

"IS THIS NEWS TO YOU, PRIME MINISTER?"

MEDIA AGENDAS, NEWS MANAGEMENT AND A CAMPAIGN INTERACTION IN THE 2005 UK GENERAL ELECTION JEREMY COLLINS

Abstract

This paper presents a specific case study – a “campaign interaction” between the prime minister and a member of the public during a live BBC TV general election debate – in order to examine a number of issues around concerns over the “crisis in public communication” and political control of news information flows. In a wider political sense this episode, in which Tony Blair seemed to be unprepared for a question about family doctor appointment times, was a relatively minor element of a general election campaign dominated by issues such as asylum policy and the Iraq war. Nevertheless, analysis of the ensuing news coverage suggests that election news agendas can be diverted away (at least temporarily) from the planned communications of political agents towards issues and themes publicised by non-official, non-expert sources, while also illustrating the ultimate reliance of the media on those official accredited sources. The role of the BBC in the case study also raises the issue of its position as a public service broadcaster, and the interaction between press and broadcasting in British political news coverage.

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Introduction

The UK General Election of 2005 was considered by many to be a predictable and rather dull campaign (BBC News website 4 May 2005) as the Labour party led by Tony Blair again won a substantial majority, in line with virtually all opinion polls and almost exactly reflecting the results projected by the “exit polls” broadcast at the close of polling on election day. Such criticisms have been made against most recent general election campaigns and have often emphasised the control of the politicians (Seymour-Ure 2002, 127) and the failures of the media to control the agenda (Norris et al 1999, 17). In 1997, Labour’s “near-robotic incantation” of their key messages, themes and slogans (p. 53) were considered to be evidence of a determination to remain resolutely “on message.”

The political parties attempt to control the election agenda through a variety of strategies that include advertising, photo opportunities, sound bites and the daily press conference (Franklin 2004, 132).¹ Margaret Thatcher’s 1979 general election photo opportunity with a new-born calf (Watts 1997, 191) is considered by some to be a pivotal moment in modern political marketing (Cockerell 2005),² Wring’s history of the Labour party’s political communications suggests however that the photo opportunity can be traced back to the earliest decades of the twentieth century at least (Wring 2005, 31).

The “permanent campaigning” of modern politics (Cockerell et al 1985, 189; Palmer 2002, 351), along with evidence that political opinions and attitudes tend to remain fairly stable over time (Norris et al 1999, 170-1) support the argument that general election campaigns have little effect on voting behaviour (Davis 2002, 9). Nevertheless, the resources which the main parties put in to their campaigns illustrate the importance they attach to the four weeks leading up to a general election, “arguably the most contested time for both citizens and elites to access news space” (Cushion et al 2006, 46). The campaigns may not produce clear effects in terms of voting behaviour or political attitudes, but the parties’ intense focus on news management suggests that they at least consider the campaign period to be of crucial importance (Norris et al 1999, 171).

In 2001, politicians and journalists were concerned that news audiences were turned off (and were turning off) election coverage (Coleman 2002, 731; Deacon et al 2001, 105), even while it presented politics “mediated as performance rather than policy” (p. 113). In terms of media analysis, this assessment might be argued to underline the control over the media agenda that is exercised by the party communications machines. It has been argued that the “sultans of spin” (Jones 1999) manipulate the media coverage of politics to the extent that journalists become “adjuncts to media campaigns by politicians” (Cockerell et al 1985, 248). The political agenda thus becomes an elite agenda with little input from the “ordinary citizen” (Cushion et al 2006, 44) and the democratic role of the media becomes seriously compromised. Others have argued, adopting a form of Habermas’s “refeudalisation thesis” (Habermas 1989; Stevenson 1995, 50), that “public relations and advertising increasingly dominate public discourse and structure political communications” (Brookes et al 2004, 74), thereby raising questions about the extent to which media representations of the public contribute to public discourse, or merely reinforce existing power structures.

Such concerns also arise in the context of a recent shift in political allegiances among British newspapers. While arguably the most significant of the changes was *The Sun's*³ switch to support new Labour in 1997, other changes have also emerged. However, the ways in which such support has been expressed has led both journalists and academics to argue that this shift represents a “dealignment rather than re-alignment” (Scammell and Harrop 2002, 154) as the support is argued to be often tentative and heavily qualified. It is also characterised as a “conversation rather than an endorsement” (Seymour-Ure 2002, 124); a shift towards Blair rather than the Labour Party (Franklin 2004, 142) and as such subject to reappraisal according to policy shifts and personnel changes. Seymour-Ure suggests this attitude was evident in the “reservations and hesitations” in the newspapers’ final election day editorials (2002, 137).

This has led to a reassertion by some analysts of the relative autonomy of the British press (Norris et al 1999, 83), while others suggest it has led to the Labour government seeking the approval and acquiescence of the tabloid press in particular in the field of media policy (Franklin 2004, 63-4).

Brookes et al (2004)’s study of the representation of public opinion discusses the role played by interactions between members of the public and politicians. While they argue that during the 2001 election these “campaign interactions” were a relatively minor form of (media representation of) “public opinion,” they nevertheless concede that two such encounters became “defining moments of the campaign” (2004, 66). They dismiss the coverage of the 2001 campaign interactions due to its emphasis on the exceptional and “irrational” aspects of the events in question. The first concerned deputy Prime Minister John Prescott throwing a punch at a protester who had thrown an egg at him; the second was the “haranguing” of Tony Blair by a member of the public, Sharon Storrer, at the entrance to a Birmingham hospital, on the topic of the National Health Service and its treatment of her partner (a cancer patient at the hospital) (2004, 76). The “fervour and frequency” of the coverage that these events received supplanted the launch of the Labour manifesto in the news (pp. 75-6; Butler and Kavanagh 2002, 96) and can arguably be understood to reflect a journalistic consensus that such episodes reveal some underlying symbolic truth about the campaign. Sabato suggests that such a “subtext” can lead to journalists emphasising such events out of proportion to their formal news value, thus “validating” their pre-existing perceptions (Sabato 1993, 71, cited in Palmer 2002, 356). Thus the aggressive elements of these two campaign interactions may be understood by journalists as revealing an underlying discontent with Labour which may not be evident either in opinion polls or in the traditional forms of election news coverage. Indeed, Norris has suggested that Storrer’s concerns about the National Health Service (NHS) highlighted the wider failures (due to over-caution) of Labour’s first term, and thus represented the “pervasive sentiment” of the election (Norris 2001, 6).

For Brookes et al, the focus in the coverage on the “spectacular” situate these interactions in the realm of the “ritual” pretence of citizen involvement in public debate (2004, 76).⁴ Nevertheless, they acknowledge that (in principle, at least), such events “offered the space for the unscripted expression of public opinion” (p. 76).

During the 2005 election another campaign interaction between the Prime Minister and a member of the public was captured by the TV cameras which, in

itself, was a relatively minor episode in terms of its political impact. Certainly it was considered to be “one of the most memorable moments of the campaign” in terms of its entertainment value (Battle 2005, 53); however, its wider significance can be found in the way it illustrates both the possibilities for, and limits of such interventions in the controlled agendas of the political campaign managers.

Part of the modern election agenda (Franklin 2004, 148) is the questioning of party leaders both by media interviewers and directly by audience members.⁵ In his discussion of the 1992 US presidential campaign, Sabato suggests that the appearance of candidates on TV to answer “issue-oriented questions” from voters was a positive development, providing a contrast with the “horserace” perspective of many reporters and promoting a limited kind of “talk show democracy” (Sabato 1993, 249–50). Livingstone and Lunt similarly suggest that such participation can provide a “challenge to expertise” (1994, 98) which can go “beyond the rules of professional interviewing” (p. 57).

In the 2005 general election, such media appearances included the BBC’s *Question Time: Leaders Special* in which the leaders of the three main parties were questioned by a studio audience under the chairmanship of David Dimbleby⁶.

A Campaign Interaction – *Question Time: Leaders Special*

As part of the usual format of the programme (outside election time), the producers of the long running BBC current affairs programme *Question Time* ask studio audience members to suggest questions for the guests on the major political issues of the day, and the most interesting or relevant questions are then selected by the producers to be asked. David Dimbleby, as presenter, calls on each of the questioners in turn, and the answers are then followed by a more “open” discussion in which other members of the studio audience ask “follow up” questions. Usually, a panel of five guests (including politicians, usually from the three main parties – depending on the location of the programme – and one or two “non-party political” celebrity guests) are invited to respond to the studio audience’s questions. However, the *leaders special* on 28 April 2005 – a week before the election – took each leader in turn for around 30 minutes each beginning with Charles Kennedy (leader of the Liberal Democrat Party) followed by Michael Howard (leader of the Conservative Party) and finally Tony Blair⁷. The issue of GP (family doctor)’s appointments was raised following a scheduled question about “new stealth taxes.” This initial question was followed up by others in the studio asking about the funding of the health service and hospital waiting times, and eventually led to Dimbleby (apparently at random) inviting a question from a man who asked why he was unable to book an appointment with his GP a week in advance. He was told, he said, that this was in order to meet the government-set target to see all patients within 48 hours. Blair replied by saying he was “absolutely astonished” by this, and suggested that it was surely not the case that the surgery would force patients to make appointments earlier than they need. The woman sitting next to the original questioner (apparently his wife/partner, and later identified in the press as Diana Church) then took up the point, explaining that their GP’s surgery only allows appointments to be made 48 hours in advance. At this point, Dimbleby asked Blair “Is this news to you?,” to which Blair replied, “I have to say that is news to me....”

Blair seemed to be unclear precisely what the problem was, and expressed disbelief that the GP might “force” patients to book appointments earlier than they were required. As other members of the studio audience reported similar experiences, Blair said he would “look into that.”

The Televisual Context

Street argues that in order to understand modern political communications, it is necessary to understand the wider context of “popular forms of communication generally” (Street 2001, 206). For our purposes this suggests a need to examine the way in which politics is presented via particular media institutions and formats. *Question Time* represents a key element of the BBC’s conception of itself as a public service broadcaster, whereby members of political (and other) elites are invited to answer questions and discuss issues raised by a self-selected, but roughly representative public audience. The interactive nature of programmes such as these has been argued to be a positive contribution to “democratic accountability” in the UK (Coleman 2002, 741) and elsewhere (Sabato 1993, 250), potentially providing the site of a form of public sphere which might help dispel cynicism about the impartiality of the media (Ross 2004, 786). Indeed, Cushion et al’s study of local newspaper coverage of the 2005 UK general election notes how the programme became a relatively unusual source for discussions on topics other than the personality or campaign coverage which is more common, thus becoming an “intervention in the elite agenda” (2006, 49). In the BBC’s own words, the programme has, for over 25 years, been “offering British voters a unique opportunity to quiz top decision-makers on the events of the day.” (BBC *Question Time* website, 2005).

The almost constant pressures on the BBC to justify its unique position, and the “dilemmas of ‘public service’” (Crisell 1997, 109) mean that the BBC has always needed to combine popular programming with more “worthy” material (especially news and current affairs) which can be seen to serve the public without necessarily gaining large audiences. Indeed, the BBC defends such programming by pointing not so much to its audience share at any particular time but by its “reach” – how many people see some part of the series – over the course of its run (Docherty 1996, 67). Recent debates, for instance, around the fate of *Panorama*, BBC One’s “flagship” current affairs programme, highlight the extent to which this issue is currently a major concern for the BBC.⁸ *Question Time*’s relatively prominent scheduling (Thursday 10:35pm) suggests that while its public service remit remains, there is also likely to be some pressure to find and maintain a substantial audience.

During a general election, the BBC’s political output takes on an even greater importance as it plays a role in the election of a new government. Negrine quotes a senior BBC figure who, in discussing media election coverage in the 1980’s, argues that it is not the BBC’s job to set the terms of the political agenda or to raise issues of its own, but rather to adopt a less active approach: “Our job as public service broadcasters is to reflect the continuing debate, to help the public understanding” (Alan Protheroe, quoted in Negrine 1994, 165).

Such an attitude reflects what has been characterised as a “sacerdotal orientation” to the electoral process (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, 117–118) among public service broadcasters. As Negrine suggests, this raises the question of the extent to which the political debates within programmes such as *Question Time* are ef-

fectively controlled by an agenda set by the parties themselves. It is certainly the case that in all such interview situations, the party communications experts will attempt to construct the process in the interests of the politicians. Brendan Bruce, as a former adviser to Mrs Thatcher, describes a crucial five-stage process in which a media “bid” for an interview is subjected to assessment and negotiation, before the interviewee is briefed, rehearsed and (post-interview) appraised (Bruce 1992, 162-3). The negotiation element of the process might well involve discussions with the broadcaster concerning location, timing and studio setting; however, in the case of *Question Time: Leaders Special*, it would perhaps have been difficult for any of the politicians involved to decline the invitation.

The Campaign Interaction as Election News

Question Time: Leaders Special was not the first time the GP appointments issue had found its way onto the media agenda. On 27 July 2000 the Department of Health published the NHS Plan, a wide-ranging programme for the “reform” of the NHS (NHS Plan 2000). The NHS plan set out various reforms including changes to GPs contracts and various targets for different parts of the health service. Clause 12.6 of the plan says that “By 2004, patients will be able to see a primary care professional within 24 hours, and a GP within 48 hours” (NHS Plan 2000, 102). There was immediate criticism of the details of the plan from doctors, usually presented by the British Medical Association (BMA) (particularly at their annual conference) and reported in the media. In July 2003 for instance, the *Mirror* reported the criticisms of BMA Chairman Dr Ian Bogle that targets are set without any understanding of their consequences and that they reflected the governments “paranoid centralism” and “corporate bullying” (Palmer 2003). However, the views of the BMA’s GP committee could be characterised as those of a vested interest, despite its influence as a (usually) highly credible news source.⁹ Following Thursday’s *Question Time Leaders Special*, the national morning newspapers had little to say about the issue of GP appointments. The *Daily Express*, for instance had 3 pages (including page one) on “Blair’s lies” focusing on the aftermath of the Iraq war, but no mention of GP appointments. A number of the newspapers (*Independent*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Mail*) carried what were effectively (if not expressly) TV reviews of *Question Time*, with the *Guardian* dedicating two paragraphs to the GP appointments issue. Only the *Daily Telegraph* led an article with the issue (“Blair learns of ‘absurd’ appointment rules for GPs,” 29 April 2005), describing the Prime Minister’s “severe grilling” which revealed his “ignorance of the contemporary National Health Service.” Like most of the other newspaper coverage on 29 April, this was really no more than a summary of the programme, covered as part of the general election coverage rather than as a news item in its own right. The key focus for the newspapers that did highlight the interaction was that the GP appointments issue was important mainly in illustrating how Blair was “out of touch” and “did not understand” (*Times*); that he “did not seem to have a clue” (*Daily Mail*). Despite the newspapers’ apparent lack of interest, BBC radio 4’s *Today* programme (itself a bastion of the BBC’s current affairs output) interviewed Diana Church, and the story was followed up on both TV news bulletins and news websites throughout Friday, 29 April. It was the lead story for the BBC at lunchtime, and by mid-afternoon both the *Times* (“U-turn over GP appointments”) and *Guardian* (“Minister defends 48-hour GP target”) websites

were following suit. By 4pm BBC radio *Five Live* were calling the story “the election story of the day” (*Five Live Drive*, 29 April 2005).

On Saturday 30 April eight national newspapers produced a total of 16 articles (over 8000 words) including three leader editorials on the issue. The next day produced five articles in four newspapers, and two more in each of the following two days. The Saturday coverage is notable not just for its volume but for its sources. It is unsurprising, particularly a week before an election, that politicians are referred to in the coverage, and Conservative and Liberal Democrat representatives do appear as opposition sources. Other major sources referred to and quoted are medical organisations such as the Kings Fund, the Royal College of General Practitioners and, principally, the BMA in the form of GP committee chairman Hamish Meldrum. Meldrum had been a key source in news coverage of the issue prior to Diana Church’s intervention on *Question Time*, and it is therefore again unsurprising that journalists turned to the BMA as the issue resurfaced. Nevertheless, this reliance on routine, accredited, institutionalised sources can also be seen as limiting the ways in which the issue might be addressed in that non-official, non-accredited perspectives become marginalised.

Widening the Debate?

Diana Church’s contribution to *Question Time Leaders Special* was certainly passionate, perhaps angry. It could not however be described as violent. It is comparable with Sharon Storrer’s 2001 confrontation with Blair outside the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, but the structured environment of the BBC studio debate provided a rather different context. Where Storrer could be marginalised in subsequent media coverage as an irrational, spectacular interruption in the smooth running of the Labour campaign in 2001, the legitimacy of Church’s question on GP appointments could not be so easily minimised. In highlighting an apparently irrational outcome of government policy, Church could be seen to adopt a clearly “rational” position, despite her apparently personal experience of the unfairness of the system. Presented in the programme as an anonymous member of the public, she could not easily be characterised as biased or unqualified to comment, and as Watts suggests, questions from members of the public cannot be “disdained” in the way those of professional media interviewers might be (1997, 184).¹⁰ The subsequent press coverage (which to some extent relied on her to personify the issue) similarly lacked any reference to political or interest group allegiances that might provide evidence of her lack of source credibility.¹¹ Indeed, she was for instance referred to by the *Daily Express* as a “40-year-old chartered accountant” illustrating her independent, professional status (*Daily Express*, 30 April 2005). I would also argue that the scope of the subsequent coverage illustrates that in this “campaign interaction,” an “unscripted expression of public opinion” was (if briefly) allowed to generate relatively sympathetic media coverage. The two “spectacular” campaign interactions in the 2001 election (Blair’s haranguing by Sharon Storrer, and Prescott’s response to an egg throwing protester) highlighted by Brookes et al (2004) were newsworthy primarily for the way in which they departed from the usual “script” of the campaign process (p. 76). However, no substantial policy debates arose from them, and this paradoxically only underlines their part in the continued media focus on the election “process,” in which the emphasis is on the way in which the campaign is being conducted (or, occasionally, disrupted).

One study puts the amount of such “process” coverage in the 2001 election as high as 45% (Deacon et al 2001, 107). This emphasis on the election process rather than on “serious policy debate” has drawn criticism not just from scholars (Norris et al 1999, 84), but also from “spin doctors” themselves (Franklin 2004, 148). The GP appointments issue by contrast does highlight a specific policy issue within wider political themes (the efficacy of the National Health Service; the wisdom of setting “targets” in public services; and more generally the “managerialism” of new Labour’s approach to public services). Diana Church’s intervention and much of the subsequent media coverage was not part of the “horse race” coverage characteristic of (post-) modern election news (Street 2001, 47-8). Nor was it *initially* one of the “delimit[ed] possibilities for citizen action and speech” which Brookes et al (2004, 76) find in the 2001 election coverage.

An Opening and a Closing Down

Nevertheless, the issue was to some extent “closed down” in two key ways. Most obviously, it became left behind in the final countdown to the election on 5 May 2005. The news agenda was always likely to move back towards the election process as the overwhelming news topic, and the failure of the issue to gain further coverage may reflect this. It is also possible that the issue was simply not considered to be a valuable news topic for any of the “political elites” which had the opportunity to prolong the coverage, and this particular “information flow” was not promoted by official news source organisations (Manning 2001, 107). Secondly, alternative perspectives on the issue failed to become established in the news agenda. For instance, some of the most negative coverage focused on Blair’s failure to understand how the 48 hour target was being implemented by many GP surgeries. Newspapers reported that Blair was “out of touch,” “looked sheepish” (*Daily Mail*) and took a “pasting” (*Daily Express*, 30 April 2005). One columnist for instance compared Blair’s usual ability to “wriggle out” of questions like a snake with the way in which the GP appointments issue “well and truly pinned [him] down with a forked stick” (Marrin 2005). The *Daily Mail* described it as the “most telling image of the week”: “a sweating, floundering Prime Minister reduced to open-mouthed confusion” (*Daily Mail*, 30 April 2005).

This kind of coverage undoubtedly reflects the politically partisan nature of the particular newspapers concerned, but also illustrates the “presidentialisation” of election news coverage (Franklin 2004, 149) and the newsworthiness of personalised criticism. Marrin’s article also represents a fairly traditional *laissez-faire* criticism of “statist micromanagement” and the “wasteful culture” of quangos and bureaucrats (Marrin 2005) and thus (notwithstanding Marrin’s own criticism of the Conservatives’ election strategy) fits well within the agendas of mainstream accredited news sources.

Similarly, the *Guardian*, usually considered to be the most sympathetic to those working in the public services, was forced to defend the targets policy by criticising the opposition parties for “supporting the providers rather than the patients” (*Guardian* 2005). Thus, I would argue, the limits of the debate begin to become apparent. The established political perspectives of the newspapers and their commentators take centre stage and the potential for unorthodox analyses by non-accredited news sources is diminished.

Media Agenda, Public Agenda

On the BBC's *Newswatch* website, *Question Time: Leaders Special* was described as "one of the highlights of the BBC's election coverage." The programme's executive editor Ric Bailey suggested that the GP appointments question was a "beneath the radar" issue in that it was not considered by the producers to be an obviously important issue (*BBC Newswatch*, 13 May 2005), and given the pressures on the BBC it is likely that this assessment would reflect the assumptions and intentions of the parties themselves. Gurevitch and Blumler describe the way in which media organisations attempt to structure the flow of information "into the day's election jigsaw" (quoted in Negrine 1994, 155). Coleman's study of *Election Call* (in which members of the public call in to ask questions of politicians) in the 2001 election distinguished between those issues which were listed by the programme's producers as the key topics for that day in a briefing for the telephonists receiving calls (the "media agenda") and those not in the briefing notes but raised by callers (the "callers agenda"; Coleman 2002, 738). We might conclude from Bailey's point, together with the evidence of the way in which the question arose during the programme, that the issue was not part of what might be seen as *Question Time's* "media agenda." We should of course distinguish between the agenda of the studio audience (which may well be influenced by the social and political make up of this essentially self-selecting group) and the issues of interest to the wider public. Nevertheless we can suggest at least that the GP appointments issue was part of the former, if not necessarily the latter. Certainly the "group discussion" nature of the *Question Time* format (in comparison with dialogical radio or TV phone-in shows; see Coleman 2002) allowed the studio audience to provide clarification of and support for Diana Church's original contention, and emphasised Blair's apparent remoteness. Studies of political radio phone in programmes suggest that callers to such programmes certainly feel that while the power differential between them and their politician interlocutors is always evident, they at least gain the opportunity to present the views of the "ordinary voter" (Ross 2004, 788).

Davis describes as the "radical pluralist perspective" the body of research which suggests that non-official sources can gain access for their own discursive positions within media agendas (2002, 120). A number of these studies have examined the potential for "resource-poor" outsider or pressure groups to influence news agendas (Murphy 1991; Ericson et al 1989; Schlesinger and Tumber 1994). Goldenberg for instance suggests that while such "non-authoritative" groups can achieve coverage of their perspectives, these are often presented as "advocacy" rather than objective news (1975, 100). Diana Church's *Question Time* intervention could nevertheless be seen as a relatively successful intervention by a traditionally marginalised "non-official" source; perhaps more so as it came from an (apparently politically unaligned) individual "voter" rather than an advocacy group. It might also be argued that the BBC's public service commitments in the context of the election campaign, and the *Question Time* format in general, helped to create the conditions in which such an intervention in the news process could occur.

Agendas and Distractions: The Wider Political Context

Deacon et al. argue (in passing) that one of the most spectacular campaign interactions of the 2001 election – John Prescott's fracas with an egg-throwing protester

– worked to deflect news attention from other problematic events on the same day (2001, 107). Without suggesting this was an intentional example of news management, it is, they say, “convenient.” It is therefore important to acknowledge the wider political context within which the GP appointments story became (briefly) a high profile election issue.

The Iraq war was always likely to be a major election issue, but it arrived at the top of the news agenda on the day of the *Question Time Leaders Special* when the government published the legal advice given by the attorney general (the chief law officer) to Tony Blair in the run up to the war. This was considered to be of crucial importance to the arguments surrounding the legality of the war, and was compared with other government information and advice in the widespread coverage. By the evening of that day, when *Question Time* was broadcast live, it is possible that the Labour party’s communications strategists were happy to see other newsworthy issues arise. When the GP appointments story attracted press attention over 24 hours later, it could be argued to have provided a relatively self-contained and controllable alternative to the potentially more damaging issue of the legality of the Iraq war.

Ross’s study of radio callers argues that audience participants often feel that the communicative skills and experience of the politicians they talk to puts them at a disadvantage (Ross 2004, 795). Blair’s apparent inability to respond with anything other than bemusement following Diana Church’s question might lead us to qualify such an idea, as it would seem that in this case at least, the “ordinary voter” gained the advantage. It has however been suggested that following criticism of Blair’s apparent aloofness, and his avoidance of “set piece studio encounters, tough interviewers and the more intensely political programmes” (Seymour-Ure 2002, 130; Street 2001, 208–211)¹², the Prime Minister has occasionally subjected himself to public interrogation as a form of expiation – what journalists have described as a “masochism strategy” – in order to show he listens to the electorate (e.g. *Sunday Times*, 1 May 2005). With this in mind we might, on the contrary, see this – as Wring (2005a) suggests – as part of such a strategy whereby Blair takes advantage of an effectively unavoidable public “grilling” by appearing as an individual under pressure (rather than as part of a wider political process; Street 2001, 49). The televised discussion and subsequent news coverage of the GP appointments issue provides a vehicle for disillusioned Labour supporters to feel that the prime Minister has taken a deserved beating; following this cathartic expression of anger, (according to the strategy) such voters will then feel it is time to return, perhaps grudgingly, to their Labour “home.”

Conclusion

This study does not take issue with the notion expressed by (among others) Brookes et al (2004, 77), Coleman (2002, 741) and Davis (2002, 7) that a “crisis in public communication” exists in contemporary British political culture: “citizen participation in public deliberation over their shared future is all but non-existent, and the political parties and media institutions not only set the agenda, but also overdetermine subsequent discussion” (Brookes et al 2004, 77).

In terms of the 2005 UK general election more particularly, there is little evidence that the news coverage reflected the concerns of ordinary citizens (Cushion et al

2006). *Question Time: Leaders Special* was one example of the attempts of broadcasters to engage the public in the election process; firstly through the restricted access provided to a small selected group of citizens as members of the studio audience, but more importantly and widely through the live broadcast of political debate. It is however likely to be subject to the same kinds of pressures that have been identified regarding the attempts of political elites to control and restrict the public agenda. These are multiplied with regard to the BBC, due to its institutional position as well as its recent clashes with Blair and new Labour over Iraq and the Hutton Inquiry.¹³ At a more micro level, the need to control the debate during *Question Time: Leaders Special* was evident in David Dimbleby's attempts to remonstrate with one member of the studio audience who persistently attempted to protest against the way in which asylum seekers were being treated in the election campaign.¹⁴

It is also clear that the extent to which the GP appointments issue can be understood as offering ideologically alternative perspectives to those of accredited mainstream media news sources is limited. Certainly, other studies have found clearer examples of news sources gaining access for more challenging non-official agendas (Murphy 1991; Schlesinger and Tumber 1994). In this case however, the source was an apparently unaligned individual member of the public – a “voter,” not any kind of source organisation. This can be understood as a hindrance in that even non-official source organisations can often have (and indeed spend much capital in building and sustaining) modest amounts of credibility with journalists (Goldenberg 1975; Manning 2001; Schlesinger and Tumber 1994). But in the political context of an election campaign, and the televisual context of the Question Time studio, Diana Church's *positive* status (as an “accountant” (*Daily Mail*, 30 April 2005), a “disgruntled audience member” (*Daily Express*, 5 May 2005), and a “mother” (*Sunday People*, 1 May 2005)) implicitly underlined her *negative* status as someone with no “axe to grind” and this provided some compensatory credibility.

The GP appointments issue does not map easily onto any “progressive” agenda, nor is it unproblematically part of any sub-political movement or campaign, and it should not therefore be understood as part of a progressive left challenge to the dominant consensus; nevertheless, the extent to which it briefly emerged onto the election media/political agenda underlines the possibility of intervening in official news agendas. The extent to which it was fairly quickly “normalised” via established news sources (including government ministers) and effectively closed down as a political issue also perhaps illustrates the limits of such interventions. This can also be understood as illustrating the possibility that none of the key source organisations concerned had both the credibility and the will to prolong the issue as a topic of news media attention. While the opposition political parties may have felt there was little “leverage” in such an issue (particularly with one week of campaigning before the election), the only accredited source organisation that might wish to see the coverage prolonged – the BMA GP committee – was hampered by media suspicion of its motives as a “vested interest.” The GP appointments issue may then have fallen between the competing communications strategies of the institutions involved.

Notes:

1. Similarly, but perhaps even more routinely, White House press briefings set out an “issue of the day,” as discussed by Street (2001, 192).

2. This was part of a conscious strategy to “soften” Thatcher’s image; she reportedly said at the time “It’s not for me, it’s for the photographers. They’re the most important people on this campaign” (Young 1993, 130).
3. The Sun is a populist tabloid, published by a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation.
4. Norris et al (1999) suggest that elections more generally can be seen as “ritualistic devices” in which the agents involved move through a series of familiar steps in an effectively pre-ordained process.
5. For instance, Margaret Thatcher was subjected to a grilling by Diana Gould, a “hitherto anonymous West Country housewife” over the precise circumstances of the sinking of the Belgrano when she appeared on a special edition of *Nationwide* during the 1983 election campaign (Cockerell et al 1985, 189).
6. The ITV equivalent, *Ask the Leaders*, involved three separate interviews, broadcast over three Monday evenings, presented by the younger Dimbleby, Jonathan.
7. One of the final questions from David Dimbleby asked why Blair refused to appear simultaneously with the other two main party leaders; broadcasters have attempted without success, over a number of years, to bring US style “presidential debates” to UK general elections (Watts 1997, 148; BBC website 28 April 2005). There is an assumption that such debates can only favour challengers, and offer little to incumbents (Bruce 1992, 171).
8. One newspaper article refers to the “perceived wisdom of BBC executives” that *Panorama* needs “protection” from competition by scheduling in a less competitive Sunday evening slot. (Brook 2005)
9. This illustrates the point that authoritative news sources are subject not just to the relatively long-term shifts in accreditation discussed by Schlesinger in his critique of the “atemporality” of the primary definition thesis (1990, 67), but also to the specific contexts of particular news stories. On health issues, the BMA is likely to be treated as a key expert source; with regard to the administrative structure of the NHS however, it becomes a “player” representing a minority interest.
10. Bruce suggests that a combative response to a question from a member of the public (which might be entirely acceptable if given to a media professional) would almost certainly lead to a damaging media backlash (Bruce 1992, 169).
11. Curtice and Davis’ (1999) study of the BBC’s Election Call (in which public phone callers put questions to politicians in the 1997 election) found that the callers were not representative of the general public. This imbalance reflected existing social disparities between those who are and are not likely to engage in politics, and was also due to the public service responsibilities of broadcasters to ensure “balance.”
12. This strategy is not a new Labour invention: Watts describes how Margaret Thatcher appeared often on the Jimmy Young radio show, usually considered a relatively “soft” interview (Watts 1997, 111).
13. The Hutton Inquiry was set up to investigate the circumstances of the death of Doctor David Kelly, a Ministry of Defence expert on biological weapons who was named as a source for BBC news reports critical of government “spin” on Iraq’s military capabilities in the run up to the war. The Inquiry’s final report was highly critical of the BBC while largely exonerating the government, and resulted in the resignations of the Chairman and Director General of the BBC (see: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/uk/2003/david_kelly_inquiry/default.stm).
14. The protest was directed most clearly against Michael Howard and the Conservatives, but as the programme came to an end and the audience member attempted to address Tony Blair, Dimbleby instructed him to “be quiet.”

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