Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication record in King's Research Portal

Citation for published version (APA):
Political parties, the press, and Twitter during the 2015 UK election campaign
ELECTION UNSPUN

Political parties, the press, and Twitter during the 2015 UK election campaign
Until the eve of the vote itself we were told the 2015 UK General Election would be the closest in a generation. Up to the point when the exit poll was released at 10pm on 7 May almost everyone believed, on the basis of extensive polling, that the result would be a hung Parliament.

This was broadly what the parties believed before the official campaign started on Monday 30 May and, again based on polling results, what they believed up until Wednesday 6 May. Despite the carefully laid plans each party prepared (this was the first election in UK history where the date was known years in advance) the polls appeared not to shift in anyone’s favour.

This makes the story of the battle to control the election agenda during the campaign all the more fascinating. The apparent closeness meant that the smaller parties played a greater role than they had in previous contests. It led politicians to respond to perceived shifts in popular sentiment (like David Cameron becoming passionate). It led to a fixation with coalition deals in the press.

This report charts how the parties, the press, and political influencers sought to define the territory on which the election was fought, and how the parties responded when their detailed plans did not seem to work out.

Using data gathered during the campaign – upwards of 170,000 articles in traditional media and over a million tweets – this report examines the inter-relationship between the parties, traditional media, and social media over the official campaign, from 30 March to 6 May.

It captures the issues that were covered in traditional media and debated by political actors and influencers on Twitter – including the degree to which their two agendas coincided.

On both Twitter and traditional media, the report identifies themes that defined the campaign, such as the personalisation of coverage of the party leaders; the participation of the press, and the way in which the economy dominated the debate. It then contrasts these with the issues everyone expected to dominate debate but did not, such as the NHS and immigration.

It also looks at the political actors themselves – the candidates – and how they were using media to promote themselves and their policies. 397 Conservative candidates and 566 Labour candidates were tweeting during the campaign, as well as LibDems, Greens, and candidates from UKIP, the SNP and Plaid Cymru. All their tweets were captured and analysed for this report.

The 2015 election campaign was played out in the media to an extent not seen before – broadcast, press, online, blogs, and social media all featured both discussion of party policies and commentary on the ‘horse race’ of the campaign. Yet it was also a highly controlled campaign in which Parties, particularly the Conservatives, sought tight control of the debate. This report looks at how this played out.
METHODOLOGY

Over the course of the 2015 UK General Election campaign we collected online media content (text) from the national press and broadcasters, from political actors and influencers on Twitter, and from the political parties themselves.

NATIONAL PRESS AND BROADCASTERS

From the national press and broadcasters we collected the text from every article published online from sixteen news outlets from 5 January 2015 through to midnight on the 6 May, the day before the election:

- BBC: bbc.co.uk/news
- ITV: itv.com/news
- Channel 4: channel4.com/news
- Sky News: news.sky.com
- The Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday: dailymail.co.uk
- The Sun: thesun.co.uk
- The Daily Express and Sunday Express: express.co.uk
- The Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror and Sunday People: mirror.co.uk
- The Daily Star and Daily Star Sunday: dailystar.co.uk
- The Daily Telegraph and Sunday Telegraph: telegraph.co.uk
- The Times: themtimes.co.uk and Sunday Times: thesundaytimes.co.uk
- The Financial Times: ft.com
- The Independent and Independent on Sunday: independent.co.uk
- The Guardian and Observer: theguardian.com/uk
- The Huffington Post UK: huffingtonpost.co.uk
- Buzzfeed UK: buzzfeed.com/uk

This added up to about 30,000 articles each week. We then removed all articles that had no relevance to UK politics or public policy. We did this by removing certain sections of content (e.g. sport, recipes, crosswords) which we knew included no coverage of UK politics. This left us with around 7,000 articles each week to analyse.

To analyse these articles we tagged each of them based on their content. For example, we tagged any article that mentioned a Party Leader, or a Party, or a senior politician. We also tagged every policy mentioned within each article. We did this using the Ipsos-MORI Issues Index. This Index consists of a list of the 36 most important political issues facing the country according to the UK public. For our analysis, we have condensed these into 14 categories:

- Immigration
- Education/schools
- EU/Euro
- Transport/Public transport
- Local government/Council tax
- Devolution/Constitutional reform
- Fuel and energy
- Housing
- Welfare
- Crime/Law & order/Justice
- Health/NHS
- Economy
- Defence & Foreign Policy
- Environment
For our analysis of partisanship in the press we manually assessed every leader column and front page lead story in the press from 5 January to the election. For most of the mainstream media analysis we analysed content from the official campaign (30 March to 6 May).

**TWITTER**

For the period of the official UK election campaign – from 30 March until 6 May 2015 – we collected every tweet published by 3,290 political actors and influencers. Six groups made up these political actors and influencers:

1. Parliamentary candidates (incumbents): 460
2. Parliamentary candidates (challengers): 1,952
3. Political Influencers: 309
4. Social Policy Influencers: 268
5. Defence Policy Influencers: 150
6. Organisations (that publish UK politics news): 151

We collected the tweets using the Twitter public API and a scraping tool that we built called ‘Steno’. On average we were collecting around 25,000 tweets per day and over 170,000 tweets per week. In total, over the six week period, we collected more than a million tweets.

We collected the tweets in a structured way in order to analyse them. This meant collecting all the content and metadata available through the API, including: the content of the tweet itself; who published it; the time and date the tweet was published; retweets and favourites; hashtags and shortlinks.

We deliberately chose not to try to use Twitter as a proxy for public opinion, but rather to focus on political actors and influencers who were likely to be important participants in policy debates and who already had large followings. In addition to general political influencers we also chose to analyse two groups of specialist policy influencers – from highly distinct policy areas – social policy and defence policy.

We identified 460 incumbent Parliamentary candidates with Twitter accounts who were competing in the 2015 election. We discovered 1,952 candidates challenging for seats in the 2015 election (with the help of yournextmp.com).

To identify political influencers we developed a series of criteria: number of tweets; number of followers; number following; Klout score; and content of tweets. We developed these criteria both inductively (ie through observation, analysis of existing tweets on political topics and hashtags, and through analysis of dialogue and reference to authority), and by correlating this with existing Twitter lists of political influencers, for example from Tweetminster. We then reviewed the list by category to make sure we were not missing important constituencies of people.

Criteria for Political Influencers (PIs) were:

- Minimum of 1,000 tweets
- Minimum of 5,000 followers
- Minimum of 100 following
- Klout score > 55
- Tweets about UK politics

From this we created a list of 309 political influencers.

To construct our list of Social Policy Influencers we identified 268 Social Policy Influencers and 150 Defence Policy Influencers. The two groups did not overlap.

We also identified organisations that publish news about UK politics. These we divided into: think tanks, centres, universities, campaign groups and news publishers. We only included organisations that were actively broadcasting current news or other content related to UK politics and left out organisations whose Twitter accounts had been silent for quite some time. From this we identified 151 organisations that publish relevant UK politics news.

By focusing on specific types of people and organisations we avoided the difficulty that affects many Twitter analyses. We acknowledge – and fully accept – that this is not a representative sample of the population. Instead, we have made a deliberate choice to concentrate on opinion formers and agenda setters on Twitter.

We tagged every tweet according to the same criteria by which we tagged articles from the national press and broadcasters. For this we developed a dictionary of terms in order to help us describe policy areas or people. For example, when a tweet included the word “NHS,” it was tagged as Healthcare but when a tweet talked about “HSBC” was tagged as Economy. In order to group tweets according to recognized names, specific words, phrases, acronyms, and hashtags, we wrote and applied more than 267 pages of tagging scripts.

**POLITICAL PARTIES**

In addition to keeping track of the Political Parties agenda via the tweets of Parliamentary Candidates, other political actors, Parties and Party press offices on Twitter, we made an ongoing assessment of Party campaign agendas using openly available information on Party websites, Facebook pages, and YouTube broadcasts.

There were, in total, six researchers working on the collection and analysis of mainstream media, social media, and political party communication over the course of the 2015 UK election campaign.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday 30 March</td>
<td>Labour launch business manifesto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday 31 March</td>
<td>Conservatives set goal of 2m more jobs in next Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday 1 April</td>
<td>Miliband zero hours speech in Leeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday 2 April</td>
<td>Seven Leaders TV Debate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday 3 April</td>
<td>Labour launch business manifesto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday 4 April</td>
<td>Conservatives warn of £3,000 Labour tax bombshell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday 5 April</td>
<td>Labour launches business manifesto</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Press

- **Labour Will Raise Tax Bill By £3,000, Says Cameron**
  - *The Times*

- **They’re Off: With Row Over Tax And A Personal Attack**
  - *The Guardian*

- **Miliband Puts Clampdown On Zero-Hours At Heart Of Policy**
  - *FT*

- **Labour Fights Back On Tory Business Letter**
  - *The Guardian*

- **Oops! I [Miliband] Just Lost My Election**
  - *The Sun*

- **George Osborne announces ‘Hat trick of good news’ as economic recovery strengthens**
  - *The Express*

- **Red Ed’s Zero Hours Hypocrisy**
  - *The Telegraph*

- **Sturgeon’s Secret Backing For Cameron**
  - *The Daily Telegraph*

- **Tories Best For Workers, Say Voters**
  - *The Sunday Times*

- **Here’s our message to British business today: [link to FT ad]**
  - @Ed_MIliband

- **Hat trick of good news just out from ONS: GDP revised up, consumer confidence up, living standards up. LongTermEconomic Plan working**
  - @George_Osborne

- **Signatories to today’s Telegraph letter include 29 SMEs and collectively employ over half a million people in UK**
  - @CCHQPress

- **Cameron dodges bullet. Miliband flat. Sturgeon shines. Farage mad. Clegg half decent. Day out for Bennett/Wood**
  - @MattChorley

- **Labour’s got a better plan. We will raise the minimum wage**
  - @LabourPress

- **The cost of a Tory Chancellor – households £1100 a year worse off under Tories**
  - @Ed_Balls

- **Sunday Times front page: “Tories best for workers, say voters.” Actual poll results: [photo of results]**
  - @AdamBienkov

### Tweets

- **The IFS has debunked David Cameron’s claim that Labour would raise taxes by £3,000 http://ind.pn/1HX6XJJ**
  - @D_Blanchflower

- **Viewing Charlotte and Christian’s new @HelpToBuy home in Clipstone, Nottinghamshire**
  - @George_Osborne
CAMPAIGN THEME

Personalising the campaign

Both in the press and on Twitter, attention centred on party leaders in the first week and throughout the campaign.

Over 50% of tweets about the leaders in the first week were on the day of the debate. Mentions of Nicola Sturgeon increased by over forty times and then did not drop back to their pre-debate average.

Over the course of the campaign, David Cameron and Ed Miliband each received 30% of the coverage – on both mainstream media and amongst political actors and influencers on Twitter.
COVERAGE OF OTHER POLITICAL FIGURES

George Osborne received almost 50% more coverage on mainstream media than any other politician. He was also mentioned most amongst the Twitter actors and influencers, though more closely followed by Boris Johnson.

**Mainstream media**

- George Osborne: 4,442
- Ed Balls: 2,452
- Tony Blair: 2,323
- Alex Salmond: 1,206
- Boris Johnson: 3,214
- Gordon Brown: 557
- Margaret Thatcher: 866
- Russell Brand: 1,685
- Theresa May: 559
- Danny Alexander: 615

**Twitter**

- George Osborne: 1,069
- Ed Balls: 728
- Tony Blair: 552
- Alex Salmond: 519
- Boris Johnson: 468
- Gordon Brown: 447
- Margaret Thatcher: 391
- Russell Brand: 275
- Theresa May: 245
- Danny Alexander: 228

*Coverage from 5 January – 12 April*

**LEADERS AND TOPICS**

In mainstream media articles, all party leaders were most associated with the economy. After that, David Cameron and Ed Miliband were most associated with health, as were Natalie Bennett and Leanne Wood. Nick Clegg was most associated with education, Nigel Farage with immigration, and Nicola Sturgeon with defence/foreign policy.
PERSONALISATION OF LEADERS IN THE PRESS

From January 5 to April 12, the Daily Star, the Sun and Sky News have had the most personalised coverage of political parties. Reading 58% of articles in the Daily Star that mentioned a political party also referred to the leader. In the Sun 52% of articles that mentioned a party also mentioned its leader.
WEEK TWO WAS DOMINATED – AS WERE MOST WEEKS OF THE CAMPAIGN – BY DEBATE ABOUT THE ECONOMY

Labour briefly captured the agenda with Ed Miliband’s non-doms announcement on the Wednesday. By the weekend the Conservatives had regained the initiative in the press with their commitment to cut inheritance tax.

---

**Monday 6 April**

- Osborne hails ‘Pensions Freedoms day’

**Tuesday 7 April**

- Cameron tours all four UK nations in a day

**Wednesday 8 April**

- Miliband non-dom speech at Warwick University

**Thursday 9 April**

- George Osborne commits to 3m new apprenticeships in next Parliament

**Friday 10 April**

- Conservatives pledge £8bn for NHS

**Saturday 11 April**

- Labour commit to 3,000 more midwives

**Sunday 12 April**

- Conservatives pledge to cut inheritance tax on homes

---

**PRESS**

- *So not only is @TheSunNewspaper flat out for Cameron, it’s trying to force the BBC to follow its agenda. Crazy days* http://t.co/0DlfHOyaxD *– @peterjukes*

- *Miliband Raids Rich in Purge Of Non-Doms* The Times

- *Labour’s Toxic Embrace* The Telegraph

---

**TWEETS**

- *@Conservatives committed to increasing health spending in real terms by a minimum of £8 billion in next Parliament* @CCHQPress

- *It’s natural to want to pass the home you worked so hard for onto your children. My video on cutting inheritance tax* @David_Cameron

- *Miliband Vow To Ban Rules That Make UK “A Tax Haven For The Rich”* The FT

- *Tories: Give £1m To Your Children Tax-Free* The Daily Mail

---

**PARTIES**

- Labour

- Conservative

- Media

- Other

---

**WEEKEND 2**

- Week 2

---

**WEEKEND 2**

- Labour

- Conservative

- Media

- Other

---

**WEEKEND 2**

- Labour

- Conservative

- Media

- Other
CAMPAIGN THEME

The economy

“It’s the economy, stupid.” Throughout the campaign the economy was by far the most covered topic, and the most discussed political issue by candidates and political influencers on Twitter.

Mainstream media

Twitter

ECONOMY
Covered in 7,967 articles

ECONOMY
Covered in 105,512 tweets

COVERAGE OF POLITICAL ISSUES IN THE CAMPAIGN

Almost a third of policy debate on mainstream news and Twitter was about the economy. The next most covered policy was healthcare – mentioned in 19% of actor and influencer tweets, though only 11% of mainstream news coverage.

TWEETS ABOUT THE ECONOMY BY PARLIAMENTARY CANDIDATES

The focus on the economy was even greater amongst Conservative candidates. 56% of their political tweets were about the economy, as compared to 26% of tweets by UKIP candidates.
**Key Issues Covered within the Economy (Mainstream Media)**

“Spending cuts” was the most referenced economic issue every week of the campaign leading up to 7 May, followed by economic growth and cutting the deficit. Behind these were Labour policies on zero hours, mansion tax and non-doms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Mainstream Media</th>
<th>Twitter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spending cuts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic growth</td>
<td>1,351</td>
<td>1,012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutting the deficit</td>
<td>675</td>
<td>687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zero hour(s)</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>614</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax avoidance</td>
<td></td>
<td>352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mansion tax</td>
<td></td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-dom(s)</td>
<td></td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporation tax</td>
<td></td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic recovery</td>
<td></td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Popular Twitter Hashtags about the Economy**

Hashtags about the economy amongst these Twitter users differed from issues covered in mainstream media. #bedroomtax was discussed most amongst political actors and influencers, above Conservative hashtags like #securetherecovery and #longtermplan.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday 13 Apr</td>
<td>Labour manifesto launch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday 14 Apr</td>
<td>Conservative manifesto launch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday 15 Apr</td>
<td>LibDem manifesto launch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday 16 Apr</td>
<td>Challengers' debate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday 17 Apr</td>
<td>Miliband launches youth manifesto in Lincoln</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday 18 Apr</td>
<td>UKIP manifesto launch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Press**

**Labour**
- "My Pledge [Miliband]"
- "Maggie’s ‘Right To Buy’ Dream is Back"
- "Labour’s Big Promise: No Extra Borrowing"
- "No Ed For Business"
- "Labour’s guarantee: every policy is fully funded with not one requiring additional borrowing"

**Conservative**
- "Return Of The Good Life"
- "Cameron Banks On Thatcher’s Legacy"
- "Happy Ever Grafters"
- "Labour’s Queen of Hypocrisy"
- "Tories Too Right Wing To Win"

**Lib Dem**
- "Return Of The Good Life"
- "Cameron Banks On Thatcher’s Legacy"
- "Happy Ever Grafters"
- "Labour’s Queen of Hypocrisy"
- "Tories Too Right Wing To Win"

**UKIP**
- "‘We Are The True Party of Working People’"
- "‘Maggie’s “Right To Buy” Dream Is Back’"
- "‘My Pledge [Miliband]’"
- "‘We Are The True Party of Working People’"
- "‘Why I’m giving £1.3m to UKIP’"

**Other**
- "‘Rescue boats? I’d use gunships to stop migrants’"
- "‘No Ed For Business’"
- "‘Labour’s Big Promise: No Extra Borrowing’"
- "‘Labour’s guarantee: every policy is fully funded with not one requiring additional borrowing’"
Press partisanship was acute throughout the campaign – both in news and leader columns. Twitter partisanship was often characterised by a battle over hashtags.

**Mainstream media**

- Partisanship on Front Pages
  - Newspaper front pages were slightly more likely to be positive than negative. The Conservatives received the majority of positive front page splashes, while stories about Labour were more often negative.

**Twitter**

- TWEETING BY CANDIDATES AND PARTIES
  - Conservative candidates were less likely to tweet, tweeting less than four times a day. Cameron and Miliband regularly tweeted about five times a day, as compared to Natalie Bennett’s average of 19 tweets/day. The party press offices were very active on Twitter.

---

**CAMPAIGN THEME**

Partisanship

Press partisanship was acute throughout the campaign – both in news and leader columns. Twitter partisanship was often characterised by a battle over hashtags.
**PARTISAN HASHTAGS ON TWITTER**

Negative hashtags about the NHS stuck most to the Conservatives, while #sameoldlabour and #justnotuptoit stuck to Labour.

**PARTISANSHIP IN LEADER COLUMNS**

There were nearly three times as many positive leader columns for the Conservatives as for Labour. From January through May 2015 there was an average of almost three negative Labour leaders columns a day.
### IN WORLD NEWS

**A MIGRANT BOAT CAPSIZED IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND AN EARTHQUAKE IN NEPAL LEFT THOUSANDS DEAD AND HOMELESS**

Even ‘real news’ about migration did not significantly raise coverage of that issue in the campaign. Instead, the economy continued to dominate

---

### PRESS

- **Hundreds Fear Dead As Migrant Vessel Capsizes**
  - *The Guardian*
- **A Plea To Europe: Stop This Tide Of Death**
  - *The Independent*
- **Union’s Sinister Hold Over Miliband**
  - *The Daily Mail*
- **‘Voters Tell Cameron To Act On Migration’**
  - *The Daily Mail*
- **‘Milliband Will Bring Back Uncontrolled Migration’**
  - *The Daily Mail*
- **‘Miliband SNP Pact Would Cost Families £350 Each’**
  - *The Telegraph*
- **‘EU Vows To Capture And Destroy Trafficker Boats’**
  - *The Independent*
- **‘Labour’s £1,000 Tax On Families’**
  - *The Times*
- **‘Earthquake And Avalanche Leave At least 1,300 Dead’**
  - *The Sunday Telegraph*

---

### TWEETS

- **‘Yikes! “Sturgeon makes bid to “lead the UK” with string of policies that overlap with Labour” – Daily Mail http://bit.ly/2qZ9iJpp’**
  - @GregHands
- **‘Satisfaction with government on immigration at lowest point since 2007 https://t.co/fbyRTtmmr’**
  - @bobbyipossMORI
- **‘No, @Independent, the @BBCNewnight of Nicola #Sturgeon as Kim Kardashian is not “amazing”, it’s “disgusting misogyny” #SNP’**
  - @LouiseMensch
- **‘Rupert Murdoch “berated” Sun journalists to go harder on Miliband and easier on Cameron. Independent.co.uk’**
  - @AdamBienkov
- **‘My pedometer says I walked 10.1 miles yesterday campaigning up and down in Islington & Battersea. Tired today “pours 3rd cup of tea”’**
  - @EmilyThornberry
- **‘What motivates UKIP voters in Con-held UKIP targets? New ComRes/ITV News poll finds immigration top reason’**
  - @Andrew_ComRes
- **‘When it comes to deals with the SNP, @Ed_Miliband’s got form’**
  - @CCHQPress

---

### WEEK 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday 20 April</th>
<th>Tuesday 21 April</th>
<th>Wednesday 22 April</th>
<th>Thursday 23 April</th>
<th>Friday 24 April</th>
<th>Saturday 25 April</th>
<th>Sunday 26 April</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SNP manifesto launch</td>
<td>John Major on lack of passion in Conservative campaign</td>
<td>Cameron and Boris Johnson promote 30 hours free childcare commitment</td>
<td>Labour unveils new campaign posters on NHS</td>
<td>Miliband foreign policy speech (Chatham House)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cameron in Yeovil – “Let’s finish what we’ve begun”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour launch disabilities manifesto</td>
<td></td>
<td>Milliband Manchester speech on NHS crisis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lib Dem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UKIP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**PARTIES**

- **SNP**
- **Labour**
- **Conservative**
- **Lib Dem**
- **UKIP**
- **SNP**
- **Media**
- **Other**

---

**TWEETS**

- **‘I’ve got the Chicken vote in Southoe’**
  - @JDjanogly
- **‘Satisfaction with government on immigration at lowest point since 2007 https://t.co/fbyRTtmmr’**
  - @bobbyipossMORI
- **‘No, @Independent, the @BBCNewnight of Nicola #Sturgeon as Kim Kardashian is not “amazing”, it’s “disgusting misogyny” #SNP’**
  - @LouiseMensch
- **‘Rupert Murdoch “berated” Sun journalists to go harder on Miliband and easier on Cameron. Independent.co.uk’**
  - @AdamBienkov
- **‘My pedometer says I walked 10.1 miles yesterday campaigning up and down in Islington & Battersea. Tired today “pours 3rd cup of tea”’**
  - @EmilyThornberry
- **‘What motivates UKIP voters in Con-held UKIP targets? New ComRes/ITV News poll finds immigration top reason’**
  - @Andrew_ComRes
- **‘When it comes to deals with the SNP, @Ed_Miliband’s got form’**
  - @CCHQPress
Immigration, despite being one of the top three concerns of the public according to opinion polls, was the fifth most written about issue in mainstream media, and was hardly tweeted about by candidates.

Even when immigration was a central topic in the challengers debate, and was discussed across Europe following a migrant tragedy in the Mediterranean, Conservative and Labour candidates hardly mentioned immigration. All Conservative candidates combined tweeted, on average, a total of 14 tweets a day on immigration. Overall, political actors and influencers were tweeting over 460 times a day about immigration.
WHO COVERED WHAT (MAINSTREAM MEDIA)

The economy was the most covered political issue on every traditional news outlet. No mainstream media outlet devoted more than 6% of its policy coverage to the environment or more than 3% to transport.

PROPORTION OF CANDIDATE TWEETS ON IMMIGRATION, HEALTH AND ECONOMY

UKIP candidates were more than five times more likely to tweet about immigration than Conservative or Labour candidates. All party candidates were more likely to tweet about health than the Conservatives, with the exception of the SNP.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday 4 May</td>
<td>Delia Smith endorses Labour party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday 5 May</td>
<td>Gordon Brown speaks to voters in Scotland, urging them to choose Labour over SNP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday 6 May</td>
<td>Cameron speaks at Conservative rally in Carlisle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday 7 May</td>
<td>Miliband speaks at Labour rally in Leeds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Labour Conservative Media UKIP Other**

**THE FINAL DAYS**

**ELECTION DAY**

- "Issue-by-issue, vote-by-vote" – that’s how the SNP will hold Ed Miliband to ransom. Youtube @CCHQPress
- "In less than 48 hours, the polls will open and we can choose to build a country that works for all working people, not just a few at the top" @Ed_Miliband
- "@RobDotHutton Can you help. Know I cannot use knife edge too close to call, neck and neck and closest election for generation. What else" @PatrickWintour
- "@nick_clegg confirms LibDems will deal with whichever party wins the most seats & votes" @BBCr4today
- "The 100,000 Voters Who Could Win Tories Power" The Telegraph
- "A Vote For Ukip "Is A Suicide Note For Britain"" The Telegraph
- "Cameron And Clegg Prepared To Move Quickly To Form Coalition" FT
- "Ed: Nurses Face Axe At 66% Of Hospitals" The Mirror
- "Save Our Bacon" The Sun
- "Why You Must Vote For UKIP" The Express

**PARTIES**

- Delia Smith endorses Labour party
- Gordon Brown speaks to voters in Scotland, urging them to choose Labour over SNP
- Cameron speaks at Conservative rally in Carlisle
- Miliband speaks at Labour rally in Leeds

**PRESS**

- "The 100,000 Voters Who Could Win Tories Power" The Telegraph
- "A Vote For Ukip "Is A Suicide Note For Britain"" The Telegraph
- "Cameron And Clegg Prepared To Move Quickly To Form Coalition" FT
- "Ed: Nurses Face Axe At 66% Of Hospitals" The Mirror
- "Save Our Bacon" The Sun
- "Why You Must Vote For UKIP" The Express

**TWEETS**

- "@CCHQPress"
- "@Ed_Miliband"
- "@RobDotHutton"
- "@nick_clegg"
- "@BBCr4today"
SNP and polling

The SNP was the ‘bogeyman’ of the 2015 campaign in the UK press.

MENTIONS OF STURGEON IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA AND ON TWITTER

By the end of the campaign Nicola Sturgeon was being mentioned in, on average, over 130 news articles a day, and in over 1,200 tweets by political actors and influencers.

POSITIVE VS NEGATIVE LEADER COLUMNS ABOUT THE SNP

Of 59 leader columns in the national press about the SNP during the 2015 election campaign, only one was positive (not including Scottish editions).
YouGov, Survation and ComRes were the most referenced polling companies in the press and amongst political actors and influencers. Neither they nor their competitors correctly predicted the election result.

On average there were 230 articles referring to polling companies each week during the campaign and over 1,700 tweets referring to polling companies by political actors and influencers.

YouGov, Survation and ComRes were the most referenced polling companies in the press and amongst political actors and influencers. Neither they nor their competitors correctly predicted the election result.
Based on percentage vote share, the Conservatives did not receive as much coverage as they might have expected, and the LibDems received more.

UK 2015 GENERAL ELECTION RESULT
The Conservatives won a majority with 331 seats (including the Speaker’s seat) and 36.9% of the vote.

CUMULATIVE PARTY COVERAGE – MAINSTREAM MEDIA AND TWITTER
The Liberal Democrats received 73% more coverage in the press than their share of the vote.
Mainstream media agenda vs Twitter

Mainstream media agenda and Twitter agenda (for political actors and influencers) follow similar profiles:

**Mainstream media & Twitter**

**THE ECONOMY – MSM VS TWITTER**
Interest in the economy on Twitter peaked during TV debates, while mainstream media was more interested in manifesto launches. Otherwise, the topography of each is similar.

**NHS – MSM VS TWITTER**
As with the economy, discussion of the NHS on Twitter mapped relatively closely to discussion of the NHS in mainstream media, except when the manifests were published in week three.
FOREIGN POLICY AND DEFENCE – MSM VS TWITTER

Discussion of foreign policy and defence peaked on 9 April when Michael Fallon accused Ed Miliband of being a ‘Backstabber’ and attacked his policy on Trident. Further spikes occurred during the challengers debate and SNP manifesto launch.

EDUCATION – MSM VS TWITTER

Education rarely rose to be a major campaign issue. Twitter peaked briefly during the leaders debate. Mainstream media interest focused on education commitments in the manifestos.
CAMPAIGN THEME

Sources of authority on Twitter

Candidates were as likely as political influencers to link out, though more likely simply to retweet.

**CANDIDATES LINKING ON TWITTER**
Candidates linked out from 33% of their tweets. Of these, about one in five links were to articles on national news websites. Almost 60% of candidates tweets were retweets.

**WHERE CANDIDATES LINKED TO FROM TWITTER**
Parliamentary candidates were more than twice as likely to link out to Twitter, YouTube and Facebook than to the Guardian, the BBC and the Independent.

**CANDIDATES LINKING ON TWITTER**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Links to social media site</th>
<th>Links to party-affiliated site</th>
<th>Links to MSM article</th>
<th>Contains short links</th>
<th>Total tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>273,700</td>
<td>9,013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC News</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4,122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2,392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telegraph</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3,556</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirror</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2,739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Mail</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2,407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1,709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITV News</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1,416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HuffPo UK</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1,334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Times</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>727</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>16,859</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC News</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15,585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10,893</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telegraph</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5,593</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirror</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3,465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Mail</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3,283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITV News</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2,931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HuffPo UK</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2,779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Times</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>780</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Where political influencers linked to from Twitter

The Guardian, The BBC and the Telegraph were the most linked to national news sources. Twitter and YouTube were the most linked to social media sites.
Growing hurdles for challengers

Many constituencies were not reported in mainstream media over the long campaign. Twitter followings have yet to provide much exposure to local candidates, particularly challengers.

**COVERAGE OF CONSTITUENCIES IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA**

194 constituencies received three mentions or fewer from 5 January to 19 April 2015 in national online news sites. 54 constituencies received no coverage at all.

**FINAL RESULTS**

**Political influencers**

80,116 followers

**Candidates (incumbents)**

14,377

**Candidates (challengers)**

1,955

*Based on all articles from 16 UK national online news outlets from 5 January – 19 April 2015.

**TWITTER FOLLOWERS – INCUMBENTS, CHALLENGERS AND INFLUENCERS**

Incumbents have, on average, seven times more Twitter followers than challengers.

Political influencers have about five times more followers than incumbents.

**CAMPAIGN THEME**

Election Unspun
The 2015 UK General Election campaign was fought over the economy. During every week of the six-week official campaign the economy dominated debate on national news websites and amongst political actors and influencers on Twitter. There were occasions when other issues gained brief prominence – such as Trident, prompted by the SNP, and Michael Fallon’s attack on Ed Miliband – but the focus always reverted back to the economy within a day or two.

The economy was also the terrain on which the Conservatives sought to win the election. From the first day of the official campaign they issued a series of statements extolling their own handling of the economy (deficit halved, 2m more people in work, apprenticeships doubled), criticizing Labour’s economic record (#sameoldLabour, #justnotuptoit) and making financial commitments should they be elected (£8bn to the NHS, right-to-buy, inheritance tax cut). These messages were communicated consistently by the party leadership, the party press office and by the candidates themselves. 55% of political tweets by Conservative candidates were about the economy.

These Conservative messages were then reported regularly and sympathetically by many national newspapers. The Times led the campaign with the Conservatives’ claim of a ‘Labour tax bombshell’. It went even further later, declaring that a Labour government would mean an extra ‘£1,000 tax on families’ (subsequently found to be incorrect). The Telegraph pressed the message that both business chiefs and small businesses supported the Conservatives.

The Labour leader, Ed Miliband, tried to fight the campaign largely on the same economic territory. He, and the shadow Chancellor Ed Balls, attempted to counter the Conservatives’ economic commitments with ones of their own: on zero-hours employment; on cancelling non-dom status; by promising no extra borrowing. The leadership, however, were not as single-minded as the Conservatives, talking about Labour’s commitment to young people, to the disabled, on crime and justice, and on the NHS. Neither were Labour candidates as disciplined on Twitter as their Conservative counterparts, tweeting about subjects other than the economy (44%) such as health (25%).

The press were also far less sympathetic to Labour’s messages on the economy. For each positive front page about Labour there were two negative. ‘Miliband puts clamp-down on zero hours at heart of policy’ the Financial Times led with on Wednesday 1 April. The following day the Daily Mail’s front page read ‘Red Ed’s Zero Hours Hypocrisy’. Leader columns in the press were harder still on Labour. For every positive leader column there were almost four negative.

Immigration, which was expected to be a leading campaign issue, rarely featured prominently. Even when UKIP’s leader Nigel Farage provoked other challengers on the issue in the televised debate on Thursday 16 April, it did not excite broader discussion. Nor did it when a migrant boat capsized in the Mediterranean days later. Tweets about immigration by Conservative and Labour candidates hardly increased on both occasions.

The negative coverage in the press, of all parties but particularly of Labour, was often highly personal. 52% of political articles in The Sun mentioned not just the party but the party leader. Just under half of those in The Mirror did the same.

CONCLUSION
On Twitter, the political agenda – as represented by 3,290 political actors and influencers – mapped surprisingly closely to the agenda on national news sites (as shown by the timelines on pages 46–49). Where there were discrepancies they were often connected to television – Twitter and TV appear to have a symbiotic relationship – or to set piece events; the press tended to be more interested in manifesto launches for example.

Although Twitter did not lead the party or press agenda, it often subverted it. When papers gave a misleading impression of polls, political influencers on Twitter pointed people to the actual results. When the Conservatives announced their ‘right-to-buy’ commitment it was challenged and deconstructed within hours by policy specialists on Twitter. When The Telegraph published a letter from 5,000 small businesses supporting the Conservatives, political influencers on Twitter discovered and publicized the news that the letter had been engineered by the Conservatives. They then helped orchestrate fact-checking of the signatories. When Ed Miliband unveiled his 8-foot ‘pledge stone’ it was mocked and ridiculed by influencers on Twitter.

This appeared to be where Twitter was at its most powerful in this election, in critiquing and puncturing the claims of political parties and mainstream media. This was not, however, how most candidates used it. Most simply used Twitter as a means to communicate their parties’ core messages rather than as a means of dialogue or to develop a personal following.

The SNP played a critical role throughout the campaign, though Nicola Sturgeon came to particular prominence following the leaders debate on Thursday 2 April. Tweets about the SNP leader amongst actors and influencers leapt forty-fold that day and never returned to their pre-debate level. The Daily Mail then led the demonization of Sturgeon with its front page on Saturday 4 April – ‘The Most Dangerous Woman in Britain’. 58 of 59 leader columns in the UK national press about the SNP during the official campaign were negative.

As the first UK election where the date was known years in advance, 7 May 2015 was bound to be carefully planned by the parties; and it was. The Conservatives were particularly well prepared and reiterated a series of messages about the economy constantly and repetitively. Labour succeeded in grabbing the agenda on occasion, most notably on non-doms, but found itself always fighting the campaign on Conservative territory.

Towards the end of the campaign national news sites and influencers on Twitter became focused on the likelihood of a hung parliament, the various potential coalitions this could lead to, and the role of the SNP. Over the final ten days there were over 400 articles referring to polling companies on national news sites.

Yet in the end the result was far simpler. The Conservatives won a majority and formed the new government. Few in the press or on Twitter predicted such an outcome before 7 May.
ENDNOTES AND FURTHER RESEARCH

All the data for the Election Unspun weekly analyses and the four specials can be found online at electionunspun.net

We will be publishing further research examining who set the agenda for the 2015 UK election campaign that will look in more depth at the communication of specific issues and the dynamics of the relationship between the Parties, mainstream media and Twitter.

For further analysis of media coverage see the work of Cardiff University (JOMEC), Bournemouth University, and the Loughborough University General Election 2015 study.

If you would like to get in touch regarding this or future research please contact Martin Moore at martinj.moore@kcl.ac.uk