

How we report elections: time for a new agenda for political journalism after the 2017 shock?

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In the wake of this shock result should journalists now abandon their previously-held beliefs about covering elections? Or is there a danger that we're replacing one set of shibboleths with fresh myths?

Most political reporters and commentators (and most media academics, including me) called most of this wrong*. Some like veteran political commentator [John Rentoul are coming out early and reflecting](#) on their mistaken opinions. That's great.

There are [a set of assumptions about electoral politics that have been overturned](#). One of the most important, that I've long cherished, is that the campaign period itself doesn't change things much. Labour's ten point rise from its start in the opinion polls to the actual result suggests that in our current unstable climate that is now false.

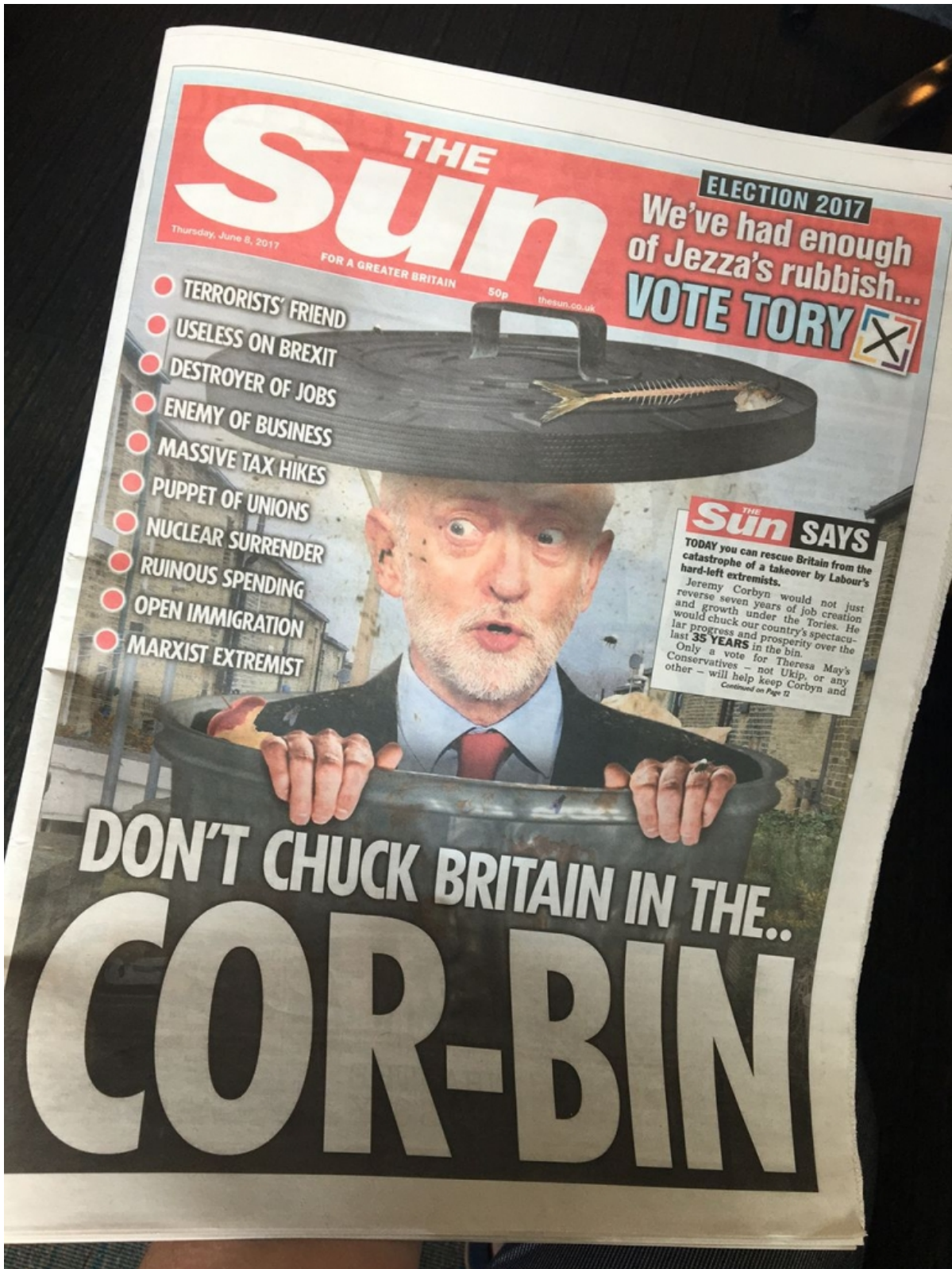
But before we rush to create another paradigm let's have a look at some of the apparent changes in political media and communication and ask what's really new in 2017.

It will take some time to judge empirically if there has been a genuine shift. Take youth voting. In the wake of the result people were recycling a figure of 70% 18-25 year-old turn-out. Anecdotal evidence plus the success of Labour in seats with a larger number of younger voters suggest this may be true, but [as BBC research shows](#), that's by no means proven – yet. [Update: [a post-election survey by YouGov](#) did indeed show that the 'Youthquake' idea was a myth – yes, there was a generational divide but there was no surge in first-time voters]

For me, here are some of the key campaign media issues that need looking at – let me know what you think and tell me if there are others that need addressing:



1. Why did so many political journalists (and politicians, activists and academics) **fail to predict the result or understand what was happening**? Did we fail to learn the lesson of Brexit? Are we still in thrall to inadequate indicators such as opinion polls? Has the Westminster 'mainstream elite' failed to get out of its London/Twitter bubble? Do we spend too much time covering the official campaign instead of looking at issues and grass roots reality and sentiment? For example, too many 'vox pops' feel like illustrations for the journalist's pre-existing narrative rather than genuine listening. [Focus group polling by companies such as Britain Thinks](#) were much more revelatory. Fox hunting, for example, barely covered as a campaign issue, appears to have been a key factor in shifting voter perceptions.



2. **The power of the newspapers.** [Left-wing commentators especially](#) have long been convinced of the ability of Murdoch, Dacre etc to brainwash voters. The polling day onslaught by the right-wing press was seen as a powerful intervention. Yet, newspaper sales are declining and their readership is ageing. Perhaps election-weary, media-cynical readers are more resistant to the kind of patronising and hysterical fear-mongering? Is it possible that it even backfires as [social media provides a forum for people to mock the propaganda](#)? It seems that in general, because of the acceleration of the news cycle and the increasing number of sources, mainstream media brands are losing power over the agenda and their gatekeeping role

for information and trends.

3. Quite rightly there are concerns about the millions spent by (both) parties on **online campaigning**. The suggestion is that [unregulated micro-targeting of undecided voters is secretly swinging the election in the privacy of people's Facebook feeds](#). I'm a little more sanguine about this. What is so different about this from traditional direct mail or door-knocking? The evidence from this election is that it has not had much effect. If anything Labour was more successful with [its online promotion of more positive messages to motivate its likely supporters](#) rather than the Tory attack ads.
4. **Fake News**. I am convinced that false news, often masquerading as mainstream journalism, is a [symptom of a wider problem around the credibility of information](#). The indications are that unlike the US, the [UK is less susceptible to the click-bait genuinely untrue news](#). But just as much a problem as the obvious hoaxes and lies is the [hyper-partisan content which is now churned out by both left](#) and right-wing activists such as the Canary or Breitbart.
5. **Twitter** is now an invaluable tool for giving voice to everyone, providing feedback on mainstream media and politicians, correcting misinformation and alerting us to breaking news. But its brevity and its binary bias towards promoting more aggressive, antagonistic content might be turning the opportunity for deliberation and interaction into a slanging match that fosters fragmentation and promotes echo chambers. Is this simply a reflection of the reality of our more diverse and angry politics or is it making things worse?



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For the record, this is the first election in 40 years where the Prime Minister has not appeared to be interviewed on @BBCRadio2

6. The political parties both turned this election campaign into something of a **stage-managed sham**. I've [argued that this was a 'fake election'](#). Certainly, Theresa May and the Conservatives ran away from open interaction with the public or news media. Their sterile sloganeering sought to build a majority for her Brexit negotiations. But they weren't prepared to debate anything else and not even that key central issue. Corbyn's Labour's strategy was to pile up votes in their heartlands to secure his leadership and the left-wards shift in the party, not to win over more centrist voters to win seats that might put the party in power. Well that worked rather better than anyone thought for Labour but they still lost. In the end Corbyn at least did appear on TV 'debates' but many journalists were left furious that they were never given the chance in set-piece interviews or press conferences to properly grill the politicians on policy. How can we make sure that there is a proper interaction next time? Do we have to come up with better formats that allow politicians to engage in debate without turning it into 'gotcha' ambushes?
7. **Expertise and 'diversity'**. We have some new platforms for political journalism such as BuzzFeed who did some innovative and intelligent work, but generally are our political journalists too similar, all drawn from a

similar PPE metropolitan elite background? Experts, such as pollsters and political academics are increasingly drawn into coverage, especially online, but is that just creating a cleverer bubble? Are we too obsessed by the horse-race of the opinion polls and ignoring policy and social trends? There's lots of partisan argument but is there any truly critical independent insight? As the Twitter exchange below shows, journalists are having doubts about their ability to pontificate, but there is a big media demand for 'opinionating' and little time to seek evidence beyond polling and other pundits' opinions:



There are plenty of other issues to tackle: did we get the balance between horse-race and policy analysis right? Was the BBC critical enough of the main parties' agenda? Why did some issues such as climate change, poverty, and foreign policy fail to get an airing? The feedback I've been getting to this article has mainly been from Corbyn supporters (as they call themselves, not 'Labour voters') and their anger is directed at mainstream media as a whole, not just the right-wing press.

There was a lots of excellent journalism during this campaign and a vibrant range of commentary on social media. But it seems to me that while the news media is adapting well to new technologies, it is not coping with a fundamental structural shift in politics, ideology and political communications. We are still clinging to the old model of the Fourth Estate with journalists as just another part of the establishment system. Mainstream politics is straining to cope with the realities of public opinion and the limitations of its power. Likewise, the news media has not thought through its real role and relevance to politics.

We are about to enter a vital historic phase of great complexity and significance. Can we create the journalism to help us understand and address this critical moment?

I personally think that key to this is even more [networked journalism](#). Not just getting out of the newsroom more but also using online tools and platforms such as the much-maligned Facebook to seek out and interact in a more humble, listening mode to a greater range of what real people are saying. We must re-double efforts on the traditional journalism functions of fact-checking, investigation and revelation but [add to that greater empathy and even emotion](#). Too much of the coverage of the 2017 election was journalists saying what they think rather than reporting what voters felt.

*One organisation that called it right was pollsters YouGov. Here's [their methodology](#).

This article by Charlie Beckett, professor in the LSE Media and Communications Department and director of Polis, the LSE's journalism think-tank.

You can send feedback via twitter @CharlieBeckett or by email to: c.h.beckett@lse.ac.uk

Updates/feedback:



How about not leading or even not reporting on opinion polls?

 **David Aaronovitch**
@DAaronovitch Following

Replying to [@CharlieBeckett](#) [@sunny_hundal](#)

In 92 John Birt banned the BBC news from leading on polls. He was right. I never stop being amazed by the way pple think a poll is a story

Why do broadcast newspapers reviews only cover the mainstream brands?

 **Jim Waterson**  @jimwaterson
Genuine Q: How do you justify broadcasters reading this out in paper reviews but not, say, some blindly pro-Corbyn viral Canary story?

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