

Backchannel Chat

Peaks and troughs in a Twitter response to three televised debates during the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum campaign



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Thursday, 18th September 2014

The Referendum on Independence for Scotland (1)



Image: *The Guardian*

Campaign dominated by two groups formed in May-June 2012:-

Yes Scotland: led by Scottish National Party (SNP), with broad support from Scottish Greens and Scottish Socialist Party



Image: **Better Together**

Better Together: broad support from Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties



Thursday, 18th September 2014

The Referendum on Independence for Scotland (2)

BALLOT PAPER	
Vote (X) ONLY ONCE	
Should Scotland be an independent country?	
YES	<input type="checkbox"/>
NO	<input type="checkbox"/>



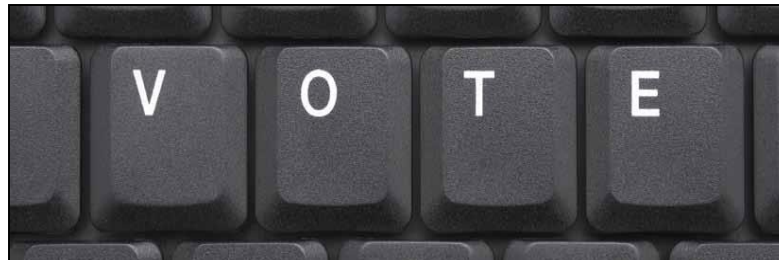
Images: UK Electoral Commission

- **Franchise extended to 16-17 year-olds**
- **Turnout: 84.6% of electorate**
- **Highest turnout for any election or referendum in the UK since 1918**
- **55.3% voted against independence**
- **Unprecedented levels of political activity on social media throughout Scotland, and beyond**



Aim and Objectives of Research

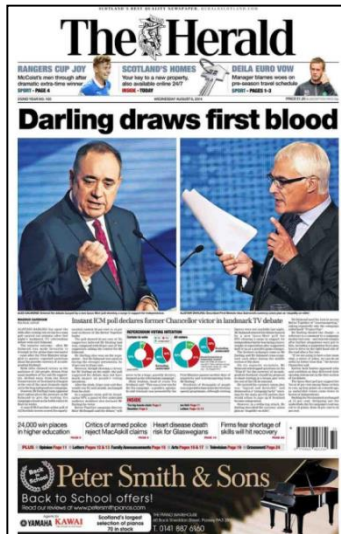
- **To develop an understanding of how Twitter is used as a vehicle for communication during televised political debates**
- **To identify peaks and troughs in Twitter usage during each debate**
- **To explore the issues and incidents that generated the greatest and least levels of Twitter discussion**
- **Three debates studied, selected because of:**
 - Timing – very close to polling day**
 - Live broadcast with no editing**
 - Status and high profile of participants**



Debate 1



- **5 August 2014, Glasgow**
- **Alex Salmond & Alistair Darling**
- **Broadcast on Scottish Television (STV)**
- **Shown only in Scotland; although also available online, in real time**
- **Average audience of 765,000 viewers; peak of 920,000**



Debate 2



Image: BBC



- **25 August 2014, Glasgow**
- **Salmond & Darling 'rematch'**
- **Broadcast on BBC Scotland and BBC Two (throughout UK)**
- **BBC Scotland: 843,000 viewers (37% share of audience)**
- **BBC Two: 1.7m viewers (7% share of audience)**



Debate 3



- **2 September 2014, Edinburgh**
- **Live on STV and itvnews.com**
- **Described as a ‘town hall debate’**

For Yes Scotland

- **Patrick Harvie, Green MSP**
- **Elaine C. Smith, actor**
- **Nicola Sturgeon, SNP MSP**

For Better Together

- **Douglas Alexander, Labour MP**
- **Ruth Davidson, Conservative MSP**
- **Kezia Dugdale, Labour MSP**



Images: STV



Our Sample: Compiled in Three Ways

- **Collected all tweets using the neutral and widely-used hashtag **#indyref**, and all tweets using programme-specific hashtags (e.g. **#ScotDecides**, **#BBCindyref**)**
- **Collected all tweets geo-tagged as sent from Scotland**
- **Collected all tweets sent by around 300 accounts whose owners had a clear interest in Scottish politics and the referendum**

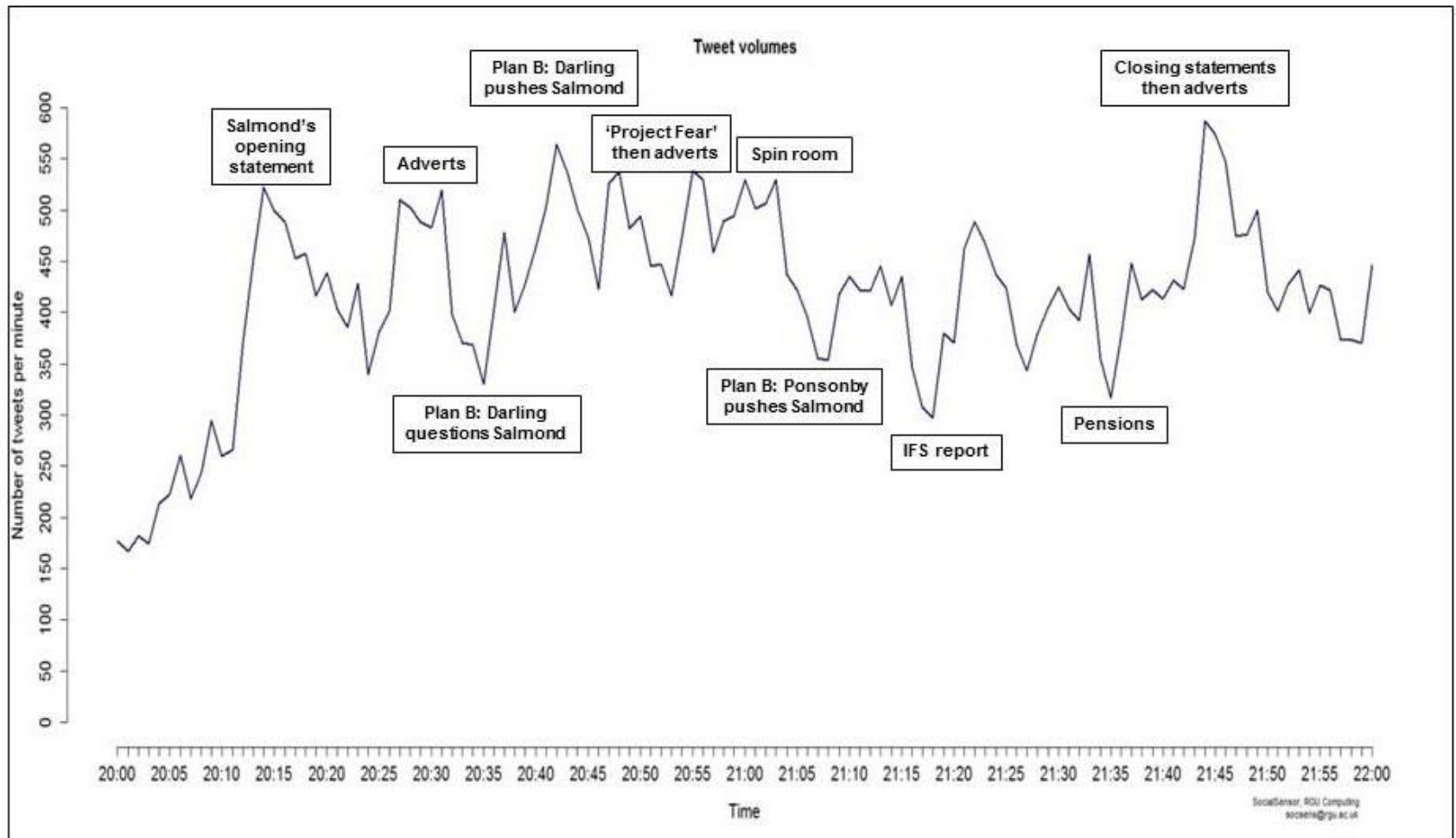


The Sample

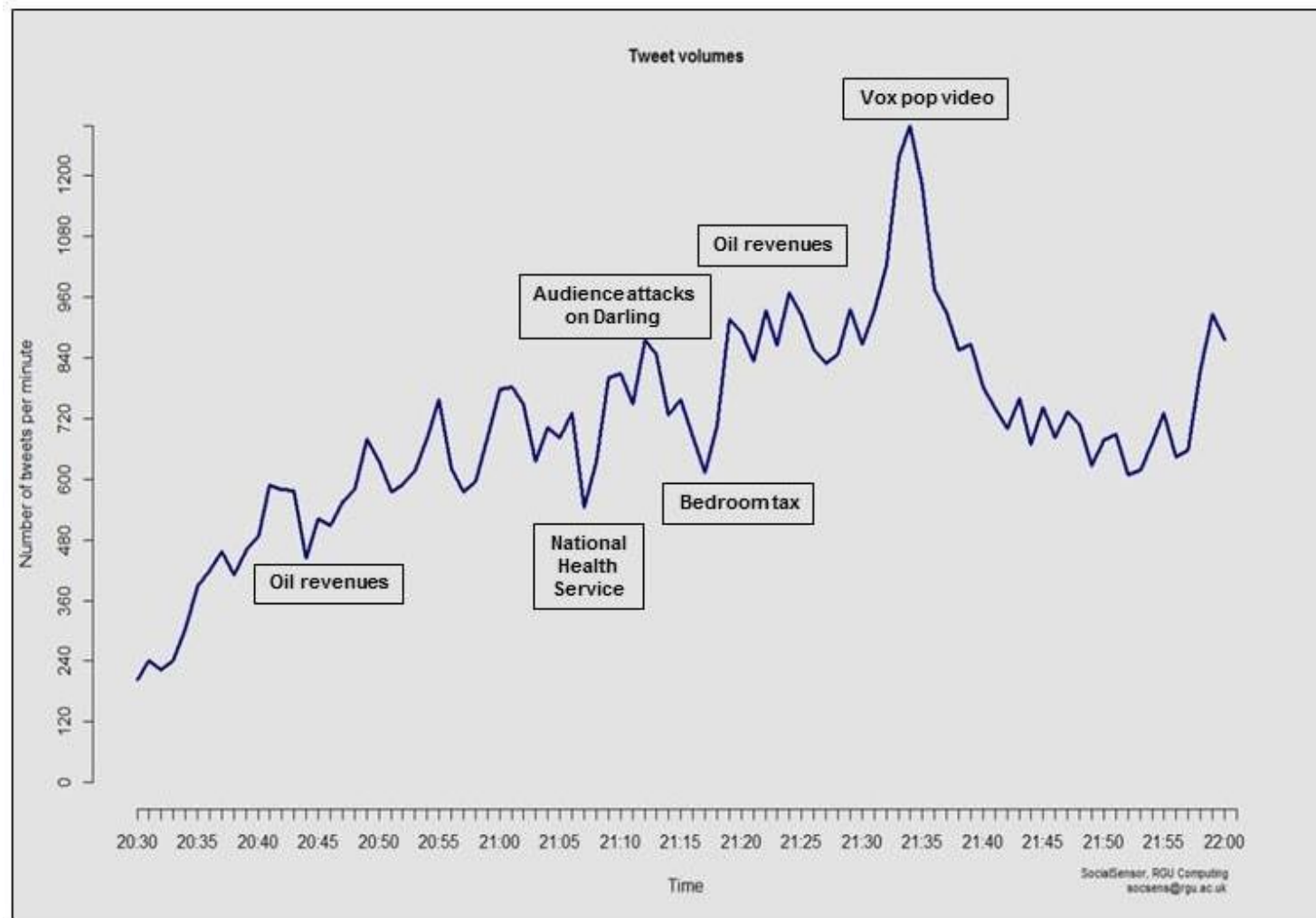
Debate	Duration	Total Tweets Collected	Ave. Tweets per Minute
Debate 1 5 August Salmond v Darling, STV	120 mins	54,811	456.8
Debate 2 25 August Salmond v Darling, BBC	90 mins	64,041	711.6
Debate 3 2 September Town Hall Debate, STV	120 mins	31,715	264.3



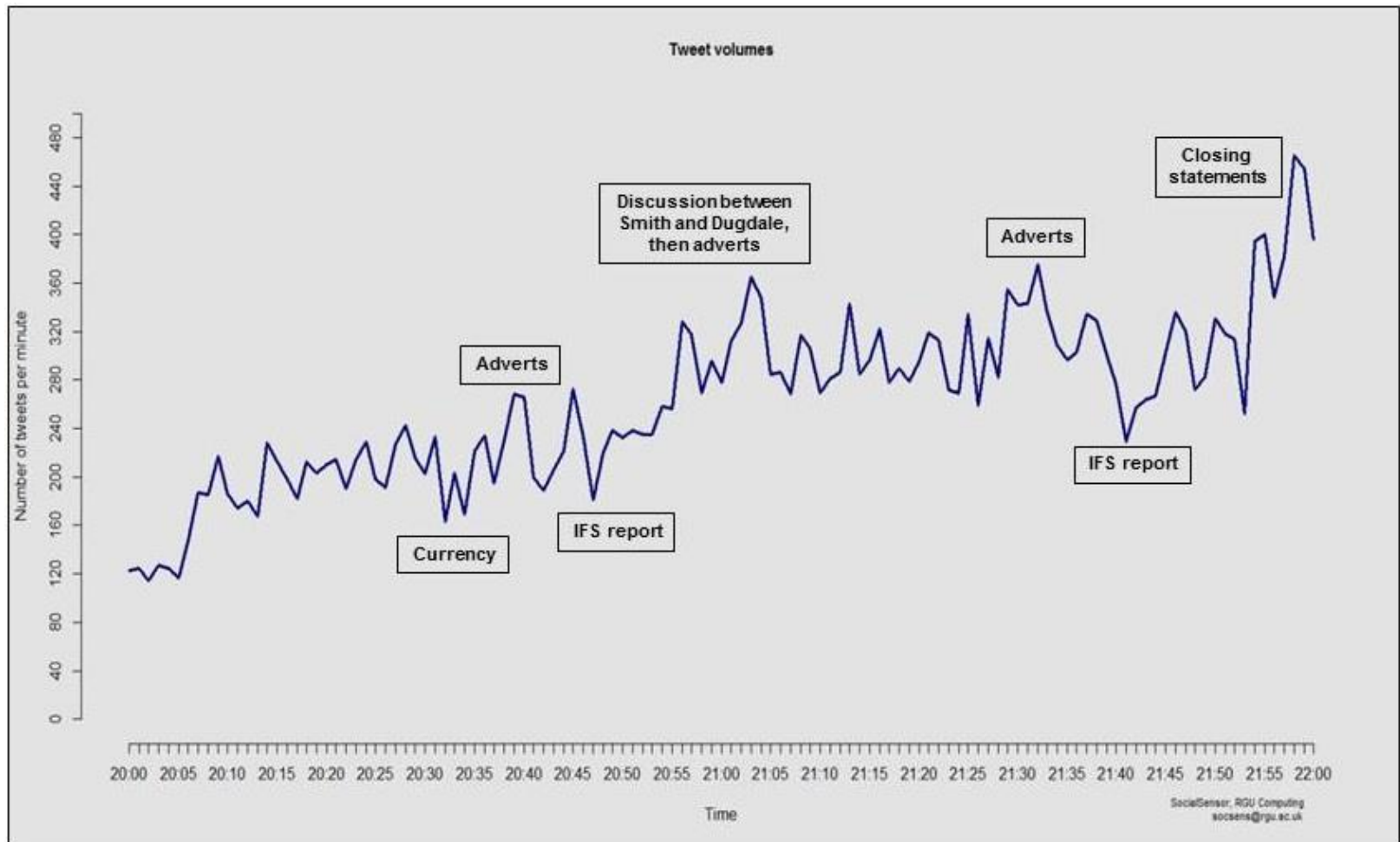
Debate 1: Peaks and Troughs



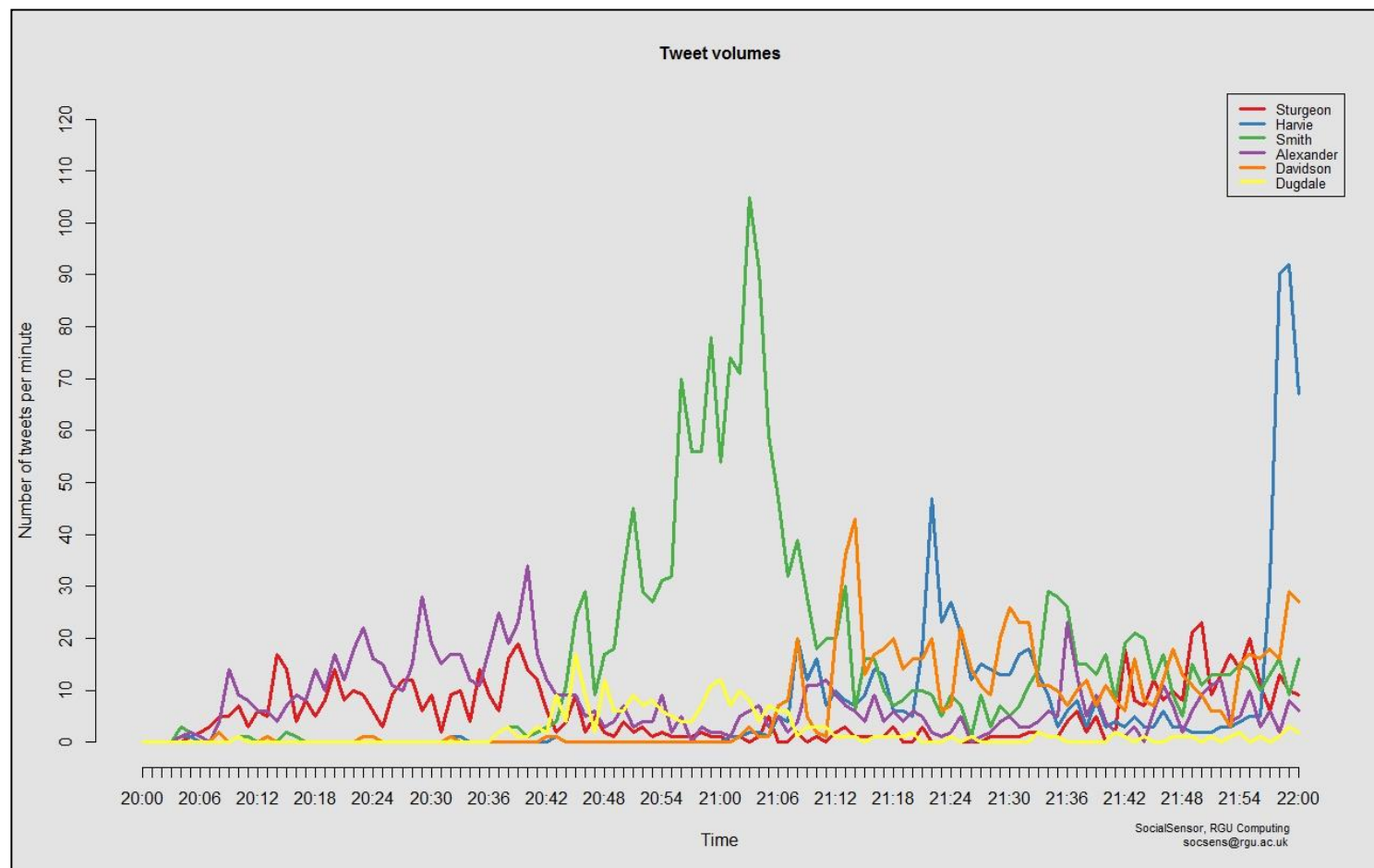
Debate 2: Peaks and Troughs



Debate 3: Peaks and Troughs



Debate 3: Elaine C. Smith Dominates Twitter Discussion



Conclusions

- **Twitter posts followed the agenda set by the media and the politicians very closely**
- **But topics that were the foci of the peaks in discussion varied from debate to debate**
- **Some topics failed to stimulate discussion throughout, particularly the IFS report**
- **Other peaks came during advert breaks, 'spin room' discussions, etc.**
- **Sample responded most strongly to moments of 'political theatre'**
- **Twitter users positive about diversity and conduct of panel in Town Hall debate**
- **Did the debates matter? Just 1.4% changed their mind after watching the Salmond-Darling debates (Edinburgh University, 2015)**



Image: *Daily Record*



Image: ITV



Implications?

- **Televised debates here to stay?**
- **cf. 2015 UK General Election televised debates: diverse panels; no all-male head-to-heads**
- **38% of UK public were influenced by the 2015 debates (Panelbase, May 2015)**
- **Twitter response can indicate formats, issues and behaviours that engage or disengage the electorate**



Image: ITV



Image: BBC



Thank you...



Image: *The Scotsman*



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