

The Devil Is In The Detail: The Primacy of Process in election reporting

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The starting gun has fired in the UK election race and already the spectators are being bombarded with a series of disputes about detail and process.

I am [on record](#) as saying that the last US election was the best covered ever, in the sense that anyone who wanted to say or know something could find facts and a platform online somewhere.

But the downside of an information age election is that you get lots of information. Of course, that's a Good Thing if a voter is trying to decide on facts and figures. However, much of the reporting is of tactics and appearances rather than the issues. That's what happened in the [2008 Presidentials](#). The media literate voter can find all sorts of good things, but the danger is that the professional analysts and citizen commentators get embroiled in rows over detail. Generally the public lets most of it wash over them and make their decision on intuitive, impressionistic grounds.



So take Day One of the British election campaign. Both parties accused the other of getting their maths wrong on tax and spending plans. The Mirror republished Labour's claim of a £34 billion 'black hole' in Conservative plans. In response the Telegraph's line was that 'Labour's Attack on Tory Sums Backfires'. You pays your money...

Luckily there are websites like Channel 4's excellent [FactCheck](#) which try to tease out the facts from the fiction, but they will have far fewer readers than mainstream newspapers.

So if the detail is so bedevilled it's not surprising that pictures will be worth more than mere words. Of course, the imagery will also be dissected, with the [Daily Mail](#) pointing out the rather eerie perfection of the first Conservative poster featuring David Cameron.

I find it rather odd that the very clever Tory PR machine made this mistake, albeit a relatively trivial one. The last thing that 'Dave' needs is cleaning up. Quite the opposite. He has such a tie-less, relaxed, chino-wearing clean image that what he actually needed was a few worry lines to show that a) he has lived and b) he cares. We are electing a Prime Minister, not the editor of GQ.

In the end, of course, campaigns only ever swing a couple of percentage points either way. Most people have made up their minds long before, even if they don't tell pollsters that. The difference this time, however, is that a couple of points could make the difference between a thumping Tory majority and Nick Clegg having the final say on Government policy.

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