William Hague, Ian Duncan Smith and Michael Howard.

Cameron’s assurance in both old and new media environments soon put Brown on the defensive. Number Ten’s response was to seek out new opportunities for promoting the prime minister’s personal qualities. This partly involved the tried and tested chat-show “sofa offensive” that had been perfected by Blair and, latterly, Cameron. Brown became a regular guest on GMTV, as well as on Andrew Marr’s high-profile Sunday morning show, and he started to give longer, more personally revealing interviews to national newspapers.

New media were also a key part of this personal rebranding. Internet marketing specialists were hired to upgrade the Number Ten website with a new range of web 2.0

features designed to allow visitors to keep in touch and interact with the prime minister and his senior staff. Visitors to the new site could now subscribe to Twitter and Flickr feeds, read a blog, watch short videos via YouTube, link to news stories through Delicious and Digg and to the Number Ten page on Facebook. One of the first highlights for subscribers to the Downing Street Twitter feed in 2008 was regular updates on Gordon Brown's visit to the US. By May 2010 <http://twitter.com/Number10gov> had 1.7 million followers, while Sarah Brown, the prime minister's wife and PR professional, had 1.1 million.

Brown and Cameron regularly used YouTube to make announcements, including Brown's damaging unilateral proposal for the reform of MPs' expenses during the summer of 2009. Number Ten introduced Prime Minister's "YouTube Question Time" in May 2008. The idea was that citizens could post their own video questions and the prime minister would answer, but of the 300 videos submitted to the first session only a few received a response (Prince 2008). The questions were pre-selected and steered away from controversial topics: one example was "what could you do for the country that nobody else could" (UK Prime Minister's Office, 2008b). This cautious approach may well explain why the site only had 7000 subscribers and around 800,000 channel views more than a year after its launch (UK Prime Minister's Office, 2008b).

Experiments with web 2.0 and the newly interactive website were designed to impress the mainstream news media by illustrating that Brown was, like Blair before him, a populist of sorts, and "in touch" with broader lifestyle changes in British society. It is this sense of being in touch that lay behind Downing Street's continued use of e-petitions. First established in November 2006, despite deep reservations on the part of some of Brown's allies, they remained on the Number Ten website through to the 2010 general election and they proved extremely popular. By the end of its first year, 29,000 petitions had been submitted and those accepted had received 5.8 million signatures from 3.9 million unique email addresses (UK

Prime Minister's Office, 2008a). During the winter of 2007, over 1.7 million people signed a petition urging the government to abandon its plans for a national system of road tolls. The government issued a cautious response, but the plan was later quietly shelved and the online mobilisation was clearly instrumental in changing government policy (Interview with Downing Street senior official, January 2008). This, however, proved to be the exception. In most cases, petitions were met with courteous but brief official explanations of why there will be no policy change, followed by pointers to other sources of information.

While the long term significance of these digital communication initiatives remains to be seen, news management strategies at the very top of British politics are changing. The new approach would appear to involve the parties using online social networking techniques that are increasingly used by many media organisations and private companies, and adapting a range of interactive features in the hope of attracting engaged followers.

Brown versus the press

Brown's premiership may well be best remembered for his toxic relationship with the traditional press. Relations between the news media and all governments undergo well documented changes, but Brown's honeymoon was particularly short. Press goodwill evaporated three months into his premiership after his U-turn on calling an early general election in the autumn of 2007. Despite a series of reshuffles and relaunches this hostility persisted through his tenure in office. Much of the anger with the administration was channelled through attacks on his personal characteristics and leadership style. The press were quick to highlight the awkwardness of his public performances and often sought to draw conclusions about his private behaviour. In June 2008, a leaked email conversation in which cabinet minister Peter Mandelson described Gordon Brown as failing to successfully mask

his insecurities received widespread coverage, but this angle reached a crescendo just weeks before the general election campaign, when the *Observer* journalist, Andrew Rawnsley, published a book including revelations of what were painted as Brown's personal failings, including his alleged bullying of Number Ten staff. Against this background it is easy to see why direct communication via the internet became more attractive to Number Ten. However, while the broadcasters were initially willing to recycle Brown's YouTube announcements, his performances were widely derided as inauthentic and increasingly became the focus of negative coverage. His use of YouTube, in short, backfired: it became another reason for both the news media and party dissidents to express criticism.

The period of the Brown premiership was replete with new innovations, new appointments and relaunches. There were various attempts to repackage the prime minister and he was eager to be seen to be breaking with the past. But in the end, he often fell back on the "old" tried and tested means of media manipulation and he was constantly fending off attacks from within his own party. Rumours of leadership challenges by members of the cabinet, particularly the foreign secretary, David Miliband, were never far from the front pages and this speculation was fuelled by a largely hostile press, creating vicious circles of negative coverage. Media operations under Brown were characterised by their own hybridity: the highly visible narrative for public consumption, where Brown emerges as a quasi-populist, in-touch reformer, providing a fresh start, using the latest web 2.0 tools; and the hidden methods, in which spin doctors were used to launch personal attacks on opponents. It was the exposure of this latter practice during the "Smeargate" affair that proved particularly damaging to Brown's reputation. This and its consequences for government credibility may prove to be the outgoing prime minister's long term legacy for British political communication.

The Conservatives fared rather better in establishing a coherent media strategy, one based on a blend of tried and tested command and control methods, the targeting of mainstream journalists, televisual “sofa offensives” but also well-integrated experiments with online engagement, such as Webcameron. The Conservatives were also much more successful in stimulating or simply aligning themselves with the growing number of grassroots activists engaged in mobilising for the party in online discussion forums and blogs. They also indirectly benefited from the damage inflicted by the influential right of centre Westminster gossip blogs (Iain Dale, Paul Staines), which professional journalists now monitor with religious dedication. After all, it was Labour’s desperation at being outmanoeuvred in the blogosphere which led to the ill-fated email exchange between Number Ten and Derek Draper concerning the establishment of a left wing version of Staines’ site. Finally, it needs to be borne in mind that the Conservatives enjoyed a remarkably favourable press environment. This began with the selection of David Cameron as party leader but the watershed came in 2009 when, on the eve of the Labour Party conference, the entire Murdoch press, including Britain’s best-selling newspaper, the *Sun*, publicly ditched Labour and switched their support to the Conservatives. By the time of the 2010 general election, only one national newspaper, the *Mirror*, declared unequivocal support for Labour.

The media and the 2010 general election campaign: the impact of the televised leaders’ debates

The general election of 2010 was one of the most closely-fought in living memory. It was, therefore, a campaign in which the media were always likely to play an important role. But few could have predicted just how important this role would turn out to be. The reason was

Britain's first live televised party leaders' debates. These three events dominated media commentary across all platforms – television, press, and online – for more than three weeks of the four-week campaign. We devote this final section to a discussion of their function and impact.

The terms of engagement for the debates emerged during the early part of 2010, after more than 70 individual rules had been hammered out in numerous meetings involving party strategists, journalists, and television producers. The agreed format required that questions were not presented to candidates in advance of the debate, that audience members would not applaud, shout, or heckle, that programme producers would not use cutaway shots explicitly focusing on the audience's reaction to statements, and that the debate moderator would not introduce material outside of the scope of the audience's questions (ITV et al 2010). The format's design was therefore politicised. During the campaign itself the rules became the subject of 700 complaints by party activists to the British broadcasting regulator, OFCOM (Sweeney 2010).

For each of the debates, which took place in Manchester, Bristol, and Birmingham, the three candidates stood side by side behind lecterns and faced the presenter and a small, handpicked, studio audience. The candidates gave tightly-scripted one-minute opening and closing statements, then responded to a range of questions from the audience. This was followed by periods of varying length during which the leaders directly engaged with each other. The first half of each debate was assigned a specific policy theme: home affairs, international affairs, and the economy.

As occurs in the United States, broadcast media and the press heavily trailed the television debates during the opening stages of the campaign and coverage ratcheted up during the first week of the campaign proper, culminating in two days of preview features on television and in the press. The entire week following the first debate was decisively shaped

by media reaction to those first 90 minutes in Manchester and this established a pattern for the reporting of the subsequent debates. Television's treatment was dominated by commentary from an assortment of "body language experts," "language experts," and opinion polling companies. Broadcast media also made much of "spin alley": a backstage space set aside for the post-debate huddles involving journalists, politicians and the parties' press officers. By the third debate, television news ran a great deal of behind-the-scenes material showing the parties' communications teams grouped with numerous journalists.

The scheduling of the debates had a crucial influence on their impact, creating the perfect conditions for a powerful cycle of coverage and commentary. All three ran on Thursday evenings, in television's hallowed 8pm-10pm prime time. This ensured close integration with the rhythms of the British media's regular politics, commentary, and opinion cycle, which now reaches a crescendo with the weekend newspapers and the Sunday political television shows. The television audience for the first debate, hosted by ITV, was 9.4 million. The second was hosted by Sky News, a satellite-only outlet, but it was also aired by the BBC News channel, ensuring a total audience of 4 million. The third, run by the BBC, was watched by 8.4 million (BBC News Online 2010a).

In keeping with Britain's hybrid media environment, live television coverage of the debates was accompanied by instant reaction based on snap online polls on the broadcasters' websites and small studio panels of citizens operating sentiment dials which generated real-time reaction "worm" charts overlaid on top of the live streaming video. Overall, during the first 90-minute debate, 184,000 individual Twitter messages were produced, as users structured their commentary and conversations using shared hashtags. The messages flooded in at an average rate of 29 per second, as 36,000 individual Twitter users engaged in real-time discussion (Tweetminster 2010). This continued the emergent role played by Twitter and Facebook as backchannels adopted by the politically interested to form ad hoc discursive

communities around major television events – a practice that first came to prominence during British National Party leader Nick Griffin’s controversial appearance on the BBC’s *Question Time* in October 2009 (Anstead and O’Loughlin 2010).

Within a few minutes of the end of the first debate, polls from YouGov/The Sun, ComRes/ITV, Sky News, Angus Reid, and Populus all showed Nick Clegg to be the clear winner. Conservative leader David Cameron came second in all but one poll (Isaby 2010). Following a weekend of remarkably positive broadcast and press coverage from newspapers across the entire political spectrum, the Liberal Democrats started the third week of the campaign with a huge boost in the opinion polls. Some polls placed them on an almost equal footing with the Conservatives; in most, Labour were unexpectedly relegated to third place (Young 2010). Even the *Sun* carried Clegg’s victory on its Monday morning front page (Dunn 2010). Broadcast journalists, too, began to exercise much greater scrutiny over the Liberal Democrats’ policy platform. Suddenly, the election had become a genuine three-party contest.

The increase in support for the Liberal Democrats greatly unsettled the Conservative-supporting newspapers, especially the *Mail*, the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*, who were torn between reflecting the rise of Clegg – clearly a major political story with a popular grassroots narrative – or turning their fire on the Liberal Democrats. This tension was resolved in a couple of days. Once it became clear that “Cleggmania” was not likely to dissolve in the short term, the right-wing press turned, producing torrents of critical coverage in the run up to the second debate. The *Mail* ran an extraordinary series of stories on Clegg, one suggesting that the Liberal Democrats’ leader had uttered a “Nazi slur” on Britain in 2002 when he had suggested that victory in the second world war had made it more difficult for the British to accept that other European countries enjoyed greater prosperity (Shipman 2010). The night before the second televised leaders’ debate, the *Telegraph* announced that

its debate-day front page would feature what it claimed was an investigative scoop: a report that Clegg, before he had become party leader, had received party donations from three businessmen directly into his personal bank account (Winnett and Swaine 2010). The *Telegraph* had trawled through the archive of documents it had bought in order to run its months-long series of exposés on MPs' expenses in mid-2009. Clegg was given a chance to respond to the story before it published and he issued a statement saying that he had used the money to pay for a member of staff and that these donations were reported in the parliamentary register of members' interests.

But during the morning of the second debate there unfolded an extraordinary series of events. As news of the *Telegraph*'s "scoop" reverberated through media and online networks, it became obvious that a large proportion of journalists—on both right and left—were sceptical of the *Telegraph*'s front-page story. By mid-morning, a satirical online flash campaign had emerged. Tens of thousands of Twitter users sardonically added the hashtag "#nickcleggsfault" to their status updates. These messages ranged from political observations to ludicrous statements such as "We've run out of houmous #nickcleggsfault," "Lunch meeting was cancelled at the last minute. So obviously #nickcleggsfault," "Have hairy toes, #nickcleggsfault". By the middle of the day this had become the third most popular shared hashtag, not just among the 7.5 million Twitter users in the UK, but the entirety of the service's 105 million registered global users. Suddenly the *Telegraph* was thrown on the defensive. Sensing that the Clegg donations story was not being as well-received as he had perhaps hoped, its Deputy Editor, Benedict Brogan, took the highly unusual step of issuing a defence on the paper's political blog. The story was dead.

Arguably the most important single development in the British media's treatment of politics since the arrival of television during the 1959 election race, the televised leaders' debates altered the course of the campaign, propelling Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg,

into the media spotlight as his party rose in the opinion polls immediately following a “winning” performance in the first debate. While the surge fell away during the final week of the campaign and did not directly translate into seats gained for the party on polling day, “Cleggmania” arguably had three important effects. First, the Manchester debate established that precious commodity – campaign momentum – for the Liberal Democrats. The Conservatives and Labour were on the back foot until very late in the race. Brown was a consistent loser in the media commentary and the snap polls following all three debates. Cameron was widely perceived to have disappointed during the first two events. He staged a strong recovery during the third, but this came just a few full campaigning days before polling day. Second, because the Liberal Democrats ended the campaign with a three or four percentage point increase in their share of the popular vote, when compared with their position in the pre-election opinion polls, they avoided being wiped out in some seats by the powerful electoral swing to the Conservatives. Their total of 57 seats could easily have been substantially lower had they not benefited from the boost provided by the debates. Third, Clegg’s strong performance enhanced his overall credibility with the media and the public, smoothing the Liberal Democrats’ transition into coalition government with the Conservatives on May 11.

Conclusion

As this paper has shown, the political communication environment in Britain is in transition. While broadcasting still remains at the heart of national political life, the nature of mediated politics is evolving rapidly and in directions that are sometimes contradictory, sometimes complementary. The election leaders’ debates reinforced television’s predominance, though

as we saw above, even those events were accompanied by a panoply of online activism, some of it facilitated by the broadcasters themselves.

The way citizens consume political information is changing in the new digital environment. As use of the internet and mobile technologies has grown, so they have become an important port of call for those seeking political news. Audiences have never had access to so much political information through such a variety of news outlets. At the same time, these technologies provide new opportunities for audiences to engage in political activities, express their opinions and contribute content in historically unprecedented ways. The evidence suggests that growth in the numbers taking advantage of these interactive opportunities is likely to continue.

There are, however, cautionary themes. Concerns about the stratified nature of the digitised public sphere remain. Those that take advantage of new technologies to participate in politics remain a minority and still tend to be wealthy, well educated and younger. Second, this new communicative digital space has also impacted upon politicians and media organisations, creating opportunities, but at the same time new uncertainties. Established news outlets remain a visible presence but face financial pressures. While news organisations have responded innovatively, competition, shrinking audiences, and lower revenues – especially from advertising – have negatively affected their resource bases. There have often been no alternatives to cost cutting. The public service provider, the BBC, has fared well up to now, but it too is likely to face future financial constraints, and this may well have implications for the quality of news citizens receive.

Politicians and their strategists have been forced to adapt to a rapidly pluralising digital sphere. Party leaders have promoted themselves using a range of interactive features to try and connect with citizens, albeit with varying degrees of success. While the internet has opened up new ways for politicians to interact with the public, it has also posed a series of

challenges. Some aspects of the online information environment have proved difficult to control. The fast-moving news cycles require constant monitoring and are significantly more difficult to direct (Chadwick, forthcoming). The public spread of gossip and rumour is perhaps more common place. While political elites have been keen to be seen embracing new media, they are understandably less keen to be seen reverting to necessary but dubious methods of control. The leaked emails that led to “Smeargate” reveal, not only that some old command and control techniques of the broadcast era are still hugely important, but also that the new media environment is inherently porous. Understanding the complex new political communication environment in the twenty-first century remains a challenge, but one to which students of politics must rise if they are to fully comprehend the nature of British democracy.

References

- Anstead, N., and O'Loughlin, B. (2010). *The Emerging Viewertariat: Explaining Twitter Responses to Nick Griffin's Appearance on BBC Question Time: University of East Anglia School of Political, Social and International Studies Working Paper*. Norwich: University of East Anglia.
- BBC News Online. (2010a). 8.4 Million Watch Final Prime Ministerial Debate. *BBC News Website*. April 30, 2010. Retrieved May 10, 2010, from http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/election_2010/8653551.stm
- BBC News Online. (2010b). The Independent Bought by Lebedev for £1. *BBC News Online*. March 25, 2010. Retrieved May 25, 2010, from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/8587469.stm>
- Blair, T. (2007). Full text: Blair on the Media. *BBC News Online*. June 12, 2007. Retrieved July 7, 2009, from http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6744581.stm
- Boulianne, S. (2009). Does Internet Use Affect Engagement? A Meta-Analysis of Research. *Political Communication*, 26(2), 193-211.
- Brundidge, J., and Rice, R. E. (2008). Political Engagement Online: Do the Information Rich Get Richer and the Like-Minded More Similar? In A. Chadwick and P. N. Howard (Eds.), *The Handbook of Internet Politics* (pp. 144-56). London: Routledge.
- Chadwick, A. (2006). *Internet Politics: States, Citizens, and New Communication Technologies*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chadwick, A. (2009). Web 2.0: New Challenges for the Study of E-Democracy in an Era of Informational Exuberance. *I/S: Journal of Law and Policy for the Information Society*, 5(1), 9-41.
- Chadwick, A. (forthcoming). The Political Information Cycle in a Hybrid News System: the

- British Prime Minister and the “Bullygate” Affair. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 16.
- CheckFacebook. (2010). CheckFacebook: Facebook Marketing Statistics, Demographics, Reports, and News. *CheckFacebook Website*. May 24, 2010. Retrieved May 24, 2010, from <http://www.checkfacebook.com>
- DMGT. (2010). Investor Day Presentation. *DMGT Website*. April 19, 2010. Retrieved May 25, 2010, from <http://www.dmgt.co.uk/events/investor-day>
- di Gennaro, C., and Dutton, W. H. (2006). The Internet and the Public: Online and Offline Political Participation in the United Kingdom. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 59(2), 299-313.
- Dale, I. (2008). Mining for Gold in the Blogosphere. *British Journalism Review*, 19(4), 31-36.
- Davies, N. (2008). *Flat Earth News: An Award-Winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in the Global Media*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Dodson, S. (2008) Platform for Free Speech... Or Hate? *The Guardian Website*. May 19, 2008. Retrieved May 10, 2010, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/may/19/pressandpublishing.telegraphmediagroup>
- Dunn, T. N. (2010). It's Lib Dems in Front. *The Sun*, April 19.
- Gibson, R. K., Lusoli, W., and Ward, S. J. (2005). Online Participation in the UK: Testing a Contextualised Model of Internet Effects. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 7(4), 561-83.
- Glover, J. (2009). Tories Winning the Battle for Economic Credibility, Poll Suggests. *The Guardian Website*. April 20, 2009. Retrieved May 25, 2010, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/apr/20/icm-poll-conservatives-ahead-on-economy>

- Goad, R. (2008). Blog traffic Reaches All Time High. *Hitwise Website*. June 10. Retrieved May 24, 2010, from http://weblogs.hitwise.com/robin-goad/2008/06/uk_blog_traffic_reaches_all_time_high.html
- Hoskins, A., and O'Loughlin, B. (2007). *Television and Terror: Conflicting Times and the Crisis of News Discourse*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Isaby, J. (2010). Brown Trailing in the Post-Debate Polls. *Conservativehome Website*. April 15. Retrieved April 15, 2010, from <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2010/04/brown-trailing-in-first-two-postdebate-opinion-polls-.html>
- Hennessy, P. (2009). Damian McBride Email Smears: Gordon Brown Pays the Price. *Daily Telegraph*. April 18.
- ITV, Sky, and BBC. (2010). Programme Format Agreed By All Parties 1st March 2010. *ITV Website*. April 15. Retrieved April 29, 2010, from <http://www.itv.com/utills/cached/common/ProgrammeFormat2.pdf>
- Keen, A. (2007). *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet Is Killing Our Culture and Assaulting Our Economy*. London: Nicholas Brealey.
- Kiss, J. (2007a). Guardian Unlimited Extends Lead. *The Guardian Website*. November 22. Retrieved May 25, 2010, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2007/nov/22/abcs.digitalmedia>
- Kiss, J. (2007b). Sun Website Draws Record Traffic. *The Guardian Website*. September 27. Retrieved May 25, 2010, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2007/sep/27/digitalmedia.pressandpublishing>
- Kiss, J. (2009a). ABCe: Guardian.co.uk, Telegraph.co.uk and Mail Online Top 30 Million Users. *The Guardian Website*. October 22. Retrieved May 24, 2010, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/oct/22/abce-guardian-telegraph-mail-online>

- Kiss, J. (2009b). Sun Online Overtakes Four Rivals to Become the Most Popular Newspaper Website. *The Guardian Website*. March 26. Retrieved May 25, 2010, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/mar/26/sun-online-most-popular-newspaper-website>
- Kiss, J. (2010). ABCe: Mail holds on to UK Newspaper Website Lead. *The Guardian Website*. March 25. Retrieved May 24, 2010, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/mar/25/abce-february-2010>
- Luft, O. (2008). ABCe: Credit Crunch Boosts Quality Newspapers Websites. *The Guardian Website*. October 23. Retrieved May 25, 2010, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/oct/23/abcs-digitalmedia>
- Norris, P., and Curtice, J. (2007). Getting the Message Out: A Two-Step Model of the Role of the Internet in Campaign Communication Flows During the 2005 British General Election. *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, 4(4), 3-13.
- Osborne, P. (2007). Clean-up in Spin City. *British Journalism Review*, 18(4), 11-18
- OXIS. (2009). *The Internet in Britain: 2009*. Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute.
- Parry, G., Moyser, G., and Day, N. (1992). *Political Participation and Democracy in Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Phillis, B. (2004). *An Independent Review of Government Communications*. London: HMSO.
- Prince, R. (2008). Gordon Brown Starts YouTube Question Time. *Daily Telegraph Website*. May 19. Retrieved May 25, 2010, from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1986581/Gordon-Brown-starts-YouTube-Question-Time.html?source=rss>
- Shipman, T. (2010). Nick Clegg's Nazi Slur on Britain. *The Daily Mail Website*. April 22. Retrieved April 22, 2010, from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/election/article-1267921/GENERAL-ELECTION-2010-Nick-Clegg-Nazi-slur-Britain.html>

- Smith, A. (2008). New Man or Son of the Manse? Gordon Brown as Reluctant Celebrity Father. *British Politics* 3(4), 566-575.
- Stanyer, J. (2007). *Modern Political Communication: Mediated Politics in Uncertain Times*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Stanyer, J. (2008). Web 2.0 and the Transformation of News and Journalism. In A. Chadwick and P. N. Howard (Eds.), *The Handbook of Internet Politics* (pp. 201-213). New York: Routledge.
- Stratton, A., and Wintour, P. (2009). James Purnell Quits Cabinet and Calls on Gordon Brown to Stand Aside Now. *The Guardian Website*. June 5. Retrieved May 24, 2010, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/jun/04/james-purnell-resigns-gordon-brown-cabinet>
- Sweney, M. (2008). Ofcom Backs ITV Plans for Regional News Cuts. *The Guardian Website*. September 25. Retrieved July 7, 2009, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/sep/25/ofcom.itv>
- Sweney, M. (2010). Leaders' Debate: Nearly 700 Complain to OFCOM Over Treatment of Nick Clegg. *The Guardian Website*. April 28. Retrieved May 13, 2010, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/apr/28/leaders-debate-complaints>
- The Guardian. (2009). Investigate Your MP's Expenses. *The Guardian Website*. Retrieved July 31, 2009, from <http://mps-expenses.guardian.co.uk>
- The Guardian. (2010). ABCs. *The Guardian Website*. Retrieved May 24, 2010, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/abcs>
- Tweetminster. (2010.). The Leaders' Debate. *Tweetminster Website*. April 15, 2010. Retrieved April 30, 2010, from <http://tweetminster.co.uk/posts/index/page:3>
- UK House of Lords Select Committee on Communication. (2009). *Communication Committee First Report: Government Communications*. December 10. Retrieved May 25, 2010 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200809/ldselect/ldcomuni/7/702.htm>

- UK Office for National Statistics. (2009). *Internet Access 2008: Households and Individuals*. Cardiff: Office for National Statistics. Retrieved May 11, 2009, from <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/iahi0808.pdf>.
- UK Office of Communications. (2005). *Viewers and Voters: Attitudes to Television Coverage of the 2005 General Election*. London: HMSO.
- UK Office of Communications. (2007). *The Communications Market 2007*. London: HMSO.
- UK Office of Communications. (2008). *The Communications Market 2008*. London: HMSO.
- UK Office of Communications. (2009). *Citizens' Digital Participation*. London: HMSO. Retrieved May 11, 2009, from http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrssi/cdp/main.pdf
- UK Office of Fair Trading. (2008). *Newspaper and Magazine Distribution in the United Kingdom*. London: HMSO.
- UK Office of Fair Trading. (2009). *Review of the Local and Regional Media Merger Regime: Final Report*. London: HMSO.
- UK Prime Minister's Office. (2008a). E-petitions: Facts, Figures and Progress. *UK Prime Minister's Website*. March 6. Retrieved October 10, 2008, from <http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page11051>
- UK Prime Minister's Office. (2008b). Ask the PM: Answered!. *UK Prime Minister's Website*. July 10. Retrieved October 10, 2008, from <http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page16293>
- Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., and Brady, H. E. (1995). *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Winnett, R., and Swaine, J. (2010). Nick Clegg, the Lib Dem Donors and Payments into his Private Account; Exclusive Donor Cash Mystery. *The Daily Telegraph*. April 22.

Young, T. (2010). Tonight's Polls: Lib Dem Surge Holds Up. *The Daily Telegraph Website*.

April 19. Retrieved April 19, 2010, from

<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/tobyyoung/100035455/tonights-polls-lib-dem-surge-holds-up>