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## The 'Tony' Press: media coverage of the election campaign

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The 'Tony' Press: Media Coverage of the Election Campaign.  
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***Introduction.***

Compared with previous campaigns, the 2001 election made for a less compelling journalistic story.<sup>1</sup> The competitive race of 1992 had been followed by an extraordinary Labour victory in 1997. Though several commentators had labelled both campaigns boring, there was a consensus that the 2001 election had been an even more tedious event. Perhaps not unrelated to this were the unprecedented levels of voter abstention. Following the election media contributors joined defeated politicians to reflect on shortcomings in their performances.

When discussing the democratic process scholars disagree over the precise nature, if any, of media effects.<sup>2</sup> During the 2001 campaign this debate was minimal because the size and consistency of the Labour lead in public opinion polls diminished interest in this particular topic. Nonetheless politicians did appear to believe that the media mattered because they spent considerable time and sums of money on using the two complimentary promotional techniques of public relations and advertising.<sup>3</sup>

Public relations strategists, the so-called 'spin doctors', co-ordinated contact with the 'free' media of journalism. Getting favourable coverage through news reporting would, it was hoped, help politicians reach the electorate. Conservative leader William Hague had former Mirror Group Newspapers executive Amanda Platell oversee and direct the PR machine at the party's Central Office headquarters. This pitted Platell against Alastair Campbell, one of her former journalistic colleagues. Campbell, an experienced tabloid reporter turned Prime Ministerial Press Secretary,

worked closely with the party headquarters at Westminster's Millbank Tower to help Labour stay 'on message'.

In addition to developing their public relations strategies parties also retained advertising agencies. These so-called 'image makers' helped conceive and execute 'controlled' media campaigns. Though regarded as less influential than 'free' coverage advertising plays an important role because it allows politicians to directly communicate with the electorate. Labour hired leading agency TBWA. In a convenient piece of self-publicity, the firm's initials featured in its last election poster, 'Tony Blair Wins Again'. Agency work was overseen by the high profile, Labour supporting executive Trevor Beattie. For the first general election in over 20 years the Conservatives were without the services of the Saatchi brothers' agency. Their account went to the relatively unknown firm Yellow M. The Liberal Democrats could not afford to spend anything like their main opponents on advertising but did hire the Banc agency.

This chapter will discuss the role of the media and party communication strategies during the election. Topics to be considered include the various ways broadcast as well as the more obviously partisan print media covered the campaign. To use Mail on Sunday journalist Peter Hitchens' term, much of the former so-called 'Tory press' had arguably become the 'Tony press'.<sup>4</sup> These newspapers' expressed admiration for Blair was tempered by their more conditional support for his party. The sycophantic cheerleading for Thatcher in the 1980s had gone and in its place a sometimes more complex and nuanced pattern of press coverage was being established.

### ***Television.***

Television is widely regarded as the most important medium of political communication.<sup>5</sup> Thus every day at the main parties' morning press conferences

broadcast journalists were invariably privileged with regular opportunities to cross-examine the relevant spokesperson on the platform. This was because spin doctors calculated that they were more likely to gain favourable exposure for their party's message if they prioritised the requirements of those reporters contributing to the major TV channels' news programmes. These and other journalists did, however, regularly ignore the conferences' chosen theme for the day in favour of their own questions. Answers to these queries were not always forthcoming and included 'soundbites' consisting of short, pre-prepared and oft repeated phrases. Journalists criticised the messengers as well as the messages. Many complained that women on the platforms rarely spoke for their parties. The issue arose at a Labour conference when Gordon Brown was laughed at for attempting to answer a question on the subject intended for his colleague Estelle Morris.

Press conferences provide an important public forum for politicians and journalists. Their continuing existence reflects a growing concern within the media over the rise of so-called 'spin'. Understood to be the slant put on stories by frequently unnamed party spokespeople often talking privately 'off the record', spin has been criticised for undermining healthy democratic debate.<sup>6</sup> Growing public awareness of this activity provides a partial antidote to its impact. Yet in the competitive realm of political journalism even the more reluctant reporters may be pressured to cultivate spin doctors in order to guarantee their future access to important new stories and leads from a particular party source.

The Blair government's perceived dependence on spin to manage the news agenda was a major topic of debate during the last parliament and continued to be discussed during the campaign. It formed a recurrent theme in media reporting of the election process (see **Table One**).<sup>7</sup> Predictably this alleged 'control freakery' was a feature of Conservative attacks. Labour's determined approach to news management was underlined from the outset of the campaign when Tony Blair chose to stage his

announcement of the election at a high achieving school. In doing so the Prime Minister replaced the traditional statement to parliament with a photo opportunity designed to emphasise his commitment to education. Many of the journalists present criticised his decision to give such a political speech to a bemused looking group of children. Following the election, BBC political editor Andrew Marr called the event a 'hideous, cringe-making example of soft propaganda'.<sup>8</sup> The speech itself appeared to give ammunition to popular satirical attacks on Blair's allegedly sermonising, preachy style.

#### TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

The tension between public relations and public opinion was demonstrated on three separate occasions in a single day during the early stages of the campaign. Visiting a new hospital development in Birmingham, Tony Blair was challenged by Sharron Storer, the partner of a seriously ill cancer patient. In a memorable attack on the government's stewardship of the National Health Service, an irate Ms Storer confronted an uncomfortable looking Blair. Her comments about the poor state of hospitals electrified the early evening news bulletins. Earlier in the day Home Secretary Jack Straw had faced highly newsworthy barracking during his speech to delegates at the Police Federation. But this, the Blair incident together with the party's manifesto launch that day were overshadowed by an extraordinary altercation in North Wales between Deputy Prime Minister and agricultural worker Craig Evans. Evans, a Countryside Alliance supporter, was filmed throwing an egg from point blank range at John Prescott. In an instinctive gesture Prescott punched his assailant and a melee ensued. The incident attracted more coverage across all media than the likely next government's plans.<sup>9</sup>

Worried by the security implications of the Prescott incident some in the Labour hierarchy began to question whether journalists might be encouraging aggrieved

voters to vent their disaffection by confronting politicians during campaign visits. This debate intensified following the widespread publication of a private memorandum on the matter from Margaret McDonagh, the party's General Secretary, to the main broadcasters. McDonagh's comments were widely derided as an ill-judged attempt to intimidate journalists. Interestingly none of Labour's elected spokespeople appeared keen to defend or explain their beleaguered official's request.

The major terrestrial and satellite/cable/digital news programmes featured large amounts of election coverage both before and during the campaign. There was, however, a noticeable attempt not to automatically relegate other important stories. The forced delay of the election due to the 'Foot and Mouth' crisis had led to a 'phoney' war in which the main parties debated key issues and gave a good foretaste of what was to come. During the campaign proper BBC1 did not extent its main evening news programme as it had done in 1997. Its newly established slot of 10pm placed it in direct competition with the rival ITV bulletin. Both these and the stations' other main news services were supplemented by regional reports and programmes. Party spin doctors appeared keen to cultivate local journalists in the belief that they were less cynical than national reporters. They were also seen as a means of communicating with voters in the key marginal seats that would determine the outcome of the election.

Both regional and national news reports devoted considerable time to leading politicians' constituency visits. The main party leaders were transported to these in their so-called 'battlebuses'. The visits were designed to support the local candidate and took the form of a walkabout, photo opportunity, formal address, voter question session or supposedly impromptu speech 'on the stump'. The leaders' partners regularly attended these events and this contributed to the highly presidential nature of the campaign. Blair and Hague alone accounted for 62% of the coverage given to all politicians.<sup>10</sup> The presence of minders and assorted media personnel ensured few met

the politicians during their carefully choreographed events. There was, however, some compensation for those keen election watchers in that the BBC News 24, BBC Parliament and Sky News cable channels provided live comprehensive round the clock coverage.

The politicians' desire to gain favourable publicity led to stage-managed visits and meetings with known sympathisers. Tony Blair highlighted the type of voters he was interested in when he was filmed taking tea with an attractive, professional looking couple in the marginal 'Middle England' seat of Warwick and Leamington. The pair turned out to be party supporters specially recruited for the purpose. Such events encouraged a media backlash against the parties' desire to manipulate or 'spin' news stories. One obvious manifestation of this was 'the man in the white suit', Channel 5 News' self-styled journalistic champion of the people. Many of his reports showed how difficult it was to gain access to leaders who were continuously protected by a close circle of aides. The journalist also attacked the high cost of a place on the parties' battlebuses by spending the equivalent sum on champagne and the hiring of a stretch limousine. Given the chance reporters on board might have done the same because many complained of feeling neglected and excluded from the campaign. This mood was particularly strong amongst those travelling with Tony Blair; in the final week of the election exasperated photo-journalists temporarily went on strike in protest at their treatment by the party's publicity machine. Earlier in the campaign its robust approach had been demonstrated by the decision to ban satirist Rory Bremner from Labour's battlebus.

If the politicians desired managed contact with the electorate, broadcasters felt obliged to facilitate more meaningful and genuine public dialogue. Both major television broadcasters organised primetime studio based sessions featuring a single party leader taking questions from an invited audience. BBC Question Time's Leader Special was presented by David Dimbleby whilst over on ITV his brother Jonathan



hosted Ask the Leader. William Hague appeared at ease with the format. This may have been because of his noted ability to cope with Prime Minister's Question Time. Indeed Hague regularly appeared to better Blair in House of Commons' debates. Yet this did not boost his personal public opinion ratings and they remained well below those of the Prime Minister. Compared with Hague, Blair looked more uncomfortable during his appearances in both public debate programmes. But, by peak time viewing standards, relatively few people noticed. Barely 2.5 million saw Blair's BBC1 debate. Over on ITV at the same time 11 million viewers watched the British Soap Awards. Rather conveniently the person making the main tribute speech turned out to be Cherie Booth, the Prime Minister's wife. It was another indication of Labour's preoccupation with the large numbers of voters consciously avoiding the campaign coverage. Blair, for instance, appeared on the largely party politics free GMTV breakfast programme and talked about one of his children thereby reinforcing his family image to viewers.

The BBC and ITV Sunday lunchtime political programmes continued during the campaign. ITV maintained its usual audience participation format whereby Jonathan Dimbleby invited politicians to debate foreign and domestic policy issues. BBC On The Record with John Humphreys did much the same. Unfortunately for the broadcasters Blair had refused to debate with rival leaders so other spokespeople fielded the questions. When his deputy Andrew Smith stood in for Chancellor Gordon Brown it had the effect of downgrading the programmes and stature of Brown's shadow Michael Portillo. Throughout the week BBC2's Campaign Live also used panels to structure live discussions between politicians and voters on a variety of topics.

The BBC once again adopted its now established Election Call format. Moderated by Peter Sissons, the programmes enabled people to phone in or e-mail their questions to a politician live on air. Most guests coped well and there was nothing to match the

most famous exchange of this kind in which Diana Gould embarrassed Margaret Thatcher during the 1983 campaign over her government's sinking of an Argentine warship during the Falklands War. This time some politicians even went on the offensive, notably Margaret Beckett who sternly rebutted the claims of an anxious patient over Labour's record on health. It is perhaps significant that Election Call was relegated from its usual BBC1 slot to BBC2. This placed it in direct competition with Kilroy, another audience participation format. Though presented by a former MP, this discussion based programme avoided election related topics in favour of its usual diet of personal testimonies and moral debates.

Public access was a major feature of Channel 5's election coverage. The channel actually started broadcasting during the early stages of the 1997 election but played little role in that campaign. This time the main evening news bulletins were supplemented by Live Talk, a studio, telephone and e-mail participation programme. Fronted by married couple Lucy and James O'Brien, the consumer affairs style format enabled the presenters and members of the public to discuss issues and express their opinions. Even senior politicians such as Peter Lilley were expected to telephone in order to make a point.

Broadcasters recognised that only certain types of motivated people were likely to participate in public access programming. Consequently the opinions of key voters were actively sought out. BBC Breakfast Time issued selected undecided viewers with video equipment to enable them to record comments that were broadcast during the election. Like the politicians, Channel 4 News employed a battlebus to enable Krishnan Guru-Murthy to visit marginal constituencies and gauge the opinions of undecided voters. BBC Newsnight also had a vehicle. Jeremy Vine's 1970s vintage 'Dormobile' took in John O'Groats and Lands End during a nationwide tour. Several memorable interviews included an uncomfortable encounter with Peter Mandelson

and, following an enforced stop due to a breakdown, a political discussion with the mechanic mending the van.

Broadcasters' attempts to engage with and understand the public mood were augmented by specially commissioned research findings. In some cases these went beyond the standard survey format. Channel 4 News' Mark Easton reported on his programme's Message Poll, a method designed to assess voter concerns on a given issue. The feature strove to offer an insight into the data and not just selected results. Frank Luntz, the prominent American campaign consultant, helped devise the studies and also took part in expert panel discussions of the findings. Other channels reported public opinion results but these were given less prominence compared with previous campaigns. Sky News' evening bulletins, for instance, ran the latest results in a continuously rotating by-line. The failure of most surveys to predict the Conservative's 1992 victory has dented journalistic faith in the method. It was one reason why some media outlets began to commission their own focus group studies.

Similar in format to Channel 4 News, BBC2's Newsnight offered extended, analytical coverage of the campaign. Features on all aspects of the election included Jeremy Paxman's unsettling interviews with leading spokespeople. His discussion with William Hague was a particularly bruising encounter. Following his resignation as leader, Hague reportedly admitted that he had found Paxman's questioning particularly unsettling because it had accurately reflected what disloyal Conservative colleagues had been privately saying about his leadership. This interview, it was claimed, contributed to his eventual decision to step down. On the Labour side Robin Cook's perceived inability to deal with Paxman's cross-examination of the party's stance on the Euro raised doubts about him remaining as Foreign Secretary. Journalist Jackie Ashley suggested Blair's surprise demotion of Cook in the post-election Cabinet reshuffle could be partly explained by his poor performance in this set piece interview.

As in 1997 a Saturday edition of Newsnight was broadcast throughout the campaign. The programmes attempted to go beyond the relatively narrow agenda of the election and took a longer-term view of key trends and issues. In a programme on class and education, comedian Mark Thomas offered a critique of the government's promotion of meritocracy. His report formed the backdrop to an expert led discussion free from party soundbites. The BBC's other main investigative input was provided by John Ware for the Panorama programme during the final week of the campaign. Ware's controversial report revisited findings of a previous edition to again question the validity of government spending claims on health, education and transport. There was a predictably swift rebuke from Labour's Millbank headquarters.

In contrast to other broadcasters' and its own previous coverage, Channel 4 partly abandoned conventional election reporting in favour of a series entitled Politics Isn't Working. Various programmes explored the apparent deepening public disaffection with the democratic process. Reporters criticised corporate sponsored globalisation, social inequality, racial intolerance and the perceived triviality of the election. Reflecting the growing trend in reality style 'fly on the wall' television, a documentary called Party Crashers had undercover reporters working for each of the main parties. This was the nearest the series got to a Westminster slant on the election. In many ways Politics Isn't Working was an attempt to re-engage with Channel 4's original mission to offer an alternative perspective to mainstream broadcasting.

For the younger viewer BBC's Newsround co-sponsored school based elections. In a hung parliament, the Conservatives came out as the largest party. 'Other' candidates did very well in what was perhaps another indicator of youth disaffection with traditional politics. Reflecting this the presenters of Channel 4's Big Breakfast morning programme ridiculed the election as a 'yawn'. It was a common theme of

many journalistic stories. Perhaps aware that viewers were avoiding the election coverage, both ITV and Channel 4 took the opportunity to launch major 'reality' television series during the campaign. Both received considerable amounts of media attention. Several journalists contrasted the apparent public apathy about taking part in a free general election with the desire of viewers for Big Brother 2, the Channel 4 programme, to pay to vote by telephone for their least favourite character in the series. People, it appeared, were still keen to participate in certain kinds of poll.

### ***Radio.***

Despite the dominating presence of television, radio played an important role during the election. Whilst commercially owned organisations relegated the campaign to brief mentions on their news bulletins, the BBC's public service ethos meant it devoted considerable time to following developments. A network of regional and local radio stations offered election features, discussion and debate. The relaxation of legal restrictions meant broadcasters found it much easier to invite individual candidates onto their programmes. Reflecting their audiences, the national stations' coverage differed. Radio 5 Live provided round the clock news from the campaign. The mid-morning phone-in programme allowed voters to call in with their frank views. Presenter Nicky Campbell combined a popular touch with detailed political knowledge. The programme included daily updates from Fi Glover and Mark Mardell on the parties' campaigns.

Radio 5 Live's less reverential approach contrasted with that of Radio 4. It aired Election Call simultaneously with BBC2 in direct competition with Campbell's largely politician free show. Radio 4's breakfast morning programme Today continued to be the key agenda-setting medium for party elites. Here leaders and their lieutenants were scrutinised by John Humphreys and colleagues. Blair, in particular, faced close interrogation over his endorsement of Minister for Europe Keith Vaz and

former Paymaster General Geoffrey Robinson as Labour candidates. Both faced ongoing investigations into their personal conduct in office. Radio 4's other coverage included an election series of debating programme Any Questions and a nightly Campaign Update bulletin.

Reflecting its core interests Radio 3 did its main election feature on the Arts. The other two stations targeted their audiences by age. For the older listener, Radio 2's Jimmy Young Show had panels of politicians discussing a policy area. Young also interviewed leaders. In a telling exchange with Tony Blair, the veteran presenter invited the Prime Minister back onto the programme in the not too distant future and inadvertently revealed what he and most voters assumed would be another Labour election victory. Publicly most journalists felt obliged to keep up the pretence that the campaign might have a surprising outcome.

Youth oriented Radio 1 tended to avoid politicians and focused its coverage on issues of potential interest to their audience. Polly Billington, a reporter with the Newsbeat programme, selected interviewees and subjects in an attempt to make the election appear relevant. The main leaders were cross-examined by a studio audience of young people. 'Minute Manifestos' were also broadcast during the midday. Whilst two of the younger SNP and Plaid Cymru candidates presented their pitches, the Conservatives fielded Steve Norris to make his party's case in 60 seconds.

### *Newspapers*

British law requires broadcasters to provide unbiased election coverage though relaxation of the code for this campaign gave broadcasters more discretion in deciding what to report. No such restrictions apply to the print media. Most national newspapers support a party. Most endorsed the winning party in 2001. This reflects a trend dating back to Margaret Thatcher's 1979 victory. Thatcher's electoral success

cemented a relationship between her party and the so-called 'Tory press'. These papers remorselessly attacked Labour and its leadership. Conservative victories in 1987 and 1992 led some to conclude that the press might have a certain degree of influence over voter attitudes.<sup>11</sup> Like the outcome the pattern of press realignment during the 1997 election was dramatic. Once Tory papers now supported the seemingly invincible Tony Blair. At the very least, this removed a public impediment to Labour. During the 2001 election press support for the party actually increased (**Tables Two and Three**).

#### TABLES TWO AND THREE ABOUT HERE

Rupert Murdoch's News International corporation owns the largest selling collection of newspapers in Britain. Their influence derives from huge audiences together with the proprietor's cultivation of politicians. Murdoch has been keen to foster relationships with governments that could threaten his media interests with new regulations. Tony Blair is one such acquaintance. That said Murdoch's best selling daily tabloid, the Sun, has not been uncritical of the Labour leader having first endorsed him in 1997. During the last parliament it even called Blair the 'Most Dangerous Man in Britain' because of his perceived pro-Euro stance.

During the run-up to the campaign the Sun published exclusives on the likely date of the election and composition of the next Cabinet. This suggested the paper enjoyed privileged access to No 10 Downing Street. Though it endorsed Labour successful editorials were respectful about William Hague and sympathetic to his anti-Euro platform. Hague's treatment was very different to the crude mockery shown past opponents such as the Labour leaders Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock. Not that populist, cliché-ridden journalism was absent from the modern Sun. Right-wing columnist Richard Littlejohn savaged the three main leaders and gratuitously insulted the Prime Minister's wife, Cherie Booth.

The decision by the Sun to declare for Blair at the beginning of the election did not have the same impact as it did in 1997. Reflecting a deepening of the relationship between Murdoch and Blair, the other News International titles moved towards the party. Having encouraged readers to vote for named Eurosceptic candidates in 1997, The Times had already broken with its longstanding tradition of supporting the Conservatives. In 2001 there was a modest endorsement of Labour. More surprising was the once arch-Thatcherite Sunday Times' support for Blair. Arguably these editorial changes had more to do with company than wider politics and may explain the relative lack of interest in these papers' declarations. The biggest selling Sunday tabloid News of the World was noticeably more sincere in its embrace of Blair this time. This stance was aided by the presence of soon to be Labour MP Sion Simon as a political columnist.

Like the News of the World, the Daily Star had been less than resounding in its endorsement of Labour in 1997. The switch then was probably wise given its readership's overwhelming support for the party. This time the paper's stance was more wholehearted in its embrace of Tony Blair. Under former editors the Star had been trenchantly right-wing. Political populism in the modern paper now came from left-leaning columnists like Dominik Diamond who, lamenting New Labour's centrism, declared his intention to abstain. That said the paper's election coverage was insubstantial. The most animated reporting featured the campaign by a favourite glamour model to become an independent MP in Manchester. The candidate, Jordan, had regularly featured in adult publications owned by Richard Desmond, the paper's new proprietor.

Whilst acquisition of the Star complimented his existing media interests, Desmond's purchase of the other Express group titles has been fraught with difficulty. Once dominant titles in circulation terms, the previously staunch Conservative Express and



Sunday Express papers are in decline partly because their ageing readerships are literally dying out. Though they stayed loyal to the Tories in 1997, dramatic editorial changes have repositioned the titles and they now support Labour. Nonetheless Desmond's tenure has downgraded the papers' news content in favour of celebrity features.

Unlike the Express papers, the Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday continue to be firmly right-wing in outlook. Labour was attacked throughout an election campaign in which the Daily Mail also criticised the Liberal Democrats' close proximity to Blair. The least predictable thing the Mail did was to not formally endorse the Conservatives. The paper's sympathies were nonetheless obvious and differed little to those of its declared Tory supporting sister, the Mail on Sunday.

Unlike the Mail, the Mirror traditionally supports Labour. Yet this relationship has been strained in recent years. Blair's cultivation of the Sun has upset Mirror executives. The paper retaliated by backing Conservative candidate Steve Norris in the London Mayoral elections. The relationship was however renewed in time for a 2001 campaign in which the Mirror ran a polemical campaign against William Hague. A satirical feature entitled 'Vote Tory' depicted what the paper believed Britain would be like under Hague. The tone of this ridicule was in marked contrast to the previous election. Then the Mirror had issued a supplement warning of the dire consequences of re-electing the Conservatives and Michael Portillo becoming Prime Minister. Other Mirror tabloids gave loyal support to Labour. The Sunday People provided the most enthusiastic endorsement of the government. Sister paper the Daily Record continued to support the party despite disagreements between it and the new Labour led Scottish executives.

Mirror Group broadsheets The Independent and Independent on Sunday were critical towards the Hague leadership. In an editorial the daily urged people to vote against

the Conservatives. The paper was probably keen not to alienate its high number of Liberal Democrat readers by coming out for Labour. In a scattergun declaration the Independent on Sunday supported the need for more Greens, Liberal Democrats and even moderate Tories. Like the Independent, the Financial Times opposed the Conservatives' anti-Euro stance and again endorsed Labour. Predictably the Guardian and its Sunday sister paper, the Observer, also fell in behind Blair. In offering support both reiterated liberal left concerns over certain policies. The papers' ideological rivals, the Daily and Sunday Telegraph, were fulsome in their support for the Conservatives.

The striking point to note about the partisanship of different newspaper audiences is that, unlike previous elections, there is no clear pattern emerging (see **Table Four**). There were modest swings to Labour within the readerships for four of the government supporting dailies. Of the other sympathetic papers, only the Express registered a greater shift towards the party. In marked contrast there was a notable swing towards the Conservatives amongst Star readers. But the most dramatic change involved Guardian and Independent voters. Here the Liberal Democrats benefited with major defections from Labour. Predictably the readerships of the two anti-government titles, the Mail and Telegraph, hardened in their already strong support for the Conservatives.

When considering the figures on the partisanship of readers a number of factors need to be taken into account. Whilst editorial content may influence audiences it should be noted that the press has been noticeably less strident of late. It is possible that the 'Tory' press did have influence during the 1980s precisely because of the intensity and repetitiveness of its attacks on the then Labour leadership. This is now not the case. The effect may have been to neutralise the electoral importance of the print media. Furthermore whilst the newspapers themselves have changed so have their audiences. Less papers are being sold and consumed. Bucking the trend is the Mail

and this may offer an explanation for its readers' swing to the Conservatives. Its ability to attract right-wing voters may be directly linked to the declining circulation of the Express and in turn that paper's more pro-Labour audience.

The most interesting changes of allegiance occurred amongst readers of the Guardian and Independent. These papers' criticisms of Blair's perceived shift to the right might have had some impact. Alternatively the voters may have been predisposed to supporting the Liberal Democrats. Whatever the case the fact that is what the traditional liberal left qualities which experience most change in this respect will undoubtedly encourage the editors to continue with their criticism of the government. Most puzzling was the swing away from Labour amongst those taking the Star. The paper hardly talked about politics and when it did was generally supportive of the government. This change could, like the Express, be explained by declining market share. A further and perhaps more important factor is that, alone amongst the dailies, a majority of Star readers did not vote in the general election.

### ***Advertising and Other Media***

For the first time in an election politicians were required to obey new limits on the amount they could spend on national campaigning.<sup>12</sup> The rule changes did not however prevent parties from producing expensive advertising. Rather the key problem for strategists turned out to be the delay of the general election. Having already booked their sites, the Conservatives displayed posters in the month prior to the formal launch of the campaign. The main slogan read 'You Paid the Tax: So Where Are The Teachers?' with alternative versions substituting 'Teachers' for 'Trains', 'Hospitals', and 'Police'.

During the actual campaign the Conservatives' agency produced some memorable adverts including one featuring a pregnant Blair captioned 'Four Years of Labour and

He Still Hasn't Delivered'. If the copy rekindled memories of the famous Saatchi and Saatchi agency's work for Thatcher this was not surprising as the image had originally been used by the firm in a 1970s birth control campaign. Blair was also a target of an eve of poll advert that called on voters to 'Burst his Bubble' and deny a smug looking Prime Minister a second term. Unlike predecessor John Major, William Hague was absent from the party's overwhelmingly negative advertising campaign. It was a telling omission and one that suggested Conservative strategists knew Hague to be an electoral liability.

Like the Conservatives the TBWA agency's campaign for Labour also used negative or 'knocking' copy. The most memorable images again featured the rival leader. 'Just William' used a picture of a teenage Hague from the time he made his first Conservative conference speech. The image suggested a precocious schoolboy debater in the mould of comedian Harry Enfield's reviled 'Tory Boy' character. Labour strategists were keen to suggest Hague was a clone of Margaret Thatcher. A striking advert featuring Thatcher's hairstyle superimposed on the balding leader's head amplified this attack. The image was recycled in media debates over its appropriateness. Negativity also featured in classic Hollywood horror film styled posters replete with anti-Tory slogans like 'Economic Disaster II' and 'The Repossessed'.

The negative election advertising marked a change from the pre-campaign strategy of stressing achievements through 'The Work Goes On' theme. This in turn had followed 'Thank You' adverts featuring perceived beneficiaries expressing their gratitude to Labour's 1997 voters for policies such as the New Deal programme. For positive campaigning neither major party could outdo the Liberal Democrats. Their modest advertising budget was spent on commissioning a few designs from the Banc agency. These highlighted the party's potential to make an electoral breakthrough and the qualities of leader Charles Kennedy and his policies. Lacking the resources to

display posters, the Liberal Democrats relied on television news coverage of launches. Of the minor parties only UK Independence invested sizeable sums on newspaper advertising courtesy of helpful donations from Eurosceptic businessman Paul Sykes.

Fewer organisations were granted Party Election Broadcasts than the record numbers who qualified in 1997. Revised rules made it more difficult for smaller parties to get slots. Most PEBs ran for 3 minutes. This condensed formula encouraged the type of higher quality production made by advertising agencies and specialist filmmakers. Labour successfully promoted a PEB on government achievements by revealing the guest appearance of pop singer Geri Halliwell. Conveniently for Halliwell this exposure coincided with the release of her new record. More embarrassing was the allegation that the singer was not actually registered to vote on security grounds. Similar reports followed the final PEB featuring celebrities from youth soap opera *Hollyoaks*. This unsophisticated film targeted young voters by showing the actors being thanked by various people for taking the trouble to support Labour. The message was undermined when a front page *Sun* story suggested one of the celebrities was unable to vote because she was too busy. Other PEBs featured Blair, a cinema style commercial attacking the Conservatives, and personal testimonies from assorted beneficiaries of Labour's first term.

Conservatives PEBs were about as negative as the Liberal Democrats' were positive. Successive Broadcasts attacked Labour's record on crime, tax and the proposed European Single Currency. The alleged victims of these policies were represented on screen. William Hague was limited to an appearance in the final PEB. The inability of the most emotive Broadcasts to provoke debate underlined the Conservatives' problems. One film was criticised for portraying school-aged teenagers as louts. Another, an attack on a government parole scheme, reworked a successful television advert that had helped the US Republicans win the presidency in 1988.<sup>13</sup> This attempt to use the same potentially explosive device failed in spite of accusations that

Labour's 'soft on crime' policy had led to the premature release of serious repeat criminals including rapists.

The Liberal Democrats' PEBs set out their main policy objectives and reinforced the party's progressive image. The exception to the series was a Broadcast that focused on Charles Kennedy and featured his family in their Highlands community. Kennedy's Scottish National Party rivals included similar imagery in quirky films featuring men in kilts and assorted voters crying 'jump!'. The SNP's Welsh sisters Plaid Cymru also received Broadcasts. Following some uncertainty over the rules a handful of minor parties qualified for a single PEB apiece. The Greens used children in their film to warn voters of the need to guarantee the environmental welfare of future generations. Acclaimed director Ken Loach made the recently formed Socialist Alliance's first ever PEB. It featured assorted spokespeople putting the Alliance case. Loach's former colleague Ricky Tomlinson appeared alongside Arthur Scargill in their film for the rival left-wing Socialist Labour Party. Famous for his portrayal of Jim in the BBC's Royle Family comedy, the actor said his stance had led to the withdrawal of an invite to make a keynote vote of thanks to his former producer Phil Redmond at the British Soap Awards. Not that politics appeared to be the problem: Tomlinson's replacement turned out to be fellow Liverpudlian Cherie Booth.

Despite some hype and comment this was not really the first 'e-election'.<sup>14</sup> Parties did have websites of varying quality but an Industrial Society survey suggested as few as 2% of Internet users went on-line for campaign related information.<sup>15</sup> Several million visits or 'hits' were, however, registered on election related sites set up by entrepreneurial web designers. Visitors were able to play games such as 'Election Invaders' and 'Splat the MP'. Radio 1's site even enabled you to get the noted beer connoisseur William Hague drunk. The other BBC sites were amongst the most visited during the campaign. These did particularly well on election results night.

After a sustained traditional media advertising campaign the Guardian Unlimited site received over a million visits. Similarly the less successful Tacticalvoter.net site relied on press and television exposure to mobilise its potential constituency of strategic defectors. Newer technologies such as mobile phones were also used in attempts to cultivate younger voters. Labour, for instance, text messaged potential supporters with slogans such as 'R U up 4 it?' These voters' parents were the targets of other tactics including voter videos featuring actor Tony Robinson and a women's magazine, Your Family, which used assorted celebrities to promote government achievements. The major parties also did a considerable amount of telephone canvassing in an attempt to mobilise their core and potential supporters.

### ***Conclusion.***

Like the results, the media's role in the 2001 general election was broadly similar to that it played in 1997. Many journalists and voters once again complained of boredom with the campaign. The most surprising thing, besides the Deputy Prime Minister punching a voter, was the low turnout. This trend was reflected in the apparent audience desertion of election coverage across all media. The public service broadcasters will, in particular, be keen to reassess their approach in the apparent growth in public disaffection with the democratic process. Commercially owned newspapers may opt to further downgrade their coverage to suit their marketing strategy.

The continuity with the 1997 general election is perhaps most striking in relation to the generally neutral or supportive newspaper treatment of Labour. Nevertheless it should be noted that whilst many of these newspapers were highly conditional in supporting the party they did appear more enthusiastic about Tony Blair. There were even some new members of the so-called 'Tony' press. Once staunchly Conservative, the Express titles' decision to support Labour in 2001 is symbolic of the changed

mediated political culture. Here a party that had been in office for 4 years received less criticism than in previous campaigns when it had been the official opposition for some time. The majority of newspapers appear to want to back the winner. This of course may be to do with following their readerships but, as proprietors like Rupert Murdoch show, it is also about organisational rather than wider political concerns. When politicians change their opinion journalists often interpret this as a sign of weakness; when newspapers do the same it is an indication of their virtue.



Table One: *Top 10 Issues in the News* (figures as % of selected media coverage).

2001		1997	
Election process	39.4	Conduct of the campaign	31.6
Europe	8.7	Europe	15.3
Health	5.8	Sleaze	9.5
Politicians' conduct	5.6	Education	6.6
Taxation	5.5	Taxation	6.2
Crime	4.3	Constitution	5.0
Education	4.3	Economy	3.8
Public Services	3.5	Health	2.5
Social Security	3.2	Social Security	2.2
Economy	2.9	Northern Ireland	2.1
Other	16.8	Other	15.2

Source: Loughborough University Communications Research Centre.<sup>16</sup>

Table Two: *Newspapers' political allegiances and circulations* (figures in millions).<sup>17</sup>

Dailies	2001		1997	
<i>Sun</i>	Labour	3.45	Labour	3.84
<i>Mirror/Record</i>	Labour	2.79	Labour	3.08
<i>Daily Star</i>	Labour	0.60	Labour	0.73
<i>Daily Mail</i>	Anti-Labour	2.40	Conservative	2.15
<i>Express</i>	Labour	0.96	Conservative	1.22
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	Conservative	1.02	Conservative	1.13
<i>Guardian</i>	Labour	0.40	Labour	0.40
<i>The Times</i>	Labour	0.71	Eurosceptic	0.72
<i>Independent</i>	Anti-Conservative	0.23	None	0.25
<i>Financial Times</i>	Labour	0.49	Labour	0.31
Sundays				
<i>News of the World</i>	Labour	3.90	Conservative	4.37
<i>Sunday Mirror</i>	Labour	1.87	Labour	2.24
<i>People</i>	Labour	1.37	Labour	1.98
<i>Mail on Sunday</i>	Conservative	2.33	Conservative	2.11
<i>Sunday Express</i>	Labour	0.90	Conservative	1.16
<i>Sunday Times</i>	Labour	1.37	Conservative	1.31
<i>Sunday Telegraph</i>	Conservative	0.79	Conservative	0.91
<i>Observer</i>	Labour	0.45	Labour	0.45
<i>Independent on Sunday</i>	Various	0.25	None	0.28

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulation.

Table Three: *Daily Circulation by Partisanship* (figures in millions)

	2001	1997
Total	13.05	13.83
Supporting		
Conservative	1.02 (7.8%)	4.5 (32.5%)
Supporting		
Labour	9.4 (72.0%)	8.38 (60.5 %)
Supporting		
Liberal Democrat	0	0
Anti-Labour	2.4 (18.4%)	0
Anti-Conservative	0.23 (1.8%)	0
Eurosceptic	0	0.72 (5.2%)
Non-aligned	0	0.39 (2.7%)

Source: calculations based on figures in Table Two.<sup>18</sup>

Table Four: *Partisanship of newspaper readers* (figures in %; 1997 equivalents in brackets).

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Swing (Lab to Cons)
RESULT	33(31)	42(44)	19(17)	2
<i>The Sun</i>	29(30)	52(52)	11(12)	-0.5
<i>Mirror</i>	11(14)	71 (72)	13(11)	-1
<i>Daily Star</i>	21(17)	56(66)	17(12)	7
<i>Daily Mail</i>	55(49)	24(29)	17(14)	5.5
<i>Daily Express</i>	43(49)	33(29)	19(16)	-5
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	65(57)	16(20)	14(17)	6
<i>Guardian</i>	6(8)	52(67)	34(22)	13.5(to LibDems)
<i>Independent</i>	12(16)	38(47)	44(30)	11.5(to LibDems)
<i>The Times</i>	40(42)	28(28)	26(25)	-1
<i>Financial Times</i>	48(48)	30(29)	21(19)	-0.5

Source: MORI.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to David Deacon and other colleagues in the Loughborough University Communications Centre for their thoughts on this and other issues discussed in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> P. Norris et al., *On Message: Communicating the Campaign* (London: Sage, 1999); K. Newton and M. Brynin, 'The National Press and Party Voting in the UK', *Political Studies*, 49 (2001): 265-85.

<sup>3</sup> B. McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Comment made on BBC Radio 4's Broadcasting House, 13 May 2001.

<sup>5</sup> W. Miller, *Media and Voters* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991).

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<sup>6</sup> B. Franklin, *Packaging Politics* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994); N. Jones, *Soundbites and Spin Doctors* (London: Cassell, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> B. Franklin, *Tough on Soundbites, Tough on the Causes of Soundbites: New Labour and news management* (London: Catalyst Trust, 1998); N. Jones, *Sultans of Spin* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1999); S. Barnett and I. Gaber, *Westminster Tales- the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Crisis in Political Journalism* (London: Continuum, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> A. Marr, 'The Retreat of the Spin Doctors', *British Journalism Review* (2001), 12:2, 6-12.

<sup>9</sup> D. Deacon, P. Golding and M. Billig, 'Press and Broadcasting: "Real Issues" and Real Coverage in the 2001 Campaign', in P. Norris (ed) *Parliamentary Affairs* General Election Special Issue (2001).

<sup>10</sup> P. Golding and D. Deacon, 'An election that many watched but few enjoyed', *The Guardian*, 12 June 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Miller, Media and Voters; M. Linton, 'Was it the Sun wot won it?', Seventh Guardian Lecture, Nuffield College, 30 October 1995.

<sup>12</sup> The new rules on spending are being overseen and enforced by the recently established Electoral Commission.

<sup>13</sup> K. Hall Jamieson, *Dirty Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> R. Gibson, S. Ward and J. Crookes, 'Was this the first e-election? Yes and no', *Fabian Review* (2001), Summer.

<sup>15</sup> The Industrial Society, Whatever Happened to the E-Lecture 1 June 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Loughborough University Communications Research Centre analysed over three thousands items from the newspapers listed in Table Four plus *The Scotsman* and *Daily Record*, Today (8-9am) on BBC Radio 4 and the five terrestrial television stations' main evening news bulletins. See P. Golding and D. Deacon, 'An election that many watched but few enjoyed'. Note for coding purposes some of the categories for 1997 and 2001 have changed but there are obvious overlaps between, for instance, 'Election Process' and 'Conduct of the Campaign'.

<sup>17</sup> Allegiance is determined by the newspapers' editorial declaration for a particular party.

<sup>18</sup> It should be remembered that readerships are often two to three times the size of circulations.

<sup>19</sup> I am grateful to Ben Marshall of MORI's Social Research Institute for these figures.