Changes in British election news reporting (1918 - 2010)

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Changes in British Election News Reporting (1918-2010)

In recent UK General Election campaigns, politicians’ complaints about journalists’ negativity and failure to engage with ‘real issues’ have been roughly equalled in prominence by journalists’ laments about the stultifying effects of ‘spin’ and PR on healthy democratic dialogue. Most participants in this blame-game present these problems as being comparatively recent in origin, but this study, led by Professor David Deacon of the Loughborough University Communication Research Centre, opens this assumption up to question by conducting a unique historical content analysis of general election coverage in the British national press between December 1918 and May 2010. In doing so, the study looks beyond obvious concerns about party political advantage to examine the broader structures and discourses that inform the translation of elections into popular culture by the news media. The focus on the national press is partly necessitated by practical considerations (this is the only media that has existed for the entirety of the sample period and where there is adequate archive coverage). More significantly, it is in recognition of the importance of the British national press in formatting media coverage more generally. The British press is renowned, at times reviled, for its partisan engagement with politics and, for this reason, is the arena where the fullest and widest exposition of discourses about the content and conduct of politics are to be found.

The project will examine the following questions:

1. Is there any evidence that the British press reporting of campaigns has reduced over the sample period, both in absolute and relative terms (i.e. taking account of changes in the overall amount of available news space)?
2. Has election reporting become more critical of politicians and the political classes during this time?
3. To what extent is the current dominance of party leaders in election news coverage evident in earlier periods?
4. Has attention to the personalities, private lives and individual capabilities of politicians increased significantly over recent years?
5. When did ‘process’ coverage - i.e. coverage of the strategies and conduct of campaigns - emerge as a central aspect of election news reporting?
6. How has the balance of ‘policy’ and ‘process’ coverage altered over time?
(7) How has the interpretative agenda of coverage altered over the last century (i.e. the themes emphasized and neglected)?

The overall aim of the research is to provide a clearer understanding of change and continuity in the political reporting of elections in Britain. Where change has occurred, it will be possible to identify when these processes began to mobilise significantly in campaign communication.

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Image: W.K. Haselden, the Daily Mirror, 31 October 1922 (reproduced with permission)