

Institution: University of Cambridge		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 19		
Title of case study: Talking Politics: Using a podcast to improve public debate and teaching about politics		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2008-2019		
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 Runciman	Professor of Politics (2012)	01.10.1998-present
Helen Thompson	Professor of Political Economy	01.09.1994-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: September 2016-present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact <p>The Talking Politics podcast is one of the most important and effective vehicles in Britain for improving public understanding of politics. Created in 2016 by academics at the University of Cambridge, it has been unrivalled in its ability to translate academic research to inform thinking across a variety of audiences, with more than 20,600,000 listens from more than 155 countries. Runciman and Thompson's analysis on the podcast, grounded in their combination of political theory, history and political economy, has enhanced the teaching of politics in schools in the UK and globally, and prompted media professionals, to rethink how they cover the subject.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>Talking Politics was created in 2016 with the aim of translating research from the Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS), University of Cambridge, into the public sphere. It is a weekly podcast dedicated to analysing contemporary political issues, hosted by David Runciman (Professor of Politics at the University of Cambridge) in conversation with Helen Thompson (Professor of Political Economy at the University of Cambridge). They are often joined by academic guests, many from POLIS, who bring their research expertise to bear on discussion of particular topics – for example Chris Bickerton on Brexit, Michael Kenny on British politics, and Ayse Zarakol on Turkish politics – as well as a range of other writers, scholars, and politicians.</p> <p>Since Talking Politics first aired, it has been organised around Runciman and Thompson's complementary research agendas, which focus on locating democratic politics and the international economy in an historically-informed analytical framework. Using insights drawn from political theory, history, and political economy, they have shed light on a range of pressing political issues, including Brexit, the role of financial and energy markets in shaping government action, and the perceived crisis of democracy. Their research has both informed, and been further developed by, conversations facilitated by the podcast.</p> <p>Runciman's books, <i>The confidence trap</i> (2013) [R1] and <i>How democracy ends</i> (2020) [R2], combine academic history and political theory with an accessible discussion of some of the main challenges in contemporary politics. Runciman developed a comparative historical framework to make sense of what is new and what is familiar in current crises of democracy. He has challenged existing views (e.g. that we risk a return to the 1930s, and about the role of time horizons in shaping democratic decision-making) to provide alternative models and points of comparison.</p> <p>Over the past decade, Thompson has shown the long-term political predicaments exposed by the Eurozone crisis that created the path to the Brexit referendum [R3], the specific role played by the funding of German banks in the Eurozone crisis [R4], and the crucial part that oil and the politics of energy played in the 2008 financial crisis and the current wave of geopolitical disruption [R5] [R6]. Just as their research has informed Runciman and Thompson's analysis on the podcast, collaboration on the podcast has fed back into their research agendas [R2, p. 230].</p>		

The weekly podcast locates contemporary politics in an expansive historical perspective. Episodes have analysed how aspects of Brexit can be illuminated by the histories of Ancient Rome, the Reformation, and the Corn Laws. The podcast avoids partisanship in favour of balanced and rigorous interrogation of long-term trends and issues. Their discussions of the post-2008 world are framed by Thompson's scholarship on the financial crisis, the Eurozone crisis, energy politics and Brexit. Episodes in which Runciman and Thompson have discussed the financial crisis and its aftermath with Professor Adam Tooze (Columbia) are indicative of how the podcast has presented rigorous analysis on issues at the core of Thompson's research. Runciman has communicated his research on democratic participation and representation through the podcast, including examination of long-term demographic trends and the role of young people in democratic politics.

3. References to the research

- [R1] Runciman, D. (2013). *The confidence trap: A history of democracy in crisis from the First World War to the present*. Princeton University Press. ISBN 9780691148687.
- [R2] Runciman, D. (2018). *How democracy ends*. Profile Books. ISBN 9781781259757.
- [R3] Thompson, H. (2017). Inevitability and contingency: The political economy of Brexit. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19(3), 434-449. [\[DOI\]](#)
- [R4] Thompson, H. (2016). Enduring capital flow constraints and the 2007-2008 financial and euro zone crises. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 18(1), 216-233. [\[DOI\]](#)
- [R5] Thompson, H. (2017). *Oil and the western economic crisis*. Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 9783319525082.
- [R6] Thompson, H. (2008). *Might, right, prosperity and consent: Representative democracy and the international economy 1919-2001*. Manchester University Press. ISBN 9780719077500.

Indicators of quality: [R1, R6] are extensive university press books that have undergone rigorous peer review processes. [R2, R5] are peer reviewed books with international audiences. [R3, R4] are articles in journals of international standing that have been through rigorous peer-review processes.

4. Details of the impact

Through the Talking Politics podcast, Runciman and Thompson's analyses of contemporary politics, grounded in their research, have become an established and widely acclaimed resource that enhances public understanding of political developments in the UK and globally. Moreover, the podcast has become an important pedagogical resource for politics teachers and their students, and has shifted how some influential media professionals think about and present programmes about politics.

1. Provision of accessible and in-depth political analysis that has made an important contribution to the UK's public culture

Contributions to improving public understanding through public media are difficult to measure precisely, but nonetheless several indicators of recognition and listenership evidence the prominent place of Talking Politics in reaching and educating a wide set of audiences.

Organised around Runciman's and Thompson's research agendas, Talking Politics was created in September 2016 to help improve the quality of public debate about contemporary politics. It has generated remarkable interest, attracting more than 20,600,000 listens by December 31, 2020. The number of monthly listens rose by more than 500% between 2017 and 2020 (131,148 in 2017 and 768,393 in 2020), drawing listeners from more than 155 countries. Runciman and Thompson also collaborated with the Fivethirtyeight podcast – one of the most popular American politics podcasts – featuring on one another's podcast to expand the reach to an American audience. In 2020, 50.9% of listeners were in the UK and 16.3% from the US, followed by Australia (6.5%) [E1].

Listenership patterns reveal that Talking Politics holds particular value during moments of crisis. Listenership has spiked in times of acute political contestation in the UK [E1]. This reflects the podcast's significance as a resource for analytical thinking about democracy under stress – from the parliamentary impasse over the Brexit negotiations, to constitutional crises around the Supreme Court and prorogation of Parliament, and to the questions raised by the government's

response to Covid-19. The most popular episodes affirm this appeal: 4 of the top 10 episodes by listenership were produced in September 2019, a month of political and constitutional crisis in the UK. Attention to the dynamics of political crisis has been a central focus of Runciman and Thompson's academic work [R2] [R3].

In addition to enhancing public understanding, the podcast has informed the views of a number of politicians, including policy makers involved in the Brexit negotiations. Brexit has been a regular feature of the podcast: from the lead up to the referendum in 2016 to exit on 31 January 2020, over 40 episodes have been dedicated to analysing the subject. In 2019, Talking Politics was the starting point for sustained discussions between Runciman and Thompson with the Irish Finance Minister and his advisors around the Brexit negotiations. The Irish Finance Minister stated that podcast helped him to understand British views of the Brexit negotiations and as trends in European politics [E2]. He notes:

"As a professional politician, the contributors to 'Talking Politics' understood the nexus between political theory and the 'real world' with a clarity that is increasingly rare. Political economy and ideas are used to understand reality, not deepen a divide. Finally, new ways need to be found to make the case for nuance and complicity – but crucially to do so with a clear and accessible style. David Runciman is a leading proponent of this approach." [E2]

"I have found this podcast to be an invaluable source of insight into British politics as the Brexit process unfolded." [E2]

Extensive positive press coverage of Talking Politics emphasises that its success is due to its rare combination of accessibility and sophisticated, historically-informed, political analysis. Praising Talking Politics as one of the "ten podcasts that shaped the decade," *Harper's Bazaar* contended that its historical approach brought something new to media coverage of current politics: *"By now, the podcast has become a vital set of instant reactions to the rise of Populism, further informed by striking echoes from the recent and the deep past"* [E3, p. 8]. A review in *The Times* commented: *"The type of political coverage that bores me most is the gossipy 'Did you see the shadow undersecretary for the fisheries has tweeted something rude about Jess Phillips's dog?' stuff. Runciman soars above this pettiness on thermals of intellectual discovery"* [E3, p. 22]. From 2017 to 2020, Talking Politics was repeatedly singled out as an important podcast, including by the *Financial Times*, *Business Insider*, *The Times*, Acast (podcast platform), and the *Guardian* [E3]. As the *Radio Times* states of the podcast, *"it never fails to deepen one's understanding of what our ever shifting politics really mean"* [E3, p. 28-29].

2. Improved teaching and learning about politics in schools

High school and university teachers have adopted the Talking Politics podcast as a vital teaching and learning resource [E4]. Teacher feedback shows how this has occurred in the UK and internationally, with data drawn from a survey in June 2019 of 170 teachers who listen to Talking Politics, direct testimonials and indirect feedback through social media.

By 2020, considerable evidence suggests that many sixth-form and A-level teachers in the UK had independently integrated Talking Politics into their teaching. A teacher from a London Sixth Form College, for example, commented that Talking Politics was *"Literally the best politics podcast around for A* student extension"* [E5]. A group of students at Brampton Manor Academy (London) created a weekly discussion group centred on the podcast, continued virtually during the COVID-19 lockdown [E6]. The survey identified that teachers frequently used the podcast to improve their own understanding of political issues (115/123) [E5]. A majority also used it to frame issues for students (67/101) or to broaden their curricula (61/98) [E5]. Its take-up is apparent in different parts of the education system, with survey respondents coming from mainstream state (18%), private or independent (15%), academy (14%), and comprehensive (11%) schools, among other kinds of educational institution [E5]. Teachers emphasised the value of Thompson's and Runciman's in-depth and historically rich analyses, something they said was missing in established media channels. A teacher from Stroud High School explained, *"it was invaluable during the heat of Brexit's passage through parliament"* [E7].

Student learning has been enriched through teachers' use of Talking Politics. 28% of survey respondents noted that the podcast sparked students' interest in politics (26/92) and 44.2% stated

that it challenged students' preconceptions (42/95) [E5]. Teachers explained that analyses on the podcast showed their students how to contextualise political events and examine them from different perspectives. A teacher at an independent school in London stated that Talking Politics generated:

"... more in depth discussion of events and key factors. There is also a sense of critical mass in that the most engaged and insightful students listen regularly so that not listening becomes a handicap for students if they want to contribute to discussions." [E5]

Similar value was identified outside the UK. This is encapsulated in statements from two teachers, the first from a state school in Ireland, the second, a school in the United States:

"To be honest, the big difference, for me, is that it's not hosted by a 'journalist'. And it's not just journalists waffling on. No disrespect to them, but you really get a far, far richer conversation on some issues (Brexit, for example) because the panel comprises a historian, political scientist etc." [E5]

"It is at once rigorous and thoughtful and on the other hand accessible. I have assigned my advanced students in European history to listen to Talking Politics, and we have interesting discussions which I don't think would be completely possible without it." [E5]

Thompson and Runciman have continued to develop the podcast in response to teachers' expressed needs. In 2018 and 2019, they produced 21 short guides on topics, some directly related to A-Level curricula (e.g. Thompson on Bretton Woods) [E1]. In May 2020 Talking Politics created a new series on the history of ideas, written and narrated by Runciman. This built on his research on historical views about democracy, representation, citizenship and the state [R2]. It explored and expanded on many issues covered in Talking Politics episodes. The series was designed to support online learning during COVID-19 school closures, and linked directly to content in A-Level and pre-undergraduate studies. A teacher at Harris Westminster Sixth Form College (London) explained that the *"History of Ideas [series] has been a great start at improving my teaching of ideologies"* and he utilised it for extension work for students aiming at A*. He continued that Talking Politics *"gives [our students] the intellectual confidence to debate and compete with the more well-heeled students across the road at Westminster School"* [E8]. The series quickly reached a very wide audience, with just over 170,000 listens in its first week and over 940,000 by the end of 2020 [E1]. It has found a receptive listenership among a diverse segment of the media and public: from a headline feature on the *Guardian's* podcasts of the week [E3, p.76] to a review in *The Daily Mail* which claimed, *"It's a proper brain exercise,"* and said of Runciman, *"I can think of no better guide than him"* [E3, p.81]. Teachers regularly tweeted links to the new series to their students, e.g. Stratford Girls School and Lancaster Royal Grammar School [E3, p. 96-97]. A new series will be released in early 2021.

3. Changes to how media professionals analyse politics

Podcasting has become an increasingly popular medium for public commentary in the UK: in 2020 the *Guardian* estimated that one-quarter of Britons listened to podcasts [E3, p.35]. Talking Politics stands out among its competitors due to its rigorous and historically-informed analysis. These qualities are widely recognised and have prompted some leading media professionals to rethink how they approach the subject. A former Controller for Radio 4 explains why Talking Politics has had such a significant impact on the media landscape:

"Talking Politics has carved out a distinctive voice and approach. For all the BBC's excellence in its coverage of politics on Radio 4 it does not pay any significant attention to political or philosophical ideas. The brilliance of 'Talking Politics' is that it takes a contemporary political agenda as its starting point and provides a listener with ways of thinking and interpreting that agenda in ways not available elsewhere. A listener will be provided with much more history, a greater exposure to ideas - current and historical - and a range of international comparisons" [E9]

Radio 4 politics programming has been adapted in response to the podcast. The current Controller, Radio 4 and Radio 4 Extra, met with Runciman in early 2018 to discuss how BBC radio could learn from how Talking Politics analysed politics. He explains:

"Talking Politics is a brilliant podcast that has shown what you can do taking an informal approach to serious politics. It has contributed to our thinking here about how to reach new audiences and introduced us to some terrific new contributors." It stands out, he continues, *"through the boldness of devoting a long time to analysis of a single question."* [E10].

Talking Politics' success led BBC Radio 4 to invite Runciman to produce a three-part series in 2019, *Rethinking representation*, to explore the challenges of political representation in the digital age. Reaching a global audience, the series developed many of the research themes showcased on the podcast – including Runciman's work on the challenge of youth representation in contemporary democracies – in conversation with politicians and other experts.

Runciman and Thompson's approach to podcasting has impacted on how other broadcasters use the medium for public engagement. For example, the form and content of the podcast helped to convince a former Labour Party leader to shift how he engaged with the wider public. He launched, and has since co-hosted, his own acclaimed podcast in late September 2017. He explains,

"Talking Politics is a very important innovation which takes academic thinking on politics well beyond the campus. ... It has certainly influenced my thinking about today's vital issues in politics" [E11]. He continues: *"Talking Politics has been a podcast pioneer, showing there is an audience for informative and serious discussions about politics. Others, including my own podcast, Reasons to be Cheerful, have followed in its trailblazing footsteps."* [E11]

Another political analysis podcast attributed a fivefold rise in their listenership to Talking Politics' popularity, with this increase taking place immediately after their guest appearance on Talking Politics [E12]. The Talking Politics podcast has made an indelible mark on podcasting as a medium for political communication, in the process both challenging and informing political analyses in the media landscape through its academically grounded approach to broadcasting. A content development manager from Acast, the largest global podcasting company, testifies,

"Having surpassed 20 million listens globally, Talking Politics is indubitably the most important, innovative and widely listened to independent politics podcast to emerge from the UK, contending now only with major politics, news and current affairs shows from behemoth news publishers." [E4]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[E1]: Statistics: Acast platform statistics on listenership, excel export (evidence available upon request).

[E2]: Testimonial: Minister for Finance, Ireland, 13 Mar 2020.

[E3]: Media reviews: Talking Politics in the media (*Business Insider, Daily Express, Daily Mail, Evening Standard, Financial Times, Guardian, Harper's Bazaar, Radio Times, RTE, The Bookseller, The Times, The Week*), 2017-Jul 2020.

[E4]: Testimonial: Content Development Manager, Acast, 8 Nov 2020.

[E5]: Survey results: survey of teachers about Talking Politics (Qualtrics, retrieved 13 Jul 2019); (i) raw data (evidence available upon request), (ii) analysed data.

[E6]: Testimonial: teacher at Brampton Manor Academy, London, 2 Oct 2020

[E7]: Testimonial: politics teacher at Stroud High School, 2 Oct 2020.

[E8]: Testimonial: teacher at Harris Westminster Sixth Form College, London, 2 Oct 2020.

[E9]: Testimonial: former Controller, BBC Radio 4, 24 Oct 2020.

[E10]: Testimonial: Controller, Radio 4 & Radio 4 Extra, 10 and 11 Mar 2020.

[E11]: Testimonial: presenter, Reasons to be Cheerful podcast, 10 Mar 2020 and 26 Oct 2020.

[E12] Tweet: Politics JaM, 22 Dec 2020. [\[Link\]](#)