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# Britain's famous red top newspapers struggle to find their voice in general election

## David Deacon and Dominic Wring

23 April 2015



Strident partisanship in the popular press has a lengthy history. And the wrath of the British tabloids used to give politicians considerable pause for thought, particularly during elections. The long defunct Daily Sketch, for example, consistently attacked the Labour party throughout the 1950s. But it was the late 1970s that marked a step-change.

Having bought The Sun, Rupert Murdoch embraced the Conservatives following the 1974 campaigns with an enthusiastic endorsement of Margaret Thatcher. Debate over the influence of the “Tory press” reached its height in 1992, when a vanquished Neil Kinnock [bitterly blamed it for his defeat](#).

Murdoch's tabloid [famously agreed with the Labour leader](#). This controversy seems a distant one in the 2015 campaign. And for good reason. [Our research](#) shows that this time round, while still flying the flag for their favoured parties, the famous red tops are not beating their respective drums anywhere near as loudly as in the past.

## Some things look familiar

It's true that you don't have to look too far for examples of partisan press engagement. The Sun in particular has not held back, whether in ridiculing Ed Miliband ([OOPS! I JUST LOST MY ELECTION](#): Miliband blows his chance on TV) or lauding David Cameron ([TORY STORY 2: UPBEAT PM BUZZING AT TORY MANIFESTO](#)). Mirror coverage offers a predictable contrast ([CAM HIT FOR SIX](#): Leaders batter PM over record on NHS & economy; [Where's the £25bn to pay for "the good life"?](#)).

This partisanship extends to the issues. Two stories emerged in March that separately discomforted the main parties. The first was the revelation about Ed Miliband's [two kitchens](#); the second the discovery that Conservative chairman Grant Shapps had held down two jobs in 2005-6 despite his initial denials.

In the six days after the kitchen story broke, The Sun dedicated 1,025 words to the matter and the Mirror only 51. During the same period of time following the Shapps revelation, the [Mirror ran](#) 2,100 words on the story whereas The Sun could only muster 72.

This kind of partisanship resembles past editorial practices but it also represents a return to past form rather than a straight continuation.

## Slight return

Between the 1997 and 2005 elections we witnessed the rise of the "Tony press", [where print media support for Labour exceeded that for his Conservative opponents](#). This change was more a case of de-alignment rather than realignment, given much of this editorial endorsement was equivocal, qualified and muted. The Sun's lukewarm support typified this and was far removed from the conviction politics it embraced during the 1980s.

In 2010, much of the press [returned home](#), although uncertainty was still evident in their editorial responses. This time the challenge was to decide who to attack following [Nick Clegg's success](#) in the televised leaders' debates. Now the rise of other challenger parties has intensified this confusion.

[Attacking on several fronts](#) dissipates the cumulative political force of editorial disparagement. And there is the gnawing concern that significant numbers of red-top readers may have some sympathies for the challengers' message of change. Life was much easier for editors and proprietors when general elections were two-horse races.

## How much coverage?

Another important consideration for this campaign is the extent to which the red tops are engaging with the campaign. Here major differences emerge between the aforementioned titles and their Daily Star rival. The Sun dedicated 25% of its available front-page space to the campaign between March 30 and April 20. By contrast, the Mirror devoted only [12% and the Star just 3.4%](#)

If we consider the coverage in key sections of the weekday editions of these papers between March 30 and April 15, Sun coverage amounted to 29,921cm<sup>2</sup>, the Mirror 21,781cm<sup>2</sup> and the Star 6,175cm<sup>2</sup>.

We can speculate about the reasons for these differences but a significant factor may well be their respective financial positions. Since [March 2010](#) all three red tops have [lost significant circulation](#) and readership (The Star is down by 48%, the Mirror 28% and the Sun 38%).

There is an old saying that principles cost – and it may well be that the ability to prioritise electoral preferences at the risk of audience disengagement is to some extent determined by the depth of one's pockets.

No paper can afford to ignore a national race these days but it is unlikely to be a political one. From April 9-11, for instance, the red tops dedicated 40% of their cumulative front-page news space to advertising free bets and form guides for the Grand National and other Aintree events. By contrast, the election horse race was an also-ran, attracting less than a third of this amount for the same period.

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