

# Time to lift the curtain on this stage-managed election?

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2017-5-3

The political correspondents are revolting. In the face of a campaign that is painfully stage-managed, slogan sterile and encounter-free, the journalists are taking to their in-house forum (Twitter) to moan about the mundane manipulation by the two main parties. In this long campaign will this change the political dynamics?

[See the end of this article for updates]

The nadir of spin control came this week with the Tories literally [locking local journalists out of a visit](#) by Theresa May to a Cornish factory.



Well done to the [Cornwall Live](#) for protesting this at great length in their witty and informed live blog.

But this is endemic. The Conservatives are repeating Lynton Crosby's formula from 2015 of appearances by their leader in front of invited party member audiences in controlled settings where journalists, let alone the real voters, are either excluded or kept under tight control.

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12:09

  94% 



Tweet





**Owen Bennett** ✓  
@owenjbennett



Tory aide won't let go of the microphone as [@JasonFarrellSky](#) asks a question, to stop him asking a follow-up



Tweet your reply



Journalists from all sectors are complaining, but the broadcasters, who actually have the visual power to expose this are not revealing on screen what they complain about on Twitter.

But in such a long campaign perhaps the parties are starting to worry that they must cut the hacks some slack. Hence, Theresa May's somewhat uneventful door-knocking episode in Aberdeen. And, of course, the media, desperate for a Gordon Brown 'bigoted woman' style gaffe, attack her for going slightly off-script.



If the news media want a more relaxed, open campaign then [they have to stop jumping on every little glitch](#).

Labour has spotted an opportunity to look more accessible. When I visited a Corbyn speech his minders were very solicitous to the media and Dawn Butler, Corbyn's compere, positively begged journalists to ask more questions. Previously, Corbyn has said he will ignore mainstream media and hope that social media will get his message out. He seems to realise that isn't working.





But if Labour are serious about engaging whole-heartedly with the news media, then why not invite his more feral critics in the right-wing press to come along?

Compare all this with the full blooded across the table French presidential TV debate which gave both politicians the chance to display their characters and their policies tête-à-tête.



I am pessimistic about the chances of proper UK election TV debates. May is too far ahead to bother, and I think Labour realise that Corbyn simply hasn't got what it takes to win an on-screen battle. The only hope is that the parties realise that in this extended campaign they need to fill the gaping void.

The UK news media should adopt guerilla-style tactics.

Journalists should show the stage-management and mention it in all articles. It's the same as when you are embedded with the military or subject to reporting constraints by an authoritarian regime. Tell your audience how your journalism is being restricted.

The news media should also argue more forcibly for greater access, for the public as well as themselves. They must think increasingly creatively about ways to engage the voters in the issues, even where the politicians stay silent. We've already sleep-walked into Brexit, the least we can do is have a conversation about what the UK will look like after we've left the EU.

I suspect that it might be the right-wing euro-sceptic press that break ranks. If they think May is engineering a massive majority so she has room to compromise on Brexit, then things might get tasty.

An election campaign is not just a horse race about who wins. Let's be honest, all bets are now off. But this period is also a chance for us to talk to each about values and policies. The public need to have some sense of ownership of the process. Democracy must be seen to be done. Boredom is the ultimate enemy of politics and all of us – politicians, journalists and citizens must fear that above everything else.

\*\*\*\*\*Updates\*\*\*\*\*

9.5.17

Just when Labour looked like it was benefiting from being relatively open while the Tories clamped down even harder, they screw it up by restricting access to BuzzFeed. [Here's BF's version of events](#). It seems Corbyn simply can't answer difficult questions.

Meanwhile, Channel 4 News' political correspondent Michael Crick has been alleging further constraints on reporters at events with Theresa May:



**Michael Crick** ✓  
@MichaelLCrick



Only pre-arranged journalists get questions at May events. Those chosen asked by May aide to state Qs in advance



09/05/2017, 13:07

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