

**Commodification & Control: News  
media agenda setting during the 2015  
United Kingdom General Election**

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# **Declaration**

I, Amy Patricia Smith, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Amy Patricia Smith

28 March 2018

## **Abstract**

As social media has become ubiquitous, power over news media agenda setting, traditionally reserved by elites, has become less secure. Current research shows how elite actors enact strategies of message control in an attempt to retain this power. This thesis examines the impact of online media on the news media agenda-setting process during the 2015 United Kingdom general election. The original contribution to knowledge offered by my research is the conceptualisation of authenticity of communication on social media within this process and how this relates to role of commodification of citizen-users' content in the process of setting the news media agenda.

I argue that this process elite actors to harness the network power that exists in online social networks. I find that successfully using network power, in conjunction with established inter-elite power relationships, leads to greater success in news media agenda setting process. In order to become part of networked relationships, the actor must appear authentic to other users by meeting required communication standards. I further find that being perceived as inauthentic on social media makes explicit the commodification of citizens' content and actions. This results in the subversion or challenging of elite agendas on social media.

I analyse two case studies of cross-media content production and dissemination; (1) the first leaders' debate of the campaign on 2 April 2015; and (2) the report of a leaked memo on 3 April 2015. I also evaluate power relationships between political and media elites, and their perception of audiences online, using two case studies; (3) BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme; and (4) ITV News' *Election 2015* results programme. The news media agenda setting process in 2015 was marked by a continuation in traditional power structures between elites, but the most successful actors were also able to use network power and to avoid commodification through authentically-perceived actions.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

Agenda-setting is the way in which actors are able to place items on the media agenda in order to influence the public agenda. It is a well-explored area of political communication (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 1997, 2004; Lee, Lancendorfer & Lee, 2005, Tran, 2014). However, the established process, and power relationships within it, face challenges from the affordances of new information communication technologies (ICTs). This is concerning for those political and media actors who have traditionally controlled the agenda. Many empirical studies have focused on the impact of the internet on agenda setting, arguing either that it strengthens (Lee, 2007; Russell, Hendricks, Choi & Stephens, 2015) or weakens the agenda-setting process (Schoenbach, de Waal, and Lauf, 2005). I argue that the pre-existing news media agenda-setting process has changed so that it is more difficult for elites to control<sup>1</sup>. This is not a normatively ‘good’ or ‘bad’ thing, but requires further examination to understand how the process of setting the news media agenda now functions, what constitutes the roles of politicians and journalists, and how power relationships operate between them.

A recent advancement in agenda-setting research has been the development of a third-level of agenda setting, or network-agenda setting (NAS). McCombs (2014: 17-18) writes that:

With the vast expansion of communication channels in recent decades, particularly the continuing proliferation of internet sites and personalized social media, we have entered a new era of agenda-setting research that is seeking answers to three key research questions.

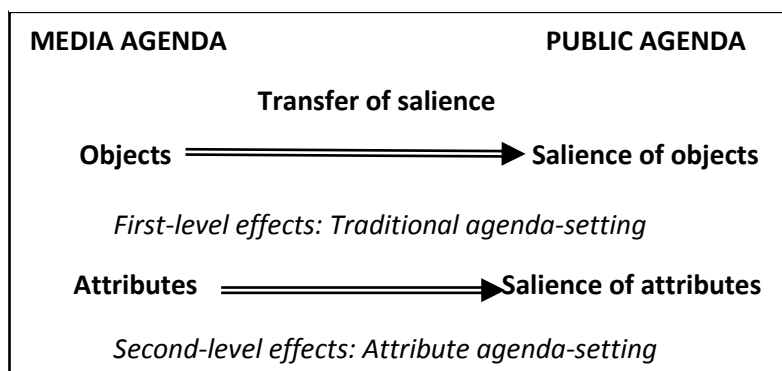
These research questions are: (1) Do internet channels of communication have agenda-setting effects among the public?; (2) Has this proliferation of new channels diminished the agenda-setting impact of the legacy media?; and (3) To what extent are there specific channel effects vs. the collective impact of a communication gestalt? The research agenda of this area of enquiry is

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<sup>1</sup> “Control” refers to the ability of politicians or journalists to set the news media agenda by directing messages on news media platforms, and achieved partly through harnessing network power or directing citizen-users’ content or action on social networking sites.

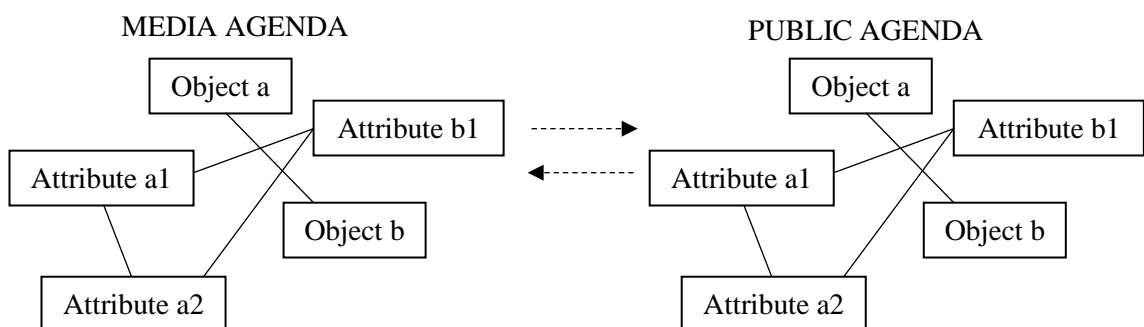
therefore progressing from theorising the first-level of agenda-setting, focussing on hierarchical object salience<sup>2</sup>, and the second-level which analyses hierarchical attribute salience<sup>3</sup>. The third-level of agenda-setting allows us to understand how a network of objects and attributes transfer from the media agenda to the public agenda. Figure 1.1 shows the first- and second- levels of agenda-setting. Figure 1.2 shows the third-level of agenda-setting. This is an important development, but it does not look at the starting point of this process – what actions are taken to try to set the news media agenda, and by whom?

Figure 1.1. The first- and second-levels of agenda-setting



Source: McCombs (2014: 41)

Figure 1.2. The third-level of agenda-setting, the Network Agenda-Setting Model



Source: Guo (2016, 6)

Around half of agenda-setting studies, including the seminal Chapel Hill study (McCombs and Shaw, 1972), focus on election campaigns (Tran, 2014). The impacts of ICTs are

<sup>2</sup> By object salience I refer to the importance of topics and issues as they are ranked on the media agenda or public agenda.

<sup>3</sup> By attribute salience I refer to the importance of characteristics or traits pertaining to objects as they are ranked on the media or public agenda.

particularly evident during an election campaign, when the competition to lead the day's news stories enters an intense, rapid cycle in which many more actors become involved. Some of the uncertainties for political and media elites seeking to promote their agendas in an election campaign period include: how to reach fragmented audiences; how to use newer media tools to achieve traditional campaigning goals such as fundraising; how to control the dissemination of a message; and, pertinently, how to ensure that a certain message or narrative sets the day's campaign agenda.

This dissertation takes a different standpoint from studies which focus only on the impact of one medium or a comparison of two media platforms or organisations. Such an approach creates dichotomies between media platforms which are, in actuality, interdependent. This dissertation uses original empirical evidence to understand the process of contemporary news media agenda-setting by studying political communications across media platforms during an election campaign. The investigation triangulates content and discourse analysis of media texts and citizen-users<sup>4</sup> content with a behavioural understanding gleaned from semi-structured interviews with, and observations of, political and journalistic elites.

This is a study of the process of setting the news media agenda during the 2015 United Kingdom general election campaign. I present an evaluation of how political and media elite actors have responded to the impact of new technologies in order to promote and control their messages in a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013). Significantly, it re-conceptualises relationship structures between political elites, media producers, and citizens as a combination of network and hierarchy. I posit that the way in which power is exercised through these structures can take the form of *commodification of citizen-users' content and action*. I use these findings to describe in detail how political and media elites are able to set the news media agenda.

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<sup>4</sup> Citizen-users are defined as citizens on social and online media who are not elite actors. The term is used where I am specifically discussing the content produced, or actions taken, by citizens on a social media website.

## 1.1 Case selection: Agenda-setting in the 2015 UK general election

Research has shown that during an election campaign citizens get their political news from a wide range of sources. Furthermore, established media organisations and political parties and candidates increasingly have an active online and social media presence that offers new ways to engage with voters. These facts are indicative of the mix of media consumed and produced during election campaigns, as well as during business-as-usual. The British Election Study 2015 found that of 20,043 respondents, 58.2% confirmed that they had read news or information on Facebook from candidates, parties, commentators, journalists, or activists (British Election Studies, 2015). Table 1.1 gives the responses of those questioned in full. The rise of alternative sources of information threatens the established news media agenda setting process. This is because it becomes more difficult for elites to maintain control over information flows as new actors enter the information environment. This results in changing power dynamics between the politicians, journalists, and citizens that the elite actor groups seek to manage.

Table 1.1. In the last 4 weeks, have you read news or found information about the upcoming general election or politics more generally that was posted on Facebook by any of the following people or organisations?

		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>% (n=30027)</b>
<b>Valid</b>	<b>No</b>	11671	38.9
	<b>Yes</b>	8092	26.9
	<b>Don't Know</b>	280	.9
	<b>Total</b>	20043	66.7
<b>Missing</b>		9984	33.3

Source: Fieldhouse et al. (2015).

Agenda-setting is the subject of study in this thesis due to its innate primacy over priming and framing. Without the creation of a media or public agenda, and the decisive inclusion and exclusion of certain issues and policies, there would be no need for strategic framing or priming to take place. This thesis uses the definition of agenda-setting developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), as a function of the mass media. In a study which recognised the role the news media

were playing as intermediaries between electors and political elites, the authors assessed “the agenda-setting capacity of the mass media in the 1968 presidential campaign” in the Chapel Hill district by attempting “to match what Chapel Hill voters said were key issues of the campaign with the actual content of the mass media used by them during the campaign” (McCombs and Shaw, 1972: 177). Their key hypothesis – tested through the use of content analysis – was that “the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues” (ibid.). Later studies have also found support for this hypothesis, emphasising its relevance in the mass media system. However, it is important to note that McCombs and Shaw’s claim that “The information in mass media becomes the only contact many have with politics” (ibid.: 176) does not remain true in the contemporary media system in which the internet and hybrid media logics (Chadwick, 2013) used by traditional media afford voters more direct and varied contact with politics.

Nevertheless, as McCombs (2004: 98) has highlighted, “As more and more evidence accumulated about the agenda-setting influence of the mass media on the public, scholars in the early 1980s began to ask, ‘Who sets the media’s agenda?’” Therefore, in a media system characterised by meshing and interdependence of multiple platforms, production and consumption, two key research questions are raised. Firstly, in such a media system, where many more media platforms and actors can come into play, who sets the news media agenda? Secondly, how does the agenda-setting process function across the contemporary media system? This dissertation seeks to contribute to the body of work which addresses these question, with a unique focus on the power relationships involved in setting the news media agenda.

The choice of case study, the 2015 United Kingdom general election, was made in part as a continuation of existing investigations into agenda-setting. According to McCombs (2004, 111), “Elections offer a particularly intensive setting for examining both the influence of news sources on the media and, in turn, the influence of the media on the public.” As noted above, Tran (2014: 206) identifies that around half of agenda-setting studies take place in the context of elections. Therefore this dissertation sits within a strong body of literature, suggesting that the



analysis of an election campaign is the ideal case study with which to examine news media agenda setting.

This predominance may be explained by the fact that general elections do continue to be broadly understood as the ultimate exercise of democracy in the United Kingdom<sup>5</sup>, despite arguments for a broadening of effective participation methods online (Dennis, 2016). The development of information communication technologies and corresponding changes to the UK's media system has altered general election campaigns extensively in the contemporary era. The more chaotic media environment therefore necessitates changing campaign strategies as elites struggle to retain control over their traditionally reserved domains of power such as agenda-setting. The role of the relationships and networks that exist within the news media agenda-setting process in the contemporary media system is yet to be fully explored; this dissertation will make a contribution to this body of knowledge through its holistic approach to media platforms and use of a mix of qualitative methods.

The 2015 United Kingdom general election has been selected for analysis as it provides a timely opportunity for this research to analyse the relationships and methods which exist in the agenda-setting process during a high profile election campaign. The analysis takes place at both the macro- and micro-levels, looking at organizations and the ways in which they structure their approach to media and news-making and incorporating individual-level observation to establish the underlying thinking and behaviours of key actors. This methodological approach will enable a deep analysis and thick description of the relationships which exist between political elites, the established media, and citizens within the news media agenda-setting process.

I recognize that problems of generalization and representation arise in selecting just one case for analysis; it is not possible to make inferences about the nature of "politics-as-usual" from the case of one election. However, due to the important and recurring nature of general elections, this case reveals significant findings regarding the nature of interactions during UK election

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<sup>5</sup> The latest report from the British Social Attitudes Survey shows that less than half of respondents took part in a political action that was not voting or signing a petition. (National Centre for Social Research, 2014).

campaigns. I have been able to make observations about power relations between the key actors on a wider scale.

Before the contemporary news media agenda-setting process can be delineated, I will provide some context to the development of agenda-setting over recent decades. This will also make clear the impetus for undertaking a study of this nature; with the constant development and adoption of “new” media, the rules governing the process of setting the news media agenda change. The following section provides a brief contextual overview of technology used in campaigning and foregrounds the theme of continuation in hierarchical power structures.

## 1.2 Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose: The historical context of agenda-setting during election campaigns

There have always been patterns of change and continuity in UK general elections. As the media and communication technologies have evolved, actors have adapted the available tools and media platforms to use them to their advantage. By briefly evaluating UK elections since 1945 I outline how campaigns have always taken advantage of communication innovations in order to reach the electorate and promote their messages. That is to say that whilst contemporary media and technology would be barely recognisable to the voters of 1945, the ends of a campaign – gaining a majority of seats in the House of Commons – remain the same. There may be more similarities between election campaigning in 1945 and 2015 than we might think. Parties still want their agenda to be the most salient and impactful, and news producers still want to break stories and attract the largest audience or readership.

For example, in the 1945 general election the populace was subjected to a new form of technology:

This peripatetic form of propaganda is particularly valuable because enormous numbers of people can be reached by it, and because of its uses. It may be used to chant slogans; this is unlikely to convert electors but it arouses them to the fact of the contest. It is useful for

collecting audiences for meetings, and saves much expense in printing advertisements. (McCallum and Readman, 1947: 133-134)

The authors are describing a loudspeaker van used by constituency campaigners to promote their parties, candidates, meetings, and policies (see Figure 1.3). If taken out of context the description given above, and the understanding of this particular strategy's purposes, could apply to social media websites today. Whilst contemporary political parties and news media producers promise interaction with citizens via newer forms of media, they largely retain their hegemony over media production - their message can "penetrate into house and home however unwilling the electors in them may be to hear" (Ibid., 89). Although citizens may shout back, for example via Twitter or email, for many MPs and journalists social networking sites remain a one-way, push, form of communication. Demos found that during the period of 28 January 2015 to 4 March 2015 MPs sent 60,000 tweets, of which 23% were @ replies (Judah, 2015). Although nearly one-quarter of interactions were responses to other Twitter users, more than three-quarters constituted other types of interactions. This reveals a preference for broadcasting their own information, or selected other information through retweets, over discussion. Therefore – despite the intention of the design of online tools or their principal method of use by citizen-users – the action of a voter contacting an MP directly via social media could become the equivalent of running down the road shouting back at the loudspeaker van.

Figure 1.3. The Labour Party's loudspeaker van in the 1945 UK general election



Evidence for politicians' preference of using social media as push media comes from the Hansard Society. A study conducted in 2009 showed that "MPs' focus remains largely on promoting themselves through reportage of their efforts in the House or constituency and by linking to ideologically similar commentators or websites" (Williamson, 2009: 3). Recently, Lilleker and Jackson (2014: 6) undertook a review that found that "the evidence, thus far, is that MPs have largely relied on Web 1.0 applications, such as websites as a one-way, top-down monologue in the form of an electronic brochure to enable them to promote their views". There appears to be a consistent preference by political elites to be the active communicators, broadcasting through digital and social media. Nevertheless, this role becomes challenged when media platforms built for both one-to-many and many-to-many communications, which allow citizens to communicate within the public sphere as easily as elites may, become prominent in the dissemination and reception of campaign messages and agendas.

McCombs (2004: 104) highlights the continuity/evolution paradox of election campaigns in relation to investigations into the agenda-setting process: “Although the ultimate goal of any political campaign is to win on Election Day, campaigns increasingly see their immediate purpose as capturing the media agenda.” As the mass media have developed and evolved into the information age, information flows have become faster and open to greater challenges. Capturing the media agenda has become simultaneously increasingly central to a campaign and increasingly difficult. Newer communication platforms are often endowed with greater influence than they may actually have – for example, being bestowed with the monikers of “the television election” (Harrison, 1964), “the internet election” (Worth, 2010), or “the social media election” (Channel 4 News, 2015c). Despite these titles often overstating the role played by the medium in the outcome of the election, it is true that newer communication tools increasingly become central to campaigns and reporting over time. This is evidenced by campaigners and news producers who assemble teams to design strategies based on the new tools afforded to them. It is for this reason that I assume that the structures of power relationships between the three actor groups – political elites, news producers, and citizens – will be different in 2015 to those exercised during preceding elections. The desire to understand how they differ, and what the impact is for the operation of the news media agenda-setting process, is the motivation for this research.

### 1.3. Actors, relationship models, and associated agenda-setting processes

#### *1.3.1 Categorising actor groups*

This thesis specifically addresses the agenda-setting process in a general election campaign by looking at interactions between different actor groups, referred to as political elites or political parties, media or news producers, and citizens. As Stanyer (2007: 2) states, “the ‘ideal type’ political communication system consists of three sets of actors: political and media institutions, and citizen audiences embedded in a national socio-political environment”. This thesis uses McNair’s (2007: 4) outline of the “three elements [political organizations, media, and citizens] in

the process by which political action is conceived and realised” to provide the scope for the actors on which this study focuses. Whilst McNair does include multiple sub-groups within the overarching category of ‘Political Organizations’, this thesis will focus only upon the ‘Parties’ subgroup. I acknowledge that many other organisations play a role in agenda-setting, however, accounting for this is beyond the scope of this research as a result of time and resource constraints. Political parties, as the central political organisation in an election campaign, will be the only political organisation analysed.

The category of “political elites” includes organisations and individuals who have access to, or have the potential to gain access to, political power through a role in a UK political party, whether as a politician, candidate, or member of staff. “Media or news producers” includes organisations and individuals who create mainstream news media for dissemination on a public platform – whether under the umbrella of ‘old’ or ‘new’ media - and includes journalists, editors, and high-profile national bloggers. Finally, the category of “citizens” encompasses all those who do not fall in to other categories but who were eligible to vote in the election. I will refer to citizen-users where I am specifically discussing the content produced, or actions taken, by citizens on a social media website. See Table 1.2 for an outline of these categorisations.

Table 1.2. Categorisation of actors included in the study

<b>Political elites</b>	<b>Media elites</b>	<b>Non-elites</b>
Political parties, MPs and candidates, political party staff	Mainstream print, broadcast, & online news organizations. Influential blogs with a national remit	Citizens who are not included in another category

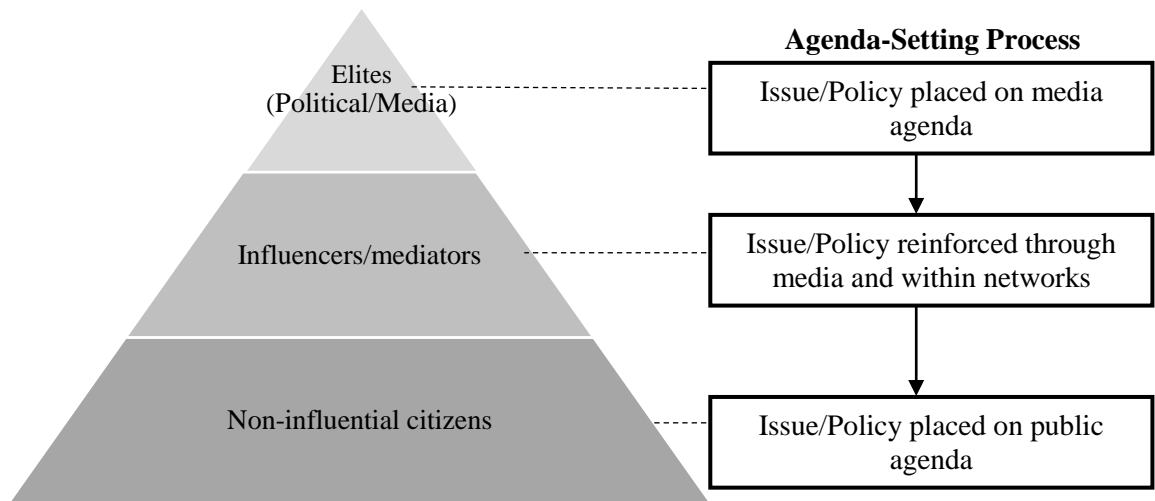
### 1.3.2 Relationship structures encompassing relevant actor groups

One way in which this dissertation will describe the process of news media agenda-setting during the election campaign is by applying an understanding of the exercise of power and conceptualising the relationship structures through which this takes place. It is important to

establish the ways in which relationships between the different actor groups have developed, and outline the existing relationship structures that influence agenda-setting in 2015. As discussed briefly in section 1.2, power relations from 1945 until recently were predominantly hierarchical, and items for the mass media news agenda were set by the campaign teams as primary news sources and by print and broadcast news editors as gatekeepers (Bruns, 2005). However, from the growth of mass media through to the emergence of the information society there has been a shift from top-down power relationships to more horizontal flows of power through networked relationships (Skelcher, 2000) This is characterised by the interdependence of different media platforms and the potential for citizens to engage directly with elites online. Furthermore, evidence has been found of a citizens' rejecting or reversing attempts to set the news media agenda or dominant news narratives (Chadwick, 2011a).

A hierarchical power relationship sees political and media elites at the top of a pyramid of actors, able to dictate messages and actions from the top-down (see Figure 1.4). Examples of this are found in McCombs and Shaw's 1972 study, where they noted that the mass media had the power to determine the issues that readers learnt about. This structure may also feature different stratifications of influencers or actors who amplify the message, as conceptualised by Katz and Lazarsfelds' (1955) "two-step flow" model of communication. In the two-step flow process, the news agenda is propagated by elites, received by citizens through the mass media, and then reinforced through influential citizens amplifying the message in their personal social networks. This model exists today, with social media and online social networks playing an important role in the amplification and embedding of certain messages, and hence playing a role in the news media agenda setting process. Many of the elite actors interviewed for this research - a sample consisting of journalists, bloggers, politicians, and party staffers - described Twitter as an "echo chamber" in which particular news stories and narratives are amplified by influential users to their followers, reinforcing specific agenda items.

Figure 1.4. Structure of hierarchical relationships associated with the first-level agenda-setting process



Recent research has suggested that the development of ICTs has enabled the growth of networked relationships, constituted by a ‘flatter’ arrangement of nodes and links between groups of people (Benkler, 2006). In such a configuration, it can be argued that information flows are more equitable, enabling those previously bereft of influence to potentially weigh in on the media agenda, and perhaps cause a shift in news narratives and discourse. McNair (2006) describes the impact of networked digital relationships:

The speed of news flows has increased ... this acceleration is a function of the combined technologies of cable, computer and satellite, and of the highly networked nature of the global media environment, in which online journalists and bloggers who post an article or item in one part of the world immediately become part of a globally accessible system, their postings indexed, linked, signposted for others, rapidly becoming part of the common conversation of millions. (McNair, 2006: 2)

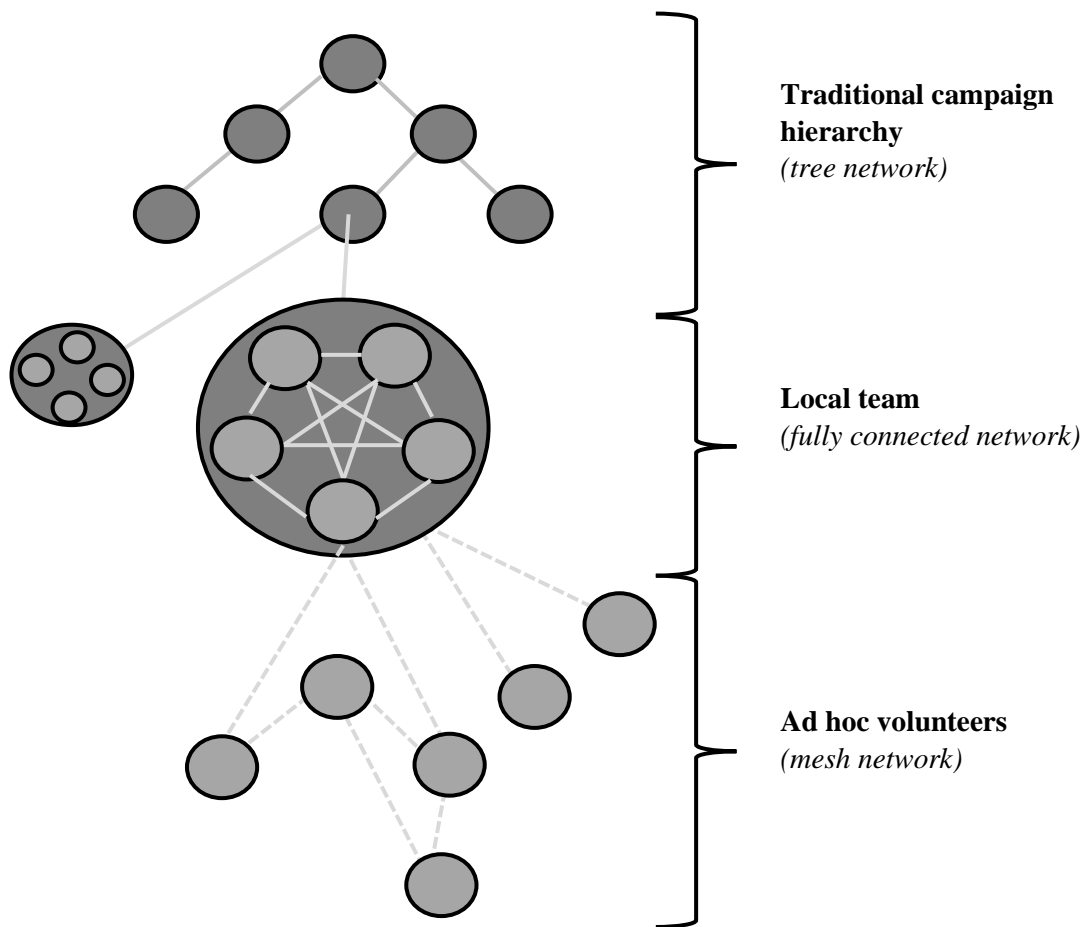
This argument is often made for the democratisation of political communication through the use of online tools. Yet crucially in such a structure I expect that agenda-setting becomes more problematic for elite actors. Competing agendas proliferate from an increasing number of sources; it might be the case that it is more difficult for traditional actors to set and control the news media agenda. This is an area which this study explores. However, evidence shows that the public still



receive news media agendas. Therefore this thesis posits that although horizontal networks have been created and the possibility of agenda-setting influence for the previously “disenfranchised” exists, a hierarchy is maintained whereby elites remain able to direct the media agenda during the election campaign. This assertion leads to the following question: how are political and media elites able to maintain their hierarchical position in the agenda-setting process amongst networks?

In order to realistically characterise relationship structures between actors in the agenda-setting process I now consider how both hierarchical and networked relationships can function interdependently. Howard’s (2011) description of the power of digital networks in modern political campaigns provides a sound conceptualisation of how these can interact. Although Howard’s model considers different actors to those analysed in this study, for example local party networks, this model can also describe relationships between media producers and their audiences. As shown in Figure 1.5, a reproduction of Howard’s model, this relationship structure is headed by a strong traditional hierarchy, usually within the central party or media organisation. From this hierarchy comes the main agenda item for promotion. This message is then not only disseminated amongst the wider population but, crucially, to smaller networks within or with strong ties to the organization. In the analysis undertaken in this dissertation the *fully connected network* corresponds to citizen-users who constitute core audiences or party activists. This group is then able to disseminate the message further to the *mesh network*, in my research this corresponds to other citizen-users who may be inclined to be supportive of the political party or news organization.

Figure 1.5. The Power of Digital Networks in Modern Political Campaigns



Source: Howard (2011: 42).

In order to promote the message and increase the chances of setting the news media agenda these networks must be harnessed by the elite actors and directed to act in a particular manner, such as information-sharing in their own personal online and offline networks. Grewal (2008) has described the way in which networks can inherently hold power, which can be accessed by members of those networks. In order to achieve this, members of the networks must meet the communication standards and standards required of that network. Therefore elite actors are tasked with communicating in a manner *fitting with* the social media space in order to exercise power over that network and the communication within it.

A theoretical basis is therefore provided for asynchronous power structures within the process of news media agenda-setting, in which networks are harnessed and directed by a hierarchical political or media elite. In this system, a hierarchy remains as political and media

elites are able to exercise control over their own networks to encourage the promotion of their messages. While networks of actors are able to exercise power, the majority of successful agendas are promoted from the “top”, and begin in the traditional news creation hierarchy. There is a high volume of dissensus surrounding issues and events in a general election campaign. Therefore in order to exercise control over the agenda, and as discussed by this study’s interviewees, political parties and news producers rely upon and direct their activists, supporters, and audiences to promote their communications through online and offline networks.

#### 1.4 Theoretical contribution: the role of commodification and authenticity

It is clear that there has been upheaval in the relationships between actors in the political communication process, and that this has had an impact upon the news media agenda-setting process that takes place during an election campaign. Despite insights from existing studies, the question of what the functions and processes of agenda-setting look like in a UK election campaign has not been categorically answered. A theoretical underpinning of this dissertation is that relationship structures between the actor groups exist in a state of interdependence between hierarchies and networks, with the networks called upon to promote messages in attempts by political elites and media producers to set the news media agenda. There are two assumptions about this process; (1) that the end goal is to set the news media agenda, a short term aim at best in an election campaign, and (2) that the central organisations of the elite groups face greater challenges to setting the agenda in a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) as a result of a diversification of content and sources. In order to exercise control over the news media agenda-setting process, elites’ relationships with citizen networks must be harnessed to provide as much direction and amplification for their message as possible.

The existence of such a relationship structure leads to the question, how do media producers and political parties control their message through activist or audience networks? As will be discussed in Chapter 2, research finds increasing evidence of control within campaign

communications (Kreiss, 2012; Stromer-Galley, 2014) and this has led to *a commodification of citizen-users' content and actions* as tools to help direct information flow and hence control the agenda in the hybrid media system. The concept of commodification that I propose builds upon the theory of controlled interactivity (Stromer-Galley, 2014) to argue that active or supportive citizens (in the case of political elites) and core or potential audiences (relating to news producers) are directed to act in a certain manner in order to amplify the elite message and aid the control of the news media agenda in the contemporary media system.

This notion finds support from Jenkins (2014) who asserted his concern that as a result of the affordances of digital technology, grassroots activity would face attempts to commodify it by corporate entities. If we consider the economic concept of commodification, it is possible to apply it to the relationship between citizens and other actor groups; Radin and Sunder (2005: 9) describe commodification as the “reduction of the person (subject) to a thing (object)”. In economics, in order for commodification to occur, it is required that one party sells an object to a second party, usually for monetary gain. From a Marxist perspective, commodification can relate to the sale of a person’s labour to an employer and is intrinsically linked to the material benefit for the employer (Rosewarne, 2010: 106). In the information environment, the benefits of commodification are not always tangible or measured in monetary terms, yet commodities such as these exist. One example is the exchange of knowledge. According to Radin and Sunder’s definition, commodification can be defined more broadly as the process by which person A becomes valuable to person B for a particular ability or skill which they can be encouraged to trade for a tangible or an intangible outcome.

To use the Marxist conceptualisation of the commodification of labour as an analogy: a political party communicates in the media system, where control of the news media agenda is increasingly difficult. The party is in the business of ‘winning the election’ and part of achieving this is strengthening its control of the news media agenda. To achieve this, the party aims to mobilize supporters to share its message across media platforms, hopefully ensuring that it becomes or remains salient. Supporters are directed on how to do this by the party and offer their labour in the form of online or offline activism in this way in the hope of a positive outcome for

the party. Similarly, the audiences of traditional news producers may be become a commodity through which the organization's agenda can be promoted, or can be used to attract further audiences to their content. Whilst, on one hand, we can argue that party activists have always undertaken action at the behest of party leadership, the key differences here are twofold. Firstly, activists are being brought into the news media agenda setting process, an area previously reserved for political and media elites. Secondly, they are needed as a commodity because of the nature of the media system which affords greater challenges to setting the media agenda, and hence requires that those inside the system – including citizens – act in an orchestrated manner to control key messages.

For strategies of controlled interactivity to become perceived by citizens as commodification, authenticity must be missing from the communication. Authenticity plays an important role in enabling actors to meet communication standards on social media, and therefore to harness and exercise network power. Enli's theory of mediated authenticity suggests that authenticity is constructed through authenticity illusions<sup>6</sup>. Therefore I hypothesise that authenticity illusions allow citizen-users to perceive their interactions with politicians and news producers as equitable; they act out of choice to share information they support. However, without the illusion of authenticity, the electioneering behind communication becomes clear to citizen-users. Inauthentic communications arise one or more relative standards for communication on social networking sites are not met. I define these standards as spontaneity, immediacy, and predictability (discussed in detail in Chapter 2). The action of being inauthentic in communication reveals activists and supporters as commodities to be gained and harnessed; they can be directed to act and engage with issues and are useful in the promotion of an agenda.

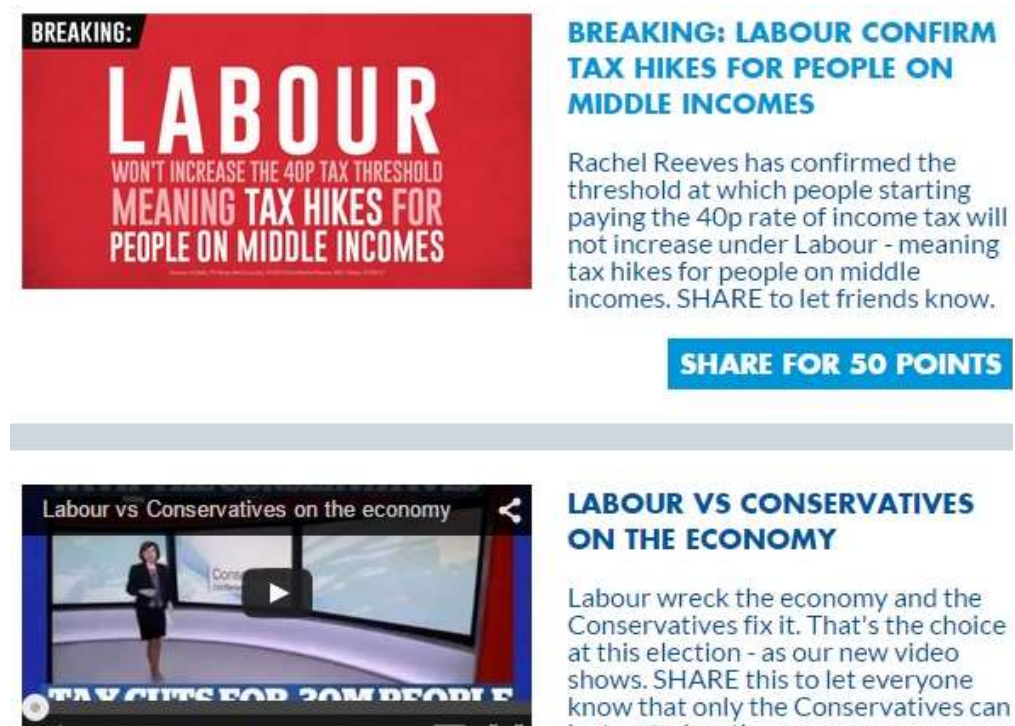
Both Stromer-Galley and Kreiss describe this relationship as "transactional". Kreiss states that "campaigns use new media to mobilize sheer numbers of individuals to deliver financial, human and political resources" (2012, 26) and Stromer-Galley supports this, asserting

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<sup>6</sup> Authenticity illusions refers to the construction of authenticity of actors through scripted performances. Illusions are created "through various production techniques, [where] raw material is manipulated in order to be compatible with media logics and format criteria" (Enli, 2016: 121).

that “campaigns work to build not a partnership with citizens using DCTs [digital communication technologies] but a transactional relationship in which support is a currency that campaigns aim to grow” (2014: 177). Taking this one step further, gamification of campaigns is on the rise. As demonstrated in Tim Pawlenty’s 2012 United States Republican primary campaign and within the Conservative Party’s 2015 United Kingdom general election campaign, parties encourage supporters to take certain actions to share their message, usually via social media, in return for ‘rewards’ or ‘points’ (see Figure 1.6). This heightens the transactional nature of the relationship, meaning that supporters receive something tangible in return. Therefore commodification of citizen-users action forms an important part of controlling the news agenda in a chaotic media system.

Figure 1.6. Screenshot from conservatives.com showing examples of gamification by the Conservative Party



A short description of an email campaign undertaken by the Labour Party in 2014 illustrates this point. Close to the 66<sup>th</sup> “birthday” of the National Health Service (NHS), the Labour Party circulated an email which contained a link to a website where the reader could discover what their birth number was when they were delivered by the NHS. At the same time as enabling

citizen interaction and engagement in this way, the party asked for an email address (if you had reached the site by other means) and a visit to the site was acknowledged by another party email which asked you to forward on the email (complete with a pre-written message) or share your birth number on Facebook. This party had multiple goals for the campaign: (1) to reinforce a connection between the party and the NHS in the voter's mind, by explicitly expressing a special relationship between the NHS and the Labour Party as its creator; (2) to collect email addresses and demographic data which could be added to the party's database for use in the election campaign; (3) to interact with the electorate, instead of distributing party political literature the party provided a useful and mildly entertaining link, such as those which are prevalent on the internet and which you might regularly share on social media; and (4) to encourage the sharing of positive information amongst voters without any overtly partisan underpinnings.

This example and Figure 1.6 demonstrates three key things pertinent for this dissertation. Firstly, they are examples of methods to control citizen-users' interactivity with parties. Secondly, they show how citizen-users are directed to share messages with their networks, and in both examples they are rewarded for doing so. Thirdly, the combination of hierarchical and networked power is demonstrated: the direction comes from an elite actor but the message is spread amongst citizen networks. As a caveat to these examples, I classify them as actions of controlled interactivity and not commodification of citizen-users' action. This is because each communication, headlines on the Conservative Party website and an email from the Labour Party respectively, meets the standards of its medium and maintains the authenticity illusion. I now turn to describing the methodological approach I will use to collect and analyse such communications and relationships in more detail.

## 1.5 Methodological approach and research questions

Sections 1.1 to 1.4 have outlined and defined some of the key concepts and theoretical building blocks for this research. They have also brought to light some of the questions facing the study of agenda-setting in election campaigns. These will be extrapolated here to form the specific

research questions that this study will answer, alongside an introduction to the methodology that will be employed to provide those answers.

The questions raised throughout this chapter include those of both a descriptive and explanatory nature and fall under two fundamental queries:

- (1) *Who* sets the news agenda in the contemporary media environment?; and,
- (2) *How* do they set the news agenda?

The first question, regarding the descriptive “*who*”, encompasses the following research questions. The first research question (RQ1) is *how do power relationships between traditional news media producers and political elites function in the 2015 UK general election campaign, and how do they impact the agenda-setting process?* Given the changing nature of these relationships contextualised in this chapter, it is imperative that I am able to observe and describe the current relationship structures that exists between elite groups. Logically following from this question is the situation of citizens within networked power. Observing and understanding how citizens interact with elites and the information that they disseminate is crucial to understanding the news media agenda setting process. Therefore the second research question (RQ2) is *how do traditional news media producers and political parties attempt to successfully harness network power?*

The second overarching question requires a thick description of the functions and strategies involved in setting the news media agenda. It necessitates a focus on understanding how news media producers and political parties integrate media logics to access network power, and what the outcome is. This prompts four further research questions: (RQ3) *how are social and digital media integrated into traditional news medias’ output, and how does this impact their power relationships with political elites?;* (RQ4) *How are (i) information sourced from social media, and (ii) the technological affordances of social media incorporated into the process of setting the news media agenda?;* (RQ5) *Do citizen-users of social media play any role, such as intervention in the information cycle, in the process of setting the agenda?;* and (RQ6) *Do citizen-users of social media replicate or challenge agendas?*



It is important that these questions are addressed, and indeed there is a strong body of work analysing agenda-setting in election campaigns and a growing sub-set of studies in relation to newer media and the internet (see Chapter 2). However, as mentioned above, many studies of agenda-setting in elections campaigns focus only on a small number of media platforms, and do not take into account or provide explanation for behaviours enacted by elites to retain control in the contemporary media system.

A qualitative mixed-methods approach will be used to evaluate the agenda-setting process and understand how political elites and media producers take action to set the media agenda. Semi-structured interviews with journalists, influential bloggers, candidates and party staff members, and participant-observations of two national broadcast news producers – BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme and ITV News' *Election 2015* results programme – will provide the context and explanation behind the strategies undertaken by political and media elites, and their interactions with citizens. A discourse and content analysis of two salient items on the election media agenda during the short campaign (March 30 – May 8 2015) provide the case studies with which to identify features of the process, including evidence of commodification of citizen-user content and actions.

I used information from the post-election interviews to identify two of the most salient news stories from the 2015 general election. These are the first leaders' debate, and a news report about Nicola Sturgeon relating to allegations from a leaked foreign office memo. By analysing patterns in the information flows related to these news events in relation to evidence of strategies used to direct the agenda undertaken by political and media elites, I am able to show how agenda-setting functioned. Critically I identify a combination of hierarchical and networked power relationships which encompass controlled interactivity and commodification. This dissertation focuses upon furthering our understanding only of the process of news media agenda-setting as it takes place during an election campaign, through evaluating the ways in which newer forms of media have impacted agenda-setting strategies. It does not seek to explain the role of agenda-setting as a media effect in the outcome of the election.

The main contribution of this dissertation is to further our understanding of the news media agenda-setting process during a UK general election. I achieve this by evaluating and describing the process of news media agenda-setting within a hybrid media system<sup>7</sup>, and how power is exercised to control the media agenda through a process of commodification of citizen-user actions and content. I demonstrate that, rather than relationships simply being hierarchical or networked, as is often suggested in the literature, a combination of the two exist in a controlled-network formation. This contribution will advance our understanding of the way in which the news media agenda is set, but also describe the dialectical nature of power in a hybrid media system. This dissertation further highlights a number of tensions between social media use by citizens and by elites within the news media agenda setting process which have not previously been described.

ICTs are constantly evolving and so too are the ways in which actors use them, as well as the impact they have on power relations. “Internet time” (Karpf, 2012) tells us that the internet is consistently changing and developing new capacities. Therefore a thorough examination and understanding of how power functioned in the 2015 general election in the form of agenda-setting will not only fill a gap in the literature, but will provide knowledge to apply in the analysis of political campaigns and campaign strategies going forward.

## 1.6. Plan of the dissertation

This dissertation is divided into two substantive parts. Part one (Chapters 2 and 3) introduce the theoretical and methodological frameworks. Part two (Chapters 4 to 8) present the empirical findings and discussion.

Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature on the main themes of this dissertation. From this review I conceptualise commodification of citizen-users and argue that scholars should

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<sup>7</sup> The theory of the hybrid media system is posited by Chadwick (2013). It is a system characterised by the interdependence of different media platforms, and the fluctuation of media logics used during content creation and dissemination.

consider the integrated nature of hierarchical and network power relationships within the news media agenda setting process. I argue that the extant body of literature addressing agenda-setting in election campaigns in the contemporary media system offers some useful insights, namely the rise of intermedia agenda-setting and the increased role of a variety of actor groups. Nevertheless, the existing research is limited in its scope by focusing only upon the correlation between a limited number of media platforms, and limited methodologically because of a reliance predominantly on searching for correlations through content analysis or survey research designs. This dissertation therefore seeks to remedy this by widening the scope of agenda-setting research to include a holistic approach to studying media agendas on a cross-platform basis. I also use qualitative methods in my research design to understand reasons behind actions and decisions, complementing existing content analyses. The literature review considers important theoretical contributions from literature regarding media systems, election campaigning and power, alongside studies of agenda-setting in election campaigns which have sought to answer the question of how the media agenda is set in the new media environment.

Through the empirical contributions of existing studies it can be established that the news media agenda-setting process has become more difficult to enact in the contemporary media system. Chapter 2 demonstrates that Chadwick's (2013) theory of the hybrid media system offers an understanding of the links between different media platforms, and the impact of this, in the UK's contemporary media system. Furthermore, I argue for an assessment of power as relational during the 2015 general election. I set out Grewal's (2008) network power as the theoretical lens through which to view power. I assert that setting the news agenda must not be seen simply as a straightforward action through decision-making. Instead, our conceptualisations must include a description of the power relationships which enable control to be maintained over the process. Additionally, the chapter demonstrates how agenda-setting models for the election campaigns which take place in a hybrid media system may benefit from a re-introduction of the two-step flow model. A two-step flow process can be exercised through influencers on social media and other online tools. Finally, the chapter posits that elites will use newer media to harness citizen

action during the campaign. This occurs in the form of “controlled interactivity” (Stromer-Galley, 2014), or through commodification of citizen-users’ content and actions.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology and research design. The methodological approach taken by this research seeks to overcome some of the limitations of agenda-setting research by broadening the scope of analysis to include a cross-media approach to platforms used during the 2015 general election. It also moves beyond a straightforward content analysis to include qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and observations of media producers and political party staff and candidates, and thick description of information flows derived from qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis. There are many limitations imposed on those who choose to carry out internet research, and these will be discussed in more detail within this chapter. The methods used and their rationale are also outlined. Briefly, these include:

1. A qualitative content and discourse analysis of communications made throughout a defined period during the election campaign on specified sites including Twitter, Facebook, political blogs, news media websites, print media, and broadcast media;
2. Semi-structured interviews with members of key campaign teams with responsibility for social and online media, and with established media producers; and
3. Observations of two media producers, BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme and ITV News’ *Election 2015*, during the campaign period.

Chapters 4 to 7 constitute the empirical analysis central to this dissertation. The discussion within them will be guided by the theoretical framework and the research questions. Chapter 4 begins with a thick descriptive analysis of texts which were produced following the first leaders’ debate of the general election, based on qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis. These incorporate the discussions of citizens and elites on social media (Twitter and Facebook), and the content of party websites, news articles, blogs, broadcasts, and newspapers. The main findings of this chapter are that whilst the process of setting the news media agenda remains dominated by hierarchical power relationships and established practices, political and media elites do utilise

hybrid media logics which take into consideration online and offline platforms. The process itself is fluid and fluctuating, comprising variously a combination of legacy and digital practices, message control strategies online as part of controlled interactivity, harnessing network power through social media, and the impact and use of other news stories to build different agendas. Although evidence of both controlled interactivity and commodification of citizen-users was noted, ultimately the impetus behind the news media agenda setting process was the engagement that political and media elites have with each other.

Chapter 5 provides a detailed case study focused upon the news agenda which emerged around *The Telegraph's* exclusive story of a leaked memo from the Foreign Office. *The Telegraph* claimed that Nicola Sturgeon would rather see David Cameron as Prime Minister than Ed Miliband. The rise of the SNP and the success of Nicola Sturgeon was highlighted in the post-election interviews by many journalists and party candidates/staff as being the most salient and impactful story of the election. Using the results of a discourse analysis and evidence gained from interviews and observations, the political information flow for this topic was mapped, and the hierarchical/networked components of the relationship structures were assessed. The extent to which activists and audiences were mobilised, and how they were mobilised, is addressed in this chapter in order to understand and describe the processes and functions of news media agenda-setting. The main findings of this chapter are that elites act to join and direct communications within social media networks. They recognise the inherent network power and want to use it to control the flow of political information. However, they are not, usually, organically a member of those networks. Therefore, the interaction that they actually achieve is an artificial re-enactment; it is not true "network power" but an attempt to continue the existence of their hierarchical power through the use of citizen-user networks.

Chapters 6 and 7 offer in-depth descriptions of news-making practices at the *Today* programme and ITV News' *Election 2015* based on interview and observation data. The main findings are that despite attempts at digital innovation by both teams, hierarchical power structures and legacy news-production practices dominated. The journalists that I observed and interviewed recognised the utility of integrating digital and legacy media logics and practices to

tell a story effectively. However their creation and dissemination of content was characterised by a continuation of traditional news-making practices, hierarchical power relationships, and selective use of social media to enhance their news agendas through commodification of citizens.

Chapter 8 draws together the main findings to clarify the conclusions made, to outline the limitations of the study, and to offer prescriptions for the areas within which future research should focus.

# Chapter 2 Hierarchy or networks?: deconstructing the processes and relationships which set the news media agenda

Increasingly we swim in a sea of diversity, and we need to understand the currents in this sea, both those that enhance communication and those that pollute the sea. (McCombs, 2014: 20)

## 2.1 Introduction

The communication gestalt in which agenda-setting occurs contains numerous actors and relations of power. These create and challenge media agendas, which in turn transmit salience to public agendas. This process is a well-researched phenomenon. Substantial evidence has been found for the first- and second-levels of agenda-setting<sup>8</sup> and emerging theory and evidence reveals a third<sup>9</sup>. Analyses of agenda-setting focus upon the transmission from the media agenda to the public agenda of objects at the first-level of agenda-setting (McCombs, 2014: 5), of attributes at the second-level of agenda-setting (ibid.: 40), and of networks of objects and attributes at the third-level (Guo, 2016). This process of transmission has been shown conclusively to occur; agenda-setting as a media effect has a significant influence over the issues which reach the public.

Whilst existing literature contributes to our understanding of agenda-setting as a process of transmission, this thesis fills a gap in the literature by developing our knowledge of the front-end of this process. It answers the question of how the news media agenda is set in the new media environment, including what strategies are used by actors to promote their agendas and how different forms of power are exercised to set the news media agenda. I investigate what role intermedia agenda-setting can play, and what strategies political and media elites can use, in order

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<sup>8</sup> The first-level of agenda-setting refers to the “relative salience of issues or subjects” (Weaver, 2007: 142), described as objects. The second-level of agenda-setting refers to “the characteristics and traits that describe the object”, described as attributes (McCombs, 2011: 5).

<sup>9</sup> The third-level of agenda-setting is Network Agenda-Setting (NAS).

to retain and exercise power over the news media agenda in the 2015 UK general election. This is important; understanding who sets the media agenda allows for identification of influence over the public agenda. A further contribution made by this thesis is to theorise and test reasons for the success or failure of an actor to set the media agenda as a result of the authenticity of their communications on social media. I build on existing knowledge of controlled interactivity (Stromer-Galley, 2014) to assess strategies of message control. I further propose a conceptual development: ‘the other side of the coin’ to controlled interactivity, *commodification of citizen-users’ content and action*.

McCombs (2014: 79) noted that there are already 400 studies of agenda-setting. The first-level of agenda-setting in particular has been applied and examined in a variety of contexts, although many of these studies centre on elections campaigns. Tran (2014) estimates the number of studies undertaken within an election context to be around half of all agenda-setting research. McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) seminal work, the Chapel Hill study, was set in the context of the 1968 US presidential election. Since its theoretical development in the early 1970s, the theory has been applied to traditional and newer media to further test it empirically. It has also undergone revisions and additions. This review discusses and critiques research undertaken in a number of key areas:

1. the development of the network agenda-setting model (NAS) (Guo and McCombs, 2011a, 2011b; Guo and McCombs 2016; Meraz, 2016; Vargo and Guo, 2016);
2. studies on the role of newer forms of media on agenda-setting (Lee, Lancendorfer, and Lee, 2005; Jungherr, 2014);
3. considerations of the role of actors other than journalists (Hopmann, et al., 2012);
4. the effect of media and audience fragmentation upon the agenda-setting process (Boyle, 1996; Schoenbach, de Waal, and Lauf, 2005); and
5. the role of intermedia agenda setting (Lee, 2007; Sweetser, Golan, and Wanta, 2008; Shehata, 2010; Russell et al., 2015).



This study lies at the intersection of these topics. Studies of agenda-setting take into account a wide variety of actors and media platforms, and the corpus continues to grow as new forms of media and news production practices proliferate (Groshek and Groshek, 2013; Paulussen and Harder, 2014; Rogstad, 2016). This research has furthered our understanding of agenda-setting at all three levels. However, gaps exist in our knowledge. Foremost amongst these is the literature's tendency to focus upon the impact of the internet as though it exists in isolation from other media, rather than looking across media platforms. Whilst intermedia studies partially remedy this, further research is required to understand how media and political elites respond to, and interact within, the networked media system. Additionally, there is a methodological reliance upon content analysis to demonstrate relationships between different media and political organizations or media platforms. I contribute to this body of literature by utilising a qualitative approach analysing information flows and case studies to identify behaviours, and observations and interviews to ascertain the underlying rationale behind elite decision-making and the impact of intermedia strategies.

Additionally, in this chapter I broaden the scope of discussion from agenda-setting to studies in pertinent areas which provide theoretical grounding for this dissertation. *Firstly*, understanding the context of communications provides the grounding to produce a theory of the news media agenda setting process. This includes an assessment of work by Jenkins (2006), McNair (2006), and Chadwick (2013). I describe how setting the news media's agenda occurs in a hybrid media system where power to do so is dispersed and message control is harder to enact. *Secondly*, I consider the development of election campaign strategies as a response to the contemporary media environment. News media agenda setting is a crucial part of election campaigning and reporting. Kreiss (2012), and Stromer-Galley (2014) all offer important contributions to understanding how the management of campaign strategies has become controlled in response to the realities of a more chaotic media system with increasingly porous boundaries between platforms. However, a gap exists in our understanding of how citizens receive these communications and calls to action. To fill this gap I consider the role played by

authenticity, defining this concept in relation to communication standards and developing the theory of commodification of citizen-users.

*Finally*, this chapter takes into consideration how we can conceptualise power relationships within the contemporary media system, and how this can be applied to setting the media agenda. Specifically, I incorporate Grewal's theory of network power (2008) alongside the continuation of hierarchical power structures. I evaluate how elite actors work to harness network power through the production and dissemination of authentic communications, drawing on the work of Castells and other power theorists. Unlike the existing body of work on agenda-setting which emphasises the transmission of salience between media and public agendas, the scope of this study is to describe and explain the process function at the back-end, the setting of the media agenda. Explaining how issues, objects, or attributes were transmitted from the media agenda to the public agenda is beyond the scope of this research. I isolate one facet of agenda-setting – the media agenda – and establish how the process of creating object salience at this level functions.

## 2.2 Agenda-setting during election campaigns: considering the role of actors in a changing media system

### *2.2.1 Recent developments in agenda-setting theory*

Political campaign teams and news producers have at their disposal a wide variety of information production and dissemination tools. These exist across offline and online sites. Recent studies have described and explained the impact of ICTs on election campaigning, and on agenda-setting during an election. Scholars have investigated how the agenda-setting process functions in election campaigns in relation to both the roles played by different media platforms and different actor groups (Hopmann et al., 2012; McCombs, 2004; Vargo, Guo, McCombs, and Shaw, 2014). The current literature on this topic has three limitations. Firstly, it often lacks the holistic approach required when researching in the contemporary media system. Secondly, the impact of campaign strategies on the media agenda is not fully explored. Thirdly, research is often based on

conceptualisations which no longer reflect power relationships as they exist within the contemporary media system.

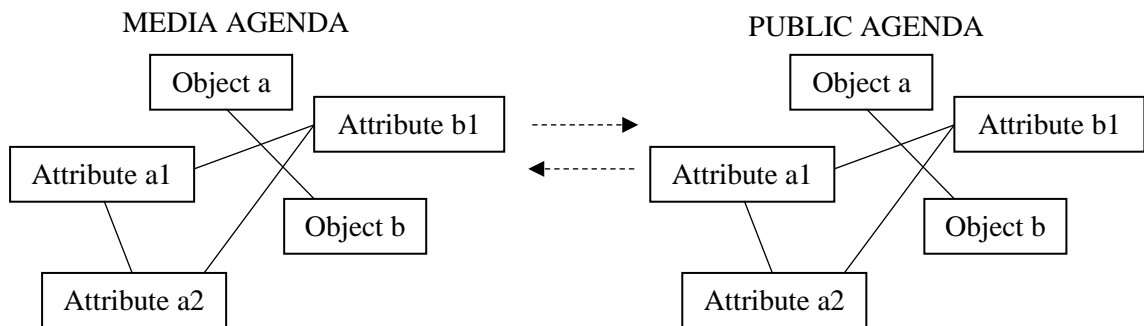
Initial investigations into agenda-setting during an election were carried out by McCombs and Shaw (1972) in a small-scale study conducted in Chapel Hill during the 1968 US presidential campaign. Their study built on findings from earlier research by Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) in the US and Trenaman and McQuail (1961) in the UK, which stated that citizens with the greatest amount of mass media exposure knew the most about election candidates (McCombs and Shaw, 1972: 177). McCombs and Shaw hypothesised that “the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes towards political issues” (Ibid.). Their findings demonstrated the first-level of agenda-setting, hierarchical object salience, by correlating interview responses from 100 undecided voters with a content analysis of local media output pertaining to the election.

Although this dissertation starts from the agenda-setting theory developed by McCombs and Shaw, testing their original hypothesis evaluating only mass media is not applicable to the United Kingdom’s contemporary media system. Since the expansion of agenda-setting theory, the production and dissemination of news has advanced to incorporate a wider variety of media, technologies, and actors. It is important that studies of agenda-setting take into account this less predictable landscape, with its porous boundaries between roles, media, and processes. Studies must consider the ways in which political and media elites reconfigure their access to power to retain control over information flows (Chadwick and Collister, 2014: 2423).

Agenda-setting research continues to focus on the transmission of object and attribute salience. McCombs and Guo (2011a, 2011b) have theorised a third-level of agenda-setting, network agenda-setting (NAS). NAS begins to look across the borders of media platforms. However, its core focus is the way in which objects and attributes form a network on the media agenda, and the salience transfer of these networks to the public agenda (Guo, 2016: 5). This a progression from the analysis of hierarchical structures produced in McCombs’ previous work, and findings from this body of research show unequivocally that these media agenda networks can transfer to the public agenda (see Figure 2.1).

The NAS model fills a gap in our understanding that other models of media effects cannot; it explains why certain nodes become linked in the public’s understanding of an issue. This is an important contribution to the literature on agenda-setting; issues, objects, and attributes do not exist in a vacuum independent of each other. The way in which the public cognitively construct information about an issue can be explained by how that item is linked to other nodes in the media agenda. For example, the news media may discuss foreign policy (the object) consistently in conjunction with characteristics or traits (the attributes) such as terrorism, Islam, or other nations. The public will come to cognitively construct a schema linking these objects and attributes which mirrors the network created by the media.

Figure 2.1. The Network Agenda Setting (NAS) model



Source: Guo (2016, 6)

Researchers have begun to test the NAS more broadly. Hellmueller and Mellado (2016) explore the relationship between journalistic role performance and agenda building in a comparative analysis of United States and Chilean news coverage. Their methodological approach incorporates content analysis and network analysis. The journalistic roles they evaluate include the watchdog model, where journalists question and criticise sources, and the loyal-facilitator model, where journalists “cooperate with those in power and protect the status quo” (ibid.: 120). The authors ascertain that there is a connection between the watchdog model and a high use of political and document sources in the creation of the media in the US (ibid.: 129). This is compared to Chile which had a loyal-facilitator model at the centre of its journalistic role performance network alongside the use of a greater number of sources.

A flaw in this study is that the authors do not consider that a higher usage of political sources may not only suggest a strengthened watchdog role or fact-checking. This finding could indicate indexing.<sup>10</sup> From this study's methods and conclusions I argue that in order to establish what these behaviours are, and how they impact the media agenda, a qualitative focus is required to observe and describe journalistic behaviours.

### *2.2.2 Theories explaining the context of communication*

Understanding how the media system functions is crucial to explaining the process of setting the news media agenda in the 2015 UK general election campaign. One contribution to knowledge of these changes is the theory of convergence culture. Jenkins (2006: 2) described cultural convergence, wherein "old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways". Jenkins focuses particularly on the production and consumption of media, with technology an enabler of convergence culture. Crucial amongst the assumptions of convergence culture are attempts to understand participatory culture. Specifically the way in which citizens, defined as fans and consumers, are able to take part in the creation and sharing of content (Ibid: 24). Jenkins' conceptualisation of participatory culture is challenged by Fuchs, who argues that Jenkins' neglects to consider ownership of content (Fuchs, 2017: 68). The notion of ownership in participatory culture is significant as it reveals relations of power. Jenkins' interpretation discloses how citizens become empowered to take part in politics, with participation extending beyond discussions in online public spaces to sharing and critiquing political information. These actions in turn impact how political and media elites are able to control their messages and the process of news production. Yet without ownership of content within the

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<sup>10</sup> Indexing refers to the hypothesis put forwards by Bennett (1990) which expects to find that the content of mass media coverage on a given topic will reflect the debates had within mainstream government (Bennett, 1990: 106).

conceptualisation of participation, citizens and the content they share and produce become a commodity used for the benefit of elite organizations. Jenkins' culturalist focus misses this point.

Although Jenkins' work is centred on cultural analysis, he ends his book with a case study of the 2004 US presidential election:

The 2004 elections represent an important transitional moment in the relationship between media and politics as citizens are being encouraged to do much of the dirty work of the campaign and the candidates and parties lost some control over the political process. (Jenkins, 2006: 22)

This describes a shift in the power relationships between actor groups during the election campaign in favour of citizens. Yet this argument is contradictory; citizens being encouraged to do "the dirty work" on behalf of the campaign conversely suggests that parties have increased their control. This is an area on which my research will elaborate, analysing the extent of the reconfiguration of power relationships in the production and dissemination of news stories. Lessons from Jenkins' work can, however, still be applied to this research. His emphasis on the convergence of popular culture and political culture (Ibid.: 12) is an important element for the production of authenticity on social media, discussed below, and also for the way in which elites try to exert power through social media networks.

A further issue with the theory is that it simplifies the process of participation by all actor groups in media production and dissemination. Chadwick (2013: 57) states:

One problem with the 'convergence culture' approach is its equation of 'online' with 'grassroots' activism. The rise of online media elites, the increasing use of the logics of online media by those working in older media together with the ongoing intervention by non-elites in the construction of political news and information brings this dualism into question.

Online and offline media logics have become increasingly integrated into the news-making practices of traditional media organizations. Klinger and Svensson (2015) refer to a "network media logic" to extrapolate differences and overlap with mass media logics. Assuming that citizen

output is a challenge to traditional media output because of its quality of 'being online' neglects the way in which online content is integrated into news-making assemblages. Some citizens' content may be supportive of elite narratives and re-circulate elite messages. This critique is supported by Couldry (2011: 487), who states that "the term 'convergence culture' blurs important processes of differentiation and stratification and therefore blocks a better understanding of the politics of convergence." Convergence culture does acknowledge the interdependence of different forms of media, and the changing roles within the production and consumption of news. However, it does not provide a conceptualisation of the nature of power relationships between political, media, and citizen actor groups within the contemporary media system.

Bruns (2008) builds on the conceptualisation of participatory culture and the roles of different actors in a converged media culture. Stating the impact of these developments on the media system; convergence will lead media producers and platforms that do not fit into the 'convergence jigsaw' to fail (Bruns, 2008: 31). Based on Bruns' explanation of the effect of convergence on media producers, I expect that elite actors would produce content which meets communication standards for social networking sites and enables their content to travel. Cultural convergence, therefore, offers a way of looking at citizen participation through digital media, and the theory suggests an increased role for non-elites which may challenge traditional power relationships. However, Jenkins' neglect of ownership in his conceptualisation of participatory culture ignores the commodification of citizen content. Therefore the study tells a contradictory story about the nature of power within relationships affected by cultural convergence. The utility of convergence culture to describe the media system within which the process of setting the news media agenda takes place, and its application to power relationships within that, is limited.

An alternative explanation of the impact of ICTs on the media system is McNair's (2006) theory of 'cultural chaos'. The author presents the case for an increase in diversity within the media system and places emphasis on the agency of actors within that media system. He suggests that we need to reorient the way in which we study journalism from a *control* paradigm, where the media are instrumental in the furthering dominant ideologies and "pro-elite media bias"

(McNair, 2006: 3), to a *chaos* paradigm. The chaos paradigm does not deny the fact that elites want control over these areas but proposes that their ability to exercise control “is increasingly interrupted and disrupted by unpredictable eruptions and bifurcations arising from the economic, political, ideological, and technological factors on communication processes” (Ibid.). This work strengthens a common theme in the literature on media systems: elites’ lose control over communications but they continue to attempt exercises of power in areas that they have traditionally dominated. Table 2.1 details the differences between the control paradigm and the chaos paradigm.

Figure 2.2. The constituents of chaos

<b>Control Environment</b>	<b>Chaotic Environment</b>
Control	Chaos
Information scarcity	Information surplus
Sealed (closed)	Leaky (open)
Opacity	Transparency
Exclusivity	Accessibility
Homogeneity	Heterogeneity (diversity)
Hierarchy	Network
Passivity	(Inter)activity
Dominance	Competition

Source: McNair (2006: 199)

The chaos paradigm provides a theory which describes the way that the outcomes of content production methods have become unpredictable, with news no longer being constructed or manufactured but “*emerg[ing]*” [emphasis in original] (Ibid.: 49) from the interactions which take place in a communication environment. A variety of actors may act within these spaces in an effort to create or shape the news, but as a result of the chaotic environment it is extremely difficult to achieve any success. McNair provides an understanding of the resultant cultural changes within news production that have rendered the media system disorderly and increased the difficulty of controlling the output and reception of communications. Through the lens of the chaos paradigm setting the news media agenda is seen as an unpredictable process.



This outlines a paradox faced by political and media elites. They are perceived to lose control over communication production and dissemination whilst simultaneously having access to a greater variety of sources and tools to produce and share content. Comprehending this tension is important for understanding the process of setting the news media agenda; elite actor groups are threatened with a loss of power over an area that they traditionally dominate, but they also have the potential to access interactions and information which may enable them to retain this power. McNair, however, does not include empirical analysis of the spaces and actors from which this power could be derived, focussing instead on the broader argument that “Communication is the medium through which power resources are disseminated, and leaky channels of communication therefore mean less secure power centres” (McNair, 2006: 200). In this case McNair establishes that traditional power centres have become less secure, but he does not explicitly demonstrate where power sits or how it is used.

Whilst the chaos paradigm describes the impact of technological developments on the culture of news production it has the opposite pitfall to that of convergence theory; it does not acknowledge how political and media elites utilise different platforms or media logics concurrently in order to exercise control over information flow. By failing to take this affordance into account, the chaos paradigm cannot provide a full description of the media system within which the news media agenda setting process occurs. It is important to acknowledge such cultural turns, but it is necessary to understand these in relation to the shifting nature of media logics. Media logics, defined by Altheide (2004: 294) as “the assumptions and processes for constructing messages within a particular medium,” have evolved so that whilst different media remain visibly separate from one another, they can come together easily and frequently. This process is not afforded for by either convergence culture or cultural chaos, nor is it explained or tested empirically in detail. As newer and older media logics interact, the roles of political elites, traditional media producers, and citizens in the news media agenda setting process are challenged.

Chadwick (2013) offers an alternative conceptualisation of the media system that draws together these elements. The theory of the hybrid media system highlights the interdependence of different media platforms, and the fluctuation of media logics used during content creation and

dissemination. It also theorises on why political and media actors work to retain power over their traditional domains of content production. Chadwick (2013: 4) states that:

Hybrid thinking rejects simple dichotomies, nudging us away from “either/or” patterns of thought and toward “not only, but also” patterns of thought... It reveals how older and newer media logics in the fields of media and politics blend, overlap, intermesh, and coevolve.

In a hybrid media system different media platforms are interdependent and mutually influence each other. This has ramifications for the news media agenda setting process as it signifies changes to the power held by, and relationships between, actors that existed in a pre-hybrid system. From Chadwick’s conclusions I surmise that power over the news media agenda may potentially belong to any actor, but that it is most likely to belong to those who have the ability to direct information flows to meet their own goals.

Criticisms of this work focus upon the narrative of political power as it functions in a hybrid media system. Chadwick claims that power functions in a relational manner, coming together through hybrid practices and logics, and presents evidence from a number of elite sources and case studies in support. But in his conclusions the author stops short of describing “exactly how old and new media and political powers were realigning” (Schillemans, 2014: 1111). Furthermore, the theory of the hybrid media system leaves normative questions unanswered (Napoli, 2015: 267). Inferences from these critiques are that the narrative of political power is not fully-formed by the author. However, I argue that Chadwick’s goal was not to provide a finite answer to questions regarding power in a hybrid system. Instead it aims to provide a theoretical framework for further empirical work in this area. As a theoretical framework, the hybrid media system provides a starting point for investigations into the structure of power relationships.

*The Hybrid Media System* arrives at its conclusions through detailed and analytical case studies and interviews with journalists, clearly exhibiting the ramifications of hybridity in media production and dissemination. Regarding this method, the case studies presented are representative of a cross-section of different areas in which hybridity has a bearing. They are

thoroughly described and evaluated, and offer strong evidence for the theory Chadwick sets out to test. They do raise further questions for investigation: does the political information cycle exist in 2015 as it did in 2010? How does the shift in news-making assemblages affect the media agenda? Whilst this dissertation does not seek to overtly address these issues, it will assess information flowing through the political information cycle and, through observations, note news-making assemblages.

The theory of the hybrid media system offers two important bases which ground this dissertation. Firstly, the shift from news cycles to political information cycles provides an important perspective on how the media agenda can become increasingly open to impact by a multitude of actors (Chadwick, 2011; 2013). Secondly, an understanding of power as relational allows for a conceptualisation of power that ebbs and flows through networks, hierarchies, and amongst actors. Chadwick draws on the work of David Singh Grewal who theorised on ‘network power’. Network power is power that emerges through social coordination; it exists within networks and is accessed through the expression of shared standards (Grewal, 2008: 4).

I turn first to political information cycles. Chadwick uses live media ethnographies<sup>11</sup> of the “bullygate” affair and the first live televised prime ministerial debate in the 2010 election to show how the prospect of intervention in the news media agenda by citizens – specifically those involved or interested in politics – is augmented (Chadwick, 2011a; 2013, 88-89). The cause, in a fragmented media environment, is the coming together of new and old media logics to form news assemblages. This provides evidence that the agenda-setting and framing powers once retained by political and media elites are under threat from other actors. The effect of this on the news media agenda setting process is the shift away from established methods of crafting a media agenda through controlled activity in a non-hybrid environment, to a process which must incorporate new media logics and assemblages - creating an agenda in response to the individuals involved and to the media used.

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<sup>11</sup> Chadwick (2011a: 3) describes this method as “close, real-time observation and logging of a wide range of press, broadcast, and online material, as the story broke, evolved, and faded.”

Enli and Simonsen (2017) provide examples of the meshing of media logics in their work analysing social media logics and their impact on the behaviour of journalists and politicians. In their study, Enli and Simonsen operationalise connectivity as the Twitter hashtag. They compared the use of hashtags by politicians and journalists and found that both actor groups used hashtags “*in correlation with their professional norms and traditional roles*” [italics in original] (Enli and Simonsen, 2017: 12). Whilst this study lacks a clear definition of what constitutes agenda-setting on social media – the authors implicitly suggest that the hashtags themselves comprise a social media agenda – it does demonstrate the meshing of media logics by elites as expected in a hybrid media system.

The second point raised above, understanding power as relational through the concept of network power (Grewal, 2008; Chadwick, 2013: 207), contributes to this dissertation’s conceptualisation of power. The UK has a media system where power relationships are being continually reconstructed as a result of actors’ interactions with social and technological networks. Pérez-Latre et al. (2011: 66) conduct a literature review of research into social media and find that “there is definite social trend towards people using technologies to get what they need from other people, instead of relying on traditional institutions like companies.” Citizens in online networks can draw upon resources and information from other members of their network, loosening the traditional control of elite actors. For politicians and journalists looking to set the news media agenda this necessitates gaining access to, and enacting control over, these networks.

Marwick and boyd (2010) conducted research in Twitter’s early years to examine the decision-making behind influential users’ tweets. Their findings demonstrate evidence that their subjects’ tweets were often strategically released to manage their networks. I ascertain from their study that Twitter users with large followings are aware of their networked audience when they tweet, and carefully curate their output: “Managing the networked audience requires monitoring and responding to feedback, watching what others are doing on the network, and interpreting followers’ interests” (Marwick and boyd, 2010: 130). Although a criticism of their study is that Marwick and boyd do not specify the type of actors contained in their sample, those with large numbers of followers, over 15,000, show evidence of strategic maintenance of their audience.

Similarly, this dissertation hypothesises that political and media elites will look to exercise control over their online networks as a tool in the promotion of the messages. This will be taken as an action in order to set the media agenda during the election campaign.

### 2.3. News media agenda setting and the role of authenticity in managed election campaigns

McCombs and Shaw's theory of agenda-setting focuses on the hierarchical power relationship between the media and the public. This focus renders other critical actors, political elites and citizens, passive in the agenda-setting process. As outlined in Chapter 1, the relationship structures through which power is exercised in order to set the news media agenda during an election campaign remain hierarchical, but there is an increased role to play for controlled networks of citizens. Election campaigns in many western liberal democracies occur in states that have reached near saturation point for the adoption of digital technologies; a study by Eurostat (2015) found that in 2014, almost "9 out of 10 individuals in Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland and the United Kingdom used the internet". This has changed the landscape of communication, including how media is consumed and produced and challenging established roles in these processes. As a result political and media elites have developed new approaches in order to harness ICTs and retain power in areas where they traditionally held it, including agenda-setting.

Recent literature has focused upon changes to campaigning and the strategies of control that have been developed as a result of the changes described above. For example, Stromer-Galley's (2014) theory of controlled interactivity furthers our understanding of directed interactions between political parties and their supporters during campaigns. Within a political party team, harnessing supporters and activists is integral to running a successful campaign. In a hybrid media system where older and newer media logics interlink and message control is less certain (Chadwick, Dennis, and Smith, 2016: 8), actions taken by supporters and activists need to

be directed by the campaign to maximise their efficacy and reach the campaign's goals, including setting the news media agenda.

### *2.3.1 Studies of agenda-setting during election campaigns*

In order to augment the scope of studies of agenda-setting in election campaigns, scholars take into account the role played by political parties, contrary to the more narrow media-only focus of earlier research. One recent extension of McCombs and Shaw's original methodology was undertaken by Hopmann et al (2012). During the 2007 Danish national election, the authors collected data from broadcast news coverage and party press releases and subsequently undertook a content analysis to enable them to compare these data. The study demonstrates the centrality of political elites in the agenda-setting nexus during an election campaign. The authors recognise the increase in importance of the role of political parties' in setting the news media agenda during election campaigns (Hopmann et al., 2012: 175). This recognition is important; it increases our understanding of the agenda-setting process by recognising motivations for political actors.

This paper further identifies discrepancies and differences in the levels of influence that political parties can have over the news media agenda. It aims to understand why some parties were more influential in election news coverage than others. Their first key finding offers a springboard for development for this dissertation as Hopmann et al. demonstrate that political parties' issue agendas, as established through the systematic analysis of their press releases, had an impact upon the broadcast news agendas (Ibid.: 182). Therefore parties have agency in this process and the role played by political parties in setting the news media agenda merits further investigation.

The second finding, however, is tautological: "the more elaborate [hypothesis] on the relevance of parties suggest that a hierarchy exists: the more relevant a party is, the more success it will have with its press releases" (Ibid.: 183). The more relevant a political party is, the more likely it is to meet news values and be included in reports. Stories about powerful individuals and organizations are more likely to be accepted by journalists (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017: 1471,

1482). Solely analysing press releases in 2014 ignores the cornucopia of communications released by parties of all levels of relevance across online and offline media platforms. Although these findings support the theory of agenda-setting's traditional conceptualisation of issue salience and transference, and apply it to a party-media relationship, they neglect the impact that less "relevant" parties could have through social media.

Whilst limited, the strengths of Hopmann et al.'s study therefore lie in its demonstration of the role of political parties in the process of setting the news media agenda. It also implicitly demonstrated that political parties sought to control the media agenda during election campaigns. Kreiss (2012) builds on this in his research on the development of management in United States presidential campaigning. Whilst acknowledging the earlier work of scholars who recognised the new opportunities afforded to campaigners online (Barber, 1997; Bimber and Davis, 2003; Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins and Thorburn, 2004), Kreiss places the decisions and agency of political actors at the centre of his interpretation. The organization of election campaigns by party staff using computational methods and tools—actions Kreiss describes as 'computational management'—is found at the heart of the drive to direct party activists both offline and online. This provides further evidence that the environment and citizens are directed and controlled, or managed, by those involved in the campaign or news production. The impact on the news media agenda setting process is yet to be fully explored.

Such tactics have inspired campaigners within the UK; the willingness of British parties to embrace US tactics is evident in the hiring of two major players in Barack Obama's 2012 presidential campaign. The Labour Party and the Conservative Party hired David Axelrod and Jim Messina respectively to advise them on communications in the 2015 UK general election. The three main UK political parties also developed strong computational strategies for the 2015 campaign:

Labour use[d] a version of Nation Builder software and retooled its Contact Creator System, while the Conservatives ... attempt[ed] to rebuild their Merlin system in-house.

The Lib-Dems ha[d] perhaps the most robust system in the shape of the Voter Activation Network (VAN) - the same platform Obama used in 2012.<sup>12</sup> (Nesta, 2014)

Computational management is a strategy which allows political and media elites to control and direct the actions taken by their activists and supporters or audiences. Considering the challenges faced by elites who want to retain control of information and promote their message, and set the media agenda, managing citizen activity and the messages they receive through computational methods may allow them to achieve this. This is a strategy which is built upon hierarchical power relationships between elites and citizens, but which allows elites to use the networked connections that exist between supporters. It opens up possibilities for elites to share in network power but it also raises issues of authenticity in action and content, a critical characteristic that will be discussed below. Effectively the process encourages activism while working to limit supporters to approved activities, as in Stromer-Galley's (2014) theory of controlled interactivity.

Strategies of management within campaigns, a part of which is constituted by computational management, form a key element of a political party's approach to agenda or message promotion across all media platforms during a campaign. Studies like Hopmann et al (2012), therefore include a greater variety of actors in their analysis of agenda-setting. However, within the wider communication landscape, the scope of these studies is too narrow. By analysing only the relationship between broadcast news media and party press releases, the findings of Hopmann et al. – whilst empirically demonstrating a role of political parties in agenda-setting – cannot be used to explain the news media agenda setting process in a hybrid media system.

Shehata (2010) builds on this need for a more holistic approach to studying agenda-setting during elections, and also outlines the impetus for strategies of computational management. Shehata paraphrases Stanyer (2007) and recognises that “political actors can no longer rely on the loyalty of citizens, just as media companies cannot rely on the loyalties of audiences” (Shehata, 2010: 184). This argument is important for this research as it identifies that decisive and controlled

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<sup>12</sup> Nation Builder, Merlin, and the Voter Activation System are databases which store voters' details and which are used by political parties in get out the vote efforts, they also enable communications to targeted groups of supporters and log campaign and supporter activity.



actions over communications, an exercise of power, need to be taken by political and media elites to retain their supporters and audiences. The necessity of bringing citizens into the fold by engaging with them during a campaign period is evident. By studying individual-level effects of the media agenda during the 2006 Swedish national campaign through a panel study, Shehata found that despite concerns regarding the “individualization of media usage” there was a correlation between the media agenda and the public agenda<sup>13</sup> (Shehata, 2010: 198). This “strong correspondence” clearly demonstrates that there is a continued hierarchy within the power structure of agenda-setting, the media agenda has an impact upon the public agenda. Considering this, it is vital to understand who sets the media agenda and how in an election campaign.

Existing agenda-setting research does provide some insights into the relationship between social media and traditional media, with investigations of the association between Twitter content and media or party agendas expanding knowledge on this topic. A study by Vargo et al. (2014) demonstrated this correlation. They looked at agenda melding through the use of computational social science methods and empirically testing the NAS. This study compared the network issue agendas of Romney and Obama supporters in 2012 with the news media’s coverage. It found significant positive relationships between media content and supporters tweets, albeit with differences in the types of media (horizontal or vertical<sup>14</sup>) affecting Obama supporters and Romney supporters (Vargo et al, 2014: 310). Although a component of this study’s methodology is content analysis, used to identify network media agendas, a contribution of this work is its shift away from simply relying upon content analysis to demonstrate a relationship. The authors incorporated computational techniques and network analysis to establish the network public agenda<sup>15</sup>.

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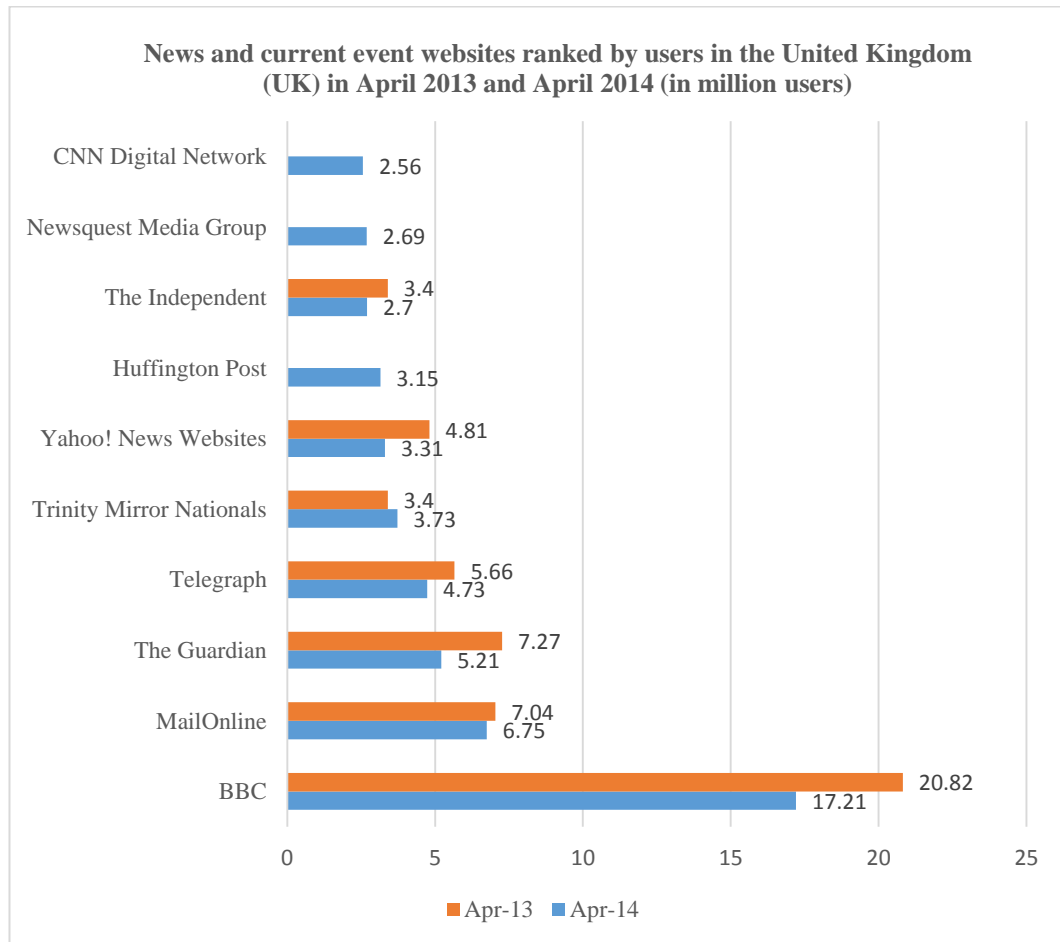
<sup>13</sup> The public agenda is the sum of objects, generally considered as a hierarchy, which are most salient amongst the general publics’ view of current affairs.

<sup>14</sup> Vertical media “reach out to broad general audiences such as daily newspapers and network radio and television” (Shaw and Weaver, 2014: 145). Horizontal media “reach out for audiences with special interests” (Ibid.)

<sup>15</sup> The network public agenda differs from the public agenda in that the former term describes the ways in which objects and attributes are networked in the minds of the public whilst the latter describes a hierarchy of objects of attributes.

Margolis and Resnick's (2000) 'normalization theory' brings focus to the retention of a hierarchical power structure in a media system. According to the authors, "cyberspace is taking on the characteristics of ordinary life" (2000, 3), for example the role of new media and online tools in election campaigns mirrors the role of older media. From this perspective, power relations are top-down and newer media are used to promote the message and push agendas, mirroring the usage of more traditional media. Their argument that "the evidence shows that those who have been powerful in the past – the established organizations, the wealthy, and the privileged – are moving into cyberspace and taking their advantages with them" (Ibid.: 208), is persuasive. The majority of most read online news producers are established media organizations. Figure 2.3 displays evidence that seven out of the top 10 most-read news sites are provided by large traditional media organizations with strong, established audience bases. The news websites included which are "online-only" (*Huffington Post* and *Yahoo! News Websites*) are also notably large media organisations with a global reach, as predicted by the normalization thesis.

Figure 2.3. Most read news websites by UK users (in millions) in April 2013 and April 2014.



Source: Statista (2015a)

At the heart of the normalization theory is a conceptualisation of continued elite power structures and relationships. Theoretically, elite actors can transfer their offline actions to online spaces without any loss of control. Politicians and journalists can use the internet in an election campaign as a tool like any other; the internet and its affordances have been co-opted into existing practices and are now a normal part of campaigning repertoires. To a certain extent this is true. Statistics show that it is now standard practice for parties and candidates to have websites and for many candidates to use social media. During the 2015 UK general election campaign, 2,375 out of 3,849 prospective parliamentary candidates (61.7%) were active on Twitter.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the

<sup>16</sup> Peadar Grogan and Donie O’Sullivan. (2015). “Tracking election candidate activity on Twitter”, *LSE Blogs*, available at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/generalelection/tracking-election-candidate-activity-on-twitter/>. Accessed on 27/04/2015.

majority of traditional media producers also have an online presence, and produce content specifically for online consumption. With individuals increasingly turning to the internet to consume news<sup>17</sup> from familiar sources, the normalization theory can explain why it might be possible for elites to retain power over their traditional areas of control.

Nevertheless, the normalization theory is restrictive when seeking to understand agenda-setting during election campaigns. Looking at power relations through the lens of normalization, we see power predominantly remaining in elite hands. Other exercises of power by other actors online become non-existent or insignificant. Citizens are merely a passive audience receiving communications, as in the era of mass media. Based on the other literature discussed here, I argue that this is not the case. Moreover, normalization is problematic when applied to newer media. The speed at which the technology and its uses can change, and the different uses for which newer media platforms are designed, mean that the normalization theory cannot be applied to this context. In the contemporary media system, media logics are adapted and integrated to suit the needs of the content producer and campaigners act pragmatically by integrating newer and older media tools to optimise their reach and promote their agendas (Vargo et al., 2014; Russell, Hendricks, Choi and Stephens, 2015; Lee, 2007). Therefore, the cyberspace world that Margolis and Resnick described in 2000 was simply the foundation of our contemporary media system, with hybridity of media platforms and practices becoming the new normal since their work was published. Theoretically, Wright (2012) sees a danger in discussing technological developments and their societal impacts as a dichotomous choice between normalization or revolution, namely that

A more nuanced understanding of ‘revolution’ and ‘normalization’ is required, one that places it in a broader range of potential impacts, if we are to assess fairly how new media impact politics, and deliberation in particular. (Wright, 2012, 245)

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<sup>17</sup> The Pew Research Centre recently demonstrated that during the 2012 US Presidential election, 47% of respondents used the internet as their primary news source (Caumont, 2013).

The flexible and interdependent nature of the media system makes control of information and the process of setting the news media agenda increasingly difficult. This condition challenges agenda-setting as a retained area of power over which elites typically have control. Political elites therefore take actions to strengthen their control in this area. Stromer-Galley's (2014) theory of controlled interactivity provides a behavioural dimension to the explanations provided by the theory of computational management (Kreiss, 2012). She describes the strategies employed by political parties and candidates to direct citizen activity in order to enhance their campaigns. Kreiss and Stromer-Galley both provide strong evidence that activists and supporters are directed to act in a desired manner. There is scope here for further investigation. Do citizens passively act in the manner directed by elites, or do citizens act independently in their interactions with campaign activity?

### *2.3.2. Controlled Interactivity and Authenticity*

The theory of controlled interactivity was developed by Stromer-Galley, building on her earlier investigations into interactivity. In 2000, Stromer-Galley published work conceptualizing a duality in interaction, in which she concluded that "most political candidates are inclined towards a façade of interaction" (Stromer-Galley, 2000: 112). The duality explained in this work was between computer-mediated human interaction, described as "interaction between two or more people through the channel of a computer network" (Ibid.: 117) and media-interaction which is interaction "with the medium itself... without ever directly communicating with another person." (Ibid.: 118). This work's central assumption was that the internet is not used to reduce communication barriers during election campaigns. Drawing from this, Stromer-Galley argued strongly for the need to also consider media-interaction alongside computer-mediated human interaction in studies which analyse campaign interactions.

Using a longitudinal approach and a qualitative lens, candidate websites from elections in 1996 and 1998 were analysed alongside interviews with campaign staff. This approach produced results that showed patterns across elections and different levels of state office. The

author noted that although channels for human interaction, for example email addresses or contact forms, increased from 1996 to 1998, they remained a “one-way, top-down communication paradigm” (Ibid.: 122-123). Crucially, Stromer-Galley identified loss of control “over the content of their site and over the communication situation in general” (Ibid.: 124) as one of the main reasons for campaigns’ focus on media interaction. Concluding, the author wrote that

The use to which they put websites is primarily to provide information about the candidate – controlled, highly crafted information, similar to a campaign brochure or television advertisement. A second use is more novel: to provide a façade of interaction with the campaign and the candidate through media interaction. (Stromer-Galley, 2000, 127)

This work was followed in 2004 by a conceptual piece providing clarity on the concept of ‘interactivity’. This article built on the distinction between “interactivity between people” or “interactivity-as-process” and “interactivity between people and computers or networks” or “interactivity-as-product” (Stromer-Galley, 2004: 391). She developed the dualism of interaction in this article, warning of the risk of conflating the two types, and separating the different research questions that studying each can necessarily answer. She moved our understanding of online interactivity forwards through her insistence that studying media interaction allows us to see the “possible social and individual level effects” (Ibid.: 392). In doing so she rejects Rafaeli’s (1988) early definition that reciprocity is a critical component of interactivity.

I agree with Stromer-Galley on this issue to a certain degree, keeping in mind that this particular article was released in 2004. Reciprocity is not a required characteristic of interactivity-as-product. I argue, however, that in the context of social media in 2015 reciprocity is a requisite characteristic of computer-mediated human interaction as social networking sites are premised upon interaction between users and with the content shared by users within social networks. Studying interactivity allows us to see the ways in which elites work to exercise power in the news media agenda setting process; citizens can be mobilized to amplify the desired agenda or issue through newer media tools. Stromer-Galley developed the theory of controlled interactivity in her 2014 book. Through immersion in five US presidential campaigns, from 1996 to 2012, and

interviews with key political campaigners, the author arrives at the theory of controlled interactivity: “when we examine campaigns for their symbolic behaviours ... much of what is offered as interactivity is a simulacrum” (Stromer-Galley, 2014: 5). Controlled interactivity explains campaigns’ use of digital communication technologies (DCTs) as a top-down activity, “DCTs are used to direct and control citizen-supporters to work in concert to achieve campaign aims” (Ibid.: 5).

Message control is a key part of controlled interactivity. Stromer-Galley identifies that

part of the purpose of many of the applications campaigns built for Facebook, Youtube... were to facilitate the two-step flow and push super-supporters to work on behalf of the campaign, whether it was for GOTV efforts or ... helping manage the chaotic messaging in the hybrid media environment. (Ibid.: 169)

The author describes ways in which journalists and political elites “tried to amplify their message by tweeting about it or encouraging supporters to tweet about events or attacks on opponents so as to make a message ‘trend’” (Ibid., 146). Freelon has taken forwards Stromer-Galley’s work and applied controlled interactivity empirically to the 2012 United States presidential campaigns, focussing on message control. He notes that current research on controlled interactivity “largely focuses on the architecture and implementation of digital campaign communication tools as opposed to the interactive processes that occur within them” (Freelon, 2017: 169-170). His work attempts to fill this gap with a study which quantifies controlled interactivity on Facebook during the 2012 US presidential election. Freelon focuses specifically on message discipline, an outcome I argue is important in the news media agenda-setting process. Whilst agenda-setting differs from message discipline in its focus on salience transfer from elite to public agendas, the news media agenda setting process requires message discipline for the activation of network power.

Using a lexicon analysis<sup>18</sup>, Freelon demonstrates that differing levels of success for controlled interactivity on Facebook posts from the Obama and Romney campaigns. He highlights how controlled interactivity is a top-down process but exists in places where there is still space for agency of citizens (Ibid.: 169), which opens the possibility of challenging a campaign's message or introducing new information into the debate. Freelon also highlights how "different types of interactive campaign environments and communication tools enact different degrees and genres of control" (Ibid.: 169). The results of his study describe a high degree of message control on both Romney's and Obama's Facebook pages. The author argues that this provides "evidence that the space's interactivity was effectively controlled" (Freelon, 2017 :177). Freelon's study is important as it provides a positivist test of the theory of controlled interactivity, complementing existing studies of controlled interactivity which have focused on structural elements.

Whilst Stromer-Galley's work is important for understanding the mechanisms through which citizens are directed to share messages, she does not deal with the issues of why they choose to do so. Beyond being supporters of a candidate or party, a choice which in itself may have many reasons, there is an assumption in the theory that citizens interacting with a campaign through controlled interactivity will always act according to the campaign's desires if the criteria for control are met. This may be the case, and research assessing citizen choice within the framework of controlled interactivity would be pertinent here. However, I identify authenticity of communication as being a key factor in a citizen's decision to interact with a campaign, or media producer, and share their message. By successfully mediating authenticity, as in Enli's discussion of Obama 2012 (2015: 109-130), the authenticity contract – as described below – with citizens is upheld. The content of the tweet or post meets the standards for communication on a given site, and citizens have the confidence derived from network power to share the message further.

Stromer-Galley's work also includes a case study of the Obama campaign. Obama's presidential campaigns are seen as a watershed moment in digital campaigning and so this is both

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<sup>18</sup> Lexicon analysis "detects the presence of different topics in a corpus of texts by searching for keywords associated with each topic" (Freelon, 2017: 172).



congruent with the body of literature and relevant. Both studies assess the ways in which the candidates constructed their image. Stromer-Galley focuses on uses of social media to construct the candidates overall image and promote through social networks, whilst Enli focuses on the uses of social media to specifically make the candidate appear authentic<sup>19</sup>. I argue that these two foci work together in strategies of message control within the news media agenda-setting process, and both will be present in successful examples of setting the news media agenda.

Authenticity plays an important role in enabling actors to meet communication standards on social media, and hence exercise network power. Enli has written extensively on the subject of authenticity. Her theory of mediated authenticity suggests that authenticity is constructed through authenticity illusions, which are the construction of the authenticity of actors through scripted performances. Illusions are created “through various production techniques, [where] raw material is manipulated in order to be compatible with media logics and format criteria” (Enli, 2016: 121). Audiences accept these due to the authenticity contract made with media producers – “an informal agreement regarding where the line is drawn between reality adjustment and outright fakery” (Enli, 2015: 132). Enli finishes her investigation by suggesting seven characteristics of mediated authenticity drawn from her case studies: predictability, spontaneity, immediacy, confessions, ordinariness, ambivalence, and imperfection (Enli, 2015: 136-137).

Enli’s work is premised on a series of case studies which present authenticity scandals, “mediated communication [which] fails and further introduces problems for audiences, as well as society at large” (Enli, 2015, 18), and authenticity puzzles, “when the media producers present a puzzle for the audience” (Ibid., 18). The case studies include The War of the Worlds radio programme, Susan Boyle and reality television, and, as mentioned above, Obama’s presidential campaigns. The goal of the case studies is to use each puzzle or scandal to “illuminate a change in the relation between producers and audiences” (Ibid., 19). Central to Enli’s argument is that the development of new media technologies necessarily results in a renegotiation of the authenticity contract. There

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<sup>19</sup> Definitions of authenticity are a “moving target” (Enli, 2015: 2). In general authenticity is defined in opposition to fake or unreal events, information, and personalities. I describe my definition of authenticity of communication below, which will be used in this dissertation as a theoretical frame.

is no universal definition of authenticity within the literature, a fact which necessitates building an understanding of authenticity from relevant research on social media. This dissertation uses Enli's mediated authenticity as the primary theoretical lens for this purpose. The characteristics which constitute authenticity of communication on social media, and which are analysed in later chapters, are informed by Enli's characteristics alongside knowledge from other scholars studying the traits of newer media and authenticity which connect elites to citizens.

To be authentic as a mediated persona, whether a politician running in a campaign or a media producer promoting a story, is to uphold your end of the authority contract and to demonstrate those relevant characteristics of authenticity as required. Each medium has communication standards that should be met to be perceived as authentic. Standards are the rules of communication on a given site. These can be formal protocols "embedded in technological artefacts... [which] make sure that its specifications are incessantly applied" (Coretti and Pica, 2015: 953). Standards are also the informal rule for communicating on, and with, a network. I define authentic communications on social media as those that meet the standards required by Twitter and Facebook, outlined below. The standards used in this dissertation are drawn from Enli's characteristics. I define authenticity of communications on social media as constituting three of Enli's characteristics as standards: (1) spontaneity; (2) immediacy; and (3) predictability.

This definition also follows work by other scholars studying authenticity of elite actors. Marwick and boyd (2010) asked Twitter users with a large number of followers what made their tweets authentic ("what makes an individual seem authentic on Twitter?") (Ibid.: 118)). Their respondents reported that a mixture of self-censorship and revealing personal information was critical in creating authentic communications (Ibid.: 125-126). The sample of Twitter users is not delineated in the article, but it appears from the discussion that the respondents are individual users who report using variations of confessions, ordinariness, ambivalence, and imperfection to communicate authentically with their imagined audience. These characteristics do not meet the professionalism with which media and political elites typically communicate on social networking sites, with notable exceptions (Enli, 2017). In contrast, spontaneity, immediacy, and predictability are applicable to expectations of elite communications held by citizens. Figure 2.4

contains the definition of each of these characteristics and demonstrates their applicability to social media content, drawn from current literature.

Figure 2.4 Defining the characteristics of authentic communication on social media

	<b>Enli’s definition (2015: 136-137)</b>	<b>Additional work: connecting with citizens authentically</b>	<b>Applicability to Social Media</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Spontaneity	Performances are rehearsed, directed, and pre-planned to seem improvised and spontaneous.	Montgomery (2001) described the perception of “unrehearsed discourse” (Montgomery, 2001: 447) as necessary for authentic communication from political elites (study of UK election broadcast).	Tweets and Facebook posts should not appear planned, even if they are.	Authentic communications <i>appear</i> to be unrehearsed, spontaneous responses to events or actors.
Immediacy	The immediate is closely related to “liveness” and imparts a sense of togetherness whereby the producers and the audiences are interconnected in a shared “now” in which they construct meaning and authenticity together.	Coleman and Wright (2008) reviewed work on political blogs and representative democracy. They noted that competition for time and attention has become an increasingly central concern for information dissemination and elites need to connect with citizens at a faster pace.	Tweets and Facebook posts must be produced to react quickly to events and actors, updating with new information as soon as possible.	Authentic communications are timely and contribute information to an event in a seemingly <i>live</i> manner.
Predictability	Mediated authenticity is crafted via a consistent use of genre features and conventions for mediated communication.	Coleman (2006: 458) described how “politicians require authenticity to gain their mandate, comprising both	Tweets and Facebook posts must be written consistently within the genre of their network. Citizens expect to see tweets	Authentic communications are predictable in that they contain the discursive features and technological

Trustworthiness of mediated content is often evaluated on the basis of previous experiences with the media.

sincerity and consistency”. Consistency in communication style is an important means of constructing trust and connecting with citizens.

containing markers such as retweets, hashtags, URLs, AV, and @ mentions, the tone may be more informal. Facebook posts may also contain URLs, tagged users, and AV, but the tone may be less informal and hashtags will rarely be used.

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standards that users *expect* to see.

The benefit of sharing ‘authentic’ content for message control within the process of setting the news media agenda is that it enables the producer to tap into social networks and their inherent network power:

The support from the user network, in the forms of, for example, retweets or other mentions, is indeed an authenticity illusion because it provides tweets and updates with credibility, and thus makes users less critical than if the support is lacking. (Enli, 2015, 93)

Successfully mediating authenticity and combining this with strategies to enable controlled interactivity should therefore lead to increased message discipline among citizen-users through the manifestation of two-step flow and the use of network power, discussed further below. Both parties – media producer and citizen – agree to the authenticity contract. To engage successfully in the news media agenda setting process these factors must be present. However, when the authenticity contract is broken, for example when a tweet does not meet the communication standards required by Twitter users, I hypothesise that strategies of message control through controlled interactivity will not enable the actor to be successful in setting the news media’s agenda. I conceptualise this state as *commodification of citizen-user content and action*, where the direction of their agency is obvious and as a result they choose not to work with the elite actor, risking the potential for them to challenge or subvert information online. It will be possible to

identify when the authenticity contract is broken through comparison of the features of units of communication text with the standards outlined in Figure 2.4. Furthermore, assessment of citizen-users reactions to, and comments on, the text will enable me to highlight breakdowns of the authenticity illusion.

With the establishment of controlled interactivity and authenticity as central to the theoretical framework of this thesis, questions are raised regarding how elite actors incorporate social media into their content outputs during a campaign. I seek to answer this question from a hybrid media perspective, considering how hybrid media logics are used to create authentic communications which travel across media platforms. Underpinning this is the concept of power: how do elites interact with each other? Who has power in the news media agenda setting process? How is power exercised through these relationships? I now turn to a discussion of that concept. I begin by looking at power specifically within studies of agenda-setting, and broaden this to question the way in which power relationships between actors have been evaluated within the media system more generally.

## 2.4 Power in the news media agenda setting process

### *2.4.1 Power in studies of the impact of the internet on agenda-setting*

Since the development and adoption of social networking sites, scholars have sought to understand their impact on the agenda-setting process (see Lee et al, 2005; Martin, 2014; Tran, 2014). These studies have made many empirical advances, showing how fragmentation of news producers, content and audiences, and intermediality have impacted the agenda-setting process. These two foci are currently central within research on the influence of the internet on agenda-setting during election campaigns. The first concentrates on changes in the media environment which have caused a fragmentation of news producers and their audiences, and as a result have rendered the agenda-setting process more difficult (Boyle, 1996; Schoenbach, de Waal, and Lauf, 2005). The second analyses intermedia agenda-setting, the process of information from other news organisations or platforms having an impact upon each other's agendas (Russell et al., 2015;

Sweetser, Golan, and Wanta, 2008; Lee, 2007). While these developments have generally been studied in isolation they exist in tandem, raising key questions yet to be addressed on the cross-media interaction of fragmented audiences. This makes the questions “who sets the media agenda?” (*which* actors are involved), and “how is the media agenda set?” (*what* is the process of agenda-setting) particularly difficult to answer.

However, one failing of this body of literature is that existing analyses of ‘internet agenda-setting’ are annexed from analyses of processes and relationships that exist in or between media. While understanding the effect of single media platforms and comparing between platforms is important, I argue that in neglecting the context of hybridity or intermediality these platforms operate within such studies cannot sufficiently explain how the media agenda is defined. There is also a need to build on existing literature through providing explanations of the dialectical nature of power that influences the news media agenda are missing from the literature.

Without taking into account the hybrid nature of the UK’s media system and using a methodological approach which analyses cross-media information flow, it is not possible for studies to provide a complete description of the news media agenda setting process and relations of power in UK election campaigns. Not only has the nature of the media system changed, but the changes to processes of news production and dissemination are irrefutable. It has altered the way consumers receive and react to news stories. As outlined above, elites have had to adapt their news media agenda-setting process in order to try to retain their dominance. This results in the simultaneous use of power through hierarchical and networked channels.

Tran (2014) explicates these differences and the difficulties and opportunities that the internet generated for agenda-setting research. He describes how “the wide variety of online communication channels” allows citizens to blend together a variety of media agendas to suit their own taste (2014: 221). This weakens the influence of the mass media. At the same time reciprocal relationships between the public, media, and social actors have increased (Ibid.). This creates a theoretical puzzle, which is at the heart of this thesis. While an increase in fragmentation of media production and consumption and an increase in intermediality have *different* impacts on the ways in which power is exercised in the agenda-setting process, they appear to work *simultaneously*. I

will argue that understanding the impact of these seemingly opposing forces reveals how and why power can function in the dialectical sense, combining hierarchical and networked forms.

ICTs have become ubiquitous in everyday life (Fuchs, 2017: 86). News production and dissemination practices have adapted to these technologies to both produce content that audiences will consume, and to enable journalists to break news continuously (Saltzis, 2012). Moving from an era of mass media to the information age (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999), the news industry has incorporated online tools into their production and dissemination repertoires (Machin and Niblock, 2006). This serves as a way to not only break news quickly, particularly for traditional print organisations, but also to engage with and integrate the opinions and creative output of their audience (Schoenbach et al, 2005; Agarwal and Barthel, 2013). This process also functions inversely, with newer media providing a voice for citizens through lower barriers to media production such as blogs, micro-blogging platforms, and video-upload websites. Citizens also have an increased opportunity to talk back to media producers and political elites – using these same methods, whether or not their input is directly sought (Gillmor, 2004; Stanyer, 2009; Giglietto and Selva, 2014).

In his review of online agenda-setting literature, Tran (2014) concludes that “Mainstream mass media entities still exert their agenda-setting power, but they are no longer a sole force.” Studies of power relationships have attempted to explain this phenomenon by analysing the impact of the internet on the agenda-setting process during an election campaigns. For example, work by Meraz (2009, 2011a, 2011b) centres on the relationship between blogs, print news producers, and their online blog outputs, addressing the question of *who* sets the media agenda. She demonstrates a symbiotic relationship wherein traditional news producers were more likely to impact blog output, but blogs did play a role in the redistribution of communication power from elites to citizens (Meraz, 2011b: 120). This suggests dispersal of communication power and therefore is important as evidence for elites’ loss of control over messages.

Other research has found evidence for the opposing exercise of power through continued hierarchical relationships. In their study of the 2000 South Korean general election, Lee et al. (2005) concentrated on the role of intermedia agenda-setting between internet bulletin boards and

newspaper coverage. They found that “the Internet may be regarded as another source that influences the traditional news media in terms of intermedia agenda-setting” (Lee et al., 2005: 68). Although this appears to describe power as dispersed throughout the internet they draw a more balanced conclusion, acknowledging the role of citizens whilst maintaining that media producers have dominance. The authors state that “this research has demonstrated that the Internet bulletin board may function as a channel that journalists are able to access in order to ascertain the climate of opinion in the shortest time” (ibid.). Therefore, these findings illustrate a two-step flow from the mainstream media to bulletin boards and then to the public; an interaction of hierarchical and networked power. Lee et al’s contribution recognises the impact of intermediality on the news agenda. This is meaningful for our understanding of the process of setting the media agenda. Their analysis of the way in which citizen discussion online can feed into news reports reflects a reality of news production which bears further investigation. Further studies of this intersection are required and this thesis contributes to moving our understanding forwards.

More recent research has demonstrated the relevance of these findings to the UK general election that this thesis takes as its case study. In a micro-level study on the impact of the internet in the 2009 German federal election campaign, Jungherr (2014: 243) asked whether the number of tweets would follow their own pattern or reflect the amount of media coverage of actors. Jungherr (2014: 242) proposed a “logic of Twitter” grounded in Chadwick’s theory of a hybrid media system, which states that “the volume of comments on Twitter should rise when the volume of traditional news media coverage of political actors rises”. His findings are complex and add weight to the theoretical puzzle regarding power relations. On days where a media event took place, a debate or polling day, tweets closely followed the coverage from mainstream media. On the other days analysed, Twitter users tended to post in reaction to information from the Internet (Ibid.: 252). Jungherr’s inclusion of hybridity as a key theoretical element in his research is a particular asset of this study. The significance of his study lies in the evidence it provides that citizens on Twitter are at times led by, and at times independent from, mainstream media agendas.

Although providing important insights, the studies discussed above are limited in scope for applicability of findings for election agenda-setting across media platforms as a whole. Studies



seeking to understand online or intermedia agenda-setting during elections must ensure they look across the wide variety of sources online to fully comprehend the process. This dissertation will build on the findings of these studies to analyse the process of setting the news media agenda. This argument is supported by Martin (2014: 28), who demonstrates how “research has not yet provided conclusive statements about the impact of information technology on both the media and public agendas, and their relationship in the agenda-setting process”. He seeks to remedy this by presenting findings from two studies of agenda-setting in two different elections. The first took place in the 2008 Indiana primary election using a content analysis of the *Indianapolis Star*, its website indystar.com, and readers’ comments available ‘below the line’ on indystar.com. The findings demonstrate extremely strong correlations between the print and online content, and a “distinct pattern of daily agenda setting from media to public as measured through the feedback comments” (Martin, 2014: 34). However, this was a short-term, immediate agenda-setting influence and was limited in scope as it only measured those who chose to consume the content of the *Indianapolis Star*.

Martin’s second study focusses on the US Senate elections. He used McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) original methodology involving surveys and a content analysis to compare media and candidate agendas through news content and press releases. Two key findings emerged. Firstly, that the websites of traditional news organizations “maintain[ed] a strong agenda-setting influence on the public” in spite of the changes on how news is produced, consumed, and disseminated (Martin, 2014: 47). Secondly, evidence was found to support the notion that candidates increase their efforts online to “influence the public’s consumption of election information” (Ibid.: 48). Whilst Martin’s studies use only content analysis to demonstrate correlations, they do provide strong evidence that a hierarchical power relationship exists. Yet, elites still need to increase their efforts in order to influence the agenda and control what citizens consume. This dissertation seeks to build on the literature outlined here by evaluating and understanding the power relationships through which these efforts occur.

#### *2.4.2. Power Relations: Tension between theories of hierarchies and networks*

As online technologies have developed, networks of communities have come to exist in these spaces. In these spaces power can be exercised in a number of different ways. For example, in a hierarchical manner, such as through an official forum moderator, or be networked, moving from dispersed to directed depending on the news of the day or the actions taken by influential users (for example Twitter). Castells' work underlines the workings of power in this system:

Whoever the political actors and whatever their orientations, they exist in the power game through and by the media, in the whole variety of an increasingly diverse media system, which includes computer-mediated communication networks. (Castells, 2010: 507)

That is to say that, regardless of the position a person or organization holds within society, the potential to affect information flows is inherent in all actors. Considering the concurrent professionalisation of political communication (Davis, 2000: 39-40), I expect to find evidence of predominant control of communication by elites working within a hybrid media system. Political and media elites will strategize to activate the latent potential of citizen networks in ways which may appear to relinquish some of their communicative agency to non-elites, whilst substantively maintaining a tight grip. Stromer-Galley (2014: 18) sees this as a continuation of a hierarchical power dynamic. Yet the position of the networked dynamic should not be easily dismissed and requires further investigation.

The concept of power underlies all discussion within this dissertation, and is the thread that links the previous sections of this chapter. The literature available on power is vast and the concept itself is essentially contested (Beetham, 1991; Keohane and Nye, 2001; Haugaard, 2002: 45; Latour, 2005; Lukes, 2005). However, there some particularly important interpretations which this review will assess, namely Grewal (2008), Foucault (1982), and Castells (2010). The predominant empirical understandings are the three faces of power: (1) Dahl's (1963) decision-making; Bachrach and Baratz's (1962) agenda-setting; and (3) Lukes' (1974; 2005) preference-shaping. These conceptions do have some use for understanding the different forms of action that

an exercise of power can take. Setting the news agenda in an election, for example, may require a repertoire which encompasses all of these conceptualisations. Nevertheless, their conceptualisations are structural and top-down. They do not allow us to understand the reciprocity of power between actors in networked relationships.

Throughout this chapter I have referred to Grewal's (2008) theory of network power which uses relations of sociability to understand power that operates through social structures (Grewal, 2008: 44-45). Power in Grewal's theory is relational and exists within social networks. It is effectively available for those able to join those networks. This is achieved by meeting the communication standards and standards required. Grewal describes clearly why actors may join a network:

Where we can identify a pattern of consistent social behaviour that operates like a standard – regulating access to others by providing a framework for social coordination through conventionality – we should expect to see a positive feedback dynamic that makes it increasingly attractive for others to adopt the same behaviour. (Ibid.: 66)

When we considered the fragmentation of audiences and the intermedia characteristics of news media agenda setting in a hybrid media system, it is clear to see that the power that lies within a network is pivotal to the news media agenda setting process. Tapping into the power of social networks, such as Twitter and Facebook, may offer elite actors a way to direct information flow in this more chaotic communication environment. I will analyse elite engagement with networks to assess their ability to use network power to direct their messages as part of the news media agenda setting process.

An example of elites using social networks in this was is found in the work of Enli and Simonsen (2017) who analyse connectivity to assess the impact of “social media logic” on the professions of journalism and politics. The authors found that social media logic is strongly related to established media logics used within traditional media. By operationalising connectivity as the hashtag on Twitter, Enli and Simonsen analysed how ten Norwegian journalists' and ten Norwegian politicians' performed their roles on Twitter. Enli and Simonsen describe Twitter

hashtags as being endowed with power and agency (Ibid.: 3). This study therefore suggests that using hashtags is a way in which journalists and politicians can join, direct, or reframe discussions on the social networking site. Given that elite actors on average have a greater number of followers than citizen-users, journalists and politicians can have more impact through their use of hashtags (ibid.: 2).

The findings of this study point to clear attempts by the elite actors to use the power inherent in the network, whilst also meeting and retaining established professional norms. Overall a strategic use of hashtags in general was noted. Furthermore the politicians used a much higher number of hashtags than the journalists, with a total of 4,482 compared to 3,407 (Ibid.: 5). Politicians' type of usage also differed to that of journalists. Politicians used more hashtags in retweets, whereas journalists used more hashtags in original tweets. According to the authors, "this tells us that, when contributing to a discursive hashtag network, the journalists aimed to contribute with a unique message, comment, or statement that in turn could be retweeted by other users" (Ibid.: 9). By sharing their own original content with a hashtag, journalists were aiming to introduce their own information into the online discussion, looking to take the lead in setting the agenda by working with existing network standards (pre-existing hashtags) (Ibid.: 10). I expect to find that in the UK general election campaign both groups of elite actors use hashtags in this way to try to direct social media discourse, and also encourage their supporters or audiences to use the organizations' hashtags or share their tweets within their own networks.

Arguments for relational power have developed in research over time. According to Foucault, power is relational: "if we speak of the structures or mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others" (Foucault, 1982: 786). Foucault's concept of power was developed in the pre-Internet era, and hence he highlighted what he saw as the intrinsic separation of the exercise of relationships of power and the exercise of relationships of communication, although he did recognise that they are "relationships which always overlap one another, support one another reciprocally, and use each other mutually as a means to an end" (Foucault, 1982: 787). The work of Manuel Castells helps us to overcome this tension and revisit relational power for the digital age.

In *The Rise of The Network Society*, Castells claims that “The network morphology is also a source of dramatic reorganization of power relationships. Switches connecting the networks ... are privileged instruments of power” (Castells, 2010: 507). Structural power is inherent here in Castells description and whilst a division between communication and the exercise of power may have existed in the mass media era, the new media environment is characterised by the integrated nature of technologies and online media. Therefore, since exercises of communications and power can be symbiotic, this separation is no longer inevitable, particularly in the realm of agenda-setting. Through the reciprocal networks of communication described by Castells, the exercise of power includes communications as a key tool, and action has evolved to include the meshing of all three faces of power.

Another tension within the literature is that Foucault’s understanding of power opposes an intrinsic element of the three faces of power; the three faces endow specific people or organizations with power, but, by definition, relational power could allow anyone, at any time, to exercise power over another, regardless of status. Although in practice Foucault recognised that relational power is organised in ways such that certain actors manage others’ conduct to a greater extent than others. The point is that hierarchy must be explained in every instance, historically; it is not a given. It can be argued that power only becomes visible and viable when it is effectively exercised by one actor over another. From this perspective it may be more useful for this thesis to analyse how power is exercised through networks, alongside hierarchical relationships. Grewal’s theory of network power allows us to do this.

Gallagher (2008) interprets Foucault’s understanding of power as diverse and dispersed, situated not within individuals but with the relationships between them. Many of the studies discussed here challenge this by investigating the correlations between different forms of media, but what remains clear is the continued existence of hierarchy in relationships between actors during election campaigns. This is supported by authors who maintain that communications networks are hierarchical in the contemporary media system, and argue that media producers must continue to rely upon elite sources and the first or second face of power. For example, Graber (2006: 19) asserts that because journalists continue to rely on political elites as sources, their

hierarchical relationship remains. Yet Castells has argued convincingly for an approach which takes into consideration the “network society”. He states that

A network-based social structure is a highly dynamic, open system, susceptible to innovating without threatening its balance... the network morphology is also a source of dramatic reorganization of power relationships. (Castells, 2010: 501-502)

If we understand power as relational, the flatter actor networks (Beckett, 2010, 2012; Thorson, 2013) which characterize much of interaction online could enable the exercise of power to be either more effective or more easily challenged. Castells’ arguments contradict the notion that hierarchical power structures remain fixed. “The rise of the network society”, as Castells explains, has reorganized existing structures. New technologies have led to “a network of producers and users who can communicate their experiences, cumulatively, learning by using and by doing” (Castells, 2010: 36). Yet the research presented here has shown that within agenda-setting processes and election campaigning at least, a hierarchy does persist. Studies of agenda-setting discussed throughout this review have tended to prioritise one actor over another, placing politicians, journalists, and citizens in a hierarchy. The same treatment is given to media platforms, even in studies of intermediality a hierarchy is often described. Yet, the process of setting the news media agenda is not so straightforward. Media logics and practices become hybridised, which leads me to question whether a similar phenomenon has happened to exercises of power. Going forwards, any notion of power relations between political elites, traditional media producers, and citizens in the contemporary media system must consider and include the networked nature of media platforms. It is these relationships of power between actors in the news media agenda setting process which require further investigation. Therefore, I seek to uncover how hierarchical power and network power co-exist within this fluid process.

## 2.5. Conclusion

This chapter has addressed some of the current research on agenda-setting and election campaigns which seeks to answer questions regarding the news media agenda setting process and the relationships of actors involved. It has also incorporated a review of the relevant key themes of media systems, election campaigning, and power which are integral to understanding the process during the 2015 UK general election. I have established the context for communications in the election campaign as a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), which facilitates the intermeshing of different media platforms and logics. I noted that due to the hybridization of media, the news media agenda and associated narratives become increasingly difficult to control. Additionally, literature on election campaigning shows that political and media elites use management strategies to control the activism of supporters and audiences, which leads to the question of whether this can be applied in a UK context, and what impact such tactics have on agenda-setting. Finally, power is exercised in two specific ways. Established hierarchical power relationships remain between politicians and journalists but face greater challenges on social media. In order to overcome this, elites attempt to access and use the network power that exists on social networking sites.

Existing research into agenda-setting does not fully describe and explain how this important media effect functions in a contemporary election campaign. Whilst individual studies of the relationships between two media platforms and the actors using them – or a focus on the internet and related tools – do further our knowledge of the effect of ICTs, there is the need to look holistically at political information flows through the media system. This should occur simultaneously with a methodological development which does not rely on content analysis but analyses information flows across platforms and seeks to understand the behaviour of actors involved. This would provide an extra dimension in understanding both *why* certain actions are taken in the news media agenda-setting process and *how* the agenda is set.

Of the themes that run throughout this research, power is central. This study seeks to lay bare power relations and how they impact the news media agenda-setting process, alongside the way in which they are being received, challenged, or subverted by the different actor groups during the election campaign. Although it is accepted that power will be exercised through

strategies that reflect the three faces approach, this thesis places Grewal's (2008) theory of network power at the centre. Alongside other understandings of relational power, such as that described by Foucault (1982), network power can be specifically applied to the structures of social networking sites and doing so enables an understanding of the ways in which becoming part of these networks may help political and media elites retain control over the news media agenda setting process. Relations of power between elites are specifically of interest in this process. Whilst research has framed either politicians or journalists as leading agenda-setting, I argue that the process is an ongoing negotiation for power between these two actor groups. This leads me to my first research question: (1) How do power relationships between traditional news media producers and political elites function in the 2015 UK general election campaign, and how do they impact the agenda-setting process?

With message control central to campaigns, but under threat from a wider variety of actors, being able to use the networked power to direct information flows online – and activate two-step flow – offers elites a way to retain control over agenda-setting in this space. This gives rise to my second and third research questions: (2) How do traditional news media producers and political parties attempt to successfully harness network power?; and (3) How are social and digital media integrated into traditional news media producers' outputs, and how does this impact their power relationships with political elites?

However, in order to realise network power, an actor must become part of the network authentically. That is to say they must meet the communication standards of a given network, and the authenticity contract as described by Enli (2015) must be upheld. I define authentic communication on social media as meeting the standards of spontaneity, immediacy, and predictability. Meeting these criteria will enable elites to more fully enact message control, and hence agenda-setting, through controlling the interactivity of their networks with the information they are promoting (Stromer-Galley, 2014). Conversely, if communication standards of a network are not met then I expect to find that the authenticity contract is compromised and actions taken by elites in social media spaces therefore become inauthentic. This results in citizen-users being less likely to share information as directed by a political or media elite. Inauthenticity reveals



strategies of controlled interactivity to citizens. Whilst under controlled interactivity citizen-users may have felt they were working alongside a campaign, through inauthentic action they become privy to their commodification. This may produce a negative reaction, whereby citizens challenge or subvert messages online and the elites lose control of the agenda.

My final three research questions are drawn from these expectations: (4) How are (i) information sourced from social media, and (ii) the technological affordances of social media incorporated into the process of setting the news media agenda?; (5) Do citizen-users on social media play any role, such as intervention in the information cycle, in the process of setting the agenda?; and (6) Do citizen-users on social media replicate or challenge agendas? These questions will guide my research to analyse the role of each actor group in the news media agenda setting process as enacted through social media. They will also enable me to describe the procedures by which journalists and politicians use hybrid media logics to access network power.

Understanding power as relational, existing through networks within a hybrid media system, therefore makes room for citizens rejecting power as expressed through agenda-setting but can still accommodate the existence of a hierarchy. With both hierarchical and networked relationships existing within an increasingly chaotic media environment, this thesis hypothesises that controlled interactivity strategies that appear as authentic may be an important part of the news media agenda setting process. The aim being to harness networks of party activists or media audiences to promote agenda items and desired messages during a campaign. It is expected that social media in particular will play a role in this through the process of two-step flow (Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955)). However, the risk of commodification remains if the action does not meet communication standards and hence breaks the authenticity contract.

# Chapter 3 Methodology and Research Design

## 3.1 Introduction

This thesis uses qualitative methods to analyse and describe the process of setting the news media agenda in the 2015 UK general election. Bryman defines qualitative research as a “strategy that usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data” (Bryman, 2004: 19-20). Bryman elucidates the indicators of qualitative research, which include (1) an inductive approach to theory and research; (2) “an emphasis on the way individuals interpret their social world” (ibid.: 20); and (3) the embodiment of “a view of social reality as a constantly shifting emergent property of individuals’ creation” (ibid.). These indicators underpin the design of this dissertation’s methodology. I chose a qualitative methodology to enable me to understand the decisions taken by individuals who wanted to be a part of the news media agenda setting process. Some descriptive statistics are used but this dissertation moves away from the methodological reliance on quantitative analysis prevalent in agenda-setting research.

This chapter begins by recapping the key theoretical assumptions of this dissertation and the rationale for its qualitative approach. It then describes each method used to collect and analyse data, and their relevance to the research. The research consists of semi-structured interviews with political and media elites, observations of two news production teams, and case studies of two news events which occurred during the election campaign. The analytical approach comprises qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis of content produced and disseminated by all actor groups. This data will be triangulated with information from interviews conducted with political actors – candidates and staff – and with journalists and bloggers, and from observations of journalists at BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme and ITV News’ *Election 2015*. The output will be a thick description which will detail power relationships and the news media agenda-setting process. By combining these three methods, this dissertation can evaluate communications,

understanding them within the behavioural context of elite interactions and actors' own beliefs about the media system.

This dissertation analyses the relationships and structures of inter-elite communication power as well as elite-citizen power relationships. In this way it is situated within a broad body of literature comprising research on interactions between actors during elections. From seminal studies such as Margaret Scammell's *Designer Politics: How Elections are Won* (1995), to more recent work such as Rasmus Kleis Nielsen's *Ground Wars* (2012) and Cristian Vaccari's *Digital Politics in Western Democracies: A Comparative Study* (2013), scholars have sought to understand how political campaigners, media producers, and citizens interact during election campaigns and what impact the media system has on those interactions.

Researching communication processes across online and offline media poses difficulties. Online research, in particular, poses problems for both data collection techniques and the quality of the resulting datasets. Two of the most ingrained problems for researchers are: (1) the problem of rapid change in the online environment; and (2) the problem of flawed datasets and untested research methods. A number of studies will be considered in this chapter and their approaches to understanding the relationship between actors online will be assessed. Research by Jungherr (2014) is included in which the author studies intermedia agenda-setting by comparing the relationship of political coverage on Twitter with coverage in the traditional media during the 2009 German Federal Election. Abascal-Mena, Lopez-Ornelas and Zepeda-Hernandez (2013) studied communications on Twitter during the 2012 Mexican General Election, their study demonstrates the value of computational methods in social science research designs. Work by Anstead and O'Loughlin (2015) provides a good example of a mixed-methods approach and successfully integrating tools to understand how social media data were used by media producers and other elites during the 2010 UK General Election campaign. I critically evaluate their methods used and conclusions drawn, using these to question current approaches and to suggest ways in which this thesis can begin to overcome some of the problems faced when studying agenda-setting in election campaigns.

Using a research design that incorporates mixed-methods and a qualitative approach enabled me to collect data and to react quickly to breaking news stories during the campaign. I use an “integrated analysis” of the data developed by Moran-Ellis et al. (2006: 54). It involves the generation of a number of different datasets, followed by the identification of themes and analytic questions across the data. These provide “threads” for further investigation which will “generate a multi-faceted picture of the phenomenon” (ibid.) For this research the datasets include interview transcripts, participant-observation field notes, tweets, Facebook posts, online and offline news media articles, and broadcasts.

Using mixed qualitative methods will enable me to understand the behaviours, strategies, and reasons behind actions taken by political and media elites. Within research on agenda-setting, case studies and content analysis are prevalent as the most common methods used. Comparative intermedia approaches analysing relationships between two media platforms or organizations are also common. To contribute to the progress of this field, this dissertation uses a qualitative research design based on pragmatism and flexibility. I take a *cross-media* approach to my analysis of interactions in the UK’s media system; a driving force of this study was the need for researchers to consider the agenda-setting process across the media system. The methodology reflects this assumption and is part of growing a body of work which uses cross-media research to investigate communication and the “interrelatedness of media” (Hasebrink and Hepp, 2017: 364).

The methodology of this dissertation is also informed by Salmons (2016) description of *deep data*. The availability of ‘big data’ gives researchers the opportunity to collect and quantitatively analyse vast datasets, and doing so produces a “broad but shallow” outcome (Salmons, 2016: xiii). Analysing a ‘big data’ corpus of tweets was a consideration when designing this research. However, approaching the dissertation from an interpretivist standpoint led me to select qualitative methods, which offer the opportunity to not only observe online interactions but also to ask questions of subjects in order to understand their behaviour. This was achieved through the use of interviews and participant-observations. In arguing for a turn towards qualitative methods in political communication research, Karpf et al (2015: 1890) highlight how “Qualitative approaches help us answer the *how* and *what* questions that must be addressed in order to answer

the *why* and *so what* questions.” I combine qualitative methods with analysis of content produced by political parties, news producers, and citizens in order to understand the roles each play in the news media agenda setting process.

This chapter begins by outlining the theoretical and methodological underpinnings which inform this research. It describes the challenges faced when conducting research online and the steps taken to overcome these. The second part of this chapter describes the methodological approach to data collection and analysis which will answer the research questions posed in Chapter 1. The methodology comprises qualitative mixed-methods, including observations, semi-structured interviews, and discourse analysis. It recognises the limitations inherent in internet research and posits ways of overcoming these to collect data for analysis.

### 3.2. Designing research for thick description: Identifying commodification and controlled interactivity?

This dissertation places Grewal’s (2008) theory of network power at the centre of its theoretical framework. The theory of network power is also measured in relation to the continuation of hierarchical power relations between elite actors. Brought together, this conceptualisation offers a reflexive interpretation of power, making room for citizens to respond to media agendas within networked relationships whilst accommodating the continued existence of a hierarchical order comprised of media and political elites. Methodologically, observing network power poses some challenges. It must be established that, firstly, network power relations exist between citizen-users, and secondly, that elite actors have tried to harness that power and, in doing so, have subsequently been successful or unsuccessful. To this end I employ *thick description* (Geertz, 2003) to ensure correct identification of power relationships and exertions, an accurate analysis guided by the research questions, and internal validity<sup>20</sup>. Described by Geertz (2003: 158) with regard to ensuring reliability in ethnography:

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<sup>20</sup> Internal validity in qualitative research is defined as “whether there is a good match between researchers’ observations and the theoretical ideas they develop” (Bryman, 2004: 273).

The ethnographer ‘inscribes’ social discourse; *he writes it down* [emphasis in original]. In doing so, he turns it from a passive event, which exists only in its moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be consulted.

By inscribing a thick descriptive account of information flow across media platforms I will be able to demonstrate actions taken by elites to harness network power, the success of these actions on social media sites, and citizens’ responses to elite communications.

A multitude of different power relationships can exist between actors and can be active during the agenda-setting process. Therefore selecting methods to collect data which will enable me to observe and understand the different configurations of power is paramount in this research design. In order to reach the required depth of detail in data, I selected observation of news teams and interviews with journalists. These methods were used by Williams et al. (2011) to understand how audience content was included in the BBC’s news output and enabled them to describe how “the rise of UGC [user-generated content] at the BBC has largely involved harnessing audience material in order to fit within existing long-established processes of journalistic production” (Williams et al., 2011: 94).

Political parties have a variety of relationships to manage. To set the agenda they must engage with traditional media organizations as well as with activists and party supporters. Additionally, their campaigns must try to capture the attention of undecided citizens; those who may not support a party or be particularly engaged in politics. The use of interviews with candidates and party staff, combined with an analysis of the information outputs of political parties, will enable me to analyse how parties and individual politicians use online media to manage their relationships and promote their content. The work of Enli and Skogerbø (2013) sets a precedent for the use of these qualitative techniques. The authors explored the reasons behind the social media use of individual politicians: “The research design can be described as explorative, qualitative and longitudinal, aiming to identify development and emerging practices of social media strategies and user patterns practice in Norwegian politics” (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013: 760). These relationships may be activated in a number of ways by elites seeking to exercise agenda-setting power in a hybrid media system. This necessitates an understanding of power

relationships which is multidimensional, incorporating networked and hierarchical power structures.

Recapping the theoretical framework described in Chapter 2 outlines the necessity for thick description drawn from a variety of methods to constitute this dissertation's methodology. I am seeking to understand how the news media agenda is set during the 2015 UK general election campaign taking place in a hybrid media system. Within this, I expect to find evidence of controlled interactivity or *commodification of citizen-users*. I further expect that commodification of citizen-users will be related to inauthenticity in communications, that is to say producing social media posts that do not meet the standards of a social networking site outlined in Chapter 2 render a communication inauthentic. Inauthentic communications do not grant the originator access to network power.

This is a complicated process. Mixed methods are necessary to assess it and find, or otherwise, evidence of commodification of citizen-users and the impact on setting the news media agenda. In order to analyse not only the communications released during the election campaign, but to understand how and why elites create communications to travel cross-platform and become a part of the news media agenda setting process, requires the behind-the-scenes quality of participant-observation and interviews. The triangulation of these methods with content and discourse analysis will reveal the full picture of the news media agenda setting process.

### 3.3. Facing the challenges of online research: choosing a qualitative approach

A central theme of this dissertation is that developments in ICTs challenge the established role of political elites, traditional media producers, and citizens in both content consumption and production. According to Karpf's (2012) theory of "Internet time", "the Internet's effect on media, social, and political institutions will be different at time X from that at time X + 1, because the suite of technologies we think of as the Internet will itself change within that interval" (Karpf, 2012: 640). I agree with Karpf that our methodological toolkit must grow to include interdisciplinary approaches, mixed-methods, and computational social science. This is

particularly important when accurately capturing data during a fast-paced election campaign. This research design takes into consideration the difficulties imposed in capturing datasets across media platforms, and also Karpf’s recommendations for the use of more creative and pragmatic methods when collecting data from an unstable online space.

The aforementioned developments in ICTs pose a number of problems for those seeking to understand political communications holistically. Firstly, information can flow in a number of directions – see Figure 3.1 which shows a typology of communicative practice compiled by Jensen and Helles’ (2010). Information flows move not only in a one-to-many pattern, but one-to-one, many-to-many, and – as Jensen and Helles (2017) later acknowledged – many-to-one. These available pathways make our *a priori* assumptions about actor relationships in campaign communications unreliable. Therefore when designing and executing this study I was prepared to find a number of combinations of power relationship structures between political elites, media producers, and citizens.

Figure 3.1. Six communicative practices

	<b>Asynchronous</b>	<b>Synchronous</b>
<b>One-to-one</b>	Email, text message	Voice, instant messenger
<b>One-to-many</b>	Book, newspaper, audio and video recording, Web 1.0/webpage, download	Broadcast radio and television
<b>Many-to-many</b>	Web 2.0/wiki, blog, social network site	Online chatroom

Source: Jensen and Helles (2010)

Secondly, information flows move faster than in previous elections, evolving or challenging the narrative of news stories. Chadwick’s (2011a) thick descriptive study of the “bullygate affair”<sup>21</sup> was produced using data from online spaces. This research clearly shows the wider remit for action available to citizens in news content creation or the challenging of agendas. It additionally highlights changes to the news cycle. The methodology of this study demonstrates

<sup>21</sup> ‘Bullygate’ refers to a political scandal which occurred when then Prime Minister Gordon Brown was accused by an ex-employee of bullying his staff.



that it is important to use complementary qualitative methods to understand the strategizing behind actions or decisions, alongside textual analysis to understand information flows across media platforms. With “Internet time” changing the nature of media from one election to the next, we cannot assume we know how actors will behave, or why they take certain actions and decisions. Researchers must observe and speak to campaigners and news producers to get a deeper understanding of their behaviour.

Further developments which must be accounted for include an increase in cross-platform communications, for example the interdependence of newer and older media, such as television broadcasts and social media used strategically in campaign repertoires. Researchers should therefore approach their field with – as Karpf posits – the basic pillars of openness and pragmatism in mind. “Internet time” tells us that the internet is consistently changing and developing new capacities. As a result, designs for internet research not only need to be open and honest about the limitations faced when studying political communication in an online environment, but also need to be more flexible and pragmatic. With these goals in mind, the research design presented here was devised to ensure that potential flaws in the online dataset are accounted for.

This dissertation uses data collected from both Twitter and Facebook in its analysis. This process is explained in section 3.4.1. To illustrate some of the challenges facing researchers on social media sites I consider a number of studies that focus upon or incorporate data collected from Twitter in their findings. Twitter is a popular source of data for scholars working within the field of political communication and elections because of its relatively open nature, the ease of data-scraping, and the opportunities it offers to ‘listen in’ to citizens’ and elites’ conversations. The social networking site had increased its number of monthly active UK users from 30 million at the beginning of 2010 to 304 million by June 2015 (Statista, 2015d). In 2015, Twitter allowed users to post tweets of 140 characters. Users can follow other users and see their tweets in a timeline, and also use hashtags – ‘#’ – to follow and contribute to conversations on specific subjects.

Twitter has had an impact on both the way in which elites communicate with citizens and the reach that they have among voters, that is to say, the number of people a message can potentially reach. Figure 3.2 demonstrates this importance through a comparison of the numbers of followers of the accounts of the leading UK newspapers and political parties and the number of people they can reach through print circulation or party membership. The data – collated just prior to the 2015 General Election – clearly shows how the majority of newspapers had a higher reach online than through print circulation. Furthermore, Twitter output had the potential to reach more voters than membership did, particularly for smaller political parties. Therefore Twitter, and other social media sites, provide a vast array of data which internet researchers can mine. Unfortunately harvesting data from social media websites can pose a number of problems, as the below review of election studies and their methods demonstrates.

Figure 3.2. Number of Twitter followers of selected newspapers and political parties compared to readership or party membership (data correct on 21/04/2015)

	Newspapers				Political Parties		
	Number of followers	Circulation	Circulation as a % of Followers		Number of followers	Party Membership	Membership as a % of Followers
The Guardian	3,512,475	185,429	5.60	Labour	201,617	c.190,000	94.24
Financial Times	2,920,255	219,444	7.51	Conservatives	150,480	c.149,800 <sup>22</sup>	99.55
The Independent	1,149,728	61,338	5.34	The Green Party	128,536	c.44,000	34.23
The Sun	736,053	1,978,702	268.82 <sup>23</sup>	Liberal Democrats	91,503	c.44,000	48.08
Daily Telegraph	937,172	494,675	52.78	UKIP	96,071	c.42,000	43.72

*Source:* Follower numbers collected from each organizations' Twitter account. Newspaper circulation sourced from Turvill (2015). Party membership figures sourced from Nardelli (2014)

<sup>22</sup> The Conservative Party “does not routinely public membership estimates”, this figure comes from the latest available data released by CCHQ in 2012 (Keen and Audickas, 2016: 10)

<sup>23</sup> The Sun was the only newspaper to have a circulation larger than its number of Twitter followers.

### *3.3.1. Methodological lessons from existing research*

Jungherr's (2014) study focuses on the logic of political coverage on Twitter during the 2009 German Federal Election and its relationship with political coverage in the traditional media. It is a study of intermedia agenda-setting. His key questions focus on the relationship between the actions taken by citizens on Twitter and their relation to actions taken by news media, political parties, and candidates. The key measure of the study is "whether the volume of Twitter messages increased in parallel to increases in media coverage of political actors or if fluctuations of political Twitter messages followed another rhythm" (2014: 243).

Jungherr asserts that "non-traditional actors have the possibility of becoming part of the discourse" (ibid.: 242), which is expected to happen in the form of a correlation with traditional media output. In order to test this, the author examined datasets from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) 2009 Campaign Media Content Analysis, the GLES 2009 Campaign Media Content Analysis: TV, and "A dataset collected by Pascal Jürgens and the author during the campaign for the federal election in Germany 2009, documenting all messages by politically vocal Twitter users in Germany" (Jungherr, 2014: 243). Jungherr chose datasets that should produce reliable findings. However, a weakness, highlighted by the author, is the potential for bias by only collecting tweets containing hashtags. The author is open when discussing this limitation: "The active use of hashtags presupposes a certain level of Twitter proficiency; users below this level are thus excluded from the analysis" (Jungherr, 2014: 244). However, the key caveat is that using hashtags acts a filter to analyse messages that "users posted with the clear intention of contributing to political discourse" (ibid., see also D'heer and Verdegem, 2014: 725), ensuring relevancy and applicability of data. Therefore the use of hashtags was not a hindrance in compiling a dataset for this study. During the 2015 UK General Election campaign the promotion of specific hashtags related to media events and within traditional or online media was widely used, directing the audience to take part in discussion in a controlled manner.

Abascal-Mena et al. (2013) also carried out an election study using Twitter which demonstrated the value of computational methods in social science research designs. Focussing

upon the 2012 Mexican General Election, the authors created a computer program to extract all tweets containing the hashtag #AMLO<sup>24</sup> with the aim of analysing the interactions of voters on Twitter before, during, and after the election. Once extracted, a discursive analysis was carried out upon the dataset using a computational method, to understand the nature of voter discussion and its change over time. The authors' findings were useful for understanding how citizens-users construct tweets. Abascal-Mena et al. (2013: 12) concluded that they were "able to find sequences that convey, in a remarkable way, mood traits like ethnographic, semantic and psychological elements that are constant throughout the corpus". This study demonstrates the utility of reliable computational methods for data collection and analysis, and also the continuing importance of discourse analysis as a means for understanding relations between actors in an online environment.

Both studies described here acknowledge the problems inherent in collecting and analysing data from Twitter in a reliable or replicable fashion. Each tries to overcome it in their own way, through quantity of tweets collected, the 'right' approach being taken in terms hashtags or key words being used, or the length of time set aside for data collection. The number of different approaches and use of newer methods is to be lauded. However, both studies do maintain rigidity in their internet research according to pre-defined specifications. When sourcing data from a social media website during an election, with its speed of change and difficulty archiving outputs, researchers must be always alert for the occurrence of the next 'media event' in order to capture citizens' reactions in real time, or close to real time. If working proactively, they must be both willing and able to adjust their methods as the campaign progresses. This flexibility allows for a more rounded and complete dataset to be collected that will, in turn, provide a more comprehensive picture of voter and elite communications online.

Anstead and O'Loughlin (2015) use a mixed-methods approach in their work on semantic polling<sup>25</sup>. Their study provides an example of a successful meshing of tools to understand how

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<sup>24</sup> AMLO is an acronym for candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

<sup>25</sup> Anstead and O'Loughlin (2014: 209) define semantic polling: "The semantic polling process has three elements. First, it involves the harvesting of large datasets from social media services online (in 2010, this meant datasets almost exclusively from Twitter). Second, those datasets are analysed using computer-

social media data were used by media producers and other elites during the 2010 UK General Election campaign. The authors' approach to understanding semantic polling in the 2010 General Election uses not only a qualitative analysis of news media output which discusses social media during the election, but also "interviews with social media researchers, opinion pollsters and journalists working in the area" (ibid.: 205). Their methodology allows them to draw conclusions about the impact of social media analysis during the election as presented in media coverage. Hence they are able to see how information on one platform is represented on another, and concurrently to collect evidence as to decisions taken regarding usage of the data by speaking to those directly involved.

Finally, there are lessons to be taken from the most recent development in agenda-setting: the third-level of agenda-setting or network agenda-setting model (NAS). NAS studies have been forward-thinking when developing a methodological approach to test network agenda-setting (Guo, 2012). Their use of content analysis of media coverage, surveys and mind-maps to ascertain public opinion, network analysis and the Quadratic Assignment Procedure to explore matrices of data, as well as network visualization tools, is a novel approach to understanding agenda salience. Mind-mapping, as used by Guo and McCombs (2011b) is a particularly noteworthy methodological innovation. Undertaken in two stages, participants were first asked to list up to five attributes each of two Texas gubernatorial candidates and secondly to make connections between the assertions if they felt there were any. Mind-mapping in this way allows researchers to explicitly obtain how participants' link attributes or objects, and is therefore preferable to the implicit outcomes of survey methods as a measure of public agendas.

Scholars have also tested NAS with big data from social media, finding support for the model (Vargo and Guo, 2016). Vargo et al. (2014) studied agendas in the 2012 United States presidential election and built on earlier findings (Vargo, 2011) that "traditional newscasts and newspaper articles can forecast the total amount of Twitter chatter an issue receives" (Vargo et

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based natural language techniques to attribute some kind of numeric indicator of sentiment to it, most often relating to the number of positive to negative comments about specific politicians, parties, or policies. Finally this information is put into a format, numerical or graphical, suitable for public dissemination."

al., 2014: 297). In their study, the authors used Shaw and Weaver's (2014) differentiation between "vertical" and "horizontal" media to test which had a larger agenda-setting effect. Vertical media "reach out to broad general audiences such as daily newspapers and network radio and television" (Shaw and Weaver, 2014: 145). Horizontal media "reach out for audiences with special interests" (Ibid.) and may constitute "magazines, many cable television programmes, talk show hosts, blogs, websites, and Twitter" (Ibid.). Vargo et al (2014) highlight the importance of NAS for establishing linkages between issues or attributes. They also raise the criticality of the ability of the model to measure the centrality of issues within a network. This ability allows researchers to understand contextual positions rather than obtain a simple hierarchical list as with the first- and second-levels of agenda-setting.

Whilst big data studies of social media and traditional media coverage are useful in showing the networks of objects and attributes on the media and public agendas, and how salient the media agendas are, they cannot show either the creation of the media agenda or explain how information is directed across media platforms by elites in order to set the news media agenda. NAS is the most useful way of assessing agenda-setting effects in the UK's media system and it offers some methodological insights that this research can benefit from. The third-level of agenda-setting is relevant to the theoretical perspective of this dissertation, which understands that many different sources of information and actors can influence and build the media agenda.

In today's media system, with the number of producers, consumers, and media sites fluctuating regularly, researchers must consider which mix of methods is most likely to produce reliable and valid results and revelations. During the 2015 general election, I used a mixed approach utilising computational techniques to collect online data, inductive qualitative content analysis to methodically sort data and to understand the main themes, and a discourse analysis of the dataset. This approach proved valuable in providing a transparent and flexible methodology suited to researching in a hybrid media system. When combined with participant-centric qualitative methods, such as semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant-observations, a holistic picture of campaign communications and an understanding of actors' decision-making was achieved. By using this mix of methods I was able to analyse the dynamics of

communications between actors and fully understand how messages were received and remediated, and the intention behind the strategies used by different groups of actors.

### 3.4. A research design for the 2015 general election

This research was designed in such a way to allow observations and interpretations to be made about the ways in which politicians and journalists harness newer media tools to set the media agenda during the 2015 UK General Election campaign. It is guided by the research questions outlined in Chapter 1. This section describes the research design used in this thesis, outlining each method and the rationale for its selection. During the election campaign I aimed to be pragmatic, remaining flexible and observant so as not to miss crucial media events and developments in news agendas as they happened. As a caveat, it is recognised that there are many limitations regarding the replicability of this research design. It is important to note that the findings are context-specific to the 2015 UK General Election given its selective and interpretivist nature. However, they help to establish the applicability of this methodology within a general election context.

#### *3.4.1 Data collection*

Data comprising content from social and news media was collected from 30 March 2015 to 8 May 2015 covering the official campaigning period following the dissolution of Parliament. The data collected consists of the following texts: tweets; Facebook posts and comments; print news articles; blogs; online news articles; television news broadcasts; and radio current affairs broadcasts. Table 3.1 list the sites in full alongside the processes used to collect and store the data, and the total number of texts collected and analysed. There are differences between the totals of numbers collected and analysed as, although information was collected consistently throughout the campaign, specific items were chosen for analysis post-campaign.

As a researcher, my own interpretations of the importance of events were at the centre of decision-making during data collection. To mitigate the subjectivity I approached the process in a pragmatic manner; during the data collection phase of research I was careful to be flexible in



the collection of information and avoided pre-determined moments for collection beyond prescribed media events. I worked to ensure that I collated news stories and information from citizen as they arose, but was also aware that my own opinions would impact on my choice of data. In order to overcome bias, in addition to collecting data on arising news stories I pre-selected some campaign events which were central to the campaign, and which would be of national importance: the leaders' debates and the parties' manifesto launches. Figure 3.3 gives details of these events.

Figure 3.3 Dates and times of prescribed media events for data collection

<b>Event</b>	<b>Political/Media Organization</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>
The Battle for Number 10	Channel 4/Sky News	26 March 2015	21:00-22:30
The ITV Leaders' Debate	ITV	2 April 2015	20:00-22:00
Labour manifesto launch	Labour Party	13 April 2015	11:10
Conservative manifesto launch	Conservative Party	14 April 2015	11:20
Liberal Democrat manifesto launch	Liberal Democrat Party	15 April 2015	10:20
UKIP manifesto launch	UK Independence Party	15 April 2015	11:20
BBC Election Debate	BBC	16 April 2015	20:00-22:00
Question Time Special	BBC	30 April 2015	20:00-21:30
Results Night	Cross-organization	7-8 May 2015	19:00-06:00

I collected tweets each day using the hashtag #GE2015. The process of online data collection on a typical election day during the campaign comprised three parts: (1) running the TAGS search function<sup>26</sup> on Twitter; (2) ensuring the RSS feeds from selected websites were

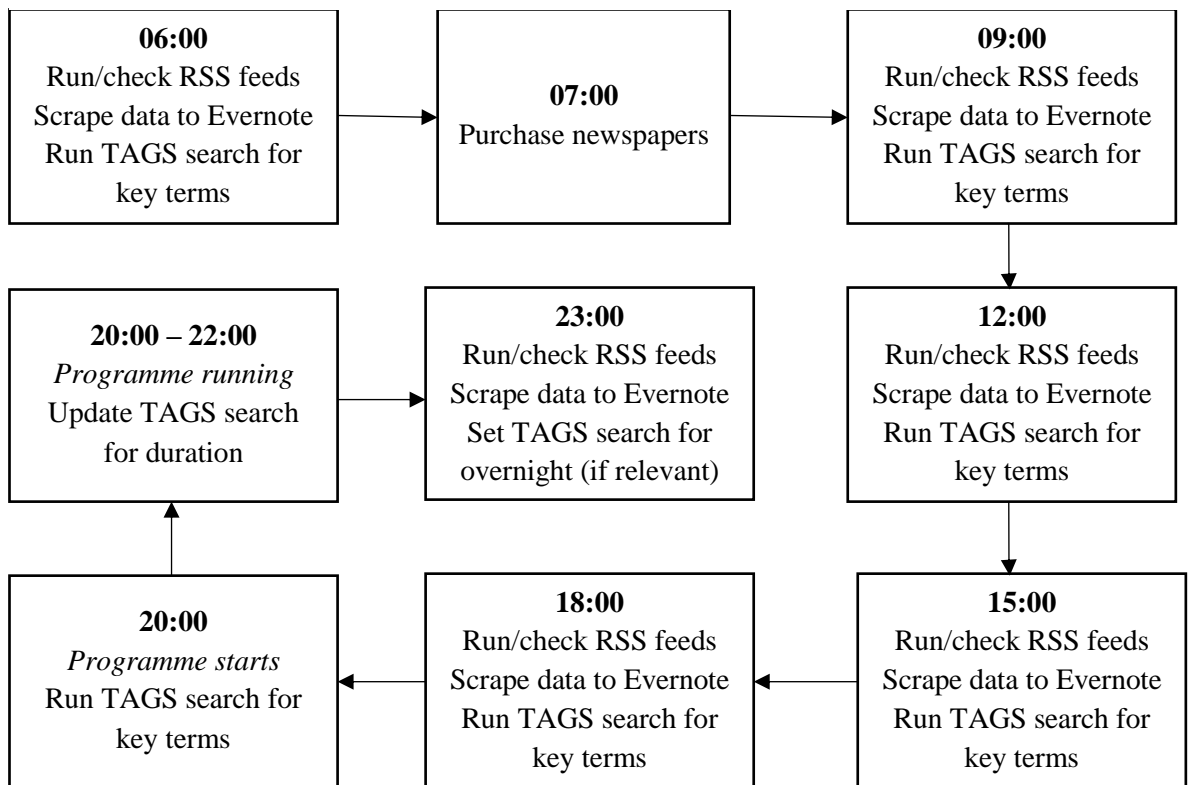
<sup>26</sup> TAGS is described by its creator as a “free Google Sheet template which lets you setup and run automated collection of search results from Twitter” (Hawksey, 2014). To search using TAGS, the user accesses a link from the TAGS website which opens a form in a spreadsheet in Google Documents. The form contains fields for search terms and parameters. The user completes these, using operators like AND or OR to search for multiple terms, and then runs the programme from Google Documents. The results are collected in a spreadsheet in a second tab. The results can be exported to a Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet and saved to the user's computer.

saving all political and election stories; and (3) regularly saving data from Facebook and websites without RSS feeds using Evernote. I did this at 3-hourly intervals, beginning at 06:00, to ensure that no key information was missed, and also to keep on top of the information being produced. On a day without a media event I ended this process at 21:00. Figure 3.4 is a flowchart which gives an example of the process for data collection during the day of the first leaders' debate.

Whilst tweets were collected in an entirely automated procedure, in the manner described in the above footnote, Facebook posts and comments cannot be scraped and saved in such a straightforward manner. For this reason, I employed a 'kludgy' workaround of the type proposed by Karpf (2012). I systematically visited each designated Facebook page and scrolled to the last post I had collected. I then opened up all comments on that post, keeping a record of these at every visit which included the timing of the last post I collected to ensure completeness in the dataset. I then clipped the new posts and comments to Evernote. Evernote is an app which allows the user to store 'clippings' from websites and save them in files in the app. It also allows the user to add tags to the information to further categorise it. For example, all posts that I saved from the Labour Party's Facebook page were added to the "Facebook – Labour" file in my Evernote app, and then were tagged with a relevant description such as "leaders' debate 02 April". Following the end of the election campaign I exported the posts to be analysed to Microsoft Word documents. This decision was taken as the formatting available in Word lends itself better to analysis than does the formatting available in Evernote.

The use of Twitter data in analysis differed from other datasets. Due to the large volume of tweets collected, I focused my assessment on tweets that were highlighted through content and discourse analysis. This decision was taken after data collection once it became apparent that sampling was incomplete and in order to avoid the pitfall of missing important evidence by sampling from a large volume of tweets. This method ensured I was analysing tweets which played a role in the news media agenda setting process. Examples include those that were used in news reports or which introduced new information into the information cycle.

Figure 3.4. Flowchart of data collection actions for the ITV Leaders' Debate on 2 April 2015



Online texts were systematically collected from the sites and spaces using automated computational methods and RSS feeds utilising key search terms, as well as manual recording when necessary. The content listed in Table 3.1 was chosen to ensure a mix of readership/audience numbers both online and offline, and any overt ideology. The number of sites was limited bearing in mind the restrictions that this study has in terms of time and manpower, but it is important to note that if an important story broke that was not on a site listed I endeavoured to collect that information regardless.

An issue was encountered during data collection with relation to timing and the saving of data from social networking sites. I endeavoured to collect Facebook posts and comments and information from websites without an RSS feed in a systematic manner to ensure that no information was missed. For example, I revisited each Facebook page in the same order every three hours and noted the time and place of my last visit. However I did not revisit posts already collected and therefore, and as may be expected with such a manual method of data collection, some comments and updates were not recorded. This could pose problems for the completeness

of my dataset. During analysis, some months later, I endeavoured to overcome this problem by revisiting the posts chosen for analysis and cross-referencing the number of comments or updates at that date with the number recorded at collection. I found minimal increases, and in many cases there was a decrease in the number of comments over time. This is potentially accounted for by individual users deleting their comments or deactivating their accounts. Therefore the issue with timing during data collection does not pose a risk to the reliability of my sample.

### *3.4.2 Analysis of the datasets*

The cases for analysis were selected by pinpointing two of the most important aspects of the campaign. This was achieved by asking the experts at hand – the interview participants. In discussions following the election, the interviewees were asked what they viewed as the most important or prevalent news stories of the election campaign. This information was used as a starting point to begin analysis on a specific subset of the data collected across media platforms. This decision was taken as a way of handling the large dataset and ensuring that the most important cases were analysed. The interview participants highlighted the leaders' debates and the rise of the Scottish National Party (SNP) as two of the most important stories which emerged during the campaign.

Given the large dataset of media texts collected, following interviewees' advice was an efficient way of deciding which cases deserved close analysis. Once identified, a basic qualitative content analysis was carried out to establish main themes. This was inductive and allowed me to establish recurrent narratives within the discourse. Units of analysis were individual news articles (online or offline), tweets, Facebook posts, comments on a Facebook post, and television and radio broadcasts. Following the example of Jacobson (2013) categories were generated inductively. This decision was taken following the example of Jacobson's study which made it "possible to rationally analyse a large data set" (ibid.: 343). Inductively creating the categories for coding allowed me to establish recurrent narratives within the discourse. The induction of categories was motivated by a grounded theory approach.

The units that were analysed using qualitative content analysis were Facebook posts and comments, online and print news articles, and television and radio broadcasts. The same coding framework was applied to Facebook posts, online and print news articles, and broadcasts, delineated by case study. However, Facebook comments were coded using different frameworks relevant to their subject matter. This decision was taken as the general frameworks were not suitable for this analysis. The comments were limited to one highly-specific topic instigated by the Facebook post, and they also expressed sentiments I wished to capture which the general frameworks did not allow for.

When inductively creating the categories and applying the general frameworks I initially coded each unit for the main subject(s) discussed, followed by actor(s) and/or organization(s). This enabled me to immediately identify object salience, which denotes the first-level of agenda-setting. This led to the second category; I coded for sentiment towards the subject(s), actor(s), and/or organisation(s), denoting the second-level of agenda-setting. I further used the content analysis to note intermedia features in the unit; specifically I coded for the presence of information from social media and the actor responsible for creating that information. This category was informed by the research questions.<sup>27</sup> This final stage of coding enabled me to identify linkages across social and mainstream media and to create timelines of information flows which were used in analysis for Chapters 4 and 5. While qualitative content analysis provided the methodical approach needed to tackle very large datasets, by identifying the paths of salient discourses and related information flows through the hybrid media system using these methods, it was possible to establish which actors had most influence over political information online. The code books used for the analysis presented in Chapters 4 and 5 are included in Appendices B7 and C7 respectively.

To achieve a thick descriptive analysis of the agenda setting process and the roles played by different actors I began by identifying the first emergence of a news story or party message

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<sup>27</sup> RQ4: How are (i) information sourced from social media, and (ii) the technological affordances of social media incorporated into the process of setting the news media agenda?; RQ5 Do citizen-users of social media play any role, such as intervention in the information cycle, in the process of setting the agenda?; and RQ6 Do citizen-users of social media replicate or challenge agendas?

and then used the dataset to track it across different platforms. I noted who became involved in framing the message, how they did so, and what effect this had on the news agenda. This approach also gave me the opportunity to assess how information from social media, as well as the networks themselves, were used and what the personal networks of those actors looked like. Overall, this was a successful approach in mapping the composition of the news events and understanding the process of news media agenda setting that occurred around them.

I examined the language used by elites in their construction of discourse around events and shaping of the news media agenda, and I looked across media platforms to assess if the same discourse was replicated or challenged. As discourse is concerned with “establishing one version of the world in the face of competing versions” (Gill, 2000: 176), this allowed me to establish attempts by elite actors to promote their “version of the world” on the media agenda. Relatedly, Foucault’s understanding of discourse illuminates the notion that “discourse forms a version of [an object]. Moreover, the version of the object comes to constitute it” (Bryman, 2004: 370). Therefore, should a specific actor’s “version” of an object become the way in which citizens speak about it on social media this will increase the actor’s power to set the news media agenda.

Table 3.1 Sites of data collection of texts for discourse and content analysis

Type of media	Media producer	Number of units <sup>28</sup> collected (number analysed)	Method of collection	Mode of analysis	Limitations
Broadcast (television and radio)	5 News Tonight	2 (2)	Box of Broadcasts	Qualitative content and discourse analysis alongside data collected from print and online sites.	Deferred liveness: One of TV's primary qualities is liveness, by watching programmes later, the sense of how they felt at that moment may be missed, especially if the audience was dual screening.
	BBC News at One (or equivalent) <sup>29</sup>	3 (3)			
	BBC News at 6 (or equivalent)	3 (3)			
	BBC News at 10	3 (3)			
	BBC Radio 4's <i>Today</i> programme	3 (3)			
	Channel 4 News	3 (3)			
	ITV News at Ten	3 (3)			
	ITV News & Weather at 1.30 (or equivalent)	3 (3)			
	ITV News & Weather at 6.30 (or equivalent)	3 (3)			
	Sky News at 7pm	2 (2)			
Sky News at 11pm	2 (2)				
Press (daily) <sup>30</sup>	Daily Mail	19 (3)	Purchase of newspaper	Content and discourse analysis alongside data collected from broadcast and online sites.	Cost/availability of product.
	Daily Mirror	17 (3)			
	Daily Telegraph	19 (3)			
	The Guardian	18 (3)			
	The Sun	18 (3)			

<sup>28</sup> 'Unit' type is dependent on the medium it is derived from and comprises a television or radio broadcast, a news article or comment piece in a print newspaper, a news article or comment piece in an online news or political website or blog, a Facebook post or comment on a Facebook post, or a tweet.

<sup>29</sup> "Or equivalent" refers to programmes who use a different name when broadcast at a slightly earlier/later timeslot or for variations across days, such as on the weekend.

<sup>30</sup> Newspapers chosen according to readership; see ABCs national daily newspaper circulation February 2014 available at <http://www.theguardian.com/media/table/2014/mar/07/abcs-national-newspapers>. Accessed on 12/09/2014.

	The Times	18 (3)		
Online (news producers and political parties)	bbc.co.uk/news	149		
	Channel4.com	41		
	Conservatives.com	18		
	Dailymail.co.uk	97		
	Greenparty.org.uk	17	RSS Feed created, alerts to be set up.	Content and discourse analysis alongside data collected from broadcast and print sites.
	Guardian.com	245	Where no RSS Feed exists, relevant	
	http://www.itv.com/news/	287	articles or comments	
	Labour.org.uk	5	'clipped' using	
	Libdems.org.uk	11	Evernote.	
	mirror.co.uk	96		
	news.sky.com	68		
	Sunnation.co.uk	96		
Telegraph.co.uk	177			
TheTimes.co.uk	99			
Ukip.org	10			
Online (blogs)	BuzzFeed UK Politics	70	RSS Feed created, alerts to be set up.	
	ConservativeHome	39	Where no RSS Feed exists, relevant	
	Huffington Post UK	106	articles or comments	
	LabourList	80	'clipped' using	
	Lib Dem Voice	30	Evernote.	
	Order-order.com	88		
Online (Social Media: Facebook)	BBC News	20 (4)		
	BBC Radio 4/ BBC Radio 4	8 (0)	Content and discourse analysis alongside data collected from broadcast and print sites.	Manual saving of information using Evernote.
	<i>Today</i>			
	BuzzFeed UK Politics	36 (3)		
	Channel 4 News	23 (5)		
	Conservatives	16 (4)		
	Guido Fawkes	27 (2)		
	Huffington Post UK	26 (3)		
ITV News	49 (4)			



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Labour Party	30 (4)
LabourList	47 (6)
Liberal Democrats	7 (3)
Sky News	26 (4)
The Daily Mail	21 (5)
The Green Party	12 (1)
The Guardian	37 (2)
The Mirror/ The Mirror Politics	69 (0)
The Sun	23 (1)
The Telegraph	79 (14)
The Times and The Sunday Times	10 (2)
UKIP	8 (1)

### *3.4.3. Semi-Structured Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with participants from three groups of actors: (1) MPs, candidates, and members of the campaign teams from the main political parties; (2) journalists from established news producers; and (3) journalists from high-profile, national blogs. These groups were chosen in order to establish the approach to news media agenda-setting taken in election campaign strategy and coverage by each main influential group involved in campaign coverage. A full list of interviewees can be found in Table 3.2. The findings from these interviews were used in conjunction with the results of the discourse analysis and observations in order to make complete and accurate explanations regarding the nature of the news media agenda setting process in the election campaign. Interviews with a variety of campaigners and journalists were conducted in order to provide cross-party evidence and to avoid the pitfall of bias.

Table 3.2 Participant details for semi-structured interviews

Name/Anonymised Reference	Organization/ Anonymised Reference	Profession	Role	Interview Dates			
				Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4
Jamie Angus	BBC	Journalist	Editor – <i>Today</i>	09-Sep-14	09-Feb-15	28-Jul-15	N/A
Daniel Boffey	The Observer	Journalist	Policy Editor	08-Sep-14	N/A <sup>31</sup>	N/A	N/A
Alex Chandler	ITV	Journalist	Editor – <i>Election 2015</i>	11-Nov-14	03-Mar-15 <sup>32</sup>	16-Apr-15	02-Jul-15
Carl Dinnen	ITV	Journalist	Political Correspondent	06-Oct-14	09-Feb-15	30-Jun-15	N/A
Martin Horwood	Liberal Democrats	Politician	MP for Cheltenham	11-Nov-14	04-Feb-15	18-Nov-15	N/A
Chris Luffingham	The Green Party	Party Staff	Director of National Campaigns	29-Jul-15	N/A	N/A	N/A
Holly Lynch	Labour	Politician	MP for Halifax	10-Aug-15	N/A	N/A	N/A
Jason Mills	ITV	Journalist	Head of Digital	25-Oct-14	N/A	25-Jun-15	N/A
Alexandra Rucki	The Evening Standard	Journalist	Online Reporter	08-Aug-14	N/A	N/A	N/A
Andrew Sparrow	The Guardian	Journalist	Political Correspondent (daily live blog)	13-Dec-2014	11-Mar-15	22-Jul-15	N/A
Jim Waterson	BuzzFeed	Journalist	Deputy Editor	14-Oct-14	04-Feb-15	26-Jun-15	N/A
Alex Wickham	Guido Fawkes' Blog	Journalist	News Editor	08-Aug-14	24-Feb-15	30-Jun-15	N/A
Patrick Wintour	The Guardian	Journalist	Political Editor	09-Sep-14	N/A	N/A	N/A
Anon01	LabourList	Journalist	Editor – Political Blog	17-Dec-14	27-Mar-15	26-Nov-15	N/A

<sup>31</sup> There was an attrition rate and three interviews were not completed with every participant. This was due to participants not confirming next interview dates despite numerous attempts to get in touch.

<sup>32</sup> An extra interview was held with Alex Chandler on an ad hoc basis during an observation at ITV.

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Anon02	Labour	Political Consultant	Advisor to a main political party	30-Sep-15	N/A	N/A	N/A
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Interviews were undertaken beginning in August 2014 and continued until December 2015. They included an initial interview and two follow up interviews per informant: one prior to, and one immediately after, the election. Potential interviewees were researched and contacted initially by a formal letter (see Appendix A1 for a sample of this letter), and if no response was received then a follow-up email or phone call was issued. There was an attrition rate, with 25% of participants whose first interview took place in 2014 not responding to requests for follow-up interviews. Additionally, 20% of all participants only took part in one interview after the general election. A snowball sampling technique was used to select interviewees. At the end of each interview, the participant was asked to provide the name of one or two colleagues who would be suitable for the study. The sampling resulted in a total of 15 participants. This mix of targeting and self-selection has produced a gender bias in the results, specifically only one female journalist and one female politician are present in the sample. However, the size of, and technique to compile, the sample are in line with guidelines for semi-structured interviews.

Prior to each interview I prepared an individual interview guide with questions guided by my research goals and grouped by theme (see Appendix A2 for a sample). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as my research had a clear focus, providing a starting point for discussion. Within the framework of the interview guide I used a mixture of questions types which changed over the course of the three rounds of interviews. For example interview one included introductory and more direct questions, and rounds two and three focussed on follow-up questions and those that enabled further probing. During the interviews I ensured that all questions in the guide were covered, as well as ensuring that interviewees had space to express their opinions, beliefs, and expectations. I followed up on pertinent statements that they made.

At the beginning of each interview I ensured that participants understood the nature of the study and confirmed if they would like to be on or off the record. I recorded each interview using a Dictaphone app on my mobile phone and transcribed from these files after the interview. For the second and third round interviews, I used information from the prior interview to design a new interview guide for each participant. This method let me delve deeper into their thoughts

on subjects raised in the previous interview as well as further questions specific for my research. Each interview was between 20 minutes and 90 minutes in length. 31 interviews were conducted in person, either in the informants place of work or in a neutral location such as a café, and two interviews were conducted via Skype.

Semi-structured interviews “allow[s] respondents the chance to be the experts and to inform the research” (Leech, 2002: 668). Additionally, Bryman (2004: 321) states that “the emphasis [of the interview] must be on how the interviewee frames and understands issues and events – that is, what the interviewee views as important in explaining and understanding events, patterns, and forms of behaviour.” Therefore, by conducting semi-structured interviews, evidence can be gathered which can be used to support or challenge the findings established in the discourse analysis and observations. This method was chosen for its flexibility; a personalised interview guide was designed for each interview to maximise discussion relating to the defined research questions, however there was also the opportunity for the respondent to air their own opinions or for follow up questions to be asked where appropriate. Therefore the data collected is qualitative and enables the researcher to fully understand the drivers behind mechanisms of control used by elites to control agendas in a hybrid media system. Furthermore, the occurrence of interviews over time show differences in the approaches taken by participants to the online environment, making allowance for ‘internet time’ and capturing responses to what happened during the campaign, as well as portraying preparations for the election.

#### *3.4.4. Participant-observation*

I spent time as a participant-observer with two news media teams – the production team of BBC Radio 4’s *Today Programme* and the production team of ITV’s *Election 2015* results programme – from January 2015 to 8 May 2015, the day after polling day. In total 32 hours of observation across 8 days was accrued across both sites. My role can be classified as that of Observer-as-Participant (Gold, 1958) or Total Researcher (Gans, 1968): “In this role, the researcher is mainly

an interviewer. There is some observation but very little of it involves any participation” (Bryman, 2004, 301). At each site I was situated with the teams and observed their interactions, meetings, and decision-making. I had the opportunity to speak to team members, but I did not take part in any work for the teams such as a participant-as-observer might have done. There were some difficulties encountered in this role where I wanted to intervene and offer my opinion, but I refrained in order to maintain my role as objective observer. For example, at my first observation day with the *Today* programme the morning news team were discussing a story regarding the issue of Julien Blanc, a “pick up artist” who gives seminars to men on how to meet women for sex. There was a, now successful, petition to the Home Office to revoke his visa on the grounds of his sexist and misogynistic nature. The piece that *Today* ran during the programme I observed came across as very light-hearted. They barely mentioned his violent behaviour, instead focussing on the humorous stories of a Radio 5 Live presenter who attended one of his classes. They did not broach the sexist or violent messages he promotes. I followed this story on Twitter during and after the broadcast and many people expressed anger about the coverage for this reason. My dilemma was, as I sat in the debrief meeting, that only one member of the team was knowledgeable on Julien Blanc and I wanted to support her and tell the team about Blanc’s nature. They ended up agreeing that “sometimes things just go that way”. As an impartial observer I could not become involved in their conversation, despite my own beliefs and disappointment in the way they covered this story.

I gained access to the programmes to be observed following my round one interviews with Jamie Angus, then Editor of the *Today* programme, and Alex Chandler, Editor of ITV News’ *Election 2015*. After interviewing each editor I put the request to them regarding observation and outlined my proposal for at least three days of observation with each time to take place between January 2015 and polling day. Both editors agreed in principle, and I followed this up with an official proposal and ethical approval (see Appendix A3). I gained agreement from Angus to observe the team on four days, including the broadcasts on days following observations, and from

Chandler to observe the team on four days including sitting with the news team overnight on results night.

During the periods of observation I shadowed members of each team, ensuring that this included observing a range of journalists in different roles, attended editorial meetings where decisions were taken on the content, structure, and direction of the programmes, informally interviewed journalists about their experiences, responsibilities, and thoughts on election reporting, and at ITV I attended meetings between the Editor and other senior colleagues who were not involved in the creation of *Election 2015* but were stakeholders. I made jotted notes using an iPad, which I typed up into full field notes following each observation.

According to Nielsen (2012: 11) “Where interviews provide data on what people say and what they say they do, participant-observation provides primary data on what they actually do.” Therefore, observation is crucial in providing evidence for the existence or otherwise of methods employed to direct political information flow in a hybrid media system. Observations were a counter-balance, establishing not only the veracity of information collected from interviews but also providing evidence to substantiate the content and discourse analyses. During the period of observation, therefore, I was able to observe the behaviour of media elites during the election campaign, and understand first-hand the aims of the teams with regard to the media system, methods employed, and the extent to which strategies were perceived as successful.

Given the natural setting of the observation, problems of reliability and validity may be encountered. In order to address these problems, the subject of data collected from the observation was defined as far as possible beforehand, whilst remaining pragmatic and recording any other notable behaviours as they arose in my field notes. Pre-defined areas for observation included processes undertaken by the teams to promote messages in the online environment, reaction to political information produced by citizens online, and reaction to breaking news during the campaign. The overall aim of the observations was to monitor staff making decisions and taking actions, providing opportunity for a description of their behaviour and engagement with citizens and with political elites.



### 3.5. Mapping the structure of the dissertation

As a clear visual aid for readers of this work, Table 3.3 maps the research questions, the chapters in which they are answered, and the methods used to answer them. The work is divided into two parts. Firstly, Chapters 4 and 5 answer research questions 4, 5, and 6, and do so through the use of information flow analysis incorporating qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis. Some data from interviews is incorporated in these chapters as triangulation. Secondly, Chapters 6 and 7 answer research questions 1, 2, and 3 and do so through the use of data from semi-structured interviews and participant-observations.

Table 3.3 Mapping research Questions, methods of analysis, and related chapters

Research Question	Data	Method(s) of Analysis	Chapter(s)
RQ1. How do power relationships between traditional news media producers and political elites function in the 2015 UK General Election, and how do the impact the news media agenda setting process?	Interview transcripts Field notes from participant-observation	Integrated analysis, identifying themes and analytic questions	6 and 7
RQ2. How do traditional news media producers and political parties attempt to successfully harness network power?	Interview transcripts Field notes from participant-observation	Integrated analysis, identifying themes and analytic questions	6 and 7
RQ3. How are social and digital media integrated into traditional news media producers' outputs, and how does this impact their power relationships with political elites?	Interview transcripts Field notes from participant-observation	Integrated analysis, identifying themes and analytic questions	6 and 7
RQ4. How are (i) information sourced from social media, and (ii) the technological affordances of social media incorporated into the process	Texts collected from online and offline news sites, broadcasts, and social media	Information flow analysis, incorporating qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis	4 and 5

of setting the news media agenda?

RQ5. Do citizen-users of social media play any role, such as intervention in the information cycle, in the process of setting the news media agenda?	Texts collected from online and offline news sites, broadcasts, and social media	Information flow analysis, incorporating qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis	4 and 5
RQ6. Do citizen-users of social media replicate or challenge elites' agendas?	1. Texts collected from social media 2. Information from social media included in texts collected from traditional news media producers	Information flow analysis, incorporating qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis	4 and 5

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### 3.6. Conclusion

This chapter has set out the research design for this dissertation. The discussion has highlighted problems inherent in internet and communications research during election campaigns which may hinder a researcher's ability to gain a full and accurate picture of the relationships between actors in a hybrid media system during this critical time. These are the nature of datasets collected online, their potential unreliability, the difficulties collecting data, and the large volumes that may be collected. Furthermore, I recognised that 'internet time' means an ever-changing environment from which to collect and analyse data, which must be taken into consideration.

In order to overcome these challenges, the research design follows the prescriptions of Karpf (2012) and remains both transparent and pragmatic; responding to any changes or important events as they emerge. Furthermore, it recognises the need for interdisciplinarity, particularly that which enables computational social science, in order to fill the gaps in our methodological capabilities. In the contemporary media system, where platforms are increasingly interdependent, drawing on the knowledge and skills of our colleagues in other disciplines can help us to overcome many of these challenges.

Finally, a qualitative mixed-methods approach is used in order to provide the research with a full and robust account of communications between political elites, news producers, and citizens during an election campaign. This research design adds a holistic approach to agenda-setting research through the analysis of information as it moves across multiple media platforms, and by generating and analysing supporting evidence from content and discourse analyses with a deeper behavioural understanding gleaned from interviews and periods of participant-observations. By utilising mixed-methods, I can be both methodical and pragmatic – there is no reason that these should be mutually exclusive. This research design used specifically for the 2015 UK General Election incorporates large scale data collection from the online environment in order to analyse information flow. This is complemented by qualitative tools; qualitative content analysis, discourse analysis, semi-structured interviews and participant-observations. These methods can answer the question of why certain communications strategies are used and how the news media agenda setting process functions during the 2015 UK general election.

# Chapter 4 Debating the debate: Exploring the process of setting the news media agenda in the first Leaders’ Debate

**Researcher:** Assuming we have leaders’ debates, what do you think the impact will be on reporting?

**Jamie Angus:** I mean Cameron’s got a reasonable point which is that they sucked the life out of the campaign [in 2010] ... I think what Cameron means by that is [the debates] just detracted enormously from substantial coverage of policy. I’m not really saying whether that’s a good thing or a bad thing but I think that that’s true. So I think that if there are debates, it will suck up a huge amount of coverage again on telly. It’s undoubtedly going to be the case that another round of TV debates will feature ... journalists interviewing each other for days in advance and days afterwards about what happened in an hour on primetime telly. (Jamie Angus, interview 2, February 2015)

*Jamie Angus, then Editor of the Today programme, explains concerns about holding leaders’ debates during the election campaign.*

Election debates are big media events. They provide parties and journalists with a wealth of information to report, promote, and challenge. Unavoidably they set the news agenda in both the build-up and the post-debate analysis. Angus’ concerns that they “sucked the life” out of the 2010 campaign referred to the way in which election reporting focussed on the debates and not on issues. In fact, the 2010 debates “transformed the narrative” of the campaign (Wring and Ward, 2010: 806) as they gave rise to news reports centred on Cleggmania<sup>33</sup> and shifted focus from the Conservative Party’s challenge. 2010 also witnessed a phenomenon repeated in 2015: online discussion about the debates on social media. Whilst spin rooms and “journalists interviewing each other... about what happened” were a (meta) feature of traditional media coverage, the “debate about the debate” also happened on social media (Kalsnes, Krumsvik, and Storsul, 2014). This chapter looks at these debates about the debate to examine how the process of setting the news media agenda functioned around this media event.

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<sup>33</sup> Cleggmania refers to the impact of Nick Clegg’s performance in the 2010 leaders’ debates. This was credited with increasing the Liberal Democrats standing in opinion polls, although this did not translate into votes on polling day. Carvalho and Winters (2015: 425-426) describe Clegg’s attributes reported by viewers including a polished performance, perceived trustworthiness, and giving the least evasive answers.

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a detailed descriptive analysis of the news media agenda-setting process which occurred before and after the first leaders' debate of the election campaign. There are two high-level findings relating to power that will be discussed in this chapter. Firstly, the process was dominated by politicians and journalists, with information overwhelmingly sourced from elite actors. Although there was a concurrent engagement with social media, content produced by citizen-users played a minimal role in the process of setting the media agenda. Secondly, the findings demonstrate that use of social media was limited to promoting or challenging the elites' content. Examples of successfully setting the news media agenda demonstrate how network power on social media is used in conjunction with the traditional power relationships that exist between politicians and journalists.

The pre- and post-debate periods were characterised by intensive competition to set the news media agenda. As predicted in the opening quote to this chapter, the solipsistic practice of “journalists interviewing each other” did occur. Fortunately for this research, media organisations and political parties released other information and content consistently throughout the period of analysis; a number of different agenda items competed for space giving plenty of scope for investigation. Over a 48-hour period from midnight on 2 April 2015 to 23:59 on 3 April 2015 I gathered a dataset comprising online news articles, Facebook posts from political parties and media organisations, broadcasts from TV and radio, the print editions of newspapers, and a sample of tweets posted using #leadersdebate. The methods of data collection are described in Chapter 3, and details of the dataset are given in Appendix A. Using these data I identified the key stories surrounding the leaders' debate through a frequency count of the topics of news reports from newspapers, online news websites, and broadcast news segments. In total 45 topics were identified from 223 individual articles and broadcast segments. I selected stories for analysis from

the five most frequent subjects (see Table 4.1). Figure 4.1 gives a timeline of each specific communication used in the cases analysed in this chapter.

Table 4.1. Five most frequent topics of news articles and broadcast segments

	Newspaper/Online Articles		Number of Broadcast Segments		Cross-platform total	
	Frequency	% ( <i>n</i> =96)	Frequency	% ( <i>n</i> =92)	Frequency	% ( <i>n</i> =188)
General information <sup>34</sup>	24	25.00	20	21.74	44	24.40
New politics/Coalition <sup>35</sup>	18	18.75	26	28.26	44	24.40
No clear winner <sup>36</sup>	16	16.67	20	21.71	36	19.15
Promoting the debate <sup>37</sup>	24	25.00	10	10.87	34	18.01
Nicola Sturgeon - positive <sup>38</sup>	14	14.58	16	17.39	30	15.96

<sup>34</sup> Article/Segment gave logistical or formatting information about the debate, for example time of broadcast or the name of the presenter.

<sup>35</sup> Article/Segment focused on the impact of the debate on a coalition outcome, or spoke about the debate as an example of how no one party could form a majority government.

<sup>36</sup> Article/Segment neutrally reported how opinion polls showed there was no clear winner in the debate.

<sup>37</sup> Article/Segment was a promotional piece for the debate, for example stressing its importance or impact in the campaign. These were mostly found on ITV platforms.

<sup>38</sup> Article/Segment reported positively on Nicola Sturgeon's performance, for example praising her oratory style, appeal to voters, or policies.

Figure 4.1. Timeline of communication texts analysed in this chapter

<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Publisher</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Content</b>
02 April 2015	0600	Liberal Democrats (@LibDems)	Twitter	Tweet: sharing information on polls from Ipsos Mori
	0600	BBC Radio 4 <i>Today</i>	Radio	Student's comment dismissing Liberal Democrats on grounds of coalition
	0600	ITV (Good Morning Britain)	Television	Segment with body language expert praising Cameron's leadership qualities
	0628	The Times	Website	Article incorporating "Cameron as underdog" agenda
	0630	The Telegraph	Website	Article incorporating "Cameron as underdog" agenda
	1037	The Telegraph (@TeleWonderWomen)	Twitter	Journalist request for audience to name the female leaders
	1120	The Telegraph	Facebook	Sharing of an old article with a negative sentiment towards Sturgeon
	1134	The Telegraph	Website	Article which questions who the female leaders are
	1230	Liberal Democrats (@LibDems)	Twitter	Tweet: sharing information on polls from Ipsos Mori
	1307	UKIP	Facebook	Post with image, includes details of the debate and calls to action to watch, like, and share
	1330	ITV News	Television	Quote in report suggests Bennett could play a role in a coalition. Quote in report from Nick Clegg on inevitability of coalition.
	1559	SNP Staffer (@RiaRobertson)	Twitter	Tweet: shares an image of Sturgeon and Wood backstage.
	1800	BBC News	Television	Report includes Clegg's preference for coalition.



1817	The Telegraph	Website	Story reporting that female leaders are plotting to “gang up” on Cameron.
1900	Channel 4 News	Television	Michael Gove quoted warning about the dangers of a coalition.
2055	Gary Linekar (@GaryLinekar)	Twitter	Tweet condemning Farage’s comments on HIV and health tourism
2130	ITV News	Website	Story reporting that Twitter users are calling for more women in politics
2200	BBC News	Television	Report that Sturgeon performed well in the debate Osborne quoted as saying Cameron was “in charge”
2206	Conservatives (@Conservatives)	Twitter	Tweet promoting #cameronincharge
2220	Ed Miliband (@Ed_Miliband0)	Twitter	Tweet condemning Farage’s HIV and health tourism comments
2226	Conservatives (@CCHQ)	Twitter	Tweet: image of Miliband in Sturgeon’s pocket
2228	The Telegraph	Website	Article stating that there was a clear choice between leaders in the debate
2230	ITV News	Television	Interview with William Hague who uses the term “clear winner” and a language of “choice”
2249	Sky News	Facebook	Post reporting on Farage’s HIV and health tourism comments
2300	Sky News	Television	Report that Sturgeon performed well Interview with Stewart Hosie of the SNP Segment on Twitter discussion
2304	The Telegraph	Website	Reporting and SNP victory and that Miliband “flops”
2308	Conservatives	Facebook	Video: Miliband in Sturgeon’s pocket

	2355	Conservatives	Facebook	Post stating that there is a clear choice between leaders
	-	Channel 4 News	Website	Report on the YouGov poll that Sturgeon performed best in the debate.
3 April 2015	0020	The Telegraph	Website	Report featuring the Cameron as underdog agenda
	0600	BBC Radio 4 (The Today Programme)	Radio	Interview with Michael Gove in which he praises Sturgeon but says that Cameron was most commanding.
	1224	The Mirror	Website	Report on Farage's HIV and health tourism comments
	1315	The Telegraph	Facebook	Post: negative story about the SNP.
	1351	Conservatives	Facebook	Post: Video mash-up of Miliband and Sturgeon
	1523	BuzzFeed	Website	Report on Conservatives' use of #cameronincharge
	1935	The Telegraph	Facebook	Post: Report that Farage and Clegg were side-lined in the debate
	-	BBC News	Website	Report on Farage's HIV and health tourism comments

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Of these five topics, I selected ‘new politics/coalition’ and ‘Nicola Sturgeon – positive’ for further analysis. I chose not to examine ‘General information’, ‘no clear winner’, and ‘promoting the debate’ as there was either consensus around the information given or the news media agenda was already set. I analysed the related content by tracking the information flows across these platforms and using the findings to identify the power relationships between actors. More precisely, the analysis was guided by the research questions: (RQ4) How are (i) information sourced from social media, and (ii) the technological affordances of social media incorporated into the process of setting the news media agenda?; and (RQ5) Do citizen-users of social media play any role, such as intervention in the information cycle, in the process of setting the news media agenda?

The findings of this chapter are established through a detailed descriptive analysis of specific news agendas. I evaluate how information moved across media platforms and which actors impacted the emergence and promotion of specific agenda items. By ascertaining the most and least salient agenda items to emerge over the 48-hour period, and tracing the information, actors, and relationships involved, I was able to understand how the news media agenda setting process functioned in relation to the leaders’ debate. The three agenda items I identified for further analysis are interlinked. These are: (1) a positive approach to Nicola Sturgeon’s debate performance; (2) the seemingly inevitable prospect of coalition through a “coalition of chaos” narrative; and (3) The Conservative Party’s line on David Cameron’s performance, referred to here as “Cameron in charge” after the party’s choice of wording. A short fourth case is also included which examines outcomes for UKIP. UKIP made gains on social media, but were still unable to set the news media agenda.

The key findings demonstrate that social media functioned predominantly as a push medium for the elite actors in the news media agenda-setting process. This push medium outcome was a strategy of message control and provides support for the theory of controlled interactivity within the news media agenda-setting process. My findings also show the risk of message control strategies being interpreted as commodification of user content by citizens. Stromer-Galley argues

that “the way politicians and their staff use DCTs ultimately are meant to benefit the candidate; greater genuine democratization is not on their agenda” (Stromer-Galley, 2014: 3). My findings show that social media was used in this manner by political and media elites.

However, the results also demonstrate that when elites’ social media outputs do not meet the required communication standards for the platform the content loses its quality of authenticity. As defined in Chapter 2, authenticity for elite organizations online during an election campaign includes spontaneity<sup>39</sup>, immediacy<sup>40</sup>, and predictability<sup>41</sup> (Enli, 2015). The outcome for inauthentic communications was that they revealed commodification of user content and interaction to citizens. As further outlined in Chapter 2, authenticity of communication is required for an actor to become part of a communication network and to exert power through that network. I find that failure to achieve this is linked to a failure to control the news media agenda.

The *first main finding* presented in this chapter is that non-elite social media users did play a role in the news media agenda-setting process but that they did not intervene in the agenda to change the course of narratives, framing, or the final media agenda items. Information sourced from social media overwhelmingly originated with the journalists’ traditional sources; other journalists, politicians, political party staffers, and other elites such as celebrities. Citizen voices were incorporated into news reports only to add colour or opinion in the form of vox populi. Additionally, conversation amongst social media users on elite Facebook posts did not uniformly follow the organizations’ agendas. There was often an independent focus by users on different topics, regardless of the subject of the original post.

Successfully setting the agenda on a social media platform did not equal a prime position in the overall process. I found that it is not sufficient to simply have a strong following on social media and successful direct message control amongst your own network. Other factors must also be in place. Social media must be a part of a cohesive, cross-platform approach recognising the

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<sup>39</sup> Authentic communications *appear* to be unrehearsed, spontaneous responses to events or actors.

<sup>40</sup> Authentic communications are timely and contribute information to an event in a seemingly *live* manner.

<sup>41</sup> Authentic communications are predictable in that they contain the discursive features and technological standards that users *expect* to see.

hybridisation of media logics. This finding does not dismiss the examples of these phenomena found in other research (see Freelon and Karpf, 2015; Chadwick, 2011; 2013). These studies have shown that it is possible for decisive intervention from citizen users of social media to change or challenge news agendas. However, during the first leaders' debate of the 2015 general election campaign I did not find evidence of this; the news media agenda-setting process remained dominated by elites and hierarchical power relationships.

This is the *second main finding*. Hierarchical power relationships remained dominant but this did not negate the need for elites to harness network power, which became important in the process when an agenda item was contested. For example, the Conservative Party were able to effectively promote their agenda regarding a Labour-SNP coalition. This was achieved through a combination of repetition of key messages to journalists and by distributing content on Facebook and Twitter. This content was then shared widely amongst their networks of supporters. The content met the communication standards of each social networking site – spontaneity, immediacy, and predictability – and was therefore perceived as authentic by its audience. Further support for this finding comes from an opposing example, that of the Conservative Party's lack of success in promoting a different agenda item as a result of their content being perceived as inauthentic, specifically this second example failed to meet the standard of spontaneity.

*Third and finally I find* that, broadly, social media reproduced the competing agendas, but evidence also exists of contestation or inversion where commodification of user content and interaction was identified. This finding is especially relevant to use of Twitter. Social media certainly played an important role in the news media agenda setting process, particularly post-debate. Nevertheless, traditional news media reports were more likely to include content produced by influential users than citizen users' content. In the 183 online news texts analysed, 49 instances of information from social media were found in 29 of the texts. Of these, most information came from the accounts of politicians, political parties, journalists, or media organisations (28.6% per actor group). Individual citizen content accounted for less than half of this. Table 4.2 shows the number of social media items from each actor group included in the texts. The most important

interventions made on social media were elites' tweets. Although news media elites and political parties made efforts to produce content for social media, helping them to strengthen their message control and harness network power, evoking traditional processes and power relationships remained central to the news media agenda setting process. The dialectical use of power was fully embedded in the process.

Table 4.2. Number of tweets used in news reports per actor group

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>% (n=49)</b>
Politician/party <sup>42</sup>	14	28.57
Journalist/media organisation <sup>43</sup>	14	28.57
Individual citizen <sup>44</sup>	6	12.24
General twitter <sup>45</sup>	5	10.20
Other organisation <sup>46</sup>	7	14.29
Celebrity <sup>47</sup>	3	6.12

#### 4.2. Case Selection

On 2 April 2015 ITV hosted a seven-way leaders' debate. Participants included the incumbent Prime Minister and Leader of the Conservative Party David Cameron, the incumbent Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the Liberal Democrats Nick Clegg, and the Leader of the Opposition, Ed Miliband of the Labour Party. Leaders' debates are a relatively new addition to UK election campaigns, with 2015 being the second time they featured.<sup>48</sup> This debate was unique as the four leaders of smaller parties participated alongside the three major party leaders. The line-

<sup>42</sup> Category includes any UK politician, candidate, or political party account.

<sup>43</sup> Category includes any journalist or news organisation account.

<sup>44</sup> Category includes any private citizen account.

<sup>45</sup> Category includes generalized references to 'the story' on social media.

<sup>46</sup> Category includes other organizations comprising polling organizations, a social media records organization, and betting company accounts.

<sup>47</sup> Category includes any celebrity account.

<sup>48</sup> The first time the United Kingdom held leaders' debates was in the 2010 general election campaign, which saw Gordon Brown, then Prime Minister and Leader of the Labour Party, face David Cameron and Nick Clegg in three separate debates.

up therefore also included Nigel Farage, Leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland and Leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), Leanne Wood, leader of the Welsh nationalist party Plaid Cymru, and Natalie Bennett, leader of the Green Party of England and Wales. Figure 4.2 shows the format of the podium line-up of the party leaders.

The inclusion of so many party leaders was a point of both contention and celebration, arising after months of wrangling between No. 10 and the broadcasters. The seven-way format attracted a lot of attention in the press and amongst broadcasters, some of whom were concerned that the debate would degenerate into arguments and noise. The event, chaired by ITV news reader Julie Etchingham, was reasonably decorous despite the large number of candidates present. The leaders' debate was a media event, defined here using Dayan and Katz's description which specifies "historic occasions that... transfix a nation" and "include epic contests of politics" (Dayan and Katz, 1994: 1). It was watched by an average audience of 7 million people (*The Guardian*, 2015) and 1.5 million tweets were sent about the debate "with an average of 8,657 per minute" (BBC News, 2015d). The debate followed a structured format covering four topics, with questions from the studio audience taken on the economy, the NHS, immigration, and the future of the UK.

Figure 4.2. Podium positions of the seven party leaders



Source: Etchingam (2015, 31/03/2015)

Overall it was noted in the news media that the debate was unremarkable as it did not break new ground, nor have a large, measurable impact on the campaign. Opinion polls were divided over the winner, with the accolade being attributed variously to Cameron, Miliband, Farage, and Sturgeon. Unsurprisingly, much of media and political elites' energy was spent on speculating over winners and losers (Iyengar, Norpoth, and Hahn, 2004). Over the 48 hour period of analysis, the main questions asked by journalists evolved from “who will win?” and “how will we know who’s won?” to “who won?”. This chapter, however, does not focus on horserace logics<sup>49</sup> but instead looks at the more complicated process surrounding how emerging stories were used, and how information was controlled across platforms in the process of setting the news media agenda.

#### 4.3. Progressive coalition or Scottish invasion?: the impact of Nicola Sturgeon’s strong performance

<sup>49</sup> See Cushion et al., 2016 for an accurate account of horserace narratives in 2015 election coverage



A key element of the news media agenda setting process was the interplay of influential news stories that were used in conjunction to build a strong agenda. In this section I analyse two agenda items; the success of each on the media agenda helped to increase the salience of the other. These were (1) Nicola Sturgeon's successful performance in the leaders' debate; and (2) the prospect of a Labour-SNP agreement in government, or the "coalition of chaos" as it was referred to by the Conservative Party. The process which enabled these items to become part of, and remain central to, the news media agenda consisted of a combination of the following: legacy newsgathering practices; a hybridisation of media logics; limited harnessing of network power; and controlled interactivity in message dissemination. In short, they provide evidence for a fluid process of news media agenda setting which was still predominantly characterised by hierarchical power structures.

These items were salient on the news media agendas because the information was circulated amongst political and media elites in established channels, whilst concurrently gaining traction in online networks. Although traditional news media agenda setting and established power relationships remained dominant, social media undoubtedly had a role to play. In answer to RQ4, political parties and media organisations used a combination of social media strategies and established agenda-setting practices to exert their influence over the news media agenda. Sections 4.3.2 to 4.3.5 analyse how information was sourced, used, and shared in relation to the two agenda items described above. Section 4.3.1 briefly looks at an unsuccessful case drawn from the Liberal Democrats' campaign, which sets the scene for the analysis which follows. This analysis details the division of power between hierarchical and networked relationships, the hybridisation of logics in the use of social, online, and broadcast media, and the successful employment of message control as part of strategies of controlled interactivity.

#### *4.3.1 Failing to use a salient item to strengthen an agenda: The case of the Liberal Democrats*

In the journalistic texts analysed there were 44 mentions of “coalition” occurring consistently over the 48-hour period (see Table 4.1). Talk of coalition was a main feature of the pre-debate build-up. Mark Austin at ITV News spoke about how “Natalie Bennett ... will be hoping to present her party as one that could play an important role in any coalition” (ITV News, 2015b), BBC News reporter Ben Wright explained that “Nick Clegg said he would prefer to see a coalition between the Liberal Democrats and one of the main parties” (BBC News, 2015a), and on Channel 4 News Michael Gove, speaking for his party, highlighted how “The clear dividing line is between a Prime Minister whose plan is working, and other parties scrabbling to form who knows what kind of coalition!” (Channel 4 News, 2015a).

The existence of closely related media agenda items primed citizens prior to the debate. Scheufele and Tewkesbury’s (2007: 11) observation that priming leads news audiences “to use specific issues as benchmarks for evaluating the performance of leaders and governments” is borne out by my findings. I noted that the discussion of coalition amongst news media and political elites prior to the debate prepared citizens to view leader interactions through this lens. 3,050 (10%) of the tweets collected using the search term “#leadersdebate” mentioned “coalition,” where many users expressed their coalition preferences or potential outcomes they disliked (see Figure 4.3). Therefore, the driving force behind the agenda was elite engagement with a coalition narrative and this was reflected in citizen discussion online. At the back-end of the process, power relationships remained hierarchical and online audiences indexed their discussion to the media agenda. The role played by social media users in this instance was in perpetuating the media agenda, and elite actors benefitted from this by sharing digital content.

Figure 4.3. Examples of citizen tweets discussing “coalition”



Source: Gugle, S. (2015) and Thompson, S. (2015)

The fact that “coalition” was firmly on the news media agenda in the build-up to the debate benefitted certain political parties. The Conservative Party used the prospect of a Labour-SNP coalition as a key message with the goal of persuading potential voters that they were the safer option (see section 4.3.5). The Liberal Democrats positioned themselves as the middle ground between the two main parties, placing the assumption of a hung parliament at the heart of their message. In pre-debate interviews Nick Clegg and Liberal Democrat spokespeople were quoted saying “Most people now know that nobody on the stage is going to win this election outright” (ITV News, 2015b), presenting a coalition government as a given election outcome. The Liberal Democrats supplemented their engagement with broadcast media with digital content. On the morning of the debate the official Liberal Democrat account tweeted “Pollsters predicting a hung Parliament: Ben Page, Ipsos Mori: ‘Most likely a hung parliament or coalition.’ #GE2015”

(Liberal Democrats, 2015a), and a different tweet containing the same information was published from the same account at 12:30 – “Pollsters predicting hung Parliament – Ben Page, Ipsos Mori on #GE2015: ‘Most likely a hung parliament or coalition’” (Liberal Democrats, 2015b) (see Figure 4.4). Citizen interactions with these two tweets were sparse, totalling 20 retweets, 1 reply, and 7 likes for the former, and 6 retweets, 6 replies, and 5 comments for the latter.

The Liberal Democrats’ tweets met Twitter standards for authentic communication on the platform, in line with the adjusted requirements for elite organizations based on Enli’s criteria (2015: 136-137): the tweets were predictable, spontaneous, and immediate. This theoretically endowed them with the ability to use network power. However, this did not work in practice. The party’s core campaign message was generally not well-received as it was reasonably uninspiring, perhaps even insulting (Perraudin, 2015), and the outcomes for the party were not made clear. Without this feature the tweets lacked the motivating impetus needed for their supporters to share the message. According to Stromer-Galley (2014: 14), motivating supporters to share information is an important factor for success in strategies of message control involving controlling the interactivity of supporters. Therefore although the technological affordances of social media were incorporated into the Liberal Democrats campaign, they failed to motivate supporters to share messages widely. The result was reduced power to set the media agenda, or indeed to direct their messages to travel online. The lesson for the party appears to be that no level of authenticity and engagement in controlled activity strategies can overcome an uninspiring message and low levels of support.

There is further evidence that, among a section of the voting population at the time of the debate, the Liberal Democrats’ reliance on a coalition narrative was backfiring, although the notion of a hung parliament election result was generally not in question by the media, other political elites, or the public. In the *Today* programme’s regular campaign feature *100 Seats in 100 Days* broadcast on 2 April 2015, a member of the public expressed concerns about the Liberal Democrats in coalition: “what’s the point in voting for them because if they go into a coalition with the Tories again it’s just going to be more Tory policies. Voting for someone else presents a

different opportunity for a different government” (BBC Radio 4, 2015a). In this citizen’s opinion the option of voting for the Liberal Democrats was overshadowed by the expectation that they would form a coalition government with the Conservatives. Not only was this voter reflecting the media consensus that coalition was inevitable, but they were also influenced by the Liberal Democrats own agenda which situated them firmly in the centre ground on the presumption of an agreement with either main party.

This example provides evidence for the loss of message control by the Liberal Democrats; although they took part in the hybrid news media agenda setting process, their adherence to the coalition agenda backfired. It also demonstrates how the process can become individualised. For the Liberal Democrats, in this instance, engagement on social media was not an effective part of their agenda-setting repertoire. Answering the research questions with this example – how are the technological affordances of social media incorporated into the news media agenda setting process? Do social media users play a role in setting the news agenda? – I have shown that the party harnessed Twitter as a platform to share positive information in line with their campaign messages, but social media users did not engage with the content. Had social media users played a more active role in the Liberal Democrats’ campaign on social media, granting them power drawn from the network, they may have had greater success in placing their items on the news media agenda.

Figure 4.4. Two similar tweets from @LibDems released at 06:00 and 12:30 on 2 April 2015



Source: Liberal Democrats (2015a; 2015b)



#### 4.3.2 Assessing the dialectical approach to power through *The Telegraph's* framing of Nicola Sturgeon

Making an issue prominent in the news media in order to make it prominent on the public agenda is a function of the traditional agenda-setting process (McCombs, 2014: 4). I argue that a tool used to achieve prominence for stories on the media agenda during the 2015 election campaign was the harnessing of network power from supportive networks that existed in online spaces. In the most effective cases, network power was used alongside hierarchical power relationships. The use of digital tools in the form of *The Telegraph's* website and Facebook page are examined here and show how the technological affordances of social media are incorporated into the news media agenda setting process. The findings answer part two of RQ4: how are the technological affordances of social media incorporated into the process of setting the news media agenda?

*The Telegraph's* outputs exemplified the attempts to harness network power by producing content that met the standards for communication on those platforms (Chadwick, 2013: 207). Equally, these actions demonstrated how established media organizations used Facebook as a push medium and therefore maintained a hierarchical power relationship. The media organisation was able to share an article originally published at an earlier date with a wider audience who potentially had not already been exposed to that text. The audience in turn could share this information through their social networks on Facebook, granting *The Telegraph* access to the structures of network power. I describe below how *The Telegraph* combined its access to hierarchical and networked power through the analysis of a Facebook post about Nicola Sturgeon (see Figure 4.5).

The post was published within the following context. A coalition narrative had become increasingly central in debate coverage as a result of the inclusion of minor parties. From morning until mid-evening on 2 April 2015, print, online, and broadcast news reports about the leaders' debate focussed predominantly on explaining its logistics and format and on introducing each of the leaders. It is for this reason that discussions of Sturgeon within the content were neutral in

tone and she was featured alongside all or most of the other leaders. In 12 out of 16 mentions in online news sources released before the debate, Sturgeon was written about in conjunction with all or most of the other party leaders. This is contrasted to the post-debate reports and analysis where she was widely lauded as a – if not *the* – winner, and certainly as the leader who performed best. For example “Miliband flops as SNP and Ukip secure shock victory” (Dominiczak, Swinford, and Hope, 2015) and “Nicola Sturgeon was judged best-performing leader in tonight’s debate in a poll of 1,117 viewers by YouGov, with 28 per cent backing.” (Channel 4 News, 2015b).<sup>50</sup> That she was seen to have done especially well in England was a surprise given her Scottish Nationalist politics. She was also noted to have been popular amongst left-wing voters who might traditionally support Labour (Mason, 2015).

This consistency was punctured by a post at 11:20 on 2 April 2015 on *The Telegraph’s* Facebook page. This post demonstrated the complicated hybrid media logics that characterise the news media agenda setting process. Captioned “Tonight the danger is that Nicola Sturgeon repeats the 2010 Nick-trick, presents her very old-fashioned politics as new, reasonable and sensible, and persuades enough voters in Scotland to vote for her party,” (*The Telegraph*, 2015a) the post linked to an article originally published on 31 March 2015 headlined “Nicola Sturgeon – the most dangerous woman in politics” (Archer, 2015). Although other pre-debate content disseminated on *The Telegraph’s* website did not overtly promote an agenda, this action indicates that the organization was engaging in the news media agenda-setting process by sharing an older story on Facebook with a clear agenda, thereby actively trying to influence public opinion.

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<sup>50</sup> Opinion poll results were mixed but generally found that Sturgeon was well received. These included YouGov who named Sturgeon the winner with 28% of their sample backing her (YouGov, 02 April 2015) and ComRes/ITV who placed Sturgeon second with 20% behind Miliband, Cameron and Farage who were in joint first place on 21% (ComRes, 02 April 2015).



Figure 4.5. The Telegraph's Facebook Post sharing their article warning against Nicola Sturgeon



Source: *The Telegraph* (2015a)

*The Telegraph's* act of sharing this post on Facebook appeared to invite interaction, and an equitable power relationship with its audience. However, the organization used the platform as a push medium rather than a tool for conversation. This is a common use of social media by elite actors, yet undoubtedly this particular action was problematic for the organization as *The Telegraph* was not responsive to its audience. Stromer-Galley differentiated between computer-mediated human interaction and media interaction, defined respectively as "prolonged interaction between two or more people through the channel of a computer network" (Stromer-Galley, 2000: 117) and "interaction with the medium itself" (Ibid.: 118). She drew on Rafaeli's (1988) work to argue that responsiveness is a requirement for computer-mediated human interaction. When two Facebook users interact on the social networking site, sending and receiving messages, this constitutes computer-mediated human interaction. When a Facebook user interacts with a post and receives no response then this is not computer-mediated human interaction *despite* the

affordances of the technology. Responsiveness is critical, and forms part of authentic communication on Facebook. *The Telegraph's* use of Facebook posts in a non-responsive manner falls under the category of media interaction and provides evidence for hierarchical power relationships between news organizations and citizens. Maintaining hierarchy has both positive and negative outcomes. The organization can maintain control of its information but effective performance in network power relationships is challenged as the act of not engaging in reciprocal communication breaks expected standards.

Yet, this story is not straightforward. Using Facebook as a push medium is not a completely redundant strategy in setting the news media agenda. These types of interactions may encourage two-step flow - at least 86 users did directly share *The Telegraph's* post within their own networks, and others may have shared the information in their offline personal networks (Dennis, 2016). I also found that the post met other Facebook communication standards. Visually and discursively it presented as a typical post that a user may find in their timeline; it contained an opinion, a link, and was relevant to the day's events.

Meeting these standards for predictability on Facebook network endowed *The Telegraph* with a perceived authenticity amongst citizen-users. By achieving this, the message had a greater chance of being shared and of setting the media agenda. Sharing content creates a virtuous circle building a post's perceived authenticity. Enli (2016: 128) demonstrates how "through their engagement with the post, social media users [do] the job of spreading the message and add[ing] a portion of authenticity by sharing directly through their networks rather than via the mass media." However, responsiveness is also a communication standard of Facebook. Increasing interaction with this standard is where media organizations could increase their agenda-setting power further. Creating a semblance of a less hierarchical power structure through responsiveness would allow them to engage with their followers more effectively and could provide new information to strengthen their agendas. The following section provides an assessment of the way in which information originating on social media was used in the creation of media agendas.

#### 4.3.3. “What are they tweeting about?”: How information from social media was used to strengthen media agendas

*The Telegraph*'s attacks on Sturgeon continued into the evening of 2 April 2015. The first pre-debate website content produced on 2 April 2015 that expressed a wholly negative opinion about Sturgeon was published at 18:17. *The Telegraph* reported that the female leaders – Sturgeon, Leanne Wood, and Natalie Bennett – were “plotting” to “gang up” on Cameron “in a bid to dominate” the debate (Dominiczak, 2015). Natalie Bennett was a source for the story. She was quoted confirming that the female leaders held a number of opinions in common. This was juxtaposed with information supportive of a different news agenda item – that the Conservatives were “warn[ing]” of a Labour-SNP coalition and that the Tories offer “clear leadership” compared to this potential “chaos”. The text immediately promoted coalition as a reality, fitting the pattern that I have established happened frequently in news reports. A coalition involving Sturgeon was presented as a strong possibility. The article reported that evidence existed for the early stages of agreement between the parties. This narrative was validated, legitimizing and strengthening this agenda in the minds of their readers by following these statements with the Conservatives’ warning.

This finding reveals the continuation of traditional functions in the news media agenda setting process and provides an answer to parts one and two of RQ4: journalists sourced information from political elites through social media, and the connectivity inherent in social media was incorporated into newsgathering practices. The way in which this information was sourced, compiled, and disseminated provides evidence of the continued dependence of news producers on elite sources, specifically political parties in this instance. This finding reveals something new for agenda-setting research: although the power relationship was hierarchical in this case study, hybrid media logics were in place for newsgathering with journalists turning to social media to provide supporting evidence. We should consider the interplay of these two journalistic practices when considering who sets the news media agenda and how they do so.

The connectivity of social media partly creates the power within its networks. This is demonstrated by the sourcing of the story through Twitter. The article used a photograph of Sturgeon and Wood backstage at the ITV studio as evidence that the female leaders were working closely together. The image was tweeted by SNP staffer Ria Robertson at 15:59. At 17:20 the Online Picture Editor at *The Telegraph* replied to the tweet asking if the photo could be used on *The Telegraph's* website. Social media therefore played a role in facilitating speedy communication between elite actors. The content of this text furthered three agenda items, all of which benefited or advanced the Conservative Party's messages. Firstly, it constructed David Cameron as an underdog in the debate who was facing a coordinated attack from smaller parties on the left, a point discussed in further detail below. Secondly, it depicted Sturgeon as a threat, forming part of an emerging frame that marked her as "dangerous". Finally, and relatedly, it strengthened the arguments for coalition by depicting party leaders "plotting" together, priming audiences for potential multiple partners in government.

In the post-debate period Sturgeon's performance was widely praised by citizens on social media and by news media organizations. For example, Vicki Young on BBC News at Ten reported that "... the people with the biggest smile on their face tonight are the SNP. They think it has been a great night for Nicola Sturgeon" (BBC News, 2015b). Sky News at 11 reported similarly positive lines where Political Editor Faisal Islam's opening speech was solely about Sturgeon's performance: "Considering that this is a UK wide audience, UK wide polling that we have been hearing, the performance of Nicola Sturgeon is the standout ... She is near the top of one of the polls and in the rest as well" (Sky News, 2015a). The result of this consensus was that political parties and media organisations used Sturgeon's strong performance to suit their own agendas, and very few texts or broadcasts were disseminated with a neutral tone about Sturgeon.

The provenance of the sources which underpin this story, including those from social media, demonstrate that *although newsgathering processes happened through digital and legacy practices, legacy (hierarchical) power structures continued to dominate agenda-setting*. Elite sources were still the primary mechanism for sourcing stories and supporting information. This is a consistent finding; 20 tweets used in online news reports, blogs, or broadcasts (n=20) were

sourced from journalists<sup>51</sup>, politicians<sup>52</sup>, or political party or staff accounts<sup>53</sup> compared to 7 sourced from citizens<sup>54</sup>. In news media content about the leaders' debate, citizen contributions made on social media were used mainly to provide colour to the news report. There were no examples of original information being brought to light by citizens and challenging the framing of discussion, as previous research has shown is possible (see Chadwick, 2010; Freelon and Karpf, 2015).

The lack of information from social media used in the broadcast reporting may be due to the difficulties of making such content fit legacy broadcast news production practices; it is easier to embed a tweet in a piece of written text. Social media often feels separate to the main story within a broadcast, as will be explored further in Chapters 6 and 7. In the one programme that incorporated tweets, Sky News at 11 broadcast on 2 April 2015, the tweets were used as supportive evidence for the story they were telling and were sourced from elite actors: two journalists and the director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

In their immediate analysis of the debate, Sky News at 11's report contained a segment specifically to discuss comments made on social media as well as high-level data<sup>55</sup> from Twitter. Anchor Adam Boulton's lead-in comment was "First of all, as we have seen, this election is nothing if not an election taking place on social media as well" (Sky News, 2015a). This statement othered social media; the election is taking place there "as well", that is to say in addition to, but separately from, the offline world. The programme's analysis strengthened this understanding of the election on social media, with the reporter's speedily delivered description highlighting the total number of tweets about the debate, the total number of tweets discussing each leader, sentiment analysis on those tweets, and finally reading out three tweets all from the establishment

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<sup>51</sup> Sources for this finding are Guido Fawkes (2015), Lockhart (2015), Nardelli and Arnett (2015), Phipps (2015), Sanghani (2015), Sky News at 11, *The Telegraph* (2015d), Waterson (2015a), Waterson (2015b), and Zurcher (2015).

<sup>52</sup> Sources for this finding are Glaze (2015), ITV News (2015c), ITV News (2015d), McTague (2015), Phipps (2015), and Sparrow and Phipps (2015).

<sup>53</sup> Sources for this finding are BBC News (2015c), Dominiczak (2015), ITV News (2015c), and McTague and Chorley (2015).

<sup>54</sup> Sources for this finding are ITV News (2015c), ITV News (2015e), MailOnline (2015), Newton Dunn (2015), Sanghani (2015), Stubbs (2015), and Waterson (2015a).

<sup>55</sup> High-level data is defined as data about large numbers of users that has been aggregated, for example about location, general subject of tweets, total number of tweets about a topic etc.

actors highlighted above. Figure 4.6 illustrates this difference in use between citizen and elite content on Twitter.

Figure 4.6. Screenshots from Sky News at 11, comparing use of information from citizens' tweets (left) to use of information from elites' tweets (right)



Source: Sky News (2015a)

This was a pattern repeated in other broadcast and online news reports. Information from citizens was only used as an original source in two ways; either as examples for a story about the reaction on social media – in which case social media *was* the story - or as supporting information in the form of vox populi. For example, on ITV News’ liveblog an update was published at 21:30 headlined “Viewers: Debate shows we need more women in politics” (ITV News, 2015g) (see Figure 4.7). Alongside a comment from Political Editor Tom Bradby, five tweets from non-elite citizens were included each making the point that the female leaders’ performances showed the need for more women in politics. In this case, the story originated on social media only in the sense that social media *is* the story – viewers’ opinions were reported as though they were the homogeneous thoughts of Twitter users.

Figure 4.7. Extract from ITV News liveblog covering a story sourced from Twitter

2 April 2015 at 9:30pm

## Viewers: Debate shows we need more women in politics

Viewers watching tonight's leaders' debate on ITV have voiced their admiration of the performance of the three female politicians on the stage.

Natalie Bennett of the Green Party, Plaid Cymru's Leanne Wood and the SNP's Nicola Sturgeon were complimented for making "reasonable points", compared to the "shouty" men of the other four main parties.

ITV News political editor Tom Bradby also commented, saying Wood was "doing rather well" in the debate.



Source: ITV News (2015g)



An example of the second type of usage comes from *The Telegraph*, who used Twitter as a source for vox populi in an article entitled “Leaders' debate 2015: Do you really know who these women are?”, published at 11:34 (Sanghani, 2015). The journalist engaged in a legacy media practice via digital methods by asking her question to the public on Twitter (see Figure 4.8). The responses were included in article alongside supporting information from a YouGov focus group. This indicates a journalist using the network power inherent in her social network on Twitter to source information for a story. In the cases presented in this section I have shown that information from citizen-users of Twitter was used at a high-level as supporting evidence for stories. Main sources continued to be political or media elite actors. For the news media agenda setting process, this demonstrates that news-making legacy practices continued, built on established relationship structures between journalists and politicians.

Figure 4.8. Sanghani's tweet requesting opinions from her followers



Source: Telegraph Women (2015)

#### 4.3.4. Constructing the “coalition of chaos”: meshing hierarchical and networked power and structures to set the news media agenda

Reports of Sturgeon’s successful debate performance gained traction across media organisations, alongside evidence of citizen-users’ positive sentiment towards the SNP leader. Opinion polling, Twitter mentions<sup>56</sup>, and the 1,200 new members claimed by the SNP during the debate, all demonstrated that Sturgeon had performed well. The Conservative Party used this emerging story and narrative as part of a strategy to strengthen their own agenda regarding a potential Labour-SNP coalition. The party successfully set the media agenda and the analysis of how they achieved this is outlined in this section. They melded older and newer media logics, sharing information across media platforms and drawing on their supporters networks to set the news media agenda. It was an effective exercise in using both forms of power which clearly reveals the functions of the process.

On Sky News at 11 Kay Burley interviewed Stewart Hosie of the SNP regarding the impact of Sturgeon’s good performance in the debate:

**Burley:** So do you think that Mr Miliband was thinking that that is someone he can do business with?

**Hosie:** I hope he was. Given that Nicola won the poll of polls which was UK-wide and not just in Scotland, I think that Labour must be looking carefully. He would be wrong now to rule out an arrangement with the SNP if that is where the polls took us.

**Burley:** I noticed you said arrangement not coalition?

**Hosie:** We have never said not coalition? We thought that that was the least likely outcome.

**Burley:** Never say never?

**Hosie:** We have effectively said no and they have said no. But if there is a supply and confidence arrangement, a vote by vote arrangement, he would be foolish to rule it out. He may be then saying, he is going to reject things which people in England want and open the door to another Tory government. (Sky News, 2015a)

This exchange was the first post-debate broadcast to specifically discuss a Labour-SNP arrangement. Sturgeon’s assured performance, alongside the snap opinion polls that ranked her

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<sup>56</sup> ITV.com/news reported that Sturgeon came third in total Twitter mentions. Data from Twitter showed that she garnered 113,000 tweets, behind Farage (262,000) and Cameron (162,000) (ITV News, 2015f).

highly, led Burley to be persistent in this line of questioning. Sturgeon's strong performance put coalition even more firmly on the agenda as it cemented her capabilities as a formidable leader in the public's minds (Green, 2015). Although during the debate she spoke about areas that the SNP and the Labour Party had in common and of them working together to "lock the Tories out of government", Sturgeon never explicitly mentioned a coalition. Despite both parties saying no to a formal arrangement, Sturgeon's olive branch to Labour was a gift for the Conservatives as the possibility of Labour-SNP coalition was a lynchpin of their campaign (Atkins, 2015).

The Conservative Party promoted two agenda items after the leaders' debate:

1. "Cameron in charge" – the framing of Cameron as the only candidate fit for leadership (see section 4.4); and
2. "Coalition of chaos" – warning about the threat of a Labour-SNP coalition government, described and analysed here.

As discussed above, potential coalition was a salient news media agenda item throughout the campaign. The attribute<sup>57</sup> of chaos became attached to the coalition narrative and the association was strengthened after the leaders' debate when the multi-party nature of the event highlighted the seeming decline of two-party politics in the United Kingdom (Robinson, 2015a). It was argued that SNP success in the election might benefit the Conservative Party as it would result in Labour losing seats in Scotland and consequently being unable to deliver a majority government (Brown, 2015). Coalition was a subject that was frequently raised in the online media, print media, and broadcasts analysed. The Conservative Party's "coalition of chaos" agenda therefore fit into existing narratives and their post-debate message gained traction by resonating with this.

Below I evaluate post-debate communications which demonstrate how power was exercised in this case. I find that the acceptance and promotion of attributing success to Sturgeon's debate performance amongst media and citizens allowed the "coalition of chaos" agenda to resonate. The Conservative Party used a combination of positive information about Sturgeon's performance, presenting her as a credible force in politics, and negative information about the

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<sup>57</sup> Attributes, as defined in Chapter 1, are qualities that "can be employed to evaluate or think about the issue" (Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan, 2002: 11).

potential outcomes of the SNP in a coalition government to build their agenda. Their approach to the dissemination of information took into account hybrid media logics, in which they combined older and newer media practices to create and share information to construct their agenda. This included using both hierarchical and network power to exert control over the news media agenda.

The established practices used by the Conservative Party included engagement with traditional media through interviews. The outcome of this was that their message travelled widely amongst mass media. The party's spokespeople praised Sturgeon in broadcast interviews and in the print and online news media, in addition to praising Cameron's performance. One example is John Humphreys' interview with the Conservative Party's Michael Gove on the *Today* programme the morning after the debate:

**Michael Gove:** It's probably fair to say that the three female leaders all did very well in different ways. It's also legitimate to say that Nicola Sturgeon emerged as perhaps the most impressive debutante on the stage. She did very well and –

**John Humphrys:** More impressive than David Cameron? Not that he's a debutante.

**Michael Gove:** That is the important distinction to draw. I think that in terms of being an insurgent or an outsider or a critic of government, I think that Nicola Sturgeon was the most impressive. I think in terms of being prime ministerial, being commanding, being someone who people who trust with the fate of this country for the next 5 years, David Cameron unambiguously won according to all the opinion polls that were taken afterwards... (BBC Radio 4, 2015b)

The Conservatives' strategy for pushing their agenda to traditional media was to maintain message consistency on both of these fronts. Gove, in the example above, highlighted Sturgeon's strengths as "the most impressive debutante" but placed Cameron above her in leadership terms. Gove used the descriptor "commanding", which was used frequently by party spokespeople to describe Cameron's debate performance. For example, William Hague described Cameron's performance as "commanding" on ITV News at Ten following the debate and a soundbite – "David Cameron gave a very strong and commanding performance this evening in the debate" – was used throughout the *Today* programme on 3 April 2015. Such descriptions of Cameron's performance were further replicated in Conservative-supporting newspapers (see Figure 4.9)

Figure 4.9. Descriptions of Cameron's performance in The Sun (left) and The Daily Mail (right)



Source: Letts (2015: 8) and Newton Dunn (2015: 5)

In addition to traditional media interviews, the party synchronously shared information on their social media accounts which promoted Miliband being in thrall to Sturgeon in a potential coalition. An image was produced and shared on the @CCHQ Twitter account at 22:26, fewer than 30 minutes after the end of the debate. It was then retweeted by the @Conservatives Twitter account. The image repeated the theme of a poster shared earlier in the campaign. It depicted a small Miliband in Sturgeon's pocket; the earlier image had depicted him in Alex Salmond's pocket (see Figure 4.10). The same image was turned into a video, zooming out from Miliband to the looming spectre of Sturgeon, while an audio clip of the SNP leader saying "SNP MPs in the House of Commons keeping him honest" played on loop. The effect was somewhat disconcerting. This was shared on the Conservative Party's Facebook page at 23:08. The Conservative Party's two-pronged approach, incorporating both hierarchical and networked power, demonstrates clearly the most effective approach to the news media agenda-setting process. They were able to harness their social media networks and the affordances of social

networking sites, whilst use their position as a powerful elite actor to share their messages through traditional media.

Figure 4.10. CCHQ tweet featuring a photoshopped image which propagates a Labour/SNP coalition



Source: CCHQ Press Office (2015)

The image was later featured in the *MailOnline*'s analysis of the debate, under the sub-heading "Now look where the Tories have put Miliband!" (McTague and Chorley, 2015). The article containing this image was published at 12:43 on 3 April 2015. The content of the text was a round-up of the debate and incorporated myriad audio-visual materials. It set out its stall in the headline: "Cameron wins by a whisker: PM attacked from all sides but 40% say he's best choice to lead the country AND back him to fix the economy as Miliband is overshadowed by Sturgeon and Farage". It is therefore clear from the beginning of this text that the *MailOnline* was

promoting the “Cameron-in-charge” agenda, but also that it was employing the coalition narrative by describing Miliband as “overshadowed” by the leaders of smaller parties.

The text further constructed Miliband as weak, describing him as “hapless” and “indecisive”, compared to Cameron who “kept a firm hand on the leadership rudder”. Information from citizen-users of Twitter was also incorporated into this article as supporting evidence rather than as an original source. This further substantiates the way in which citizen information was used as a supporting act in the news media agenda-setting process. The text of tweets were integrated into the main news report instead of a screenshot of the tweet being embedded. Visually, this treats tweets as quotes from a source in a legacy sense and may lead the reader may give more weight to the source.

A further Facebook post was created at 13:51 on 3 April 2015 containing different content but with the same goal. It successfully travelled through the Conservatives network on Facebook, receiving 3,800 likes and 1,100 shares (see Figure 4.11).

Figure 4.11. A still from a video ‘mash-up’ of Miliband and Sturgeon during the leaders’ debate



Source: Conservatives (2015a)

The post consists of a video comprising clips of Miliband and Sturgeon edited together, appearing as though they are finishing each other sentences. The video is unrefined; the audio and video are not seamless. This could be a design decision following a specific media logic of digital content. The video replicates the look of videos by semi-comedic online media producers which regularly go viral such as Casetteboy, a British duo who are noted for creating mash-up videos of politicians. The caption repeats the party's core messages, reading "Labour propped up by the SNP means chaos for Britain – and hardworking taxpayers will pay for it" (Conservatives, 2015a). Repetition is a significant part of agenda-setting effects (McCombs, 2014; Stone and McCombs, 1981), as is the related characteristic of message discipline for controlled interactivity in an election campaign (Freelon, 2017). The Conservative Party were successful in enacting both of these strategies to promote the "coalition of chaos".

Further to repeating their core messages and phrases in the caption, the party employed strategies of message control through calls to action by directing followers to "LIKE and SHARE" the video. This post met requirements for authenticity on Facebook; it was spontaneous in its message, the content was not obviously rehearsed. Furthermore, it was immediate, posted soon after the leaders' debate, and was predictable. That is to say the post contained discursive and technological markers that the audience would *expect* to find in a Facebook post such as the call to action ("Hit SHARE"), and the inclusion of video content. As a result, it was widely shared. This demonstrates that the party were able to successfully engage in the contemporary news media agenda-setting process through their creation of relevant content and by exerting power within online networks on Facebook to activate two-step flow.

Analysis of the comments on the post show that this agenda item achieved salience amongst this audience. Of the total number of comments analysed (564), the highest proportion expressed fear or concern regarding a Labour-SNP coalition, compared to only 3% which expressed disdain about this narrative and 4.6% of comments which criticised the electioneering behind the video. This small but important perception shows that citizen-users were able to perceive commodification and demonstrates the awareness that some users have about



campaigning strategies, notably they reacted to the lack of spontaneity perceived in the communication. Such awareness is one way in which the illusion of authenticity can be broken. Once a communication is revealed as inauthentic, for example by appearing as rehearsed, behind-the-scenes electioneering can be perceived and attempted commodification of citizen content and action is revealed. The actor loses the ability to direct citizen activity in a meaningful manner. This might make citizens less likely to share information.

Generally Facebook users were divided about this agenda item. Specifically their division centred on whether a Labour-SNP coalition would be a good or bad outcome, and not on whether or not it was a realistic prospect. The general consensus across both digital and traditional media was that a coalition government would be the election outcome, and that Labour were likely to enter into an arrangement with the SNP. Citizens who commented on a Facebook post on *The Telegraph's* page published at 13:15, which shared their earlier article entitled "Leaders' Debates: The SNP won, the rest of the country lost" (Stanley, 2015), discussed the prospect of a Labour-SNP arrangement. For example the first comment on this topic stated that "What is clear is a vote for Labour in England is a vote for Scottish Separatists to rule England. Anyone really fancy that...?" A reading of the article shows that Sturgeon is constructed as a threat and likely to be a "kingmaker".

The Conservative Party in this instance successfully engaged in the hybridised practices which constituted the news media agenda-setting process in the 2015 general election campaign. They produced shareable content for social media, encouraged their followers to share it amongst their networks – and successfully persuaded them to do so by meeting the communication standards for the social media platforms. Simultaneously, they engaged with the traditional media, sharing their message and promoting another news story (Sturgeon's successful performance) to further their own. They used the technological affordances of social media successfully and meshed this approach with legacy practices in their engagement with traditional media to set the news media agenda. However, not all of their strategies were as successful. The following section analyses the second of their approaches, and highlights the importance of authenticity of communications within social media networks.

#### 4.4. #cameronincharge?: The role of authenticity in setting the news media agenda

The Conservative Party's post-debate agenda-setting approach had two lines of attack. Discussed above was their "coalition of chaos". This section analyses their second, less successful, item, which I refer to as "Cameron in charge". This strategy involved framing Cameron's performance during the debate as masterful and above the fray, and by extension Cameron as the only party leader with leadership qualities. "Cameron in charge" was the top line promoted by Conservative Party spokespeople across media platforms and in their own content. Whilst this agenda did transfer to Conservative supporters on social media and amongst the right-wing press and online news producers, it did not achieve success as a main news line across traditional media. This was the result of two important criteria. Firstly, the "Cameron in charge" agenda did not have a pre-existing narrative to draw on, as did the "coalition of chaos" communications. Secondly, despite using many of the same tactics to promote this agenda item, the Conservatives' communications were inauthentic on social media. Specifically, they lacked both spontaneity and predictability despite meeting the standard for immediacy.

Beginning with the Conservative Party's first post-debate Facebook post made at 23:55 on 2 April 2015, it is notable that they strongly and consistently pushed their core message. This post-debate agenda comprised a dichotomy of Conservative competence versus Labour chaos. The text of the Facebook post presented this idea as a *fait accompli*: "Tonight's debate *confirmed* what we already knew" (italics added for emphasis) and utilised the language of choice; (1) a choice between Cameron and Miliband; and (2) a choice between a competent government and a chaotic one. The headline of the link stressed that there was an obvious answer: "Tonight the choice was clear". This wording is similar to an earlier *Telegraph* article online (*The Telegraph*, 2015b), which shows consistency and reflexivity between the Conservative Party and supportive press in constructing this agenda.

The Facebook post was carefully designed to enhance message control and to motivate sharing amongst their supporters. The image in the post was a screenshot of the leaders at their podiums, on which the hashtag “#cameronincharge” was superimposed (see Figure 4.12). This hashtag was used by Conservative Party members and supporters on Twitter, but by sharing it on an image posted to Facebook it broke the standard of communication for predictability. Although there is overlap between the two social networking sites in terms of functionality, networking, and user base – and Facebook functionality indeed supports the use of hashtags – they are not widely used in practice on Facebook and do not operate in the same way as on Twitter. Research shows that including hashtags on a Facebook post can ultimately lead to lower user engagement (Hutchinson, 2016).

Figure 4.12. Conservative Facebook post promoting #cameronincharge



Source: Conservatives (2015b)

By sharing an image with a hashtag the post failed to meet the standard of predictability for authentic communication, as it introduced a device which citizen-users would not expect to see. Enli and Simonsen (2017: 5) show how politicians and political parties attempt to influence agendas by redefining or reframing an existing hashtag already at use in the network. This is part of a social media logic. In this case, however, the Conservative Party attempted to direct conversation by introducing a new hashtag and promoting it on Facebook as well as Twitter. This action is a failure to apply social media logic accurately. The use of hashtags is not a standard on Facebook and therefore not a feature a user would expect to find. In breaking this standard the Conservatives uncovered their message control strategies - more so than using explicit calls to action, which are standard practice by organizations on Facebook (Vitak et al., 2008: 112).

By shattering the authenticity illusion, attempts to direct the message by controlling and motivating interactivity became inauthentic as a consequence; attempted commodification of citizen-users was made clear. This reduced the party’s chances of harnessing network power and was reflected in the comments, which were disparate and not united in support for Cameron’s leadership skills. Of a total 547 comments, 18.8% were negative about Cameron’s performance, Cameron in general, or the Conservative Party, and 9.0% were negative about Miliband’s performance, Miliband in general, or the Labour Party (see Table 4.3). A small number of citizen-users’ comments included language which either reflected (2.4%) or subverted (2.2%) the Conservatives’ agenda. These included references to Cameron’s leadership and competence capabilities, and five comments which specifically challenged #cameronincharge for example “Cameron will only be in charge of his (second) kitchen after May 7<sup>th</sup>.”

Table 4.3. Frequencies of user posts on Conservative Party Facebook post promoting #cameronincharge by topic

		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>% (n=547)</b>
01	Issue - education	7	1.28
02	Issue - employment	4	0.73
03	Issue - economy	8	1.46
04	Issue – health	3	0.55
05	Issue – EU	6	1.10

06	Issue - defence	1	0.18
07	Issue - austerity	2	0.37
08	Cameron - good performance	12	2.19
09	Cameron - bad performance	21	3.84
10	Cameron - positive	32	5.85
11	Cameron - negative	36	6.58
12	Conservative Party - positive	34	6.22
13	Conservative Party - negative	46	8.41
14	Miliband - good performance	1	0.18
15	Miliband - bad performance	5	0.91
16	Miliband - positive	7	1.28
17	Miliband - negative	19	3.47
18	Labour Party - positive	7	1.28
19	Labour Party - negative	25	4.57
20	Farage - positive	17	3.11
21	Farage - negative	5	0.91
22	UKIP - positive	45	8.23
23	UKIP - negative	3	0.55
24	Sturgeon - positive	20	3.66
25	Sturgeon - negative	7	1.28
26	SNP - positive	5	0.91
27	SNP - negative	1	0.18
28	Clegg - positive	2	0.37
29	Bennet - negative	1	0.18
30	Labour-SNP - positive	2	0.37
31	Labour-SNP - negative	20	3.66
32	Anti-politics	29	5.30
33	Media bias	3	0.55
34	Polls	4	0.73
35	Unclassified	107	19.56

Turning to Twitter, #Cameronincharge did not gain traction on this site for three reasons. Firstly the Conservative Party’s attempts to promote their hashtag was ineffective. Although I did not collect tweets using #cameronincharge, I collected a sample of 323,694 using #leadersdebate. In this sample only 726 tweets (0.2%) used #cameronincharge. A tweet by @Conservatives which contained a clear call to action to share the message, “RETWEET to let friends know that at #leadersdebate, it was #cameronincharge” (Conservatives, 2015c), was retweeted 211 times in total. This represents 0.13% of the 151200 followers the account had during the election campaign (Hayes, 2015). Secondly, “Cameron in charge” did not benefit from prior existence on the news media agenda in the same way that agendas involving the coalition narrative did. Thirdly,

although expectations for Cameron had been down-played by some news media, with seven participants the candidate most ‘in charge’ was an ongoing debate in which the case could be made for many different leaders.

Yet this agenda *was* partially constructed by news actors in addition to Conservative Party staff. On the morning of 2 April 2015, ITV’s breakfast show *Good Morning Britain* was the first television broadcast to use a line featuring “Cameron in charge”. Anchor Kate Garraway interviewed a body language specialist as part of the programme’s promotion of – and build-up to – the debate (Good Morning Britain, 2015). The expert praised Cameron’s “commanding presence” and compared Miliband to him unfavourably on the basis of this trait. Therefore 12 hours prior to the debate Cameron was being framed as the more prime ministerial candidate by the media organisation hosting the event. This action should have been helpful for the Conservative Party in their promotion of “Cameron in Charge” as it supported their message and anticipated their later attempts to set the post-debate agenda. However, such priming was a one-off occurrence. Without strong repetition of the message across news media, as the “coalition of chaos” narrative received, “Cameron in charge” could not gain salience.

Following the debate, Conservative Party spokespeople did repeat the line to journalists. As with the “coalition of chaos” soundbite, Conservative Party spokespeople strongly promoted “Cameron in charge” on traditional media alongside their social media output. Clips and footage of various candidates and MPs appeared across the broadcast news media as the party strove to portray Cameron as the sensible choice compared to the chaos that they associated with Miliband. For example, on the post-debate bulletins on ITV News at Ten, Conservative spokesperson William Hague and reporter Romilly Weeks held the following exchange where Hague claimed victory for Cameron by invoking the themes of command and choice:

**Romilly Weeks:** Now William Hague, David Cameron had most to lose, but he didn’t emerge as a clear winner.

**William Hague:** Well I think he was a very clear winner. He gave a very commanding performance ... He showed how all the other parties there would create more debt and more taxes. And that is the choice facing the country. (ITV News, 2015c)

These themes were also included in a report by the BBC News at 10 journalist Vicki Young, who emphasised that this was the message that the party wanted the viewer to take away:

George Osborne has just been saying to me that David Cameron was totally in charge from beginning to end. He said he was not getting pulled into the scrapping. That was the message they wanted to get across, that he was prime ministerial, rising above the others, showing that chaos would institute if there is another coalition. (BBC News, 2015b)

The promotion of these lines continued into the following morning where Radio 4's *Today* programme used clips from spokespeople stating that "David Cameron gave a very strong and commanding performance", and "Who's got the leadership qualities? I think we saw tonight it was David Cameron, and these are the choices that people are going to make as we approach the election" (BBC Radio 4, 2015b). The language used by spokespeople to construct this particular agenda was coherent and memorable. Employing alliteration – command, chaos, control, and coalition – was an effective strategy to ensure the message was consistent and the objects could easily be linked. The network agenda of these objects and attributes<sup>58</sup>, created by the party, was strong but it did not transfer in its entirety to the media agenda despite receiving airtime and being quoted in print and online news reports. I argue that this was a consequence of the inauthenticity of the message. As a result it was less able to tap into network power. As discussed above, repetition is one way to aid message consistency, but it runs the risk of exposing electioneering strategies and baring the authenticity illusion. The impact of Theresa May's election slogans and seeming inability to provide spontaneous responses in 2017 is also revealing here (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017) and demonstrates the applicability of these findings beyond 2015.

The inauthenticity of #Cameronincharge was noted by some media outlets, particularly its lack of spontaneity which made clear the rehearsed nature of the tweets and discourse. BuzzFeed journalists noticed the persistence with which Conservative Party candidates pushed this item on social media during the immediate post-debate period of analysis. BuzzFeed's then

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<sup>58</sup> As defined in Chapter 1, objects are "the things on which the attention of the media and public are focused" and attributes are "the characteristics and traits that describe the object" (McCombs, 2011: 5).

Political Editor, Jim Waterson, tweeted about, and wrote an article on, the topic (see Figure 4.13). Conservative candidates had demonstrably been instructed to tweet, simultaneously, using an approved set of words, and as Waterson pointed out "The idea is that this discipline means the core message reaches everyone in the country. The risk is that it looks inauthentic" (Waterson, 2015). I argue that this inauthenticity, the lack of spontaneity in these communications, is the reason that these tweets did not gain traction on Twitter; beyond existing Conservative supporters and members it was not a line that was widely repeated. With the exception of retweets from @Conservatives and @CCHQ, original tweets using this hashtag tended to be mocking, and social media users subverted or challenged the agenda.

On Twitter an important facet of communication standards which give the user authenticity is spontaneity, as outlined in Chapter 2. Although the #Cameronincharge tweets posted by Conservative Party candidates met the standards for immediacy and predictability, the *forced spontaneity* revealed an underlying premeditation. This resulted in inauthentic communication. Although on one hand this strategy ensured consistency of message and enabled it to reach a greater number of people, on the other hand – once exposed – it had a damaging effect on the party's ability to set the news media agenda because the inauthenticity of the message led journalists and citizens to challenge or mock the message rather than repeat it.

The authenticity contract can be broken if attempts at control become clear. Enli (2015: 132) states that "mediated authenticity is constructed by authenticity illusions, such as the enhancement of raw material through adjustments that make it seem more realistic, genuine, and trustworthy". Rather than motivating controlled interactivity on the part of citizens, such actions appear as attempts to commodify their interaction and content. In this instance the construction of the message was laid bare as it appeared rehearsed. In this case, achieving immediacy also worked against the party, as large numbers of MPs and candidates almost simultaneously tweeted the same information rendering the lack of spontaneity – and therefore the attempted agenda setting and electioneering – obvious. When its inauthenticity became apparent and the party was faced with a plethora of opposing or alternative interpretations of the debate, it became unable to harness network power.



“Cameron in charge” never became a serious contender on the news media agenda despite the party’s message consistency on social, broadcast, print, and online news media for two reasons. Firstly because it did not easily fit with other agendas like the potential coalition and Sturgeon’s success and so was less likely to be reported, and secondly because the party were unsuccessful in their efforts to promote the message on Twitter and Facebook. Arguably, the news media agenda setting process involved harnessing the technological affordances of social media and using strategies involving controlled interactivity to direct their message, but authenticity of communication is required to realise the potential of these actions.

Figure 4.13. BuzzFeed’s tweet thread showcasing a selection of “Cameron in charge” tweets

If you were on Twitter during the election leaders' debate you might have seen quite a lot of Conservative politicians talk about how David Cameron was "in charge".



*Source: Waterson (2015b)*

#### 4.5. Some media are more equal than others: Domination of Facebook does not equal domination of the news media agenda

I have argued that for an elite to retain control of the news media agenda-setting process in the 2015 election campaign it was necessary for them to control and direct their message on social media and to use the network power inherent in these platforms. This became increasingly important the greater the number of competing agendas. I also found that it remained important to take part in the established hierarchical practices of news-making. Simply repeating a message consistently on social media does not equal domination of the news media agenda. To evidence and illustrate this point I discuss below the autonomy with which Facebook users acted on the posts examined, and notably the comments made by users on a variety of elites' Facebook posts which often digressed from the original premise.

One of the most common themes within the Facebook comments on the analysed texts was discussion of Nigel Farage and/or UKIP. This was reflected in the online news media texts, elite Facebook posts, and broadcasts in which Farage was the third most mentioned leader (see Table 4.4). On Facebook, however, debate about Farage occurred far more regularly, even appearing in the comments for posts ostensibly unrelated to UKIP or their leader. Therefore, information about UKIP was recurrent in a number of citizens' Facebook feeds before and after the leaders' debate. Arguably this gave them access to a wealth of network power and I expected to see this access translate to agenda impact. However, this access to social media networks did not convert into mirrored analysis and discussion in the traditional media, with the notable exception of Farage's comments on health tourism and HIV patients.

Table 4.4. Number of mentions per party leader

	Facebook and Online News Websites		Broadcast Segments		Cross-Platform Total	
	Frequency	% (n=471)	Frequency	% (n=255)	Frequency	% (n=726)
Ed Miliband	74	15.71	45	17.65	119	16.40
David Cameron	69	14.65	42	16.47	111	15.29
Nigel Farage	77	16.35	31	12.16	108	14.88
Nicola Sturgeon	68	14.44	37	14.51	105	14.46
Nick Clegg	70	14.86	27	10.59	97	13.36
Leaders collectively <sup>59</sup>	32	6.79	35	13.73	67	9.23
Leanne Wood	45	9.55	20	7.84	65	8.95
Natalie Bennett	36	7.64	18	7.01	54	7.44

*Note:* Online news articles (n=129) Facebook posts (n=40) Broadcast segments (n=80)

UKIP effectively enacted controlled interactivity over their message dissemination before and after the debate. During the afternoon prior to the debate, at 13:07, they posted an eye-catching image to Facebook designed for sharing. It comprised:

- the ‘UKIP purple’ background;
- a headshot of Farage;
- a headline stating "The ITV Leaders’ Debate”;
- a direction to supporters to "Watch Nigel tonight at 8pm on ITV"; and
- the calls to action "Like & share" and "#TeamNigel" (see Figure 4.14).

This image was well-designed. It had a strong appeal to their audience through use of UKIP’s core branding colours and an image of Farage. It was demonstrably highly shareable collecting a total of 8,200 likes and 2,200 shares. 543 user comments were collected from this post. Of these,

<sup>59</sup> The ‘leaders collectively’ code was used when political party leaders were referred to as a group, without differentiating between individuals.

230 (42.36%) interacted with the party or addressed a comment directly to Farage. for example "Good luck Nige!", or "Go get them!". 49 (9.02%) offered direct advice to Farage within these interactions, such as "watch for the ambush from Cameron", "ignore all the bait that the others throw at you", and "have a pint of beer before you go on". Table 4.5 contains frequencies of all codes applied to each user comment.

Figure 4.14 An image promoting the Leaders' Debate shared by UKIP on Facebook.



Source: UK Independence Party (2015)

Table 4.5. Frequency of user comments on UKIP's Facebook post by topic

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>% (n=543)</b>
01 Farage - positive	89	16.39
02 Farage - negative	15	2.76
03 Polls	3	0.55
04 Interaction	181	33.33
05 Interaction with advice	49	9.02

06 Unclassified <sup>60</sup>	53	9.76
07 Issue - EU	6	1.10
08 Issue - immigration	33	6.08
09 Issue - employment	1	0.18
10 Metacommunication	23	4.24
11 UKIP - positive	39	7.18
12 UKIP - negative	7	1.29
13 Issue - Islam	4	0.74
14 Miliband - negative	1	0.18
15 Issue - disability	2	0.37
16 Debate general	13	2.39
17 Issue - health	1	0.18
18 Cameron - negative	3	0.55
19 Issue - housing	1	0.18
20 Tagging a friend	19	3.50

These findings show that the UKIP Facebook community felt a direct connection to the party's leader; their comments seemingly had a clear expectation he would receive them, and they addressed him informally. Unlike in the case discussed in the following chapter, it appears that because of the strength of their supporters' loyalty it was unimportant that the party did not respond to these comments. The discussion amongst citizens built momentum and the feeling of a grassroots movement, and many confirmed they had shared the message with their networks.

These themes were noted in the comments on other Facebook posts made by both political parties and by news media organisations. The consistency of Farage appearing on the agenda of Facebook comments of citizen-users was observed in two places: (1) in comments on posts covering Farage's statement on health tourism and HIV patients; and (2) in comments on posts unrelated to the health tourism furore, but where users discussed Farage regardless. The first example comes from a Sky News post created at 22:49, under 50 minutes after the end of the debate. This post comprised a clip of Nigel Farage's speech on HIV and health tourism, alongside the information that it was the most tweeted about moment of the debate (Sky News, 2015b). Of the 826 recorded comments, 457 (55.3%) expressed support or a positive sentiment towards

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<sup>60</sup> An unclassified code was applied to comments where no clear topic could be discerned or the content was irrelevant, for example an offensive remark made to another user.

Farage’s statements on HIV patients, compared to just 109 (13.2%) which were negative or unsupportive (see Table 4.6).

Table 4.6. Frequency of user comments on Sky News’ Facebook post by topic

		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>% (n=826)</b>
01	HIV comments - positive	457	55.3
02	HIV comments - negative	109	13.2
03	Farage - positive	14	1.6
04	Farage - negative	17	2.0
05	UKIP - positive	14	1.7
06	UKIP - negative	3	0.4
07	Sturgeon - positive	1	0.1
08	Sturgeon - negative	1	0.1
09	Green Party - negative	1	0.1
10	Miliband - negative	1	0.1
11	Media Bias	12	1.5
12	International comparison	5	0.6
13	NHS - positive	7	0.9
14	NHS - negative	2	0.2
15	Issue - benefits	4	0.5
16	Issue - EU	9	1.1
17	Issue - immigration	19	2.3
18	Issue - health	5	0.6
19	Issue - economy	4	0.5
20	Issue - international aid	2	0.2
21	Issue - defence	1	0.1
22	Issue - Racism	21	2.5
23	Issue - terrorism	1	0.1
24	Tag only	31	3.8
25	Anti-politics	4	0.5
26	Poll	1	0.1
27	Unclassified <sup>61</sup>	80	9.7

Amongst the comments made by citizen-users there were persistent themes that Sky News was anti-UKIP and that the media organization typically removed comments that were positive about the party. Many users drew on their personal experiences to support Farage’s statements on health tourism, with claims made that he was “speaking for the people”. Despite an

<sup>61</sup> Unclassified comments were coded where the content was unrelated to the topic, for example on user insulting another, or posting an unrelated link.

overall negative stance being taken towards Farage's HIV comments amongst media organisations, other political parties, and other elite actors (see BBC, 2015e; Glaze, 2015; Linekar, 2015; and Miliband, 2015), Facebook comments made by citizen-users showed evidence of support for Farage's remarks. I argue that this is a result of UKIP's social media approach which maintained the authenticity illusion, meeting standards for spontaneity, immediacy, and predictability. This in turn strengthened message control and dissemination of information amongst their members and supporters, and motivated those supporters to share their core messages.

Illustrative of the second finding is a Facebook post by *The Telegraph* published at 19:35 on 3 April 2015 (*The Telegraph*, 2015c). *The Telegraph* shared a link to their daily election campaign winners and losers report. Despite being a general discussion piece it did include the debate as its main point for the 3 April round-up, using a screenshot of the debate as the accompanying image captioned "A good day for the Scottish National Party (SNP) but not so great for the side-lined Nigel Farage and Nick Clegg." This is a theme for *The Telegraph*, who, as shown above, had produced content praising Nicola Sturgeon but also playing down Farage's performance. This binary approach suited the Conservative Party's agenda; simultaneously talking up Sturgeon's performance in order to scare potential Tory voters in England who would want to avoid a Labour-SNP coalition, and diminishing the chance of UKIP in the eyes of those same voters.

Despite the article covering the whole day of campaigning, all user comments focused on the debate outcomes. Of the 91 user comments, 27.5% (25) expressed support or liking for Farage and related to this were the 8.8% (8) comments which suggested that *The Telegraph* was biased against Farage. It may be the disconnection between what UKIP's supporters saw in their Facebook feeds and what they saw reported in the press, online, and in broadcasts which led them to the belief that the news media were biased against UKIP and Farage. Current research supports the notion of social media users' news exposure being limited to their own preference 'bubbles' (see Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic, 2015; Nikolov et al, 2015). However, what is clear is that simply marshalling a numerous 'People's Army' on social media does not translate into control

of the media agenda. Trevison and Reilly (2015) state that “while UKIP received much less coverage in traditional broadcast and print media than the other parties, Farage’s party dominated Google searches”. However, effectively exercising network power, through authentic action and successful control of the message on social media, did not impact the news media agenda in this instance. Although my findings provide support for the existence of hybrid media logics, and the promotion of news media agendas on social media platforms is an important part of the process, the case of UKIP demonstrates how hierarchical power structures must also be drawn upon in order to successfully set the agenda.

The disjuncture between media organisations and the public, as represented on the Facebook posts of media organisations, reveals that media agendas do not always make the transfer across to public agendas. Although news media organisations and politicians were successful in setting the news media agenda to be, on the whole, against Farage’s comments on health tourism, this dominance did not translate to the public agenda as expressed through Facebook. Facebook has the largest cross-demographic segment of the UK population of any social media site validating this finding.<sup>62</sup> In contrast to the Twitter users in my sample, who mostly condemned Farage’s comments in line with other political parties and media organisations, users on Facebook appeared to be less receptive to this particular agenda. Social media therefore cannot be treated as a homogenous entity in the news media agenda setting process. Each platform requires a different approach in order to reach its network power, and – in the event that an actor is successful in doing so – there must still be established agenda-setting relationships in place for the message to impact the news agenda.

#### 4.6. Conclusion

The analysis of news stories and information released following the first leaders’ debate has demonstrated that the contemporary news media agenda setting process is multi-faceted. It moves

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<sup>62</sup> In 2015, there were 35.13 million Facebook users in the United Kingdom (Statista, 2017) – over half of the UK population.



our understanding of the process forwards by highlighting the asymmetrical relationship between hierarchical and network power required when setting the media agenda. The technological affordances of social media and information from citizen-users on social media formed a part of the process in the cases analyses, but their use was not uniform. I have drawn the following conclusions from these findings. Whilst the process remained dominated by hierarchical power relationships and established news-making practices, political and media elites did utilise hybrid media logics. Elite actors used both online and offline platforms, and responded to them as part of a cross-platform approach to content production and dissemination. Varying degrees of success were found, the most successful of which was the “coalition of chaos” narrative. Evaluation of this case strongly suggests that whilst a hybridisation of logics is crucial within the process, hierarchical power and the ability to draw on established narratives remain most important.

This chapter has shown that the process of setting the news media agenda was fluid and fluctuating. It comprised a combination of legacy and digital practices, message control strategies online as part of controlled interactivity, harnessing of network power through social media sites, and the use of other news stories to build the media agenda. Ultimately, though, the main force behind the news media agenda setting process was the engagement through established relationships that political and media elites have with each other.

Citizen-users of social media did not make any decisive interventions in the news agenda following the leaders’ debate. The content created and shared by citizens tended to reflect the existing news agenda. This provides support for existing knowledge around agenda-setting, that the public agenda will mirror the media agenda. However, a conceptual development comes from the instances of users subverting or challenging elite information, as happened with #cameronincharge, and the number of divergent agendas discussed on Facebook, such as those related to UKIP. Agenda-setting research has predominantly focused on the salience from the media agenda to the public agenda. The findings presented here show that even if items are in alignment, publics discuss agendas differently or may be challenging them within their social networks.

Hierarchical and established practices undoubtedly remained central to the news media agenda setting process. Yet both political and media elites tried to utilise network power in order to control their message on social media. Content produced by Twitter users was used by traditional media organizations to provide evidentiary support for a news story. Occasionally, social media became the story itself when media organizations reported on emerging themes of discussion on social networking sites, for example the positivity felt by citizens towards the female leaders. Both information from citizen-users and access to network power through them became more important when agendas were competing or contested. As message control through the professional media becomes more difficult for elites, message control on social media to activate a two-step flow system can increase the ability of an actor to retain control over the agenda setting space. The case study of UKIP showed how effective this can be when the actor manages their social media engagement effectively.

On the other hand, this case also demonstrated how seeking to dominate social media without engaging in established processes with traditional media does not give a party influence over the news media agenda. Network power and relationships with social media users does not have the same importance in the process as the ability to tap in to hierarchical power structures between elites. Controlling your message and only being able to use network power online, no matter how effective, does not allow political actors to set the agenda for the wider news media. It is imperative that the established processes and relationships are evoked. Therefore although there is a dialectical nature to power in the news media agenda setting process, power exercised through hierarchical relationships remains the most important.

The findings of this chapter also provide conceptual development in our understanding of acts that constitute controlled interactivity and those that comprise commodification of citizens' content and action. I outlined this through analysis of network power, which is not negligible in this process. Its role can perhaps best be seen in its impact on failed attempts to activate networks. When elites produce online content which breaks the authenticity contract with citizens, such as occurred with 'Cameron in charge', their attempts at controlled interactivity instead reveal electioneering and the underlying motive of commodification of citizens' content

and action. This reduces citizens' motivations to share messages amongst networks and hence reduces the ability of elites to access network power. It can also lead to an increase in subversion of the message and challenges to attempts to set the agenda. The following chapter analyses these trends in further detail, closely evaluating the anatomy of one news story and the battle for dominance over the agenda following the leak of a civil service memo with damaging implications for Nicola Sturgeon.

# Chapter 5 Contestation and control in building a media agenda: An anatomy of reports on Nicola Sturgeon and the leaked memo

**Researcher:** In your opinion then what do you think was the biggest story across the campaign period?

**Jim Waterson:** The SNP and what the SNP would do, and who they would go with, and the effects of it. It's probably what won the Tories the election. In retrospect it's turned out the SNP have no say, because the SNP are irrelevant now because there is no coalition. So the weird thing is the story of the campaign was wrong, but only due to the result which in no small part came about because of the story of the campaign. I can't work out really which of the chicken or the eggs in that situation came first. Covering a story like that there is nothing to add, how do you move it on? (Jim Waterson, interview 3, July 2015)

*Jim Waterson, Political Editor of BuzzFeed, speaking in our final interview about the impact of the SNP's success on the news media agenda.*

The success of the Scottish National Party (SNP) was one of *the* stories of the 2015 UK general election. Both during the campaign, when “Surging Sturgeon” led her party to high polling results and was lauded for her debate performances (McTague, 2015b), and after the SNP's historic landslide victory in Scotland. The SNP and its leader were a constant feature of election reporting. Following from the previous chapter's analysis of the agendas emerging from the leaders' debate, this chapter examines a news story that arose partially from Sturgeon's success and the threat the SNP posed. Assessing the process of setting the media agenda around the SNP was particularly interesting as I was able to focus on an area of high contestation, and place power relationships and the flow of information under closer scrutiny.

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter describes in detail how the hybridisation of news-making practices has impacted the process of setting the news media agenda. To do so it reports on findings from qualitative analyses conducted on one news story that emerged during the election campaign. The

report was based on a leaked memorandum from the UK Government civil service which claimed that Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of Scotland and leader of the Scottish National Party, would prefer to see David Cameron as Prime Minister over Ed Miliband. The story was broken by *The Telegraph* on its website. This chapter takes this news report, and the information released in relation to it, as a case study. Building on the findings of Chapter 4, I ask how news media and political elites used social media to strengthen their power in the news media agenda-setting process. The findings of this chapter provide answers to three of this dissertation's research questions: (RQ4) How are (i) information sourced from social media, and (ii) the technological affordances of social media incorporated into the process of setting the news media agenda?; (RQ5) Do citizen-users of social media play any role, such as intervention in the information cycle, in the process of setting the news media agenda?; and (RQ6) Do citizen-users of social media replicate or challenge agendas?

Whilst *The Telegraph* instigated the news story, over the time period of analysis a multitude of actors released relevant political information into the news cycle. The result was that *The Telegraph's* framing was challenged and replaced. There were three main findings which explain for *The Telegraph's* loss of control and the relative success of the SNP in gaining control of the news agenda. *Firstly*, *The Telegraph*, and political elites supportive of this agenda, had no substantial new information to share and they did not draw on any information arising from citizen-users on social media. In answer to RQ4, although *The Telegraph* and the Labour Party used social media to promote their agendas, they did not source any new information from these spaces. This resulted in a reliance on the original source information and the repetition of their established frame in myriad outputs. The impact of this in terms of the news media agenda-setting process is similar to the "Cameron-in-charge" effect discussed in the previous chapter. Simply stating the same information repetitively through social media channels does not allow the actor to harness network power. Whilst the concept of commodification of citizen-users does not apply in this scenario, there was a failure of controlled interactivity strategies on the part of elites which cleared the way for the success of competing agendas.

*Secondly*, the story and underpinning assumptions were effectively challenged through denials from actors involved. This information was shared to great effect through a combination of elite actions within traditional media and by citizens on social media. In response to research questions 5 and 6, outlined above, citizens were active on social media debating this story. Critically, their conversations were indexed to discussions in the news media. Just as the news media contained an increasing amount of political information which challenged *The Telegraph*, so this was reflected by citizens on social media in their discussions and content. Furthermore, citizens not only reflected the discourses being presented by mainstream media outlets but also propagated their own interpretation. For example the more measured “denials” in news reports led to a stronger discourse around “lies” aimed at *The Telegraph*. Broadly, citizen-users of social media were found to reproduce the competing agendas and discourses of the traditional media, but differed in their interpretation of them.

*Thirdly*, the SNP successfully used a mixture of older and newer media logics to disseminate information, which enabled them to be part of both the hierarchical power structure and the networked power structure. This dialectical power structure was central to the news media agenda setting process in the 2015 UK general election. Actions taken by the SNP to counter *The Telegraph's* agenda and exert control provide clear evidence of the hybrid approach now needed to be successful in the news media agenda setting process. Their actions also demonstrate the efficacy of combining the hierarchical power structure of traditional media with network power on social media platforms. Their approach to social media in this case can be contrasted with that of the Labour Party. The SNP were able to motivate and activate their supporters online to share Sturgeon’s denial and related information. In comparison, the Labour Party’s own supporters expressed disagreement with their message. The party tried to overcome this by repeating the same information and interpretation across media platforms. These repetitive interventions by the Labour Party revealed their electioneering because, although predictable and immediate online, the content lacked spontaneity and was rehearsed. This rendered their communications inauthentic. Party supporters subverted rather than promoted their agenda and this contributed to the party’s failure to exert control over the news media agenda.

Ultimately, information released on Twitter played an important role in the news media agenda in that the most important intervention was made on Twitter by Nicola Sturgeon. Sturgeon was able to challenge *The Telegraph's* framing quickly and decisively in a tweet. Her communication met the standards of Twitter and the requirements for authenticity: (1) it appeared as unrehearsed, and therefore spontaneous, (2) it was immediate, the tweet was released under 20 minutes after the article was published; and 3) it was predictable, using the @ mention and including a period before the journalists handle to ensure all followers could view it. She was able to tap in to the network power of her followers, who widely shared information regarding her denial. Despite Sturgeon's example, journalists and political parties in general did not fully realise the network power available in social media, utilising it predominantly as a push medium. This is evidence of a significant tension that exists between elites and citizens in their use of social media, there is a disconnection in the ways that each group uses social media. I argue that had *The Telegraph* or the Labour Party fully met the communication standards on Facebook and Twitter, or been able to release new political information supportive of their agenda, they would have been more successful in maintaining and exerting their influence.

The case of the news story regarding Sturgeon and the leaked memo therefore demonstrates both the most and least effective ways to engage with other actors in the news media agenda-setting process. By combining older and newer media logics, calling on hierarchical and networked power relationships, and maintaining authentic communication outputs on social media, the SNP were able to influence an initially damaging agenda item. This is compared to the approach taken by *The Telegraph* and the Labour Party who made little attempt to interact within network power relationships, beyond using social media as push media, failed to effectively control the interactivity of their audience and supporters due to the repetitive and inauthentic nature of the messaging, and were unable to introduce new information into the political information cycle to maintain their framing.

## 5.2. Case Selection

The story was first reported by *The Telegraph* on 3 April 2015 at 21:30 in an article published on their website and printed on their front page the following day (see Figure 5.1). Journalists Simon Johnson and Peter Dominczak reported on a leaked memorandum which claimed that Nicola Sturgeon had held a discussion with the French Ambassador, Sylvie Bermann, wherein she expressed a preference for David Cameron to become Prime Minister. It further alleged that she did not see Ed Miliband as “PM material”, and that she would not want a formal coalition with Labour (Johnson and Dominczak, 2015a). Sturgeon’s denial of all the allegations was rapid. At 21:47, just 17 minutes after the report was published, the SNP leader issued a tweet claiming that the story was “categorically, 100%, untrue” and further that the journalists had not consulted her before publishing (see Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.1. Front Page of *The Daily Telegraph* on 4 April 2015





This particular news report was chosen for analysis as it offered a different perspective on Sturgeon's preferences to the other Conservative-supporting press. As described in Chapter 4, the notion of a Labour-SNP agreement or coalition was a constant on the news media agenda. This report bucked the trend by suggesting that Sturgeon may have preferred Cameron to be Prime Minister instead of Miliband. Therefore this agenda item was likely to be challenged; studying this case provided insights into the news media agenda-setting process. Additionally, the choice of this story for analysis reflects of the weight given to the impact of the SNP during the campaign by the politicians, staffers, and journalists I interviewed for this project, as the opening quote to this chapter makes clear. In ten out of eleven post-election interviews the participant named the impact of the SNP as the biggest news story and one which dominated the campaign. Taking my lead from my interviewees, this story was chosen for analysis.

Figure 5.2. Twitter thread showing the conversation between Nicola Sturgeon and Simon Johnson



Source: Sturgeon (2015a) and Johnson (2015)

### 5.3. Method and Data

The data from which these findings were established is specified in Table 5.1. The dataset contained all related online news articles, Facebook posts, and user comments published over a 24-hour period following the release of the story (from 21:30 on 3 April 2015 to 21:30 on 4 April 2015). The dataset also included television news bulletins broadcast between these times from BBC News, ITV News, Channel 4 News, 5 News Tonight, and Sky News, and the *Today* programme broadcast on BBC Radio 4. Finally, newspapers published on 4 April 2015 were included for analysis. Details of the full dataset are given in Appendix B.

Tweets were treated differently. In order to avoid the pitfall of missing important evidence by sampling from a large volume of tweets, I noted tweets which had an impact on the news agenda. Examples include those that were used in news reports or which introduced new information into the information cycle. I then evaluated their impact, looking at the actors involved in their creation and dissemination, and response to them by others. Please see Chapter 3 for greater detail on this method.

Table 5.1. Number of sources per media type

		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>% (n=35)</b>
Online	News websites	14	40.00
	Political blogs	2	5.71
	Facebook posts	8	22.86
Broadcast	Radio	1	2.88
	Television	6	17.14
Print	Newspapers	4	11.43

In order to assess the patterns within comments made by citizen-users on Facebook posts, each comment was coded individually using a specific coding framework. Coding frames were individualized to take into account the fact that the user was commenting on a specific organization's page. When assessing the results from coding, I translated each number into a percentage so that this descriptive information could be used to draw comparisons between the

different texts. This study is qualitative, as such it uses an inductive approach to the development of the coding framework for content analysis. I took this decision in order to avoid prescribing my results. Also included in this analysis is information from the interviews I undertook with politicians, political staffers, journalists and political bloggers. This functions as triangulation, providing supporting evidence and rationale behind the behaviours and actions described from the content and discourse analyses.

#### 5.4. *The Telegraph* and the Labour Party: Relative success, eventual failure

##### 5.4.1 *Betrayal and Devastating Revelations: The Labour Party's Response*

The Labour Party was the only political party to vocally support *The Telegraph's* claims. It released information across media platforms to this effect, and party leaders were quoted in the traditional media condemning Sturgeon's comments. My findings show that their supporters did not agree with their interpretation of events. Labour's agenda was not promoted through supporters' social networks and did not gain salience on the public agenda. Conversely, it was challenged by citizen-users who denounced the story as a lie by the Tory-supporting *Telegraph*. This section will show that although the Labour Party attempted to use network and hierarchical power, they were unsuccessful in gaining access to social media networks. Due to both the lack of supportive information and the plethora of information challenging *The Telegraph's* story, Labour's interaction in the news media agenda-setting process was ineffective.

*The Telegraph's* initial news story broke allegations that Sturgeon wished to see Cameron, and not Miliband, as Prime Minister. This claim ran contrary to usual campaign reporting, which focussed on the potential for a Labour-SNP agreement and contained the assumption that Sturgeon would prefer to see Miliband in power. As a result, the central notion of the "leaked memo" story that readers were required to accept as true in order to make the report both credible and threatening was that Sturgeon was two-faced and devious. This frame was inherent in *The Telegraph's* campaign coverage generally and was also a feature of other

organizations' approach to Sturgeon, notably *The Daily Mail*. This notion was furthered by similar framing within the Labour Party's responses.

The attribute of "Sturgeon-as-devilish" was present from the beginning of the report; the headline referred to Sturgeon "secretly" backing Cameron. It was further made explicit throughout the article. For example, Johnson and Dominiczak wrote "Yesterday, unaware that the memo had been leaked to *The Telegraph*, she continued to openly back Mr Miliband" (Johnson and Dominiczak, 2015a). Such allegations built on the theme of deception by suggesting that Sturgeon was hiding her true allegiance, and furthermore that if she had she been aware of *The Telegraph's* access to the memo then she might have admitted her actual preference. Information within the original report therefore contributed to a frame that was an attack on Nicola Sturgeon personally, building an image of her as a deceiving person.

The report used information from elite Scottish political leaders to support its case. Quotes from the leaders of Scottish Labour, Jim Murphy, and the Scottish Liberal Democrats, Willie Rennie were incorporated. Both of these party leaders foregrounded a dichotomy between public and private space in which Sturgeon and the SNP were alleged to be deceptive, for example Murphy stated that "the SNP say one thing in public but another in private" (Johnson and Dominiczak, 2015a). This dichotomy formed the basis of the Labour Party's response to, and interpretation of this story, and was one of the few political party agendas which worked with *The Telegraph*.

Within the two hours following the publication of the allegations online, the Labour Party's response was disseminated throughout the media, using a hybrid system of newer and older media to release their statements. Murphy's statement was widely repeated across the news media; his quote was used in online news reports and in the outputs shared by the party on social media. The Labour Party pushed their lines determinedly: from 21:49 to 23:20 there were eight outputs shared on social media and an article on LabourList which clearly set out the party's stance. Tweets from @scottishlabour, the official Twitter account of Scottish Labour, all followed a definitive pattern in which they claimed that the allegations were shocking and true by labelling them "devastating" and a "betrayal", and the majority of their tweets shared the link to *The*

*Telegraph's* report (see Figure 5.3). They resolutely promoted their agenda regarding the contrasting public and private faces of the SNP and references to *The Telegraph's* report as “the truth” provided proof that the SNP were lying. However, @scottishlabour’s tweets on the subject stopped abruptly once statements denying the allegations began to be issued by the actors involved. Individual MPs and candidates even retracted the similar tweets they had posted or issued an apology.

Figure 5.3. Examples of tweets from @scottishlabour

**Scottish Labour** @scottishlabour

For months Nicola Sturgeon has been telling Scots she wants rid of Cameron. Now we know the truth:  
[telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/...](http://telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/...)  
 #voteSNPgetTories

**Nicola Sturgeon secretly backs David Cameron**  
 The SNP leader told the French Ambassador in February that she would prefer that "David Cameron remain" in Downing Street according to an official account of their conversation see [telegraph.co.uk](http://telegraph.co.uk)

**Scottish Labour** @scottishlabour

Betrayal: @Telegraph has tonight reported that Nicola Sturgeon would prefer the Tories to win the election #VoteSNPgetTories  
[vine.co/v/OI1qYZKheAr](http://vine.co/v/OI1qYZKheAr)

RETWEETS 114 LIKES 21

**Scottish Labour** @scottishlabour

This is a devastating revelation that if true exposes the truth behind the SNP campaign:

**Nicola Sturgeon secretly backs David Cameron**  
 The SNP leader told the French Ambassador in February that she would prefer that "David Cameron remain" in Downing Street, according to an official account of their conversation seen by ... [telegraph.co.uk](http://telegraph.co.uk)

RETWEETS 119 LIKES 47

10:21 PM - 3 Apr 2015

**Scottish Labour** @scottishlabour

Nicola Sturgeon has been telling Scots she wants rid of Cameron, yet in private she admits she wants a Tory Govt.

**"SHE'D RATHER SEE DAVID CAMERON REMAIN AS PM"**

RETWEETS 327 LIKES 65

11:21 PM - 3 Apr 2015

Source: Scottish Labour, 2015a; 2015b; 2015c; 2015d

The article released by LabourList was shared in a Facebook post and on Twitter simultaneously, an action taken to increase its reach by enabling their audience to share the article amongst their online networks. Evidence for this strategy used by online journalists comes from my interview with an editor of a political blog. When asked about the role played by their readership on social media, the editor informed me that:

The number of tweets and Facebook messages that we would do about our content was completely dwarfed by [audience shares]... the readership was absolutely crucial. And it becomes a sort of self-sustaining loop so the more readers you get, the more people are sharing which grows the readership. (Anon01, Interview 3, November 2015)

LabourList also used hyperbolic language to stress the importance of this story (LabourList, 2015a). The author deemed the allegations “explosive”, an adjective which suggests that *The Telegraph’s* report was both impactful and controversial. Conversely, the article also implied that the Labour Party was not surprised by the allegations made and that the basic facts of the news report were commonly known: “In Scottish Labour circles there is a widely held belief that both the SNP and Tory leaderships would like to see the other perform well in May” (LabourList, 2015a). The party’s framing of the story as a “betrayal”, “devastating,” and “explosive” was therefore aimed at party supporters and other actor groups who were not familiar with this narrative. The article also made a link with the ‘Sturgeon-is-devilish’ attribute through its inclusion of the information from Murphy’s statement that Sturgeon “says one thing in public and another in private”.

Whilst LabourList is not a mouthpiece for the Labour Party, it is unsurprising that they would follow the party’s line on this subject as the Labour Party was particularly threatened in Scotland. This stance was further elaborated by the blog on 4 April 2015. Following Miliband’s condemnation of Sturgeon’s alleged remarks, LabourList published two additional articles. The first, at 10:55, simply contained the background to the story and Miliband’s full statement (LabourList, 2015b). This was shared on Facebook with the caption “Miliband has his say...” alongside an imposing headshot of Miliband perhaps intended to demonstrate the seriousness with

which Labour were treating these allegations (see Figure 5.4). Unlike the Labour Party, however, Facebook users were not so convinced. Despite being the Facebook page of a Labour-supporting blog, the comments were mostly negative about the party's response. Of 38 comments 15.8% (6) were negative about Miliband and 36.8% (14) were negative about Labour's response and approach to the allegations (see Table 5.2). Some citizen-users' referred to the story as a lie and argued that Labour needed to stop treating the story with credibility.

Table 5.2. Frequency of comments coded by topic on LabourList's (2015b) Facebook post.

		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>% (n=38)</b>
01	Labour response - negative	14	36.8
02	Miliband - negative	6	15.8
03	Sturgeon - negative	2	5.3
04	Lie	6	15.8
05	Supportive of story	3	7.9
06	Unclassified	7	18.4

Figure 5.4. Facebook post from LabourList reporting on Miliband's response



Source: LabourList (2015b)



The second article shared by LabourList on 4 April 2015 was a comment piece by then Editor Mark Ferguson. He wrote in support of Labour's interpretation, looking to provide evidence for this agenda item and persuade Labour supporters of its validity. A notable section of this text was his statement "I don't rule this out simply because she denied it. (And if a simple denial is enough to make you believe something isn't true, I envy you the lack of cynicism that politics has drilled into me)" (Ferguson, 2015). As mentioned above, a number of Labour candidates and MPs had retracted their condemnations once denials began to appear as part of the story. With this statement, Ferguson was responding directly to both the Labour Party's doubters and to the backtracking MPs and candidates, as well as the many members of the public basing their arguments against Labour's response on the denials.

The Labour Party also tried to further their agenda around Sturgeon's deception by posting the link to *The Telegraph's* article on Facebook at 22:49 alongside their line "Saying one thing in public and another in private?" (The Labour Party, 2015). By posing this as a question they invited interaction with their followers on Facebook, encouraging them to consider the question for themselves. Interaction is a culmination of communication standard for Facebook posts. It aids spontaneity, actual or illusory, as it creates a conversation between users. Interaction is expected by citizen-users, and therefore the communication would meet criteria for predictability. Finally, interaction – although potentially not taking place in real-time – can create the illusion of liveness, up to a point. Interaction therefore helps to create authenticity around an elite post; based on my theoretical framework I would expect this to be a positive move in the promotion of this agenda. Inviting interaction suggests a reciprocal or networked relationship, particularly on a social networking site where computer-media human interaction is expected by users. Nevertheless, the Labour Party did not uphold their side of this rule and failed to meet users' expectations. Again the elite actor used a social media platform as a push medium.

Inviting responses backfired for the party. They were attacked in the comments by their followers for furthering "The Torygraph's" biased agenda. Many of the comments referred to the story as a lie in light of the various statements of denial which had been released. Commenters called for the Labour Party to stop pushing this particular agenda item but interaction with their

Facebook followers stopped at the caption. The comments of their supporters on Facebook had no impact on the party; they continued to promote this line into the following day. I argue that interacting with their supporters on Facebook would have met communication standards for spontaneity, immediacy, and predictability, increasing the authenticity of their content, and therefore enabled them to increase their control of the message through access to network power. Interacting through a networked power structure via authentic communication may have resulted in a greater number of ‘convinced’ supporters who would promote their message.

#### *5.4.2 Outcomes of The Labour Party’s response*

One of the key findings that emerges from this research is that within the media system there is tension and a point of difference between the expectations of citizen-users and elite-users on social media. As established, social media can create a challenging environment for political or media elites trying to influence the news agenda. Using the power that exists in social media networks can offer journalists and politicians a way to retain control of the news media agenda setting process. If the tension in difference of use is unresolved, or at least does not appear resolved, this opens up the door for inauthenticity. It is imperative that journalists and elites take action online to achieve this.

I observed this tension particularly in the ways in which the Scottish Labour Party, the UK Labour Party, and *The Telegraph* used Twitter and Facebook as tools to share their information. The associated accounts shared the links to the same information, and, in the case of Scottish Labour, did so repeatedly in a short space of time. Social media logics contain routines for information sharing (van Dijck and Poell, 2013), which have come to be adopted into mass media logics. This can be seen in the importance placed on social media in campaign strategies. Chris Luffingham, national campaigns director for the Green Party, provided evidence for this in his interview. When asked about the integration of media strategies in the campaign he stated that:

They were very much one and the same. We tried, where possible, to link all of these things up. So for the policy announcement[s] ... we had the traditional forms of communications, letters, leaflets, policy briefings, etc. but then also you would make sure that the social media effort reflected that as well... [We would produce] memes around it, we would produce tweets around it, and make sure there were common pieces. (Chris Luffingham, interview 1, July 2015)

Ultimately, elites see the threat to their traditional reserved areas of power and attempt to retain influence by engaging with social media as part of their repertoire. However, their engagement on social media constitutes treating the platforms as push media, with little broader engagement or conversation with their followers. As discussed above, this approach lacking in interactivity does not help an actor to be influential in the news media agenda setting process as it does not meet standards of communication for media which are based on networks and not, primarily, on broadcasting. Examples of this can be seen in Chapters 6 and 7. This tactic was not successful for either *The Telegraph* or the Labour Party. Whilst the news report undoubtedly had a wide reach, citizens' tweets instead perpetuated information that challenged *The Telegraph's* and Labour's framing of the leaked memo, particularly related to actor denials. For these elite users of Twitter, simply sharing the same piece of information repeatedly did not enable them to be effective in controlling the news agenda as it contravened the standards for spontaneity and immediacy; appearing rehearsed and re-hashed. This is similar to the outcome for the 'Cameron-in-charge' rhetoric discussed in the previous chapter. I argue that increasing their engagement by being more responsive to citizens' comments might help them authentically become a part of network power relationships and increase their chances to exert power and control the news media agenda.

Analysis of the comments made on Facebook posts shows that citizens were not supportive of *The Telegraph's* agenda. Even on pages of organisations which supported the story, notably posts made by *The Telegraph*, *MailOnline*, and the Labour Party, debate about the story's validity was prevalent in the comments. Shown in analysis of posts throughout this chapter, the majority of comments challenged the framing of the report and the media and political

organizations' interpretation of Sturgeon as devious or two-faced. There was no response from any of these elite actors to comments made by Facebook users, despite the fact that some users addressed their comments directly to the originator of the post. This provides evidence of the tension between the ways that citizens and elites perceived their relationship on social media. Citizen-users treated Facebook pages as a space for discussion and conversation, and their actions indicated that they expected the organization to be included in that. Conversely, the political and media elite-users analysed in this case study treated their Facebook pages only as a place to share information. As mentioned in Chapter 5, there is evidence of the hybridity of media logics in the practice of information-sharing and of extending the two-step flow model to incorporate social media (see also Choi, 2015). It further reveals the inauthentic ways in which elites try to use network power without truly engaging with the network of citizen-users.

In an interview I conducted with a digital advisor to a major political party he made clear the differences between the social networking sites, Facebook and Twitter, and their roles in the setting the news media agenda:

Twitter was tremendously important for the media cycle, the back and forth with journalists, how people viewed the success or otherwise of the different leaders on debate nights ... Facebook was just not very impactful for that media debate, but half a million people would see a piece of our content on Facebook. (Anon02, Interview 1, September 2015)

It is clear from this quote that the importance of Facebook for this political party lay not in exercising power over journalists through traditional structures, but in convincing their supporters to share key messages. In order to do this parties needed to ensure that they were meeting the required communication standards for the platform. In the case of the leaked memo, the Labour Party consistently shared the same message across traditional and newer media. They failed to take into account, and respond to, the fact that many supporters felt this was a discredited story. Nor did they provide specialised content for different platforms. Repetition of a key message without taking these factors into account renders the communication inauthentic, lacking spontaneity and immediacy, not only resulting in an inability to use power drawn from the

network but also as a failure to enact strategies of control and direct or motivate supporters to share the message.

Labour's responses were widely reported across all news outlets. This information was promoted into the next day. Over the 24-hour time period of analysis, the story was reported numerous times by broadcast and online news media, and in six print articles in newspapers on 4 April 2015. The Labour Party's main lines were featured in news reports online and in broadcasts. For example at 10:10 on 4 April 2015, ITV News' online liveblog was updated with a video of Ed Miliband, and a full text quote lacking context, claiming that the report in *The Telegraph* constituted "damning revelations" (ITV News, 2015k).

*The Telegraph's* story was covered by other news outlets throughout the night. In the early hours of the morning, at 01:41 on 4 April 2015, *The Times* published an online article headlined "Sturgeon 'says she prefers Cameron'" (McIntosh, 2015). The article presented the allegations as fact. The caption under the picture – situated immediately underneath the by-line – did contain Sturgeon's denial (see Figure 5.5), which was initially made in her tweet (Sturgeon, 2015a) and then repeated by the SNP's spokesperson in an official statement. The text took a speculative approach, making the argument that, if true, the story "would be hugely embarrassing," and that "Scottish Government sources were last night at a loss to explain where the report had come from". This approach supported *The Telegraph's* agenda as it never questioned the basis of the allegations: the leaked memo. The article also provided reasons from the Labour Party to claim truth for the assertions.

Figure 5.5. The Times reporting the leaked memo allegations: headline and image

## Sturgeon 'says she prefers Cameron'



Source: McIntosh (2015)

### 5.5. Challenging *The Telegraph's* version of events: Meshing media logics to build a stronger media agenda

Beyond Sturgeon and the SNP's denials made on Twitter and through traditional channels in a press release and statements to reporters, further information was released into the information cycle which increased challenges to this agenda item. With a stream of challenging information being revealed, *The Telegraph* made a concerted effort to add more supportive information into the cycle and maintain their influence in the news media agenda setting process. For example, following Sturgeon's call for an inquiry into the leak *The Telegraph* produced two successive articles which addressed this development in different ways (see Figure 5.6).

The first article was a very short text which contained a written account of Sturgeon's denial alongside the facts of the case, and an embedded video of Sturgeon calling for an inquiry. This was published at 14:00 (Krol, 2015). The second article was written by the authors of the original piece and was 4.5 times the length of Krol's piece, at 877 words compared to 189. The

second article, published at 14:13, was more inflammatory. From the verbs used in the headline – “Sturgeon demands inquiry” (Johnson and Dominiczak, 2015b) compared to “Sturgeon calls for inquiry” (Krol, 2015), the text then continued with a highly detailed recap of the story and some of the denials which had been issued (Johnson and Dominiczak, 2015b). More descriptive detail was given about the actors and events. For example the senior civil servant became "an experienced UK civil servant" who compiled the memo "immediately" after talking to the French Ambassador. The authors highlighted how their source has "faith" in the civil servant and that they were "experienced and reliable", thereby providing evidence that this is the more dependable version of the story. The text also included phrases which seem objective but actually strengthened *The Telegraph's* agenda, for example "The First Minister has denied she made the comments but, when challenged, refused to say that she thought Ed Miliband was prime ministerial material." Further similar actions occurred through the juxtaposition of Sturgeon's "claims" with what the newspaper "understands" to have happened. *Claims* being unverified assertions compared to *understanding* based in knowledge. The text ends with the now oft-repeated quotes from Miliband and Rennie.

Figure 5.6. Contrasting articles from The Telegraph reporting Sturgeon's call for an inquiry

HOME » NEWS » POLITICS » SNP

## Nicola Sturgeon demands inquiry into claims she secks David Cameron

Nicola Sturgeon has asked for a leaks inquiry into how a confidential document that claimed she wanted David Cameron to remain Prime Minister was published



By Simon Johnson, and Peter Dominiczak

2:13PM BST 04 Apr 2015

[Follow](#) 4,112 followers

Nicola Sturgeon has demanded a full-scale investigation into how a confidential document compiled by a senior civil servant that claimed

Sources: Johnson and Dominiczak (2015b) and Krol (2015)

HOME » NEWS » POLITICS » SNP

## Nicola Sturgeon calls for inquiry into leaked memo alleged PM comments

SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon calls for an inquiry into a leaked memo alleged she prefers to see David Cameron as prime minister over I



By Charlotte Krol, video source ITN

2:00PM BST 04 Apr 2015

SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon has called for a civil service inquiry into she said the memo about her conversation with the French ambassador is "100 per cent untrue"



Johnson and Dominiczak's report is a reproduction of their original story, only with more adverbs and positive adjectives. Its creation demonstrates *The Telegraph's* attempt to release new information into the political information cycle (Chadwick, 2011a). By the time of publication of these articles, the new information being released predominantly consisted of denials of the allegations and information about the inquiry. I argue that due to the speed of the political information cycle, the actor most likely to influence the news media agenda is that which can release new information to be dissected by journalists and citizens alike. *The Telegraph* had no new information to add and so reproduced their story with embellishments.

*The Telegraph* continued to take steps to exert control over the process of setting the news media agenda. Later in the day the organization took recourse in targeting Sturgeon. On the evening of 4 April 2015 *The Telegraph* posted new information in the form of a news story that read like an opinion piece. Headlined "Never before has Scotland been quite this deluded" this text was not a story about the leaked memo, it was a character assassination of Sturgeon. Anderson described Sturgeon in scathing terms that fitted the "devious" framing of her used in the original memo report: "It is less a question of a splinter of ice in her heart, as a few scraps of heart tissue clinging to an icicle" (Anderson, 2015). This text provided information in support of the newspaper's interpretation of Sturgeon, specifically that she was two-faced and capable of lying. This text was published in the news section of the website, which suggested that it was targeted at audiences who would be expecting to read a factual report.

Another example of further information released in efforts by *The Telegraph* to keep control of this agenda item was their lambasting of SNP supporters who had placed stickers denying the story on print copies of the newspaper. The stickers read "This story is a fabrication and has been denied by both Nicola Sturgeon and the French Ambassador" (Sawyer, 2015). Despite the stickers only being placed on copies of the newspaper in one supermarket shop, Sawyer's article derided SNP supporters as a whole and criticised their offline protest. This story was shared on *The Telegraph's* Facebook page at 21:13. The post had the positive impact of keeping the story on their readers' radar in the final hours of its first day, although they challenged *The Telegraph's* agenda and framing. Of 311 citizen-user comments collected from this post only

20 mentioned the stickers, many instead debated the veracity of the leaked memo story (see Table 5.3). 18.3% (57) argued that the story was a fabrication and 15.1% (47) condemned *The Telegraph* and their journalism. Only 5.8% (18) directly argued that the story was true.

Table 5.3. Frequency of user comments by topic on *The Telegraph's* Facebook post about stickers

		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>% (n=311)</b>
01	Agrees the story is a lie	57	18.3
02	Agrees the story is not a lie	18	5.8
03	SNP - negative	15	4.8
04	SNP - positive	6	1.9
05	Telegraph - negative	47	15.1
06	Telegraph - positive	6	1.9
07	Sturgeon - negative	23	7.4
08	Sturgeon - positive	3	1.0
09	Stickers	20	6.4
10	Labour response - negative	4	1.3
11	Tag	3	1.0
12	Unclassified	109	35.0

The story remained on the news agenda throughout 4 April 2015, with broadcasters following the lead of print and online media organisations. This fact points to broadcasters potentially playing a more central role in the news media agenda setting process. Whilst only briefly covered in newspaper reviews on BBC Breakfast and the *Today* programme, it was a lead story on ITV News, BBC News, 5 News Tonight, Channel 4 News and Sky News from their midday bulletins (where applicable) through to their evening and night-time bulletins. However there was a notable shift in the focus on which information was prioritised and reported. This shift provides evidence for the impact of various actors.

The midday bulletins from ITV (ITV News, 2015q) and BBC News (BBC News, 2015f) both opened with the main claims from *The Telegraph* as the first pieces of information in their reports, and the content of the memorandum itself was the focus of the report. Both reports also included footage of Miliband and his quote: "These are damning revelations. What it shows is

that while in public the SNP are saying they do not want to see a Conservative Government, in private they are actually saying they do want a Conservative Government." At 18:00 the leaked memo remained the top story on the ITV News bulletin (ITV News, 2015m). Although the item had remained prominently on the news media agenda, new information had been introduced by elite actors and its framing was markedly different. The headline announced on ITV News was "allegations of dirty tricks", demonstrating the influence of the SNP who had introduced a new interpretation; the SNP's strategic response to the report included framing the scenario as "dirty tricks" from Westminster in response to the establishment's fear of SNP success. The BBC News website led with this in a headline on the morning of 4 April 2015. A section of the text with the sub-heading "Completely false" focused entirely on the denials and Sturgeon's full quote criticising Whitehall, part of which was: "It suggests a Whitehall system out of control - a place where political dirty tricks are manufactured and leaked" (BBC News, 2015k). However, as the BBC have a requirement to remain impartial, a second section was included headed "Damning revelations" and reverted to the coalition frame. This method was repeated in their broadcasts later that day.

James Cook's report on BBC's evening news bulletin also led with a different angle, which focused on the launch of the inquiry (BBC News, 2015g). On Channel 4 News, Labour's "unholy alliance" description was used in the top line alongside the summary of the memo and a full statement of denial from Sturgeon (Channel 4 News, 2015d). Reporter James Blake also offered some analysis of the Labour Party response, noting that they were "quick to pounce on the story" due to the threat of the SNP and that "The Scottish Labour leader ... would not admit that Labour jumped the gun in using *The Telegraph* story to attack the SNP". Whilst ITV's report later in the evening remained the same (ITV News, 2015n), the BBC circled back to the pervasive coalition frame. Reporter Eleanor Garnier ended the segment with "... what this episode reinforces is that the days of a two-party system here in Westminster are well and truly over and we are now fully entrenched in a multiparty system" (BBC News, 2015h).

Nicola Sturgeon made a second decisive intervention to shift the news agenda (see Figure 5.7). She wrote a piece for *The Observer* which was published online on 4 April 2015 at 19:33

and in the print edition the following morning (Sturgeon, 2015b). The majority of the piece was dedicated to describing and endorsing SNP policy and the SNP's rationale for *The Telegraph's* article, namely the framing of the "Westminster establishment" as afraid. The final three paragraphs address the leaked memo, repeating the claims that it is "100% untrue" and "comprehensively rejected by both the French ambassador and consul general". Sturgeon wrote about her request for an inquiry and reiterated her challenge to Ed Miliband: "will he and Labour join with us in locking David Cameron out of Downing Street?" This is an attempt at invoking the coalition frame with a positive emphasis on a Labour-SNP agreement in order to bring to an end the suggestion that she would prefer Cameron to be Prime Minister.

Figure 5.7. The headline and sub-heading of Sturgeon's comment piece for *The Observer*



Source: Sturgeon, 2015b

*The Observer* additionally published an online piece reporting on Sturgeon's article (Helm, 2015). The top lines of this story were that Sturgeon was seeking an "anti-austerity pact" with Miliband as she denied the allegations made in the leaked memo. This text focussed on her "anger" about, and denials of, the claims. The article took a negative stance towards Miliband and denounced him for the Labour Party's electioneering: "Miliband jumped into the controversy over the alleged Foreign Office memo as he tried to turn the row to his party's advantage". The impact

of Sturgeon's piece went further as allegations of "dirty tricks" were included in the BBC's night-time news bulletin on 4 April 2015 (BBC News, 2015h) and on Channel 4 News on 5 April 2015 (Channel 4 News, 2015e). Sturgeon's appeal to the Labour Party was repeated in online articles (for example Sky News, 2015c), and on BBC Breakfast the following day (BBC News, 2015i). The salience gained by the SNP's "dirty tricks" narrative is indicative of their power to set the news media agenda. They did so by engaging in networked and hierarchical power structures with citizen-users on social media and traditional media organizations alike.

Another key frame that began life as part of the anti-Sturgeon agenda and ended as an integral part of the anti-*Telegraph*/pro-Sturgeon agenda was the use of information regarding Sturgeon's popularity. Specifically, her perceived win in the 2 April 2015 leaders' debate was given as an underpinning rationale for the leak of the memorandum. *The Telegraph's* reporters wrote pejoratively about Sturgeon's success in the leaders' debate, stating that she "appeared to have 'won' Thursday night's general election debate" and "the disclosure of her private comments may undermine Miss Sturgeon's new found popularity" (Johnson and Dominiczak, 2015a). This was further promoted by an article published by *MailOnline* at 22:00 who used "undermine" in reference to how the allegations would affect Sturgeon's claims that she wants a progressive alliance (Chapman, 2015). However, in contrast to *The Telegraph*, the *MailOnline* reported Sturgeon's debate win as a fact, this helped them to strengthen their own agenda that Sturgeon was "the most dangerous women in Britain". In the context of an article that claimed she was dangerous, reporting Sturgeon as the winner of the debate presented her as powerful and well-supported and therefore gave credibility to that claim. This was further promoted in a comment piece in the print edition of *The Daily Mail* on 4 April 2015 which was published simultaneously with their lead article.

A further finding establishing how the release of new information challenged *The Telegraph's* report and supplanted it in the news media agenda comes from the discussion of Sturgeon's popularity and debate success by the *Huffington Post*. At 23:44 on 4 April 2015 the online news aggregator and blog put forward an interpretation of this agenda item in which it described *The Telegraph* as "attacking" Sturgeon because of how well she had done in the leaders'

debate polls. The text brought to the fore the Conservative bias of *The Telegraph* and explicitly linked Sturgeon's success to the allegations, writing that "Fleet Street's main Tory newspaper has moved quickly to attack Nicola Sturgeon following her impressive performance during the live TV debate on Thursday" (Vale, 2015). The author of this text linked to an important news story from the previous day, Sturgeon's success in the leaders' debate. It was used to construct a narrative in which Sturgeon was being targeted as a result of her success. It found salience amongst citizen-users of social media.

This interpretation began to be reflected consistently across social media. Comments on Facebook posts by media organisations challenged the allegations on this basis. For example, on *The Telegraph's* 06:55 Facebook post (*The Telegraph*, 2015d), which shared a link to the report. As part of the qualitative content analysis of this post, I coded citizen-user comments for negativity or positivity toward *The Telegraph's* story. Additionally I noted any language which supported or challenged *The Telegraph's* agenda (see Table 5.4). Out of 57 citizen-user comments, I found that 68.4% (39) challenged the basis or facts of the story, compared to just 19.3% (11) which were supportive. Of those comments 5.7% based their opposition on the idea that the article was a result of Sturgeon's debate success. Other notable uses of language included 21 instances of *The Telegraph* being accused of lying, 10 accusations of bias by the newspaper, four claims of bad journalistic practice, and just one comment which referred to Sturgeon as two-faced and therefore concurred with *The Telegraph's* framing. This pattern is repeated across Facebook comments on other posts. For example, on the *Huffington Post's* Facebook page (HuffPost UK, 2015), where they shared their article discussed above, 41.8% of citizen-users comments were negative about the story compared to 12.4% which were supportive (see Table 5.5). 48 comments used language which pertained to lying, 26 discussed bias, five accused the newspaper of bad journalistic practice, one linked Sturgeon to the "danger" frame, and seven spoke of logical reasons for Sturgeon to prefer Cameron.

Table 5.4. Frequency of codes in support or challenging *The Telegraph's* agenda on The Telegraph's Facebook post

		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>% (n=57)</b>
01	Negative	39	68.4
02	Positive	11	19.3
03	Unclassified	7	12.3

Source: *The Telegraph* (2015d)

Table 5.5. Frequency of codes in support or challenging The Telegraph's agenda on Huffington Post Facebook post

		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>% (n=201)</b>
01	Negative	84	41.8
02	Positive	25	12.4
03	Unclassified	92	45.8

Source: HuffPo Uk (2015)

I found that a key reason that *The Telegraph* lost control of this item on the news agenda was because of the lack of supportive political information released from other news sources. With the exception of the *MailOnline* most reports focussed on the various denials from the key actors involved from early on in the political information cycle. This is a fault inherent in the story itself, it simply could not stand up under scrutiny when the central actors were issuing denials of all allegations. However, had other sources been used in support of the original information *The Telegraph's* agenda item would have had more of a chance to retain its dominance, as happened to challenger frames. Having a series of varied sources that media actors could draw on enabled news outlets to present different framings of this story. This was then reflected on Twitter and Facebook; users opposing *The Telegraph's* agenda were more likely to cite a wider variety of sources than those who promoted *The Telegraph's* interpretation and were therefore limited to information within the original report.

It is clear that *The Telegraph* was successful in placing the item firmly on the news agenda, but also that it lost control of the narrative. The report was covered on the *Today* programme and BBC Breakfast, albeit briefly and in the newspaper reviews, and it led to numerous news online articles and debates on Twitter and Facebook. However, *The Telegraph*

had lost control of the way in which the story was framed due to the lack of new supportive information released. The political information that was being released into the news cycle constituted denials by the actors implicated. The SNP were particularly successful at re-framing the story as an attack by a frightened Westminster elite. They were able to enact power through their online networks of citizen-users who shared this interpretation. As the news agenda shifted to focus on the denials, and on the SNP's rationale for the story, citizens on social media reflected this.

#### 5.5.1 *The Conservative Party's Response*

The Conservative Party bided their time in responding to the leaked memo claims, and when they did respond the story's importance was diminished. Cameron first referred to the claims mid-morning on 4 April 2015 at a campaign event, in which he said "Nicola Sturgeon's alleged comments that Mr Miliband was not "Prime Minister material" was nothing new" (ITV News, 2015p). On 4 April 2015 ConservativeHome, a Conservative-supporting blog, produced a comment piece which furthered the party's framing of this agenda item (Phibbs, 2015). This text expounded on reasons why the contents of the leaked memo as reported by *The Telegraph* were accurate. However, it concluded by saying that accuracy was irrelevant because if the SNP were to win the majority of seats in Scotland they would put Labour in power and "that threat remains". The text was also pejorative about the tweet through which Sturgeon first denied the story, the subtext being that her medium of choice – Twitter – makes her denial less believable: "Sturgeon has denied it in the most emphatic terms. On Twitter." The division of this sentence places the emphasis on the medium and not on the denial.

#### 5.6. The Role of Social Media



Framing of the news report in established media and by politicians was clearly reflected on social media. For example, the notion of the story as an attack on Sturgeon as a result of her popularity was frequently reflected in tweets and Facebook comments. In answer to research question 6, citizen-users both replicated and challenged elite agendas. Citizens also used the discourse of elites as a starting point for interpretation of the news report, for example reports about the denials of actors involved were invoked on social media as evidence that *The Telegraph* was lying. The word ‘lie’ or any of its derivations were not used in news reports or by the SNP in its statements, but it was frequently used by citizens who then cited traditional media content in support.

In considering the positions of actors in this process, it is noteworthy that none deviated from their prescribed role and I find evidence that traditional media producers and politicians acted according to an expected media logic in the reporting of political information. The public were also well-versed in how this should work; citizen-users did not make critical interventions in the telling of this story but they did criticise its construction insofar as they recognised *The Telegraph’s* failure to use any of the main actors involved in the memo as a source, or to get a response from Sturgeon before publication. Citizens on Twitter and Facebook referred to this poor journalistic practice as part of their repertoire of challenges to the media agenda, with one commenter writing on *The Telegraph’s* Facebook page “Please make sure your hacks have some sort of evidence before printing such nonsense in the future. The British public are watching this election closely.”

Interventions on Twitter can be important, and in this case the most central actor offered an alternative framing of the story and had the ability to reach a large group of supporters willing to share the information. The first challenge to *The Telegraph’s* position in the process of setting the news media agenda came directly from Sturgeon on Twitter, and was posted at 21:47, just 17 minutes after *The Telegraph’s* article was published online. In the words of one Twitter user, the story began “imploding before the print edition had even hit the shelves.” (Trainer, 2015 – see Figure 5.8.)

Figure 5.8. Twitter user @PaulTrainerPT's response to the story



Source: Trainer (2015)

Nicola Sturgeon's tweet was a particularly quick response to the story as she had not been approached for comment during the newsgathering stages. It was seen by a wide audience compared to a traditional press release, which would have had a slower and potentially less far-reaching impact. Arguably a press release would not have been such a decisive intervention as it would have relied on the news media for further dissemination. Sturgeon's tweet resulted in a shift in the focus of the news media agenda and provided a direct challenge to *The Telegraph*, in part leading to the online debate about the truth of the allegations. The tweet also marked the beginning of the individual actors involved in the story gradually coming forwards to deny the allegations. This happened through traditional media processes in interviews with mainstream media organisations and through the release of official statements disseminated on both online and offline platforms.

Sturgeon's tweet also formed an important part of wider debate on Twitter. The debate consisted of many conversations which were amalgamated into 'one debate' by the mainstream media and characterised as "a savaging" of *The Telegraph* by the *Huffington Post* (Vale, 2015) and as "vicious" by *The Times* (Elliott, McIntosh, and Fisher, 2015). Interestingly in discursive terms, *The Times* attributed a level of importance to Sturgeon within the agenda-setting process for instigating the debate as a result of her tweet, stating "Ms Sturgeon's statement sparked a vicious row on Twitter, with accusations of bias on the part of the media and the civil service."

Not only does this ignore the role of other actors, it implicitly acknowledges the network power held by Sturgeon by endowing her personally with the ability to spark a row on the social network.

Social media allowed non-influencer users the chance to play the role of watchdog.<sup>63</sup> This finding demonstrates that citizens engaged with and responded critically to the agendas put forwards despite the fact that their engagement was one-way and ultimately had little impact on elite actions. Nevertheless, the impactful interventions from Twitter users came from elite-users only, most prominently from Nicola Sturgeon. Therefore whilst there is no evidence that the public performed a critical intervention in the telling of this story, the way they responded to it demonstrates a development in media logics pertaining to the role of the audience. This is a factor that *The Telegraph* may have wished to engage with more effectively in order to retain power over the direction of information.

I therefore argue that some interventions on Twitter can change the course of the news agenda, but these were interventions from elite-users. Sturgeon's very early intervention in this political information cycle was a tweet denying the allegations made against her. It was retweeted 4,662 times and was featured in 37.5% of online news articles analysed for this dissertation. The wording of the tweet was reproduced in the SNP spokesperson's official statement and was paraphrased on the broadcast news bulletins. As a party leader Sturgeon had the ability to activate her online social networks and use power through networks. Her tweet had a large reach and was seen by, and shared by, a large group of people who were supportive of her and the Scottish National Party. In this tweet we see evidence of the co-existence of continuing hierarchical power that exists between political elites and journalists in the newsgathering process and the network power in existence on Twitter.

## 5.7. Conclusion

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<sup>63</sup> Influencers is here defined as those users "who exhibit ... network attributes such as connectivity or centrality—that allows them to influence a disproportionately large number of others, possibly indirectly via a cascade of influence" (Bakshy et al, 2011: 1).

By joining [networks], one gains access to the resource, or the “network power” that resides in the cooperative relationships facilitated by those norms and practices. This is why individuals constantly adapt their norms and practices to join networks that will provide them with advantages of varying kinds. (Chadwick, 2013: 17)

Journalists and politicians want to join and direct actions within networks that exist on social media, they recognise the inherent network power and want to use it to control the flow of political information. However, they tend not to be an organic member of those networks. This results in elites actually achieving an artificial re-enactment; it is not true “network power” but an attempt to continue the existence of their hierarchical power by utilising these networks. By sharing information on social networking sites there is the expectation that the network will share it in a two-step flow pattern, and the news agenda can be directed. But social media are many-to-many platforms and a failure to engage with users, and to appropriate or re-package information from users in order to strengthen frames, results in a weaker hold on power. This, combined with the glut of political information challenging the *Telegraph's* agenda and with Sturgeon’s decisive early intervention on Twitter led this particular news agenda to flounder in its early stages.

Three important factors played a role in undermining *The Telegraph's* hold on the news media agenda. Firstly, *The Telegraph* did not have any new information to release into the political information cycle. The political information cycle of a given story is a fast paced process involving different actors across multiple platforms, with different combinations coming together and moving apart. This makes it easy to both release new information which challenges the agenda, and to perpetuate challenges to the agenda. As noted previously, simply repeating information on social media is an inauthentic way to interact with citizen-users who expect a level of spontaneity, immediacy, and – indeed – change. *The Telegraph* failed to do this, but the SNP and their supporters on social media were successful in doing so and so were able to shift the frame of the story.

Secondly, although the report received airtime across multiple channels, discussions by citizen-users on social media were inclined to be negative about the story. There was not a transfer of issue salience to the public who tended to dismiss it as a result of Sturgeon’s success in the

leaders' debate or a response to the SNP's success in Scotland. As a result, outputs by the Labour Party using the story to further their own agenda were not well received on social media. Their own supporters did not share the party's content, which was inauthentic as it did not meet required communication standards for Facebook. Furthermore, the links between Labour and the story, and the repetitive nature of their outputs, revealed their electioneering which rendered their inputs inauthentic and "embarrassing" to some supporters. Therefore Labour's interactions can be categorised as commodification of citizen-users. Overall, social media played an important role in subverting this agenda item, broadly reproducing discussion in the traditional media but offering greater diversity in their interpretations.

Finally, a combination of older and newer media logics was used successfully by the SNP to share their information. Beginning with Sturgeon's quick denial of the allegations on Twitter and followed by an official statement from an SNP spokesperson that repeated almost verbatim the original tweet, the SNP moved on to engage with traditional media including Sturgeon's opinion piece in *The Observer* newspaper and on *The Guardian's* website. This piece was crucial in pushing the party's rationale for the report, namely that the Westminster establishment were afraid of the SNP's success in Scotland and were working to damage the party and its leader as a result. Meeting communication standards on all platforms played a role in enabled the SNP to control the interactivity of their supporters to promote their message, activating a network to share their denials. The party also engaged with hierarchical structures to frame news reports. This combination was successful in shifting the agenda onto a favourable slant.

Overall, this case demonstrates a news media agenda setting process that requires the ability to tap into network power and to maintain a position within hierarchical power structures, to produce content that suits older and newer media platforms, and to be able to introduce or interact with a stream of supportive new information within the political information cycle. *The Telegraph* may have been able to set the news agenda initially, but they were unable to maintain control and influence over the story over the course of the period of analysis as a result of the SNP's efficacy at achieving these criteria. The following two chapters look in detail at the actions taken by two different news producers to meet these standards.

# Chapter 6 The *Today* Programme's Election: campaign coverage marked by continuity in hierarchical power relationships

**Researcher:** Do you [the programme] use Facebook?

**Jamie Angus:** Yeah a lot. But we never look at it

## 6.1. Introduction

Leading on from the findings of Chapters 4 and 5, I now turn to a discussion of participant-observations and interviews with UK news producers. The core tension between attempting to set the news media agenda and achieving this is summed up in the quote above, that is to say an underlying belief amongst elite actors that they are acting one way on social media, and evidence from analysis that they are not meeting the required communication standards. In order to fully understand the actions and decisions of actors involved in news production - and specifically the integral power relationships – this chapter and Chapter 7 evaluate how media elites reconfigured their roles and content output as part of the agenda-setting process in the hybrid media system. This chapter focuses upon the observations and interviews that I carried out at BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme.

The daily news programme is widely recognised as being one of the UK's leading news media agenda-setters (Berry, 2012: 256). The aims of the observations of the programme team and interviews with then Editor, Jamie Angus, were to understand the decisions behind the news production process at the programme in the context of a hybrid media system, how their relationship with political elites was constituted, and the role these factors played in *Today's* position in the news media agenda-setting process. The main finding of this chapter is that *Today* was unsuccessful in challenging the political parties' news agendas in the election campaign

because the programme team did not utilise boundary-drawing power (Chadwick and Collister, 2014), signalling a continuation in traditional power relationships. The team also did not fully realise their cross-platform content production, the result of which was an inability to both use network power within their newsgathering or message promotion strategies. They did not fully use the affordances of controlled interactivity (Stromer-Galley, 2014). Therefore, regardless of the presence of elements of a two-step flow effect through *Today's* influential Twitter followers, the programme was unable to have the impact on the news media agenda that it was hoping for. Ultimately, *Today's* election campaign was characterised by continuity in power relationships and content production, their adaptations to the hybrid media system were incomplete and left them in a weaker position in the news media agenda-setting process than more adaptive news producers.

The irony of this finding is that the Editor, and the team in general, expressed a great deal of recognition around the positive impacts of engaging with their audience on social media for promoting their lines and as a newsgathering source which would enable them to challenge the political parties in a greater variety of ways, and the need to reconfigure *Today's* content production and dissemination, at least to some extent, in order to allow their news stories to travel further and increase in salience. Yet, despite expressing the positives of hybridity within a media system, *Today* failed to follow through with related action during the election campaign.

The questions that guide this section of my research are drawn from the overarching research question 'what does the agenda-setting process look like during the 2015 general election?' I aimed to find out specifically how power relationships are constructed between the journalists and Editor at *Today* and political parties' central teams and high-profile candidates, and how those relationships are perceived at *Today*. I also looked to establish how and why news production practices have changed in the context of the news media agenda-setting. Ultimately, though, given the misalignment between stated beliefs about these two factors and actual observed activity and outcomes, I asked how these misalignments affected *Today's* role in the news media agenda-setting process. The research questions answered in this chapter are (RQ1) How do power relationships between traditional news media producers and political elites function in the 2015

UK general election campaign, and how do they impact the agenda-setting process?; (RQ2) How do traditional news media producers and political parties attempt to successfully harness network power?; and (RQ3) How are social and digital media integrated into traditional news media's output, and how does this impact their power relationships with political elites?

This chapter focuses on three inherent and inter-related tensions. The first of these is the conflict which exists between political elites and journalists. The second is the tension which exists between older and newer forms of media, specifically for this older – legacy – form of broadcast media. The third is the tension between hierarchical (elite-led) and networked (shared by audience members) information dissemination. From the theoretical discussion in Chapter 2, and from the findings outline in Chapters 4 and 5, I argue that the news media agenda-setting process requires media producers to find a balance between the second two tensions. They need to produce content which can cross the boundaries of newer and older forms of media, and there should be some element of encouragement of bottom-up or horizontal information dissemination amongst their audience members.

This chapter will look at what claims were made about media production by the journalists in the *Today* team and analyse this against actual output. I show that whilst there was a recognition of the need to create content for social media, and online media in general, this was not as successful as the journalists and editorial team hoped for, and was not ultimately enacted. I further demonstrate how the power relationship which existed between the programme team and political parties was indicative of a continuity in hierarchical power, with the parties' tightly-controlled campaigns providing a stumbling block to *Today's* reporting of the election.

The methods employed in this chapter are analysis and description of interview and observational data, and a textual and discursive analysis of their content. These methods resulted in a thick description of the underlying beliefs of the journalists, an account of their actions and decisions, and how these two factors correspond. I began by coding the interview transcripts and field notes to identify themes and beliefs held by journalists about the media system, power, and their role in setting the news media agenda. I also coded for actions they had taken, or expressed a desire to take, in response to these beliefs. I finally compared their stated beliefs and



expectations with their cross-platform election coverage information outputs to establish the realities of position in power structures and the media agenda. This integrated analysis approach raised analytic themes which I explored in further detail through considerations of discourse.

The chapter is structured according to these two main findings, incorporating an analysis of observations and interview responses which answers the questions regarding changes in news practices and power relationships. It demonstrates that the journalists who produced the *Today* programme were aware of the need to produce hybridised content – there was a lot of discussion around this from Angus – and that they made some steps towards this goal in their diversification of content, but content produced did not accurately reflect the lip-service paid to these values. Furthermore, power relationships between the media producers and politicians remained hierarchical. I argue that in terms of the news media agenda-setting process while challenges to *Today's* position, and the steps needed to hold onto their place in the media ecology, are recognised, in reality continuity was central during the election campaign.

## 6.2. Choice of Case Study: Why *Today*?

The *Today* programme has a long and venerable history of interrogating politicians and setting the nation's news agenda; in 2017 *Today* celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> year. A case study of BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme was chosen because within in the UK's news media agenda-setting process there is a level of respect and importance attributed to it by other journalists and politicians. If it can be said that a particular programme is seen to be a power player in agenda-setting for a day's reporting, *Today* holds that accolade. Furthermore, the programme team themselves accept this as one of their main attributes and even their *raison d'être*. I had a unique opportunity; to understand what the contemporary news media agenda-setting process looked like by studying the mechanisms of power and decision-making from the perspective of a news team who appear to, and are widely believed to, hold a large amount of influence over other news producers and political elites alike.

Berry (2012: 256) argues that *Today* is important due to three main reasons: firstly, its audience share makes it “the most popular news programme in broadcasting... Secondly, its audience has a heavy concentration of professionals and opinion formers, and, thirdly, it is widely seen as significant in setting news and political agendas in other parts of the media.” In one of the three interviews conducted for this study, then Editor Jamie Angus highlighted that: “There are days when [the news cycle] works really well because *Today* can literally set the agenda; that’s what the programme is supposed to do, [it’s] one of the programme’s core functions” (Jamie Angus, interview 3, July 2015). The acknowledgement of this position by other journalists across the field is a main contributing factor in creating this interpretation of the programme’s role as important for political communication.

When Nick Robinson, then BBC Political Editor, announced his new role as Presenter on the *Today* programme in July 2015, he did so on Twitter stating “So farewell Westminster. I’ll miss you. I’m joining @BBCr4today – the programme which set’s the nation’s agenda – to fill Jim’s immense shoes” (Robinson, 2015). It is not just BBC journalists who ascribe this role to the programme. Reporting the same story, *The Mirror* stated that “The presenter and journalist replaces Jim Naughtie as part of the core presenting team on BBC Radio 4’s agenda-setting flagship news and current affairs programme” (Walker, 2015), and in 2009 – reporting on an award bestowed upon *Today* by a listeners’ group – *The Telegraph* began its story thus: “The agenda-setting news programme topped a list of the 25 most respected shows of the past quarter century to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Voice of the Listener and Viewer” (Telegraph, 2009).

### 6.3. “A lot of aggro is expended on both sides”: The *Today*-Politician Power Relationship

Clearly a big media organisation like the BBC has a huge amount of influence on [the news media agenda] and it would be pointless to suggest otherwise. Which is why in election time quite a lot of political effort goes into trying to steer programmes like *Today* onto particular areas of coverage. A lot of aggro is expended on both sides. (Jamie Angus, interview 1, October 2014).

Previous research on power in a contemporary media system has focussed on the relationship between professional journalists/media organizations and their audiences (Boyle, 2001; Schoenbach, de Waal, and Lauf, 2005). Clearly there is an impetus among scholars to understand the reconfiguration of power in this relationship which has occurred due to the capabilities afforded to citizen-users by digital technology (Giglietto and Selva, 2014; Gillmor, 2004; Stanyer, 2009). However, this is not the only relationship of importance in political reporting. The media's relationship with politicians, parties, and their staff, as sources, subjects of reporting, and commentators, are significant. The relationship is reciprocal. Carl Dinnen, political reporter at ITV News explicated this view of the power relationship in our first interview:

If you take it that knowledge is power for a start then journalists have a certain amount of power. And when you consider how important the image and message are politicians, and journalists are in such a strong position to mediate that, then of course they have power. (Carl Dinnen, Interview 1, October 2014).

At *Today* I sought to understand the way in which this relationship was both perceived to function, and actually functioned, during the election campaign, ultimately finding a gap between stated expectations in my early interactions with the programme team and actual occurrences during the election campaign. I also sought to understand and interpret the effect that this had upon *Today's* news production and dissemination strategies, and ultimately on their ability to control their own place and role in the agenda-setting process. Within a hybrid media system, journalists also have the ability to direct the interactivity of their audiences. By mobilizing citizen-users, or drawing on information from citizens, journalists can increase their ability to hold politicians to account and set the media agenda. However, I found that, despite the potential for journalists to increase their own agenda-setting power through integrating digital media, for example by drawing on the resources and network power integral in their audiences, in the 2015 general election campaign *Today* did not successfully enact power within the redrawn platform boundaries and, more often, political elites were positioned to dictate the news media agenda.

The microcosm of relations between *Today* and political actors in the opening quote of this section speaks to the debate around the power relationships which exist between political

parties and journalists. Angus's summary statement that "A lot of aggro is expended on both sides" encapsulates the power struggle for the news agenda at any time, especially during a general election. His use of the word "aggro" provides a starting point to understanding this relationship by suggesting a process that is conflict-driven, and in which *Today* and the BBC became a battleground with political parties involved in a struggle to dictate the news agenda to the media organization.

Further to this, the opening quote makes two key points for which I did not observe evidence in the 2015 election campaign. Firstly, the language used makes it appear as though the effort expended in the power relationship is mostly on the side of the parties. This is a point that Dinnen's quote, above, also supports. Secondly, and as a result of this, there is the rightful assumption that ultimately the BBC has a huge influence and the wrongful assumption that therefore it is the parties' job to persuade the media, who may pick and choose the agenda. As will be demonstrated below, events and observations ultimately demonstrate that this was not the case.

The assessment given by *Today's* editor of his programme's place in the media ecology was that of importance. "I think the programme's influence over the daily news is still pretty marked ... because of the amazing position it occupies at the start of the day. That will always give *Today* quite a lot of prominence and people write a lot about what we cover" (Jamie Angus, interview 1, September 2015). Angus bestows upon *Today* a central place in the UK's news media agenda. He asserts that its position in terms of timing and its influence over other journalists give it a measure of agenda-setting power. This logistical factor, timing, is crucial in *Today's* agenda-setting ability, and this was the case during the election campaign. For example *Today* regularly trended on Twitter, yet the programme was speaking predominantly to those already pre-disposed to listen; journalists and the programme's regular audience

As demonstrated in Chapter 5, being an influencer on Twitter gives access to network power which can then be used to promote your messages or agenda items. The *Today* programme is an influencer because of its large network which incorporates citizens, journalists and politicians. As well as having a network of listeners, *Today* is part of the elite networks that exist

on Twitter. In an interview with Jim Waterson, then Deputy Editor of BuzzFeed UK, he informed me that “Twitter is read by journalists and what that means is that something gets big on Twitter and then it might make the 6 o’clock news” (Jim Waterson, interview 1, October 2014). *Today* theoretically has the ability to combine both its powerful position in the mainstream news media hierarchy with interactions with listeners to harness network power.

When Angus and I first spoke, in September 2014, he was optimistic about the ways in which the new media environment could help strengthen power for journalists over political parties in the agenda-setting process. When discussing the control of messages by politicians and journalists, he spoke about an erosion of control of single-message dissemination for parties as a result of two phenomena: (1) the rise of anti-politics sentiment resulting in the public becoming less receptive to party lines; and (2) the greater challenge that parties can face from journalists because of the ability to reach out into social media and find people or opinions to counter party lines. Finding evidence of the second phenomena this during *Today’s* campaign would signal a shift in the power relationship between politicians and journalists. However, although Angus recognises this capability to draw on network power relationships, I did not observe any evidence of such action taking place at *Today*.

Angus’ statement is a recognition of the challenges that politicians face as a direct result of hybridity in the media system. In this instance, the strategic use of the affordance that enables journalists to crowdsource opinions which provide contradictions to the party information. Ensuring a flow of alternate political information into the news cycle via both legacy and digital media is an important part of retaining control of the news media agenda in the fast-paced political information cycle. The idea underpinning Angus’ statement is that the relational nature of power within the media system, as described in Chapter 2 concerning the work of Foucault (1982) and Castells (2010), means that the power to communicate news stories has become dispersed amongst the online social networks of the broadcaster. There has been a diffusion of power amongst actors, creating networks which can then be harnessed by journalists to challenge the political agenda. The potential for this in terms of the process of setting the news media agenda

is that the journalists at *Today* could pose a greater challenge to political party information by drawing upon their social networks.

However, in my second interview with Angus in February 2015 he was less idealistic, describing the extent to which *Today*'s programming follows party agendas in political reporting: "it does come and go, so some day's there's tons of politics and some days it just seems to suit everyone for there not to be any. So really it depends on what the political parties are doing." (Interview 2, February 2015). It is evident that without party and candidate activity in the build up to and during an election campaign there would be a dearth of political campaign news to report. This is not to say that the journalists at *Today* followed the party lines verbatim, but that their agenda remained very much tied to party agendas, and – whilst they regularly challenged their interviewees about party messages and policy – I did not observe the use of social media as a source to challenge politicians in the manner described by Angus in our first interview.

During my fourth observation period of the team I attended a morning editorial meeting. This occurred on 4 May 2015, the day before Nick Clegg was due to give his final *Today* interview of the campaign. Most of the discussion focussed upon what angle the team could "push" Clegg on, but the attendees acknowledged that they faced the problem of Liberal Democrat leader sticking rigidly to party lines and not answering their questions. They needed to find a way to approach Liberal Democrat key messages that would lead Clegg to give a meaningful answer. The team considered different discussion points, for example that the party could lose all their seats in Scotland, suggestions that Clegg had lost control of the party, and a challenge on why policy on Europe was not one of their "red lines". Another option put forwards was that *Today* could get a "strong line" on resignations within the party to put to Clegg. The editorial meeting ended without reaching a consensus on this issue. It appeared to me that the stage-managed campaign, so tightly-controlled by the party, was posing a significant challenge to journalists looking for different angles – or indeed a story that would set the news media agenda. In follow-up interviews with journalists more broadly this was confirmed. Andrew Sparrow, political correspondent at *The Guardian* and author of the politics live blog, reflected on this: "I think it was worse ... certainly all journalists that were going out were saying that it was basically worse

than it's ever been in terms of limited access for the press and probably access with politicians too." (Andrew Sparrow, interview 3, July 2015)

From this example I deduce two key points. Firstly, and in answer to RQ2<sup>64</sup>, despite Angus' optimism in our first interview regarding the potential for networks to journalists to reach out and find information to challenge party lines through social media networks, this was never an option used in practice. In the editorial meeting described above no member of the team suggested this as a way to source information or stories to put to Clegg, either to find a new angle or push him further on Liberal Democrat messages. Secondly, and in answer to RQ1<sup>65</sup>, the fact that Angus spoke of the programme remaining tied to party agenda's in this way suggests a continuation of a hierarchical power relationship in the agenda-setting process. This is supported by the lack of evidence of any divergence from legacy practices during the observation periods.

Following the election, in July 2015, Angus' viewpoint on the power relationship between journalists was at its most pragmatic.

I think probably in general terms the campaign was notable for a lack of really big breaking news stories, because mostly the news agenda was so tightly controlled by the parties and access to the candidates was really tightly controlled by the parties... I don't think *Today* really stood out in terms of breaking new lines. But I don't really feel that's our fault, it's just kind of a feature of the campaign. (Interview 3, July 2015)

It could be the case that Angus' post-election statement was symptomatic of the malaise felt within the wider journalistic profession, also outlined in the Sparrow quote, following an election where parties had so tightly controlled access, key messages, and ultimately the news agenda. Additionally, opinion polls – a key source for journalists– had been incorrect. However, there are two central points to draw out from this quote before drawing conclusions. Firstly, the power relationship acknowledged by Angus is that the vast majority of power sat with the political elites and there was nothing that *Today* could do about that. In the quote the journalists are described

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<sup>64</sup> How do news media producers and political parties attempt to successfully harness network power?

<sup>65</sup> How do power relationships between traditional news producers and political elites function in the 2015 UK general election campaign, and how do they impact the agenda-setting process?

as disenfranchised and subject to the whims of the parties. Secondly, Angus removes agency from *Today* with the statement “I don’t really feel that’s our fault”. This suggests that no actions could have been taken to bring control of the news agenda into journalists’ hands, use of social media was not a consideration at this point. This statement in our final interview is in marked contrast to the optimism demonstrated in interview one, eight months prior to the election campaign. I found no evidence, therefore, that the audience was networked with the programme on social media. Whilst prior to the campaign using network power by encouraging citizen-users to share their lines or sourcing alternate viewpoints from social media sites was practically seen as a way to drive or challenge a news agenda. However, during the campaign this did not occur and legacy news production practices continued.

A fact that illustrates the power relationship that I describe is that *Today*, and indeed the news media in general, missed what turned out to be a very important story in the campaign: the successful Conservative campaign which wiped out the Liberal Democrats and delivered a Tory majority government. Angus raised this in our post-election interview, telling me that the BBC was doing a lot of “soul-searching” to understand why the story was missed. The explanation given by Angus as to why this story was not reported was that it did not fit with the prevalent narratives: the opinion polls, the Conservative Party’s framing of SNP, and speculating about coalition. Due to the focus the news media gave to these items, and the fact that no party made it a set piece of their campaign, it was missed by mainstream journalists.

This is a key finding that provides evidence of a hierarchical power relationship with stories led by elite actors; news media story-telling followed the agendas of political parties’, augmented by evidence from the polling companies and election forecasters. During my observations with the team, the “real” story was not mentioned once. Considering the Editor’s statements I contend that this is because the programme was dismissive of evidence that did not fit with the picture being painted by national polls. Therefore, far from widening out their sourcing of stories utilising social networks, *Today* relied heavily on traditional sources and information networks. Angus’ complaints about how tightly controlled the party’s campaigns were, and the little room for manoeuvre that this left for journalists, demonstrates clearly that rather than



challenging party agendas or pushing to set their own the *Today* programme relied upon parties and other organisations for their leads. In this way, traditional news media agenda-setting processes persisted, despite Angus' initial optimism regarding *Today's* news media agenda-setting potential.

In conclusion, it is worth noting and understanding again the conflicting perceptions put forward by Angus in relation to journalist-politician power relations. When asked how politicians and their staff engaged with the *Today* programme Angus replied that:

People like the BBC, they're respectful of us ... there was a bit of argy bargy at times during the campaign but it tended to be less between politicians and us, more between press handlers and the journalists. (Jamie Angus, interview 3, July 2015)

Angus creates dichotomies between 'politicians' and their 'press handlers' and between 'us' – i.e. senior programme-makers at *Today* – and 'journalists', reporters following the campaign. This ignores the fact that party press handlers are directed by the political party infrastructure comprising staffers and politicians. Additionally, the journalists on the ground who dealt with those press handlers were the frontline for the programme. Despite the "respect" between those at more senior levels, the junior members of staff enacted the power plays evident in the analysis above; parties withheld or fed information to the journalists as best suited them, and journalists followed their lead.

Returning to the questions asked the beginning of this chapter, the power relationship structures between *Today* and political which influenced the process of setting the news media agenda remained hierarchical. Political parties were at the top of the pyramid withholding and releasing political information, and *Today* used them as their main source. The journalistic consensus surrounding the coalition frame may have resulted in fewer challenges to parties who, as has been discussed previously, used this to frame their own agendas and interests. Network power was available to *Today*, and they occupied a central influencer position within their networks. However given their adherence to party agendas and their reticence in engaging with their audience to find alternate information, they did not use this to its full advantage.

#### 6.4. The Missing Link: *Today's* failure to engage in a renewal of boundary-drawing

The disconnection between the statements made by Angus in interview one, and those made in our second interview three months prior to the start of the official campaign period, speaks to a tension inherent throughout this research project. Firstly there was widely held recognition of the changing nature of news production, agenda-setting, and the role of citizens, and a belief that it posed a challenge to the existing process of news media agenda-setting. Secondly, this led news producers to the belief that they needed to take certain actions, and that the news-making process should be adapted. But thirdly, and crucially, the mere fact of holding such beliefs rarely translated into meaningful actions.

I argue that strategies of message control, as described by Stromer-Galley (2014) in her conceptualisation of controlled interactivity, are required in the news media agenda setting process that exists in a hybrid media system. Although Stromer-Galley's theory was developed in relation to party campaigning, the tenets of message control are applicable to any actors within the media agenda-setting process, including journalists. *Today's* approach fell short of requirements for controlled interactivity, but also cannot be classed as commodification of citizens as their interactions with their audience were minimal. I term their method insufficient interactivity, their digital outputs did not help them to set the news media agenda. *Today's* communications online met requirements for authenticity and communication standards, they generally appeared as spontaneous despite the constructive thought that went into their creation, they were immediate, being shared during and after the programme, and they were predictable, crafted specifically for each platform. However, the team were unable to motivate their audience to share content widely on social media.

The challenging conditions for legacy news-making practices, including hybridity across the media system and the ability of audiences to challenge the status quo, were recognised. The solution - diversify content across platforms and bring audiences in to content production and dissemination - was known. However, follow-through in terms of action was weak. This can best be summed up in the following interaction from interview two in February 2015:

**Researcher:** Do you [the programme] use Facebook?

**Jamie Angus:** Yeah a lot. But we never look at it.

The duality around the programme's use of this specific social medium, Facebook, is illustrative of this insufficient level of interactivity. The *Today* programme posted to Facebook regularly, and indeed had a strategy for the type of content and its creation that I observed in action during my time with the programme team. The communications were authentic but responsiveness was missing: the programme did not enter into conversations with the audience. In my observations of the social media sub-team's work, and subsequent data collection during the election campaign period, it became apparent that *Today* used Facebook as a push medium, instead of the two-way push-pull that could be used to create a relationship with their network and motivate citizens to share their digital content. This finding is in line with the behaviour of other organizations as described in Chapters 4 and 5, for example the discussion in Chapter 5 regarding Labour's use of Facebook which demonstrated that responsiveness can encapsulate the standards of authentic communication by facilitating spontaneity and immediacy.

Strategizing to gain network power and use social media and your audience is integral to message control and to upholding a position as a central node in the media system. Support for this comes from Alex Wickham, news Editor at *Guido Fawkes*, who held the opinion that "social media is good in lots of ways. It's great for news and it can help drive news agendas" (Alex Wickham, interview 3, June 2015). The idea of extending control over networks in this way is complementary to Chadwick and Collister's (2014) discussion of boundary-drawing power, which the authors define as:

The capacity of an organizational actor to reconfigure the context of its own actions by using resources and strategies that are intrinsic to itself but which also involve interfacing with other actors in a hypernetworked environment. (Chadwick and Collister, 2014: 2427).

Although there was an acknowledgement at *Today* of the potential for social media to play a role in content creation, I observed that news media production remained a hierarchical process. The inherent tension that exists between top-down content from established media producers and bottom-up content from citizens is not a challenge for *Today* or the BBC in general. As an organization, they are in a position to commodify their audience, incorporating them, their views, and their outputs when those features add something to news reports. Yet there is no necessity in this beyond giving the audience some sense of belonging or loyalty to the show, and rounding out the news content. The incorporation of citizen journalism or producer content is generally superfluous to the BBC's own output in general, and not linked to the way in which their programming sets the news media agenda.

For example, during observations I noted that *Today's* feature '100 seats in 100 days', comprising reports from 100 different constituencies in the months leading up to the election, was driven by national issues. Constituencies were chosen, on the whole, due to their relevance to policy proposals or issues of national importance. Citizens were included in a traditional vox populi practice or were interviewed on how these issues would affect them, but a local story was rarely a driving force in the choice of constituency. Local citizens additionally did not play a role in the choice of constituency, and audience interactions with this feature on digital media were not used in the segments. The one exception to this came from a candidate from Grimsby who asked to be interviewed after reading about the recording of the '100 seats in 100 days' campaign feature in their local newspaper.

It remained imperative that *Today* established and maintained a successful digital presence for a number of reasons. It is a feature of a hybrid media system that news producers work across platforms and combine older and newer logics both in newsgathering, content production, and dissemination. In order to exercise greater control over the news media agenda in the election campaign, *Today* needed to engage in a reconfiguration of media boundaries. It is a broadcaster with a traditional platform and a steady listenership, but to reach a wider audience during the election campaign and beyond it needed to maximise its use of digital media. Chadwick and Collister's conceptualisation of boundary-drawing power was derived from a study of a print

media company with a strong online presence. The lessons from their study of *The Guardian* do not transpose precisely onto another medium. Yet when combined with a consideration of other theories which describe mechanisms of power and message control across platforms and networks (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Kreiss, 2012; Stromer-Galley, 2014) it is clear that in order to position itself in the news media agenda-setting process *Today* needed to strategically employ cross-media tactics and engage more fully with its audience.

Prior to the election, in February 2015, Angus appeared to recognise this need:

One of the things I'm sort of anxious about is how you take quite a traditional radio-only platform like *Today* and do something web-wise which doesn't look forced or inappropriate but offers kind of additional extras for the audience who want that kind of thing. (Jamie Angus, interview 2, February 2015)

The editor's use of the phrase "doesn't look forced or inappropriate" is telling, suggesting a belief in a basic incompatibility of traditional broadcast content and non-traditional digital content. Angus' idea that internet content is either forced or inappropriate when tied to a radio news programme is noteworthy: radio broadcasting is 'natural' in this situation and digital content is not. Seemingly, digital content lacks the authenticity of the broadcast. *Today* initially struggled to create content that met the communication standards for social media, although they ultimately achieved this. The quote leads to two further points, firstly that the content itself might actually have been "forced" or "inappropriate", but in order to sell it to the audience the programme team needed to make them think it was neither of these things. The implications of these actions would be inauthenticity of communication and commodification of citizen-users by hiding the insincere nature of the communication. Secondly, that the creation of digital content which offered something extra for the audience was superfluous for the majority of listeners who were assumed to be happy with the radio content only. Despite these deductions the fact that Angus was "anxious" about creating this content suggests that it was something he believed needed to happen and something that the programme needed to improve upon.

It is this basic failure to engage with the hybridity of the media system and practice boundary-drawing power that contributed largely to *Today's* lack of intervention in the news media agenda during the campaign. By treating digital content as an added extra, rather than an integral part of the news-making assemblage, *Today* missed the opportunity to control and promote information flows to a greater extent. This happened despite Angus' and the production team's recognition of the need to create a stronger digital footprint. Angus told me that:

We want the audiences to feel as though they have got a personal involvement in the programme and with its presenters and that they might find stuff in our timeline or on our Facebook page through the day that rewards them sharing it, using it, watching it, listening to it. (Jamie Angus, interview 1, October 2014)

The use of the word "reward" suggests that *Today's* audience were viewed as needing encouragement to engage with digital content and the quote also speaks to Angus' desire to be able to use the power within *Today's* networked audience more effectively.

Despite these criticisms, from observation of the *Today* team it became clear that the number of staff responsible for social and digital content was not only increasing but that the digital team was becoming increasingly integrated with the wider programme team. Within the office space, the social media team sat amongst the reporters and editors and were represented at all editorial meetings and programme debriefs. Those members of staff were responsible for creating and disseminating digital output and they focussed their efforts on a range of actions, including producing and sharing a daily round-up email of effective and less effective digital strategies with the wider team, creating content for digital media with a particular focus on video, and encouraging reporters and presenters to capture content specifically for digital media.

During the election campaign the team hoped to be able to make an impact in the social media space, focussing on Facebook and Twitter, in order to both push their main news lines and to reach a broader audience. However, it was recognised by Angus that beyond *Today's* 180 minutes running time it would be difficult for them to "dominate" social media websites. This gave rise to the need to push lines early in the day and to produce shareable content which could

be disseminated throughout the day. The direction given to the social media producers was that the core purpose for Twitter was to get lines out quickly in order to set the news agenda, an action commensurate with *Today's* position as an influencer within their social media network. Following that, the aims were to get a high volume of click-throughs or retweets. The impact and worth of these actions came from publics seeing the content and engaging with it. These outcomes, had they occurred, would indicate the increase of interactivity required for the audience to become a tool within the process of setting the news media agenda. The underlying assumption was that actions taken by the audience to share *Today's* content would promote *Today's* brand and news lines amongst people who did not tune into the broadcast.

In my observations of the digital producers it was clear that they implicitly understood the importance of resonating with Facebook's communication standards when developing content for social media. Immediacy, spontaneity, and predictability were all considered when creating content for Facebook. The team aimed to produce content which would engage with the audience on lighter subjects working on the premise that, having caught the attention of an audience, citizen-users would then be more likely to view the serious current affairs content. Actions such as these provide evidence that the programme wanted to tap into its audience's personal networks. For example, spontaneity and bloopers are known to "travel well", that is to say that they are widely shared. The team targeted such clips at Facebook users and used them to direct audience members to longer clips and "harder" current affairs content. According to Angus, "What we do need to do is think about what material we're putting out on social to reinforce the messages we want people to understand about the programme" (Jamie Angus, interview 2, February 2015). This has a clear implication for the process of setting the news media agenda; specific information was chosen and shared to direct the audience to think about the programme in a particular way.

During my observation of the team, I noted that Twitter was seen by some producers as the most useful way to achieve this. The Social Media Content Producer highlighted the importance of Twitter for disseminating news lines, and communication standards for tweets were met. I observed the way in which the producer superimposed quotes from the programme over relevant images or *Today* backgrounds, using a headline from an election story or interview.

These specific items were created for social media using quotes and images from the day's broadcast, and they were designed to travel. The team expressed the belief that this was one of the best ways to increase interaction on Twitter, and would also help to push *Today's* top news lines. Through the lens of redrawing boundaries, this can be seen as a partial attempt to situate *Today* across platform boundaries and produce and promote content; these are actions which have been shown to increase salience in the news media agenda-setting process. However, audience interaction with the content is also a crucial factor in redrawing boundaries, they need to know that the social media platforms contain content worth visiting for. They also need to engage with that in order for it to travel. This did not happen to the necessary extent during the general election campaign.

Focussing on the two most widely used social media sites in the UK, Facebook (c.31 million users in the United Kingdom) (Statista, 2015) and Twitter (c.15 million users) (Statista, 2015c), I identified certain actions taken by *Today's* editors and producers to increase their chances of setting the news agenda during the 2015 UK general election. The first thing to note from the interviews with the Editor is that he felt strongly that *Today's* content on Facebook received more interest than that on Twitter. However, as Angus admitted in the statement given earlier, user responses to Facebook content were not interacted with by the programme.

As mentioned above, *Today* often trended on Twitter during the election campaign through the hashtag #r4today. The production team termed those who use this hashtag "super-users". Super-users were defined as listeners who talk to each other on Twitter about the broadcast. Trending amongst a defined group of people partially meets the requirements for a two-step flow. It crucially falls short of actually promoting the content to people who had not already heard the broadcast, and hence promoting *Today's* lines more widely.<sup>66</sup> In line with the programme's use of Facebook, the official Twitter profile - @BBCr4today - was used principally to promote news lines rather than interacting with listeners or creating dialogues. During

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<sup>66</sup> As a caveat, one limitation to this method is that I was unable to identify the number of retweets by super-users or learn about their offline sharing information. Therefore measurements of how far information travelled are limited.



observations of the show, I kept track of tweets from the official *Today* account and those using #r4today. Discussion online amongst listeners made connections between news stories and reports, and some users challenged the narratives being broadcast. However, there was minimal to no reaction during the show to listeners' comments. Twitter users talked only to each other, signalling insufficient interaction of the part of the programme and a missed opportunity to activate their audience networks.

Furthermore, from data I collected during the election campaign it is clear that the number of interactions by the audience with purposely-created campaign video content on *Today's* Facebook page were low in comparison to interactions on Instagram, although the figures were small in general with an average of 17 likes on Facebook and 20 on Instagram on directly comparable days when the same content was shared (see Table 5.1). In addition, when comparing the numbers of likes for election-based content on Facebook in comparison to non-election content posted more recently we can see marked differences. 'Today's *Today*' were 15-second videos which featured a presenter talking directly to camera in the newsroom, and were filmed in a homemade style that aimed to strengthen the connection between audience and presenter. They featured the presenter simply summarising the main campaign news and current affairs covered in the programme. These short videos received an average of 13 likes, 4 shares, and 15 comments on Facebook during the election campaign. In comparison, a video posted on 30 December 2015 showing the impact of the Boxing Day floods in Northern England garnered 127 likes, 348 shares, and 27 comments. There could be many factors explaining this difference, not least of which may be to do with the nature of the news story. Election coverage might be regarded as less interesting and lacking the human interest of the story used for comparison. The inconsistency with which the *Today* programme posted to social media is also revealed in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1. Number of interactions with Today's social media posts from 15 April 2015 to 6 May 2015

	Facebook						Instagram				Twitter			
	Likes	% <i>n</i> =(148)	Shares	% <i>n</i> =(45)	Comments	% <i>n</i> =(162)	Likes	% <i>n</i> =(242)	Retweets	% <i>n</i> =(7)	Favourites	% <i>n</i> =(6)	Replies	% <i>n</i> =(14)
15 April	13	8.78	0	0	3	1.85	26	10.74	-	-	-	-	-	-
16 April	22	14.86	12	26.67	2	1.23	31	12.81	-	-	-	-	-	-
20 April	6	4.05	0	0	27	16.67	-	N/A	-	-	-	-	-	-
21 April	6	4.05	0	0	35	21.60	30	12.40	-	-	-	-	-	-
22 April	8	5.41	0	0	20	12.35	28	11.57	-	-	-	-	-	-
23 April	11	7.43	0	0	9	5.56	35	14.46	-	-	-	-	-	-
24 April	-	-	-	-	-	-	29	11.98	-	-	-	-	-	-
27 April	8	5.41	2	4.44	22	13.58	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
28 April	-	-	-	-	-	-	32	13.22	-	-	-	-	-	-
29 April	44	29.73	29	64.44	14	8.64	31	12.81	7	100.00	6	100.00	14	100.00
02 May	10	6.76	0	0	6	3.70	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
05 May	7	4.73	0	0	4	2.47	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
06 May	13	8.78	2	4.44	20	12.35	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Note: A dash (-) indicates that a post was not shared on this platform on that date

The decision to produce 'Today's *Today*' is indicative of perhaps the most important way that the *Today* team attempted to blur boundaries in their content creation: the use of video. Video was recognised as one of the most important ways of engaging citizens to share messages, not just at *Today* but amongst my interviewees more generally. For example, a digital advisor to a main UK party stated that "In some ways we were copying the style and format of how American campaigns use email, how American campaigns use online video in particular." (Anon02, interview 1, September 2015) Audio-visual material played an important role in the '100 seats in 100 days' feature and is a significant indicator of *Today's* diversification of content. Nevertheless, although I found that development of social and digital media as a complementary piece to the legacy radio broadcasts were viewed as crucial by the programme team during the election campaign of 2015, the extent to which this was enacted was insufficient to harness network power.

Overall, the actions taken by the *Today* programme in their production of election coverage demonstrates evidence of content diversification as a means of participating effectively in the contemporary agenda-setting process. Some limited steps were taken by the programme to improve their integration of digital and legacy content in order to increase their reach over audiences and to increase their cross-platform output, and hence retain their place in the agenda-setting process. However, the extent and success of this was limited. Understanding how the programme interpreted its place and role within the contemporary media system, particularly in relation to other actors and pertaining to agenda-setting, is crucially important for assessing the validity of the controlled-network relationship model in this context. It is clear that some actions were taken to broaden *Today's* digital space. Perhaps if these had been more successful, *Today* may have been able to harness their social media networks and exercise more control over the agenda. Ultimately, though, their biggest downfall was inaction in the face of the tightly-controlled party campaigns in conjunction with their failure to successfully redraw boundaries and position themselves across platforms.

## 6.5. Conclusion

Despite attempts at digital innovation by the team at the *Today* programme, hierarchical power structures and legacy news-production practices dominated their approach to campaign coverage. *Today* combined a small number of digital practices with legacy practices. In an election characterised by “stage-managed” political party campaigns within a hybrid media system, these limited actions were ineffective. *Today’s* approach resulted in a failure to realise the programme’s full potential within the news media agenda-setting process. Drawing on the findings presented in this chapter, I argue that *Today* was not able to access power inherent in social media networks due to its limited approach to creating original content for digital spaces. Additionally, where content was shared the journalists were unable to motivate their online networked audience to share it widely. Furthermore, *Today* did not source information from citizen-users from social media, which I argue would have enabled them to find more challenging perspectives to party lines.

Whilst the editor and programme team certainly recognised the potential for digital and social media to help them in the content creation and promotion, a tension existed between the theory and practice of two key factors. The first of these findings relates to power relations between the programme and the political parties. Initially, Angus spoke about interaction with politicians as though power was relational. He stated the belief that the hybridity of the media system, and the greater amount of information produced by citizens, was beneficial to journalists and detrimental to parties. However, these beliefs did not turn into action during the election campaign. Instead, *Today* continued to operate within a hierarchical power structure whereby their main sources were traditional organizations such as parties, who – in keeping a greater level of control over their messages – were able to lead the news agenda most days. For example, the discussions I observed during the editorial team’s preparations for the interview with Nick Clegg showed a continuation of legacy journalistic practices, with no suggestion of using digital or social media to mount a challenge to party lines.

Further to this, news production practices neither diversified nor demonstrated a commitment to re-drawing of boundaries. The *Today* programme's team were conscious of the potential for them to exert power in online spaces by taking these actions. This was demonstrated by growing their social media team and their production of content for social media. Nevertheless, the amount of interactivity enacted during the campaign was minimal. The interactivity with citizen-users was insufficient for the programme to use their social media networks to the fullest extent and hence exert or retain power over the news media agenda-setting process. The lessons from these main findings is that to engage effectively in the process of setting the news media agenda, a news organization must engage in a re—drawing of platform boundaries using hybrid media logics. This includes responsive interaction with their audience through controlled interactivity directing authentic communications across their networks, and engaging with citizens not only to promote content but also as a source for content which challenges others' messages.

In previous chapters I outlined an updated process for news media agenda-setting, involving the engagement with, and use of, citizens to create salience around a news story. Required for this were elements of controlled-interactivity, alongside a two-step flow process in which audience members share content with their own networks, increasing the reach of a story or news line. Whilst *Today* occupied the same space within the UK's media system that it has done since its inception, and undoubtedly played a role in the news media agenda-setting process, it had very little opportunity to lead the agenda due to the continuation of traditional practices. This adherence to tradition came at the expense of incorporating interactivity to challenge party messages and to promote its own lines and interpretations.

There are, of course, some limitations to this case study. As with any case study based on observational insights the findings relate only to this specific scenario in which the observations were made: in this case one radio current affairs programme during the 2015 UK general election campaign period. The external validity of the findings is therefore low, but as an account of an important news programme interacting with political parties within the agenda-setting process certain statements can be made which can be applied more generally. Additionally, as a stand-

alone account of *Today*'s news-making processes and procedures, it provides a reliable insight into a legacy organisations attempt to adapt to a hybrid media system. The following chapter analyses news output from ITV News. The coherence of findings from this rival news channel with findings from *Today* demonstrates the internal validity of this dissertation.

# Chapter 7 ITV News *Election 2015*'s failure to engage: insufficient interactivity and continuity in hierarchical power relationships

**Alex Chandler:** So just being in the right place at the right time with a camera phone doesn't make you a journalist – it makes you a very useful feature of what our modern media world is, because the more opportunities to capture images makes it much easier to tell different stories. You don't have to be a reporter and a crew in the right place at the right time to capture something. Anybody can do it. And that means that stories that wouldn't necessarily come to light or come to air do come to air. And that's great, that democratization of news-gathering has been fantastic. (Interview 1, November 2014)

Alex Chandler, Editor of ITV's election results night programme *Election 2015*, explained to me how important citizens were in the newsgathering process. His words endowed citizens with the quality of being a “useful feature” for professional journalists, which explicitly describes commodification of their content and action. He also highlighted how the information brought to light by citizen-users can tell, enhance, or challenge a news story. This is a process he described as democratizing, despite the clear continuation of a divide between professional journalists and non-professionals. This chapter analyses the beliefs and actions of journalists working on *Election 2015* and compares it to the output of the programme to describe the power relations and use of social media that impacted *Election 2015*'s ability to take part in the news media agenda-setting process.

## 7.1. Introduction

*Election 2015* was ITV News' election results programme. As part of this study I undertook observations of the *Election 2015* programme team, and interviews with the programme Editor, Alex Chandler, and the Digital Director, Jason Mills. The goals were to gain an understanding of the decisions made and the way in which the news-making practices were used to create an agenda-setting programme. As stated in the previous chapter, this case study – and that of *Today* – were carried out in order to fully understand the impact of decision-making as a function in the

contemporary news agenda-setting process. Within that I also sought to establish how journalists respond to the affordances and challenges of the media system, and how power relationships between audiences, journalists, and political parties function.

ITV News is arguably better-versed in the integration of digital and legacy media logics and practices than the *Today* programme. This is because on a day-to-day basis the news teams behind ITV's national and regional news broadcasts produce content designed to cross platforms, including television, the ITV News website, and their social media accounts. It is also easier for a television broadcast to be turned into visual clips which travel further online. The journalists producing *Election 2015* were therefore familiar with enacting boundary-drawing power, defined by Chadwick and Collister (2016: 2423) as the "capacity of an organizational actor to reconfigure the context of its own actions by using resources and strategies that are both intrinsic to itself but which also involve interfacing with other actors in a hypernetworked environment." I observed that this was incorporated into their decision-making and content production.

The research questions are developed from the over-arching focus: 'what does the agenda-setting process look like during the 2015 general election campaign?' This chapter focuses specifically on research questions (RQ1) How do power relationships between traditional news media producers and political elites function in the 2015 UK general election campaign, and how do they impact the agenda-setting process?; (RQ2) How do traditional news media producers and political parties attempt to successfully harness network power?; (RQ3) How are social and digital media integrated into traditional news media's output, and how does this impact their power relationships with political elites? I aimed to find out precisely how social and digital media were integrated into the programme's design, and what impact this had on *Election 2015*'s ability to set the news agenda. I also asked how the power relationships between the editor and journalists producing *Election 2015* and the political parties were constituted and how they were impacted by the hybridity of practices within the media system (Chadwick, 2013).

The findings discussed in this chapter continue the theme of insufficient integration of interactivity which had a negative outcome on the programme's ability to use network power within social media networks. Social media and the integration of digital and legacy media logics



and practices was spoken about regularly by the professionals I interviewed. In contrast I observed a continuation of older media practices augmented by a small amount of specific, high-level, data<sup>67</sup> from social media. Attempts at using network power were the result of inauthenticity of communication and therefore not fully realised. The main difference between the *Today* programme and *Election 2015*'s case was that the latter did have a great deal more integration of media platforms. The level of control exercised over integration suggested that they wanted to limit the interactivity offered to their audience members and use macro-level data gleaned from social media to strengthen their framing of news stories, rather than encourage controlled interactivity by including social media users and their content in the programme or online conversations.

*The first key finding* of this chapter is that despite an acceptance amongst journalists of the need to include social media as part of the programme's output, and a recognition of the way in which it would strengthen their position in the agenda-setting network, there were discrepancies between this understanding and the actions taken. In the context of news media agenda-setting, I noted that the journalists working on *Election 2015* were aware of their social media networks and the potential for them to harness the more influential members of those networks in order to promote their content. This shows understanding regarding methods of message control online and reflects a re-consideration of Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow which I argue can form a key part of the news media agenda-setting process in an online space. As shown previously, if this is done successfully it has the potential to increase the news media agenda setting power of the media producer. However, whilst I expected to see action being taken on election night in order to achieve this, the action noted had limitations.

The tension between what was discussed in the interviews pertaining to the use of social media and what happened in practice is *the second key finding* presented in this chapter, and fits the pattern established in the previous chapters. I found two uses of social media highlighted in the interviews and noted in the observations. Firstly, that there was a desire to include content

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<sup>67</sup> High-level data is defined as data about large numbers of users that has been aggregated, for example about location, general subject of tweets, total number of tweets about a topic etc.

produced on social networks, whether by the audience, by politicians, or other journalists, in the programme as a way of including the audience and other elite actors in the conversation. Secondly, the information that could be gleaned from social media from a higher level, for example geographic data such as the most popular topic of conversation in a given area of the country, could be used to illustrate the story. I found that despite informants speaking of both ways of using information from their social networks, only the second method was substantially included in the broadcast. It is important to note that while the journalists interviewed emphasised that what they offered was a substantive way of involving their audience, and that there was room for improvement; what their actions actually achieved was to allow the team to incorporate selected information that would help them to tell their story.

Therefore, *a third key finding* from this analysis regards the inclusion of Twitter and Facebook. The data presented by the two companies played a crucial role in allowing the editors and presenters to strengthen their narrative or to move the story on in line with their own agenda. In *Election 2015* established cultural norms and practices were retained and traditional newsgathering logics remained in place, but these were augmented by selected digital practices. Prior to results night, the programme team seemed poised to use their network power in order to further the goals of the programme, but in observations and analysis of the programme support was not clear. Social media allowed the programme to tell parts of the story in new ways, but the 2015 general election did not mark a change or an increase in the social media-related production practices used. Instead *Election 2015* was characterised by continuity of previous news media agenda setting practices and functions, including continuity in hierarchical power relationships with other actor groups.

## 7.2. Case Study: Why *Election 2015*?

I chose to study *Election 2015* as an example of an election night results programme, which is the climax of the televised election campaign. A programme of this type is qualitatively different to

a regular broadcast such as *Today*. Observing the preparations for, and decisions behind, the news-making practices which enabled reporting on election night gave me further insights into the impact of media convergence and the hybridisation of platforms and media logics. ITV News also has a broader audience, both demographically and numerically, than the *Today* programme - although *Election 2015* was targeting a niche audience.

*Election 2015* was ITV News' election results night programme, and the editor Alex Chandler drew upon his experience as an editor of other news programmes to develop the broadcast. I was interested in the ways in which the broadcast and digital teams creating the programme drew on their experience under business-as-usual reporting and past election programmes and applied this to the creation of a one-off programme. Chandler stated a desire to take a more innovative approach to telling the story of the election compared to ITV News' previous approaches. The team also set the goal of standing out from their competitors in 2015 by breaking news first. Chandler headed up a large team comprising a variety of workstreams including newsgathering, social media and digital, graphics, and technology. The team expanded over the five month period in which I observed them. The team held three rehearsals which also expanded in scope over time. Some of the key changes that Chandler and his team made to the programme, as compared to 2010, included incorporating specific technological developments and having a second on-air space – the Opinion Room – in which analysts and guests gathered to give their views on the events of the night. Particularly notable is the inclusion of analysts from Facebook and Twitter who used aggregated data from their websites to simultaneously illustrate the story being told and bolster the on-air conversation.

One limitation that must be addressed is the fact that setting the agenda when the story boundaries are so narrow is a difficult thing to do, especially on an election results night when the majority of media outlets are reporting on the same event. There tends to be little in the way of differing interpretations and challenges to the news media agenda in election results reporting. I did expect, as did most journalists, politicians, and staffers I interviewed, that the election results might lead to coalition negotiations, in which case there may have been more contestation over the framing of the results. However, the key stories that emerged were indisputable on the night

of 7 May 2015. Most prominently was the shock of the exit poll, which showed a clear majority for the Conservative Party and not the hung parliament predicted throughout the campaign. The news team had to be reactive to this and recalibrate their approach. Entire set pieces developed especially for the programme, such as the coalition calculator, were not used as a result. Other key stories include the huge victory for the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) and a great loss for the Liberal Democrats. It was therefore important to observe and understand how *Election 2015* told these stories and the mechanisms through which they attempted to direct the news agenda.

### 7.3. Integrating Digital and Legacy News Practices: Being the First to tell the Story

The market is increasingly competitive when it comes to the providers of opinion and content ... How you stand out and how you prioritise content over and above other people is a challenge for anybody who's in the business of providing content and making content, and making it relevant to the right sorts of people who are out there is part of the challenge that we all face now. (Alex Chandler, interview 4, July 2015)

This opening quotation is taken from my final interview with the programme's Editor in July 2015. It summarises one of the main challenges for a programme such as *Election 2015*: how to make your content and story stand out amongst the content of so many different producers. Furthermore, the suggestion that it needs to be tailored to the "right sorts of people", implies that creating content for a specific target audience – whether that includes influencers or ordinary audience members – is an important part of enabling their story to travel. It is also an implicit recognition of the need to meet communication standards in order for the content to be shared widely. This is relevant in the context of a re-conceptualisation of two-step flow (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955) in a media system incorporating social media networks. Capturing an audience of influential users with networks has the potential to increase the reach of content and, by association, its salience within the news media agenda. Chandler recognised that the interaction undertaken by audiences online is mostly done in their own social networks and is less likely to be achieved between broadcaster and audience member. However, he was also aware of the

potential for the broadcaster to tap into those networks and use the inherent power there to invoke a two-step flow of information dissemination between the audience and their personal networks.

In our second interview in March 2015 Chandler stated that:

Being first is one of the things that helps you to stand out from the crowd and if we are able to deliver key bits of content ahead of our competitors then I'm hoping that that will get picked up elsewhere on social media, and our output and our name and the characteristics of the programme will be clear, and will be shared, and will be making an impact, beyond simply viewers at home. (Alex Chandler, interview 2, March 2015)

In this quote, Chandler sets out how he hoped *Election 2015* would reach groups other than the viewing audience, potentially the social media influencers and political elites that the programme was hoping to engage with. The desire to include social media content in the programme was motivated not only by the interactivity it offered to the audience, but also by the benefits the programme would receive. Chandler spoke early on, in our first interview in November 2014, about the potential contributions of the audience and how they could impact the programme if utilised:

They may be sharing some really interesting conclusions about what they are seeing, which I think can then stimulate the conversation elsewhere within the programme, and if that happens you start to get a virtuous circle of people who are posting stuff that we're picking up and their picking up what we're talking about and its genuinely having a bit more of a sophisticated conversation than the presenter and a party politician having a row about whether the exit poll was right. (Alex Chandler, interview 1, November 2014)

In this way the programme's output could become embedded in conversations on social media and hence their news lines could gain traction. As stated above, Chandler had hoped that the "right" people would become engaged in conversation on social media around *Election 2015*, this statement provides support for the idea that the programme wanted to create arenas of interactivity with the audience, but specifically wanted to engage with influencers online. One way of doing this, according to the Editor, was to work towards creating a "virtuous circle" of discussion with social media users. He described the basis of how Twitter works, the creation and sharing of

information leading to conversations. Had *Election 2015* achieved this, they would have met an important standard in communication for Twitter interaction. They did not achieve this, as discussed below, and their interactions in fact demonstrate a continuation of hierarchical power relationships. This leads to the conclusion that within the news production process, and within contemporary news media agenda-setting, legacy practices continued to dominate, despite the hybridity inherent in the UK's media system.

Setting the news agenda first is a key way to increase impact as a content producer. When devising *Election 2015*, telling the story first was a significant goal for the programme team. As a broadcaster vying for audience share with the BBC, Channel 4, and Sky News, ITV needed a selling point, and it was decided that speed would be the feature to set them apart. For *Election 2015*, being first to tell the story amounted to declaring the constituency results first. Chandler believed that achieving this would allow the programme to make a potential news media agenda-setting impact. It should be noted that whilst *Election 2015* was successful in calling seat results first, their focus on speed did result in one seat - Warwickshire North - being called incorrectly by the anchor. Overall, however, according to Chandler, the stringer<sup>68</sup> network “delivered results [first] in 75% of the constituencies so that was an achievement” (Alex Chandler, interview 4, July 2015).

*Election 2015* wanted to set itself apart from its competitors by being first to deliver the constituency results, an act that could potentially ensure a top position in the news media agenda-setting process as other news producers may look to them for information. In order to achieve this, the team took actions combining legacy and digital media logics, as well as incorporating new technology. This particular goal was consistent with ITV News' goals under business-as-usual production, as Mills confirmed in our first interview in October 2015: “We pride ourselves on putting a story up and getting it tweeted out before most other news organisations have even put out the tweet in the first place” (Jason Mills, interview 1, October 2015). During my time with

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<sup>68</sup> Stringers are typically freelance journalists who are hired by a company when their employees will be unable to cover a news story or reach the location in time. In the context of an election, a large number of stringers is necessary to be at local counts.

the team I was able to observe the practices they engaged in as they prepared for newsgathering and dissemination on 8 May 2015. In terms of technology incorporated, Chandler spoke about a new process which allowed reporters in regional or constituency hubs to text updates to a central area (Alex Chandler, interview 3, April 2015). This worked alongside the automatic simultaneous dissemination of results across many different platforms, which not only helped the programme in their pursuit of speed, but enabled their lines to reach as many people as possible.

In addition to being first with the results the programme team also had to be reactive once the unexpected results of the exit poll had been released. This was an event which had an impact on the news media agenda-setting process across a UK news media who were mostly expecting to report a close race resulting in coalition formation. Election results programmes are in the irregular position of telling a news story that breaks slowly over a large time period but which is unlikely to be dynamic for large swathes of the night. In the event, the exit poll did provide an energetic start to the night as their results were entirely unexpected and – within the newsroom where I was present – seemingly disbelieved. The programme team of *Election 2015* therefore constructed content more pragmatically than planned, with Chandler telling me that they “changed the direction of the narrative that we thought we were going to be dealing with” (Alex Chandler, interview 4, July 2015).

In answer to research question 3<sup>69</sup>, a connected observation I made in the build up to 7 May 2015 was that, whilst pragmatism was called for on the night, this particular approach had been prepared for in terms of crossing the boundaries of media. It was clear during observations that the team aimed to be pragmatic with their use of a variety of media platforms to tell the story. For example, the online team’s integration into the news team was particularly beneficial as they could quickly create short videos from the broadcast to share on social media and [itv.com/news](http://itv.com/news). By recognising in the planning stages that the stories of the night may not be particularly dynamic, and deciding not to try and present them as such, Chandler and the programme team focussed on

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<sup>69</sup> How are social and digital media integrated into traditional media’s output, and how does this impact their power relationships with political elites?

creating space for analysis and explanation within the show. They incorporated practices which would allow them to tell the story first and offer a different approach to their competitors.

When asked if they felt they had played a role in the agenda-setting process on results night, and indeed throughout the campaign, both Chandler and Mills were positive about ITV News' place. Chandler believe that the joined up coverage they provided across media platforms, and across programmes as the story moved into 8 May 2015, gave the programme persistence and pervasiveness and allowed the news producer to play an important agenda-setting role. Mills shared this opinion: "We spent a lot of time at least helping set the agenda. If you think about how the first leaders' debate massively set the agenda, and that was an ITV event" (Jason Mills, interview 2, 25 June 2015). However I argue that this is not correct. Claiming influence for ITV media events like the leaders' debate on the basis of hosting does not equate with setting the news agenda after that event. This may indicate a lack of clarity in their understanding of news agendas. As discussed in Chapter 4, the leaders' debate had many different competing agendas. The fact that ITV hosted the event was not, in itself, a reason that they did or did not set the news media agenda. Nevertheless, overall in terms of evidence gathered during my observations and analysis of the programme it can be argued that they were successful at achieving their goal to be first with the story on election night thanks to the integrated media logics and technologies that they utilised.

For *Election 2015* ITV News' integrated approach to digital and legacy practices included newsgathering in targeted areas that would help to tell the stories that were expected, the use of a database to manage seat and constituency information, and the role of the stringer network, who were crucial in getting the story out first. These were complimented by digital practices, such as reporting live on the ITV News website, streaming the programme live on YouTube, having a physical presence from social media networks in the opinion room, promoting the programme across social media networks, sourcing information from online spaces, and using new technologies to improve communications. Despite the success described above, the extent of this integration in terms of pushing boundaries was limited. It can be argued that the interactivity afforded to the audience was insufficient. However the way in which social media was used did augment a traditional journalistic practice; it enabled them to strengthen their narrative and agenda



by sourcing supportive information from digital spaces which provided constituted new information in the news cycle.

#### 7.4. The Two Functions of Social Media

Despite early indications that interactivity would play a large role *Election 2015*, on results night the programme had a very limited reciprocal engagement with its audience on Facebook and Twitter. With the exception of the Facebook Q&A sessions, hosted by people who were guests on the programme, there were only a few calls for the audience to “get involved” online. No audience tweets were used in the programme, and all references to data from Facebook and Twitter involved curation and interpretation. This meant that data from social media could be used as evidence to support *Election 2015*'s framing of the results, information created by the audience was not used to give a platform to different viewpoints. This raises the question of what the team deem to be “artificial” engagement. When I started this research I expected to find evidence of relational power structures, and horizontal networks, but observing and interviewing journalists working on *Election 2015* demonstrates that while they believe power to be more fluid and networks to be more horizontal than in the past, their continued ties to legacy news-making practices negates the attempts at engaging with their audience and the content they can create. In fact, the programme simply used its boundary-drawing power to create logics allowing it to sit across platforms and disseminate its news lines.

##### *7.4.1. Tensions between beliefs and action about the uses of social media*

[Social media] has changed the way that journalists discover stories, it's changed the speed at which stories develop, and it's changed the number of different people who can input into the story. (Jason Mills, interview 1, October 2014)

During my first observation with the team on 8 January 2015, in which I attended a meeting held between Chandler and Mills to discuss the role of digital media, I noted that Facebook and, later on, Twitter were to be included for two main reasons. The first of these was

to use information from social media to spark the discussion offline, the second was its merits as a source of demographic data<sup>70</sup> to be drilled down into to provide information or context to a story. These are two very different reasons for including information from social media. The first suggests that information produced by the programme's audience and wider social networks would – to some extent – direct and support discussion on the programme. This is an important use of network power which would enable the programme to exact alternate or new information to be included in the political information cycle, and potentially alter or set news agendas.

The second reason suggests that the amalgamated information available from social media would be used to provide evidence for the stories already being told, strengthening the message coming from the broadcast but not the messages being promoted on other platforms. There is a key difference relating to this between what I noted in the interviews and observed during my fieldwork. In the interviews the Editor and Digital Director quite often spoke about engaging with the audience through social media, and incorporating social media output into the fabric of the programme. However, during observations I noted the way in which this data would be used was discussed more “realistically”, as a way in which a story could be told, supported, or strengthened.

Chandler expressed a concern about the way that broadcast journalists sometimes use social media in their news productions and stressed how he not only wished to avoid this, but actively carve out a role for social media content within the broadcast programme:

I think the danger is sometimes with broadcasters you think “oh god I’ve got to do something with social media, I’ve got to do something about online” and it becomes something that’s stuck on rather than part of the fabric of the programme.” (Alex Chandler, interview 1, November 2014)

Therefore, one of the programme's aims was the incorporation of social media into *Election 2015* to encourage interaction and provide a different viewpoint. Yet, the extent to which this happened

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<sup>70</sup> Described during the meeting as the ability to pinpoint what different groups of people (age, gender etc.) were discussing in different geographical locations at any given moment.

was somewhat limited. This is similar to beliefs and aims expressed by *Today* and is reflective of changes in the wider journalism industry, where the relationship between social and other media is symbiotic. Jim Waterson, Deputy Editor of BuzzFeed UK, provided support for this in his first interview: “We spend our entire time trying to create things that you will share on Facebook or Twitter. If you aren’t sharing it on Facebook or Twitter then we aren’t getting any traffic” (Jim Waterson, interview 1, October 2014).

This factor was considered early on in the design phase of the programme. The team expressed the desire to have a mechanism in place for audience members to get in touch with their own questions, specifically through hosting a series of Facebook Q&As. This idea was further developed through discussions with representatives of the Facebook and Twitter companies regarding their incorporation into the Opinion Room. These discussions focussed upon what data the social media companies would be able to provide during the programme and what it would look like on screen, but also covered topics such as how the zone for each company would be branded within the Opinion Room.

The approach to social media was therefore built around two separate methods but the implementation of these was demonstrated a large degree of variation between the two. Throughout interviews prior to the election it appeared that from the editor’s viewpoint social media were a reciprocal medium: “there’s a whole online group of people who will be monitoring, filtering, and making some editorial decisions about what social media bleeds into the programme on air, and how that happens. And what of our programme gets onto social media” (Alex Chandler, interview 1, November 2014). However this was something of a balancing act for the programme team: “we want to try and, without giving overweight to what people are sharing and posting online, what they’re talking about on social media, we want to make sure that we tap into what the atmosphere and what the mood is out there” (Alex Chandler, interview 1, November 2014). The interviews with Chandler therefore demonstrate a desire for the integration of social media into the broadcast. However, I observed that very little content from social media was included in the broadcast, with focus instead falling on statistical information and demographic data which illustrated the story being told.

In terms of the new media agenda setting process, this approach did not meet the criteria established. In answer to research question 2<sup>71</sup>, the reality of the programme's engagement with social media did not enable them to exert power over the news media agenda via networks. They did not release a substantial amount of content with the intent to interact with their audience. Although their content did meet the standard of predictability, had the reciprocal relationships been a key part of content creation then message control and direction online may have been stronger. This may have allowed the programme to release a greater amount of information which impacted the political information cycle. Such action would have constituted the standards of spontaneity and immediacy, and their interactions may have been authentic instead of the inauthenticity which occurred in the Opinion Room, discussed below.

Chandler spoke about the positive aspects of working across boundaries. The discussion of an event or the use of a specific frame on the programme, either in the studio or in the Opinion Room, followed by Opinion Room guests tweeting or posting on Facebook, made it possible to extend that aspect of a story beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of the broadcast: "So there's an interaction going on that we've picked up on and broadcast but then it carries on and continues to deliver online" (Alex Chandler, interview 2, March 2015). The positive impact of this for the programme's role in the news media agenda-setting process is that, if this were successful, it would give *Election 2015's* stories more salience and increase their longevity within discussion amongst influencers and non-influencers. This is also pertinent because it demonstrates the belief in the need to exercise of boundary-drawing power and create content that can travel well across platforms, potentially allowing the programme to lead conversations about the election in a wider variety of spaces.

Another advantage of encouraging interactivity within the broadcast and online output is the way in which the output can be used to strengthen the programme's narrative. The programme could choose whether or not to incorporate audience discussions online directed at or about the

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<sup>71</sup> How do news media producers and political parties attempt to successfully harness network power?

programme. The niche audience watching were seen, at least initially, as almost akin to analysts.

Chandler spoke about members of the audience who might be dual-screening:

They're watching the results but they're also commenting on them. Now I think capturing some of that will be really interesting, simply because we know that our audience is not representative of a mainstream regular, primetime audience. It is there to serve a purpose, and actually the depth of opinion and critique that you'll get from people who are engaged by the nature of it being an election programme will be a benefit rather than a disadvantage. (Alex Chandler, interview 1, November 2014)

Furthermore, when discussing the content that publics can generate, the editor spoke quite clearly about how such actions fit into the media ecology:

Just being in the right place at the right time with a camera phone doesn't make you a journalist – it makes you a very useful feature of what our modern media world is, because the more opportunities to capture images makes it much easier to tell different stories. (Alex Chandler, interview 1, November 2014)

That is to say that, whilst contributions are recognised, they are more of a tool – a “useful feature” – for journalists to tell the stories in greater detail, rather than allowing a non-professional to tell their own story. Picking out the content produced by audiences, whether tweets, Facebook comments, or media content that the audience have produced, aids the story-telling function of the programme. Therefore I can ascertain that interactive features were used as a way to direct the audience's attention to ITV News' coverage, and also were an attempt to encourage them to share this amongst their online and offline networks.

In addition to using social media in the broadcast, the programme team wanted to deliver their content seamlessly across multiple platforms, and it was able to do this by harnessing online tools, although digital content remained driven by the primary broadcast. During my observation of a rehearsal on 17 March 2015 I witnessed discussions around how tweets would be shown on screen, and how the presenter – Tom Bradby – would view them and highlight them to viewers. At a follow-up observation on 19 March 2015 I was privy to discussions around the types of tweets which would be shown and the importance of an editorial bar being in place to ensure

consistency and relevancy; tweets from influential actors, political elites, journalists and commentators were preferred. Additionally, the decision to include a ‘Twitter mirror’<sup>72</sup> in the Opinion Room enabled the commentators and guests to record statements and immediately tweet these directly from the studio.

During rehearsals it was decided that Bradby would have a screen in front of him showing tweets, and that it would be up to him to highlight these for the audience. An editorial process was put in place whereby tweets would be read out and put into context by Bradby so that they made sense to the audience. Concerns were expressed during the workstream meetings that it may not be easy for the broadcast’s audience to understand tweets out of context. Therefore, it was stated during rehearsals that whilst the Opinion Room would be able to look at whole conversations, Bradby would only see one tweet at a time relevant to the on-air conversation and deemed to be adding something to the discussion. The programme team were planning to curate information from social media users and act as a gatekeeper highlighting social media content related only to the show’s stories, and contextualised by the presenter. The impact of this for the story told would be that different news lines may be unlikely to be presented, or they could be used to challenge guests on-air.

In our interviews the editor emphasised the reciprocal relationship that *Election 2015* could have with its audience on social media platforms. Specifically social media was both a way of sharing information and a source of information, and both those things would benefit the programme by increasing the salience of their narratives. Despite Chandler’s positive view regarding engagement with the audience on Twitter and Facebook, he spoke about how he wanted to avoid giving a platform to “meaningless and uninformed or ill-informed opinion” (Alex Chandler, interview 1, November 2014). He went on to state that “We know that there are lots of people out there who have a really in-depth connection to politics ... we will be looking for those people particularly and to see what trends there are.” Therefore, the editor expected that the programme would be sourcing from social media very much as it sourced from other areas: with

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<sup>72</sup> Twitter Mirror is a tablet computer that allows users to record a video or take a photo and approve it before tweeting it.

a focus on elites, and through the curation of political information. This clearly demonstrates a continuation of legacy practices, simply transposed to a digital space. Indeed, on election results night, the information used fitted the agenda that the programme wanted to put forwards.

This can be illustrated with an example of story-telling on the programme regarding the Scottish National Party's polling success. This topic dominated conversation on the broadcast between 0200 and 0400. Looking at a 20-minute segment of the programme focussing on the Scotland story, from 0235 to 0255, demonstrates how social media information was used in comparison to elite and expert sources, and deductions regarding the meaning for the news media agenda setting process can be made. Beginning this section, Bradby engaged the two academic experts present in the studio, Jane Green and Colin Rallings, in a discussion about the SNP, the reasons behind their success, and the probability of them winning all Scottish constituencies. The action then moved to the Opinion Room, where Adam Sharp, then Head of News and Politics at Twitter, highlighted two pieces of data from the website. The first of these being that at that moment one-third of all tweets related to the election were about the SNP, making them the most talked about party for the first time that night, and secondly that Nicola Sturgeon, who he introduced as an "active Twitter user", was the biggest share of the conversation she had been since the Scottish leaders' debate a week prior. Following the Opinion Room segment, Bradby then interviewed Nicola Sturgeon live from her location in Glasgow, focussing on her interpretation of the results and what role the SNP might play in Westminster.

Only two tweets were actually shared on screen and discussed by the presenter and analysts in the main news room. This was lamented by Chandler when we spoke after the election:

The first [tweet] ... where Nicola Sturgeon said "looks like it's going to be a good night but it's far too early to tell," it was that sort of level of discourse we were anticipating much more of, and actually, from the major political players, it didn't really deliver. So that was a surprise. And in part a disappointment because we had wanted to make that aspect of the election on social media very much part of the fabric of the programme. (Alex Chandler, interview 4, July 2015)

The disappointment expressed by the editor in our final interview suggests that he wanted to incorporate more content from social media, but specifically from political elites. He places the blame for the lack of political tweets with the candidates and parties. My observations prior to election night had pointed towards the inclusion of citizen tweets in the programme, of which there were thousands available. Chandler's consternation at the low level of discourse amongst political elites demonstrates the continued hierarchy through the practice of reliance on political parties as the only news sources in this context.

In the same interview he went on to state that:

As it happened, because we had Twitter in the Opinion Room, we were able to do different things with the interactivity of social media and capture what was being shared, but at a lower level, more in volume terms rather than individual bits of content. (Alex Chandler, interview 4, July 2015)

Whilst this statement paints a picture of the team taking a pragmatic approach, the use of data from Twitter and Facebook at a "higher level", such as using demographic data to discuss how many people in Sunderland were talking about UKIP, was a core part of the strategy throughout the planning stages. Although the programme team did expect a larger volume of individual tweets to be used, discussion around the incorporation of macro-level data was planned for. Therefore, despite the disappointment levelled at the number of tweets shown on screen in the programme, the actual methods of using social media data demonstrated the execution of the plans the programme had made during their preparation.

As discussed above, to add to disappointment over the Twitter output of political elites Chandler further lamented that "There wasn't any of that sort of posting on social media networks [by MPs and candidates] of the sorts of content that you might have anticipated there being. So that was a surprise I suppose in a way." (Alex Chandler, interview 4, July 2015). Nevertheless, Chandler was pleased with the contributions made by the analysts from Twitter and Facebook to the Opinion Room "The social media connection, watching what was going on with volumes, and traffics, and peaks, and interesting areas was an opportunity to really connect with those people"



(Alex Chandler, interview 4, July 2015). Therefore, even though the level of interactivity was not what the Editor had outlined in our earlier interviews, the inclusion of data at an aggregate level helped the programme to tell the story and deliver a more superficial level of interactivity. For example, during my observation periods I noted that it was felt that the Twitter analyst would be able to offer the tracking of moments and how they developed, instant reaction, changes in the conversation (and also pinpoint the moment at which the conversation changed), and how the conversation continued. This was not provided.

This is an example of commodification on the part of a news producer. Whilst some interaction was managed through Twitter and Facebook, both social networks were used as push mediums statistical information taken from them was used to tell the story that the media organisation wished to tell. As Chandler stated, citizens are a “useful feature” of social media. Using data in this way, without meeting the communication standards of the platforms and using network power means that the relationship is not reciprocal, it is hierarchical. Message control strategies are being used which do not meet communication standards and therefore do not meet criteria outlined in the theory of controlled interactivity.

#### *7.4.2. Insufficient Interactivity: ‘Othering’ social media in the Opinion Room*

The desire to include some element of interactivity in the programme had a number of different incentives, including – as outlined above – utilising digital media as a tool to aid reporting. However, there were two sides of the coin in relation to how social media could help the programme reach their potential audience. Chandler told me that creating a programme that offered something different, and some level of interactivity, was important in attracting an audience. Nevertheless, it is important to note that in the course of my observations at ITV there was a tension between how the programme team spoke about using Facebook data, and how it in fact came to be used. From a focus on interactivity, there was a shift to the ability to tap into aggregate data as a way of telling the story on the night. This gap between belief, statement, and action was also observed at *Today* suggesting that in 2015 there may have been a common

disconnection between what journalists believed social media could offer and how it was actually used.

Having spoken about the insufficient interactivity offered by *Today* in the previous chapter, I draw similar conclusions through analysing the reasons underpinning engagement on social media by *Election 2015*. In our first interview, Chandler stated that:

I think being honest and open about what the offering [on social media] is and what the likely outcome is going to be is important so that you're not artificially getting people to engage with you, or the engagement only really being one way. (Alex Chandler, interview 1, November 2014)

Therefore, as at the *Today* programme, there was concern around what constitutes authentic engagement on social media. Chandler's use of the word "artificially" suggests that some ways of encouraging interaction between the audience and the programme create a false interaction, perhaps less meaningful or realistic than either actor would want it to be. There is also concern with ensuring that the interaction is not artificial, that it is perhaps an organic process. This could also be an implicit recognition of, and desire to avoid, the process of commodification of citizens' action or content. But by the nature of the power relationship between media organization and audience, engagement will almost always be orchestrated – controlled or commodified. The action to take for news media agenda setting is to ensure that the content output meets communication standards, enabling journalists to produce communications which are perceived as authentic and thereby utilise their network power.

Chandler stated specific expectations regarding how *Election 2015's* audience would behave on social media platforms and recognised that the programme would benefit if an interactive relationship was created with the audience, however I found that the level of interactivity offered was insufficient in enabling the programme to set the news agenda across digital platforms. When speaking about what he expected to see online on election results night, Chandler stated that "People will be sharing, talking, contributing, a lot of stuff and we need to be aware of that and find ways of incorporating that both in our online offering but on the

programme too” (Alex Chandler, interview 1, November 2014). By incorporating information from their social networks and audience, and through promotion of *Election 2015*’s content by those online networks their agenda-setting function may have been stronger. Their networks would have been encouraged to share the information as well as providing new information to be used in the creation and promotion of content.

My reading of existing literature has demonstrated that the contemporary agenda-setting process is reliant upon networks of producers and consumers in a hybrid media system. For example, Lilleker and Jackson (2011: 25) demonstrate that “while the social units may be fragmented over space and time, they operate within an ecosystem that relies upon participation and connectedness.” Statements made in my interviews with Chandler support this notion. He claimed that people’s opinions as shared on social media, and the content they might create, would play an important part in the campaign and, thus, in the coverage. This supports the level of importance ascribed to the use of network proliferation in the relationship structures that exist between media producers and their audiences in the news media agenda-setting process. However, evidence for this was not found in relation to *Election 2015*.

The journalists also expected that political party information creation and dissemination would be impacted by social media. Chandler reflected on the myriad ways information can be released by parties during a campaign by describing the difference between past campaigns and his expectations regarding the speed of information dissemination in 2015. Critically he considered how this would impact the power relationship between journalists at ITV and political parties. He specifically emphasised that the abundance and intensity of information could in fact encourage journalists to critique communications more strongly and efficiently, something also raised by Jamie Angus at *Today* and discussed in the previous chapter:

I actually think the speed has the potential to deliver much more critical journalism than just putting stuff out as and when it arrives [in press releases]. It encourages you to ask questions immediately, rather than waiting for other people to ask questions first. (Alex Chandler, interview 1, November 2014)

Again, this is the belief that social and digital media affordances, in this specific case the speed with which information can be shared, would allow journalists to challenge party news agendas at an increased pace. When discussing his opinion of parties' power in the agenda-setting process during the impending election campaign, Chandler was initially quite clear that he believed it to be limited, telling me that he "think[s] our experience is that politicians always want to set the agenda and they rarely manage to do it" (Alex Chandler, interview 1, November 2014). He linked this to the fast-paced contemporary media environment containing more platforms and sources, meaning that it is easier for the messages of political parties to be challenged or deflected. Mills echoed this optimism prior to the campaign, stressing the importance of media fragmentation and greater opportunities for consumers in allowing other narratives to be heard:

The old days of dominance of a few media players in a wider landscape has gone. I think the quicker legacy organisations realise that, that the narrative we think is not the only narrative, there are all sorts of conversations going on the whole time ... We should embrace that and say that's fantastic, that the narrative is what people decide what they want it to be really. (Jason Mills, interview 1, October 2014)

However, in practice in the UK general election campaign of 2015, this was not the case. Political parties ran very tightly-controlled campaigns, the most salient stories reflected the output of parties, as well as stories from the polling organizations. There were no instances of party narratives being successfully derailed through the use of newer media or citizen journalism, although some stories did start on social media, such as the Milifandom<sup>73</sup>. Citizen-users' reactions on Twitter to campaign events and news reports often constituted stories in their own right: "If an event happens on Twitter it's as real as if it happened in real life" (Jim Waterson, interview 1, October 2014).

That there was a dearth of tweets from high-profile figures available for *Election 2015* to use demonstrates the continuation of hierarchical power relationships, as established in previous

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<sup>73</sup> Hills (2015) describes #milifandom's journey from Twitter to national media: "The hashtag #Milifandom was reinvigorated by 17-year-old Abby Tomlinson during the campaign, taken up by BuzzFeed and conveyed into the wider media ecology."

chapters. This was one way in which political parties maintained tight control of messages throughout the campaign and into results nights. Chandler does not fully explain why so few tweets were shown on-air and links it to the output of politicians themselves, which suggests that the programme's focus on interactivity was very much concentrated upon their traditional sources, especially political elites. The use of citizens' tweets or posts in the programme was never really considered, beyond the commodification described above. Therefore limiting newsgathering to their legacy sources reduced the ability of the programme to include a wider variety of voices in their story-telling and to strengthen their narrative by engaging with a broader range of actors.

Additionally, there was tension between Chandler's characterisation of and use of interactivity. For example, in our final interview he discussed the way in which social media was incorporated into the programme and stated that "It would feel more odd if you had done that whole thing 'right now we're going to turn a corner and go over to our social media area and dip our toes into what might be going on in this weird and wonderful world'" (Alex Chandler, Interview 4, November 2014). Yet Chandler's statement describes exactly how information from social media was incorporated into the programme. Facebook and Twitter were given their own branded corners of the Opinion Room and their representatives were asked to share their data specifically, albeit in relation to the framing of the news story being told. They were effectively 'othered', talking about what the conversation was like on their respective networks. Occasionally a link was made between presenter Nina Hussein's discussion with the Facebook or Twitter representative and subsequent discussion with Opinion Room commentators (comprised of journalists, pollsters, and party representatives) but only once did a social media representative, Facebook's Elizabeth Linder, then Government and Politics specialist, appear in conversation with other guests. That the information given by the social media companies was standalone in these ways did create the feeling of "let's go see what happening on social media", rather than fully incorporating it into the framing of the stories.

For example, following the announcement of results from the Sunderland South constituency, Bradby discussed how the share in the UKIP vote had increased massively in that area, despite the party not winning the seat. Immediately after this, Hussein in the Opinion Room

discussed data given from the Facebook representative regarding the specific constituency (see Figure 7.1 below). The representative highlighted how:

Within the constituency just called, 45% of that conversation dominated around UKIP. Now what's really important to note is that these are the conversations that real people within the UK are having, in this constituency are having, at home, with their friends, out at restaurants with colleagues. This is not reflective of what the press is talking about, this is reflective of what the people are talking about.

Hussein clarified, "We don't know whether they're talking positively or negatively, but we know they're talking about UKIP." This episode demonstrates how digital information is used as a source to strengthen the story told by the programme, in this case the story regarding the surge in votes for UKIP. Data from Facebook was aggregated and used to support this narrative. The language used pertaining to the audience should also be noted; they are 'real people', as opposed perhaps to the commentators and experts dissecting the election during the broadcast. There is also a dichotomy created by Hussein between "we" and "they", which fits the way in which information from social media is othered and not used to advance the story, simply to support the narrative that the journalists are telling.

Table 7.1. Screenshot of Facebook data regarding discussion in Sunderland South



Source: ITV News (2015r)

The creation and inclusion of the Opinion Room is indicative of the goal to increase the programme's presence on social media. The Opinion Room did play a role in facilitating discussion related to the programme and its output online. This was particularly notable in the response to the five Facebook Q&As held by commentators in the Opinion Room, which demonstrates some level of interaction offered to the audience, and in the use of '#opinionroom' to enable the audience to participate in discussion, although no tweets using this hashtag were highlighted in the programme. The Opinion Room was a second space for the programme to deliver analysis from, and also was an attempt to mark the programme's output as different to that of its competitors. However, although it had the potential to bring it to the attention of a wider demographic its role in increasing the programme's reach through activating its audience's social networks in this way was limited. This would have been an action that could have provided the programme with a wider reach and hence a stronger position in the news media agenda setting process had the programme integrated social media more fully.

As with the journalists at *Today*, interviews with journalists at ITV News demonstrated a sustained belief in the importance of incorporating digital media into the programme's content production. As at *Today*, the reality of this fell below expectations. Interviews with, and observations of, the programme team suggest that the journalists were interested in how they could use information from social media to contribute to the conversation. This is a central finding; interactivity with the audience to source a wider set of opinions or information to challenge party agendas, or to improve audience experience, are not the most desired outcomes. The application of information sourced online to tell the story is the most beneficial outcome for the programme as it strengthens the narrative and helps to increase the salience of their agenda.

## 7.5. Conclusion

The *Election 2015* programme team recognised the utility of integrating digital and legacy media logics and practices to tell a story effectively, and to make the most of a hybrid media system. However the creation and dissemination of content was characterised by a continuation of traditional news-making practices, hierarchical power relationships, and selectively using social media to enhance their news agendas. This limited form of interaction with citizens constituted commodification of citizen content to further the programme's goals. Nevertheless, this combination did not help them to dominate the news agenda. I argue that by creating authentic engagement with their audiences via social media, constituting content that is spontaneous, immediate, and predictable and is also responsive to citizen-users, and incorporating more individualised social media content into the broadcast, it may have been possible for *Election 2015* to present a greater challenge to news agendas and political party lines on results night.

The programme team had two main approaches to social media, but only one of these played a substantial role in the broadcast. The first approach, spoken about at length in interviews, was the sourcing of political information from content produced by social media users, and including it in the broadcast – although in a mediated manner. The potential advantages of this would have been to strengthen the story being told, and to create a strong networked relationship with their audience who may then have shared the programme's content more widely, resulting in increased salience for their news content. This did not happen, only two tweets were used in the programme. This may have been a result of the programme team's focus on legacy sources combined with the political parties carefully managed media strategies. Throughout our interviews, the editor spoke about incorporating the “right sort” of social media content, and this narrow focus limited the team in what they could achieve regarding interactivity. Whilst there were calls for citizens to take part in the debate on social media using #opinionroom and by joining in the Facebook Q&As, this interactivity was insufficient to activate an agenda setting process by harnessing the network power inherent within social media networks.

The second approach to social media was more widely exercised. This focussed upon incorporating brief analyses of macro-level data into conversation in the Opinion Room. The analysis was presented by representatives of Facebook and Twitter. This data was used to



illustrate the news stories and helped the programme to strengthen their own agenda items. Throughout the pre-polling day interviews that I conducted with Chandler and Mills this function of social media was downplayed, although its role was evident during the observations and from analysis of the broadcast of *Election 2015*. This finding is important. It suggests that journalists recognise that platform boundaries should be crossed when creating programmes, and that to some extent audiences must be included. Yet, in practice the *Election 2015* team limited their use of social media to be another source from which to add colour to the story or reinforce their news lines. Arguably this could result in a more virulent role for the programme in the news media agenda setting process. Nevertheless it is a limited interaction with citizen-users, represents commodification of their data, and highlights a continuation in hierarchical power structures, specifically those between journalists and their audience. It lacks the interaction with citizens that is needed to use network power and make headway in setting the news media agenda in the contemporary media system.

*Election 2015* did undertake some re-drawing of media boundaries, integrating digital and legacy media practices such as the use of new technologies, and the automatic simultaneous dissemination of results across platforms. I argue that their focus would have been better spent on not just reporting the results quickly, but on harnessing a wider range of views from sources other than elites in order to unpick what was happening on a very surprising results night; challenging party agendas using social media to carve out their own space in the media ecology.

# Chapter 8 Conclusion

## 8.1. Introduction

This dissertation has examined the news media agenda setting process within the context of the 2015 UK general election. I combined a thick descriptive account of information flows relating to two news events that occurred during the campaign with observations and data from interviews at two of the UK's leading media organizations. This approach enabled me to describe the process of setting the news media agenda. I identified that it comprises a combination of networked and hierarchical power relationships, alongside newer and older media logics and practices. I also described and applied the characteristics of authentic communications on social media which, if met, enable actors to direct network power and set the news media agenda. The findings of this research therefore constitute a development in our understanding of news media agenda-setting as they introduce a dialectical view of power into a process in which researchers have typically only considered one function of power at a time.

Additionally, the importance of the standards of spontaneity<sup>74</sup>, immediacy<sup>75</sup>, and predictability<sup>76</sup> in creating authenticity of communication have been considered and shown to impact the role social media content can play in setting the news media agenda. Authenticity of communications are necessary for elite actors to avoid commodification of citizen-users' content and actions, and by extension to avoid challenges to – or subversion of – their agenda. To become a part of networked relationships an actor must appear authentic to other users by meeting the required communication standards of the network. I found that being perceived as inauthentic on social media makes explicit the attempts to use citizen-users' content actions for campaigning or reporting. I conceptualised this finding as the commodification of citizen-users content and

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<sup>74</sup> Authentic communications *appear* to be unrehearsed, spontaneous responses to events or actors.

<sup>75</sup> Authentic communications are timely and contribute information to an event in a seemingly *live* manner.

<sup>76</sup> Authentic communications are predictable in that they contain the discursive features and technological protocols that users *expect* to see.

actions. I further identified evidence of the occurrence of commodification by distinguishing moments when citizen-users took action to subvert or challenge an elite agendas on social media. These findings advance our study of this subject by opening up new lines of enquiry regarding the role that authenticity plays in effective political communications.

From a discussion of the existing literature, I grounded the conceptual framework in a number of key theories: Chadwick's (2013) theory of the hybrid media system, Stromer-Galley's (2014) controlled interactivity, and Enli's (2015) conceptualisation of authenticity. A fourth central theory was Grewal's (2008) network power. Chadwick (2013) introduces network power in relation to political communication; I extended this application by using this conceptualisation of power as a prism through which to view relationships between political elites, media elites, and citizens. I also assessed network power in conjunction with traditional, hierarchical power relationships in order to establish the role of each in agenda-setting. From these theories, six research questions were formulated: (1) How do power relationships between traditional news media producers and political elites function in the 2015 UK general election campaign, and how do they impact the agenda-setting process?; (2) How do traditional news media producers and political parties attempt to successfully harness network power?; (3) How are social and digital media integrated into traditional news media producers' outputs, and how does this impact their power relationships with political elites?; (4) How are (i) information sourced from social media, and (ii) the technological affordances of social media incorporated into the process of setting the news media agenda?; (5) Do citizen-users of social media play any role, such as intervention in the information cycle, in the process of setting the agenda?; and (6) Do citizen-users of social media replicate or challenge agendas?

A mix of qualitative methods were incorporated into the research design to answer these questions. The output of this methodology was of a thick descriptive analysis of two media events and two news programmes. I used an integrated analysis of the data<sup>77</sup>, for which I generated a number of different datasets. I began the analysis by the identifying the key themes and analytic

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<sup>77</sup> Integrated analysis involves the generation of a number of different datasets, followed by the identification of themes and analytic questions across the data.

questions which emerged across the data. These themes were the dialectical nature of power relationships, the use of strategies of message control on social media, tensions between citizens' and elites' use of social media, and tensions between journalists' beliefs and actions taken to exercise control over the news media agenda setting process.

Firstly, analysis was undertaken on media texts pertaining to the first leaders' debate of the election campaign. This generated a thick description of different agendas as they emerged over a 48-hour period. I described the ways in which different actors attempted to exercise control over their messages in order to impact the news agenda. Secondly, I applied this method to a specific news story, the allegations against Nicola Sturgeon made in a memorandum leaked from the Foreign Office. Focussing analysis on one news story allowed me to track the information flows in great detail and take a deep data approach<sup>78</sup> (Salmons, 2016) to understanding both how this item impacted the news agenda and the efficacy of actions taken by different elite groups.

The final two empirical chapters reported on interview and observational data from my time spent with BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme and ITV News' election night programme *Election 2015*, which was augmented by data from in-depth interviews with key actors. I provided a detailed account of practices and behaviours within the teams that enabled me to draw out important findings about the nature of intra-elite power and power relations that exist between elites and citizens. I also observed and assessed the actions taken to harness network power through their interactions on social media.

This chapter outlines the main findings and contributions made by this dissertation. The findings show that the news media agenda setting process is highly complex and fluid. It consists of hybrid structures and hybrid media logics, including overlapping hierarchical and network power relations. In order to exercise control over messages to increase impact on the news agenda, elites must learn to balance these along with a number of other tensions which are outlined below.

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<sup>78</sup> A deep data approach requires a close analysis of qualitative data as opposed to systematic quantitative analysis of *big data*.

## 8.2. Main findings

This dissertation examines the impact of online media and social networking sites on the process of setting the news media agenda during the 2015 United Kingdom general election. It specifically describes the structures of power relationships that exist between political elites, established media producers, and citizens in this process. The most important conceptual development to agenda-setting research is the description I provide of the integration of networked and hierarchical power used to exercise control over political information. This is an advancement of our understanding by considering the different forms that power can take in this process. My work is a departure from established work on agenda-setting, such as McCombs and Shaw (1972) and McCombs (2005), as although my findings show that hierarchical power remains central in the process, there are also strong indications that power in agenda-setting is increasingly fluid and hybrid, specifically comprising a networked element. Further, I found that if enacted correctly, network and hierarchical power can be used simultaneously by elite actors to augment their position in the news media agenda setting process.

This work also contributes to literature on audience participation, extending and updating our knowledge of how and why audiences are incorporated into journalistic outputs. I extended the findings of studies which demonstrate how journalists view citizen-users of social media as a news source and retain their editorial control despite greater interaction with audiences, for example Williams, Wardle, and Wahl-Jorgenson (2011). However, I also extended this understanding by integrating it with evidence of elites' attitudes towards citizen-users within the process of agenda-setting.

My targeted application, focussing on a specific process, found a more nuanced and complicated relationship than previously expressed. Despite a widely-held belief amongst my informants that citizen-users of social media could be an active part of the agenda-setting through networked relationships, over and above simply being a news source, hierarchical power relationships remained central and interaction with citizen-users was peripheral. Therefore network power was a secondary structure to the primary hierarchical relationships. As a result,

my findings contradict some studies on the relationship between audience participation and agenda-setting. For example, Lee and Tandoc Jr. (2017) noted that “Meetings to plan a day’s news coverage usually begin with a discussion of trending topics on social media”. I saw no evidence of this in my observations of editorial or team meetings at Radio 4 or *Election 2015*.

I initially asked (RQ1) *how do power relationships between traditional news media producers and political elites function in the 2015 UK general election campaign, and how do they impact the agenda-setting process?* I found that the ultimate driving force was the interaction between media and political elites. However, in some instances the process of setting the news agenda required political and media elites to interact online through networks. This finding both supports existing literature and extends our knowledge of power in the news media agenda setting process.

The most important contribution to the study of agenda setting were the instances I assessed in which political and media elites were required to harness network power in online social networks. Successfully using network power constituted sharing an *authentic* communication<sup>79</sup> on a social networking site which could then be further disseminated amongst citizen-users’ networks or was reflected through the use of the same or similar discursive terms within the comments. Achieving this, in conjunction with established inter-elite power relationships, led to greater success for elite actors in message control and in the process of setting the news media agenda. For example in the case of the leaked memorandum, the SNP’s response successfully challenged and then set the news media agenda through the use of networked and traditional hierarchical interactions with citizens and the news media. Therefore, my findings extend our understanding of power in agenda-setting: it is not a one-way process incorporating a limited number of actor groups, but rather it *can be* multi-directional encompassing many different actors at different points in time. I argue it is most effective when it achieves this combination.

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<sup>79</sup> A communication on social media defined as meeting the standards of spontaneity, immediacy, and predictability.

This is an area which merits further investigation as my findings contradict studies that have found evidence of media agendas being led by user-generated content (UGC) (Jang et al., 2017). Although this dissertation shows a role for citizen-users, my findings from interviews and observations are clear that power to set the news media agenda remained in the hands of elite actors. A reason for this contradiction is the context of these studies. Previous research has found the media agenda to be led by UGC during non-election periods. During a general election campaign the stakes are higher for political actors, as a result political parties' tightened control over their information production and dissemination and journalists relied to a greater extent on expert and political sources. The difference in context therefore explains the difference in these findings, and new lines of enquiry concerning comparative research would be worthwhile to reconcile these.

As stated above, evidence noted from observation and interview data demonstrated clearly that journalists and politicians expressed a desire to interact with citizens on social media. Interviewees wanted to engage with citizens online and become a part of their networks. This is in line with existing attitudinal studies which assess journalists' beliefs about their audiences. For example, the findings that my elite informants wanted to engage with citizens through social media channels supports Heise et al. (2014).

Taking this research to its logical next step, my research combines *attitudinal findings* with an analysis of the *actions* taken by journalists at BBC Radio 4 and ITV News. A critical finding emerges from the combination of these two analyses, which develops our understanding of this phenomenon; although media elites spoke of including audiences in content creation, in the 2015 election campaign citizen-users were side-lined in favour of traditional news-making practices. This is a departure from agenda-setting and audience participation research which has tended to find that information from citizen-users becomes a part of those news-making practices. In the analysis presented here, I found little evidence of user-generated content playing a role in newsgathering.

Nevertheless, media and political elites did work to become a part of citizen-users' networks on social media. This was for a number of reasons. Firstly, the journalists expressed the

belief that social media could be a source of alternate information for them, as was often opined at both the BBC and ITV. Novelty in this finding comes from uncovering beliefs about the use to which information from citizen-users could be put within the news media agenda setting process. Drawing on a wider array of information from social networks was viewed by journalists as a way to challenge the news agendas of other elite actors. Secondly, elites wanted to engage with citizens on social media to direct their actions in support of the elite actor's agenda. This study therefore highlights that elite actors recognise the existence of network power and its value to them in controlling their messages online.

The role of network power on social media is a new but growing area of research. The findings outlined here develop knowledge from work produced so far which has been predominantly based on quantitative methods. My use of qualitative methods contributes a behavioural dimension to the current picture of network power. D'heer and Verdegem's (2014) study of relations between Twitter and mainstream media found similar structures to those outlined in this dissertation using quantitative and network analysis. My work extends their conclusions further following their recommendation that "in-depth interviews could reveal how the different agent types perceive these structures" (ibid., 731). I found that elites perceived network structures as inherently useful to them, particularly pertaining to sharing information and maintaining their position of influence within the process of setting the news media agenda.

In the 2015 election campaign, elite actors needed to grow their own networks or enact the ability to join groups to which they did not usually belong in order to successfully gain network power. News media agenda setting as a motive is an erroneous rationale for joining such online networks and communicating in those spaces; that is to say elites do not join those online networks for the same reasons that citizens do. Harnessing network power through the sharing of content was successful if the content was perceived as authentic, meeting the standards of communication outlined above, or unsuccessful if the content was perceived as inauthentic. Therefore I argue that this demonstrates the maintenance of hierarchy in power relations, and using social media network as a way to promote agendas was a means to this end; it is not true "network power". The contribution of this finding to the field of study is that it provides a caveat



to our knowledge of the use of networks to exert power. On one hand, it categorically supports existing research which finds evidence of both intermedia relationships between social media and mainstream media and of elite actors producing content for social media. On the other hand, it provides a tempered approach which encourages us to consider the ways in which elite actors incorporate social media and UGC into existing campaign repertoires and reproduce established hierarchies.

Although power relations functioned through a combination of hierarchy and network structures, elite actors held the expectation that through sharing online content they could direct citizen-users in their networks to promote their messages in a two-step flow protocol and gain greater control over the news agenda. However, social media are predominantly based upon one-to-many and many-to-many communications and failing to authentically interact with users, or to appropriate or re-package information from users in order to strengthen frames, results in a weaker hold on power. I found evidence for this in the evaluation of the leaked memo news report. *The Telegraph* and the Labour Party failed to produce enough diverse content that met the required standards for authenticity of communication on social media sites. Combined with the volume of political information challenging *The Telegraph's* agenda and with Sturgeon's decisive early intervention on Twitter – itself an indicator of hierarchy in news sources – this particular news agenda item was challenged and replaced.

*The Telegraph* was undoubtedly successful in placing this item on the news agenda, but it ultimately lost control of the story because it did not have any new information to release into the political information cycle. This finding has implications for research into agenda-building (see Kioussis et al., 2015; Parmalee, 2014) which considers the types of information subsidies which can create or challenge agendas. *The Telegraph* and the Labour Party's response, simple repetition of the same information on social media, was an inauthentic way to act on a media platform which requires perceived spontaneity and immediacy in content. *The Telegraph* failed to do this, but the SNP and their supporters on social media were successful in doing so and so were able to shift the frame of the story. Agenda-building research discusses the role of different types of information subsidies in creating agendas. Parmalee (2015) shows that political tweets

play an important part of this process. The findings of this dissertation contributes to and extends this knowledge. I suggest that not only are a variety of information subsidies required to build a strong agenda, but the information contained within them should also vary and keep pace with the political information cycle. Immediacy and novelty, in this case, become important.

Furthermore, my analysis of the leaked memorandum story extends the methods of some audience participation research, which has assessed intermedia agenda-setting through quantitative time-lag analyses, into qualitative realms. Jang et al.'s (2017) study on the correlation between the social media agenda of the ice bucket challenge agenda and the agenda in mainstream media found that "By reversing the direction of intermedia agenda-setting, the mainstream media may be able to rekindle a dying fire and offer a fresh perspective on the agenda." (ibid.: 1304). I offer an extension of this approach in my qualitative analyses of the leaders' debate and the leaked memo. Where Jang et al. (2017) found correlation between the social media agenda and the mainstream media agenda, my chapters analysing information flow through tracking information across platforms and incorporating discourse analysis demonstrate in more descriptive detail exactly how this relationship functioned to set the news media agenda.

Secondly I asked (RQ2) *how do traditional news media media producers and political parties attempt to successfully harness network power?* This question links closely to the third research question, as the integration of newer and older media can often be seen as attempts to harness network power: (RQ3) *how are social and digital media integrated into traditional news media's output, and how does this impact their power relationships with political elites?* The analysis of news stories and political information flows from the first leaders' debate and the leaked memo news report provided evidence that a multitude of actions are taken by elites in the news media agenda setting process with the goal of controlling their message. Whilst I noted that the process remained dominated by hierarchical power relationships and established practices, I did find evidence that political and media elites utilise mixed media logics to produce content for online and offline platforms. The process itself is changeable; logics reconfigure as new information emerges and travels across different platforms. As a result, combining legacy and digital practices of content production and sharing was a key part of message control strategies,

and central to controlled interactivity. My elite informants believed that achieving this would allow them access to network power.

Despite this belief the continuation of hierarchical power structures and legacy news practices was evident from my observations of the news teams at BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme and ITV News' *Election 2015*. Despite some meshing of older and newer media logics in their creation, curation, and dissemination of content, traditional patterns continued to dominate. This may have been a result of the intensely stage-managed campaign run by the political parties, but neither of the programmes that were analysed diversified their content and used the affordances of newer media platforms in ways which would have increased their network power.

These findings extend current knowledge of how media organisations use social media to control interaction with their audience and augment their own outputs. Jacobson's (2013) research into the use of Facebook by the *Rachel Maddow Show* found that staff used the social networking site for two reasons. Firstly to "reinforce the importance of the story as an issue for its audience" and secondly "to frame the story" (Ibid.: 351). Maddow concludes by stating that "Further research is needed into how news organizations use social media to frame news stories" (Ibid.) This dissertation responds to Jacobson's call for further research. It describes the way in which organizations promote the same information across platforms to harness multiple networks and to set the agenda. This dissertation contributes to this field of research by providing evidence that, among the organizations analysed, Facebook was used as a push medium to reinforcing the visibility of selected stories. This was the case at *Today* where Facebook was used to share specific content with the goal of attracting an audience to the 'harder' current affairs output. It also occurred on the pages of political parties, for example in the Conservative Party's choice to reiterate 'Cameron in charge' across multiple media platforms, despite being unsuccessful.

Successful attempts at harnessing networks included the SNP's response to *The Telegraph's* report of the leaked memo and the Conservative Party's "coalition of chaos" narrative. Both of these involved the production of content using different media logics and practices, allowing for the exercise of power between political and media elites in a hierarchical

structure alongside harnessing network power on Twitter and Facebook. Network power is not negligible in this process. Its role can perhaps best be seen in failed attempts to activate networks. When elites produce online content which breaks the authenticity contract with citizens, their attempts at controlling interactivity instead appear as attempts to commodify citizens. This reduces citizens' motivations to share messages amongst networks and hence the ability of elite actors to use network power. It can also lead to an increase in subversion of the message and greater challenges to attempts to set the news media agenda.

Unsuccessful attempts at setting the news media agenda also make clear the necessity of creating content which uses both forms of power. The Conservative Party's hashtag '#cameronincharge', following the leaders' debate, showed how a failure of authentic communication on social media closes the doors to network power. UKIP's failure to make an impact in the print and broadcast media despite strong support from citizen-users on Facebook, as discussed in Chapter 4, is evidence of the continuation of hierarchy in the production and sourcing of news. The case of UKIP in particular demonstrates the need for political actors to have an established relationship with journalists.

This relationship can work inversely. My findings that UKIP's supporters on Facebook did not limit their discussion to those issues on the traditional news media agenda extends a body of literature which finds that media coverage does not constrain how an online audience frames their discussion (Zhou and Moy, 2007). Farage was regularly featured in news media<sup>80</sup>, but the agenda that journalists chose to highlight regarding his comments about health tourism went against UKIP's interests. This was in comparison to the many favourable comments made by citizen-users on Facebook. Therefore, in the 2015 election campaign successfully setting the social media agenda did not equate to setting the new media agenda. This finding contradicts work which suggests a positive correlation between social media agendas and mainstream media agendas. Again, this discrepancy can be explained by the different contexts within which many

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<sup>80</sup> This was especially the case after UKIP was designated a major party by OFCOM.

of the studies take place, namely everyday politics compared to a general election campaign. I reiterate a call for comparative research to further substantiate and test these outcomes.

The importance of social media networks in the agenda-setting process was acknowledged by the journalists and political elites who participated in this research, but – as discussed above – a tension was found between understanding this fact and incorporating it into reporting or campaign strategies. At *Today* the editor and programme team recognised the potential for digital and social media to help them in the content creation and promotion but this recognition did not turn into action during the campaign. Instead, *Today* continued to exist within a hierarchical power structure where their main sources were traditional organizations such as parties, who – in keeping a great deal of control over their messages – were able to lead the news agenda most days. These findings provide support for existing work which explicates the integration and overlapping of mass media logic and social media logics, or network media logic (Klinger and Svensson, 2015). I offer a revision to this understanding: in the 2015 campaign, although elites attempted to harness network power by creating content that met social media communication standards or by using social media as a tool for newsgathering, this was only partially realised. Leading from this I suggest that by re-drawing boundaries across media platforms and creating more original content for digital which meets communication standards, news producers can better mobilise their networked audience to share their stories.

I also asked (RQ4) *how were social media, including information sourced and as a sharing platform, incorporated into the news media agenda-setting process?* The clearest answer to this is that social media provided elites with the ability to access network power. Social media was a key route to controlling interactivity. I applied and extended the work of Stromer-Galley (2014) and Freelon (2017) to reach this finding. I contribute further empirical evidence which demonstrates forms of controlled interactivity, and also the successful application of this theory to agenda-setting. Both political and media elites attempted to harness network power in order to control their message on social media. This became more important when there were competing or contested agendas, as in the case of the leaders' debate. As message control through the professional media becomes more difficult, message control on social media to activate a two-

step flow process can increase the ability of an actor to retain control over the agenda setting space.

Evidence for this is best seen in the combination of older and newer media logics which was used successfully by the SNP to share information across platforms and deny the allegations against Sturgeon in the leaked memo case. I discuss above the integration of mass media and social media logics as unsuccessful when only partially realised. However, evidence from the SNP's interventions in this case show how they can be successfully integrated and provide a way to direct the news media agenda. Sturgeon was quick to issue a "categorical" denial of the allegations on Twitter, and this was followed by an official statement from an SNP spokesperson that repeated the wording of the original tweet. The SNP then engaged with professional media organisations, a strategy which included Sturgeon herself writing a comment piece in *The Observer* newspaper that was also published on *The Guardian's* website and promoted on its social media accounts. This combination, wherein the party met communication standards on all platforms, activated their network of supporters to share their denials, and engaged with hierarchical structures to promote their framing of news reports, was successful in shifting the agenda in their favour.

I argue that news production practices should be diversified and should incorporate a re-drawing of boundaries. I found in my observations that journalists both at *Today* and at *Election 2015* were conscious of the need to do this and to increase their interaction with audiences on social media. However, the extent to which this was achieved was insufficient for the programmes to access network power and hence to gain more control over the news media agenda-setting process. *Election 2015* pre-defined its approach to social media as the sourcing of political information from content produced by social media users. This had a number of potential benefits for the programme, such as strengthening story-telling by incorporating information from a variety of sources, and strengthening the networked relationship with the audience. As described in Chapter 7, they were not successful in achieving this because the programmes incorporation of social media content was minimal.

Similarly, the editor of *Today* expressed a desire to produce specific content for digital which would both direct their audience to share their outputs and attract a larger number of listeners to the programme. *Today* did produce digital-specific content which met communication standards for Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. However, their approach was ad hoc. The social media strategy employed did not involve a consistent stream of content across these platforms, and input from listeners on social media was not encouraged not included in the programme. Furthermore, they did not use social media as a source of information – despite a recognition of this affordance made by the editor. Therefore boundary-drawing power was only partially achieved. For both programmes, the integration of newer and older media and practices was limited.

The fifth and sixth questions I posed were: (RQ5) *do citizen-users of social media play any role such as intervention in the information cycle, in the process of setting the agenda?*; and (RQ6) *Do citizen-users of social media replicate or challenge agendas?* I found that non-elite users on social media did not make *decisive* interventions in the case studies analysed here. Instead, the role of social media users was to promote or challenge the agendas put forwards by elites. I found that the content created and shared by citizens on Twitter reflected elite outputs or stories already on the news media's agenda. I did find evidence of non-elites subverting and challenging content produced by parties and journalists, but I did not find evidence of user-generated content setting or changing the course of the agenda. This finding contradicts the conclusions of Chadwick (2011a). To reiterate, Chadwick's analysis of 'bullygate' finds that

The hybridized ways in which important political news events are now mediated presents new opportunities for nonelite actors to enter news production assemblages through timely interventions and sometimes direct, one-to-one, micro-level interactions with professional journalists. (Chadwick, 2011a: 19)

I agree that individual actors can make interventions in the political information cycle, and so impact the news media agenda setting process. However, I found no evidence on non-elite actors actively intervening in news production in this way. My findings also mark a departure from the intermedia field of research which finds evidence of social media agendas leading mainstream

media agendas. I caveat this by acknowledging the different contexts of the studies and suggest that comparative research would be a useful avenue to pursue to clarify these discrepancies. My response to the question of intervention from social media users is markedly different to research on intermedia agenda setting during every day politics for this reason. I argue that some interventions on Twitter can change the course of the news agenda, but in the case studies analysed these were solely interventions from elite-users.

A second role for social media users was that of news source for elites, albeit it either as supporting evidence for a story (in the form of vox populi) or in instances where social media discussion in general became a news story. On *Election 2015*, for example, I found that social media was used regularly in this way. Macro-level data was used to illustrate the news stories. This had the effect of allowing the programme to strengthen its own narratives and story-telling. Despite the beliefs stated by the team during planning discussions for the programme in which journalists expressed a desire to integrate social media content with the programme, during the broadcast social media was used as simply an additional source from which to add colour to the story or reinforce their news lines. I argue that the programme would have benefitted from harnessing a wider range of views from sources on social media in order to better understand what was happening as results were called, and for the potential to provide alternate viewpoints to help *Election 2015* lead the news media agenda.

### 8.3. Thesis contributions

#### *8.3.1 Authenticity and its relationship to commodification of citizen-users*

One of the most important original contributions to knowledge offered by my research is the conceptualisation of authenticity of communication on social media within this process, and how this relates to commodification of citizen-users' content and actions. These were two factors which determined the success of news media agenda setting across a hybrid media system, due to their importance in harnessing network power. It is clear that political and media elites engaged



in actions to control the interactivity of citizens with their campaigns in the manner described by Stromer-Galley. I argue that media elites also attempt to control interactivity of audiences with their news gathering and reporting. I have focussed on the aspect of message control within controlled interactivity. Message control is central to news media agenda setting, and in a hybrid media system elites must find ways of enacting this across social media.

The answer to this lies in elite actors becoming authentic actors within a network, thereby gaining access to network power in order to direct relevant information flows. To achieve this, the actor must be perceived as authentic by meeting the communication standards for the given social networking site. The defined standards are spontaneity, immediacy, and predictability. For example on Twitter communications should appear informal, timely, short, spontaneous, and relevant. Facebook posts can be longer, but the need for immediacy and spontaneity remains. There is an expectation of computer-mediated human interaction on both sites. Heise et al. (2014: 417-418) found that “Users ... expect journalists to get into conversation with their audience about current events to a greater extent than the journalists themselves feel professionally obliged to.” My dissertation therefore extends our knowledge in this area, providing empirical evidence of the disconnection between citizen and elite expectations on social media and how authenticity contributes to this. If an elite actor produces communications which are perceived as authentic by the audience then they are able to exercise network power, and strategies of controlled interactivity will be more successful as they are *authentically* a part of that network.

The commodification of citizen-users’ content and actions which I demonstrate in this thesis is an extension of Stromer-Galley’s (2014) theory of controlled interactivity. It ties authenticity to communication and highlights how, if communications produced do not meet the required standards, then they will not maintain the authenticity illusion required for strategies of controlled interactivity. A breakdown in citizens’ perception of authenticity renders elite action commodification of citizen-users. A lack of authenticity within communications appears to encourage citizens to challenge or subvert the information shared by elites. This is because it reveals electioneering tactics and the attempts to harness citizens as cynical actions, rather than as a choice made by a citizen to share information.

### *8.3.2 A process marked by tensions*

Describing the process of news media agenda setting in the 2015 UK general election is a story of tensions that are so far only partially resolved, and which have not yet been fully identified and explained. The process necessarily contains both newer and older media practices, logics, and platforms which are often integrated but can be conflicting. There is a tension between the beliefs that journalists hold regarding integration of people and social media into news-making practices, and what is achieved in reality. Existing literature has noted these phenomena separately. This dissertation offers clarification around this discrepancy by drawing on empirical evidence from attitudinal data from in-depth interviews, and triangulating these findings with analysis of observations and communication outputs. This method enabled me to describe in detail the impact of this belief and elites' related actions on the news media agenda-setting process.

My work also contributes an extension to existing research, especially in the field of audience participation, which has been quantitative. I offer a qualitative dimension which adds a behavioural understanding to politicians' and journalists' decisions and actions. I found a further tension between the roles of the audience; audiences can simply be passive consumers, but they are also potential active allies or commodities, and sometimes they act as critics. Whilst these tensions have always existed, the growth of social media and its importance in the media ecology has thrown these tensions into sharp relief. This merits greater investigation of their impact on agenda setting processes, and is an area for future research.

This dissertation has highlighted these tensions as an inherent part of the news media agenda setting process. They are unavoidable given the hybridisation of roles and capabilities in the media system. It is important to acknowledge that these tensions exist because of the need for combination of structures used in power relationships. Setting the news media agenda is no longer a straightforward process involving a limited group of powerful actors within a mass media system. This dissertation's description and understanding of these tensions, particularly highlighted through observations of news teams and interviews with journalists, is crucial in

moving forwards our explanation of agenda setting. Understanding the different barriers in place to elites looking to set the agenda, and therefore how they overcome them, is crucial.

### *8.3.3 Power in flux: an integration of network and hierarchy*

The most important of these tensions which have been identified is that which exists between the continued hierarchical power structures and network power drawn from citizen-users of, and the structure of, social media. This dissertation describes a news media agenda setting process that requires the ability to tap into network power and also to maintain a position within hierarchical power structures. This necessitates the production of content that suits older and newer media platforms, and also requires interaction with citizens to create salience around a news story through promotion in social networks.

The findings of this dissertation provide support for findings in other research that journalists normalise the use of social media as a source in the same manner as legacy sources. They value the interaction of their audiences for providing content to use at the discretion of the editorial team. This is an easy way to gauge public opinion, and it creates a sense of loyalty between media organization and audience, a finding supported by Heise et al. (2014: 422): “From the perspective of journalists, audience participation is also an important means to increase viewer loyalty.” However, my findings show that interaction often remains one-sided and insufficient. Media organizations retain power over their audience within a hierarchical structure, eliciting information from them where needed, using macro-level data to support their stories,<sup>81</sup> and acting as a gatekeeper through the selection of user-generated content to share.

This has the impact of rendering elite actions in networked spaces inauthentic. It is difficult to reconcile a position of hierarchical power with a position within a flatter networked system. Elements of controlled interactivity were required for the control of a message, alongside a two-step flow process in which audience members would share content with their own network.

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<sup>81</sup> For example journalists using Twitter to cite high-level demographic data, as occurred on *Election 2015*.

However the tension between elite actors' beliefs that they were authentically interacting with citizens, and their actions which demonstrate that they were not, impeded this process. For example, the *Election 2015* programme team recognised the utility of integrating digital and legacy media logics and practices to tell a story effectively. However, the creation and dissemination of content was characterised by a continuation of traditional news-making practices, hierarchical power relationships, and selectively using social media to enhance their news agendas. This constituted commodification of citizen-users' content and actions.

The description of commodification is a key contribution to the field of study on campaign communications and agenda-setting. It explains why elites might be unsuccessful in their attempts to harness network power or direct information flow on social media, offering another side to the coin of (successful) controlled interactivity. Commodification is a testable phenomenon, and so can be taken forwards into future research. Additionally, it provides a clear lens through which we can analyse the attempted integration of network power into hierarchical structures as part of the process of setting the news media agenda. Therefore, this dissertation provides evidence of the dialectical nature of power in the news media agenda setting process, but also provides a conceptual lens for future research.

#### 8.4. Limitations of this dissertation

There are some limitations to this study which should be highlighted. As with any case study based on observational insights the findings relate only to this context. However I have identified mechanisms that can apply generally to a wider context and can be examined in other election campaigns. As an account of elite interactions during an important general election campaign and how these impacted the agenda-setting process, statements can be made which can be applied more generally to political reporting. Additionally, as stand-alone accounts of *Today* and of *Election 2015*'s news-making processes and procedures, the dissertation provides a reliable insight into a legacy organisations' attempts to adapt to a hybrid media system.

The sampling for the interview participants was mostly opportunistic. Although I identified and contacted suitable participants in the early stages of research, I received a low response rate. This led me to use a snowball sampling technique which inevitably resulted in a bias in the overall participant population. This population was not statistically representative of journalists, politicians, and staffers – most starkly it featured only one female journalist. However, considering the goal of understanding the rationale and belief behind elite actions I believe this method was suitable to achieve this and I am not concerned that this was so limiting as to render the findings invalid.

The most limiting factor was in the collection of data from Facebook and Twitter. As a doctoral candidate I could not gain access to Facebook and Twitter data in the same way as scholars who may have more privileged access. This resulted in the risk of incomplete datasets and the potential to miss the most important or impactful tweets. To overcome this limitation, I built my research design not around content analysis of a large dataset but instead focussed on thick description of information flows, taking news media texts as my starting point and working in a multidirectional manner from them to identify any information mentioned which originated in another media text.

## 8.5. An Agenda for Future Research

When I submitted my PhD proposal I did not expect that there would be a second general election during the course of my research, let alone a referendum to decide the UK's future in the European Union. Applying the findings from this dissertation to describe the process which occurred in 2017 would be an excellent test of the direction in which the news media agenda setting process is developing.

There were some marked differences between 2015 and 2017 that have already been noted. 2017 was even more tightly stage-managed than 2015, with the Labour Party banning whole groups of journalists from their campaign events and Theresa May making minimal un-staged appearances. Did these changes mark a stronger shift back towards hierarchical power, or

did social media fill the void left by politicians? The UK 2017 General Election also saw a much more tangible and long-lasting version of #cameronincharge. The Conservative Party's slogan "strong and stable" was used in all of their communications consistently, and was roundly mocked across different forms of media. What role did the challenge to this agenda item play in the Conservative Party's bad election results?

Questions around audience perceptions of authenticity also remain to be answered. Further research to understand why citizens decide to subvert an agenda on an individual-level is paramount to fully capturing their role in the agenda-setting process. Assessing how authenticity in election communications is perceived by citizens would strengthen the findings here and the authenticity characteristics and standards of communication could be characterised as testable variables in future projects. The findings of this research raise further questions such as: why did social media users decide not to share communications that were perceived as inauthentic? What aspects of a communication act make social media users more likely to engage with it? Additionally, commodification of citizen-users' content and actions merits further investigation. As an extension to controlled interactivity, this concept – linked to authenticity – provides an understanding of why strategies to direct citizen-user engagement might be unsuccessful. The testing of this concept empirically alongside citizens' recognition of authenticity would strengthen it further.

Questions should also be asked around first- and second-level agenda-setting more broadly. If the process of setting the agenda has become so complex and volatile, what are the repercussions for issue transference from the media agenda to the public agenda? Research has established that intermedia agenda-setting and network agenda-setting takes place, but there is room to take this further. In spaces where audiences are fragmented and receive different information and perhaps multiple news agendas, what issues retain their salience? What does this mean for how different groups in society understand key issues?

The overall recommendations that can be drawn from the findings and contributions of this dissertation are that any elite organization attempting to set the news media agenda in a hybrid media system must engage in a redrawing of platform boundaries. Across that they must engage

with their audience authentically to harness network power. That said, the process of setting the news media agenda is constantly in flux. The most common criteria for setting the news media agenda remains influence with the hierarchical relationship between politicians and journalists, but the influence of social media is growing. Elites must balance their hierarchical power structures and inter-elite competition with network power by interacting meaningfully with citizens not only to promote content but also as a source from which to challenge other agendas and frames.

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# Appendix A: Supporting information for Chapter 3

## A1. Example of letter sent to potential interview participants



Department of Politics and International  
Relations  
Royal Holloway, University of London  
Egham  
Surrey  
TW20 0EX

21 October 2014

Dear Mr Chandler,

I am a PhD candidate in the New Political Communication Unit at Royal Holloway, University of London. My thesis is supervised by Professor Andrew Chadwick and Professor Ben O'Loughlin and will analyse the news coverage of the 2015 UK general election. I am writing to ask if you would be willing to be interviewed as part of my research.

I understand that you will play a pivotal role in ITV's coverage of the UK election, and as such your opinions will help to inform my research by providing an "insider" look at the election campaign and the way in which it is reported. During the interview I would also like to explore your opinions and thoughts on the impact of new media tools on the news agenda, and upon the status of journalism as a profession. Your insights would offer an extremely important and useful perspective for my work.

Before you agree to an interview, I can confirm that:

- This research has been approved by the Royal Holloway College Ethics Committee;
- The interview can be conducted on or off the record, dependent upon your choice. Should you choose to remain off the record your anonymity will be maintained at all times and no comments will be attributed to you by name in any written work or verbal presentation. Nor will any data be used from the interview that might identify you to a third party.
- Should you request one, a list of questions will be available to you five working days before the interview;
- You will be free to withdraw from the research at any point and for any reason, and to request that your transcript not be used;
- I will write to you on completion of the research and a copy of my final research report will be made available to you upon request.

I expect that the interview would take around 30-40 minutes and it will be recorded for transcription. I sincerely hope that you are able to help but if, for any reason, you are unavailable, I would be extremely grateful if you could suggest the names of one or two

colleagues who might be willing and able to speak to me. If you have any queries please don't hesitate to contact me via email at [amy.smith.2011@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:amy.smith.2011@rhul.ac.uk) or telephone on 07825769351.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Amy P. Smith



## A2: Example of an interview guide for a round 1 interview



Ms Amy P. Smith  
PhD Candidate  
Department of Politics and International  
Relations  
Royal Holloway, University of London  
Egham  
Surrey  
TW20 0EX

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please can you begin by outlining what your specific role is, and any involvement you think you will have in the 2015 UK general election.
2. In your opinion, how has the rise of online media impacted upon your profession and upon news production?
3. Thinking generally, how important are online tools and social media to (1) your organisation; and (2) to you within your current role?
4. How do online and offline media mix, or otherwise, within your organisation?
5. In your organisation, roughly how much of the content produced relies on both online and offline sources?
6. In your organisation, roughly how much of the content produced is shared across online and offline sources?
7. During the 2015 campaign, how important do you think online and social media will be to campaign coverage?
8. Does your organisation encourage interaction with its audience? If so, how does it do this?
9. How much attention do you/your organization pay to bloggers or amateur news sources available online?
10. Does your organisation, in any way, rely upon citizens to create, or share, a story or news frame? How does it do this? E.g. are there any special online 'members areas' etc.
11. How much attention do you/your organization pay to the online content produced by political parties, as opposed to their traditional outputs (press releases etc.)?
12. How much influence do you think your organisation has in creating or challenging the news agenda or in promoting their own interpretation of a news story?

13. Thinking about the 2015 election campaign, can you imagine how your organisation will react to breaking news or statements by politicians? I.e. how will content be created and distributed to your readers? How might fact checking work in a faster news cycle?
14. Thinking again about the election, how do you think your organization will engage with readers and share information? Will it change as we go through the different stages of the election?
15. Do you think that groups (political parties and their staff, citizens, amateur journalists, bloggers etc.) will be more or less likely to have power over or impact a news story during the election campaign in 2015 than in previous elections?
16. In your opinion, who would you say exercises the most power over the framing and promotion of political news stories (a) currently; (b) during an election campaign; and (c) immediately after an election?
17. Can you think of any ways in which non-journalists can share news or challenge the power of professional journalists or politicians in promoting a news agenda?
18. Will you pay attention to the international reporting of UK elections?
19. How does your social media system work? What platforms are used (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram)? Is there a style guide or guidelines for using online or social media?
20. In your opinion, when did/will the election campaign really begin?
21. In your opinion, has power become more centralised (i.e. located in Westminster and the Government) in the UK, despite technological advances?
22. How does having a fixed term limit for a government affect election coverage?
23. What impact do you think TV debates will have, if they are held?



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**PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION PROPOSAL:  
AMY P. SMITH, PhD CANDIDATE**

**1. What is participant-observation?**

Participant-observation is a form of qualitative social science research wherein the researcher spends time with the subject, and can take part in tasks within that group, in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of how the subject works and of the behaviour that occurs and the decisions that are taken.

In this specific case, the researcher would act as a participant-observer in editorial meetings, or with the news team, and would witness the gathering of news and creation and broadcast of a news programme.

**2. Main aims of participant-observation**

- To provide the research with observed evidence to support or disprove its hypotheses.
- To allow to researcher to view behaviour and decision-making as they happen within the news-making process, providing support for findings ascertained from interviews.
- To give credibility to the research through observation of actions taken in the 'real-world,' and hence to increase the validity and reliability of the research.
- To enable the researcher to give as detailed an account as possible of news-gathering and production during the 2015 election campaign in a prominent media outlet.

**3. Logistics of participant-observation**

- The researcher envisages an 'observer-as-participant' role, whereby they principally observe what is happening, but are able and free to take on certain duties to help the teams where and when needed and/or appropriate.
- It is proposed that the researcher takes on a low level of participation, if any, and this is to be discussed and mutually agreed with the Editor prior to the first observation taking place.
- The researcher will use a tablet computer to take written, or record spoken, notes. The notes will be typed up as a full report and included as an appendix in the finished thesis.
- Dates and times are to be pre-agreed with the programme Editor, but can be subject to change if necessary.
- The researcher will visit the team on the following occasions:

Date	To Visit	Aim of visit
January 2015 (Date TBC)	Editorial team or whole team meeting.	See decision-making and preparation in action and understand the aims and strategies of the editorial team.
February 2015 (Date TBC)		See decision-making in action regarding content and strategy and understand the aims of the editorial team and journalists. Take note of progression since last observation.
March 2015 (Date TBC)		See decision-making in action regarding content and strategy and understand the aims of the editorial team and journalists. Take note of progression since last observation.
April 2015: Week Commencing 06/04/15 (Date TBC)	Editorial team or whole team meeting.	See decision-making in action regarding content and strategy and understand the aims of the editorial team and journalists. Take note of progression since last observation.
April 2015: Week Commencing 13/04/15 (Date TBC)		
April 2015: Week Commencing 20/04/15 (Date TBC)		
April 2015: Week Commencing 27/04/15 (Date TBC)		
May 2015: Election Night (07/05/2015)	Election night coverage	Observe the broadcast of the election night programme and production of the live show on the night, including reports and strategies discussed in previous observations and their execution.

#### 4. How will the data be used?

- All observations will be written up as a full record of the day;
- Observations will form the basis of written work in the afore-mentioned thesis and may be published following successful completion of the doctorate or prior to this in the form of journal articles;
- This research has been approved by the Royal Holloway College Ethics Committee;
- The Editor may choose whether they and their team and programme remain anonymous in any or all published works;
- Should the Editor choose to remain anonymous, this will be maintained at all times and no comments or observations will be attributed to you, your staff, or your programme

by name in any written work or verbal presentation. Nor will any data be used from the observation that might identify you to a third party;

- The Editor will be free to withdraw from the research at any point and for any reason, and to request that any observations collected not be used;
- The researcher will write to Editor on completion of the research and a copy of the final research report will be made available to you upon request.

#### **5. What are the benefits for the organization?**

As an academic studying news and journalism within new and online media, the researcher would be able to impartially observe and produce a report for the Editor on the effective practice of his or her team. Should this be requested, it would include an analysis of working practice, use of online media tools to best effect, and engagement with the programme's audience through the prism of contemporary communications theory. It could also include an analysis of the programme's output through online and social media and recommendations, if requested.

#### **6. Researcher's contact details**

Name: Amy P. Smith  
Address: Department of Politics and International Relations  
Royal Holloway, University of London  
Egham  
TW20 0EX  
Email: [amy.smith.2011@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:amy.smith.2011@rhul.ac.uk)  
Telephone: 07825 769 351

# Appendix B: Supporting information for Chapter 4

B1 List of sources from organizations' websites organised by publication date and time

<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Organization</b>
01-Apr-15	22:41	Sky News
02-Apr-15	01:02	The Times
02-Apr-15	01:03	The Times
02-Apr-15	01:22	Sky News
02-Apr-15	06:28	The Times
02-Apr-15	06:30	The Telegraph
02-Apr-15	08:00	ITV News
02-Apr-15	08:46	The Guardian
02-Apr-15	08:55	Huffington Post
02-Apr-15	09:00	The Guardian
02-Apr-15	09:39	ITV News
02-Apr-15	09:58	ITV News
02-Apr-15	10:15	Guido Fawkes
02-Apr-15	10:31	The Guardian
02-Apr-15	10:33	ITV News
02-Apr-15	11:34	The Telegraph
02-Apr-15	12:00	The Guardian
02-Apr-15	12:00	The Telegraph
02-Apr-15	12:18	BuzzFeed
02-Apr-15	12:25	ITV News
02-Apr-15	12:29	ITV News
02-Apr-15	12:29	ITV News
02-Apr-15	13:33	Huffington Post
02-Apr-15	13:36	MailOnline
02-Apr-15	13:52	ITV News
02-Apr-15	14:11	Guido Fawkes
02-Apr-15	15:48	ITV News
02-Apr-15	17:25	BuzzFeed
02-Apr-15	17:36	The Guardian
02-Apr-15	18:17	The Telegraph
02-Apr-15	19:50	ITV News
02-Apr-15	20:05	ITV News
02-Apr-15	21:12	Guido Fawkes
02-Apr-15	21:30	ITV News
02-Apr-15	22:15	ITV News
02-Apr-15	22:19	ITV News
02-Apr-15	22:22	ITV News

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02-Apr-15	10:23	ITV News
02-Apr-15	22:25	Guido Fawkes
02-Apr-15	22:28	The Telegraph
02-Apr-15	22:29	ITV News
02-Apr-15	22:33	ITV News
02-Apr-15	22:33	Channel 4 News
02-Apr-15	22:41	ITV News
02-Apr-15	22:48	ITV News
02-Apr-15	22:56	ITV News
02-Apr-15	22:58	ITV News
02-Apr-15	23:04	The Telegraph
02-Apr-15	23:22	BuzzFeed
02-Apr-15	23:40	Sky News
02-Apr-15	23:53	ITV News
02-Apr-15	0 <sup>82</sup>	BBC News
02-Apr-15	0	BBC News
02-Apr-15	0	Channel 4 News
02-Apr-15	0	BBC News
02-Apr-15	0	BBC News
02-Apr-15	0	BBC News
02-Apr-15	0	BBC News
02-Apr-15	0	The Green Party
02-Apr-15	0	The Green Party
02-Apr-15	0	The Sun
02-Apr-15	0	The Sun
03-Apr-15	00:20	The Telegraph
03-Apr-15	00:25	Huffington Post
03-Apr-15	01:05	The Times
03-Apr-15	01:26	The Mirror
03-Apr-15	01:34	ITV News
03-Apr-15	01:52	MailOnline
03-Apr-15	01:55	The Telegraph
03-Apr-15	03:02	Sky News
03-Apr-15	03:22	BuzzFeed
03-Apr-15	03:36	BuzzFeed
03-Apr-15	04:00	ITV News
03-Apr-15	05:53	ITV News
03-Apr-15	06:00	ITV News
03-Apr-15	06:00	The Guardian
03-Apr-15	06:00	The Guardian
03-Apr-15	06:15	The Telegraph
03-Apr-15	07:00	The Telegraph
03-Apr-15	07:04	The Guardian
03-Apr-15	09:57	The Mirror

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<sup>82</sup> 0 denotes that no publication time could be established

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03-Apr-15	10:13	The Telegraph
03-Apr-15	01:05	The Times
03-Apr-15	10:34	The Guardian
03-Apr-15	10:48	The Guardian
03-Apr-15	11:21	The Guardian
03-Apr-15	11:50	Guido Fawkes
03-Apr-15	12:24	The Mirror
03-Apr-15	12:31	ITV News
03-Apr-15	12:43	MailOnline
03-Apr-15	13:31	The Telegraph
03-Apr-15	13:37	ITV News
03-Apr-15	13:50	The Guardian
03-Apr-15	14:23	BuzzFeed
03-Apr-15	14:30	The Mirror
03-Apr-15	14:35	The Guardian
03-Apr-15	14:54	The Guardian
03-Apr-15	15:17	Huffington Post
03-Apr-15	15:42	The Telegraph
03-Apr-15	16:23	MailOnline
03-Apr-15	16:30	The Telegraph
03-Apr-15	17:11	The Guardian
03-Apr-15	17:11	MailOnline
03-Apr-15	17:32	Guido Fawkes
03-Apr-15	18:16	ITV News
03-Apr-15	18:23	The Guardian
03-Apr-15	18:29	MailOnline
03-Apr-15	18:34	The Mirror
03-Apr-15	18:40	The Guardian
03-Apr-15	18:42	MailOnline
03-Apr-15	19:45	ITV News
03-Apr-15	19:55	The Guardian
03-Apr-15	20:07	The Telegraph
03-Apr-15	10:08	ITV News
03-Apr-15	22:24	ITV News
03-Apr-15	10:55	ITV News
03-Apr-15	12:15	The Telegraph
03-Apr-15	0	BBC News
03-Apr-15	0	BBC News
03-Apr-15	0	BBC News
03-Apr-15	0	BBC News
03-Apr-15	0	BBC News
03-Apr-15	0	BBC News
03-Apr-15	0	BBC News
03-Apr-15	0	BBC News
03-Apr-15	0	BBC News
03-Apr-15	0	BBC News
03-Apr-15	0	The Sun

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03-Apr-15	0	The Sun
03-Apr-15	0	UKIP

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B2. Frequency of organizations' websites in dataset

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>% (<i>n</i>=129)</b>
BBC	15	11.63
BuzzFeed	6	4.65
Channel 4 News	2	1.55
The Green Party	2	1.55
The Guardian	18	13.95
Guido Fawkes	6	4.65
Huffington Post	4	3.10
ITV News	34	26.36
MailOnline	7	5.43
The Mirror	5	3.88
Sky News	4	3.10
The Sun	4	3.10
The Telegraph	16	12.40
The Times	5	3.88
UKIP	1	0.78

B3. List of sources from organizations' Facebook posts organised by publication date and time

<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Organization</b>
01-Apr-15	22:02	ITV News
02-Apr-15	07:53	Sky News
02-Apr-15	07:58	LabourList
02-Apr-15	08:20	The Telegraph
02-Apr-15	11:10	BBC News
02-Apr-15	11:20	The Telegraph
02-Apr-15	13:07	UKIP
02-Apr-15	13:52	BuzzFeed
02-Apr-15	14:01	ITV News
02-Apr-15	19:46	The Telegraph
02-Apr-15	22:38	The Telegraph
02-Apr-15	22:49	Sky News
02-Apr-15	22:50	The Times
02-Apr-15	22:58	The Green Party
02-Apr-15	22:59	The Guardian
02-Apr-15	23:27	BBC News
02-Apr-15	23:40	The Daily Mail
02-Apr-15	23:44	Channel 4 News
02-Apr-15	23:55	Channel 4 News
02-Apr-15	23:55	Conservatives
03-Apr-15	00:13	LabourList
		Liberal
03-Apr-15	03:22	Democrats
03-Apr-15	06:32	The Telegraph
03-Apr-15	07:45	Huffington Post
03-Apr-15	08:00	BuzzFeed
03-Apr-15	08:02	The Telegraph
03-Apr-15	08:32	The Daily Mail
03-Apr-15	09:13	Labour
03-Apr-15	11:31	Sky News
03-Apr-15	13:00	The Guardian
03-Apr-15	13:07	Guido Fawkes
03-Apr-15	13:15	The Telegraph
03-Apr-15	13:51	Conservatives
03-Apr-15	14:38	BuzzFeed
03-Apr-15	14:51	The Telegraph
03-Apr-15	15:00	The Daily Mail
03-Apr-15	15:04	Channel 4 News
03-Apr-15	17:38	Guido Fawkes
03-Apr-15	18:47	LabourList
03-Apr-15	19:35	The Telegraph



B4. Frequency of organizations' Facebook posts in dataset

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>% (<i>n</i>=38)</b>
BBC	2	5.26
BuzzFeed	2	5.26
Channel 4 News	3	7.89
Conservatives	1	2.63
The Daily Mail	3	7.89
The Green Party	1	2.63
The Guardian	2	5.26
Guido Fawkes	2	5.26
Huffington Post	1	2.63
ITV News	2	5.26
Labour	1	2.63
LabourList	3	7.89
Liberal Democrats	1	2.63
Sky News	3	7.89
The Telegraph	9	23.68
The Times	1	2.63
UKIP	1	2.63

B5. List of sources from broadcast programmes organised by date and programme start time

<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Programme</b>
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
02-Apr-15	06:00	Good Morning Britain
02-Apr-15	06:00	Good Morning Britain
02-Apr-15	06:00	Good Morning Britain
02-Apr-15	06:00	Good Morning Britain
02-Apr-15	06:00	Good Morning Britain
02-Apr-15	06:00	Good Morning Britain
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
02-Apr-15	13:00	BBC News at One
02-Apr-15	13:00	BBC News at One
02-Apr-15	13:00	BBC News at One
02-Apr-15	13:30	ITV News and Weather
02-Apr-15	13:30	ITV News and Weather
02-Apr-15	18:00	BBC News at 6
02-Apr-15	18:30	ITV Evening News
02-Apr-15	18:30	ITV Evening News
02-Apr-15	19:00	5 News Tonight
02-Apr-15	19:00	Channel 4 News
02-Apr-15	19:00	Channel 4 News
02-Apr-15	19:00	Channel 4 News
02-Apr-15	22:00	BBC News at 10
02-Apr-15	22:00	BBC News at 10
02-Apr-15	22:00	BBC News at 10
02-Apr-15	22:00	ITV News at 10

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02-Apr-15	23:00	Sky News at 11
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
02-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
03-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
03-Apr-15	13:00	BBC News at One
03-Apr-15	13:30	ITV News and Weather
03-Apr-15	17:00	5 News Tonight
03-Apr-15	18:00	BBC News at 6
03-Apr-15	18:30	ITV Evening News
03-Apr-15	19:00	Channel 4 News
03-Apr-15	19:00	Channel 4 News
03-Apr-15	19:00	Sky News at 7
03-Apr-15	22:00	Sky News at 10
03-Apr-15	22:00	ITV News at 10
03-Apr-15	22:00	BBC News at 10
03-Apr-15	22:00	BBC News at 10

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B6. Frequency of programme broadcast segments in dataset

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>% (<i>n</i>=81)</b>
5 News Tonight	2	2.47
BBC Radio 4 Today	28	34.57
BBC Breakfast	18	22.22
BBC News at One	4	4.94
BBC News at Six	2	2.47
BBC News at Ten	5	6.17
Channel 4 News	5	6.17
Good Morning Britain	6	7.41
ITV News and Weather	3	3.70
ITV Evening News	3	3.70
ITV News at Ten	2	2.47
Sky News at 7	1	1.23
Sky News at 10	1	1.23
Sky News at 11	1	1.23



B7 Code book used for inductive qualitative content analysis of texts relating to the leaders' debate

**The first leader's debate (2 April 2015)**  
**Code Book – News Reports, Facebook Posts and Comments, and Broadcasts**

1. What media platform is this published on?

1	News website (Any website that produces news, whether linked to a traditional media organisation or not)
2	A post to Facebook
3	Comments on a Facebook page
4	Print newspaper
5	Broadcast – radio
6	Broadcast – television

2. What organization/programme has published/broadcast the content?

1	The Telegraph
2	The Daily Mail
3	ITV News
4	The Times
5	The Guardian
6	LabourList
7	Labour
8	Huffington Post
9	Sky News
10	The Mirror
11	BBC Radio 4 - Today
12	Guido Fawkes
13	BBC News
14	BuzzFeed
15	UKIP
16	Channel 4 News [online]
17	Green Party
18	Conservative Party
19	The Sun
20	Liberal Democrats
21	Good Morning Britain
22	BBC Breakfast
23	BBC News at One
24	ITV News and Weather
28	BBC News at 6
31	ITV News at 6.30pm
32	5 News Tonight
33	Channel 4 News [broadcast]
34	BBC News at 10
35	ITV News at 10
36	Sky News at 11
37	Sky News at 7
38	Sky News at 10

2a. BROADCAST ONLY – What is the segment type?

1	News headline
2	Extended news report
3	Interview
4	Feature

2b. BROADCAST ONLY – Who appears in the broadcast?

Which actors speak in the broadcast? Code for all persons speaking in separate columns, 2b1, 2b2 etc. Populate spare cells with 0.

1	Anchor/Presenter
2	News reader [different to programme presenter]
3	Reporter
4	Political party candidate
5	Member of the public
6	An expert commenting on an issue (e.g. Paul Johnson of the IFS)
7	Political party representative

3. What is the publication/broadcast date of the content?

Publication or broadcast date of the content in the format: DD-MMM-YY

4. What is the publication/broadcast time of the content?

Publication or broadcast time of the content in the format: HHMM

This includes: the time of publication for articles or tweets; the start time of the broadcast or start time of the relevant segment; the time that the first comment was published on a Facebook post. For print media use 00:00.

5. Which actors are mentioned in the content?

Actors involved in the story or quoted as commenting on it in a news report. Name them in separate columns in the order they appear in the text (5.1, 5.2, 5.3 etc.) Populate spare cells with 0.

1	All party leaders/leaders in general
2	ITV News
3	David Cameron
4	Ed Miliband
5	Nick Clegg
6	Nigel Farage
7	Nicola Sturgeon
8	Natalie Bennett
9	Leanne Wood
10	Sky News
11	BBC
12	Julie Etchingham
13	Labour spokesperson(s)
14	Viewer(s)
15	Female leaders in general
16	Liberal Democrat spokesperson(s)

17	Conservative Party spokesperson(s)
18	UKIP spokesperson(s)
19	Polling organisation(s)
20	The Guardian
21	Heckler (Victoria Prosser)
22	Party 'spin' teams in general
23	Gary Linekar
24	Green Party local candidate
25	Liberal Democrat local candidate
26	Labour Party local candidate
27	Conservative Party local candidate

6. What is the prevalent tone towards these actors?

1	Negative
2	Neutral
3	Positive
0	No tone is discerned.

7. What/who are the main subjects of the content?

If there is more than one subject, list them in separate columns in the order they appear in the text (7.1, 7.2, 7.3 etc.) Populate spare cells with 0.

1	General logistics of the debate
2	Speculation on potential outcomes of the debate
3	Liberal Democrat strategy
4	Polls on the debate winners/losers
5	Leader preparations in general
6	Labour Party strategy
7	UKIP strategy
8	The news media coverage/newspaper coverage
9	Nicola Sturgeon [general]
10	Female party leaders
11	Plaid Cymru strategy
12	Julie Etchingham/the programme
13	#Ratethedebate
14	Spin room
15	The social media response
16	Winners/losers
17	Farage's HIV comments
18	Cameron as winner
19	Audience opinion
20	A win for small parties
21	General – debate round-up
22	The heckler
23	Ed Miliband – personal
24	Cameron – bad performance
25	Labour-SNP coalition
26	Conservative agenda on Twitter
27	Nick Clegg's performance
28	Coalition outcome
29	Nigel Farage – good performance

30	Immigration
31	NHS
32	Austerity

8. Is there a clear agenda in the article?

1	Promoting the debate
2	Neutral reporting – informing citizens
3	Opinion polls are unhelpful
4	David Cameron as an underdog
5	Prediction – Ed Miliband will do well
6	No – General debate build-up
7	Nigel Farage as winner
8	“Dangerous” Nicola Sturgeon
9	Anti-Labour agenda
10	Women – positive
11	Cameron, Miliband, and Farage as winners
12	Natalie Bennett as loser
13	Anti-Farage agenda
14	“Coalition of chaos”/Labour-SNP
15	Conservatives “in control”/Cameron in charge
16	Sturgeon – positive
17	Small parties – positive
18	Ed Miliband as a loser
19	David Cameron as the winner
20	Farage and race
21	HIV comments – negative
22	HIV comments – positive
23	Farage – positive
24	Coalition outcome

9. Does it refer to any information from social media?

0	No
1	Yes

10. If yes, who/what is the information sourced from?

0	N/A
1	Betting Company’s(ies) Twitter account
2	Organisation’s/Journalist’s own social media account
3	Citizen-users’ replying to organisation
4	SNP staffer/candidate
5	Twitter users in general
6	Ed Miliband tweet
7	Polling organisation tweet
8	Other journalist(s) tweet
9	Politician’s tweet
10	Citizen-users’ tweet (non-reply)
11	Political Party’s tweet
12	Citizen-user’s vine
13	Media organisation’s tweet
14	Social media records organisation

15	Celebrity tweet
16	Influential satire twitter account

11. What is the role of the social media information?

0	N/A
1	Evidence for news story/support
2	Original sourcing for news story

# Appendix C: Supporting information for Chapter 5

C1. List of sources from organizations' websites organised by publication date and time

<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Organization</b>
03-Apr-15	21:30	The Telegraph
03-Apr-15	22:00	MailOnline
03-Apr-15	22:00	MailOnline
03-Apr-15	22:24	ITV News
03-Apr-15	23:20	LabourList
03-Apr-15	23:44	Huffington Post
04-Apr-15	01:05	The Times
04-Apr-15	00:17	The Telegraph
04-Apr-15	00:17	The Telegraph
04-Apr-15	01:28	Sky News
04-Apr-15	07:53	ITV News
04-Apr-15	08:41	The Mirror
04-Apr-15	09:40	ITV News
04-Apr-15	10:07	The Guardian
04-Apr-15	10:10	ITV News
04-Apr-15	01:21	The Times
04-Apr-15	10:55	LabourList
04-Apr-15	11:19	The Guardian
04-Apr-15	11:41	ITV News
04-Apr-15	12:18	ITV News
04-Apr-15	12:35	Guido Fawkes
04-Apr-15	13:42	ITV News
04-Apr-15	13:51	ITV News
04-Apr-15	14:00	The Telegraph
04-Apr-15	14:13	The Telegraph
04-Apr-15	14:31	LabourList
04-Apr-15	16:41	The Telegraph
04-Apr-15	17:16	MailOnline
04-Apr-15	18:53	The Telegraph
04-Apr-15	19:33	The Guardian
04-Apr-15	20:46	The Guardian
04-Apr-15	17:34	BuzzFeed
04-Apr-15	0	UKIP
04-Apr-15	0	Channel 4 News
05-Apr-15	07:37	Sky News

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05-Apr-15	13:29	The Times
05-Apr-15	01:39	BuzzFeed
07-Apr-15	01:01	The Times
07-Apr-15	10:45	The Times

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## C2. Frequency of organizations' websites in dataset

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>% (<i>n</i>= 39)</b>
BuzzFeed	2	5.13
Channel 4 News	1	2.56
The Guardian	4	10.26
Guido Fawkes	1	2.56
Huffington Post	1	2.56
ITV News	8	20.51
LabourList	3	7.69
MailOnline	3	7.69
The Mirror	1	2.56
Sky News	2	5.13
The Telegraph	7	17.95
The Times	5	12.82
UKIP	1	2.56



C3. List of sources from organizations' Facebook posts organised by publication date and time

<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Organization</b>
03-Apr-15	22:32	The Times
03-Apr-15	22:32	The Times
03-Apr-15	22:49	Labour
03-Apr-15	23:20	LabourList
04-Apr-15	06:55	The Telegraph
04-Apr-15	07:00	Huffington Post
04-Apr-15	06:55	The Telegraph
04-Apr-15	07:25	Sky News
04-Apr-15	09:40	The Daily Mail
04-Apr-15	10:56	LabourList
04-Apr-15	16:41	Huffington Post
04-Apr-15	19:55	BBC News
04-Apr-15	21:13	The Telegraph
04-Apr-15	21:20	MailOnline

#### C4. Frequency of organizations' Facebook posts in dataset

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>% (<i>n</i>=14)</b>
BBC News	1	7.14
The Daily Mail	2	14.29
Huffington Post	2	14.29
Labour	1	7.14
LabourList	2	14.29
Sky News	1	7.14
The Telegraph	3	21.43
The Times	2	14.29

C5. List of sources from broadcast programmes organised by date and programme start time

<b>Date</b>	<b>Start Time</b>	<b>Programme</b>
04-Apr-15	07:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
04-Apr-15	07:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
04-Apr-15	07:00	BBC Radio 4 Today
04-Apr-15	08:00	BBC Breakfast
04-Apr-15	12:00	BBC Weekend News
04-Apr-15	12:30	ITV News and Weather
04-Apr-15	18:15	ITV News and Weather
04-Apr-15	18:15	ITV News and Weather
04-Apr-15	18:40	BBC Weekend News
04-Apr-15	18:40	Channel 4 News
04-Apr-15	18:40	Channel 4 News
04-Apr-15	19:00	Sky News at 7
04-Apr-15	22:00	Sky News at 10
04-Apr-15	22:10	BBC Weekend News
04-Apr-15	22:10	BBC Weekend News
04-Apr-15	22:30	ITV News and Weather
04-Apr-15	22:30	ITV News and Weather
05-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
05-Apr-15	06:00	BBC Breakfast
05-Apr-15	18:30	Channel 4 News

C6. Frequency of programme broadcast segments in dataset

<b>Programme</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>% (n=19)</b>
BBC Breakfast	3	15.79
BBC Radio 4 Today	3	15.79
BBC Weekend News (lunchtime)	1	5.26
BBC Weekend News (evening)	1	5.26
BBC Weekend News (late evening)	2	10.53
Channel 4 News	2	10.53
ITV News and Weather (lunchtime)	1	5.26
ITV News and Weather (evening)	2	10.53
ITV News and Weather (late evening)	2	10.53
Sky News at 7	1	5.26
Sky News at 10	1	5.26

C7: Code book used for inductive qualitative content analysis of texts relating to the leaked memo

**Nicola Sturgeon and the “leaked memo”  
Code Book – News Reports, Facebook Posts, and broadcasts**

12. What media platform is this published on?

1	News website (Any website that produces news, whether linked to a traditional media organisation or not)
2	A post to Facebook
3	Comments on a Facebook page
4	Print newspaper
5	Broadcast – radio
6	Broadcast – television

13. What organization/programme has published/broadcast the content?

1	The Telegraph
2	The Daily Mail
3	ITV News
4	The Times
5	The Guardian
6	LabourList
7	Labour
8	Huffington Post
9	Sky News
10	The Mirror
11	BBC Radio 4 - Today
12	Guido Fawkes
13	BBC News
14	BuzzFeed
15	UKIP
16	Channel 4 News [online]
17	Green Party
18	ConservativeHome
19	The Sun
20	Liberal Democrats
21	Good Morning Britain
22	BBC Breakfast
23	BBC Weekend News
24	ITV News and Weather
28	Channel 4 News [broadcast]
31	Sky News at 7
32	Sky News at 10

2a. BROADCAST ONLY – What is the segment type?

1	News headline
2	Extended news report
3	Interview
4	Feature

5	In depth discussion with the news reporter
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2b. BROADCAST ONLY – Who appears in the broadcast?

Which actors speak in the broadcast? Code for all persons speaking in separate columns, 2b1, 2b2 etc. Populate spare cells with 0.

1	Anchor/Presenter
2	News reader [different to programme presenter]
3	Reporter
4	Ed Miliband
5	Conservative Party spokesperson
6	Nicola Sturgeon
7	Pierre-Alain Coffinier
8	David Cameron
9	Jim Murphy
10	Member of the public
11	Alastair Carmichael
12	Labour Party spokesperson

14. What is the publication/broadcast date of the content?

Publication or broadcast date of the content in the format: DD-MMM-YY

15. What is the publication/broadcast time of the content?

Publication or broadcast time of the content in the format: HHMM

This includes: the time of publication for articles or tweets; the start time of the broadcast or start time of the relevant segment; the time that the first comment was published on a Facebook post. For print media use 00:00.

16. Which actors are mentioned in the content?

Actors involved in the story or quoted as commenting on it in a news report. Name them in separate columns in the order they appear in the text (5.1, 5.2, 5.3 etc.) Populate spare cells with 0.

1	Nicola Sturgeon
2	David Cameron
3	Ed Miliband
4	Jim Murphy
5	Willie Rennie
6	SNP Spokesperson
7	Labour Party
8	The SNP
9	Sylvie Bermann (the French Ambassador)
10	French Consul-General
11	French Ambassador's Spokesperson
12	British Civil Servant
13	The Scottish Government
14	The UK Government
15	The Scotsman

16	The Telegraph
17	BBC
18	The Daily Mail
19	Simon Johnson (Telegraph Scottish Political Editor)
20	Other
21	The news media [referred to in general]
22	Alastair Carmichael
23	Sir Jeremy Heywood
24	Conservative Party
25	Foreign Office
26	Natalie Bennett

17. What is the prevalent tone towards these actors?

1	Negative
2	Neutral
3	Positive
0	No tone is discerned.

18. What/who are the main subjects of the content?

If there is more than one subject, list them in separate columns in the order they appear in the text (7.1, 7.2, 7.3 etc.) Populate spare cells with 0.

1	The memorandum
2	Nicola Sturgeon
3	News media bias
4	SNP/Sturgeon's denial
5	"Damning revelations" [Quote from the Labour Party]
6	The inquiry
7	Ed Miliband as Prime Minister material
8	"Unholy alliance" [Quote from the Conservative Party]
9	Coalition in general

19. Is there a clear agenda in the article?

1	Supportive of The Daily Telegraph/Is anti-Sturgeon or anti-SNP
2	Neutral reporting – no clear agenda, unbiased (either offers no opinion or offers opinion on both sides)
3	Supportive of the SNP/Critical of The Daily Telegraph or the original report
4	Reflects the Labour Party's response
5	Nicola Sturgeon – as a liar/sneaky
6	Promoting a Labour-SNP coalition

20. Does it refer to, or include a screenshot of, Sturgeon's original tweet denying the story?

0	No
1	Yes

21. Does it refer to, or include a screenshot of, Simon Johnson's (*Telegraph journalist*) original tweet disseminating the news story?

0	No
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1	Yes
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22. Does the article refer to any information from social media other than Sturgeon or Johnson's first tweets?

0	No
1	Yes

23. If yes, who/what is the information sourced from?

1	Citizen
2	Labour Party candidate or staff
3	SNP Party candidate or staff
4	Journalist
5	Celebrity
6	General social media discussion

24. What is the role of the social media information?

1	Evidence in support of <i>The Telegraph's</i> news report
2	Evidence against <i>The Telegraph's</i> news report
3	General extra information for the report



