

How the TV debates were organised in #GE2015 and their impact: the full story

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I wrote the chapter on broadcasting for the [Cowley/Kavanagh Election 2015 book](#). Here is the section on the negotiations that led to the TV 'debates' and their impact – for the full chapter and the authoritative record of all aspects of that campaign, [get the book here!](#)

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In this election broadcasting tried to reflect a changing political landscape. Television in particular was challenged to adjust to the impact of the smaller parties such as the Greens, UKIP and the SNP. Editorially, broadcasters had to cover a diverse range of issues of varying degrees of scale, importance and relevance to different audiences. All journalists, but most obviously broadcasters, found themselves limited in scope by the unprecedented levels of party stage-management. There were the usual concerns about delivering impartiality and information but perhaps the hardest task for the broadcast journalists was to fulfil their key democratic functions at election time: to engage the public and to hold politicians to account. The strategic reluctance of the main parties to conduct more open campaigns meant that the desire for dramatic broadcasting to match the significance of the stakes was frustrated. Like all journalists, broadcasters were also misled by erroneous polling to construct a false narrative around the relative success of the two main parties. Indeed, the way the campaign was conducted and reported by all news media was arguably a distraction from any serious attempt to have an honest, critical argument about the big issues such as the deficit, welfare, national identity and the nature of British society.

British broadcasters are required by law to be impartial and have regulatory codes covering their output during election campaign periods.^[2] This is tricky at the best of times, but it was made more complex because of the rise of UKIP, the surge in support after the 2014 independence referendum for the SNP and the continued niche popularity of the Green Party. This more plural political context provided a technical problem in the negotiations for the TV election debates. There was also a more direct political context for the regulated public service broadcasters of having to deal with the politicians from the major parties who could be deciding their organisations fate after the election. This was most keenly felt at the BBC which faces a renewal of its Charter in 2016. All parties subjected the BBC to regular complaints which its Director of News, James Harding found 'astonishing' in their 'ferocity'.^[3] BBC Political Editor Nick Robinson, said that at one point on the campaign trail he was told the Prime Minister had threatened to 'close down the BBC'.^[4] This might just be part of the rough and tumble of media/political relations, but it was also a background factor in the struggle for journalistic independence – and in the extensive discussions about the TV debates.

Debate negotiations

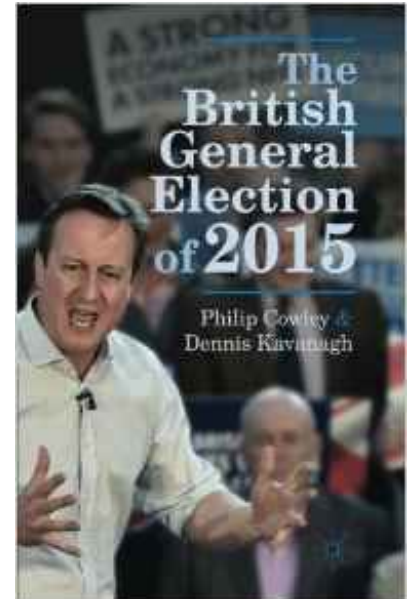
In 2010 the TV debates formed 'the spine' of the campaign. [5] The three 90-minute leaders programmes reached an average audience of 22.5 million and shaped the rhythm of the campaign. They created a dominant dynamic in a period where a sense of momentum and direction of travel is seen as important for the 'optics' or public perception of the political struggle. So whether and how they would happen in 2015 became an important (pre-) campaign issue in its own right.

The broadcasters assumed that the default position was to repeat the structure of 2010, albeit with some adjustments. However, there were external pressures for further reform. The downside of the 2010 debates was that their novelty and timing meant they had monopolised media attention. Each dominated the media space for three days. They probably did not 'suck the life out of the campaign' as alleged by David Cameron. Indeed, the strong viewing figures for each of the lengthy programmes suggested a high degree of public interest. But they unbalanced the campaign. There was a growing sense that the programmes had to change in style as well as substance to reflect the new political realities. However, discussions between the broadcasters and politicians were always going to be uncertain because no binding agreement on process or aims was made following 2010.

Although there were some preliminary discussions early in the parliament, the most important player, the Conservatives, put off detailed talks until after the 2014 party conferences. The political context of 2010 had been favourable because it was in the interest of all party leaders to take part, including the Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown who was lagging behind in the polls. But by 2014 the incumbent David Cameron had more to risk than the various challengers. The Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg received an opinion poll boost from his TV debate appearances in 2010 and that precedent meant that in 2015 the Tories feared sharing a platform with rivals. Any kind of publicity would be good publicity for Ed Miliband, Nick Clegg and Nigel Farage. This would distract from Conservative campaign advisor Lynton Crosby's strategy of a relentless focus on the economy and the choice between Cameronian 'competence' and Milibandian 'chaos'.

It was understandable tactics for the Conservatives to resist raising the profile of their competitors. However, Cameron's long track record of support for the principle of TV debates and the political risk of looking weak if he ducked out. As late as April 2014 Cameron said "I've just always believed that these need to happen. It's good for democracy". [6] Despite the widespread belief at the time that the Conservatives were trying to force the collapse of the debate discussions, his team insist they always assumed there would be debates but reserved their right to delay a final decision in an effort to secure the best format from their point of view. Labour, however, were very keen to participate, almost whatever the format. They saw the debates as a way of raising Miliband's profile and countering what they saw as the misleading impression so many people had of him. But they also had a preference for as tightly focussed a debate as possible, and especially one that would allow them to attack David Cameron's record. 'He doesn't like to have to defend his record', said one of those involved in Labour debate preparation. 'Every time we'd practiced a hand-to-head [debate], we'd found we could really get stuck in to him'.

In their opening formal proposal on 13 October 2014 the broadcasters produced a more flexible format than 2010 to reflect the new context of the campaign. [7] It was designed to respond to the core political reality that either David Cameron or Ed Miliband would be Prime Minister but it also sought to recognise the special status of the Lib Dems as the coalition government partner and the rise of UKIP, both in the opinion polls and the fact that it had a growing number of MEPs and councillors. Nigel Farage had taken part in two debates with Lib Dem leader Nick Clegg in the run up to the 2014 European elections which acted as a taster, if not precedent for his inclusion.



The proposed format was also created to reflect more accurately the range of mainstream broadcast media. Channel 4 and Sky News were to share one of the programmes and all of them were to be online. A detailed schedule was published with programmes planned for 2, 16 and 30 April in a 2-3-4 structure (though the actual order would be decided by lot): Cameron and Miliband; Cameron, Miliband and Clegg; and Cameron, Miliband, Clegg and Farage. Former BBC Newsnight presenter Jeremy Paxman was lined up by Channel 4 to chair a 'debate' between the two main leaders with Sky's Kay Burley as the anchor of the programme who would steer the 'post-debate analysis'.

The second debate would be produced by the BBC with David Dimbleby chairing. The third debate would be chaired by ITV News's Julie Etchingham. Unlike in 2010, when each of the debates focused on a different policy area, this time each debate would cover all subject areas. They would all be in front of audiences selected by the broadcasters. The audience would submit questions to be put to the politicians. The broadcasters promised to work with social media organisations like Twitter and Facebook to ensure the widest possible audience engagement. Each broadcaster would also make their debate available live to all other media outlets.

The difficulty of including UKIP but not the Green Party, who already had one MP and were at around 4% in the opinion polls, was immediately raised, and not just by the Greens. The SNP, the Northern Irish unionists and Plaid Cymru also made claims that their status was of UK-wide significance. The Conservatives accused the broadcasters of naivety in thinking that they could include a party that was widely seen as a threat to the Tory vote (UKIP) but not one that was more a threat to Labour (Greens). Equally predictably, some newspapers, still smarting from the dominance of broadcast in 2010, felt that they distracted from the 'real' campaign and fostered 'presidential' style politics. Many pointed out the harsh political logic that the Conservatives had no self-interest in taking part. Others argued that, for all their flaws, the debates attracted public attention to the campaign and tested the mettle of the politicians.

On 8 January the broadcasting regulator Ofcom ruled that UKIP was a 'major' party for the purposes of election coverage in England and Wales but that the Greens were not.^[8] This decision was based on a detailed consultation and a thorough analysis of a series of indices such as vote share, MPs and opinion polls. But, in short, it was decided that there had to be a cut off and the Greens were on the wrong side of it. The nationalist parties were to continue as before to get major party treatment in their own countries. However, Ofcom could only advise the broadcasters about the minimum requirements in this respect and the overall need for fair treatment. So the broadcasters were still free to think again for themselves when the next political initiative opened up.

The debate about the debates came to a head during the 14 January Prime Minister's Question Time. Labour leader Ed Miliband taunted the Prime Minister with selected quotes from Cameron supporting TV debates and their role in democracy.^[9] Cameron's response was that it was impossible to have the Lib Dems and UKIP involved but not the Greens. As the Prime Minister put it: 'Why is Labour so frightened of debating with the Greens?' This was going beyond Ofcom but it allowed him to be in favour of debating while putting up yet another obstacle. The broadcasters side-stepped that by adapting their offer to include the Greens but they felt that meant the SNP should also be involved. And if one nationalist party was involved, they felt obliged to have Plaid Cymru too. Logically that might have also meant the Democratic Unionist Party but it was argued that the Northern Ireland campaign was historically and politically separate.

The new proposal was still for three programmes, on 2, 16 and 30 April. But this time they would be made up of two seven-way debates on the BBC and ITV plus a head to head between Cameron and Miliband jointly hosted by Channel 4 and Sky. The broadcasters never used the phrase 'empty chair' at this point, but they made it clear that they would go ahead even if one party refused to take part. This is less dramatic than it sounds. It can refer simply to the presenter pointing out that someone had been invited and had declined. No actual chairs need be involved. However, Ofcom did warn at that point about the risk to 'impartiality' and it infuriated the Conservatives who saw the prospect of an 'empty podium' as a political act on the part of the broadcasters.^[10]

In early March Downing Street made a 'final offer' to take part in one debate with all seven leaders to be held before

the official campaign began. This apparent logjam was broken in a dramatic weekend of talks with the BBC's Head of News James Harding and Channel 4's Chief Creative Officer Jay Hunt dealing directly with Number 10. These figures had not been directly involved in the discussions before which might have helped them to arrive at a compromise that delivered most of what the broadcasters wanted. There would be no genuine head-to-head debate between Cameron and Miliband, but every channel and (almost) every party would get a programme and the BBC would also put on a special edition of *Question Time*.

In the week before that crucial weekend many journalists had been briefed that the mainstream broadcasters' proposals were likely to be completely rejected and that an alternative proposal from a consortium of digital and newspaper platforms was a contender. As the mainstream proposals stalled, the digital alternative debate plan went from being a maverick, hypothetical proposition to a real option. The consortium of Google with the *Guardian* and *Telegraph* had been arguing that they should have at least one of the slots to break the conventional broadcaster monopoly and to recognise the new realities of video consumption in the UK. Their late offer of a one-off, seven-leader debate held before April would have allowed the Conservatives to say they had contributed to a debate.

However, despite its digital logic it never stood much of a chance of surviving the crossfire of media and party politics. The main broadcasters would always be the most important player as far as the politicians were concerned because of their established audiences. This is significant because unless there is a complete failure to stage a mainstream broadcaster debate next time, it looks for now as if the main TV companies will remain the dominant election broadcast organisations, not newspapers, social networks or digital platforms.

The final format completely reshaped the debates from 2010 in terms of the makeup of the programmes and their participants, while the more spread out timing meant they were less likely to swamp the campaign.

From a starting point of three debates with four participants, through to the prospect of no debates or debates with empty chairs, had emerged four special election programmes featuring seven people – including two, SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon and Plaid leader Leanne Wood, who were not even standing in the election – and only one programme where any kind of direct exchange was allowed between the Prime Minister and the man most likely to replace him.

The TV debates

The TV special 'debate' programmes did not 'suck the life out of the campaign' in the way that the 2010 debates had dominated media coverage. No longer a novelty, the total average audience figures for the 2015 debates were down from 22.5 to 15.2 million, though including the fourth BBC Question Time programme audience brings the figure to 21.2 million including people who watched simulcasts of the debates on other channels. So the numbers were lower than 2010 but they still helped shape the campaign.

An analysis of 211 lead broadcasts during the six-week campaign indicated that 16% of broadcast news bulletin lead items were about the election debate strategies or featured the debates themselves.^[11] Overall, the TV debates were referenced in about 19% of these bulletins, although this varied hugely from week to week, as Table 11.1 shows. This suggests that they weaved their way through the editorial narrative but only occasionally dominated the news agenda. Sky News staged live broadcasts from debates hosted by the other channels, but overall debate-related stories were covered with relative restraint in the bulletins.

This should be put in the context of what was otherwise a dull and incident-free campaign for the broadcasters. The novel arrangements and new participants might have helped freshen up the interest. Certainly, they represented and articulated the idea that this was a less predictable and more complex election. The fact that the opinion polls told us that the race was close meant that more attention was paid to every gesture and utterance – especially of the two main leaders – in case it might create momentum or drama in a static and closed-down campaign. In this sense the debate coverage unwittingly played into the false narrative of a neck and neck race.

The Battle For Number 10

The first joint production was watched by 2.6 million on Channel 4 and 0.3 million on Sky. Both were decent figures for those channels and the overall viewing figures edged up to 3.5 million including on demand and the BBC News Channel broadcast. It was before the official short campaign but on the day of prorogation, and since the phoney war had begun in January it helped signal that battle really was about to commence. Cameron had 18 minutes with Jeremy Paxman followed by 18 minutes with the studio audience asking questions refereed by Sky News' main presenter Kay Burley. Miliband followed in reverse order, facing first the audience and then Paxman. The Prime Minister had chosen to go first, but appeared defensive in his interview where he struggled with classic awkward questions on the number of food banks and whether he could live on a Zero Hours contract. Burley was noticeably more interventionist when Miliband took his turn with the audience. That resulted in complaints to Ofcom of bias but was more likely just an attempt to inject life into what was turning out to be a fairly routine piece of political TV.^[12] One study of the interviews showed that Paxman was more aggressive towards Miliband, intervening more often and asking more aggressive questions. It also showed that Cameron got to speak 22% more.^[13]

Before, during and after the programme (and all those to follow) there was a spin-battle as party politicians and officials at press rooms at the venues and on social media sought to talk up their candidate's performance. The verdict on Miliband was relatively positive, an impression reinforced by polls of Twitter 'sentiment' that showed the Labour leader had performed well according to the highly unrepresentative sample of those who were on Twitter and bothered to tweet about the contest. According to the Centre For the Analysis of Social Media Cameron got 35% 'cheers' and 65% 'boos' on twitter while the figures for Miliband were 62% positive and 38% negative. Social media – especially when used by broadcast journalists – is now an integral part of the television coverage and reaction to it. The TV debates largely drove content on social media, but social media also acted as a distorting feedback loop for journalists and the public. Even when a *Guardian*/ICM instant opinion poll came out 54-46 in favour of Cameron it was still reported as encouraging for Miliband, on the basis that Cameron should have been further ahead. The instant reactive judgements were encouraged by other aspects of the debate programming such as the optional live on-screen graphic 'worm' that allowed viewers to see how other people were responding to what speakers said as the debate unfolded. It was meant to be a tool for engagement with no claims of accuracy but it too may have added to the skewing of perceptions.^[14]

More detailed analysis coverage of the data regarding audience reaction showed that Miliband's gains were minor and that Cameron was still scoring well ahead on the key indicators such as trust and competence. In his analysis 24 hours after the programme the *Guardian*'s political data journalist Alberto Nardello made a thoughtful dissection of the evidence before making this prescient judgement:

Based on the past, Thursday's Q&A is unlikely to noticeably shift voting intention once opinion stabilises. There are at least three debates (or sort-of debates) to go, but for now don't hold your breath.^[15]

The ITV Leaders Debate

The ITV Leaders debate on 2 April presented by Julie Etchingham was the highest rating of the programmes with a total average audience of 8 million viewers. The presence of the smaller parties meant that there was little time for anyone to engage with each other, including Cameron and Miliband, although the director tried hard to generate drama with cut-aways of the leaders responding when attacked. Each was allowed to make a short opening statement before taking questions from the audience. The critical first half hour when audiences are highest and most attentive was dominated by a discussion on the deficit. It set the pattern for the evening, allowing the SNP's Nicola Sturgeon to attack both the main parties. Her direct, passionate style got a positive reaction from viewers. Nigel Farage also cut across the other speakers, often literally interrupting their responses.

The second question on sustainability of funding for the NHS demonstrated why health never really became a hot issue during the broadcast campaign. All the leaders promised more money. Only Farage took a different tack raising the spectre of 'health tourism' but otherwise all the leaders were divided only by the different ways they promised to increase the NHS budget.

Despite the logistical challenge of so many speakers, it did at least demonstrate the existence of multi-party politics. Memorable moments included Leanne Wood telling Nigel Farage that he should be ashamed of himself but there were no breakthroughs. This was reflected in the various instant opinion polls afterwards that gave mixed results.^[16] A YouGov poll asking who had 'won' the debate had Nicola Sturgeon ahead on 28% with Farage on 20%, Miliband on 18% and Cameron on 15%. But both a ComRes and Survation instant polls had Cameron and Miliband level as 'winners'. An ICM poll gave Miliband a slender lead. Yet, whatever momentum Miliband thought he had created was diverted by the attention paid to his Scottish rival. Again, this played into the overarching false narrative of the campaign: that it was 'too close to call' and that the minor parties could have a significant role in the outcome and in a subsequent government. However, the regular opinion polling on intended voting preferences appeared to be unchanged.

BBC Election Debate

Presented on 16 April by David Dimbleby, the BBC's 'challengers' debate without David Cameron and, more controversially, without deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, only attracted an average audience of 4.7 million viewers. Each leader was allowed one-minute opening remarks and then answered questions from the audience in turn. The politicians had no advance notice of the questions, but Dimbleby had and he asked follow-up questions and allowed some further interaction between the politicians. The choreography of the reduced cast did have some significance. Miliband was forced to engage directly with Sturgeon in a heated way that sent a strong visual signal to voters that theirs was a relationship that mattered. It established a juxtaposition that was critical in the last phase of the campaign reinforcing the narrative of the SNP holding Labour to account.

After the debate Emily Maitlis presented a further reaction programme from the 'spin room'. This allowed William Hague to give a detailed response on behalf of the Conservatives that sought to characterise the debate as confused and chaotic. He was quick to highlight the exchanges between Miliband and Sturgeon as evidence that the SNP would have a hold over a Labour minority government. The critical exchange was when Sturgeon called on Miliband to "work with us to keep the Tories out of government". Miliband insisted curtly that 'we're different' but she replied "If we work together we can lock Cameron out of No10" The *Telegraph* front page lead the next day featured that offer to back Labour if it agreed to take an anti-austerity stance: "Sturgeon Offer to Miliband: I'll Make You PM".

An instant Survation poll 90 minutes after the programme put Miliband ahead on 35% and Sturgeon second on 31%.^[17] At one point Farage criticised the studio audience itself for what he saw as BBC-engineered left-wing bias but the audience at home seemed to like him enough to give him a 27% score in the Survation poll. As the programme ended the three female leaders embraced leaving Miliband looking on forlornly. Some felt it symbolised a new female order but in fact only one woman really broke through into public consciousness. Just 5% thought Natalie Bennett had 'won'; just 2% thought it of Plaid's Leanne Wood.

BBC Question Time Special

The BBC had always hoped to have editions of Question Time during the campaign, but it had not been part of the official debate discussions between the politicians and broadcasters group. Until the final stage of discussions the BBC saw it as an alternative, not an addition to the other debates. All the broadcasters were surprised that the Conservatives agreed to this confrontation with the public, but Cameron's team insist they were always happy to see their man engage directly with voters. Each leader faced 30 minutes of questioning from the Yorkshire audience who had asked to take part. It was a rare moment in the campaign where the politicians were forced to engage directly, at length and in public with voters. An average audience of 4.7 people watched the leaders weathering the storm in contrasting styles, but Miliband's worst moment came with a question about the deficit, where he did not give the

prepared answer and instantly regretted it (see p.x). But as Table 11.2 shows, the key thing about the subject matter was that public spending and the deficit was only topic to come up at all four debates, being the subject of 13 questions, almost twice as many as the next most popular question.[18] As Miliband left the stage, he stumbled. It was a trivial moment but made worse because he was so close to the camera. The trip was instantly and insistently rebroadcast on social networks. As usual, Miliband was ahead on Twitter approval ratings, although an ICM instant poll of a representative sample of voters in the real world had Cameron on 44% to the Labour leader's 38%. With hindsight we can see that was more accurate than the regular campaign opinion polls on voting intention.

Collectively, the TV debates should be seen as political theatre that tell stories and demonstrate character rather than as a gladiatorial combat where someone 'wins' and someone else 'loses'. Their significance in the campaign is the degree to which they challenge – or more likely confirm – public attitudes to the politician and the party they represent. They are what Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz call 'Media Events' that have power to shape collective feelings.[19] The live reaction or instant 'post-match' analysis made possible by social media and continuous news coverage therefore may have a bias against understanding the real, long-term effects on eventual voting outcomes. As we will see below, there was plenty of other broadcast coverage of the election but particularly in such a stage-managed campaign these live set pieces still produced the most potent and useful political drama for those people who understood the political performance rather than the hype.

Future policy

In the context of this full but flat coverage, the election debates provided much needed variation. They attracted reasonable audiences with extensive further engagement via social media and newspaper reportage. They allowed the public to judge the leaders under pressure and evaluate their arguments in competition with others. They also served an important role in demonstrating that democracy is about putting yourself directly before the public and answering their questions.

All the broadcasters and political parties largely accept that after 2015 something similar now has a place in future campaigns. However, almost everyone rules out any kind of formal regulatory or legislative framework as unrealistic and undesirable. Now we have had two elections with debates makes it less likely (but by no means impossible) to imagine one without any set-piece encounters. The fact that broadcasters were flexible in 2015 makes it harder for parties to refuse to accept adjusted arrangements on any kind of absolute principle. The next test will be how the various stakeholders come up with an arrangement for the EU Referendum and European elections. Regardless though of what happens for those polls, the next General Election will be subject to negotiation.

While a formal independent structure to organise debates sounds attractive, it raises questions about who would have the final say and how adaptable it would be if the political landscape continues to evolve.[34] A debate commission sounds like a practical step but the parties will not agree to one unless it gives them more power. Broadcasters are better served by maintaining their independence. However, there are useful principles to abide by. Broadcasters should produce an offer and as with every other kind of programme making, the subject has the right not to take part. Broadcasters need to keep a united front and produce as simple a proposal as possible. They have to stress the public value of these debates but that includes the potential for robust and direct exchanges with the speakers and the public. They should have proposals ready on time but they should also then be open-minded about adjusting the model right up to a short period before transmission.

There are dangers in leaving it to political bartering. The parties may insist on tighter control over, for example, audience selection in an effort to make the events less risky. The spiral of media management may continue to circle inwards. So the debates become ever more important as a way to orchestrate some kind of space for real deliberation and convincing and engaging political theatre.

Conclusion

It would be simplistic to separate out the different news media because they are all networked into each other. Yet social media was clearly the worst offender in creating a self-referential bubble, especially on the left. In a mirror image, the right-wing newspapers that were panicked by an apparently close race redoubled their efforts to drive home the horrors of Ed, Nicola and Nigel. But TV and radio were key brokers in this campaign of mistaken premises. Broadcasting remains the medium with the most impact on voters: 38% said that they ‘were influenced’ by the TV debates, 23% by news bulletins.^[35] On the one hand the broadcasters did try much harder than the newspapers and social networks to cover a broad range of topics and they did deliver an unprecedented slew of information and balanced analysis. But on the other, they went along with the banal theatre of the tightest, most sterile, stage-managed campaign ever.

In the end the process of election broadcast journalism and its relationship with the politicians will always be political, just like every other aspect of the campaign. The Conservatives’ tactics were more successful in focusing attention on the SNP factor and in the same way they were the most successful in handling the TV debate negotiations – as well as managing the wider media frame – than the Labour party were.

Media, let alone one platform such as broadcasting, cannot make politics interesting by itself. That depends on the politicians and the public. One needs to avoid either nostalgia for some golden age of a vibrant public sphere or get sucked into digital delusions of engagement. But consider an election without TV debates and it is clear that broadcasting has a key role in trying to counter apathy. For all their faults, the so-called TV debates are now a significant part of the UK election campaigns claim to democratic authority. As the limits of newspaper and online coverage become clearer, broadcasting as a whole remains absolutely vital.

TV ‘debates’, as finally agreed

26 March: Sky/Channel 4: Sequential leaders’ interviews with Cameron and Miliband by Jeremy Paxman, with studio audience moderated by Kay Burley.

2 April: ITV: Debate with the leaders of the Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, UKIP, Greens, SNP and Plaid Cymru chaired by Julie Etchingham.

16 April: BBC: Debate with the “challenger parties”, Labour, UKIP, SNP, Plaid Cymru and Greens, chaired by David Dimbleby.

30 April: BBC Question Time with Cameron, Miliband and Clegg taking questions from the audience sequentially, chaired by David Dimbleby.

‘I’ll only agree to do this debate...’. Morland, *The Times*, 12 January 2015.

[1] Thanks to research assistance from Brooks Decillia, Emily Reves, Isha Vermani and Richard Kirsch.

[2] ‘The Ofcom Broadcasting Code’ (March 2013–July 2015), Ofcom, March 2013.

[3] ‘Election brings record BBC traffic, but news chief ‘quite astonished’ by ‘ferocity and frequency’ of party complaints’, *Press Gazette*, 2 June 2015.

[4] Nick Robinson, *Election Notebook*, Bantam, 2015, p.357.

[5] Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, *The British General Election of 2015*, Palgrave, 2010, p. 147.

- [6] BBC Radio Manchester, 16 April 2014
- [7] 'BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Sky join forces for party leader debates proposal', BBC Media Centre, 13 October 2014.
- [8] 'Review of Ofcom list of major political parties for elections taking place on 7 May 2015', Ofcom, 8 January 2015.
- [9] HC Deb 14 January 2015, c.849.
- [10] 'Lord Grade defends David Cameron from bullying broadcasters', *The Guardian*, 11 March 2015.
- [11] The 211 broadcasts draw on six news programmes over the course of the six weeks of the campaign: BBC TV News at 22:00; ITV News at 13:30; Sky News at 19:00; Channel 4 News at 19:00; BBC Radio Four's Today Programme (between 08:00-08:30) and PM (between 17:00-17:30).
- [12] There were almost 500 complaints to OfCom, more than all the other election debate programmes combined.
- [13] Sylvia Shaw, *Winning and losing the 'Battle for Number 10'*, UK Election Analysis 2015
- [14] Colin J. Davis , Jeffrey S. Bowers, Amina Memon, Social Influence in Televised Election Debates: A Potential Distortion of Democracy, PLoS ONE, 2011, 6(3): e18154.
- [15] 'Why David Cameron's victory in the leaders' interviews matters', *The Guardian*, 27 March 2015.
- [16] 'So who won the ITV general election leaders' debate?', *The Telegraph*, 3 April 2015.
- [17] 'Who won BBC leaders debate according to the data?', *The Mirror*, 16 April 2015.
- [18] Next came questions on immigration and post-election coalition formation, both of which were the subject of seven questions.
- [19] Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events*, Harvard University Press, 1992.
- [20] Talk at LSE, March 28th 2015.
- [21] In addition, Channel 4 broadcast 'Channel 4's Alternative Election Night'.
- [22] Robinson, Nick (2015) *Election Notebook*, Bantam p363
- [23] 'BBC has focused more on policy in election coverage, study finds', *The Guardian*, 16 April 2015; BBC election coverage became 'infected' by speculation of Labour-SNP coalition, head of news admits', *The Independent*, 2 June 2015.
- [24] 'TV news focuses on election race at expense of policy issues', *The Guardian*, 7 May 2015.
- [25] BBC Editorial Guidelines, *Section 10: Politics, Public Policy and Polls – Opinion Polls, Surveys and Votes*.
- [26] 'The BBC was not in the pocket of Labour this election. Quite the opposite', *The Guardian*, 13 May 2015.
- [27] 'Channels 4 and 5 giving Tories more airtime than other broadcasters', *The Guardian*, 24 April 2015.
- [28] Loughborough University General Election 2015, *Media coverage of the 2015 campaign (report 5)*, 11 May 2015.
- [30] 'Why is the British media so supine in the face of control from the big parties?', CAPX, 22 April 2015.

[31] Richard Scullion, *Liars, bullies, confused and infantilised, and that's just the electorate*, UK Election Analysis 2015.

[32] Rutherford, *Standing behind the leaders*, UK Election Analysis 2015.

[33] Frances Smith, *Ordinariness and authenticity in the 2015 General Election campaign*, UK Election Analysis 2015.

[34] 'The Guardian view on televised election debates: shine the light', *The Guardian*, 14 January 2015.

[35] 'Election 2015: TV debates "most influential" for voters', BBC News Website, 9 May 2015.

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