Conservatives dominate in UK election media battle

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Conservatives dominate in the election media battle
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The Conversation

Brexit may be taking the UK into uncharted political waters but national media reporting of the first week of the 2017 general election was a very familiar combination of choreography, conspiracies and cock-ups. The most “off message” moment came with the leaking of the Labour Party manifesto (and the accidental crushing of a photographer’s foot in one of the ensuing melees). The most “on message” event came with a docile, domiciliary interview of the prime minister and her husband, Philip May, on the BBC’s The One Show.

But beyond these headline stories, what other issues and individuals dominated national media coverage? Our real-time analysis reveals that the Conservative Party dominated the press reporting and commanded greatest coverage in TV news in the first week. More than half of all the politicians reported about in the national press came from the Conservative party.

Figure 1: party appearances in press coverage.

Coverage was less imbalanced on TV, but the figures also show how prominent Theresa May was in these reports. She accounted for 55% of all Conservative Party appearances.
A further measure of the Prime Minister’s newsworthiness came in the extensive coverage of her personal life. In a radio interview during the week she described her husband as “the most important Philip in Downing Street”. He was certainly the most important Philip in media terms, with his One Show interview making him the fifth most frequently reported political figure of the week. By contrast the chancellor of the exchequer, Phillip Hammond, did not make the top 20 most reported politicians.

In 2015, much was said about the arrival of multi-party politics in the UK and this was reflected in the distribution of news coverage afforded to the minor parties. In 2017, this pattern has already shifted considerably.

Figures 3 & 4 compare the percentage change in TV and press coverage given to parties in 2017 and at the same stage of the 2015 General Election. On TV, the SNP saw the greatest reduction in its news presence (5%), followed by UKIP (3%) and the Liberal Democrats (1%). The Conservatives’ relative presence increased by 9% in comparison with 2015. The scale of this increase is partly explained by the slightly disadvantageous position the Conservatives occupied at the same stages of the 2015 campaign.
The most dramatic shifts have been in press coverage: UKIP’s news presence reduced by a tenth, SNP by 7% and the Liberal Democrats by 3%. In contrast, the Conservatives’ prominence increased by 15%, which is particularly remarkable as they already attracted the most press coverage at the start of the 2015 campaign.

This might reflect the changing fortunes of the smaller parties. In 2015, the Liberal Democrats had 57 MPs and UKIP was riding high after the 2014 European elections. Both parties enter this election considerably weakened.

But the same cannot be said of the SNP, which suggests other factors at work. It might also be that the lack of TV leadership debates is having an effect. These major media events in 2015 involved the minor parties for the first time and Nicola Sturgeon in particular used the opportunity to raise her party’s profile.

Another factor could be the impact of recent changes in the regulation of broadcast campaign coverage. UKIP’s heightened presence in 2015 broadcast coverage was
guaranteed by Ofcom’s designation of them as a “larger party”. In March 2017 Ofcom announced it was abandoning the concept of “larger party” status and allowing broadcasters more scope to make their own decisions about apportioning coverage on the basis of current or past electoral support.

This move was largely welcomed by the minor parties, but these trends, if they continue, may give them pause for thought.

**Brexit dominates**

In terms of the issue agenda, Brexit has predictably dominated media discussions.

![](image)

5: Main Issues in Coverage. (NB percentages=frequency of item/ total number of items coded)

This is again good news for the Conservatives, as they seek to use the issue to contrast the supposed desirability of the prime minister’s “strong and stable leadership” with that on offer from Jeremy Corbyn.

Other issues which the opposition parties have put forward on health, education, devolution, social security, transport, housing and environment have received much less coverage.

In short, week one of the media campaign was dominated by one politician and one issue. We’ll have to see how long this particular version of the One Show runs.

*John Downey, James Stanyer and Dominic Wring from the Centre for Research in Communication and Culture, Loughborough University, also contributed to the research featured in this article.*