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Original Article

Reporting different second order elections: A comparative analysis of the 2009 and 2013 local and EU elections on public and commercial UK television news bulletins

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Abstract Drawing on a systematic content analysis, this article examines how far television news bulletins with different levels of public service obligations reported the EU and local elections in 2009 and the local elections in 2013. The aim is to compare coverage on the main evening terrestrial bulletins in the United Kingdom (the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5) during different types of second order campaigns and according to their regulatory responsibilities. Although UK citizens appear to value local above EU elections, the latter campaign was more extensively reported than the former on all broadcasters, with politicians sourced differently. Most striking was the market deficit of second order election news, notably Channel 5 – the broadcaster with the lightest public service obligations – containing no policy related stories. It was left to the BBC – the broadcaster with the strongest public service commitments – to deliver the most comprehensive and policy-orientated coverage.
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Keywords: second order elections; media content analysis; UK broadcasting; public sphere

Introduction

Election campaigns represent a significant moment in political communication scholarship (Negrine and Stanyer, 2007). It is, after all, when citizens are most likely to be exposed to information about the relative merits of different political parties. Consequently, key debates in the literature are often informed by characteristics

empirically assessed in election reporting and used to theorize broader trends (Cushion, 2015). However, an examination of election studies literature also reveals an overwhelming focus on what have been defined as 'first order elections', such as Presidential or general elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). In other words, key debates in political communication are to a considerable extent shaped by empirical research exploring first order elections. The 'first' status is seen to represent citizen perceptions that Presidential or general elections are more important than European Union (EU) or local elections, which have been relegated to the status of 'second' order (ibid.). Scholars have sought to differentiate between different types of second order elections, moving beyond European Parliamentary (EP) ballots to understand the behavior and engagement of voters at local, regional or state level (see, for example, Franklin and Weber, 2010; Marsh and Mikhaylov, 2010). In doing so, research conducted about second order elections often relates to how citizens perceive and participate in them (see, for example, Carrubba and Timpone, 2005; Schmitt, 2005; Clark and Rohrschneider, 2009), rather than about how the media report different types of election campaigns.

Nonetheless, over the last decade or so there has been increasing attention paid to European elections by communication scholars, notably in large-scale cross-national studies exploring media content (De Vreese, 2003; De Vreese *et al*, 2006). By contrast, local elections have received far less scholarly attention, meaning many studies informing debates about second order elections are interpreted within a European context. In the *Handbook of Election Studies*, for example, while some chapters focussed on the EU elections, not one of the 22 chapters was dedicated to exploring local or state elections (Strömbäck and Kaid, 2008). Empirical studies examining media coverage of second order elections, in short, have primarily focussed on EU Parliamentary campaigns.

The purpose of this study is to begin to redress this imbalance by systematically comparing the priority afforded to local and EU Parliamentary elections in United Kingdom (UK) television news coverage. In doing so, we examine how far broadcasters with different public service broadcasting obligations reported the EU and local elections in 2009 and the local elections in 2013. Coverage is analyzed in the context of wider news agendas 3 weeks before election day. Central to our research design is thus a comparative dimension: to compare and contrast coverage of second order elections on the main terrestrial television bulletins in the UK (the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5) in both the 2009 and 2013 campaigns.

Television in the UK remains the dominant source of information about politics, despite the rise of new media (Barnett, 2012). With the exception of the BBC, each broadcaster has mixed commercial and public service responsibilities. Our intention is to assess how far their regulatory obligations may impact on the quantity and nature of election news. We can thus evaluate whether bulletins most shaped by public service broadcasting obligations deliver distinctive news about second order elections. After all, a central goal of public service broadcasting is to supply news of

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democratic value (Cushion, 2012), and reporting second order elections clearly represents a time when it is vital the media inform citizens about the various campaigns. In doing so, our study can contribute to wider debates about the democratic value of competing media systems, considering how political information environments can be shaped to better enhance people's understanding of politics and public affairs (Aalberg and Curran, 2012; Esser *et al,* 2012).

Second Order Elections and Broadcast Systems

Reif and Schmitt (1980) conceptualized second order elections to develop a way of interpreting how citizens behaved at a European level. However, they also included 'by-elections, municipal elections, various sets of regional elections, those to a second chamber and the like' (ibid., p. 8). Their framework for positioning local and EU elections as secondary can be summarized by 'less being at stake' compared with first order types involving national Parliamentary or Presidential elections (ibid., pp. 9–10). Put more bluntly, voters care less about them. However, there is evidence suggesting citizens place greater value in local rather than in European elections. In the UK, for example, a representative survey exploring voters' attitudes to both election types concluded that 'more of our respondents turned out to the vote in the local elections, many of them felt that it made a difference who won, and fewer reported they voted on the basis of national issues' (Heath *et al*, 1999, p. 406). More recently, an Electoral Commission (2004, p. 24) review of voter turnout concluded that voting in the EU elections is so low 'one might almost describe European Parliament elections as "third order"'. Indeed, a representative poll of attitudes toward the 2009 local and European elections concluded that 'European elections are viewed as somewhat secondary in comparison with the locals' with 1 in 10 indicating they would not have voted in the EU election had the local election not been held on the same day (Electoral Commission/ICM, 2009, p. 3).

This perceived relevance of different elections among voters has important democratic implications for the extent to which television reports on second order elections and how they are covered. After all, in the classic taxonomy of news values (for example, editorial selection), relevance ranks highly (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). However, more recent studies about contemporary news values suggest commercial interests are increasingly shaping news selection (Harcup and O'Neil, 2001) and market forces are considered to have influenced election coverage over successive decades (Patterson, 2000). Comparing the United States (US) and UK election coverage in the 1980s, Semetko *et al* (1991) identified that more commercially-driven channels (notably in the US) not only produced less news, but less informative news. The shift toward market-driven news has been interpreted as 'dumbing down' news content with a focus on entertaining rather than informing people about what is

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happening in the world (Franklin, 2008). Blumler and Gurevitch (1987) have suggested the editorial selection of news can be distinguished between taking a sacerdotal and pragmatic approach to election coverage. The sacerdotal approach views elections as pivotal to citizen needs, and '*inherently* and significant important' to democracy (Semetko *et al,* 1991, p. 6, *their emphasis*). The pragmatic approach interprets election news as it would any other story, something to be assessed in terms of newsworthiness. As newsworthiness can vary significantly between competing media and cross-nationally (Brighton and Foy, 2007), a pragmatic approach means whether an 'election story' makes the news is at the mercy of numerous forces, most notably commercial decision making. Since the news media market has proliferated in the 1990s and 2000s (Prior, 2007) and operates in a far more competitive and commercialized landscape with less public service obligations (Barnett, 2012), a pragmatic approach to reporting elections appears to have become more widespread in many countries.

As a consequence, previous studies of second order elections have often shown a low visibility of campaign related stories. In European countries, a fluctuation in the level of EU reporting is explained by unique cross-national characteristics such as a country's attitude toward European politics and the type of media systems (Cushion, 2012, pp. 115–124). So, for example, De Vreese *et al* (2006, p. 489) examined the 1999 and 2004 EU elections comparing television coverage across 26 nations and found 'EP [European Parliamentary] elections were consistently more visible on public broadcasting news programmes than on commercial television news'. In the 2009 election, 26 countries were examined and 21 public service television news bulletins reported the EU election campaign more frequently than their commercial competitors (Cushion, 2012, p. 117). There is, however, less evidence about the reporting of local elections within different media systems. As there has been little empirical research examining national television reporting elections at state, council and regionalized level, it is difficult to draw conclusions about how far they are covered by broadcasters with different public service obligations. Further still, there is little empirical evidence about how much media coverage is granted to local above European elections.

In order to investigate whether there has been a shift toward an increasingly pragmatic approach to reporting campaigns, as the media landscape has become more commercialized and deregulated, our first hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 1: The broadcaster with the most public service broadcasting commitments will report the most election television news coverage.

It was also established that UK voters appear to consider local elections more important than EU elections. We anticipate that all broadcasters – particularly those who carry the most public service responsibilities – will reflect the greater value citizens perceive the local elections to have. After all, public service broadcasters such as the BBC have statutory obligations and specific editorial standards requiring

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them to reflect the democratic interests of citizens. We therefore have two further hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2: There will be more television news coverage about the 2009 local rather than the EU election on evening bulletins with the greatest public service broadcasting obligations.

Hypothesis 3: There will be more coverage of the 2013 local election than the 2009 EU and local elections on evening bulletins with the greatest public service broadcasting obligations.

Beyond the quantity of coverage, it is important to establish the nature of election news. The reporting of politics has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention. Broadly speaking, election news is often interpreted by whether it is policy orientated or about the strategic game of politics. The former refers to news, in some form, about policy, typically featuring different political parties' positions on issues of substance. The latter is about non-policy issues such as reports about political personalities, conflict between or within parties, and 'horse race' aspects of elections including opinion polls and voter apathy (Patterson, 2000; Bennett, 2007). Many decades of research into media reporting of elections has identified that, in general, policy related news is being replaced by coverage related to non-policy issues such as the strategy or game stories. Although the strategy and game frame have been defined differently by scholars (Aalberg *et al*, 2012), the focus in this study is on the degree of policy versus. non-policy reporting. Our purpose is to explore how far both public and more commercially driven broadcasters supply information about the policies shaping the local and European elections.

As previously acknowledged, empirical studies exploring the balance between policy and non-policy reporting relate to a large extent on first order elections. Moreover, many are based in the US, which has a predominantly market-driven broadcasting system and relatively weak public service broadcasters compared with many European countries. Consequently, by studying second order elections in the UK – where an overarching public service broadcast infrastructure shapes the editorial output of news (Barnett, 2012) – findings could deviate from the dominant trends established in political communication literature. However, we anticipate that the migration toward non-policy election news will be least evident among the more public-service-driven broadcasters. In this context, our fourth hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 4: The evening bulletin with the most public service broadcasting commitments will report a greater degree of policy related stories.

A consequence of prioritizing non-policy oriented news is that journalistic interpretation of political events is often at the expense of sourcing politicians' voices and actions more likely to be related to policy. In making sense of this shift,

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scholars have examined the changing ways in which politicians are sourced in election coverage (Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2012). Many studies, for example, have shown how political soundbites – politicians being seen and heard on-screen – have reduced in successive elections, notably in the US (Hallin, 1992) and by more commercially driven broadcasters (Esser, 2008; Grabe and Bucy, 2009). Instead politicians are increasingly appearing on-screen but without being audible. These have has become known as 'imagebites', with journalists narrating over politicians' speeches and actions (Esser, 2008; Grabe and Bucy, 2009). Strömbäck and Dimitrova (2011), for example, examined the length of soundbites and imagebites in US and Swedish election news, measuring how far politicians' voices and actions spoke for themselves or whether they were edited by journalists. They identified a greater use of imagebites and less reliance on politicians as sources on US television news because of the more market-driven environment of television news.

As one of the characteristics of second order elections is an enhanced role for a greater range of smaller and newer political parties (Reif and Schmitt, 1980), we also anticipate that this could impact on how politicians are sourced during both elections. As impartiality is closely monitored in UK broadcasting – not least during election campaigns – editorially this might encourage journalists to provide more imagebites of politicians as opposed to verbally sourcing different politicians on-screen. The latter demands more time whereas the former can be more subtly edited into journalistic packages. Imagebites arguably appear less substantive than soundbites, meaning editors may not feel the need – or pressure – to balance out images of competing parties in the same way. In order to examine the editorial priority granted to election reporting across different broadcasters and the structural limitations of impartiality (balancing the voices of political parties), our next hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 5: The average length of imagebites will be longer than soundbites on more commercially-driven evening bulletins.

Finally, our study will go beyond quantifying just political sources during the election. After all, sourcing is a long-standing convention in journalism and builds credibility in how a story is presented and analyzed (Manning, 2001). Political debates can be shaped by numerous actors – from business and trade unions, think tanks and citizens – in order to inform campaign coverage. As we anticipated that broadcasters with the most public service obligations will deliver most election coverage (Hypothesis 1), it might follow that they offer the most opportunities for competing actors to be sourced. Further still, a key ethos of public service broadcasters is to represent a diverse range of viewpoints and to promote citizenship (Cushion, 2012). As a consequence our final hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 6: The range of sources informing coverage will be greater on evening bulletins with more public service broadcasting obligations.

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The overall research question of the study is:

> Are there any differences in the extent and nature of news reporting about different second order elections – the EU and local elections – on UK evening television news bulletins operating under varying levels of public service broadcasting obligations?

Election Case Study, Method and Sample

As a key focus of this study is to compare the news value of different second order elections, it is important to contextualize the two campaigns we will examine. The EU and local election polls were conducted on 4 June 2009. All UK regions could vote in the EU elections, electing 72 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) with 27 nations also participating throughout Europe. The 2009 local elections, by contrast, were for English regions only, including 27 County Councils, with some other council, unitary and mayoral elections. The 2013 local elections in the UK were held on 2 May 2013. This involved 34 local authorities in England, one in Wales and two mayoral elections. There are, however, different types of local elections in the UK. The 2009 and 2013 local elections related primarily to county councils. Thus, when interpreting our comparative case study of the local elections in the UK it should be noted that there are other types of local elections such as unitary authority, borough, district, city, town and parish. These arguably could generate a different level of media or public attention.

Local elections in the UK, for example, can be defined as heterogeneous, as campaigns are not necessarily waged on common issues and ideologies in different constituencies. From a broadcaster's perspective, this of course makes it hard for UK national bulletins – the object of study in this article – to 'localize' election stories in order to make them sufficiently newsworthy throughout the country. In doing so, news reporting about local elections might find it hard to compete with EP elections where the relevance of a national narrative could more easily be constructed. Consequently, it could be argued that comparing the local and EU elections is almost like comparing apples and pears. But since the EU and local elections were part of the same campaign in 2009, from a citizen's perspective it remains important to be informed about both ballots and useful to know which broadcasters supply the relevant policy information. Moreover, comparing the EU and local elections in 2009 with the local elections in 2013 also means the news value of different second order elections can be systematically compared and the findings discussed in light of how far broadcasters reported each campaign.

We should also point out the limitations of the UK as a case study and how far one can generalize how the EU elections are reported in other countries. According to Eurobarometer data, the UK is one of the most Eurosceptical countries of the EU.[1] While all UK broadcasters are legally required to be impartial in how they report EU

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politics, the particularly negative attitudes toward European political institutions among UK citizens could influence the volume and nature of television news coverage that might not be replicated internationally. Of course, voting in an election is not the only form of political participation. Many citizens today focus on less formal ways of engaging with politics, such as participating in a protest, organizing a Facebook campaign or signing a petition. As many citizens increasingly turn to less institutional forms of political participation, it could be that broadcasters pay less attention to representative party politics such as election campaigns.

In order to systemically compare and contrast election coverage between broadcasters, a content analysis of the UK's early evening television news bulletins was carried out. This included the following bulletins: Channel 5 at 17:00, BBC at 18:00, ITV at 18:30 and Channel 4 at 19:00. Channel 4 provides the longest bulletin, lasting 1 hour (with commercial breaks). The scheduled length of the BBC, ITV and Channel 5 is approximately 25 min, although the BBC is marginally longer (no advertisement break). All data will be interpreted in the context of the time spent on election coverage within a bulletin, thus taking into account the different length of programmes. The viewing figures for each bulletin vary considerably. The BBC and ITV on average attract 4.4 m and 3.4 m respectively, whereas Channel 4 and Channel 5 draw audiences of about 800 000 and 700 000 (Ofcom, 2012). Although the latter two broadcasters have fewer viewers, they reach different demographic groups. Channel 4 is seen as more highbrow, appealing to socio-economic group ABC1, whereas Channel 5 attracts more DE viewers (Ofcom, 2012).

The broadcasters in our sample hold competing regulatory obligations. While the BBC is a wholesale public service broadcaster with clear and comprehensive public service responsibilities closely regulated by the BBC Trust, the other commercial broadcasters are regulated by a 'light touch' body called Ofcom (Barnett, 2012). Although all broadcasters are required to be impartial, each has more specific license agreements related to the provision of news outlined in communication acts.[2] ITV, for example, is required to produce local and national television news at peak times, whereas the other two broadcasters are only expected to produce national programming. A close examination of the license agreements for Channel 4 and Channel 5 also suggests the former has greater demands than the latter. Although both are expected to produce news programmes 'of high quality and deal with both national and international matters', according to Channel 4's agreement it should also provide coverage that is 'accurate, impartial, authoritative and comprehensive, in terms both of geography and subject matter'. In summary, *the relative degree of public service obligations for each broadcaster can be interpreted as the BBC having most while Channel 5 have least, with ITV and Channel 4 sharing similar expectations about the volume and range of their output.*

As the focus of this study considers the comparative differences between broadcasters with different public service obligations, our sample was limited to terrestrial television channels. But we could have examined broadcasters operating with no

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public service obligations, such as Sky News. Moreover, if greater resources were available the sample could also have been extended to radio and online news outlets with different regulatory responsibilities. Newspapers also represent an important source of news during election campaigns and comparing broadsheet, mid-market and tabloid newspapers, for example, would represent a similar comparative dimension to the approach taken in this study. Needless to say, including radio, online and newspaper coverage would have significantly increased the size of the sample and possibly the type of election news reported. For instance, it has been argued that UK national newspapers reporting of EU politics is largely negative, with coverage focussed on controversial policy decisions that adversely influence people in the UK (Morgan, 1999). In addition, the study could also have included more specialist television programmes that may have related to EU and local elections, such as *Question Time* – an hour-long format where political elites are quizzed by a live studio audience (McNair *et al*, 2003). Again, this may have resulted in different types of election news issues being discussed. As already acknowledged, the format of an evening television news bulletin is relatively short, and political news – and indeed election news reporting – represents only one possible issue in the context of all news that day. Finally, we could have included local/regional television news bulletins – which may have generated more reporting about the local elections – but it was beyond the scope of the study to examine them.

The sample period was 3 weeks before election day: 11 May–3 June 2009 and 8 April–2 May 2013 (excluding weekends).[3] The unit of analysis in the content analysis study was twofold. In order to interpret the amount of airtime dedicated to election news as a proportion of all news, we first examined every story reported such as politics, crime, health, entertainment, foreign affairs and so on. Of particular interest was the proportion of time dedicated to national political news. This allows us to explore how far national political news – primarily about Westminster – was reported as opposed to political news about second order elections. In other words, how far was 'normal' reporting about Westminster politics interrupted by news about second order elections? We then examined every EU and local election story in more detail over the sample period. Stories were also coded as a 'mixture' of EU and local election coverage if both campaigns were dealt with equal measure (and where one campaign was not explicitly more prominent than the other).

Two noteworthy stories were of particular significance in both sample years. First, the abuse of MPs' expenses was newsworthy throughout the 2009 campaign, with details breaking about specific items bought by politicians. Second, and to a lesser extent, the death of Margret Thatcher on 8 April 2013 was particularly prominent in the first week of the sample period. No sample, of course, can ever claim to be 'typical' and our findings must be interpreted in the context of external news events. Compared with previous second order elections – in the 2004 EU elections, say – the two major parties also faced stiffer competition from so-called 'minor' parties during both the 2009 European and 2013 local election campaigns. UKIP, in particular,

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grew in popularity and its leader, Nigel Farage, has attracted a considerable amount of media attention over recent years (Ford and Goodwin 2014).

Beyond establishing the amount of airtime granted to election news as a proportion of all news between broadcasters, we will also compare how different second order elections were reported. So for example, the amount of coverage will be interpreted according to whether it was predominantly about the local or EU election, or if it is a mixture of different elections (including, for instance, competing mayoral or by-elections). To explore the nature of coverage, we quantified the proportion of time allocated to policy related stories as opposed to non-policy stories. Finally we quantified the type of sources used to inform coverage. We recorded the length of every on-screen source aurally within an election story (soundbites). We also coded politician imagebites when they appeared visually. As there were sometimes multiple images of politicians edited in an election story, we measured the combined length of imagebites within a single story. All content analysis variables have previously been piloted, with an intercoder reliability test indicating a high level of agreement.[4]

Overall, then, the study examined 67 hours, 5 min and 7 seconds of UK television news and a total of 1607 news stories. A total of 2 hours, 15 min and 52 seconds of election coverage was isolated. For 2009 the sample generated 33 hours, 41 min, 17 seconds of monitoring across 883 news stories and in 2013, 33 hours, 23 min, 50 seconds across 724 news stories. When election coverage was isolated, in 2009 it amounted to 1 hour, 16 min, 41 seconds across 35 news stories and in 2013, 59 min, 11 seconds across 15 news stories.

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Findings

Figure 1 illustrates the total airtime granted to election news by different broadcasters as a proportion of all news.

Our study supported Hypothesis 1. The broadcaster with the greatest public service broadcast commitments – the BBC – reported the most amount of election television news coverage in 2009 and 2013. Moreover, an analysis of the general news agenda during the campaign demonstrates the extent to which broadcasters with different regulations covered the election compared with other newsworthy stories. In 2009 testing ($\chi^2 = 23160.614$, $P<0.0005$, DF = 39) reveals statistically significant indications that Channel 5 (the broadcaster with the least public service regulatory obligations) pursues the lightest news agenda or what some might describe as 'dumbing down' content (for example, crime, entertainment and celebrity stories). In 2013, this picture is reinforced ($\chi^2 = 7317.672$, $P<0.0005$, DF = 39), as the BBC's greater propensity to cover election news, the softer news agendas of ITV and Channel 5, and the generally harder news agenda of Channel 4 can all be concluded from those items shown to be statistically significant (see Table 1).

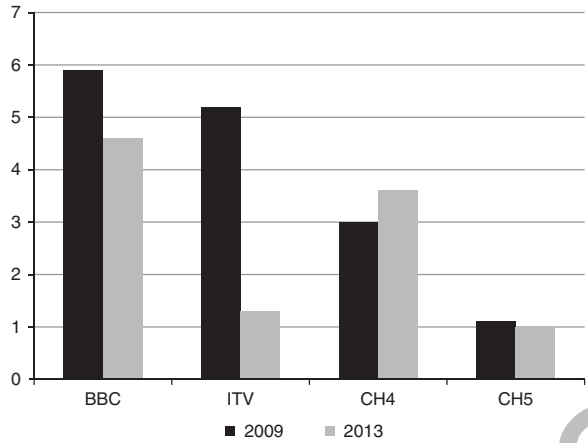

Figure 1: The percentage of total airtime dedicated to election news in 2009 and 2013 as a proportion of all news on UK television news bulletins.

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Table 1, meanwhile, shows the spread of the most reported news categories 3 weeks before election day, in order to understand each broadcaster's broader news values over the campaign periods. The overall percentage of stories does not add up to 100 per cent because only the most reported categories – 13 in total – have been included.

Although election, politics, foreign affairs and war reporting received substantial coverage on the bulletins of the more public service orientated broadcasters – notably the BBC – news related to human interest, celebrity and entertainment was made more evident on the most commercially driven broadcaster (Channel 5). ITV and Channel 4 appeared somewhere in between with a mix of 'hard' and 'soft' news, consistent with previous empirical studies of UK television news (Barnett *et al*, 2012).

Table 2 shows the proportion of airtime dedicated to both 2009 EU and local elections and 2013 local elections. There were some instances when a specific election was not mentioned in a news story. So, for example, an item might state 'the upcoming election' or 'in tomorrow's voting …' These unspecified references to elections have been excluded from Table 2, as the aim is to compare – where possible – the amount of news devoted to local and EU elections.

Because all broadcasters reported the EU elections to a greater extent than local elections, Hypothesis 2 can be rejected. We had anticipated that local elections would be covered to a greater extent than the EU elections – particularly broadcasters with the greatest public service responsibilities – as the evidence suggested UK citizens value the former more than the latter. After all, the term 'second order election' was coined to convey the greater importance voters – based on their behavior – granted to first order elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). As a proportion of all television news

Table 1: The percentage of time spent on the most reported categories of news during the 2009 EU and local elections and the 2013 local elections on UK television news bulletins (seconds in brackets)

	BBC		*ITV*		*CH4*		*Five*	
	2009 (%)	*2013 (%)*	*2009 (%)*	*2013 (%)*	*2009 (%)*	*2013 (%)*	*2009 (%)*	*2013 (%)*
Election	(1565)	(1262)**	(1397)	(292)	(1396	(1784)	(243)	(213)**
	5.9	**4.6**	**5.2**	**1.3**	**3.0**	**3.6**	**1.1**	**1.0**
National Politics	(10621)	(5576)	(11238)	(4570)	(15172)	(11109)	(3170)**	(4164)
	40.1	**20.3**	**41.5**	**20.6**	**33**	**22.2**	**14.5**	**20.2**
Crime	(1828)	(5741)	(2497)	(4874)	(4287)	(10905)	(2434)	(5930)**
	6.9	**20.9**	**9.2**	**22.0**	**9.3**	**21.9**	**11.2**	**28.7**
War	(3240)	(2626)	(2201)	(1578)	(6034)	(4633)	(1538)	(1219)
	12.2	**9.6**	**8.1**	**7.1**	**13.1**	**9.3**	**7.1**	**5.9**
Sport	(918)	(1884)**	(1681)	(908)	(476)	(1850)	(1355)	(737)
	3.5	**6.9**	**6.2**	**3.4**	**1.0**	**3.7**	**6.2**	**3.6**
Accidents/ disaster	(964)	(879)	(1672)	(1774)**	(1594)	(1550)	(1194)	(1233)
	3.3	**3.2**	**6.2**	**8.0**	**3.5**	**3.1**	**5.5**	**6.0**
Business	(1390)	(1434)	(771)	(1098)	(3175)	(2689)	(668)	(935)
	5.3	**5.2**	**2.9**	**5.0**	**6.9**	**5.4**	**3.1**	**4.5**
Foreign affairs	(1830)	(1624)	(1613)	(794)	(2736)	(3495)**	(233)	(463)**
	6.9	**5.9**	**6.0**	**3.6**	**5.9**	**7.0**	**1.1**	**2.2**
Entertainment /culture	(706)	(861)	(792)	(124)**	(2398)	(2080)	(2502)**	(760)
	2.7	**3.1**	**2.9**	**0.6**	**5.2**	**4.2**	**11.5**	**3.7**
Health	(449)	(1993)	(80)	(2504)**	(284)	(1645)**	(1320)**	(1764)
	1.7	**7.3**	**0.3**	**11.3**	**0.1**	**3.3**	**0.6**	**8.5**
Celebrity	(177)	(161)	(851)	(22)	(1089)	(431)	(2039)**	(302)
	0.7	**0.1**	**3.2**	**0.1**	**2.4**	**0.1**	**9.4**	**1.5**
Home affairs	(247)	(1385)	(363)	(1387)	(760)	(2353)	(542)	(1599)
	0.9	**5.0**	**1.3**	**6.3**	**1.7**	**4.7**	**2.5**	**7.7**
Human Interest	(331)	(414)	(495)	(98)	(365)	(596)	(2022)**	(129)
	1.2	**1.5**	**1.8**	**0.4**	**0.1**	**0.1**	**9.3**	**0.1**

**These observations were the biggest contributors to the χ^2 test and statistically significant at the 0.005 level.

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examined over the sample period, the amount of coverage predominantly about the 2009 EU election items was higher (1.8 per cent) compared with news about local elections (0.4 per cent) – in real terms, four and half times more. However, 1 per cent of news was a mixture of EU and local election news.

The BBC – the main public service broadcaster – provided most coverage of both local and EU elections in 2009. Moreover, there was a striking absence of news about the local elections on the most commercially-driven evening bulletins – ITV or Channel 5 – over the campaign period. While ITV featured a number of mixed EU and local election stories, Channel 5 ran relatively few, constituting just 0.5 per cent of its overall news agenda in 2009.

Table 2: Percentage of time airtime (as a proportion of all news) reporting different elections in 2009 and 2013 on UK television news bulletins where the type of election is specified (seconds in brackets)

	2009 elections			*2013 elections*	
	Local (%)	*EU (%)*	*Mixture (EU and local) (%)*	*Local*	*Mixture (local, Mayoral and by-election) (%)*
BBC	(196) **0.7**	(1105) **4.2**	(264) **1.0**	(676) **2.5**	(38) **0.1**
ITV	/	(484) **1.8**	(501) **1.9**	(224) **1.0**	(68) **0.3**
Ch.4	(265) **0.6**	(647) **1.4**	(315) **0.7**	(514) **1.0**	(398) **0.8**
Ch.5	/	/	(118) **0.5**	(196) **0.9**	(17) **0.1**

(χ^2 tests could not be performed because of the low number of observations)

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Coverage of the 2013 local elections – where only one major election was being fought – generated 1.3 per cent of all airtime. Although there was a by-election and a Mayoral campaign in 2013 also, these only constituted 0.4 per cent of broadcast time. In 2013, Channel 4 aired the most election news overall (because its bulletin lasted 1 hour) but an overwhelming focus of this coverage related to the by-election (for example, mixing stories about the local and by-election). This focus on a first order by-election arguably inflated the status of the local election. Or, put another way, if the by-election had not been called it might have resulted in less 2013 local election coverage on Channel 4. The BBC had by far the most focussed coverage of the 2013 local election news – more than double any other broadcaster. Once again, Channel 5 had the least amount of election related news in both years.

Overall, then, we reject Hypothesis 3 because while the bulletins with the greatest public service obligations had the most amount of 2013 election coverage, the editorial priority granted to EU elections was greater. The EU elections, in short, have a higher news value than the local elections. Beyond the volume of news, our analysis now extends to examining the nature of election coverage. We begin by exploring the proportion of election news related to reporting the policies of competing political parties over the campaign period (see Table 3).

Overall, Hypothesis 4 is supported because the broadcaster with the most public service broadcasting commitments – the BBC – supplied the most policy-orientated election agenda. In both years over half of its coverage was policy related. Channel 4's coverage also dedicated a majority of its agenda to policy related news in 2013, but in 2009 this dropped to a fifth of election reporting. Although just under a fifth of coverage was policy orientated in 2009 on ITV, in 2013 election reporting contained no substantive policy stories. However, Channel 5's coverage was most striking, as it contained no policy related election news in either year.

In order to examine the nature of election coverage in more detail, the content analysis quantified how and to what extent politicians were represented by different broadcasters. To recap, we measured the average soundbite of a politician (aurally

Table 3: The percentage of time spent on different types of election coverage during the 2009 EU and local elections and the 2013 local elections on UK television news bulletins (seconds in brackets)

	2009 elections		*2013 elections*	
	Policy as percentage of election coverage	*Non-policy percentge of election coverage*	*Policy as percentage of election coverage*	*Non-policy as percentage of election coverage*
BBC	(837) **53.5**	(728) **46.5**	(649) **51.4**	(613) **48.6**
ITV	(250) **17.9**	(1147) **82.1**	/	(292) **100**
CH4	(289) **20.7**	(1107) **79.3**	(895) **50.1**	(889) **49.8**
FIVE	/	(243) **100**	/	(213) **100**

(χ^2 tests could not be performed because of the low number of observations)

Table 4: Mean average length of image bites and sound bites during the 2009 and 2013 elections on UK television news bulletins (in seconds)

	BBC		*ITV*		*CH4*		*Five*	
	2009	*2013*	*2009*	*2013*	*2009*	*2013*	*2009*	*2013*
Ave political image bite length	18.8	31.6**	12.4	10.8	14.5	20.4**	19.3	9.5
Ave political sound bite length	15.8	32.4	11.2	12.8	21.7	94.6	8.0	16.3

**These observations were the biggest contributors to the χ^2 test and statistically significant at the 0.005 level.

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airing their views) as well as the average imagebite (visually pictured) as a proportion of the whole item. We anticipated that the length of imagebites would be longer than soundbites on the most commercially driven bulletins, and in 2009 testing reveals that Channel 4 have a tendency toward shorter imagebites and Channel 5 longer ones (see Table 4). The BBC's average length of imagebite was greater than soundbites in 2009. However, these findings were not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 5.606$, $P = 0.132$, DF = 3) and on that basis Hypothesis 5 cannot be supported. By contrast, in 2013 there was a significant association between channel and length of image and soundbite. The largest contributors to the χ^2 test ($\chi^2 = 23.464$, $P = <0005$, DF = 3) were the BBC's tendency to provide longer imagebites and Channel 4's tendency toward shorter ones. Overall, therefore, we reject Hypothesis 5. The most striking finding, however, was not the differences between broadcasters – it was in how political sources were used differently in 2009 and 2013 campaign coverage.

The relative length of both imagebites and soundbites, of course, needs to be interpreted in the context of the individual bulletins (as there are varying lengths,

Table 5: Distribution of sound bites during the 2009 and 2013 elections on UK evening television news bulletins (seconds in brackets)

	2009							*2013*		
	Total sound bites	*P (%)*	*C (%)*	*NPA (%)*	*R (%)*	*M/P (%)*	*A (%)*	*Total sound bites*	*P (%)*	*C (%)*
BBC	(377)	(279)	(86)	(12)	—	—	—	(389)	(292) }	(97)
		74	**22.8**	**3.2**					**75**	**25**
ITV	(388)	(178)	(171)	—	(6)	(33)	—	(64)	(64)	—
		45.9	**44.1**		**1.5**	**8.5**			**100**	
CH4	(553)	(112)	(205)	(106)	—	(104)	(26)	(813)	(757)	(56)
		20.2	**37.1**	**19.2**		**18.8**	**4.7**		**93.1**	**6.9**
FIVE	(50)	(16) **32**	(34) **68**	—	—	—	—	(65)	(65) **100**	

Note: *P* = Politician, *C* = Citizen, NPA = Non-party activist, *R* = Researcher, M/P = Media Pundit, *A* = Academic.
(χ^2 tests could not be performed because of the low number of observations)

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with Channel 4 considerably longer). With the exception of Channel 4, all broadcasters had a longer average length of imagebite in 2009 as opposed to 2013. In 2013, soundbites were longer than imagebites on every evening bulletin. Moreover, a closer breakdown in 2009 reveals that the average length of imagebites was higher than soundbites in predominantly EU related items. The average length of imagebites on the BBC, for example, was 21 seconds compared with soundbites of 16 seconds. This suggests – as we develop further in our discussion – a different journalistic approach to reporting the EU and local campaigns rather than just the local election.

We also explored the overall range of sources broadcasters used to inform election coverage overall. As Table 5 illustrates, while politicians were prominent in all evening news bulletins, in 2009 – with the exception of the BBC – citizens were featured to a greater extent.

Overall, a greater range of actors informed the commercial bulletins compared with the BBC, which was shaped to a far greater extent in 2009 – three quarters of all soundbites – by politicians. In 2013, politicians played a more dominant role across all broadcasters. Contrary to Hypothesis 6 that is rejected, the BBC reflected the narrower range of sources in both elections, and it was the commercial bulletins that were shaped to a larger degree by citizens acting as sources – notably Channel 5 and ITV – primarily in respect of reporting non-policy stories such as MPs' expenses. However, it should also be noted that in 2013 the most commercial broadcasters – Channel 5 and ITV – granted little airtime to sources during the campaign. The BBC and Channel 4 gave far more time to politicians and featured the views of citizens.

Discussion

Our findings, overall, demonstrated some clear and striking differences between broadcasters with different commercial demands and public service obligations. Indeed, the news values of the different broadcasters were laid bare when examining all news reported over the campaign. Put simply, bulletins operating under the most public service regulations – notably the BBC – tackled far harder news topics than the most commercially driven bulletins – particularly Channel 5 – that had a softer news agenda. The elections, in other words, did not enhance hard news coverage.

Unsurprisingly, then, a striking difference in the proportion of time granted to second order elections was identified between competing media systems. Therefore, for example, Channel 5 offered little more than 1 per cent of its entire news agenda to the election – 4–5 times less than the BBC. ITV and Channel 4 – as anticipated – hovered somewhere in the middle, with the former reporting more election news in 2009 and the latter in 2013. Meanwhile, the BBC delivered the most policy-orientated agenda, whereas – with the exception of Channel 4 in 2013 – all the commercial bulletins were dominated by non-policy news. The commercial broadcasters were also distinctive from the BBC by the high proportion of election stories that mixed different campaigns in the same report, most especially in 2009 with the local and European elections. Reporting both types of elections in a single story left little time to substantively engage with either the local or the EU election campaign. Indeed, Channel 5 – a bulletin with the lightest regulatory baggage – featured no policy-driven election stories in either 2009 or 2013. Moreover, Channel 5's coverage sourced politicians on-screen for just 16 seconds throughout the whole 2009 coverage campaign and little over a minute in 2013. Comparatively speaking, then, the BBC spent the most time reporting second order elections whereas Channel 5 supplied the least coverage.

The study rejected our initial hypothesis that the local elections would be more newsworthy than the European elections because citizens appeared to value the former over the latter. Comparatively speaking, as a proportion of all television news, more EU election stories were reported in 2009 than news predominantly about the 2013 local elections, despite it being the only major election. However, second order elections did little to interrupt routine Westminster television coverage of politics. National political news generated approximately 7–9 times more coverage than combined local and EU coverage in 2009. Since our sample coincided with a period of time when Parliament was under considerable scrutiny because of the expenses scandal and the news of Margaret Thatcher's death, future longitudinal studies are needed to confirm whether national politics dominated second order elections to the same degree or to examine how they shaped coverage. Therefore, for example, with the exception of the BBC, in 2009 we discovered that citizens – rather than politicians – were the most sourced actors over the campaign. Contrary to previous election studies – where politicians (as they did in 2013) dominated the airwaves – this perhaps reflected an atypical moment with citizens thrust into the limelight to

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react to the MPs' expenses scandal. This was most strikingly embraced by the commercial broadcasters, and helps to explain their greater use of non-political elites and the lack of a policy related agenda during the campaign. Contrary to our hypothesis, this explained why the main public service broadcaster – the BBC – did not convey a greater range of sources than its commercial competitors.

In our research design we anticipated that, as second order elections tended to involve more political parties than first order elections, it might mitigate the use of soundbites in television news stories. After all, sourcing more than a handful of political parties in a single package could prove highly challenging. Instead, we suggested commercial broadcasters in particular could make greater use of imagebites – visual displays of politicians – thus sidestepping editorial constraints and the UK's strict impartiality laws. However, we found little evidence to support greater imagebites being associated with more market-driven broadcasters and instead identified a different approach to sourcing in the 2009 and 2013 election campaigns. With the exception of Channel 4, in 2009 broadcasters sourced political imagebites more than soundbites. In 2013 soundbites, by contrast, were longer in all evening bulletins. The difference could relate to the greater range of political parties involved during the EU rather than the local elections. In short, the evidence suggests that in elections where more parties compete to gain power, political actors are less likely to be sourced via soundbites. This has important democratic consequences for political parties during the EU elections in particular because their campaign messages are more likely to be interpreted by journalists (with background imagebites of politicians) rather than politicians (with on-screen soundbites).

Our study, overall, demonstrates the importance of public service broadcasting to representative democracies. After all, if the BBC did not exist, election coverage – notably during the local campaign – would have been barely visible on the more commercial television bulletins 3 weeks before election day. Moreover, the level of public service obligations correspondingly informed the volume and nature of election coverage, with Channel 5 paying little regard to either election campaign. We can thus draw a distinction between the news values of different media systems. The more commercial broadcasters appear to adopt what Blumler and Gurevitch (1987) describe as a pragmatic approach to politics, considering its newsworthiness in the context of competing news stories. Hence, for example, Channel 5 continuing its diet of tabloid news during the campaign. The more public service orientated bulletins, by contrast, can be seen to have taken a sacerdotal approach to covering second order elections, reporting both elections – in spite of their low commercial news value – because of the inherent democratic value to viewers.

As legislators debate the future of broadcasting in an increasingly market-driven environment, our study showed the UK's main public service broadcaster – the BBC – played a significant role in informing viewers about second order elections. While the commercial public service broadcasters – in particular ITV and Channel 4 – supplied some coverage of the elections, if their regulatory obligations were

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lightened (as is the case with Channel 5) it might arguably diminish coverage of second order elections even further. As many advanced democracies have witnessed an expansion of commercial multi-channel television programming over recent decades including dedicated news channels, there has been pressure to relax public service obligations because of the apparent choice and diversity of news brought about by market forces. The evidence presented in this study challenges this logic and suggests that public service broadcasters continue to play a distinctive role to informed citizenship at a time when there was a clear market deficit of second order election news coverage.

Notes

1 *Eurobarometer data can be accessed here:* http://www.gesis.org/en/eurobarometer/topics-trends-question-retrieval/eb-trends-trend-files/ Accessed 16 April 2014.

2 The aim of our study was not to simply compare the BBC with three commercial broadcasters. After all, the three commercial broadcasters have different levels of public service obligations. These can be evidenced by a close reading of the license agreements for each broadcaster, which can be accessed in the following documents: For Channel 4 http://licensing.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/tv/c4/c4drl.pdf, for Channel 5 http://licensing.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/tv/c5/c5drl.pdf and for ITV http://licensing.ofcom.org.uk/tv-broadcast-licences/current-licensees/channel-3/. All documents were accessed on 1 June 2013.

3 We excluded weekends for logistical reasons. The media monitoring system at our university only records weekday bulletins because on the weekend bulletins are often scheduled at irregular times making them difficult to pre-record. In addition, the following bulletins – the BBC on 25 May 2009 (Bank Holiday), Channel 4 on 3 June 2009 and 5 News on 3 June 2009 – did not record for technical reasons.

4 Our study was a part of a larger set of ongoing studies into television news that drew on similar variables. Therefore, for example, drawing on Fleiss's (1981) approach to intercoder reliability, one study involving several coders recorded an overall score of 0.965 (Cushion and Thomas, 2013). According to Fleiss's compressed scale, this result can be interpreted as excellent.

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