

Institution: Loughborough University		
Unit of Assessment: UOA34 - Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management		
Title of case study: Improving the quality of media coverage and public debate during elections and referenda		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: March 2015 - February 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
David Deacon	Professor of Communication and Media Analysis	4/1/1990 to present
John Downey	Professor of Comparative Media Analysis	1/1/2000 to present
Emily Harmer	Lecturer in Communication and Media	13/5/13 to 15/6/2016
David Smith	Research Assistant	8/4/2015 to 31/8/2019
James Stanyer	Professor of Communication and Media Analysis	1/9/2005 to present
Dominic Wring	Professor of Political Communication	29/9/1997 to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: January 2015 – February 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Rigorous and timely monitoring of news media are vital during major elections and referenda, where citizens rely heavily on news coverage to inform their understanding and evaluations of manifestos, candidates, and parties. Research conducted at Loughborough University's Centre for Research in Communication and Culture (CRCC) provided unique 'real time' analysis of mainstream news coverage of all major UK campaigns since 2015 (three General Elections and the EU Referendum). The overall impact of the research has been to improve the quality of media coverage and public debate during elections and referenda. This has been achieved through (1) helping politicians and journalists raise public awareness of inequality of media access, (2) enabling campaigners and journalists to identify and challenge media partisanship, and (3) improving the balance of media agendas.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Research conducted by David Deacon, Dominic Wring, James Stanyer, John Downey, Emily Harmer and David Smith has provided authoritative, timely and accessible statistical analyses of the performance of the major news media during the most significant recent UK political campaigns (2015, 2017 and 2019 UK General Elections and 2016 EU Referendum). These studies used rigorous manual content analysis methods to examine more than 11,000 relevant news reports and commentaries published during the four campaigns. Producing this kind of high-quality data at scale in a highly restricted time frame is a huge intellectual and logistical challenge. Manual content analysis is labour intensive but remains the methodological 'gold standard' for analysing multi-faceted content.</p> <p>Findings from all four studies were published <i>as the campaigns unfolded</i> through weekly reports, accessible via Loughborough University's main website, and supported by intensive social media and other publicity activities. The reports provided measures of 'stopwatch balance' (how equitable and diverse was the coverage of rival politicians?), 'directional balance' (how positively or negatively were competing protagonists represented?) and 'agenda balance' (which issues were foregrounded or neglected?). Key findings from the four studies included evidence of:</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An intensification in pro-Conservative press partisanship across the three General Elections [R5]; • The dominance of Conservative sources in press and TV coverage of the EU Referendum, and the narrow range of issues reported in the debate over UK withdrawal during that campaign [R3, R6]; • The intermittent news-worthiness of 'Europe/Brexit' related coverage across 		

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three General Elections, despite its manifest significance [R1, R2, R4];

- The persistent underrepresentation of women in coverage throughout the four campaigns [R4];
- The reduction in multi-party representation since the 2015 Election [R2, R4, R6];
- A greater policy focus in TV news in GE2017 and GE2019 compared to GE2015, which was dominated by coverage of the electoral process itself rather than substantive manifesto issues [R4].

The research built on an unbroken legacy of ‘real time’ analysis of General Election news coverage dating back to 1992, when Loughborough University collaborated with the *Guardian* newspaper to provide the first ever examination of UK broadcast and print coverage published during the actual election campaign itself. The most recent studies remain the only news audits that combine comprehensive examinations of both press and television content, thereby enabling analysis of the related inter-media dynamics.

Furthermore, by conducting the research across all four campaigns, the analysis was uniquely positioned to combine immediate and longitudinal comparative perspectives. This has enhanced the value of the findings to external stakeholders.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[R1] Deacon, D., and Smith, D. (2020) ‘The politics of containment: Immigration coverage in UK General Election news coverage (1992-2015)’ *Journalism*, 21(2): 151–171. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884917715944>

[R2] Deacon, D. and Wring, D. (2016) ‘The UK Independence Party, Populism and the British News Media: Competition, Collaboration or Containment?’ *European Journal of Communication*, 31(2): 169-84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323115612215>

[R3] Deacon, D. and Wring, D. (2017) ‘One Party, Two issues: UK News Media Reporting of the EU Referendum’ in J. Mair et al. (eds) *Brexit, Trump and the Media*, London: Abrams, pp.36-44.

[R4] Deacon, D., Downey, J., Smith, D., Stanyer, J., Wring, D. (2019) ‘A Tale of Two Parties: Press and Television Coverage of the Campaign’ in D. Wring et al. (eds) *Political Communication in Britain: Campaigning, Media and Polling in the 2017 General Election*

[R5] Wring, D. & Deacon, D. (2019) ‘A Bad Press’ in Cowley, P. & Kavanagh, D., *The British General Election of 2017*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 347-384.

[R6] Smith, D., Deacon, D., and Downey, J. (2020) ‘Inside Out: the UK Press, Brexit and Strategic Populist Ventriloquism,’ *European Journal of Communication*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323120940917>

All outputs were peer reviewed and/or commissioned by leading journals or book series. The 2015 General Election study was funded by a grant from the peer reviewed British Academy/Leverhulme Small Grant Scheme (SG142216). The 2017 and 2019 General Elections were snap elections and the 2016 Referendum timing was only confirmed four months before the vote. For these studies, we secured internal University funding in order to work rapidly and responsively. The team was awarded the Loughborough University Vice-Chancellor’s Award for Research Excellence for their analysis of the 2016 EU Referendum.

4. Details of the impact

The four campaigns occurred in a context of tumultuous political change, with each framed by controversy over the UK’s future relations with Europe. Three of the four campaigns also produced unanticipated outcomes. It is especially challenging to make rapid and prominent interventions in these highly charged and competitive environments. Deacon, Wring, Stanyer, Downey, Harmer and Smith **developed five impact pathways** to ensure immediate and sustained high visibility for their research throughout each campaign:

(1) Weekly news audit reports and commentaries: during the five weeks of campaigning before each polling day (seven weeks in the EU Referendum case), the team produced weekly commentaries and statistical reports. Every instalment identified and measured trends in news coverage and was published on a bespoke University website. During the 2015 campaign, the site received 8.2K visitors and

6.7K unique users. These figures increased exponentially over time, with our 2016 Referendum analysis achieving 26.8K views and 21.3K unique users and our analysis of the 2019 election reaching 36.7K visitors and 30.7K unique users. We wrote additional analytical pieces to promote every instalment published during each campaign for a range of influential blog sites and online journals. These included the ESRC sponsored *UK in a Changing Europe*, the *Press Gazette* and *Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom*. We published fourteen articles in *The Conversation* (the highly respected independent on-line site for academic expert opinion) across the four campaigns. These received a total of 97K readers, with an average of 6930 readers per item [S1].

(2) Social media: key findings from every report were distributed via Twitter, Facebook and other channels. Our tweets aggregated 2.64 million Twitter impressions and 172k engagements across the four campaigns. These figures only capture Loughborough account-linked tweets and social media activity prior to polling day. They do not include the wider, more substantial circulation of our findings by external users nor their post-vote distribution. During every campaign, leading politicians, opinion-forming journalists, and influential public figures retweeted and commented on our findings, thereby significantly enhancing the public reach of the research. These included, Labour Leader, **Jeremy Corbyn**, Conservative Cabinet Minister, **Esther McVey**, Shadow Chancellor, **John McDonnell**, former Downing Street strategist **Alastair Campbell**, ex-Deputy Prime Minister **John Prescott**, singer **Lily Allen**, musician **Mick Hucknall**, senior SNP politician **Angus MacNeil**, actor **Rob Delaney**, and prominent journalistic commentators such as **Owen Jones** (*The Guardian*), **George Monbiot** (*The Guardian*), **Stephen Smith** (*Financial Times*) and **Jim Waterson** (*The Guardian*) [S2, pp. 40-53].

(3) Media relations: Advanced copies of CRCC reports were released to selected contacts at the *Press Association*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, BBC and *Huffington Post*; additional data analysis was requested and provided to various journalists including the flagship ITV political programme *Peston*, the *Guardian*, *Independent* and *Huffington Post*. Weekly news and video releases were also distributed and in 2019 we produced our own podcasts. Together these activities generated considerable news interest in the research. Nationally, these included items in *The Observer*, *Peston*, *Huffington Post*, BBC Radio 4, *The Financial Times*, *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Mail*. Internationally, the research was reported by numerous outlets including the *New York Times*, *China Today*, *Al Jazeera* and *CNBC* [S1],[S2],[S3],[S4],[S5]

(4) Post-mortem events: after each campaign, the team hosted a collaborative event, at which journalists, political strategists, pollsters and other external stakeholders reflected on the campaigns and the key takeaways [S1].

(5) High level briefings for senior policy makers: team members received numerous invitations invited to present findings in person to numerous high-status external stakeholders, including public bodies such as the Welsh Assembly, Ofcom and the French Embassy [S1].

A major factor in securing high levels of public and media reach was gaining recognition for the significance and authoritativeness of our research evidence. In 2015, Ivor Gaber, a former political journalist with BBC, ITN and C4 and now Professor of Journalism at the University of Sussex, observed of the research: 'It's the gold standard if you like... People recognise it as the definitive statement of media agendas, media bias and so forth and also in particular compared to other surveys, it covers both press and broadcasting and that is very useful' [S9]. In 2017, Gaby Hinsliff, former political editor of the *Observer*, stated the Loughborough studies were 'the British equivalent' of Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy ('Is Labour fighting shocking media bias or does it need to get its act together?', *The Observer*, 20/5/2017).

This research **improved the quality of media coverage and public debate during elections and referenda**. This was achieved through three impacts which depended on

close and continuous engagement with media sources. It is important to emphasise that Journalists and news editors were significant external stakeholders in their own right, as the research addressed directly their professional practices.

1. Helping politicians and journalists raise public awareness of inequality of media access

This impact derived from the monitoring of ‘stopwatch balance’ [R2], [R3], [R4]. Loughborough’s analysis extended beyond checking party political imbalances (such as the dominance of Conservative sources in the Referendum coverage) to consider wider issues concerning media diversity. For example, the CRCC identified major gender inequalities in the reporting of all four campaigns covered by this impact case study. During the Referendum, former **Deputy Labour Leader Harriet Harman** wrote to Ofcom, complaining that broadcast coverage had been dominated by men and it was “*time for women’s voices to be heard*” (24/5/2016) [S3, pp. 2-3]. Ms Harman cited Loughborough’s data at the public launch of her complaint - which also involved three Shadow Secretaries of State and received blanket national press coverage— and in her formal submission to Ofcom [S3, pp. 7-16]. Loughborough’s research showed there was a marked shift in TV news coverage following the MP’s intervention. In the 12 weekdays before Harman’s Ofcom complaint, women accounted for 20 percent of the political sources appearing on primetime TV news coverage of the Referendum. For the same period after the intervention, this figure increased to 31 percent - a statistically significant difference [S3, p.17]. This change was partly the result of a shift in the dynamics of the campaign that followed directly from the complaint. According to the *Financial Times*, both the official Remain and Leave campaigns nominated women politicians to represent them in the ITV Referendum debate held on 9 June in direct response to these criticisms, with Boris Johnson the only male among the six campaigners onstage [S3, pp. 4-6]. Our evidence in 2016 was also used to support public interventions by the Fawcett Society and Operation Black Vote raising concerns about the lack of diversity witnessed in the Referendum campaign [S3, pp. 18-21]. In the 2019 General Election, our findings were cited by **Dr Helen Pankhurst**, great granddaughter of suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst, to highlight enduring gender inequalities in media reporting [S3, pp.22]. In February 2019 **Conservative Cabinet minister Esther McVey**, quoted CRCC statistics on the gender imbalance of Referendum news coverage in launching her ‘Ladies for Leave’ pressure group. The video on Twitter had more than 872k views and 10k tweet engagements.

2. Enabling campaigners and journalists to identify and challenge media partisanship

This impact links to Loughborough’s research on trends in the ‘directional balance’ of campaign coverage [R2], [R5]. UK national newspapers routinely endorse parties (and positions) during campaigns, and typically most press opinion has nominally supported the Conservatives. But political partisanship is not an ‘either’/‘or’ matter: there are several gradations in the strength of these endorsements. Most significantly this is expressed in the degree of routine positive/negative editorial treatment of candidates and policies. In recognition of this, the CRCC developed a methodology for calculating the aggregated strength of individual news outlets’ support/opposition for competing positions. By linking these calculations to circulation, the team were able to show that pro-Leave coverage had a significantly wider public distribution than pro-Remain coverage in the 2016 EU Referendum, despite equal numbers of daily titles supporting either campaign [R3]. This methodology also demonstrated that anti-Labour coverage intensified significantly in the 2019 General Election. Both these findings received considerable public and media exposure and the latter findings were cited by senior politicians. For example, on 19 December 2019, Labour Leader **Jeremy Corbyn** retweeted a link to our analysis of press partisanship with the comment ‘*What was it about our plans to make the super-rich pay their fair share that the billionaire press barons didn’t like?*’ [S2, p.51]. This tweet generated more than 45K additional engagements within three days. Other senior Labour politicians also drew attention to Loughborough’s data, including the Shadow Chancellor and Shadow

Transport Secretary [S1, pp.30-32]. On occasion, the interpretation (but not the integrity) of our evidence was the subject of public debate and this further expanded its reach. For example, following a complaint from a *Daily Mirror* political correspondent, the BBC Radio 4 statistics programme *More or Less* ran a segment assessing contrasting interpretations of Loughborough's figures relating to the prominence (or not) of Jeremy Corbyn in the reporting of the 2016 EU Referendum [S7].

Loughborough's methodology has been adopted by opinion-forming media outlets. In December 2019, when researching the role of mobile news apps in alerting voters to political content, *The Guardian* acknowledged it was: 'Following a methodology applied by Loughborough University to analyse print news'. It has since reused the method to conduct further investigations into the partisan treatment of the Royal family and celebrities [S6].

3. Improving the balance of media agendas

This impact relates to the findings on 'agenda balance' [R2], [R3], [R6] and has been achieved in three ways. First, the research promoted reflexivity about the nature of the news and its significance during campaigns. As Richard Hooper, Producer of BBC R4's *The Media Show*, commented after his show's review of the 2019 election 'The inclusion of Loughborough's research enhanced the quality of the debate, making it more informed and increasing the awareness and understanding of the role of the media among the participants' [S4]. Second, leading journalists and editors approached us on many occasions for data to assist them in developing new lines of editorial enquiry about media-campaign dynamics. For example, we frequently furnished data and analysis to ITV's flagship current affairs show *Peston* to expose important aspects of the mediation of the campaigns [S5, pp.3-8]. In October 2018, following intense political debate over the implications Brexit held for custom arrangements for Northern Ireland, on our own initiative we provided the programme with findings demonstrating how little coverage there had been of Northern Ireland and border issues during the Referendum campaign itself. The results were prominently reported in the programme and afterwards Kishan Koria, producer of ITV's *Peston* show stated:

'We are always on the lookout for the best research and data to help tell the story of what is happening in politics and we've come to find the Loughborough University CRCC an incredible resource to help us do this' [S5, p.2].

Third, our research also influenced wider editorial strategies in campaign reporting. For example, the BBC consciously increased the substantive policy focus of its news coverage in the 2017 General Election after our research helped to highlight the inordinately high percentage of coverage that focused on the political drama rather than the policy substance of the preceding 2015 campaign [S8].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- Source 1: Portfolio of publicity activities related to CRCC campaign analyses, 2015-2020.
- Source 2: Media and social media reach of campaign analyses, 2015-2020.
- Source 3: Harriet Harman letter to Ofcom and accompanying evidence, 2016.
- Source 4: Letter from Richard Hooper, BBC R4 *Media Show* producer, 2019.
- Source 5: Letter from Kishan Koria, editor. ITV *Peston Show*, 2018.
- Source 6: The *Guardian's* adoption of CRCC methodology, 2019 - 2020.
- Source 7: Discussion of CRCC research on BBC R4's *More or Less* programme, 2016.
- Source 8: Changes in BBC content, 2015 -2017.
- Source 9: Testimonies about CRCC research, 2015.