"All this is a boon to Britain's crumbling democracy": meta-reporting about the TV-debates in the British General Election 2015

Book or Report Section

Accepted Version

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"All this is a boon to Britain's crumbling democracy": meta-reporting about the TV-debates in the British General Election 2015. In: Kranert, M. and Horan, G. (eds.) 'Doing Politics': discursivity, performativity and mediation in political discourse. Discourse Approaches to Politics, Society and Culture. John Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 361-382. ISBN 9789027201935 Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/73398/

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See Guidance on citing.

Publisher: John Benjamins

"All this is a boon to Britain's crumbling democracy". Meta-reporting about the TV-debates in the British General Election 2015[1]

This contribution analysis meta-reporting in the 2015 British election campaign. First, the concept of mediatisation and the consequences of mediatisation for political communication will be discussed more generally. Second, the concept of meta-reporting will be introduced as both symptom and consequence of an increased degree of mediatised political communication. Thirdly, based on previous findings, a qualitative analysis of newspaper reporting on the four TV debates during the 2015 election campaign exhibits various elements of meta-reporting. Meta-reporting about these media-initiated and mediatised communicative events includes a) reporting about spin doctoring, image work and strategies for self-representation of political actors; b) discussing the media format itself and the media actors involved in them c) the effect of the TV debates on the audience and on voting behaviour. The analysis of meta-reporting about the TV debates indicates both a de-politicisation of political agency as well as a politicisation of media agency.

1 Mediatisation of political communication

While mediation refers more neutrally to the role of the media in conveying information between different social actors (see Strömbäk 2008), mediatisation refers to a concept that captures on the one hand the influence of the media on other social actors or institutions which adapt their practices to practices of the media and on the other hand the communicative construction of social reality in and through media (cf. Hepp 2014). With regard to the former aspect, studies focus for example on changes in parliamentary practices geared towards gaining publicity (e.g. Kepplinger 2002, Burkhardt 2003) or on the increased management of political communication as indicated by the use of PR consultants and advertising agencies, especially during election campaigns. With regard to the latter aspect, studies show how news values (cf. Bednarek/Caple 2012) determine the selection of which topics and actors make it into the media and how standardised as well as time- and space-limited media formats influence the representation of political issues and political actors[2]

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[1] This contribution is a substantially amended version of …

[2] I use the term 'political actors' here to refer to include politicians and election candidates as well as persons acting on behalf of political parties or their candidates, e.g. campaign organisers. I also use 'media actors' in the following to refer to media institutions (e.g. broadcasters, newspapers) as well as persons acting within or on behalf of media institutions, in particular journalists, including the TV debate moderators.

through the media (e.g. Kamps 1999). However, in practice these two aspects are intertwined and reinforce each other. For example, symbolising a political programme through the person or personality of a political candidate is more compatible with media formats than explaining a complex programme and its rationale. Hence, for political parties, the personality and media-compatibility of their candidates becomes more important in order to gain favourable publicity. As a consequence, candidates may undergo image make-overs, extensive media-training and employ consultants who help them prepare for appearance in a variety of media formats. If this is in turn rewarded with wide ranging media presence of the candidate, their representation in the media may contribute to them becoming 'celebrity politicians' (Stanyer 2013) with an increasing focus on their personality and private life.

Blumler/Kavanagh (1999) describe three phases of post war mediatised political communication; first of all a phase were political parties still had a large degree of control over the emittance of their communication, followed by the introduction of public broadcasting services which became the main medium for political communication. At the same time, voters' political affiliations became less fixed to certain parties or milieus, and voting behaviour became more volatile, therefore increasing competition and the need to convince voters by means of effective communication. A third phase is marked by an increasing diversification of available media institutions, formats, technologies, devices and acceleration of transmission. These developments offer a multitude of new communication channels and formats that can be used for political communication as well as an increased and in terms of media formats diversified exposure at the receiving end. This increased the need for political parties to invest in developing communication strategies, media consultancy and public relations management in order to win support for their positions. Volatile voting behaviour makes politicians and parties increasingly dependent on optimising their use of opportunities for media presence. In turn, journalists react with opposition to the attempts of politicians and parties to control political communication by means of spin doctoring:

> After all, the party publicity ideal is to shape the news environment so that journalists are driven to focus only on such and such an issue (…). For their part, however, journalists do not relish having their news choices severely narrowed by those whose activities they are supposed to cover. […] (215)

Exposing spin on part of parties and politicians has therefore become a feature of the representation of politics in the media. This also points towards the increasingly adversarial

conditions under which politicians and political parties are granted media presence. Detailed analyses of political interviews show that these have become more adversarial and that some questions can be deliberately designed so as to expose politicians for not providing a direct answer, but appearing evasive (Bull 2003, 2012), which at the same time reducing the informational value of political interviews. Journalists develop strategies to distance themselves from politicians, e.g. through a tendency to report on issues that are negative for or that scandalise political actors, to put campaign strategies and tactics into the focus of reporting, to discuss and dramatise polls as well as personalities and character traits (Esser 2003, esp. 168). To a degree, these strategies result in backgrounding of political substance in news reporting.

At the same time as the media expose attempts by politicians and political parties to control their representation, the media's role in constructing such representations, and the media institution's self-interest that guides this process (cf. Street 2011) receive notably less critical self-reflection. Instead, the media insist on their watchdog role (cf. Louw 2010, 48ff.) and, as again analyses of political interviews show, frame themselves as the advocates of the public's right demand for politicians to explain themselves (Clayman 2002, 2007). Nevertheless, as McNair points out, the media also rely on the provision with newsworthy material that emanates from spin doctors, constituting a "relationship of mutual dependence", which "gives the demonology of spin some of the character of a 'phoney war'" (McNair 2000, 136). The relationship between politics and media has therefore developed a complex dynamics in which the increased need by political actors to manage communication is met with resistance from media actors, resulting in a more adversarial representation of politics in the media which in turn political actors might attempt to overcome with even more fine-tuned strategizing.

2 Meta-reporting

While the phenomenon of meta-reporting has been noted and investigated by researchers on political communication, in particular within election campaign reporting (Bennett 1992, Johnson et al. 1996, Kerbel 1998 and 1999, McNair 2000), Esser et al.'s work puts this phenomenon in the context of mediatisation. In doing so, meta-reporting emerges as one manifestation of the journalistic strategies used to counter the increasing spin and PR management of politicians. Meta-reporting is not about core political issues or about the content of statements by parties and politicians, but about parties' and politicians' media

communication strategies and advisers, their image work and the reactions from the media and their audience to how politicians present themselves. Esser et al. (2001) propose a view of meta-reporting as indicative of broader changes in election campaign coverage. It follows the stages of issue coverage (i.e. election campaign reporting that focuses on political issues) and strategy coverage (i.e. stories about campaign strategies and tactics which have emerged as a new way of election campaign reporting since the 70s) as identified by Patterson (1994). Meta-reporting becomes has become a notable strand in election campaign reporting since the 90s:

> Here, the press self-referentially and self-consciously diverges from its customary role as a conduit of information to one of reporting on how it is one of the actors on the campaign stage. (…) Metacoverage can, therefore, be defined as self-referential reflections on the nature of the interplay between political public relations and political journalism. (…) Campaign coverage has now reached a *meta* level where reporters ask, How do the campaign handlers try to use the media for their own ends and how are we covering the election anyway? (Esser et al. 2001, 17f.; italics in the original)

In line with the above described dynamics of mediatisation, D'Angelo and Esser (2014) point out that because of the dependency of political actors on achieving media presence, campaign organisers contribute to the mediatisation of politics. This makes the media a more powerful actor and therefore, "heightened media autonomy is a byproduct of media dependency on part of campaign organizations." (D'Angelo/Esser 2014, 299). In turn, political communication consultants use meta-reporting as a "sounding board for candidates seeking to determine how they are being portrayed and how well media strategies are working." (D'Angelo/Esser 2014 299f.). This can be seen as one of the increasingly fine-tuned strategies by political actors to deal with increasing media power.

Following Johnson 1996 and Kerbel 1998, Esser et al. (2001) differentiate between "self-referential news" and "process news", both of which they regard as typical manifestations of meta-reporting. Self-referential news contain news about the quantity and quality of the reporting about election campaigns, candidates or issues; the influence of the media on the outcome of the vote; topic management within the campaign as well as campaign reporting which focuses on the image, character or personal life of the candidates. "Process news" comprise "reports about the backstage manoeuvers of campaign operatives to guide or

influence journalists" (19); for example reports about the attempts of candidates to construct their image, about their motivations and the campaign organisers' relationship with the media.

Esser's (2003) analysis of media reporting in the German election campaign 2002 in TV news provides further evidence for the presence and contents of meta-reporting. The latter include reporting about polls, personalities/character traits and scandals as well as journalism and publicity. For instance, meta-reporting relating to journalism includes 'journalists interviewing journalists', 'media insiderism and subjective views of reporters', 'news media report on self-initiated polls', 'news media as an influence on voters, the campaign and politicians'. Meta-reporting relating to publicity includes 'management of events, image, media and communication management', 'campaign-, PR- or media-consultants as political actors', 'preparation of, self-representation in and spin/framing after TV debates'. All of these components of meta-reporting also emerge from the following analysis of the reporting about the British election TV debates.

A comparative quantitative content analysis of election campaign reporting in TV news (Esser 2008) in Germany, the USA and the UK shows the lowest degree of meta-reporting in UK media (in the 2001 election campaign for the latter) and the highest in the USA. The topics of meta-reporting, however, are similar across the three countries. A further comparative analysis of newspaper reporting about spin doctors (Esser et al. 2001) in Germany, the USA and the UK (in the 1997 election campaign for the latter) suggests a critical attitude and a critical distance on part of the British press towards the management of political communication through PR-strategists, i.e. in particular spin doctors are not quoted as a source of information, but they are the subject of reporting that indicates a critical view on their role in campaigns.

Within this background, the following analysis will focus on the meta-reporting about the TV debates in the 2015 British general election campaign and provide a more in depth case study which allows a detailed view on the textual representation of the phenomenon and on different forms of meta-reporting. While the work by Esser et al. carves out the phenomenon of meta-reporting, situates it within the dynamics of mediatisation and analyses its quantitative presence as well as topical remit, these studies provide little detail on how this plays out at the textual level. The previous studies are largely content analyses of election campaign reporting as established in the Social Sciences, based on thematic coding that also allows to quantify the presence of (sub-)topics in reporting. The following analysis is a

smaller scale case study that does not focus on the (role of meta-reporting in) overall campaign reporting, but only on the media response to the media-initiated TV debates. It is intended to add depth through a closer textual analysis of meta-reporting and thereby brings out don the one hand some features of its textual representations, such as the metaphorical conceptualisation of theatre and on the other hand, how several traits of meta-reporting work together in portraying politicians' contributions to the debates as uncommunicative and meaningless. Despite limited comparability of the research designs, the above mentioned analyses on meta- reporting in the 1997 and 2001 British general election campaigns allow in conclusion a view on possible changes, not least since the introduction of TV debates in the UK in 2010.

With regard to the mediatisation of political communication, as briefly discussed above, TV debates can be seen as mediatised politics and as a media genre that mixes elements of discussion show, political interview, hustings and political/parliamentary debate, wherein the logics ruling the systems of politics and media meet, or are likely to clash (Bucher 2007). The media reporting about TV debates can already be seen as a metadiscourse – i.e. communication about a communicative event – which in addition is characterised by media self-referentiality. The reporting about the TV debates focuses on reactions of media audiences and experts, image work and strategies of self-representation of the participating politicians, (debates about) the media format itself, media actors and PR-strategists. In line with this, the things that politicians had to say within these media-initiated instances of political communication were denied relevance. Niehr (2007) in his analysis of the media reporting about the German TV debate between Angela Merkel and Gerhard Schröder 2005 also observes the backgrounding of political content and the foregrounding of competition, of contestants' relationships with the media and critical comments about the TV debate as a media format itself.

3 Data and methodology

The following analysis will focus on meta-reporting regarding not the overall 2015 British election campaign, but one aspect of it – the TV debates. After the first televised debates in the context of an election campaign had been broadcast – and covered in media reporting – in 2010 (cf. Pattie/Johnson 2011), it is fair to say that the media reporting about the 2015 general election campaign was dominated by a series of such debates broadcast in the weeks before the election. The election was held on 7 May, and between 26 March and 30 April

four debates which were held in different formats were produced and aired by different broadcasters (for the development of the different formats and politicians' participation in the events, cf. Beckett 2016):

1. 26 March, BBC: Jeremy Paxman interviewed first David Cameron (Prime Minister, Conservative Party) and then Ed Miliband (Labour Party). Following this, Jeremy Paxman moderated the studio audience's questions to the two politicians, who again made successive appearances.

2. 2 April, ITV: Julie Etchingham put questions relating to different topics to the chairs of seven UK political parties, i.e. Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party (SNP), Green Party, Plaid Cymru, UK Independence Party (UKIP), followed by questions from the audience in the studio, also moderated by Julie Etchingham.

3. 16 April, BBC: David Dimbleby moderated a debate between the chairs of the five opposition parties (Labour, SNP, Green Party, Plaid Cymru, UKIP).

4. 30 April, BBC: David Dimbleby moderated a special edition of the political discussion show *Question Time*, in which the studio audience could ask most of the questions. Participants were David Cameron (Conservatives), Ed Miliband (Labour) and Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrats). This was followed by shorter, separate broadcasts with a similar format, featuring Nigel Farage (UKIP), Leanne Wood (Plaid Cymru) and Nicola Sturgeon (SNP).

The newspaper articles about these four debates which form the text corpus for the following analysis were retrieved from the Lexis Nexis database. The Lexis Nexis database contains most of all legal texts, but also a variety of newspapers, dating as far back as these are available digitally[3]. It is possible to perform targeted searches, most of all in being able to select and combine individual sources, apply or combine search terms and to limit the search to a particular time span. Through using these search options, a corpus of newspaper reporting specifically about the TV debates could be systematically assembled for closer textual analysis, instead of having to browse these newspapers' entire content. The time span for the search was set for three days before until three days after the event, i.e. altogether seven days with the day of the broadcast itself included.[4] The searches were conducted within

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[3] This varies from paper to paper.

[4] Indicative searches showed that this is the main time span of pre- and post debate reporting, even though the debates may be referred to in a variety of articles at other times, too.

the left-liberal *Independent* and *Guardian* as well as the conservative *Times* and *Daily Telegraph*, including their weekend editions. The search terms for the first debate were: "Cameron AND Miliband AND TV AND debate", for the second "ITV AND debate", for the third "BBC AND TV AND debate", and for the fourth "question time". It is reasonable to expect explicit reference to the TV debates that the newspapers report about, hence these appeared to be the most useful general search terms in order to assemble the corpus for analysis. The following table provides a breakdown of the number of articles per event and newspaper which were retrieved through the searches described above:

	26 March debate	2 April debate	16 April debate	30 April Question Time	Total per newspaper
Independent	38	45	25	40	148
Guardian	35	36	35	36	142
The Times	16	13	17	40	86
Daily Telegraph	14	23	13	49	99
Total per debate	103	117	90	165	
Total					475

Only broadsheet newspapers were chosen because firstly, the focus of this research does not include a comparison between broadsheet and tabloid papers and secondly, it strengthens the argument of this chapter to focus on broadsheet newspapers: Here we would expect less meta-reporting than in other papers and more substantive focus on political content. It is therefore particularly illustrative of the currency of meta-reporting in the context discussed in section 2 above if even the broadsheet newspapers devote a lot of space to focus on the TV-debates and to meta-reporting in writing about these events.

Considering that the TV debates started six weeks before the election, that the main reporting about each debate spanned a week – i.e. four of the six weeks before the election – and that altogether 475 articles were retrieved (i.e. on average 17 articles per day and 4.3 per day per newspaper), indicates that the reporting about the general election campaign was at least heavily influenced by these media-initiated communicative events.

All of the retrieved articles were analysed for occurrences of meta-reporting, guided by forms of meta-discourse identified in previous research by Esser et al. above. Recurring forms of meta-reporting were then drawn together, such as meta-reporting that relates to a

metaphorical conceptualisation of the debates as theatre or recurring comments about the format of the debates, and related to either process news or self-referential news. The analysis does therefore not focus on specific linguistic features, but manifestations of meta-reporting at textual level, even though metaphorical conceptualisation and recurring lexical features will be noted in the analyses below. This procedure is akin to the – methodologically diverse – Critical Discourse Analysis "as a problem-oriented interdisciplinary research movement" and with "a shared interest in the semiotic dimensions of power" (Fairclough et al. 2011, 357) – here the effect of mediatisation, and with it in particular meta-reporting, on political communication and the degree to which it reflects shifts of power between media actors and political actors. A combination of concepts from other disciplines such the Social Sciences or, in this case, Media Communication Studies, with qualitative-heuristic textual analysis is also characteristic as well as particular emphasis on context, since "all discourses are historical and can therefore only be understood with reference to their context." (Wodak/Meyer 2009, 20). In this case, this requires recognising mediatisation as a process of change in political communication, within which the current analysis offers a snapshot of the way in which the introduction of the TV debates might have influenced campaign reporting and triggered increased meta-reporting within it. However, such an analysis does not only add detail to the quantitative content analyses of meta-reporting found in Media Communication Studies by quoting from the newspaper articles, but a more detailed analysis and interpretation also allows to carve out how the different forms of meta-reporting identified here reinforce each other in the construction of politicians' contributions as meaningless but at the same time in the construction of the political significance of the TV-debates.

4 Results

4.1 Process news

4.1.1 Theatrical Metaphor

Theatrical metaphors reinforce the staged character of the communicative event. They are realised through lexis such as "show" (e.g. Guardian, 27.3. and many more), "performance" (z.B. Observer, 29.3. and many more), "last night's drama" (Independent, 2.4.), "appear on stage" (Guardian, 26.3.) and "play" (Times, 3.4.). The Guardian most succinctly comments:

> It was the normal, unrevealing bit of political theatre in which all the actors read out the lines you thought they were going to say, then had a stab at improvisation and trundled off. (Guardian, 2.4.2015)

Politicians operate on the basis of 'scripts' (Sunday Telegraph, 5.4.) and say their 'lines', which suggests that what they say are not genuine propositions that they identify with, but is pre-fabricated text that may have been penned by another person: "Miliband's advisers, who include former tabloid journalist and a stand-up comedian, help him craft his attacks on his opponents." (Sunday Times, 5.4.) Thus, the politicians, like actors, have to bring across what others have penned in a convincing manner without necessarily being convinced themselves of what they say. The representation of this media-initiated communication event as 'drama/theatre' implies that we are dealing with inauthentic communication that is only about the style of delivery, not about content. This implies that the politicians-as-actors do not have to mean what they say and that they cannot be held to account for what others tell them, or what the script tells them to say. Meta-reporting emphasises how the – commercially active and not democratically elected – PR strategists become playwrights and stage directors who exercise substantial influence on what gets said and how.

> Miliband's performance owes in part to his diligence. […] He trained hard […]. The "Hell yes, I am tough enough" soundbite […] sounded as though it emerged from discussions with David Axelrod, the former Obama adviser. (Guardian, 27.3.2015)
> Some of this is straight out of the election playbook of Lynton Crosby, Mr Cameron's chief strategist. (Sunday Times, 29.3.2015)

The spin doctors therefore become persons of public interest; an article in the Times is dedicated to portray one of the campaign strategists (26.3.) and quotes from the 'spin room' are part of the performance assessment (Daily Telegraph, 18.4., Guardian, 17.4., Independent 16.4., Times 1.5.). The Daily Telegraph (28.3.) assesses Cameron's appearance within the framework of the main strategy points developed by the Conservatives' campaign strategist. In contrast to Esser et al.'s (2001) findings from the 1997 election campaign, who report a critical distance towards spin doctors in meta-reporting, the latter have now become a reference for assessing the performance of the politicians that they advise.
The Guardian published a satirical article (16/4) that offered its readers a 'script' in order to mime the part of David Cameron who remained reluctant to participate and hence absent

from the debate to be broadcast the same evening. This satirical forecast suggests the high degree of preparation, but also predictability of politicians' contributions, and it situates media actors as experts who are able to assess, and also to access both: The Guardian shares its insights from a broadcaster's "briefing document" about the structure of the debate, (2.4.) and the Sunday Times quotes from Miliband's "briefing notes", "left behind in an ITV dressing room" (5.4.).

Meta-reporting also casts a view backstage on the actors' rehearsals. The high degree of preparation is frequently mentioned and contributes to the emphasis on successful delivery.

> [...] debate preparation is a flurry of briefing books, statistics memorisation and scenario responses [...]. The next challenge in debate preparation is war-gaming question and answer scenarios. (Guardian, 26.3.2015)
>
> For the two nights beforehand, the Labour team had based themselves in the Radisson hotel in central Manchester and rehearsed. With Alastair Campbell, the former spin-doctor, playing the part of ITV presenter Julie Etchingham […]. Tory preparations involved Rupert Harrison […] playing Mr. Miliband. (Sunday Telegraph, 5.4.2015)

While theatrical metaphors and the conceptualisation of political debate as drama are not new in meta-discourse about political communication, it is worthwhile noting how – within the process of increasing mediatisation as indicated by meta-reporting – foregrounding of backstage preparations, scripting and script-writers contributes further to backgrounding what politicians say. The content of the debates appears to be obsolete (cf. Niehr 2007 with a view on news reporting on the German 2005 TV debate), not only because it is hardly reported, but also because the theatrical metaphor undermines the authenticity and accountability of politicians' statements. It also undermines their agency in the process by positioning them actors and their PR-advisers as directors.

4.1.2 Media formats

While the 2010 TV debates only featured politicians of the three major political parties, it was agreed to have a broader party spectrum represented in the 2015 debates. Some newspaper articles deal with how the formats were developed and debated (Guardian 23.3.,

26.3. and 28.3., Independent, 28.3.). Especially the ITV debate with seven party leaders triggered a reflection on how the chosen format reflected the political situation in the UK:

> The new fragmentation will be on display on Thursday, embodied by a TV screen crammed with candidates jostling like marked traders forced to share a single pitch. Of course, a duel is more fun to watch than a 14-legged scrum. But that's no reason to recoil from the noise, mess and complexity we'll see next week. On the contrary, it will be a good guide to who we now are. (Guardian, 30.3.2015)
>
> The presence of SNP and Plaid Cymru tomorrow night is a recognition that the politics of the devolved nations now matter on the UK-wide electoral stage. (Guardian, 1.4.2015)
>
> The UK is not necessarily becoming a democracy of many parties as the debate's format implied. (Independent, 3.4.2015)
>
> The seven-way TV debate on Thursday was a reminder of how much our politics has changed […]. So why not the Northern Irish parties, too? (Independent, 4.4.2015)

These quotes suggest that the media format could or even should be representative of the political situation in the country. The construction of the political process in media representation is explicitly measured against existing political constellations, suggesting that the way in which the media events are constructed can be regarded in terms of a ratification of political reality.

The representativeness of the studio audience also became a meta topic in the newspaper reporting, partly triggered by complaints from the political parties about the questions that were selected or permitted from the studio audience, such as Nigel Farage's (UKIP) characterisation of the studio audience during the 16 April debate as left wing (cf. Times, 17. and 18.4., Daily Telegraph 17.4., Guardian, 18.4.).

> Under the plans put forward by the Corporation 75 per cent of the audience will be made up of supports of each of the three parties split equally. The remaining 25 per cent will made up [sic] of 15 per cent supports of other parties and 10 per cent who are still to make up their minds. (Independent, 30.4.)
>
> Labour said the BBC must have weighted the audience to be pro-Conservative. (Daily Telegraph, 02.05.2015)

The BBC, a public broadcasting service funded in part by UK taxpayers, is obliged to strive for politically balanced reporting and, at a superficial level, the fair and proportional representation of different parties and their positions is a legitimate demand. However, this also implies the more problematic assumption that individual media formats could reflect political reality, or that a media initiated communicative event can do justice to the complexity of any political reality.

Meat-reporting is also concerned with politicians' decisions in favour of or against participating, especially with a view on the first and third debate. Apparently, Cameron had been invited to join the third debate, despite his claims that he had not been and that his non-participation was due to him not having been invited rather than avoiding it.

> Political commentators questioned the wisdom of Mr Cameron's decision to stay away from Thursday night's BBC election debate […]. An analysis of Google searches during the event was topped by the question "Where is the Prime Minister?" (The Independent, 18.4.)

Regarding the first debate, Cameron rejected a direct encounter with Ed Miliband so that both candidates were interviewed and questioned by the audience successively, not simultaneously. The following quotes illustrate how the issue of the formats and the presence or absence of politicians in the debates have themselves become arguments within the wider political debate of the election campaign.

> PM's rejection of head-to-head debate is 'devastating blow to his own authority'. Labour election campaign chief says David Cameron is 'unwilling to put himself up for a job interview' in front of Britain's voters. (Guardian, 26.3.)
> Campbell, who has previously accused Cameron of attempting to "wiggle and weasel" out of the debates, said that instead of trying to water down and manipulate the format Cameron should have just pulled out. (Guardian, 24.3.)

Meta-reporting frames media formats in terms of their representativeness of political reality – party constellations on the stage as well as political orientations within the audience – and thereby suggests that media-initiated communication events can or should do justice to reality 'out there'. Any reflection on the limitations of media formats to adequately do so is absent from the reporting about the debates. While, as seen above in 4.1.1, what politicians have to

say is seen as negligible, the demands of the media format are pressing, so that their (non-) participation and their attempts at influencing the format become politically relevant. This could be seen as a de-politicisation of political communication, and a politicisation of media formats and media actors. The following analyses of self-referential news are in support of this first conclusion.

4.2 Self-referential news

4.2.1 Focus on image

Meta-reporting covers the impression that politicians leave on potential viewers, focussing on supposed indicators of personality, emotional state, or state of mind instead of content or quality of argumentation. Especially the reporting about the first debate between the Conservative and Labour party leaders triggered a multitude of image-related comments. Cameron for example "gave a rather defensive performance" (Times, 27.3.), "had some uncomfortable moments" (ibid.), "was widely seen as confident" (ibid.), "was much more relaxed on the economy" (Independent, 27.3.), "did not lose his cool, but looked uneasy at times" (Independent, 27.3.), "tiptoed gingerly around his failures" (Daily Telegraph, 27.3.), "runs the risk of being too laidback" (Sunday Times, 29.3.), "lacked passion" (ibid.). Miliband attracted comments such as "passionate" (Independent, 3.4.), "relaxed and unexpectedly assertive" (Guardian, 2.4.), "earnest, boyishly wide-eyed", "with occasional bursts of self-deprecating joviality" (Daily Telegraph, 27.3.), "not pleasing", "gawky and confusing "by turns robotic and almost childishly boastful" (Daily Telegraph, 28.3.).

The particular focus on the two leaders' images might also be related to opinion polls' suggestions of a close race, so "that more attention was paid to every gesture and utterance – especially of the two main leaders – in case it might create momentum or drama in a static and closed-down campaign." (Beckett 2016, 284) However, the concern with politicians' image is also a general feature of increasing meta-reporting (Esser 2003, 2008), together with reporting about how politicians actively attempt to control how they come across to the audience.

> Miliband […] spent much of the interview trying to find a way to cope with it without sounding cross or whining. (Independent, 27.3.2015)

But in what one ally called a "calm down, dear" strategy, Cameron is instead being encouraged by his aides to keep his cool in Thursday's debate against what is expected to be a six-way onslaught from his rivals. (Sunday Times, 29.3.2015)

[...] the [debate preparation, MS] sessions all emphasised the need for Mr Cameron to stay calm, so that voters would regard him as the natural choice for prime minister. (Sunday Telegraph, 5.4.2015)

On 1 May the Times published an article about assessing who delivered the best performance in the 30 April debate, suggesting the following criteria: "best/worst joke", "worst clichés", "body language", "best soundbite", "most cheered", "heckles". It is worthwhile noting that only three of the six criteria relate to the content of politicians' statements. One of the three arguably highlights the entertainment value of such content ("best/worst joke"), another one is essentially dismissive ("worst cliché"), and another one relates to its chances to receive media attention ("best soundbite"). The latter indicates the media's interest in and readiness to repeat catch phrases and suggests an interest on part of the politicians to deliver these in order to increase their media presence. One criterion relates to "body language" and directs attention beyond content towards symptomatic evidence of politicians' state of mind or even discrepancies between content and such symptomatic evidence. The remaining two are based on audience reaction (cheered/heckled). As will be discussed in 4.2.3 below, audience response to the TV-debates as media-initiated communicative events is another focus of meta-reporting and another indication of the politicisation of media agency, while the focus on image as described above contributes to the de-politicisation of political agency. The Independent published an article (17/04) that provided a summary for all participating politicians according to "what they said" and "how they did". The first category contains one or two brief quotations from the politicians; the second category is more detailed and focuses on the politicians' personalities and the impression they had made. This style of reporting does not only illustrate that it may indeed be more important how politicians come across than what they actually have to say, but crucially, it also contributes to producing this effect by focussing on personality and image rather than political programme.

4.2.2 Media actors in the spotlight

Media actors are not only introduced with a view on their journalistic competence and experience prior to the debate. Partly, they are also given space for own contributions; Jeremy

Paxman published an article in the Times (4.4.), in which he explains to readers how to best conduct political interviews and "how to cut through the waffle". The meta-reporting after the debates also includes comments which suggest that it was mainly the media actors who did a good job and contributed something meaningful to the debate.

> If the people of Britain were allowed to go to the polls immediately after Cameron & Miliband: the Battle for Number 10, there'd be a landslide. And our new prime minister would be Jeremy Paxman. (27.3.)
>
> Paxman was the decisive victor in Thursday night's non-debate […]. The aim of the television interviews with politicians is to apply democratic scrutiny […]. All this is a boon to Britain's crumbling democracy. Indeed, we need more of it. (Independent, 28.3.2015)
>
> Should Julie Etchingham run the country? Balancing the budget or securing the future of the NHS must be a cinch compared to refereeing a debate […]. […] composure amid a relentless torrent of clashing views. (Daily Telegraph, 3.4.2015)
>
> Even if undecided voters were not swayed by the quizzing of the three main party leaders on Thursday night, they were in no doubt why David Dimbleby remains in power. (Independent, 08.05.2015)

These quotes present the media actors as the only participants who deserve acclaim for their achievements, and it is even suggests that they would do better in political positions than the democratically elected representatives. The latter's contributions, by contrast, are characterised as irrelevant and not engaged in meaningful dialogue.

> No ringing refrain emerged from a staccato seven-way conversation (Guardian, 3.4.)
>
> Shout, shout, interruption, shout: it was an exhausting, unilluminating, seven-way oratorical pile-up (Daily Telegraph, 3.4.)
>
> Almost nothing had been decided and little would be remembered (Guardian, 2.4.)
>
> (…) televisual equivalent of hiding in the cupboard under the stairs and involuntarily banging your head against the wall while the grown-ups argued (Guardian, 2.4.)

The viewers and voters are cast as suffering from the lack of honest replies and authentic debate. If they turn away from the quarrelsome politicians competing to score their points,

they could fantasise those into political positions who take up the role as neutral moderators and to see these as the better guardians of democracy than the elected representatives.

> To see Jeremy Paxman in full onslaught on David Cameron and Ed Miliband [...] illustrates the unparalleled skill of the British media at picking apart the claims of the country's would-be leaders – an exercise in political vivisection that meets the public's expressed desire […] cuts it political leaders down to size – and into small pieces. (Sunday Times, 29.3.)

The way in which the media actors are portrayed as better representatives than the participating politicians again emphasises the politicisation of media agency and the de-politicisation of political agency, in that the former act as advocates of the public's demand for information whereas the latter are concerned with quarrelling among themselves whilst disregarding the needs of their audiences and voters. Elements of critical discussion of the role of the media are nearly absent in the corpus that was analysed for this chapter. One article, with a view on the preceding debate, criticises the attitude towards politics fostered by televised political communication, in that "(i)t accepts and encourages public contempt for politicians" (Sunday Times 5.4.); another one criticises focus on "the cult of politics-by-personality" as "an evasion, a way of ducking the difficult arguments about direction". (The Times, 4.4.)

4.2.3   Influence on voting behaviour

The possible influence of the TV debates on voting behaviour is discussed extensively in the newspaper reporting through quoting experts – including strategy consultants and journalists –, voters – including those who took part in media-initiated focus groups –, social media comments and social media research as well as polls and snapshot or instant polls, again largely initiated by the newspapers themselves.

Journalists and holders of political posts, as well as campaign strategy consultants are asked to assess participants' performance in the TV debates. Whole articles are devoted to how the proceeding debates were commented in the so called ‚spin room' (Daily Telegraph, 18.4., Guardian, 17.4., Independent 16.4., Times 1.5.).

An article in the Guardian is dedicated to a research project that dealt with Tweets about the TV debates (17.4.). The Times (27.3.) quotes Alex, Jennifer, Joe, Keyth, Joe and Alastair, participants in a focus group of voters. Most articles offer a range of reactions; for example, the Guardian on 27.3. uses the following sources: Its own poll and a poll initiated by the Times, one-word verdicts by the Guardian's own journalists, Tweets and further statements from Guardian journalists about how well the candidates stood their ground against the feared interviewer Jeremy Paxman. Polls capturing reactions to the TV debates are often rather inextricably connected with polls that predict election results, as for example in the following headlines:

> Labour races into 4-point lead but ‚doomed to fail' in Scotland; Miliband enjoys post-TV surge but poll indicates SNP will win 47 seats (Sunday Times, 29.3.2015)
> As our poll puts Labour in the lead, Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher identify key battlegrounds where just a few votes will make all the difference (Sunday Times, 29.3.2015)
> Cameron still beats Miliband in almost all surveys, […] but it doesn't look comfortable. […] Still no Tory surge. David Cameron has not yet clinched his most important deal. (Sunday Times, 29.3.2015)

Meta reporting about media-initiated polls blurs the line between reactions to the debate or to predicted voting behaviour. Media initiated polls can also be seen as in terms of the media's self initiated participation in political process (Esser 2003, 186) in that media reporting about polls might itself become a factor to influence voting behaviour (cf. Cowley/Kavanagh 2016, Beckett 2016, Deacon/Wring 2016 on the 2015 UK election).

In the newspaper reporting, the question of how far the TV debates may influence the election outcome is also openly addressed.

> And obviously the TV debate is just a TV debate. It's 7 May that counts blah etc. But it would be hard to argue that how the seven party leaders […] perform tonight will have no bearing on how they're viewed by voters – and the media – in the coming days and weeks. (Guardian, 2.4.)
> Should Ed Miliband outperform Mr Cameron, or the prime minister stumble, the impact on the election could be profound. (The Times, 26.3.2015)

Could the debates move the polls? […] this year, with the polls so close, even a small shift could make a big difference. (Guardian, 26.3.2015)

This perception of the debates, together with the evaluation of their content as redundant and overly competitive mean that on the one hand, whatever the politicians say is not considered politically relevant. On the other hand, however, the TV-debates are acknowledged as communicative events with profound implications for voters' decision making. Again, this is reflective of a de-politicisation of political agency, and a politicisation of media agency in the field of political communication.

4 Conclusion

Esser (2003) points out that the concept of meta-reporting can help to gain a better understanding of the consequences of increased mediatisation of political communication as well as of the self-interest and norms of the media actors, which sheds a light on the relationship between political journalism and political publicity/public relations. Indeed, the preceding analysis of meta-reporting in the newspaper reporting about the TV-debates identifies, through a closer textual analysis of the general themes of meta-reporting as identified in previous research, two parallel tendencies: Firstly, the de-politicisation of political agency and secondly, the politicisation of media agency. The first tendency shows first of all in the phenomenon of meta-reporting itself in that it foregrounds process and self-referential news at the expense of news reporting that focusses on political issues. It also shows in the construction of the politicians' contributions to the debates as lacking authenticity, accountability and agency: Process news, and as part of it the conceptualisation as 'staged drama' highlights how others write the script and direct, with the politicians saying their lines and acting accordingly. Furthermore, what they have to say is regarded in terms of point-scoring and ignorant of the needs of audiences, i.e. their voters. The politicisation of media agency is reflected in reflections about the representativeness of the media format and audience composition and the (non-)participation of politicians in media communication events as a political argument. However, most of all it can be seen in representing media actors as the potentially better politicians and bearers of democracy as well as in the wide-ranging explorations of the effect of the media-initiated TV-debates on attitudes and voting behaviour, which despite the purportedly redundant contributions declares these media events as decisive factors of democratic decision-making.

Blumler (1997) sees mediatisation as resulting in an insecurity regarding the norms and ethics that should govern the changing relationship between politics and media: "When does the journalist cross the line between healthy scepticism and corrosive cynicism?" (Blumler 1997, 399) This insecurity seems to still exist (cf. also Bull 2012), especially since meta-reporting is increasing and in effect reducing focus on substantial political content as well as sustaining a tendency to portray political actors in a negative and journalists in a positive light; which comes in addition to more general effects of mediatisation such as reducing complexity of political process to match limitations imposed by media formats. The de-politicisation of election campaign coverage that goes along with meta-reporting also comes in addition to other tendencies of de-politicisation such as the outsourcing of formerly state controlled areas of policy (such as education and health) to private business and the transnationaliation especially of economic and financial governance (Hay 2007).

Even if meta-reporting is pertinent mostly for election campaigns and might have to be relativised within a broader picture of news reporting, it is a phenomenon that seems to serve the self-interest of the media better than the citizens' opinion forming in order to inform their vote. It could also still be argued that during election campaigns, it becomes particularly crucial to devote space to an informed and multi-faceted discussion of political issues and proposals. The increase of meta-reporting during election campaigns and its depoliticising effects as illustrated through the preceding analysis in this chapter needs to be evaluated critically with a view on its consequences for democracy. While the media pay increasing attention to the phenomena of strategic self-presentation and spin by political actors, at least initially showing or fostering a critical distance towards these, it is equally worthwhile to shed a critical light on the representation of politics in meta-reporting. If the politicians' contributions in the TV debates are dismissed as redundant, then the staging of these events seems to be in the media's own interest in the first instance. If the debates' content is dismissed in favour of meta-reporting, then again the attention that the debates receive seems to be a self-serving matter for the media. Finally, if meta-reporting, as shown above, offers an opportunity for the self-aggrandizement of media actors over the politicians who purportedly act out scripts under pressure to perform and to score points (allocated not least by media actors and through media reporting), then again, the debates and the reporting about them indicate a shift of power from politics to media in the realm of public political discourse.

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