

Election '10: the media matters but which media?

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Whose election is this? That was the question I am left with at the end of a fascinating week where I have heard directly from a top [Labour campaign strategist](#), [Welsh voters](#), and [LSE political pundits](#). If you believe the mainstream media it is in the hands of the spin doctors and journalists. The pollsters and professors say it's 'motorway man' in the marginals. I am not so sure.

As top political columnist Andrew Pierce argued at the Pierhead Sessions in Cardiff, we haven't had a close election for a long time and so we are rather excited about this one. The media matters this time. But which media? Andrew's Mail or the Twitter/blogosphere?

Normally I would argue that campaigns - even long long campaigns such as we are currently experiencing - don't shift electoral contests in the UK. So any media effect is even more marginal in the short term. Not this time.

Media may make the difference in 2010. Firstly, it will frame the narrative in more general terms. But it might actually swing the key marginal votes in the crucial days leading up to polling day. This is partly because the difference between the parties appears to be narrowing.

But it is also because the state of opinion appears to be so unstable. As the LSE's Simon Hix's analysis shows, the polls give us a sense of what will happen but not a firm prediction. He suggests that there is a 67% chance of a hung parliament. But he also acknowledges that there is an unpredictable factor. How will the media and voters react to the prospect of a hung parliament itself?

That instability is a result of wider social and economic forces: the decline of political parties, the economic upheaval, the growth of individualism and lack of deference. People don't trust politicians and they don't trust journalists.

And yet their election will be more mediated than ever before.

But which media?

I spend most of my time analysing how journalism has changed because of new technologies and new public behaviour and social conditions. I have no doubt that this is having effects on reporting of politics and the conduct of politics and perhaps public attitudes. But here's the headline news for election 2010:

Mainstream Media is Back.

Firstly, our ailing newspapers are reasserting some political impact. The fact that the Sun has switched suggests there's some life left in the proprietorial dog yet. And of course, as producers of online content they will actually have more contact with voters/readers in more ways than at any election before.

However, the stats tell us that TV is still dominant. And the BBC will be especially dominant with the decline in ITV news. But don't forget how important Sky is - not for its audience size but for the fact that it (and News 24) is on around the clock in every MP's office and in every newsroom.

Then there will be the TV debates. The prospect of which is thrilling all media folk and making the political campaigners rather excited too. As Douglas Alexander suggested at the LSE, those three events will dominate the campaign for about nine days: the preview day, the day of combat and the aftermath.

However, the TV will be watched by millions with email, Twitter, Facebook and blogs. So the debates will be significant for the way they are networked. Their effect will be much more dependent on a complex set of interactions over different platforms including a lot of interaction from the public as well as the parties.

So in the coming months you should look out for the viral video and the guerrilla journalist ambush. But I am not sure they will define the campaign unless they connect into wider concerns.

Yes, enjoy the super-service of the wonkathon websites such as Politicshome, BBC Online, Leftfootforward, ConservativeHome, Labour List, and lots of others. There is going to be some fantastic upmarket policy material online. That will have an impact on campaigners and the more thoughtful journalists. But it will have an indirect impact on the voters via mainstream media.

Most people will get most of their political information and impression from mainstream TV news. Nick Robinson's appearances on the 10 O'Clock News will matter more than his blog. But the fact that he has both symbolises how networked this election news will be.

But I do have one fear. Because this election is so up for grabs and because the media and opinion environment is so unstable, we might see the campaigns clamp down. This might be the most defensive, boring, inhibited and unexpansive election ever.

It's up to us all – and especially those networking into mainstream media - to make sure that isn't the case.