The Changing Nature of Party Election Broadcasts: The Growing Influence of Political Marketing

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings from a study of the changing nature of the narrative contents and production formats of Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs) produced by the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democratic parties for UK General Elections from 1979 to 2010. This analysis tracked production changes that might signal a movement on the part of the political parties towards using marketing-oriented techniques of the kind found in televised advertising. Although PEBs are not technically classified as advertisements by the broadcasting industry, but rather as programmes, they nevertheless present an opportunity to political parties to promote themselves and their policies. Using content analysis, it was found that PEBs have grown progressively shorter from 1979 to 2010 and become faster paced. They have become more sophisticated as productions with wider use of dramatised documentary formats rather than talking heads, popular music and professional performers.

KEYWORDS: elections, PEBs, political marketing, political parties

Introduction

The use of marketing techniques has gained increased currency among political parties in the UK over the past two decades (Franklin, 2004; McNair, 2007; Scammell, 1995). This has triggered a debate about the role of these techniques in political decision-making. Some writers have regarded such developments as enhancements to the political process (Newman, 1994; Lees-Marshment, 2000). Others take a more critical stance and believe that it represents part of a wider malaise in political communication that places image ahead of substance and ultimately undermines democratic principles (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; Mayhew, 1997).

The application of marketing principles to the promotion of political parties is understandable in a world in which the mass media play an increasingly crucial role in politics (Palmer, 2002). Television, in particular, has become a key medium through which politicians reach their electorates. Politicians are placed under almost continuous media scrutiny and they must learn to use the media – especially television – effectively to ensure that the exposure they receive presents the messages they wish to get across in a manner that ordinary citizens will not only understand but also pay attention to. This last point is crucial in a world in which people are growing increasingly alienated from politics and distrustful of politicians (Hay, 2007).

Political Marketing

In early political marketing research special attention was paid to political communications in American election campaigns. These campaigns were seen as providing the best examples of the application of marketing techniques in a political context (Scammell, 1995). Manifestations of a marketing-orientation include the way political candidates conduct campaigns, the forms of communications they use and the ways in which their parties manage their affairs as organisations (Scammell, 1999).

The application of marketing methods in party politics has also emerged in Europe (Palmer, 2002). Here parties are the “product” being marketed as much as candidates and this is particularly true of the UK (Norris et al., 1999). Product sales or marketing-oriented techniques have been distinguished in relation to party approaches to campaigns (Lees-Marshment, 2001). Parties increasingly try to “advertise” their credentials in a fashion similar to the promotion of commercial products. Electorates are regarded as “markets” to which political messages must be “sold”. Ultimately the parties hope that their “markets” will “buy” their messages (policies or personal credentials) and that this purchase will be manifest in terms of their voting choices.

While the use of advertising is a prominent feature of political campaigns in the USA, across all major media in the UK political advertising is restricted to the non-broadcast media. Broadcast political advertising is outlawed. In its place, the political parties are permitted to take airtime that is freely allocated to them during election campaigns to fill with their own party election broadcasts (PEBs). According to the Electoral Commission (2003a), party broadcasts are designed to allow the parties to freely publicise their platforms and policies to voters. PEBs are technically classified as programmes. Over the years, however, they have become shorter and more professionally and glossily produced and as such have come more closely to resemble advertisements.

Its proponents believe that a marketing approach in politics can enhance party or candidate credibility. By sticking to tried and tested marketing principles, advertising can provide an effective mechanism through which to convey political messages to voters (Newman, 1994; Maarek, 1995; Lees-Marshment, 2001). Critics have countered that marketing approaches tend to favour image over substance. Communications styles focus on candidate personality and qualities rather than on issues and policies. This

means that political marketing can undermine democratic principles founded on the notion of an informed electorate taking decisions about political candidate support based on the policies that candidates stand for (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; Mayhew, 1997).

The effectiveness of PEBs is an important matter given that they have consumed increasing shares of campaign funds over successive General Election campaigns (Norris et al., 1999). The use of glossier formats absorbs significant costs and may also indicate some degree of movement towards a marketing approach in British politics. To be clearer about whether PEBs are really just another form of political advertising, however, we need to examine what changes have occurred internally to these broadcasts.

Political advertising on television in the United States resembles other types of advertising in physical terms. Televised political advertisements are typically around 30 seconds in length and adopt a style and tone that are persuasive in nature. The advertising of politics has been further differentiated in terms of whether it is positive in nature (saying something distinctive about the advertised candidate) versus negative (saying something critical about an opponent) and image-oriented (focusing on the personal qualities of the candidate) versus issue-oriented (emphasising the policies the candidate stands for) (Trent and Friedenberg, 2008).

This study investigated whether PEBs can legitimately be regarded as programmes any more or whether they have taken on the form of advertisements. This shift, if it has occurred, will be manifest not simply in the length of these broadcasts but also in the kinds of production techniques that characterise them.

Party Election Broadcasting

Political parties and candidates in the United Kingdom are forbidden to buy advertising time on television and radio. Instead, a committee of the political parties and broadcasters allocates airtime for parties to produce their own promotional messages (PEBs) based upon previous electoral support, and the number of candidates standing at the election. Over time conventions have been established such as the maximum number of broadcasts should be five per party, and that the governing party and main opposition party receive the same number of broadcasts (for more on the historical development of the PEB system see Electoral Commission 2003a, and Franklin, 2004). These broadcasts have the status of programmes and are bound by broadcasters' codes of practice, for instance in terms of taste and decency, although they are exempt from the Advertising Standards Authority code of practice that applies to commercial advertising, and content is otherwise entirely the responsibility of the political parties. In the early 1950s, when television news was in its infancy and bound by significant limitations on what could be reported, PEBs were the only television material produced during general election campaigns themselves. Over the years, however, PEBs have gone from being the focal point of elections on television to an ever more marginal feature as news coverage became ever more dominant (Franklin, 2004). New media too have begun to feature in party election communication activities, though nowhere near as prominently or influentially as in the USA (Electoral Commission, 2003b), and in the 2010 General Election Britain held its first series of televised debates between the main party leaders which had a major impact on the 2010 campaign (Harrison, 2010) including the PEBs (see below).

Over time PEBs' value has been increasingly brought into question, particularly in terms of whether they would continue to be sufficiently engaging for viewers (Scammell, 1990), and certainly evidence over time has shown them to be, whilst

widely viewed, a consistently unappreciated mode of campaign communication by viewers (Scammell and Langer, 2006). An apparent response to this competition for attention with other kinds of campaign communication content, on the one hand, and electorate dissatisfaction on the other, is that PEBs have increasingly taken on the form of advertisements since the early 1980s, for instance having reduced significantly in length, and adopting advertising-like production techniques. For some observers this pattern of change represents part of a wider shift in approaches taken by political parties in promoting themselves to the electorate (Norris et al., 1999). The use of marketing strategies is an increasingly prominent and central feature of political communications, particularly during election campaigns.

In addition to this observation, however, distinct patterns were identified in respect of the types of productions made by the major political parties. The Conservatives' PEBs in 1992, for example, were judged to be more personality oriented than those of the Labour Party. The Lib Dems were similarly found to rely on political personalities to convey their message. The latter used simpler production techniques than the two larger parties, most likely because of a more limited budget (Scammell and Semetko, 1995). Some thematic differences were found in relation to the issues that received greatest emphasis on the part of each political party. The Conservatives focused on the economy, Labour on social welfare issues, and the Lib Dems on education. Perhaps the most significant observation made by this study was an apparent "Americanisation" of PEBs that effectively embraced the utilisation of marketing-oriented techniques such as focus on personalities, use of emotional appeals, and negative campaigning (Scammell and Semetko, 1995).

A subsequent study analysed PEBs broadcast during the 1992 and 1997 General Election campaigns. This research again noted an increased use of personalities and

negative campaign attacks in these broadcasts. Issues and policies were not discussed in depth. In many ways, PEBs were becoming more like American televised political advertising (Hodess, Tedesco and Kaid, 2000).

By the 2001 General Election campaign, a further study observed that while the PEBs in that campaign covered key issues, they adopted a more “personal” style of delivery. Just a few privileged issues were covered at all, however, and the three major parties often imitated each other in relation to the issues they debated in their PEBs (Dermody and Scullion, 2002).

To pin down whether PEBs have become more like advertisements, though, we need to look at more than how long they are. There are specific production techniques that typically characterise commercial advertising and evidence that PEBs have become more like advertisements is likely to be found in relation to the extent to which such techniques have been deployed by the major parties in their own televised election broadcasts.

Methodology

The methodology was originally developed by Juarez (2004) who examined PEBs for the three major UK political parties across all general elections from 1979 to 2001. This paper focuses on the 2010 and 2005 General Election campaigns, but comparisons are made with findings from the earlier campaigns. The use of a content analysis based on concrete, objectively specifiable and quantitatively measured variables facilitated a concise and systematic investigation of prominent and emerging content and format trends within these broadcasts. The research was underpinned by a need to explore whether marketing-oriented perspectives were present in these broadcasts. The analysis over time enabled that investigation to determine whether political marketing techniques had become more prevalence and more prominent across successive election

campaigns. Furthermore, it determined whether any such trends were common to all three political parties or more prominent for one than others (Juarez, 2004).

Content analysis focuses on the surface features of media outputs. It does not explore deeper-level meanings that may reveal cultural and social forces at play. Nor does it demonstrate anything about the effects of content or production formats on audiences.

Broadcast sample

The research comprised a content analysis of PEBs for the three leading political parties (Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats) broadcast on television during the last two general election campaigns in 2005 and 2010. In 2005, five televised PEB slots were allocated in each case to the Conservatives and Labour Party, and four were allocated to the Liberal Democrats. However, these broadcast slots were not always filled by different PEBs. While Labour produced five different broadcasts and the Liberal Democrats produced four distinct broadcasts, the Conservative Party produced just three different broadcasts. Two of these broadcasts were televised twice. In 2010, the Conservative and Labour were again allocated five PEBs each, while the Liberal Democrats were allocated four broadcasts.

All the major TV channels (BBC1, BBC2, ITV1, Channel 4, Five) carried these broadcasts, although not always at the same times in the evening on days when PEBs were transmitted. Editorial control of these broadcasts was controlled by the parties themselves, but they were required to observe the terms of Ofcom's Broadcasting Code for television programmes. In 2010, the major parties' PEBs were also sometimes transmitted on different days in England, Scotland and Wales.

Coding and Analysis

Three levels of content analysis are presented: party election broadcast (PEB) level, party leader level, and proposition level.

The *PEB level* took the broadcast as unit of analysis. Categories of content were informed by previous research (Kaid and Johnston, 2002; Hodess, Tedesco and Kaid, 2000). Each PEB was coded in terms of audio, visual and verbal structural complexity incorporating measures of camera shot changes, format style (documentary style, video clip, talking head), category of dominant speaker, gender of speaker, use of music, and genre of music used.

The *party leader* analysis reflected growing interest in the rise of the political personality (Stewart and Clarke, 1992; Swanson and Mancini, 1996). Party leaders were coded in terms of whether they were seen, heard or seen *and* heard; whether they addressed the audience directly or were in an on-screen interview or other scenario; formality of dress; nature of camera shot (close-up, long shot); nature of appeal (emotional versus rational); valence of appeal (positive versus negative); and whether music was present or absent during the leader's appearance.

The *proposition level* of analysis represented a response to rising interest in negative versus positive comparative advertising in politics (Basil, Schooler and Reeves, 1991; Kaid and Johnston, 2002). Negative attacks in political advertising have been found to mediate the way it affects voters' attitudes towards candidates and the advertising itself (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1991). This analysis level therefore examined specific propositions contained in PEBs that were self-promotional, attacks against opponents or neutral. The nature of each proposition is also classified in terms of whether it is emotional or rational; the type of emotional strategy used (fear, humour, enthusiasm); the type of rational appeal used (factual, opinion); the presenter of the

proposition (professional actor, party member, party leader, member of an interest group, other).

Each PEB was viewed by a trained coder using the coding frame and code book developed by Juarez (2004). Separate viewings were required to complete each level of analysis. The coding frame's reliability had been established by Juarez (2004). Reliability scores were 80% at the PEB level, 88% at the proposition level, and 93% at the party leader level.

At each level of analysis a different base unit of analysis was used. At the *PEB level*, attributes were coded for each PEB with averages being reported for and percentages based on the number of televised broadcasts transmitted in the 2010 General Election campaign. At the *party leader level*, appearances within made by party leaders were counted within PEBs and these appearances (whether on camera or off-camera – voice only) represented the base units on which data were computed. At the *proposition level*, propositional statements that occurred within PEBs were used as the base units of analysis and all averages and percentages were derived from these measures.

Data were analysed within SPSS and comparisons made between the findings for the 2010 and 2005 PEBs and with those obtained in earlier research with PEBs from general elections held from 1979 to 2001.

Findings

PEB Level of Analysis

At the PEB level the aim was to provide a general impression of the content and format of these televised political messages in terms of their physical dimensions, production treatments and broad political references. Changes in duration, use of camera shots, nature of speakers (professionals versus party members), and references to minorities,

social class and partisanship, use of different production styles and use of music were coded. More detailed analyses of PEB ingredients were provided at the other levels. The key measures reported here were derived from earlier research (see Juarez, 2004) and comparisons are made with the findings from that study which covered general election campaigns from 1979 to 2001 inclusive.

Length of PEBs

Although the number of PEBs for the main parties have remained very stable, the length of PEBs has declined significantly from around 15 minutes per PEB in the 1950s, to under 10 minutes by the early 1970s, with the standard official allocation per today being 5 minutes per PEB (see Franklin, 2004). A significant shortening of average PEB durations was observed over the 1979 to 2001 period (as shown in Table 1), with 1992 (524 seconds) proving an exception to this prevailing trend. Since 2001, PEBs have grown longer across the three major parties, although still remain much shorter than they were up to the early 1990s, and shorter than the time available to them to use. The Labour Party produced the longest broadcasts in the 2005 General Election at 219 seconds (range: 160 seconds to 273 seconds), with the Conservatives producing the second longest on average at 196 seconds (range: 162 seconds to 219 seconds), and the Liberal Democrats producing the shortest average broadcasts among the major parties at 176 seconds (range: 157 seconds to 221 seconds). In the 2010 General Election, the Conservatives had the longest PEBs (241 seconds), followed by the Liberal Democrats (203 seconds) and finally Labour (163 seconds). For the Conservatives, their 2010 PEBs attained the longest duration seen since 1979, while for Labour their PEBs were about the shortest they have been since 1979. The Liberal Democrats did not break any duration records for their PEBs in 2010, but they were on average much longer than in 2005.

Pace of PEBs

The pace of PEBs can be determined by the average number of shot changes that occur within these broadcasts and by the average length in seconds of camera shots. A larger number of shot changes and shorter duration shots signal a faster pace. As Table 2 below shows, post-1990 PEBs contained more camera shot changes on average than did pre-1990 PEBs and average shot lengths (in seconds) has progressively reduced since 1979. The average shot length in 2005 remained stable compared with the previous election in 2001. At an average shot duration of three seconds, however, there is little scope for shot lengths to get much shorter. What these findings do signify, though, is that PEBs have not only got shorter in total length over time but they have also become much faster paced. The PEBs from 2005, however, indicated that this development may have been carried as far as it can go.

Despite the longer average duration of PEBs for the three major parties in 2010, the mean number of camera shots per production fell by a large margin in 2010 compared with 2005. This finding, coupled with the longer average camera shot duration signalled slower paced PEBs in 2010 compared with the previous few general elections. The pace did not slow to the level observed in the late 1970s and early 1980s when PEBs were much longer.

[Table 2 about here]

Speaker Type

Distinctions were made between dominant spokespersons in PEBs who were politicians or ‘actors’ (speakers other than known members of the party – often professional actors). In 2005, 80 per cent of dominant speakers in Labour broadcasts were actors

(compared to a 1979-2001 average of 41%), with 20 per cent identified as politicians (1979-2001 average – 59%). The distributions of speakers in Conservative broadcasts in 2005 was 40:60 in favour of politicians (1979-2001 average: 65:36) and for the Liberal Democrats it was 50:50 (1979-2001 average: 7:93).

The type of spokesperson used by the three major parties exhibited marked shifts in 2010 from 2005. While the Conservative Party (80%) and Liberal Democrats (100%) moved away from using professional actors to showing politicians as spokespersons, Labour moved in the reverse direction and did not use politicians at all – only actors or celebrities. What is particularly significant here is that Labour decided against using the Prime Minister as a front for the party. This stands out given that since the first leader-centred PEB (on Neil Kinnock in the 1987 election), in every election since then the leaders of all three major parties have been the focus of at least one PEB, and present in some form or other in many others. The absence of Gordon Brown from Labour's 2010 PEBs may say a lot about his perceived contribution to the Labour Party brand at that time.

Party Identification References

The extent to which the three main political parties included references within their PEBs designed to reinforce party identity varied. Such references are designed to appeal to members and supporters and can therefore also be labelled 'partisanship' references. In 2005, only the Labour Party included any such references in its PEBs (in one PEB out of five). This was on a par with the 1979-2001 election campaigns average for the party. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats were found to have included no such references in their PEBs in 2005, which was consistent with 2001, but a departure from PEBs in earlier campaigns where such references had been detected, usually in one or two PEBs per campaign (Juarez, 2004).

Overall, partisanship references occurred at a very low level in the major parties' PEBs in 2005, reinforcing the finding of 2001 where no such references were found. These findings confirm a post-2000 election phenomenon with the major parties whereby addressing the party membership exclusively is apparently regarded as less of a priority by parties.

Party identity references increased dramatically in 2010 for Labour PEBs occurring in all five of their PEBs. Conservative PEBs also exhibited partisan references to the party in two out of five PEB, whereas they had been completely absent in 2005. These references were once again completely absent in Lib Dem PEBs in 2010. This is a result that might indicate a tendency on the part of Labour to focus on the party's 'achievements' in government. The opposition parties instead were more focused on challenging Labour's track record.

Format Features of PEBs

An important aspect of this analysis has been to establish whether PEBs have changed in terms of the production techniques they use. Earlier research, covering PEBs from 1979 to 2001, had indicated that a documentary style of production was dominant for all three political parties (Juarez, 2004). Trends over time indicate that 2005 witnessed a fall in the use of documentary style format across all parties and a further growth in the use of issue dramatizations and video clips. By 2010, the use of a documentary style diminished still further. Instead, a montage of video clips was preferred. Thus, the pattern emerging is that PEBs have assumed more complex production formats overall with a greater mix of different production techniques – even though the use of the 'talking head' format where a presenter is addressing the audience by directly looking at the camera in the style of news bulletin broadcasts has been completely abandoned post-2000 (see Table 3).

[Table 3 about here]

This above pattern held true in 2005 for each of the three political parties, but with the use of documentary style disappearing altogether in 2010 for the Liberal Democrats. In 2010, with the Conservatives and Labour the use of video clips occurred in three out of five PEBs in each case.

Music in PEBs

One aspect of the production treatment of PEBs is whether these broadcasts contain any music or not. If so, what types of music do they contain? Music was relatively rarely used in 1979 and 1983 (in under one in five PEBs). In 1987 and 1992, music occurred in nearly nine out of ten PEBs. In 1997, the use of music slipped back to around seven in ten PEBs, before climbing again to nine in ten by 2001. In 2005, music appeared in all PEBs for the three major parties and in nine out of ten in 2010.

The analysis continued by examining the genre of music used in PEBs. A broad distinction was made between classical and popular music only for this analysis. Party by party comparisons indicated preferences for classical music between 1979 and 2001 for Labour (56% of PEBs), the Liberal Democrats (66%) and most of all for the Conservatives (100%). This level of preference for classical music remained in 2005 for Labour in 2005 and 2010 (three out of five PEBs each year). The Liberal Democrats used classical music in two out of four PEBs in 2005 and in all of them in 2010. The Conservatives mixed up music styles more and featured popular music in three out of five PEBs in 2005 and in 2010.

Party Leader Level of Analysis

The party leader level of analysis focused on the physical presence of party leaders in party election broadcasts. The unit of analysis in this context was any appearance by a party leader, whether shown on camera (speaking or silent) or heard as a voice-over off camera. These appearances were timed and classified in terms of a range of presentational and narrative attributes. These attributes included the degree of visual versus verbal presence of party leader in PEBs, that target of the party leader's message, camera shots used, use of emotional versus rational and positive versus negative appeals, and past and future reference to party's performance.

Earlier published research has indicated that party members have a diminishing presence in party broadcasts as presenters of party statements about performance, policy or intentions (Franklin, 2004; McNair, 2007). Another feature identified by other researchers in the field has been the deployment by political parties of techniques gleaned from advertising (Scammell, 1999; Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1995).

Party Leader Presence

For many years, the dominance of party leaders in party general electioneering on television was underlined by their visible and verbal presence in PEBs. By the late 1970s, party leaders' voices were always present, and from the 1980s, leaders also became visibly more prominent in these broadcasts (see Table 4). This leader prominence has disappeared in the last 10 years, as leaders have been placed more in the background and by 2010 were heard rather than seen, at least in the front of the screen.

[Table 4 about here]

For Labour, 2005 PEBs displayed a greater emphasis on visually presenting the party leader (57% of appearances compared with 36% between 1979-2001). As mentioned, in

2010, however, Gordon Brown was never used as the visible lead spokesperson. If he was seen, it was always in the background. For the Liberal Democrat PEBs in 2005, the party leader was visible more often (in 50% of his appearances) than between 1979 and 2001 (38%). By 2010, for the Liberal Democrats, however, more than nine out of ten appearances by the party leader were voice-over only (91%). For the Conservatives, the party leader was used much more in voice-over mode in 2005 (43% of appearances) than was usual over the previous six election campaigns (26% between 1979 and 2001). For the Conservatives, though, the party leader was less often visible in 2005 PEBs than over 1979-2001 (43% versus 74% of appearances). By 2010, the Conservative Party leader was used as a voice-over in one third of his appearances (33%), otherwise he was shown in the background (66%).

Target of Party Leader's Narrative

At the party leader level, PEBs were assessed in terms of who the leader was speaking to when he (or she) appeared in a broadcast. A broad distinction was made between speaking directly at viewers in the television audience and someone else (possibly within the broadcast itself). Across the 1979 to 2001 general election campaigns, the party leader was judged to be speaking to the viewer in the audience much less often than someone else in the case of Labour PEBs (38% versus 63%) and Conservative PEBs (28% versus 72%), but with direction of speech more evenly divided for Liberal Democrat broadcasts (44% versus 41%, with other instances being difficult to judge).

On occasions when the party leader was speaking in PEBs in the 2005 campaign, the Labour and Conservative PEBs displayed mirror opposite patterns, while the Liberal Democrats addressed viewers at home and someone else fairly evenly (47% versus 53%). With Labour PEBs, the great majority of cases when the party leader spoke

(89%), he addressed someone else rather than the viewers, while in Conservative PEBs, the party leader addressed viewers directly in most instances (71%).

There was a greater tendency for party leaders to speak directly to viewers in 2010 than had been the case in 2005. This represented a return to a preferred style in 2001, which at the time represented a dramatic shift of perspective from the three previous election campaigns. The Liberal Democrats' leader was much the most likely to speak directly to viewers (91% of appearances), with the Conservatives leader (33%) much less likely to do so. Labour's leader did not speak at all in any of his party's PEBs.

One interesting feature about 2010 is how the original plans of the Conservative Party for their PEBs changed at the last minute due to the impact of the televised debates. Initially the plan for their PEBs had been to use at least some of them to attack their opponents, particularly Labour leader Gordon Brown. The success of Liberal Democrat Leader Nick Clegg in the first TV debate, and the ensuing significant increase in news media attention paid to his party, forced a last minute rethink, with one of the later Conservative PEBs given over to a hastily edited together piece all about Cameron, with lots of footage and audio from campaign speeches made by him, designed to try and counter the perceived threat of Nick Clegg (Harrison, 2010, p. 276). This late change also indicates how PEBs, far from being a highly formulaic, pre-planned and rather archaic form of parties' electoral communication output, are seen as a significant part of parties' dynamic pro-active marketing strategies during election campaigns.

Nature and Valence of Appeals Made by Party Leader

Political party leaders' appeals to the electorate were differentiated in terms of whether they were 'emotional' or 'rational' and positive or negative in nature.

Nature of Appeals. Party comparisons for 2005 revealed that Labour relied entirely on rational appeals by the party leader in its PEBs, the Conservatives depended

more on emotional appeals (76% of appeals in PEBs), and the Liberal Democrats used both types of appeal fairly evenly (emotional – 47%; rational – 53%). This pattern revealed a dramatic shift of emphasis from emotional to rational appeals for Labour PEBs (1979-2001 average – 9%) and slight shifts towards greater use of rational appeals by the Conservatives 24% in 2005, compared with 1979-2001 average of 7%) and Liberal Democrats (1979-2001 average for emotional appeals – 60%).

In 2010, the Conservatives (93%) and Liberal Democrats (88%) relied predominantly on rational appeals to voters. In both cases this marked a significant increase in the use of such appeals in 2010 compared with 2005. Labour failed to register any emotional or rational appeals in their 2010 PEBs.

Valence of Appeals. The valence distinguished positive from negative appeals by party leaders. The distinction made here was between whether party leaders spoke positively about their party's own policies or achievements or negatively about the shortcomings of their opponents.

Negative campaigning was far outweighed by positive campaigning in PEBs in 2005. This was most clearly the case for the Labour Party which was judged to have used only positive statements in its PEBs. The other two parties also relied two-thirds of the time on positive statements (Conservatives: 65%; Liberal Democrats: 67%), though did also include some negative snipes at the Labour government in one-third of their 2005 PEB appeals. The level of negativity in the PEB campaigns of the latter parties exceeded the average observed in earlier campaigns, especially for the Conservatives (35% in 2005; 1% between 1979 and 2001) and Liberal Democrats (33% in 2005; 12% between 1979 and 2001).

In 2010, the valence of appeals profile did not change much from 2005. For Labour no negative statements were recorded again but nor were there any positive

statements. The Conservatives positive statements (67%) outnumbered negative statements (33%) by two to one. For the Liberal Democrats, positive statements (74%) outnumbered negatives (26%) by three to one.

Averaging across parties, positive campaigning has declined and negative campaigning has increased over time. Although negative campaigning is still significantly outweighed by positive campaigning, the growth in its prevalence is quite marked and more than doubled in prevalence in 2005 PEBs compared with 2001 (see Table 5). Given the relatively small number of PEBs, unlike systems like the USA where broadcast political advertising is allowed generating lots of ads, making comparisons concerning trends such as increasing negativity is not straightforward, but it is worth noting that an increasing presence of negativity in UK PEBs identified here does parallel research evidence of increasing negativity in political advertising elsewhere in the world (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 2006).

[Table 5 about here]

Proposition Level of Analysis

A further level of analysis examined propositional content of PEBs. In the original research the proposition unit of analysis was defined as “communication content structured in constituent parts comprising of an orientation, target, focus and argument.... A proposition item therefore includes at least two of the following characteristics: (1) a particular presenter, (2) an identifiable orientation (i.e., attack, compare, promote), and (3) an explicit target (i.e., party leader, party)” (Juarez, 2004, p. 214.).

Nature of Proposition

Proposition nature was differentiated in terms of whether it was emotional or rational. Emotional propositions satisfied empirical criteria derived from audience research literature that indicated the potential of certain types of content to elicit emotional responses in the audience (see Juarez, 2004). Trends over time by party indicated that the distribution of emotional and rational propositions within PEBs fluctuated from campaign to campaign (see Table 6). In 2005, rational propositions were far more prevalent than emotional propositions for all three parties' PEBs. In every case, there was a dramatic shift in the nature of propositions used in 2005 and 2001. The last election campaign witnessed a significant increase in the use of rational propositions by all three parties and a marked reduction in the use of emotional propositions compared with the previous three general election campaigns. Rational propositions were most prevalent in 2005 in Conservative PEBs. The use of emotional propositions by this party and by the Labour Party reached their lowest levels ever across all the campaigns analysed.

In their 2010 PEBs the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats focused on rational propositions and avoided the use of emotional propositional appeals. In contrast, for Labour emotional appeals outweighed rational appeals which showed a reversal of 2005, and a return to the types of appeals used during the early Blair era.

[Table 6 about here]

Types of Emotional Propositions

Breaking down emotional propositions further, the coding frame examined specific strategies adopted by political parties when addressing viewers via PEBs. Propositions deemed to be emotional on the grounds that they satisfied certain empirical conditions,

established through audience research, for evoking emotional reactions in viewers, were differentiated in terms of whether they might invoke fear, humour or some other emotional response. Data over time indicated that the use of statements designed to play on fear or enthusiasm responses were generally more prevalent within PEBs than statements of a humorous nature (see Table 7). The use of fear exhibited a steady and unrelenting reduction over the 1979 to 2001 campaigns, but recovered sharply in 2005. Propositions designed to invoke another type of emotional audience response (other than fear or humour) exhibited growth from 1987 to 2001, but fell away dramatically in 2005. Humour has never been a major feature of PEBs, but achieved its highest level over the period monitored in 2005. By 2010, the use of both fear and humour fell away again.

[Table 7 about here]

On examining the distribution of emotional strategies by party, it emerged from 2005 PEBs that fear was used more by Labour (86% of propositions) than had been the case in elections from 1979 to 2001 (49%). By 2010, however, the use of fear by Labour fell dramatically (35%). The Conservatives, in contrast, used fear a great deal in 2010 (80% of emotional propositions in its PEBs), and to a much greater extent than it had in 2005 (58%) or between 1979 and 2001 (64%). The Liberal Democrats dropped all use of fear appeals in 2010, such appeals characterised nearly half its emotional propositions in 2005 (46%) and 1979-2001 (48%).

Humour rarely featured in Labour PEBs from 1979 to 2001 and was not present at all in 2005 and 2010. For the Conservatives, there was a steady increase in the use of humour from 1979 to 2001 (11%) to 2005 (17%) and then 2010 (20%). The Liberal

Democrats had always been the political party most likely to use humour between 1979 and 2001 (18% of emotional propositions on average), exhibiting a dramatic increase in its use in 2005 (54%) and then an equally dramatic fall in 2010 (25%).

Orientation of Propositions

This measure examined whether propositions were used to promote party performance, positions and policies, to attack other parties on the same terms or to make comparisons between own party and other parties in these respects. Over time the use of promotional propositions has grown, while use of attack propositions and comparison propositions has declined (see Table 8). Only minor fluctuations from these prevailing patterns were observed over the 1979 to 2005 period. Clearly, the three political parties have placed more emphasis on self-promotion in their political broadcasts in recent general election campaigns and have devoted less attention to attacking other parties or making comparisons between themselves and others.

[Table 8 about here]

It is important to go beyond these general time trends and examine any differences that may exist between parties. As with a number of other content and format variables examined in this research, inter-party differences emerged yet again in relation to use of propositions of different orientation.

In 2010, the Conservative Party used mainly self-promotional statements much less often than in 2005 (52% versus 81%), and more than the 1979-2001 average (34%). Use of attack statements in 2010 (41%) increased dramatically on 2005 (13%), which had seen an exceptionally low level of usage compared with 1979 to 2001 (51%).

In 2010, Labour used 'self-promotional' statements (55%) more than it did in 2005 (48%) or had done between 1979 and 2001 (43%). Its use of attack statements in 2010 (45%) was higher than in 2005 (39%), but did not vary a great deal from 1970 to 2001 (41%). The party did not use comparison statements at all in its 2010 PEBs, and used them fairly sparingly in 2005 (13%) and across 1979 to 2001 election campaigns (16%).

The Liberal Democrats used self-promotion statements most often in 2010 (61%) and more so than they did in 2005 (44%) or across the earlier campaigns from 1979 to 2001 (34%). Attack statements were used much less widely in 2010 (38%) than in 2005 (53%) or earlier years (48%). Comparison statements were never used often up to 2001 (18%) and hardly used at all in 2005 and 2010 (2%).

Discussion

This research has examined the contents and format features of televised party election broadcasts transmitted for the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties across General Election campaigns from 1979 to 2010. A content analysis methodology was used throughout this work. The research was conceptually driven by the notion that these televised political communications have evolved over time and have increasingly adopted marketing techniques. In this vein, PEBs have taken on the appearance of political advertisements, even though they are technically classified as programmes and broadcast political advertising is banned in the UK.

The empirical evidence accrued by the original research reported by Juarez (2004) indicated that the PEBs of the major political parties did change radically between 1979 and 2001. Most notably they became much shorter and much faster paced. Camera shot durations reduced in length and the broadcasts became increasingly glossy and

sophisticated productions. Professional actors were used to provide voice-overs and to present critical messages about party policies and performance, and reliance on party leaders or other party members in these roles declined. While always present to some extent in PEBs, the use of music evolved and the range of different types of music increased. Popular music scores were used as often as classical music scores during the Labour government era.

Glossier documentary formats came to dominate these productions replacing the more simplistic earlier formats with strong reliance on talking heads. All these trends were found to have continued in the 2005 general election campaign, though the pace of PEBs slowed a little in 2010. Furthermore, the documentary style was displaced to some extent by the use of video montages.

These changes in production treatments have represented radical shifts over time in their nature and reflect the adoption of techniques that are found in televised commercial advertising. PEBs have reduced in length to the point where many barely qualify as 'programmes'. The shortest PEBs in 2010 and 2005 were only slightly longer than the longest commercial advertisements. Of equal significance though is the average length of camera shots (three seconds) which again reflects the style of commercial advertisements and represents a much faster-paced form of presentation. Such rapid shot changes are designed to maintain audience attention and presumes that the average viewer has a short attention span while watching television that continually needs to be re-oriented towards the screen by rapid on-screen changes of scene.

The increased use of professional actors or celebrities in recent election campaigns also signals a need to match the professionalism of television programming and advertising in this respect. Politicians do not always make the best television presenters. Although leading politicians are increasingly skilled in television interview formats,

addressing the audience direct to camera requires a different skill set. This task is often handled better by trained actors.

The more prevalent use of popular music in PEBs also reflects a need to engage with the general audience by using techniques that will attract the attention and interest of the ordinary viewer. It may also represent a tactic designed to appeal to younger people who have generally been perceived to lack any significant interest in politics.

PEBs in 2010 continued a trend observed since 2000 for the major political parties to address their messages beyond the party faithful. Instead the parties focus on highlighting their achievements to all or (mostly in the case of opposition parties) challenging the success of the incumbent government.

Another notable change in PEBs has occurred in the way party leaders are used, or it would be more accurate to say these days, not used – or at least not shown. In 2010 PEBs, unlike in nearly all other general election campaigns since 1983, the depiction of party leaders diverged across the parties. Gordon Brown was almost entirely invisible from Labour PEBs. The Conservatives did use David Cameron, but at least one of their PEBs was a late substitution for original attack ads, responding to the so-called post TV debates “Clegg effect”, and as such there would similarly have been a greater invisibility of the Conservative leader too had they stuck to their original plans. Only the Liberal Democrats placed their leader more centrally in their PEB (which was screened several times), and even here the format used was anything but a traditional talking head.

In 2010, as in 2005, the major parties largely avoided negative campaigning in their PEBs preferring instead to make positive statements about their own policies and achievements. Labour avoided negatives completely, while for the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives between one in four and one in three statements were criticisms of

other parties, largely the Labour government. Negative campaigning that is designed to enhance the notion of the election as a competition between political factors that will adopt whatever tactics are necessary to win, are techniques used in other forms of communication to generate audience involvement (see Thorson, Christ and Caywood, 1991).

The use of emotional appeals increased for the Conservative and Labour across the 1980s, then dipped before rising again across the 1990s and then dipping significantly again in 2005. For the Liberal Democrats rational appeals always outnumbered emotional appeals until 1997 and the latter continued to rise into 2001. In 2005 all three parties shifted to greater use of rational appeals. In 2010, rational appeals reached their highest points for the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, while there was a shift back on the part of Labour to greater use of emotional appeals that once again outnumber rational appeals.

In 2010, where emotion was present in PEBs, it was much less likely than in previous years to comprise fear appeals. These PEBs also exhibited a much diminished tendency to use humour, whereas in 2005, humour was used to a greater extent in PEBs than in any other campaign since 1979.

Whether the use of negativity and emotionality enhance the 'entertainment value' of PEBs and also enhance their political impact upon the audience is a debatable point (Scammell and Langer, 2006). Certainly, it is important to attract and maintain the interest of the audience. In the television environment, PEBs must compete for audience share and attention against other broadcast outputs that also utilise attention-grabbing and emotional eliciting techniques. As with other competing programming and advertising outputs on television, PEBs must know their audience and use the

techniques known to be most effective in attracting the interest of those they seek to appeal to or influence.

A primary and traditional function of PEBs has been to reach the electorate on a large scale with informative messages about the political parties that has relevance to aiding decisions about who to vote for. Some observers have noted that PEBs do contain important information in this context (Hodess, Tedesco and Kaid, 2000; Pattie and Johnston, 2002), and they do continue to reach large audiences- the first Labour PEB of 2010 reached some 9 million people (Harrison, 2010, p. 273). It has also been recognised, however, that PEBs have an important role in engaging members of the public who display less interest than average in politics and who may also have not made up their minds about which party they wish to vote for. Involved viewers who have made up their minds already are unlikely to be greatly influenced by PEBs (Hodess et al., 2000; Pattie & Johnston, 2002). To be of interest to the politically alienated and dis-engaged, it may be necessary to beyond straight informational appeals and to utilise techniques designed to make political content a sufficiently attractive package to buy into. The shifts observed in this research in the production treatments used in PEBs reflect these kinds of developments. The techniques being utilised increasingly resemble those adopted by commercial advertisers. In effect, PEBs have, over time, come increasingly to resemble advertisements demonstrating the growing role of political marketing in transforming established, some might say even old-fashioned, channels of election communication into carefully constructed components of sophisticated, dynamic modern election campaigns.

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Table 1 Average Length of PEBs

Year	Average Length (seconds)
1979	555
1983	456
1987	461
1992	524
1997	292
2001	167
2005	197
2010	203

Table 2 Camera Shot Changes in PEBs

Year	Mean Number of Camera Shots per PEB	Average Duration of Camera Shots (seconds)
1979	39	14
1983	42	11
1987	59	8
1992	82	6
1997	60	5
2001	62	3
2005	57	3
2010	32	6

Table 3 Format Features of PEBs: 1979-2005

Year	Documentary	Video clip	Issue Dramatization	Talking Head
1979 %	72	0	0	28
1983 %	94	0	0	6
1987 %	80	0	0	20
1992 %	87	0	14	0
1997 %	55	0	14	30
2001 %	70	7	23	0
2005 %	50	21	29	0
2010%	21	43	7	0

Table 4 Nature of Party Leader Appearances in PEBs

Year	Visual	Verbal	Background
1979 %	0	100	0
1983 %	59	41	0
1987 %	59	38	3
1992 %	63	35	2
1997 %	47	46	7
2001 %	27	27	46
2005 %	49	42	9
2010%	4	57	38

Table 5 Valence of Appeals in PEBs: 1979-2005

Year	Positive	Negative
1979 %	100	-
1983 %	78	22
1987 %	93	7
1992 %	100	-
1997 %	95	5
2001 %	88	12
2005 %	72	28
2010%	70	30

Table 6 Nature of Proposition

Party	1979 %	1983 %	1987 %	1992 %	1997 %	2001 %	<i>2005</i> %	<i>2010</i> %
Labour								
- Emotional	40	34	91	56	71	90	<i>33</i>	<i>55</i>
- Rational	60	66	9	44	29	10	<i>67</i>	<i>45</i>
Conservative								
- Emotional	46	34	69	81	89	80	<i>19</i>	<i>6</i>
- Rational	54	66	31	19	11	20	<i>81</i>	<i>94</i>
Lib Dems								
- Emotional	27	18	37	48	65	71	<i>29</i>	<i>6</i>
- Rational	73	82	63	52	35	29	<i>71</i>	<i>94</i>

Table 7 Emotional Strategy: Time Trends

Emotion Type	1979 %	1983 %	1987 %	1992 %	1997 %	2001 %	<i>2005 %</i>	<i>2010 %</i>
Fear	72	73	56	52	52	38	<i>65</i>	<i>38</i>
Humour	16	21	11	1	18	4	<i>23</i>	<i>7</i>
Other	13	6	33	47	30	58	<i>13</i>	<i>55</i>

Table 8 Orientation of Propositions: Time Trends

Proposition Orientation	1979 %	1983 %	1987 %	1992 %	1997 %	2001 %	2005 %	2010 %
Promote	24	35	38	39	37	54	61	56
Attack	50	46	49	47	47	35	32	40
Compare	26	19	13	14	16	11	7	4