

**Performance, Politics and Media: How the 2010 British General Election leadership debates generated ‘talk’ amongst the electorate.**

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### **Abstract**

During the British General Election 2010 a major innovation was introduced in part to improve engagement: a series of three live televised leadership debates took place where the leader of each of the three main parties, Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative, answered questions posed by members of the public and subsequently debated issues pertinent to the questions. In this study we consider these potentially ground breaking debates as the kind of event that was likely to generate discussion. We investigate various aspects of the ‘talk’ that emerged as a result of watching the debates. As an exploratory study concerned with situated accounts of the participants experiences we take an interpretive perspective. In this paper we outline the meta-narratives (of talk) associated with the viewing of the leadership debates that were identified, concluding our analysis by suggesting that putting a live debate on television and promoting and positioning it as a major innovation is likely to mean that is how the audience will make sense of it – as a media event.

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### **Introduction: The Leadership debates in the 2010 British General Election**

Political discussion is understood to be a vital part of deliberative democracies (Crick 2000, Dahlgren 2003). More than this, with a reduction in traditional political party engagement and a more sceptical electorate (Couldry 2005, Dermody, Hamner-Lloyd and Scullion 2009) talk between members of the electorate - including online discussion - is likely to have increased potential to influence voting behaviours. We ask how such talk can be instigated by the media, looking specifically at the three live debates between party leaders (Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat) that took place in the three weeks leading up to the 2010 UK General Election, as a potential catalyst for political talk. The three debates were broadcast live on ITV, BBC and Sky News at weekly intervals during the campaign, all using questions put forward by a voter audience.

The debates became a major feature of the election campaign (*BBC news*, *Times*) with much media coverage in the lead-up to, and subsequent detailed analysis of each debate. Indeed, Beale writing in the *Independent* said, “if this election has taught the parties’ communications strategists and their advertising agency partners anything, it’s the power of television. There’s no doubt that all the time and money spent on advertising has been overshadowed by the impact of the televised debates”. Several surveys seem to support the idea that the debates were excellent public relations for the election itself. For example, *PR Week* note: “More than 80 per cent of the 3,000 respondents to PR Week Poll survey said future elections should include debates” (PR Week May 5<sup>th</sup> 2010). Their survey also found that 70 per cent of respondents believed the debates made them feel more engaged with politics, and that they paid more attention to the leaders’ debates than other types of campaigning such as canvassing, social media, advertising and editorial. Sixty five per cent said the debates had increased their understanding of what the leaders and their parties stood for. When asked if the debates would influence their voting, 39 per cent said yes. These findings are corroborated in an on-line poll conducted for *Marketing Week* (May 6<sup>th</sup> 2010) after the election had taken place. It found that over 30 per cent of respondents said that the live television debates had influenced their vote. Research conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research (2010) indicates that 69 per cent of respondents thought the debates were a positive addition to the election campaign process.

These live debates (broadcast simultaneously on television and radio) were considered a major innovation in this election, and, in the context of concerns about disengagement (Butler and Kavanagh 2001, Harrison and Munn 2007) and low voter turnout (Denver 2007, Clarke et al 2006) can be seen as an attempt to promote the election and to position it as something important. Anecdotal evidence certainly suggests the debates stimulated some form of political discussion; for example Turner (2010) notes how nearly 15,000 comments were made on *Twitter* within fifteen minutes of the first of the debates finishing, in addition over 7,000 people engaged with *Facebook’s* ‘rate the debate’ application, although we might consider these figures in the context of the average of nearly 8 million people who viewed the debate (BARB). What has not yet been considered in depth is what the nature of ‘everyday’ discussion was; what discourses it produced; and what people actually said about them, to whom, and for what purpose. Consequently, in this

paper we explore the role of the leadership debates that took place during the 2010 British General Election in relation to the generation of talk of a political nature amongst the electorate.

### **Civic culture and political talk**

Civic culture exists between those spaces occupied by the economy and by the state, where citizens reside (Marshall 1950) and is considered essential for a healthy public sphere, and thus, for legitimate democracy to flourish (Turner 2001). Dahlgren (2006) argues that all must feel able to participate, and without a sense of civic-ness resonating and impacting the choices we make, democracy may lose moral authority. His widely cited work notes a circuit of six dimensions required in order for participatory democracy to thrive. These are knowledge, values, identities, affinity, experience and *discussion* with the latter - talking about politics - envisaged as the lubricant keeping the circuit alive. At its core the notion of being a citizen embraces the act of participation in political processes (Marshall 1950, Crick 2000) and means expressing concern on public problems that go beyond simply making personal 'whinges' about society (Moloney 2005).

It is also argued that there has been a decline in the value we place on acting in such a citizenly manner and in political institutions in general (Turner 2001, Marquand 2004, Dermody and Hamner-Lloyd 2005). Such anxiety is succinctly expressed by Dahlgren (2003 p151), when he says "the formal systems seem stagnant...and citizens are dropping out as manifested in declines in voting...and in some places a marked growth in civic cynicism". Couldry (2005) picks up on these concerns, arguing that a lack of perceived opportunity and proficiency are core reasons for a disconnection with politics and related conversations. The 2010 leadership debates could be seen as an attempt to address some of these problems. For instance, by scheduling the debates on prime time television and in a format familiar to television audiences, it offered an opportunity for politicians and the electorate to connect. Furthermore, by encouraging some parts of the electorate who might normally avoid politics to watch the debates, it was hoped that voter learning could be encouraged, and hence more people felt proficient to participate in politics. The leadership debates were therefore presented by both politicians and the media as one potential antidote to disengagement with politics, but apart from their success as a prime-time spectacle we might question how they stimulated everyday political talk.

Clarke (2006) argues political talk is in decline, with widespread use of commercial language reducing the connectedness between individuals and the political system. In her seminal work on political talk, Eliasoph (1997, 1998) demonstrates how her respondents' lack of belief in the value of political discourse leads to a disengagement from politics. She further claims that in a privatised public sphere citizens increasingly "assume that talking politics in a publicly-mannered way is wrong and out of place" (1998 p245). People choose to engage in other types of talk, in part to avoid having to face concerns considered to be public in character. Even citizens who might at first appear to be fulfilling publicly-minded action are, according to Eliasoph, limiting their field of vision by focussing only on terrain where they are confident that they can make a difference. Public discussion has thus become small-scale, local, and practically-oriented, contradicting notions of the public sphere (Asen 1999, Habermas 1992).

What seems evident is that we choose how to engage with politics in large part through how we include it in everyday conversations and practices, but an increasingly consumerist culture pushes public-oriented actions to the margins of our everyday lives. To paraphrase Eliasoph

(1997), we have reached a situation where the vast majority of the electorate are too busy making life to be bothered about making history.

### **Political talk or ‘just’ conversation**

For Schuefele (2000), political discussion may consist of rational argument, or simply an informal expression of opinions and viewpoints. Schudson (1997) however, argues that a more nuanced definition of political talk is required so that casual conversation is excluded. This is so because “nothing in conversation itself suggests democracy” (p305). For Schudson, talk is a condition for solving conflict, deciding public policy positions, or protecting one’s own interests, but to be ‘political’, talk has to be goal oriented and contain persuasive and/or informative qualities. In this normative view, not all talk is of equal value to democracy.

Schuefele (2000) tested this conception of political talk, concluding that such a distinction holds up empirically. However, he also notes “it is reasonable to assume that casual conversation makes political talk more likely” (p 778). Tentative support for such a claim can be found in a recent study where a discussion taking place on reality TV was able to trigger discussion of an overt political nature (Graham and Harju, forthcoming). The work of Kwak, Williams, Wang and Lee (2005) also substantiates this assumed link between everyday conversation and political talk. They illustrate three core structural features of political talk; the size of one’s network, the frequency of discussion, and degree of homogeneity of one’s network. The larger and less diverse a group of associates one has, and the more often this group engage in talk; the more connected, informed, and engaged in politics they are likely to be. The demobilising effect of network heterogeneity is highlighted by Mutz (2002) where exposure to diverse perspectives in one’s discussion increases social risk whilst reducing any sense of having a social anchor or bridge, yet Kwak et al. (2005) found that some of the electorate were able to evaluate different views to draw conclusions that enhanced political participation “by virtue of careful attention and frequent interaction” (p103). We might consider that online forums may have an impact on these structures of talk. More broadly the Internet is presented as a possible new and important location for political engagement (see Bohman 2004; Coleman 2004; Janssen and Kies 2005). Against highly individualised ways of living, the web offers an opportunity for engagement with large networks and within these we might expect routine political talk (see Stromer-Galley 2003). However it may also be clear that the web provides spaces that are both highly networked and active, yet are more heterogeneous than Mutz’s ‘ideals’. Despite considerable interest in the internet as a new public sphere there has been relatively little attention paid to the everyday political talk that takes place online.

There is also a strong and long-established conceptual link between media exposure and political talk, with a number of studies finding news media as *the* universal trigger of conversational topics of the day (Kim, Wyatt and Katz. 1999; Page 1996; Tarade 1989). Furthermore, engagement with both news media and political talk has been closely associated with political participation (Page 1996).

So political talk has an essential place in democracy, but there is a need for clarity about what types – including online discussions – produce meaningful political engagement and how such talk may be framed by the media in general, and more specifically for us by the leadership debates. Stated in grander terms, a greater understanding of political talk is significant because we need to honour the importance of people’s ability to control what is ‘publically sayable’ as an

essential part of what power is (Scott 1990). This makes a case for our research that aims to understand if watching these debates generated political talk, and if so, the nature of such talk.

## **Methods**

In order to minimise the challenges that arise when attempting to capture everyday political talk we pursued a dual methodology of focus groups and netnography.

Participants for our focus group sample were selected on the basis of being able to vote and having watched (or listened to) at least two of the debates. A total of five focus groups were held, each consisting of at least five participants. Discussions lasted approximately one hour forty-five minutes and took place in the period between the last debate and within two weeks of Election Day. They allowed us to explore in detail the conversations about the debates that participants recalled having, however we note problems participants may have in accurately recalling everyday conversation in detail.

We therefore observed political talk in a large online community in order to understand how political talk may actually unfold. As Graham (2008) points out, this also allows for talk to be captured in its natural format.

“... the internet makes everyday political talk visible. Seas of informal political conversations, which researchers in the past have had difficulties gaining access to, are now readily available online...” (Graham 2008 p21).

This is consistent with a netnographic approach, which is now established in consumer research (Kozinets, 1999); however, it required careful selection of an appropriate site. Many online groups deal with special interests that attract specific demographics or psychographics. We therefore selected a popular online community which has a broad interests in consumer matters - a ‘deal’ forum where members and visitors share information on consumer matters - but which also hosts an active ‘off topic’ forum. Two researchers monitored the site for the period covering the election campaign, noting the emerging political conversations. One of the researchers has also been monitoring the site as part of an extended netnography for over two years. Consistent with Man and Stewart’s (2000) concerns about attracting unwanted attention to an online community by naming them in research, we keep the forum and users anonymous here. The site contains forums relating to good consumer deals, shopping vouchers, competitions, and freebies for a range of products and services, but there is also a lively ‘off topic’ section (accounting for about 15% of total threads) where discussions can be on any subject. This is where political threads emerged, and was the focus of our analysis. The site has over 250,000 registered members, and regularly has over 10,000 members and guests online at any one time. Although a limitation of such data is that exact demographics cannot be known, the general interest nature of the site’s content suggests that the forum is broadly representative of internet demographics. Importantly for us, it has no explicit political aims meaning that any political debate that emerged was spontaneous.

Perhaps inevitably, much research into online political discussion has focussed on political forums (Coleman 2004; Dahlberg 2001; Tsaliki 2002). But because of their dominance by the politically active (Coleman, 2004), researchers can only give a partial view of the types of political conversation generated by a political event. Furthermore, in contemporary Western democracies such as the UK, the traditional boundaries between the political and non-political are becoming

increasingly blurred (e.g. Bennett, 1998; Street, 2004). Consequently, there is a case to shift the focus of attention towards the less overtly 'political' as a realm in which to conduct political research. Taking up Dahlberg's (2004) call to move beyond the "first phase" of internet public sphere research, and towards more inclusive discursive spaces, we wanted to understand how the debates inspired conversations amongst those people who are not inclined to seek out an overtly 'political' forum.

Despite these advantages, online forums have weaknesses: for example a lack of depth caused by the need to type rather than say and an inability to capture reflections about motivations and feelings experienced as a result of talk, i.e., the inability to probe participants without interfering with the community. We also note that anonymity in online forums may produce trolling, and extreme positions taken and so on, which may not necessarily be a reliable indicator of everyday political conversations away from the online space. Our chosen forum however has consistently enforced rules to discourage such behaviours.

Our research design therefore produced two sets of narratives that relate to talk about the leadership debates: detailed conversations with focus group participants based on their recollection of conversations following the debates; and the threads from a large and popular general interest forum that capture online talk over the period of the debates. Both sets of data were independently analysed by the authors to identify key themes. These were then compared and reassessed to produce the narrative we present below. Multiple independent analysis, inspired by Hoover, Clark and Alters (2004), reduced the chances of us missing something important and allowed us to identify both commonalities and differences in our interpretation of each theme. In the next section we outline and discuss the themes we collectively believe were most salient and widely held by our participants.

## **Findings**

Our intention is not to directly compare on and offline talk and in any case we find common rather than divergent practices. Consequently we only refer to each context where pertinent. Firstly, we outline the structures that framed talk about the debates. We then discuss the contents of discussions that transpired, and then the purposes that were ascribed to engaging in such talk. In our final section we then reflect on these findings in order to come to some conclusions about the outcome of the leadership debates as a way of encouraging political talk.

### ***Framing of talk about the debates***

We identified four key ways in which talk of the debates was framed: accessibility, permission, novelty, and positioning the debates as a media event.

The debates were considered to be highly *accessible*, and as such an easy way into thinking about the General Election. The heavy promotion and the format reminiscent of reality-type programmes bought familiarity and audience participation. The promise of winners and losers and the belief that these events forced the politicians to 'come down' to the level of 'ordinary' member of the electorate, all contributed to this sense that the debates 'opened-up' the otherwise remote political sphere.

The fact that leaders directly answered questions posed by the audience particularly appealed. Martin, for example, tells us that he often avoids political news because "you have to filter out all

of the biases”, but found the debates accessible due to their direct and unmediated connection between the prospective Prime Ministers and the electorate. Participants in the focus groups and members of the forum also felt able to engage with the debates as a format they understood. In this sense, the status of the debates as a mainstream televised event was crucial as it afforded many people the opportunity to watch political talk between leaders and to subsequently bring it up in conversation in a way that would not have otherwise been possible with other mediums. As Sophie explains:

“you don’t really start a conversation based on what is in the paper the other day to the same extent as you do TV”.

In this sense watching the debates also gave the participants a sense of *permission* to talk about politics. Having viewed a debate our participants felt they had both material and confidence to engage with others in conversation about what they had witnessed. For some this sense of permission extended to politics in general, as Paul, a first-time voter explains:

“Anywhere you go now you can have a discussion about politics and it doesn’t seem a bit strange. Before, if you talk to people about politics, especially our age, they are like, ‘what are you talking about?’ But now, because it’s so accessible to anyone, anywhere you go you can do it”

In the focus groups it was particularly noticeable that those previously less politically involved and informed referred to the debates as a ‘first step’ into having something to say on the subject, and, just as importantly, gave them belief that others who they talked to would not find it odd if they raised politics as a subject of conversation. Amongst the social circle of Emily, for example, “everyone was talking about politics, and it was enjoyable”

The ubiquity and nature of the media coverage of the debates meant that it felt safe and acceptable to include reference to it in their everyday talk. For some, at least for a brief period of time, this resulted in them seeking out others specifically to talk about the debates. We could also see this in the online forum. Members started a number of threads directly relating to the debates and actively encouraging discussion. As a whole, forum members accepted the debates as a legitimate topic of conversation and the most contributed-to threads in the misc section immediately following the debates directly referred to them.

Given the dominance of a consumer culture that privileges the new (Campbell 1992) it is perhaps not surprising that *novelty* also emerged as significant for participants. What they called the ‘hype’ surrounding the lead up to and subsequent coverage of the debates produced a desire ‘not to miss out’. Participants also noted that it was so rare to have such thoughts and feelings towards a political event. They recognised that such debates had never taken place before in the UK and picked up that the debates were being labelled ‘historic’. This produced expectation that they ‘promised something different’. As such, the participants were keen to see if they lived up to the build-up, wanted to be part of the hype, and so talked them up, at least initially, in order to sustain the sense that they were witnessing something momentous. In this context we might see the forum debates as a process of memorialising the event. The threads allowed participants to publicly declare that ‘they were there’. This was evident for example in posts that *described* the leaders of the debate (rather than commented on them or the policies they discussed). In this respect you could compare them to a major film release, sporting event, or reality TV competition,



all of which also routinely feature in popular threads on the forum.

This leads to the final narrative to emerge. The debates were perceived as *media events*. In the same way that reality TV programmes and talent shows are related to by the audience as a spectacle (Vartanov 1991) so the debates became ‘must see’ television. This was manifest in practices typical of planned viewing (Hoover et al. 2005), chores were completed to ensure they were free, effort was made to be home in good time, participants talked of pouring a drink and getting themselves ready to watch. Several participants added to the sense of occasion by organising to watch the debates with other people.

One implication of this framing was that it was apparent that the salience of the leadership debates were temporally and spatially restricted, self-contained and removed from everyday life, and as such, highly perishable in character. This was evidenced by the transient nature of the on-line discussion. Many of the participants in the debate threads contributed to record that they had seen them, but did not maintain prolonged discussion. In addition, focus group participants struggled to recall the detail of their viewing experiences and subsequent conversations about the debates. Much of the talk generated was therefore restricted to the spectacle itself. This is a topic we pick up in the next section.

### *Contents of talk about the debates*

As a consequence of the framing of the debates as a media extravaganza, watched as stage-managed, event-style programmes, we observed that the dominant theme that infused all forms of talk was *performance*. Much of the discussion both on and off line was about what they thought of the executional elements of the show: how some of the adjudicators were better than others at their job; the passivity of the audiences; the design of the set, camera angles, and; the length of the programmes. Talk about the leaders included comments about their mood, their dress sense, style, tone of voice, degree to which they repeated themselves, body position in relation to the lecterns they stood near, whether they looked into the camera or at the audience member who asked the question, their facial expressions and other mannerisms. This was considered a legitimate opportunity to get to know the leaders ‘as people’ (or possibly as would-be celebrity performers) and it was through noting and commenting on this personal detail that participants felt able to express opinion and make judgements.

Consistent with evaluations about characters in other programmes, participants discussed how the leaders interacted with each other, how they responded to the pressure of the occasion, and how their performances changed over time. For example, there was much talk about Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg’s polished achievements in the first debate and his inability to ‘live up to’ this in subsequent debates. Participants also talked about how each leader mimicked the ‘best’ aspects of their rivals’ presentations. This reinforced their belief that the leaders were knowingly involved in television pageant. As such, having conversations about the colour of the leader’s tie, whether they looked tired or energised, and how apt each of them were at implementing performance ‘tricks of the trade’, were points of entry allowing the audience to have something to say about the candidates. Considerable discussion about the leaders performances revolved around working out how natural or staged they were. Hence Gordon Brown’s (Labour party leader) attempts to smile and David Cameron’s (Conservative Party leader) heavily made-up forehead were typical types of talk that emerged both on and offline.

Reading into *how* the leaders argued their case was more prevalent in participants talk than *what* their case was. Clegg's ability to remember all of the names of those audience members who asked questions was worthy of discussion because it was illustrative of a broader message about his character, and we note here as in other themes, media commentary often seemed to provide the script for conversation as participants and forum members parroted the themes that journalists identified. Felicity explains this process first-hand: "I almost felt that I was being pushed into reacting to it in particular ways by the way it was being over-analysed". Ultimately, conversation was consistent with the media coverage about this being a zero sum contest where there had to be winners and losers, and where the individual leaders' apparent achievements and failures on the programmes would impact the outcome of the election. The three longest threads on the forum related to each of the leaders and invited discussion about their individual performance.

Policy-oriented talk *did* emerge, though infrequently and more evidently in the online forums than amongst those recalling their experiences in the focus groups. Most significant is how this policy talk remained framed in a performative manner, tending to focus on how issues 'came across', clarity of presentation, passion and sincerity, and how skilfully it was defended. For example participants recalled how they had mocked Brown because he kept bringing up the issue of tax credits; it became a point of amusement they shared each time the term was mentioned "tax credits, tax credits, tax credits!" (Sophie). Similarly, parts of the debates about policy where either Cameron or Brown said 'I agree' generated mocking conversation rather than detailed discussion about what such an agreement might mean for the relative political positions of the leaders. For example, Ros recalled discussing after the first debate how Clegg's (interestingly, not the Liberal Democrats) policies on immigration and Trident would 'turn against him' in future debates, and she discussed how he 'distanced himself' from these policies in the final debate. Her political talk was thus not about the policies themselves, but rather how policy can be used for political gain.

Talk about policy was often framed as discussion about how credible and believable the presentation was and only on some occasions and for some participants did such conversation extended into the detail of policy merits and shortcomings. However, the range of policy issues discussed was limited largely to immigration, the state of the economy and taxation. It was evident in the forum how people appropriated media commentary to articulate their points, for example disputing Gordon Brown's arguments about immigration with direct reference to newspaper articles. However, more frequently, users simply linked to media content without further comment and this included links to parodies on *YouTube* (for example when emphasising Cameron's poshness), or spoof political adverts. Policy-oriented talk was often dominated by simply restating existing positions on a given issue as 'true', or 'given'. This is significant because it restricts possibility of elaborated discussion on policy issues (in the forum moves to discuss policy in detail were often either ignored, or reduced to trolling). This leads us into our third section of the discussion where we consider what purpose was ascribed to engaging in talk.

### ***Purposes of talk about the debates***

Motivation for talk becomes more important when we consider the normative considerations ascribed to political talk outlined earlier. At one level the mere act of watching the debates, often with other people, and knowing that a large number of people had also seen them, meant they provided topical things to use in routine social conversations that people engage in to mark their friendships and acquaintances and this includes routine online 'chat'. Beyond this there seems to have been four distinct meanings attached to the discussions that ensued: a chance to memorialise

something; a means of bolstering existing viewpoints; a way of avoiding detailed political talk; and a reinforcement of frustration with contemporary politics.

The leaders' debate was a specific, meaningful event that produced talk that helped individuals to get involved in something. And, as we discussed earlier when referring to the debates being framed as novel, talk sustained a sense that they were part of a notable occasion. So, for example participants recalled talking for the very first time to work colleagues, and even strangers, about politics. Such conversations were noted as 'special' and unusual and served to mark involvement in this historic event.

The debates were also used to *reinforce existing views*, often playfully. For example one deliberately called their father-in-law to 'wind them up' by referring to supposedly weak points made by the leader of the party they support. Where viewers with different political persuasions watched the debates together, the conversations recalled included advocacy and antagonism reminiscent of the predisposed supporters of a sports team: "it's like a bad decision in a football match when they say something that you don't agree with, or you know they're not telling the truth" (Will). The debates were therefore a way to 'cheer your side on'. Deliberate antagonistic 'trolling' was even more evident online to the point where several participants were warned by moderators about their behaviour and several threads were even closed because they had descended into repetitive and aggressive arguments.

Talk confirming existing views may be seen as a strategy to *avoid* the more difficult work of interrogating the intricate detail of political policy. Indeed, forum member's collectively restricted political talk to more general and even superficial aspects of the leaders' performances. As the debates online developed, several members started new threads on specific policy issues. Not only were these less popular (in terms of post and views), but they attracted complaints by other members that the forum was been 'overrun' by political discussion when in reality the political threads still accounted for only a small proportion of all threads even during the final days of the election campaigns. Online and in the recalled stories, individuals deliberately limited their field of vision, restricting what they consider to be acceptable political talk in public. This is reminiscent of what Eliosoph (1998) found. For example, David felt the debates failed to penetrate the barriers that exist to engaging in substantive political discussion:

"You would think that a programme like that would stimulate debate, but a lot of people are reluctant to discuss politics ... it's a very English thing isn't it, that you are not supposed to discuss politics, which is probably why most of the population know nothing about it."

Similarly, Ken, who like David was politically informed and engaged, found it hard to find people to share political discussion with:

"although the media would have us believe this is being talked about by 90% of the population ...in my general life it didn't seem to me it was the thing at the front of most people's minds"

There is an apparent contradiction in our findings; we suggest the debates were accessible offering permission to talk, yet at the same time argue that some participant's attempts to generate discussions were thwarted. Essentially this highlights the difference between the type of talk being referred to - substantive and non-substantive.

Finally discussion generated through watching the debates fuelled some viewers' sense of disillusionment with *the ways of modern politics*. Focus group participants often had a lot of negative things to say about the leadership debates ranging from how regulated they were, to how shallow the cross-examinations were, though it was notable that such criticism was a far stronger theme amongst the more politically experienced and engaged. Ken summarises this frustration:

“if you want to perhaps try and educate people a bit more about the political process so that they can hopefully participate a bit more then I thought there were better ways of doing it than those political programmes”.

These people had hoped that the innovation of holding live debates offered the possibility of 'grown-up political deliberation', but in their discussions with other people about what they considered to be the flawed debates, they expressed the view that these were symptomatic of deeper problems with 'media driven politics'. As such, these discussions also had a reinforcing purpose, however in their case it corroborated why they were frustrated with politics.

Similarly in the forum there was both persistent frustrations expressed by some participants that the debate was not more sophisticated, and dismissive calls that politics was not worth talking about, or rather that none of the leaders were worth talking about. In this respect where the debates did prompt reflection it was shallow or cynical, and only about the political process and the choice available to voters. We can see this as an example of the individualised and non-civic 'whinging' that Moloney, (2005) identified.

## **Discussion**

We now reflect on these findings in order to come to some conclusions about the outcome of the leadership debates as a form of political communication that we may hope stimulated political talk in everyday conversation. Our interpretive approaches mean we make no claims of a cause and effect nature, nevertheless, the accounts our participants gave coupled with our netnography of discussions that emerged allows us to make the following observations.

During the election campaign, explicitly political threads appeared on the forum far more prominently than usual, and for a time attracted considerable comment and attention. However, engagement with such communication was limited temporally, spatially and cognitively. For example, positioning the live debates as a major innovation is likely to mean that is how the audience will make sense of it – as a media event. Much of the discussion about the debates was about aspects of the event as a spectacle and a show where the politician's performances are most salient. Only fleeting talk about the detail of the policy offerings took place and these were hard to sustain, in part because the debates were full of performative qualities that were more accessible points of discussion and because being part of the spectacle may have been more important than being part of the politics. Purists of democratic theory could therefore dismiss much of the talk we witnessed on the grounds that they do not appear to engender careful rational deliberation or fulfil Schudson's (1997) criteria of conflict solving and deciding public policy positions. In effect we could see these more as 'media talk' than 'political talk'.

The debates became a focal point for assembled thoughts about the election. Watching may have reduced the informational and efficacy barriers to engage in political conversation by offering a resource that the participants appropriated in everyday talk. Thus, as is widely found in consumer cultural research, the viewers were proficient at reworking messages in order to glean their own

meaningfulness from it. The very experience - often a shared one - of viewing the debates gave people reflective opportunities that were in part manifest in enacting political talk. These experiences also fed the practice of self-dialogue - participants shouted at their TV screens and thought out loud whilst watching the debates, some posted cathartic rants to the forum – and this in itself may be empowering. They triggered what Schudson might term ‘conversation’, and it was possible that at least some this developed into political talk that included politics more generally. It is likely that the discussion that took place will have increased awareness of and interest in the General Election.

For a short time the debates may have generated political talk, but the ‘breakthrough’ for the media in arranging the televised debates was not mirrored by a breakthrough for political talk – at least not when set against normative expectations of ‘everyday talk’. We might reflect on the comment that people tend not to talk about a *Newsnight* episode or press article, and contrast that with the relative ease of talking about the debates, concluding that conversations about performance may be better than nothing. Online especially, we read posts from people who may not regularly mention politics in everyday talk, and whose political engagement is generally quite low. And we might note that many more viewed at least some of these threads than actually posted. So as well as political talk, there was a degree of political listening, but listening to other citizens’ views rather than those of politicians and journalists.

However, findings from the forum in particular showed that if you expose less engaged people to TV debates they do not suddenly gain the capacity to engage in substantive and informed policy discussion – they talk about what is accessible and familiar – performance. There may have been discussion that fits the normative expectation on other platforms (like BBC online’s *Have Your Say* for example), but we might suggest that for a large section of the electorate – for the relatively fleeting moments that politics was made salient to them - this *is* how they talk about politics. They simply bring to political talk established conversational practices. This should not be surprising. The barriers to ‘idealised’ forms of political talk put forward in the literature were unlikely to be broken down by a prime time, stage-managed media event.

## **Conclusion**

Despite media commentary positioning the debates as ‘groundbreaking’ we found no sense of transformative discussion; rather the talk was almost entirely reactive to the performances as spectacle. In addition media analysis of the debates used immediate and questionable methods and measures such as the ‘worm’, our more considered way of investigating the impact puts the utility of the debate into a broader, non media-centric everyday context. Such debates - formatted and framed as they are - serve as a conforming force because they created no obvious need for viewers to look beyond their regularised ways of talking about politics. As such, we note a tension where the discussion generated might be characterised as a curious mix of being sometimes personally-belligerent, yet always collectively-conservative.

If the debates hoped to raise the quality of political talk generated by TV debates, we suggest the nature of the medium itself shape and restricted such talk. Because television is such a visual medium, it seems inevitable that audiences will be drawn to comment on performative aspects. Television is also dominated by entertainment, and so is seen by audiences primarily as an entertainment medium. This frames how they view such debates (as a show), and therefore subsequent discussions.

When thinking about the conditions needed for political talk to thrive, we must therefore consider the present challenges. Ideally, political talk (including in online forums) serving to enhance political engagement might best be established as normal in everyday life so that it is seen as just another part of the daily diet of conversation. The leadership debates then might be presented in a way that not only prompts political talk, but also directs this to a more substantive connection with political issues over a prolonged period of time. But this is far from a reality, because it requires an informed and engaged audience, who value civic culture.

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