

SUMMARY

**REPORTING OF THE
ELECTIONS TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT**

ON

UK TERRESTRIAL TV NEWS PROGRAMMES

AND

BBC RADIO 4

9TH MAY, 1999 - 12TH JUNE, 1999

A survey conducted

for

Global Britain

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by

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- A survey, conducted by independent researchers, Minotaur Media Tracking, of the entire broadcast news output of UK terrestrial television and BBC Radio 4 during the European Parliamentary Elections, has revealed significant problems of bias and a very low level of coverage.
- The research, undertaken for the Global Britain cross-party think tank, founded by Lord Stoddart of Swindon, Lord Harris of High Cross and Lord Pearson of Rannoch, covered the five weeks leading up to the poll on June 10. It asked whether the BBC and the commercial channels were meeting their public service obligations to provide high quality and impartial news.

- More than 600 hours of programming and more than 600 individual news programmes, including Today, Newsnight and Channel 4 News, as well as the main bulletins on all channels, were recorded and the items of relevance to the Elections transcribed.

MINOTAUR MEDIA TRACKING

- David Keighley, a Cambridge history graduate, is a former newspaper and BBC radio journalist and news producer. He was the BBC's News and Current Affairs publicity officer and in 1985 joined TV-am as Controller of Public Affairs, responsible for the station's political coverage on matters of bias and range of coverage. As a media consultant working for clients such as Reuters Television, he conceived and developed News World, the leading international conference for news broadcasters which annually attracts 450 of the world's senior broadcast news executives from over 50 countries.
- Kathy Gyngell worked as a research sociologist after graduating from Cambridge with First Class Honours and from Oxford with an M.Phil. She co-edited *Inside Information, British Government and the Media*, Routledge 1981. After working as a researcher in London Weekend Television's Current Affairs division she moved to TV-am as a producer where she went on to become Features Editor and conceived of and edited *After Nine*. (She is married with two sons and is founder of the voluntary support and campaigning group, Full Time Mothers)

Key Findings

Neglect

The amount of broadcast coverage of the European Elections and associated issues was low, even allowing for the war in Kosovo. Just 2% of the television news output and around 6% of that on radio, was devoted to Election issues (220 items in 600 hours of coverage).

Terrestrial television's main two news analysis programmes, **Newsnight** on BBC 2, and **Channel 4 News**, carried just 10 items between them in almost 40 hours of transmission.

BBC Television News, in its main bulletins at 1, 6 and 9pm daily, as well as those at weekends, carried 25 separate items, amounting to around 2.5% of the total time, and on just 17 of the 37 days monitored. None of the items was longer than 2.5 minutes and many were much shorter.

ITV news, provided by ITN, transmitted just nine separate items, amounting to around considerably less than 2% of its total output time. Some were repeated in more than one bulletin at different times of day. Its reports confined to short correspondent pieces with soundbites from Party leaders were sparse.

BBC2's Newsnight, the Corporation's flagship television news analysis programme, carried just four items of any substance about the Election or Europe. One of them was after the Election and it described the event as "an outbreak of narcolepsy", perhaps summing up the editorial team's attitude. Jeremy Paxman did not interview any of the candidates or Party leaders.

Channel 4, also produced by ITN, carried just six items on the Election. Most of them included arguable examples of bias against the Tory Party. Jon Snow, the main presenter, appeared at times flippant in some of his treatment of Election issues.

GMTV, in its weekday daily output, scarcely mentioned the Elections at all, and outside news bulletins carried just three programme features before the Election - all in Election week and all at 6.17am. GMTV offered a curious paradox. Its Sunday programme covered the Election probably best of all outlets, with more time devoted to it and a greater range of programme guests. Even so, it is hard to see that this met its public service remit.

Channel 5 News, with news programmes totalling 45 minutes daily, broadcast just three short packages totally less than 10 minutes.

BBC Radio 4's Today, as the Corporation's flagship news programme at the heart of its public service remit, carried around 50 items on the Election, and several stories tackled nowhere else on the broadcast agenda. But it also ignored, or did not cover, many key issues.

It is arguable that both the BBC and ITV failed to cover the Elections sufficiently to meet their public service obligations. Reporting was of the barest minimum, narrow in focus and rarely went off diary to get to grips with the main issues that affect the voters of the United Kingdom. On television, both the commercial companies and the BBC allowed the coverage of Kosovo to dominate output to the point where the Elections were not properly covered. On BBC Radio 4 - the BBC's flagship news output - coverage was of the bare minimum.

Quality and Bias

In not covering many facets of the Election, the broadcasters themselves decided that the Election was not that important to voters. Their reporting from very early on spoke of voter apathy, underlining the unimportance of the Election. Some commentators said that this was what the Labour Party wanted.

There were clear examples of bias or imbalance in the treatment of a number of areas and issues. The Tories and their opposition to the Euro were regularly characterised as split - even though virtually no evidence was provided and, as the campaign unfolded, it became clear that, for the duration of the campaign at least, they were not. The Pro-Euro Conservative Party was given prominence

beyond what was warranted. It eventually achieved 1.3% of the vote and did not win a single seat. By contrast, the UK Independence Party was scarcely mentioned but won 7.7% of the vote and 3 seats.

The most outstanding example of this came two days before the Election, on **Today**, when a letter from Sir Julian Critchley to the **Times**, saying he had doubts about the Tory opposition to the Euro, was judged so important that it became the key point of an interview that morning with William Hague (and one of the few stories in the entire election to make headlines status).

(By contrast, some political correspondents did say that the Conservatives had fought a good campaign, and managed to keep the focus on the Euro. This, however, did not cancel out or balance the “split” accusations).

On the Record, the BBC’s main television news and current affairs programme, did not achieve political balance during the campaign and gave favourable treatment to the Labour Party - in the run-up to the Election, it contained interviews with two senior Labour Ministers, as against just one each for the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. It also carried a pro-Federalist interview with Romano Prodi, without a balancing exploration of a different approach to Europe’s future.

The Dimbleby programme on ITV was also imbalanced. It carried a long interview with John Redwood in which Jonathan Dimbleby spent a considerable amount of time trying to establish that his views were at variance with those of the Party. Paddy Ashdown featured in one of the programmes and actually had to ask to be asked about Europe. There was no equivalent examination of his views. The Labour Party was not invited on at all to discuss their stance.

Some attention was paid to problems in the Labour Party. Most of this centred on why they had not campaigned harder, and on why Mr Blair had not made the case for the Euro more strongly. There was no mention of Labour Party members opposed to the Euro, or of groups on the left who were opposed to the Labour Party’s stance on Europe. And Labour’s problems over MEP, Christine Oddie, though explored on Today at the start of the campaign, were not followed through.

Bias by Omission

There is a strong case that there was also bias by omission. Some said that this was an Election that Labour did not want. The BBC scarcely reported at all many structural issues that were important to the future of the European Parliament: moves towards greater federalism, to widen the membership of the EU, to change existing policies on CAP or employment law, the development of a unitary tax structure, and the further consequent limitation of UK sovereignty. They were mentioned - but not investigated, and thus arguably relegated in importance.

Robin Oakley, at the Labour manifesto launch, said that Party campaigners were insisting that being pro-European didn't involve backing for policies that would lead to a federal European superstate. But this vital point - clearly a point of contention in Labour's approach - was not explored further.

On television, there was little exploration of the key issues - and then mainly confined to 10-20 second soundbites of the Party leaders. Channel 4 News carried four pre-June 10 packages about the Election, and Newsnight carried two. In short bulletin reports, they mentioned the manifesto launches. All gave the impression that the Election was "being done", rather than providing an insightful look at the key issues. BBC Breakfast examined the Euro in a special sequence of three reports, had a discussion about the size of the ballot paper and had two constituency/ area reports (from Liverpool and Kidderminster). BBC Television News confined itself to one constituency report, brief mentions of the manifesto launches and of the Euro, a discussion of the ballot paper size, a few campaign progress reports, and, then, in Election week, items on voter apathy and the progress towards the polls. ITN was the same, with fewer reports.

The longer-form television programmes - On the Record, GMTV, Dimbleby and Breakfast with Frost - did carry extensive interviews with the Party leaders and their senior lieutenants. As such, they engaged in aspects in the Euro Election debate. GMTV's programme came closest to achieving wide-ranging coverage, but it is broadcast at 7am. There were questions of balance over OTR and Dimbleby. Frost did achieve balance, but the extent of questions on Europe was limited to around two to three minutes for each of the Party leaders.

Radio 4, as would be expected with a news output of more than six hours a day, covered more ground, but it is hard to see that the coverage was systematic or comprehensive. Many central issues of policy were not tackled at all. Part of the coverage on Radio 4 was biased against the Conservatives. In the initial part of the campaign, it characterised the Party as being split. In the week of the Election, inordinate weight was given to “splits” that never materialised.

Disregard

Election broadcasting conventions suggest equitable treatment of political Parties, but those representing Euro-sceptic groups were almost entirely absent from the list of those interviewed in items on the Election. The UK Independence Party, which polled 7.7% of the vote and won three seats was scarcely mentioned. However, the Pro-Euro Conservative Party, which polled 1.3% of the vote and did not win a single seat, was given extensive and headline coverage.

These conventions also provide that balance of programming in an Election period should be kept across the transmissions of that programme. On the Record did not achieve political balance; and nor did the Dimpleby programme.

Coverage of candidates was minimal (Pauline Green and Edward MacMillan-Scott were the only two to feature more than once). Even allowing for the problems posed by the voting system, an accommodation could have been arrived at with the other political Parties. This became a faceless Election.

Conclusions

Each channel surveyed carried a surprisingly low level of Election reporting, even allowing for the Kosovo War. Broadcasters said, almost from the beginning, that the Election was about apathy. But, in news terms, they seemed to passively accept that, and failed to take steps to bring it alive for the voters.

The BBC prides itself on its news. But this report throws up disturbing issues of a low level of coverage, bias and a failure to

get to grips with, or elucidate, some of the key issues facing voters at a crucial phase in the development of the European Union. Election coverage in general was characterised by a lack of any coherent editorial strategy which, compounded by a paucity of items, would leave any viewer or listener dependent on broadcast news as their only source of information, with a view of the Election limited largely to the launch of manifestos, voter apathy and the size of the ballot paper.

The survey showed that coverage on commercial channels was even less than that on the BBC. It is for the ITC to decide whether nine reports on ITN, seven on Channel 4, three on weekday GMTV and three on Channel 5, truly constituted public service broadcasting, as defined by the 1990 Broadcasting Act.

Summary of Findings

Neglect

Minimal overall broadcast with a significant proportion in off peak hours:

- two per cent of BBC TV news and current affairs output
- one and half per cent of ITN's output
- three per cent of GMTV's output
- under one per cent of Channel Five news
- six per cent of Radio Four's output

of the flagship news and current affairs programmes:

- two per cent of BBC News Bulletins output
- four packages from Newsnight
- nine packages from ITN
- four per cent of Channel Four's output
- all but ignored by Channel Five news

Bias

Overt in:

- Radio Four's treatment of the Conservative Party
- On the Record's balance of interviews in the Election run-up
- BBC Breakfast News' overall balance of interviews
- BBC Breakfast News' polling day programme
- Channel Four News inequitable treatment of interviewees
- ITN reporter bias incidents

Omission and minimising of key topics:

- The federalist case for Europe
- The fall in value of the Euro
- The EU Commission
- Taxation

Disregard

Election broadcasting conventions ignored in;

- Balance of On the Record programming and Jonathan Dimbleby's programme
- Inequitable treatment of smaller Parties, with marginal coverage of the UK Independence Party and the Greens, no coverage of the Socialist Labour Party and extensive coverage of the Pro-Euro Conservative Party