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How is impartiality interpreted by media regulators? Towards more editorial judgements in UK election news reporting

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As the 2017 UK General Election Campaign gets under way, most people will again turn to broadcast news to learn about competing parties and candidates. Drawing on his research on the 2015 campaign, Stephen Cushion explains how regulators interpret impartiality rules in the UK.

Since broadcast news represents the main source of information for most people during an election campaign, most Western democracies regulate for political balance during an election campaign. These regulatory rules differ between countries and within media systems, but broadly speaking the aim is to achieve political balance in the news by remaining impartial or objective in coverage of competing parties and candidates. While many studies have examined how fair and balanced broadcast news is during an election campaign, few have explored how this goal is interpreted by regulators.

Our study combined a content analysis of television news coverage of the 2015 UK general election and interviews with regulators to consider how the impartiality of news was interpreted during the campaign (Cushion and Thomas 2017). In the UK's regulatory guidelines (see for example, [the BBC guidelines](#) and [Ofcom's](#)) the term 'due' precedes impartiality, which suggests broadcasters can exercise a degree of editorial judgement when reporting politics and public affairs. However, several academics have suggested that broadcast news during UK election campaigns is quantitatively policed by way of stop-watch balancing the amount of airtime parties receive (Hoppman et al 2012; Semetko 2000). The aim of our

study was to explore whether *broadcasters and regulators subscribed to a quantitative or qualitative way of interpreting impartiality during the campaign.*

During the 2015 election campaign, Ofcom regulated the impartiality of commercial news, while BBC programming was overseen by the BBC Trust. Both broadly define 'due impartiality' in similar ways, but during election campaigns each body adopted a slightly different approach in their regulatory guidance. Ofcom classified major and minor status to political parties based on assessing past electoral support and standing in opinion polls. Within Great Britain, the major parties were Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, while UKIP was in England and Wales. The SNP was classified a major party in Scotland, but not within Great Britain. The BBC Trust did not assign major or minor status to parties, but the BBC did offer similar guidance, with parties given a relative amount of coverage according to past and/or current electoral support. Our analysis of the main evening bulletins – BBC News at Ten, ITV News at Ten, Channel 4 News at 7pm, Channel 5 at 5pm and Sky News at Ten – during the campaign (30 March to 6 May, 2015) assessed how impartial the main broadcasters were based on this regulatory guidance.

Table 1. The proportion of airtime for political parties in television news coverage of the 2015 General Election (by percentage with seconds in brackets)

	BBC	ITV	Ch4	Ch5	Sky	Total
Conservative	28.3	28.3	26.4	32.9	25.6	27.8 (7939)
Labour	27.5	24.7	28.3	24.2	24.2	26.4 (7554)
Lib Dems	14.8	15.4	18.0	23.2	14.3	17.3 (4936)
Green	2.4	4.5	3.3	0.9	3.5	3.0 (862)
UKIP	6.4	10.2	14.7	8.8	10.9	11.3 (3224)
SNP	15.3	13.8	5.2	7.6	18.3	10.4 (2987)
Plaid	2.5	2.6	2.1	0.9	3.1	2.2 (638)
Other	3.0	0.5	1.9	1.5	/	1.6 (444)
Total	100 (4688)	100 (3939)	100 (11321)	100.0 (4078)	100 (4558)	100 (28,584)

Note: This table is adapted from [Cushion and Thomas 2017](#).

We found, unsurprisingly, Labour and Conservative – the two largest parties – received most airtime during the campaign across all broadcasters. As Table 1 shows, most striking was the level of coverage the SNP received, which was higher than UKIP on BBC, ITV and Sky News and the Liberal Democrats on BBC and Sky. When we examined which party was dominant within a news item, the SNP – with the exception of Labour and Conservatives – was again granted more attention than the other major parties on three out of 5 broadcasters. This was *significant because the SNP was assigned a minor party status within a Great British context and yet received greater airtime and prominence over the campaign in UK national bulletins.*

When we put these findings to **Ofcom**, the editorial standards officer was relaxed about the amount of coverage the SNP received. In our interviews with **Ofcom** and the **BBC** Trust, both suggested that due impartiality should be interpreted flexibly and be based on

news values rather than a mathematical formula. So, for example, Ofcom’s Adam Baxter said:

Due impartiality does not mean equal division, and I suppose carrying on with that, having major party status does not mean you give all major parties equal time. Gone are the days when you had people in studios with stopwatches. ... The major party framework, although you could say isn’t it just a binary – you’re either a major party or you’re not ... It doesn’t mean equality of treatment.

In other words, ‘due impartiality’ should be applied according to editorial judgements.

Whereas scholars have suggested UK impartiality rules are policed quantitatively, *our findings reveal how regulators allow a considerable degree of journalistic discretion.* Above all, news values appear to be the driving force behind editorial decision making.

Since news values are not politically neutral, in our view relying on editorial judgements undermines the impartiality of broadcasters. While it could be argued that the SNP (a minor party in Great Britain) rightly received greater coverage than UKIP or the Liberal Democrats (major parties) because it had far more MPs elected in 2015 (54 in total), its dominance had political implications. Many English voters were put off by the possibility of a Labour-SNP coalition, a narrative the Conservatives successfully promoted during the campaign. But how far there was an electoral pact between these parties (and not others) remains debateable. Caught up in the pace and excitement of the 24/7 news election cycle, understandably editors may have been attracted to a 'horse race' story about a Labour-SNP collation. But, in our

view, 'due impartiality' should not be influenced by the success of one political party's campaign or overlook the political impact of coverage.

As of March 2017 Ofcom decided it would no longer issue major and minor party status before election campaigns. Instead, broadcasters will have greater editorial discretion to make impartial judgments. We believe abandoning any quantitative accountability to balancing campaign coverage risks undermining the very purpose of impartiality at a key point in any democracy (See Cushion, S. and Thomas, R. 2018. *Reporting Elections: Rethinking the Logic of Campaign Coverage*. Cambridge: Polity).

This note represents the views of the author and not those of PADEMIA. It is based on his co-authored article, 'From quantitative precision to qualitative judgements: Professional perspectives about the impartiality of television news during the 2015 UK General Election', (online first) in Journalism.



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