Pluralist public sphere or elitist closed circle? Elite-driven agendas and contributor 'chemistry' as determinants of pundit choice on a flagship BBC politics show.

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PLURALIST PUBLIC SPHERE OR ELITIST CLOSED CIRCLE? ELITE-DRIVEN AGENDAS AND CONTRIBUTOR 'CHEMISTRY' AS DETERMINANTS OF PUNDIT CHOICE ON A FLAGSHIP BBC POLITICS SHOW

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Abstract: Since BBC1's *Politics Live* discussion show launched in 2018, it has been characterised by an accessible and chatty, if sometimes highly involved, discursive style more native to podcasts than conventional daytime television. The programme attempted to distinguish itself through distinctive features including meaningful engagement with social media, a dynamic 'musical chairs' approach to refreshing panels mid-show, live fact-checking of disputed political truth-claims, and a sometimes self-consciously inclusive strategy for balancing the age, race and gender profiles of studio guests. If the programme has struggled to fulfil any of its trumpeted selling-points, however, it is its quest to reflect the world of politics at 'grassroots' level – by venturing beyond London's insular 'Westminster bubble' to seek out issues and contributors that better reflect the topics people chat about in the pub. This chapter combines analysis of the voices and issues aired on *Politics Live* during the opening months of its second year and an interview with its head producer to determine the extent to which it qualifies as a pluralistic, representative public sphere, rather than a superficially persuasive reconfiguration of existing elite circles.

Political pluralism as public service norm

Public service broadcasters (PSBs) have long been held to a higher standard than other media outlets when it comes to ensuring their current affairs output respects the diversity of the societies they aim (or claim) to represent. PSB political coverage faces a particular challenge in this regard, especially in highly regulated broadcasting systems such as the UK's, where its responsibilities are twofold: to offer fair representation to social, cultural, ethnic and other actors from across the societal spectrum, while simultaneously respecting additional rules/guidelines requiring it to maintain impartiality.

Besides respecting 'the letter' of the regulations that bind them, though, what are the practical limits of the pluralism we can expect of broadcasters like the BBC? And how do concepts like 'balance', 'objectivity' and that elusive aforementioned standard, 'impartiality', relate to

the pluralistic ideal? One concern is that box-ticking approaches to promoting diversity of opinions and representation can foster tokenistic, *performative* forms of pluralism. At worst, they can deny the existence of what Karppinen describes as "structural relations of power, conflicts of interest" and the "irreducible pluralism of values" in society: real-world tensions that cannot (and *should* not) be masked by the convenient construction of illusory "utopian" arenas for seeking "rational consensus" on justifiably disputed issues (2007: 499, citing Mouffe). Put more prosaically, the danger of limiting access to such public forums to a cosy coterie of mainstream elite pundits is one of confirmation bias – or what Hallin would call an illusory "sphere of consensus" that masks the existence of "legitimate controversy" (Hallin, 1984).

In navigating this thorny ground, PSBs face particular challenges that, given their primarily publicly funded business models, can be existential. The BBC, for one, depends for its survival on both state and public 'buy-in' – problems that seldom trouble the editors of newspapers, which (in Britain at least) may adopt openly partisan positions (IPSO, 2020) and face none of the statutory regulatory pressures arising from the code requiring the BBC to guarantee the "impartial treatment of controversial issues" (Gibbons, 1998: 481).

It is against this backdrop of normative, institutionalized "internal pluralism" (La Porte et al, 2007: 386) that we must consider any question of whether PSB television presents a viable site for realizing a fully inclusive "political public sphere" (Habermas et al, 1974: 114). In a 1964 elaboration on the concept of the public sphere, Habermas described it (in defiance of its almost exclusively bourgeois historical associations) as a deliberative environment in which "access is guaranteed to *all* citizens" [author's italics], before explicitly singling out "newspapers and magazines, radio and television" as "the media of the public sphere" (ibid).

The Habermasian 'ideal' has lately been subjected to considerable criticism over its perceived narrowness and bias towards insular bourgeois concerns – issues to which we turn later (e.g. Karppinen, 2007). Moreover, today we must obviously extend Habermas's analogue-era definition of media to embrace the realm in which deliberation is most active, visible and continuous – the Internet, and social media specifically – even if the essence of this 50-year-old position arguably remains valid. But, setting aside the logistical impossibility of giving all citizens (or even those claiming to represent them) direct access to the deliberative space of a TV studio, how feasible is it for any single political broadcast to offer 'access' to a cross-section of public opinion diverse enough to be considered authentically pluralistic?

This chapter attempts to interrogate the extent to which the term 'political public sphere' – whether of the consensus-seeking Habermasian kind or the more conflict-ridden "radical-pluralist" variety favoured by Mouffe (2000 and 2002) and others – might justifiably be applied to a flagship weekday political panel show, *Politics Live*. Launched in September 2018 as a replacement for long-running BBC2 weekday lunchtime digest the *Daily Politics*, the show explicitly set out to engage with "more diverse audiences" (Neil, quoted in Singh, 2018) while dispensing with its precursor's commitment to following "every incremental change" in the UK Parliament. Instead, it would focus on "things people feel they have got something to say about" when they are (to invoke a popular UK shorthand for informal socializing in public houses) "down the Dog and Duck" (Coburn, quoted in Waterson, 2018). In other words, if *Politics Live* started life with a 'manifesto' it was to engage more proactively with 'grassroots' concerns – in all their multifarious, multicultural variety – by involving pundits and perspectives that "hold up a mirror" to the diversity of "society" (Stanton, quoted in Burns, 1977: 186), rather than allowing itself to be accused (however

contestably) of being a hollow echo-chamber for insular Westminster politicians and/or politics.

The aim of the chapter, then, is to measure *Politics Live's* success on its own terms. It does so by combining a content analysis of topics covered and contributors featured on the programme with an original interview with the show's senior producer and BBC Editor of Live Political Programmes at time of writing, Rob Burley. Taken together, the findings present a complex picture which underlines the competing pressures and priorities facing the makers of PSB political programmes today. They raise questions about the extent to which well-meaning statements of intent about promoting inclusion and pluralism can be compromised by a combination of normative journalistic news values; commercial concerns about ratings and viewer engagement; and a sequence of editorial choices that prioritizes topics over contributors when seeking plurality. It concludes that, as a result of these factors, however varied and wide-ranging topical discussions might become, the diversity of voices and perspectives included risks staying stubbornly limited.

Media pluralism, public service broadcasting and the BBC: A brief overview

Debates about pluralism in news and current affairs journalism – what it looks like and how it can be measured – have a long history and are broadly divided into concerns about two distinct dimensions of the media. These are the range of views available across an overall media *market*, even if individual outlets are biased – its level of 'external' pluralism – versus the diversity of groups or voices to which specific outlets give access (their 'internal' pluralism). Although the proliferation of online media has reduced the gatekeeping power of traditional news organizations, giving voices to individuals from a wider range of backgrounds than ever through social media and citizen journalism, research suggests that

legacy news organizations retain a disproportionate agenda-setting role, not least through their ongoing influence on politicians and other key decision-makers (e.g. Helfer, 2016). There is also widespread agreement about the continuing importance of external mainstream media pluralism in promoting free speech, fair representation, democratic debate and public engagement with politics. Where *concentrations* of ownership occur, even in deregulated media markets like the UK press, they are viewed as recipes for homogenous output and the kinds of monocultural and/or hegemonic perspectives that, when manifest in dictatorships, are rightly termed "propaganda" (Herman & Chomsky, 2010).

Internal pluralism is the diversity standard by which we tend to judge a PSB, given its commonly accepted definition as "television and radio programmes that are broadcast to provide information, advice or entertainment to the public without trying to make a profit" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). The concept of 'the public' itself is, of course, increasingly understood to be diffuse, multifaceted and problematic – especially in the kinds of liberal, cosmopolitan and/or northern European "Democratic Corporatist" societies which concern themselves with maintaining public service broadcasters (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 126). It is, then, hardly surprising that organizations whose explicit *raison d'etre* is to 'serve' this public – or, as Karppinen wisely puts it (2007: 205), "multitude of publics" – should be the focus of so much discussion about social and cultural inclusion.

As one of the world's longest-established PSB organizations, the BBC has long attracted fierce scrutiny over the (un)representativeness of its output, and the range of pundits, sources and contributors to whom it gives airtime (e.g. Wahl-Jorgensen et al, 2017). In the context of political coverage specifically, these debates are invariably couched as tests of its "impartiality": another problematic concept first formally defined by BBC executives in a

1949 directive entitled "Policy Notes for Programme Staff" (Belair-Gagnon, 2013: 482, citing Hampton, 2008). This "characterized impartiality" as "an obligation to present a range of sources and claims, get a hold of the best advocates available, offer fair reporting, and maintain balance" (ibid). More recently, however, the issue of expected levels of BBC impartiality has been complicated by the concept's increasing politicization and the conflation (not least by the Corporation itself) of this concept with the superficially similar yet distinct, principles of 'objectivity' and 'balance'.

The BBC's 1996 Royal Charter, published in the last year of a Conservative government which repeatedly accused it of "left wing bias" (e.g. Ayton & Tumber, 2001), replaced the requirement for it to respect *absolute* impartiality with a new standard of "'due' impartiality" – belatedly acknowledging that "no absolute test of accuracy or impartiality" exists (ibid: 482). Through a content analysis of "sourcing patterns" used in BBC programmes between 2007 and 2012, Wahl-Jorgensen et al noted a troubling "paradigm of impartiality-as-balance" (2017: 781). This editorial trend was characterized by privileging "a narrow range of views and voices" on the "most contentious and important issues" and "reporting that focuses on party-political conflict", instead of "context" (ibid). Others have identified the growing prevalence of "he-said, she-said" reporting in coverage of "human-driven climate change": "false balance", masquerading as "objectivity", which sometimes gives equal billing (and implied credibility) on largely uncontested issues to the majority of experts who recognize them and the "minority" of mavericks "who dispute this consensus" (Fahy, 2017).

The (im)possibility of media public spheres

Closely related to the debate around PSBs' pursuit of internal pluralism, impartiality and (in the BBC's case) 'balance' is the deeper question of whether they can plausibly aspire to host

authentic political public spheres. In recent years, the feasibility of constructing public spheres that are adequately pluralistic, inclusive and open to all in a given society – whether through the media or any other arena – has been increasingly disputed by self-styled 'radical' democrats/pluralists, notably Mouffe (2000 and 2002) and Karppinen (2007). They argue that, in championing the idea that deliberative democracy can ever achieve a rational consensus acceptable to everyone in society, the Habermasian school "fails adequately to theorize power", by omitting to address "existing forms of exclusion" which might prevent and/or deter marginalized groups from participating (Karppinen, 2007: 497). However, some who sympathize with this "radical-pluralist" position are equally critical of the "naïve pluralism" of (hitherto excluded) groups that reject the overtures of would-be public spheres, instead retreating to self-segregating positions that "celebrate all multiplicity and heterogeneity" (ibid: 496). Karppinen (citing Mouffe, 2000) describes this tension between Habermasian pluralism and these alternatives as a "democratic paradox": a conundrum of "how to envisage a form of commonality strong enough to institute a 'demos' but nevertheless compatible with true religious, moral, cultural and political pluralism" (ibid: 497). He argues that the only way the media can construct a viable, truly inclusive public sphere (or spheres) is by reconciling two obstinate positions: "the strong pluralist agenda" of those who feel their identities/worldviews can never be catered for by the mainstream media and the hardwired traditional view of PSB media "as a central tool for integrating people into a political community, creating a common culture, national identity or a shared arena for public debate" (ibid). To do so, media outlets/outputs must somehow "bridge" the "dead ends of identity politics" and "the more essentialist or outmoded views on the role of public broadcasting" that typify the conventional thinking of liberal pluralists (ibid: 504).

This, then, is the theoretical context into which we venture as we turn to considering the level of inclusiveness achieved by the most recent BBC political show at time of writing to attempt to reflect the plurality of Britain's societal interests: *Politics Live*.

Revolving panels, tweeting viewers and fact-checkers: the case of *Politics Live*

From its 2018 launch, *Politics Live* adopted a proactive approach to promoting diversity which initially saw it criticized for being "too PC" and "gimmicky"- albeit for superficial reasons, such as featuring all-female panels (Lyons, 2018). Its recipe for achieving pluralism was a distinctive mix of ingredients: multiple topics were debated in each episode; viewer tweets were integrated into discussions; and panels were refreshed, often repeatedly, as conversation switched from one subject to another. Crucially, the show strived to balance its studied inclusiveness with live fact-checking – the aim being to stop panellists getting away with empty rhetoric, dubious statistics and/or inaccurate truth-claims. But how inclusive, diverse and pluralistic has *Politics Live* been in practice?

The following sections attempt to answer this questions by, first, presenting key findings from a quantitative content analysis of topical themes discussed and panellists included during the first three months of the programme's second year: September to December 2019[i]. Given the tumultuous politics unfolding at that time (parliamentary paralysis over Brexit followed by a 'snap' general election and dramatic Conservative victory), these findings were then compared to those from a later, less eventful, period, which produced broadly comparable results. This was the single month of February 2020, which fell immediately after the UK's formal withdrawal from the European Union but prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and national lock-down. My interpretation of the resulting data and assessment of its implications for *Politics Live's* qualification as a political public sphere is further informed

by an original interview with the show's then senior producer and BBC Editor of Live Political Programmes, Rob Burley.

The analysis primarily focuses on the balance between what might be termed 'elite' and 'grassroots' topics and contributors, rather than a detailed breakdown of relative levels of representation given to individual genders, ethnic/cultural minorities, socioeconomic groups or other demographics. It also avoids analysing the balance between Left, Right, Centrist and other political parties/interests – an issue explored by this author elsewhere (Morrison, 2019). The definition of 'grassroots' topics applied is one that consciously draws on public sphere theory, by focusing on issues that *directly affect* people: in essence, those relating to the *substance* of policy, its implementation and effects, rather than political *process* or "horse-race" rivalries between competing politicians/parties (Hallin, 1985: 126). As the data shows, this definition appears to broadly reflect the approach taken by the producers of *Politics Live*, in determining which topics merited being addressed by 'grassroots' contributors.

Calibrating punditry: open arena or closed circle?

On the surface, the representation given to individuals and interest groups drawn from outside the 'Westminster bubble' during the first three months of *Politics Live* series 2 was disappointing. As Figure 1 shows, nearly half of all contributors (194 out of 419, or 46%) were politicians and another 31.5% (132) journalists, with a further one in ten (40) present or former special advisers (SPADs), economists and think-tank spokespeople. Almost all these pundits – collectively numbering 87% of the total number of guests featured – were also 'national-level' actors: Ministers, MPs, members of the devolved parliaments/assemblies (significantly, not local councillors) or national, rather than regional, journalists. The ranks of 'elite' contributors were further swelled by academics, opinion pollsters and lawyers,

together numbering 18 (4.3%). In fact, only 24 contributors (5.7%) across the whole period were individuals who might be termed 'grassroots'. And even this number was qualified, in that around half such contributions took the form of vox-pops or other filmed inserts (e.g. from individual constituencies). Another 11 came from what might be termed 'celebrity campaigners': high-profile grassroots representatives, such as teacher-cum-Labour activist Holly Rigby (although the celebritization of such individuals is hard to avoid once they have appeared more than once on national television). Indeed, a notable trend was for many 'grassroots' concerns to be championed not by citizens themselves but by 'elite anti-elitist' pundits: counter-hegemonic commentators, often with Left-leaning views. For example, *Guardian* columnist Owen Jones, an outspoken critic of recent government austerity programmes, especially welfare cuts, featured on September 2 to debate a then impending Spending Review by the Chancellor. More authentic 'grassroots' voices might have included any of a number of groups representing those with the most to lose from further cuts (and the most to gain from their reversal), such as the user-led Black Triangle Campaign or Mums against Austerity. Including such commentators, or inviting them on (and informing viewers), would have gone some way towards addressing radical-pluralist concerns.

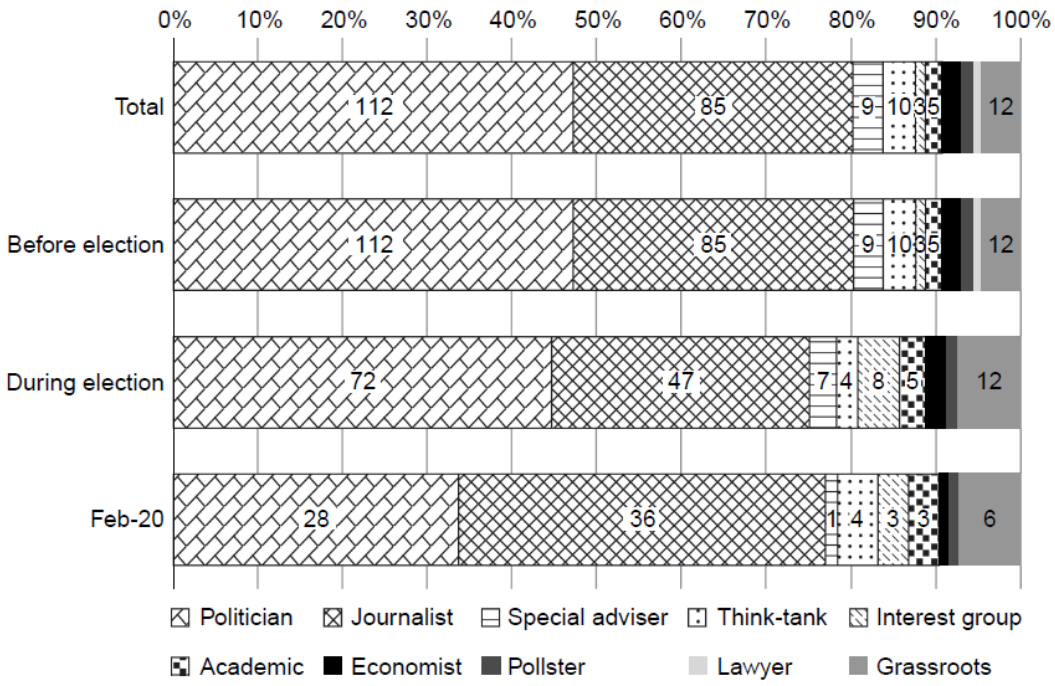

Figure 36.1 Contributors, excluding BBC correspondents

For all the show's surface resemblance to a 'sphere of consensus', however, the picture was more nuanced on closer inspection. In addition to the 24 *bona fide* 'grassroots' contributions, another 11 (2.6%) came from 'interest groups'. This category encompassed a mix of charities, trades unions and business leaders – most of whom could claim (in the broadest sense) to be voicing 'ordinary people's' concerns. In addition, the input of 'grassroots' contributors increased markedly during the official election campaign period (November 6 to December 11) – during which Brexit's dominance receded and attention switched to issues expected to inform voters' decisions at the ballot-box. Half of all 'grassroots' representatives (12) and nearly two-thirds of 'interest groups' (eight out of 11) appeared during this five-week period alone – pointing to demonstrable pre-election efforts to focus on substantive policy areas with a direct impact on voters. Additionally, the programme's only two contributions from pollsters came during the campaign, with both focusing (unsurprisingly) on the issues judged most likely to determine the election outcome. Altogether, then, a

respectable one in seven contributors during the campaign could broadly be termed 'grassroots' representatives.

By contrast, throughout the whole of February 2020 – a month liberated from the 'necessity' of endless Brexit talk, following the election and the UK's subsequent EU withdrawal – only six of the 83 contributors (7.3%) hailed from 'the grassroots' themselves. This number rises marginally to 11 (12%, or one in seven) if we add groups representing particular interests, such as unions, business-owners and a single pollster. In searching for dissenting voices, radical-pluralists instead had to be satisfied with 'elite anti-elitists' – ranging from those on the political Left (*Guardian* commentator and environmental campaigner George Monbiot) to the libertarian Right (Inaya Folarin Iman, founder of the Free Speech Union).

Determining the pundit pool: topics as starting-points

The imbalance in pluralism identified in relation to *contributor* choice during the 2019 sample period starts to make more sense when viewed alongside the narrowness of *topic* selections. With the date for EU withdrawal already postponed until October 31 by the time *Politics Live* commenced its second series, and another delay announced shortly afterwards, Brexit continued to dominate throughout the pre-election phase. It featured in more than a quarter of all 420 discussions between September and December 2019 – though some of these covered two or more related issues, so its dominance was slightly less marked (just under 20%) if we break conversations down into discrete topics (totalling 571). The extent of Brexit coverage is worth contextualizing, however, because the overall UK political public sphere was overwhelmed during late 2019 with debates around the obstacles a then minority government faced in winning Parliament's approval for its EU withdrawal agreement. In this sense, many Brexit discussions debated what might loosely be termed 'grassroots' concerns,

in that they revolved around Ministers' struggles to implement the outcome of a public referendum: issues framed by populist pro-Brexit forces (however dubiously) as conflicts between "the will of the people" (Johnson, quoted in BBC News, 2019) and, for example, an "unaccountable" UK Supreme Court (O'Neill, 2019). Conceptualizing such discussions as 'grassroots' also finds some (retrospective) support in early analyses of the 2019 election outcome, which largely interpret it as a "Brexit election" (e.g. Cutts et al, 2020).

However, given the disproportionate editorial emphasis placed on Brexit – and its reflection of a highly debatable elite consensus that the UK's ongoing relationship with the EU was an issue as important to punters 'down the Dog and Duck' as jobs or schools – my analysis here focuses primarily on coverage given to topics *excluding* Brexit. Specifically, how well did *Politics Live* reflect 'grassroots' issues in late 2019? Overall, Figure 2 suggests its performance was patchy: 272 (58.7%) of the 463 non-Brexit topics addressed over the period concerned political parties (whether alone or combined with other issues), while the constitution accounted for another 29 (6.3%). Altogether, this means nearly two-thirds of topics debated could be described (for our purposes) as "Westminster bubble" issues (Hain, 2012: 75). The biggest 'grassroots' theme, only slightly ahead of the constitution, was 'social issues': a hybrid category encompassing interrelated policy areas invariably discussed in relation to low-income households, including welfare (social security), social care and housing (debated 30 times). Another 37 topics (18.7%) were concerned with issues it would be hard to describe as 'grassroots', in the sense that they affect voters day to day: the prospect and/or conduct of the election itself (22, or 11.1%), US politics (7.1%) and the Royal Family (three, or 1.5%). This number rises sharply to 63 (31.8%) if one adds the 26 occasions (31.8%) on which racial, gender-based and other forms of identity-related online abuse were debated. While these matters are likely to be relevant to many *Politics Live* viewers (and

voters), and their inclusion is a notable indicator of the programme's efforts to address 'radical-pluralist' concerns by reaching out to more diverse audiences, their increasing media profile at that time was the subject of sustained criticism by self-styled champions of "the people", who characterized them as the obsession of an out-of-touch "metropolitan elite" (e.g. Littlejohn, 2019). Such claims are, of course, hugely problematic, as they are often disingenuously mobilized for political gain by populist (and almost invariably elite) political actors.

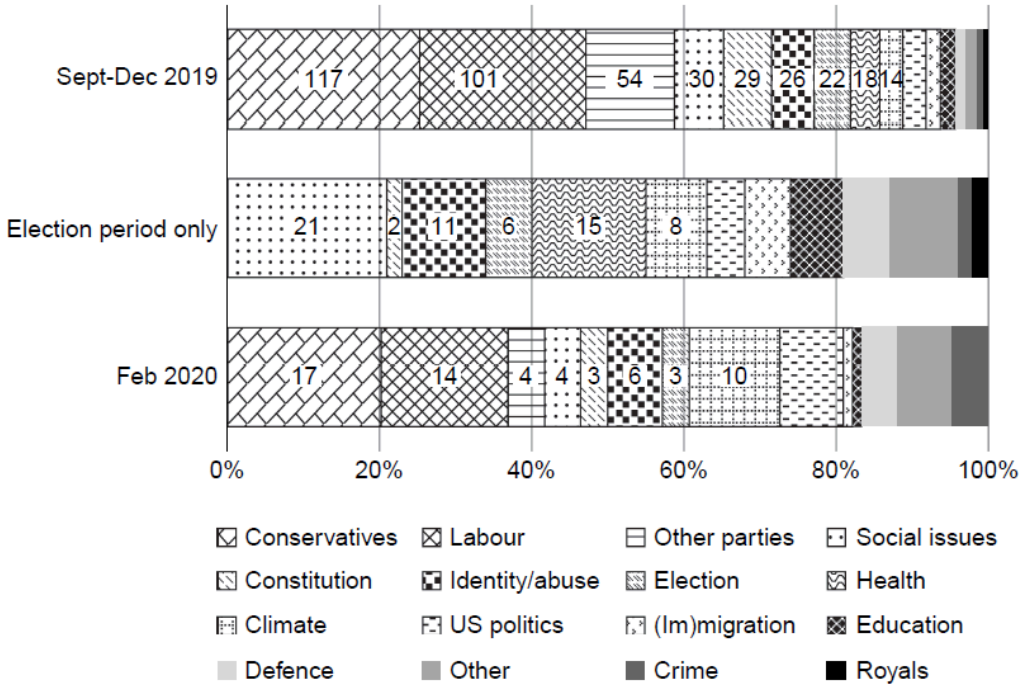

Figure 36.2 Distribution of topics, excluding Brexit

Stripping out everything but the most clear-cut (if prosaic) 'grassroots' topics – principally those relating to funding and delivering public services – removes nearly half the total (94, or 47.5%). Of those remaining, most striking is the relatively low exposure *Politics Live* gave across the three-month period to three issues consistently identified by independent think-

tank the Institute for Government (2015) as the "most salient"[1] (bar Brexit) in the years immediately beforehand: immigration (nine topical inclusions, or just 4.5% of the total), health/the NHS (18, or 9.1%), and the economy (13, or 6.6%). In fact, during the pre-election phase, health and (im)migration featured just three times each, before increasing in prominence during the campaign itself, to 15 and six respectively. Similarly, it took until the election run-up for the economy to visibly register, rising from just 4.1% to 9% of all topics. Meanwhile, perhaps the most high-profile *global* issue of 2019 – climate change – was covered just 14 times (7.1%), featuring on 6 occasions before the campaign and 8 during it. Despite these limitations, however, nearly three-quarters of non-Brexit/party topics discussed during the campaign itself (74%) could be described as 'grassroots' – up from 30% during the preceding period. This disparity was largely down to the disproportionate pre-campaign focus on the constitution, which accounted for 27 out of 98 topics during that phase, as Ministers repeatedly clashed with Parliament and the courts over efforts to force through a Brexit deal.

What, then, of the issue coverage during February 2020? Even during this relatively 'business-as-usual' period, fewer than half of all topics (43 out of 99, or 43.4%) related to grassroots concerns, with political parties collectively accounting for 35 (35.4%) and items focusing on debates about what might broadly be termed 'identity' issues (e.g. gender, race and social class) and the constitution still featuring prominently (6 and 3 times respectively). While the parties' profiles can be attributed, in part, to ongoing inquests into the election result, their continued prominence suggests *Politics Live's* agenda remains normatively preoccupied with 'horse-race politics', even out-with election campaigns – periods during

[1] In this context, the term "salient" was used to denote public perceptions of the most important policy areas and consequent levels of satisfaction with government

which "party media agenda-setting" is considered to be most prevalent (e.g. Hopmann et al, 2010). If, however, we remove both political parties and Brexit (five) from the equation, as before, 'grassroots' issues become much more visible – accounting for nearly three-quarters of all remaining topics (43 out of 59). This is almost exactly the same proportion found during the 2019 election phase: the point when Brexit tumbled down the agenda, as ministerial battles with MPs and judges were interrupted by the dissolution of Parliament and a switch in focus to prospective election issues. Taken together, then, both the November to December 2019 and February 2020 snapshots suggest that, at times when the political agenda is not distorted by Brexit, *Politics Live* reflects 'grassroots' *issues* relatively well – albeit with the crucial caveat that it also displays a normative preoccupation with horse-race party politics, even out-with election campaigns. While it might give considerable coverage to *issues* concerning ordinary people, however, it could do much better in letting 'the people' speak for themselves. Only one in seven 'pundits' during either the November/December 2019 or February 2020 snapshots hailed from 'non-elite' circles. Instead, the default setting was to invite elite anti-elitists to speak *for* 'the grassroots'. There is, then, a disconnect between the three-quarters of grassroots topics debated over these periods and the much weaker levels of pluralism visible in choices of *contributor*.

Speaking *for* 'the people': the role of elite anti-elitists

Why, then, does *Politics Live* reserve so much airtime for elite and/or elite anti-elitist commentators – even when *topics* under discussion concern grassroots themes? Rob Burley, the programme's senior producer during these snapshot periods, described the four-person panel that deliberates on its daily discussion topics as its "main event". He went on to outline the "essential format" underpinning this approach as follows:

> …this programme is an attempt to make the conversation different [to other political coverage], if not necessarily all the personnel. It's built around the chemistry of

> people who can talk around the subject…You do have people who are *good* at that. Therefore, there can be a criticism that you do only have the 'media elite' people on there.

While conceding that some panellists "become sort of ubiquitous", because "you can rely on" them, Burley insisted that the show tried to vary its choices whenever certain pundits started appearing "too much". Though it had "tried 'new faces'", however, he argued that "once they've been on the programme they're no longer new faces" – reflecting the conundrum around inadvertently celebritizing grassroots contributors identified in the content analysis.

Where, then, does this talk of 'main events' and pundit 'chemistry' leave us, in discerning the underlying drivers behind *Politics Live's* choices of contributors – and topics? While the show has clearly had some success in creating a pluralist political public sphere through its breadth of *issue* coverage, its *contributors* have been less diverse. How far can this qualified success be put down to basic practical difficulties – as Burley put it, "the problem…that we *are* based in Westminster" – rather than normative news values or other concerns, like ratings, that are widely characterized as "market-driven" (McManus, 1994)? To illustrate, some of Burley's other comments reflected the seepage of commercial factors into this PSB context. These included his observation that *Politics Live's* audience was 30% bigger than that for the *Daily Politics* – an achievement he nonetheless emphasized had come *despite* the show's focus on giving subjects "more time and depth" than other politics shows.

Conclusion

Though it offers only indicative conclusions, this short case study of a PSB political programme launched with the explicit aim of reflecting what voters talk about 'down the Dog and Duck' offers some grounds for optimism. In terms of the overall breadth of issues covered at the start of its second year, and notwithstanding the relentless background noise of

Brexit and the election, *Politics Live* displayed considerable range – with three-quarters of all topics debated in the run-up to polling-day (excluding Brexit and party politics) relating to grassroots concerns such as public services, immigration and the economy, and concerted efforts made to reach neglected audiences – albeit mostly in the context of troubling issues around online abuse.

During February 2020 – by which time 'normal service' had resumed (however briefly), following the election/Brexit but prior to the pandemic – the show performed more strongly, with 20% fewer items focusing on party politics. However, while its *issue* coverage became more pluralistic as Brexit faded into the background somewhat, its *contributor* selections prioritized "main event" panels featuring high-profile pundits over grassroots "new faces". It would be unfair to confuse the programme's efforts to "engage" with outright commercialism. The pursuit of "more diverse audiences" can, after all, be predicated on admirable aspirations to appeal to complex and *varied* publics: neither a lowest common denominator mainstream nor an imagined "common culture" (Karppinen, 2007: 497).

However, the language of televisual "chemistry" and "main events" once more exposes the creeping tensions facing today's PSBs, as they navigate a fiercely competitive media landscape that requires them to adopt more market-orientated approaches. If one 'lesson' might be drawn from this analysis it is that a more pluralistic approach to PSB political coverage might be achieved if producers turned their editorial logic on its head. By starting with *contributors* rather than issues, and recruiting them from a wider, more representative pool, grassroots voices would feature more strongly – and topic choices would take care of themselves.

[ii] Politics Live's seasons follow the rhythm of the 'parliamentary calendar': commencing with the resumption of Parliament's business after the annual summer recess, followed by the party conference season, in September.

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