

# Britain's First Live Televised Party Leaders' Debate: From the News Cycle to the Political Information Cycle<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Britain's first ever live, televised, party leaders' debate took place on 15 April 2010, during one of the most intriguing and closely fought general election campaigns in living memory. Arguably the most important single development in the media's treatment of politics since the arrival of television during the 1959 campaign, the leaders' debate and its aftermath provide a unique window on the political communication environment of contemporary Britain. This article focuses on the surrounding processes of mediation before, during and after the event, particularly the interactions between broadcasting, press and online media, including citizen opinion expressed and coordinated through online social network sites. A narrative reconstruction of journalists', political parties' and online activists' behaviour raises the question of whether traditional understandings of the 'news cycle' should now be replaced by a broader concern with what I term 'political information cycles': assemblages of personnel, practices, genres and temporalities in which supposedly 'new' online media are increasingly integrated with supposedly 'old' broadcast and press media.

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BRITAIN'S FIRST EVER LIVE, televised, party leaders' debate took place on 15 April 2010, during one of the most intriguing and closely fought general election campaigns in living memory. Arguably the most important single development in the British media's treatment of politics since the arrival of television during the 1959 campaign, the leaders' debate and its aftermath provide a unique window on the political communication environment of contemporary Britain. The debate—the first of three, though none of the others had its dramatic impact—altered the course of the campaign, propelling the Liberal Democrat party leader, Nick Clegg, into the media spotlight as his party rose in the opinion polls immediately following a 'winning' performance, albeit one that did not directly translate into electoral gains on polling day. This article focuses, not on the debate's influence on the Liberal Democrats' electoral performance, but on the processes of mediation before, during and after the event—the interactions between broadcasting, press and online media, including citizen opinion expressed and coordinated through online social network sites.

A narrative reconstruction of journalists', political parties' and online activists' behaviour surrounding the 15 April debate raises the question of whether traditional understandings of the 'news cycle' should now be replaced by a broader concern with what I term 'political information cycles'. This analysis suggests that political information cycles possess certain features that distinguish them from 'news cycles'. They are assemblages in which the personnel, practices, genres and temporalities of supposedly 'new' online media are increasingly integrated with those of supposedly 'old' broadcast and press media.<sup>2</sup> They are set to become the systemic norm for the mediation of high-profile political events in Britain.

### *The news cycle*

'News cycle' has become a widely used term, but it is surprisingly underwritten, both conceptually and empirically. In its original sense it simply meant the predictable daily period between the latest and the next issue of a newspaper: a time for gathering, writing, editing, compiling, selecting and presenting new material or new developments related to recent coverage. Much of the influential early work on the sociology of news production implicitly or explicitly describes cyclical routines in press and broadcast media environments.<sup>3</sup>

Over the last two decades, the rise of 'rolling' broadcast coverage and the internet have generated much discussion of the so-called '24-hour news cycle'. Once-new tools—satellites, email, digital content management systems—are said to have led to the compression of news time, and the thought of a single, daily news cycle now seems almost as quaint as linotype. Some authors have used this as the basis of (largely critical) books,<sup>4</sup> but it is more common to see the '24-hour' prefix briefly mentioned as shorthand for the harmful effects of the increasingly restrictive time constraints on the production of news, such as the duplication or 'churning' of other outlets' content or public relations (PR) releases, in a process that leads to 'content homogeneity' and poorly sourced stories.<sup>5</sup>

Important subplots in this drama include the growing strategic awareness among politicians that intervening at certain stages in the gathering and production of news is more likely to produce their desired outcomes<sup>6</sup> and a growing recognition of the interpenetration of political and journalistic elite practice, dictated to a large extent by the temporal demands of radio and television.<sup>7</sup> In addition, more recently a small group of US scholars has begun to focus on what the relationship between 'new' and 'old' media actors entails for traditional models of agenda setting. For instance, Davis presents a series of case studies of professional journalists and 'A-list' bloggers that illuminates the opportunities but also the constraints experienced by both groups.<sup>8</sup> Messner and DiStaso analyse the content of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the 120 most popular US blogs, and find some

evidence of ‘intermedia agenda setting’: in other words, bloggers source from newspapers and journalists source from bloggers.<sup>9</sup>

Yet irrespective of the approach, those who have explored the news cycle have hitherto been united by the common assumption that the construction of political news is predominantly a tightly controlled game involving the interactions and interventions of elites: politicians, officials, communications staff, journalists and now elite bloggers.<sup>10</sup> While these elite-driven aspects of political communication are still very much alive and well in contemporary Britain, this study of the mediated construction of the televised leaders’ debates presents a different interpretation—one that suggests the need to revise some traditional assumptions about how power and influence work in the construction of political news. The overall aim is to draw attention to the ongoing interactions between old and new media actors, how these interactions shape important news events over the periods of time that come before and after an event itself, and how framings and interpretations are created, and later reinforced or contested, in intra-elite and/or elite-activist news-making assemblages.

### *Integrating and pre-empting real time*

Stage one of the political information cycle began long before the debate itself and was based on the integration and pre-emption of potential real-time responses through specific decisions about format and timing. The terms of engagement for Britain’s party leaders’ debates emerged during the early part of 2010, after more than 70 individual rules had been hammered out in numerous meetings involving party strategists, journalists and television producers. These rules were left largely unmentioned during the first debate but were prominently displayed on the integrated ITV leaders’ debate website.<sup>11</sup> The agreed format required that questions were not presented to candidates in advance of the debate, that audience members would not applaud, shout or heckle, that programme producers would not use cutaway shots explicitly focusing on the audience’s reaction to statements and that the debate moderator would not introduce material outside of the scope of the audience’s questions. There was even some ambiguity around whether the audience was to be allowed to laugh at jokes; they did, with much reserve, betraying a sense of uncertainty.

It is clear that British broadcasters paid close attention to the format and tone of American presidential candidate debates. The studio format was eerily familiar. The three candidates stood side-by-side behind lecterns and faced the presenter and a small, handpicked, studio audience at ITV’s Granada television studios in Manchester. The candidates gave tightly scripted one-minute opening and closing statements, then responded to a range of questions from the audience. This was followed by periods of varying length, during which the leaders directly engaged with one another. The first half of each debate was assigned a

specific policy theme: home affairs, international affairs and the economy. These rules became the subject of media coverage, when, the day before the first debate, Conservative leader David Cameron stated in a BBC television interview that he was concerned that the format might prove sterile and that the public might be 'short changed' by the experience. This move was quickly condemned by the other parties on the grounds that the Cameron team had already agreed to the rules, but this episode reveals the extent to which the design of the format was politicised.<sup>12</sup> The rules also became the subject of 700 complaints to the British broadcasting regulator, OFCOM.<sup>13</sup>

As occurs in the USA, broadcast media and the press heavily trailed the television debates during the opening stages of the campaign. There were repeated mentions of the 'historic' nature of television's role in informing public opinion. Douglas Alexander, the Labour Party's election campaign manager, had predicted that the debates would cast a long shadow over the election media coverage, possibly absorbing as many as nine campaigning days—three days for each debate.<sup>14</sup> This proved a conservative estimate. The media trailers began many weeks before the official start of the campaign (6 April) and coverage ratcheted up during the first week of the campaign proper, culminating in two days of preview features on television and in the press. The entire week following the first debate was heavily shaped by media reaction to those first 90 minutes in Manchester and this established a pattern for the reporting of the subsequent debates.

Preview features were typically concerned with 'learning lessons' from candidates' triumphs and mistakes in the USA. The historic footage of the famous Kennedy-Nixon debate from 1960 was wheeled out time and again, as was Lloyd Bentsen's famous 'You're no Jack Kennedy' dismissal of Dan Quayle in the 1988 vice presidential debates; the inconvenient truth that Quayle ended up on the winning team was usually forgotten. Television's treatment was dominated by commentary from an assortment of 'body language experts', 'language experts' and opinion polling companies.

The scheduling of the debates had a crucial bearing on their impact, creating the perfect conditions for a powerful cycle of coverage and commentary. All three ran on Thursday evenings, in television's hallowed 8–10 p.m. prime time. This schedule ensured close temporal integration with the rhythms of the British media's regular politics, commentary and opinion cycle, which now reaches a crescendo with the weekend newspapers and the Sunday political television shows. BBC and ITV, the major television news players, run their main nightly news shows at 10 p.m. The scheduling meant that they could guarantee immediate post-debate coverage in these regular bulletins. Thursday evenings have also long been the favoured slot for the influential political discussion show, *Question Time*, which was aired as usual on the BBC soon after each debate. Running the debates on Thursdays thus

jelled with political broadcasting tradition and was part of a bid to maximise the audience. The television audience for the first debate was 9.4 million, though there was speculation beforehand about 15 and even 20 million.<sup>15</sup>

### *Orchestrating real time*

Stage two of the political information cycle is best characterised as the orchestration of real time. It involved the following: instant reaction based on snap, unrepresentative, self-selecting, online polls on ITV's and the main newspapers' websites; small studio panels of citizens operating sentiment dials, which generated real-time reaction 'worm' charts overlaid on top of the live streaming video on the ITV website; the expression of citizen opinion, primarily through the two most popular online social network sites, Twitter and Facebook and minute-by-minute live blogs produced by professional journalists during the event.

ITV's website featured a live video stream of the television coverage, but it also featured a rolling comment facility, provided by the Canadian company, CoveritLive.<sup>16</sup> This allowed members of the public to post messages that appeared underneath the video feed as it happened. The ITV web page also featured a real-time reaction worm laid over the streaming video. This was a dynamically updated line chart depicting the changing negative and positive responses of a small selected panel of 20 undecided voters watching the debate on television, armed with dial boxes in rooms in the nearby marginal constituencies of Bolton North West and Bolton East.<sup>17</sup>

The *Times*, the *Telegraph*, the *Guardian*, the BBC and MSN all carried live blogs, while *Sky News*, *Channel 4 News*, the *Times* and the *Mirror* supplemented their sites with text comments provided by an embedded instant message service, again provided by CoveritLive.<sup>18</sup> A Twitter 'sentiment tracker' provided by the web company Tweetminster funnelled real-time text content analysis of Twitter messages, with hashtags such as #leadersdebate, #ukelection or #ge2010, into the ITV website. Overall, during the 90-minute debate, 211,000 individual Twitter messages were produced, as users structured their commentary and conversations using these shared hashtags. The messages were produced at an average rate of 39 per second, as 47,420 individual Twitter users engaged in real-time discussion.<sup>19</sup> This continued the emergent role played by Twitter and Facebook as backchannels adopted by the politically interested to form ad hoc discursive communities around major television events. Far right British National Party leader Nick Griffin's controversial appearance on the BBC's *Question Time* in October 2009 first brought this practice to the attention of mainstream media and the wider public.<sup>20</sup>

Some journalists, most notably Nick Robinson, the BBC's political editor, pre-empted their post-debate appearances on the 10 p.m.

television news by posting their initial reactions on their blogs and on Twitter.<sup>21</sup> *Channel 4 News's* Krishnan Guru-Murthy, eager to intervene despite the absence of a late night bulletin on Channel 4, joined hundreds of other British journalists in posting real-time commentary on Twitter.<sup>22</sup> As of October 2009, there were more than 500 known UK journalists using the service.<sup>23</sup>

One issue here is how the Twitter audience compared with the television audience. Twitter's design is asymmetrical and some well-known individuals amass huge armies of followers. Many less well known but still important individuals, especially those inside, or on the margins of, the Westminster 'village', have follower lists running into the several thousands. The 47,420 active debate tweeters constituted just half a per cent of the total television audience of 9.4 million. But the important number here is the combined amount of *followers* these 47,420 active tweeters had—in other words, the number of people who were potentially exposed to commentary on the debates. Note 'potentially': we have no means of verifying actual exposure in this case. Unfortunately, these data on follower counts are impossible to obtain, so consider a hypothetical illustration based on a mixture of conservative assumptions and what we already know from large-scale studies of message propagation on Twitter in its entirety.<sup>24</sup> Labour's Alistair Campbell has 44,000 followers; the comedian Chris Addison has 24,000; *Channel 4 News's* Krishnan Guru-Murthy has 27,000. All three were active tweeters during the leaders' debates. Granted, these are celebrities and we know that Twitter as a whole has a long tail of users with relatively few followers; in June 2009, the company itself revealed that the average number of followers per user is 126.<sup>25</sup> There are also important unknowables, particularly the amount of mutual following inside the network of 47,420 active debate tweeters, and the extent to which individuals outside the active network followed multiple individuals inside it. Bearing these caveats in mind, let us somewhat artificially but conservatively assume that each of the 47,420 active debate tweeters had an average of just 50 'unique' followers. This produces a potentially exposed audience of 2.4 million individuals. Then there is further propagation of content, either through Twitter's retweet feature or selective repetition of others' messages, through which the followers-of-followers are also potentially exposed. The basic statistic that 47,420 Twitter users tweeted about the debate therefore only tells part of the story, which is that, due to its design, Twitter can quickly scale in ways that expose surprisingly large potential audiences to messages.

The main parties were eager to selectively present their own participants in these social media backchannels in order to create excitement and engagement through a sense of liveness, but also to attempt to influence broadcasters' coverage. For example, Labour featured three live Twitter feeds on its home page, from 'politicians', bloggers' and

‘Labour on Twitter’.<sup>26</sup> These were hand picked and highly sympathetic to Labour. The Conservatives’ site featured CoverItLive’s real-time text commenting facility.<sup>27</sup>

*ITV News*’s and *Sky News*’s home page featured a Facebook Connect widget which pulled in comments in real time from Facebook’s Democracy UK page.<sup>28</sup> The *Guardian*’s website had a live feed, featuring constantly updated messages from its own journalists on Twitter, an online poll and a crude ‘sentiment tracker’, which relied upon individuals to click plus or minus buttons for each of the three parties as they watched the debate.<sup>29</sup> At least this had the virtue of transparency, unlike the several Twitter sentiment trackers whose text mining algorithms were left unpublished. This is a development which should signal the huge accountability and transparency problems if, as seems certain, such devices are to become a permanent feature of campaign coverage across the advanced democracies. The *Guardian* tracker poll was deeply flawed in that it was reportedly manipulated through automated page loading by staff in the Liberal Democrats’ central office. Their IP addresses were banned by the *Guardian*’s online editor, Janine Gibson, once the activity was discovered.<sup>30</sup>

*Sky News* could not resist starting to ‘analyse’ the performances before the debate had actually ended. Having arranged an instant text messaging real-time tracker poll of 1608 viewers, run by Fizzback, a ‘real-time survey company’, the channel was able to use interim results to declare Cameron the ‘winner’ just a third of the way into the 90-minute show. Fizzback provided two sets of interim results—at 30 and 60 minutes. The 30-minute results page remained on *Sky News*’s main webpage until later that night, when the full results emerged, revealing Clegg as the winner by a large margin. The company used instant text message polls of selected samples from what the *Sky News* website claimed was a panel of 10,000 individuals; it also tracked real-time responses to specific policy issues on a scale from -10 to +10, again by text message.<sup>31</sup> Earlier, *Sky News*’s press release had stated that Fizzback’s panel would consist of ‘more than 6000 voters’ and that it would be ‘pre-selected to represent the demographics of the whole of the UK’ while ‘rigorous quota sampling and weighting of the results will be overseen by Futuresight [another market research company] to ensure the results are robust.’ The precise nature of the sampling and method were not published, though mention was made of ‘The unique Fizzback Artificial Intelligence Engine’.<sup>32</sup>

It seems clear that broadcasters and the established press tried to construct a particular role for new media. Facebook and smaller, niche organisations such as CoverItLive and Tweetminster were integrated into the production in ways that were perceived to add value to the television viewer’s experience. They were there to do the things that television itself was ill-equipped to do: real-time crunching of huge volumes of online social network data, sentiment analysis and the

attention-grabbing visualisation of results. This creates a qualitatively different sense of 'liveness' around an event, one that does not rely upon traditional political broadcasting and press genres, which, in this context—live blogging aside—were staid and familiar. A similar symbolic liveness has previously been observed in interactive 'reality' and comedy entertainment formats.<sup>33</sup> As Couldry argues, liveness is often now a 'cross-media construction'.<sup>34</sup> Online media's role in the televisual aspects of the leaders' debate largely rested upon technological expertise and a wilfully 'geeky' attention to the flow of vast amounts of data. The ITV web page epitomised this integration, with its live video feed direct from the television studio situated alongside the various internet widgets tracking data from the social network sites. ITV news presenter, Alistair Stewart, explicitly drew attention to the website's affordances at the start of the debate, when he asked viewers not only to follow along on television, but to 'join in' on the website.<sup>35</sup>

The problem here, though, is that this broader strategy of integration sometimes blunted digital media's affordances for transparently encompassing a wider range of expression in the event's immediate framing. The digital players ended up tailoring their offerings in ways that closely fitted with the broadcasters' and newspaper editors' requirements. There was little transparency around the precise methods involved in real-time sentiment analysis of online text, which is far from an exact science, but these data were too often presented as social facts by the television and newspaper websites, and by the online companies themselves. These real-time digital genres often therefore simply reinforce the long-standing normative problems associated with traditional ritualistic shortcuts to 'public opinion' through opinion polls.<sup>36</sup> They provide a sanitised, symbolic presence for the public<sup>37</sup> in what is essentially an orchestrated, one-to-many, broadcasting environment. That they do so in real-time compounds the problem, because there is even less scope for journalists to explain key issues such as sample size, method, self-selection bias and any number of problems associated with the unpublished algorithms used for data mining.

Nevertheless, broadcasters did use digital media in ways that laid bare some techniques that have been the staple of political communication specialists for decades, but which have usually been hidden from public view. The depiction of the backstage processes is a case in point. In the hours and minutes leading up to the debate, several professional journalists, including Laura Kuenssberg, the BBC's chief political correspondent, posted pictures from their camera phones, capturing something of the character of 'spin alley': a backstage space set aside for the post-debate huddle involving journalists, politicians and the parties' press officers, with its giant screen and rows of desks covered with laptops, smartphones and notebooks.<sup>38</sup> ITV formally held exclusive rights over backstage photographs for the first debate,<sup>39</sup> so depicting

spin alley *during* the debate mostly fell to bloggers, albeit elite ones, such as *Conservative Home*'s Tim Montgomerie, who posted camera phone pictures on Twitter of senior Conservative, Jeremy Hunt, former Liberal Democrat leader, Paddy Ashdown and Labour's Peter Mandelson, briefing journalists before the debate had ended.<sup>40</sup> These semi-illicit photos clearly influenced the mainstream coverage. The *Times* election blog managed to sneak out some photographs the following day<sup>41</sup> and by then television news was running behind-the-scenes material showing the parties' communications teams grouped with numerous journalists. Such coverage became part of the fabric of the remaining two debates.<sup>42</sup>

'Process' and 'meta-coverage' were therefore much in evidence.<sup>43</sup> And yet the implications here are ambiguous. Similar, if less formally organised spaces in which journalists, politicians and communications staff come together to establish a common understanding of a major event like the leader's speech at the annual party conference have been a crucial part of the reporting of major political events in Britain for decades.<sup>44</sup> Yet due to the real-time framing of reaction, spin alley assumed a new significance. The smuggling out of surreptitiously taken camera phone shots by some journalists and bloggers as well as Twitter updates condemning party staff and journalists from getting together before the debate had ended served to expose these machinations to the viewing public, but it was also part of a meta-game: the simultaneously competitive and cooperative interactions between new and old media players.

### *Mobilising real time*

The third stage of the political information cycle involved journalistic commentary, the reporting of a range of further instant opinion polls—this time by established polling companies—and more traditional interviews with representatives of the three main political parties. These took place immediately following the debate. Television journalists ran their post-debate interviews from the backstage news room. This conveyed a sense of the urgency and importance of the media's presence, but these episodes were formal, staged and in a space away from the busiest parts of the room. They provided little genuine sense of the ongoing interactions that were out of shot in spin alley. And they largely featured senior politicians from each main party, whose judgements predictably divided along party lines.

Stage three was strongly framed by discussion of the orchestrated real-time mechanisms of stage two. A good example was ITV's mobilisation of selected excerpts from its 20-person backstage reaction panel, complete with a re-run of the computer-generated graphic of the worm chart the panel had collectively produced for the ITV website during the debate.<sup>45</sup> The BBC featured its own worm poll analysis, provided by Ipsos MORI and based on a sample of 36 'undecided voters from

the Manchester area'.<sup>46</sup> As discussed above, the information generated during stage two was mostly the result of unrepresentative, non-transparent and in some cases easily manipulated instant polls and sentiment trackers. And editorial decisions about which footage to use must, out of necessity, have been taken before the debate actually drew to a close, during the scramble to assemble video packages by the 10 p.m. deadline.

Four 'traditional' instant polls, all using transparent sampling, were published within a few minutes of the end of the debate. These were based on a variety of methods. YouGov/the *Sun* used an online survey of its pre-recruited panel of viewers.<sup>47</sup> ComRes/ITV News used automated phone calls to poll a pre-recruited panel of 4032 members of the public.<sup>48</sup> The *Times*/Populus relied on a pre-recruited online panel from which it sampled 1004 individuals.<sup>49</sup> Angus Reid used an online panel, whose responses were filtered directly and in real-time onto its website—before its poll had actually ended.<sup>50</sup> All of these polls showed Nick Clegg to be the clear winner. Conservative leader David Cameron came second in all but one. Fifteen minutes after the debate drew to a close, ITV's 10 p.m. news revealed the results of its ComRes post-debate poll. The results gave Clegg 43% against Cameron's 26% and Gordon Brown's 20%.<sup>51</sup> This poll went on to play a crucial role in shaping stage four of the political information cycle.

If the real-time information was opaque or flawed, what can be said of these post-debate polls? All were conducted by reputable polling companies who subscribe to the British Polling Council's code of practice. Yet because they are so influential in determining journalists' interpretive frames—perhaps rightly so when the only alternative sources of immediately available information are post-debate interviews with politically slanted personnel from the parties—we need to consider the inevitable compromises that accompany rapid reaction polling. Some of the potential pitfalls are illustrated by the ComRes/ITV poll conducted straight after the third debate on April 29. This had Cameron as the debate winner on 36%, Clegg on 33% and Brown on 26%. But the voting intention profile of this poll's sample was not representative, at least not if judged in the context of other polls conducted around the same time: 36% of respondents were Liberal Democrat supporters, 35% were Conservative supporters and just 24% preferred Labour.<sup>52</sup> If we assume that supporters of a particular party are more likely to have favourable attitudes towards its leader's performance in a televised debate, the profile of a poll sample becomes an important variable in shaping its outcome. In this case, the results inflated Clegg's rating. Although the internet has enabled polling companies to publish their methods for all to read, in the scramble to present the results, journalists and presenters only very rarely highlight these methods.

### *Augmenting real time*

Stage four of the cycle consisted of more detailed post-debate analysis and commentary taken up by news broadcasters and the press. First up was the BBC's flagship long-form public affairs show, *Newsnight*. An hour after the debate it featured a blow-by-blow dissection by the news anchor and two journalists, an expert round table including former party communication advisers, and a session with a now-obligatory 'body language expert' and *Times* restaurant and television reviewer, A. A. Gill.<sup>53</sup> By this point, the major newspaper editors were making decisions on the front pages of the following day's print editions and their websites were updated with analysis of the debate. The overwhelming majority of the next day's papers, including the Conservative-supporting outlets, contained coverage of the Clegg 'surge'.<sup>54</sup>

For broadcasters, the debate's influence on routine news values was immediate. The morning after the debate, as the print editions of the papers were absorbed, the major agenda setters—BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, BBC Five Live and the ITV and BBC television breakfast television shows—were saturated with commentary. The *Today* programme's morning prime time slot, just after the 8 a.m. news bulletin, was devoted to a feature based around Frank Luntz, an American opinion pollster and political consultant long favoured as a BBC pundit.<sup>55</sup> The night before, Luntz had run his own 32-person reaction-dial focus group for the *Sun*, complete with its own real-time worm chart. The *Sun* filmed Luntz and the panel at work and prominently displayed an edited video clip on their website the next day. Luntz's and his panel's verdicts were unequivocal: Nick Clegg was the winner, by a large margin.<sup>56</sup>

Friday's daytime and evening broadcast news bulletins were accompanied by continuing online discussion on the most popular political blogs—Iain Dale, *Guido Fawkes*, *Conservative Home*, *Labourlist*, *Left Foot Forward* and *Liberal Democrat Voice*.<sup>57</sup> By now, YouTube featured several hundred edited video clips uploaded by the news organisations, the parties and members of the public.<sup>58</sup> Twitter users continued to label their messages with the #leadersdebate, #ge2010, #ge10 and #ukelection hashtags.<sup>59</sup> This continued throughout the remainder of the campaign, and took an interesting twist, as we shall see below.

By Friday evening, BBC, ITV and Channel 4 news all led on a different story—the closure of UK airports due to an ash cloud caused by a volcanic eruption in Iceland. But Nick Clegg's victory came a close second. In-depth reporting on Friday evening included *Channel 4 News*'s FactCheck feature, which covered exaggerated claims concerning the wastefulness of local police forces made by David Cameron during the debate. As has become the norm, the FactCheck team of

reporters used Twitter throughout the day to post teasers and interact with potential audience members about the content of their evening bulletin.<sup>60</sup> Friday evening's coverage also saw the first instalment of an extraordinary mini-series on Channel 4's 7 p.m. news show. Entitled 'Britain's Next Boss', this featured a studio audience and three expert guests: 'entrepreneur James Caan, comedienne and now leadership consultant, Ruby Wax and business psychologist Dr Adrian Atkinson.' As presenter Krishnan Guru-Murthy explained: 'Who's got the personality to lead this country, the character to deal with a crisis? On Britain's next boss we'll put the three main party leaders under the microscope ... This show is a policy-free zone, because some of the biggest tests of a prime minister are on things never mentioned in manifestos.' The expert panel began with commentary on sound- and image-bite excerpts of the previous night's leaders' debate.

The remainder of stage four stretched across the weekend into Monday and in turn went on to frame the build-up to the second debate which came during the third week of the campaign. Friday's commentary and analysis fed into the weekend newspaper journalists' copy deadlines and editors' final decisions on the contents and layout of the weekend print editions. Sunday newspapers feature the heavy-weight commentary and columnist content in British political news. Yet 'the Sundays' are now essentially published well in advance as online editions are released to the web throughout Saturday evenings. As a result, the Sundays now play an increasingly important role in defining the news agenda for the equally influential Sunday morning political television shows, particularly the BBC's 9 a.m. Andrew Marr show, but also Adam Boulton's 11 a.m. show on *Sky News*, and the BBC's midday *Politics Show*. These shows shovelled up the fallout from Thursday evening's debate and used it as a means of emphasising the importance of the second debate, scheduled for four days later. Once again, the dominant frame was Clegg's remarkable performance in the televised debate.

### *Contesting real time*

Following a weekend of remarkably positive broadcast and press coverage from newspapers across the entire political spectrum, the Liberal Democrats started the third week of the campaign with a huge boost in the (traditionally conducted) opinion polls. Some polls placed them on an almost equal footing with the Conservatives; in most, Labour were unexpectedly relegated to third place.<sup>61</sup> The *Sun* carried Clegg's victory on its Monday morning front page.<sup>62</sup> Suddenly, the election had become a genuine three-party contest and this unleashed much soul-searching commentary among the press, especially the pro-Conservative papers such as the *Daily Mail*, the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*. Broadcast journalists, too, began to exercise much greater scrutiny over the Liberal Democrats' policy platform. This was

palpable in the BBC's major news shows, which were now characterised by a 'who is the real Nick Clegg?' frame.<sup>63</sup>

It was primarily television that played the predominant role in the Liberal Democrats' surge by raising public awareness of Clegg's approach as leader and of the Liberal Democrats as a party. Yet there were early signs that the internet was playing some role. The Liberal Democrats became the first UK party to have a Facebook group—albeit an unofficial one—to recruit a higher number of members than the dues-paying membership of the party itself. The group, 'We got Rage Against the Machine to #1, We Can Get the Lib Dems Into Office!' was founded on 13 April by a young Liberal Democrat activist, Ben Stockman.<sup>64</sup> Taking its name from the successful online charity campaign to prevent the winners of 2009's *X-Factor* talent show from reaching the number one slot in the music charts, it grew rapidly to more than 100,000 members by the Monday (19 April) following the first debate. This placed it way ahead of the other party political Facebook groups and fan pages, official or otherwise, and the group went on to reach 165,000 members by polling day. Some of the post-debate polls seemed to reveal that the party picked up significant new support from voters under the age of 35.<sup>65</sup> Clegg presented himself as a 'fresh' alternative to what he continually described as the 'old parties' and this was based upon a narrative of what he termed 'real change'. The 'We Can Get the Lib Dems into Office' Facebook group was evidence of this 'outsider' appeal. Weakly aligned voters, especially the young to middle-aged, educated, middle-class citizens that dominate online politics, were possibly looking for something resembling a movement for reform. A hung parliament was the prize, leading to electoral reform as a condition of supporting a minority administration.

The increase in support for the Liberal Democrats greatly unsettled the Conservative-supporting press, who were now torn between reflecting the rise of Clegg—clearly a major political story with a popular grassroots narrative—or turning their fire on the Liberal Democrats. This tension was resolved in a couple of days. Once it became clear that 'Cleggmania' was not likely to falter in the short term, the right-wing press turned, producing torrents of critical coverage in the run up to the second debate.

The *Daily Mail* ran an extraordinary series of stories on Clegg. One suggested that the Liberal Democrats' leader had uttered a 'Nazi slur' on Britain in 2002 when he had suggested that victory in the second world war had made it more difficult for the British to accept that other European countries enjoyed greater prosperity.<sup>66</sup> The piece remarked that Clegg 'has a Spanish wife, a Dutch mother and a Russian grandparent, [and] began his career as a Brussels bureaucrat and moved to Westminster after a spell as a Euro MP.' The 'debate' section of the *Mail's* site was dominated by articles on the Liberal Democrats and Clegg, from 'Dirty Tricks of the REAL Nasty Party'<sup>67</sup>

to 'How the LibDems Would Release 60,000 Convicts'<sup>68</sup> and 'The LibDems are a Party Full of Shadow Lobbyists'.<sup>69</sup>

The night before the second televised leaders' debate, the *Telegraph* announced on its website that its debate-day front page would feature what it framed as an investigative scoop: a report that Clegg, before he had become party leader, had received party donations from three businessmen directly into his personal bank account.<sup>70</sup> The *Telegraph* had trawled through the archive of documents it had bought in order to run its months-long series of exposés on MPs' expenses in mid-2009. Clegg was given a chance to respond to the story before the *Telegraph* published. He issued a holding statement saying that he had used the money to pay for a member of staff and that these donations were reported in the parliamentary register of members' interests. The *Telegraph's* article was quickly circulated via the *Conservative Home* website and on Twitter. It was also picked up within minutes by BBC *Newsnight's* political correspondent, Michael Crick, who, in a taste of what was to follow, hinted that it was an unremarkable revelation.<sup>71</sup>

But during the morning of the second debate there unfolded an extraordinary series of events. As news of the *Telegraph's* 'scoop' reverberated through media and online networks, it became obvious that a large proportion of journalists—on both the right and the left—were becoming sceptical of the *Telegraph's* front-page story. By mid-morning, a satirical online flash campaign had emerged on Twitter which reflected and further reinforced this scepticism. Tens of thousands of users sardonically added the hashtag '#nickcleggsfault' to their status updates. These messages ranged from political observations to ludicrous statements such as 'We've run out of houmous #nickcleggsfault', 'Lunch meeting was cancelled at the last minute. So obviously #nickcleggsfault', 'Have hairy toes, #nickcleggsfault'.<sup>72</sup> By the middle of the day this had become the third most popular shared hashtag, not just among the 7.5 million Twitter users in the UK, but the entirety of its 105 million registered global users.

Suddenly, through the combination of elite and non-elite scepticism, the *Telegraph* was thrown on the defensive. Sensing that the Clegg donations story was not being as well-received as he had perhaps hoped, the paper's deputy editor, Benedict Brogan, took the unusual step of issuing a defence on its political blog. By that stage, however, the BBC's Radio Four presenter, Evan Davis, had posted on Twitter: 'Extraordinary. Twitter parodies undercut media attacks on Clegg (#nickcleggsfault). Telegraph ends up defending itself'.<sup>73</sup> Later that afternoon, the BBC's digital election correspondent, Rory Cellan-Jones, published a blog post about the #nickcleggsfault meme, adding further fuel to the Twitter campaign.<sup>74</sup>

Later that evening, just before he walked on stage in Bristol for the second leader's debate, Clegg produced bank statements proving that there had been no financial wrongdoing. The *Telegraph's* intervention was fading fast. The publication of Clegg's financial records was the

most important direct factor in blunting the story's impact and keeping it off the evening television news, but this came in the context of a growing awareness among elite journalists, spurred in part by the online mobilisation among activists earlier in the day, that the *Telegraph's* story was driven by excessive partisan bias.<sup>75</sup> By this time, the next debate's political information cycle had already begun.

The second and third leaders' debates closely followed the pattern established by the first. Within 15 minutes of the beginning of the second debate, the Liberal Democrats uploaded Clegg's one-minute opening statement to YouTube and posted links to it on Facebook and Twitter.<sup>76</sup> Once again, campaign communications staff and journalists could not resist interacting before the debate had ended, but others were willing to use social media backchannels to reveal this. For example, *Daily Mirror* reporter Kevin Maguire reported that the Conservatives' health press officer Paul Stephenson was 'trying to brief hacks in the Bristol centre while [the] debate's on'.<sup>77</sup> Snap polls and sentiment tracking played an even greater role in the second and third events. *Sky News* dropped Fizzback after the first debate for reasons unknown, but immediately after the second and third debates *Sky* announced the results of its YouGov instant poll, which placed Cameron first, closely followed by Clegg and Brown. Its broadcast interviews were once again constantly framed by this poll. By the time of the second debate, the BBC and *Sky* had joined ITV in foregrounding their own small audience panels with sentiment dials and worm charts.

### *From the news cycle to the political information cycle*

A range of new real-time genres, non-elite interventions and elite-activist interactions are coming to assume a greater role in the shaping of political news in Britain. These news assemblages are heavily dominated by political and journalistic elites, semi-professional bloggers, the PR industry and politically active citizens, but they also involve much greater numbers and a more diverse range of actors than typical news cycles. They include many non-elite participants who engage exclusively online, sometimes in real-time exchanges during an event, but also during subsequent stages of the cycle of news that follows an event, in order to advance or contest news frames.

Broadcasters and the elite press now seek to integrate non-elite actions and information from the online realm into their own production routines and genres, not only to convey the increasingly important online activity taking place, but also to marshal specialised techniques, such as the appealing presentation of behavioural data in real-time, which broadcast media and newspapers are still surprisingly ill-equipped to provide for themselves. Established television and newspaper genres sit cheek by jowl with newer digital genres in a hybrid but integrated flux of 'remediation'.<sup>78</sup>

In some respects these processes duplicate and amplify aspects of broadcast coverage that have long been considered problematic. Most notable in this study is the inauthentic expression of public opinion through snap polls, whose symbolic value to news media is always likely to prove attractive in a mixed media reporting environment with pressures to create ever greater amounts of 'fresh' content. While it needs to be borne in mind that Nick Clegg was the major beneficiary of the first debate's instant polls, and what turned out to be the Clegg 'bubble' was, in part, created by this real-time frame, the potential for news outlet bias to colour the design and reporting of what seem on the surface to be 'neutral', technologically driven devices for monitoring public opinion could become of greater concern in future leaders' debates, when there are less obviously consensual outcomes than Clegg's win.<sup>79</sup>

An important outcome of this assemblage of personnel, practices, genres and temporalities are interpretive frames that are strongly determined by repertoires of real-time coverage that are orchestrated during and immediately after an event. But political information cycles are not simply about an acceleration of pace: they are characterised by more complex temporal structures, and the idea of a '24-hour news cycle' does not quite capture their multiplicity. As this study reveals, commentary was orchestrated, produced, co-produced, packaged and consumed in real time during the event, but it was also integrated into later stages of the political information cycle. Real-time news was mobilised and augmented and eventually became the subject of contestation between the right-wing press and left of centre online activists.

Political information cycles contain pockets of engagement that may momentarily bring greater numbers of players into news-making assemblages. Intra-elite competition is a dominant feature of this environment and the non-elite actors in this study were mostly, though not exclusively, motivated and strategically oriented political activists—or those with at least an interest in following politics—whose behaviour suggests an awareness that carefully timed interactions with elite politicians and professional journalists will occasionally be able to play a role in shaping the news. At the same time, however, we should not lose sight of the fact that ordinary citizens, operating away from the elite political-media nexus, can, on occasion, affect the meaning and flow of news.

This interpretation presents a challenge to 'content homogeneity', one of the main strands of the critique of digital news media.<sup>80</sup> Overlap and duplication has come to be a defining characteristic of the contemporary news environment and there is little evidence that the political information cycle surrounding Britain's first leaders' debate was an exception to this trend. But there is an important distinction to be made between homogeneity of content across *outlets* and homogeneity across *platforms*. Few would dispute that homogeneity of content across outlets is a threat to pluralist understandings of media and politics. But in an increasingly fragmented media environment, in which growing segments of the audience are turning away from traditional platforms, particularly the printed

press, should we be so quick to denigrate content duplication across platforms? Political information cycles are partly dependent upon cross-platform iteration and recursion. These processes increase the likelihood that multiple, fragmented audiences will be exposed to political content and they arguably loosen the grip of journalistic and political elites by creating opportunity structures with greater scope for timely intervention by citizen activists. Homogeneity across platforms can thus fashion a form of unifying ‘publicness’ that has long been presented as withered due to media fragmentation. It should also be borne in mind that the creative practices of online mark-up culture, including editing, remixing and satirical commentary, by both elites and non-elites, are important features of the political information cycle.

### *Conclusion*

This analysis of Britain’s first ever live, televised, party leaders’ debate shows that competition and conflict, but also interdependence among broadcasters, the press and digital media actors—the latter including some online activists organised in informal social network environments—are now growing forces in the mediation of political life. The selective real-time coverage of early stages of the political information cycle, and the occasional integration of greater numbers of non-elite actors in the construction and contestation of news at multiple points in the cycle’s lifespan, are emerging systemic norms in the mediation of high-profile political events in Britain.

To finish on a broader point, the 2010 election leaders’ debates were an opportunity for British broadcasters to deal a blow to their traditional competitors in the press, but they were also widely framed as a means of exposing the deficiencies of new media, in order to force home television’s advantage as the principal medium of political communication for the British public, a status it undoubtedly retains. Previews, analysis and commentary concerning the debates dominated news coverage across all media for the entire campaign, leading many to label 2010 a ‘TV election’. This article suggests that while this label is accurate in many respects, it is also partial and therefore misleading. It fails to capture the reality of Britain’s hybrid media system.

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