Our partisan press: does it matter to journalism or politics?

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UPDATED: To mention the Sun’s interesting decision to back the SNP in its Scottish edition and the Tories in its English edition. See end of article.

[This is the full version of an article that first appeared in The Guardian]

Is anyone really still surprised how far our newspapers will go to back their chosen political party? What was shocking about today’s Daily Telegraph Tory election leaflet of a front page was not that it had been organised by Conservative Central Office. It’s that they think it might work.

The full page splash ‘exclusive’ revealed how 5,000 small business people backed Conservative economic policy. ‘Wow’, you think, ‘fancy that! In that case I’m voting Conservative!’

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So what? At every election our fiercely independent [sic] newspapers take a party line and pursue it with varying degrees of rigour and veracity. This morning’s *Mirror* was just as enthusiastic in service of Ed Miliband and his rent freeze proposal. So this is not new and it is not just a right-wing thing.

Britain’s newspapers are clearly partisan and some more than others. *The Independent* has drifted left-wards to join *The Guardian* and the *Mirror*, although the bulk of sales and online traffic is garnered by newspapers who want a Conservative victory. Richard Desmond’s *Express* has gone even further and backed Ukip. Some papers, like Rupert Murdoch’s *Times*, swing both ways in their coverage, even when their party allegiance is declared.

This is all very transparent. Any *Sun* or *Mail* reader, for example, who doesn’t realise that their papers have a political point of view is beyond help. Out there on the social networks everyone is a media critic so these Pravda style gestures are relentlessly pilloried. The evidence seems to be that the political Twitter tribes cancel themselves out. They are even more partisan than the papers. But the effect of all that online calling out of servile articles does mean that the rising public scepticism about journalists and politicians is amplified.

**Propaganda Piece**

So I am not sure that anyone beyond the core vote of the Tory party will be swayed by such a crass piece of propaganda. In this election it seems that undecided voters are deeply mistrustful of the big parties and mainstream politicians. So it seems silly to treat them like sheep to be rounded up.

There are signs that the newspapers – including the *Telegraph* – realise this. *The Guardian* is a pioneer in data journalism and interactive, live political coverage. But all the papers now have lots of online political journalism that gives you a much better range of opinion, information and sources than you would find in the hard-copy paper. *The Telegraph* has even teamed up with Vote Match to provide an app to help you work out how to vote without treating you like an idiot.

Of course, the biases are still there. *The Sun*’s lively digital election offering *Sunnation* is very engaging and plays well across different online platforms, but while it is often funny and insightful, it is still unmistakably right-wing.

Compare that to the Buzzfeed which is targeting a similarly youthful market. It has hired a talented bunch of budding political hacks who are churning out a wide range of content including serious interviews with party leaders as well as polls, jokes and photo-led list-style pieces on odder aspects of the campaign. Yes, they loved the #milifandom thing. They include a lot of perspectives but the editorial line is non–partisan.
I don’t mind that our newspapers have a point of view. We have a mainstream media ecology that still offers a real choice. Don’t forget that the biggest source of political information for the public is still the much more ‘balanced’ broadcasters. But I do think that the papers need to grow up. Even Lord Leveson thought that we have some of the best political journalism in the world. We are not making the most of their talents if we put them in a strait-jacket of party loyalty. Leave that to the politicians scrambling for votes.

Paper sales are falling and so is their influence. The parties don’t even bother with daily press conferences during election campaigns anymore. If our news brands want to remain relevant then they need to ditch the party press releases and stage the honest debate that our politicians are so keen to avoid.

UPDATE: 30.4.15

The Sun has decided – and don’t think for a second that the decision wouldn’t be cleared by London and therefore have to pass the Rupert Murdoch Approval Test – to back the SNP in Scotland and the Conservatives in England. On the face of it this appears to be contradictory.
But the Sun’s managing director took to twitter to counter criticism of this:

And their press person pointed out that they have done it before:

Indeed, here are those previously ‘devolved’ front pages:
The difference this time, of course, is that the SNP is now on track not just to rule over Sun readers in Scotland but to have a decisive factor in the government for those who enjoy the Sun in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Normally the Sun likes to back a winner because it is a popular, not niche paper. But this time it is intervening in a complex political equation. Backing the SNP will play well in Scotland and a strong SNP hurts Labour. However, a strong socialist SNP that has the whip hand over a minority Labour government might mean we end up with more lefty policies for the whole of the UK including a tougher line on media regulation and ownership. Of course, the Tories might win…

My point would be that this is clever marketing from the Sun. Few Scottish readers will go online and spot the bifurcation. Even fewer will care. In the end I would repeat the point of the above article. Telling your readers how to vote looks increasingly old-fashioned and patronising.

More commentary on media and the General Election here