

News, Citizenship and the Internet: BBC News Online's Reporting of the 2005 UK General Election

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ABSTRACT

PhD thesis by Einar Thorsen

This thesis considers the importance to democracy of online spaces where citizens can engage in dialogue on issues of public concern. Specifically, it evaluates the BBC's news and features provision on its website dedicated to the 2005 UK Parliamentary General Election, entitled *Election 2005*. Particular attention is given to sections such as the *Election Monitor*, the *UK Voters' Panel* and *Have your say*, to which people were encouraged to submit their views and comments for posting. Given the leading status of BBC News Online in the UK (the remit for which is defined, in part, by its Royal Charter obligation to provide a public service), it is vital to examine the *Election 2005* website and its role in the democratic process.

The principal aim of this thesis is to analyse the ways in which BBC News Online deployed its website to facilitate spaces for citizens to engage in dialogue during the 2005 UK General Election. To achieve this aim, the thesis makes use of web dialogue analysis, which is a method proposed and defined for the purpose of this project. The case study is divided into three chapters: the first dealing with online news in which citizen voices were found to be marginalised; the second concerning different genres of online feature articles, wherein citizen voices was the most prominent source; and the third focussing on sections where people were encouraged to submit comments.

Through analysing the nature of source utterances (quotations and paraphrases), and comments submitted to debate sections, the thesis found little dialogue taking place in any of the sections on the BBC's *Election 2005* website. It argues this was caused by a) the deliberate intention of BBC staff to discourage dialogue, and instead facilitate a 'global conversation', b) the manual process used to publish comments to the site, and c) people being at the time unaccustomed to participate in any meaningful debate using online forums. In this way, the thesis seeks to contribute to a developing area of scholarship concerned with news media representations of national elections, online journalism and citizenship.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The research contained within this thesis considers the importance to democracy of spaces where citizens can engage in dialogue on issues of public concern. The project evaluates the nature of source utterances (quotations and paraphrases) and dialogue within both the BBC's online news and features provision on its site dedicated to the 2005 UK Parliamentary General Election¹, entitled *Election 2005*. Particular attention is given to sections such as *Have your say*, which encourage people to submit their comments for publication. This chapter will first provide a brief overview of the 2005 UK General Election, the role of the internet and the *Election 2005* site, before outlining its aims and objectives, and concluding with an overview of the remaining chapters.

The 2005 UK General Election was viewed by many political commentators as being a potential landmark in British electoral history for two reasons. Firstly, the Labour Party had the opportunity of securing an unprecedented third term. Secondly, it was positioned as a referendum on New Labour politics, and in particular likely to be dominated by issues of trust following questions around the legality of the Iraq war and its failure in uncovering weapons of mass destruction. The campaign, which officially lasted from 5th April – 5th May 2005 (though had in earnest begun many months prior), was regarded by many as a non-event. This was in part for its predictable outcome, but also the stage-managed approach to campaigning by the main political parties (see Lilleker et al., 2006). Labour secured a landslide victory, albeit with a reduced majority, winning 356 seats. The Conservative party won 198 seats, and the Liberal Democrats 62, with other parties claiming 25 seats between them.

Following a seemingly lacklustre campaign, voter turnout in the 2005 election was 61.4%. Whilst a slight increase, this remained indicative of an overall dramatic decline in voter turnout over the 40 years leading up to the election – falling from 77.2% in 1964 to the all-time low of 59.4% in 2001. The 2005 figure is still a significantly low number considering the MPs elected are intended to represent the interests of the population as a whole. Moreover, Chadwick (2006) points to research that indicates the voter turnout in the UK is lower among first and second time voters than the rest of the electorate, thus suggesting the downward trend might continue as the population ages.

¹ 2005 UK Parliamentary general election is hereafter referred to as the 'UK General Election', '2005 UK General Election', or '2005 election' depending on the context.

Commentators were widely expecting the internet to play a decisive role in 2005 UK General Election, but also hoping it would help stem the decline in voter turnout among young adults. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, this optimism was founded in part on the success of different forms of internet use during the 2004 US Presidential Election. Specifically its use as a vehicle for raising campaign funds and mobilizing activists, but also the increasing influence of the political blogosphere. It was also no doubt inspired by the 2002 South Korean Presidential Election, where the citizen journalism site OhmyNews and online activism were largely responsible for a relatively unknown candidate from the Millennium Democratic Party, Roh Moo-hyun, gaining office. While no comparable site existed in the UK, it demonstrated how the internet could make a tangible difference to the election outcome.

However, advocates were ultimately left disappointed by the perceived failure of the internet to influence the 2005 UK General Election and mobilise young voters. This is not to say that the internet was not used widely, indeed internet access was by then above 60% (Dutton et al., 2005:10) with around 27% of the UK population using it to access electoral news, which equates to around two thirds of those who looked at news online (Ward, 2006:10). To put this into perspective, more people turned to the internet as an election news source, than those who watched Channel 4 News, Sky News or listened to Radio 4. Despite such a widespread adaptation, the internet was still some way behind radio, television and newspapers as a *primary* news source, with only 5% of the population ranking it as their first choice destination (Ward, 2006:10). It was still reported in a Hansard study as having made an impact for those accessing election information online, however, with 18% agreeing 'that the Internet helped make a better informed choice, and 19% that it helped them make their mind up, either by confirming their vote choice or by changing it' (Lusoli and Ward, 2005:20). However, the above figures are all based on opinion polls or surveys and should as such only be considered to be indicative of broader trends and patterns.

The discourse created by news coverage of the internet during the election campaign is important since attention, positive or negative, raises awareness of online tools and their uses. The lack of prominence of the internet during the campaign may therefore in fact have reinforced a lack of connectivity with online material. In the absence of any such detailed research, a small study was conducted for the purpose of this thesis. Specifically it analysed news reports published in the period 1st April 2005 to 10th May 2005, based on a

LexisNexis search containing the following terms: 'internet OR website OR online OR blog OR citizen AND election'. The search returned 432 news reports, though results were not coded empirically and the findings are intended only to give an indication of what areas were being addressed. Broadly speaking then, the newspapers were concerned with:

- Internet polling and in particular YouGov, which was by far the largest issue in relation to the use of Internet in the election campaign;
- Surveys or basic polls carried out by the press themselves or results of surveys published online;
- References to online counterpart of print based papers and content provided by these;
- Websites allowing voters to work out which party best matched their stance on a series of issues and thus who to vote for;
- Websites facilitating tactical voting and vote swapping including references to people selling votes on eBay;
- Websites allowing political betting not included reference to the gambling bill discussed prior to the election;
- Websites where people could find additional information about parties and candidates;
- Official blogs from parties and candidates;
- Analytical or commentary blogs;
- Satirical blogs and counter blogs.

While this highlights some examples of innovative forms of internet use, such as tactical voting sites, the internet appear to have a comparable 'non-event' feeling as the election campaign. This might in part be because of a similar aura of predictability and landslide victory to that of Labour being replicated in the online world. Not, of course, the Labour Party website, but rather the BBC News Online website. During the 2005 campaign it accounted for 78% of all internet news traffic, about one in five of the total election news audience (Ward, 2006:10). By comparison, blogging, which had featured noticeably in the US Presidential Election the year before, attracted only 0.5% of the online audience during the election (Ward, 2006:11).

Importantly, my analysis above found no mention of online spaces where citizens could freely engage in dialogue on issues of public concern (the blogs mentioned were not forums of active debate). Citing a MORI telephone survey commissioned by the BBC, Ward (2006) noted that just over 10% of respondents visited election websites in 2005 to

ask questions and discuss issues. However, the relatively low adaptation of these features does not negate their importance in offering opportunities where democratic debate can take place. Indeed, it is vital to analyse these online spaces in their infancy to ensure they are developed further and continue to play an increasingly important role in facilitating dialogue among citizens on issues of public concern.

Although there is an increasing collection of literature around online campaigning, little of this actually touches on the role of news websites in elections – with the notable exception of blogging in the US, especially following the 2004 election. Scholarly contributions in this area have to date been limited both in scope and detail, partly due to difficulties in defining the field of the rapidly evolving nature of the internet as an object of study. Importantly, the role of journalism as a ‘Fourth Estate’ appears to be lost in relation to most research around democracy and the internet. For instance, even the Hansard Society’s Digital Dialogues investigation² does not explore news websites as a possible space for promoting dialogue between central government and the public, despite discussing technologies such as blogging and forums that are in widespread use by news providers.

Investigations into the internet and national elections tends to emerge from either political communications research or journalism studies. Political communications research tends to focus on (1) the use of internet technology to market political parties to prospective voters, (2) measures of if and how these prospective voters make use of these provisions, (3) forms of use relating to government and associated institutions, not the campaign. Research within journalism studies tends to focus on (1) the changing working practices for journalists dealing with online news, (2) the rate at which people visit such sites. Of course there are overlaps, but the focus from both camps are thus either on the facilitators of civic engagement or on the participants (either through perceived use or experience of technology). However, no research has yet to be conducted on the actual representation of citizen voices in online news, or the nature of their contributions to interactive forums (especially those hosted by news organisations), during election campaigns. This thesis will thus make a noticeable contribution to redressing the deficit in scholarly attention to the interplay between national elections, online journalism and citizenship.

² URL: <http://www.digitaldialogues.org.uk/>

1.1. Aims and objectives

Given the overwhelming dominance of BBC News Online in the UK, its Royal Charter obligation to providing a public service and the lack of strong alternatives, such as blogging in the US, it is essential to analyse the *Election 2005* site and its role in the democratic process. The aim of this thesis is thus to explore how BBC News Online used its website to facilitate a space for citizens to engage in dialogue during the 2005 UK General Election. Web dialogue analysis has been devised for the purpose of this thesis and is used to examine election news and features on the BBC News Online, *Election 2005* site, including sections allowing people to post comments for publication. This analysis is contextualised, as appropriate, by interviews with members of the BBC Interactivity team who worked on the *Election 2005* site. The thesis will consider the importance to democracy of public spheres where citizens can engage in dialogue on issues of public concern. Moreover, it will evaluate the extent to which the BBC was successful in facilitating such a space online during the 2005 election. The thesis will seek to provide a sound basis for our understanding of online news discourses and online public spheres, whilst contributing to existing research on media representations of national elections.

In order to address these broader issues, the thesis will more specifically seek to answer questions relating directly to the re-inflection of public opinion – either mediated in news and features or as expressed by citizens themselves in debate sections – on the BBC News Online’s *Election 2005* site. The main case study is therefore positioned to answer the following series of questions:

- What were the characteristics of the different genres present on the *Election 2005* site?
- How did the BBC’s use of citizens as sources in news and features on the *Election 2005* site compare to that of political or institutional sources?
- What was the nature of dialogue between sources in news and features on the *Election 2005* site?
- What were the parameters controlling citizens’ engagement with the *Election 2005* site?
- What were the levels of participation from citizens on the *Election 2005* site?
- What was the nature of citizens’ engagement with debate and comment opportunities on the *Election 2005* site?

The emphasis on dialogue may reasonably be assumed to have taken place in the dedicated debate sections, as these were the spaces where people could freely submit comments for publication. However, this thesis is equally concerned with the nature of source utterances within online news and features articles, and the nature of dialogue between these.

1.2. Chapter overview

The present thesis is categorised into seven chapters as detailed below.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The current chapter positions the study and gives an outline of the present thesis. Moreover, it identifies the aims and objectives of the thesis and describes the research problematic.

Chapter 2: BBC News, The Public and Online Civic Engagement

The second chapter begins by detailing theoretical perspectives concerning the relationship between journalism and democracy. Specifically it examines Habermas' notion of the public sphere and related models of deliberative democracy. It will also discuss complements to this theory that includes making use of Bakhtin's idea of dialogism to better understand the communicative dynamic in such public forums. Particular focus is also placed on the evolution of the BBC and its public service remit, the development of public access programming and different forms of mediated participation (e.g. letters to the editor and vox populi). Focus then turns to online communicative spaces and the democratic potential of forms of internet use. In this light it also examines the nature of online participation, not least the development of various forms of citizen journalism. The need for mainstream journalism to change to a more dialogic form in this new media landscape is also highlighted. Finally the chapter turns to a historical review of BBC News Online – with emphasis on the 1997 and 2001 UK General Elections as well as the re-inflexion of public service standards online.

Chapter 3: BBC News Online and the 2005 UK General Election

The third chapter briefly explores the different themes and agendas of the 2005 UK General Election, before discussing in detail the role of the internet during the campaign. It describes both the different types of online content, such as blogging and tactical voting websites, and the levels of internet access and use. Particular attention is then given to the BBC's *Election 2005* site, which is the subject of the case study in the present thesis. The

chapter explores the policies and guidelines underpinning the development of the site, but also the working practices of members of staff involved in supporting it during the campaign. The chapter also discusses methodological issues concerning the study of online news and web based dialogue. Attention is given to web sphere analysis as a way of situating the object of study in a larger context. It then puts forth a new multifaceted approach called web dialogue analysis and describes how it has been applied to the case study in the following three chapters.

Chapter 4: Citizens as sources in election news

The fourth chapter is concerned with the use of sources in election news and the nature of their engagement when given a voice either through quotation or paraphrase. The present thesis is primarily concerned with the voice of citizens, though the chapter contextualises the analysis of these sources in relation to party political and institutional sources. It explores the contexts in which citizens are allowed a voice and focuses in particular on instances where these sources are represented as having engaged in dialogue with others. This includes every news report published on the front-page, and incorporates *Have your say* style comments submitted by members of the public for publication on small number of such articles where this was allowed.

Chapter 5: Citizens as sources in election features

The fifth chapter describes the use of sources in election features, which as it explains represent several different narrative genres: factual, analytical and human-interest narratives. Each of these encompasses one or more different subsections of the *Election 2005* site, which includes amongst others serialised features such as *Election at-a-glance* and *Election Bus*, election analysis columns, transcripts from interviews or speeches and non-serialised features. Like the previous chapter, it analyses the nature of source utterances in the form of quotations and paraphrases, and in particular where these are seen to engage in dialogue. The chapter again focuses primarily on citizens' voices and contrasts these to party political and institutional sources. It also discusses differences between the genres to provide an additional comparative element to Chapter 4.

Chapter 6: Dialogue and civic engagement

The final case study chapter is concerned with the special election features on the *Election 2005* site, which offered citizens a space to freely express their opinion. These were the *Election Monitor* blog, the *UK Voters' Panel* and *Have your say* features. The formats of these sections were different from the two preceding chapters and their particular genre

characteristics are discussed in detail. However, the main attention is on the comments submitted for publication to each of these sections by members of the public. In particular it explores the extent to which these sections may have contributed to engender a dialogue between members of the electorate. Of concern will also be the extent to which the BBC first defined and then controlled the topics and parameters of debate, thus restricting the framework in which citizens were able to express themselves and engage in deliberation. Nevertheless, there was a significant amount of activity on the site, and the chapter will also seek to examine in detail the levels of participation.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The final chapter brings together the findings of the three previous chapters and discusses these firstly in relation to the research questions outlined above and secondly in relation to the normative standards outlined in Chapter 2. This essentially provides an evaluation of the discursive forms and practices of the *Election 2005* site, and the extent to which it engendered dialogue among citizens. Moreover, it will examine the extent to which there is a dichotomy of two different domains, one for elite sources and another for ‘ordinary citizens’, and analyse the tension between these both in terms of form and function. The problems with limited degree of interaction between these will also be discussed. Finally the thesis will be brought to a conclusion by discussing developments relating to user generated content on BBC News Online since the 2005 election. Current innovations by the Corporation will also be addressed, which may give an indication of BBC News Online’s direction in preparation for the next UK General Election due to take place no later than 3rd June, 2010.

Chapter 2: BBC News, The Public and Online Civic Engagement

This chapter will begin by briefly exploring theoretical perspectives that underpin the orientation of this thesis. Specifically the chapter will discuss Habermas' notion of the public sphere, related models of deliberative democracy and the application of such frameworks to the internet and its associated forms of use. These ideas are important since they inform and provide a conceptual vocabulary for much of the work conducted in relation to the role of news and citizenship in democratic societies, not to mention the democratic potential of the internet.

There is a strong link between the perceived purpose of media in the public sphere and the ideals of public service broadcasting. The chapter will therefore discuss the historical role of the BBC in relation to the British public through its public service obligations. As will be demonstrated, this is seen by some as the only way to cater for the type of diversity required in a public sphere. The chapter will then look at ways in which the BBC has actually operated as a forum for debates through public access programming. Other ways in which public opinion and debates can be re-inflected or even constructed by the media is also examined, such as letters to the editor, opinion polls and vox populi.

Having discussed the traditional forms of media, the chapter turns to review the literature surrounding democracy and the internet, which have by some been seen as a potential facilitator of public spheres. It also examines the nature of online participation and the changing nature of journalism within the contemporary media landscape. The chapter concludes by reviewing the history of BBC News Online with particular emphasis on news, the evolution of public service standards online, citizen feedback or interaction, and recent UK General Elections.

2.1. News, Democracy and the Public Sphere

Western democracies have in recent electoral cycles seen a trend emerging of decreasing voter participation, which has also been the case in UK General Elections since the mid-1960s as described in Chapter 1. The suggestion is therefore that the representative democratic system is malfunctioning – that is how can politicians claim to be truly

representative of the electorate when the majority of people did not vote for them or even at all? However, the decline in voter participation is merely one way of measuring a democratic deficit – which Dahlgren argues must ‘be seen as the consequence of the inability of the political system to meet social expectations’ in what he terms ‘a corrosive climate of cynicism’ (2001a:43). The media, Dahlgren argues, have a partial role in precipitating this democratic deficit (see also Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995), but moreover it needs to be seen in the context of ‘economic insecurity, unemployment, low wages, declining social services, and growing class cleavages’ (Dahlgren, 2001a:43).

Whatever its consequences, the democratic deficit as witnessed in the West is not simply about the low voter turnout, but equally about what happens in the public sphere – between elections and during the campaigns leading up to the ballot. The extent to which the electorate feel distanced from day-to-day political decision-making or indeed any contact with the political establishment. Thus in practical terms being unable to influence the development of policy and political manifestos that are eventually brought to the public at election time. Any alternative democratic models or communicative spaces must in my view be understood in this context, as they often seek to redress not just the decline in voter-turnout, but the very fabric of democratic functions.

2.1.1. Habermas and the public sphere

Central to the study of democracy, citizenship and media has been Habermas’ notion of the public sphere, derived from his historical examination of the feudal public sphere in the 16th and 17th Centuries, and bourgeois public sphere in France, Germany and England during the 18th and 19th Centuries and subsequent decline in the mid-19th and early 20th Centuries (Habermas, 1989). Essentially a critique of society’s ‘structural transformation’ as a consequence of early capitalism, Habermas argued that these societies developed at least in an ideological way a bourgeois public sphere that facilitated a form of dialogic opinion or will formation that sought to hold the state accountable for its actions. The bourgeois public sphere was operationalised through gatherings of members of the bourgeois class in physical spaces – namely salons (France), Tischgesellschaften (Germany) and coffee shops (Britain). While these physical spaces differed, their form of discourse shared particular aspects, which Habermas identified as a disregard for status, a sense of common concern, and relative inclusivity. Specifically Habermas noted that, for the bourgeois, the public sphere meant ‘the authority of the better argument could assert itself against that of social hierarchy’ (highlighting rational and critical debate), ‘discussion

within such a public presupposed the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned' (that is, moving beyond the confines of the traditional authorities such as the Church), and finally that 'everyone [bourgeois] had to be able to participate' (Habermas, 1989:35-6).

Newspapers and printed pamphlets, Habermas argued, played a central part in circulating information and facilitating critical debate in the bourgeois public sphere. Following a relaxation of state censorship, newspapers began to incorporate opinion in addition to containing necessary information about trade (e.g. shipping details and government tax announcements). This enabled a shared discussion of sorts to take place between people in different locations.

The decline of the bourgeois public sphere was precipitated by industrial capitalism in the mid-19th and early 20th Centuries. Of particular importance was the impact of advertising and popularisation of the press. This reliance on advertising fostered a perception of audiences as consumers of goods, rather than as citizens participating in politics. In other words, public communication became moderated by the demands of big business. Subsequently, editors would in pursuit of larger markets seek to commodify their news product by appealing to the lowest common denominator, or 'dumbing down'. This contrasted with the media at the time of the bourgeois public sphere, which had tended to 'level up' in the interest of self-education and cultivation (see Roberts and Crossley, 2004).

Habermas described the result of these changes as the 'refeudalisation of the public sphere'. Essentially he argued that as capitalism and liberal democracy developed, members of the public were reduced to the role of spectators in relation to reified elite political figures, institutions and private corporations – similar to the role of the monarch in feudal society (see Habermas, 1989:201). This ultimately led to the decline of rational-critical debate, the hallmark of the bourgeois public sphere. Consequently the opportunities for ordinary citizens to participate or influence democratic decision-making was reduced.

Critics argue that that Habermas' vision privileges the views and expressions of the dominant groups in society. Specifically, his insistence that only issues in the 'public interest' are viable topic for discussion in the public sphere, ignoring matters of 'private need' (Benhabib, 1992). This is problematic as what constitutes 'public interest' is typically defined by the most powerful, 'in such a way as to sustain their privilege' (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007:13). Moreover, critics have highlighted that the 'everyone' referred to in

Habermas' account above was necessarily limited to those who counted as 'citizens', which in the historic period covered excluded the vast majority of the population, encompassing as it were predominantly educated, property-owning men (see Calhoun, 1992, Fraser, 1992). Looking at America, Fraser (1992) argued there was a multiplicity of co-existing public spheres, made up of people excluded from the dominant sphere of debate – in particular women, uneducated and unemployed or low-income workers (see also Allan, 1997, Eide and Knight, 1999, Keane, 2000, Negt and Kluge, 1993, Örnebring and Jönsson, 2004, Papacharissi, 2002). These alternative or counter public spheres were not equally powerful, but facilitated collective identities and interests. Fraser contended, however, that no government has ever existed that equally engaged and considered the diversity of such voices.

Habermas' seemingly uncritical embrace of 'rational debate' has also been a cause of criticism. Politics is inherently passionate and partial (Goodwin et al., 2001), in which people rarely get involved because of some abstract notion of 'common good' (Hauser, 1999). Similarly, De Luca and Peeples (2002) argue that real-life debates are not based on rationality or consensus, but are instead essentially messy and conflicted. Moreover, they contended that the focus on 'rationality', 'consensus' and 'civility' did not adequately incorporate the forms of participation enabled by modern mass communications and in particular the internet. This has in their view 'fundamentally transformed the media matrix that constitutes our social milieu, producing new forms of social organization and new modes of perception' (cited in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007:14). Similarly, Habermas' suggestion of a 'golden age' of media production (Hallin, 1994) has been accused of cultural snobbery and elitism (see for instance Dahlgren, 1995, McGuigan, 2002). By way of example, Hartley (1996) points to reportage of the French Revolution to suggest that the media have always been inscribed with a certain degree of manipulated bias. Others argue that people never passively consume media, but actively manipulate it for their own interests and discuss everyday dilemmas in their day-to-day lives (Billig, 1991, see also Roberts and Crossley, 2004). However, regardless of such criticisms, few contest the usefulness of public spheres as a concept and 'powerful tool for analyzing a fundamental problem of limited participation in mass democracies' (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007:15, see also McNair, 2000).

2.1.2. Communicative action and deliberative democracy

While Habermas' study as detailed above was an examination of a set of historical conditions and processes, he also sought to establish a set of normative ideals for how modern democratic society *ought* to function and how citizens should participate in this (see Calhoun, 1992). Specifically, citizens in a democratic society ought to be actively engaged in public discussion, with the explicit purpose of holding government to account. Such discussion should reflect the hallmarks of the bourgeois public sphere as described above – in particular a rational, reasoned and open minded debate, where people judge arguments on their merit rather than the status of the speakers. In his later works, Habermas also distinguished between two different types of communication pragmatics: 'strategic action' and 'communicative action' (Habermas, 1992, 1996), where the former 'is goal-oriented and manipulative', whilst the latter 'aims for mutual understanding, trust, and shared knowledge' (Dahlgren, 2001a:40, see also Fornäs, 1995).

Unsurprisingly, communicative action is closely associated with deliberative democracy, insofar as it emphasises communication among people as a way of grounding democratic actions (see Benhabib, 1996). Democracy in this sense is viewed more as an ongoing process than turn-based representative terms. Moreover, democracy not only requires *free* speech, but a form of *democratic* speech, as Noveck argues:

It is a half-truth to say that democracy depends upon free speech. Rather, the participative practices of democratic life require open, equal, reasoned deliberation. Deliberation is more than just talk; it involves weighing approaches to problem solving in such a way that the viewpoints of all members of the community can be heard. Deliberation is *a special form of speech structured according to democratic principles* and designed to transform private prejudice into considered public opinion and to produce more legitimate solutions.

(Noveck, 2004:21, emphasis added)

Clearly one of the desired goals of deliberative democracy then is the formation of consensus or common opinion, which can underpin decision-making (as opposed to delegating this opinion forming to elected representatives). This is not to suggest that differences, or 'private prejudice', cannot exist of course. Rather that people are open and willing to concede their position in the presence of a more convincing argument.

In his more recent works, Habermas (1992, 1996) also moved away from the stringent

normative component of the public sphere, which he replaces with a more erratic conception of discussion and debate (see Roberts and Crossley, 2004). Building on this new interpretation, Hirschkop (2004) has drawn on Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin as a way of describing the intricate dynamics of public spheres (see also Roberts, 2004). Bakhtin (1984) argued that every word always exists in relation to other words, where it simultaneously informs and is informed by its social context. This constant state of ongoing and endless re-inflection of meaning, Bakhtin referred to as dialogic or dialogism. Such a process of dialogic interaction between various truth-claims, essentially rejects 'official monologism' containing a 'ready-made truth' for a heteroglossic notion of reality (see Bakhtin, 1984, Morris, 1994, Morson and Emerson, 1990). More specifically, Bakhtin (1984) asserts that: 'truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction' (Bakhtin, 1984:110 emphasis in original). Arguably then, the importance is not just the extent to which public spheres actually facilitate Habermas' (1992, 1996) communicative action, but equally that any dialogue is taking place in the first place.

However, there are inevitably practical restrictions to all-encompassing deliberation and dialogue (see Coleman and Götze, 2001, Goodin, 2003, Peters, 1999). In particular, the large population of most nation states would leave very little time for each citizen to express their contribution, never mind the time required to observe, consider and react to all such contributions. Moreover, while stressing the importance of engaging the public in 'authentic polylogue' instead of top-down 'consultations', Coleman (2004) notes that people predominantly engage in political discussion with family. Their detachment from the political apparatus is exemplified in an Oxford Internet Survey, he argues, by 88% of respondents having *no* face-to-face contact with their elected Member of Parliament and further exasperated by a lack of trust in political institutions (only 48% of respondents trusting local councils and 43% the British government) and politicians (18%). Nevertheless, some attention has been given to theorising the transition from a participatory democracy to a deliberative democracy (e.g. Vitale, 2006, see also Dahlgren, 2001b), with several studies proposing pragmatic ways of engaging citizens in processes which could help realise deliberative democratic processes – including 'deliberative opinion polls' (see Fishkin, 1993, 1997), citizen juries (see Crosby, 1995, Armour, 1995) and National Issues Convention or Forums (see Fishkin, 1993, Gastil and Dillard, 1999).

2.1.3. Fragmented public(s) and mass media as communicative space

Common for all of the practical solutions to deliberative democracy or recreating public spheres described above, however, is that they take place outside of the traditional mass media. That is, the solutions are situated – often implicitly – within a given media landscape that informs the communicative space they attempt to create, but the deliberation itself does not take place within the mass media. Journalism is perceived as upholding its historical role of informing citizens, as Gans explains:

The country's democracy may belong directly or indirectly to its citizens, but the democratic process can only be truly meaningful if these citizens are informed. Journalism's job is to inform them

(Gans, 2004:1)

However, the role of mass media is not simply about informing or educating the public. It also serves as a platform for some of the dialogic exchanges of a public sphere to take place – that is, a communicative space or public sphere in its own right (see Page, 1996). In the context of deliberative democracy, Strömbäck (2005) contends that the role of journalism extends far beyond that of simply informing citizens. Strömbäck argues that '[s]ince it is through media and journalism that citizens mainly access political discussions, the deliberative model of democracy places exacting demands on media and journalism' (Strömbäck, 2005:340). In particular, Strömbäck states the core normative demands placed upon journalism are that it should '[a]ct for inclusive discussions; mobilize citizens' interest, engagement and participation in public discussions; link discussants to each other; foster public discussions characterized by rationality, intellectual honesty and equality' (Strömbäck, 2005:341). Clearly these demands are not simply about creating a communicative space *within* the mass media where the public can engage in political debate. Nor is it simply about the *qualitative* characteristics of the dialogue taking place. Indeed, it is implicit that the media organization should *actively pursue* such a function by mobilizing and connecting citizens.

Informing and providing a communicative space for the public in a coherent and universal manner might not be straightforward when, as some scholars argue, the public is becoming increasingly fragmented – resulting in part from the diversification and specialisation of media (see Swanson and Mancini, 1996, see also Dahlgren, 2001a, McQuail, 2008), especially television following expansion of satellite and digital terrestrial broadcasting (Webster, 2005), not to mention various forms of online news (Eveland Jr et al., 2004,

Tewksbury, 2005). Implicit in this hypothesis is the notion that people will ultimately concentrate on a select set of media outputs and neglect others, thus leaving little or no overlap in the audience³. ‘As a consequence’, Schulz (1997) details:

different segments of the society are attuned to different streams of information, world views, and value systems. The common ground of experience for all members of society dissolves and the public sphere breaks to several fragmented publics, even esoteric circles.

(Schulz, 1997:62)

The ideal system to deal with this fragmentation Schulz argue is one governed by public service principles. That is, a media system that is not driven by the commercial imperatives of private enterprise – for whom the fragmentation of audiences is beneficial since it allows targeted advertising to the audiences as distinct consumer groups – but rather media as a universal service for the public good. Indeed public service programming also caters for niche audiences, but does so in order to protect the diversity of minority interests as opposed to what ‘the market’ deems economically viable. Moreover, serving the public implies a connection with the same democratic ideals described above in relation to the function of media vis-à-vis the public sphere. That is, there is a strong link between the perceived purpose of media in the public sphere, and public service ideals (Moe, 2008).

The concept of public service broadcasting originates from the early years of the BBC – interestingly a period following the decline of the bourgeois public sphere as described in Habermas’ account above – and has been emulated widely across the world (in particular Europe and the British Empire / Commonwealth). Fundamental therefore to any discussion concerning mass media, the public and democracy – and of course this thesis’ exploration of BBC News Online – is the Corporation’s historic role as a public service broadcaster, its articulation of citizenship and relationship with the British public (see also Briggs, 1961-95, MacDonnell, 1991, Crisell, 1997, McNair, 2000, Curran and Seaton, 2003, Allan, 2004).

³ This differs from the diversity of public spheres identified above where certain people were *actively excluded* from participation in public life. The extent to which this can be considered a ‘free’ choice is debatable, of course, though such a discussion falls outside the scope of this thesis.

2.2. The BBC and The British Public

The BBC was first established as the British Broadcasting Company in 1922. Its monopolistic position was perceived as a convenient solution by the Postmaster General to the problem of spectrum scarcity and the inevitable radio interference caused by a more free market mode of regulation (as was operating in the US) (see Curran and Seaton, 2003). The Crawford Committee, which was set up to discuss broadcasting organisation and its effects on viewers, unquestioningly supported the necessity of a broadcasting monopoly when it reported in March 1926. The committee further recommended that broadcasting should be run not by a company, but by a public service corporation – a ‘Public Commission operating in the National Interest’. There were to be no direct parliamentary controls and the licence fee funding, initially reinforced by the Sykes Committee in 1923, should be extended for ten years. The Crawford Committee also recommended that the BBC should emphasise educational programmes. The outcome of the committee’s recommendations was the establishment in 1926 of the British Broadcasting Corporation by Royal Charter to replace the British Broadcasting Company (see MacDonnell, 1991).

The BBC has since its early days had an intricate relationship with British citizens. John Reith as the first Managing Director of the BBC was determined that it should serve the whole nation, eventually guided by the overarching mission to ‘inform, educate and entertain’. Assuming this responsibility in the name of public service, the BBC represented not just a new communications technology, but in the words of William Robson a ‘sociological invention of immense significance’ (cited in Curran and Seaton, 2003:111) that ensured the BBC developed into one of the key institutions shaping citizenship in British society.

Reith firmly believed that the people involved had done their ‘best to found a tradition of public service rather than public exploitation’. In his view, ‘[t]he broadcasting system of a nation is a mirror of that nation’s conscience’ (cited in MacDonnell, 1991:15). Despite such laudable ideals, Reith’s perception of what constituted Britain’s ‘conscience’ was grounded in a rather elitist philosophy, and the BBC was frequently accused of being too paternalistic and top-down in its programming (see Born, 2002). Reflecting on accusations of elitism, Reith maintained that ‘somebody has to give decisions’, further commenting that:

It is occasionally indicated to us that we are apparently setting out to give the public what we think they need and not what they want – but few know what they want, and very few what they need.

(cited in Curran and Seaton, 2003:115)

Reith also had little interest in audience surveys as he was a firm believer of cultural homogeneity – ‘the class and tastes of groups of listeners were irrelevant’ (Curran and Seaton, 2003:150). Moreover, he believed there was a danger that programme organisers would pander to popular preference if it were known. Indeed it was only in 1936 that the BBC carried out its first rudimentary forms of audience research (Allan, 2004:28).

However, the Second World War sparked a reform of the BBC and Reith’s ‘cultural unity’ was soon abandoned by the new Director General, Frederick Ogilvie. Having visited British troops in France he was ‘convinced that the morale of the forces would be improved by knowing that their families at home were listening to the same programmes as them’ (Curran and Seaton, 2003:154). Following the War, internal competition was introduced between the various parts of the Corporation, which further forced programme makers to identify and cater for the tastes of distinct groups – as opposed to trying to change their views. The dynamic between the Corporation and the public had changed fundamentally.

2.2.1. The BBC as forum for public debate

The perceived elitism described was also evident in the interpretation of how the BBC would ‘provide a forum for public debate’ – one of four major criteria governing BBC programme making in the early years. C. A. Lewis, the BBC’s organiser of programmes in 1924 proclaimed that the BBC:

must establish itself as an independent public body, willing to receive any point of view in debate against its adversary. Its unique position gives the public an opportunity they have never had before of hearing both sides of a question expounded by experts. This is of great general utility, for it enables ‘the man in the street’ to take an active interest in his country’s affairs.

(C. A. Lewis cited in MacDonnell, 1991:13)

Sexist realities and discourse of the time aside, it is clear that the notion of allowing

ordinary citizens a direct voice, was out of question. Instead 'the man in the street' would be enlightened, or even empowered, by the diversity and plurality of experts' points of view provided by the BBC. Nevertheless, one of the founding principles of the Corporation was that it would facilitate public debate and in so doing enhance democratic society through informed citizens. Despite this, the BBC's original licence conditions prevented it from broadcasting anything that 'could be regarded as controversial, which was also taken to apply to the proceedings of Parliament' (Allan, 2004:27). While the ban on controversial broadcasts was lifted in 1928, the main political parties remained anxious about the perceived threat from the broadcast medium. Politicians feared that 'the BBC could ultimately appropriate for itself the status of a forum for national debate to match that of Parliament' (Allan, 2004:35). Thus rather than viewing such debate hosted by the BBC as a healthy contribution to democracy, politicians perceived it as a threat to their own power base. These fears ultimately lead to the implementation of the 'fourteen-day rule' on 10th February 1944, which would remain in place until 1957. This prevented the BBC from broadcasting on issues relevant to either the House of Commons or the House of Lords until two weeks after they had been debated there.

Despite the presence of the 'fourteen-day rule' the immediate post-war period saw the BBC pioneer political discussion programmes on radio where ordinary members of the public were able to participate for the first time. *Any Questions?*, the most prominent contribution to this experimentation, was first broadcast by BBC's regional service for the West Country on 12th October 1948, with regular national broadcasts since 1950. The format of the show, which is still being broadcast on Radio 4, typically features a panel comprising of four politicians or other public figures who answer questions put to them by an audience made up from the locality being visited. Questions typically cover topical political issues and the panel members are not given prior notice of what they will be asked.

While the rules might seem to have been relaxed for the BBC in relation to political programming, there were still serious constraints – in particular on television. The BBC's commitment to 'impartiality' ultimately had a fundamental impact upon the cautious types of journalistic forms and practices that evolved – the unseen announcer used for television news until ITN introduced on-screen presenters being a prime example. Moreover, in 1955 the BBC had given little or no airtime to the UK General Election taking place. As Robin Day recalled:

It is an incredible fact of broadcasting history that in the very year that ITN began (1955) there had been a general election in which there was no coverage by BBC broadcasters of the campaign, *not even in the news bulletins*.

(cited in Allan, 2004:40, emphasis in original)

Things changed after the 'fourteen-day rule' was lifted, and the general election of 1959 was the first in which the BBC covered the campaign according to their traditional news values as they would any other event. The Corporation also produced a series of programmes called *BBC Hustings*, which was broadcast on television and then repeated on radio in the evening. Local candidates, selected by the parties, answered questions in front of an audience invited predominantly by the parties themselves – of about sixty tickets, only five were reserved for 'independent' questioners (Briggs, 1961-95:248).

In the 1960s television and radio broadcasters began to adopt programming styles and formats where members of the public gained a higher degree of access and visibility. Contrary to the 1955 election, which seemed to pass the Corporation by, the 1964 election campaign actually heralded some experimentation with audience interactions on television. *Election Forum* was a special programme broadcast by the BBC where viewer's questions were put to senior politicians. However, the degree of dialogic interaction was limited, since, as co-presenter Robin Day pointed out, 'it did not have real audience participation by visible voters in the flesh' (cited in Hibberd, 2003:49).

Experimentation with audience interaction on radio also picked up pace in the 1960s with the introduction of the radio phone-in format. Interestingly, the quality of debate was often perceived as being poor since 'the British public were largely unaccustomed to requests for their views' (Hibberd, 2003:49). People quickly adapted, however, with the advent of commercial radio in 1973 spawning a plethora of local and eventually national phone-in programmes. There were political shows too, with *It's Your Line* launched in 1970, followed in 1974 by *Election Call*. The latter contained questions put to leading political figures on a range of issues during the two election campaigns that year (February election returned a hung Parliament and Labour's Harold Wilson went to the polls in October winning a tiny majority).

The perhaps most iconic of the BBC's political audience participation programmes, *Question Time*, was launched on September 25, 1979 - nearly five months after Margaret Thatcher had been elected Prime Minister for the first time. The weekly television

programme, originally chaired by Robin Day, was based on a similar format to radio's *Any Questions?* as described above. Questions were taken from audience members prior to broadcast and the chair selected some that are put to a panel of guests (one each from the three major parties and one other public figure, but extended in 1999 to encompass two non-partisan members). Although it was intended as a short series, the format's popularity among the public has ensured that it is still being broadcast today – Robin Day was replaced by Peter Sissons in June 1989 who in turn gave up the reins in 1993 with David Dimbleby taking over since 1994.

This rise of public access programming has also been evident in the commercial sector. In the case of television, ITV (e.g. Sunday lunchtime slot), Channel 4 (e.g. *On Trial...* series), Channel 5 (e.g. *The Wright Stuff*) and Sky (e.g. *Your view*) all scheduled programmes where the voice of ordinary people were in one way or another centre stage. Public access programming was taken to another level with the introduction of BBC Radio Five Live in March 1994 – a station wholly dedicated to news and sports with a central focus on citizen's voices. The morning and late-evening schedule was dedicated to phone-in programmes on current affairs, major political issues or the latest developments in sports. The commercial station Talk Radio followed in 1995, though could only sustain the model for four years and reverted to focus on sports discussion only in 1999 under the new name, Talk Sport (Hibberd, 2003:50).

Evidently there is a historical tradition for public access programming that seeks to facilitate ordinary members of the public expressing their opinions. However, whilst they engage contributors in dialogue with other citizens, party political or institutional representative, this is nevertheless a constructed or mediated form of participation. This chapter will now turn to explore these concepts in greater detail, drawing on additional examples of letters to the editor and vox populi.

2.3. Mediated participation and news construction of public opinion

Clearly the public access programming described above, focussing as it often does on politics and current affairs, resembles at least superficially something of a public sphere. Contrary to the experiments described in 2.1.2 above, in this instance the discussion or deliberation itself takes place in spaces provided by the media and is broadcast to a mass audience. However, the question-answer-debate format as described above has been

criticised by the likes of Bourdieu (1998) for being an artificial construct, or in McNair's (2000) words 'an illusory form of access which symbolically reasserts the status division and power disparities which exist between leaders and led, elite and mass' (McNair, 2000:113, see also Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). Nevertheless, despite its limitations, this carefully mediated form of participation *does* serve a purpose insofar as it enables a limited degree of public interrogation of politicians and symbolically positions the public as part of a public sphere. 'They may not be perfect' expressions of citizen-politician dialogue', McNair contends, 'but they are valuable as a means of direct public access-by-proxy to politicians who are otherwise largely free of any obligation to confront the public' (McNair, 2000:113)'.

Indeed, while Ross (2004) found that callers to BBC's *Election Call* during the 2001 UK election did much less talking than the politicians, there was enough evidence to support the notion that the programme facilitated 'some kind of dialogue, even if this sometimes meant rude interruptions and frustration' (Ross, 2004:799). Deliberating with politicians is particularly problematic during election time, since the political parties essentially 'lock' their policies prior to the campaign by publishing a policy manifesto. Thus the debate will be artificially focussed on those priorities – which may or may not be aligned with the priorities of members of the public – and the majority of party political actors will dogmatically follow the principles set out in these documents, regardless of rational and persuasive argument. After all, within a representative democracy such as what exists in the UK, voters need to be able to have a clear sense of what each party claim to represent in order to make an informed choice. Discussions at election time are thus limited to an exchange about truth claims or promises made within election manifestos with persuasion only working in one direction, as opposed to a truly deliberative dialogue between politicians and the electorate. This, according to Ross, did not diminish the functional value of *Election Call* in the eyes of the citizens participating:

While callers consciously acknowledged that politicians were unlikely to change their minds and policies as a consequence of their own critical intervention, they were much more optimistic about the programme's awareness-raising potential among the listeners, which *could* influence voting behaviour. For them, this was the point.

(Ross, 2004:799, emphasis in original)

The majority of talk shows do not, however, contain senior politicians – their dialogic

contribution instead re-angled to the participating citizens by the journalist. Participants in public access programming – phone-ins or studio audiences - are also inherently self-selective. That is, they typically hold an above average interest in politics and are motivated to articulate their citizenship in ways beyond simply casting a vote (see McNair et al., 2002). This comes as no surprise, of course, and echoes the perception of the public in other forms of mediated participation – such as letters to the editor (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007).

2.3.1. Constructed debates: letters to the editor

Traditional letters to the editors might appear less dynamic than the live television or radio broadcasts since dialogue is not instantaneous, but constructed over a prolonged period. Nevertheless, they too can be considered a forum of public debate – even by newspaper editors, as Hynds (1991) found, who ‘run letters to the editor to help provide the public forum expected of newspapers in democracy’ (cited in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007:66). However, the letters to the editor was in Wahl-Jorgensen’s (2002, 2007) study not found to be fully developed deliberative forums. That is, many letters did not live up to the public sphere ideals of rational and civil debate – thus failing to provide the specific democratic discourse associated with such a communicative space. Moreover, participants were naturally self-selective and contributions subject to editor selection – thus failing on the criteria of inclusivity. Specifically, Wahl-Jorgensen (2002) identified four criteria of ‘newsworthiness’, which editors applied in determining their selection of letters to publish: relevance, entertainment, brevity, and authority.

Richardson and Franklin (2004), who examined local newspapers and the letters to the editor during the 2001 UK general election campaign, concur with these points. However, they further argue the construction, or orchestration of, public debate in accordance with political alignment of the newspaper and their perceived readership is even more important. That is, not just the selection of the letters to include, but also the way in which the chosen letters are subedited and composited on the page - purposefully placed in relation to others to ‘*construct* debates within and between letters and contiguously signal the pertinence of the included letters to the “debate,” thereby acknowledging and on occasion (depending on how the letter is being used) legitimating their contents’ (Richardson and Franklin, 2004:462, emphasis added, see also Bromley, 1998, Schiff, 1997, Richardson, 2001). The study further demonstrates how elections add or accentuate another set of pressures in relation to the construction of public debate within letters to the

editor. Specifically the attempts by political parties and activists to influence the publication of letters through orchestrated campaigns to reinforce their political platform – thus echoing the lack of openness to deliberation highlighted above. Despite criticisms, however, letters to the editor nevertheless do represent an opportunity for citizens to voice their individual opinion to the general population through the media.

2.3.2. Representing the public voice: vox populi and opinion polls

Like letters to the editor, the use of vox populi is also seen to give individual citizens an opportunity to comment on the news (McNair, 2000, Lewis et al., 2005), and while equally unscientific, these are also positioned as providing ‘a sense of public opinion’. After all – these are *ordinary citizens* talking as ‘authentic’, individual members of the public. Larson (1999) likened the use of vox pops in television news during the 1996 US election to a public sphere, suggesting that they were a better expression of public opinion than polls. While maintaining that vox populi is the most substantial representation of citizens’ voices, Lewis et al (2005) argue that there are ‘only a limited number of subject positions from which to speak in vox pops’ and that citizens subsequently ‘appear as self-interested members of society and as fans of commentators on popular culture’ (2005:71).

Vox populi, or citizens as news sources more generally, hardly ever appear at the start of a news story and citizens therefore do not act as ‘primary definers’ who set the terms of reference for the issue being addressed (Hall, 1978). Nor do they feature in the ‘normative order of authorized knowers in society’ (Fishman, 1980:96) on anything other than their personal experience. Moreover, news stories that are focussed around giving a sense of public opinion in this way are considered human-interest and thus given a low position of importance in the sequence of the news programmes – indeed hardly ever appearing in the lead story (Lewis et al., 2005). In other words, citizens expressing their opinion typically rank at the bottom of the ‘hierarchy of credibility’ (Becker, 1967), both within the news programmes and the individual bulletins – with newsroom culture instead privileging ‘elite and other (white) male voices’ (Ross, 2007).

If public opinion is expressed somewhat unscientifically through vox populi, the news media’s use of opinion polls represents an attempt at a more scientific – and by extension objective – articulation of public opinion (see Page, 1996, Splichal, 1997, Herbst, 1998, Lewis, 2001, Lewis et al., 2005). That is, the precision of the polling methods and statistical forms of verification ensures that – within a stated margin of error – the outcome

has a sense of facticity. It is widely recognised, however, that opinion polls can return significant disparity in responses simply by slight changes in the wording of a question or information given by the interviewer (e.g. Schuman and Presser, 1981, Zaller, 1992). Subsequently, Lewis (2001) contends that pollsters 'manufacture responses' rather than 'recording' them. Bourdieu (1979) goes even further and argues that 'public opinion' simply does not exist in the contrived, pseudoscientific manner constructed by the opinion survey.

Nevertheless, opinion polls are – especially during election campaigns – central to the way journalists reference public opinion. That is, '*not* as a way of increasing the democratic accountability of politicians, but as a way of providing a narrative context for political coverage' (Lewis et al., 2005:53, emphasis in original; see also). Polls provide the basis for continued media speculation about the relative performance of political parties and politicians – even extending to what candidates need to do in order to win elections. However, Lewis et al (2005) contend that the importance of polls lie in their ability to indicate people's policy preferences. 'To reduce polls to merely providing a commentary on the electoral horse race', they argue, 'is to muffle what is already a limited form of public expression' (Lewis et al., 2005:54).

Lewis et al's (2005) study is particularly interesting as it also assessed the 'degree of political engagement suggested by each reference to or representation of public opinion' (2005:42) – be that opinion poll, vox pop, direct or indirect inference (see also Lewis and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005). That is, they examined the extent to which citizens were *represented* in the news as being active or passive. The methodology of this study will be examined more closely in Chapter 3 of this thesis, but for our purposes here it is worth noting their conclusion that citizens are 'shown as passive observers of the world'. They do not appear to have much to say about current affairs and political issues are left to politicians and experts. 'What emerges from this analysis', they contend, 'is that while politicians are often seen telling us what should be done about the world, *citizens are largely excluded from active participation in such deliberations*' (Lewis et al., 2005:49, emphasis in original). It is within this context – where traditional media platforms are seemingly failing to facilitate active participation in deliberative processes – that this chapter will now turn to examine if the internet can facilitate such a communicative space.

2.4. Communicative spaces online

The potential of the internet, or rather the potential of its possible forms of use, have been described in great detail by scholars and commentators alike during the past decade (for a meta-critique see Chadwick, 2006, see also Ward et al., 2003, Dahlberg, 2001a, Sassi, 2001, for history of electronic democracy see Vedel, 2006). In the early years of the world wide web, the internet was viewed by some as holding unrivalled potential that would ultimately see it emerge as the very saviour of democracy (see Faucheaux, 1998, Noble, 1996). Such positivist visions of internet use implied that this new medium (or platform) would be able to facilitate communicative spaces that would (amongst other things) enable large scale public deliberation and decision making (see Rheingold, 1993, Rash, 1997), perhaps even on a global scale (Sparks, 2001). Tsagarousianou (1999) maintained that new technologies have the potential to sustain online public spheres ‘as they enable both deliberation (citizen to citizen communication) and “hearing” (citizen to authority communication)’ (1999:195-6). Hauben and Hauben (1997), and later Coleman and Götze (2001), argued deliberative democracy could be made practical through online asynchronous discussion forums⁴. Noveck (2004:21), in contrast, envisaged ‘democratic rules of conversation’ operationalised through a software restriction on communicative flow, where each participant speaks in turn before anyone else speaks again.

New technology could be an asset to democracy, not because it creates more outlets for speech but because software can impose the structure that transforms communication into deliberation.

(Noveck, 2004:21)

While perhaps more democratic in the traditional sense, imposing such structures would also stifle any ongoing dialogue between participants and thus actually undermine the deliberation desired. It is also ambitious to assert that the imposition of a given ‘structure’ automatically ‘transforms communication into deliberation’. Indeed it is important to avoid an entirely technologically deterministic account (for a meta-critique see Agre, 2002), and instead consider forms of use of technology (see Salter, 2004). That is, the same technology can be used in a plethora of ways that could equally engender a propagandising monologue or a deliberative dialogue. Whilst technological innovations or restrictions might help precipitate either of these extremes, it is ultimately the forms of use that

⁴ Both studies examined Usenet, which is rapidly being superseded as a platform for public discussion, instead being swamped by binary distribution of pornography and pirated media.

determine the type of communicative space created and subsequently the type of social changes resulting from this. Moreover, Wright and Street (2007) conclude that it is not just the architectural design of the internet that is important, but the design and construction of the user interface. Thus the success or failure of any technology aimed at facilitating civic engagement is dependent on design choices, rather than predetermined by the technology (see also Salter, 2004).

Yet the dialogic interaction in such a sphere is merely one of the important democratic functions of the internet. Ferguson and Perse (2000) in their comparison of television and web use, for instance, found that the web was 'functionally similar to television', but that within their sample people indicated that their time using the web was for 'acquisition of information and Web materials – activities that are more goal-directed and mindful' (Ferguson and Perse, 2000:170). By comparison, one of the core reasons for television use was 'relaxation', which did not feature prominently as reasons for using the internet. Similarly, Karakaya Polat (2005:435) argues that political participation should be situated in a context with 'the Internet as an information source, as a communication medium and as a virtual [sic] public sphere' (Karakaya Polat, 2005:435). The function of the internet is therefore not simply to provide the space for Habermas' communicative action mentioned above, but equally as a source of information to educate citizens and empower them to take an active role in any deliberation that might take place.

2.4.1. Digital divide

Whether internet technology or its forms of use determine potential levels of civic engagement is merely an academic discussion of semantics to the vast majority of the world's population who do not even have access to electricity. Indeed some scholars have been sceptical of the power of different forms of internet use, maintaining that it reinforces existing political forces and differences (see Margolis and Resnick, 2000). That is, they argue, the internet normalizes existing power relations as opposed to empowering citizens in a newfound sphere of civic engagement. Critics often point to unequal access and the colonisation of commercial interests online (see Norris, 2001). Such scholars rightly contend that a 'digital divide' exists that prevents citizens equal access to information technology (e.g. Bauer et al., 2002, Drori and Jang, 2003, Lucas and Sylla, 2003, Crenshaw and Robison, 2006, Warschauer, 2003). Although this divide is perhaps most obvious on a global scale, between industrialised and economically developing countries, it also exists between rich and poor within individual nation states. Income, education, age

and ethnicity all play important roles in determining levels and forms of internet use (see for instance Livingstone and Helsper, 2007). Castells (2001) suggests the internet is becoming 'the electricity of the informational era', or in other words 'an essential medium that supports other forms of production, participation, and social development' (Warschauer, 2003:29-30). Subsequently, Norris (2001) maintains that such differences in forms of use and access is also causing a 'democratic divide' between those who do and those who do not use the internet to engage and participate in public life.

Such arguments must be seen in relation to the given national contexts, and are not necessarily linked to economic development or established democratic traditions. By way of example, Hill (2003) examined the ability of Indonesian citizens to scrutinize raw polling data on official websites during the 1999 legislative election. As the first democratic election since 1955 (post-Soeharto) the very credibility of the ballot relied on such a detailed transparency – arguably only possible through a centralised database system with distributed universal access through the internet. Millions of citizens took the opportunity to monitor these statistics – often from internet cafés and other public access points – and traffic to the election site absorbed virtually all of Indonesia's available public internet capacity (Hill, 2003:527, see also Blackburn, 1999, King, 2000).

While Indonesia represents one end of the spectrum in terms of its relative low private internet distribution, Finland is a world leader in number of users per capita. Subsequently, the country witnessed a widespread use of websites by candidates in Finland's 1999 parliamentary election. However, these websites closely resembled traditional printed campaign material and made little or no use of interactivity or multimedia features (Carlson and Djupsund, 2001:83-4). During this period of still relatively early adoption of internet use for political communications, widespread internet availability and advanced communications systems were therefore not necessarily indicators of creative forms of use of such technology. Indeed the democratic conditions appear in the case of Indonesia to have led to a more creative use of the internet.

The above criticisms of access and different forms of use are an important consideration of course, though they clearly do not negate the existence of public spheres (however exclusive) in various forms on the internet. Rather, the notion of the internet as a single unified public sphere with universal access is untenable, just as it is in society at large. Thus care must be taken to not overstate the impact of such public spheres on society as a whole, but rather consider the internet and its associated functions within a broader

framework of social change. Nevertheless, the internet is in the context of deliberative democracy usually assessed on its ability to facilitate alternative, online public spheres (Gimmler, 2001)⁵. More specifically, Ward and Vedel (2006) contend that research relating to the ability of forms of internet use to facilitate civic engagement has focussed on three interrelated areas: 'increasing opportunities to participate, lowering the participatory barriers and enhancing the quality of the participatory experience' (Ward and Vedel, 2006:213).

These are all structural and conceptual concerns, however, often relating to designing forms of use as detailed above. Arbitrarily listing different forms of use that might engender communicative spaces is not conducive without also considering levels of participation and quality of dialogue in such spheres. Considerable research has been conducted on participation⁶, though strangely – considering the normative discursive ideals of deliberation – the quality aspect has yet to receive similar treatment.

2.4.2. Online participation

The earliest known example of organized partisan political participation on the internet, was during the 1992 US Presidential Election when Listserv discussion lists devoted to the campaigns of the three main candidates began to emerge (Sakkas, 1993). While a slightly more prominent feature in the 1996 campaign – when Republican Presidential nominee, Bob Dole, famously read out (in a rather awkward way) the URL to his website at the end of a television debate – the internet was still predominantly used as a means to mobilize existing activists (Bimber, 1998). Johnson's (2003a) comparative survey of internet users during 1996 and 2000 US presidential elections (442 politically interested web users), found that the internet was 'at least partially responsible for this increase in civic engagement' (voter turnout increased by about two percent). Internet use was also the strongest predictor of political attitudes. The internet increases people's access to information, and by extension 'an informed public that is more interested in participating in the political process' (Johnson and Kaye, 2003a:10).

Farnsworth and Owen (2004) found in their study of internet use during the 2000 US election (sample of 4,186 online users) that interactive elements of websites stimulated use

⁵ The internet has been seen to hold a democratic potential, not only for supporters of deliberative democracy, of course, but also from several other perspectives (see Dahlberg, 2001a).

⁶ Numbers of people connected to the internet and participating in political communication online is discussed in further detail in the respective historical contexts later in this chapter.

of online sources. Not surprisingly, those who *sought* information made better use of these as a useful informant in determining their voting decisions. Moreover, Stromer-Galley et al. (2000) argue that since very few political candidates actually provided discussion spaces or links to opponents' sites, citizens would not necessarily envision the benefits of such features. Indeed, Coleman (2000) goes even further by arguing few of these forms of use fostered any sense of citizen debates online, thus questioning the effect of such, largely non-dialogic, interaction.

Nevertheless, there does appear to be a connection between online political participation and traditional forms of political actions. Tolbert and McNeal (2003) for instance argue that the internet positively influence civic participation - even beyond voting (for UK perspective see Gibson et al., 2002, Gibson et al., 2005). However, while agreeing with the sentiment, Shah et al. (2005) contend that online media *complements*, rather than replaces, traditional media. Indeed, when considering the plethora of different variables affecting political efficacy, knowledge and participation, the internet only plays a marginal role (Kenski and Stroud, 2006). While there are arguably some innovative connections between 'virtual' and 'physical' participation – such as the use of 'meetup' websites in the US to mobilize attendance at local meetings (Weinberg and Williams, 2006) – these are exceptions rather than the norm.

Young people are perhaps the demographic most subjected to scrutiny in relation to levels of political participation online. Due in part to their perceived technical proficiency and embrace of new media platforms (see Katz et al., 2001, Wellman et al., 2001), but also because of a perceived disillusionment – or even apathy - with politics within this demographic (see Coleman and Gøtze, 2001, Chadwick, 2006, Mesch and Coleman, 2007). Both of these assumptions are problematic. As described above, the digital divide does not escape the age barrier and the universal classification of young adults as 'online experts' has been criticised (see Facer and Furlong, 2001, Livingstone and Helsper, 2007). Moreover, it is increasingly recognized that a decline in formal involvement with politics does not necessitate a disinterest in politics per se (see Henn et al., 2002, Livingstone et al., 2005). Instead young adults appear to be more concerned with politics outside of the traditional party political electoral cycles – for instance single-issue organization, interest or pressure groups and other (new) social movements (see Jordan, 1998, Kimberlee, 2002).

Nevertheless, young people are according to Gidengil et al. (2003) the most likely demographic to make use of online resources in search of political information – even if

the crude numbers doing so 'are not very impressive'. This group is self-selective, however, with Livingstone et al (2005) finding that young people who did make use of opportunities to act and interact on the internet were already interested in politics (see also Johnson and Kaye, 2003b). Indeed those who *did* use the internet for civic and political participation, were *not* heavy users of other web based services. This is problematic as it appears to confirm Sunstein's (2001) earlier thesis that online forums are mere 'echo chambers', since lack of barriers (particularly geographic) on the internet means people seek out like-minded individuals who will reinforce rather than challenge their perspectives. Thus the internet, or online public spheres, are even more self-selective than real life – as Ward et al. (2005) contended in the case of the most recent UK general election, that the internet may in fact be reinforcing participation gaps (see also Ward et al., 2003).

While levels and demographics of participation can be measured empirically with relative ease, understanding the nature of that interaction is more complex – not least because of the normative standards for deliberation as discussed above. In a critique of online deliberation, Witschge (2004) posits that we should differentiate between political dialogue and deliberation. That is, political dialogue typically happens between like-minded individuals where people *avoid* engaging diverse and contesting viewpoints, whilst deliberation serves democracy 'because differences in opinion are addressed and these opinions are put to the test in order to move society forward' (Witschge, 2004:111).

Following the above logic, it is therefore important to not simply understand the composition of online public spheres, but also the dialogic nature of participants' interaction. Or indeed the lack of dialogue, as Smith (1999) argues most online posts (in this case Usenet) actually go unanswered. This point is echoed by Davis (1999) who found that in particular dissenting views in online political discussions are often ignored, resulting in frustration on the part of the poster who eventually leaves the group. Worse still, when dissenting views are put forth, they risk 'vigorous attack and humiliation'. Dissenters might feel more liberated to express their views anonymously, which is easily achieved and widely adopted online. However, whilst anonymity might in theory contribute to a more open debate – since people feel less restricted in articulating their true opinions – it also allows those 'flaming' to be less civil in their rebukes since their comments are not traceable to them as a person (see Witschge, 2004). Nevertheless, Dahlberg (2001b) contends that anonymity itself is not an issue, as 'identity simulation and time-space distancing does not stop interlocutors in cyberspace undertaking critical-

reflexive deliberation' (2001b:93). Indeed Dahlberg argues that the absence of face-to-face interaction is not problematic since the 'rationality is formed in discourse'. In concurring with this point, Bohman (2004) states 'there are other ways to realize the public forum and its multiple forms of dialogical exchange in a more indirect and mediated manner, even while preserving and rearticulating the connection to democratic self-rule' (Bohman, 2004:49).

2.4.3. Online journalism and dialogue

Following Bohman's (2004) point above, it would seem natural to look towards news organisations as potential facilitators of such an indirect and mediated dialogical exchange on the internet. However, most of the early innovation in online journalism has been driven not by the major print or broadcast news organisation, but by ordinary citizens. The internet has allowed anyone with access to relatively inexpensive communications tools to produce and publish news to a potentially global audience. Indeed new forms of journalism such as blogging are perceived as expressionistic, raw and *unmediated* (see for instance Allan, 2006, Allan and Thorsen, 2009, Bruns, 2008, Matheson, 2004, Tremayne, 2007). Bloggers typically also encourage feedback on their posts, or responses on other blogs, to facilitate a public dialogue on the issues raised. Indeed this level of dialogism, or intertextuality, is a crucial aspect of the blogosphere and other citizen journalism projects, such as Indymedia (see Jankowski and Jansen, 2003, Platon and Deuze, 2003, Salter, 2006).

Whilst blogs are typically individual efforts, both in the way they are written and published, there are also formally organised citizen journalism websites that in one way or another seek to emulate some of the news structures associated with mainstream media. Most overtly in this regard is the South Korean citizen journalism site, OhmyNews⁷, established 22nd February, 2000 by Oh Yeon Ho under the motto: 'Every Citizen is a Reporter'. In addition to a vast network of some 54,900 citizen reporters, the organisation also employ 60 staff journalists (figures from May 2008, cited in Young, 2009). These work in a collaborative environment that merges amateur and professional content into what has become one of the country's most influential news organisations (Joyce, 2007, Young, 2009). However, the citizen reporters are encouraged to freely communicate in their own style and not just follow the professional reporters lead (Allan, 2006).

⁷ URL: <http://english.ohmynews.com/>

Launched in November 2004, Wikinews⁸ reverses this logic by striving to retain familiar notions of 'truth' and 'accuracy' associated with traditional journalistic objectivity through its Neutral Point of View policy inherited from sister project, Wikipedia (see Bruns, 2006, McIntosh, 2008, Thorsen, 2008a). However, through the wiki-editing process, which allows anyone with a computer and internet access to edit content, the site uniquely involves citizens in a seemingly non-hierarchical collaborative news production cycle. Contributors are taking an active role in a productive dialogue by evaluating claims and counter-claims about news content, with the aim of people working together to create neutral and arguably heteroglossic news stories (Thorsen, 2008a).

Bruns (2005) concludes that through initiatives such as the ones outlined above, audiences have become 'gatewatchers' who are keeping checks on mainstream media. This has dramatically recast the relationship between news providers and their audience, which for advocates such as Dan Gillmor, means the top-down model of news needs to be replaced by a genuine dialogue with their users.

Tomorrow's news reporting and production will be more of a conversation [...] The communication network itself will be a medium for everyone's voice, not just the few who can afford to buy multimillion-dollar printing presses, launch satellites, or win the government's permission to squat on the public's airwaves.

(Gillmor, 2004:np)

However, whilst this kind of dialogic journalism has predominantly been the preserve of citizen journalism initiatives as indicated above, mainstream media are increasingly appropriating and normalising such forms and practices, often under the banner of 'user generated content' (see for instance Allan, 2006, Singer, 2005, Thurman, 2008, Wardle and Williams, 2008). Spurred on in particular by overwhelming number of eyewitness accounts, not least images and video taken with mobile phones, submitted during crisis events (Allan and Thorsen, 2009). Such content may enrich the news output, but journalists are also concerned about the impact it might have on their professional values, such as authenticity, autonomy and accountability (Singer and Ashman, 2009, see also Singer, 2003, Singer and Gonzalez-Velez, 2003). To this end, Singer (2006) has called for renewed attention to a dialectical approach to journalism (see Merrill, 1989). One which 'connects production to the individual producer' and at the same time 'connects that

⁸ URL: <http://en.wikinews.org/>

producer to the erstwhile audience' (Singer, 2006:3). This, she argues, is:

a socially responsible approach essential in a media environment that also is both interactive and information-rich. In doing so, it draws on constructs of professionalism, which sociologists define as involving both autonomy and public service.

(Singer, 2006:3)

Allan (2006) contends the BBC is an exemplar of incorporating the dialogic principle of 'We the Media' highlighted above. 'Citizen-generated content is an important and growing feature of BBC News Online operation', he notes, as 'a commitment understood to be derivative of its public service ethos' (2006:180). This dedication to involving its audience is according to Gillmor (2004) not matched by any other major journalism organization. It is against this backdrop that this thesis now turns to examine BBC News Online in detail, with particular focus on its commitment to engaging members of the public with its content.

2.5. BBC News Online: A Brief History of The Early Years

This chapter will now turn to a more focussed historical review of BBC News Online. The focus of this section will be predominantly on the evolution of BBC News Online, as opposed to BBC Online more broadly. However, references will be made to other developments where they are relevant for the evolution of the news service or the UK general elections discussed. This thesis is primarily concerned with UK General Elections, though this section will provide some international context by noting research conducted on election campaigns and the internet outside of the UK where appropriate.

This historical account of BBC News Online emphasises the core elements relevant to this thesis – news, developing public service standard online, citizen feedback or interaction, and UK General Elections. The account is not intended to be definitive, and developments in relation to sites supporting existing television and radio programmes have mostly been excluded (a good starting point, though by no means exhaustive, is Reynolds, 2007).

2.5.1. Broadcasting text

Before considering the BBC's move online, however, it is pertinent to remember that the internet was not the first text-based 'interactive' service delivered by the Corporation. On September 23, 1974 – some 23 years before the official launch of BBC News Online – the Corporation launched its teletext service entitled Ceefax (a play on 'see facts'). The service was invented by BBC engineers who were researching solutions to providing subtitles for the deaf. They discovered that it was possible to use the 'spare' lines from the traditional 625 line television picture, called the vertical blanking interval, to transmit words and numbers (see Carlson, 2003:32-4, see also Schlesinger, 1985, Henke and Donohue, 1986). Consequently, the system was limited in the amount of text each page could hold, so information had to be succinct.

The initial service only contained 30 pages, though this quickly reached 600 pages by 1983 and has since risen further to around 1,000 pages. Ceefax pages essentially comprises of anything from current affairs and sports, to transport timetables and recipes. The perceived importance of the teletext service was exemplified on two occasions in the early 1980s – first when the Government designated October 1981 as *National Teletext Month* to propel take-up of the service, and then subsequently in 1983 when BBC Research and IBA Engineering were bestowed the Queen's Award to Industry for Technology in recognition of their work to pioneer teletext (Cook and Brown, n.d.). On the 30th anniversary of Ceefax, Michael Grade, BBC chairman at the time, commented that the service had been 'at the forefront of journalism' prior to the advent of the internet and 24-hour news channels, adding that 'it led the way in the breaking of stories' (cited in BBC, 2004).

While interaction with the service is largely limited to selecting the desired page using the television remote control, it does nevertheless represent a non-linear, on-demand experience for the audience. That is, people are free to choose when to access it, what to view and in what order - comparative to early examples of the web, which provided little functionality beyond this. However, Ceefax is an important context for the online developments not just because it represents a text-based delivery platform, but because the content from this service was syndicated into early iterations of the website as discussed below. The teletext service, therefore, directly enabled the BBC to populate a vast number of webpages without having to produce new content. This undoubtedly gave the BBC an advantage in providing a wealth of background information – especially important at election time. However, it also meant the website inherited certain technical restrictions imposed on the teletext service, such as length of headlines, which other websites would

not be bound by.

2.5.2. Auntie goes online

The early development of the BBC website was not guided by policy, but rather the foresight and dedication of BBC technical staff⁹. Brandon Butterworth (member of the BBC design and development team at the time) in particular was a central driving force in the early years and the person who registered the `bbc.co.uk` domain name in October 1991 (Butterworth, [1999]:np)¹⁰. The domain was originally used for internal communication, although Butterworth solicited content from around the BBC to create proof-of-concept websites.

"As new technology, such as streaming, became viable I enticed more to join in [...] It was symbiotic – I needed content to test the technology, producers needed technology to deliver new services, the public was hungry for content and their use justified our efforts."

(Butterworth, cited in Barrett, 2007:np)

BBC Education was the first to capitalise on the opportunity, 'recognising that it could enhance learning beyond the broadcast in the same way as leaflets, books and events' (Barrett, 2007:np). George Auckland, education producer at the time, recalls having to teach himself HTML programming in order for the Education team to produce a companion website for their television programme *The Net* in 1993 – without anyone's permission announcing the URL at the end of the programme (ibid 2007:np). The *BBC Networking Club*, another BBC Education project, launched in June 1994 and started to formalised the arrangement – acting as a means to get members of the public connected to the internet and more importantly the early BBC content¹¹. Starting in 1995, several of these early projects also sought to use the internet as a means to interact with members of

⁹ The corporation's focus in terms of new technology adaptation was firmly fixed on the traditional broadcast mediums, the digitisation of these and the role of cable and satellite broadcasting (see Goodwin, 1997).

¹⁰ Butterworth ([1999]) had registered with the Defense Data Network Network Information Center (DDN NIC) in January 1989 and received a Class B address to cover the entire BBC network. He set up Internet access in mid 1989 as `bbc.uucp` (Unix-to-Unix Copy, a legacy system used for Internet connectivity) with dial-up access via Brunel University – a service only made available to the BBC development group. Butterworth also describes how he was originally not allowed by the UK academic naming body, NRS, to register anything other than a UK domain (`.co.uk`) and was required to have a director sign the domain application form to prove that it was legitimately coming from the BBC (it was signed by Mr C. Dennay, Director of Engineering at the time).

¹¹ The site was originally published on <http://www.bbcnc.org.uk/> (no longer available) to support existing radio and television programmes, and later merged back into the main BBC website (<http://www.bbc.co.uk>).

the public during live television and radio programmes.

Email feedback seems trivial now, but being able to respond to a programme and have the presenter respond to you on air was far simpler to do than a phone-in. IRC [Internet Relay Chat] questions into live political chat shows hooked News and Radio 3's Facing the Radio programme produced live from user-generated content and streamed the programme.

(Butterworth, 2007:np)

The BBC News and Current Affairs team published a dedicated site for the 1995 budget speech, entitled *Budget '95*, in collaboration with the Press Association¹². The news and audio links were all directed to the Press Association site, however, and the promise of live coverage never materialised (see Belam, 2005). Experimentation continued in August 1996 when the BBC published a party conference website, including a live uninterrupted audio feed (unlike the programme breaks on radio and television) and 'wall-to-wall coverage' (Butterworth, [1999]:np). The event that really propelled the development of the BBC News Online project, however, was the surprising popularity of the dedicated *Budget 96* site, which was launched in November 1996¹³. The site contained background information on the budget (analysis, history and procedures – with an associated quiz), RealAudio streams and some 28 news reports (published in the period 11-27 November 1996), details of the main measures and reaction from key political parties. There was also a section dedicated to answering emails from members of the public (eleven were published with associated responses from experts on the *Money Box Live* panel) as well as transcripts of the Radio 4 *Budget Call* programme where listeners had called in to ask questions about the budget.

At this stage the BBC website was still destined to become a commercial operation. The impetus for this came in part from a White Paper entitled *The Future of the BBC*, published by the Conservative government in 1994, 'which urged the BBC to expand into new media and to become more commercial, in order to both make up its financial shortfalls and to forge a bridgehead for British media into global markets' (Born, 2003:66). When exploratory talks with Microsoft about a potential partnership stranded 'after the software giant suggested it might like some editorial input' (Smartt, 2007:np), the BBC management instead opted to have a commercial presence (using the domain beeb.com)

¹² URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/budget95/index2.html>

¹³ URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/budget96/index.htm>

through an existing deal between BBC Worldwide and computer company ICL. However, following the successful renewal of the BBC's Royal Charter in May 1996, John Birt (Director General at the time) pulled out of the deal with ICL at the last minute in December 1996, deciding instead to make news and sport public service offerings (see Barrett, 2007:np). The decision was to have an incredible impact on all of the BBC online activities and was described by Jem Stone (BBC Future Media and Technology executive producer) as 'the most important thing he ever did' (cited in Barrett, 2007:np).

2.5.3. The internet and the 1997 UK General Election

The first UK General Election to prominently feature the internet was in 1997 when New Labour came to power. Between 1994 and 1996, due to the increasing availability of information on the internet and in anticipation of perceived importance of websites, most of the political parties had managed to establish an online presence (Ward, 2005:191). Internet access was still relatively low at around 10-15% (Chadwick, 2006:158), however, with only 2% accessing from home (Coleman, 2001b:679). Given that there was a relatively low demand for an online campaign in the UK, it seemed the main purpose of the party websites were to allow the party leaders to appear dynamic, modern and in touch with the younger electorate, simply by associating themselves with this new technology. The sites certainly contained little or no interactive elements and connecting with the voters was not a priority (Chadwick, 2006:158-9, cf Gibson and Ward, 1999, Ward and Gibson, 1998, Wheeler, 1998).

The UK Citizens Online Democracy¹⁴, an independent non-commercial site, took the idea of citizen interaction even further than simple email feedback or publishing comments, by creating a site dedicated to non-partisan citizen deliberation. Co-ordinator of the project, Irving Rappaport, described the grand vision as:

[...] an experiment to find out whether people can use the Internet to discuss and become better informed about the complex issues that affect their lives. It is also designed to enable the public to participate directly in and affect the political process. We hope it will become a place to make things happen - a powerful new interface between the public and politicians, both locally and in the Palace of Westminster.

(Rappaport, 1997)

¹⁴ URL: <http://www.democracy.org.uk/>, no longer available.

The site contained some basic threaded forums, making the distinction between ‘public discussion’ and ‘politicians discussion’¹⁵, where the latter featured a range of politicians submitting answers to some pre-defined questions as opposed to an extended deliberation.

GE97

Election Day: News
powered by: Planet
in association with: PA NEWS

Thursday March 27th

- ▶ [Howard's 'soft Labour' claim angers Blair](#)
- ▶ [Major hits again at Labour's union pledge](#)
- ▶ [Labour manifesto pledges tax cuts](#)
- ▶ [SNP debate exclusion unfair - court hears](#)
- ▶ [Britain booming says pamphlet](#)
- ▶ [Praise for Paddy - from armed robber](#)
- ▶ [Redwood denies anti-Euro book harms Tory hopes](#)
- ▶ [Tories gather to select MP's replacement](#)

Cash-for-questions: Tim Smith stands down

PA NEWS One of the Tory MPs at the centre of the "cash-for-questions" allegations, former minister Tim Smith, has announced he is standing down as the party's candidate at the election

Analysis

GE97 Exclusive feature ▶
[Smart Voters Are Tactical Voters](#)
Eric Hobsbawm

GE97 Exclusive feature ▶
[Tories Strike Gold With Return Of Union Power Market Access](#)

[Election Campaign Issues](#)

[Safe In Their Hands? Labour and the NHS](#)

[New Labour, No Sandwiches - Labour, Government and the Trade Unions.](#)

[The Enforcer Rt. Hon Donald Dewar MP, Shadow Chief Whip](#)

Media Centre

- ▶ [News](#)
- ▶ [Yahoo! UK Polling](#)
- ▶ [MORI Polls](#)
- ▶ [Wirral Watch](#)
- ▶ [Economist Election Brief](#)

Need to Know

- ▶ [The Players](#)
- ▶ [Manifestos](#)
- ▶ [The Constituencies](#)
- ▶ [Events Calendar](#)
- ▶ [Backgrounder](#)
- ▶ [UKPlus Politics Search](#)

The Issues

- ▶ [Issue Index](#)

Get Involved

- ▶ [Debate Forums](#)
- ▶ [GE '97 Chat](#)
- ▶ [Electoral Reg](#)

Extra! Extra!

Figure 2-1, Example of GE97 website

In terms of online news during the 1997 election, all the national broadsheets (*Guardian / Observer*, *Telegraph*, *Independent*, *Financial Times*, and *Times / Sunday Times*), *The Economist*, *The Scotsman*, the BBC, Channel 4 and ITN all either ran or participated in sites (Bromley and Tumber, 1997:70). One of the most prominent was a dedicated election site entitled GE97 (see Figure 2-1 above)¹⁶ set up by an independent company, Online Magic, in partnership with *The Economist* and the Press Association (Bromley and

¹⁵ There was also a feature called ‘invited discussion’ where organisations perceived to have expert knowledge on a topic would be invited to contribute in ‘public discussion’.

¹⁶ URL: <http://www.ge97.co.uk/>, no longer available.

Tumber, 1997:71, Coleman, 2001b:683). GE97 published a range of news reports relevant to the election, syndicated from the Press Association. The site also contained detailed information about the parties, their manifestos and the electoral process, even allowing a section with satirical features. Both live chat and ten threaded forums were available to allow citizens an opportunity to partake in online debate, though these were basic compared to current forms of such features.

Many of the other news sites also sought to provide citizens with opportunities to debate or submit feedback. *The Independent* provided a 'debating chamber' as the focal point of its site, The *Guardian* site had eight forums, and the ITN site 'provided users with the opportunity to submit questions by e-mail to be put to politicians appearing on news bulletins' (Bromley and Tumber, 1997:72). While the functionality may have been provided in theory, in real terms the technology itself and people's familiarity with this, as well as slow connectivity, prohibited the type of engagement envisaged and taken for granted ten years later. This was reflected both in negative user feedback and the low number of participants in forums provided (ibid 1997:72).

2.5.3.1. The BBC Election 97 site

The BBC's *Election 97* site went live on March 17 when then Prime Minister John Major announced May 1 as the election date (see Figure 2-2 below)¹⁷. Birt's decision to pull out of the ICL deal and the popularity of the *Budget 96* website helped the BBC News team justify the creation of a dedicated election website. However, as Butterworth recalls, the approval was only issued some six weeks before the election, leaving the people working on the project little time to prepare (Butterworth, 2007:np).

Upon launch the BBC published a news report, together with an audio clip of Major's announcement (just shy of 17 minutes long). Subsequently, about 5-10 news reports were published most days leading up to the election. Beyond news reports, the BBC also provided lists of the various constituencies, details of all candidates and party profiles. These profiles formed the vast majority of the approximately 8,000 pages published on the site. They were created automatically using a proprietary Content Production System (CPS, originally built in three days, it gradually evolved and still forms the basis of BBC News Online), which 'turned live Ceefax and Election system feeds into html for each constituency and candidate' (Butterworth, [1999]:np).

¹⁷ URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/election97/index.htm>

Background issues were also explored, including an archive of past elections, analysis of campaign issues including a tool allowing comparison of party manifestos, and finally detailed information on the election procedures. Throughout the site were links to audio content published in Real Audio format. On polling day, results were published on a special 'live' page which was updated continuously.

The image shows a screenshot of the BBC election 97 website. On the left is a vertical navigation menu with the BBC logo at the top and a list of links: news, constituencies, candidates, background issues, polls, parties, analysis, UK breakdown, tv/radio/web, interactive, live, forum, and features. The main header features the text 'election 97' in a large, stylized font, with a search bar and navigation links for 'search', 'about this site', 'feedback', and 'home'. Below the header is a 'News Index' section for 'April 28'. It lists seven news items, each with a small thumbnail image and a headline followed by a brief summary:

- Major Visits the Four Corners of the UK**: Prime Minister claims "72 hours to save the Union"
- Blair Warns Against Complacency and Landslide Predictions**: In the Midlands the Labour leader says people will want to wake up to Labour on May 2nd
- Ashdown Launches "Crusade" For Votes**: The Lib Dem leader has once again put education at the top of his agenda while reminding party workers "to fight for every vote"
- Lib Dems tell Former Tory Voters To "Come Home"**: Menzies Campbell has urged voters to follow the example of Tory defectors Emma Nicholson and Peter Thurnham...
- Party Leaders Hit the Road**: With 3 days of campaigning left, the party leaders step up the pace.
- Tory Says VAT on Food is "Inevitable"**: Sir Teddy Taylor has said that a fifth term Tory government would put VAT on food.

Figure 2-2, Example of BBC election 97 website

Despite politicians and the political parties not making much of an attempt at engaging with voters on their sites, the BBC requested feedback both on the quality of its website and on specific election issues. The BBC published a handful of this feedback in a section entitled *You say!*, which would in 2001 become *Talking Point* and in 2005 *Have your say*. The BBC also invited users to submit questions which were then put to politicians and published in a 'forum' section. However, only five politicians and Bill Bush, the Head of

the BBC Political Research Unit at the time, actually answered questions. Pre-voters were encouraged to take part in the mock General Election taking place in the week leading up to the actual poll on the Newsround *Election '97* website. Other interactive features included an early attempt at recreating Peter Snow's Swingometer and some more basic calculation forms to predict outcomes based on percentage of overall vote, as well as a quiz based game entitled 'Have you got what it takes to be an MP?'. Many of the features were not fully developed or were indicative of innovative forms of use being held back by technological limitations.

2.5.4. Formalising BBC News Online

The *Election 97* site was considered a great success internally and BBC News quickly established *Politics 97* as a follow up site¹⁸, which included the first public screening of the Hong Kong handover (Butterworth, 2007). The site was essentially a response to the positive performance of other news sites (including CNN) and was only intended as a stop-gap whilst another team worked on the full news site (Butterworth, [1999]). It was, however, the death of Diana Spencer (Princess of Wales) and Dodi Al-Fayed in a car crash on August 31, 1997, which finally justified the investment in BBC News Online from a strategic public service perspective. The tribute site, which was hastily put together overnight, received an estimated 7,500 emails on the topic and all were published¹⁹. Bob Eggington, project director of BBC News Online at the time, recalled how this response made him realise the importance of incorporating citizens' voices.

"It was a huge revelation to me that people wanted to participate and what they wanted to read was what they, not the BBC, had written."

(Bob Eggington cited in Barrett, 2007:np)

Butterworth still leading the technical development, described the impulsive reaction from management to finally commit to a BBC News Online site as follows:

By a week later - September 10th - the response to the Diana coverage had convinced everyone that the Internet would be big and that the BBC would be there - properly. With an October deadline, there was no point continuing with meetings. A committee wasn't going to make it. A ninja squad was needed.

¹⁸ URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/politics97/>

¹⁹ URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/politics97/diana/>

I got a small bucket of cash and got told to do whatever was needed.

(Butterworth, 2007:np)

The site ended up being less ambitious than 'the great ideas' the design team had originally intended as Mike Smartt, BBC News Interactive's Editor-in-chief for the first eight years, recalls how the original design for the BBC News Online site was rejected three weeks prior to launch on the basis that it would 'take several hours to render on people's screens down ponderous dial-up connections' (Smartt, 2007:np). Nevertheless, BBC News Online officially went live in on November 4, 1997, with the main BBC Online website going live on December 15, 1997²⁰. Originally the BBC was granted a one-year trial by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), which was then ratified a year later (Barrett, 2007:np).

Despite its late official arrival on the scene in November 1997, the BBC quickly established itself as the leading British content site on the internet – mitigating some of the early criticism the BBC received in relation to adaptation of new technology (see Goodwin, 1997), though the early experiments were not always well received (Wykes, 2000). However, by March 1998 BBC News Online recorded 8.17 million page impressions and by June that year BBC Online offered 140,000 pages of content, of which about 61,000 consisted of news (Allan, 2006:37-8). The BBC News Online became known internally as the 'third broadcast medium' (Allan, 2006:37), though Smartt described the site more pragmatically as a dynamic newspaper, or a hybrid of formats:

When I was asked in the early days what BBC News Online would become I used to say: a national and international newspaper, updated every minute of every day, with the best of TV and radio mixed in.

(Smartt, 2007:np)

While the analogy of a hybrid newspaper is useful in relating to the predominantly text based format of the web at the time, the BBC's commitment to the internet was very much based on extending its public service values to the online domain. These public service values are often surmised as 'inform, educate and entertain', based on the BBC mission statement that has remained largely unchanged for the past 80 years (BBC, 2007:np). The

²⁰ During this period the BBC News team had also managed to produce another site, dedicated to the 1997 budget, entitled *Budget 97* (URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/politics97/budget97/>).

'historical' functions of the BBC gives a more detailed understanding of how these three terms are interpreted conceptually – described in the corporation's submission to licence fee review panel in March 1999 below.

- “Bringing the nation together” – providing the focal point for major national events; reflecting the nation and its diversity; creating a shared, communal experience
- “Informing democracy and citizenship” – providing fair, independent news; covering a wide range of factual and current affairs; ensuring citizens have the necessary knowledge to make informed decisions
- “Serving a richly diverse audience” – nurturing the diversity of the UK's heritage, identity and cultural life, across the nations and regions, across all ethnic and religious groups and minorities
- “As a cultural patron” – acting as a patron to the arts through financial investment, training, promotion
- “As a civilising force” – making arts accessible to all
- “As an educator” – enlarging people's horizons and extending their education
- “As a technological pioneer” – pioneering new technologies and associated services, from radio and analogue television to digital television and the internet

(Graf, 2004:68-9)

For the purpose of this thesis, it is worth emphasising the points about 'informing democracy and citizenship' and acting 'as an educator'. This clearly demonstrates the historical function of the BBC in relation to British citizens, being as it were to ensure they 'have the necessary knowledge to make informed decisions'. While the education function of the BBC is often operationalised through overtly pedagogic programming, it is also inextricably linked to the diversity and plurality of the BBC news and information services. The final point serves as a reminder of the BBC's function 'as a technological pioneer' and further legitimises the BBC's move online. The 1999 submission also articulated what the corporation perceived to be the core elements of BBC Online.

- The provision of news and information
- The role of trusted guide to the internet, helping users to enjoy the full potential of the internet
- The development of communities of interest, based around BBC content

- The opportunity for viewers and listeners to provide feedback on programmes and services
- The provision of a range of educational sites and services
- Local and regional content

(Graf, 2004:69)

News and information at the forefront once again, while the third and fourth points demonstrate the importance of interactivity and civic engagement, which are positioned in the report as a core objective to delivering on the BBC's public service obligations. Interestingly, interactivity is stated as being between the BBC and members of the public ('feedback'), as well as between members of the public themselves ('communities of interest'). These social elements have a stated purpose of 're-enforcing democratic values, processes and institutions' (cited in Graf, 2004:70). The strategy of developing BBC Online as a public service offering was also a long-term commitment to future generations since, in the words of Bob Eggington, 'that's where young people are going' (Bob Eggington cited in Allan, 2006:35).

During the licence fee review in 1999 there were still external pressures to turn BBC Online (including news and sport) into a commercial operation by accepting advertising. Two of the key drivers behind this move were a finding that many of the visitors to the site connected from abroad and did not contribute through the licence fee, as well as the commercial proposition of floating BBC Online as a business on the stock market. Despite such arguments, the idea was rejected by the independent review panel on the future funding of the BBC²¹, as they expected BBC Online:

[...] to become a core part of the BBC's public service in the next few years. We also expect that closer convergence will take place between websites and broadcast services, so that the BBC's domestic audience will increasingly access BBC output via the website.

(Davies et al., 1999:65)

Other ideas, such as sponsorship, subscription fees and direct government funding were also considered and largely rejected as they 'could change fundamentally the purpose and nature of the BBC's public services, both broadcast and online' (Davies et al., 1999:68).

²¹ The report did favour continued commercial development of beeb.com and BBC Worldwide, however.

Of course the BBC is involved in private enterprise, with Enli (2008:112) arguing that the Corporation is ‘among the public service broadcasters with the freest scope as commercial players’. However, it was concluded during the 1999 review that BBC News Online should be considered a public service operation on equal terms to the other broadcast services.

2.5.5. The internet and the 2001 UK General Election

By the 2001 UK General Election around 40% of British adults had access to the internet, with 35% of households connected (Chadwick, 2006:158). Increased connectivity was complemented by a more sophisticated web presence, both from political parties (see Chadwick, 2006, Coleman, 2001b, Gibson et al., 2003, Ward and Gibson, 2003, 2000) and news organisations (see Coleman, 2001a, Ingham et al., 2001, Hill, 2001) The Government, however, shut down the interactive section on the Downing Street website before the campaign – in part to avoid undue advantage being given to the governing party, but also following technical problems and issues with moderation (Wright, 2006).

The political parties had made significant progress in using their sites to connect with voters – the Conservative Party web manager even stated that their strategy was to create a ‘one-to-one’ relationship with the voter (cited in Bowers-Brown, 2003:105). Sites typically contained several interactive features and a vast amount of information on party policy. People were also encouraged to forward information to others through email postcards (and text messages in the case of Labour) and sign up to party mailinglists. The three main parties also invited prospective voters to submit questions or feedback ‘and had dedicated correspondence units co-ordinating responses to public enquiries via letter, facsimile, telephone, as well as email’ (Bowers-Brown, 2003:111). While providing such functionality, Bowers-Brown found that only the Conservative Party provided personalised responses whilst Labour and the Liberal Democrats provided automated responses and references to policy documents respectively.

Indeed the internet was still predominantly perceived as a way of engaging with *young* voters. Being perceived as technologically advanced, or trendy, remained as important as it had been in 1997. Labour even launched a dedicated site to engage the youth vote, entitled *RU UP 4 IT?*²², though their attempt was widely criticised for being poorly executed (see Chadwick, 2006:158, Ward and Gibson, 2003:191). As in the US the year before, vote trading on the internet appeared. Though there were several such sites, the two most

²² URL: <http://www.ruup4it.org.uk/>, no longer available.

popular were votedorset.net, fronted by singer Billy Bragg, and tacticalvoter.net – the pledges of which would have been sufficient to determine the outcome of two constituencies, Dorset South and Cheadle (Coleman, 2001b:683).

Whilst sites such as the UK Citizens Online Democracy were still around, the 2001 UK General Election was the campaign where the traditional media organisations, that is print and broadcast, firmly established their dominance online. Whilst most of the broadsheets and national broadcasters provided information-rich sites, the tabloids interestingly shied away from extensive election coverage (Coleman, 2001b:683). Moreover, the *Guardian*, BBC and Channel 4 also provided users with rich interactive elements that could be seen to replace, or at least overlap with, the deliberative function of UK Citizens Online Democracy. The most in-depth and perhaps most sophisticated of all these sites were BBC News Online's dedicated election section, entitled *Vote 2001*²³.

2.5.5.1. The BBC Vote 2001 site

Having published a dedicated election site in 1997, the BBC nevertheless stated in its 2001 *Guidance for all BBC Programme Makers during the General Election Campaign* that '[t]his will be the first full Online election' (BBC, 2001:np)²⁴. The document even included a section devoted to specific guidelines for BBC Online, which further emphasised the importance of the internet and the status the Corporation's website had achieved within just four years. Whilst the BBC's *election 97* site was published as a self-contained website, the Corporation's *Vote 2001* site (see Figure 2-3 below) was contained within the framework of BBC News Online.

In addition to news reports, the *Vote 2001* site contained a series of features designed to provide citizens with a rich source of information about the election. *Vote 2001* contained a detailed overview of election issues, various tools to allow readers to explore, compare and contrast the stance of selected parties on those issues. To complement this section, the BBC also provided links to a series of 'correspondent analysis', again pertaining to the defined election issues. Other column-like features were Andrew Marr's Week (political editor of BBC News at the time), Mark Mardell's View (political correspondent of BBC News at the time), The Campaign Today with Nick Robinson (chief political correspondent of BBC News 24 at the time) and The Battlebuses which featured reports

²³ URL: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/vote2001/>

²⁴ These guidelines were essentially draft versions of the ones published for the 2005 election, which are detailed in Chapter 3.

from a range of campaign correspondents travelling with the leaders of the three main parties. The combination of these sections, although not specifically called blogging, were in many ways a precursor to the BBC's *Election Monitor* blog during the 2005 election (The Campaign Today with Nick Robinson has further evolved into a regular political blog entitled *Nick Robinson's Newslog*, though news blogs were not formally launched until December 2005 (see Hermida, 2008)). The *Vote 2001* site also gave detailed information on the main political parties, 'crucial seats' and 'key people', with a further list and overview of every candidate standing for election. Detailed information was also provided on the election system and particulars of the election process, including a historical archive of past 'election battles' since 1945.

BBC HOME PAGE | NEWS | WORLD SERVICE | SPORT | MY BBC low graphics | help

BBC NEWS VOTE 2001 SEARCH VOTE 2001 go

You are in: **Vote2001**
VOTE2001 Tuesday, 14 August, 2001, 14:03 GMT 15:03 UK

Main Issues

- Features
- Crucial Seats
- Key People
- Parties
- Results & Constituencies
- Opinion Polls
- Online 1000
- Virtual Vote
- Talking Point
- Forum
- AudioVideo
- Programmes
- Voting System
- Local Elections
- Nations**
- N Ireland
- Scotland
- Wales

BBC NEWS

BBC SPORT

BBC Weather

THE ELECTION



The poll that never was

A Labour landslide, more Lib Dems and the Tory leader resigns. So, no change there then.

- ▶ Labour romps home again
- ▶ Hague concedes defeat
- ▶ Kennedy hails Lib Dem result
- ▶ Turnout at 80-year low
- ▶ A strong case of election apathy
- ▶ Blair's triumph tarnished
- ▶ World leaders hail Blair victory

CONSERVATIVE LEADERSHIP



Hague to step down

William Hague is to resign as leader of the Conservative party following his disastrous showing in the general election.

- ▶ Portillo hangs fire on leadership
- ▶ Widdecombe urged to run
- ▶ Battle on for Tory leadership

UK Scoreboard

After **659** of **659** seats declared

Party	Seats	Gains	Losses	Net
Lab	413	2	8	-6
Con	166	9	8	+1
LibDem	52	8	2	+6
SNP	5	0	1	-1
PC	4	1	1	0
UUP	6	1	5	-4
DUP	5	3	0	+3
SDLP	3	0	0	0
SF	4	2	0	+2
Oth	1	1	2	-1

The winning post



SEATS WON: 0 100 200 300 400
WINNING POST 330

- ▶  UK political map
- ▶  Full results service

TALKING POINT

Labour are back - what should they do first?
 The new-look cabinet gears up for business



Figure 2-3, Example of BBC News Online's *Vote 2001* website

Analysis of opinion polls were provided on an ongoing basis, with an interactive swingometer-style 'virtual vote' feature allowing users to trace potential election

outcomes. The BBC also commissioned ICM Research to conduct regular online surveys of a 2,000 strong voters panel, aimed to be representative of the UK adult population and not just internet users. The feature was dubbed *Online 1,000* and contained a new issue every month, and every week in the three weeks leading up to the election. Constituency results were also published on the site as soon as they were finalised. Moreover, the BBC provided a detailed breakdown of each constituent and a UK political map to visualise the results. The local elections running concurrently were also offered a separate section with a breakdown of results and links to related news items.

Prior to the 2001 election the Hansard Society had concluded that 'there is scope for a trusted web site such as BBC Online to generate a real national discussion, perhaps in conjunction with its *Election Call* phone-ins, that can show the unique character of the internet as a channel for public deliberation' (Coleman, 2000:60). The *Vote 2001* site provided two such interactive features. The first of this, titled *Talking Point*, allowed citizens to post their comments on a range of pre-defined issues and questions. This section can essentially be seen as an attempt at facilitating debate between ordinary members of the electorate, and is the precursor to the *Have your say* section during the 2005 election. The second feature, entitled 'Forum', was vastly improved from the *Election 97* equivalent. Essentially an extension of the *Talking Point* feature, the Forum allowed citizens to submit questions to the BBC, a selection of which would then be put to politicians by one of its correspondents. Both a video (albeit low quality) and a transcript of the interview would then be published on the *Vote 2001* site. Uniquely, several prominent politicians agreed to answer questions, including the party leaders of New Labour, the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Scottish Nationalist Party. These interactive features indicate early attempts by the BBC to facilitate deliberation among the electorate, but also between the electorate and the candidates. There was also an opportunity for pre-voters to state their political policies on the Newsround feature 'If U were Prime Minister', which according to Coleman (2001b:683) received several thousand posts.

The *Vote 2001* site registered around 500,000 page views every day throughout the campaign, with a massive surge to 10.76 million on polling day, 7th June, and results day, 8th June (Coleman, 2001b). The latter figures exceeded the BBC's previous record, interestingly achieved by the 2000 US Presidential Election. Coleman concluded, '[p]eople go on the web for breaking news (such as election results) and personalised information (such as their constituency results)' (Coleman, 2001b:683). Overall, however, the internet

had little decisive impact on the 2001 election. According to a survey carried out by Mori only 7% of respondents claimed to have used it to look for election information, compared with 74% for newspapers and 89% for TV. Only 4% of respondents said it had a 'great deal' or 'fair amount' of influence on their voting decision (cited in Chadwick, 2006:161).

2.5.6. Reviewing BBC News Online: The Graf and Neil Reports

The first major independent review into the BBC's Online services was commissioned by Tessa Jowell in 2003 and published in 2004. This review, conducted by former Trinity Mirror CEO Philip Graf, came in part as a response to criticism that the investment from the BBC into new media was to the detriment of the commercial sector, and indeed overstepping the original objectives that had granted them Government approval in the first place (see Carter and Allan, 2005)²⁵. The Graf Report reaffirmed news and current affairs as a strategic priority for BBC Online, whilst retaining the inextricable link to citizens and democracy. Specifically the Graf report stated that BBC News Online:

[...] should continue to provide fair, independent (national and local) news and current affairs coverage, ensuring citizens have the necessary knowledge to make informed choices and decisions and supporting the UK's democratic processes and institutions. The public value of this type of service will continue to grow, as more people use the internet as a – or even the – primary source of their news and basic information.

(Graf, 2004:75)

This commitment to 'supporting the UK's democratic processes and institutions' through the BBC's online news provision should be seen in the context of the wider editorial values of the BBC's journalistic output. Specifically, the Neil Report published in June 2004, which reviewed the BBC's editorial processes and values in the aftermath of the Hutton Inquiry (see Barnett, 2005). The report concluded that 'the BBC's journalistic promise for the years ahead centred round a group of five basic editorial values, on which there could be no compromise' (Neil, 2004). Further described as 'a code of conduct for every person who practises journalism in the BBC at whatever level', the five journalistic values were:

- Truth and Accuracy
- Serving the Public Interest

²⁵ See also Collins (2006) for a more detailed overview of governance and regulation of the UK Internet.

- Impartiality and Diversity of Opinion
- Independence
- Accountability

(Neil, 2004:6)

The Neil Report then turns to a more detailed explanation of each of these values with a series of statements for each point. Some of these have particular significance for the problematic of this thesis and are worth highlighting. In relation to ‘serving the public interest’, for instance, the report states that the BBC ‘will provide a comprehensive forum for public debate at all levels’ (Neil, 2004:7). Moreover, in relation to ‘impartiality and diversity of opinion’, the report states that the BBC ‘will strive to be fair and open minded by reflecting all significant strands of opinion, and by exploring the range and conflict of views’ (Neil, 2004:7). The phrase ‘significant strands of opinion’ in the latter statement interestingly places a value judgement on the ‘diversity of opinion’ provided – that is, ‘significant’ can refer to volume of sources holding a particular opinion, as well as credibility or status of sources (see also Chapter 4 for how this was implemented in 2005). Finally, while the report states the BBC should critique a diversity of opinion, the onus will be on citizens themselves to determine the extent to which one point of view, or truth claim, presides over another. Specifically, the Neil Report states: ‘Testing a wide range of views with the evidence is essential if we are to give our audiences the greatest possible opportunity to decide for themselves on the issues of the day’ (Neil, 2004:7).

The mission was extended during the Charter review in 2005 with five criteria by which the BBC should be judged – the first and most important of which was ‘sustaining citizenship and civil society’ (Department for Culture Media and Sports, 2005:5). While this move was seen as important to protect the BBC’s standing in an increasingly commercial media landscape, its reassertion of public service online in relation to citizenship is also important as a benchmark for the number of public service media organisations across Europe and the rest of the world that have been modelled on the BBC and the British conceptions of public value.

2.6. Summary

Public sphere and deliberative democracy are useful concepts for mapping out normative ideas about how society should be governed. As demonstrated above, they also highlight a set of important issues surrounding online civic engagement at election time, which

informs the present thesis' analysis of the BBC's *Election 2005* site. However, these concepts are not without practical limitations, especially when considering communications on a mass scale and the increasing fragmentation of audiences. Schulz (1997) argue the ideal system to deal with this is one governed by public service principles. Such a system is also the one best placed to deal with the type of normative demands Strömbäck (2005) suggests deliberative democracy places on media and journalism. In particular, 'mobilizing citizens' interest, engagement and participation in public discussions' (Strömbäck, 2005:340), which resonates well with the public service ethos of the BBC.

Indeed this chapter has shown how the BBC's commitment to providing a forum for public debate has evolved from the pioneering of political discussion programmes on radio in the late 1940s to regular scheduling of public access programming on both radio and television – not least through the vastly popular *Question Time*. While arguably not without its limitations as discussed above, this carefully mediated form of participation nevertheless serve a purpose insofar as it enables a limited degree of public interrogation of politicians and symbolically positions the public as part of a public sphere.

This chapter has also demonstrated that despite optimistic predictions in the mid-1990s heralding the internet as the saviour of democracy, the reality of online communications has proven to be quite different. This is not to say internet usage has not spiralled, but rather its forms of use have not yet facilitated the type of dramatic change envisaged. Instead the internet appears to encourage people to seek like-minded individuals who will reinforce rather than challenge their perspectives – thus effectively creating 'echo chambers' (Sunstein, 2001) as opposed to public spheres. Moreover, people who do express dissenting views in online forums are often either ignored or subject to abuse (Davis, 1999, Witschge, 2004).

This of course, is not to suggest the internet does not encourage and indeed engender dialogue between members of the public. Citizen journalism through its various forms, for example, is highlighted in this chapter as an exemplar of facilitating public dialogue. Moreover, through such initiatives ordinary citizens have become 'gatewatchers' who are keeping checks on mainstream media (Bruns, 2005). Thus major news organisations are having to adapt to accommodate the realities of a new media landscape and enter into a dialogue with their audiences.

The BBC is heralded by many as an exemplar in this respect, which in the name of its public service ethos is embracing citizen-generated content on several levels. However, the chapter also demonstrates that the Corporation owes its success to the foresight of its engineers and the freedom these were given in the early 1990s to experiment with technology. Having nevertheless been a late entry in the online news landscape, BBC News Online grew rapidly and soon established its position as a market leader. As this chapter shows, various forms of citizen feedback or interaction has been centre stage throughout this evolution, not least during the 1997 and 2001 UK General Elections. The following chapter will pick up this thread by examining in detail the 2005 UK General Election and BBC News Online's *Election 2005* site. In so doing it will also describe the methodological framework as applied within the present thesis.

Chapter 3: BBC News Online and the 2005 UK General Election

This chapter will explore the role of the internet during the 2005 UK General Election, and more specifically the BBC News Online *Election 2005* site. In order to provide a thorough review it will draw on existing literature and original research conducted for the purpose of the present thesis (interviews with people involved with the *Election 2005* site, a preliminary deconstruction of its features, and a review of relevant BBC policy documents). Together this material will provide the necessary context for the proper analysis of the research questions posed in Chapter 1.

The second part of the chapter will introduce the methodological framework applied to the case study of this thesis. Particular focus is devoted to assessing problems associated with researching online journalism and web based dialogue, which as emerging areas of study still have many unresolved methodological issues. Consequently, this thesis puts forth a multifaceted approach called web dialogue analysis that helps bridge the gap between new and traditional methods. This discussion will be conducted with the *Election 2005* site at the forefront and some preliminary findings will be used to illustrate the narrative where appropriate.

3.1. Themes and agendas of the 2005 UK General Election

There has been considerable research conducted into the events of the 2005 UK General Election and the party political campaigns preceding it. It is not the intention of this section, therefore, to recite every detail about the 2005 election (for general overviews see Bartle and King, 2006, Geddes and Tonge, 2005, Kavanagh and Butler, 2005, Leonard and Mortimore, 2005, Lilleker et al., 2006, Smith, 2005b, The Electoral Commission, 2005). However, it is useful to understand the various agendas that were operating during the campaign to get a sense for the themes and issues that were at the forefront of media and public attention (for a timeline of key events during the election, please refer to Appendix 1).

Drawing on research conducted at Loughborough University for the Electoral Commission, Gaber (2006) identified six distinct agendas in media coverage of the 2005

election campaign – those of the three main parties (Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats), the broadcasters and ‘broadsheets’, the ‘tabloids’, and finally the electorate (expressed through opinion polls). Each of these groups prioritised issues differently, as demonstrated by the table reproduced below (numbers stipulate how each issue ranked in terms of priority, equal signs denote equal prominence with those contiguous).

	Public	Media	Lab.	Con.	Lib Dem
Health		7	2	3	3
Asylum	2	2	4	5=	-
Economy	3	6		4	
Crime	4	5	5		8
Education	5	8	3=	8=	4=
Tax	6	4	-		7
Pensions / Social Security	7	9	6	7	4=
Iraq	8		-	10	2
Families	9	-	7	-	-
Europe	10	-	-	-	-

Table 3-1, Issues ranked according to priority (from Gaber, 2006:153, top rank shading added)

While the table broadly indicates what the *issues* of the election were, it also shows how aligned with public opinion the media and political parties were in their news coverage and campaigns. The media only had two of the public’s top five issues in their top five, whilst Labour had all five in its top five (though in slightly different order), the Conservatives matched four of the five and the Liberal Democrats three of the five. Gaber concludes ‘that Labour was the most effective at pursuing an agenda that matched the concerns of the voters, possibly indicating a stronger market orientation, and the media were the least successful in terms of reflecting these concerns’ (Gaber, 2006:153). By breaking down the media coverage further it is possible to discern that television, broadsheets and mid-market papers all followed a broadly similar agenda with strong focus on Iraq, voting irregularities and asylum. The red-tops had a much broader focus with some nine topics falling in the 4-7% range (see Table 3-2 below demonstrating the percentage of coverage dedicated to each theme by the given media sectors).

	Television	Broadsheets ²⁶	Mid-market ²⁷	Red-tops ²⁸	Average _
Election process	41	49	28	45	44
Iraq	10	8	10	4	8
Voting irregularities	7	7	16	6	8
Asylum	9	6	9	6	7
Crime	4	2	5	5	7
Taxation	4	5	7	4	5
Economy	2	4	3	5	4
Health	4	3	7	7	4
Education	3	3	4	5	3
Pensions / Social Security	2	2	4	4	2
Local government	4	1	1	-	2
Environment	2	2	1	1	1
Europe	1	2	-	1	1
Other (less than 1%)					7

Table 3-2, Percentage of news coverage dedicated to each theme during the 2005 UK General Election campaign (adapted from Gaber, 2006:153, and The Electoral Commission, 2005:34-5).

Clearly the single biggest subject of media attention was the ‘election process’, with ‘voting irregularities’ also connected with this featuring third in the list. However, the mid-market press had twice the amount of coverage than any other media sector on this issue. Interestingly the top three issues for the media, after ‘election process’, did not feature in any of the parties’ top three priorities as detailed above.

According to the British Election Study, the public felt that the media should report policies and activities of the various parties in an informative and impartial way, though remained divided on whether or not the media achieved this during the 2005 election campaign (The Electoral Commission, 2005).

The most influential part of the media was BBC’s *Question Time* on 28th April where Jeremy Paxman interviewed the leaders of the three main parties. The interviews attracted nearly 4.1 million viewers, 73% of whom felt it helped them understand the respective parties’ policies better (The Electoral Commission, 2005:38). According to a post-election MORI poll with a sample of the whole electorate, 18% of respondents said the *Question Time* programme had influenced their vote, while 14% stated newspaper coverage had done so, 12% were influenced by local candidates, 8% by political leaflets and 3% by

²⁶ Broadsheets: *Guardian, Observer, Independent, Independent on Sunday, Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Times, Sunday Times, Financial Times.*

²⁷ Midmarket press: *Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Daily Express, Sunday Express.*

²⁸ Red-tops: *Sun, News of the World, Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror, People, Star, Sunday Star.*

posters or billboards (The Electoral Commission, 2005:38-9, see also Lusoli and Ward, 2005, Norris, 2005). Of particular interest to this study was the finding that only 2% stated that the internet had influenced their voting preference. The reason for this is and the role of the internet during the 2005 election campaign more broadly is explored in the next section.

3.2. *The internet and the 2005 UK General Election*

Commentators were widely predicting the internet to play a decisive role in 2005 UK General Election. Optimism and great expectations about forms of internet use during the election were even rearticulated by the BBC's technology analyst, Bill Thompson, only a few days into the campaign. The internet facilitates activities 'that would be difficult or [sic] not impossible without the net', he argued, 'and does it in a way that enhances the democratic process and opens up the campaign' (Thompson, 2005a:np).

Wherever we look it is clear that Internet tools like email, websites and chat are going to be central to this election.

It will happen at every level and goes far beyond the national campaign run by the national parties.

(Thompson, 2005a:np)

These lofty predictions came in large parts due to the success of the internet in influencing the US presidential Election the year before²⁹. There the internet had been an important vehicle for raising campaign funds and mobilizing activists. Howard Dean's primary campaign in particular is noteworthy here, as its success was based around online fundraising and the use of Meetup.com to organise real world political gatherings (Wolf, 2004). However, the Dean campaign would not have been able to maximise the potential of the Meetup groups had it not been for the publicity given to them by bloggers (Chadwick, 2006). In a signal of how established blogging had become in the political landscape, both the Democrat and Republican parties accredited bloggers to cover their nomination conventions as journalists (Adamic and Glance, 2005). The influence of blogs

²⁹ This development in turn came on the back of other overseas elections such as the 2002 South Korean Presidential Election - where the citizen journalism site OhmyNews and online activism were largely responsible for a relatively unknown candidate from the Millennium Democratic Party, Roh Moo-hyun, gaining office (Joyce, 2007). For detailed discussion of specific connection between features of Moo-hyun and Dean's campaigns, see Chadwick (2006).

stretched beyond the blogosphere through its interaction with national media, and there were several cases where political blogs were either first in breaking stories or fact-checking mainstream media news reports. For example, the Swiftvets.com anti-Kerry video was first linked to by bloggers until John Kerry finally responded to the allegations, which brought mainstream media coverage. Another prominent example was when bloggers forced an apology from CBS News anchor, Dan Rather, over his reporting of memos relating to alleged preferential treatment toward President Bush during the Vietnam War (for both examples, see Adamic and Glance, 2005, Allan, 2006, for blogging and the 2004 US election see also Scott, 2007, Janack, 2006, Kaid and Postelnicu, 2007, Mears, 2005, Meraz, 2007, Williams et al., 2005, Papacharissi, 2007, Kerbel and Bloom, 2005, Trammell et al., 2006).

However, analysts were eventually left largely disappointed by the perceived failure of the internet at influencing the UK election and *mobilising* young voters (for overview see Ferguson, 2005). The blogosphere for instance, which had featured so prominently in the US election the year before, was only slowly beginning to be emulated in the UK (Ward, 2005, Stanyer, 2006, Ferguson and Griffiths, 2006, Howell, 2005, Auty, 2005). However, this is not to say that the internet was not used widely, indeed internet access was now above 60% (Dutton et al., 2005:10) with around 27% of the UK population using it to access electoral news, around two thirds of those who looked at news online (Ward, 2006:10). Moreover, whilst internet penetration in the UK only increased by 3% between 2003 and 2005 (Dutton et al., 2005), people were rapidly switching from dial-up to broadband with a 77% year on year increase from May 2004 – May 2005 in broadband market share of connections to the internet (Pollard, 2005:2). Subsequently, those using the internet regularly had almost doubled since the 2001 election (Ward, 2005). Despite such a widespread adaptation, the internet was still some way behind radio and television as a primary news source, with only 5% of the population rating it as their first choice destination (Ward, 2006:10).

Where the internet did appear to have an impact was on the ‘mostly young, male, educated, and internet literate citizens who went online for electoral information’ (Lusoli and Ward, 2005:14). The detailed breakdown in Table 3-3 indicates a perhaps more positive image of internet effects on citizens election behaviour than the figures from the The Electoral Commission (2005) stated at the end of Section 3.1 above. Most respondents clearly felt the internet had *some* effect, with almost one in five suggesting online information made the election more interesting and helped them make a more informed voting choice. While

one in six claimed the internet had encouraged them to use their vote, it made little difference in terms of influencing their voting decision – confirming, changing or voting tactically (Lusoli and Ward, 2005:18-9, see also Mesch and Coleman, 2007, Di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006).

	Below 35	35 and above	All
More interest in the election	22.3	15.0	18.4
Helped make a better informed choice *	24.2	12.4	17.8
Encouraged to vote *	12.9	6.2	16.2
Confirmed vote decision	18.2	14.5	9.3
Changed vote decision	4.0	1.9	3.5
Encouraged to vote tactically	4.0	3.1	2.9
Encouraged to take part in the campaign	2.1	0.9	1.5
Some effect *	62.7	43.8	52.5

Table 3-3, Percentage responses from each age group, adapted from Lusoli (2005:19)³⁰.

Mesch and Coleman similarly concluded that ‘the Internet is a medium which stimulates greater political engagement among young people’ (Mesch and Coleman, 2007:46). Again, the study found that this political interest did not necessarily translate to voting behaviour. However, while the internet has a self-fulfilling prophecy insofar as those seeking information online are those already interested in politics, Norris (2008) found some evidence to support a two-step model, where these citizens would in turn disseminate this information to other citizens (Norris, 2008:18).

According to Ward and Vedel (2006) the disappointment felt by analysts was actually in part because of an unhelpful comparison with the US, which set unrealistically high expectations and ‘ignores the central role of the UK social, political and media environments in shaping the use of technology’ (Ward and Vedel, 2006:223). Specifically, they argue that the British system favoured doorstep canvassing and face-to-face contact with voters, due to its party-centred constituency campaigning in comparatively small geographic areas. This was perceived by parties as more valuable than e-campaigns and thus downplayed the role of ICTs in the UK election (see also Ward, 2005).

The discourse created by news coverage of the internet during the election campaign is

³⁰ ‘Q12. Thinking about the information and news about the election you read or received online, do you think it? internet users who looked for or came across information about the election, n = 401. * = difference is statistically significant at p < 0.05’

important since attention, positive or negative, raises awareness of online tools and their uses. The lack of prominence of the internet during the campaign may therefore in fact have reinforced a lack of connectivity with online material. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, news reports during the campaign did not devote much attention to the internet or its associated forms of use relating to the democratic process (see also Thompson, 2005c). By way of example there were only brief mentions of political manifesto comparison sites, tactical voting sites, election information sites (both independent and partisan) and blogs, and no focus on news websites or sites providing forums for election discussion. Alan Connor argued that this was not necessarily due to lack of influence, but rather forms of internet use becoming so normalised that they were no longer inherently newsworthy:

It is emails exchanged by colleagues and family members that have more of a sway on the result. Just as it would be daft to ask whether the election was won in the pubs or at the dinner table, so is online political chat such a normal part of life that we would never hold the front page to report it.

(Alan Connor, BBC News Online, 10 May 2005)

Thompson (2005c) concludes that the lack of attention given to the internet by mainstream print and broadcast news was in part due to there being 'no big story, no Dean-like candidate coming from nowhere thanks to the innovative use of online tools and no "Rathergate" to focus attention on the blogosphere in its role as the Fifth Estate' (Thompson, 2005c:22). Even sites that were subject to 'viral' distribution did not get significant news coverage, despite receiving tens of thousands of visitors (Thompson, 2005c:24). These include notapathetic.com, where people could register their reason for *actively* choosing *not* to vote; The Public Whip³¹, a searchable database of voting records for (former) MPs; the associated site, TheyWorkForYou³², which facilitated contact with (former) MPs and linked to their voting records; and finally 'Who Should You Vote For?'³³, where people could match their preferences on a series of statements to a political party. There were also examples of online humour, aimed at stimulating political participation through ridiculing politics itself (Shifman et al., 2007).

Candidate blogs received little attention, Thompson (2005c) argues, partly because their style and content was so clinical they 'were immediately dismissed as exercises in e-spin'

³¹ URL: <http://www.publicwhip.org.uk/>

³² URL: <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/>

³³ URL: <http://www.whoshouldyoutvotefor.com/>

(Thompson, 2005c:24). Indeed Jackson (2006a, 2007) found that it was the smaller parties that were the most likely to adopt two-way symmetrical communication, whilst the larger parties relied on asymmetrical communication. Blogging by political parties for instance were merely one-way communication that 'added colour to party websites'. Moreover, 'such weblogs may have encouraged visitors to return because of some form of voyeurism, but they were not either effective conversational, campaigning, or promotional tools' (Jackson, 2006b:292). Drummond (2006) confirmed this finding among first time voters (18-24) looking at party websites. Respondents felt the internet played a significant role both in the election process and in the marketing of political parties. However, they also felt that whilst technologically sophisticated, the content provided on such sites did not inspire or determine voter intention.

Looking at the UK blogosphere as a whole, Stanyer (2006) identified some 312 blogs with messages concerning the election campaign – ranging from blogs with one or two posts over the period of the campaign to those entirely dedicated to the election. 57% of these blogs belonged to members of the public with the remaining 43% being associated with an organisation either directly or indirectly. Of the non-partisan bloggers, 60% had no discernible political allegiance, 36% could be classified as left-wing (nearly half of which had a clear anti-Blair stance), and 4% were identified as right-wing (Stanyer, 2006:410). The issues addressed in the blogosphere largely reflected the mainstream media agenda, and blogs ultimately did not have any impact on the campaign news agenda. However, Thompson (2005b) maintained that whilst there was no 'blog breakthrough' during the 2005 election, 'that does not mean that there was not a rich and complex debate taking [place] between those who write, read, and link to those blogs that took an interest in the election'. Indeed, based on his personal experience, he argued 'that the *quality* of debate was significantly improved by the lack of any larger-scale media attention' (Thompson, 2005b:np, emphasis added).

Evidently the internet did not have a significant visible impact on the 2005 election outcome, different forms of use were not widely reported by the mainstream media and there were no ground breaking innovations in online campaigning. However, it is equally clear that the internet was of importance to certain demographics (young internet literate men for instance) and that those people did make use of it as an election information source. In many ways the increasing maturity of the internet was actually reflected in that it did not stand out as having had a significant impact on its own, but rather had become somewhat a naturalized part of existing media landscapes and campaign processes.

3.3. The BBC Election 2005 site

While the internet might not be perceived as having had a significant impact on the election outcome, the BBC certainly had a considerable impact on citizens' online activities. During the 2005 campaign, BBC News Online accounted for 78% of all internet news traffic, about one in five of the total election news audience (Ward, 2006:10): Blogging, which had featured noticeably in the US Presidential Election the year before, attracted only 0.5% of the online audience during the election (Ward, 2006:11). On average, 550,000 people visited the *Election 2005* site each day of the campaign, though this only represented 10% of all BBC News Online users (UK or otherwise) and only 5% of page views (Ward, 2006:17). On election-day, May 5, the number of unique visitors to the election site tripled to 1.5 million, with the figure doubling on May 6 when the results were published (Ward, 2006:17). In May 2005 the BBC published *Building public value – its response to the Government Green Paper A strong BBC, independent of government*³⁴ – which recalled the BBC's election website in grand terms:

Throughout the campaign, interactive and digital media were used extensively. The election website was used by over 500,000 unique users each day. An online issues guide helped audiences compare policies on 20 central issues. On election night itself, the complex dynamics were explained to 15 million people by the innovative use of 3D graphics, and the local perspective was covered in more detail online and via interactive television. The day after the election the BBC website recorded a record 50 million page impressions.

(BBC, 2005e:17)

Evidently the BBC website was heralded by the Corporation as a success in terms of number of visitors and market share of the online election news audience, but also in terms of the additional features the site offered as part of its public service commitment to the British public. However, both Ward's study (2006) and the BBC's own statement focuses on the success in terms of website statistics based on log data or audience surveys about perceived usage. Neither actually examine in detail the content published to understand qualitatively the manner in which the BBC's website facilitated a space for citizens to express their views and engage in dialogue. Addressing this shortfall is, as outlined in

³⁴ The Green Paper was part of a review into the BBC prior to the renewal of the Royal Charter in 2006.

Chapter 1, at the heart of the present thesis. Before detailing the case study and how it was conducted, this chapter will now turn to examine in detail the various aspects of the *Election 2005* site, starting with the relevant editorial and policy guidelines that underpinned the development of the site.

3.3.1. Democratic value and civic engagement

In preparation for the impending general election, and very much informed by the review process following the Graf report described in Chapter 2, the BBC developed its most detailed guidelines to date in relation to the role of BBC News Online during the election. As a general statement on 'broadcasting during elections' the *Editorial Guidelines: The BBC's Values and Standards* stated that BBC staff should ensure that 'news judgements at election time are made within a framework of democratic debate which ensures that due weight is given to hearing the views and examining and challenging the policies of all parties' (BBC, 2005c:97, emphasis in original). While this statement is referring to the treatment of political parties, the 'framework of democratic debate' implies a much broader concept. Though no definition is provided for this concept, the *BBC Statements of Programme Policy for 2005/2006* provides further evidence of how the BBC delivers 'democratic value' – specifically in relation to new media services it states:

In line with the new remit, our news and information service will be aimed primarily at creating democratic value and civic engagement, complementing the BBC's broadcast news coverage across all subject areas.

(BBC, 2005b:40)

These documents provide a conceptual framework of the BBC's aims and objectives. The personal interpretations of such policy frameworks would necessarily differ between the vast range of BBC staff involved in developing and maintaining the election site – including, but not limited to, technical staff responsible for developing the computerised infrastructure, staff responsible for providing factual information (or educational provision), staff responsible for news and commentary, and staff responsible for managing interactivity. Vicky Taylor, Editor of BBC Interactivity at the time, explained her interpretation of 'democratic value and civic engagement' and how this was operationalised in relation to BBC News Online during the 2005 election:³⁵

³⁵ While this thesis comments on the working practices of staff involved with the *Election 2005* site, to account for all plausible interpretations of the policy framework falls outside its scope. The views of Vicky

It's not instructing people how to vote. [...] If you feel more part of a process and if you're more informed you're then likely to be more engaged, and then perhaps you may decide to vote or not vote. It's not our duty to make people vote, but it's our duty to give people as much information as possible to have an informed opinion one way or the other. So, I think the way to read that 'democratic value' is more [to do with] information and giving people the access to that, rather than saying: go and make sure you get to the polls and be democratic. 'Civic engagement' just means interactivity if you're a citizen - and that's on our debates.

(Taylor, 2007)

Justifying the interactive features in terms of public service, Taylor stated that it is 'much better if you're getting your audience telling you what they think than just the officials or people in power [...] it's a form of democracy - more people get their chance to have their say about something' (Taylor, 2007). The implication being in her reading that the interactive features of BBC News Online are not merely part of a 'democratic framework', but are in themselves democratic.

The *Guidance for all BBC Programme Makers during the General Election Campaign for 2005* articulated the requirements in more pragmatic terms – in a dedicated section to BBC Online it stated that '[c]are must be taken to ensure that forums and message boards are vehicles for lively debate' (BBC, 2005d:np). In order to ensure such a debate and prevent these from being 'hi-jacked by organised campaigns of one particular group or party', the guidelines said to avoid 'open ended message boards on political issues', and that hosts would 'be required to initiate topics with appropriate questions and to steer threads so as to encourage effective debate about the issues' (BBC, 2005d:np). The topics were to be set by journalists and be 'based on the issues not personalities' (BBC, 2005d:np).

Looking at all the BBC's broadcast services during the 2005 election, Mena-Aleman (2005) argued that the achievement of this 'democratic value' could be summarised in three broad categories³⁶: 'engaging the citizenry; enabling informed choice; and promoting interest in the election campaign' (2005:4). In terms of 'engaging the citizenry' (or audience), Mena-Aleman found that *Question Time*, *The Election Roadshow* and the

Taylor are highlighted because of her particular role in overseeing the interactive elements that deal directly with highlighting citizen voices and facilitating debates.

³⁶ Mena-Aleman did not argue that these categories were conclusive, but rather that they were useful as a means to assess the quality of BBC election broadcasts with regards to 'democratic value'.

BBC's *Election Bus* all contributed to this purpose, as well as nearly all news programmes (through vox pops). *The Politics Show* and *BBC Breakfast* news regularly carried emails and text messages from viewers, whilst Radio 4's *PM* programme also carried listeners' letters. For the second category, 'enabling informed choice', Mena-Aleman highlighted the *Panorama* programme, political commentary and in-depth interviews on *Newsnight* and the *Politics Show*, as well as regular news bulletins. He also pointed to the *Election 2005* website where people were able to compare and contrast party policies as important in enabling 'the acquisition of a systemic and more precise knowledge of party positions and proposals' (2005:5). For the third category, 'promoting interest in the campaign', Mena-Aleman pointed out that the BBC had made use of 'a bus (the official BBC *Election Bus*), a narrowboat (*The Politics Show*)[,] a helicopter (*Newsnight*) and a motorcycle sidecar (*BBC Breakfast*)' (2005:5) to catch the attention of the audience. While relatively positive about the BBC's performance on the first two criteria, Mena-Aleman argued that the latter 'gimmicks fail to contain enough substance to maintain attention throughout the campaign', and perhaps more severely that '[t]hey also contributed toward shifting the focus away from the election story in other news reports' (2005:5).

Interactivity is not exclusive to the online domain, however, and the 2005 election witnessed an interesting development in use of 'red-button' by digital TV users. On election night some 422,000 BBC viewers made use of this service to select their own view of the election results, which constituted 10% of its audience (Coleman, 2005). Colman argues this might allow people unable to afford computers access to interactive services, but also notes that 'it moves interactivity away from the geekiness of computers to the centre of shared domestic space' which might help increase its usefulness (Coleman, 2005:6).

3.3.2. Website news and features

Following its early attempt in 1997 and more successful execution in 2001, the BBC again created a dedicated section for its election coverage this time entitled *Election 2005*³⁷ (see Figure 3-1 below). In anticipation of the forthcoming election, the BBC Interactivity team had spent a 'good four months' planning the content, with the creation of the technical infrastructure having started even earlier (Taylor, 2007). News reports were centre stage, with 843 reports published. Of these reports, 57% were categorised as front-page news, whilst 21% were categorised as belonging to England and 8% to Wales, with Scotland and

³⁷ Site URL: http://news.bbc.co.uk/nol/ukfs_news/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/

Northern Ireland each receiving 7% of the filed news reports.

bbc.co.uk Home TV Radio Talk Where I Live A-Z Index Search

Low graphics version

BBC NEWS Election 2005 Election news in video

News Front Page Last Updated: Monday, 19 September 2005, 11:09 GMT 12:09 UK

Election 2005

Results
Issues
The Basics
Weblog
Fun and Games
Have Your Say

England
Northern Ireland
Scotland
Wales

SERVICES
Election news alerts
Email services
Mobiles/PDAs
News for your site
RSS
What is RSS?

RELATED SITES
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On This Day

FIND THE RESULTS

AT-A-GLANCE
324 seats needed to win
LAB 356 CON 198 LD 62
LOCAL ELECTIONS
Full council results

LOOK FOR YOUR SEAT
By postcode
Or by place
SEARCH
Election 2005 at-a-glance
Full results in detail
In pictures: Election night

USE MAP

Blair secures historic third term
Tony Blair acknowledges the Iraq effect but urges unity as he wins a third term with a greatly reduced majority.
Election night at-a-glance
WATCH Election night round-up

Howard will stand down as leader
Tory leader Michael Howard will stand down "sooner rather than later" over voters

Kennedy hails 'party of future'
Labour can no longer "ride" over voters

OTHER TOP STORIES
Shock win for Galloway in London
UUP leader loses Upper Bann seat
UKIP falls short of its targets
Green vote doubles in two seats
BNP sees increase in total votes

Figure 3-1, BBC News Online's *Election 2005* website

As in previous years, BBC News Online featured several sections to complement its traditional news coverage, designed to give citizens a more in-depth knowledge of election issues. The core issues analysed were classified as education, health, law and order, environment, constitutional reform, immigration, Iraq, Europe, transport, pensions, rural affairs, tax and spending, families and children, and equal rights. Users were also able to compare three parties of their choice at any one time through the *Issues grid*, which detailed the 'key party priorities' and gave a short paragraph on where the party stood on a selection of issues. Links to party manifestos, the BBC party profile and the party's own website were also provided. Profiles of ten party leaders were also given and a 'clickable guide[s] to who's who on the front bench' provided the reader to profiles of MPs from Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. The level of detail on other candidates, however, was scarce.

The *Election 2005* site also included some visual guides, including a step-by-step guide to voting. Other graphical sections included the poll tracker, an interactive *Swingometer* and a

seat calculator allowing users to predict outcomes based on percentages in opinion polls (percentage share converted to parliamentary seats), with links to various videos with Peter Snow giving an overview of different election aspects. The traditional archive of past elections was also featured, though this time in animated form. The 'basics' section complemented the visual guides by detailing '[e]verything you need to know about voting... but were afraid to ask'.

3.3.3. Citizens' voices

Compared to the election sites of 1997 and 2001, the BBC in 2005 significantly improved the opportunities for ordinary citizens to post their comments on the website. The BBC's election blog, entitled *Election Monitor*, announced on the main page that it aimed at 'bringing you first-hand reports from around the country from our team of correspondents, as well as the best of the newspapers, choice morsels from the web, and your e-mails.' The blog followed a by now traditional reversed chronological order, identifying the author of blog entries with name and title next to their picture. At the end of the item was a link to 'your comments', which would bring you to a page including both the blog entry and a selection of the comments posted. At the very bottom of each blog entry page was a form to post comments, which included the following caveat: 'The BBC may edit your comments and not all emails will be published.' The blog finished on 276 posts (in addition to the main holding page), of which 189 had received replies from visitors to the site.

The blog is more explicitly an extension of the journalistic provision of the BBC, retaining the core values of 'authenticity' and 'transparency' (Wilson, 2007). Bloggers are still expected to remain impartial, although the 'direct talking' style of the blog might be considered 'more believable' in the eyes of the public (Wilson, 2007). The blog was intended to provide commentary and analysis, not breaking news. However, whilst the BBC in the early years referred to many of its online news experiments as blogging, it is evident that many of these were not consistent with the forms and practices described as blogging elsewhere on the internet (Hermida, 2008). Even the editor of BBC News Online at the time, Pete Clifton, acknowledged this issue, predominantly rooted in problems with the technological implementation:

The site has called all manner of things blogs in recent months, even, briefly, this column. None of them have been blogs, and our publishing system does not currently

have the tools to produce them properly. So we've looked pretty dumb. [...] So until our kit can produce a blog that behaves properly, I've banned us calling anything on the site a blog.

(Clifton, 2005:np)

Nevertheless, despite technical limitations, the *Election Monitor* was without doubt consistent with forms and practices of blogging and also attracted considerable amount of comments from members of the public as will be explored in subsequent chapters.

The *Have your say* section evolved from a similar feature of the 2001 election site entitled *Talking Point*, where the BBC invited readers to respond to a series of questions relevant to the themes of the election. The Editor of BBC Interactivity, Vicky Taylor (2007) explained that this change in title was to unify the terminology used in other interactive programmes and because '*Have your say* felt more of a call to action'. Though Taylor recognised that the *Talking Point* title might have been more indicative of deliberation, she felt that it sounded too formal – like 'having some high level discussion whilst *Have your say* is inclusive' (2007).

The type of questions citizens were asked to engage with were often directly related to issues perceived to be of importance to the election campaign. However, the BBC also sought to engage citizens in more general debates about democratic processes, including the campaign itself. The BBC also fuelled the notion of disengagement from the election campaign, by asking: 'Is this campaign the most boring ever?' Most importantly, however, citizens were offered an opportunity to come up with their own issues to deliberate. In total the BBC published 67 pages under the *Have your say* banner where people could freely submit their comments.

The final part of the *Have your say* section was the *UK voters' panel*, created in collaboration with Breakfast television. Seemingly an evolution of the *Online 1,000* feature from the 2001 election, this panel consisted of 19 voters who had been asked in advance to contribute their views 'in text and in video, using 3G mobile phones,' throughout the election³⁸. Each of the constituent countries ('Home Nations') apart from England also had

³⁸ Taylor and Fottrell (the person responsible for managing the *UK Voters' Panel*) operated with different figures on how many members there were in the voter panel. Specifically Taylor (2007) stated it had 20 members, whilst Fottrell (2007) stated it had 22-23 members. The figure referred to in the text (19) is the empirical finding of this study. Thus while the panel may have contained more than 19 members, only contributions from these were actually published on the site.

their own voters' panels.

3.4. Researching BBC News Online

This thesis has thus far focussed on providing a historical background to the *Election 2005* website – in terms of technological development and evolution of relevant policy frameworks. Working practices of staff associated with *Election 2005*, and audience demographic and use of the site has also been examined. Only when understanding this context can the analysis of the content, which is central to the present thesis, be properly executed. Having established this setting, the chapter will now turn to discuss the methodological framework used to analyse the *Election 2005* site.

3.4.1. Methodological issues and defining object of study

The above literature review demonstrates the extent to which scholarly attention to online election news and web based dialogue is still in its infancy – somewhat narrowly focussed on levels and forms of usage with little qualitative attention to content. This may be precipitated by a lack of suitable methodological frameworks to adequately deal with the challenges posed by analysing the content of new media. Much of the above research relies on traditional methodological frameworks and contributes little towards a solution for dealing with the rich problematics uniquely associated with online news, or indeed interactive services, as an object of research.

While there are particular challenges in relation to the study of online audiences (how to determine unique visitors as opposed to hits, and time spent on each page, for instance), much of this can be resolved through the combined use of surveys or log statistics (e.g. Ward, 2006). Thus extending the method used to determine popularity and demographics of broadcast services and circulation of print media. Likewise, the dynamic nature of websites has had a fundamental impact on the working practices of journalists and support staff, which can be examined through ethnographic studies or interviews (as used to complement the analysis above). This of course does not overcome the potential problem with anonymous contributors in the case of user generated content as detailed in the previous chapter – understanding who these people are, what motivates them, and their practice for producing and submitting material may be difficult, if not impossible.

Looking at online *content*, however, poses a series of additional complexities. While it is a multimedia object (combining text, image, audio and video often on the same page), which could be subjected to traditional forms of textual analysis, it is also often dynamically updated in a non-linear manner. That is, as opposed to broadcast audio or video – which is dynamic, but linear – any part of a webpage can be updated at any time. Moreover, this updating will also in most instances destroy the previous copy of the webpage, which Foot (2005) suggested would be as if ‘each day’s newspaper was printed on the same piece of paper, obliterating yesterday’s news to produce today’s’ (Foot, 2005:5). The ephemeral nature of web pages therefore calls for an archiving system that enables a sense of permanence associated with traditional news media. Some technological platforms have the functionality to compare each revision of published pages, such as Wikinews (e.g. Bruns, 2005, 2006, McIntosh, 2008, Thorsen, 2008a), although this was not the case for the BBC News Online website in 2005³⁹. Thus the end product analysed may have differed in public form at various stages – both including and excluding material contained in the final artefact.

These are just some very brief issues that one might be faced with when researching online journalism as compared with traditional platforms. This is not to suggest that the web as ‘new media’ necessarily requires a methodological reinvention. Indeed Jankowski and Selm (2005) express scepticism about such a sentiment, arguing that ‘much more is to be gained through application of conventional research methodologies and practices than those on the vanguard of Internet research innovation seem willing to acknowledge’ (Jankowski and Selm, 2005:200). However, the reality is probably an element of both, whereby the web does require both an evolution of existing frameworks and the invention of new methodologies – the determining factor of this balance being the research objective itself.

One potentially useful framework is ‘web sphere analysis’ (Foot and Schneider, 2006), which demonstrates a multifaceted approach to websites (content, producers and audience). Foot and Schneider (2006) portray web sphere analysis as ‘a multimethod approach involving contemporaneous and retrospective interrogation of Web objects and

³⁹ In computer science terms, these pages are typically still static HTML pages that can easily be archived at any given point. Within such a context dynamic often refer to pages created by the client browser or a server based on database information – each page being bespoke and generated upon request when accessing a particular URL. Very few pages on the BBC website was based on such a system at the time. Indeed the BBC News Online content management system generates a unique page URL for each news item published. It is therefore the continuous updating or editing of this page by BBC staff that gives the page a ‘dynamic’ feel.

interactions with Web producers and Web users' (Foot and Schneider, 2006:211). Specifically they described a 'demarcation of electoral Web spheres, campaign site analyses, user focus groups, user survey, site producer interviews, and site producer survey' (Foot and Schneider, 2006:211). Foot and Schneider (2006:20) 'conceptualize a Web sphere as not simply a collection of Web sites, but as a set of dynamically defined digital resources spanning multiple Web sites deemed relevant or related to a central event, concept, or theme'. However, it is not the mutual hyperlinking that defines the sphere, but rather the shared topical orientation across a range of online resources. 'An electoral Web sphere', they conclude, 'has a topical orientation toward the election and includes sites produced by actors with a role in the electoral arena, such as candidates, civic and advocacy groups, press organizations, citizens, and government bodies' (Foot and Schneider, 2006:20).

Thus the BBC News Online website, and more specifically the *Election 2005* site, can be considered as part of a wider electoral web sphere for the 2005 UK election, but more significantly as a web sphere in its own right – containing as it did a wide range of digital resources and an amalgamation of voices and material from the 'electoral arena'. Foot and Schneider's study was focussing on campaign websites, and thus the function of persuasion was centre stage. Of particular importance was the 'practice of involving [which] is manifested in online structures that facilitate affiliation between the site producer and the site visitors' (2006:22). The role of the BBC News Online website in the electoral arena is not to persuade, but rather to inform and educate. The interactive elements also serve to facilitate involvement in a similar way to campaign websites, and arguably the contributions to public debate (as part of a public sphere) are often positioned with the express intention of persuading others. However, the BBC should (at least in theory) be the facilitator of a neutral space for such dialogue to take place.

The web sphere analysis framework is nevertheless limited in that it focuses predominantly on the function of web sphere 'nodes' in the 'network'. In terms of analysing content on actual sites, it examines website features (e.g. campaign news, speech texts, links to external sites, online polls or email sign-ups) categorised by practice (i.e. informing, connecting, involving, and mobilizing), but not the actual text itself in any detail (see also application in *The Internet and National Elections* study, Dougherty and Foot, 2007, Kluver et al., 2007). Given that the study examined several hundred websites for each election, this is perhaps not surprising. However, it therefore omits a qualitative critique of those features and the content presented on the site itself. Thus, this framework is useful in

illuminating the larger aspect of the research problematic – the conceptualization of the BBC website as a web sphere, but also how this is situated within a much broader electoral web sphere. However, this thesis is first and foremost concerned with the representation of citizen voices and instances of civic engagement by members of the public through participating in dialogue with others using the BBC News Online website. To this end, it is important to bring in another methodological dimension that allows a more detailed textual analysis of this content.

3.4.2. Web dialogue analysis

In order to overcome the obstacles described above, the present thesis will make use of a bespoke methodological framework that consists primarily of a close textual analysis. For the purpose of this thesis, this close textual analysis and its associated aspects discussed below, will be referred to as web dialogue analysis. This term has been fashioned to emphasise the distinctiveness of the approach, but also to enable a more structured discussion of the method and its application within this study.

As indicated in the section above, analysis of web artefacts or spheres is still a relatively new discipline and as such there is no set vocabulary to describe online discourse. To this end, web dialogue analysis will draw on the conceptual vocabulary associated with Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin and proponents of his work (see for instance Bakhtin, 1984, Morris, 1994, Morson and Emerson, 1990). While his original work was concerned with the analysis of literary work, Bakhtinian ideas and principles have usefully been applied to the analysis of truth and objectivity in news discourse (see for instance Allan, 1998, Talbot, 2007, Thorsen, 2008a) and used to complement Habermas in relation to the public sphere (Hirschkop, 2004, Roberts, 2004) as discussed in Chapter 2.

Two terms are of particular importance to define here as they are applied in relation to web dialogue analysis. Firstly, dialogic (or dialogism) refers to the constant state of ongoing dialogue in which every word enters. That is, every word always exists and makes sense in relation to other words, where it simultaneously informs and is informed by its social context. As mentioned in Chapter 2, this implies that reality is inherently heteroglossic as it is created in the process of dialogic interaction between people collectively searching for 'truth'. Dialogic interaction is applied within this thesis to mean the actual demonstrable interchange of ideas between individuals (e.g. comment and reply in a debate section). However, at times it also used to refer to the non-documented dialogic interaction between

the text and the audience (e.g. the person reading, but not contributing).

Secondly, the primary element of dialogue Bakhtin described as an utterance. That is, a thought which a person gives voice, either in speech or in writing. For the purpose of the present thesis, an utterance refers to any unit of text that can be attributed to a source. This is further broken down into three different forms: paraphrases (or indirect discourse), which infer what a person said in news and feature articles; quotations (or direct discourse), which are direct reproductions of spoken utterances in news and feature articles; and comments, which are direct reproductions of written utterances posted to debate sections (another form of direct discourse).

It is important to acknowledge at this stage the need for a self-reflexive approach to qualitative analysis as applied within this thesis. That is, to recognise that this aspect of the analysis is necessarily informed by the subjective judgement of the researcher and as such is not intended to be viewed as the only possible interpretation of the object of study. This process can also be understood in terms of Bakhtin's dialogism as described above, since it seeks to document one aspect of the dialogic interaction between addresser and addressee – or in other words the dialogism between text and the reader, which in this instance constitutes the web pages and the researcher.

Web dialogue analysis, as applied herein, also made use of a coding system to enable quantitative summary statements to be made on the basis of the qualitative analysis of such a vast number of web pages. The coding scheme is adapted from the groups used in Lewis et al's study (2005) into representation (or construction) of public opinion in television and newspapers. Despite this study being concerned with traditional media platforms, it details public opinion and how to differentiate between passive and active citizens (and variations thereof). The thesis further draws on Wright and Street's (2007) coding scheme of online discussion forums (based in turn on Wilhelm, 2000). This scheme classified both the content of messages and the communicative interaction between posted messages (e.g. if they replied to another comment or incorporated ideas from others). Finally, following Richardson and Franklin (2004) the tone of the comments were also classified as being positive, neutral or negative to determine their attitude towards engaging in rational dialogue with other posters. However, it is important to clarify that despite coding of entries, the thesis is a qualitative study, which given its scale describes some of the findings quantitatively – it is not intended to be an empirical content analysis.

The framework described above and in the preceding section indicates a multi-faceted approach, which ultimately consisted of four core elements. These were:

- a. Historical contextualisation of BBC News Online
- b. Analysis of relevant policy framework influencing BBC News Online
- c. Observations of working practices and interviews with the people producing and maintaining BBC News Online and in particular the *Election 2005* website
- d. Web dialogue analysis of the BBC News Online's *Election 2005* website

Findings from the three first elements (context and practices) are described in Chapter 2 and 3, whilst the final element forms the basis for the case study detailed in the impending three chapters. The three first elements are essential to enable an informed analysis of the chosen object and help support the conclusions that can be drawn from a web dialogue analysis. However, they should not be considered distinct from this method and are integral to understanding the dialogic nature of the object of study. That is, the *Election 2005* site is itself in continual dialogues with the three first elements, which extends in both directions and mutually influence each other. This chapter will now turn to describe in practical terms how web dialogue analysis, covering all the four elements above, was applied to the present thesis.

3.4.3. Analysing context and practices

The history of BBC News Online is incredibly rich and diverse, and this thesis only touches upon a selection of key events with an emphasis on three UK General Elections. It should by no means be considered a conclusive account and further research is required to ensure parts of this early history are not lost.

Very little is actually written about the early years of the BBC website and what material is there often contains vague, sometimes contradictory, references to what actually took place. Examples of sites prior to 1997 are difficult to access – despite many of these being available on the BBC servers, they are not readily publicised as such and finding the correct URLs involve a healthy proportion of guesswork. Once the original index file has been identified, many of the links contained within are broken and content missing.

In the early years of BBC Online computer storage costs were a premium, thus the larger (in size terms) and more interactive material has in some instances been deleted (e.g. the

Swingometer from the 1997 election site, or images associated with the 1998 FIFA World Cup site) – perhaps in order to make way for new pages or as a consequence of human error. It was only in August 1999 that John Birt, Director General at the time, issued a request to the Head of Heritage to ‘work out what we need to do to preserve the BBC’s early work on the Internet’ (cited in Smith, 2005a:22). The Legal and Historical Internet Archive system that was subsequently put in place interestingly did *not* capture BBC News Online (since this remained online), audio and video content (most of which was stored in their original broadcast format) and dynamic database-driven content (Smith, 2005a:23). Although such functionality is said to have been planned for the future it highlights the danger of an incomplete historical archive.

The Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine⁴⁰ goes some way to mitigate this, but perhaps even more impressive for the BBC are two independent initiatives. Firstly, Matthew Somerville’s BBC News Archive⁴¹ which indexes the BBC homepage and news front-page every minute, and provides a range of visualization tools and a version comparison based on this data. Secondly, NewsSniffer⁴² which contains two services – ‘Revisionista’ which archives and displays revisions of news items, and ‘Watch Your Mouth’ that monitors *Have your say* debates (with the intention of spotting comments that have been removed or censored). What none of these systems are currently capturing, of course, are all those submissions from ordinary citizens that were discarded prior to publication – particularly a problem with material submitted to the *Talking Point* and early iterations of *Have your say* sections when content was received via email and published manually. There would have been no process for systematically archiving material that was never published.

Moreover, any form of web archiving is unable to capture the human processes involved in producing these websites. As demonstrated by this chapter, much of what illuminates and brings to life any web history is the first-person accounts of the people working on or with the site at the time. The detailed mapping of their experiences is urgently needed to ensure their valuable insight do not suffer a similar fate to much of the early web material.

Since the BBC is a publicly funded organisation, its policy documentation is available in the public domain. However, it was not always straightforward to obtain historical guidelines with the ones published online typically referring to the current incarnation.

⁴⁰ URL: <http://www.archive.org/web/web.php>

⁴¹ URL: <http://www.dracos.co.uk/work/bbc-news-archive/tardis/>

⁴² URL: <http://www.newsniffer.co.uk/>

Nevertheless, it was possible to not only obtain the relevant Statements of Programme Policy, but Editorial Guidelines and specific guidelines for the election. These were analysed in advance of a fieldtrip to BBC's Broadcasting House to observe the working practices of the BBC Interactivity team and online newsroom, as well as to conduct semi-structured interviews with people responsible for interactive content and submissions from members of the public on the *Election 2005* site. The fieldtrip was conducted in accordance with the Bournemouth University *Research Ethics Policy and Procedures* and care was taken to obtain the necessary consent from people interviewed and observed⁴³.

Interviews were conducted with Vicky Taylor, the Editor of BBC Interactivity, Giles Wilson, the person in charge of blogs, Stephen Fottrell, the person in charge of the *UK Voters' Panel*, and finally one of the people responsible for manually publishing comments submitted by members of the public⁴⁴. The fieldtrip and interviews were conducted on March 27, 2007 and lasted a full working day. Observations were made of working practices and members of staff gave detailed demonstrations of the content management system as well as the process (past and present) for handling submissions from members of the public. The interview with Vicky Taylor was recorded, though this was not practicable for the others as these were conducted in a more informal manner whilst they were demonstrating software or other aspects of their work. Some of the interviewees also specifically requested some of their comments to remain confidential, though their omission for this thesis is inconsequential.

Each of these three elements (historical contextualisation, policy analysis and observation of working practices) were conducted prior to the main case study analysis to ensure their full benefit were realised. This final element can itself be broken down into three key stages – preparation of data, analysis of citizen voices within articles, and comments submitted by members of the public in response to articles or debate entries. Preparation involved identifying and archiving data for analysis (in this case individual web pages), as well as stripping the web archives of unwanted information and extracting individual comments from debates. The two analysis stages involved a web dialogue analysis of all web pages and subsequent coding of web pages to empirically represent the qualitative findings. This chapter will now turn to a more detailed description of each of these stages.

⁴³ The Bournemouth University *Research Ethics Policy and Procedures* document is available in full at: <http://portal.bmth.ac.uk/StudentRegulations/>

⁴⁴ This person was originally employed on a temporary contract for the 2005 election to manage citizen submissions, but was since retained and is now a full-time employee. Name withheld.

3.4.4. Preparation of news and comments included in study

As mentioned in the previous section, the BBC Legal and Historical Internet Archive system did not capture pages from BBC News Online and subsequently did not include the *Election 2005* site. The logic being that these pages were still available and could be accessed via the original URL indefinitely. Subsequently a process had to be deployed to identify and archive each page belonging to the *Election 2005* site. Manually going through the BBC website, irrespective of this being done at the time of the election or in hindsight, would be exceptionally laborious and almost certainly inaccurate. It is possible to conduct a search using the built in tools on the BBC website itself⁴⁵. However, this tool is somewhat limited in its functionality and aimed at giving results most relevant to current news as opposed to providing an accurate rendition of all pages related to your chosen topic. Indeed this is also a significant problem relating to picking search terms to define the chosen topic. That is, a search for 'uk general election 2005' may return a series of pages which may or may not be related to the event of the UK General Election 2005. Likewise, it may also fail to return web pages that were relevant to the election, but did for whichever reason not contain the words specified. In order to mitigate these inherent limitations and complexities of conducting such searches, this thesis relied on a combination of methods as described below.

The solution was to conduct a Google 'site search' on the base URL for the *Election 2005* page⁴⁶. Two aspects complicated this – firstly not all the pages were necessarily filed as subsidiaries of the base URL, and secondly the Google search engine only returns a maximum of 1,000 results and the initial site search on the base URL suggested that this would be exceeded. To overcome this the application Blue Crab was used to conduct a webcrawl of the base URL. This is a technology similar to that used by search engines to index websites and follows the links on every document stored in the specified URL. This was done in order to identify any additional locations that were relevant storage areas for the *Election 2005* site and it also helped identify the subsections of the base URL. The core URLs identified are listed in Table 3-4 below.

By using these URLs it was possible to bypass the maximum result boundary of Google whilst also incorporating documents with a different base URL to the *Election 2005* site (the final two URLs in the list – for these the results from the webcrawl was used as

⁴⁵ URL: <http://search.bbc.co.uk/>

⁴⁶ The Google syntax being the URL prefixed by 'site:', which returns all pages indexed by the search engine containing that URL in their address.

well)⁴⁷. While this method was exhaustive, it is impossible to assert that it was conclusive. That is, there may be pages that were not indexed by the search engine, were not linked to by other BBC pages, were unable to be accessed by the webcrawler method, and / or were removed by the BBC for whatever reasons. However, the likelihood of such pages being reached by members of the public – somehow accidentally – are miniscule. Thus it can be argued that the pages identified for the purpose of this study are those that members of the public would reasonably have had access to.

BBC News Online URLs related to 2005 UK General Election	Google Hits
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/	~8,530
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/basics/	68
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/blog/	275
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/frontpage/	528
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/england/	365
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/have_your_say/	127
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/issues/	56
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/northern_ireland/	114
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/scotland/	98
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/wales/	134
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/vote2005/	~1,270
http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/election1/	N/A

Table 3-4, Number of pages returned by Google for each URL from BBC News Online associated with the 2005 UK General Election

Given the vast number of webpages involved, a script was written to automate the archiving and preparation of each individual page⁴⁸. Specifically this would grab all the links from every search result page in Google, filter the relevant URLs to remove advertising and additional Google queries, create a webarchive of each page and import these into the database. The database entries were then all named after the title tag of the webpage. In order to allow a chronological organisation of the entries (date tag was originally set to the save date of the webarchive, not the original save date of the webpage itself), another script was created that would look up the meta-tag containing the publication date. This date was then extracted, reformatted and inserted in the comments field and the created date of each record was changed to match this (note that the BBC uses GMT as the main publication timestamp which is not corrected for British Summer Time).

⁴⁷ The results were also corroborated using a series of Yahoo! searches to compare the different indices, which in the case of the *Election 2005* site were found to be consistent.

⁴⁸ The solution described involved various software (Blue Crab, Automator, DevonAgent and DevonThink) and script programming (AppleScript and Perl).

Duplicate entries were then removed (these occurred both in the individual Google results and as a consequence of conducting a range of different queries) using an automated script, which was subsequently verified manually.

The above method essentially resulted in a database containing all web pages relating to the *Election 2005* site, though these required some further preparation to be compatible with the chosen coding software, TAMSAnalyzer (see Figure 3-2 below). Each page was therefore processed to remove the navigation panel and contextual links that were not directly related to the story, which would have differed depending on when the page was loaded (for instance the “latest news” would be relevant to the time the user loaded the page, not when it was published). The resulting page represented the article or debate, as it would have appeared in rich format to the reader (i.e. including all links, information boxes and images). Another plain text version was also created that could then be used to feed the coding software. All image text and information boxes were still included, positioned within the body text relative to where they appeared on the original page.

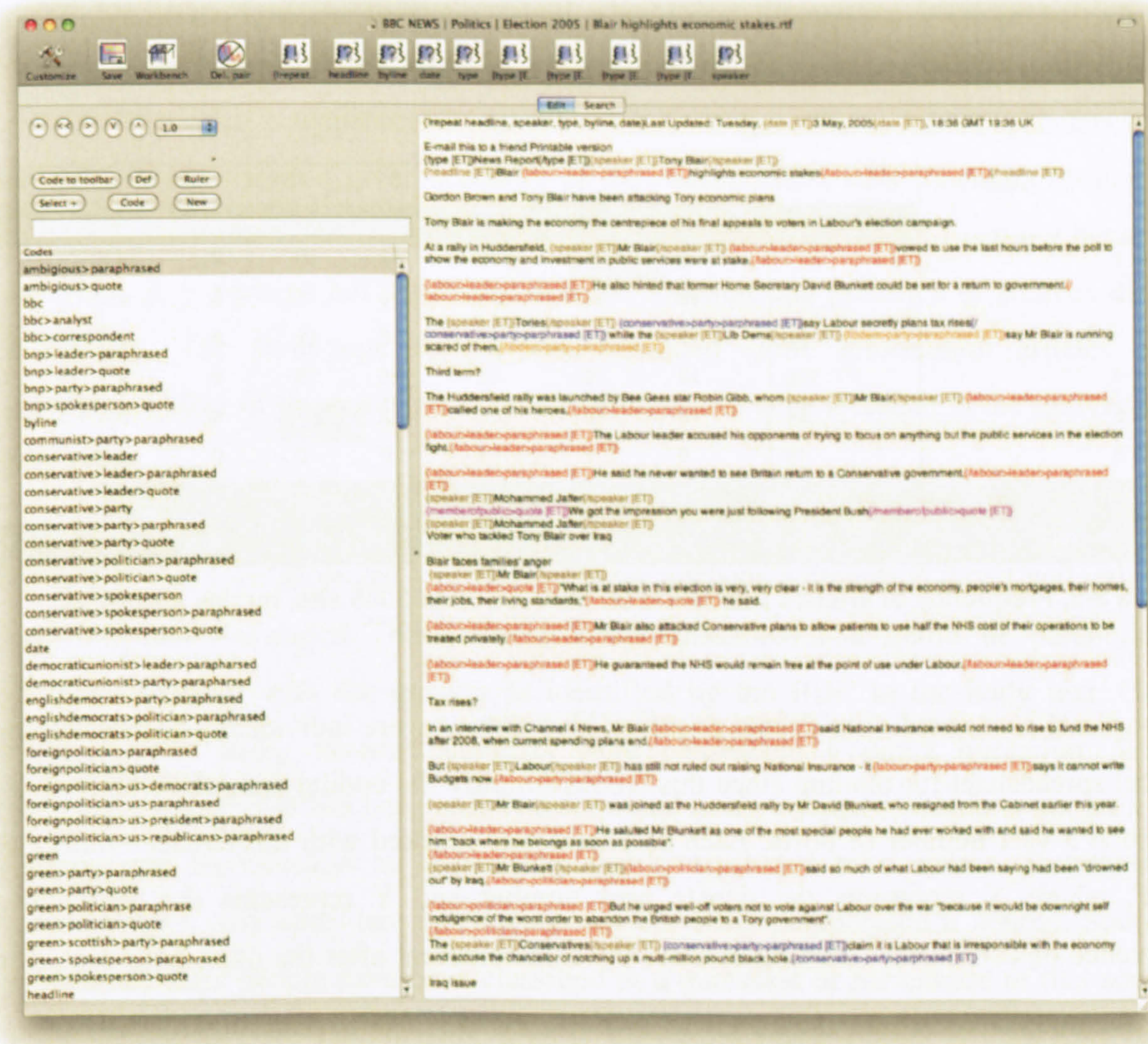


Figure 3-2, example of news text marked up in TAMSAnalyzer

The research presented within this thesis focuses only on the 472 articles published on the front-page of the *Election 2005* section coupled with the *Election Monitor* blog, *UK Voters' Panel* and *Have your say* sections. This was in order to create a manageable sample size. Moreover, it coincides with findings from Ward's (2006) study of the BBC's server log as detailed above, which demonstrates that the majority of people only viewed content published on the front-page.

As demonstrated by Table 3-5 below⁴⁹, on average 11 articles were published on the front-page of this section each day of the campaign. However, unsurprisingly there is a significant dip in articles published on 5th May, consistent with respecting polling day as free from campaigning, and a subsequent peak on 6th May when the results were announced. It is also worth noting that fewer articles were published at the weekend, whilst Tuesday had the highest average of articles published per weekday (equal to Friday, though this is influenced largely by the anomaly of 6th May). Whilst there is a slight increase in articles on the front-page in the final two weeks of the campaign, it is worth noting that the BBC consistently published a high number of articles both on a daily and weekly basis.

	Totals								Avgerage
	Weekly	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Daily
Week 1	75	0	11	16	18	10	7	13	11
Week 2	95	18	16	12	19	16	5	9	14
Week 3	90	13	21	14	16	12	6	8	13
Week 4	108	13	15	22	25	15	9	9	15
Week 5	94	13	19	15	2	34	6	5	13
Week 6	10	8	1	1	0	0	0	0	1
Overall totals	472	65	83	80	80	87	33	44	
Overall averages	79	11	14	13	13	15	6	7	11

Table 3-5, Frequency of articles published on BBC Election 2005 site, by day and week

Comments associated with debate pages or blog entries were individually copied into an Excel spreadsheet for markup since this would simplify the coding and relational analysis of such a vast number of posts. Each comment was indexed with a reference number of X.Y, where X represents the debate post number and Y represents the enumerated sequence of comments - starting at 1 for the first comment after the main body text. The

⁴⁹ The dates highlighted are 5th April and 6th May, dates announcing the election and the results respectively.

order of the debates (X) is arbitrary as the date for these were dependent on when they were last updated, as opposed to when they were initiated. The order of *UK Voters' Panel* entries was further prefixed with a letter to demarcate the debate these belonged to.

3.4.5. Analysis and coding of news and features

The articles published on the front-page have been classified depending on their narrative structure, and are presented here as separate categories since their treatment of sources differ significantly depending on the genre. The classification mostly follows the BBC's own labelling of articles, though some articles were clearly features or analysis, without having been marked as such by the BBC. News reports, interestingly, hardly ever featured a byline – seemingly an echo of the old values where the news was presented in a sombre and impartial way, to the point where in the early days of television news the news anchor was not even visible. In contrast, feature and analysis articles contained a byline on almost every occasion. Within features, the active voice of the journalist functions primarily to drive the narrative and set up the voices of interviewees. However, the journalist is also allowed to make personal observations and summarising remarks. Analytical columns, however, consists primarily of the voice of the journalist (analyst or expert on the area in question). The voice is again active and the narrative is typically based on speculation of potential outcomes from a given scenario, or the consequences of a statement (policy or otherwise) or opinion polls. Given the distinctly different narrative structures between these three, it is perhaps not surprising that the function and presence of sources differ considerably. The front-page sample also included some information articles and transcripts. Neither of these was significant, but they have been included in the analysis for consistency.

Each article was then subjected to a web dialogue analysis where each direct and indirect source utterance was coded. These utterances were classified as a 'quote' or 'paraphrase' and also associated with the speaker as identified by the BBC in the body text. Only utterances cited using inverted commas were considered a direct quotation. What constitutes a paraphrase has been strictly interpreted as an utterance, which is not a direct quotation, but nevertheless an expression clearly attributed to a source. Paraphrased utterances were only considered as such when the BBC paraphrased a source. Sources paraphrasing other people have been classified as a quotation or paraphrase of that source and not the one they are paraphrasing. That is, utterances where a point of view have been attributed to someone else by a particular source, is considered to be an utterance by that

source and not the person whose point of view is being inferred. Whilst this strict interpretation of what constitutes a quotation or paraphrase may inadvertently lead to some actual quotations being coded as paraphrases (and perhaps some paraphrases not coded at all), it reduces the level of interpretation on behalf of the coder, thus ensuring a more rigorous representation of source utterances. Moreover, if the utterance is ambiguous to the coder, it would probably have been unclear to the reader as well, thus this level of coding is likely comparable to the audience's experience of the text.

In total there were 105 codes used to describe direct or indirect utterances in news and feature reports (see Table 3-6 below for code roots and sub-levels). Only the core groups – main parties, other parties, institutional sources, members of the public and others – were predefined. All other codes were created during the analysis process to accommodate the type of sources present. The code sublevels therefore differ for most code roots. All the articles were coded to highlight relevant utterances prior to the qualitative analysis, during which all coded utterances were verified a second time and corrected if required⁵⁰.

Code root	Code sublevels
labour	leader, party, party>member, politician, source, spokesperson
libdem	leader, party, politician, spokesperson
conservative	leader, party, politician, spokesperson
bnp	leader, party, spokesperson
communist	party
democraticunionist	leader, party
englishdemocrats	party, politician
green	party, politician, spokesperson
independent	candidate, supporter
nationalfront	party
otherparties	otherparties
peoplesjusticeparty	party
plaidcymru	leader, party, politician
respect	leader, party, politician, spokesperson
sdip	leader, party
snp	leader, party
ukip	leader, party, politician, spokesperson
ulsterunionist	leader, party, politician
veritas	leader, party, politician, spokesperson
xtraordinarypeopleparty	leader
foreignpolitician	foreignpolitician, us, us>democrats, us>president, us>republicans
institutional	academic, army, army>officer, army>soldier, bookmaker, celebrity, charity, church, corporation, education, electionofficial, eu, foreignmedia, houseofflods, industry, judge, lawyers, localbusiness, localgovernment, media, ngo, nhs, officialbody, otherpolitical, police, pollster, postoffice, prisons, retail, tradeunion, transport, un, usmedia
memberofpublic	audience, blog, campaigner, criminal/prisoner, haveyoursay, haveyoursay-debate, memberofpublic, opinionpoll, publicdebate, streetencounter
ambiguous	ambiguous
bbc	analyst, bbc, correspondent

Table 3-6, coding categories used in content analysis element of methodology

⁵⁰ Only a small number of utterances required re-coding. These either related to increasing or reducing a code sublevel to accommodate findings. By way of example, utterances relating to *Have your say* comments were initially all classified as memberofpublic>haveyoursay, though on reflection two categories were needed to differentiate between highlighted comments on a news report and comments that were part of a debate page.

Political sources were coded as relating to their specific party, though for the purpose of summarising these findings the three main parties (Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats) will be separated against the cluster of 'other parties'. Likewise, the other core categories were also grouped so as to create a broad basis for comparison.

Each occurrence of a code was counted, but in order to get a sense of the magnitude of the respective voices, the number of words in each utterance was also counted. Across all items 5,698 utterances were coded as paraphrased and 3,736 as quoted. These utterances totalled 100,450 words paraphrased and 95,171 words quoted - which represents 29.6% and 28% of text published in these articles respectively (the total word count for all front-page articles being 339,665 words). Thus effectively 57.6% of the text published on the front-page could be attributed to a source.

Counting the word length of each utterance also enabled an average number of words per code group to be worked out, to determine if there was any difference between source groups in the way they were cited. In addition to this the distribution across the relevant articles were calculated, to demonstrate the penetration of each code group – for example, some sources might register with a high frequency and magnitude, whilst only being present in a small number of articles, thus reducing their true exposure to the audience.

While all direct and indirect utterances by news sources were coded quantitatively, they were also analysed qualitatively. That is, whilst the quantitative coding gives a sense of what sources the BBC cited and the section in which these appeared (e.g. news, feature, analysis, transcript or information), the web dialogue analysis enables a critical view of how these points of view were expressed and importantly their relationship with other sources. This relationship is not presented quantitatively, as what is of interest here is the nuances and particular characteristics of each utterance and dialogic interaction. While the thesis highlights commonalities and demonstrates trends within each genre, it is impossible to reduce the qualitative interpretation of these unique interactions to empirical enumerations (it would also be difficult to manage statistically the vast number of codes with relatively low frequency that would undoubtedly occur). Within the qualitative textual analysis, particular focus was placed on the representation of citizens' voices or public opinion, plus the specific relationship between coded utterances (quotations or paraphrases), especially focussing on articles and exchanges where citizens were involved.

Three issues that needed to be addressed during the coding process are worthwhile highlighting here. Firstly, there was at times a certain degree of source ambiguity – for instance, what differentiates a citizen / campaigner from a representative of a union / NGO / charity? This study has aimed to classify the sources as they have been described in the news report – that is, one source may have been described as a campaigner in one article, and as an official of an organisation in another. This may seem contradictory, but it is consistent with the problematic of this thesis, which concerns the *representation* of citizen voices. Secondly, there were some news items with different headlines, but identical body content – e.g. ‘Non-voters get Aardman treatment’ and ‘Non-voters get their own cartoon’. Presumably these were duplicated by mistake in the process of changing the headline. Both have been coded and included in this study since visitors to the site could reasonably have been expected to encounter either or indeed both versions. Several other news items contained a certain degree of repetition from previous articles, though this was not as widespread as expected. It would seem the BBC updates the existing story several times rather than creating unique references each time. Finally, analytical and feature articles where the BBC correspondent or analyst wrote in an active voice were not coded in its entirety as such. These codes have been reserved for discrete quotations or paraphrases of BBC correspondents or analysts where they occurred. This decision was taken to avoid disproportionately skewing the results.

3.4.6. Analysis and coding of comments from the public

Through interviews conducted during the fieldtrip to the BBC described above, it became clear that the debate sections on BBC News Online required manual intervention in order for comments to be published to the website. This workflow is detailed in Chapter 6, though it is worth noting at this stage that only a fraction of the comments submitted to the BBC were ever published. Vicky Taylor, Editor of BBC Interactivity, explained that this was predominantly due to a lack of resources within her team and estimated that probably 90% of the contributions received, ended up being ignored. In other words, the relatively low estimated publication rate of comments was *not* due to a structured rejection of comments that were deemed to fall outside BBC guidelines. Subsequently, it is clear that many potentially valuable contributions to the public debates hosted by the Corporation would have been excluded – not only from this study⁵¹, but also from the dialogic interaction in which their authors were seeking to partake. Whilst the present thesis

⁵¹ It was not possible to obtain access to unpublished comments.

analysed *every comment published* to the BBC website, this should therefore only be considered a sample of the *actual comments received*.

Because of the manual updating process used by the BBC News Online website at the time, there was no existing storage or computerised tally of number of entries, comments or even individual contributors. To this end, part of the objective of this thesis was to map these aspects empirically. While the results might seem trivial in the context of the current system used by the BBC News Online website, which has contributor statistics published on most holding pages, the actual coding of such content based on static pages involved a complex set of arrangements.

Firstly, people posting to the website did not need to register with a unique username. Therefore it was difficult to identify posts by the same person, before even considering the implications of anonymity or assumed identities. However, it was possible to give some indication on replies made by the same person by counting identical, or near identical, bylines. For instance '*J Westerman, Leeds*', '*J Westerman, Leeds, UK*' and '*J Westerman., Leeds, UK*' could reasonably be assumed to be the same person – in this case responsible for 22 replies and the most frequent unique poster to *Have your say* topics. With perhaps less certainty we can also assume that '*Chris, UK*' could be counted as the same person, responsible for 20 replies and the most frequent poster with the same unique id. Although we might assume '*Sarah Williams, Kent*', '*Sarah, Kent*' and '*S, Kent*' is the same person, this would perhaps be stretching the concatenation too far. Following such logic then, although never entirely accurate, we can identify presumed individuals who have posted more than one reply to each topic, or posted replies to several topics.

Secondly, in order to understand the nature of dialogic interaction taking place on the interactive parts of the BBC's website, each response was evaluated and grouped depending on the nature of their engagement. Initially entries were coded by identifying the target of comments or the specific rhetorical characteristic of the comment. The categories are in part based on Lewis et al's (2005) levels of citizen engagement on US and UK television⁵², defined as: (1) citizens making proposals, (2) citizens responding to politicians, (3) citizens commenting on an issue/event/group without making proposals for action, (4) citizens speaking about personal experiences or as consumers, (5) citizens speaking about sports, celebrity or entertainment (Lewis et al., 2005:42-3). The first four

⁵² These levels were in turn based on categories used by Brookes et al (2004) when defining news representation of citizens during the 2001 UK general election.

levels were further broken down into 22 sub-categories, depending on whom or at what their comments were targeted.

The levels identified by Lewis et al (2005) were a useful starting point, but contained only two sub-categories of dialogue between citizens themselves: 'proposals to fellow citizens', and 'appeal to fellow citizens, no clear proposal' (both sub-levels of category 3 above). Given the debate-oriented nature of the text identified for analysis in this part of the thesis, the exact categories would have to more specifically address dialogue. At the same time it would not require the level of detail exhibited by Lewis et al's 22 sub-categories, since the latter would emerge more naturally from the qualitative analysis. Wright and Street's (2007) coding scheme tagged each message as providing information, seeking information, seeding information (groundwork or start of new topic), incorporating opinions or ideas from others, replying to another message, and validate or novalid (rational deliberative contributions versus contributions based on prejudice, emotion or aesthetic judgement).

Based on these two approaches ten levels of citizen engagement were identified and subsequently used to classify each comment. While the Lewis et al's levels were presented in the order of which they were perceived to be *active*, the levels used within this thesis are presented here in two sections in the order in which they are perceived to be *dialogic*. The first five categories were the least dialogic in the sense that they only engaged either directly with the topic of the debate or other topics with varying degrees of relevance.

1. Citizens speaking about personal experiences related to the original article, debate or post.
2. Citizens addressing or simply noting the issue raised in the original article, debate or post.
3. Citizens addressing the election or an issue directly related to democratic process, not directly relevant to the original article, debate or post.
4. Citizens addressing a specific election issue, not directly relevant to the original article, debate or post.
5. Citizens commenting on an unrelated issue.

The final five categories all describe the nature of dialogue that contributors engaged in – presented by the order in which they can be seen as active.

6. Citizens making proposals or being particularly solutions driven.

7. Citizens responding to the author of the original article, debate or post.
8. Citizens responding to another contributor by name or quote.
9. Citizens addressing issue or point raised by another contributor, but not engaging that person directly.
10. Citizens addressing the BBC as an organisation.

While there were comments that transcended more than one category, they were only classified according to their most dominant or dialogic characteristic. That is, a comment may have been making reference to a personal anecdote whilst also responding to another author directly. In such an instance, the comment would have been classified only as having responded to another author directly. This was due to the enormous amount of data involved, and although an obvious limitation of the study, helped make the web dialogue analysis more manageable. The categorisation of each comment was verified twice during the analytical process.

In addition to the level of citizen engagement, the connections between each comment were also marked in a separate column. These connections were primarily based on categories 7-10⁵³, which given the nature of the BBC's debate section required extensive analysis. That is, the comments were non-threaded and non-sequential – meaning each comment had to be assessed against all other comments in that debate to ascertain if there was any direct or indirect association between any of them. Comments were also found to be responding to messages posted in other debates – most likely a consequence of the manual updating process leaving the system open to human error when transferring comments from email to the web.

When illustrating examples in the subsequent chapters, comments have been rearranged to represent the logical flow of dialogue as it appears to have been intended by the authors. That is, comments are listed sequentially, according to who or what they engage with. It is important to note that this is *not* how the comments, and thus the dialogic interaction, were presented to visitors of the *Election 2005* site. Their experiences of such dialogue may therefore differ from the one portrayed here, and indeed some readers may have been entirely unaware of connections demonstrated in this thesis. Although passive observers of debates taking place in public spheres are an important consideration, the detailed analysis

⁵³ The use of categories necessarily differed across the article genres, as will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters. It is worth pointing out at this stage, however, that the *Have your say* introductions for instance did not have an explicit author, thus making category 7 largely irrelevant for such comments.

of such experiences fall outside the scope of this thesis.

Reconstructing the likely order of comments does have certain limitations. It could, for instance, contain false positives if one comment responded to a non-published comment with identical byline to one that had been published. Moreover, actual dialogue may also have been truncated, as comments engaging in dialogue (replying to a targeted comment, for instance) may not have been published due to lack of human resources as described above. However, what is of importance here is the extent to which published comments actually demonstrate peoples' explicit and implicit attempts at connecting with other contributors, despite technological limitations of the website, and as such embody certain characteristics of a public sphere.

Determining the level of dialogic interaction is useful in assessing the degree to which citizens are being active, but it gives little indication as to the nature of their comments. By analysing the inferred tone of comments through their vocabulary use, register and syntax, it was possible to further determine the extent to which people were making a positive, neutral or negative contribution to the debates. To this end, each comment was also coded according to the tone of their contribution as detailed below.

Positive: Optimistic or positive tone. Also encompass polite disagreement with solutions driven orientation.

Neutral: Noting issue or comment made, in spirit of original post (including humour).

Negative: Negative tone, confrontational manner or correcting others. Encompass contributions that were uncivil or impolite, though this was not necessarily a criterion for being considered to have a negative tone.

These codes are perhaps the most subjective aspect of the thesis and it is difficult to give an exact definition of what constitutes either category. The conclusions that can be drawn from these codes should therefore be taken primarily as broad indicators. It is important to note that the classification was relevant to the *tone* of the comment, as opposed to the extent to which that contributor agreed or disagreed with any particular issue. That is, comments could be expressing support for a particular issue in a negative way and vice versa.

It is important to note that while there were some debates embedded at the end of news and feature articles, these were only coded using the method described in Section 3.4.5 above.

This was predominantly to keep the dataset manageable and the methodological approach distinct between the news and features on the one side and the discrete debate sections on the other. However, the qualitative observations remained similar and comparative between debates conducted in either section.

3.5. Chapter summary

This chapter began by describing the political context, themes and agendas of the 2005 UK General Election, before concentrating more specifically on forms of internet use during the campaign. Overall the internet was *not* found to have an impact on the election outcome, which was reflected in and perhaps reinforced by news coverage of the campaign. There were sites on a more local level that sought to intervene in the election through encouraging so-called tactical voting, but the UK blogosphere did not feature prominently and attracted few visitors. Those who *did* go online for election information found it useful in making an informed choice, but not to the extent of changing their voting decision.

The election news audience was almost entirely consumed by BBC News Online's *Election 2005* site, with traffic to the site peaking the day after polling when people were visiting to find out the results in their constituency. It is evident from the discussion in this chapter that providing 'democratic value and civic engagement' was central to the Corporation when developing the *Election 2005* site. While this was most overtly intended to be achieved through forums or message boards such as the *Have your say* section, editorial guidelines also stipulated that news reports too were part of a 'framework of democratic debate'. Evidently the Corporation's aim was to utilise its online presence to provide a sense of public service directly related to and supportive of the democratic process. The extent to which this was realised through facilitating dialogue among citizens is at the core of the present thesis.

Having provided the necessary context for the case study then, the chapter moved to discuss various methodological issues facing the present thesis. It then proposed a bespoke methodological framework for the analysis of the *Election 2005* site, called web dialogue analysis. This is positioned as multifaceted approach that draws on both qualitative and quantitative methods. In particular it relies on Bakhtin's (1984) conceptualisation of dialogism, and coding schemes used by Lewis et al's study (2005), Wright and Street's

(2007) and Richardson and Franklin (2004). The chapter concluded by demonstrating pragmatically how web dialogue analysis has been applied to the case study herein.

This thesis will now turn to the case study, which is split into three parts. Chapter 4 deals with election news on the *Election 2005* site, followed by Chapter 5 focussing on election features. Both of these chapters are concerned with the mediation of source utterances, in particular articulations of public opinion and citizen voices. The thesis will then shift its attention in Chapter 6 to sections on the BBC website that enabled seemingly unmediated access through forum or message board like features.

Chapter 4: Citizens as sources in election news

This chapter focuses on election news reports published on the front-page of BBC News Online's *Election 2005* site. Election news was only one of several genres present on the site, though it was by far the most prominent. As described in Chapters 1 and 3, this thesis is concerned with issues relating to the re-inflection of public opinion within the various sections on the *Election 2005* site. While it is primarily concerned with the voice of citizens and their role as a source within election news, this thesis will map all sources used by the BBC so as to provide the necessary background to fully contextualise the voice of citizens. To this end this chapter will start by providing a broad overview of all source groups found within news reports, before dealing predominantly in empirical terms with party political and institutional sources. Attention will then shift to a more detailed web dialogue analysis of the representation of citizen voices within election news. Specifically, the chapter will seek to establish the nature of source utterances and if news reports represented these as engaging in dialogue with each other.

Overall it might seem that citizens' voices featured prominently in election news with 856 quotations and 554 paraphrases, covering a total of 41,378 words. Or rather, 12% of the text published in articles on the *Election 2005* front-page could be attributed to members of the public. To assess if their contribution is truly as significant as it might seem, we need to look in greater detail at the context in which these sources featured and the nature of their engagement. In order to do so, the chapter will firstly turn to a broad review of all source groups represented in news reports.

4.1. News sources

During the period of the election campaign, 5th April – 5th May 2005, there were on weekdays typically at least three news items relating to campaign events of that day, each with a different primary focus on the three main parties respectively. These would headline and lead with that party's story of the day, and note in a sentence or two how the other parties had been campaigning. News reports, especially concerning campaign or policy announcements, appear to follow a strict order with a series of quotations followed by a single sentence stating the two main opposition parties as a paraphrased statement of their position.

Perhaps as expected then, elite political sources, and in particular the three main political parties (Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats), dominated the election news published on the BBC News website⁵⁴. As demonstrated in Table 4-1 below, Labour sources were the most frequently cited in news reports with 450 direct quotations and 1,064 paraphrases. The Conservatives followed with 434 direct quotations and 912 paraphrases (or 11% less than Labour), whilst the Liberal Democrats quoted 350 times and paraphrased on 693 occasions (or 31% less than Labour). Of particular interest here is the marginalisation of other political sources in news reports. By comparison these were only allowed an active voice on 132 occasions and were paraphrased 269 times, or 74% less than Labour. Given the potential of online publishing methods to ease the restrictions on the volume of content, it is perhaps strange to note the extreme domination of the three major parties carried over from the traditional news outlets. Political parties were not the only elite sources to be dwarfed in comparison to the three main political parties, however. Institutional sources were quoted 247 times and paraphrased on 480 occasions, which is 52% less than Labour. Members of the public were quoted 314 times and paraphrased on 207 occasions (or 66% less than Labour), although the vast majority of the quotations were related to *Have your say* debates associated with the respective news reports as discussed later in this chapter.

Code Group	CODE COUNT			WORD COUNT			WORDS / CODE		DISTRIBUTION		
	P	Q	T	P	Q	T	P	Q	P	Q	T
conservative	912	434	1,346	15,180	9,236	24,416	17	21	71%	48%	73%
labour	1,064	450	1,514	17,817	9,445	27,262	17	21	74%	50%	75%
libdem	693	350	1,043	11,321	7,525	18,846	16	22	66%	40%	67%
otherparties	269	132	401	4,603	2,833	7,436	17	21	18%	14%	20%
foreignpolitician	3		3	45		45	15	-	1%	0%	1%
institutional	480	247	727	8,474	5,110	13,584	18	21	44%	23%	45%
memberofpublic	207	314	521	3,629	14,852	18,481	18	47	14%	29%	34%
ambiguous	101	3	104	1,660	63	1,723	16	21	25%	1%	25%

Table 4-1, Summary of code breakdown in news stories (n = 280)

⁵⁴ This is also reflected in the intentionally differential treatment given to the political parties in news coverage of the election. In accordance with the 2005 *Guidance for all BBC Programme Makers during the General Election Campaign*, for the purpose of 'the General Election Campaign the main parties in England are Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrats; In Scotland these three plus the SNP, in Wales these three plus Plaid Cymru; in Northern Ireland the Ulster Unionists, the SDLP, the DUP and Sinn Fein' (BBC, 2005d:np). Moreover, news provisions 'must achieve an appropriate and fair balance in coverage of the main parties in the course of each week of the campaign' (BBC, 2005d:np, emphasis in original). The news reporting of 'minor parties' was scaled in accordance with the following criteria: '1) Parties who have had MPs elected under their banner; 2) Parties who have had MEPs or devolved representatives elected under their banner; 3) Parties who have not had anyone elected but who will contest at least one sixth of seats; 4) Other parties, by number of candidates and/or electoral record' (BBC, 2005a:np).

The frequency of citations is only a starting point for understanding the amount of space given to each source to articulate their positions. The length of each quotation and paraphrase also carries a certain importance in comparing the magnitude of citations. Looking at the word count of coded utterances then, we find that the proportional difference between elite political sources is similar to that of the frequency count (see Table 4-1 above). Labour sources were quoted using 9,445 words and paraphrased using 17,817 words. The Conservatives followed with 9,236 words quoted and 15,180 words paraphrased (or 10% less than Labour), whilst the Liberal Democrats accounted for 7,525 words quoted and 11,321 words paraphrased (or 31% less than Labour). Institutional sources accounted for 5,110 words quoted and 8,474 words paraphrased, whilst sources from other political parties were only afforded quotations totalling 2,833 words and paraphrases totalling 4,603 words (respectively equalling 50% and 73% less than Labour). Whilst this effectively means these sources closed the gap on the three main parties fractionally compared to their frequency, the largest contrast between frequency and magnitude is seen in members of the public. Quotations from members of the public totalled 14,852 words and paraphrases 3,629 words – or 32% less than Labour, compared to a 66% lower frequency. Overall members of the public were only 365 words behind Liberal Democrat sources, whilst also being the only source type where quotations represents the larger proportion of their citations. This is directly linked to the aforementioned reproduction of *Have your say* debates associated with the news items, which is dictated by the length of citizen's contributions rather than journalistic norms. By way of comparison, the average quotation from a member of the public was 47 words, whilst for all other sources it was 21 or 22 (see Table 4-1 above). Contrast this to paraphrases, which obviously excludes *Have your say* contributions, the average of 18 words was in line with the range of other sources with 15 to 18 words.

The consistency of these averages reflects the rigid narrative conventions of the BBC's online reporting style and indicates a consistently applied house style for length of quotations and paraphrases. It is important to not simply note the frequency and magnitude of citations, however, but also the spread of these across the respective articles. That is, there may be instances where a source is quoted or paraphrased repeatedly in a small number of articles, but is otherwise not referred to, thus reducing the likelihood of their voice reaching the audience.

Not surprisingly, Labour sources were again the most prevalent in news reports, appearing either quoted or paraphrased in 75% of such articles overall (see Table 4-1 above). In

comparison, sources from the Conservatives featured in 73% of news reports and from the Liberal Democrats in 67%. Although this reflects the dominance these elite political sources have in UK election news, it also hints at the structure of news reports, as described earlier, where the position of the three main parties are almost always stated when either of them is referred to. Institutional sources and members of the public were featured in 45% and 34% of news reports respectively. It is interesting to also note the relatively large number news reports containing ambiguous source references. One quarter of all news reports contained such references, which one could argue defies good journalistic practice. More concerning, however, is the finding that only 20% of all news reports contained a quotation or paraphrase from a political party other than the three major parties. Although it might be expected that the three main parties were allowed a voice more frequently and with a greater amount of space, it is concerning to note the serious lack of diversity of political voices across the news reports.

4.1.1. Party political sources

Perhaps as expected given the focus on a general election, and as demonstrated in the previous section, the three largest parties in terms of electoral representation were also the three largest source groups within election news. Following the same logic, we might also have predicted the party leaders to be the most prominent individual sources, ranked in the order of their parties. This is not the case, however, as demonstrated in Table 4-2 below. Interestingly the largest source among elite party political sources were Labour politicians – cited on 713 occasions using a total of 13,379 words. Second came the Conservative leader, Michael Howard, who was the most frequently cited of all the party leaders (649 times) and also given the most amount of space to articulate his views (11,713 words). Perhaps even more remarkable, is the Liberal Democrat leader, Charles Kennedy, as the third largest elite party political source – he is allowed a voice 489 times using 9,226 words, prevailing over Tony Blair both in terms of frequency and magnitude. This is despite Charles Kennedy appearing as a source in only 30% of the news articles, compared to Michael Howard who appears in 38% and Tony Blair who is cited in 36%. Tony Blair is only the fourth largest elite party political source, being cited on 467 occasions, using a total of 8,411 words. Although this is a significant 182 times and 3,302 words less than Michael Howard, it does reinforce the campaign strategy chosen by Labour to promote both their party leader, Tony Blair, and the Chancellor, Gordon Brown. This may also go some way to explain why Labour politicians were so much more prominent than politicians from any other party.

Code Group	Speaker	CODE COUNT			WORD COUNT			WORDS/CODE		DISTRIBUTION		
		P	Q	T	P	Q	T	P	Q	P	Q	T
conservative	leader	405	244	649	6,737	4,976	11,713	17	18	36%	25%	38%
	party	247	8	255	3,806	137	3,943	15	15	46%	3%	46%
	politician	218	139	357	3,834	3,209	7,043	18	20	20%	19%	31%
	spokesperson	42	43	85	803	914	1,717	19	20	8%	7%	10%
labour	leader	327	140	467	5,337	3,074	8,411	16	18	30%	20%	36%
	party	253	12	265	4,033	142	4,175	16	16	44%	3%	44%
	politician	449	264	713	7,782	5,597	13,379	17	19	44%	33%	46%
	source	5		5	92		92	18	18	0%	0%	0%
	spokesperson	30	34	64	573	632	1,205	19	19	8%	6%	11%
libdem	leader	295	194	489	4,968	4,258	9,226	17	19	29%	18%	30%
	party	266	6	272	4,055	42	4,097	15	15	49%	2%	49%
	politician	87	90	177	1,549	1,965	3,514	18	20	15%	15%	21%
	spokesperson	45	60	105	749	1,260	2,009	17	19	10%	12%	15%
otherparties	candidate	18	18	36	263	400	663	15	18	1%	1%	1%
	leader	79	44	123	1,295	953	2,248	16	18	8%	6%	9%
	party	109	1	110	1,910	7	1,917	18	17	11%	0%	11%
	politician	38	39	77	687	892	1,579	18	21	7%	6%	8%
	spokesperson	8	24	32	165	451	616	21	19	2%	3%	4%
	supporter	9	3	12	149	66	215	17	18	1%	0%	1%
	otherparties	8	3	11	134	64	198	17	18	0%	0%	0%
foreignpolitician	us	2		2	24		24	12	12	0%	0%	0%
	foreignpolitician	1		1	21		21	21	21	0%	0%	0%

Table 4-2, Summary of elite politician code groups in news stories (n = 280)

The differences in the codes politician and spokesperson reflect a particular type of register used to describe politicians. Specifically, Labour politicians are usually referred to as ‘ministers’, or ‘secretary of state’, whilst Conservative politicians are referred to the same titles prefixed by ‘shadow’. The Liberal Democrats and other opposition parties are instead referred to as ‘spokesperson’ on the topic in question. Thus it is not unexpected that the Liberal Democrat spokespeople appear more frequently compared to spokespeople from the other two parties.

4.1.1.1. Other party political sources

Political parties outside of main three main were, as demonstrated by Table 4-2 above, typically represented through their leader (123 utterances using 2,248 words), sometimes with additional remarks made by a fellow politician (77 utterances using 1,579 words), a local candidate (36 utterances using 663 words) or a spokesperson (32 utterances using 616 words). The latter rarely appeared in an article, which did not also feature a quotation or paraphrase from the respective party leader. The only exception to this was the Green Party – as their flat structure without a set leader ensured they were only represented by nominated spokespeople as seen in Table 4-3 below. These other parties were also almost

equally represented through paraphrases attributed to the political party itself – 110 utterances and 1,917 words accounting for such utterances.

The parties outside of the top three were ranked by frequency and magnitude as UKIP (109 utterances and 1,936 words), the Green Party (95 utterances and 1,889 words) and Respect (62 utterances and 1,190 words), with independent candidates as a group coming in fourth (48 utterances and 878 words). Interestingly, the Green Party is by proportion quoted more frequently compared to UKIP who are predominantly given a voice through paraphrases. The Green Party also has a slightly higher penetration in terms of distribution across all news reports compared to UKIP.

Code Group 2	Speaker	CODE COUNT			WORD COUNT			WORDS / CODE		DISTRIBUTION		
		P	Q	T	P	Q	T	P	Q	P	Q	T
bnp	leader	10	3	13	163	83	246	16	28	1%	1%	1%
	party	4		4	52		52	13		1%	0%	1%
	spokesperson		1	1		27	27		27	0%	0%	0%
communist	party	4		4	58		58	15		0%	0%	0%
englishdemocrats	party	8		8	116		116	15		0%	0%	0%
green	party	38	1	39	691	7	698	18	7	5%	0%	5%
	politician	17	28	45	302	666	968	18	24	3%	4%	4%
	spokesperson	4	7	11	79	144	223	20	21	1%	1%	2%
independent	candidate	18	18	36	263	400	663	15	22	1%	1%	1%
	supporter	9	3	12	149	66	215	17	22	1%	0%	1%
otherparties	otherparties	8	3	11	134	64	198	17	21	0%	0%	0%
peoplesjusticeparty	party	1		1	11		11	11		0%	0%	0%
plaidcymru	leader	1		1	25		25	25		0%	0%	0%
	party	3		3	45		45	15		1%	0%	1%
	politician	1		1	27		27	27		0%	0%	0%
respect	leader	16	21	37	278	441	719	17	21	1%	2%	2%
	party	10		10	169		169	17		1%	0%	1%
	politician	1		1	45		45	45		0%	0%	0%
	spokesperson	3	11	14	55	202	257	18	18	1%	1%	1%
sdip	party	1		1	11		11	11		0%	0%	0%
snp	leader	2		2	53		53	27		0%	0%	0%
	party	1		1	22		22	22		0%	0%	0%
ukip	leader	30	16	46	468	333	801	16	21	4%	2%	4%
	party	32		32	558		558	17		2%	0%	2%
	politician	16	9	25	280	188	468	18	21	2%	1%	2%
	spokesperson	1	5	6	31	78	109	31	16	0%	1%	1%
ulsterunionist	party	1		1	16		16	16		0%	0%	0%
	politician	1		1	6		6	6		0%	0%	0%
veritas	leader	12	2	14	220	47	267	18	24	1%	0%	1%
	party	6		6	161		161	27		1%	0%	1%
	politician	2	2	4	27	38	65	14	19	1%	0%	1%
xtraordinarypeopleparty	leader	8	2	10	88	49	137	11	25	0%	0%	0%

Table 4-3, Breakdown summary of code group with other parties in news stories (n = 280)

One cause for concern is the virtually complete elimination of sources from parties fielding candidates in only one of the constituent nations – such as Plaid Cymru in Wales (five

utterances and 97 words), the Scottish National Party in Scotland (three utterances and 75 words), and the Ulster Unionist Party (two utterances and 22 words) and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (one utterance with 11 words) in Northern Ireland – while Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party were not quoted or paraphrased at all in any news articles published on the front-page. News where these sources were allowed a voice appears to have been completely relegated to regional importance, despite the election being for a UK Parliament and these parties having incumbent MPs⁵⁵. Of interest here is that Veritas (24 utterances and 493 words) and the British National Party (cited in 18 utterances using 325 words), as well as UKIP, the Green Party and Respect as mentioned above, are all given more space to articulate their policies, despite not having elected MPs (though some had elected councillors and MEPs).

Respect sources appear predominantly in articles together with the Labour incumbent, Oona King, which may be explained by the tension between her and the Respect leader George Galloway in the Bethnal Green and Bow constituency. Likewise, Veritas sources typically appeared together with UKIP sources. Again this may be a consequence of their leader, Robert Kilroy-Silk, having been elected as an MEP for UKIP in 2004 and subsequently defected in January 2005 to form Veritas. Other than this, the smaller political parties were only given a voice when the news item appears to fit the stereotypical perception of their values. That is, the likes of UKIP and BNP are allowed a voice in relation to news reports on immigration and the Green Party on environmental issues. These parties are therefore, in my reading, framed as single-issue parties who have not developed serious policies in other areas. Despite this, even the BBC's own 'issues grid', where people can compare the manifesto stance of selected parties, includes UKIP and the Green Party. Unfortunately, this type of reporting reinforces the party stereotypes and undermines the diversity of the UK political spectrum, where only the two main parties (Labour and the Conservatives) are perceived as having any realistic chance of forming a government.

When reporting a story containing a named candidate other than the front-bench politicians, other candidates standing in that constituency were only occasionally listed at the end of the article (if not otherwise mentioned in the report). However, this was not a regular feature of election news and it could be argued the BBC often failed to ensure a more balanced exposure of candidate names than its policies promised.

⁵⁵ Number of incumbent MPs prior to 2005 election – UUP: 6, SNP: 5, DUP: 5, Plaid Cymru: 4, Sinn Féin: 4 and SDLP: 3.

4.1.2. Institutional sources

In addition to the focus on party political sources, there was also a strong presence of institutional sources within news reports published on the *Election 2005* site. Quotations or paraphrases from other media organisations were the largest contributing institutional source, both in terms of frequency and magnitude (105 utterances and 2,115 words in total), not to mention distribution (penetrating 13% of news reports). US media sources were also present (4 utterances and 85 words), as well as the BBC paraphrasing its own analysts and correspondents (21 utterances and 431 words). The vast majority of these references were paraphrasing reports by other media organisations or named journalists providing their own analysis and insight into the campaign (typically about the role of the media). Election officials were the second largest singular institutional source, cited on 90 occasions using a total 1,612 words and penetrating 7% of news reports. Of course it is not surprising to find a strong standing of such sources in election news, providing as they did practical information on the electoral process – postal voting in particular being an issue during the 2005 campaign. Other official bodies, which included organisations such as The Institute of Fiscal Studies, The Confederation of British Industry and The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, represented the fourth largest group of institutional sources, with 53 utterances and 1,034 words across 5% of news reports, and were positioned exclusively as figures of authority within their respective fields.

NGOs and charitable organisations were by frequency the third and fifth largest source groups, though combined they would have represented the second largest institutional source with 115 utterances and 2,232 words. These were often included as a counterweight to politicians, as opposed to directly driving or setting the agenda themselves. However, both of these code groups had a lower penetration across the news reports compared to members of the public classified as campaigners (3% and 5% respectively, compared to 6% for campaigners). Trade unions also featured prominently as a source lobbying politicians, covering 44 utterances with 758 words and penetrating 4% of news reports.

It might be unexpected to see elite sources such as the police feature in only 3% of all news articles, and with a comparatively low frequency and magnitude count (15 utterances and 323 words). This can be explained through the lack of crime stories associated with the election campaign. In real terms it was only irregularities surrounding postal ballots that received any significant attention. Legal sources, such as judges and lawyers, were in

much the same position. It is strange, however, that the police in particular is not directly cited more frequently in relation to news reports concerned with policies on law and order. Their voices were typically inferred in such instances as a secondary paraphrase – for instance when one of the elite party political sources attributed an utterance to the police.

Code Group	Speaker	CODE COUNT			WORD COUNT			WORDS/CODE		DISTRIBUTION		
		P	Q	T	P	Q	T	P	Q	P	Q	T
institutional	academic	29	11	40	529	263	792	18	20	3%	1%	3%
	army	10	2	12	243	35	278	24	23	1%	0%	1%
	celebrity	17	12	29	255	198	453	15	16	3%	2%	4%
	charity	26	19	45	506	387	893	19	20	3%	1%	3%
	church	1		1	18		18	18	18	0%	0%	0%
	corporation	13	6	19	163	109	272	13	14	1%	1%	1%
	education	2		2	48		48	24	24	1%	0%	1%
	electionofficial	60	30	90	987	625	1,612	16	18	7%	3%	7%
	houseoffords	1		1	6		6	6	6	0%	0%	0%
	industry	26	1	27	587	19	606	23	22	1%	0%	1%
	judge	16	2	18	271	22	293	17	16	3%	1%	3%
	lawyers	14	22	36	227	494	721	16	20	2%	2%	2%
	localbusiness	2	2	4	37	54	91	19	23	0%	0%	0%
	localgovernment	18	8	26	259	133	392	14	15	3%	1%	3%
	media	75	30	105	1,402	713	2,115	19	20	12%	3%	13%
	ngo	39	31	70	746	593	1,339	19	19	4%	3%	5%
	nhs	11	4	15	203	54	257	18	17	2%	1%	2%
	officialbody	33	20	53	586	448	1,034	18	20	5%	3%	5%
	otherpolitical	16	5	21	258	91	349	16	17	2%	0%	2%
	police	11	4	15	175	148	323	16	22	3%	1%	3%
	postoffice	2		2	44		44	22	22	1%	0%	1%
	prisons	1	4	5	19	60	79	19	16	0%	0%	0%
	tradeunion	28	16	44	462	296	758	17	17	4%	2%	4%
	transport	18	9	27	255	220	475	14	18	3%	1%	3%
	un	10	6	16	171	80	251	17	16	2%	1%	2%
	usmedia	1	3	4	17	68	85	17	21	0%	0%	0%
bbc	analyst	11		11	228		228	21	21	3%	0%	3%
	correspondent	10		10	203		203	20	20	2%	0%	2%
ambiguous	ambiguous	101	3	104	1,660	63	1,723	16	17	25%	1%	25%

Table 4-4, Summary of institutional code groups in news stories (n = 280)

Though celebrities were mentioned, these represent a relatively low number overall with 29 utterances and 453 words, only penetrating 4% of news reports. This is not to suggest celebrities are not present, rather that certain politicians are assuming this role in election news – for instance, George Galloway and Robert Kilroy-Silk, not to mention the three main party leaders and Gordon Brown. The treatment of these sources by the BBC was led by a preoccupation with celebrity personas where the concern for a balanced articulation of different policy positions was often secondary.

4.2. Representing public voices

Having examined empirically the party political and institutional sources, attention now turns to an empirical and qualitative critique of citizen voices – the code group classified as members of the public. There were 521 utterances with a total of 18,481 words that could be attributed to members of the public, penetrating some 34% of news reports (see Table 4-5 below). These were further classified into seven sub-categories to better distinguish between the vastly different forms citizen voices took. The categories were opinion polls, audience surveys, campaigners, individual members of the public (which includes public debates and street encounters), and *Have your say* comments (split into quotations from debates and comments published at the end of an article). *Have your say* quotations and comments made up just over half, or 52%, of the coded utterances relating to utterances by citizens. In terms of magnitude, however, this distribution is even more disproportionate, with 75% of the words from members of the public relating to *Have your say* quotations or comments. Despite this, the voice of citizens in more conventional forms was still cited on 249 occasions using 4,634 words. In terms of distribution across news reports members of the public was on par with institutional sources, though no-where near party political sources.

Code Group	Speaker	CODE COUNT			WORD COUNT			WORDS/CODE		DISTRIBUTION		
		P	Q	T	P	Q	T	P	Q	P	Q	T
memberofpublic	audience	21		21	508		508	24	24	1%	0%	1%
	campaigner	47	29	76	732	659	1,391	16	18	6%	3%	6%
	criminal/prisoner	5		5	46		46	9	9	1%	0%	1%
	opinionpoll	82		82	1,566		1,566	19	19	8%	0%	8%
	memberofpublic	47	18	65	743	380	1,123	16	17	4%	1%	5%
	haveyoursay		31	31		444	444		14	0%	11%	11%
	haveyoursay-debate		236	236		13,369	13,369		57	0%	3%	3%

Table 4-5, Summary of member of public code groups in news stories (n = 280)

The source groups of opinion polls and audience surveys necessarily represented voices of citizens as a collective and described these in statistical terms. Individual speakers were also typically referred to generically, such as 'patients' or 'voters', 'audience member', 'listener', 'an elderly woman', 'young Asian woman', or simply 'a man'. When actually referred to by name, their surname was often omitted, thus reinforcing the non-professional register used to describe citizens, and undermining their perceived importance as a source. Members of the public contributing through the *Have your say* section were free to type anything as their name, including remaining anonymous, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

4.2.1. Reporting opinion polls

Opinion polls feature prominently during election time – partly because of their presumed ability to forecast the election outcome and because the polling choices are clearly defined. Whilst the reliability of opinion polls as predictor of election outcomes varies, and indeed pollsters are keen to stress their statistical caveats, journalists rely on them to represent an expression of the current mood, or even perceived collective opinion, of the public (see Lewis, 2001).

In total there were 82 utterances covering 1,566 words describing opinion poll results, including four headline references⁵⁶. Of the four headlines that cited poll results, two highlighted a strong support for Labour among the electorate, one relating to potential turnout of first time voters and finally a poll suggesting ‘sixty per cent of British Asians think there are already too many immigrants in the UK’ (Too many immigrants - Asian poll, 29 April, 2005).

Public opinion was inferred through polls in 8% of all news reports. In terms of distribution this might not seem that significant, yet it is a greater reach than any of the non-media institutional sources described earlier. Three articles even relied on opinion polls as the sole source: ‘First-timers “unlikely to vote”’, ‘Opinion polls suggest Labour lead’, ‘Too many immigrants - Asian poll’. Indeed, most of these inferences came as part of news reports dealing specifically with the latest polls results, as opposed to adding information to reports concerning campaign events or policy issues. When they did appear in such reports they typically appeared towards the end of the article, often as a simple statement of the current head-to-head position of the three main parties.

The opinion polls were used by the BBC almost exclusively as a means to predict the election outcome, focussing predominantly on the variance between the three main parties from one poll to the next (example one below). The option of voting for a party ‘other’ than the three main ones was only reported in two articles containing a total of six such utterances (example two below). This not only reinforces the notion of three-party-politics, but also implies that people who consider voting for anyone other than these three is not worthy of mention.

⁵⁶ Utterances coded as opinion polls were all considered to be paraphrases.

[1] It says the voting intentions of those certain to vote are 36% Labour, 33% Conservative and 22% Liberal Democrat.

(Polls suggest Labour lead solid, 30 April, 2005)

[2] An ICM poll for the Sunday Telegraph suggests Labour leads on 38%, with the Tories on 34%, Lib Dems on 20% and other parties on 8%.

(Parties keep campaigning low-key, 9 April, 2005)

Polls appearing in news reports more directly concerning policy issues, such as ‘Tories plan to cut stamp duty tax’, were still focussing on the horserace between the three main parties. For instance, the headline ‘Health and crime top poll battle’ might suggest a report on public perception of campaign issues. Instead the ‘health’ and ‘crime’ reference refers to the issues the main parties are focusing on in the fight for an advantage in the polls. Three independent polling results are reported in the final section of the report, focussing on the performance of Labour, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats compared to the previous week. Thus the emphasis is not on what the public actually want, but rather on what they *might* respond positively to. This is speculative, however, as none of the polls cited actually examine the reason for the week-on-week variance – or at least this is not a feature of the news report.

In fact only three of the opinion polls reported actually inferred public opinion on a particular policy issue. Firstly, ‘Environment “ignored” in campaign’, is interesting for the way in which it uses a reference towards an opinion poll to undermine a particular narrative. That is, the report is based on a claim by Greenpeace that the environment is being ‘ignored’ in the campaign. About half way through the article the following utterance appears: ‘Opinion polls suggest the environment is low on voters’ priorities for the election.’ No further information is given about the nature of those polls. The statement appears just after several direct quotations from Greenpeace UK Executive Director, Stephen Tindale, The Royal Society, and director of Friends of the Earth, Tony Juniper, who all expressed a concern that politicians were ignoring the environment. Although particularly vague, the reference towards public opinion in this instance can be seen to have undermined the preceding claims that politicians are being ‘irresponsible’ for ignoring the environment. Moreover, it could be seen to vindicate the politicians – after all, why campaign on an issue that is not important to voters? The remaining article is almost in its entirety devoted to politicians and spokespeople from the three largest parties

defending their positions, counterbalanced only by a brief statement from Green Party principal spokesman, Keith Taylor, at the very end.

The second article 'Too many immigrants - Asian poll' reported on a poll conducted by MORI⁵⁷ for the BBC Asian Network of '325 adult British Asians [...] of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin'. Responses highlighted were: the level of immigrants in the UK, the untrustworthiness [sic] of the main party leaders, the decision to go to war in Iraq, if they thought the UK would see an Asian Prime Minister in the next 20 years and finally if Britain had good race relations overall. While the survey found that 60% of respondents felt the UK already had too much immigration and 75% believed the invasion of Iraq was wrong, there is no indication of the importance placed on these issues when the interviewees were deciding whom to vote for. The only such indication was part of the final sentence which stated 'the same number [75%] said that they would not change their party preference simply because one of the candidates on the ballot paper was Asian'. Thus it is not clear the extent to which the survey actually demonstrates issues that would truly impact on voting behaviour.

Finally, and perhaps most interesting is the survey data presented in 'First-timers "unlikely to vote"'. The poll reported was conducted by ICM⁵⁸ for BBC Radio 1's Newsbeat programme. Importantly it went beyond the simple dichotomy of whether the target age group was intending to vote or not, and looked at what would make those young adults more likely to vote. Voting online raised likelihood of voting from 31% to 56% it stated, with text voting pushing that figure even further to 59%. The article also described which parties were most credible on a series of issues. Significantly the survey also asked the respondents what they would do if they were allowed to govern for a single day, as outlined below.

The 1,078 first time voters were asked what would be the first thing they would do at Number Ten if they were prime minister for a day.

While 20% of those questioned would spend more on the NHS, 17% would pull British troops out of Iraq.

⁵⁷ The BBC was usually consistent in crediting the pollster, though on this occasion MORI was omitted from the news report.

⁵⁸ Again the pollster, ICM, was omitted from the news report.

Fifteen per cent would raise the minimum wage and 14% would abolish university tuition fees.

(First-timers 'unlikely to vote', 3 May, 2005)

It is not clear from the article, or the original BBC press release, whether the interviewees were asked to prioritise predefined alternatives or expected to articulate their own policies. Either way it represented a refreshing use of polling information to allow citizens a more active voice in a news report. The article also contained a quotation and link to a *Have your say* debate, directly concerned with why voter turnout among young adults was down. Whilst this was one of the more focussed discussions linked in this way, it would have been fascinating to see such a debate also canvassing opinion on what other citizens would want to prioritise if they were allowed to set the agenda.

4.2.2. Audience ratings

Audience viewing figures differs from opinion polls in that they are in effect a survey of actual behaviour as opposed to an opinion held at a particular moment in time. Still, they are also a statistical representation of responses given from a sample of the public and as such deserve attention in the same way as opinion polls. Citizen voices were inferred through audience viewing figures on 21 occasions, using a total of 508 words. This is limited, however, to three news reports. Two of which were reporting viewing figures of political adverts, and one reporting viewing figures for the Question Time election special. While the viewing figures for political adverts are described in association with otherwise popular programmes as seen below, the articles do not explicitly state that the viewing figures of political adverts necessarily depend on the time-slot in which they are aired.

Some 4.6m, or 25.6%, of the available audience watched it [the Conservative advert] on BBC1, ahead of Watchdog, while 5.3m, or 29.6%, watched it on ITV1 before the soap *Emmerdale*.

(Tories win election ratings bid, 13 April, 2005)

That is, those news reports were implicitly suggesting that the quality of a political advert or popularity of a particular party increased the viewing figures for that party political broadcast. However, it is more realistic to assume the higher viewing figures were a direct consequence of the popularity of the respective channels in those particular time-slots. Regardless of this, the viewing figures do tell a great deal about the marketing of political

parties and the influence campaign expenditure has on their ability to reach a large audience.

It should be noted that both opinion polls and audience viewing figures were predominantly passive inferences towards the opinion of a preselect sample of the public, as opposed to the active contribution from any of those individuals. Yet, despite their limitations, these statistics continue to be an important way for allowing citizens a voice within news reports.

4.2.3. Vox populi and soft news

Citizen voices were represented in a further 31 utterances, encompassing 499 words and distributed across 5% of news reports. The majority of these references came in soft news stories where citizen voices were often cast in vox populi style quotations or paraphrases. Problems associated with postal votes were of great concern during the election campaign and the BBC jumped on the opportunity to report on a toddler receiving 'a polling card for the general election - 18 years before she is eligible to vote'. The quoted response from the mother epitomises the tone and nature of these more light-hearted news reports:

Her mother Glenda said: "She hasn't show any interest in Mr Blair or Mr Howard or Mr Kennedy. She quite likes Thomas the Tank Engine."

(Paragraph 4: Polling card posted to baby girl, 27 April, 2005)

In another article the BBC stated it had 'interviewed people on the street about why they are not voting', using the voices of these people to accompany animations created by Aardman for BBC One's *This Week* programme. Two of the statements are then reproduced in the article, the second of which in particular puts the emphasis on humorous responses from citizens:

[...] a pair of teenagers, Warren and Dino, say they would vote for the politicians who removed the bolts which stopped them "grinding" their skateboards on Bristol's College Green.

(Paragraph 9: Non-voters get Aardman treatment, 24 April 2006 / Non-voters get their own cartoon, 15 April 2005⁵⁹)

⁵⁹ These reports were identical, apart from different headlines and 'last updated' dates. Both have been included as visitors to the site may have encountered both copies.

Not every report shared such a light-hearted sentiment, however, and the BBC also reproduced concerns expressed by citizens in other media.

The Daily Telegraph features a letter from a voter, John Lally, who witnessed a girl who "could not have been more than 12" turn up with a ballot paper and vote.

Officials had apparently been forced to authorise the ballot paper because they were not able to challenge her identification.

(Paragraphs 15-16: New postal vote safeguards urged, 6 May, 2005)

The relatively low presence of such vox populi within news reports reflects the BBC's clear distinction between its news genres, restricting such representation of citizen voices primarily to feature articles (as discussed in Chapter 6). The presence of such voices within conventional news reports appear to be almost a glitch, either in the copy-editing or in the cataloguing of the article, rather than a conscious effort of incorporating such voices into this domain.

4.2.4. Talking to politicians

In his analysis of the election campaign, Nick Assinder articulated the frustration felt by journalists at the lack of access to true dialogues between politicians and members of the public. It is clear from his comments that there was a very real desire on behalf of the journalists to not only report rehearsed soundbites delivered at press conferences, but a true dialogic interaction between politicians and the electorate.

The stage management and media manipulation has been at an unprecedented, and in some cases ludicrous, extreme with the parties' determination to "meet real people" often used as a cover to keep the national media well away from the leading players.

This campaigning fell far short of the old hustings-based contests with rowdy public meetings that used to dominate general election campaigns.

(What sort of campaign has it been?, 4 May, 2005)

Dialogue between members of the public and politicians rarely featured in news articles and such exchanges only reported when part of public debates or encounters between

members of the public and politicians on the campaign trail. While the frequency of such dialogic interactions was low, the quality of deliberation was also subject of concern, which is explored in detail below.

4.2.4.1. Public debates

While perhaps not quite the type of hustings Nick Assinder was calling for, nine news reports contained statements made by citizens as part of staged public debates. In total there were 17 paraphrases and five quotations, covering 437 words. The narrative position of these statements was typically towards the second part of the article. All the exchanges were originally part of the BBC's own special editions of *Question Time* and *Newsnight*, *UK Leaders Live* (a 90-minute programme broadcast across the commercial radio network), or ITV's *The Ballot Box Jury*. Essentially these programmes seek to recreate some sense of an artificial public sphere - where a limited number of citizens are able to field preselect questions to elite party political figures.

The most famous example from these debates was the Question Time exchange where Diana Church challenged Tony Blair on her inability to book GP appointments more than 48 hours in advance. Tony Blair was not aware of the practice described and the exchange even lead to a government review of how their policy on the issue was implemented. This exchange was also referred to in other news reports on the website, though Diana Church was only cited in one of these (Blair promises fewer NHS targets, 29 April, 2005). It was the surprisingly frank response from Tony Blair that made the headlines, which is demonstrated by the positioning of him as the first and most prominent source in the report. The first reference towards the Question Time exchange is in the third paragraph and picked up again in paragraph nine, with the quote from Diana Church only cited in paragraph 11 as seen below. Note also how Diana Church is described simply as 'a woman' in the first reference, implying a reduced significance of the person who actually prompted the response from Tony Blair, and reinforcing the unbalanced power relationship between the two.

The Labour leader said he was "astonished" when the complaint was raised by a woman on BBC Question Time.

[...]

Mr Blair heard concerns about the effect of the government's target of ensuring people could get a GP appointment within 48 hours.

Target culture?

Labour says GPs have already received leaflets on two separate occasions telling them not to prevent pre-booking.

But audience member Diana Church said: "You can't make the appointment in a week because you are only allowed to make it 48 hours beforehand.

"You have to sit on the phone for three hours in the morning trying to get an appointment because you are not allowed to ask for the appointment before that because by making it 48 hours beforehand they are meeting the government's target."

When others in the audience concurred, Mr Blair said it was news to him, although the Tories said they had previously raised the issue with his ministers.

Mr Blair admitted this interpretation of the targets was "absurd" and said he would look into it.

(Blair promises action on GP row, 29 April, 2005)

The two citations of Diana Church represent the longest uninterrupted statement reported of a non-activist member of the public. It is interesting to note that the exchange is not set up as a simple dialogue between the two. Rather, Diana Church makes an assertion and backs it up with a reference to her personal experience. Tony Blair meanwhile responds only after 'others in the audience concurred' – implying a disbelief in the original statement by Diana Church. Interchanged with the paraphrases of Tony Blair's response, there is a reference towards the Conservatives who claim to have 'previously raised the issue with ministers'. Of course the party leaders were separated during the event and the paraphrase relates to a statement issued by the Conservatives in the aftermath of the event. This construction of narrative exchange is common within news accounts and represents a dialogue by proxy, facilitated by journalists, rather than a conversation that actually took place.

Following on from the Question Time special the BBC also published several associated analysis and feature articles, as well as a dedicated *Have your say* debate which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Reporting on exchanges on ITV's *The Ballot Box Jury*, the below article contains two identified members of the public putting forth their arguments and a subsequent set of responses from Michael Howard. Interestingly the first speaker, Eemaan Elmougy, addresses the presentation, or rhetoric, of Conservative policy, as opposed to the policy itself. The negative undertone of this statement is enhanced by the BBC in the first paragraph, where the utterance is clearly framed as an indictment of Michael Howard himself.

In the latest in a series of broadcast confrontations with voters, he [Michael Howard] was compared to Enoch Powell - whose famous "rivers of blood" speech on immigration in the 1960s caused uproar.

Eemaan Elmougy urged Mr Howard not to try to sound like he was trying to "frighten people" and "turn things back to 40 years ago and Enoch Powell's days".

Leela Soma, originally from India but now living in Scotland, said: "As a first generation immigrant I think I find it quite worrying that you are moving your party to the right."

She said the refugee quota system planned by the Tories may have meant his own Jewish grandfather, who fled the Holocaust, was not allowed into the country.

But Mr Howard defended his policy on immigration, adding he had met "many people from ethnic minority backgrounds" who agreed with the Conservatives on the issue.

He insisted he was "passionate about the need for proper immigration control" because it was "essential" to maintaining good community relations in Britain.

(Tories can still win, Howard says, 25 April, 2005)

The second member of the public, Leela Soma, uses both her own and Michael Howard's background as rhetorical devices to support her argument. Interestingly, Mr Howard

dismisses these outright by using his own experience of 'many people from ethnic minority backgrounds' to undermine her, implying her views are unrepresentative of this group.

Unfortunately, apart from the above examples, the identity and voice of citizens were mostly reduced to an insignificant prompt for the politicians to then freely express their point of view. The below example relaying an exchange that took place on *UK Leaders Live* demonstrates how the voice of the citizen was inferred and anonymous.

Asked why he had not accused Mr Blair of lying over the war, he [Charles Kennedy] replied: "I think he made the wrong judgement and it's as simple as that."

(Kennedy attacks 'lame duck' Blair, 1 May, 2005)

Sometimes the prompt from the citizen was even carried after the response from the politician, thus further reducing their significance against that of elite political sources, as seen in the example from the *Newsnight* special below.

Mr Clarke told the programme, broadcast on Tuesday night: "There might be a case for some of the people who are failed asylum seekers but can't be returned to their country for a variety of reasons whether work could operate in some of these cases."

He was responding to a question from a member of a specially-selected, 150-strong audience, who suggested immigrants would better integrate into British society if they paid tax and National Insurance.

(Failed asylum seekers 'may work', 27 April, 2005)

The above report makes only one vague reference to a member of the public asking a question, despite all the soundbites from the politicians being based on responses to questions from the audience. By comparison Charles Clarke was cited eight times, David Davies five times and Mark Oaten three times. Thus what was originally a dialogic interaction is stripped down to focus on the elite sources and conform to a traditional news narrative. Whilst it is clear that the written news reports favours the elite party political sources, the actual programmes reported on also suffer from a restricted framework. Thus the debates being reported are themselves constructed and thus sets up an artificial dynamic between panellists and the audience as discussed in Chapter 2.

4.2.4.2. On the campaign trail

Public confrontations with politicians on the campaign trail might be a better measure for real-life dialogic interactions, but given how stage-managed the campaign was, these were few and far between. There were only two news articles reporting such encounters⁶⁰. The first came when shoppers in Leeds were invited to meet Tony Blair:

The sternest attack came from 20-year-old Jessica Haigh, who told him: "It is heartbreaking when you work so long to get a Labour government in power and then they turn into a Conservative one."

Mr Blair said he often had similar complaints from Labour members.

He argued: "If you measure any government against perfection, you would vote for someone else.

"But you must measure us against the alternative, which is the Conservatives."

(Parties battle over council tax, 20 April, 2005)

Interestingly the response from Tony Blair in this instance does not actually address the question from Jessica Haigh. Indeed it seems like he is ignoring her point that there is no difference between Labour and the Conservatives, and instead replies as if she has merely suggested she had been disappointed by Labour's achievements whilst in power. This is naturally explicit in her statement, but her statement also indicates that she has indeed compared Labour against the Conservatives. There was no comeback from Jessica Haigh and no other exchanges were reported.

The second exchange came in the final days of campaigning, when Tony Blair was on the streets in Gloucester.

Mr Jaffer said: "I think you have done a fantastic job of running this country, but foreign policy you need to look at really close up.

⁶⁰ It should be noted that one of these reports was duplicated and thus three articles existed, reporting to two events. Both have been included in the coding since they were filed twice with separate headlines and lead paragraphs, thus visitors to the site may have encountered both copies.

"We have lost hundreds of lives, thousands of lives. We got the impression you were just following President Bush."

He later told reporters he would vote for Mr Blair if he just apologised to the British public and said "forgive me".

Mr Blair told Mr Jaffer prime ministers had to take difficult decisions and said it was the economy, the health service, schools and law and order which affected people.

(Party leaders rally supporters /
Blair highlights economic stakes, both 3 May, 2005)

This exchange highlights two interesting issues. Unlike the Jessica Haigh encounter, Mr Jaffer does have a response, though this is given to reporters and strangely cited before the paraphrase of Tony Blair's statement. The implication could be that Tony Blair moved on before Mr Jaffer was able to articulate a response and thus avoiding an extended dialogue. Secondly, Tony Blair concludes that people are not affected by Iraq, even though Mr Jaffer clearly states that he is. Tony Blair thus implies that the views of Mr Jaffer are either incorrect or simply not representative of 'people'.

These examples of citizens talking to politicians epitomises the clichés that politicians fail to directly answer a question and insist that views opposing their perception of public voices are unrepresentative. Moreover, the dialogue is always reported as one way – the citizen asks the politician a question, the politician answers, end of dialogue. There was not a single instance where this dynamic was reversed and the politician asked what a member of public thought. If this lack of engagement with what the citizens actually said was a true reflection of what happened, then it perhaps explains part of the reason why such exchanges rarely made the news – after all, why report a dialogue that in many ways never really took place?

4.2.5. Politically active citizens

Campaigners represent perhaps the most politically active of citizen voices and people assuming this role appeared frequently within news reports. They were used as a source 76 times and given 1,391 words to express their points of view – twice featuring in headlines ('Bereaved families demand inquiry' and 'Buy back rail network – marchers'), and overall present in six percent of news reports. Some news reports were even based predominantly

on activities of campaigners, e.g. 'Autism mother may become Tory MP', 'Bereaved families demand inquiry' and 'Hauliers threaten poll disruption'. Campaigners usually featured as a counterbalance to elite party political sources, often together with sources from charities, NGOs and trade union officials⁶¹. This is perhaps not surprising during an election, as these all exist with the purpose of lobbying Government and other political institutions. The campaigners were often explicit in their opportunistic timing, as demonstrated in relation to the Iraq war and fuel price protests below.

In terms of media attention during the election campaign, the Iraq War only really gained momentum when part of the legal advice from Lord Goldsmith was leaked and subsequently published in full. Campaigners sought to keep the issue fresh close to polling day, however, by delivering a letter demanding an independent public inquiry as reported on 3 May 2005. The campaigners admitted 'there was no question that they had timed their legal action to cause embarrassment for Mr Blair' (Bereaved families demand inquiry, 3 May, 2005), and indeed their action did receive attention by the media. Likewise, hauliers sought to capitalise on the 2005 General Election to mobilise public support against rising fuel costs, similar to the national protests in 2000 led by lorry drivers and farmers, and subsequently force Labour to make an election promise to avoid antagonising voters. While the bold rhetoric of the campaigners was reported by the BBC ('Hauliers threaten poll disruption', 22 April, 2005), no widespread disruptions followed and the threat did not impact significantly on the election. The boldest statement came from the Fuel Lobby's Andrew Spence:

"Don't rule anything out - the election would be stopped if we had our way," he said.

"Tony Blair will not have enough fuel in his car to get to the polling station."

(Hauliers threaten poll disruption, 22 April, 2005)

4.2.5.1. Representing a movement

The BBC rarely used the term 'campaigner', opting instead to describe such people in more passive terms, such as 'man', 'woman', 'rail workers', 'drivers', 'farmer and haulier', 'bereaved families', 'relatives of servicemen who died in Iraq', 'parents', 'father', 'wife' or 'widow'. Describing people initially as an unstructured group of individuals gave

⁶¹ While campaigners were often part of such organisations, and could thus be construed as institutional sources, they were typically represented in the news reports as individuals. Their role as individuals, or personification of wider campaigns, is explored in this section.

stories a more human touch and potentially instilled a sense of sympathy for their cause. Moreover, these campaigners sought to reinforce this sympathy, legitimise their actions and mobilise support for their cause through giving emotive personal accounts of events that led them to act, which was further animated by the BBC's description of their mental state. Such views were often given a prominent position right from the outset, as can be seen below, and contributed to a separation between political actors and citizens.

Peter Brierley's son Shaun died in a traffic accident in Kuwait on 30 March 2003, just days after the start of the war.

But Mr Brierley remains an angry and frustrated man.

"My son went out expecting weapons of mass destruction, I believed they would find weapons of mass destruction. Tony Blair, as far as I'm concerned did lie and sent my son to his death unnecessarily."

(Paragraphs 2-4: Bereaved families demand inquiry, 3 May, 2005)

Indeed the distance between campaigners and the political establishment was often explicit – as demonstrated in the example below, both by the campaigner in question and through the BBC's description of his appearance.

Tony Hamilton-Jewell describes himself as "not a political man", and accompanied by his white Scotty dog makes an unlikely figure striding up to the gates of Downing Street.

(Paragraph 10: Bereaved families demand inquiry, 3 May, 2005)

However, the campaigners rarely acted as lone individuals and their action was always part of a targeted campaign. The BBC did not overtly try to suppress such associations, but typically gave the information a reduced prominence within the narrative hierarchy. In the aforementioned example for instance, the BBC eventually identifies the organised nature of the action and the institutional weight behind the campaigners, though only in paragraphs 20 and 21, towards the end of the article:

Mr Brierley and Mr Hamilton-Jewell are among the relatives who have formed Military Families Against the War.

They are aided by Phil Shiner, of Public Interest Lawyers, as well as the Stop the War Coalition.

(Bereaved families demand inquiry, 3 May, 2005)

The final reference, however, is again towards a 'group of relatives and activists', thus seemingly retaining a narrative distinction between the two, even though this did not exist materially. In a similar vein, the article 'Autism mother may become Tory MP' centres entirely on Maria Hutchings until the final paragraph where it is revealed she is indeed acting together with 'representatives of Pencil, Liverpool and Merseyside parents who campaign about children with special educational needs'.

While individual campaigners were often highlighted because of a particularly moving personal experience, and thus becoming an embodiment of the campaign, the reverse was typically the case in industrial disputes or action involving trade unions. In such instances, trade unions were explicitly representing a larger body of campaigners and the union officials tended to stress the issue or solution rather than a personal account. One such example is found in the article 'Buy back rail network - marchers', where the voice of protesters was simply inferred or paraphrased, with the active voice being given to trade union officials. In this instance the RMT general secretary, Bob Crow, take on the role of speaking on behalf of 'the protesters'.

"The message our marchers have had all the way down from Glasgow is that Britain wants a publicly-owned railway, and it is about time that choice was put before the people of Britain," he [Bob Crow] said.

[...]

The protesters in London are also calling for an end to what they call the "disastrous Tube PPP" (public-private partnership deal).

(Buy back rail network – marchers, 30 April, 2005)

4.2.5.2. Meeting with politicians

While active voices in the sense that they clearly expressed political points of view, and often offered alternative solutions, campaigners were typically not reported as engaging in dialogue with politicians, but rather used the media as an opportunity to broadcast their points of view. This is not to suggest they are any more dogmatic than politicians – indeed

both groups it can be argued use the media as a vehicle to inform public opinion of their position and to persuade people of its legitimacy.

The rhetoric of campaigners was at one stage given free flow over five paragraphs, through an extended quotation of Tony Hamilton-Jewell's statement. Importantly this implied the action had been taken not out of self-interest, but 'to make sure government don't do this again'. Hamilton-Jewell argued Blair was 'seeming to be covering up for himself and his government and it has got to be exposed', promising that they 'shall pursue you [Blair] in and out of office'. The campaigners were also making concrete proposals for how to achieve this and specifying possible future actions should their demands not be met, as the paraphrased example below demonstrates.

They want a public inquiry and are prepared to go as far as contemplating private prosecutions of Mr Blair for "aggression" or misfeasance in public office.

(Bereaved families demand inquiry, 3 May, 2005)

Whilst the act of delivering a letter to the Prime Minister is clearly indicative of politically active citizens, there was nothing to suggest that the campaigners had actually been allowed to speak with Blair. Indeed, while there are several quotations from the campaigners, the view of Blair was only evident in utterances reproducing or inferring to statements he had previously made.

But Mr Blair has already ruled out holding a public inquiry, saying in an interview on Channel 4 News: "We've had inquiry after inquiry, we do not need to go back over this again and again."

(Paragrah 7: Bereaved families demand inquiry, 3 May, 2005)

As the utterance above further demonstrates, the BBC appear to have suggested the campaigner's action was futile and deemed to fail from the outset, since their request had already been ruled by Blair out on a previous occasion.

There were explicit references towards dialogue having taken place in 'Autism mother may become Tory MP', where Maria Hutchings was reported as having 'approached the Labour leader in February on a live channel Five programme as he spoke about school discipline' and that 'she had since corresponded with Mr Blair over the issue of saving special schools but she had yet to be given any firm proposals'. However, none of these

dialogues were actually reproduced or described in any greater detail – indeed there was a suggestion that they had not actually been concluded, by Mrs Hutchings stating ‘I’d like an answer before the election’. Likewise, she did not want to relay any part of her dialogue with Michael Howard, whom it was speculated had asked her to consider standing as a Conservative MP. Twice Mrs Hutchings declined to offer any details of such discussions, stating ‘I have spoken, although it was a private conversation, with Michael Howard’.

To compensate for lack of access to such private dialogues, the BBC resorted to constructing a dialogue by proxy. That is they reconstructed a presumed dialogue that might have taken place based on statements responding to the argument by either side as presented by the journalist. As demonstrated in the below example, such dialogue by proxy was then represented as if directly reporting on a dialogue that had taken place.

Guardsman Anthony Wakefield, 24, from Newcastle, was killed by a bomb on Monday. His widow, Ann Toward, said Mr Blair should not have sent him to war.

Mr Blair said he understood the widow's grief but defended his war decision.

Relatives of troops killed in Iraq say they intend to take legal action to force a public inquiry into the war. But Tony Blair has ruled that out.

[...]

Earlier, Mr Blair sent his "profound condolences" to Guardsman Wakefield's family.

(Paragraphs 2-4, 7: Blair faces Iraq families' anger, 3 May, 2005)

Action from protesters was usually directly targeted at the Government, and by extension the Labour party, thus not publicly attempting to engage other parties in any dialogue on the issue. Sometimes the BBC sought to construct such dialogue, by reporting the response of the two main opposition parties. The below example demonstrates not only this, but also the extent to which Labour was unwilling to even engage with the argument of the protesters, whilst both the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats willingly offered their views.

A Labour Party spokesman declined to comment on the threat of demonstrations.

But a Conservative spokesman said: "Fuel tax is likely to be higher under Labour than us because they are going to have to raise taxes to pay for the unsustainable borrowing levels."

A Liberal Democrat spokesman said the party was "obviously sympathetic" with the hauliers' cause, but added: "We don't think punishing other innocent road users and businesses will help."

(Paragraphs 18-20: Hauliers threaten poll disruption, 22 April, 2005)

Whilst it is clear that campaigners did engage in dialogue with Blair and other Government representatives, the BBC did not have access to such meetings. To this end the voice of such active citizens was represented as a series of utterances, much in the same way as party political sources would appear in news reports on their campaign activity.

4.2.6. Linking to Have your say

The vast majority of citizens' voices featured in news reports through an association with the *Have your say* section. Of contributions classified as coming from a member of the public, some 52% were relating to the *Have your say* comments. The utterances can be split into two different categories – firstly *Have your say* comments provided as a quotation with a link to a debate external to the news report, and secondly *Have your say* debates taking place on the same page as the news report. The first category consisted of 31 quotations using 444 words and was present in 11% of news reports⁶². The second category was much greater in frequency and magnitude encompassing 236 utterances and 13,369 words, yet was concentrated in only 3% of news reports.

4.2.6.1. Quoting from and linking to debates

Whilst every news article contained a link to the dedicated *Have your say* section, courtesy of the navigation menu on the left hand side, only 32 of these pages carried a quotation from and link to such a debate. The actual link between the news report and the *Have your say* debate was mainly thematic – that is, the linked debate was broadly concerned with an issue touched upon in the news report, without discussing this directly. The BBC often linked to the same debate from several different news reports as seen in Table 4-6

⁶² The utterances coded as *Have your say* entries represents comments submitted by members of the public and are thus all considered to be direct quotations.

(reproduced in Appendix 3). Indeed of the 32 news reports listed, there were only 20 unique debates.

Acknowledging genuine concerns, Mr Blair said it was essential to be fair both to British taxpayers and to genuine asylum seekers and legal migrants who boosted the UK economy.

'Huge contribution'

He argued it was vital immigration and asylum issues were not used to divide people or turn British tolerance on its head.

"I think most people know the huge contribution that immigrants have made to our country," he argued.

He attacked the way the Tories were raising the issue.

"It is an attempt deliberately to exploit people's fears, to suggest that for reasons of political correctness, those in power don't dare deal with the issue," he said.

The opposite was really true, he said.

Labour had cut asylum claims faster than anywhere else in Europe to the lowest level since March 1997, he said.

'Babble'

New controls, including a points system for economic migrants, more detentions and tagging for asylum seekers, were also planned by Labour.

Home Secretary Charles Clarke said Labour planned to recruit 600 new immigration officers to work at ports - a one in eight increase.



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“ I don't think immigrants should come here because they take over everything ”

Joanne Smithe, Hackney

[Have Your Say](#)

[Fact check: Illegally in UK](#)

Figure 4-1, Example of in-text quotation from and link to Have your say debate

The two most frequently linked to *Have your say* debates were 'Is Iraq a key election issue for you?' and 'Who is right on immigration?', which were both highlighted in four news reports. It is interesting to note that the debate on the Conservative manifesto is linked to on three occasions, whilst debates on Labour and Liberal Democrat manifestos only warrant a single association with the article reporting their respective launches. Moreover, the news reports leading with a issue concerning the Conservative party were more likely than the other two parties to be associated with a focussed discussion. That is, there were seven news reports leading with a Conservative issue, and seven such associated *Have your say* discussions. By comparison there were 11 news reports leading with a Labour issue, whilst only four of the associated *Have your say* pages had a similarly closed focus. Instead the majority of debates linked to news reports predominantly concerning Labour

were of a slightly more general nature. The Liberal Democrats were again poorly represented with only three news reports and two focussed debates. Five of the news reports were concerned with the electoral process (three of which reporting on the problems with postal voting), whilst the remaining five related to immigration, health, Iraq and campaigning.

Most of the debates associated with news reports were prefixed by a headline formulated as a question – with the exception of the debates on the manifestos and the final Prime Minister’s Questions, ending as they did with ‘your views’ or ‘your reaction’. However, few of the debates actually encourage elaborate responses and could easily be answered with a single word or sentence. Rather, most questions appear to be designed to survey opinion in a broad fashion. This is not necessarily problematic in itself, though it does fail to encourage a greater engagement with the topic from citizens. Two debates are notable exceptions to this, namely ‘Do you waste food?’ and ‘Why are first-time voter numbers down?’. On face value the first debate might not appear to be inviting citizens to make proposals, but further down in the text itself we find additional guidance to contributors in the form of question such as ‘How much food do you throw away? Do you pay attention to the sell-by date? How can waste be reduced? Send us your comments and experiences.’ The debate concerning first-time voters, however, is interesting as it is a direct response to the research contained within the news report to which it is associated. That is, the debate is set up to find the cause of the problem described in the news report.

With the exception of perhaps two articles (‘Post vote applications quadruple’ and ‘First-timers “unlikely to vote”’), none of the news reports containing links to *Have your say* debates were founded on citizen sources. Thus the associated debates were positioned as a reaction to news reports based on elite sources – and in particular elite party political sources – again relegating citizens to commenting on a predefined agenda.

It is worth noting that the debates were continuously updated once the news report has been effectively closed for editing. This demonstrates that the issue continues to attract interest and remains live among the people choosing to partake in the discussions.

The *Have your say* quotations were positioned in the second part of the news text, and in every instance required the reader to scroll down for it to be displayed⁶³. If the article contained other information or quotation boxes, the one linking to the *Have your say* debate was always the last or second to last to appear. Whilst this may suggest a reduced sense of importance, or even credibility of the source, it may also be a practical consideration whereby the BBC wants the reader to complete reading at least the majority of the text before moving on to another page.

The quotation carried was usually a stripped down version of the comment originally made by someone in the main *Have your say* section, as seen below (underlined text appeared as quotation).

Tony Blair must stand down as soon as possible. He does not represent the values of the Labour Party - simply his own agenda. His leadership is a threat to everyone on the political spectrum.

Alex, London, UK

(What should Blair's priorities be now?, 16 May, 2005)

This system is clearly open to fraud in so many ways. Raising turnout should be achieved through inspiring people to care enough to vote rather than simply making it more convenient.

Chris Dunckley, Cambridge

(Is postal voting an invitation to fraud?, 24 April, 2005)

First-time voters aren't bothered about voting because none of the political parties are bothering to engage them. All the parties want to talk about are 'hard-working families' and 'hard up pensioners'. If you talk to young people they are interested in things that will affect them in the future such as the environment, long-term job security and how they will ever afford a house. All the current parties are interested in is 'here-and-now' policies that will win them a handful of marginal seats.

Chris, Berkshire

(Why are first-time voter numbers down?, 4 May, 2005)

⁶³ Standard resolution of 1024x768 pixels is assumed here, although the quotations are positioned such that scrolling would be required even at higher resolutions.

As someone who has served in Iraq I think I'm more entitled than most to comment.
As prime minister, Tony Blair had a difficult decision to make and he made it, that's
why he's the Prime Minister.

Martin S, Lymstone, UK

(Is Iraq a key election issue for you?, 4 May, 2005)

Essentially the BBC stripped down already brief statements into simple soundbites, which underpinned the notion of public voices as a news spectacle. Moreover, only a single quotation was carried in each instance, which obviously limited the balance of citizens' voices presented. That is, no single quotation could ever be seen as representative of such large-scale debates containing contributions with widely differing views. Moreover, it is presumptuous to assume that most people will indeed click on the link provided and read the other comments published.

The quotations that were carried often represented strong party political views, or opinions on the political process. In doing so the BBC seemed to be creating a personalised balance to their formal reporting. However, with only one quotation per article (that contained comments), this was not always the case, leading to some unfortunate associations. Take for instance the quote from 'Steve Stacey, Spalding, England' published on the article titled 'Lib Dems "are real alternative"', reporting on the Liberal Democrat election manifesto launch: 'The Lib Dems' manifesto contains much with which I fully agree'. Whilst the comment is clearly attributed to a member of the public, it leaves the BBC open to accusations of partisan bias. Especially considering some of the other comments which were highlighted on the actual *Have your say* page and could have been chosen:

If anyone expects the Lib Dems to keep their promises then forget it

Allan Ledwith, Colchester, Essex

I thought the Lib Dems were a real political party. To talk of removing all nuclear weapons is nonsense

Martin, Glasgow

Local income tax based on ability to pay - what a joke

Mark, Liverpool, UK

Voting for them is a sure ticket to chaos, anarchy and destruction

The article reporting on the Conservative manifesto launch contained an equally supportive comment: 'In my view, immigration and the economy - especially pensions - are the two main election issues' (from Paul P, Birmingham, UK). By comparison, the comment associated with the new report of Labour's manifesto launch was a more negatively worded: 'I'm sure income tax won't rise under Labour, just as I am sure that almost every other tax will' (from Dom Brady, Southampton). It is not the intention of this thesis to imply a conscious bias from BBC staff responsible for managing this process, but rather that the singular inclusion of comments from associated *Have your say* debates is problematic.

It should be noted that on one occasion the comment quoted as part of the news report, did not exist in the actual debate the article linked to. 'Campaigns focus on health clash' contained the comment 'Hand the NHS back to the doctors with the existing budget and let them make it work like it used to' from David Ball, Wokingham, which did not feature in the *Have your say* debate, 'Who has the best health policy?', it was linked to. There is no obvious reason why is the case, though the manual updating system could mean human error was at fault (i.e. that the comment was cut, as opposed to copied, from the debate and pasted in the news report).

4.2.6.2. Debates published in news articles

The second category of *Have your say* associations with news reports, where comments were published immediately below the news text (see Figure 4-2 below), encompassed 88% of the utterances and 97% of the words coded as *Have your say* contributions. Despite this, as mentioned earlier, debates were published in this way on only 3% of all news reports. Thus the overall number of *Have your say* contributions associated with news reports clearly gives a skewed impression of the true reach of sources classified as members of the public. The news reports that warranted such a treatment are detailed in Table 4-7, which also lists the number of comments published with each article. Two of the debates derived from articles based on Labour statements (or support in the case of the Sun) whilst one was derived from a focus on the Conservative proposal for more faith schools. Four of the debates concerned smaller political parties (one each for Veritas, UKIP, Respect and the Green Party) with a further two being based news reports on opinions of special interest groups.



Figure 4-2, Example of news article with Have your say debate published on same page

The debate published below the article ‘Tories propose more faith schools’, was listed as having been suggested by a member of the public. Kate Corwyn, Exeter, England was cited as having put forth the following question: ‘Both of the major parties have said that they want more faith schools, should this be encouraged[?]’ The extent to which this actually initiated the inclusion of the debate, or if it had already been planned is not clear (see Chapter 7 for a more extended discussion of such ‘suggested debates’). It also remains unclear what criteria, if any, was used to determine which debates were carried as part of news reports, and which were simply linked to.

Headline	Published	COMMENTS	
		Frequency	Words
Greens reveal 'radical' manifesto	12 April, 2005	46	2,052
Kilroy attacks 'liberal fascism'	14 April, 2005	27	1,344
Targets 'not to blame for MRSA'	14 April, 2005	10	1,123
Tories propose more faith schools	14 April, 2005	17	886
UKIP aim is to 'reclaim' nation	15 April, 2005	52	3,460
Respect action over postal vote	18 April, 2005	30	1,738
Party chiefs face Muslim voters	19 April, 2005	17	1,189
Sun sends smoke signal to Labour	20 April, 2005	23	1,085
More fuel protests at refineries	26 April, 2005	14	492

Table 4-7, Details of Have your say debates published on same page as news articles

Publishing such debates directly associated with the news report appears to have increased the focus of the debate, compared to those contained within the dedicated *Have your say* section (see Chapter 6). That is, rather than discussing ‘who is right on immigration’ as described above, people were able to discuss the UKIP statement that they would ‘reclaim the nation’. Though this focus might have reduced the number of overall replies to any one topic, it did facilitate a more on-topic debate. Moreover, it makes the contributions a more manageable, not to mention likely, read for other visitors. Whilst the debates had a closer focus compared to those contained within the *Have your say* section, there is no evidence to suggest that this has actually increased the likelihood of contributors engaging in dialogue with each other. The debate on UKIP’s manifesto launch did spark a couple of such exchanges, which are reproduced below. The square bracketed number at the start of each utterance represents the sequential order in which they were represented on the page – note the inconsistent chronology of the responses, likely caused by the manual publishing process used by the BBC at the time (see Chapter 7 for a more detailed discussion of this).

[39] I did not realise anyone had stolen the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom voluntarily participates in the EU because it is in our interests as it is in the interests of almost every other country in Western Europe. It is interesting UKIP want us to leave whenever everyone else is desperate to join. They are nothing but old fashioned imperialists thinking Britain can go it alone. This is the modern world - no one can.

Sunil Joshi, United Kingdom

[40] The reason why UKIP wants zero net immigration, is because we believe that there is not the housing for more people in the UK. Sadly the other parties are being dishonest because they are not trying to disprove us instead they just try to ignore the housing issue. As regards, Sunil Joshi's comment: Switzerland and Norway are not desperate to join the EU

David, London, UK

[19] Ah, that old chestnut: David from London says what about Switzerland and Norway? Ah yes, those major engines of the European economy, representing hmmm, about eight million souls out of three hundred million. UKIP are a national embarrassment. They couldn't run a tap, let alone formulate cogent economic policy. As a Scot working in a distant, isolated country like Australia, the economic and political benefits of belonging to a large social and trading bloc are painfully clear.

But then I imagine most of the UKIP have never ventured beyond Dover. Has anyone told them that Queen Victoria is dead now?

Colin, Sydney, Australia

[20] Regarding the comment about Switzerland and Norway not wanting to join EU - even though they're outside, they still have to comply with EU law and contribute to the EU budget to participate in the single market. People in Norway joke that they have a 'fax democracy'- 'Brussels' faxes their government the legislation and they enact it. EU states, like the UK, have a say in the making of those laws.

Alex, Durham, UK

(UKIP aim is to 'reclaim' nation, 15 April 2005)

This particular exchange is interesting as it demonstrates several contributors engaging in dialogue. David, London, UK responds firstly in a general way to negative comments made by several other contributors relating to the UKIP stance on immigration, before turning to specifically address a point made by Sunil Joshi, United Kingdom. Colin, Sydney, Australia and Alex, Durham, UK then seeks to counter the argument put forth by David, London, UK. Unfortunately all the contributors only make one comment each and as such the dialogue stops at argument and counter-argument, without either side demonstrating any shift in opinion or expansion of knowledge. Interestingly, the relationship between Switzerland, Norway and the EU, which is at the crux of their exchange, was not a topic of the news report itself. Thus the contributors have extended the scope of the debate to incorporate other arguments to evaluate the theme in the news report – in this case the UKIP manifesto pledges.

The comment from David, London, UK also implies that he is actually a member of UKIP when he justifies UKIP thinking by stating 'we believe'. Another contributor was even more overt about their membership of a political party, signing the comment anonymously as 'New UKIP Member, West Sussex'. There are only diminutive examples across all *Have your say* debates of people identifying themselves as either candidates or members of a political party. While it is unclear if either of these two contributors were contesting a seat, it demonstrates an interest in engaging with members of the public on contentious issues.

The UKIP manifesto is honest and innovative and is what the Tory manifesto should have been.

While the dialogic exchange described above did not contain any comments admitting a shift in opinion based on the presentation of arguments, a comment from Phil, Oxford, explicitly describes how he was considering changing his mind based on the news report.

Until I read this article I was intending to vote UKIP, as I believe the EU in its current state is only bad for the UK. Now I see some of the other policies that UKIP are proposing (huge borrowing increases, nuclear power) I'm not so sure - maybe my vote will go to the Conservative party after all.

Phil, Oxford

(UKIP aim is to 'reclaim' nation, 15 April 2005)

Comments containing such admissions were incredibly rare, but it perfectly demonstrates the persuasive power of information presented in news reports. Moreover, it underlines the importance of election news in educating the electorate about party policies, thus enabling them to make an informed choice on polling day.

4.3. Summary

This chapter has analysed the use of sources in election news on the BBC News Online website. It is clear from this analysis that the narrative conventions of the BBC's online reporting style ensures that most sources are quoted or paraphrased in the same way with a comparatively equal average number of words. However, there is an evident disparity between *who* is cited, with priority given to elite party political and institutional sources. The three largest parties in terms of electoral representation were also found to be the three largest source groups, with either party leaders or prominent MPs the main speakers. Media organisations other than the BBC, election officials and other official bodies were the largest institutional source groups, although interest groups such as charities and NGOs also featured prominently. It is a matter of concern regarding democratic diversity that other political parties were by comparison rarely cited. Moreover, the BBC largely failed to give the due balance of exposure to candidate names promised in its policies (i.e. by listing names of candidates standing in a given constituency otherwise not mentioned in the news report).

Following a discussion of party political and institutional sources, the chapter turned to examine in detail the representation of citizens in news reports. Opinions from members of the public individually or inferred collectively were present in various forms, although essentially still marginal compared to other source groups. However, of interest to this thesis was not simply the empirical measure of expressions of public opinion, but the dialogic nature of these instances.

Reporting of opinion polls as a sample of public opinion was typically concerned with the current head-to-head position of the three main parties and positioned towards the end of articles. Together with audience viewing figures these references almost exclusively constructed public opinion as a passive group with little ability to set the agenda. Citizen voices appearing in vox populi style utterances were also cast as passive and part of soft news stories more reminiscent of the feature genres described in Chapter 5 next. None of these examples demonstrated any dialogic interaction between citizens and other source groups, or between citizens themselves.

Nevertheless, there were some news reports containing references to members of the public taking a much more active role in the democratic process either as self-professed campaigners or by confronting politicians as part of public debates, on the campaign trail or pre-scheduled meetings. Whilst these rare examples did involve examples of dialogic interaction between individuals, the exchanges were evidently short and none of the participants appeared to have altered their position as a consequence. This apparent lack of openness to persuasion, and dialogism in general, appears to contradict the normative standards of a public sphere described in Chapter 2. That is, public spheres should comprise of rational, reasoned, and open minded debate, where the authority of the better argument is allowed to prevail. Instead the sources utterances present in news reports on the *Election 2005* resembled, in my reading, the type of ‘goal-oriented’ and at times ‘manipulative’ discourse associated with the form of communication pragmatics Habermas termed ‘strategic action’ (Habermas, 1996, 1992, see also Dahlgren, 2001a).

This prominence in news articles of ‘strategic action’ and the near absence of any detailed reports of politicians actually engaging with ordinary voters may in part be the consequence of political parties running a tightly controlled and stage-managed election campaign. The consequence of this was a media spectacle of the campaign, at least in the BBC’s online news reporting, that reinforced the perceived disconnect between politicians and the public described at various points in Chapters 2 and 3. This is not to suggest such

exchanges between politicians and prospective voters did not take place, but rather that their virtual absence from the BBC's national news agenda reinforced a sense of top-down politics. Again this appears to contradict the hallmarks of a public sphere, which should foster inclusivity and *public* discussions, aimed at holding politicians to account. Whilst the news reports give some indication that the BBC is seeking to hold politicians to account, there was only limited evidence to suggest ordinary citizens were able to contribute to this interrogation process – directly through reported face-to-face meetings with politicians, or indirectly through posting comments to the BBC.

The majority of citizen utterances came in the shape of *Have your say* debate entries, which were associated with a minority of news reports either below the article or as a quotation and link to a separate discussion page. This relatively low integration of debates with news stories created a separation between the two domains. Such a distinction is problematic as it may implicitly suggest the themes covered in the debates have a restricted relevance on the majority of news items. By extension this could also have given the impression that certain news is worthy of debate, whilst other reported events should simply be accepted as presented. There certainly seems to have been reluctance from the BBC to provide links to or create such associations between its debates and the news reports. This may well be associated with logistical complications given the manual updating process of such comments (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5). The BBC may have deemed that it did not have the capacity to allow such debates to take place on each news report. However, it may also have been a qualitative judgement, whereby the contribution from citizens could not be seen to undermine or threaten the authority of the news report.

In my view, the news reports published on the *Election 2005* site did themselves not constitute a realm of rational-critical debate. However, they would nevertheless have played an important role in informing debates in various communicative spaces, including other parts of the BBC website – in other words, the wider 'electoral web sphere' (Foot, 2005). Whilst members of the public were rarely given a voice as sources in election news, the next chapter will now turn to analyse dialogue in feature articles – a series of different genres where the source emphasis is almost the reverse of news articles. As will become clear, this also has an impact on the nature and levels of dialogic interaction evident.

Chapter 5: Citizens as sources in election features

Having examined in detail the news reports published on the *Election 2005* site, the present chapter moves to analyse citizens as sources in election feature articles. Features make up a significant proportion of articles on the *Election 2005* site and 192 such articles were published on the front-page. As explained in Section 3.4.5, news and feature articles were for the purpose of this thesis predominantly classified according to BBC's own labelling of articles. This is a generic classification and unlike the unified style of news articles, the feature articles represent several different narrative genres. These narrative genres encompass one or more different subsections of the feature articles and can be described broadly as including:

- **factual narratives** – e.g. election information, transcripts from interviews or speeches, and *Election at-a-glance* (serialised features containing a combination of factual information, quotations and images);
- **analytical narratives** – e.g. election analysis columns written by BBC experts;
- **human-interest or soft news narratives** – *Election Bus* (serialised features focussing on election issues in selected constituencies and local people's views on these), and non-serialised features typically a light-hearted take on campaign issues or human interest stories.

Looking at features overall, excluding transcripts⁶⁴, we find a reverse logic compared to news articles, whereby members of the public were the most frequently cited with 542 quotations and 328 paraphrases (see Table 5-1 below). Institutional sources closely followed, having been quoted 371 times and paraphrased on 440 occasions – or 7% less than members of the public.

By comparison the party political sources were significantly lower, with the Labour party again making up the largest number – quoted 85 times and paraphrased on 326 occasions, which is a total of 53% fewer than members of the public. The Conservatives followed with 71 quotations and 244 paraphrases, against parties classified as other with 96 quotations and 154 paraphrases (64% and 71% less than members of the public

⁶⁴ Figures from the transcripts have not been included in the overall feature statistics as they would unduly skew the balance and ratio of these. Their significance will be discussed later in the chapter together with an individual breakdown of the empirical data associated with these.

respectively). The Liberal Democrats came in fourth among political sources, with 50 quotations and 191 paraphrases, or 72% fewer than members of the public.

Code Group	CODE COUNT			WORD COUNT			WORDS PER CODE		DISTRIBUTION		
	P	Q	T	P	Q	T	P	Q	P	Q	T
labour	326	85	411	5,771	1,934	7,705	18	23	52%	21%	55%
conservative	244	71	315	4,735	1,549	6,284	19	22	42%	17%	45%
libdem	191	50	241	3,262	1,086	4,348	17	22	40%	13%	41%
otherparties	154	96	250	3,042	1,747	4,789	20	18	15%	8%	16%
foreignpolitician	19	32	51	328	869	1,197	17	27	3%	2%	3%
institutional	440	371	811	9,116	7,645	16,761	21	21	48%	32%	50%
memberofpublic	328	542	870	6,235	16,488	22,723	19	30	43%	24%	48%
ambiguous	159		159	3,690		3,690	23		38%	0%	38%
bbc	51		51	2,879		2,879	56		16%	0%	16%

Table 5-1, Summary of code breakdown in feature stories (n = 192)

The difference between citizens' voices and other sources becomes even greater when looking at the magnitude of the respective citations. Members of the public were quoted using 16,488 words and paraphrased using 6,235 words (see Table 5-1 above). This is a full 26% more than institutional sources, which were quoted using 7,645 words and paraphrased using 9,116 words. The order of the other sources remained the same as the frequency count, though as with the institutional sources, this difference was increased significantly.

The three main parties were again close, with Labour the largest with 1,934 words quoted and 5,771 paraphrased – 66% less than members of the public. The Conservatives followed with 1,549 words quoted and 4,735 words paraphrased, and the Liberal Democrats with 1,086 words quoted and 3,262 words paraphrased (72% and 81% less than members of the public respectively). The consolidated group of other parties again beat the Liberal Democrats however, totalling 1,747 words quoted and 3,042 words paraphrased, which is a difference of 79% compared to members of the public.

Although members of the public were featured more prominently within the features, and indeed some of these were specifically designed to focus on citizen voices (as discussed later in this chapter), the dominance of these sources can in part be contributed to the inclusion of *Have your say* comments associated with some of the articles. This is demonstrated by the larger than average words per code for quotations from members of the public, as well as the code distribution across all feature articles where both Labour and institutional sources actually surpass those from members of the public - featuring in 55%

and 50% of articles respectively compared to 48% for members of the public (see Table 5-1 above). The Conservative party followed closely, being cited in 45% of feature articles and the Liberal Democrats in 41%. Voices from other political parties were only present in 16% of features, thus demonstrating the large concentration of codes within a small number of articles.

This chapter will now turn to discuss specific characteristics and code distribution within each subsection of feature articles (e.g. *Election Bus* or election analysis columns). In addition to linguistic differences, the composition of both text and images on these pages also varied considerably. Most feature articles also contained a byline, which by comparison was only present in five news reports. There was some overlap between the narrative style and characteristics of source utterances across the different feature subsections. These will be examined in detail predominantly in the subsection where they were most prominent so as to avoid unnecessary repetition.

5.1. Election at-a-glance

The *Election at-a-glance* series consisted of 22 daily summaries of election events and two overall election summaries (totalling 9% of all feature articles). The first daily summary was published on 6th April and the last on 4th May, with the election summaries last updated on 9th May and 11th May. Interestingly the feature was not published every day of the campaign and the days in which it was not published changed each week (i.e. not consistently avoiding weekends as might be expected). Each article contained a selection of elements from the following subsections: Today In A Sentence, Campaign Catch-Up, Pick Of The Analysis, A View From [selected countries], Photo Of The Day, and Quote Of The Day (see Figure 5-1 below). Because of the summary nature of this series, there was little opportunity for any dialogue or source interaction.

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BBC NEWS Election 2005 Election news in video

Last Updated: Thursday, 28 April, 2005, 20:37 GMT 21:37 UK

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CAMPAIGN CATCH-UP QUOTE OF THE DAY
PICK OF THE ANALYSIS

28 APRIL IN A SENTENCE

Downing Street publishes the attorney general's full legal advice on the Iraq war after part of it was leaked to the media, and the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats step up the pressure on Tony Blair.

Return to the top

CAMPAIGN CATCH-UP

Tony Blair dismisses as a "damp squib" the implications of any apparent changes in the attorney general's advice on the Iraq war and agrees to publish it.

Read more
VIDEO Watch Tony Blair respond to opposition criticism

Labour claims it is the "party of enterprise" as it unveils its business plans.

Read more
VIDEO Watch Labour's election briefing

ELECTION 2005

LATEST NEWS

- Blair: I've listened and learned
- Howard will stand down as leader
- Blair secures historic third term
- Kennedy hails 'party of future'
- Shock win for Galloway in London
- Trimble quits after poll defeat
- Election 2005 at-a-glance

FEATURES AND ANALYSIS

Remember this?
Looking back at some of the highlights - and low moments - of election 2005

- Blair's muted victory
- Howard's parting favour
- What's in the new PM's in-tray?
- Did the opinion polls get it right?
- Who deserted Labour?

GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS

Soar and glide over the UK - every seat, every candidate

- See party positions on the issues
- Track all the opinion polls

VIDEO AND AUDIO

Watch Peter Snow analysis

Figure 5-1, Example of *Election at-a-glance* feature

Members of smaller parties were represented in 20 utterances (that is, quotations and paraphrases) totalling 380 words (see Table 5-2 below). Labour sources again represented the largest individual group being cited on 79 occasions using 1,130 words, with Conservative sources coming in second with 64 utterances and 978 words. It is worth noting that utterances were attributed to the Party as opposed to a named politician in 38% and 47% of the utterances respectively, thus reinforcing the generalised nature of these summaries. This is reversed in the case of the Liberal Democrats, where Charles Kennedy was the more frequently attributed source.

The anomaly of foreign media is due to special attention being placed in a selection of articles on the reporting of the UK election in foreign media – countries represented being Australia (7 April), Ireland (8 April), Denmark and Sweden (listed as Scandinavia, 12 April), Spain (13 and 14 April), USA (17 April), Bosnia (30 April) and Germany (2, 3, 4 May). By comparison, institutional sources outside of foreign media sources are represented in only 14 utterances totalling 192 words.

Code Group	Speaker	CODECOUNT			WORD COUNT			WORDS/CODE		DISTRIBUTION		
		P	Q	T	P	Q	T	P	Q	P	Q	T
labour	leader	21	6	27	322	134	456	15	22	7.3%	2.6%	7.8%
	party	30		30	366		366	12		7.8%	0.0%	7.8%
	politician	21	1	22	303	5	308	14	5	7.3%	0.5%	7.3%
conservative	leader	21	3	24	310	94	404	15	31	6.8%	1.6%	6.8%
	party	30		30	423		423	14		8.3%	0.0%	8.3%
	politician	6	4	10	83	68	151	14	17	3.1%	2.1%	4.7%
libdem	leader	26	6	32	380	141	521	15	24	8.3%	3.1%	9.4%
	party	24		24	228		228	10		7.3%	0.0%	7.3%
	politician		1	1		17	17		17	0.0%	0.5%	0.5%
	spokesperson		1	1		29	29		29	0.0%	0.5%	0.5%
otherparties	candidate		1	1		30	30		30	0.0%	0.5%	0.5%
	leader	3	1	4	60	34	94	20	34	1.0%	0.5%	1.6%
	party	13		13	231		231	18		4.7%	0.0%	4.7%
	politician	2		2	25		25	13		1.0%	0.0%	1.0%
institutional	academic	1	1	2	16	20	36	16	20	0.5%	0.5%	1.0%
	celebrity	2	1	3	15	12	27	8	12	1.0%	0.5%	1.0%
	electionofficial	2		2	27		27	14		1.0%	0.0%	1.0%
	foreignmedia	56	18	74	1,562	481	2,043	28	27	4.7%	3.1%	5.2%
	media	2		2	25		25	13		1.0%	0.0%	1.0%
	ngo	2		2	35		35	18		1.0%	0.0%	1.0%
	officialbody	1		1	15		15	15		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
	tradeunion	1		1	11		11	11		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
un	1		1	16		16	16		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%	
memberofpublic	campaigner	7	1	8	122	22	144	17	22	3.1%	0.5%	3.1%
	memberofpublic	4		4	68		68	17		2.1%	0.0%	2.1%
	opinionpoll	7		7	104		104	15		2.6%	0.0%	2.6%
ambiguous	ambiguous	6		6	102		102	17		2.6%	0.0%	2.6%
bbc	analyst	40		40	983		983	25		10.9%	0.0%	10.9%
	bbc	1		1	20		20	20		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
	correspondent	1		1	19		19	19		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%

Table 5-2, Summary of code breakdown in *Election at-a-glance* features (n = 192)

Members of the public were represented in 19 utterances using 316 words. This reinforces the notion that voices of ordinary citizens, or even institutional sources for that matter, were not deemed to be the focal point of the election – or at very least not worthy of summation in such a daily bulletin. Instead the focus was on the horserace representation of politics, in line with the analytical columns described later in this chapter. Specifically there was no subsection featuring the *Have your say* comment or debate of the day, nor an opportunity for people to engage in a general dialogue on these daily summaries.

5.2. Election information

The *Election 2005* site had a subsection devoted to election information articles and two such articles were also published on the front-page in their own right (see Figure 5-2 below for an example of one of the pages). While an insignificant number overall, it is important

to not neglect these as they signify an added importance on the sources contained therein. That is, election information articles were provided to educate the reader about the most important election issues in a factual manner – not as a vehicle to report party political communication.

The screenshot shows a BBC News article from April 28, 2005, titled "Q&A: Iraq legal advice row". The article discusses the government's legal advice on the Iraq war. It includes sections like "What is it all about?", "What's happened now?", and "What did the attorney general say?". There is a photo of Lord Goldsmith and a video player.

Figure 5-2, Example of election information article relating to Iraq legal advice row

Code Group	Speaker	CODE COUNT	WORD COUNT	WORDS/CODE	DISTRIBUTION
		P	P	P	P
labour	leader	2	30	15	1.0%
	party	1	34	34	0.5%
	politician	3	66	22	0.5%
conservative	leader	1	38	38	0.5%
libdem	party	1	21	21	0.5%
Institutional	army	1	25	25	0.5%
memberofpublic	opinionpoll	1	33	33	0.5%
ambiguous	ambiguous	4	80	20	0.5%

Table 5-3, Summary of code breakdown in *Election information* features (n = 192)

Articles classified as information only contained, perhaps not surprisingly, a mere 14 paraphrases and no quotations (see Table 5-3 above). Six of these were attributed to Labour, whilst four were ambiguous. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats were both paraphrased once each, as were institutional sources and members of the public. The average word count was slightly higher than in other sections ranging from 20 to 38 words.

Given the low number of articles belonging to this subsection, it is impossible to draw any broader conclusions beyond noting that sources were also used in election information, though in a much smaller scale than other feature articles or news reports. The reliance on paraphrases can be linked to the passive and factual linguistic style, where points of view are largely omitted unless of particular importance.

5.3. Election transcripts

Transcripts are of greater interest as they signify a particular piece of text, usually a transcribed or pre-prepared speech, which carries such importance it warrants reproducing in full (see Figure 5-3 below). To this end the presence of source types in these articles carries additional weight. The majority of transcripts, of which there were 11 in total (totalling 6% of feature articles), were focussed on speeches made by Labour or Conservative politicians. However, articles classified as transcripts sometimes also contained paraphrases or quotations from other sources than the main speaker – usually to contextualise the main narrative before the transcribed text. Interestingly Conservative sources were most frequently cited, with 261 coded utterances, against Labour’s 259 coded utterances (see Table 5-4 below)⁶⁵.

Code Group	Speaker	CODE COUNT			WORD COUNT			WORDS/CODE		DISTRIBUTION		
		P	Q	T	P	Q	T	P	Q	P	Q	T
labour	leader	24	139	163	355	3,896	4,251	15	28	1.0%	1.0%	2.1%
	party	1		1	11		11	11		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
	politician	3	92	95	17	2,944	2,961	6	32	0.5%	1.6%	1.6%
conservative	leader	30	216	246	502	5,063	5,565	17	23	1.0%	1.6%	2.1%
	politician	4	11	15	37	351	388	9	32	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
libdem	leader	19	49	68	349	997	1,346	18	20	0.5%	0.5%	1.0%
institutional	media		52	52		1,538	1,538		30	0.0%	1.0%	1.0%
memberofpublic	memberofpublic	24		24	236		236	10		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
ambiguous	ambiguous	2		2	30		30	15		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%

Table 5-4, Summary of code breakdown in *Election transcript* features (n = 192)

⁶⁵ Each unique paragraph within transcribed sections was marked as a coded utterance. Thus the large number of codes is not a reflection of the number of articles containing transcripts, which totalled 11. Rather, it gives an indication of the narrative structure of political speeches, though this obviously falls outside of the scope of the present thesis.

Looking at the magnitude, however, we find that Labour sources as a group is 18% larger than the Conservatives, having been cited using 7,223 words against 5,953 words for the Conservatives. Similarly, the Liberal Democrats were cited 68 times, against institutional sources at 52, although the latter was given more space for each quotation – institutional sources being cited using 1,538 words against the Liberal Democrats at 1,346 words.

The screenshot shows the BBC News website interface for the 2005 UK general election. The main headline is "In full: Howard Flight interview". Below the headline, there are three sub-headlines: "Sacked Conservative MP Howard Flight has dropped his attempts to become a Tory candidate.", "Instead, Arundel and South Downs Tories have chosen think tank chief Nick Herbert as his successor.", and "Mr Flight was sacked after hinting Tory plans for reducing public spending went further than the party had admitted. But Labour says Mr Herbert voiced similar views in a 2002 Spectator article." A photograph of Howard Flight is shown with the caption "Howard Flight has tried to draw a line under his sacking". The transcript includes a Q&A session where Flight discusses his resignation and the party's future. The website also features navigation menus, a search bar, and various news sections like "VIDEO AND AUDIO NEWS" and "GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS".

Figure 5-3, Example of election transcript from interview with Howard Flight

Five of the transcripts were associated predominantly with Labour sources (predominantly Tony Blair, Jack Straw and Lord Goldsmith), four with Conservative sources (predominantly Michael Howard) and one with a Liberal Democrat source (leader Charles Kenney). The final article was a transcript of the Question Time programme, with quotations from the three main party leaders equally balanced. The contributions from politicians other than the Labour leader were all related to the basis on which the decision was made to invade Iraq.

Two of the transcripts took the form of interviews, where the exchange between the journalist and interviewee was reproduced in full (John Humphrys acting as interviewer in both instances). While this dialogic interaction was reproduced, the transcribed summary of the Question Time debate with the three main party leaders was significantly truncated. That is, despite the debate being modelled around questions from the audience, the transcript merely included a vague reference towards the actual question and no information about the person asking the question, followed by a paraphrase of the response (e.g. 'Asked about Iraq, Mr Kennedy said the Lib Dems believed there should be a phased withdrawal of troops.'). Thus the focus was entirely on the responses from the party leaders, despite this being one of the very few forums of interaction between members of the public and politicians. The website summary would thus appear to undermine one of the core functions of the programme. Furthermore, the Question Time programme featuring the leaders of Plaid Cymru and the SNP did not warrant a full transcript (at least not on the front-page). Instead, their programme was merely noted in an article describing the timings and setup of the programme. This further epitomises the elitist nature of the online reporting.

5.4. Election analysis columns

Of all the feature articles published on the front-page of the *Election 2005* site, 36% could be classified as election analysis columns (69 articles in total). There were 16 authors in total, and two articles without a byline. Only one of the columns was thematically serialised, the others dealing with individual campaign or election issues as they occurred (see Figure 5-4 below). The balance of sources was similar to that found in news articles, as demonstrated by Table 5-5 below. However, the number of citations was proportionally lower due to the narrative conventions followed by such articles. That is, the bulk of the text contains the analytical commentary of the journalist or columnist and not source utterances.

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BBC NEWS Election 2005 Election news in video

News Front Page Last Updated: Sunday, 1 May, 2005, 11:52 GMT 12:52 UK

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Iraq could dominate final days of campaign

Analysis
By Nick Assinder
Political Correspondent, BBC News website

So much for the big three political leaders' plans to move on from Iraq and Tony Blair's character.

Thanks to fresh newspaper allegations and a series of interviews and campaign rallies, the war and the prime minister's integrity have been driven back to the top of the agenda.



Tony Blair is under fire over a leaked memo

For the second weekend running, Mr Blair has found himself presented with leaked information giving new impetus to the row over the way he took Britain to war.

Last weekend it was the attorney general's controversial advice over the legality of the conflict.

Now it is a leaked memo seen by some as confirmation the prime minister had agreed to back US military action to remove Saddam eight months before the war started.

'Military action'

The document details a top secret meeting in July 2002

ELECTION 2005

LATEST NEWS


- Blair: I've listened and learned
- Howard will stand down as leader
- Blair secures historic third term
- Kennedy hails 'party of future'
- Shock win for Galloway in London
- Trimble quits after poll defeat
- Election 2005 at-a-glance

FEATURES AND ANALYSIS

Remember this?
Looking back at some of the highlights - and low moments - of election 2005

- Blair's muted victory
- Howard's parting favour
- What's in the new PM's in-tray?
- Did the opinion polls get it right?
- Who deserted Labour?

GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS



Soar and glide over the UK - every seat, every candidate

- See party positions on the issues
- Track all the opinion polls

VIDEO AND AUDIO

Watch Peter Snow analysis

Figure 5-4, Example of election analysis column written by Nick Assinder

Looking in detail at the sources appearing in analytical articles and the context in which they appear, we find a strong focus on the horserace of the two largest parties – Labour and the Conservatives. The Liberal Democrats are completely marginalised by comparison, and sources from parties other than these three appear only on three occasions. Labour was the most frequently cited source with 30 quotations and 145 paraphrases, closely followed by the Conservatives who were quoted 23 times and paraphrased 98 times (or 33% less than Labour). However, the Liberal Democrats were in analytical columns surpassed by both members of the public and institutional sources who were quoted 24 and 56 times, and paraphrased 88 and 73 times respectively (or overall 36% and 26% less than Labour respectively). The Liberal Democrats were quoted only twice and paraphrased 50 times - considering their status as the third largest party in the UK, a phenomenal 70% less than Labour. Other remaining political parties, meanwhile, were even worse off, being only cited on three occasions. Again there is little difference between the percentage variance in frequency of codes and the actual code lengths among the three main parties (see Table 5-5 below).

Code Group	Speaker	CODE COUNT			WORD COUNT			WORDS/CODE		DISTRIBUTION		
		P	Q	T	P	Q	T	P	Q	P	Q	T
labour	leader	74	7	81	1,356	73	1,429	18	10	13.0%	2.6%	13.0%
	party	25	1	26	512	38	550	20	38	7.3%	0.5%	7.8%
	politician	46	22	68	879	546	1,425	19	25	7.8%	2.6%	8.9%
conservative	leader	63	8	71	1,294	124	1,418	21	16	9.9%	2.1%	10.4%
	party	16	5	21	353	84	437	22	17	4.2%	1.0%	4.7%
	politician	18	10	28	330	249	579	18	25	5.7%	2.6%	7.3%
	spokesperson	1		1	19		19	19		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
libdem	leader	29	2	31	573	30	603	20	15	5.7%	1.0%	5.7%
	party	15		15	352		352	23		6.8%	0.0%	6.8%
	politician	6		6	98		98	16		2.6%	0.0%	2.6%
otherparties	leader	1		1	12		12	12		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
	party	1		1	3		3	3		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
	politician		1	1		14	14		14	0.0%	0.5%	0.5%
foreignpolitician	us	4		4	66		66	17		1.0%	0.0%	1.0%
institutional	academic	9	15	24	169	283	452	19	19	2.1%	1.6%	2.1%
	charity	3	9	12	56	166	222	19	18	1.6%	1.6%	1.6%
	corporation	1		1	8		8	8		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
	education	2		2	47		47	24		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
	eu	2		2	52		52	26		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
	industry	6	6	12	132	150	282	22	25	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
	media	20	9	29	438	141	579	22	16	4.2%	0.5%	4.2%
	ngo	10	5	15	179	126	305	18	25	1.0%	1.0%	1.0%
	nhs	5	4	9	83	79	162	17	20	1.0%	0.5%	1.0%
	officialbody	5	6	11	100	137	237	20	23	1.0%	1.0%	1.0%
	otherpolitical	1		1	43		43	43		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
	police	1		1	6		6	6		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
	pollster	4	2	6	85	50	135	21	25	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
	un	3		3	39		39	13		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
usmedia	1		1	11		11	11		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%	
memberofpublic	blog		1	1		97	97		97	0.0%	0.5%	0.5%
	campaigner	11	4	15	278	51	329	25	13	2.1%	1.0%	2.6%
	haveyoursay		3	3		52	52		17	0.0%	1.6%	1.6%
	memberofpublic	30	16	46	577	354	931	19	22	5.2%	1.0%	5.7%
	opinionpoll	47		47	1,202		1,202	26		5.7%	0.0%	5.7%
ambiguous	ambiguous	108		108	2,625		2,625	24		20.3%	0.0%	20.3%
bbc	analyst	6		6	1,788		1,788	298		3.1%	0.0%	3.1%

Table 5-5, Summary of code breakdown in *Election analysis columns* (n = 192)

Labour sources were quoted using 657 words and paraphrased using 2,747, with Conservative sources being quoted with 457 words and paraphrased with 1,996 words – or 28% less than Labour. The Liberal democrats were given 69% less space compared to Labour, with 30 words quoted and 1,023 words paraphrased. Both the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats were cited using fewer words than sources coded as ambiguous, institutional and members of the public. Ambiguous sources in particular appeared more significant in magnitude compared to their frequency, being paraphrased using 2,625 words (no quotations), proportionally only 23% behind Labour. Institutional sources were quoted with 1,132 words and paraphrased using 1,448 words, or 24% less than Labour, which is 2% closer than how they compare in relation to code frequency. Members of the

public, however, were up 13% compared to code frequency, with 554 words quoted and 2,057 words paraphrased equating to 23% less than Labour.

When looking at analytical pieces we might reasonably expect ambiguous sources to feature more prominently compared to news reports, due to the greater use of speculation and conjectures. Indeed this is also reflected in the distribution of such codes, where ambiguous sources were present in 42% of all analytical pieces, but only 20.3% of all features (see Table 5-5 above).

Labour sources were again the most prominent, however, featuring in 58% of analytical pieces. The Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats featured in 46% and 31% of analytical pieces respectively. Members of the public were quoted or paraphrased in 38% and institutional sources in 31%. Thus, despite the strong presence of members of the public in terms of both frequency and magnitude, their contributions are restricted to selected items and surpassed by both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats in terms of distribution. This is significant as the greater the distribution of particular voices across articles, the more likely readers are to encounter their views – and thus by extension the news organisation must have prioritised these sources as more significant on a greater number of topics than non-elite sources.

Media sources were frequently drawn on in a self-referential manner, cited on 29 occasions using 579 words. Sources representing academic institutions also featured prominently, being cited on 24 occasions using a total of 452 words. The academic sources were more concentrated, however, and featured in half the number of analytical columns compared to media sources. Academic sources were used to provide authoritative context to the analysis, a function shared with other official bodies (cited 11 times using 237 words). Charities and NGOs on the other hand were again used as providers of critique and counter arguments to politicians, though on a smaller scale compared to their role in news reports. These two source groups combined totalled 27 utterances containing 527 words.

5.4.1. Examining public opinion

Members of the public had a strong standing within analytical columns, totalling 112 utterances and 2,611 words. This stems in part from a strong focus on the analysis of opinion polls (47 utterances and 1,202 words), which as a sub-category was the largest non-party political source present in election analysis columns. Perhaps not surprising

given the predictive element they add to an analytical narrative. As such they mimic the function of opinion polls within news reports, as a means to predict the election outcome (or support the analyst's predictions). Indeed, even minor fluctuations in polling figures were used by analysts to reinforce (or construct) a sense of drama about the campaign. However, while news reports would refer to specific poll results, analysts would just as often refer to polls in a more generalised manner – as seen in the example from Nick Assinder below.

Polls suggest he may be a liability for Labour with some voters who give Chancellor Gordon Brown a higher trust rating.

(Howard gambles on personal attack, 24 April, 2005)

The actual details of the poll was in such instances of less importance, the analyst focussing instead on the potential consequence of such opinions being held by a selection of the voters. Opinion polls were also used to report public opinion on particular policy issues, typically as part of articles dedicated to that specific topic as seen in the example below. Again this contrasts with the use of opinion polls in news reports, which focussed predominantly on overall poll variances between the three main parties.

And all his internal polling and focus group surveys have suggested he is on to a winner when he talks in tough terms about policing Britain's borders and clamping down on immigration and bogus asylum seeker

(Howard hopes voters buy Britishness, 15 April, 2005)

While some of these polls were only mentioned in passing to support the broader argument of the analyst, they indicate a sense of public mood on the particular issues. Analysts would also speculate on how a particular issue or event might affect future polls – posing questions such as ‘Will Iraq trust issue sway polls?’. It is worth noting the interesting use of ‘polls’ here, instead of ‘public opinion’ or ‘voters’. In such instances ‘polls’ were not only representing public opinion, but also a personification of public opinion in itself.

Unfortunately this use of opinion polls was inconsistent and not all articles analysing policy issues contained any reference towards a broader public opinion. By way of example, the article ‘Analysis: Do we need nuclear?’ only contained two utterances paraphrasing members of the public (described vaguely as ‘some environmental campaigners’), relying instead almost entirely on institutional sources. Moreover, there

was no attempt at mapping the views of other citizens or even engaging them in a debate on the issue – despite the massive impact the renewal of the British nuclear industry would have on the public.

However, the broad inclusion of opinion polls in analytical columns did reinforce the fundamental importance of citizens and their views within the election process (even if they were in response to predefined issues). Some of the analytical columns were also concerned with the accuracy of opinion polls and the nature of polling itself. One article contained citations from a pollster offering their analysis on how particular policy issues influences certain demographic groups' polling preferences. David Cowling also provided an analysis of how the polls had compared to the actual election outcome, concluding that 'the election was an impressive overall performance by the polling companies and goes a long way to repair the damage their collective reputation has sustained in recent elections' (Did the opinion polls get it right?, 9 May, 2005).

The sub-category containing individual members of the public was also greater than all other non-party political sources, with 46 utterances and 931 words. While the overall distribution of this sub-category equalled that of opinion polls, 35 of the utterances were concentrated in only two articles. One analysing the reaction to George Galloway's win from people in the Bethnal Green and Bow constituency, and another analysing the Question Time programme featuring the three party leaders. The two articles contrasts in their treatment of public opinion, however – the first containing eleven named members of the public as speakers (most utterances as direct quotations where people spoke freely about their support or objection to George Galloway), and the second only paraphrasing the public as a general opinion of the audience. Diana Church's comment from the Question Time debate was quoted in an article analysing GPs 'dislike of the 48-hour target', though the remaining ten utterances were all paraphrases attributed to unnamed members of the public.

5.4.2. Have your say on analysis

There were only three links to *Have your say* debates from a total of 69 analytical articles, one of which was not even an open debate, but rather a link to the *UK Voters' panel*. Moreover, it was not possible to publish comments at the end of the main body text, thus placing a certain restriction on the extent to which people were able to contest the views or engage in dialogue with the columnist about their analysis. This is in stark contrast to the *Election Monitor* blog where almost all posts contained an option for people to submit

their comments to appear on the page. The differentiation appears to have been between the ‘serious election analysis’ and the ‘light-hearted campaign commentary’ of the blog. While such a distinction was not necessarily a problem in itself, the exclusion of citizen feedback on the analytical columns was, since it stifled the potential for civic engagement on important issues.

Analysis title	Last updated-	Have your say debate	Last updated
Howard's immigration dilemma	19 April, 2005	Who is right on immigration?	4 May, 2005
What's happened to Europe?	20 April, 2005	Should Europe be an election issue?	3 May, 2005
All to play for at halfway stage	21 April, 2005	UK voters' panel: Halfway mark	20 April, 2005

Table 5-6, List of feature articles with links to associated Have your say debate

The ‘Who is right on immigration?’ debate was also linked to from four news reports as well as the analytical column mentioned above and as such did not represent a fresh opportunity for people to engage with the specifics of ‘Howard’s immigration dilemma’. Since the third article linked to a closed sub-category of the *Have your say* section, the analytical columns provided only a single unique opportunity for interaction among citizens. The implication appears to be that the analytical articles were authoritative and should not be subjected to debate. Though arguably it is such interpretation of information that *should* be at the very centre of a healthy democratic debate and thus the BBC website appears to have missed an opportunity for civic engagement here.

5.5. Election Bus

The *Election Bus* travelled 2,843 miles across the UK, stopping in 18 places to report on ‘the views of you, the voter’ and finding ‘out about the issues that matter’ (BBC election bus, 4 May, 2005). Reports in this serialisation made out 9% of feature articles published on the front-page. Richard Critchlow, who reportedly spent a year preparing the *Election Bus* concept, explained the philosophy driving the project:

"The political parties shouldn't always dictate what is going to be talked about. We decide where we are going, and thoroughly research the issues that affect that area.

"Sometimes they will coincide with what the parties are talking about and sometimes they won't.

"We have tried to identify as big a variety of areas as possible, whether it be a city centre or village of 200 people, to reflect the whole country and the issues people will be voting about."

(BBC bus revs up for the election, 5 April, 2005)

As illustrated by Table 5-7 (reproduced in Appendix 3), the themes that were covered by the *Election Bus* feature did broadly echo those present in national debate, though in each instance they were treated with a distinctly local angle as promised by Critchlow. In contrast to many of the other feature articles where citizen voices formed a majority, the *Election Bus* articles had a serious tone and tackled policy issues. Unfortunately the feature was significantly weighted in favour of England, at least in terms of places visited – 14 of the stops were in England, with only two in Scotland and one each in Wales and Northern Ireland⁶⁶.

The screenshot shows the BBC News website interface for the 2005 UK general election. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, TV, Radio, Talk, Where I Live, and A-Z Index, along with a search box. Below this, the 'Election 2005' banner is prominent, featuring the BBC News logo and a 'Low graphics version' link. The main headline reads 'BBC election bus' with a sub-headline: 'The BBC election bus has been on the road around the UK for the past 4 weeks.' An image of a double-decker bus with 'Electric 2305' branding is shown. The text below the image states: 'Stopping off each day in cities, towns and villages, we have been assessing the views of you, the voter.' To the right, there is a 'GUESS THE MILEAGE' section with the text: 'How many miles has the bus travelled since day one in Birmingham and its last stop in Northampton?' and a note that the competition is now closed, with the correct answer being 2843 miles and the winner being J. Collier from London. A sidebar on the right contains 'LATEST NEWS' and 'FEATURES AND ANALYSIS' sections, including a 'Remember this?' section with a photo of a man and a 'GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS' section with a map of the UK.

Figure 5-5, Concluding page of *Election bus* feature

⁶⁶ The extent to which the *Election Bus* was empirically a balanced reflection of 'the whole country and the issues people will be voting on' as suggested by Critchlow falls outside the scope of this thesis, but the claim seems somewhat grandiose considering the relatively limited number of articles published under this moniker.

Clearly the *Election Bus* served an extended purpose for the whole of the BBC, and not just BBC News Online⁶⁷. For all the departments involved, the bus was an important bridge between the BBC and members of the public, providing as it were a tangible presence of the BBC in the communities it visited. In addition to using the bus as a mobile studio, the BBC also erected a marquee alongside it, which provided people with a space to ‘access the website, ask questions and have their say about election issues, and watch what's going on in the bus on a big screen’ (BBC bus revs up for the election, 5 April, 2005).

Arguably the *Election Bus* features did centre on voices from ordinary citizens covering a phenomenal 247 utterances with 4,027 words and represented in some way in each of the *Election Bus* features (see Table 5-8 below). Institutional sources by comparison were only cited on 242 occasions, but were still given more space than members of the public with 4,550 words overall. Nevertheless, the core function of institutional sources was often to drive the narrative or add facts and figures. The institutional sources were typically sources representing local institutions, businesses or government, as opposed to national counterparts (discussed further in section on institutional sources below).

In terms of elite party political sources, Labour was only present in twelve utterances, whilst the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in one utterance each. Indeed, with the exception of the six utterances citing Baroness Blood in relation to policing in Northern Ireland, each of the party political references were vague paraphrases of party or government policy. That is, despite the focus on local issues, the *Election Bus* features did not engage local party political sources either, the emphasis remaining solely on people’s personal experiences.

The strength of sources from local businesses reinforced the local angle of these articles, often also speaking about their personal experiences (this is explored in detail later in the chapter). In total there were 41 utterances using 732 words relating to local businesses. The voice of academic sources appeared in 33 utterances using 661 words, typically providing factual information (statistics or research findings) to corroborate claims by either members of the public or the theme put forward by the journalist. Indeed such sources had the second highest penetration of all code groups in *Election Bus* features, appearing in

⁶⁷ Notably 6 O’Clock News, News 24, Radio Five Live and Radio 4 were all involved in using the *Election Bus* to develop stories and complement their programming.

about one third of such articles. In terms of distribution we find that institutional sources other than these were typically only present in one or two *Election Bus* articles where they were directly related to the topic. There were for instance special features on crime, education or defence cuts, which accounts for the high number of police sources (30 utterances and 495 words), educational sources (18 utterances and 342 words) and army sources (15 utterances and 210 words) respectively. However, each of these source groups had an overall distribution of less than 0.5%. The focus on crime is particularly interesting as the frequency of police sources within *Election Bus* features was exactly double that found in news reports (30 utterances against 15 utterances). Though the magnitude of these sources showed a slightly lower differentiation (495 words against 323 words), it is clear that the focus on policing in these features was disproportionate to that seen in election news. Charities and NGOs were again among of the largest institutional source groups, having been cited on 28 occasions using 558 words.

Code Group	Speaker	CODE COUNT			WORD COUNT			WORDS/CODE		DISTRIBUTION		
		P	Q	T	P	Q	T	P	Q	P	Q	T
labour	party	5	1	6	75	52	127	15	52	2.1%	0.5%	2.1%
	politician	1	5	6	6	145	151	6	29	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
conservative	party	1		1	22		22	22		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
libdem	party	1		1	8		8	8		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
otherparties	party		2	2		8	8		4	0.0%	0.5%	0.5%
institutional	academic	12	21	33	222	439	661	19	21	3.1%	3.1%	3.1%
	army	8	7	15	124	86	210	16	12	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
	charity	11	15	26	226	283	509	21	19	2.6%	2.1%	2.6%
	church		7	7		95	95		14	0.0%	0.5%	0.5%
	education	9	9	18	200	142	342	22	16	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
	electionofficial	4	3	7	90	50	140	23	17	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
	industry	5	20	25	92	448	540	18	22	1.0%	1.6%	1.6%
	localbusiness	21	20	41	310	422	732	15	21	2.6%	2.1%	2.6%
	localgovernment	5	5	10	86	176	262	17	35	1.0%	1.0%	1.6%
	media	1		1	14		14	14		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
	ngo	2		2	49		49	25		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
	nhs	5	6	11	55	122	177	11	20	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
	officialbody	1	1	2	8	35	43	8	35	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
	otherpolitical	1		1	58		58	58		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
police	10	20	30	106	389	495	11	19	2.1%	1.0%	2.1%	
retail	2	2	4	36	44	80	18	22	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%	
transport	4	5	9	47	96	143	12	19	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%	
memberofpublic	campaigner	5	11	16	64	232	296	13	21	1.6%	1.0%	1.6%
	haveyoursay		2	2		26	26		13	0.0%	1.0%	1.0%
	memberofpublic	101	128	229	1,628	2,122	3,750	16	17	7.8%	7.8%	7.8%
ambiguous	ambiguous	7		7	140		140	20		2.6%	0.0%	2.6%
bbc	analyst	1		1	21		21	21		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
	correspondent	1		1	25		25	25		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%

Table 5-8, Summary of code breakdown in *Election bus* feature articles (n = 192)

The *Election Bus* interestingly contained a greater balance of quotations compared to paraphrases. That is, sources were more frequently allowed a direct voice as opposed to an

indirect voice. Moreover, while there were some examples of citizen voices being described using generic terms such as ‘a young man’, ‘the girls’, ‘parent’, ‘mother’, ‘audience member’ or ‘voter’, in contrast to news reports members of the public were almost always referred to using their full name. By giving people a clear identity through use of their full name and sometimes additional background information, the BBC elevated the importance of such sources within feature articles. The implied credibility of Nicole Garrington, who is ‘both single parent to two boys and business owner, working a 70-hour week’ (Live to work, or work to live?, 21 April, 2005), compares favourably to that of a ‘middle-aged passer-by’ (Battling drugs and violent crime, 28 April, 2005) or other even more non-descript characters.

5.5.1. Expressing personal opinions

One of the important characteristics of the *Election Bus* was that it gave individuals not just a voice, but an opportunity to express themselves across several paragraphs of an article uninterrupted by other sources. The *Election Bus* articles frequently contained citizen voices uninterrupted across five to eight utterances. By comparison, voices of citizens in news reports were, with only a few exceptions, represented as single statements (often just prompting an extended articulation from an elite source).

In one article the BBC presents the personal views of three pensioners (Pat Cleary, Tony Eagles and Ron Bishop) on issues that may be of particular concern to the ‘grey vote’. Prompted by the journalist, or as an extension of another topic, they address the view of pensioners on the following issues: pensions and benefits, NHS, council tax, military spending and immigration. The information we are provided is highly personal and rife with politically charged statements – including several complaints about council tax as demonstrated by Ron Bishop below.

"My pension went up 75p one year but my council tax went up from £41 a month to £60. I don't know how other people get through on the pension the government gives," he says.

(Gloucester and the grey vote, 26 April 2005)

Such specific examples of figures are rare, however, and members of the public rely instead on emotional accounts of their experiences or perception of particular issues.

Chantelle May, exemplifies this mode of expression when she describes the impact of tax on her disposable income:

"Our wages are rubbish, and though I do it because I love the job, there's not much left over at the end of the week."

(Business concern over rising tax burden, 12 April, 2005)

While the *Election Bus* appeared to dispel the myth of politically interested citizens by engaging them in local topics with a national significance, it also offered a space for those who were consciously aware of their own detachment from the political process. In particular, it allowed such people to explain in detail why they feel disillusioned with the democratic process, or even their reason for choosing not to cast their ballot. Such views range from Alfred Ridley, a pensioner from Towcester, who think politicians 'are a lousy bunch of rotters - a waste of time and money', to A-level student, Ben Coleman, who argues:

"Politicians have just got to start talking more about issues. I don't think we're particularly concerned about personalities as much as the politicians think."

(Frustration and disenchantment, 4 May, 2005)

Other articles, such as 'British Asians fear victimisation', contained citizens who strongly objected to the established political system because of their feeling of being mistreated by it. Again these views are based on their own personal experience – and their perception of how their treatment compares to that of others. Kamran Siddique for instance, likens the Bradford riots in 2001 to football hooliganism, and as a consequence questions the severity of punishment given to British Asians who took part. Others go even further in their rejection of Government policy, as demonstrated by Nuzhat Ali below.

She compared the new anti-terrorism powers being introduced with Nazi Germany.

"I'm not saying we're there yet," she said as she stirred, "but if we look at history, we need to learn the lessons of where it could go."

(British Asians fear victimisation, 20 April, 2005)

However, not all of these statements were allowed to pass unchallenged by the BBC. The seemingly controversial views of Haqueq Siddique – that Al-Qaeda is 'a fantasy' and there

being 'no link between the 19 Saudis who blew up the twin towers and Bin Laden' – were preceded with a warning of 'conspiracy theories abound' (British Asians fear victimisation, 20 April, 2005). This clearly has the effect of alerting the reader to be sceptical of the views that follow. Interestingly, the same level of caution did not apply to examples of blatant racism and ignorance as expressed by pensioner Tony Eagles in relation to immigration:

"Genuine asylum seekers, fine," he says.

"But I'm not too keen on Islam. We've given them a home and accepted them into our society but they're biting the hand that feeds them," he adds.

(Gloucester and the grey vote, 26 April 2005)

It could of course be argued that the views expressed are those held by Haqueeq Siddique and Tony Eagles respectively, and probably representative of others who hold similar views. To this end, such views have relevance and it is fair to acknowledge their existence (especially in features focussing on neglected voices). However, when the BBC questions the validity of one set of views, it is difficult to see how they can reasonably allow other views of equal controversy to pass unchallenged. Arguably such flawed expressions are problematic when they appear unchallenged, as they could mislead the reader who may reasonably assume there is a level of accuracy in sources used by the BBC. By the same measure, it is problematic when the BBC journalist seemingly applied personal judgement (or common sense) on what should be considered acceptable points of view, and which should be ridiculed. To this end both these examples were problematic – and the better solution may have been to balance those controversial voices with other members of the public.

Not all of the opinions expressed were equally negative, however, and Pat Cleary even positively contradicted what he perceived as being the general consensus of poor hospital treatment on the NHS. Having recently undergone a knee replacement surgery at the local hospital he stated 'Everybody moans about the hospital but I got very good treatment there' (Gloucester and the grey vote, 26 April 2005). Linda Mays who had received dialysis treatment since 1979 echoed this sentiment. Currently with the Heartlands NHS Trust she said she had 'been impressed by the standards of hygiene on the ward, vital in an area full of patients whose immune systems are particularly vulnerable' (Real concerns within the NHS, 12 April, 2005). While such positive praise was typically reserved for the

NHS, it clearly demonstrated a difference between people's own experience and the perceived experience of others – the latter arguably in part constructed by the media and political campaigners. It is clear, however, that despite the personal experience of these people validating their own opinions, general points required a more authoritative source to lend credibility to the story.

5.5.2. Personal opinions of institutional sources

While the *Election Bus* features were broadly dominated by voices from ordinary citizens, all the articles contained at least a couple of utterances with voices from institutional sources. As stated earlier, these institutional sources typically represented local organisations or local counterparts to national organisations. They mostly expressed the organisations' points of view, but often using a linguistic register that had little resemblance to official or formal discourse. That is, such sources were typically the only source of facts and figures, but they also provided their personal opinions as part of the narrative. Institutional sources expressing their own opinion in this way, only occurred in feature articles and was almost entirely restricted to the *Election Bus* serialisation.

Sources interviewed in their capacity as employees or representatives of an institution were thus allowed a greater sense of freedom to express personal views. Emma Topley, for instance, comments both on the state of the education system in her capacity as a teacher (representing the school) and what it is like being a newly qualified teacher in her capacity as a private individual (representing herself)⁶⁸. The below example demonstrates the personal experience of what is otherwise considered an institutional source:

She's wanted to be a teacher, she says, since she was a little girl, teaching imaginary pupils.

"I enjoy the challenge, interacting with the children," she says. "It's great when they 'get' something."

(Examining education, 19 April, 2005)

In the case of 'Gloucester and the grey vote', statements on the role of pensioners in the election campaign is provided by Linda Sheperd from the Age Concern Gloucestershire

⁶⁸ The school is also represented by the headteacher, Gary Coleby, though he only comments on the education system and the school itself.

and Pat Scannell from the Gloucestershire Pensions Forum - Age Concern is also the source of the only statistical information provided in the article. Their views are no less political than those expressed by the pensioners themselves, as bluntly exemplified by Pat Scannell:

"Pensioners are fed up listening to the government throwing everything at children. We're fighting for a reasonable pension without any strings, not freebies at Christmas."

(Gloucester and the grey vote, 26 April 2005)

Some of the articles were even framed predominantly around institutional sources – or at very least the concerns of businesses. Despite this, those articles did contain a certain degree of personalised discourse – or almost a personification of the enterprise. William Lees-Jones, owner of J W Lees Greengate brewery in Chadderton, clearly illustrates the personalised views of small business owners.

"What has added to our expenses is the invisible costs - the minimum wage going up, the cost of electricity, gas, and the cost of legislation that emanates from Westminster or Brussels.

"We also have higher charges to meet on National Insurance," he says.

"To my mind it is a direct tax - even if Gordon Brown may disagree."

(Business concern over rising tax burden, 12 April, 2005)

The final sentence in the above example also demonstrates a tendency by members of the public (or in this case, institutional sources expressing personal opinions) to insist on their particular framing of the problem to legitimise their own points of view. Of course this technique is common among politicians, though usually executed with a little more subtlety.

5.5.3. Talking to journalists and institutional sources

It is not only the voice of citizens or institutions that was accentuated within *Election Bus* articles, however. The voice and actions of the reporter was also occasionally actively

positioned within the text, as seen in the example below where Jill McGivering is interviewing Pat Cleary in a Gala Bingo Hall.

"Life will get a lot better if I win tonight," he grins.

I tell him if he does, he will give my article a great ending. He immediately worries I have jinxed him.

(Gloucester and the grey vote, 26 April 2005)

Such examples were present throughout these articles and forefronts the dialogue that actually took place between the interviewee and the journalist – as opposed to the constructed dialogue by proxy between two sets of interviewees seen in news reports. The voice of the journalist thus helped to create a more personalised narrative, focussing more on the background and personality of the source to illuminate the issue being discussed. The casual setting of such dialogues – meeting in the pub or at someone's house – is also of importance and helps to further break down any formal barriers between the reporter and the interviewees⁶⁹. The journalist also overtly describes methods, such as 'knocking on doors' to 'test the school's reputation' (Examining education, 19 April, 2005). While such information would be deemed unnecessary as part of a news report, it serves as another means to personalise the accounts provided in the feature articles.

The journalists on two occasions also observed and reported institutional sources engaging in dialogue with members of the public – both of which involved institutional sources talking to young adults on the streets⁷⁰. Each of the sections was positioned at the very end of their article. In the first example, police officer Steve Morgan demonstrates the relationship that has developed between him and some local youths. The dialogue is very limited – four words, one word, five words – but is still important as a rare example of institutional sources engaging with members of the public.

"Tell them my name," he demands of the cheeky young lads hanging out on a street corner.

⁶⁹ This is not to suggest that journalists do not ordinarily seek such places to secure interviews or statements from members of the public, but rather that the overt admission to this and the clear use of it as a location within the story is confined predominantly to the feature genre.

⁷⁰ It is possible to argue that the teacher in 'Examining education' is also engaging in some sort of dialogue with her students. However, she is shouting instructions at her students against their 'screeching' and 'din', thus this exchange is perhaps more of a one-way utterance than a dialogic exchange.

They shuffle, embarrassed, hands in pockets, baseball caps back to front. "Robocop," pipes up one at last.

"Robocop is on the case."

(On the beat with Barry's bobbies, 27 April, 2005)

The second example contains a dialogue between Reverend Palmer and a group of teenage girls. Again the actual length of the dialogue is limited, but interestingly, this is then followed by the journalist asking girls what they thought about the exchange – in a sense reviewing their own engagement with the institutional source.

We watched as she approached a group of teenage girls, hanging out together on a corner.

"Anyone need a prayer for anything?" bellowed the Reverend Palmer. Silence.
"Anyone got exams coming up?"

The girls shuffled and stared at their feet.

"No, thanks, we're fine."

They were briefly blessed anyway and the Prayer Patrol moved on. What did they make of it?

"They don't make any difference," said one girl with force.

Her friend shrugged. "But they're good people," she said.

(Battling drugs and violent crime, 28 April, 2005)

The follow up comments to the journalist creates a sense of closure around the statements and feelings of the young teenagers. While such closure is a natural way of ending news or feature articles, the closure around a section of dialogue in this manner is comparably rare.

5.5.4. Additional voices and Have your say links

The BBC sought to incorporate additional voices from members of the public by providing a link on the *Election Bus* articles, typically entitled ‘in pictures’, which provided a pop-up window (and on two occasions directed to a different page) with a series of images each accompanied by a few short paragraphs of text⁷¹. Ten of the picture series (out of the 18 *Election Bus* articles) were vox populi of members of the public stopped in the street, at place of work or leisure. The other picture series followed a chosen person or family through an ordinary day, where their story expanded on the theme explored in the original article⁷². The number of images ranged from six to ten, and some of the people presented, both in vox populi and ‘day-in-the-life-of’, were those already described in the main body text.

Despite this feature series being dedicated to the ‘the issues that matter’ and ‘what people want to talk about’, only two of the articles contained a quotation and association with the *Have your say* section.

News report	Last update	Have your say debate	Last update
Devon's housing problem	29 April, 2005	Are the parties doing enough for rural areas?	1 May, 2005
Windfarms, energy and politics	19 May, 2005	Are the parties doing enough for rural areas?	1 May, 2005

Table 5-9, List of feature articles with links to associated Have your say debate

Both these articles linked to the same debate as demonstrated in Table 5-9 above, and extraordinarily also cited the exact same contribution:

The quality of life people associated with living in the country has gone
 Andy D, Oxford, UK

(Devon's housing problem, 29 April, 2005 and
 Windfarms, energy and politics, 19 May, 2005)

⁷¹ These pages were not coded and does not form part of the statistics provided for the feature articles, since they were essentially not published on the front-page. While they were connected to the article, they did represent an additional depth of navigation from the visitor. It should be further noted that some of the *Election Bus* articles also contained ‘quick guides’ to the topic featured, thus creating a richer assessment of the issue overall – though the information provided as additional extras was never more than what can be expected as part of an extended feature article in any conventional ‘broadsheet paper’.

⁷² The article ‘Battling drugs and violent crime’ contained an additional link to ‘Victims’ tales’, which directed the reader to a page with two extensive personal accounts from victims of violent crime. This page was also linked to from the front-page and is an example of a good way to present highly emotive and sensitive information as an extension of the existing feature.

It is curious that the public was not afforded a greater opportunity to freely discuss these issues actually on the website. The selective sample of a handful vox populi in the picture series described above, merely acts as an extension of the existing article and did not facilitate a space for dialogue. Importantly, there were quite clearly existing *Have your say* debates on most the issues covered by the *Election Bus*, however broad, that *could* have been linked to, but were not.

5.6. Non-serialised features

In total 70 of the feature articles (equalling 36% overall) did not belong to any of the aforementioned serialisations or columns (see Figure 5-6 below for an example). In genre characteristics these non-serialised features have much in common with the *Election Bus*, focussing frequently on citizen voices, though at the same time also contain a strong balance of party political and institutional sources.

In these features we find a strong presence of party political sources – both from the three main parties and other parties. With a total of 139 utterances the Labour party was the most frequently cited party political group (see Table 5-10 below). The Liberal Democrats and Conservatives followed neck-and-neck with 129 and 128 utterances respectively. While only third of these three in terms of frequency, the Conservative sources were the largest in terms of magnitude with 2,793 words, beating both Labour with 2,763 and the Liberal Democrats with 2,471. In terms of distribution, Labour politicians were the most prominent of all source groups and had a higher penetration than any of the other party-political sources, being present in 30% of all non-serialised features. It is interesting to note that politicians from the three main parties are their largest contributing source within non-serialised features. For parties other than these three, however, it is the party leader who is the most prominent source. This was in contrast with news reports where the three main party leaders (plus Gordon Brown in the case of Labour) are the most prominent sources.

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Gloves come off in Bethnal Green

By Brian Wheeler
BBC News political reporter, in Bethnal Green

Bethnal Green is sometimes described as the spiritual home of British boxing.


But the East London borough can have seen few contests more bloody and bitter than the one currently being played out over who will represent it in Parliament.

The battle between George Galloway - the Glasgow MP expelled from the Labour Party for his comments about the Iraq war - and Labour's Oona King has all the makings of a classic political scrap.

It is New Labour versus "the ghost of Old Labour" (as Mr Galloway describes his Respect Party). The pro-war left versus the anti-war left. The flamboyant maverick versus the party loyalist.

And the atmosphere as the pair faced each other for their first full-scale debate of the campaign was more akin to a heavyweight boxing match than an election hustings.

The tiny Oxford House theatre was packed with noisy



Mr Galloway's election literature suggests he is spilling for a fight (Photo: Jess Hurd/Report Digital)

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Figure 5-6, Example of non-serialised election feature article

In terms of party political sources, leaders of parties outside of the main three were the largest contributor, cited in 86 utterances totalling 1,766 words. This strong presence can in particular be attributed to the celebrity personas of the Respect and Veritas leaders who were cited on numerous occasions. Bethnal Green and Bow, where George Galloway challenged and eventually defeated incumbent Labour MP Oona King, became one of the key battles in the campaign and thus featured prominently. Other party political sources contained a strong presence from the Green Party and UKIP, whilst the BNP, the Communist Party, the Democratic Unionists, English Democrats, the National Front, Plaid Cymru, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, Ulster Unionists and independent candidates were also used as sources on occasions. It is worth noting that the BBC published a feature on fringe political parties, with a focus on their extraordinary (usually single-issue) policies, which also helped increase the presence of party political sources outside the main three.

Code Group	Speaker	CODE COUNT			WORD COUNT			WORDS/CODE		DISTRIBUTION		
		P	Q	T	P	Q	T	P	Q	P	Q	T
labour	leader	13	3	16	199	99	298	15	33	3.1%	1.0%	3.6%
	party	32	1	33	582	18	600	18	18	6.8%	0.5%	7.3%
	politician	48	33	81	956	718	1,674	20	22	10.4%	6.8%	10.9%
	spokesperson	4	5	9	85	106	191	21	21	1.6%	2.1%	2.6%
conservative	leader	9	3	12	148	78	226	16	26	1.6%	1.0%	2.1%
	party	28	1	29	629	7	636	22	7	4.7%	0.5%	4.7%
	politician	30	20	50	537	330	867	18	17	5.2%	3.1%	5.2%
	spokesperson	20	17	37	549	515	1,064	27	30	2.1%	2.6%	3.1%
libdem	leader	13	3	16	194	77	271	15	26	2.6%	1.0%	2.6%
	party	35		35	683		683	20		6.3%	0.0%	6.3%
	politician	28	24	52	428	498	926	15	21	6.3%	4.7%	6.3%
	spokesperson	13	13	26	297	294	591	23	23	1.6%	2.6%	3.1%
otherparties	candidate	7	17	24	120	340	460	17	20	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
	leader	51	35	86	1,000	766	1,766	20	22	4.2%	3.1%	4.2%
	otherparties	33	6	39	785	84	869	24	14	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
	party	16	1	17	317	5	322	20	5	4.2%	0.5%	4.2%
	politician	24	22	46	419	318	737	17	14	3.6%	2.6%	3.6%
	spokesperson	1	10	11	30	148	178	30	15	0.5%	1.0%	1.0%
	supporter	2		2	40		40	20		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
foreignpolitician	foreignpolitician	9	32	41	171	869	1,040	19	27	1.0%	1.6%	1.6%
	us	6		6	91		91	15		1.6%	0.0%	1.6%
institutional	academic	42	27	69	961	616	1,577	23	23	4.2%	3.6%	4.2%
	army	14	6	20	316	140	456	23	23	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
	bookmaker	7	7	14	105	114	219	15	16	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
	celebrity	18	18	36	325	357	682	18	20	1.6%	1.6%	1.6%
	charity	2		2	39		39	20		1.0%	0.0%	1.0%
	corporation	3	3	6	103	41	144	34	14	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
	education	2	2	4	66	37	103	33	19	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
	electionofficial	10	13	23	235	354	589	24	27	2.6%	2.1%	2.6%
	foreignmedia	2	2	4	57	15	72	29	8	0.5%	0.5%	1.0%
	industry	3	3	6	79	85	164	26	28	1.0%	0.5%	1.0%
	judge	1		1	10		10	10		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
	localbusiness	10	6	16	152	103	255	15	17	1.6%	1.0%	1.6%
	localgovernment	2		2	31		31	16		1.0%	0.0%	1.0%
	media	32	31	63	612	607	1,219	19	20	6.3%	3.6%	6.3%
	ngo	11	14	25	377	284	661	34	20	1.0%	1.0%	1.0%
	nhs	1	2	3	14	25	39	14	13	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
	officialbody	8	3	11	143	55	198	18	18	1.0%	1.0%	1.6%
	otherpolitical	3		3	56		56	19		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
	police	1		1	9		9	9		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%
	pollster	9	7	16	202	119	321	22	17	1.6%	1.0%	1.6%
	tradeunion	7	2	9	132	52	184	19	26	1.0%	0.5%	1.0%
transport	4	5	9	63	118	181	16	24	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%	
un	1	1	2	33	20	53	33	20	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%	
usmedia	4	2	6	78	31	109	20	16	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%	
memberofpublic	campaigner	25	7	32	402	153	555	16	22	4.2%	2.1%	4.2%
	haveyoursay		3	3		45	45		15	0.0%	1.6%	2.1%
	haveyoursay-debate		244	244		10,782	10,782		44	0.0%	2.1%	2.1%
	memberofpublic	71	122	193	1,367	2,552	3,919	19	21	9.4%	6.8%	9.9%
	opinionpoll	19		19	390		390	21		3.6%	0.0%	3.6%
ambiguous	ambiguous	34		34	743		743	22		10.9%	0.0%	10.9%
bbc	correspondent	1		1	23		23	23		0.5%	0.0%	0.5%

Table 5-10, Summary of code breakdown in non-serialised feature articles (n = 192)

While placing a focus on alternative political voices, the BBC also sought to address political issues that did not register prominently in the campaign. The BBC published an article entitled ‘The big single issues’, since ‘for many people it's the issues that don't grab the headlines that count’. In contrast to the local focus of the *Election Bus*, this article detailed the national position of the parties on seven select policy issues, namely: smoking, aircraft noise, speed cameras, fathers' rights, wind farms, animal welfare and green belt.

Institutional sources overall accounted for 351 utterances and 7,371 words. The focus on crime however, which was strongly evident in the *Election Bus* features, disappears completely in non-serialised features where only one single utterance with nine words could be contributed to the police. Indeed the presence of celebrity sources on 36 occasions with 682 words exemplifies the lighter tone and subject matter in many of these articles. Academic sources were the largest individual group, being cited on 69 occasions using 1,577 words. Their function echoed that seen in news and the other sub-genres, adding factual information and detailing academic research. Domestic and foreign media combined, was cited more frequently (on 73 occasions), but with fewer words (1,400) compared to academic sources.

Charities and NGOs had a lower proportional representation compared to the news and analytical articles, featuring in only 27 utterances using 700 words, though members of the public acting as campaigners were also represented on 32 occasions with 555 words.

Election officials were only allowed a voice in 23 utterances, using 589 words to briefly describe the electoral system used in the General Election and to comment on the safety of postal votes. Pollsters were also incorporated in these non-serialised features on 16 occasions, using 321 words to describe the mechanisms behind opinion polls and to give their own predictions on the election outcome. While relatively marginal in the overall presence of sources in non-serialised features, it indicates an attempt at demystifying some of the processes behind the election – and in particular the representation of this process by analysts.

Mirroring the trend seen in the *Election Bus* feature, we find that members of the public were again the largest overall source group within non-serialised features with a total of 491 utterances covering 15,691 words. However, a full 244 of these were *Have your say* comments published on the actual article (encompassing a total of 10,782 words). Despite this, the category individual members of the public were significantly larger than each of

the party political groups with 193 utterances and 3,919 words, penetrating some 27.5% of non-serialised features. Opinion polls were less prominent in proportion to other sources compared to analytical columns, with only 19 such references covering 390 words.

While party political sources were fewer in both frequency and magnitude compared to members of the public, they could still be classified as elite sources in this context. That is, their representation when they *did* feature was one that implied a greater importance or authority on the subject and often this was the very reason they had been included. The exception to this seems to be the fringe parties, which are typically included for curiosity.

5.6.1. On the campaign trail

Many of the non-serialised features continued the principle of the *Election Bus* by seeking to interview people about their local constituency issues – or local concerns about national issues. Thus a feature dealing with the impact a foxhunting ban might have on the Stroud constituency in Gloucester also had members of the public voicing their concern on issues including housing, healthcare, taxation, education and transport. However, the non-serialised features differed in the way they sought and obtained such views, with the journalist often embedded with local politicians as they campaigned. This also served to illuminate the nature of campaigning itself, but clearly shifts the emphasis from issues people are directly concerned about, to issues the politicians are campaigning on (this is not to imply the two are always mutually exclusive of course).

In one such article Brian Wheeler compares the degree of campaign activity in Brent East (a marginal seat held by the Liberal Democrats) to that in Kensington and Chelsea (a safe Conservative seat). Interestingly the only hint at an exchange between politicians and members of the public (in this case the audience in a local Islamic centre) was when ‘Mr Livingstone points out that I [Brian Wheeler] am a BBC reporter - another example, he adds, of how important Brent East is to this general election’. The remaining article focuses on vox pop style comments from either local politicians or constituents Wheeler himself met whilst walking the streets in each of the constituencies. When these constituents expressed their political preference, they often did so by denouncing a particular candidate or party, as opposed to positively endorsing their counterparts.

Judith Meadows, out shopping in Kensal Rise, said: "For the first time, I won't be voting Labour, because of the war in Iraq."

(A tale of two constituencies, 27 April, 2005)

While they offer a sense of the mood in each of the constituencies, they fail to represent any real sense of dialogue between constituents and politicians. In another article, Jenny Matthews follows the campaigning of Garry Bushell, English Democrats candidate for Greenwich⁷³. This article describes in detail the exchanges between a party political source and members of the public. The dialogue was short and demonstrates little attempt from either person at putting forward persuasive arguments.

"Hello, we're campaigning for an English Parliament," he tells one man who does actually answer the door.

"I'll read the leaflet but I don't think you'll persuade me to vote for you," the man says. They smile at each other politely, and Mr Bushell wanders back down the drive.

The nearest we come to a boisterous exchange is when a group of schoolchildren walk past, one calling: "Vote Labour!"

Mr Bushell laughs. "And get nowhere!" he responds.

(Campaigning with Garry Bushell, 4 May, 2005)

Matthews commented in the subsequent paragraph, 'It is all very pleasant and polite, and perhaps very English. But it is not very interesting'. While not necessarily representative of normal campaigning (both the politicians and people answering their door may well have altered their normal behaviour due to the presence of a journalist), the examples of campaigning reported by the BBC demonstrated the short time afforded individual members of the public by politicians plying for their votes – not to mention the lack of extended dialogue between the politician and who they are meant to represent.

⁷³ The choice of Garry Bushell from a non-mainstream party as the focus of an article where the journalist follows the campaign of a politician, was likely due to his pre-politics pseudo celebrity status, stemming from careers in music and journalism.

5.6.2. Children and young adults

Children's voices were largely ignored as part of the main BBC coverage, though the election did have a significant presence on the CBBC Newsround website targeting this audience directly⁷⁴. However, the BBC did also attempt to redress the deficit of the main news section, by publishing a special report by Jackie Storer dedicated to the voice of children, entitled 'Children say: Give us a vote'. The children interviewed attended the Sir John Lillie Primary School in Fulham and were all between nine and eleven years old. Despite being several years away from gaining the right to vote the children demonstrated a clear awareness of the election campaign, the main party leaders and prominent issues. Yassin Abbaze (aged 10) was for instance quoted uninterrupted over seven paragraphs and his utterances are worth reproducing at length:

"I don't really like Tony Blair, but if you vote for the Conservatives then all the people who haven't got British passports have got to get out of this country.

"If I was prime minister I would do good for this country - there would be no wars or anything.

"On the estates, less trouble, less pollution and all the food poisoning - take that away.

"I'd get jobs for the bad people, so they would get away from trouble.

"Young people do bad stuff because they have got nothing to do, so clubs and stuff would help.

"I think Labour's going to lose this election because Tony Blair and George Bush did bad to this country.

"Some of my friends come from Iraq and some of their families died,"

(Children say: Give us a vote, 4 May, 2005)

Some of the points made were of course articulated with a certain degree of inaccuracy, though the sentiment remained unmistakably clear. Issues they felt needed addressing

⁷⁴ This site is independent of the BBC News Online site and thus falls outside the scope of this thesis.

usually related to something they had direct personal experience of – from having Iraqi friends who lost relatives in the example above, to Sarah Drew (aged nine) wanting better care for the elderly because of her grandfather losing his eyesight, or Isabeau Gervais (aged 10) wanting more CCTV cameras on the streets because her house was burgled and Ayan Ahmed (aged 11) who wanted more teaching assistants in class to help with her learning. Storer was complementary of the children’s contributions, but also described them as ‘quirky thinkers’.

Some of these are particularly insightful thoughts on important issues like crime, immigration, and education.

Others are just plain quirky, like having a children's minister whose job it is to dish out free sweets.

(Children say: Give us a vote, 4 May, 2005)

While not in the business of ‘dishing out free sweets’, Storer could of course have pointed to the Minister of State for Children, Young People and Families, Margaret Hodge (subsequently replaced by Beverley Hughes after the election) and the work associated with her role to demonstrate that the idea of a dedicated ‘children’s minister’ was not actually that far fetched. This omission epitomises a separation of children’s voices from any official electoral discourse evident throughout the article – that is, their comments are not related to policy or campaign issues, beyond the children’s own experiences or speculative conjectures on the party leaders. This is not to imply that the children should be expected to engage in this level of discussion, but rather that their views could have been better contextualised by the journalist to emphasise their relevance. Despite this, the article represents a commendable effort to incorporate otherwise neglected voices in the news landscape.

5.6.3. Unscientific surveys

Non-serialised features taking a distinctly light-hearted approach to election issues were often framed around vox populi of citizen voices. These include articles on how shoppers rate politicians’ looks, a speed dating test, unconventional election bets and double acts of the party leaders. The BBC was overt in its humorous approach to these articles and even admitted in one that its method was ‘entirely unscientific’. The features nevertheless addressed some serious cultural issues – the extent to which image plays an increasingly

important role in electability and the extent to which talking about politics has become a social stigma. The response received from members of the public was surprisingly reflexive, considering the informal context provided by the BBC. Astrid Baverholt for instance admitted:

"It is important [how they look] because we don't think about it but we judge them subconsciously, "

(How shoppers rate politicians' look, 30 April, 2005, clarification in original)

Annette Deleon-Jones also made a succinct point about the inadequate gender and race balance of the 15 pictures they were shown (the five leading politicians from each of the three main parties), though still offers her views based on the photographs presented.

"There are no women, no black people, just white, middle-aged men. So I'm making the best of a bunch of people."

She plumps for Gordon Brown, Charles Kennedy because he "looks sincere" and Jack Straw "who always make me feel I could trust him".

(How shoppers rate politicians' look, 30 April, 2005)

The final paragraph is a single quotation from Moira Rose who essentially provides a closure around the topic and summarises the sentiment from the people interviewed and arguably the frame developed by the journalist.

"I do think it's wrong that appearances make a difference[,] but you can't say that [just] because it isn't nice I don't do it myself." [sic]

(How shoppers rate politicians' look, 30 April, 2005)

5.6.4. Others have their say

Quotations from and links to separate *Have your say* debates were only present in four non-serialised feature articles. As with news reports, the associated debates were broadly concerned with an issue touched upon in the actual article, though often not addressing this directly. Two of the linked debates were concerning the electoral system and another two concerned the election campaign generally (see Table 5-11 below). One of the debates, 'Is postal voting an invitation to fraud?', was also linked to from three news reports, in

addition to the link from the feature article mentioned above. This was one of only two debates that spanned both news and feature articles (the other being an analysis article as described earlier), despite many other issues overlapping between the two genres. Compared to the debates associated with news reports, however, *Have your say* debates linked to features were actually *less* concerned with policies or personalities, focussing instead on the election as a democratic process.

Feature report	Last update	Have your say debate	Last update
How safe is your postal vote?	15 April, 2005	Is postal voting an invitation to fraud?	24 April, 2005
Is the voting system fair?	27 April, 2005	Should the voting system change?	2 May, 2005
The marginal election battle	2 May, 2005	Have you seen your candidate?	4 May, 2005
Election battle nears its climax	4 May, 2005	What's your campaign verdict?	5 May, 2005

Table 5-11, List of non-serialised features with links to associated Have your say debate

Have your say debates were also only published on the same page as four non-serialised feature articles, where they amassed a total of 244 comments and gave citizens 10,782 words to articulate their points of view (see Table 5-12 below for how these comments were distributed across the four features). Half of the citizen voices in non-serialised features derived from the *Have your say* section in this way, thus representing one of the most significant ways in which citizens were able to express themselves on the BBC News Online website.

Headline	Published	COMMENTS	
		Frequency	Words
New dad may find focusing tough	12 April, 2005	35	1,274
Who are 'Britain's hardworking families'?	19 April, 2005	21	2,031
Politics takes speed dating test	26 April, 2005	63	2,116
What you've said: leaders special	29 April, 2005	125	5,361

Table 5-12, Details of Have your say debates published on same page as non-serialised features

The perhaps most light-hearted of these debates consisted of people sending well wishes to Charles Kennedy and commenting on him becoming a father at such a crucial stage in the campaign⁷⁵. The feature where political reporter, Ollie Stone-Lee, went speed dating and only spoke about politics to test the respondents' reactions might have been well positioned to create a similarly light-hearted discussion. Instead it attracted a flurry of contributions staunchly defending the need for discussing politics – and in particular with

⁷⁵ While most of the comments were sympathetic and positive, there were also some expressions of cynicism and his suitability as a leader having to now care for a newborn.

your partner. While there seemed to be a split between the usefulness of discussing politics on your very first date, the comments certainly reflected the great importance people placed on politics and current affairs in their daily lives. Scenarios ranged from Joan, Scotland, who admitted her husband initially wooed her ‘by discussing politics and current affairs’ to the healthy mutual appreciation of different political persuasions as described by Kit, Chipping Norton:

My girlfriend and I are from completely different political worlds. I am a Lib Dem activist and campaigner, she is a right wing Tory who hates Europe. Its great - we spend all our time arguing about politics so don't bother arguing about each other.

(Politics takes speed dating test, 26 April, 2005)

The BBC’s invitation for people to define the campaign cliché ‘Britain’s hard working families’, prompted equally emotional contributions and expressions of anger – people reacting to what they perceived as being favourable treatment of an essentially indefinable group. The value judgement on ‘hard working’ as opposed to just ‘working’ received considerable scrutiny. There was also an interesting attempt by contributors to target specifically one of the sources in the actual article. Mother of eight, Lizzie Bardsley, who reportedly claimed £37,500 per year in benefits, received several rebuttals from contributors disagreeing with her justification for not working. While presumably not expecting a response from her (either personally or on the page), their posts were all written dialogically – as if responding directly to her and her statements, as opposed to commenting on the perceived problem she embodied. Steve, Peterborough UK exemplifies this:

Lizzie, no one is disputing that just because you were not working you couldn't love children or care for them emotionally. It was the fact that you had such a large family whilst on benefit[.]

(Who are 'Britain's hardworking families'?, 19 April, 2005)

The article ‘What you’ve said: leader’s special’ breaks from the normal format in that it followed chronology of the Question Time Election Special – that is, rather than publishing comments from members of the public at the end of an article, the comments were published immediately following the audience questions to each of the three main party leaders. In essence the page thus contained a multiplicity of very short debates or groups of comments. For Charles Kennedy there were four categories: Economic policy,

Iraqi security, 'Middle-class' policies and Labour coalition; for Michael Howard five: Immigration, Negative campaigning, Iraq war, Taxation and Healthcare; and for Tony Blair three: Attorney General's opinion, Stealth taxes, Top-up fees. The page also contained a long list of 'general comments on the programme' at the very end. The article did not contain any of the party leader's answers, however, and was made up entirely of citizen voices – the questions asked by audience members on the Question Time programme, and the *Have your say* comments from members of the public.

The Question Time Special debate had 125 comments, covering a total of 5,361 words – yet the actual number of messages submitted to the BBC is likely to have been much greater. This is also acknowledged at the very start of the article, where the BBC announces that 'The following comments reflect the balance of opinion we have received'. The page is particularly important as it allows members of the public to express their opinion on an otherwise restricted forum (see previous chapter for a discussion of how they were reported in the news). Most of the responses were negative and cynical, with some praise on the actual programme itself and the chair, David Dimbleby.

Importantly this is one of the very few places where the comments indicate that people have changed their opinion based on the presentation of an argument – or rather based on the respective performances of the party leaders. The contributors in question appear to have been undecided or floating voters who have allowed the Question Time programme to persuade them which party to vote for. There is no indication in these comments that statements from other contributors influenced their decision. To this end they are not actually engaging in direct dialogue with either the politicians or other members of the public – yet their admission of having shifted their point of view represents an important aspect of deliberation and is incredibly rare among the *Have your say* comments, or indeed the utterance of any other source. Most of the contributors who appeared to have changed opinion, did so in a negative response to Michael Howard's performance – particularly in relation to the invasion of Iraq. John Brownie, Wakefield exemplifies the sentiment expressed by many of the comments:

Oh dear...I was seriously considering the Tories until Michael Howard's dismal performance this evening, crowned by his astonishing admission that, despite criticising Tony Blair endlessly over Iraq, he still fully supports the invasion. The last chance saloon can lock up now: Mr Howard has left the building.

(What you've said: leaders special, 29 April, 2005)

One contributor pledged to support Tony Blair, arguing Michael Howard was a ‘hypocrite’ reasoning the switch as ‘better the devil you know’ (Lee Pearson, Wolverhampton), whilst another simply stated ‘I think Charles Kennedy just won my vote’ (Jack B, London, London [sic]).

There was also a rare occasion of the BBC actually responding to one of the comments. Sarah Macnab, London complained that there was ‘no-one in the audience with grey hair’ and questioned the apparent exclusion of those over 60. Her comment was immediately followed by a link to a page on the BBC NewsWatch site entitled ‘Audiences in the spotlight’, where Executive Editor Ric Bailey explained the profile of the audience and how audience members were selected. The article was a response to more than 70 complaints received by the BBC in relation to the programme, and obviously not just Sarah Macnab’s *Have your say* comment (or other posts raising the same issue). However, it demonstrates one particular way in which the BBC *could* take part in the debates on its site and respond to contributions from members of the public, without being seen to unduly influence what people submitted.

5.7. Summary

This chapter has demonstrated how feature articles can be divided into several different genres and sub-sections. Common for most of these is a significant increase in the number of citizen contributions – as sources in feature articles and via *Have your say* debates – compared with news reports as described in Chapter 4. Indeed when excluding *Have your say* contributions, 58% of all references to citizen voices came within feature articles. Inference of public opinion through opinion polls were relatively low, with the journalists instead preferring a narrative with citizens describing real life experiences or providing vox-pop style comments to campaign issues. This is not to suggest citizens were cast as individuals in isolated circumstances, however. On the contrary, both the BBC and the citizens themselves positioned their voices as part of a group.

The BBC did not claim citizens’ voices to be in any way statistically representative (such as surveys), but rather the case studies were deemed to exemplify broader trends and

embody the issues faced by others (if not in identical circumstances)⁷⁶. Likewise, the language used by members of the public often contained a sense of generalisation that implied they spoke on behalf of the public as a group (or factions thereof), using their own experience, employment or membership of an organisation as a seemingly factual legitimisation of their points of view. Such forms of expression contrast with the normative ideals described in Chapter 2, that truth claims in a public sphere should be judged on their merit rather than on the status of the speakers. Moreover, people who were positioned as members of the public, appear frequently to have been selected by the BBC *specifically* because of their professional status or official capacity in order to support the intended narrative. In terms of this analysis these have often been considered institutional sources (such as local government, or local businesses), when they in essence do not express private points of view, but official verbatim. In other words, their utterances resemble ‘strategic action’ (Habermas, 1992, 1996), making them appear almost as ‘elite citizens’. There was a strong focus on corporate issues, even when the BBC was attempting to engage members of the public or explore issues of concern in the private sphere. This could be linked to concerns about work, although crucially the focus was on the wellbeing of the businesses as opposed to the wellbeing of the workers.

The prominence of citizen voices within feature articles was in part due to special election features, such as the *Election Bus*, which was designed to give citizens a voice on ‘local’ issues – though these were always related to elements of a national debate. This helped provide a tangible human angle to national election issues, whilst having the potential for allowing citizens to assume the role of experts on their particular situation. However, on the rare occasions when institutional sources were used in this section, it was to add ‘facts and figures’, thus undermining ordinary citizens as potential voices of authority. Citizens’ personal experiences could in this context be perceived as mere subjective anecdotes used to illustrate ‘objective’ and ‘verifiable statistics’ from institutional sources, rather than considered qualitative judgements in their own right.

Elite party political and institutional sources were practically absent from most feature genres on the *Election 2005* site. This evidently reinforced the BBC’s convention that these sources were kept largely separate from ordinary citizens – in effect creating two separate (mediated) communicative spaces with hardly any overlap. Indeed the only

⁷⁶ Such an anecdotal approach may have contributed to certain issues or groups of people being overrepresented, whilst simultaneously neglecting others. However, the extent to which the BBC’s use of sources matched national demographics falls outside the scope of the present thesis.

feature genres where elite party political and institutional sources dominated and citizen voices became marginalised, were transcripts, information and election analysis columns. Moreover, the election analysis columns were not positioned as a vehicle for discussion, with only three of 69 articles linking to *Have your say* debates. This reinforces the barrier between the formal, authoritative narratives (hard news, information and analysis) and the informal, light-hearted narratives (soft news and features) – citizen voices being confined almost entirely to the latter. Or in other words, citizens were predominantly cited in relation to matters of private concern, whilst largely excluded from matters of public concern. Citizen voices were thus represented in feature articles as a spectacle of public opinion, not as engaging critically with political debates.

Nevertheless, feature articles contained a much greater degree of dialogic interaction than what was evident in news articles – containing as they did several examples of dialogue involving citizens, politicians, institutional sources and uniquely even the journalist. Whilst citizens were in feature articles typically allowed to articulate their opinions over several utterances, the examples of dialogue were not prolonged in a similar way and contained few attempts at putting forward persuasive arguments. Instead the interactions were typically formulated as one-way interviews, with either the journalist or local politicians asking citizens questions, which was never reported to have resulted in an extended discussion. The resulting dialogisms, therefore, were some distance from constituting the type of rational-critical debate that could facilitate a creation of consensus or common opinion for the purpose of democratic decision-making – integral to, for instance, deliberative democracy as described in Chapter 2.

The feature genres essentially represent an overtly mediated form of public dialogue, where the utterances of citizens were reported and recast by the journalists in their narrative. Whilst clearly an online communicative space where citizen voices were prioritised, it was nevertheless some distance away from the normative standards of public spheres – composing as it did of only limited dialogic interaction, restricted access and a separation from elite political sources (and as such the potential for asserting any influence). In the final case study chapter this thesis will now turn to examine sections of the *Election 2005* site that facilitated a more direct way for citizens to express themselves and engage in debate.

Chapter 6: Dialogue and civic engagement

The final part of the case study is concerned with the special election features on the *Election 2005* site that offered citizens a space to freely express their opinion - that is, the *Election Monitor* blog, the *UK Voters' Panel* and *Have your say* features. These are the sections that were identified by Vicky Taylor (2007) as being where the BBC realised its policy commitment to facilitating 'civic engagement', as discussed in Chapter 3. The present chapter will examine each section in turn, by analysing the comments submitted and the nature of engagement reflected in these. That is, the extent to which contributors are making proposals and engaging in dialogue with others. Of concern will also be the extent to which the BBC first defined and then controlled the topics and parameters of debate, thus restricting the framework in which citizens were able to express themselves and engage in deliberation. Nevertheless, there was a significant amount of activity on the site, and the chapter will seek to examine in detail the levels of participation.

Most importantly, the chapter will provide a web dialogue analysis of the dialogic engagement between the original entries and the associated comments, and between authors of the comments themselves. That is, the analysis will seek to establish qualitatively the extent to which citizens were engaged in any form of deliberation, or simply stating their own opinion without any consequence to their own or other's reasoning on the given topic.

6.1. Structural limitations

Any visitor to the BBC's *Election Monitor*, *UK Voters' Panel* and *Have your say* sites was free to post comments to each of the blog entries or discussion topics. People were not required to fulfil specific criteria to partake in debates, and subsequently both overseas and anonymous posts were frequent. However, the BBC reserved the right to censor obscene content or posts that were off-topic and inappropriate for that particular debate.

The perhaps most important constraint to the number of replies, and by extension the flow of debate, was the nature in which replies to entries was published. People wanting to comment essentially had to fill out a web-based form, with their name, location and desired text. This form invoked a script, which would add HTML tags to the user's submission and email this to the BBC Interactivity team. The person reviewing the post

would then copy and paste the comment, if deemed acceptable, into the software entitled Content Production System (CPS), which powers the BBC's website (for detailed technical overview of BBC's network and content management structure, see Mayhew et al., 2004). The *Election Monitor*, the *UK Voters' Panel* and the *Have your say* pages were all based on modified templates designed to suit news items⁷⁷, making the task of updating and managing user contributions difficult. As a consequence, comments were evidently posted interchangeably in chronological and reversed chronological order. Moreover, this was also inconsistent even within replies to each entry or topic, thus further upsetting the logical flow of debate.

Vicky Taylor, Editor of BBC Interactivity, estimates that because of this manual process only about 10% of all the contributions they received actually ever made it on to the website. That is, content never made it onto the site despite being appropriate, due to a lack of resources. This low publication rate of user contributions makes the relatively high numbers of actual contributions published seem even more impressive - extrapolating the figures based on Taylor's estimate would mean a total of more than 70,000 contributions with an average of more than 1,000 contributions per topic in the case of *Have your say* debates. However, it can also be considered to have failed in providing 'civic engagement' for the vast majority of people whose contributions were never published. This irregular publication of comments also necessarily prevented a coherent flow in debates and restricted the ability of contributors to engage each other's comments directly – thus stifling any sense of dialogue or deliberation among the citizens who had chosen to partake.

6.2. The Election Monitor

The *Election Monitor* blog ended up on 276 posts as well as a main holding page (see Figure 6-1 below), which showed the full text excluding comments of the latest entries in reversed chronological order. Where applicable, the author of each item was given with name and title next to their picture. At the end of each entry was a link to 'your comments', which would bring the reader to a page including the article and together with a selection of the comments posted. At the very bottom of each blog item page was a form

⁷⁷ The BBC has since brought in specialised software to power both sections. The blog is based on Movable Type (industrial scale third-party software), whilst *Have your say* is powered by Jivesoft (software originating from a US based company bought by the BBC and rewritten to work with CPS). In the case of the blog the change has led to virtually all replies being published, whilst *Have your say* has at time of writing seen the publication rate rise to 49% of all contributions submitted to the site.

to post comments, which included the following caveat: ‘The BBC may edit your comments and not all emails will be published.’ Some of the blog entries contained links to external pages from within the blog text itself, though this was the exception rather than the norm that had developed on blogs elsewhere. Indeed readers expressed strong criticism of the lack of such external links in several comments published on the blog - *Mac Jordan, Bristol, UK* venting the frustration felt by many others: ‘It would be nice if Mark [Mardell] could tell us where these blogs are!’ (Something new to say, 5 April, 2005).

Figure 6-1, Final page of *The Election Monitor* blog

6.2.1. Journalists have their say

The main contributors to *The Election Monitor* were Mark Mardell (Chief Political Correspondent at the time, 44 posts and 4,941 words), Mark Simpson (BBC News and Ireland Correspondent at the time, 38 posts and 5,817 words), Guto Harri (Political Correspondent at the time, 30 posts and 2,605 words) and Nick Assinder (Political Correspondent of the BBC News website at the time, 26 posts and 2,716 words). These four contributors were responsible for 50% of all the *Election Monitor* posts (see Table 6-1, reproduced in Appendix 3). Another 11 named contributors provided 64 posts between

them, containing a total of 9,696 words. Finally, one post was published by 'ELECTION MONITOR' whilst another 74 posts did not have a byline, thus effectively 27% of all the blog entries were anonymous.

The average blog entry was 129 words, with the longest being 608 words (a transcript of the Paxman / Galloway exchange live on election night) and the shortest being only 25 words (a brief reference to a press conference 'gaffe' on the type of nappies the Kennedy's used for their newborn)⁷⁸. While Mark Mardell was the most frequent named contributor, and Mark Simpson was the largest in terms of magnitude, their average blog post was shorter than Brian Wheeler (307 words per post), Will Walden (274 words per post), Jackie Storer (242 words in a single post) and Phillip Herd (175 words per post).

The screenshot shows the BBC News website interface for the 2005 UK general election. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, TV, Radio, Talk, Where I Live, and A-Z Index, along with a search box. Below this is a banner for 'Election 2005' with a 'Low graphics version' link and a 'Search' button. The main content area features a post titled 'Do you think I'm thinking...' by Guto Harri, a political correspondent. The post is dated Friday 6 May, 0010BST. The main text of the post discusses Michael Howard's 'battlebus' and its upcoming task. There is a photo of Michael Howard with the caption 'Scarves ready'. To the right of the post, there are sections for 'TOP WEBLOG ENTRIES NOW' and 'PREVIOUS WEBLOG ENTRIES', each with a search box and a 'GO' button. The left sidebar contains various navigation links such as 'Election 2005 Results', 'Issues', 'The Basics', 'Weblog', 'Fun and Games', and 'Have Your Say'. At the bottom of the page, there are 'RELATED SITES' and 'TOP WEBLOG STORIES' sections.

Figure 6-2, Example of post published on *The Election Monitor*

⁷⁸ There was a shorter post by Guto Harri, which appears to be a test published by mistake. It was entitled 'blkj lkj' and contained the two word 'entry': 'blalkjljlk sdlfkj'. It has been included for statistical accuracy, but has no value in qualitative terms.

Blog entries with no byline received the most amount of comments overall, with 287 comments containing a total of 10,239 words. Mark Mardell was the named correspondent receiving the most amount of comments to his entries, with 127 comments containing 5,534 words overall. Brian Wheeler received the highest number of comments per post, averaging six comments per entry and 54 in total. On average, the longest comments were submitted to Alan Connors entries (54 words).

Visitors to the *Election Monitor* site were allowed to submit comments to existing blog entries, but were not allowed to create new ones. However, the *Election Monitor* team did occasionally publish items entitled ‘e-mail of the day’, which were posts based on content received from readers of the blog. Whilst people could comment on these pages, they had no control over which emails were chosen or excluded. Moreover, despite intending this to be a daily feature, there is only evidence of twelve blog entries being based on emails from readers.

The topics covered by the blog were essentially campaign gossip and journalists’ observations that would have been unsuitable for inclusion in a traditional news item on the BBC News Online website. The majority of entries were seemingly spontaneous reactions from correspondents, though there were also some more regular features. The most frequent of these was ‘Today’s papers’ which provided ‘daily highlights from the newspapers’ election coverage’, totalling 24 entries all posted without a byline. Other ‘daily’ features were the 14 entries published as ‘E-mail of the day’ (not all contained emails from readers) and five ‘Morning reports’, whilst the four image caption competitions were published on a week-by-week basis – of all these, only three contained a byline (Mark Mardell’s ‘Morning reports’). Brian Wheeler posted eight entries to his ‘Political Ad Breakdown’ commentary on political marketing, while there were four articles concerning ‘cybersquatting’ (people registering domain names associated with political opponents to, for instance, run counter-campaign websites) – two published by Alan Connor and two without a byline.

The light-hearted approach in the blog was evident in posts such as Branwen Jeffreys’ ‘The fancy dress war’ (covering animal costumes of campaigners), Nick Assinder’s ‘Goodwill butties’ (discussing the breakfast given to journalists at Lib Dem press conferences) or the anonymously posted ‘Spell it out’ (pointing out that the UKIP manifesto which called for greater literacy among young people, ironically included spelling mistakes). There were also some more serious entries, such as Mark Simpson’s

‘Missing issues’ (mentioning protests on the hunting ban and invasion of Iraq) and Mark Mardell’s ‘What do you mean bored?’ (an energetic and lengthy description of why he had enjoyed the campaign thus far).

6.2.2. Commenting on blog posts

Of the 276 blog entries in the *Election Monitor*, 189 received one or more comments from members of the public – which equates to 68% of all entries – totalling 783 comments across all blog posts⁷⁹. Six posts did not have a submission form for comments, whilst another 81 posts (or 29%) did not receive any comments despite such functionality being provided. Moreover, 123 posts received only one or two replies. On average each post received three replies, with only 13 posts receiving more than 10 replies, the largest number of replies being 25 – achieved by a post from Mark Mardell challenging the notion that the campaign was boring. Thus the contributions from members of the public were in the case of the *Election Monitor* sporadic. This may in part be a consequence of the way most blog entries were positioned as a seemingly trivial comment, without direct invitations or specific questions to readers.

Though it is difficult to say for certain the number of unique individuals who responded to the blog by their chosen byline, we can make some assumptions based on the principles described in Section 3.4.6. In so doing it was possible to identify 593 unique contributors among the 783 comments submitted by members of the public, 66 of which submitted more than one comment. Interestingly the largest individual contributor was based abroad, *Candace, New Jersey, US*, with 26 comments totalling 403 words. Other frequent contributors included *David Patrick, Reading, UK* (16 comments and 555 words), *Harry Lee, London, England* (11 comments and 299 words), *Roger Mereweather, Sandown, UK* (10 comments and 369 words) and *Alan, London UK* (10 comments and 351 words). Some 22 entries were completely anonymous – that is, they either signed their entry ‘anon’, with a single letter (e.g. ‘H’ or ‘J’), their initials (e.g. ‘AT’ or ‘BK’), with a mock name (e.g. ‘The One’) or with an indication of their electoral status (e.g. ‘Ex-pat’ or ‘KL/ex uk/reg overseas voter’). Some anonymous entries did specify a location, though this is of course not enough to determine their identity.

⁷⁹ Some comments were repeated on more than one blog entry and have been counted individually for each instance in which they appeared. It is plausible that members of the BBC interactivity team did this to give the impression the blog posts were more popular than was actually the case. However, such repetition is more likely the cause of human error, due to the manual updating process described previously in the thesis.

The BBC's website has a global reach and the geographic spread of the people choosing to engage in the debates is interesting to note. Specifically there were nine contributors to the *Election Monitor* from the US, responsible for 34 replies, though only *Candace, New Jersey, US* as described above actually wrote more than one reply. There were also nine contributions from France, four each from Australia, Belgium and Spain, three from Canada, two from Sweden and one each from Austria, Germany, Ireland, Mexico, Nigeria, South Africa, Sri Lanka and the United Arab Emirates. Thus in total 8% of the comments received by the *Election Monitor* described themselves as being based abroad, which demonstrates the global reach of the BBC brand as much as international interest in the UK General Election. All other contributors were either from the UK or did not specify their location.

Of the 783 replies received by *The Election Monitor*, 72.2% were directed at the issue raised in the original blog post – that is, the vast majority of respondents stayed ‘on topic’ and did not attempt to engage in a dialogue beyond commenting on the original post or the issue raised by this (see Table 6-2 below).

Nature of contribution or engagement	Overall	TONE OF COMMENTS		
		Positive	Neutral	Negative
1. Personal story / account related to topic	4.3%	6%	35%	59%
2. Issue addressed in original post	72.7%	12%	39%	48%
3. Election or issue directly related to democratic process	2.7%	24%	10%	67%
4. Specific election issue	0.3%	0%	0%	100%
5. Unrelated issue	0.6%	20%	40%	40%
6. Making proposals or particularly solutions driven	3.7%	10%	55%	34%
7. Author of the original post	7.9%	8%	35%	56%
8. Another contributor by name OR quote	3.6%	29%	18%	54%
9. Issue raised by another contributor, but not engaging that person directly	2.8%	5%	41%	55%
10. BBC as an organisation	1.4%	0%	36%	64%

Table 6-2, Nature of contribution and dialogic engagement of comments submitted to *The Election Monitor* blog (n = 783)

Nearly half of these comments (48%) had a negative tone, which typically reflected a cynical attitude towards the established parties or the democratic process. The comment from *Ray Sant, shrewsbury [sic]* below exemplifies the strong sense of rejection of political actors expressed by many contributors. His comment came in response to a blog entry without a byline announcing Liberal Democrat MP Paul Marsden was defecting back to Labour, which he left three and a half years earlier.

[20.6] [W]ell what a surprise that marsden [sic] has raised his head above the parapit [sic] again.. He has done precious little whilst serving the people of shrewsbury [sic] so heres [sic] hoping Tony Blair tells him where to get off... The river Seven [sic] would be a good starting place

Ray Sant, shrewsbury [sic]

Hello again Paul, 6 April, 2005

Neutral responses accounted for 39% of responses directly addressing the blog post and were typically humorous or light-hearted, in keeping with the spirit of the blog post itself⁸⁰. This is well demonstrated by Phil's comment in response to Mark Mardell's entry entitled 'Tony's little red book', referring to the Labour election manifesto.

[74.5] Is it available from Amazon.co.uk yet? Should I look under fiction or non-fiction?

Phil

Tony's little red book, 13 April, 2005

Another 2.7% commented on the election itself or an issue directly related to the democratic process, without this having necessarily been raised in the blog entry. Two people commented on an unrelated election issue, whilst another five commented on issues unrelated to the election or the blog post. Some criticism was directed towards the BBC as an organisation and in particular their treatment of the election. Although only 1.4% of the posts focussed on such criticism, it is significant that the BBC allows such 'voices of dissent' in its debates. The negative tone of these replies is well demonstrated by *Malcom Dunn, London's* response to Branwen Jeffreys' entry describing Conservative campaigners dressed as groundhogs.

[160.3] Hasn't the BBC got better things to write about than stupid little stories like this? You're election coverage on your website has been one of the worst examples anti Conservative bias. I used to think that the Tory party were paranoid about the BBC,now [sic] I think they have a very legitimate case.

The fancy dress war, 26 April, 2005

⁸⁰ Satirical comments such as these are classified as neutral / in the spirit of the original post. They could of course be seen as simultaneously negative because of their strong sense of cynicism, and positive because of their humour and critique.

Not all comments directed at the blog author or the BBC were negative, however. Indeed, some were positively agreeing with the author and provided a sound reflection of the current state of the democratic process.

[161.6] In terms of journalistic potential, I agree with Mark; there are indeed lots of good stories connected with these events. Yet the public do not see it this way. They are not so much bored as ignored, they have no great political differences to chew over, and the parties now use 'mosiac' and other trendy software to target those undecided voters in marginal seats. The politicians are so careful not upset us that they fail to excite us. This is the politics of the bland. The public need to be challenged rather than pandered to.

Howard Yong, Brighton

What do you mean, bored?, 26 April, 2005

People describing their own experience or private life to support their argument represented only 4.3% of the comments, less than the proportion of comments in both the *UK Voter Panel* and *Have your say* sections. However, the people referring to personal experiences within the *Election Monitor* comments typically did so for the merit of the story itself, as opposed to as a rhetorical device to strengthen their argument. For instance, when responding to Mark Simpson's entry about Tony Blair being heckled by school children, *Henry Hayes, London, England* could have finished after his first sentence, leaving a comment simply stating that because he was a student in a similar school he was an authority on the slang likely used by the hecklers. Instead he continues and provides a more elaborate example to further develop his argument, as seen below.

[165.6] Being a student in year 10 in an inner-city London school, I can tell you without doubt that no one has ever said "boom, boom" here. However, Tony Blair isn't exactly popular in my school. In an assembly 'Vote' on monday [sic] morning, the huge majority of the school said that they'd vote Lib Dem, while only a very small number said they'd vote Labour. Even so, when asked who wouldn't bother, nearly everyone put their hand up. I'd guess it was a "boo".

Henry Hayes, London, England

Return to boom, 26 April, 2005

Interestingly three of the contributors also admitted being members of a political party – *Peter Barber, Glasgow, Scotland* described himself as a Green Party member, *Alex*

Swanson, Milton Keynes, UK described himself as having been ‘a Conservative party activist for thirty years’, whilst *Tom, Sedgefield, England* described himself as ‘a life long socialist and member of the Labour Party’. Neither of them indicated they might be standing as a candidate in the election, but their presence demonstrated three rare examples of politicians posting comments within a domain otherwise dominated by members of the public. It should be pointed out that none of them actively advocated support for their party, but rather used their association as a means to legitimise or explain their particular stance. Indeed *Tom, Sedgefield, England* even insisted he was intending to vote for the Liberal Democrats, despite hoping Labour would win, to ensure ‘the current MP will get the message that he can't take my vote for granted’.

Instances where people had been more actively making proposals or were particularly solutions driven made up 3.7% of the comments. More than half of these comments (55%) had a neutral tone or was in the spirit of the original blog post. The majority of these comments were responses to caption competitions or other similar requests posed by the blog author, and were as such not sophisticated interventions into a serious debate. Such comments did exist, as exemplified by *Penny Waterhouse, London, England* below, though such proposals were rare among comments submitted to the *Election Monitor*.

There is a positive alternative for the 17m who didn't vote last time, and for the countless thousands who now want to vote but despair when contemplating the choices available - SPOIL YOUR VOTE! Mass spoiling is a more effective tactic than protest voting for a candidate that you know will not win - as the aggregate effect will be much greater. Draw attention to the desperate crisis in British democracy and help create the space we need to forge a new political settlement.

Penny Waterhouse, London, England

Welcome to our weblog, 5 April, 2005

This leaves 112 replies, or 14.3% of the overall total, as having attempted to engage in some sort of dialogic interaction. This can be broken down as 7.9% having made a comment trying to engage the author of the blog post, 3.6% having engaged another contributor by their name or a direct quotation, whilst the remaining 2.8% commented on an issue raised by another contributor without direct reference to their comment.

6.2.3. Engaging correspondents in dialogue

Of the 62 respondents who directed their comments specifically at the author of the blog post and sought to engage them in further dialogue, 35 were negative, confrontational or offering corrections to the statement made, 22 were either neutral or simply noting the point made, whilst only five comments were positive or in active agreement with the author. While most of the entries were either seemingly rhetorical questions directed at the blog author, or correcting an assertion they had made, some people actually asked the correspondents to carry out specific journalistic tasks. *Tina McPhail, Glasgow, UK* for instance, requested that Alan Connor did some further digging in relation to the ‘cybersquatting’ affair he was blogging about.

[113.1] Could I ask you to quiz the respective party leaders if the [sic] condone this criminal behavior, and if not what are they going to do about it.

Tina McPhail, Glasgow, UK

Cybersquatters III, 19 April, 2005

Her request was ignored, however, in the fourth and final instalment of the ‘Cybersquatters’ series, where Alan Connor simply listed another three examples of URLs containing politician’s names or party slogans having been registered by opposition parties. This was not an isolated instance, however, as correspondents writing for the *Election Monitor* did not offer regular responses to the replies on their entries. This is perhaps more at odds with the expected results considering the nature of blogs outside of the mainstream media. Taylor (Taylor, 2007) argued that the lack of answers from their correspondents was due to resources and time constraints. Indeed there were only five examples of such exchanges taking place.

Eddie Cochrane, Feltham, UK managed to get a reply from the *Election Monitor* team when he criticised their poor record of linking to external content as mentioned earlier, which he posted in response to an article discussing entries on the anonymous blog John Prescott’s Battlebus. In this instance the *Election Monitor* team responded using the comments, and provided the readers with the link to the relevant page (underlined utterances denote hypelinked text⁸¹).

⁸¹ ‘here, but of course’ linked to: <http://www.labour.org.uk/jpbattlebus>.

[185.1] You know, a link to the site would have been nice. That **is** one of the notable features of blogs, links to other sites.

Eddie Cochrane, Feltham, UK

[185.2] Yes, good point. The blog is here, but of course, the BBC is not responsible for the content of external websites.

Monitor response

Today's papers, 27 April, 27 April, 2005

Nick Assinder also provided a direct response to a reader's email, though he did so as part of his blog entry 'Other side of the dour' and not in the comments as seen above. Indeed the example is strange since it does not actually quote the original email itself, nor was it a comment posted in response to any of the other blog posts. Rather Assinder simply paraphrases the sentiment of the original request in the final of three paragraphs in his blog entry as seen below.

Incidentally, reader John S has asked about the possibility of Mr Brown becoming deputy prime minister after the election. I think that's unlikely, as deputies seldom make leaders. It's also rumoured that the PM has that job lined up for someone else already, naming no names (Alan Milburn). In any case, I suspect it won't be too long before Mr Brown's supporters are pushing him for the top job.

Other side of the dour, 7 April, 2005

The final three examples of *Election Monitor* staff responding to members of the public were all part of the 'E-mail of the day' series. These were simply light-hearted comments attached to the end of the quoted email, one was from Mark Mardell (though the post itself did not have a byline)⁸² and the other two were entirely anonymous as seen in the example below. Underlined utterances denote hypelinked text⁸³.

"Each day we handpick one of your e-mails. This from Paul, London

⁸² Mark Mardell's comment is further interesting as *Steve, Hastings*, whose email was quoted in the blog entry, actually posted a follow-up comment responding to Mardell's comment, including a reference and quotation to back up his original claim.

⁸³ 'Rusty Lee' linked to: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/hereford/worcs/3712742.stm> and 'click this link' linked to: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/vote2005/html/654.stm>.

Hey there's not been nearly enough coverage of Rusty Lee during the election. Can't we do a Rusty watch? :)

Course we can, Paul. Rustywatch is hereby initiated. Contributions gratefully received. (For other candidates in Wyre Forest, [click this link.](#))"

E-mail of the day, 22 April, 2005

Clearly the nature of these five responses from *Election Monitor* staff demonstrates that, while there may have been a resource issue, the practice assumed by many blogs of responding to readers' comments had not been normalised or even adopted in its most basic form by the majority of BBC correspondents at the time. This, however, did not deter members of the public from trying to engage with them through the blog, as demonstrated by the large proportion of comments being directed as a personal response to the blog authors. While the correspondents did not appear to be quite comfortable with the stylistic form of blogging, it also seems the audience sometimes suffered from the same unfamiliarity - *Ron Burns, Poole, Dorset's* response to Nick Assinder's second entry of the campaign, where he comments on Tony Blair's failure in a TV interview to guarantee that Gordon Brown would continue as Chancellor.

Good Lord Mr Assinder! Do you really think this constitutes a story? Dog doesn't bite man...

Ron Burns, Poole, Dorset

Poor old Mr Brown, 6 April, 2005

6.2.4. Engaging other contributors in dialogue

Members of the public also tried to engage each other in dialogue through comments posted in response to *Election Monitor* entries – either through engaging another contributor by their name or a direct quotation (28 comments or 3.6% overall), or commenting on an issue raised by another contributor without direct reference to their comment (22 comments or 2.8% overall). By also including people whose replies were subjected to comments by others, but they themselves did not respond (52 in total), this figure rises to 102 replies, or 13% of the overall comments having engaged in or been the subject of dialogic interaction.

Of the 28 respondents who replied directly to another contributor, either by using their name or quoting some of their words, 15 can be classed as negative whilst eight were positive and five simply noted the other person's contribution. The 22 comments indirectly engaging another contributor were similarly negative, with only one positive and nine neutral. The majority of comments do not indicate a willingness to engage in a productive dialogue, but rather a sense of negative correction of others whose views they do not share. Such apparent lack of self-reflexivity leads to defensive responses and hindered ongoing deliberation taking place.

In fact, only two examples of an extended exchange of views (beyond claim and counterclaim) could be found among all the replies to *The Election Monitor*. The first exchange was a response to Mark Simpson's entry detailing a rare encounter between Tony Blair and a member of the public (Jess Haig), the latter being staunchly critical of the former. The replies to this blog entry also demonstrate the inconsistent chronology of comments in the way they were represented when published – in all probability caused by the manual updating process used to update the BBC website at the time. The comments are rearranged here in order to give a natural flow.

[119.9] If Jess Haig is so opposed to globalisation why is she drinking coffee in a shopping-mall coffee shop? Is there a more demonised “global monster” than Starbucks? This merely shows the hypocrisy of socialists and is one more point in Tony's favour.

Peter, Nottingham

[119.10] In response to Peter from Nottingham, the coffee shop may well have been a fair trade one. Judging by the coffee cups the venue was not a Starbucks.

Thomas Steuart-Feilding, Bristol, UK

[119.7] In response to those savaging me - Nottingham city centre has 11 coffee shops. Four Starbucks, three Costas, two Pret-a-mangers, a Coffee Republic & a Cafe Nero. Neither of them make more than a token effort towards fair-trade. On balance of probability I doubt if Leeds city centre is any different. However if any reader can send me the address of this socialist-coffee shop paradise which protests against Starbucks I'll happily apologise.

Peter, Nottingham

[119.2] In response to Peter, it wasn't [sic] in fact any of the chains, but a carefully stage managed "coffee shop" set up especially for the occasion. Tony still seems to be shying away from the traditional walkaround!

Jon, Leeds

Jess v Tony, 20 April, 2005

From this exchange we can see that *Peter, Nottingham* initially questions Jess Haig's integrity, based on her behaviour as described by Mark Simpson in the blog entry. His questions are in part rhetorical and in part directed at the general readership of the blog entry. The response from *Thomas Steuart-Feilding, Bristol, UK* defends the stance taken by Jess Haig, although in a manner that is less confrontational than the defence it provoked. Clearly *Peter, Nottingham* has felt the response to his contribution was a personal attack ('those savaging me'), and proceeds to make an emotional case to defend his argument. Even the final offer of apology if anyone can prove him wrong is set in the context of a sarcastic reference to 'this socialist-coffee shop paradise', thus the offer appears more like a further attack than a genuine open-mindedness. This second post by *Peter, Nottingham* appear to have received a reply from *Jon, Leeds* further disputing the nature of the coffee shop and in so doing provided a thinly veiled attack at the stage-managed nature of the election campaign⁸⁴.

The only other extended exchange of views was found in the comments posted to Brian Wheeler's second Political Ad Breakdown entry. *Stephen McCullough, Perth, Australia's* comment attracts two different types of responses – firstly a cynical throwaway remark from *Damon Marshall, Manchester* personally addressed to 'Stephen McCullough', and secondly a more in depth response from *Crispin Heath, London*, who only addresses *Stephen McCullough, Perth, Australia's* comment indirectly – the comment also clearly from illustrates the difficulty in identifying dialogic connections⁸⁵. *Mike R, London* concludes the exchange by agreeing with 'Crispin H' and adding his own thoughts on the issue.

⁸⁴ It is plausible that the response from *Jon, Leeds* was directed at *Peter, Nottingham's* first comment, though the mention of 'any of the chains' implies it would have been targeted at the second reply.

⁸⁵ The term 'pathetic' was only used by *Stephen McCullough, Perth, Australia*, and thus the response from *Crispin Heath, London* must refer to his comment, despite the broad address of 'all these correspondents'. The actual response, however, could have been to *Damon Marshall, Manchester's* comment, as it does not seek to engage *Stephen McCullough, Perth, Australia* in a dialogue, but rather comments on his utterance.

[47.13] Pathetic.

Stephen McCullough, Perth, Australia

[47.17] Just a few words in response to Stephen McCullough's 'pathetic' comment...this from a country that elects John Howard?

Damon Marshall, Manchester

[47.19] I thought it hit the spot perfectly. Who's the target audience - middle England - what's the message - we've built a stong [sic] base but that's just the start we need to keep on going to ensure it carries on and guess what someone's listened and it didn't really take a pop at the tories [sic] - positive, strong, warm, confident and together, for those who don't really give a flying fig about politics this was just the kind of comforting film to get them out for Labour. That's what advertising's about isn't it, forget what you already know about the product actually it's lovely - look. Of course all these correspondents thought it was, pathetic. They would have said the same whatever the film had been.

Crispin Heath, London

[47.21] I agree with Crispin H. The most important thing about the broadcast is the message. Ignore who's wearing a tie and what colour it is or who ate what in the breakfast clip. Without a strong sustainable economy, we would all be suffering 16% interest rates again, rampant inflation, stikes [sic] etc. Listen to the message, respect the politics, Blair and Brown aren't looking for an Oscar.

Mike R, London

Political Ad Breakdown II, 11 April, 2005

While the above exchange is more linear than the previous example and each contributor only posted a single comment, it still produced a dialogue between the contributors. Such dialogue was not common, yet the overall atmosphere created by the blog was in my interpretation a sense of a small community, where the readers were able to engage in friendly election banter with BBC correspondents. The grand political debates were few and far between, but the *Election Monitor* appears to have succeeded in creating an informal space where citizens could freely express their points of view. The 'move from a one-to-many form of communication' to a multi-faceted dialogue envisaged by Alan Connor did not quite materialise, however, as responses by staff at the BBC to requests or comments from members of the public was limited.

6.3. The UK Voters' Panel

The *UK Voters' Panel* was published as a serialised feature of the *Have your say* section, but in many ways it had more in common with the *Election Monitor* blog. That is, rather than the BBC providing a brief introduction to a debate, members of a preselect group would provide their views which would then in turn be open to discussion by members of the public. The pages analysed in this section contained 19 different people who had been asked in advance to contribute their views 'in text and in video, using 3G mobile phones,' throughout the election. The first article contained the following caveat in terms of representativeness of the panel:

The readers' panel has been selected from as wide a cross-section of people as possible and may not be representative of wider public opinion.

UK voters' panel: Election announcement, 5 April, 2005, emphasis in original

The screenshot shows the BBC News website interface for the 2005 UK election. The main headline is "UK voters' panel: Final reaction". The sub-headline reads: "Throughout the election campaign we asked a panel of 20 voters to share their views in text and in video, using 3G mobile phones and video cameras." The article text states: "In the final panel of the campaign eight of the voters react to the election results and discuss their voting decisions." Below this, six voter profiles are displayed in a grid:

- Vanessa Walters** (London): "I'm a Labour supporter but voted Lib Dem"
- Alistair Quinn** (Kings Lynn): "We're back with Labour and I'm happy with that"
- Tonia Barton** (Nelson): "The Conservative Party has started to make gains"
- Leigh Webber** (Leeds): "I switched from Tory to Labour on election day"
- Mike Dommett** (Alton, Hampshire): "I'm pleased the Lib Dems made gains at Labour's expense"
- Gerry Harris** (Glasgow): "I was glad the other major parties did well"

Each profile includes a small video icon and a "Watch message" link. The right sidebar features a "HAVE YOUR SAY ELECTION 2005" section with a "VOTERS' PANEL" sub-section, a "Final reaction" link, and a list of topics including "Decision time", "Question Time", "Issues and apathy", "Immigration", "Halfway mark", "European agenda", "Manifesto musings", "Election expectations", "Views from Northern Ireland", "Views from Wales", and "Views from Scotland". There are also links for "Panel question Howard" and "Panel quiz Kennedy". Below this is an "ELECTION BLOG" section with a "The inside story on the election with BBC correspondents, your e-mails and more" link. At the bottom of the sidebar is a "GET INVOLVED!" section with links for "What do you want to talk about?" and "Your news, your election pictures".

Figure 6-3, Final page of the *UK Voters' Panel*

The very term ‘The UK voters’ panel’ transcends the notion of a representative group, instead suggesting the panel somehow belongs to the voters, or has been chosen by members of the public themselves. This is only partially true of course – the people on the panel nominated themselves through responding to a call for participation, but BBC staff selected the members based on personal judgement. While the members of the voters’ panel were intended to be a cross section of the population (both in terms of demographics, but also political allegiance), the people were ultimately also chosen based on them being ‘interesting, presentable and articulate’ (Fottrell, 2007).

The difference between the *UK Voter Panel* and feature articles, where citizen voices were also prominent, is that they contained no journalistic voice in the narrative or indeed any visible journalistic input. Arguably the panel contributors recording their own message and having this published unedited is more akin to citizen journalism, or ‘user generated content’ in the words of the BBC, than the traditional forms of journalism described in the previous chapter. That is *not* to say that the citizens set the parameters for the features, which was still controlled by the BBC.

It is important to note that only the preselect group defined as the ‘voters’ panel’ could contribute their views on the predefined topics, leaving other members of the public to comment on their posts.

6.3.1. Panellists have their say

Overall there were 54 responses submitted by 19 different panellists across nine debate topics, with an average of 6 panellists published on each occasion (see Table 6-3, reproduced in Appendix 3). Only five of the 19 panellists were women and only three were coloured or of an ethnic minority, which arguably undermines a perceived representativeness of the wider population. In terms of age distribution, there was one person under 20, four in their twenties, seven in their thirties, four in their forties, two in their fifties and one in their sixties. There were three students and only one pensioner.

The balance in terms of party political support was better, with four each for Labour, the Conservatives and undecided, three for the Liberal Democrats and one each the Green Party, UKIP, Plaid Cymru and SNP. Fourteen of the contributors were from England, three

from Scotland, two from Wales and none from Northern Ireland⁸⁶. The final post allowed the panel members to reflect on the campaign and the eight members on this occasion also revealed their actual voting behaviour. Four of the panel members also revealed their actual voting intention in the 'Decision time' debate (represented in Table 6-3 enclosed in square brackets). It is interesting to note that where actual voting behaviour was given or indicated, six voted for their original preference, the four undecided all made a choice and two changed their vote from the original preference (from Labour to Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives to Labour).

The screenshot shows the BBC News website interface for the 2005 UK election. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'Home', 'TV', 'Radio', 'Talk', 'Where I Live', and 'A-Z Index'. Below that is a search bar. The main header features the 'BBC NEWS' logo and 'Election 2005' branding. A sidebar on the left lists various news categories like 'Election 2005 Results', 'Issues', 'The Basics', 'Weblog', 'Fun and Games', and 'Have Your Say'. The main content area is titled 'UK voters' panel: Tonia Barton'. It features a quote from Tonia Barton: 'I sincerely believe that we need a fair immigration and asylum system.' Below the quote, there's a 'MEET THE PANEL' section with a photo of Tonia Barton and her details: Name: Tonia Barton, Age: 43, Lives: Nelson, Lancashire, Works: Wine and spirit wholesalers, Current voting intention: Conservative, In 10 words or less: "Single, committed socially liberal Conservative". To the right, there's a 'HAVE YOUR SAY ELECTION 2005' section with a 'VOTERS' PANEL' sub-section, including a 'Final reaction' and a list of topics like 'Decision time', 'Question Time', 'Issues and apathy', etc. Below that is an 'ELECTION BLOG' section with a 'GET INVOLVED!' sub-section.

Figure 6-4, Example of *UK Voters' Panel* entry from Tonia Barton

The most frequently published panellist was Ayub Khan with five entries. The largest contributor in terms of magnitude was Gerry Harris who contributed 1,235 words across four entries. Georgina Grant and Siobhan Burgess both only contributed one entry each

⁸⁶ Each of the constituent countries ('Home Nations') apart from England also had their own voters' panels, though filed under the country sections and not the main *Have your say* section. These fall outside the scope of the present analysis, as they required an additional depth of navigation for the visitors to the site. However, the presence of these additional panels does not justify the strong weighting of the *UK Voters' panel* in favor of England.

with the latter making the shortest contribution in terms of magnitude. The most frequently debated panel members were Tonia Barton and Venessa Walters each with 59 comments published across four entries. In terms of magnitude, Tonia Barton received the largest contribution from members of the public with 4,264 words published across her entries. Thus neither of the two largest contributors (in terms of frequency and magnitude) were the ones receiving the most attention from people submitting their comments. The lowest number of comments both in terms of frequency and magnitude was Siobhan Burgess with four comments and 214 words posted to her one entry. The longest individual entry was Georgina Grant's response to 'Issues and apathy' with 377 words, whilst the shortest was Alistair Quinn's response to 'Party manifestos' with 136 words (see Table 6-4, reproduced in Appendix 3). The two most popular entries were Vanessa Walters and Tonia Barton's responses to 'Election announcement', each receiving 34 comments (2,272 words and 2,265 words respectively). Four entries received no comments – Ayub Khan's response to 'Halfway mark', Paul Holdsworth's response to 'Issues and apathy', and Philippa Bartlett and Paul Holdsworth's responses to 'Decision time'.

The nine different debate topics associated with the *UK Voters' Panel* included issues (Europe, immigration, party manifestos and what the panellists perceived to be key election issues), election campaign (announcement, halfway review, decision time and final reaction) and a special response to the Question Time Special. The BBC provided a brief introduction to the concept of the *UK Voters' Panel* and a single statement indicating what the panellists had been asked to address in their response. On average this introduction was 49 words and as such did not provide much additional context to the topic. However, the cumulative word total of the panellists' entries across each topic ranged between 1,038 words for 'Party manifestos' to 1,560 words for 'Final reaction', with an average per panellist entry of 217 words. This compares favourably to the relatively short entries preceding ordinary *Have your say* debates and even *Election Monitor* blog entries – especially if each topic is looked at as a group. The consequence of this was a broader spectrum of opinion and information on which to base a debate. This would also have benefitted readers who did not take part in debates, but used the information provided to form an opinion.

The most popular among members of the public taking part in discussions was the 'Election announcement' with 145 comments and 9,192 words across the six entries published (see Table 6-4, reproduced in Appendix 3). The least popular was 'Halfway mark' with only 21 comments and 1,471 words across six entries. Interestingly the topic

‘Issues and apathy’ was the second least popular with only 29 comments and 1,992 words. While the *quality* of debates may have benefited from longer introductions (as discussed in the next section), there was no correlation between the length of the entries written by the panellists and the *number* of comments received.

6.3.2. Commenting on voter panel entries

The extent to which it is possible to positively identify unique contributors from bylines associated with each comment is limited. However, based on the principles described at the start of this chapter, it was possible to identify a possible 423 unique contributors among the 524 comments submitted by members of the public. Looking at number of comments per unique contributor, we find that 59 people submitted more than one comment, though never more than once on the same panellist entry. *Chris G, Cambridge, UK* was the most frequent unique contributor with 8 comments totalling 409 words. Other frequent contributors included *Phil, Herts, UK* (6 comments and 296 words), *Alex, London, UK* (5 comments 296 words), *Christopher Wheatley, London* (5 comments and 97 words) and *Steve Brereton, York, UK* (5 comments and 325 words). Eight comments with a total of 404 words were published with an anonymous byline, though most of these specified different locations and thus could not be considered the same person.

The screenshot shows the BBC website interface for the 'Election 2005' section. The main headline is 'UK voters' panel: Tonia Barton'. Below the headline, there is a quote from Tonia Barton: 'I sincerely believe that we need a fair immigration and asylum system.' To the right of the quote is a photo of Tonia Barton. Below the photo, her details are listed: Name: Tonia Barton, Age: 43, Lives: Nelson, Lancashire, Works: Wine and spirit wholesalers, Current voting intention: Conservative, In 10 words or less: 'Single, committed socially liberal Conservative'. To the right of the main content is a 'Your comments:' section with three comments from David Innes, Richard Brook, and Donna Courtice. The comments discuss immigration and asylum systems, comparing the UK to Australia and Canada, and expressing concerns about illegal immigration and the impact of the economy on refugees.

Figure 6-5, Example of *UK Voters' Panel* entry with associated comments listed below

The longest comment submitted was 231 words by *Mike Coyle, London* in response to Ayub Khan's 'Party manifestos' entry, while the shortest was only four words submitted by *Jonathan Fisher, London* in response to Vanessa Walters' 'Election announcement' entry. The average length per comment was 67 words and citizens used more than 100 words to articulate their contribution on 88 occasions.

Looking at the comments qualitatively we find that 52.3% addressed the issue in the panellist's entry (see Table 6-5 below). They frequently did so by specifically agreeing or disagreeing with that person, though without engaging the panellist directly. Nearly two thirds (63.9%) of these comments had a negative tone, were confrontational or corrected assertions made by the panellist, while 17.9% were neutral or simply noting the comment made, and 18.2% were positive or agreeing with the panellist's entry.

Nature of contribution or engagement	Overall	TONE OF COMMENTS		
		Positive	Neutral	Negative
1. Personal story / account related to topic	6.1%	15.6%	31.3%	53.1%
2. Issue addressed in original post	52.3%	18.2%	17.9%	63.9%
3. Election or issue directly related to democratic process	0.6%	0.0%	33.3%	66.7%
4. Specific election issue	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
5. Unrelated issue	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
6. Making proposals or particularly solutions driven	2.5%	15.4%	69.2%	15.4%
7. Author of the original post	29.2%	20.9%	19.6%	59.5%
8. Another contributor by name OR quote	4.6%	4.2%	16.7%	79.2%
9. Issue raised by another contributor, but not engaging that person directly	4.8%	4.0%	16.0%	80.0%
10. BBC as an organisation	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Table 6-5, Nature of contribution and dialogic engagement of comments submitted to UK Voters' Panel (n = 524)

The large amount of negative responses is more indicative of the tone used in the comments, however. Thus a person agreeing with the panellist's entry would have been classified as negative if the utterance is negative overall, as seen below where *JP Goddard* agrees with Tonia Barton's entry and then degrades other contributors.

[A2.16] Tonia has expressed perfectly some sensible views here and has her own ideals. From what she has written I also believe she is someone capable of listening to alternative views which is more than can be said of some very foolish correspondents here.

JP Goddard, Harlow, Essex

UK voters' panel: Tonia Barton [Election announcement], 8 April, 2005

The use of personal accounts or stories related to the topic was dominant in 6.1% of the comments. Just over half of these (53.1%) comments were negative, though only 15.6% registered as positive with a large number (31.3%) having a neutral tone. This served as a means to legitimise the views expressed by the respective contributors, and also provided a personal aspect to the debate. It is clear that the contributors felt personal experience of the issue at stake was a good rhetorical device to ensure their voice on the matter was perceived as being authoritative. Personal accounts related predominantly to ethnic origin (of friends, family members or the contributor him/herself), occupational experience (often self-employed or working in social care) and family unit (size and makeup of family as well as dynamics associated with members of this unit). The below response exemplifies the latter category where one contributor draws on their personal experience to support aspects of David Mayer's response to party manifestos.

[B6.11] As I have a son who has Asperger's syndrome, I have sympathy for David's views, especially about special needs schools. We have been forced to educate our son at home - he simply could not have coped at a mainstream school. I have found the current system to be truly dreadful, as it does not afford any choice to parents.

SPT, Wiltshire

UK voters' panel: David Mayer [Party manifestos], 13 April, 2005

6.3.2.1. Making proposals

Citizens made proposals or were particularly solutions driven in 2.5% of the comments. These utterances represented the most proactive engagement by citizens with such online discussions. The suggestions were often specific solutions to a problem raised either in the panellist's entry or by other members of the public – often simply drawing attention to alternative solutions, which were being overlooked. Given the nature of the *UK Voters' Panel*, people often offered their advice on how the panellist should go about making their decision – as demonstrated by Richard Burningham, Plymouth below.

[B3.6] Unfortunately for Philippa, all the Lib Dems can do is make speeches. They can't actually change anything. The one thing we know is that the Lib Dems won't be forming a Government on 6 May. It'll be Labour or the Tories. I would suggest she needs to look at the policies and, crucially, record of both main parties - then look at what is likely to happen in her own constituency - and vote accordingly, if she really want to make a difference. If her seat is a Labour-held marginal and her Lib Dem vote helps the Tory candidate win, well, one thing we can be sure of is that a Tory

Government won't be very sympathetic to the civil liberties issue. Michael Howard has already said he will look at scrapping the Human Rights Act, passed by Labour.

Richard Burningham, Plymouth

UK voters' panel: Philippa Bartlett [Party manifestos], 13 April, 2005

However, people making proposals did so most frequently through a direct proposal for change. *Paul Ashton, Northampton* in response to Gerry Harris' Halfway mark entry, for instance, specifically sought to address issues of apathy through allowing people to cast their vote without giving a preference to any of the candidates:

[D5.1] It will be better once we get a "none of the above" box to tick, they are all boring penpushers - they talk about how it would be great if we do this or that but none of it makes any difference. That's why people don't vote.

Paul Ashton, Northampton

UK voters' panel: Gerry Harris [Halfway mark], 21 April, 2005

Interestingly, comments where the contributor is making a proposal or is particularly solutions orientated were the only group where the majority did not have a negative tone. Rather, the majority of such comments (69.2%) had a neutral and often factual tone, with positive and negative comments accounting for only 15.4% each.

6.3.3. Engaging panellists in dialogue

Some 29.2% of the comments posted in response to panellists' entries sought to engage the original author in dialogue. This is a much greater percentage than the comments received by the *Election Monitor* blog, and obviously ordinary *Have your say* debates as these did not have an identifiable lead author. Again they were predominantly negative in tone, 59.5% versus 20.9% positive and 19.6% neutral, though any attempt at engaging in dialogue is arguably a positive act by a citizen if the aim is to facilitate civic engagement.

On some occasions the contributor would ask a question directly of the panellist, as done by *Larry, Leeds* in the first example below. While such questions were positioned to seemingly expect a response, it is impossible to ascertain if the contributor actually returned to check if they had received a response. In other comments, however, the question was clearly rhetorical, as seen in the second example where *Sunjay, London* is clearly condemning the views of the panellist, Alistair Quinn.

[A2.2] Tonia, just a quick question: if you've always been a Conservative, then why did you feel such hope during the early years of New Labour?

Larry, Leeds

UK voters' panel: Tonia Barton [Election announcement], 8 April, 2005

[B1.4] So Alistair, which newspaper has been brainwashing you? You are a narrow minded bigot.

Sunjay, London

UK voters' panel: Alistair Quinn [Party manifestos], 13 April, 2005

Uniquely, two of the panellists actually *did* submit comments to the debates themselves. Keith Brockie acted as a member of the public when he posted a comment to David Jones' Halfway mark entry, though more interestingly Richard Gosling posted a comment to his own Election announcement entry – responding in his capacity as a panellist. Within this comment he sought to address six of the comments that had been posted by others. It is worth noting that the comment is largely positive and highlighting comments that agreed with his original entry or asked a specific question, as opposed to confronting those who disagree. He also complements other contributors for highlighting arguments to support his cause that he did not cover in his original entry.

[A4.9] I'm glad my comments have provoked such a mixed reaction!! If I may address a couple of points raised: Yes, there is such a thing as a safe LibDem seat - last election they got 46%, twice that of the 2nd placed Conservatives. Very good point the two comments suggesting that being in the EU is not necessarily the best way to help poorer European countries. We never joined the EEC on the basis that it was to be a charitable organisation! The comment about Britain becoming a small fish in a big pond is nicely addressed by the previous comment mentioning Norway and Switzerland, both smaller countries than Britain who are doing very well outside the EU. On David Ewing's point about British citizens currently working in other European countries, there is no reason why, as an independent country, we cannot negotiate deals with other countries to allow our citizens to work there and theirs to work here - just as we will still be free to negotiate free trade treaties with other countries. I look forward to more comments!

Richard Gosling, Newburgh, Aberdeenshire

UK voters' panel: Richard Gosling [Election announcement], 8 April, 2005

While a positive intervention into the debate, it is curious to see Gosling ignoring the ‘mixed reaction’ he himself identified and instead dogmatically highlight support for his own line of argument. It is also worth noting that there was only one comment suggesting ‘the EU is not necessarily the best way to help poorer European countries’, though three arguing the opposite – such as *Matthew Beevor*, *Milton Keynes* below.

[A4.23] I don't see why it is such a problem that "tax money from the richer countries will go to subsidise the poorer countries". A rich, developed EU will benefit everyone, so the short term losses will bring long term benefits; and Richard should remember that only 0.2% of our GDP goes to the EU.

Matthew Beevor, Milton Keynes

UK voters' panel: Richard Gosling [Election announcement], 8 April, 2005

It is plausible that Gosling mistook one of these comments for support of his argument, though the refusal to engage with contributors who disagreed with his entry demonstrates an unwillingness to truly engage in a proper deliberation on the issue. This is unfortunate, since his comment is the only example of a lead author (journalist, columnist, analyst or panellist) actually partaking in the debate on his or her own entry.

6.3.4. Engaging other contributors in dialogue

There were essentially two ways in which contributors engaged with comments posted by others – addressing an issue raised by another contributor without engaging that person directly, or engaging another person directly through name or quotation. The former category encompassed 4.8% and the latter 4.6% of comments made to *UK Voters' Panel* entries. The comments were overwhelmingly negative, 80% and 79.2% respectively. However, both these utterances represent members of the public interacting with each other, as opposed to simply stating their points of view on a particular issue, and as such are useful ways of measuring the extent to which civic engagement was taking place.

The below exchange illustrates how *Nigel, UK* responded to comments published by *Derek, UK* and *Steve Wade, Bedford*, which interestingly he treats differently. In the first instance he talks about *Derek, UK's* comment in the third person, directing his evaluation of his views to other readers rather than *Derek, UK* himself. In the second instance he talks directly to *Steve Wade, Bedford*, responding to his question directed at the panellist, Ayub

Khan, before posing some follow up questions to *Steve Wade, Bedford*. Two other contributors (*Charles, Bristol* and *Mandeep Singh, Blackburn, UK*) also addressed *Derek, UK*, seeking to correct his assertion that ‘illegal immigration had skyrocketed’ since 1997. They did so by addressing *Derek, UK* directly and asking specific questions to underline the weakness of his argument. The nature of these rebuttals are interesting, as the contributors fundamentally disagree with, in the words of *Charles, Bristol*, ‘rhetoric presented as facts’. Clearly the desire by contributors was to have an evidential basis to claims and counterclaims – though this was not always possible, there was a clear sense of a will to facticity among members of the public engaging in these debates (see section 6.4.3.1 later in this chapter for a more in-depth discussion of this).

[E6.11] I'd just like to point out that since 1997 illegal immigration has skyrocketed. No doubt Mr Khan can blame that on the Tories, but most of us are tired of hearing the same old 'it was the Tories' fault' refrain from a party that's been in power for the last eight years.

Derek, UK

[E6.8] Simple question to Mr Khan: What has Mr Howard said that suggests that any immigration policy implemented by the Conservatives will be dependent on the colour of peoples' skin? Where is this? This is said continually, but no one ever justifies it.

Steve Wade, Bedford

[E6.4] I am no Labour supporter but I do dislike seeing rhetoric presented as facts. So let me ask 'Derek, UK' how does he know that illegal immigration has skyrocketed? No one, as Blair admitted, knows exactly what the state is of illegal immigration. There has been a systematic failure to address this side of immigration over the years. However, it is a misrepresentation to assume that it has skyrocketed. You have no evidence to back up this comment. It is time for facts as opposed to assumptions otherwise the arguments do not progress, they stagnate.

Charles, Bristol

[E6.5] Derek, unfortunately no-one knows whether illegal immigration has "skyrocketed", because it is illegal and therefore unrecorded! Perhaps you mean Australian backpackers overstaying their visas, or perhaps failed asylum seekers? In

addition Ayub rightly points out that over the last 30 years both the Tories and Labour have failed in their policies - not just Labour.

Mandeep Singh, Blackburn, UK

[E6.1] Exactly what evidence does Derek have for his bold assertion? Or is it just a reflection of his bigoted perception? Steve Wade - it can be seen as racist because nobody is upset that citizens of all West European EU member states are free to come here to live and work. Could that be because they are white and "more like us"? Otherwise why are people not concerned about them?

Nigel, UK

UK voters' panel: Ayub Khan [Immigration], 20 April, 2005

There was no evidence of extended dialogue – that is, when a contributor responded to a comment posted by someone else, the author of that comment did not respond. To this end the degree of dialogic interaction taking place was limited. However, the contributors showed a greater willingness to engage with other comments submitted by others than both the *Election Monitor* blog and the *Have your say* section.

Overall, the results from the *UK Voters' Panel* suggest that people appear to have related better to an argument or issue put forward by a member of the public, than the more formal introductions given by the BBC to *Have your say* debates, or even the campaign commentary provided by journalists in the *Election Monitor* blog. Indeed comments to entries in the *UK Voters' Panel* were consistently on-topic, which is demonstrated by none being coded as addressing another specific election issue or another unrelated issue. Likewise, none of the comments sought to address the BBC as an organisation. There were three comments (0.6% overall), which addressed the election campaign itself, or an issue directly related to the democratic process. These represent the only comments not directly engaging with the topic of debate or people involved in that discussion.

6.4. *Have your say*

The *Have your say* section of the BBC News Online website was a space dedicated to allowing members of the public to 'have their say' on election issues. The section contained a dedicated holding page from where visitors could navigate to pages where they could submit their comments and read what had already been published from other people's submissions. The holding page was similar to the news holding page with a lead

topic and two sub-topics on which some brief information was given together with a link, followed by a series of linked headlines without any further detail. This format differed from that of the *Election Monitor* where much more extensive information was provided in a blog summary format.

Figure 6-6, Final *Have your say* overview page

The *Have your say* section contained 53 topics, though six of these received enough comments to warrant the creation of one or more additional pages where the debate could be extended⁸⁷. Thus in total there were 68 individual pages, which contained a total of 7,164 comments submitted by members of the public. The actual involvement in these debates was much greater, however, considering only about 10% of the comments received were actually published due to the manual updating process used by the BBC at the time and lack of resources to manage this process, not to mention the vast number of people choosing to read without contributing their own comments. Most of the pages contained a disclaimer that ‘the comments reflect the balance of opinion we [the BBC] have received

⁸⁷ There was no technical limitation to the number of comments that could be published on each single page, though there are practical implications including how long the page would take to load on slow connections, how much a visitor would need to scroll to read all the comments, not to mention putting the emphasis on new comments so as to further encourage people to take part.

so far', though in reality this came down to the judgement of temporary staff employed to copy and paste comments onto the site – thus in reality the comments were probably more reflective of what the BBC had the resources to publish, than some objective criteria to 'reflect the balance of opinion' received. *Katharine, Colchester, UK* noted how the range of views published could help get people who were otherwise apathetic involved in political debate:

[43.3] Anyone who's apathetic only needs to be directed to these Have Your Say pages - there's bound to be at least one comment that will get them thinking, which is the first step to getting involved. Contributing to the debate should be set as homework at school.

Katharine, Colchester, UK

Why are first-time voter numbers down?, 4 May, 2005

N Rhodes, Leicestershire went even further by describing how he or she used the views expressed by other contributors to the *Have your say* debates to inform his or her own political decisions. Indeed even arguing it was a 'far more convincing a source of political influence' than the party political campaigning.

[44.6] My seat is about number nine on the Labour target list, with Lib Dems some way back in the 2001 election. Other than a few leaflets pushed through the door, I have neither seen nor heard anything from any candidate or their representatives. I don't think it would make any difference though. I am sure that none of them would have anything to say that would sway my vote. Instead I read peoples' inputs onto the "Have your say" section of the Election 2005 BBC. I find this far more convincing a source of political influence.

N Rhodes, Leicestershire

Have you seen your candidate?, 4 May, 2005

While these two comments perhaps represent the notional ideal of how people should have engaged with the *Have your say* section, certainly in the context of BBC facilitating civic engagement, the reality was somewhat different as will be explored here. They nevertheless demonstrate the popularity of the section and high regard some members had for the debates. The comments also articulate how people *could* use the *Have your say* section, and as such provide an interesting backdrop when examining actual engagement by members of the public with these debates.

6.4.1. Election debates

The majority of *Have your say* pages were published with headlines formulated as a question to frame the discussion. Each page was further initiated by a brief synopsis of or introduction to the topic, often followed by a specific question or questions to direct the debate. The questions were broad and usually widened the scope of debate as opposed to narrowing it, compared to the question posed in the headline. The aim appears to have been the exact opposite of the closed-focus debates contained within news reports or feature articles (as described in the two previous chapters), but rather to provide a broad spectrum of statements from members of the public in relation to the issue raised or more specifically the questions posed.

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BBC NEWS Election 2005 Election news in video

News Front Page Last Updated: Thursday, 14 April, 2005, 07:41 GMT 08:41 UK

Election 2005 E-mail this to a friend Printable version

Who will run the economy best?

The Labour Party has unveiled its key economic pledges, saying it will end the boom-bust cycle of the past.

Among the promises on Labour's six point pledge card are an inflation target of 2% and an increase in the minimum wage.

Conservative leader Michael Howard has promised voters greater control over their money. He has also given a commitment to lower taxes, but details will be revealed later in the campaign.

The Lib Dems want a new 50p rate of income tax on the highest earners.

What do you think of Labour's economic pledges? Who do you trust on tax? Send us your views.

Click here to read a second page of your comments

This debate is now closed. Read a selection of your comments below.

The following comments reflect the balance of opinion we have received so far:

HAVE YOUR SAY ELECTION 2005

VOTERS' PANEL

Final reaction
Our panel give their reaction to the election results

- Decision time
- Question Time
- Issues and apathy
- Immigration
- Halfway mark
- European agenda
- Manifesto musings
- Election expectations
- Views from Northern Ireland
- Views from Wales
- Views from Scotland

VIDEO Panel question Howard
VIDEO Panel quiz Kennedy

ELECTION BLOG

The inside story on the election with BBC correspondents, your e-mails and more

GET INVOLVED!

- What do you want to talk about?
- Your news, your election pictures

Figure 6-7, Example of *Have your say* page

The average *Have your say* question was 6 words with the explanatory introduction being on average 84 words. Even if we exclude 15 pages which effectively contained the continuation of other debates, and as such had short introductions with words to this effect,

the average length of introductions only rise to 108 words per topic. The longest introduction was 132 words (setting up a debate on Sinn Fein's IRA appeal) and the shortest, excluding overflow pages, was 33 words (asking visitors for their reaction to the election result). The length of the debate introduction indicates that the contextual information provided may not have been sufficient to generate an in-depth deliberation on the issue. The lack of external links where people might have acquired background information also placed high demands on people's existing knowledge on the topic, potentially inhibiting people from making effective contributions⁸⁸. Moreover, the nature of the questions posed by the BBC in both the blog and *Have your say* entries were typically positioned to invite statements of personal opinion, as opposed to a solution driven deliberation.

The entries in the *Have your say* section were largely concerned with the campaign, 28 focusing on such themes and another 13 entries focusing on the results. There were a further seven entries focusing on a comparison of party policies (e.g. 'Who will run the economy best?', 'Who do you support on education?' or 'Which party is best for families?'), though these were predominantly concerned with the three major parties. There were seven entries on law (e.g. 'Do you welcome the hunting ban?'), four on health (e.g. 'Are foundation hospitals a good solution?'), three on immigration (e.g. 'Who is right on immigration?'), two on economy (e.g. 'Do Tory tax plans add up?'), and one each on education ('How can school meals be made healthier?'), religion ('Should religion and politics mix?') and Northern Ireland ('What do you think of Sinn Fein's IRA appeal?'). It is also pertinent to dissect the 28 entries relating to the campaign further to fully understand the nature of these questions. Nine of these entries were concerned with defining key election issues (e.g. 'What are Scotland's key issues?') and disseminating party manifestoes (e.g. 'Labour manifesto: Your views?') - though again only of the three main parties. Another ten entries were concerned with evaluating the electoral system (e.g. 'Should the voting system change?') or addressing issues of political apathy (e.g. 'Why are first-time voter numbers down?'). Thus even though the themes are heavily centred on the campaign, they are less concerned with campaign gossip or the spectacle of politics than the *Election Monitor* blog. Indeed it seems there was a concerted effort to move beyond just traditional campaign topics and open debate about some more difficult issues.

⁸⁸ It should be noted that the BBC News Online website did provide a wealth of information regarding the election, key issues and processes as part of their *Info* section. However, this was not sufficiently cross-referenced in the *Have your say* debates. Thus people would have had to independently seek such information, reducing their likelihood of returning to partake in the debate or choosing to partake without obtaining such information.

6.4.1.1. Citizen defined topics?

The BBC actively encouraged people to influence the *Have your say* debates, which contrasts with the set structure of the blog, where BBC correspondents would define the content and merely allow visitors to comment, and the *UK Voters' Panel* where the BBC staff framed topics for panellists to submit their responses to. However, despite posting several messages inviting users to suggest themes for discussion, only 12 topics, or 17.6% of the entries, were said to have originated from user suggestions. More concerning perhaps, even in the topics originating from user suggestions, the BBC effectively defined the parameters of debate by writing the introduction and in most cases creating a new headline question as demonstrated in Table 6-6 below. The original suggestion on which the debate was supposedly based was published in a highlighted box at the start of replies to the topic (where such debates spanned more than one page, the original suggestion was only published on the first page).

Original suggestion	Submitted by	BBC's lead question	Last upd.
Should it take a TV series and the intervention of celeb Jamie Oliver to get the government to finally act on the issue of school meals?	Meg, UK	How can school meals be made healthier?	5 April, 2005
Should abortion be a political issue or a matter for the individual's conscience?	Al, Coventry, UK	Should religion and politics mix?	5 April, 2005
Everyone seems to assume that the parties will follow their manifesto proposals to the letter but can they be trusted?	Jason Garner, UK	Have you made your mind up?	13 April, 2005
How relevant are political defections?	Alan Davidson, London, UK	Do you agree with Brian Sedgemore?	27 April, 2005
Should immigration be an election issue?	Ed, Scotland	Who is right on immigration?	4 May, 2005

Table 6-6, Comparison of questions submitted to *Have your say* section and actual questions used by BBC to set up debate

This exemplifies the extent to which the BBC would redefine the original contribution to suit a structure they wanted, or perhaps even how they chose user contributions to suit their pre-defined debates so as to give an illusion of a citizen defined topic. In particular the question on immigration is interesting in this regard, where the original suggestion, from *Ed, Scotland*, was a debate on whether or not immigration warranted being an election issue. By repositioning this debate as a question about who is right on immigration, the BBC effectively answered 'yes' to *Ed, Scotland's* original problematic by reinforcing its

status as an election issue. Thus despite giving an impression of being more open to people's suggestions, the *Have your say* debates were very much defined by BBC staff in the same way as the *Election Monitor* blog and *UK Voters' Panel*.

6.4.2. People have their say

The *Have your say* feature was significantly more popular with every entry receiving some degree of contribution from visitors to the site. In total 7,164 replies were published across 68 pages, giving an average of 105 comments for each page. However, as described earlier, 15 of the pages were continuations of other debates, thus giving an average of 135 comments for each unique topic. The largest number of replies on an individual page was 277 ('Lib Dem manifesto: Your views'), with the most popular debate attracting 470 replies (people's reaction to Labour's victory, spanning five pages). The most popular non-results debate received 429 replies (asking if people agreed with proposed plans for new anti-terror laws). Interestingly the entry 'What do you want to talk about?' only had one published response, the lowest number of all the topics⁸⁹. Other than this, the lowest number of replies to a unique topic was 26 ('Will NI results affect peace process?'), which was still one more than the highest number of replies to the *Election Monitor* blog entries.

The following comments reflect the balance of opinion we have received so far:

The fact that unemployment has now risen for four consecutive months shows that Mr Blair's so-called strong, stable economy has started to head for the rocks. We need a Conservative government before we hit those rocks and higher interest rates and taxes don't start to drown us all.
Anon, Southend

I feel poorer under Labour than I ever did under the Tories. I can't afford to buy a house, I have credit card debts. It seems the only way to get a fair deal under Labour is to get married and have at least one child. The more children you have, the better. What about the hard working single people?
Scott, Warrington, UK

People and business people. The government does not run the economy, The independent Bank sets interest rates and companies make products and profits. The EU sets our laws. The only thing that the government does is tax and spend and in that respect to win votes they can only promise more and not less.
Bill, England

Gordon Brown has generally done a good job of running the economy, so far. However, it's going to get tough after the election. The budget deficit has ballooned, while the Treasury's economic forecasts look fanciful. So it seems inevitable that the tax burden will have to increase again to pay for Labour's ambitious spending increases. While I agree with spending more on the NHS and schools - I don't like the idea of throwing money at organisations without careful planning.
Krish, London

To all the people who are worrying that the Conservatives will take us back to high interest rates again - remember it

Figure 6-8, Example of comments submitted to a *Have your say* debate

⁸⁹ It is of course plausible that not all the entries were published and that it was actually intended as a promotional page for people to submit suggestions for other *Have your say* debates. It is also plausible that people preferred contributing to a pre-defined debate.

The average length of each reply to topics in the *Have your say* section was 54 words, the shortest again being one single word (*Patricia Gibson, Farnham, Surrey, UK's* apt response to the debate on Labour's victory: 'Gutted!') and the longest reply being 238 words (written by *F Kinderman, Kent* in response to the topic 'Are the parties doing enough for rural areas?'). Clearly it would be difficult for anyone responding to a topic to articulate a detailed argument in such a limited number of words. This is not to say that the BBC prevented people from writing longer replies, rather that this was the most natural way for people to respond given the parameters of the debate as described earlier. Three of the *Have your say* debates even included the option for people to vote in an electronic poll as outlined in Table 6-7 below, thus allowing people to simply select one of two or three pre-defined options in order to 'have their say'.

Headline	Associated Poll	Options	Votes	Last updated
Do you welcome the hunting ban?	Do you welcome the ban on hunting with dogs?	Yes = 52% No = 48%	326,942	5 April 2005
Have you made your mind up?	Have you decided who to vote for?	Definitely decided = 82% May change mind = 18%	1,901	12 April, 2005
What should Blair's priorities be now?	When should Blair go?	This year = 57% In two years = 13% Serve full-term = 30%	5,309	16 May, 2005

Table 6-7, Details of electronic polls associated with *Have your say* debates (n = not stated)

The actual comments submitted by members of the public were predominantly posted in reversed chronological order with the first comment at the bottom and new contributions added above this. However, as with the other sections, there were several examples where the statements made indicated that this logic had not been followed. Like the *Election Monitor* blog the *Have your say* section also included a range of comments that were published on more than one page. In total there were 105 entries that were duplicated, thus affecting 210 comments or 3% of the contributions overall. While a relatively small number it indicates the difficulty of managing and keeping track of the large volume of contributions received by the BBC⁹⁰.

Using the coding principles described in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.6, it was possible to identify 5,631 unique bylines among the comments posted to the *Have your say* debates.

⁹⁰ The specific duplicate entries were: 15.1 – 15.63 = 34.70 – 34.132 (34.1 – 34.69 were unique entries), 41.128 – 41.91 = 23.187 – 23.150 (41.1 – 41.90 and 23.1 – 23.149 respectively were unique entries), and 62.1-62.5 = 61.64-61.48.

At least 744 people were identified as having posted more than more than one comment – that is, 10.4% of the people contributing did so more than once. Some 45 entries were signed either ‘anon’ or ‘anonymous’. Extending the criteria for what constitutes an anonymous entry by also including entries that only contained a first name and only a country specific location (e.g. ‘Gwen, Wales’, ‘Ian, UK’ or ‘Simon’), we find a total of 510 anonymous entries. That is 7% of the total number of contributions did not have a byline with a clear identity.

Looking at the *Have your say* section, we again find the largest overseas contribution coming from the US with 87 replies – the diversity being greater as well with 82 unique contributors. Canada with 24 replies, Australia with 23 replies, Belgium and the Netherlands with 22 replies each and France with 20 replies. Countries with ten or fewer replies each (presented here in descending order): Switzerland, Poland, Singapore, Norway, India, Denmark, Czech Republic, Dubai, Tanzania, Oman, Malaysia, Italy, Greece, Brazil, Bermuda, Zimbabwe, Thailand, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Luxembourg, Austria, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Rwanda, Russia, Philippines, Pakistan, Kuwait, Ghana, Georgia, Egypt, Croatia and Cameroon.

All other contributors were either from the UK or did not specify their location. However, there were interestingly also a number of contributors who specified their constituent country within the UK. In particular 560 replies were specified as being from England, 214 from Scotland, 141 from Wales and 19 from Northern Ireland⁹¹. The largest number of contributions from a single area or city came, perhaps unsurprisingly, from London with 917 replies. Outside of London, Manchester was the second most popular origin with 122 replies, just beating Edinburgh and Leeds each with 119 replies. The other capital cities produced fewer results with Cardiff coming in at 49 replies and Belfast only 21. Cambridge was perhaps the most surprising result, considering its relative size compared to the other cities mentioned, with 110 replies.

Although BBC Interactivity staff would effectively decide when a debate was finished and stopped allowing people to submit responses at such a time, they would provide no closure or summary of the debate. The role of the BBC was solely to define the topic and set the

⁹¹ Only comments where the byline specifically stated each of these constituent countries were included in this tally. That is, where a contributor specified only their city or town of origin, the constituent nation of that location was not counted. The point here is to gain an appreciation for people’s self-identification in geographical terms and how they choose to represent this to other members of the public. It should also be noted that the BBC submission form had an option for stating your country of origin, thus increasing the likelihood of people in the UK providing such information.

parameters of debate. No responses were submitted to *Have your say* topics by BBC staff – at least not in an official capacity. The only form of debate summary provided was small snippets or excerpts of the comments to topics, highlighted as a quotation and usually next to the original comment. These excerpts ranged from three to 41 words, with the average being 13 words, and seemed intended to sum up the essence of the contribution. However, these snippets were little more than soundbites and although had the potential of giving an indication of the mood of a debate, was certainly not enough for someone to grasp the complexities of people’s contributions.

6.4.3. Nature of citizen contributions

Overall 75% of comments published on *Have your say* pages specifically addressed the issue as defined by the introduction to each respective topic (see Table 6-8 below). Contributions were typically phrased in a negative or confrontational manner, even if the person agreed with the sentiment of the topic – in total 78.7% of the comments directly addressing the topic had a negative tone, whilst only 13.6% were positive and 7.7% remained neutral or simply noted the issue.

Nature of contribution or engagement	TONE OF COMMENTS			
	Overall	Positive	Neutral	Negative
1. Personal story / account related to topic	14.3%	13.5%	7.0%	79.5%
2. Issue addressed in original post	75.0%	13.6%	7.7%	78.7%
3. Election or issue directly related to democratic process	0.5%	5.4%	2.7%	91.9%
4. Specific election issue	0.3%	4.8%	9.5%	85.7%
5. Unrelated issue	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
6. Making proposals or particularly solutions driven	2.8%	41.7%	17.6%	40.7%
7. Author of the original post	0.2%	0.0%	6.7%	93.3%
8. Another contributor by name OR quote	1.2%	11.5%	0.0%	88.5%
9. Issue raised by another contributor, but not engaging that person directly	5.3%	7.6%	5.5%	86.9%
10. BBC as an organisation	0.3%	10.0%	5.0%	85.0%

Table 6-8, Nature of contribution and dialogic engagement of comments submitted to *Have your say* debates (n = 7,164)

The low number of comments (0.5%) in the category covering issues directly related to the democratic process outside the scope of the current topic, was largely due to the *Have your say* topics dealing with many of those issues already – thus people wanting to comment on such issues did not need to stray from the original topic in order to do so. The manner in which people remained on-topic was further reinforced by the low percentage of comments dealing with an election issue other than the one addressed in the original post (0.3%) and those which addressed an issue unrelated to both the original post and any of the core

election issues (0.1%). The fact that published comments remained so closely on-topic can of course in part be attributed to the inevitable moderation which happened when manually pasting the comments onto the website. Staff responsible for this role admitted exercising their own 'common sense' judgement on whether or not a contribution was suitable for publication – creating discussions which were on-topic being one of the key concerns for the BBC Interactivity team.

The comments often echoed the rhetoric put forth by the political parties or media in relation to specific issues. Indeed the negative comments very much reflected the negative campaign strategy chosen by the major political parties. That is, rather than positively agreeing with a point of view or putting forward their own opinion, contributors would mimic politicians and show support for their stance by attacking or being negative about the opposing point of view. *Mike, Barnet, UK* was only one of many who both commented on this process and reflected it in their own contribution.

[12.141] What campaigning?? All they've done so far is slag each other off. No wonder people like me don't know who to vote for, as no party is promoting themselves, just putting the others down. If someone wants my vote then they should tell me why I should vote for them - not why I shouldn't vote for someone else.

Mike, Barnet, UK

Have you made your mind up?, 13 April, 2005

Few could have been more positive and graceful in defeat than Conservative voter *Robin Fairless, Leighton Buzzard, England*, however. His response to Labour's victory was met not only with goodwill, but an optimistic outlook for the coming parliamentary period. While a minority of comments expressed their contributions with such a positive attitude, it demonstrates that there were people happy to break the otherwise negative tone of the *Have your say* debates.

[56.153] I voted Conservative. I believe in Conservative values, but I have to congratulate Mr Blair. He has won a third term with a large majority. Historically the approx 80 seat majority he's won would have been applauded by his party. I think he has a good working majority. I suspect we will see democracy work in this his third, as Labour cannot just bulldoze acts through parliament. We will see a return of balance to the Commons with negotiation and diplomacy between the parties being important. This is good news for the UK.

6.4.3.1. Competing truth claims

Throughout the *Have your say* debates, contributors had an incredible strong sense of 'fairness' and 'trustworthiness', which was reflected in the language and rhetoric used by contributors. Indeed they demonstrated an inherent 'will to facticity' (Allan, 1995, 1998) in their comments, often expressed by referring to 'facts' and 'figures'. Some were ambiguous references towards 'all the international research' (*Bev, West Sussex, UK* when responding to 'Which party is best for families?', 18 April, 2005) or 'recent research' (*Brian, Derby* when responding to 'Do politicians get too hard a time?', 26 April, 2005), whilst others included figures to corroborate their claims. While some statistical claims were clearly rhetorical (*Mike Molloy, Bedford, England* claiming 'Iraq is not an issue for 97% of the electorate' in response to 'Is Iraq a key election issue for you?', 4 May, 2005), others were simply factually incorrect (*Kathryn Waller, Derby* arguing that 'the education policy to get 80% of students to university is ludicrous' in response to 'Who do you support on education?', 29 April, 2005 – the actual figure being 50%).

Interestingly utterances based on factual statements or figures often went unchallenged by both the BBC staff publishing the comments and other contributors (including the examples above). Thus while the contributor is demonstrating a will to facticity, the accuracy of these truth claims remain unverified. This is particularly noticeable, and indeed problematic, in debates where several comments 'quote' differing figures from the same source, essentially contradicting each other's truth claims. By way of example, two comments posted in response to 'Do Tory tax plans add up?' contained contradicting claims as to the value of Labour's alleged savings of £21bn and £22bn respectively, when putting forward an argument about the true savings cut from the Conservatives.

[21.65] I can't believe people are 'shocked' by the proposed £35 Billion savings - the government have already identified £21 Billion and are executing the cuts. And we know Labour love their admin managers. The Tories have it right 100% - independently proven. What more can you say? One more term under Labour and the economy they took over will return to a typical Labour mess.

Guy, Worcester

[21.154] Not only do Michael Howard's economic plans add up, they are very modest. Total government expenditure this year (on the present government's own figures) will be £518bn. Howard offers a £35bn saving of which Blair says £22bn is already scheduled, leaving only £13bn between them. That is just 2.5%. Any businessman and any housewife in the country would know how to achieve such a small saving!

Brian Cook, Harrow, Middlesex

Do Tory tax plans add up?, 21 April, 2005

The introduction to this debate only stated that the Conservatives had devoted £1bn to cut tax on stamp duty, thus the overall figures were brought into the debate by the two contributors in question. News reports published on the BBC News Online site referred to a Labour claim of already scheduling £21bn of the Conservative savings, whilst at the same time reporting that the Liberal Democrats put the figure of new savings at £13.3bn, leaving £21.7bn in savings already scheduled. Thus it might appear that the second contributor is simply attributing a rounded-up figure to the wrong party. It can be difficult at best of times to follow claims and counterclaims by political parties, never mind in a heated election campaign. However, what is of interest here is not necessarily what the true figure was, but rather that two competing truth claims were published without being challenged either by the BBC staff posting the comments on the site (and thus monitoring the debates) or members of the public engaging in the discussion.

Such truth claims did not always involve quoting figures, however, but instead making factual assertions on a particular issue. Comments published in response to a debate on the role of Europe in the election, for instance, were divided between those who argued the European Union either controlled or had major influences on chosen policy issues, and those who argued the UK itself controlled these areas. Two comments suffice to demonstrate the dichotomy of opinion expressed by many of the contributors – note how the two utterances directly contradict each other particularly in relation to immigration and economy (taxation). Again it is the articulation of these statements as factual that is of interest, and that such contradictions were published side-by-side without any sense of correction, as opposed the actual legitimacy of either claim.

[40.57] None of the major election issues, such as taxation, public services, including hospitals, schools, railways, nor pensions, crime, asylum seekers or immigration are part of European Union law, nor are they involved in the proposed constitutional

treaty which has no coercive powers. The opposition of the Tories and UKIP on the question of sovereignty is bogus. The elections priorities prove it.

Michael Lake, Hereford

[40.66] It is as though "Europe" is a separate issue from the rest of politics, but it is not. Europe decides our immigration policy, our industrial policy, our economic policy, our environmental policy and much more. It influences our tax rates and foreign policy. Europe is central to how we are run.

Andrew, London

Should Europe be an election issue?, 3 May, 2005

Only on a very few occasions were factual claims challenged by other contributors. These challenges were mostly directed generically at 'these comments' or 'many of the people participating in this discussion', as opposed to directly disputing the validity of truth claims made by other authors. One exchange containing such a speech dynamic was present in the discussion on immigration, where *Richard, Australia* argues the 'facts' put forth by *Mark Field, Coventry* are actually made up by the BNP as a scare-tactic to recruit support for their immigration policy. Unfortunately the two comments were not only published apart, but on separate pages. Thus those reading *Richard, Australia's* comment will understand his utterance as a rebuttal of (in his eyes) an erroneous factual claim, whilst those only reading *Mark Field, Coventry's* comment would not have had the benefit of this counterpoint.

[28.13] Mr Blair claims that immigration is of financial benefit to the country. A figure of £2.5 billion is quoted by the various pro immigration groups. This figure is matched by the current spend on the treatment of overseas AIDS patients on the NHS. The reality is that the government is owned by large corporations like Tesco and McDonalds, who require access to a cheap labour force.

Mark Field, Coventry

Who is right on immigration? [third page], 26 April, 2005

[42.23] What Howard is doing is allowing all the closet racists to voice their view and pretend it is respectable. Some of the facts on here, like the comment we spend £2.5 billion on AIDS treatment for foreigners, are made up by groups like the BNP to scare people.

Richard, Australia

Of course the BBC did not have the resources to publish all comments, never mind fact checking the claims made in these. Instead these contradictions can be seen as a way of providing a plurality of points of view, thus the BBC retaining an impartial stance independent of competing truth claims. The problem with this, however, is that many of these statements are not based on opinion, but a claim to facticity. Indeed they specifically positioned to persuade others through legitimising their own claims with seemingly independently verifiable facts. There was no evidence to suggest contributors willingly mislead, however. On the contrary, there appeared to be a genuine will to facticity among members of the public when contributing to a debate.

6.4.3.2. Personal stories

People describing their own personal stories or accounts relating to the topic made out 14.3% of the comments published to *Have your say* debates. These were usually small anecdotes followed by a statement of their opinion on the subject. The majority of these were to illuminate a perceived problem with social services or aspects of society, where the contributor offered their experience as a first-hand account to legitimise their argument. To this end it is perhaps not surprising to note that 79.5% of these comments had a negative tone, with only 13.5% being positive and 7% neutral. *Sue Hudson, London, UK* for instance uses her personal experience of seeing ‘bogus asylum seekers’ to legitimise her claim that the country is ‘flooded’ by them in a scathing attack on the current immigration policy. Her comment also has a strong racist subtext, as she creates a dichotomy between those that should be allowed (majority white and English speaking) and those ‘bogus asylum seekers’ that should not – it clearly is not possible to identify the residential status of a person by simply looking at them as she claims.

[22.17] It sickens me when I see this country flooded by bogus asylum seekers, and yet people from Australasia and Canada are now not allowed to work here for more than a year. At least they contribute towards Britain's finances, which is a lot more than any of the bogus asylum seekers I see wandering around my local shopping mall!

Sue Hudson, London, UK

Who is right on immigration?, 22 April, 2005

Others were even more direct in their claim to legitimacy based on personal experience,

such as *Maxine, UK* who criticised the British Crime Survey and asked people to trust her judgement on the quality of the questions asked since she had actually taken part in the survey itself ('Which party can cut crime?', 25 April, 2005). Some contributors even stated outright that their personal experience not only legitimised their views, but also entitled them to a greater right to comment on the particular issue than others who did not share such an experience. The below example was *Martin S, Lympstone, UK's* response to the extensive debate on Iraq.

[46.111] As someone who has served in Iraq I think I'm more entitled than most to comment. As prime minister, Tony Blair had a difficult decision to make and he made it, that's why he's the Prime Minister.

Martin S, Lympstone, UK

Is Iraq a key election issue for you?, 4 May, 2005

Many people did not settle for speaking with greater authority on a particular matter based on their personal experience, but even assumed the role of speaking on behalf of others – articulating what they perceived to be collectively held views. *Jack, Essex* for instance announced that 'We're all bored' in response to a debate on the campaigning getting too personal ('Is the campaign too personal now?', 3 May, 2005), whilst *James, UK* claimed to speak for the 'vast majority of the public' when he attacked the current immigration laws as seen below.

[22.176] The vast majority of the public are sick and tired of paying for these people. Immigration should be halted immediately. The government are making a bad job of looking after our own, without trying to look after everyone else's.

James, UK

Who is right on immigration?, 22 April, 2005

Not all the personal accounts were equally bombastic, however. There were a significant proportion of comments where the contributor indicated they were either a first-time voter or pre-voting age. Young people were prone to stating their age, often in an almost apologetic way – such as *Simon MacDonald, Hemel Hempstead* stating: 'I'm only 17 but I feel that the Lib Dems would be the best thing that ever happened to Britain.' (Lib Dem manifesto: Your views, 20 Apr, 2005). Another pre-voter, *Gus Eldridge, Norwich*, even pleaded with other contributors to vote for his preferred choice, based on the negative

experiences he described having with the education system at the time ('Who do you support on education?', 29 April, 2005).

6.4.3.3. Citizens making proposals

People usually commented in a negative manner on the topic in question, but rarely offered suggestions to how things could be otherwise or what would make them be positive about it. Overall, only 2.8% of the comments made proposals for change or were particularly solutions driven. Interestingly, these 199 comments were the only category where the majority had a positive tone, albeit by a narrow margin – 41.7% positive against 40.5% negative and 17.6% neutral.

There were numerous calls for a change in electoral system to proportional representation and the introduction of the option to vote for 'none of the above' - perhaps not surprising with one of the *Have your say* topics entirely devoted to the question of changing the voting system. While many of these suggestions were simple calls for change without any further details, some elaborated on the form this change would take – in this instance the type of proportional representation they favoured. *Brian Butterworth, Hove* put forward his idea for deploying the system used by the London and Northern Ireland Assemblies:

[36.23] The London and Northern Ireland Assemblies use the "d'Hondt" PR system. This allocates seats proportionally, keeps the geographical link and keeps extreme parties (with less than 5% of the vote) out. We should be able to vote this way for the Commons and have a national list for the Lords.

Brian Butterworth, Hove

Should the voting system change?, 2 May, 2005

Several contributors proposed forms of voting systems used in Germany, Switzerland and Scandinavia, whilst others proposed their own constellations, as exemplified by *Alan Cooke, London* below.

[36.52] No system is perfect. PR has significant weaknesses in that the party that most people voted for can be kept out of government by a coalition of two or more smaller parties. Coalitions themselves throw up interesting issues. How does a voter know which policies of their party will be thrown out if that party goes into a coalition? Perhaps the solution is to keep the first-past-the-post system for the commons and introduce a PR system for the Lords.

People also submitted radical proposals to change the taxation system. *Phil Beharrell, West London* suggesting to 'let the local council work out how much extra cash they need then divide it by the number of households in the relevant district' in order to identify 'an equal tax rate for everyone', whilst *Phil Daw, Cardiff* proposed to scrap all forms of local taxation and replace this with 'a subscription system on actual usage of council services' managed by a personal 'swipe card' that could be recharged on a regular basis (both contributions to 'Council tax: Your views', 27 April 2005). Even the *Have your say* sections were subject to proposals for improvement - *Paul Johnson, Seoul, South Korea* arguing people should associate comments with their income level, as political allegiance was in his eyes inextricably linked to what would make people better off ('Lib Dem manifesto: Your views', 20 April, 2005).

Comments that were particularly solutions driven did not always position their comment as a proposal to advocate a change in behaviour. Rather, the value was in them sharing their own ideas or behaviour with others. *Paul C, Seaton Sluice, Tyne and Wear, UK* for instance described in detail how he had used the interactive features on the BBC website to decide who to vote for.

[7.190] I've used your 'Compare Policies at a Glance' which I find very useful. I allocate 10 points for each policy to be split across the 3 parties based on which policy I prefer. Then I just add them all up and whichever party gets the most is the one I will vote for as the 'overall' better party.

Paul C, Seaton Sluice, Tyne and Wear, UK

What are the key issues for the election?, 11 April, 2005

While not making a proposal as such, the description of his personal form of use of the BBC website could have inspired others and enabled them to follow the method he described when they themselves were deciding who to vote for.

6.4.4. Engaging elite sources in dialogue

The proportion of comments that engaged the author of the original post was naturally low, since all the debates were set up without a byline. Still, some 0.2% of the contributions

took issue with the way a particular question was framed or the information provided in the introduction or the topic itself. To this end, they served the same purpose as those who sought to either engage or challenge the author of *Election Monitor* or *UK Voters' Panel* entries, albeit only indirectly targeting the BBC staff that prepared the topic introduction. *Mike Hall, Kingham, UK* for instance, rejected the question posed in the headline of the debate on postal voting as seen in the example below, but nevertheless proceeded to answer the question.

[41.22] There is no need for your question; a judge has ruled that the postal voting system is an invitation to fraud. With modern technology I fail to see why a citizen cannot vote anywhere in the country by simply arriving at a voting station, with some valid ID and voting for the candidates in their registered area. Those persons housebound or infirmed can have postal vote with a doctor's certificate. Those out of the country or on holiday tough. Keep it simple, but get rid of the fraud or the chance of it.

Mike Hall, Kingham, UK

Is postal voting an invitation to fraud?, 4 May, 2005

Another 0.3% of the comments took issue with the provision of the BBC or sought to engage the BBC as an organisation. People often formulated their responses as a question (both rhetorical and directed at the BBC), though there was no evidence within the debates that such comments were being followed up by BBC staff. *Eric Houghton, Southport, Merseyside*, for instance, vehemently challenged the attention given to calls for Tony Blair to step down as leader of the Labour Party, in his response to a debate on Tony Blair's priorities.

[63.39] He should NOT stand down. Why is BBC propagating this policy when majority of people wants him as leader - as election shows. Stop this stupid negativity and look for positives in your reporting.

Eric Houghton, Southport, Merseyside

What should Blair's priorities be now?, 16 May, 2005

The examples above demonstrate the negative undertones that prevailed in the majority of comments for both these categories (93.3% and 85% respectively). However, there were some contributors who simply wanted to praise the BBC for the quality of its broadcast or web services – as *Paul Rhodes, York, North Yorkshire's* response to the debate on

Labour's victory below.

[56.96] I really just wanted to say that we have had just wonderful commentary and coverage of the election by the BBC last night and all this morning. All these brilliant interviewers and commentators in one room. Paxman and Dimbleby have been outstanding. They must be so tired but you always make watching entertaining. Very well done.

Paul Rhodes, York, North Yorkshire

What do you think of Labour's victory?, 6 May, 2005

While comments posted to *Have your say* debates rarely addressed the BBC or its correspondents, contributors often directed their comments to politicians. *Claire, Brighton*, for instance, explained how she would prefer a proper debate among the politicians (thus answering the set question for the debate), before directly addressing both Michael Howard and then Tony Blair.

[38.50] I would prefer each candidate to debate on the facts and avoid personal attack. To Michael Howard, I just want to say that making the poor asylum seekers and immigrants your scape goat [sic] will certainly not buy you votes. It is a very low tactic so try something else like telling us about how you intend to reform the NHS. Blair, just admit that you went to war just to be in George Bush's good books.

Claire, Brighton

Is the campaign too personal now?, 3 May, 2005

Some people specifically requested proof of official claims (e.g. *Helen* in response to the debate 'What do you think about GP row?', 3 May, 2005, requesting evidence of the claim that only 2% of surgeries was affected by problems associated with the GP appointment system), while others recited their personal experience and specifically stated that they wanted the party leaders to 'know about this situation' (e.g. *Helen Matthew, Preston, Lancashire* as in the example below). Although one is requesting information from an elite source and the other is wanting to provide information to an elite source, both were hoping to use the *Have your say* forum as a connection between themselves and the political establishment.

[59.61] Having queued for over an hour, myself and at least 100 others at a primary school in Fulwood Preston were denied the right to vote. This was not our fault as we

had turned up in good time but it was due to bad organisation. How can a general election take place when myself and 100 others were turned away having turned up to vote in good time? My local councillor Jennifer, and Stuart, Greenhalgh were very angry and stressed by the situation. I want Tony Blair and the government to know about this situation. I am very angry and upset.

Helen Matthew, Preston, Lancashire

Did you have problems voting?, 9 May, 2005

Potential for such a connection, or even dialogue, using the *Have your say* debates was limited, however. While there may have been politicians and strategists reading the comments, there were only a minority of examples where people admitted to being a current or former member of a political party – including five from Labour (three current and two former members), and one each from the Conservatives, the Green Party, the Scottish Nationalist Party and the Scottish Socialist Party. Apart from the Scottish parties, the majority of these members interestingly did not advocate a vote for their own party, but either promoted a tactical vote (as Green Party member *Ian Sly, Edinburgh* in the first example below) or an outright rejection of their chosen party (as seen by the anonymous Labour Party member in the second example below).

[8.7] I'm a life-long Green Party member, but because of our unfair electoral system I'll be voting tactically this time, for the party most likely to deliver a fair voting system. In my case that means Lib Dem.

Ian Sly, Edinburgh

Have you made your mind up?, 12 April, 2005

[17.156] So that's the Labour manifesto is it? OK then, two weeks in I am not convinced that Labour have discredited the Tory economic plans. The absence of any mention of National Insurance screams out 'tax hike looming' to me. Plus let's not forget Mr Blair's position on Iraq. Having been a Labour Party member for 14 years I can say only one thing - Please vote Conservative.

Anonymous, Richmond

Labour manifesto: Your views?, 17 April, 2005

There was only a single comment from a person identifying himself as an actual candidate in the election. *Martin Levin, Essex* described his struggle as an independent to canvass all the constituents without comparable funds to the three main parties. He was the only

candidate taking part in these open debates across all sections of the BBC News Online site.

[44.15] I am a candidate - an independent standing in a marginal seat. I have made the effort by driving around the area with a megaphone - just like old times. I don't have the vast funds that the main parties have showered upon them by benefactors, but I do know what my constituency feels: anger. I don't have the resources to knock on everyone's door.

Martin Levin, Essex

Have you seen your candidate?, 4 May, 2005

None of the sources identifying themselves as being members of a political party or standing as a candidate engaged in dialogue with other contributors. That is, they did not comment directly or indirectly on comments made by others, and perhaps more surprisingly given the aforementioned attempts by people to connect with politicians, none of them were the subject of other people's contributions. One contributor, *Ellie, Uxbridge*, even went as far as questioning if the apathy lay with the politicians, as opposed to the electorate ('What do you think of Labour's victory?', 6 May, 2005).

6.4.5. Engaging other contributors in dialogue

While the BBC Interactivity team sought to 'actively discourage dialogue' among contributors Taylor (2007), such exchanges nevertheless took place among a number of the comments posted on *Have your say* pages. Overall 5.3% of the comments were targeted at an issue raised by another contributor without engaging that person directly, whilst a further 1.2% of the comments sought to engage another contributor directly through use of their name or a direct quotation. The vast majority of comments in both categories (86.9% and 88.5% respectively) had a negative tone, were confrontational or sought to correct a statement made by someone else. Again rhetorical questions were frequently used as a way of generically engaging or addressing other contributors, exemplified by *Daniel, Oxford's* response to a debate on Conservative taxation policy below.

[21.157] How can anyone be so stupid as to believe anything Howard and his Tory "yes men" say? Come on, they had 18 years to get tax right but failed miserably. Remember the Poll Tax?!

Daniel, Oxford

Some contributors did attempt to engage in a deliberation over issues as opposed to simply pose or defend their argument. This often took the form of specifically asking for an answer or guidance on a particular issue, with the contributor demonstrating a clear open-mindedness when partaking in the debate. The comment below from *J Westerman, Leeds* demonstrates how he requested advice from others instead of simply responding that he had not yet made up his mind about who to vote for.

[12.8] I am doing my best to make up my mind. Is there anyone who can tell me whether Michael Howard had access to exactly the same facts as the PM when he voted for the Iraq war? If he did not have such access was it his duty to ensure that he had all the relevant facts and that nothing was concealed from him? I think that I should be correctly informed on this matter before going to the polls.

J Westerman, Leeds

Have you made your mind up?, 13 April, 2005

Likewise, *Mid, Windsor, Canada* was responsible for one of the very few posts where the effect of engaging with these debates came to the fore – describing what he or she learnt from reading other contributions and then posing a general question based on his or her understanding of the issue.

[4.32] After reading through some of the responses, I've learned a few things about the destructive nature of the hunt - what happens to dogs that are too old, blatant disrespect for damaged properties such as people's gardens, how the foxes are killed... Why not find the most humane way to control the fox population and apply it?

Mid, Windsor, Canada

Do you welcome the hunting ban?, 5 April, 2005

Both examples were dialogic in the sense that they either invited responses from others, or responded to comments by others. However, neither contribution received any further comments. The comment most frequently responded to directly was *roger, England's* [3.47] off topic remark in response to a debate on foundation hospitals ('Are foundation hospitals a good solution?', 5 April, 2005), which received eight comments addressing his argument that Scottish MPs should not be allowed to vote on English issues (the so called

West Lothian Question)⁹². This large number of responses to a single comment was unique, with most such cases only attracting one or two comments.

However, these exchanges still did not move beyond claim and (several) counterclaims. Indeed only three *Have your say* debates actually included exchanges that involved two or more contributors in an extended dialogue (Do you welcome the hunting ban?, Which party is best for families?, and Who has the best health policy?). In the below exchange *Bev, West Sussex, UK* directs a general criticism against calls for more childcare places (both from politicians and other contributors to the debate). This is picked up by *Julie, UK* who describes how she has managed to work whilst looking after her own child as well as providing childcare places for others. This is in turn questioned by *C Smith, Fleet*, who does not think the solution outlined by *Julie, UK* would allow sufficient attention to her own children.

[18.15] It's all very well banging on about more childcare places but what about supporting parents who want to do what's best for their young children (see all the international research)and [sic] stay at home for the first few years?

Bev, West Sussex, UK

[18.6] In answer to Bev from West Sussex: you can stay at home with your young children. I wanted to do the same thing so I registered as a childminder. I'm at home for my child, whilst still working and helping the economy, and at the same time, I'm creating childcare places for parents who want to go out to work.

Julie, UK

[18.7] To Julie, UK: I would love to work and have more money. However, my children's needs come first. If you are child minding you cannot be spending as much time with your children than if you were not. Unfortunately, the current society looks down on stay-at-home mothers and does not appreciate the help they provide for their children.

C Smith, Fleet

Which party is best for families?, 18 April, 2005

Such exchanges demonstrated how contributors could engage in a more extended and

⁹² This was in fact the only example where a significant amount of contributions within the same *Have your say* debate strayed from the original topic.

solutions driven dialogue than what was evident in the vast majority of comments.

6.5. Summary

This chapter has analysed in detail the three sections on BBC News Online's *Election 2005* site where people were allowed to submit their comments for publication on the website – that is, the *Election Monitor* blog, the *UK Voters' Panel*, and the *Have your say* debates. These sections represent the most overt implementation of 'civic engagement' as described in the Corporation's policy guidelines (see Chapter 3), but also constitute online communicative spaces that in principle resemble forums for (democratic) public debate more closely than the news and feature articles in the preceding chapters. Focus has therefore been on evaluating the nature of civic engagement, demonstrated through comments by themselves and in relation to other comments – that is the extent to which contributors were partaking in dialogue.

Of these three sections, *Have your say* evidently attracted the largest number of contributions with nearly ten times as many comments as the *UK Voters' Panel*, which in turn had one third as many as the *Election Monitor* blog. Whilst the three sections seemed to provide open access for anyone with a computer and internet access to have their comments published, the reality was found to be somewhat different. As explained at the outset of this chapter, the debate sections on the *Election 2005* site required a person to manually copy and paste each submission from an email into the HTML template of the debate page. The BBC was unable to sufficiently staff this labour intensive process and as such only a fraction – some 10% according to Vicky Taylor – of the contributions to the debate sections actually ever made it online. This dramatically restricted the openness of these communicative spaces and necessarily limited the 'quality' of dialogism and civic engagement they were able to foster – both for participants and observers.

Within all of these debates the BBC achieved a strong sense of focus around the issue in the original post. That is, off-topic comments were virtually non-existent. However, the tone of the majority of comments was negative, being as they were often complaints, cynical or confrontational statements. Moreover, whilst there was evidence of citizens making proposals and being solutions driven, this was not matched by people signalling openness to being persuaded. In other words the debates were not based on the normative characteristics of public spheres of open and rational dialogue, as described in Chapter 2.

Indeed there was only sporadic evidence of dialogic interaction in any of the three sections analysed in the present chapter.

The section that *did* generate the most amount of dialogic interaction among contributors and / or the author of the original post was the *UK Voters' Panel*. One third of all comments in this section addressed the panel member, with about one tenth addressing another contributor either directly or indirectly. The results indicate that people contributing responded better – in terms of creating a dialogue – to an argument or issue put forward by an identifiable member of the public, than the anonymous introductions to *Have your say* debates or even the *Election Monitor* blog entries. However, despite this encouraging trend there were no examples of extended dialogue between contributors in any of the sections.

Within the *Have your say* debates people did post questions directly addressing elite political sources, but these all went unanswered. Considering MPs are elected as representatives of their constituents it is concerning that only *one* self-identified candidate engaged with these debates – independent *Martin Levin, Essex*. Likewise there was only a minority of examples where people admitted to being a current or former member of a political party – most of whom actually used their membership status as a way of adding gravitas to their *rejection* of their affiliated party. Whilst the debates therefore were open to anyone wishing to take part, they consisted almost exclusively of ordinary citizens. Thus the separation of ordinary citizens from elite political and institutional sources identified in news and features (see Chapters 4 and 5) was also evident in the debate sections – the least mediated part of the website.

It is clear, however, that people partaking in the debates were striving for a public sphere where they could not only discuss topical issues with fellow citizens, but were wanting this to be a channel of direct communication with politicians – be that local candidates or senior party officials. The debate sections on the *Election 2005* site singularly failed to facilitate such a connection, though this is likely to have been the fault of politicians' reluctance to partake – or apathy as suggested by one contributor – as opposed to the BBC preventing them from posting. In other words, BBC provided online communicative spaces that seemingly *could have* facilitated the type of communicative action and connection with decision makers normatively associated with public spheres and journalism (Strömbäck, 2005). The reason for this potential not being properly fulfilled appears to be in part due to the technological limitations described above, but also that citizens and

politicians themselves could have chosen not to pursue such forms of use during the election campaign.

This chapter has concluded the case study part of the thesis, with the final chapter bringing together findings from all three chapters and providing the overall conclusion. It will also highlight recent developments of the BBC News Online website and indicate relevant directions for future research.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to explore the re-inflection of public opinion – either mediated in news and features or as expressed by citizens themselves in debate sections – on the BBC’s *Election 2005* site in the context of the Corporation’s commitment to providing ‘democratic value and civic engagement’. Evidently the *Election 2005* site was an exemplar of things to come, as described in the BBC document *Building public value*, published in May 2005:

In future, the BBC websites will be a major plank in strategies to reach new audiences. The internet is creating new forums for individuals and communities to engage with each other through social or political expression. Weblogs (or ‘blogs’), discussion boards and online communities are an early signal of how content generated by audiences may come to revolutionise media. There are big implications for how the BBC will facilitate debate. Its aim is to be a trusted hub for open, intelligent and independent debate in forums at local, UK-wide and global levels.

(BBC, 2005e:17)

What this thesis has examined is the extent to which this vision of ‘intelligent and independent debate’ was facilitated by the *Election 2005* website. The main case study was therefore positioned to answer the following series of questions:

- What were the characteristics of the different genres present on the *Election 2005* site?
- How did the BBC’s use of citizens as sources in news and features on the *Election 2005* site compare to that of political or institutional sources?
- What was the nature of dialogue between sources in news and features on the *Election 2005* site?
- What were the parameters controlling citizens’ engagement with the *Election 2005* site?
- What were the levels of participation from citizens on the *Election 2005* site?
- What was the nature of citizens’ engagement with debate and comment opportunities on the *Election 2005* site?

This chapter will now turn to a discussion of the findings of the present thesis firstly in relation to the above research questions and secondly in relation to the normative standards

outlined in Chapter 2. The chapter will then turn to developments relating to user generated content on BBC News Online since the 2005 election. Current innovations by the Corporation will also be addressed, which may give an indication of BBC News Online's direction in preparation for the next UK General Election due to take place no later than 3rd June, 2010⁹³. The chapter will offer a self-reflexive assessment of the thesis's contribution and its limitations, and conclude by exploring further areas of research that lead on from this thesis.

7.1. Discussion of findings

This section will seek to formulate a response to the research questions described above by discussing the key findings of the present thesis. The case study was split into three parts to differentiate between the varying genres and forms that provided opportunities for citizens to express their opinions. Evidently there were more than three genres present on the *Election 2005* site, which have been described in detail throughout the thesis. Broadly speaking these consisted of news, factual, analytical, and human-interest narratives. In addition to these there were the *Election Monitor*, *UK Voters' Panel* and *Have your say* sections, which represented distinct genres in their own right, but shared the purpose of engaging citizens by allowing them to post their comments for publication.

The requirement for dividing the case study in three was also based on the incredible volume of information available on the *Election 2005* site, and indeed the level of citizen voices actually present. It is fair to state that the volume of sources and debate entries far exceeded expectations at the start of the project. By way of example, of all the text published on the *Election 2005* front-page 57.6% could be attributed to a source as either a quotation or a paraphrase. Evidently citizen voices played a significant part in this with 12% of the text published attributable to a member of the public. However, the distribution of these sources across the different genres was uneven.

While it is clear that the BBC did make some notable attempts at integrating citizens' voices as part of its feature articles, as well as linking articles to its interactive service called *Have your say*, it is evident that including members of the public in news reports was secondary - and overall more about creating a news spectacle than the 'civic engagement' stated in its own Programme Policy. Clearly two separate domains existed,

⁹³ This is the last possible date for the next UK General Election in the event that no election has been called before Labour's term officially expires on 10th May 2010.

one aimed at allowing elite political sources to express their views, and another for ordinary members of the public – the latter in many ways resembling the mediated discourse present in public access broadcasting. There was hardly any crossover of sources between the two domains, and when citizen voices did feature on the front-page, they were almost entirely relegated to feature articles or as passive subjects of a news story.

Naturally there was a recurring interest in public *opinion*, though this was used more as a way of measuring the performance of politicians than allowing citizens to truly engage in debates or even setting the agenda. The BBC has obviously made a conscientious effort to incorporate public voices and engage citizens with its web *content*, though it remains overtly protective of its traditional news structures where voices from the public appear not to be as integrated as one might expect given democratising *potential* of new media discussed in Chapter 2 – or indeed the BBC's own programming guidelines. Many of the issues and limitations to the engagement of citizens in news are simply mirroring those found in the traditional media of print, radio and television. This is surprising considering the opportunities presented by the comparatively inexpensive publishing methods on the internet. Indeed it seems that the genre of online news is simply replicating or echoing the existing news values and structures. The main problem appears therefore to be that the BBC struggled to integrate the traditional journalism provision online with new content and innovations.

The most overt exemplification of this was the differentiation between analytical columns – where members of the public were *not* allowed to comment, containing as it did only three links to *Have your say* debates overall – and the *Election Monitor*, which was in a blog format, where almost each article facilitated reader feedback. Clearly the BBC was experimenting with the blog format and created a distinction between the formal analytical columns broadly associated with and published among news reports – thus seemingly sharing the editorial values of news, compared to the almost colloquial linguistic style of the *Election Monitor*. This separation between the different genres where input from members of the public were deemed appropriate clearly reinforces the notion that the BBC created separate domains for civic engagement and news (civic information or education).

Of course the disconnect between politicians and the public was widespread and certainly not confined to the BBC's website. Reflecting on the campaign, John Kampfner, the political editor of the *New Statesman*, noted:

This was a campaign on two levels. On one level journalistically and for the public it was extremely dispiriting in terms of the narrowness of messages, the tightness of organisation and the lack of real debate or spontaneity. On the other level, it has been interesting in demonstrating the extent of the gulf between the political classes and the population - anti politics. The mismatch between the political anoraks and the world out there has been greater than it has ever been.

(Kampfner cited in Brown and Harris, 2005)

It is in my view problematic that the bastion of public service broadcasting in the UK was found to reinforce this gulf rather than bridging the gap. Not only through creating distinct domains for 'the political classes' and 'the population', to borrow Kampfner's words, but also by failing to create any 'real debate' between citizens.

7.1.1. Dialogic interaction

Vicky Taylor (2007), Editor of BBC Interactivity at time of the 2005 election, stressed that the BBC consciously implemented a system that would *discourage dialogue* between individual users, because it wants to facilitate a 'global conversation'. Though she recognised that some respondents do reply directly to other contributors, only minimal evidence was found to substantiate this in relation to the *Election 2005* site. The parameters of debate on the BBC's *Election 2005* site appear to have been predominantly concerned with soliciting people's points of view, as opposed to generating any sense of democratic deliberation. Debates were dichotomised into stating your position on a particular issue – often a simple agreement or disagreement would suffice. The broader 'democratic value' of a 'conversation' that does not engage other's utterances is arguably limited.

The topics subject to debate were defined along the parameters of *general* election issues, thus they often lacked a clear focus and contributions become a selection of bite-sized anecdotes relating to a broader issue – as opposed to getting people involved in formation of collective ideas or agreeable compromises (epitomised by the lack of closure on topics). Indeed it could be argued that the site reinforced the top-down nature of British politics, where politicians, or as in this case journalists, define the issues and parameters of debate, whilst members of the electorate are reduced to offering opinions on pre-defined alternatives.

The nature of the debate topics as they were defined by the BBC initiated a particular form of response – people either (a) agreed or disagreed with the dichotomy set or (b) noted their personal experience relating to the issue or finally (c) criticised quality, or even lack of, public debate in relation to the topic. The way issues were defined did not impel a solutions driven deliberation, rather people were encouraged to simply elaborate on their agreement or disagreement to predefined stances or policies in relation to a particular issue. Very few people offer their own solutions or policy suggestions, and the ones who do are often related in part to existing policies for some parties (e.g. the introduction of Proportional Representation instead of First Past The Post). However, despite the questions often lending itself to a simple yes or no answer, people usually wrote more extensive responses – either explaining their reasoning or describing a particular problematic relating to the topic. The poor ‘quality’ of debate in many ways mimics the first radio phone-in programmes when, as noted by Hibberd (2003:49), ‘[t]he British public were largely unaccustomed to requests for their views and, unsurprisingly, the quality of debate was often poor’. Likewise, the British public may have been unaccustomed to participate in any meaningful debate in online forums during the 2005 election.

Nature of comment	Have your say ⁿ¹	UK Voters' Panel ⁿ²	Election Monitor ⁿ³
1. Personal story	14.3%	6.1%	4.3%
2. Issue in original post	75.0%	52.3%	72.7%
3. Election campaign	0.5%	0.6%	2.7%
4. Election issue	0.3%	None	0.3%
5. Unrelated issue	0.1%	None	0.6%
6. Making proposals	2.8%	2.5%	3.7%
7. Original author	0.2%	29.2%	7.9%
8. Another contributor by name or quote	1.2%	4.6%	3.6%
9. Issue raised by another contributor	5.3%	4.8%	2.8%
10. BBC as organisation	0.3%	None	1.4%

Table 7-1, Comparing nature of contribution and dialogic engagement of comments submitted to *Have your say*, *UK Voters' Panel*, and *The Election Monitor* (n1=7,164, n2=524, n3=783)

Nevertheless, an impressive amount of content submitted by citizens was actually published on the *Election 2005* site – this is despite only about 10% of the content that was submitted to the BBC actually ever appeared online. The *UK Voters' Panel* was

proportionally the section that stimulated the most amount of interaction among members of the public (see Table 7-1 above) – perhaps in part because it was largely defined by opinions from a panel of ‘ordinary citizens’. While these figures demonstrate the inception of dialogue, the reality was that such exchanges were almost exclusively a one-way utterance by one person in response to a comment or issue raised by another person. Examples of extended dialogue where the subject of a comment replies were incredibly rare. There were extended exchanges involving more than two people, however these were rare and each person did typically not contribute more than once to any one debate.

The below figure demonstrates the forms of communicative flow that were present in debate sections of the *Election 2005* site to allow a more visual interpretation of the above categories.

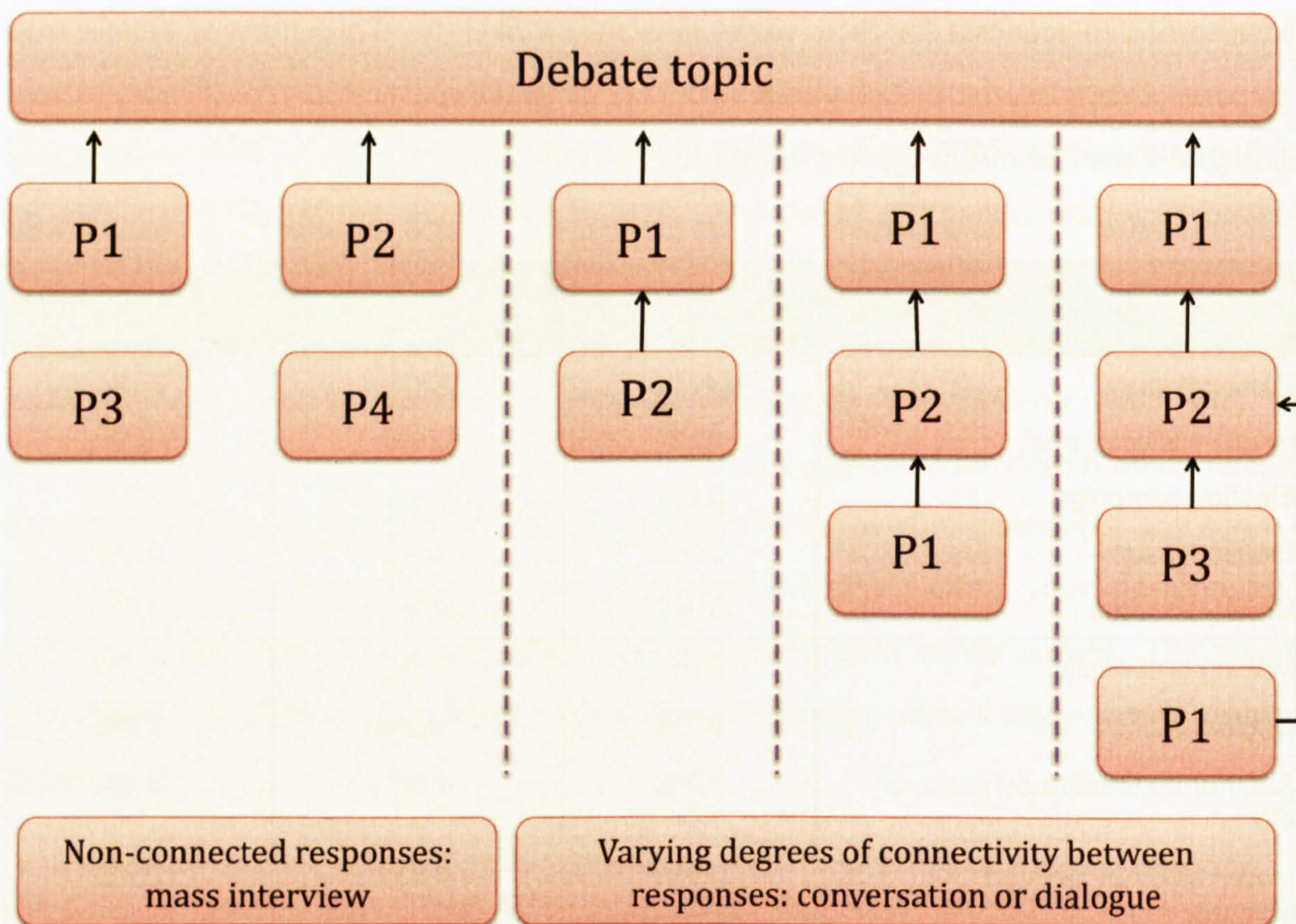


Figure 7-1, Illustration of communicative flow present in various debate sections

The first column demonstrates the vast majority of responses, which in varying ways addressed the debate topic or responded to the question set (categories 1-5, 7 and 10). The three next columns demonstrate an increasing degree of connectivity between responses, indicating the nature of isolated instances of dialogic interaction taking place. The second column essentially demonstrates one person (P2) responding to a comment made by

another (P1) – either directly or indirectly (categories 6, 8 and 9). Columns three and four represent dialogic interactions that were almost non-existent on the *Election 2005* site. Essentially demonstrating one person (P2) responding to a comment made by another (P1) who in turn replies. The final example contains a third person (P3) who also engages with the dialogic interaction of the other two (P1 and P2). The diagram is of course a vastly simplified version of what is actually taking place, but it helps visualize the communicative flow between comments.

Ultimately the discussion points across the various debate sections were positioned more like qualitative polls or opinion surveys than a dialogue – resulting in a parallel monologue rather than a dialogue, never mind deliberation. Moreover, the exchange was not dialogic in the sense that it did not contain a true openness to being right or wrong. Rather the sense of debate that was actually present fostered a determination to be right and defend one's original standpoint.

Another way of looking at the debate sections, and in particular *Have your say*, could be as a mass interview – similar to Coleman's (2004) description of the UK experiment 'the Big Conversation'. That is, the BBC asks a series of questions and people post their answers. The exchange is formally structured 'between mediating interrogators and a designated guests [sic]' (Coleman, 2004). Interviews can 'attempt to simulate conversation', according to Coleman, but they are ultimately constructed to highlight the views of the interviewee.

In a conversation both (or all) participants have equal rights (and duties) to ask questions, give answers and change the subject in accordance with the principle of joint ownership. Where there is an imbalance of communicative power, such as in a job interview or police interrogation, the requirement to listen is indicative of subjection. In a collaborative dialogue, such as a conversation, listening comprises the silent, reflective part of speaking.

(Coleman, 2004:np)

Clearly politicians were conspicuous in their absence from any of the debates hosted by the BBC, and the dialogue between contributors was minimal as described above. Interestingly there were various indications on the BBC News Online site that BBC staff *might* engage in the debates. Most of these were implicit references, but there were also some explicit statements such as the following, posted at the start of the *Election Bus* series:

Dedicated correspondents Caroline Wyatt and Jill McGivering will write for the BBC News website, and *get involved in online discussions with readers*.

BBC bus revs up for the election, 5 April, 2005 (emphasis added)

Again, there was little evidence of this actually taking place, although the absence of any engagement from the BBC can of course be considered to be consistent with its commitment to impartiality. Instead the Corporation acted as a facilitator and mediator of debates. However, this mediatory role did not extend to an active chairing of debates as in the case of *Question Time* or *Any Questions?*. Rather, the mediation was conducted behind the scenes as part of the moderation process. To this end, these online discussion forums can almost be seen as micro-letters to the editor on a mass scale. Indeed the internet would appear to mitigate concerns expressed by Wahl-Jorgensen (2007) in relation to letters to the editor, as the web does not conform to the same restrictions associated with cost of publication. However, as this study demonstrates, the computerised framework used to power the citizen contributions still restricted the degree of contribution available. By way of example, the mediation on the *Election 2005* site was not always because of *active* moderation, but also as a consequence of the manual updating process whereby comments had to be copied from emails and pasted into web pages. Due to an inability to adequately staff this manual process, as described in Chapter 3 and 6, the BBC failed to publish 90% of the material it received (*potentially* some 63,000 comments). Whilst not an active moderation, the extent to which people were able to partake in large-scale discussions was evidently still a question of economics – although the obstacle being to manage the large number of contributions, rather than the material cost of the publication itself.

It is important to note that many of the limitations with the online discussion features on *Election 2005* were not necessarily the fault of the BBC. Rather they are examples of constraints within human interactivity on a mass scale and the current forms of use of internet technologies as detailed in Chapter 2. Of course it is impracticable to conduct an effective debate on a large scale if every contribution to each topic was several thousands words long with extensive bibliographies. Moreover, Taylor (2007) points out that ‘most people are reading not contributing, so what we've got to try and do is encourage the best read for people as well’ – thus highlighting the competing interests at stake. However, whilst audiences would have been able to read comments, it may at times have been difficult to identify elements of dialogue due to the non-threaded publishing of debates, not

to mention how comments had been posted interchangeably in chronological and reverse chronological order. Therefore the dialogism between text and reader, or addresser and addressee, would also have been hampered and thus limiting the democratic potential of the debate sections.

7.1.2. Discussion in relation to normative standards

In many ways, the BBC was successful in achieving the goals stated in its producer guidelines and policy documentation, and according to Taylor's (2007) articulation of what constitutes 'civic engagement and democratic value'. However, as indicated above, the extent to which this civic engagement translated into dialogue – or even deliberation – was limited. In this context it is useful to consider the findings against the normative ideals discussed in Chapter 2 to understand why there is a disparity between the two.

The premise of Habermas' (1996, 1992) theory of the public sphere was not only a way to describe historical conditions and processes, but also intended as a set of normative ideals of how modern democratic society *ought* to function and importantly how citizens should participate in this. Drawing on the examples of the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas argued that citizens in democratic society ought to be actively engaged in public discussions with the explicit purpose of holding government to account. In order for this to be effective, discussions in a public sphere must reflect a rational, reasoned and open minded debate, where people judge arguments on their merit rather than the status of the speakers.

The role of news providers in relation to public spheres was historically to inform debate on current affairs matters and to provide a link between proponents of arguments in different geographical locations. Strömbäck (2005) further argues that journalism within a deliberative democracy must take on an even more encompassing role. Specifically he asserts that news providers should themselves foster inclusive public discussions 'characterized by rationality, intellectual honesty and equality'. Moreover, he maintains that it is journalism's normative role to 'mobilize citizens' interest, engagement and participation in public discussions' and 'link discussants to each other' (Strömbäck, 2005:341). In other words, the news media should facilitate communicative spaces for democratic discussion that can underpin decision-making, whilst simultaneously actively informing, mobilizing and connecting citizens. Whilst Strömbäck was referring to news providers in broad terms, the stringent demands chimes particularly well with the type of

public service commitment guiding the BBC – overtly evident in the Corporation’s mission to ‘inform, educate and entertain’, not to mention its numerous attempts at providing forums for public debate on both radio and television as discussed in Chapter 2.

Evidently the BBC was through its *Election 2005* website successful in providing information for debate and stimulating some people to express their opinions as demonstrated in the section above. In other words, broadly fulfilling the function of the press as noted in Habermas’ study of the bourgeois public sphere. However, it also failed on several accounts, in particular if each of the three areas analysed in this thesis are considered in isolation – which, apart from the odd exception, was how the BBC presented them.

The news reports were reserved predominantly for elite party political and institutional sources and thus failed to be truly inclusive. Their utterances typically resembled ‘strategic action’, which Habermas (1996, 1992) defined as a ‘goal-oriented’ and at times ‘manipulative’ form of communication pragmatics. In other words, far from the rational, reasoned, and *open minded* debate that allowed the authority of the better argument to prevail. While it would have served to *inform* the public, citizens’ voices as uttered by individuals or referred to collectively by another source were rarely reported. Clearly BBC journalists were seeking to hold politicians to account on behalf of citizens, but there was only limited evidence to suggest those citizens were able to contribute to this interrogation process – either directly through reported face-to-face meetings with politicians, or indirectly through posting comments to the BBC.

Feature articles meanwhile *did* allow citizens’ voices, but excluded political actors – thus again failing to provide a bridge or connection between the two. Indeed even among the features articles there were sub-genres that separated the elite party political or institutional sources in formal, authoritative narratives (e.g. information and analysis), from ordinary citizens who occupied informal, light-hearted narratives (e.g. soft news and serialised features such as *Election Bus*). On the rare occasions when institutional sources did cross into articles predominantly devoted to citizens’ voices, it was to add ‘facts and figures’, consequently undermining ordinary citizens as potential voices of authority. Similarly, dialogic interactions were typically formulated as one-way interviews, with either a journalist or local politician asking citizens questions. Whilst restricting citizens’ ability to articulate personal political motivations (which may have differed from the agenda of the

questioner), this also appears to have hindered any extended dialogue. In other words making it difficult to deliberate different truth claims.

The special election features that offered citizens a space to freely express their opinion – that is, the *Election Monitor*, the *UK Voters' Panel*, and *Have your say* – were inclusive to the extent that anyone with internet access were able to submit comments and feedback. Though this freedom and inclusivity was restricted by the framework imposed by technical and organizational limitations (e.g. not being able to publish all contributions). The moderator role is not necessarily incompatible with inclusivity as the public sphere and deliberative democracy requires rational and reasoned debate – thus comments rejected as inappropriate could be understood to be irrational or unreasonable for that particular debate. However, this judgement was at any one time the preserve of a single member of staff working as a temp, who in his own words would use his ‘common sense’ to evaluate each contribution before publication. This is problematic in two ways – firstly it does not allow the other participants in that debate to evaluate that comment (and as such the rejection of it is not a collective decision), and secondly, as Gramsci (1971) argued, ‘common sense’ is inherently ideological and reinforces the dominant or hegemonic ideas in society (thus effectively failing to have a proper inclusivity of thought).

As demonstrated in the section above, these debates were further hampered by the near complete absence of politicians taking part and the lack of interaction between citizens’ own contributions. Moreover, the tone of the majority of comments was negative, being as they were often complaints, cynical or confrontational statements. Whilst there was evidence of citizens making proposals and being solutions driven, this was not matched by people signalling openness to being persuaded. In other words the ‘quality’ of debate contributions did, in my view, not match the normative characteristics of a public sphere.

The resulting dialogisms in any of the three parts of the case study (news, features and debates) were some distance from constituting the type of deliberation that could facilitate a creation of consensus or common opinion for the purpose of democratic decision-making – a normative function of public spheres. Even if we consider the *Election 2005* site as a singular entity, constituting of several sections or domains that all contribute towards engendering a public sphere, the failure of creating extended dialogism *between* these sections means it would at best have been a defective one.

Obviously there is some distance between the two measures then, if on one hand the BBC was successful and on the other it was not (or at least only in part). The problem here may lie in the articulation of the BBC's policies rather than the website's performance against either of these standards. In particular the policies, and to a certain extent the guidelines, deal in grand narratives, which are open to wide-ranging interpretations. What constitutes 'civic engagement' for instance is not clearly defined, and while the form such engagement should take is alluded to, it is never specified what qualities such an engagement should actually have.

That is, the BBC did a good job of facilitating an online space where citizens can articulate their opinion on given issues, though the failure of any sense of dialogic interaction or deliberation taking place is not considered relevant in relation to the BBC's notion of 'civic engagement'. Rather, the plurality of points of view is celebrated and indeed seen as the end goal - what Taylor (2007) termed 'a global conversation' as opposed to dialogue. This gives a false impression of the actual success of the BBC - that is, it is largely successful and seen to deliver on its public service obligations, but this does little to actually further or change democratic society. Instead it reinforces, or at least in the case of the 2005 election reinforced, the status quo. Since the status quo is a liberal democracy where politicians do not take into account discussions in such online forums in their decision making, it begs the question: Have your say and then what? That is, what consequence does having your name and opinion posted on the BBC website actually have - beyond the parallel monologic articulation of one's own views? Public service should therefore, in the context of deliberative democracy, not only allow citizen voices to be heard, but also facilitate interaction between these. The BBC cannot alone force a dramatic change in the democratic system, but it has the opportunity to achieve a greater sense of 'civic engagement' than it did in 2005.

It is also possible to reverse the above logic - that is, arguing that the normative standards of the public sphere and deliberative democracy are unrealistic and impossible to achieve in modern society, regardless of the online communicative spaces created. The reality is in my reading somewhere in between. In other words, dialogic interaction as a process *is* important within democratic societies, as reality is inherently heteroglossic (see Bakhtin, 1984, Morris, 1994, Morson and Emerson, 1990). That is, in the words of Bakhtin (1984): 'truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction' (Bakhtin, 1984:110 emphasis in original). This 'truth' can also be understood as the

foundation upon which the political system reaches and legitimises its decisions. For such a purpose, the normative ideals of deliberation appear excessively stringent, and we would be better served by ‘simply’ focussing on achieving dialogue. As explained above, the BBC’s website nevertheless would have fallen short of facilitating such dialogic interaction on any significant scale, but at least the apparent shortcomings are much less dramatic than it would seem against the ideals of deliberation.

Given such a conclusion, what could the BBC have done differently? With the benefit of hindsight, and considering both normative standards outlined in the present thesis and the BBC’s own policies, I offer the following suggestions for the future. Firstly, the BBC ought to establish a more pragmatic articulation of how its (rightly) lofty policies can actually be achieved. In so doing, the Corporation should secondly also consider the qualitative merit of its debate sections, as opposed to simply embracing its plurality and opportunity of access. In other words, the website should build on the BBC’s ability to attract a large number of contributions, by seeking to make the ‘global conversation’ an *actual* conversation through allowing citizens greater freedom in connecting with each other. Thirdly, it should consider narrowing the topic of debates to allow a more focussed discussion – in order to reduce the threshold for taking part, but also to provide a more coherent read for the passive observer. Similarly, the Corporation could fourthly be more flexible in terms of allowing citizens to define topics of debate and enabling citizens to express more freely their own political priorities.

The BBC made some excellent attempts at engaging citizens with their online content – the *UK Voters’ Panel* and the *Election Bus* particularly noteworthy, despite their limitations. However, the Corporation needs to break down the barriers between such attempts at facilitating civic engagement and its traditional forms of journalism. Convergence, long an industry buzzword, should encompass not just technology and methods of distribution, but access, content and storytelling as well. Finally, whilst embracing a more converged and dialogic form of journalism on its own website, the BBC should also seek to explicitly position itself within a larger electoral sphere. That is, incorporating and linking to debates taking place elsewhere – either on the internet or in physical places.

Journalism’s role during elections has traditionally been to inform and educate the public about the various political parties and their manifestoes, the electoral process itself, and of course relevant matters of public concern and current affairs. Not only do journalists act as gatekeepers of information, but they also have an important function as watchdogs,

interrogating and holding politicians to account – in particular vital during election campaigns when political parties are vying for electoral support. Journalism is in other words integral to the democratic fabric of British society.

Whilst the internet has since the 1990s dramatically changed the media landscape, it is not my suggestion that journalism should abandon its traditional roles or functions. However, the internet does offer opportunities to rethink some of the ways in which these are fulfilled, whilst simultaneously incorporating new ways to facilitate civic engagement and support the democratic process. With its commitment to public service, the BBC has been, and should continue to be, at the forefront of such innovation.

Many of the above suggestions have, at least in part, been addressed by current developments of the BBC website. This chapter will now turn to examine some of the technological advances and evolutions in forms of use most relevant to the BBC's function in UK democratic society.

7.2. Current developments

As this chapter has shown, the BBC News website has to a certain degree been a product of technological experimentation and innovation – sometimes as part of an online strategy, other times in response to crisis events. Indeed the 2005 UK election was to be followed a few months later by a devastating terror attack in London. At approximately 08:50 on July 7, 2005, three bombs exploded within a minute of one another on the London Underground. Initially it was not clear what was happening, with early reports from Reuters suggesting it could have been a power-surge. At 09:47 the fourth bomb detonated on a double-decker bus in Tavistock Square, and just over an hour later the police formally announced there had been a coordinated terror attack. The principal source of news for many people already at work was the internet, with iconic images and eyewitness reports again provided by ordinary citizens caught up in the events (for a more in depth discussion see Allan, 2006).

The BBC News website was among the first to break the story online. In contrast to September 11, 2001, the Corporation now had 'an established process of handing control of the main picture promotional area of the homepage directly over to BBC News in the event of a major story breaking' (Belam, 2007:np). With the website receiving on average 40,000 page requests per second, it soon became clear that the technical team would have

to reduce the content on the page ‘in order to minimise the download footprint for each page view’ (Belam, 2007:np). The solution was to deploy an experimental ‘proof of concept’ XHTML/CSS table-free version, which eased the bandwidth usage thus allowing a greater number of connections.

Having learnt from the Indian Ocean Tsunami some eight months previous, the BBC quickly began soliciting eyewitness accounts and photographs from ordinary citizens. Richard Sambrook, Director of Global News, recalls the incredible response:

Within six hours we received more than 1,000 photographs, 20 pieces of amateur video, 4,000 text messages, and 20,000 e-mails. People were participating in our coverage in a way we had never seen before. By the next day, our main evening TV newscast began with a package edited entirely from video sent in by viewers.

(Sambrook, 2005)

The four people responsible for managing ‘user generated content’, whose team had only been set up as a temporary measure for the 2005 election and then made permanent in the aftermath, were clearly unable to cope with the wealth of contributions from members of the public. However, as Sambrook explained, ‘audiences had become involved in telling this story as they never had before’ (Sambrook, 2005).

The quantity and quality of the public’s contributions moved them beyond novelty, tokenism or the exceptional [...] Our reporting on this story was a genuine collaboration, enabled by consumer technology – the camera phone in particular – and supported by trust between broadcaster and audience.

(Sambrook, 2005)

This remarkable admission demonstrates not just citizen journalism coming of age, but also an acceptance by traditional news organisations that audience material is integral to online news reporting – not least in times of crisis.

In order to keep up with the rapidly changing nature of the web, the BBC News website is in a constant state of flux – always evolving and adding new features. Changes to the site include refreshing the visual design and consolidating technical approaches (such as the type of software used to power discussion boards), but also appropriating ideas and forms of practice established elsewhere on the web (blogging, social bookmarking and Twitter to

name a few). The BBC has also experimented with mapping of *Have your say* comments using Google Maps where both geographical location is marked and semantic nature of comment tagged; the automatic publication of comments (with associated change in moderation process – in particular post-moderation where readers themselves have to flag inappropriate comments); the ability for people to support comments without having to express it in words (thus actually increasing a dialogic *recognition* – a tick on a comment could conceptualize for example a grunt or a nod in face-to-face dialogue); and finally registration of users to increase openness and use of actual as opposed to assumed identity.

In the past there have also been proprietary projects dedicated to experimenting with civic engagement online, including *iCan*⁹⁴ (later relaunched as *Action Network*⁹⁵), *Collective*⁹⁶ and *talk*⁹⁷, though all of these have now been closed. Most interesting in election terms is the promise of wiki-style constituency profiles for the next campaign (Taylor, 2007), which opens up the potential for a much more engaged deliberative process, where citizens collaborate to form a collective opinion on the issues in their geographical location. It remains to be seen of course, the extent to which the BBC will be able to allow this to develop freely without moderation.

Recent experimentations have seen the BBC trialling inline hypertext powered by Apture. Until now the BBC has only provided links to related websites outside the main story, typically on the right hand side of the page, in order not ‘to interrupt a news story by sending the reader off the page in the middle of a sentence’ (Herrmann, 2008). The idea about the new system is that ‘it shows the related content in a smaller window within the same page, whilst also being quick and simple for the journalists to add’ (Herrmann, 2008). For the trial the external sources include Wikipedia articles, YouTube and Flickr content, as well as the BBC’s own pages. Tristan Harris, co-founder and CEO of Apture, stated that the idea is for the BBC to ‘facilitate the discovery of meaningful information [...] perhaps even make it interesting to a reader who wouldn’t otherwise care’ (Harris, 2008).

The BBC Innovation Labs initiative has also lead to a series of collaborative semantic web projects – such as the Muddy Boots prototype API developed with Rattle Research (see Austin, 2008). The idea is for such a system to scan the news article and automatically

⁹⁴ URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/ican/>

⁹⁵ URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/actionnetwork/>

⁹⁶ URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/collective/community>

⁹⁷ URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/communicate/>

provide links to other websites (typically Wikipedia, YouTube, Flickr or IMDB), and extract snippets of contextual information that can be shown without leaving the BBC's site. While the Apture system relies on the journalist highlighting the words or phrases that should be linked to, this latter system would be wholly automated – the challenge being therefore to develop a system that can differentiate between ambiguous names or phrases depending on the context in which they appear. Both systems are intended to enrich digital storytelling and semantic hypertext narratives, but also represent an emerging trend in computer aided reporting that largely automates the task of enriching the news copy – an important element of online news reporting that might traditionally have been perceived as too time consuming.

However, the most significant new online initiative for the Corporation, probably since the launch of the BBC website itself, has been the development of the BBC iPlayer. The service was widely anticipated, in large parts due to continued promises by former Director of the Future Media and Technology group at the BBC, Ashley Highfield, that it was 'coming soon'. It was first made available as an 'open beta' download Peer-to-Peer player in July 2007, amidst a cloud of controversy surrounding choice of proprietary technology (Windows Media Player) and associated Digital Rights Management (DRM) issues. The official version finally launched on December 25, 2007. Within a fortnight some 3.5 million programmes had been streamed or downloaded – the most popular being the Dr Who Christmas Special, but nearly half of the programmes were from outside the traditional top 50 most popular shows.

While the iPlayer has become a remarkable success story in a relatively short period, it is the integration of this technology to stream video content (both recorded and live) from within the BBC News website that has really transformed the site. Embedding the live news channel feed creates an entirely new audience experience and redefines the notion of multimedia journalism. By way of example, for the election of Barack Obama in November 2008, the BBC was able to provide online users with an embedded video feed from the BBC News channel, maps showing the results dynamically updated as states were called, and a running text commentary by BBC journalists integrated with selected quotes from the BBC's *Have your say* debates, external blogs and even Twitter updates.

The volume of audience material received by the BBC also continues to increase and set new records. Most recently, in February 2009 during which the UK experienced its heaviest snowfall in 18 years, leading to widespread disruption across the country.

According to Peter Horrocks, head of BBC Newsroom, more than 35,000 people submitted pictures and video of the heavy snow.

This was a record both for the sheer number of pictures and almost certainly for the size of the audience response to a news event in the UK.

(Horrocks, 2009)

This popularity was also reflected in visitor statistics, with the BBC News website attracting some 8.2 million unique visitors (5.1 million from the UK) on Monday, February 2 – which was also a new record. Meanwhile, the BBC News channel had a peak audience of 557,000 viewers – ‘no doubt boosted by huge numbers of people taking an enforced day off work’, as Horrocks points out. However, in a significant demonstration of the convergence between the online and broadcast platforms as mentioned above, there were also 195,000 plays of the BBC News channel live on the website. Without doubt this highlights the dramatic journey of the BBC website, and fulfilment of its original vision in late 1997, as explored in Chapter 2, when the original designs for the Corporation’s news website were rejected as ahead of their time.

Speaking at an e-Democracy conference in November 2008, Helen Boaden, BBC’s director of news at the time, commented that ‘user’ contributions ‘can really enrich our journalism and provide our audiences with a wider diversity of voices than we could otherwise deliver’ (Boaden, 2008). Moreover, she observed that the internet has opened up a vast array of communication channels for the public to express their opinion in public. No longer are they necessarily reliant on broadcasters to host debates through televised debates of radio phone-ins. To this end, ‘the challenge for news organisations is in learning how to integrate the opinions of their readers, listeners and viewers in new ways’ (Boaden, 2008). This, she argued, is ‘essential for the development of our journalism and our public purpose of informed citizenship’ (Boaden, 2008).

Whilst these are laudable ideals, some of which are slowly beginning to materialise as described above, Boaden also recognised that the Corporation must go even further in order to realise the potential of online civic engagement. The BBC ‘are using digital technology to establish new relationships with our audiences’, she contended, ‘but we are acutely aware that the formal political processes need to be brought into this world too’ (Boaden, 2008). She announced a new BBC website intended to help facilitate this, called Democracy Live (yet to be launched at time of writing), which in the words of Boaden

will:

offer live and on demand video from all the main UK institutions and the European Parliament. Users will be able to search across the video for representatives and issues that are relevant to them. They will be able to find out more about their representatives in the institutions and follow their contributions.

The site will also offer detailed guides to how the institutions across a devolved UK work and what powers they have, all the must know information about issues in the news and blogs from our political editors, *plus a range of ways for users to comment and contact their representatives and institutions.*

(Boaden, 2008, emphasis added)

Democracy Live will thus not only facilitate civic engagement among members of the public in isolation from the formal democratic processes, but also directly connect those citizens with political representatives and institutions. The type of dialogue taking place on *Have your say* debates will take on a new relevance if it might actually incorporate and influence decision makers. This at very least promises to move one step closer to the type of communicative action and deliberation discussed in Chapter 2. However, as demonstrated by this thesis, there is no guarantee that such dialogue will necessarily ensue just because the technology makes it possible. To this end, the BBC needs to also consider the best ways in which these initiatives, and indeed its existing *Have your say* debates, will actually encourage dialogue between all parties involved – or to borrow Coleman's (2004) terminology, engaging the public in 'authentic polylogue' instead of top-down 'consultations'.

7.3. Further research

In light of the findings and the subsequent developments, a series of areas for further research emerge that require scholarly attention. Firstly, the thesis sought to contribute to the further development of a methodological framework for analysis of online news and interactivity. While some frameworks are emerging – web sphere analysis the perhaps most prominent of these (see for instance Foot and Schneider, 2006) – these are typically empirical in nature and does not account for all the methodological complexities described in Chapter 3. To this end the thesis defines a bespoke method called web dialogue analysis, which is a multifaceted approach that combines qualitative and quantitative methods.

However, this only resolves the issues faced by the research problematic posed in this thesis and should be seen as a contribution towards a broader debate, not a conclusive solution. Further research is required to consolidate a coherent set of methodological frameworks for analysing the dynamics of online news, both to enable a more focussed deconstruction of such artefacts, but also to enable a meaningful comparative analysis.

Secondly, certain elements of the *Election 2005* site were excluded from the thesis because the data they would have produced would have been unmanageable. In particular it would be worth investigating if the material published in sections dedicated to each constituent nation would produce results that differed from the findings presented here. In particular, the extent to which citizens were used as sources and the level of interaction between these and politicians. Empirical elements of this thesis will in theory be easier to obtain now that the BBC is using a more automated and database driven system. However, the ability of external researchers to gain inhibited access to such material is as yet uncertain. The thesis touches on the use of political and institutional sources, though these have not been explored in detail as the central focus has been members of the public. These preliminary findings do, however, suggest a need for some further investigation with regard to these source groups. In particular it would be useful to further examine the failure of the internet to provide a greater opportunity for smaller parties to articulate their views and policy positions in regular news reports.

Thirdly, while the BBC is a giant in the UK online news market, some comparative element with other websites should be explored to understand how the BBC performed not simply against its own policies or normative standards, but in relation to other communicative spaces. Of course this element should not be confined to assessing 'performance', but exploring and sharing best practices. Comparative elements should also include examining the BBC in a non-electoral context to see the degree of civic engagement facilitated when the political process is not as prominent in the news landscape. Finally, historical comparisons would also be useful between BBC's treatment of this election and the next UK general election, which will take place in either 2009 or 2010. Of interest here would be the difference the maturity of technological implementation – the effect this has on representation of citizen voices and their actual civic engagement using the BBC News Online website. Any findings from such a comparison will of course also require a cultural reference of the changing maturity in people's adaptation – or forms of use – of online technologies. That is, any change in the findings from such studies would not necessarily only be down to the differing

implementation from the BBC, but also from the changing adaptation and new media literacy of members of the public.

Following on from the previous point, whilst this thesis has contributed to a historical review of BBC News Online, the focus was predominantly on the website in relation to national elections. Fourthly then, there are vast areas of the history that are not well documented and accounts of the early years of the website (and associated sites that precede this) contain conflicting elements or vague references to what actually happened. A historical review is particularly timely as the BBC News Online has recently passed its first ten years. It is also critical to map these early years whilst the people involved are still in a position to relay their experiences of the time. Any online or interview material archived during such a study could be incorporated in this archive. An important aspect of such a historical study would be the changing working practices of journalists – the BBC website moving from a peripheral activity by a small number of people, through a large division in its own right, until the recent introduction of a convergent newsroom, which puts online practices on an equal footing to other broadcast activities. While such newsroom critiques are emerging, typically based on ethnographical approaches (e.g. Paterson and Domingo, 2008), they have thus far not focussed on the BBC.

Finally, much of the content described in this thesis comes under the BBC umbrella term ‘user generated content’, which encompasses all material derived from members of the public. The term ‘user generated content’ is problematic in itself as it implies a ‘consumer’ centric approach to content derived from members of the public, when the BBC has an equal obligation to its audience as ‘citizens’ (see Collins, 2007, Hastings, 2004, Livingstone et al., 2007, Thorsen, 2008b). It also risks convoluting what is actually taking place by being too broad a generalisation – how does a comment in a discussion on football gossip compare to photographs taken during a crisis for instance? Wardle and Williams (2008) argues a similar point in their study of user generated content on BBC Online, maintaining that the term is ‘inappropriate and inadequate’ (2008:8). They instead propose a series of terms under the umbrella term ‘Audience Material’ as follows:

- Audience Content – including audience footage, audience experiences and audience stories;
- Audience Comments – for instance to *Have your say* debates;
- Collaborative Content – material produced by audience, but supervised or supported by the BBC journalists and producers;

- Networked Journalism – attempts by BBC ‘to tap into expert communities within the audience to improve the quality of journalistic output’;
- Non-News Content – e.g. restaurant reviews, photographs of community events, weather or scenery.

(adapted from Wardle and Williams, 2008:9)

While this classification is certainly an improvement on ‘user generated content’, further research in this area is required to ascertain the extent to which this represents a tangible problem, or if it remains simply an issue of linguistic aesthetics. However, regardless of its name, the use of such material does have strong ethical considerations that also need further investigation. By way of example the archiving of personal information (see Smith, 2005a), the monitoring and moderation of debates, and using content without remuneration (or inconsistencies in such remuneration). The importance of this becomes even more marked when the amount of content reaches a scale that the BBC, or commercial operators for that matter, cannot feasibly manage given its current resources (or at least those allocated to online moderation). Also important in this consideration are the documentation of comments that *are not* published. In the case of the *Election 2005* site these are likely to have been lost forever, and it is not certain that the current automated system at the BBC has any better ways of dealing with essentially rejected material.

BBC News Online has come a long way since the heady days of technological experimentation in the early 1990s – having not only established itself as ‘the third broadcast medium’ but also as an essential part of the British democratic fabric. To date, the BBC has successfully defended its online operations from commercial pressures and managed to establish a dynamic public service model for the web – one that is being emulated around the globe. The public value of such an offering, as this thesis has sought to highlight in the discussion above, is particularly noticeable in relation to citizenship. The BBC’s online offering complements this through innovative strategies in providing news and information in ways which are seen to be both relevant and responsive to citizen interests. Indeed the conclusion of the BBC Trust’s service review of bbc.co.uk published in May 2008 stated that the website ‘is especially strong in promoting the Citizenship and civil society, Nations and regions, Education and learning, and Global purposes’ (BBC Trust, 2008:12). The future is uncertain, however, as the types of criticisms first rehearsed in the Graf Report continue to resonate in current policy debates. Certain commercial providers are insistent that whilst the BBC may have led the first decade of online news provision, the future will be shaped much more strongly by the competitive ethos of the

global marketplace. Precisely what counts as 'public service' – and thus 'citizenship' – in this regard may very well be dramatically recast in the years to come.

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Appendix 1: Chronology of election campaign

The following Appendix provides a chronological overview of the 2005 UK General Election campaign from the start of the year, through the official campaign period 5th April – 5th May. The material is adapted from Kavanagh and Butler (2005) 'The British General Election of 2005' pages 63-67 and 70-71, to provide the reader with a detailed overview of the key events of the election.

Chronology of the near-term campaign

January

- 1 Jan As tsunami death toll nears 150,000, Blair remains on holiday despite spiralling criticism
Freedom of Information Act (FOI) 2000 comes into force
- 3 Jan Access under new FOI Act to Lord Goldsmith's advice on legality of Iraq war denied
- 4 Jan Continuing violence in Iraq: Governor of Baghdad shot dead with six of his bodyguards
- 5 Jan G. Brown begins week-long national campaign tour
Writing in the *Guardian*, G. Brown outlines his own view of the direction Lab should be taking
- 6 Jan Cons pledge to match Govt funding on international aid
T. Blair assures G. Brown he will have 'central role' in election campaign
T. Blair rules out TV leaders' debate
M. Howard makes clear tax cuts will play central role in Cons campaign
- 9 Jan Palestinian Authority presidential elections held
R. Peston book published: claims Blair promised Brown he'd stand down before 2005 general election
- 11 Jan *Independent* poll: Lab vote would increase by one-third if G. Brown leader
- 12 Jan US Govt agrees to release four remaining British Guantanamo Bay prisoners
- 13 Jan Lib Dems pledge to scrap Govt's child trust fund and use money to cut class sizes to 20
Prince Harry wears Nazi uniform to fancy dress party
- 15 Jan Con MP R. Jackson defects to Lab
- 16 Jan M. Howard on BBC's *Breakfast with Frost* announces Con's spending

- plans
- 17 Jan James Report published: public spending cuts of £35 billion, £4 billion tax cuts
Lib Dems and Lab say Cons' sums 'don't add up'
- 19 Jan Blanket press coverage of new pictures of British soldiers abusing Iraqi prisoners
- 20 Jan G. W. Bush sworn-in for second term
Homelessness charities speak out over Lab right-to-buy plans
Former chatshow host R. Kilroy-Silk quits UKIP, branding it 'A joke'
- 23 Jan Cons on immigration: propose quota system on Australian model
- 24 Jan Lib Dems pledge to increase maternity pay
J. Prescott announces new plans aimed at helping first-time home buyers
- 25 Jan EU and UN oppose Cons' immigration plans
- 29 Jan *Telegraph/YouGov* poll: majority would reject EU Constitution in referendum
- 30 Jan Elections held in Iraq
Mail on Sunday prints Lab 'Shylock' posters next to image of Fagin: Lab accused of anti-Semitism
- 31 Jan Controversial posters withdrawn from Lab website
Cons plan voluntary and private orgs to find jobs for incapacity claimant
- February**
- 1 Feb Lab announces incapacity benefit cuts
Ruth Kelly pledges 'zero tolerance' approach to 'low-level disruption' in classrooms
Cons propose CCTV, random drug testing and metal detectors in schools
- 2 Feb R. Kilroy-Silk launches new party Veritas
- 4 Feb C. Blair calls chatshow *Richard and Judy* to complain T. Blair never buys her flowers
- 6 Feb T. Blair becomes longest-serving Lab Prime Minister
C. Clarke on *Breakfast with Frost*: Migrants mustn't become 'burden on society'
- 7 Feb C. Clarke unveils immigration plans - points system to ensure migrants have 'right skills'
- 8 Feb *Times/Populus* poll: Lab hits post-Iraq high
Lib Dems launch five-point plan on civil liberties

- Daily Mail/YouGov* poll: 78% think Lab not tough enough on immigration
- 10 Feb Number of Scottish MPs cut from 72 to 59
T. Blair on chatshow *Richard and Judy*
- 11 Feb T. Blair unveils six election pledges with helicopter tour of six marginal constituencies
Press continues to be dominated by news that Charles and Camilla are to wed
- 12 Feb BBC claims violence in Iraq is returning to pre-election levels
M. Howard reveals his grandfather may have entered UK as illegal immigrant, to pre-empt forthcoming biography
- 13 Feb T. Blair closing Lab spring conference, promises he has abandoned the 'I know best' approach
Shi'a parties victorious in Iraq poll
- 14 Feb C. Kennedy begins week-long national tour
Cons advocate health tests for asylum-seekers including screening for HIV and TB
M. Howard promises to abolish NHS waiting lists and eradicate MRSA
- 16 Feb 'superbug'
Lib Dems target ethnic minority vote
- 17 Feb Lab withdraws legal support from six councillors facing allegations of electoral fraud
- 18 Feb T. Blair in *Jewish Chronicle* promises to 'never, ever, ever' attack Howard over Jewish beliefs
Cons pledge council tax cut for over-65s
- 21 Feb C. Kennedy announces birth of his baby will take priority over campaign
BNP leader N. Griffin labels Cons' immigration plans 'a definite move onto our turf'
- 22 Feb Govt criticised for trying to rush through Prevention of Terrorism Bill
- 23 Feb Accusations that Lord Goldsmith changed mind over legality of Iraq war
- 24 Feb Two British soldiers found guilty of abusing Iraqi prisoners; 18 more face trial
- 27 Feb Lab announces paid maternity leave to increase to nine months by 2007
- 28 Feb Lib Dems pledge 50% tax for those earning over £100,000

March

- 1 Mar C. Clarke backs off over Prevention of Terrorism Bill house arrest clause
Ongoing violence in Iraq: 115 killed in suicide bomb attack
Cons unveil work permit plans aimed at avoiding upgrade to permanent residency
- 2 Mar M. Howard uses specific case of Margaret Dixon to highlight broader NHS failures
- 4 Mar T. Blair accuses Cons of 'ruthless exploitation' of M. Dixon
Greens launch campaign platform: the 'Radical Alternative' to Westminster politics
- 5 Mar Lib Dems launch campaign slogan 'Real Alternative'
- 7 Mar Cons: national curriculum to be reviewed 'head to toe' and political correctness 'rooted out'
- 9 Mar *Sun* launches 'War on gipsy free-for-all'; *Daily Mail* gives similar emphasis
- 10 Mar Lord Sainsbury donates £2 million to Lab
C. Clarke launches five-point 'touch action' plan on crime
C. Kennedy promises extra £100 monthly to over-75s
- 11 Mar Concessions made to pass Terrorism Bill
- 13 Mar M. Howard interview in *Cosmopolitan*: UK system 'tantamount to abortion on demand'
T. Blair on ITV all-female debate show
- 15 Mar T. Blair warns against abortion becoming election issue
- 16 Mar G. Brown delivers budget, satisfying speculation of pre-election giveaway.
Pensioners, first-time home buyers and working families targeted.
- 18 Mar M. Howard confronted over views on gun control
- 20 Mar Archbishop of Canterbury calls for urgent review of abortion laws
- 21 Mar Lib Dems unveil manifesto for business
Govt accused of 'jumping on the Jamie Oliver bandwagon' in new plans for school dinners
Cons pledge new powers to prosecute 'travellers'
- 22 Mar Judge in vote-rigging trial condemns postal vote system as 'open invitation to fraud'
Lib Dems launch ten pledges
- 24 Mar Foreign Office lawyer E. Wilmshurst's resignation letter published: claims Lord Goldsmith changed legal advice twice in run-up to war
J. Straw rejects opposition calls for legal advice to be published

- 25 Mar H. Flight, Con Vice-Chairman, sacked after claiming at private dinner that a Con Govt once in power would go further than James's £35 billion spending cuts
H. Flight refuses to stand down as parliamentary candidate and seeks legal advice
- 26 Mar *Guardian* and *Times* lead with Cons' 'turmoil' and 'disarray' as J. Reid, T. Blair and C. Kennedy all go on the offensive over Cons' spending plans
Lord Callaghan dies aged 92
- 27 Mar M. Howard defends H. Flight sacking
- 28 Mar Cons pledge increases in family tax credits
- 29 Mar Electoral Commission condemns postal vote system
- 31 Mar IFS study claims average income has fallen for first time in ten years: G. Brown taxes blamed

Chronology of the campaign, April to 5th May

- Sat 2 Apr Pope John Paul II dies
- Mon 4 Apr Verdict in Birmingham vote fraud case
- Tue 5 Apr Blair announces election date
- Wed 6 Apr Final Prime Minister's Questions
- Thu 7 Apr Parliament prorogued
MG-Rover receivership
- Fri 8 Apr Pope's funeral
Blair and Brown fly to Longbridge
- Sat 9 Apr Wedding of Prince of Wales and Camilla Parker-Bowles
- Sun 10 Apr UN attacks Howards's false claims over immigration
- Mon 11 Apr Dissolution of Parliament
Con launch
- Tue 12 Apr Green launch
Kennedy baby
- Wed 13 Apr Lab launch
Veritas launch
- Thu 14 Apr Kennedy stumbles at Lib Dem launch
SNP launch
UKIP launch
- Mon 18 Apr PC launch

Appendix 2: Timeline of BBC News Online

The following Appendix provides a timeline overview of BBC News Online. Most of these events are described in the main body text, although the timeline also mentions some additional events or developments. To avoid confusion with the preceding event, question marks signify that the specific date or month for a particular event is unknown.

Year	Month or Date	Event
1989	January	Brandon Butterworth registered with the Defense Data Network Network Information Center (DDN NIC) and received a Class B address to cover the entire BBC network.
		Set up internet access in mid 1989 as <code>bbc.uucp</code> (Unix-to-Unix Copy, a legacy system used for internet connectivity) with dial-up access via Brunel University.
1991	October	Brandon Butterworth registers <code>bbc.co.uk</code>
1993		Education team produce a companion website for their television programme <i>The Net</i> - George Auckland, education producer at the time.
1994	June	The <i>BBC Networking Club</i> , another BBC Education project, launched.
	July 6	White Paper entitled <i>The Future of the BBC</i> , published by the Conservative government.
1995	?	Several of these early projects begin to use the internet as a means to interact with members of the public during live television and radio programmes.

- ? The BBC News and Current Affairs team published a dedicated site for the 1995 budget speech, entitled *Budget '95*, in collaboration with the Press Association.
- ? Exploratory talks with Microsoft about potential partnership.
- 1996** **May** **Renewal of the BBC's Royal Charter**
- ? When exploratory talks with Microsoft about a potential partnership stranded 'after the software giant suggested it might like some editorial input' (Smartt, 2007:np), the BBC management instead opted to have a commercial presence (using the domain beeb.com) through an existing deal between BBC Worldwide and computer company ICL.
- August** **BBC published a party conference website, including a live uninterrupted audio feed (unlike the programme breaks on radio and television) and 'wall-to-wall coverage'.**
- November** ***Budget 96* site**
- December** **John Birt (Director General at the time) pulled out of the deal with ICL deciding instead to make news and sport public service offerings (see Barrett, 2007:np).**
- 1997** **March 17** **BBC's *Election 97* site went live - the approval was only issued some six weeks before the election, leaving the people working on the project little time to prepare (Butterworth, 2007:np). Proprietary Content Production System (CPS, originally built in three days, it gradually evolved and still forms the basis of the BBC News website) 'turned live Ceefax and Election system feeds into html for each constituency and candidate' (Butterworth, [1999]:np).**

	?	BBC News quickly established <i>Politics 97</i> as a follow up site, which included the first public screening of the Hong Kong handover.
	August 31	Diana Spencer (Princess of Wales) and Dodi Al-Fayed die in a car crash . Tribute site set up - received an estimated 7,500 emails on the topic and all were published. Bob Eggington, project director of BBC News Online at the time.
	November 4	BBC News Online goes live (officially) [Edward Briffa, the controller of BBC Online and Interactive, Mike Smartt, BBC News Online editor, Bob Eggington, Tony Hall, chief executive of BBC News, Matt Jones, responsible for original design]
	December 15	BBC Online goes live. Originally the BBC was granted a one-year trial by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), which was then ratified a year later (Barrett, 2007:np).
1998	March	The BBC News website recorded 8.17 million page impressions .
	June	BBC Online offered 140,000 pages of content, of which about 61,000 consisted of news (Allan, 2006:37-8).
	December	US President Bill Clinton impeached.
1999	April 27	Jill Dando murdered.
	March	The Corporation's submission to the license fee review panel articulated for the first time in a formal capacity what the Corporation perceived to be the core elements of BBC Online. Significant external pressures to turn BBC Online

(including news and sport) into a commercial operation by accepting advertising. [Bob Eggington]

	August	John Birt, Director General at the time, issued a request to the Head of Heritage to ‘work out what we need to do to preserve the BBC’s early work on the Internet’ (cited in Smith, 2005a:22).
	September	“BBC News Online has been inundated with e-mails from victims of the Taiwan earthquake and those seeking loved ones.”
2000	December	US Presidential Election, sets new record for number of hits
	?	New design
	?	myBBC launched.
2001		UK General Election, <i>Vote 2001</i> site. The <i>Vote 2001</i> site registered around 500,000 page views every day throughout the campaign, with a massive surge to 10.76 million on polling day, 7th June, and results day, 8th June (Coleman, 2001b).
	September 11	Redesign of news homepage to cope with traffic. [Smartt, Belam, and Butterworth]
	September	Major speech delivered by the Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell to the Royal Television Society conference. In many ways, this speech signalled a decisive turning point in governmental thinking about the future of the BBC in the digital age.
	October 22	BBC <i>Newsround</i> launched its interactive website. [Editor in 2007 Sinéad Rocks]

2002	March	Queen Mother dies.
2003	April	Invasion of Iraq. Massive peak in hits – new record.
	August	First major independent review into the BBC's online services commissioned by Tessa Jowell. The review centred on a public consultation exercise conducted by former Trinity Mirror chief executive Philip Graf.
	September	Beslan Siege.
	?	New design - primarily by Paul Sissons and Maire Flynn, coincided with a relaunch of the BBC News Channel (then BBC News 24) and featured a wider page design.
2004	March	Madrid bombings – attracted some UGC.
	June	Neil Report published, which reviewed the BBC's editorial processes and values in the aftermath of the Hutton Inquiry.
	July	Graf Report published. In response, five websites would be closed on “the grounds that their market impact might be greater than their public value.” [Ashley Highfield, the BBC's director of New Media and Technology]
	December	US Presidential Election. First formal experiments with blogging – by Kevin Anderson
		Indian Ocean Tsunami – surge in UGC. <i>Have your say</i> used to help people establish contact with missing friends or relatives. The message board was incredibly popular, receiving more than 250,000 hits on the first day alone.
2005	April / May	UK General Election, <i>Election 2005</i> site. Team of temps set up to deal with UGC, which was subsequently made permanent fixture. During the 2005 campaign, BBC News

Online accounted for 78% of all UK internet news traffic, about one in five of the total election news audience (Ward, 2006:10).

July 7 London bombings. BBC News website among the first to break the story online. Readers sent about 1,000 images and about 20,000 emails.

December 12 Buncefield - explosions at a fuel depot near Hemel Hempstead in Hertfordshire. Eyewitness accounts and amateur video footage. 6,500 photographs were sent to yourpics@bbc.co.uk - a new record for the site. Picture galleries of the fire also received a large amount of reader traffic - 657,367 page impressions on the Sunday.

? Computerised discussion board system introduced to *Have your say* debates.

? BBC formally launches Blog Network.

2006 **December** Saddam Hussein executed.

? New design

2007 **June** Gordon Brown becomes Prime Minister.

July BBC iPlayer first made available as an 'open beta' download Peer-to-Peer player.

September Robert Peston breaks story about Northern Rock on his blog first, not TV.

Myanmar / Burma protests. BBC makes good use of UGC material.

December 25 BBC iPlayer officially launched.

	?	Restructuring / merging of news operations begins
2008	February 9	Camden fire – several eyewitness accounts and images submitted used in main news accounts.
	March 31	New design – most significant yet, wider pages and central alignment, added emphasis on audio-visual content. BBC slowly begins to migrate from RealPlayer to BBC Embedded Media Player (iPlayer) powered audio and video content.
	June	Restructuring / merging of news operations complete.
	November	US Presidential Election. BBC combines live stream of News 24 with text updates and interactive graphics. Mumbai attacks.
2009	February	UK experienced its heaviest snowfall in 18 years. New record for UGC submissions. More than 35,000 people submitted pictures and video of the heavy snow. The BBC News website attracted some 8.2 million unique visitors (5.1 million from the UK) on Monday, February 2 – which was also a new record. [Peter Horrocks, head of BBC Newsroom, Steve Herrmann, BBC News Online editor]

Appendix 3: Tables

The following Appendix contains additional tables referred to in the main body text. Table numbers are preserved from their original context.

News report	Last updated	Have your say debate	Last updated
Leaders stage face-to-face battle	06-Apr-05	Prime minister's questions: Your reaction	13-Apr-05
Matrons drive Tory hospital plans	07-Apr-05	What do you think of Tory health plans?	13-Apr-05
Parties keep campaigning low-key	09-Apr-05	Tory manifesto: Your views?	15-Apr-05
Tory leader attacks asylum system	10-Apr-05	Tory manifesto: Your views?	15-Apr-05
Blair attacks 'flawed' Tory plans	11-Apr-05	Who will run the economy best?	14-Apr-05
Tories launch election manifesto	11-Apr-05	Tory manifesto: Your views?	15-Apr-05
Labour attack Tory economic plan	12-Apr-05	Do Tory tax plans add up?	21-Apr-05
Blair makes manifesto tax pledge	13-Apr-05	Labour manifesto: Your views?	17-Apr-05
Lib Dems 'are real alternative'	14-Apr-05	Lib Dem manifesto: Your views	20-Apr-05
Ricin case 'shows asylum chaos'	14-Apr-05	Who is right on immigration?	04-May-05
Lib Dems set environment targets	15-Apr-05	Do you waste food?	19-Apr-05
Campaigns focus on health clash	18-Apr-05	Who has the best health policy?	21-Apr-05
Howard defends immigration stance	19-Apr-05	Who is right on immigration?	04-May-05
Postal vote legal bid is launched	19-Apr-05	Is postal voting an invitation to fraud?	25-Apr-05
Court refuses post vote challenge	21-Apr-05	Is postal voting an invitation to fraud?	24-Apr-05
Tories plan to cut stamp duty tax	21-Apr-05	Do Tory tax plans add up?	21-Apr-05
Blair accuses Tories over asylum	22-Apr-05	Who is right on immigration?	04-May-05
CBI boss rejects immigration cap	22-Apr-05	Who is right on immigration?	04-May-05
Call to punish parties over Iraq	25-Apr-05	Is Iraq a key election issue for you?	05-May-05
Tories accused of 'playing dead'	26-Apr-05	Who do you support on education?	29-Apr-05
Veteran former Labour MP defects	26-Apr-05	Do you agree with Brian Sedgemore?	27-Apr-05
Election fight getting personal	27-Apr-05	Is the campaign too personal now?	03-May-05
Post vote applications quadruple	27-Apr-05	Is postal voting an invitation to fraud?	24-Apr-05
Brown calls for MPs to decide war	30-Apr-05	Is Iraq a key election issue for you?	04-May-05
Blair concerned over Iraq effect	01-May-05	Is Iraq a key election issue for you?	04-May-05
Blair faces Iraq families' anger	03-May-05	Is Iraq a key election issue for you?	04-May-05
First-timers 'unlikely to vote'	03-May-05	Why are first-time voter numbers down?	04-May-05
Blair heads for historic victory	06-May-05	Election results: Your reaction	06-May-05
Blair secures historic third term	06-May-05	Can Blair's new team deliver?	10-May-05
Blair: I've listened and learned	06-May-05	Can Blair's new team deliver?	11-May-05
Howard will stand down as leader	06-May-05	Who should lead the Tories?	10-May-05
Blair backers reject quit calls	09-May-05	What should Blair's priorities be now?	16-May-05

Table 4-6, List of news reports with links to associated Have your say debate

Day	City	Feature headline	Theme	Byl. ⁹⁸	Last updated
1	Birmingham	Real concerns within the NHS	NHS	CW	12 April, 2005
2	Rochdale	Business concern over rising tax burden	Tax	CW	12 April, 2005
3	Windermere	Windfarms, energy and politics	Energy	CW	19 May, 2005
4	Dumfries	The farming-supermarkets battle	Farming	CW	14 April, 2005
5	Belfast	Solving N Ireland's policing dilemma	Crime	CW	15 April, 2005
6	Boston	Migrating to work	Immigration	JM	18 April, 2005
7	Leicester	Examining education	Education	JM	19 April, 2005
8	Bradford	British Asians fear victimisation	Discrimination	JM	20 April, 2005
9	Gateshead	Live to work, or work to live?	Maternity rights	JM	21 April, 2005
10	Edinburgh	Marching to the same tune?	Defence cuts	JM	22 April, 2005
11	Reading	Red tape is 'pain in the neck'	Tax and small businesses	JM	25 April, 2005
12	Gloucester	Gloucester and the grey vote	Pensioners	JM	26 April, 2005
13	Cardiff	On the beat with Barry's bobbies	Crime	JM	27 April, 2005
14	Bristol	Battling drugs and violent crime	Crime	JM	28 April, 2005
15	Beaford	Devon's housing problem	Housing	JM	29 April, 2005
16	Dover	Hands across the Channel?	Tax, export and immigration	JP	2 May, 2005
17	Cambridge	Travelling times	Transport	TS	3 May, 2005
18	Northampton	Frustration and disenchantment	Voter turnout	JP	4 May, 2005

Table 5-7, Detailed list of *Election bus* features

Byline	BLOG POSTS			COMMENTS RECEIVED		
	F	M	A	F	M	A
Alan Connor	12	1,607	134	31	1,676	54
Branwen Jeffreys	11	1,023	93	16	455	28
Brian Wheeler	9	2,766	307	54	2,054	38
Carole Walker	3	395	132	2	38	19
ELECTION MONITOR	1	125	125	4	66	17
Guto Harri	30	2,605	87	68	2,256	33
Jackie Storer	1	242	242	2	65	33
Jenny Scott	5	271	54	8	250	31
Mark Mardell	44	4,941	112	127	5,534	44
Mark Simpson	38	5,817	153	101	3,348	33
Nick Assinder	26	2,716	104	59	2,081	35
No Byline	74	9,896	134	287	10,239	36
Phillip Herd	3	526	175	1	26	26
Reeta Chakrabarti	12	1,206	101	11	543	49
Sean Curran	2	359	180	2	18	9
Steve Schifferes	2	354	177	0	0	0
Will Walden	3	822	274	10	215	22

Table 6-1, Summary of contributors, posts and comments to *The Election Monitor* blog

⁹⁸ Byline initials: CW = Caroline Wyatt, JM = Jill McGivering, JP = Jane Peel and TS = Tom Symonds.

UK Voter Panel	BIOGRAPHY	VOTING PREF		CONTRIB		COMMENTS	
	1. Age 2. Lives 3. Works 4. In 10 words or less	Original	Actual	F	M	F	M
Alistair Quinn	1. 34 2. Kings Lynn 3. IT 4. Family man, small business owner trying to earn a living	LAB	LAB	3	471	39	2,597
Ayub Khan	1. 45 2. Batley, West Yorkshire 3. Highways enforcement officer 4. Hard working, fair minded, family orientated, proud British Asian Muslim	N/A	[LIBDEM]	5	1,105	52	3,253
Chris Li	1. 26 2. Bournemouth 3. Sales 4. Graduate, family man, political activist	LAB	[LAB]	2	383	33	2,347
Christopher Williams	1. 21 2. Oxford 3. Student 4. Pragmatic, realistic, caring, responsible and Green	GREEN		2	382	26	1,759
David Jones	1. 58 2. Llanamlet, Wales 3. Retired teacher 4. Likes to travel, interested in current affairs, Wales rugby fan	PLAID		2	357	5	370
David Mayer	1. 45 2. Emsworth, Hampshire 3. Financial services 4. Husband and father of six, fearful of our economic future.	N/A	LIBDEM	4	810	34	1,906
Gary Watson	1. 42 2. Peterborough 3. IT consultant 4. Family man, business owner, school governor, England rugby fan	CON		3	743	16	1,079
Georgina Grant	1. 62 2. Guildford 3. Communications officer 4. A grandmother who values family life, employed, but approaching retirement	CON		1	377	5	283
Gerry Harris	1. 52 2. Glasgow 3. Promotions 4. Family man, business man, independent individual expecting beneficial political intervention	N/A	LIBDEM	4	1,235	24	1,338
John Devenney	1. 39 2. Norwich 3. Nurse 4. Analytical, caring, disappointed with Labour, patriotic, hard working, fair, honest	LIBDEM		3	884	31	1,759
Keith Brockie	1. 32 2. Falkirk, Scotland 3. IT analyst 4. Scottish, left wing, environmentally aware, altruistic, egalitarian, scientist, atheist, sceptical	SNP	[SNP]	2	471	18	1,130
Leigh Webber	1. 22 2. Leeds 3. Student 4. Community-minded final year politics student at Leeds Uni	CON	LAB	2	440	35	2,622
Michael Dommett	1. 48 2. Alton, Hampshire 3. Engineer 4. Folk dancing civil engineer, loves exploring, history and reading	LIBDEM	LIBDEM	3	642	15	1,006
Paul Holdsworth	1. 19 2. Aberystwyth, Wales 3. Student 4. Politics student with appalling fashion sense	N/A	PLAID	4	731	14	1,077
Philippa Bartlett	1. 30 2. Rothwell, Northants 3. Helpdesk manager for software co. 4. Laid back Liberal, passionate about life, hates ignorance and prejudice	LIBDEM	[LIBDEM]	3	443	14	1,001
Richard Gosling	1. 32 2. Aberdeenshire, Scotland 3. Design engineer 4. Married with two children, classic car enthusiast and keen rower	UKIP		2	469	41	2,987
Siobhan Burgess	1. 35 2. Warrington 3. Occupational health nurse 4. Family-centred wife, mother, nurse, cyclist, animal lover, amateur gardener	LAB		1	231	4	214
Tonia Barton	1. 39 2. Nelson, Lancashire 3. Wine and spirit wholesalers 4. Single, committed socially liberal Conservative	CON	CON	4	697	59	4,264
Vanessa Walters	1. 27 2. Walthamstow, London 3. Writer 4. Single city dweller into art and people	LAB	LIBDEM	4	776	59	3,858

Table 6-3, Summary list of UK Voters' Panel members, contributions and comments

PANELLIST ENTRIES				COMMENTS		
Topic	Headline	Last updated	M	F	M	
UK voters' panel: Election announcement		5 April, 2005	58			
1	UK voters' panel: Vanessa Walters	8 April, 2005	164	34	2,272	
2	UK voters' panel: Tonia Barton	8 April, 2005	171	34	2,265	
3	UK voters' panel: John Devenney	8 April, 2005	273	20	1,190	
4	UK voters' panel: Richard Gosling	8 April, 2005	215	27	1,966	
5	UK voters' panel: Ayub Khan	8 April, 2005	212	16	792	
6	UK voters' panel: David Mayer	8 April, 2005	210	14	707	
UK voters' panel: Party manifestos		11 April, 2005	48			
1	UK voters' panel: Alistair Quinn	13 April, 2005	136	24	1,735	
2	UK voters' panel: Leigh Webber	13 April, 2005	189	33	2,550	
3	UK voters' panel: Philippa Bartlett	13 April, 2005	143	9	660	
4	UK voters' panel: Christopher Williams	13 April, 2005	169	17	1,113	
5	UK voters' panel: Ayub Khan	13 April, 2005	200	15	1,115	
6	UK voters' panel: David Mayer	13 April, 2005	201	15	846	
UK voters' panel: Europe		18 April, 2005	54			
1	UK voters' panel: Vanessa Walters	20 April, 2005	184	7	466	
2	UK voters' panel: Gary Watson	20 April, 2005	192	2	168	
3	UK voters' panel: Michael Dommett	20 April, 2005	175	6	326	
4	UK voters' panel: Richard Gosling	20 April, 2005	254	14	1,021	
5	UK voters' panel: Keith Brockie	20 April, 2005	273	15	1,048	
6	UK voters' panel: Paul Holdsworth	20 April, 2005	179	13	1,043	
UK voters' panel: Halfway mark		20 April, 2005	68			
1	UK voters' panel: Siobhan Burgess	20 April, 2005	231	4	214	
2	UK voters' panel: Gary Watson	21 April, 2005	302	5	463	
3	UK voters' panel: Philippa Bartlett	21 April, 2005	153	5	341	
4	UK voters' panel: David Jones	21 April, 2005	171	2	183	
5	UK voters' panel: Gerry Harris	21 April, 2005	252	5	270	
6	UK voters' panel: Ayub Khan	20 April, 2005	194			
UK voters' panel: Immigration		25 April, 2005	53			
1	UK voters' panel: Chris Li	27 April, 2005	161	29	2,143	
2	UK voters' panel: Tonia Barton	27 April, 2005	184	15	1,518	
3	UK voters' panel: John Devenney	27 April, 2005	360	4	218	
4	UK voters' panel: David Jones	27 April, 2005	186	3	187	
5	UK voters' panel: Gerry Harris	27 April, 2005	313	8	549	
6	UK voters' panel: Ayub Khan	27 April, 2005	221	11	792	
UK voters' panel: Issues and apathy		28 April, 2005	59			
1	UK voters' panel: Vanessa Walters	28 April, 2005	245	7	429	
2	UK voters' panel: Georgina Grant	28 April, 2005	377	5	283	
3	UK voters' panel: Michael Dommett	28 April, 2005	275	7	570	
4	UK voters' panel: Christopher Williams	28 April, 2005	213	9	646	
5	UK voters' panel: David Mayer	28 April, 2005	233	1	64	
6	UK voters' panel: Paul Holdsworth	28 April, 2005	189			
UK voters' panel: Question Time Special		29 April, 2005	58			
1	UK voters' panel: Alistair Quinn	29 April, 2005	179	10	488	
2	UK voters' panel: Gary Watson	29 April, 2005	249	9	448	
3	UK voters' panel: John Devenney	29 April, 2005	251	7	351	
4	UK voters' panel: Gerry Harris	29 April, 2005	367	9	343	
UK voters' panel: Decision time		4 May, 2005	56			
1	UK voters' panel: Chris Li	4 May, 2005	222	4	204	
2	UK voters' panel: Tonia Barton	4 May, 2005	200	6	261	
3	UK voters' panel: Philippa Bartlett	4 May, 2005	147			
4	UK voters' panel: Keith Brockie	4 May, 2005	198	3	82	
5	UK voters' panel: Paul Holdsworth	4 May, 2005	196			
6	UK voters' panel: Ayub Khan	4 May, 2005	278	10	554	
UK voters' panel: Final reaction		6 May, 2005	47			
1	UK voters' panel: Vanessa Walters	12 May, 2005	183	11	691	
2	UK voters' panel: Alistair Quinn	12 May, 2005	156	5	374	
3	UK voters' panel: Tonia Barton	12 May, 2005	142	4	220	

4	UK voters' panel: Leigh Webber	12 May, 2005	251	2	72
5	UK voters' panel: Michael Dommelt	12 May, 2005	192	2	110
6	UK voters' panel: Gerry Harris	12 May, 2005	303	2	176
7	UK voters' panel: Paul Holdsworth	12 May, 2005	167	1	34
8	UK voters' panel: David Mayer	12 May, 2005	166	4	289

Table 6-4, Detailed list by theme of each *UK Voters' Panel* entry and associated comments