

Did Britain's right-wing newspapers win the election for the Tories? Guest Blog

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This article by LSE Media and Communications' Dr Bart Cammaerts who researches and teaches political communication.

The day after the unexpected defeat of the Labour leader Neil Kinnock in the 1992 election, the Murdoch-owned tabloid The Sun's infamous headline read: 'It's The Sun wot won it'. During the 1992 campaign it seemed as if the Tories would lose and Labour would win. It was a campaign during which Kinnock was attacked hard and hit below the belt repeatedly by the mainly right-wing media in the UK. Just as today, it turned out differently and John Major won a convincing majority; Kinnock left the political stage.

In the recent 2015 campaign, all the newspapers, bar the Guardian and the leftist tabloid Daily Mirror, were extremely pro-Tory and rabidly anti-Labour. This raises two important questions:

1. How come nearly every national newspaper in the UK supports one specific party in an election campaign?
2. Did this heavily skewed media support have an influence on the final outcome? Was it the media wot won it (again)?



The answer to the first question is relatively simple. Almost all the newspapers in the UK are the personal property of billionaires: the Australian media tycoon Rupert Murdoch owns The Sun and The Times, Viscount Rothermere the Daily Mail, the Barclay brothers The Daily Telegraph and the Russian oligarch Lebedev The Independent and The Evening Standard. Together, these men are worth a staggering £12 Billion. Their interests are simply better served by a right-wing party, like the Conservatives, than by Labour, who during this campaign adopted a more pronounced leftwing position than during the Blair years. But there's more to this than mere capitalist interests.

If we analyse the election manifestos of the Labour Party and the Conservatives, it is striking that there is little mention of the media in the manifesto of the Conservatives, except a reduction of the funding for the BBC, something the rightwing media would applaud. Labour, on the other hand, clearly stated that they were going to do something about the lack of pluralism in the British media and that they wanted to promote ethical media. Labour was, in other words, [planning to implement the recommendations of Lord Leveson](#). The British media owners considered these recommendations as something evil, as a blatant interference in their freedom of expression and have done everything possible to prevent their implementation. This is also one of the reasons for their very dirty media war against Labour and for their very personalized fight against 'Red Ed', which was waged even more fervently compared to the attacks against [Kinnock in 1992](#).

Uncritical loudspeaker

The answer to the second question, i.e. has the media helped Cameron win an overall majority and if so to what extent?, is more complex. The large part of the British media, broadcasters included, have served as an uncritical loudspeaker for the Tory campaign. No effort whatsoever was made to maintain the illusion of impartiality and objectivity so often acclaimed by journalists. Without falling into a simplistic argument of a stimulus-response effects model, it is clear that the UK media did set a certain tone, they outlined the contours of public debate and they have had an influence on how and on what people think.

Moreover, most people inform themselves about politics through the media, especially during an election campaign. So, if almost all media are so enthusiastically choosing the same ideological side, this will inevitably have a profound impact on public opinion which is dangerous for democracy. I would even go as far as arguing that the British media has acted in a blatantly anti-democratic way during this election campaign.

At the same time, we must also recognize that what drives people to vote for or against a particular party is complex and can not be merely reduced to their media consumption. There are many scientific studies out there which conclude that the influence of the media on the electoral behaviour is often very minimal. It is not easy to isolate the exact influence of the media on electoral behaviour and more research will be needed to ascertain what precisely happened during this campaign.

What is clear, however, is that social media has had no or very little impact at all. The hashtag #Milifandom and the nearly 10 million followers of comedian Russell Brand did not make a difference, except then that they made many commentators, [myself included](#), believe that a Miliband government was possible.

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