

TV Is The New Media For This Election: Connecting People & Politicians

This post was originally posted on [Charlie Beckett's blog](#) on April 18th.

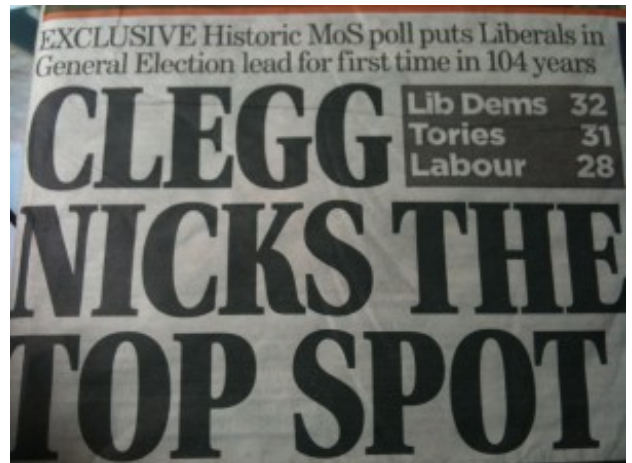
[Charlie Beckett](#) is the Director of POLIS.



This is a weird election, especially from a media point of view. [As I predicted](#), it is the TV election, but I hadn't realised just how radically that might turn out.

I have just spent half a day combing through the Sunday papers as part of a research for a book chapter on the 2010 election media. There is the usual partisan stuff. The mind-numbingly infantile sycophancy of Jane Clinton in the Sunday Express deserves a special mention in that regard. But generally, there is some excellent analysis (eg Rawnsley and D'Ancona) amidst the cheerleading and mud-slinging.

The Lib Dem rise in the polls has given the political journalists a real campaign story but the election has been blown off the front pages by the volcano and the flight ban (along with Britain's Got Talent, of course). But what's interesting about the coverage is the growing realisation that the TV debates have impacted on the power of the newspapers and the party spin-doctors to control the message.



Normally the political PR people and the newspaper columnists, proprietors and editors are pretty good at 'framing' the issues for a campaign. TV newsrooms tended to take their lead from print. But this time it is TV that is setting the agenda and providing the momentum, albeit through the debates rather than the news itself. Thursday's TV Debate has unleashed an unpredictable variable that is impacting directly and immediately on what is a very 'soft' electorate.

Commentators in the Sundays across the political spectrum have realised that the TV debates allow the voters – particularly the interested swing voters – to make up their own minds about the political leaders. Instead of taking note of the highly partisan newspaper journalists and the lines they are fed from the Parties, the curious voter can watch the debates and form their own judgements on the basis of what the candidates say and how they perform.

This kind of 'disintermediated' communication is usually thought of as an Internet phenomenon. But as [Michael Cockerill's excellent documentary](#) on the history of TV debates reminded us – mainstream broadcast media can do it, too, albeit without interactivity.

This is going to make it tough for David Cameron to regain the initiative. Most of the conservative-supporting Sundays called on him to 'find a game-changer'. They urged him to warn the voters that 'voting orange lets in brown'. They want 'Cam' to connect personally to those vital undecideds. But the problem is they are doing their own connecting via the TV screens.

Of course, the media is not the most important factor when voters decide. In the end, I think Alastair Campbell was right in his tweet today (@campbellclaret):

"election so far – first NICs, then Nick, tomorrow back to unchanged fundamentals – choice of competing futures, economy key"

The Lib Dem surge is just that – a surge that will retreat. It is not a flow of lava that will leave the other parties buried under a new political landscape.

However, in a tight election where the margin between majority and No Overall Control is so tight, the TV Debate Effect may make the crucial difference. In media terms it has reminded us of the power of direct communications. The only surprise is that it was good Old Fashioned TV rather than the Internet that brought the politicians to the people.