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The present in retrospect: Press reporting of UK General Elections, 1918-2015

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Abstract

This article provides a unique content analysis of 100 years of national press coverage of UK General Elections and tests four claims about historical trends in election news reporting: (1) that coverage is becoming more focused on political leaders at the expense of other political sources; (2) that reporting of the personalities and personal lives of politicians has expanded; (3) that editorial treatment of politicians has become increasingly negative; and (4) that news coverage is increasingly obsessed with the conduct of politics rather than its substantive content. Through the detail of this analysis we identify areas of historical continuity as well as change and challenge overly neat periodizations and simple histories of election news reporting.

Keywords: Elections, Newspapers, Personalisation, Metacoverage, Negativity

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Introduction

Across numerous international contexts concerns have increased about a hollowing out of media coverage of politics through an increased emphasis upon personalities rather than policies, and a growing negativity in the reporting of political debate (e.g. Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999). These analyses often connect with a deeper entropic narrative about political processes and systems, in which they are assumed to be moving from a state of order to disorder and where political debate is becoming ever more demeaned, denuded and diminished (e.g. Franklin, 2008). Not all commentators share this pessimistic outlook and several interventions have argued that the rise of personality-based politics, media interest in the workings of ‘spin’ and PR, soundbite culture might have positive democratic aspects and outcomes (e.g. Scammell, 2014, McNair, 2004, Brennan and Hamlin, 2000; Marcus, 2002). But for all their divergence, these interventions share the core premise of the entropic narrative: that the coverage of politics, and elections in particular, has changed decisively over recent decades.

The purpose of this article is to subject these assumptions to empirical scrutiny by examining newspaper reporting from twelve election campaigns spanning 100 years in the United Kingdom¹. We contend this kind of temporal comparative analysis is vital, because change is too commonly presumed rather than demonstrated within public and academic debate. In making this claim, we acknowledge the valuable contribution already made by previous historical studies on trends in the mediation of politics. Nevertheless, we contend there is a need for a more extensive temporal reach than has hitherto been achieved. Even the most ambitious studies take the immediate post-World War 2 period as their starting point. As we will explain, there are a range of reasons why this departure point needs to be questioned and why the pre-war period warrants closer scrutiny. Through our analysis we test four received wisdoms about trends in election news reporting in democratic systems: (1) that coverage focuses increasingly on political leaders at the expense of other political sources (‘presidentialisation’); (2) that reporting of the personalities and personal lives of politicians has expanded in the mediation of politics (personalisation); (3) that editorial coverage of politicians has become

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increasingly negative (adversarialism); and (4) that news coverage is increasingly obsessed with the conduct of politics rather than its substantive content (process news). Our study uniquely extends across 100 years of UK election reporting, but before presenting the details of our study, we will provide an overview of the concepts, evidence and claims-making that surround these research questions.

Personalisation and presidentialisation

‘Personalisation’ is a term that has been widely applied to describe historical change across many democratic systems. In political communication terms, it refers to an ever-greater focus upon politicians as individuals rather than as representatives of broader political values or collectives. Consequently, judgements about their political credibility are increasingly bound up in appraisals of their personal qualities and private conduct. The origins of this change are seen as both general and particular. In the 1970s, Richard Sennet described the emergence of an ‘intimate society’ in which ‘all social phenomena, no matter how impersonal in structure, are converted into matters of personality to have meaning’ (1977: 219). Sennett saw this as a ‘tyranny’, but others have characterised the wider ‘intimitization’ of the public sphere in more positive terms (e.g. Van Zoonen, 1991). In the political realm, personalisation is seen as created by wider political changes, such as the growth of political dealignment and the weakening of party political structures. It is lent further momentum by the professionalisation of communication strategies of mainstream parties and the changing media environment, such as the arrival of television and ratcheting commercial pressures upon journalistic activities (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999, Langer, 2011).

As such a wide-ranging concept, ‘personalisation’ benefits from disaggregation. Van Aelst et al (2012) identify two elements to the personalisation debate. The first is the rise of *individualization* in which political communication has become more candidate rather than party-centred. One manifestation of this is in the supposed rise of ‘presidentialisation’ – a process by which main party leaders come to dominate discourse and crowd out the contributions of others. The second element is in the growth of *privatization* which focuses on examining the individual qualities and interior lives of politicians.

There is conflicting evidence about the extent that political coverage has become more personalised and presidentialised (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007). A number of longitudinal studies presents strong evidence to support increased individualization in election coverage (see Dalton et al, 2000; McAllister, 2007; Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007). Others reveal this is not the case in all national contexts. Wilke and Reinemann (2001) found no evidence of increased attention on party leaders in their study of German newspaper coverage since 1949. Similarly, Kriesi (2011) shows that 'presidentialisation' varies across different countries. His comparative study of six European democracies shows there was a greater focus on the top two party leaders in the UK than in other parliamentary systems. Evidence from UK studies strongly suggests leaders have become more visible, accounting for a high proportion of coverage compared to their party colleagues (Mughan, 2000; Deacon et al. 2017; Scammell and Semeko, 2008).

For privatization, there are also mixed findings. Reinemann and Wilke (2007) found no clear evidence that personal characteristics were more prominent in German election campaigns. Ana Langer's study of the personalisation of political coverage in the UK between 1945 and 2009 concludes that most measures 'do not show the consistent and sizeable growth that the insistent talk about the presidentialisation of British politics has led us to suspect' (2011: 163). However, she does identify a 'personal turn' in political reporting since the 1990s, which displays a more judgemental, intrusive and less deferential quality in coverage more recently (ibid:165). Similarly, Stanyer (2013) demonstrates that political coverage in the UK has become more 'intimised' and focused on politicians personal lives in recent years. Van Aelst et al (2017) note that there are fewer studies that provide longitudinal analysis of the privatization dimension of personalisation, which our study seeks to redress.

Negativity

Scholars have also claimed that political news is becoming increasingly characterised by negativity and conflict (e.g. Protess et al., 1991; Sabato, 1993; Sabato et al., 2000; Barnett, 2002). Whilst some express concern that adversarial reporting might increase political cynicism and discourage political engagement

(Cappella and Jamieson, 1997); others argue that there may be some benefits, such as enabling citizens to be more critical of elected representatives and thereby politically engaged (Schuck et al, 2016).

Negativity has been variously conceptualised by different researchers which demonstrates the complexity of the concept (Kleinnijenhuis, 2008). Lengauer et al (2011) identify five ways of conceptualising negativity: 1) negative tonality in news stories; 2) pessimistic outlook on politics; 3) coverage focusing on conflicts and disputes between actors and parties; 4) emphasising the misconduct or failure of politicians or policies; and 5) actor-related negativity, meaning unfavourable coverage of politicians as individuals or collectively, regarding their competence or performance. It is this final conceptualisation that we adopt in our study.

Empirical research from the US suggests that political news tends to focus on negative aspects whilst evidence from other political and media systems is less conclusive (Esser et al, 2017). Longitudinal analysis of US television coverage shows that negative references to presidential candidates tripled between 1960 and 2000 (Patterson, 1994). Evidence from European countries also demonstrates that election coverage has become increasingly negative (Wilke and Reinnemann, 2007; de Vreese et al. 2006; Semetko and Schoenbach, 2003). Lengauer et al. (2011) argue that the overwhelming evidence suggests that negativity toward individual politicians is increasing. Our study seeks to assess to what extent this trend can be observed in UK election coverage over a much lengthier time period.

The rise of process news

Another frequent claim about contemporary mediation of politics is that journalists have come to see the reporting and interpretation of the party political strategies and attempts to manage the news as increasingly important aspects of the story (e.g. de Vreese et al, 2017; Cushion and Thomas, 2018). This has been variously described as the growth of 'strategic and game framing', 'metacoverage', or 'process news', in which the drama of the campaign, political strategies, motivations and failures of the *dramatis personae* gain prominence at the expense of the analysis of substantive policy alternatives and performance (de Vreese et al, 2017). Increased financial pressures upon journalism are said to be accelerating this trend, as this emphasis makes fewer editorial demands than complex policy analysis.

There is also some evidence that focusing on the personalities and strategies of the campaign attracts a wider audience than policy coverage (Iyengar et al, 2004). Esser et al (2001) outline three stages of the development of metacoverage. They argue that journalism was issue oriented up until the early 1970s. After that they suggest that issue orientation is replaced by focusing on more strategic elements of the campaign, such as party strategies for voter engagement. Finally, they argue that during the early 1990s, journalists added a meta-level, where they examined media management activities as well as increasingly recognising their own role in the political process.

Recent work by de Vreese et al (2017) shows that the strategic game framing, which focuses specifically on political strategy and electoral prospects, is pervasive in political coverage across Europe, the United States and beyond, but suggests that such coverage increases during election periods. Although much of this research focuses on commercial news, Kerbel et al (2000) argue that public service broadcasting contains as much process coverage. Evidence from UK election coverage supports this claim (see Deacon et al. 2017). Various studies show that the volume of process news during UK elections regularly accounts for around half of overall coverage with a peak of 70 percent recorded at the 2010 election (Jackson, 2014). Longitudinal studies from UK elections are scarce, but content analyses dating back to the 1970s show that process news was less prominent then, accounting for around 20-30 percent of election campaign news (see Semetko et al. 2011).

History Lessons

We noted in the introduction that many accounts of contemporary campaign coverage propose that there have been important historical changes in the way elections are reported but, in many cases, these are assumptions made on the analysis of contemporary conditions, which can lead to overestimations of the linearity and extent of change. Certainly, studies that incorporate historical comparisons empirically, reveal a more complex and contingent picture.

What is striking about all existing historical studies is that none extend their analytical reach to before the end of the Second World War. This post war pattern is also evident in many of the meta-commentaries about political communication trends

over time (e.g. Norris et al, 1999; Seymour-Ure, 1991, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995). We suspect one particularly important factor determining this periodization is the assumption that the arrival of television in the 1950s was crucial for the communication and conduct of political business in most democracies (Blumler and Kavanagh (1999).

We identify two reasons why ignoring the pre-war period is problematic. First, the decades after World War Two had unique social, economic and political qualities for most Western democracies. The post war settlement, which emerged in reaction to the privations of the Great Depression and WW2, saw expanded social citizenship, economic corporatism and a reduction in political polarisation. This postwar consensus was entirely different from the pre-war dissensus that gained momentum through the travails of the 20s and 30s. Second, in the immediate post war period, news organisations were emerging from several years of tight government control and were well trained in sublimating their independence to the demands of the national interest. Newsprint remained rationed for several years after the war, and the newspapers of the immediate post-war period were stunted and limited. This situation contrasts with the pre-war period, where the news industry experienced a period of intense competition across diverse national contexts. Many newspapers expanded their structure and content to survive in a highly competitive commercial environment (Curran and Seaton, 2003). New forms of mass communication were also establishing their presence, radio in particular.

Recognition of both points raises the possibility that the entropic narrative we identified earlier, and claims about the significance of the television revolution, may be an artefact of the historical sample period taken. In particular, we contend that if one wants to assess the transformative impact of television there is a need to go further back than the atypical media environment that pertained in the immediate post war period. A more logical departure point, within a UK context at least, would be to start when transformational political change unquestionably occurred, the introduction of the 1918 Representation of the People Act, which marked a huge expansion in the electorate and the near-realisation of mass enfranchisement.

Research Design and Methods

The analysis we develop in this article examines four trends in UK election newspaper coverage over the last century: (1) personalisation, (2) presidentialisation, (3) negativity and (4) process news. It is based on a content analysis of UK national newspaper coverage of twelve UK General Elections held between 1918 and 2015. There have been 27 General Elections held in Britain since 1918. These campaigns occurred unevenly across the sample period, as historically Britain did not have fixed parliamentary terms. For this study, we selected the campaign from each decade with the highest voting swing, which produced the following distribution of campaigns: 1918, 1929, 1931, 1945, 1951, 1964, 1979, 1983, 1997, 2005 and 2010. We also added analysis of the 2015 General Election, for two reasons. First, the complex transition from a Coalition to Conservative majority government in 2015 rendered the main two party swing test inappropriate. Second, we wanted to assess the veracity of claims that the reporting of this campaign marked a sharp reversal in partisanship trends (see Deacon and Wring, 2017).

The newspaper titles selected for analysis were: *The Times*, the (*Manchester*) *Guardian*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express*, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Herald/The Sun*². These titles were selected because of their continuity (all titles have been published for the entirety of the sample period), political diversity (the selection encompasses a wide range of editorial opinion) and market orientation (the selection covers 'quality', 'mid-market' and 'popular' titles). The content analysis coded all election related content on (1) the front page, (2) the next main domestic news page, (3) the pages containing and facing the paper's leader editorial. For each campaign, we analysed coverage from the week commencing on the day of the formal dissolution of parliament and the week preceding the day of the vote. This produced a composite sample of twelve days' coverage for each campaign. Overall, the data set covers 5881 items that met the terms of inclusion.

The newspaper content was coded manually and all of the findings presented meet appropriate thresholds for inter-coder reliability³. The units of analysis for the

² The *Daily Herald* was relaunched as *The Sun* in 1964.

³ All coding was completed by a single coder. The coding schedule was extensively piloted and ICR tests were conducted on 20 randomly selected news items per election. Frequent spot checks were made to ensure that the coding remained consistent throughout the coding process. ICR figures were calculated using the ReCal web resource (Freelon, 2013). The lowest value found for a variable using

study were individual items produced by journalists (news reports, features, commentaries etc.) that made any reference to the pending election. Readers' letters were excluded. We operationalized our measures in the following way.

Presidentialisation: For each item in the sample, we coded the four most prominent actors. Presidentialisation was assessed by determining the relative frequency of appearance of the Prime Minister and main opposition leader relative to all other politicians.

Personalisation: To assess the extent to which the personal qualities of politicians have attracted attention over time, for each politician identified we coded whether there was any reference to all, or any, of 6 personal characteristics. These were: (1) personal life, (2) personal political competence and/or experience, (3) honesty, probity and integrity, (4) presentational style/ deportment, (5) personality, and (6) independence and/or autonomy.

Developing Langer's (2011) distinction between personality politics (coverage emphasising competence and ability) and the politicisation of private persona (referring to family and private life), we conceive of these six characteristics as relating to the public faces and private lives of politicians to differing degrees (see Figure 1). Commentary about the competence and experience of people standing for office and their political independence are predominantly 'public sphere' concerns, whereas discussion about a politician's personal life or innate personality traits are essentially 'private sphere' issues whose public relevance needs to be demonstrated. We argue that questions about politicians' integrity, style and deportment seem to be located in the overlap between these two spheres, uniting who people are, how they seem and the direct implications these hold for their suitability to public office.

Figure 1: The private and public aspects of personalisation

Krippendorff's Alpha was 0.795. Most ICR scores exceeded 0.83. Krippendorff deems 0.800 as a good indicator of intercoder reliability with 0.667 as 'acceptable' for tentative conclusions (2004: 241).

When coding these aspects, we also differentiated between instances where (a) the featured actor referred to the personality or personal qualities of another political actor, (b) referred to them in relation to themselves and/or (c) were the subject of direct editorial comment.

Negativity: To measure this we draw on the 6 personal characteristics mentioned above. When these were mentioned in relation to an individual actor, we coded whether they were explicitly evaluated as positive, negative, mixed or neutral.

Process-coverage: We measured this in two ways. For each item we coded up to two main substantive policy themes. In items where policy themes appeared, we coded an estimate of how much of the item consisted of policy coverage to get a sense of how detailed the policy discussion was to gain an understanding of how issue focused (or not) they were. We coded: (1) less than 25%, (2) between 25-50%, (3) between 50-75%, and (4) 75-100%. We also counted the number of words in the longest quotation in each item to determine to what extent the direct access to politicians' words has remained constant over time⁴.

Findings: Presidentialisation

⁴ Full coding schedule available online here: <https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/dspace-jspui/handle/2134/18150>

In a UK electoral context, presidentialisation refers to the extent to which an incumbent prime minister and their main political opponent dominate media coverage (Van Aelst et al, 2012; Foley, 2000). Figure 2 compares the percentage proportions of coverage that the Prime Minister and leader of the opposition appeared in, both individually and in combination. A third order polynomial trend line and R2 values are also included for the combined count. As two simple rules-of-thumb for interpretation: the straighter a line is, the greater the consistency of the trend and the higher the R2 value, the stronger the 'goodness of fit' between the data distribution and the suggested trend.

Figure 1: Proportional presence of main party leaders

Notes: Percentages = (frequency of appearance of leader/ total frequency of appearance of all party political sources)*100. Up to 4 political sources could be coded per news item. Where more than four sources were reported, the most prominent sources were coded. The number of items per election are: (1918) 616, (1929) 565, (1931) 633, (1945) 386, (1951) 537, (1964) 505, (1979) 354, (1983) 572, (1997) 461, (2005) 426, (2010) 413, (2015) 413. (Total N= 5881.)

The combined calculation of the prominence of Prime Ministers and their main political opponent suggests an increased and consistent presidentialisation trend over the century. The results also suggest differences between pre-war and post-war periods, with the two main leaders attracting consistently lower levels of prominence prior to the Second World War.

When this combined trend is disaggregated (by Prime Minister and main opposition leader) the results show that levels of coverage given to incumbent Prime Ministers have not increased consistently and their news-value has varied (e.g. 1951 and 1964). The trend line is not straight, barely inclines and has a low R² value

(0.3375). What has changed is the increased levels of coverage given to the main opposition party leaders in post war coverage. Here again we see a strong, straight upwards trend, with a higher R^2 value (0.7456). There is some volatility in the patterning, which seems to reflect a 'strength of opponent' effect. In elections where opposition contenders were recognized as having little prospect of success, their news worthiness seems to have been reduced (see 1983 and 2005). Overall our findings provide longitudinal evidential support to Kriesi's (2007) claim that the increased prominence of opposition leaders is driving the trend.

The public and private faces of personalisation

The data analysis reveals a complex picture when it comes to personalisation. The data in Table 1 show the overall prominence of the 6 personal characteristics (described above) across the 100 year period. The percentages in the columns listed as 'source' indicate the proportion of items in each election that featured any political source making some reference to a specific personalisation category, whether in relation to themselves or in reference to another politician. The figures in the columns marked as 'journalist' indicate that these matters have been specifically commented upon by the author/journalist. 'Source' and 'journalist' are independent measures (i.e. they could both feature in the same item). The columns marked 'All' indicate the proportion of items that made any reference to the specific personal category, whether in the comments of sources, journalists or both.

Table 1: Six measures of personalisation

	Personal Life			Competence			Integrity/ Standards		
	Source	Journalist	All	Source	Journalist	All	Source	Journalist	All
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
All	15	32	37	20	18	33	15	10	22
1918	16	34	40	17	14	28	12	7	18
1929	11	29	34	16	16	27	14	7	19
1931	12	37	41	16	12	25	15	9	21
1945	8	22	26	16	15	29	20	16	32
1951	12	17	24	25	8	31	19	4	22
1964	13	28	32	15	11	24	14	3	16
1979	13	32	35	14	10	23	9	5	13

1983	13	39	40	21	15	33	16	4	20
1997	25	47	50	17	22	34	16	14	24
2005	20	35	39	28	30	48	19	16	29
2010	21	31	38	28	35	53	10	11	18
2015	20	35	41	29	31	48	22	26	41
Order 3 Polynomial trend lines & R ² value for 'All'
	Style/ Department			Personality			Autonomy		
	Source	Journalist	All	Source	Journalist	All	Source	Journalist	All
All	4	18	18	7	10	15	3	2	5
1918	1	7	7	5	6	10	11	5	14
1929	2	10	11	5	7	10	1	1	3
1931	1	9	9	5	6	10	2	2	3
1945	1	11	11	4	11	14	10	4	13
1951	2	15	15	11	5	15	2	1	3
1964	5	25	26	6	11	16	1	1	2
1979	3	20	20	10	10	19	1	1	3
1983	4	16	18	7	13	18	1	1	2
1997	5	27	27	7	14	19	1	1	2
2005	4	19	19	3	10	12	-	1	1
2010	8	35	37	9	14	21	0	-	0
2015	8	29	31	12	15	23	7	10	15
Order 3 Polynomial trend lines & R ² value for 'All'

Notes percentages=(the number of items which contained any reference made to these specific personal qualities by a source and/or journalist / total number of election items identified)*100. The number of items per election are: (1918) 616, (1929) 565, (1931) 633,(1945) 386, (1951) 537, (1964) 505, (1979) 354, (1983) 572, (1997) 461, (2005) 426, (2010) 413, (2015) 413.(Total N= 5881.)

The results show that reference to the personal lives of politicians was the most consistent aspect of personalisation overall, and has been an enduring feature

of coverage across the century. This suggests that 'intimitization' has deeper historical roots than many have assumed. Having said this, it is notable that the highest peak occurred in the 1997 election which saw the Labour party gain office, which corroborates Ana Langer's observation that the election of Tony Blair marked a step change in the appropriation of private lives for political purpose in the UK (Langer, 2011).

It is also pertinent to note the different trends in the 'source' and 'journalist' columns (Table 1). For most of the century, commentary on personal lives has been the province of journalists, but over more recent elections we see an increased proportion of items where politicians themselves are referring to their personal lives. This also seems to have gained prominence from the 1997 General Election, offering further support to Langer's (2011) claim that Blair's personalised approach created an enduring change in electoral campaigning.

References to the personal 'competence' of politicians was the second most prominent feature found in coverage, and here we see a clearer upwards trend over the post war period. Commentary on this aspect was more-or-less equally divided between sources and journalists. A more complex historical picture emerges in relation to references to the 'political standards and integrity' of featured politicians. The trend line shows the patterning is weak and inconsistent across the century and its final uplift is solely explained by the prominence of the issue in the 2015 campaign. Here again, it is important to note the difference between trends in source and journalist-based commentary: political sources were consistently more likely to refer to this aspect than journalists in all but one election (2015).

The most linear trend identified across the sample period was for references to the 'style, deportment and presentation' of politicians, the fourth most prominent personalisation category. The step change in this aspect appears to have occurred from the 1960s and was particularly prominent in the most recent UK General Elections. On this matter, it is the journalists rather than the sources who have the most to say. In terms of references to the innate 'personality' of politicians, we also see an upwards trajectory over time, but the goodness of fit between the trend line and the data is weaker. It is also important to note its marginality relative to other personal characteristics and the implications this has for understanding the trajectory

of personalisation. Although, the private lives of politicians have been consistently prominent across the century, discussions pertaining to their interior psychological worlds has grown but not to a dominant extent. There is also no clear pattern as to whether journalist or source commentary gave greater emphasis to this aspect up until the 1983 General Election. After that point journalist-based coverage comes to the fore. The least frequently reported personal quality was 'autonomy/independence', to the point that it was found to be virtually absent in several campaigns. However, there were three elections when it gained some traction (1918, 1945 and 2015).

Evaluating personal qualities

These results suggest that different aspects of personalisation have had particular histories over the last 100 years, and there is no consistent pattern by which 'private sphere' elements have come to supplant 'public sphere' considerations. Some private sphere elements have always had prominence, whereas some public sphere issues have gained significance. We now want to consider whether these variable patterns have created aggregate evaluative differences in the media presentation of political sources.

Table 2 compares the percentage of items that contained any 'solely or mainly positive' or 'solely or mainly negative' comments about any featured politician, in relation to any of the six personal qualities analysed. It also differentiates between evaluations made by politicians in their reported comments ('source') and those expressed directly by the journalists themselves ('Journalist').

In aggregate terms the levels of positivity and negativity across the entire sample of elections were similar (between 16% and 18% of items for all four measures). In some instances, there was a lack of any major temporal differences. Levels of positive commentary associated with political figures (whether advanced by a quoted source or a journalist) had flat and inconsistent trend lines. The one outlying value occurred in the 2010 General Election, where levels of positive journalist commentary were far higher than for all other elections.

In terms of negative commentary, we see a minor increase in the post war period in source based negativity in the immediate post war period, but then this increase levelled off and varied inconsistently through to 2015. It is in the proportional presence of negative journalist commentary that we see the most dramatic, consistent and pronounced increase, particularly from the 1997 General Election onwards.

Table 2: Levels of positivity and negativity in the reporting of politicians

	Negativity		Positivity	
	Source	Journalist	Source	Journalist
	%	%	%	%
All	18	16	17	16
1918	11	10	22	20
1929	15	10	13	18
1931	9	9	20	13
1945	23	18	23	17
1951	24	6	19	9
1964	21	9	7	12
1979	18	8	12	13
1983	23	10	12	11
1997	15	20	14	18
2005	22	28	18	12
2010	17	29	19	30
2015	28	46	20	20
Order 3 Poly- nomial trend lines & R ² value

Notes: percentages are separate and relate to independent measures. Percentages=(number of items that contained any source/ journalist positive/negative reference to the personal qualities of a politician/total number of items)*100. The number of items per election are: (1918) 616, (1929) 565, (1931) 633,(1945) 386, (1951) 537, (1964) 505, (1979) 354, (1983) 572, (1997) 461, (2005) 426, (2010) 413, (2015) 413.(Total N= 5881.)

The exponential increase in journalistic negativity over the last twenty five years could be affected by structural changes in the style of political reporting over

the sample period. For example, McNair (2008) has written about the ‘columnar explosion’ that has transformed recent newspaper formats in the UK since the mid 1990s. Our content analysis confirms that levels of commentary, editorialising and analysis have increased in British election newspaper coverage over the last two decades. In 1918, columns, analyses and editorials accounted for 16 percent of all election news items, in 1983, the figure was 18 percent. In the campaigns from 1997, the figures increased steeply: 27 percent, 28 percent, 30 percent and 33 percent, respectively.

This coincidental patterning in the rise of columnists, comment pieces and editorials with the rise of journalistic negativity raises the possibility that the latter is an artefact of the former, as analyses and commentaries by their very nature invite judgements and evaluations. Figure 3 suggests that this is not a sufficient explanation, as rising levels of negativity from 1997 onwards are also evident even when news items are considered in isolation.

Figure 3: Journalist negativity in ‘all’ coverage and ‘news only’

Notes: The number of items per election are: (1918) 616, (1929) 565, (1931) 633, (1945) 386, (1951) 537, (1964) 505, (1979) 354, (1983) 572, (1997) 461, (2005) 426, (2010) 413, (2015) 413. (Total N= 5881.)

Process over substance?

This growth in journalistic negativity over the last two decades raises the possibility that this could be symptomatic of a hollowing out of election news reporting, as journalists become more focused upon critiquing and deconstructing political spin rather than presenting substantive policy details. To assess whether this was the case, we measured the proportion of each election item that could be identified as policy-focused (i.e. the amount of content in an item that described and assessed manifesto commitments and/ or other policy related matters). Figure 4 shows the proportion of items per election where policy content exceeded 25 percent of item content. The results provide no evidence of a clear shift over time and reveal considerable election-by-election volatility. Moreover, they challenge claims that there has ever been a time when ‘issue orientation’ prevailed (Esser et.al. 2017) and policy-rich content dominated the pages of British newspapers. Election reporting has always been interested in the theatre, process and uncertainty of the ballot. That said, this does not preclude the possibility that the qualitative nature of metacoverage has changed. For example, a large proportion of election items in the pre-war period provided descriptive constituency reports (1918: 17 percent, 1929: 12 percent, 1931: 14 percent). These virtually disappeared in the post war era (1945: 4 percent, 1983: 3 percent, 2010: 0.4 percent).

Figure 4: Percent of items where policy content exceeded 25 percent

Notes: The number of items per election are: (1918) 616, (1929) 565, (1931) 633,(1945) 386, (1951) 537, (1964) 505, (1979) 354, (1983) 572, (1997) 461, (2005) 426, (2010) 413, (2015) 413.(Total N= 5881.) These base counts apply to all percentages presented in subsequent tables.

One area where there is a clear temporal shift is in relation to the quotation time allocated to political sources. Quotation time reveals a lot about the politics of media access, but also provides an indicator of changes in political communication practices and new production values. From the 1980s, several commentators identified the growing importance of ‘sound bites’ where PR strategies and professional news values operated in a pincer movement to compress public speech acts into increasingly succinct and sensationalist statements (e.g. Hallin, 1992, Franklin, 1998). To assess whether and when this process manifested itself in election news reporting, we counted the number of words in the longest direct quotation in each news item. We then calculated the 5 % trimmed mean and interquartile range for these quotations in each of the sampled elections (to reduce the risk that the overall values were distorted by outliers). As the results show in Figure 4, there was a marked reduction in the average length and range of these quotations from 1964 onwards. We can only speculate on the reasons for this, but it is pertinent to note that the 1964 election was the first election in our sample where television played a central role in the mediation of the campaign.

Figure 5: Average length and interquartile range of longest quotation (news items only)

Discussion

This article has scrutinised some widely-held but under-explored claims about historical changes in media reporting of politics. These concerns connect with what we term an 'entropic narrative' in which the orderliness of the communication of politics in earlier eras is presumed to have become disrupted as promotionalism and media logic have exploited the spaces created by the growing political dealignment of the electorate (Esser et al. 2001; Cushion and Thomas, 2018). Through a unique analysis of UK national press coverage of 'first order' elections over a hundred-year period, we have explored areas of continuity and change in relation to four aspects of political reporting: presidentialisation, personalisation, negativity and the prominence of process coverage.

Our analysis of presidentialisation shows that the two main party leaders have accumulated greater levels of press coverage over last 100 years, but the increases are variable and the rate of the incline is modest. This rise is largely explained by the growth of press coverage of main opposition leaders in the post war era (also see Kriesi, 2007). In contrast, incumbent leaders have always commanded high news value throughout the century. This change may be explained by a range of factors. It could indicate partly the changing campaigning strategies of opposition parties, and the emergence of a more media-orientated approach to the pursuit of public office from the 1960s onwards (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999). It could also be seen as a marker of an increasingly personalised and conflictive emphasis in the reporting of politics, as arguments need antagonists.

The support for this conclusion is far less straightforward. Our findings on personalisation show that many elements of this phenomenon have deeper historical roots than have previously been assumed (e.g. Stanyer, 2013), and there are particular histories to its different aspects. The UK press has a considerable legacy in its portrayal of the intimate details of electoral candidates, as coverage of the 'personal lives' of politicians was the most prominent feature overall, and a consistent if fluctuating presence across the century (Langer, 2011). By contrast, we found a strong upwards

trajectory decade-by-decade in the attention given to politicians' competence. Coverage of politicians' integrity and standards have also been a recurrent, if less prominent, topic across the sample period. In contrast, there is evidence in a steady increase (from a low base) of reporting upon the 'personal style and deportment' of politicians, particularly since the latter part of the 1990s. Collectively, these results find no evidence that personal issues that relate to 'public sphere' coverage have become increasingly crowded out by 'private sphere' orientated concerns about the personal lives, psychological motivations and suitability of politicians. Indeed, there appear to be enduring historical limitations to the depths of intimitization. Discussion of the personality of politicians – their psychological interiors and deeper motivations – were found to be consistently marginalised relative to all other personalisation measures. This suggests that intimate politics in media reporting has tended to be more performative rather than investigative – more commonly a licenced intimacy fuelled by politicians' own willingness to mobilise aspects of their private lives for political advantage rather than media intrusiveness and prurience.

With regard to negativity, our results show that negative coverage of personal attributes of politicians was relatively stable until 1997, when levels suddenly rose exponentially. News management and PR have been enduring features of electioneering over the century (Wring, 2005), but the 1990s saw an intensification of these activities in the UK. The term 'spin' first entered the lexicon of British political life in the 1992 General Election (Billig et al. 1993; Seymour-Ure, 2003) and became synonymous with New Labour's rise to power and governance regime. It is difficult to avoid speculating that the power of this sensitising concept and the intensification in the promotionalism of political parties it described had a key role in fuelling more negative coverage over recent periods.

Our research could also be seen to challenge the commonly advanced claim that political journalism has become less issue oriented over the recent period and more fixated with the conduct and process of the campaign (e.g. Esser et al., 2001). Certainly, our results indicate that there has never been a time when policy debate dominated electoral news reporting. But we would caution that these quantitative continuities mask important qualitative changes in process coverage. As we also show, much of the meta-coverage in early elections was made up of descriptive constituency reports rather than the strategic analyses commonly found in the contemporary era. We also identify a

major shift from the 1964 onwards in the amount of direct quotation of political sources. We can only speculate whether the televisual revolution that gained impetus from the 1950s was a factor in this change, but this reduction in quotation also suggests a significant change in the ways in which journalists mediated the messages and content of campaigns.

One of the major purposes of this investigation is to chart the trajectory of all these aspects over a far longer historical period than even the most ambitious existing studies to date. By including the interwar period, we have sought to test whether the familiar narrative arc advanced by many post 1945 histories is challenged once the analysis takes an earlier departure debate. As we have explained, the immediate post-war 2 period was in many respects an atypical period both in media, social and political terms. However, our analysis finds no evidence of significant changes in political reporting practices between the interwar and immediate post war periods, despite the media revolution that occurred in the period after WW1 with the advent of radio and exponential increases in popular newspaper circulation and that was then placed in abeyance in the immediate post WW2 period. It has become commonplace to talk of how media cultures and political cultures have become inextricably connected. Our findings show that this interconnectedness is a relatively recent phenomenon, as earlier periods of media innovation and competition produced no appreciable change in the content and conduct of political communication.

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