

A Boulton
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Exhibits TABB1-7

**IN THE LEVESON INQUIRY INTO THE CULTURE, PRACTICES AND ETHICS OF THE
PRESS**

EXHIBIT TABB3

This is the exhibit TABB3 referred to in the first witness statement of Thomas Adam Babington Bolton dated 25 April 2012.

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'This fascinating collection of essays provides a detailed, scholarly but always accessible analysis of the interplay between the media and politicians - when there is most at stake. *Political Communication in Britain* is the 2010 election laid bare' - Michael Cockerell, Award-winning political broadcaster

Political Communication in Britain provides unique insights into the UK General Election of 2010 from those who fought, reported and polled the campaign. These contributions, together with those from leading academic experts, offer compelling analyses of how the parties, electorate and media participated in the democratic process. This book also discusses the nature and impact of the first ever British Prime Ministerial Debates from the perspective of those responsible for convening and organising these historic encounters. Consideration is given to other pertinent issues including: voter attitudes towards politics in the aftermath of the parliamentary expenses' scandal; the role of the Internet during the campaign; and the issues as well as innovations in the various media platforms' representations of the contest.

Dominic Wring is Reader in Political Communication, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, UK. He is co-editor of *Political Communications: The General Election Campaign of 2005* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); author of *The Politics of Marketing the Labour Party* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); founder/former convener of the UK Political Studies Association Media & Politics Group and Chair of the International Political Studies Association Research Committee for Political Communication.

Roger Mortimore is Director of Political Analysis, Ipsos MORI, UK. He has worked for MORI since 1993, concentrating on electoral research in particular, notably the highly successful exit polls at the last four general elections. He has written or co-written a number of books on elections, including *Elections in Britain - A Voter's Guide* (5th edition, Palgrave, 2005) with Dick Leonard, and the *Explaining Labour's Landslide* series with Robert Worcester and Paul Baines, and was co-editor of the *Political Communications* books on the 2001 and 2005 elections. Since 2003 he has been Journals Review Editor of the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*.

Simon Atkinson is Assistant Chief Executive, Ipsos MORI, UK. He has worked on the company's political polling for twenty years, and has been a member of the British Polling Council since its launch in 2004. Simon is co-editor of the *Political Communications* books on the 2001 and 2005 general elections.

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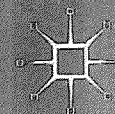
POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN BRITAIN

EDITED BY DOMINIC WRING, ROGER MORTIMORE
AND SIMON ATKINSON

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN BRITAIN

The Leader Debates, the Campaign and
the Media in the 2010 General Election

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3

The Election Debates: Sky News' Perspective on their Genesis and Impact on Media Coverage

Adam Boulton and Tom D.C. Roberts

Britain's General Election in 2010 was unique. For the first time ever the three main UK party leaders took part in live debates on television – fifty years after the first ever televised Presidential debate in the United States between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. This chapter falls into two sections. First there is a description of how the television debates came to happen from the perspective of Sky News, which is widely credited with playing a decisive role in bringing them about. This is followed by an examination of the impact of the televised debates on the coverage given to the general election campaign by the rest of the news media, especially the national press.

Over the past fifty years there have been many attempts to organise televised debates between party leaders. All of them were unsuccessful until the 2009/2010 cycle. The failures resulted from an inability of the relevant politicians to agree a suitable format with the broadcasters. For most of this period the chances of agreement were further stymied by the rigidities of electoral law. Under the old Representation of the People Act, equivalent candidates had an effective veto on any debates; by refusing to take part they would render them unbalanced under the terms of the law.

At least one of the candidates usually felt that it would not be to their advantage to facilitate the debate. Most often this was the incumbent Prime Minister, who resisted debating his or her opponents because it would raise them up to an equal level. But, in the run-up to the 1997 election, Tony Blair was so far ahead in the opinion polls that he rejected Prime Minister John Major's challenge with the condescending words 'nice try'. As a result, campaign events were enlivened first

by the appearance of Tory chickens (or rather people in chicken suits) outside Labour events and then by Labour foxes to chase them away.

Like the politicians, the broadcasters also had their rivalries. Their competing debate programme bids were skilfully played against each other by party officials to ensure stalemate. Prior to the launch of Sky News in 1989, the BBC and ITV/ITN were the only broadcasters interested in staging debates. For a long time after that, the terrestrial TV companies regarded putative election debates as theirs by right. A key factor in the success of 2010 was that the broadcasters put aside their differences at an early stage to negotiate as a bloc (BBC/Sky News/ITV) across the table with a bloc of political parties (Labour/Conservative/Liberal Democrat). This reflected the recognition by the terrestrial broadcasters of the presence by then of multichannel television and rolling news in the majority of British homes.

It is interesting to note that, in the UK, TV debates have mostly been regarded as a matter for the broadcasters and the politicians to sort out between themselves. This is in contrast to the United States, where civic-minded organisations such as the League of Women Voters had previously taken the burden of responsibility away from the TV networks. In Britain, *The Times* newspaper has probably been the strongest independent champion of leaders' debates at successive elections, including drawing up plans to stage them.¹ Previous attempts to secure debates had also run into difficulty because the negotiations started too late, typically around the time that the election was called. By this stage the parties had already committed their resources to planned campaigns and were reluctant to have them derailed by a major unpredictable factor such as debates. Whether or not candidates were willing to take part also inevitably became a political football in the campaign, just about destroying any chance of agreement.

The Sky campaign

From its launch, Sky News had consistently advocated that leaders' debates should take place at election time. It also judged that agreement would only be achieved in isolation from the political campaign. By early 2009 there appeared to be a window of opportunity, because the next election seemed increasingly likely to be called at full term, more than a year hence. Sky also felt that it needed to reassess its approach to covering the next general election because of the decline in both voter turnout and viewer interest over recent campaigns. On 6 April 2009 John Ryley, the head of Sky News, circulated an internal discussion

document by email to the most senior editorial staff involved in political coverage. It ran to eight single-spaced pages and contained the skeleton for what became the Sky News Leaders' Debate Campaign. Ryley proposed mobilising as many Sky News, BSkyB and News Corp resources as possible to create momentum for a televised leadership debate, stressing that this would increase engagement with the electoral process among jaded voters. He argued that such a campaign chimed with a populist sentiment that demanded politicians be held more accountable following the expenses scandal.

Sky envisioned a fresh approach to securing debates to cut through the Gordian knot which had paralysed previous attempts. Initial negotiations should take place *independently* of the parties and be supported by legal opinion. And, while Sky News was keen to be at the vanguard of the campaign, it accepted that any debates would be a public good, most likely facilitated by individual broadcasters but made openly available. Mounting a collaborative approach – Sky, BBC and ITV – from the start would provide the best possible chance of success. Exchanges between the recipients quickly concluded that securing television debates would be the most appropriate way for Sky News to try to enhance voter engagement. And, with the full support of BSkyB at corporate level, it was decided to launch the campaign in early September 2009, when the political year started again after the long summer recess.

Sky also significantly toughened up the tactics it would employ. As a result of the changes in electoral law, party leaders could no longer veto a debate by refusing to take part, provided that they had been invited fairly to do so. It was decided to turn the tables by stating that Sky News was going to stage a leaders' debate, and leaving it up to the individual leaders whether they turned up or not. It was hoped David Cameron and Nick Clegg would take part because both had supported the idea of debates in principle, while Gordon Brown had never been as intractably opposed as his predecessor. During the summer Sky discussed what it was planning to do privately with representatives of all the parties. As an independent twenty-four-hour news channel, Sky News was free to pursue its objective more aggressively than a traditional public service broadcaster. Sky was prepared to take the risk of staging an open leaders' debate, but would anybody turn up? By the end of July Sky had been given private commitments that Clegg and Cameron would debate each other even if Brown refused to participate. The pivotal discussion took place *al fresco* over lunch at the Inn The Park restaurant, St James' Park, between Andy Coulson, David Cameron's Head of

Communications, and Adam Boulton and Jon Levy, Sky News' Political Editor and Executive Producer for politics respectively.

Coulson committed Cameron unconditionally to the debate, provided that Sky News would state publicly that Brown had been invited to take part should he decline to do so. This presented no problem for Sky News, since it was already dedicated to campaigning for the debate or debates with maximum openness. Coulson also expressed the view that the Conservatives were not interested in negotiating with individual broadcasters. He wanted the TV companies to sort out their differences and to come back with firm proposals as a bloc. Independently, the other parties reiterated this view. Unbeknown to Sky News, the BBC was also in discussions with the parties about staging a series of six BBC exclusive leaders' debates both before and during the election campaign. Only the Brown camp expressed any enthusiasm for this proposal.

In July 2009, BBC and ITV news executives wrote jointly to John Ryley inviting Sky News to discussions about possible debates in October after the party conferences. Ryley accepted, even though it was evident that this invitation was something of an afterthought. He did not inform them of the already well-advanced plans for the Sky Campaign. On 2 September 2009 Sky News launched the Leaders' Debate Campaign – on air, online and in the press. On television we broadcast a number of reports and discussions about election debates. Online we launched a petition to sign up in support of an election debate. John Ryley authored an opinion piece for *The Times*: 'Who'll show up for the TV showdown? Party leaders are cordially invited to take part in the democratic process, they'll be punished by the public if they don't.' Ryley announced: '[T]oday, I have written to Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Nick Clegg, informing them that Sky will be hosting a live debate between them during the election campaign.'² He also committed to host separate debates in Scotland and Wales, and confirmed this in writing to the SNP and Plaid Cymru leaders the same week.

Laying out the campaign, the head of Sky News confirmed that it was an initiative in the public interest, not an attempt at 'an exclusive'. 'I also recognise that – however much I might wish it were other – a televisual moment of such importance cannot be "owned" by any one broadcaster. We will, therefore, offer the debate live and unedited to any of our competitors that want to run it. We are ready to sit down with them to discuss the timing and the staging; this debate must be about empowering the British people; egos and self interest must be set aside by us all.'³ Within twenty-four hours Cameron and Clegg had publicly agreed to take part. Gordon Brown said it was 'not the time' to

make the decision. BBC and ITV executives reacted with 'fury', according to news reports. One ITV spokesman described Sky's move as 'childish' and 'a marketing stunt'.⁴ The BBC expressed disappointment, arguing that Sky had damaged the notional joint approach by the broadcasters to secure debates. Its invitation to the October broadcasters' meeting was withdrawn. However, informal contacts between broadcasters and with politicians continued through the party conference season. Gradually the BBC and ITV came to accept that Sky wanted to work with them rather than to compete, but that, as Adam Boulton told BBC Radio 4, its campaign had 'kick-started' getting debates.

Gordon Brown's participation in the debates was the remaining hold-out, as became clear in an ugly on-air exchange between Brown and Adam Boulton during Labour's 2009 party conference. Many believe that Brown had planned to make a challenge to the other leaders to debate the centrepiece of his Leader's Speech in Brighton. However, there was no such challenge in his address on 29 September – perhaps because he felt the Sky campaign had stolen his thunder. Brown's speech was in any case overshadowed by the announcement at 10 pm that evening by the *Sun*, Britain's biggest-circulation daily newspaper, that it was switching its editorial support from Labour to the Conservatives.

The *Sun* is wholly owned by News Corporation, which has a controlling share of BSkyB plc, Sky News' parent company, but the two are entirely independent of each other editorially. Indeed, the *Sun* only told Sky News of its switch at the same time as it told the BBC, one hour before it was announced. But these subtleties seemed to be entirely overlooked by Brown when he confronted Boulton during a round of live breakfast-time interviews the following morning. Seemingly conflating the *Sun's* offence with Sky News' questions about the debates, the Prime Minister told Boulton 'You sound like a political propagandist yourself' before storming off without first detaching himself from his microphone. The *Evening Standard's* front page headline boomed that Brown had suffered a televisual 'meltdown'.⁵ But three weeks later Brown's spokesman announced that, subject to negotiations, he would agree to debate with Clegg and Cameron during the upcoming election campaign.

The negotiations

The broadcasters soon managed to form a common front behind agreed proposals for three debates to be held under the same rules. Each organisation nominated two production executives for the negotiating team: Sue English and Ric Bailey from the BBC, Chris Birkett and Jon Levy for

Sky News and Michael Jerney and Jonathan Munro from ITV. Two of Gordon Brown's special advisers, David Muir and Justin Forsyth, represented Labour. The other parties fielded communications professionals: Coulson and Michael Salter for the Conservatives and Jonny Oates for the Lib Dems. Channel Four requested to be part of the group and then withdrew to pursue its own ideas. By general consent, Channel Four subsequently staged the first televised debate of the Election Campaign (actually just before it officially started) between the Treasury spokesmen Alistair Darling, George Osborne and Vince Cable, moderated by Krishnan Guru-Murthy. This left a fairly simple prospect of three debates each to be staged by ITV, the BBC and Sky. Each broadcaster had different objectives, but these were accommodated by their competitors.

Both Sky News and the BBC took a public service approach, making 'their' debate available live to others. ITV had long insisted that it would only surrender prime airtime to a 'live exclusive'. In the event, BBC 2 rebroadcast all three debates the same day at 11.15 pm after *Newsnight*. Sky News and the BBC News Channel each carried the other's debate live, and rebroadcast the ITV debate. It was left to each organisation to honour its obligations to the parties in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There was some legal sabre-rattling from nationalist parties. In the end all three channels staged live televised debates between these nations' main party leaders nationally: Belfast 22 April (UTV); Belfast 4 May (BBC1 NI); Glasgow 20 April (STV/ITV1); Edinburgh 25 April (Sky News); Edinburgh 2 May (BBC1 Scotland); Cardiff 18 April (Sky News); Cardiff 20 April (ITV1 Wales); and Pontardawe 2 May (BBC1 Wales).

It took from October until mid-February to secure full agreement on the debates with the three main UK parties. Throughout that period, regular weekly meetings took place in secret, first in rooms at RIBA, just up from BBC Broadcasting House, and subsequently at the Mothers' Union in Great Peter Street, close to 4 Millbank, the broadcasters' shared base in Westminster. Most of the discussion was about detail: the nature of the staging, the lighting, the presenters, the audience, the camera shots, the speaking order, and so on. (The full list of guidelines is reproduced in the Appendix.) Perhaps surprisingly, there was little debate about who should participate and on what terms. It was accepted from the outset that there would be three debates, each featuring the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats on equal terms. With hindsight, Conservatives, led by Lord Ashcroft and Conservativehome.com, have criticised the ceding of parity to Nick Clegg.⁶ But this can be taken as an indication of the commitment to hold the debates in all three camps, since any attempt to downgrade a participant would have resulted in a legal logjam.

From one perspective it can be said simply that the leaders' debates happened in 2010 because, for the first time ever, all three of them were willing to take part – greatly to the credit of David Cameron, Nick Clegg and Gordon Brown, in the authors' view. It should also be recognised that a three-way debate reflected the trend towards multi-party plurality in British politics. In 1959, the closest UK general election to the first US televised debate, Conservatives and Labour combined took 93.2 per cent of the votes cast; but by 2005, the last UK election without debates, this had fallen to just 67.6 per cent. It was 65.1 per cent in 2010. In this century around a third of the vote goes to 'third forces'. The presence on the debate stage of the leader of the largest 'third force' was consistent with this trend.

On 21 December 2009, the winter solstice, the debate negotiators, both TV and party political, announced a joint agreement in principle that three Clegg/Cameron/Brown debates would take place during the 2010 General Election campaign. Details of themes, locations and dates were perforce left open, since the Prime Minister had not yet determined when polling day would be. As it turned out, these issues were more than technicalities. There was a hiatus of almost a month on the issue of themes. Labour had consistently favoured themes for debate, while the Conservatives wanted open discussion. A compromise was reached: half of each debate would be devoted to questions on one of three agreed themes – domestic affairs, foreign affairs and the economy. The broadcasters drew lots twice, for order of debates and for order of subjects. This resulted in the sequence of first debate: ITV, domestic; second debate: Sky News, foreign; third debate: BBC, economy. Initially this was endorsed by the three parties, but, after consultations with the Prime Minister, the Labour team announced that the order was now unacceptable – the economy had to be the theme for the first debate. Substantively this only mattered seriously to Brown, but to backtrack at this late stage would have undermined the principles of mutual consent on which the whole debate agreement was based. Neither the Liberal Democrats nor Tories were inclined to give way. A four-week standoff ensued before Brown relented and accepted the original order of themes. The announcement of final agreement was made at the beginning of March.

The debates

The first ever UK general election leaders' debate took place on 15 April 2010 at Granada Studios in Manchester, moderated by Alastair Stewart of ITV News. On 22 April, Adam Boulton moderated the Sky News Leaders'

Debate at the Arnolfini Centre in Bristol. David Dimbleby moderated the BBC debate on 29 April at the University of Birmingham. Each debate lasted ninety minutes, without commercial breaks, and accommodated eight questions from an independently selected and demographically representative local audience (plus up to four questioners nominated by the broadcaster). The debates respected the commitment to distinct themes – immigration was the only issue raised explicitly in all three debates. The debates were a spectacular success for British television in terms of impact, audiences and engaging the electorate. The first debate was watched by 9.6 million viewers, the second by 4.2 million and the third by 8.6 million. The debates were also broadcast on BBC and Independent Radio and on C-SPAN in the US. The Sky News debate enjoyed a record audience for the channel; it was broadcast live in HD as well (and watched in HD in 68 per cent of HD-enabled homes). The debate was also recorded in 3D.

Having campaigned so hard for the debates, Sky News took a rigidly disciplined approach to staging the Bristol debate. Unlike the BBC and ITV, Sky located its debate in a relatively small cockpit theatre, the moderator seated with back to the audience directly facing the leaders, each standing behind a podium. This gave a stark intimacy to the Bristol event that was lacking in Birmingham and Manchester. Sky conducted around half a dozen full debate rehearsals in studios mocked up to precisely represent the Bristol theatre.

Sky News also devoted great efforts to question selection, convening around five full meetings of the official certified question selection panel.

The agreed guidelines stipulated that the questions had to be posed by the audience without coaching from the broadcaster. However, the audiences also had to be recruited by an independent body to reflect the electoral demographics of the local area. In spite of the huge public interest in the debates, this meant that many of those who had the privilege of witnessing the event live were comparatively lukewarm about being there and often uninterested in asking questions. Sky News solicited questions from around 300 people who made up the local audience panel.

Each broadcaster was also allowed to add a maximum of four questioners from its general viewership. Sky News also solicited questions via its website, and subsequently went through over 10,000 submitted questions. Questioners chosen in this way took part in the Sky debates in Bristol, Edinburgh and Cardiff.

Even while the programme was live on air, the Sky News producers were still sifting questions to be asked according to the ground already

covered by the leaders. The moderator was informed of changes through his talkback earpiece.

In this way the Sky News debate posed probably the most controversial and pointed question of all the debates: the so-called Pope Question – whether the leaders welcomed the upcoming visit to Britain of Benedict XVI. All three leaders commented to Adam Boulton immediately after the debate that they had not anticipated the question and had been momentarily flummoxed by it. At the same time they commented that it was a legitimate issue in the Foreign Affairs debate.

Adam Boulton was on the Sky News question panel. But none of the moderators could raise questions of their own in the way that they would normally as TV journalists and interviewers. Instead, moderating the debates was largely a technical exercise of ensuring that the participants kept to the agreed order and timings – while also trying to make the flowing discussion as accessible as possible to the general viewer.

Boulton tested the limits of the moderators' role when a question was asked on MPs' ethics on the day that the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph* both carried negative stories about Nick Clegg.⁷ In a full round of answers none of the leaders had dealt with this issue, so Boulton referred directly to the *Telegraph* when bringing in Clegg. The Liberal Democrats did not lodge an official complaint with Sky News, but there were several hundred complaints to Ofcom. Although Ofcom acknowledged that it had little jurisdiction over the debates, it subsequently ruled that Boulton had acted within the relevant guidelines and did not uphold the complaints.

The media reaction

Following Sky News' September 2009 initiative in pushing for the debates, the press reaction was largely supportive, though mixed with reservations as well as some outright attacks. The *Financial Times*, then still supporting Labour, considered that, although the campaign was 'wrapped up in the gimmickry of modern television', it was 'a serious and welcome initiative'. The 'traditional line' of refusal, that televised debates would lead to the 'presidentialisation' of British politics, was 'high-minded, but quaint'. Participation by all three leaders, the hesitant Brown in particular, was required; after all, 'The great British television-watching public deserve better than an empty chair.'⁸

The *Economist* too felt that the 'arguments trotted out against debates are weak' while it was 'amazing that, in 2009, Britain is still debating debates'. Instead, 'a live showdown might help to excite a worryingly

apathetic electorate.' Brown should stop 'dragging his feet' – following his disastrous experiments with new media, 'taking on Mr Cameron and Mr Clegg might soften his aloof image.'⁹ The Labour stalwart *Daily Mirror* also saw an opportunity for Brown if he decided to participate. Among the '10 things' the Prime Minister had to do to save his party, the paper's political editor, Kevin Macguire, advised him to agree to participate in the debates and call the three broadcasters immediately to tell them so. In Maguire's view, the chance to bash his opponents in the forum of the history-making 'ding-dongs' made the decision a 'no-brainer'.¹⁰

A more nuanced view was explored by Andrew Rawnsley in the *Observer* under the headline 'Will TV debates change the face of the election?', published the day after Brown, now 'so unpopular that he has nothing to lose', confirmed his participation.¹¹ The debates were likely to be 'the defining event of the election campaign' for Clegg and Cameron. However, for the electorate they would be a 'mixed blessing' if the electoral coverage trend of recent years towards greater concentration on the 'personalities at the top' continued 'at the expense of everything else'. For both the party machines and media, the debates would become 'the hinge occasions of the campaign, the crucial encounters on which political fortunes will be won or lost'. As to the events' wider success and importance, Rawnsley hedged his bets: 'If we are unlucky, leaders' debates will not be an enhancement of democracy, but a trivialising parody of it' with a focus 'on shallow personality issues, the colour of the candidates' ties, and arguments about whether they should use leeterns or not. If we are fortunate, however, leaders' debates will prove to be a welcome novelty to Britain and a refreshment of voter engagement.' Rawnsley signed off with the hope that the events would provide 'a robust interrogation of the candidates' characters, philosophies and policies, a stress test of those who aspire to govern us that makes a powerful contribution towards helping the electorate to decide...'

The *Independent's* chief political commentator was having none of it, though. In twelve hundred barbed words under the headline 'The last thing we need is a televised election debate',¹² Steve Richards set out his prediction of broadcaster disagreements and endless negotiating. A focus on the trivialities of the format and events themselves would be the 'only talking point', while the big political issues would not 'get a look in'. The whole process would be 'an anti-climax'. With confidence, Richards signed his piece off with the unequivocal assertion: 'Do not believe for one moment that the televised debates would do anything to enhance Britain's fragile democracy.'¹³ Fast forward to the

day of the election itself, and readers of the *Independent* would be forgiven for scratching their heads as they digested the newspaper's front page. Under a banner headline declaring 'THE PEOPLE'S ELECTION: On Polling Day, 15 reasons to celebrate a campaign that, with your help, could change the face of British politics for ever', listed in pole position were:

1 THE LEADERS' DEBATES

The main party leaders spoke largely in calculated soundbites and platitudes in their three showdowns, yet the effect of their communicating directly to millions of voters was electrifying. Nearly 10 million people watched the first debate – and within 24 hours the British political landscape had been transformed.¹⁴

Richards had at least moderated his view by then. The debates 'were much better' than he had feared: 'meaty, substantial events that conveyed something about the three individuals and what they represent'.¹⁵

Readers of the *Guardian* may also have experienced some confusion on picking up their paper the day after the first ITV debate. Marina Hyde, having chosen to watch the debate in a West End sports bar, concluded amongst other criticisms that those who had 'nurtured fantasies of politically re-engaged punters... were in for a disappointment'.¹⁶ These views ran consistent with her original questioning, when Sky News launched its initiative, of whether 'anyone one might care to know socially [would] actually watch the thing?' Hyde had also predicted that 'you'll be weeping with boredom before the first merciful ad break,' espousing the view that the 'whole pointless idea' should be dropped.¹⁷ However, those turning back to the post-debate front page leading paragraph would read Patrick Wintour's account of 'an electrifying, fast-moving, 90-minute primetime broadcast... [that had] focused on domestic issues, especially crime, immigration, education and cleaning up politics – but rapidly spread right across the political canvas'.¹⁸

For an election campaign period which had, up until the point of the first debate, failed to engage the electorate or communicate issues in an attention-grabbing way, the front pages of 16 April revealed the sudden shift and the re-centring of political debate back into the public sphere. Despite having a crippling volcanic ash cloud as competition, from the *Financial Times* to the *Daily Star* coverage of the debate made the front page. For the *Sun*, everyone was 'PARALYSED BY HOT AIR'. (It is fascinating to note that the *Daily Star*, usually the national daily least likely to deviate from celebrity exposé and human interest front page

leads, also gave equally high prominence to reports of the two further debates.¹⁹) Although, as media commentators wryly stressed, the assessments of who 'won' each debate remained curiously in line with the particular newspaper's political allegiance,²⁰ the phenomenon that was quickly termed 'Cleggmania' left the press playing catch-up.

Having watched the same live broadcast of the same leaders answering the same questions, each viewer was empowered to make his or her own decision unmediated by comment and editorial skewing. For Channel 4's Jon Snow, not a fan of the 'wretched TV debates' which in his view drained the 'lifeblood' out of the campaign, this typified the 'dreadful election' of the tabloids: 'What did they do? They told their readers that the viewers were wrong. When the viewer had thought that somebody had won they were then told by the media, the tabloids, they were wrong... There was a marvellous moment where the *Daily Mirror* said Brown had won and the *Sun* said that Cameron had won despite the polls saying Clegg had won.'²¹

But it was not just the printed press that would prove to perform below expectations. Before the debates took place, the 2010 General Election was heralded as the occasion when the internet and social media would break through as the most important form of political communication in Britain. Gordon Brown's pollster Deborah Mattinson had declared 2010 as the 'Mumsnet election'²² and Google and Facebook put commercial rivalry aside to launch the first Digital Debate.²³ Four days before the first TV debate, reporting under the headline 'Web 2.0: the new election superweapon', the *Observer* assessed the 'powerful new ways to engage voters' that technology offered, from 'Twitter and Facebook to viral ads and crowdsourcing'.²⁴ However, the televised debates would blow such predictions off course, as reflected in the post-mortem studies since.

Nic Newman prefaced his working paper for the Reuters Institute on the role of the internet in the 2010 election by conceding that 'Ironically, the biggest media story of the 2010 election ended up being a television event: a set-piece leadership debate which turned the campaign on its head – with the internet seen as something of a sideshow.'²⁵ Newman's investigation led him to recognise that 'the TV debates spawned a wide range of complementary activity in the social and digital sphere.' Citing blogger and *Telegraph* digital commentator Shane Richmond's view that 'Social media are at their best and most powerful when they are wrapping around other things,' Newman contended that in the case of the debates 'they enabled an unprecedented sharing of thoughts and opinions about politics...'²⁶ Another report seeking to assess the media's role within the 2010 election, which similarly noted that 'Web 2.0 served

mostly to amplify and complement news events created on other media, typically television, was undertaken jointly by YouGov and Deloitte.²⁷ Its findings, drawn from a survey of 2,000 adults, indicated that, despite a final election result which appeared to reflect none of the change in voting intentions during the campaign supposedly stirred by the televised debates, 'television's role in the election was arguably more significant than superficial.' The report found that 'Television was not only a major source of information for voters but it also shaped voting intentions, with its impact often strongest among the younger people.'²⁸ For the authors: 'Television's biggest impact was to offer, in the form of the debates, a relatively unfiltered view of the leaders to the general public.'²⁹

In his roundup of Fleet Street's coverage of the election campaign, Peter Preston acknowledged that, in pushing for the televised debates, 'Ryley has changed elections for all our lifetimes – and, though you wouldn't quite deduce it amid much press snarling, he's given newspapers a circulation transfusion as well.'³⁰ Preston noted that sales had increased across the board 'between 5% and 10%' on the day following each debate: 'You watched, you chatted, you wanted to compare notes: so you bought a paper.' Despite the swirls of criticism, the simple facts remained: 'Participation went up, not down. So did interest.'³¹

The televised leaders' debates provided a focused forum, devoid of the feared trivialities and easily accessible to the whole electorate. Their great strength lies not only in having generated direct awareness of issues and questions during the live transmission, but also in prompting further discussion and investigation that continued through other media forms, whether press, digital or social – a process which ultimately invigorated newspapers and new media alike. As *Broadcast* magazine stated, the debates 'were transformational, both in the way campaigns will be organised in the future and how broadcasting and other media will report them. Millions of people engaged with the political arguments and political leaders of the day in a way that they had never done before. One thing seems clear: now that we've had the televised debates we will want them again – the viewing and the voting public will demand it'.³² The debates changed the way the media cover politics and elections in Britain forever. But did they change politics? The question will long be debated.

Labour strategists have subsequently claimed that the debates 'cost David Cameron his majority' by broadening the participation and admitting Nick Clegg. Andy Coulson and David Cameron insist that the widening effect of the debate helped them and prevented Labour from running a focused 'Tory Cuts' campaign of the type that had proved so successful in the past. On the face of it, the Liberal Democrats

had most reason to be disappointed by their performance on polling day – but without Cleggmania would Nick Clegg have been accepted so readily as a credible Deputy Prime Minister? Some constituency campaigners claimed they were 'swamped' by the national debates. But others thanked the debates for energising the election. Voters were inspired to stage debates and hustings at constituency and regional levels. And some canvassers reported that for the first time ever they were welcomed when they knocked on the door because voters wanted to discuss the issues raised in the debate. Certainly, audience surveys showed that those who came stayed for the ninety-minute duration of the debates (to paraphrase the Duke of Wellington).

For broadcasters the point surely is that we did what television does best and deployed our unique selling point by staging a series of live mass audience events – this time on the important political issues of the day. It is simplistic to try to trace cause and effect from the debates. What matters is that we increased voter engagement as John Ryley had intended. Voter turnout was up modestly as well. At last television did its job at election time. We have established a firm basis for TV debates at future elections. It will be a brave leader indeed who ducks treading where Cameron, Brown and Clegg have gone before. Of course, refinements are possible. But, as Sue English of the BBC remarked, 'If we have to do it all again on the same template we will.' 2010 was the first British Television General Election.

Notes

1. For one example, see 'Time to Turn On', *The Times*, 14 April 1997.
2. 'Who'll show up for the TV showdown? John Ryley', *The Times*, 2 September 2009.
3. *Ibid.*
4. 'TTV and BBC accuse Sky News of jeopardising election debate', Leigh Holmwood, [guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/sep/02/itv-bbc-sky-election-debate), 2 September 2009 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/sep/02/itv-bbc-sky-election-debate>
5. 'Brown goes into meltdown on TV', *Evening Standard*, 30 September 2009.
6. See 'Ashcroft exposes Tories' failings', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 19 September 2010 and 'General Election Review: The election debates gave the Liberal Democrats by-election status, and disrupted an already disjointed Tory campaign', ConservativeHome, 12 May 2010 <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/generalelectionreview/2010/05/the-election-debates-gave-the-liberal-democrats-byelection-status-and-disrupted-an-already-disjointe.html>
7. See the front page stories 'Clegg in Nazi Slur on Britain', *Daily Mail*, 22 April 2010 and 'Nick Clegg, the Lib Dem donors and payments into his private account', *Daily Telegraph*, 22 April 2010.
8. 'Prime-time politics', *Financial Times*, 4 September 2009.

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9. 'Ready for his close-up?', *The Economist*, 12 September 2009.
10. '10 things Brown must do to save Labour', *Daily Mirror*, 26 September 2009.
11. 'Will TV debates change the face of the election?' *The Observer*, 4 October 2009.
12. 'The last thing we need is a televised election debate', *The Independent*, 31 July 2009.
13. *Ibid.*
14. 'The People's Election', *The Independent*, 6 May 2010.
15. 'What have these showdowns taught us?', *The Independent*, 1 May 2010.
16. 'Bar customers not prepared to give TV election debate a sporting chance', *The Guardian*, 16 April 2010.
17. 'A TV debate is pointless', *The Guardian*, 5 September 2009.
18. 'Clegg the outsider seizes his moment in the TV spotlight', *The Guardian*, 16 April 2010
19. 'Leaders' TV clash is a draw', page 1, 16 April 2010; 'Clegg is pegged back...', page 1, 23 April 2010 and 'Cameron has Gord on Ropes', page 1, 30 April 2010. Although the judgement of the text varied along broadly pro-Cameron lines, equal sized photographs of the three leaders were used in illustration on each of the occasions.
20. See in particular 'Who won the TV debate? Which paper do you read?' Media Monkey, *The Guardian*, 16 April 2010 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/mediamonkeyblog/2010/apr/16/who-won-which-paper-monkey>
21. Report of Jon Snow speaking at the Westminster Media Forum, 20 May 2010, 'Jon Snow: tabloid newspapers had a dreadful election', *The Press Gazette*, <http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=45474>
22. '2010 - Was it really the Mumsnet election?' <http://www.mumsnet.com/politics/mumsnet-election-reviewed>
23. 'The YouTube Facebook Digital Debate', 10 April 2010 launch, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-Ua4kPMwrU>
24. 'Web 2.0: the new election superweapon', *The Observer*, 11 April 2010.
25. '#UKelection2010, mainstream media and the role of the internet: how social and digital media affected the business of politics and journalism', Nic Newman, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, July 2010, p. 3.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
27. 'Perspectives on Television in Words and Numbers', Deloitte and YouGov. 2010 p.7 http://www.deloitte.com/assets/Dcom-UnitedKingdom/Local%20Assets/Documents/Industries/TMT/UK_TMT_ONTV-Perspectives-on-television2010V3.pdf
28. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
30. 'Next time, Fleet Street may get the election right', *The Observer*, 9 May 2010.
31. *Ibid.*
32. 'Broadcast Digital Awards', 18 June 2010.

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4 Media Coverage of the Prime Ministerial Debates

Stephen Coleman, Fabro Steibel and Jay G. Blumler

After years of prevarication, non-negotiation and bluster, televised election debates came to the United Kingdom in 2010. For many, this was seen as the worst of times to try such an experiment: in the aftermath of the MPs' expenses scandal, politicians' reputations were at a low ebb; in a period of economic crisis and austerity political leaders were accused of not being straight about their policy intentions. Could the televised prime ministerial debates lead to something like a fresh start – perhaps even serving to reduce or alleviate public disenchantment? Or might the debates fall down the sceptical drain, as it were – be dismissed as just 'more of the same'? With their peak audiences of 10.3 million viewers,¹ the televised debates made possible direct appeals from candidates for the premiership to the immediacy of the domestic audience. While we should not overstate the significance of these events (both the most-viewed first debate on ITV and the second most-viewed debate on BBC attracted smaller audiences than *Britain's Got Talent*, *EastEnders* and *Dr Who*, all shown in the same weeks), there can be little doubt that they reached more voters than any other episode of televised election coverage – and stimulated a considerable amount of reflective commentary and debate both on television and in the wider media.

The effects of the debates cannot be understood in isolation from the wider media coverage, for each of them arrived with its own pre-history of mediated speculations and expectations and was followed by well-orchestrated party spin offensives and journalistic accounts. In many cases, this surrounding media build-up and follow-up reached people who had not seen or heard all, or any, of the debates themselves. As Lang and Lang observed as long ago as 1978 (after the second US televised presidential debates between Ford and Carter),