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Digital agenda-setting: Measuring mainstream and social media influence during the UK 2015 election campaign

This paper examines the setting up and managing of 'Election Unspun', an experimental news content analysis project, and its main findings. In the end, the project collected every tweet from more than 3,000 political actors and influencers, analysed the national newspapers' coverage and websites of ITV News, Sky News and Channel 4 News and the UK versions of the Huffington Post *and* Buzzfeed *Politics during the 2015 general election campaign in the UK. It concludes that, despite the plethora of media platforms available, 2015 was a top down, stage-managed campaign. From the statements, tweets and party political material published by the parties, the party leaders, and the candidates it was clear that both the Conservatives and Labour were eager to talk about the economy, and the press largely followed their lead.*

Keywords: digital agenda setting, UK General Election, media content analysis

Introduction

On Tuesday 21 April 2015, George Osborne published an unusually detailed tweet for a Chancellor of the Exchequer: 'We will help fund road improvements in Eastleigh, including Chickenhall Link Road and Botley bypass, and junction 6 of the M27' (Osborne 2015a). A few days later he told his Twitter followers about 'Our plan for the West Midlands: £50bn in HS2 and extending Enterprise Zone to cover the regeneration area around Curzon St sta-

tion' (Osborne 2015b). The following week he increased the number of his transport and infrastructure commitments and their specificity. 'We will improve junction 25 of M5, upgrade Devon link road, start planning new station between Castle Cary & Taunton,' Osborne tweeted on Tuesday 28 April, nine days before the UK General Election (Osborne 2015c).

Osborne's tweets in the fortnight before the General Election were clearly not accidental. They appeared to be part of a carefully planned strategy to make direct infrastructural commitments to specific geographic areas. It is not known whether the local Conservative candidates then used these commitments on the doorstep, but Osborne certainly gave them concrete pledges with which to woo voters, and material for their local paper in the days leading up to the election. We also know, looking at the tweets from previous weeks, that these infrastructural tweets were anomalous. Before Monday 20 April, Osborne was, like most candidates from the leading parties, publishing general tweets only a handful of times a day.

We know about Osborne's tweets because we – the small team at Election Unspun – followed them. We did not just follow Osborne's tweets but all 68,974 tweets of the 497 Conservative candidates we could identify on Twitter from Monday 30 March to polling day on Thursday 7 May. We followed another 560 Labour candidates (and their 128,627 tweets), more than 1,300 other candidates from smaller parties, and over 700 political influencers on Twitter. In total this added up to more than one million tweets during the campaign.

Despite this vast number of tweets, Twitter was our secondary focus during the UK 2015 election campaign. Our primary focus was the mainstream media. From the websites of the national press, public service broadcasters, and major online news sites such as *Huffington Post* and *Buzzfeed*, we collected data on approximately a quarter of a million news articles, from across sixteen news outlets from the beginning of 2015 through to the May election.

We published the findings of our data driven analysis of media coverage of the UK election online at www.electionunspun.com and in two subsequent publications – *UK election 2015: Setting the agenda* (Moore and Ramsay 2015) and *Election unspun: Political parties, the press, and Twitter during the 2015 election campaign* (Moore et al. 2015).

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This paper explains how we set up and managed 'Election Unspun', an experimental news content analysis project using software we developed expressly for the purpose, and its main findings. It was a project conceived in the light of the enormous possibilities for large-scale news analysis offered by advances in processing power, data storage, analytical tools, and the explosion of information in a digital age. With a relatively small team, modest resources, and some programming expertise, it is now possible to undertake news analysis projects on a scale unimaginable a just a few years ago. By explaining 'Election Unspun', we hope to show how new researchers might experiment with new methods of content analysis on large digital datasets.

Content analysis: Analogue to digital

News content analysis used to be, and in many cases still is, a very time-consuming process. In the days of print-only newspapers – and today still, in non-digitised archives – it could mean spending weeks in a newspaper library poring over kilometres of microfiche. Video or audio analysis could involve spooling through piles of VHS tapes, audio cassettes, or delicate (and sometimes disintegrating) reel-to-reel film. Before the use of spreadsheet and statistical analysis packages, results would need to be hand-calculated. The usual constraints of time and money ensured that such content analysis projects were either limited in scope, or very expensive and required a small army of researchers. More recently, print news content analysis has been made somewhat easier by the collections of commercial companies such as Factiva or Gorkana, but again large-scale analyses using these resources require a lot of manual counting and transferring of data to, for example, SPSS for analysis (Ramsay 2014), and charge expensive subscriptions. Though source material is far easier to collate using these techniques, analysis can still be extremely time-consuming.

There is something a little incongruous about manually counting digital information and going through several stages of gathering and preparing data to transfer to Excel or SPSS before even rudimentary quantitative analysis can be done. We set out to develop a more efficient and flexible way of doing news content analysis, building on our previous experience of creating digital tools such as Journalisted. com and Churnalism.com. Unable to find any equivalent open-source software to do the job, we built our own digital news content analysis tool, Steno. It was named in honour of Nicholas Steno (1638-1686), a 17th century Danish geologist who, amongst other things, discovered that fossils did not fall from the sky (as many of his contemporaries believed), but were instead the accretion of once-living organisms. As Nicholas Steno made discoveries in layers of rock laid down over millennia, so – our thinking went – Steno, the research tool, would discover patterns in layers of news articles laid down day after day.

Part content collector, and part analytical tool, Steno can be aimed at news websites, from which it will collect every article published, as well as logging important metadata about each article – who wrote it, when it was published, the headline and URL, and so on. This content is then stored in a structured database for retrieval. Provide Steno with the dates you would like to analyse, and it will provide every news article published by your chosen news sources on each chosen date. A desktop application then allows researchers to perform queries on the resulting sample of articles.

Ultimately, Steno is intended for targeted analysis of news coverage of specific policy areas. However, since the 2015 General Election campaign provided a unique opportunity to see whether a small research team using Steno could deal with the complexities of monitoring the entire range of party policy platforms, we decided not just to cover the election as a whole, but to analyse election coverage on an ongoing week-by-week basis, making all the findings and data available online (via www. electionunspun.net). Once we knew that our analysis worked on our sample of mainstream media outlets, we decided to add a Twitter analysis component and started collecting every tweet from more than 3,000 political actors and influencers.

Doing Election Unspun taught us a lot. For example, we learned about the dynamics of the relationship between parties, press, Twitter and broadcast news – particularly the intimate relationship Twitter has with broadcasting. We learnt about the bizarre inefficiencies of online publishing – for instance, that a shortlink in a tweet can link to up to 10 different shortlinks before reaching the original URL. We also learned that, before we begin any future similar project, we need to answer five questions.

Question 1: What news content should we analyse?
In a world where everyone can do journalism and publish news – and many do – establishing the boundaries of digital news content analysis is the fundamental first step. Even when fast

and easy-to-use tools make analysis of large datasets possible, a realistic and justifiable sample is essential.

We began by focusing on articles published online by national newspapers (*The Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Daily Mirror*, etc), but quickly saw that it would be insufficient to exclude the BBC's news website and – consequently – the websites of ITV News, Sky News and Channel 4 News. Conscious that the period between the 2010 and 2015 General Elections has seen the growth of serious online-only news publishers, we added the UK versions of the *Huffington Post* and *Buzzfeed* Politics. We could have gone further; weekly journals like the *Spectator* and *New Statesman* were publishing election campaign news and opinion daily, as were spin-off election sites like www.may2015.com.

Selecting a sample of Twitter accounts to analyse proved a greater challenge. Generating representative samples is a key concern in any analysis of Twitter (Bruns and Liang 2012, Gaffney and Puschmann 2014). Given that we were interested in understanding the dynamics of political influence and agenda-setting, we decided to focus on a selection of political actors and political influencers. Of the two groups, political actors were fairly easy to identify. We followed all 2,412 parliamentary candidates with personal Twitter accounts. Identifying political influencers was more difficult. We used a combination of criteria – number of followers, number of profiles the account follows, Klout score, and the frequency and type of tweet content – to capture one group of general political influencers, and two groups of specialist policy influencers (Moore et al 2015).

Question 2: How should we collect the news content?
There are various ways to collect news content, some commercial and some non-commercial. We chose to develop software to do it ourselves by building Steno. This allows for the collection of very large amounts of information, and the subsequent analysis of that data through relatively straightforward tools. Steno is written in 'Go', an open source programming language developed by Google (it could just as well have been written in Python, Ruby, C++, Javascript or PHP). It consists of a server-side set of programs that collect the textual content and metadata from each URL, and a client-side graphical user interface (GUI) desktop application for performing analysis. The server-side runs continuously to collect news articles from a set of target sites. These articles are stored in a database, ready for later collection and analysis. Using the GUI application, the researcher can pull in articles (and/or tweets) from one or more servers. Once downloaded, the user can access and analyse them via a simple Excel-like window on the desktop. In the window are tools for tagging and untagging articles, and a simple scripting language to help automate this. The whole system is modular – different servers can be configured to collect different data, and the server Application Programme Interface (API) for extracting articles can be used by other tools, not just the GUI application.

Question 3: How should we index the news content?
The key to analysing bulk media content is applying effective methods of filtering and classification. For example, to find the proportion of news articles that contain references to political party leaders, one had to find all the articles that contain references to one or more leader. Steno does this by 'tagging' – in other words by adding descriptors to content to explain what it is or what it contains. Tagging is done through matching strings of text within articles, or on the basis of metadata attached to certain articles (i.e. text of byline or headline). Like keywords within news websites, each article could have a large number of tags attached.

Relatively simple tagging – marking all articles containing references to Nigel Farage, leader of UKIP, for example –was fairly straightforward. We used a 'party leaders' tagging script, which automatically tagged relevant articles according to whether it mentioned each leader. The 'Nigel Farage' script fragment was: '"Nigel Farage" OR Farage OR "Farage's" => TAG farage'. We also used more complex tagging, for example to study specific policy issues such as health or welfare. Basing our definition of policy issues on the Ipsos-MORI Issues Index, we separated out fourteen areas of public policy and wrote scripts to capture all references to each of these areas. For something like defence and foreign policy, we identified a number of recurring terms, such as 'Trident', 'Ministry of Defence', 'foreign office', to indicate that the article was about defence or foreign policy. Tags were not mutually exclusive; many articles referenced multiple areas of policy. For Twitter, we added abbreviations and hashtags to the tagging script. In this case, examples included #tridentrenewal and #scraptrident.

Question 4: Is the data clean?
No large data set will start out clean. Unexpected content will accidentally be included, and content incorrectly tagged. For our news content, we cleaned the data in two stages.

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First, we took out all the articles that had nothing to do with politics (sport, lifestyle, fashion, entertainment) by automatically tagging them, usually on the basis of URL content (e.g. /sport/), and deleting. This left us with the 'core' of political news articles that we conducted our analysis on, typically 7,000-8,000 articles each week. Second, we scanned through the lists of articles tagged for each policy issue to see if any had been tagged incorrectly. Some policy tags, we found, were highly accurate: immigration and housing, for example, could be tagged by a number of words and phrases that were fairly unambiguous. Certain other policy areas – particularly education and crime, policing and justice policy – were associated with more ambiguous terms (e.g. 'sentence', 'academy') that occasionally resulted in mis-tagged articles, which then needed to be untagged. This process took around 2-3 hours per weekly sample.

Question 5: What will the data tell us?
Large data sets, particularly of news content, can seem overwhelming. By developing hypotheses, and assessing the extent to which the data can provide the answer to these hypotheses, the initial stages of analysis become much more manageable. Having devised methods to collect, tag and clean the data we came up with a series of hypotheses to test. These were partly based on findings from previous studies of media and Twitter in election campaigns, and partly from our own experience of monitoring news sources and Twitter. For parliamentary candidates on Twitter, for example, we wanted to see if candidates used the platform for dialogue or, as found in previous studies, for broadcast (Graham, Jackson and Broersma 2014). We wanted to discover what political issues candidates were tweeting about and the extent to which they were 'on message'. We were keen to explore where candidates linked to from Twitter, and whether mainstream news media sources were their chief sources of authority.

What did Election Unspun 2015 discover?
Despite the plethora of media platforms available – or perhaps in response to the abundance of media – 2015 was a top down, stage-managed campaign. From the statements, tweets and party political material published by the parties, the party leaders, and the candidates it was clear what they wanted the campaign to be about. Both the Conservatives and Labour were eager to talk about the economy, and the press largely followed their lead.

Economy, economy, economy
Almost a third (31 per cent) of articles about any policy area, or 7,967 articles on national news sites, referred to the economy over the course of the official campaign from Monday 30 March up to Wednesday 6 May. This compares with just over 11 per cent of articles that referred to health (2,897 articles) and 10 per cent that referred to education (2,494).

Reports and commentary about the economy focused first on spending cuts (1,351), then on economic growth (921) and cutting the deficit (675). These were all issues about which the Conservatives spoke regularly and had consistent messaging. Less covered were some of the issues Labour wanted to emphasise, notably zero hours (445), mansion tax (339) and non-domicile status (322).

The economic agenda in national news outlets tended to follow the parties' lead, chiefly that of the Conservatives. On Monday 30 March, the first day of the official campaign, for example, *The Times* led with 'Labour will raise tax bill by £3,000, says Cameron'. This followed a claim first made by the Conservatives in a dossier released in January 2015, *A cost analysis of Labour Party policy* (Conservative Party 2015a) which was then re-released for the official campaign under the title *£3,028: Labour's tax rise for every working household* (Conservative Party 2015b). The Conservative claim also featured in the *Sun* and *Express* (Newton Dunn 2015; Little 2015).

It was symptomatic of Labour's difficulties finding supportive coverage in anything but a handful of papers, that on the first day of the official campaign they paid for an advertisement in the *Financial Times*. The full-page advert warned of the threat to UK business of a British exit of the EU. Labour would struggle for coverage of its economic proposals in the press throughout the campaign, with the exception of its non-domicile announcement. For the most part, the press seemed more willing to publish Conservative announcements, sometimes almost verbatim.

On Friday 10 April, *The Times* led its front page with the news that 'Tories freeze rail fares as Labour edges ahead'. The first sentence of the article reported the news as a party press office might have written it: 'Rail fares will be frozen in real terms over the next five years under Conservative plans to prevent more than 250,000 commuters being ripped off at the ticket office' (Paton and Elliot 2015).

On Wednesday 29 April, the *Telegraph* led its front page with 'Cameron's pledge: No tax rises for five years'. Again the first sentence read like a press office announcement: 'There will be no

VAT, national insurance or income tax rises for the next five years under a Conservative government, David Cameron will announce' (Swinford 2015).

Other front page leads announcing or backing Conservative policy included: 'Osborne's housing revolution' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 5 April), 'Tories: Give £1m to your children tax-free' (*Daily Mail*, 12 April), 'Maggie's 'right to buy' dream is back' (*Express*, 14 April), 'We are the true party of working people' (*Telegraph*, 14 April), 'Happy ever grafter' (*Sun*, 15 April), and 'White Van Dan: Cam's my man' (*Sun*, 28 April). Over the course of the campaign, there were 80 national newspaper front page leads that supported the Conservative position.

There were 30 newspaper front page leads that were sympathetic to Labour. These tended to be less overtly supportive than the Conservative leads, and were often linked to an interview. The *Guardian*, for example, led with an interview with Labour campaign adviser David Axelrod on 18 April; 'Tories are "panic-stricken" says top Miliband adviser'. The *Independent* led with 'Miliband's £7.5bn game changer' on Sunday 12 April, based on an exclusive interview with the Labour leader. The *Mirror* led with 'My pledge' on the day of the Labour manifesto launch, again based on an exclusive Miliband interview.

Of Labour's economic announcements during the campaign – on tax avoidance, the minimum wage, zero hours contracts, rent capping, tuition fees – only one gained traction across the political spectrum: the commitment to cancel non-domicile tax status. This led not just the *Guardian* and the *Independent* front pages on 8 April but also those of *The Times* and the *Financial Times*. In response, the Conservative MP and Secretary of State for Defence, Michael Fallon, wrote a personal attack on the Labour leader in *The Times*: 'Ed Miliband stabbed his own brother in the back to become Labour leader. Now he is willing to stab the United Kingdom in the back to become prime minister' (Fallon 2015). This bid to change the subject was ultimately successful. 'To be fair,' Stephen Tall tweeted, 'Michael Fallon's tactic of getting people to stop talking about non-doms has worked. At great cost to his cred, but still' (Tall 2015).

Health a distant second and immigration fifth
What was *not* being talked about was also interesting. Some 4 per cent of mainstream news coverage was about the environment. Low as this was, it was even lower on Twit-

ter, where less than 3 per cent of tweets from political actors and influencers were about the environment. Not even the Green Party leader, Natalie Bennett, was closely associated with the environment. In the press, Bennett was associated with the environment less than she was with health, immigration, defence, or education.

Periodic focuses of attention towards the NHS and health were exceptions to the rule, even when the Labour Party sought to shift the agenda in this direction. In the week beginning Monday 20 April, Labour staged a series of events in an effort to push health to the top of the campaign agenda. The party launched a disability manifesto, participated in a King's Fund healthcare debate with Jeremy Hunt, Health Secretary since 2012, and Andy Burnham, then Shadow Health Secretary, and unveiled a new NHS poster campaign. The same week new and startling figures were released about visits to food banks. Yet during that week, coverage of health in the mainstream media actually fell. The number of articles on health published across the sixteen leading national news sites (including bbc.co.uk) dropped from 563 the previous week to 510 in week four.

On Wednesday 22 April, the Trussell Trust released figures showing the number of visits to food banks had increased by 19 per cent over the previous year to 1,084,604 (Trussell Trust 2015). The story did not feature in the print editions of some of the largest-selling national newspapers. According to left-leaning blog *Left Foot Forward*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Telegraph*, the *Sun*, the *Express*, and *The Times* did not cover the news in their print editions (though the *Daily Mail* did publish a story online) (Barnett 2015). When the story was covered by the *Telegraph* it was to highlight how the Trussell Trust had been forced to clarify its headline figures (Hope 2015).

By contrast, the news triggered much debate on Twitter and online, particularly amongst social policy influencers. The number of health related tweets by social policy influencers – the issue they were already tweeting most about – rose by 10 per cent (from 4,266 tweets to 4,695) as coverage in mainstream media fell by the same percentage. In the absence of much mainstream news coverage, social policy influencers linked to the Trussell Trust statistics themselves, and to older tweets including the 'List of reasons people had benefits cut and turned to foodbanks', and to the tweet by Clare Gerada, medical director of the Practitioner Health Programme, of 28 March: 'Sadly, last week, I

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referred more patients to the food bank than I did to A&E. 'Something profoundly wrong with the way we live today' (Gerada 2015).

If coverage of health in the mainstream media was lower than expected, news coverage of immigration was even lower still. Across the news published in 16 national outlets, immigration was the fifth most referenced political topic, after the economy, health, education and foreign policy/defence. This despite being considered the most important issue facing Britain for four of the first five months of 2015, according to the Ipsos MORI issues index (Ipsos MORI, 2015).

If the press were reporting immigration less than might have been expected, candidates from the two main parties were hardly acknowledging the topic on Twitter. Only 3 per cent of Conservative candidates' political tweets were about immigration, as were the same proportion of Labour candidates' tweets. Even when immigration became a subject of debate during the campaign the candidates did not comment on it on Twitter in substantially greater numbers.

In the fortnight from 13 April to 26 April, the UKIP leader, Nigel Farage, caused controversy during the TV 'Challengers' debate' by blaming foreigners for the housing crisis, Katie Hopkins triggered a social media storm by comparing immigrants to cockroaches in a column in the *Sun* on 17 April and a migrant boat capsized in the Mediterranean, killing hundreds and sparking a migration debate across Europe (Hopkins 2015). During this fortnight Conservative candidates published more than 4,000 tweets about the economy, each day on average. Over the same period they published just 197 tweets about immigration (14 per day). For Labour candidates the figures are 330 per day for the economy, and 16 per day for immigration. The number of tweets about immigration hardly moved despite Farage, Hopkins and the Mediterranean tragedy.

A partisan press
As in previous UK elections, most national newspapers had decided which party they wanted to win the election long before the official campaign started. Having decided many of them then chose to express their preference repeatedly.

From Monday January 5 to Sunday 3 May, there were 1,050 leader columns in the national press that expressed a positive or negative view of one or other of the political parties. 40 per cent of these expressed a view about the Conservatives (424 articles) and another 40 per cent a view about Labour. Yet, while more than half the leader columns that expressed a view about the Conservatives were positive (51 per cent), only 21 per cent of articles about Labour were positive. The majority of Labour-supporting leaders were published in the *Mirror* – 55 (out of a total of 87) in total between January and May. The *Guardian* and *Mirror* combined accounted for 85 per cent of positive leader articles about Labour.

The *Telegraph* was the most supportive of the Conservatives, publishing 55 leader articles in support. The *Daily Mail* followed this with 49, followed by the *Express* with 36, the *Sun* with 35 and *The Times* with 34.

When it came to negative leader articles about Labour, the *Sun* led the way with 102. This exceeded the *Daily Mail*'s 75 anti-Labour leaders, the *Telegraph*'s 67, *The Times*' 39 and the *Express*' 33. More than half the negative leader articles about the Conservatives were published in the *Mirror* (109), and 44 more in the *Guardia*. Overall, on the basis of leader columns, the *Mirror* was the most partisan paper, with 109 anti-Conservative and 55 pro-Labour leaders.

An *Independent* report claimed that Rupert Murdoch, frustrated that the *Sun* had not been critical enough of Labour, berated its journalists in late February 2015. 'Rupert made it very clear he was unhappy with the *Sun*'s coverage of the election,' the *Independent* reported. 'He instructed them to be much more aggressive in their attacks on Labour and more positive about Conservative achievements in the run-up to polling day.' The paper's partisanship intensified during the subsequent official campaign (Sherwin and Wright 2015).

Proportionally, the greatest opprobrium was reserved for the SNP. Over the course of the official campaign – from 30 March to 6 May – there were, in total, 59 leader articles in the national press which expressed a view about the SNP. 58 of these were negative.

Candidates on Twitter: Broadcast not dialogue
Parliamentary candidates used Twitter during the campaign, but not as a way of creating more openness and dialogue with the public. They used it as a broadcast campaign platform. Some 59 per cent of candidates' tweets were re-tweets, generally those by the party leader, the party press office or a senior party figure. When not re-tweeting, the candidates were telling followers that they were out campaigning: 'My

pedometer says I walked 10.1 miles campaigning up and down in Islington and Battersea. Tired today *pours third cup of tea*', Emily Thornberry, Labour MP for Islington South and Finsbury, (@EmilyThornberry) tweeted on 22 April.

Tweets about political issues were generally consistent with top down messages. On 30 March, the Conservative incumbent for the Redditch constituency, Karen Lumley MP, tweeted: 'Only a Conservative government can secure a better future for families in Redditch County http://youtu. be/bLJo1tj7QZE [links to Conservative YouTube video]' (Lumley 2015). Tweets criticising opposition policy frequently linked to party posters – the following was tweeted by multiple accounts: 'The price of Labour: £3,028 extra tax for every working family – http://betterfutu.re/1MpbNT2 [links to sharing page for Conservative poster]'. Tweets about canvassing were positive, upbeat and bright: 'Out and about meeting people in East Brighton with my @bhlabour team,' Labour candidate Nancy Platts tweeted. 'Bright and sunny in Upper Bullington this morning,' Caroline Nokes MP told her followers (Nokes 2015).

On political issues, Conservative candidates appeared to be highly disciplined. Some 56 per cent of their tweets were about the economy (14,927 tweets). The next most tweeted about issue was health, at 13 per cent (2,492). Labour candidates also tweeted most about the economy (45 per cent of tweets), but were more likely to tweet about other political issues as well. Some 25 per cent of Labour tweets were about health and nine per cent about education.

While the candidates were mostly restrained and cautious, the party press offices were noisy and antagonistic. The Conservative press office (@CCHQPress) was particularly prolific, tweeting an average of 92 times a day. Labour (@labourpress) was slightly less active, tweeting 57 times a day (perhaps because @UKLabour was also busy). The LibDem press office (@LibDemPress) was more reserved at only 34 tweets a day. Other parties tweeted from party rather than press accounts.

The Twitter feeds of the party press offices read like 21st century spin rooms. Throughout each day they pushed out positive messages about the party, negative messages about the opposition and links to those doing the same. The Twitter accounts were used for rapid rebuttal, to promote new election posters and videos, and to try to frame the language of debates.

Politicians in the press

Certain politicians came out of the media campaign better than others. George Osborne had a highly successful election in media terms. More than a thousand articles in the mainstream media referenced Osborne (1,069). Many, particularly those published by newspapers, wrote about the Chancellor and the economy over which he presided in glowing terms. In a *Telegraph* article entitled 'George Osborne's "housing revolution" election pledge', the paper asked: 'Does the Chancellor agree with Mr Cameron that he would make a fine leader of the party and PM one day?' (Ross 2015).

By contrast, Ed Miliband was lambasted and lampooned in much of the press. He was called a shameless hypocrite, a land-grabber, a tax avoider, a puppet of the unions and the SNP, and a flop, amongst other things. Some 5,374 articles were published in the mainstream press referencing Ed Miliband. Yet, there were also 46,756 tweets referring to the Labour leader, many of which reacted against the press coverage. Political influencers enjoyed and in some cases adopted the brief #milifandom craze and #JeSuisEd.

Broadcast and Twitter: A symbiotic relationship?

Beyond the politicking of the campaign itself, our data analysis also illuminated the relationship between different media platforms. By comparing the extent of coverage of issues over time, for example, it showed the symbiotic relationship between broadcast and Twitter. During each televised election debate, notably during the leaders' debate of 2 April, the challengers' debate of 16 April, and the *Question Time* of 30 April, political activity on Twitter shot up. The number of tweets published by political actors and influencers almost doubled on Thursday 2 April compared to the week previously – from an average of 23,000 to just under 45,000. Similar, if not quite as extreme, jumps happened on 16 and 30 April.

This intimate relationship between broadcast and Twitter is also apparent, to a lesser degree, on radio. When the Defence Secretary Michael Fallon re-asserted his claim that Ed Miliband would 'stab Britain in the back' over Trident on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme on Thursday 9 April, defence tweets more than tripled amongst political actors and influencers (2,034 tweets, compared to average 590 tweets per day).

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Conclusions

Twitter, while following rather than leading the campaign agenda, did to a large extent play a role in investigating factual claims by parties, news sources, and journalists. These observations have wide implications for British electoral politics for the next electoral cycle at the very least, and perhaps much longer. If social media continues to occupy a significant role in political communication, official claims by both parties and news outlets will be critiqued and – perhaps regularly – debunked, undermining trust and authority, but perhaps preventing the more transparent examples of spin. If political parties continue to view the expanded digital media landscape as necessitating damage-limiting and risk-averse campaigning, a long procession of dull campaigns may lie before the British electorate. Regardless, there will be a continuing need to monitor how politics, the media and the electorate interact in British politics, and emerging practices of digital news analysis – such as that we employed in the Election Unspun project – will play a vital role.

Overall, the data we generated during the Election Unspun project, as well as giving us concrete information on certain quantitative measures (mentions of parties and their leaders, policy issues covered, and so on), also allowed us to draw some broader conclusions about the 2015 General Election campaign as a whole. First and foremost, 2015 was an extremely risk-averse campaign. Candidates on social media were on a very tight rein, and the major parties at various times restricted journalistic, never mind public, access to their walkabouts, photo-ops and factory visits. Second, the dominance of the economy as the main policy issue across all news outlets benefited the Conservatives, whose party messages (posters, interviews, official Twitter feeds) were very keen to remain focused on that issue.

During the course of the General Election campaign we analysed hundreds of thousands of news articles and more than a million tweets. We could not have done this without digital analytics tools. The amount of digital content is only increasing. Whereas today we can justifiably still focus on national news sites and a sample of Twitter users, at the 2020 election there are likely to be many more platforms and channels we need to take into account.

We can build on our research model and start applying it to other elections within the UK and internationally, and specific policies, and other issues. How will the UK press cover the build-up to the UK's European referendum? How is the media and social media discussion of immigration evolving? Perhaps, if we can enhance the software in time, we could even take a shot at analysing the media and the November 2016 US election.

The statistics referenced in this report were collected by the authors as part of the Election Unspun project and have been published in Moore and Ramsay (2015) *UK election 2015: Setting the agenda*, Policy Institute: King's College London; and Moore et al (2015) *Election Unspun: Political parties, the press, and Twitter during the 2015 UK election campaign*, London: Media Standards Trust.

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