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Television framing of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum

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Executive summary

The purpose of the *Television framing of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum* research project was to identify the main ways in which television coverage answered the question ‘what is the referendum about?’ in the final month of the referendum campaign. The research involved an analysis of the Scottish coverage of BBC Scotland and STV, and interviews with broadcasters, campaign communicators, and civil society organisations. This report includes key points from the research, presented at a seminar for broadcasters, regulators, political communicators, civil society representatives and academics in June 2015, and from the subsequent discussion.

Research findings indicate that:

- The referendum was primarily presented as a strategic game between two opponent sides and as a decision about policy – economic policy and other policy areas, such as defense, public services or welfare. Other understandings of the referendum were present in the coverage but much less prominent.
- There were no significant differences between the two channels in this respect, even though BBC Scotland had more referendum coverage than STV.
- The different definitions of the referendum found in the coverage were also reflected in how interviewees understood the event.
- The two official campaigns had a significant influence in defining the debate. They were the key sources for the coverage.
- The official campaigns decided to frame the referendum as being about policy, each for different reasons.
- Broadcasters felt it was not their role to decide what the referendum was about. They saw their role as presenting arguments from both sides, explaining the issues to the audience, but not deciding what these were.
- Balance was a major consideration and a key requirement for all interviewees in evaluating broadcasters’ performance. This was broadly understood as giving equal space to Yes and No representatives and counteracting claims by one side with a response from the other. This contributed to an emphasis of the competition between them.
- The regulatory requirements, the structure and day-to-day process of covering the referendum were similar to other major political events. Interviewees felt that a focus on process is common in political journalism nowadays.
- A focus on the political ‘game’ was also seen as attracting audiences and making a contribution to the public sphere, particularly through the televised leaders’ debates, and particularly for the commercial broadcaster.

Introduction

The 2014 Scottish independence referendum was a crucial moment in the history of Scotland and the first time the Scottish electorate was given the opportunity to decide whether the nation should remain in the United Kingdom or become an independent state. The campaign was the longest the country had ever experienced, with debate starting as early as the aftermath of the 2011 Scottish election, when the Scottish National Party (SNP) won a second term in the devolved Scottish parliament. As negotiations between the Scottish and UK governments progressed from whether and how a referendum could be held, to setting the date in September 2014 and deciding on the wording of the question, media attention was focused on Scotland's constitutional future. Media debate intensified after the two official campaigns, Yes Scotland and Better Together, were established in the summer of 2012 and began organizing their strategies.

The referendum saw an unprecedented engagement of the public in politics. The Yes campaign encouraged and nurtured a grassroots movement with substantial presence in local communities and on digital media, whose enthusiasm arguably pushed both the official campaigns into a more direct engagement with voters. Citizens became passionate about politics for the first time in a long period. By the end of the campaign grassroots groups supporting both the Yes and No sides were canvassing, organizing local meetings and debates and trying to persuade others. At the same time, the referendum generated passionate discussion at homes and workplaces, and there was hardly a conversation in Scotland around the time of the vote that did not include this topic.

The question on the ballot paper was simple: 'should Scotland be an independent country?' In reality though, as is the case with any contested political issue, there were competing definitions of what voting for or against independence would mean and what exactly the electorate was deciding on. This research has looked at the answers given to this question by the coverage of the two main terrestrial broadcasters who produce news and current affairs programmes specifically for a Scottish audience, BBC Scotland and STV.

Although digital media played a key role as a platform for discussion among citizens and grassroots groups, television remained in that period a major source of information for news and current affairs, with Scottish viewership reaching close to 850,000 for programmes like the two official leaders' debates (Plunkett, 2014), which were staged by BBC Scotland and STV in the final stage of the campaign. Participants at the expert seminar debated whether political discussion still has its main locus on television, whether television itself 'is' the debate, or whether 'old' media are being displaced by newer sources of information and platforms for participation. At the time of the referendum, television remained the most used medium on a daily basis for the great majority of people (Ofcom, 2015) and its coverage fed into debates in other parts of the public sphere, including digital media. For this reason television coverage is worth studying, while acknowledging that no medium operates in a vacuum and there is significant interdependence among different platforms for news and debate.

This report outlines key findings from the *Television framing of the 2014 independence referendum* research project, and also incorporates elements from the discussion that took place during an expert seminar with members of the Scottish broadcasting industry, broadcasting regulators, campaign and civil society actors, and academics on 17 June 2015.

Framing the referendum

The purpose of the research project was to identify the key ways in which television coverage answered the question ‘what is the referendum about?’ in the final month of the campaign. Different answers to this question provide different ‘frames’ for thinking about the referendum. Was the referendum a decision about the economy and which outcome would make Scots better off financially? Was it a decision about policy and which option would ensure better public services, welfare or national security? Was it about Scottish identity as distinctive or shared with the rest of the UK? Was it about Scotland making its own decisions and getting the governments it votes for? Was it a breakup of a family or of a relationship between partners or friends?

Each frame involves a different definition of what was at stake, what the possible implications of a Yes or a No vote might be, what criteria should be applied in deciding, and what the referendum outcome could be expected to deliver. Each frame focuses on a different aspect of the event and, although they competed in public discourse, these frames cannot be proven true or false – they are different, but legitimate, ways of looking at this political event.

Frames are used in understanding everyday events and in explaining them to others. As a key component in story telling, they are central to the way the media report on the news. By applying a frame to an event, journalists help audiences process what is happening; however the choice between different frames is not necessarily a conscious one. Frames originate in public discourse, are often created or adopted by interest groups, and most issues in the public sphere are a battleground between competing frames (Vliegenthart and van Zoonen, 2011).

This research aimed to establish which frames were prominent in the coverage of the final month of the referendum campaign (18 August – 18 September 2014) in the Scottish coverage of BBC Scotland and STV and how they came about. It comprises a content analysis of all news and current affairs items about the referendum on *Reporting Scotland*, *STV News at Six*, *Scotland 2014* and *Scotland Tonight*, as well as all special programmes broadcasted by the two channels in the final month of the campaign addressing a Scottish audience. The final month of the campaign was selected because that is when the coverage would be expected to reach its peak, with the topicality of the event increasing as polling day approaches. At the same time, voters who may not have followed the campaign over the previous two years have to make up their mind in the final stage. Both television channels devoted considerable attention to the event in that month, with a total of 64 hours of referendum coverage, two thirds of which were on BBC Scotland.

The research also comprised 13 interviews with news and current affairs teams at both channels, political communicators working on both sides of the referendum argument, civil society representatives and broadcasting regulators. These aimed to establish how different actors understood and framed the referendum and why.

A decision on policy and a competition between opponents

The referendum was primarily presented as a *strategic game* between two opponent sides and as a decision about *policy* – economic policy and other policy areas, such as defense, public services or welfare. Other understandings of the referendum were present in the coverage but much less prominent. The ‘game’ frame was present in about 70% of each channel’s coverage in the final month, and the policy frame followed closely in 68% and 62% of the BBC Scotland and STV coverage respectively. By comparison, all the other frames identified were present in under

20% of each channel's coverage. These included the idea that the referendum was about getting more powers for Scotland through *constitutional change* (the only one of the less prominent frames that passed the 20% threshold on one of the channels, with 24% of the BBC coverage); the idea that the decision was about *self-determination*; *national identity*; *social justice*; a *divorce*; an *achievement/celebration of democracy*; or a cause of *national division*. The relative prominence of different frames was also very homogeneous between the two broadcasters.

The intensification of the campaign in the final month, the increased need for daily coverage of developments, and the closeness of opinion polls may have encouraged the emergence of more game-framed news. Broadcasters participating at the seminar suggested that their coverage before that final stage was more focused on the 'issues', while at the end they had to provide a daily digest of campaign activities, emphasizing the competition between the two camps. A study of newspaper coverage of seven weeks at different points between April 2013 and September 2014 showed that the game and policy frames were the most prominent frames in print media throughout those 18 months, with the policy frame being more prominent in every week sampled except the last two, in August and in September 2014 (Dekavalla, forthcoming). This shows that, at least in print media, proximity to the vote did result in more game-framed coverage, and this is likely to be more generally the case, as has been suggested by previous research in other contexts (Dunaway and Lawrence, 2015). However the newspaper analysis also suggests that the game frame was one of the two most prominent frames throughout the campaign and this is likely to be the case for other media too.

On the other hand, as suggested earlier, the end of a campaign is seen as the time when voters' attention is focused on how to vote and when the news media have the most significant role in contributing to deliberations (de Vreese and Semetko, 2004). Therefore how the news represents a referendum in that final stage matters.

The policy frame: where the two campaigns met

Yes Scotland and Better Together decided to frame the referendum as being about policy implications. They both promoted other frames as well – social justice and self-determination were key Yes frames evident, for example, in messages like 'fair society' and 'Scotland's future in Scotland's hands'; while constitutional change and divorce were No frames, evident in the 'Vow' and in political speeches about the 'heartbreaking' split of the UK. However policy was a frame that both sides contested because, according to the Yes side, it had more potential to engage voters than an abstract debate about the constitution, and, according to the No side, the fear of losing economic security established within UK-wide economic policy, was a decisive factor in how people would vote.

The policy frame linked the result of the referendum with specific policy outcomes: whether jobs and pensions would be safe, whether citizens would be better off financially, whether the health service would remain public, whether nuclear weapons would be removed from Scotland, were all linked to the decision of becoming an independent country or staying in the UK. Some academics argue that the constitutional issue in Scotland historically has never really been about the constitution itself but about disagreement between Scotland and Westminster over policy (Paterson, 2015). The two campaigns therefore arguably built their messages on a deep-rooted frame.

The two official campaigns were the key sources for broadcasters at the end of the referendum campaign and had substantial opportunities to promote their frames. Although a range of sources

were present in the coverage, including grassroots campaigners, ordinary voters, experts and professional associations, representatives of the two campaigns and of the parties that comprised them were the most frequently used type of source. Broadcasters' choice of sources was partly led by the credibility and newsworthiness of the official campaigns, but it also adhered to the Electoral Commission's designation of the lead campaign groups representing the two sides of the argument – this took place early in the campaign following an application procedure (http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/164395/sp-ris-designation.pdf).

Reflecting the debate

The broadcasters interviewed felt it was not their role to decide what the referendum was about. They saw their role as reflecting the debate rather than defining its scope. Discussion at the seminar questioned where the debate was taking place and whether broadcasters can avoid responsibility for its construction since much of it was happening through television.

Although journalistic professionalism in a liberal democracy requires the media not to interfere with the messages promoted by political elites, but to reflect them fairly and accurately in an effort to let citizens make their own decisions, in practice broadcasters cannot avoid a more active role in the construction of political events. Many of the activities the two campaigns staged during the referendum were created with television coverage as an end goal, while broadcasters themselves put together some of the key events for the official campaigns, such as the two televised leaders' debates. Broadcasters felt it was the campaigns that framed those debates as a game of performance between politicians, and television simply reflected this, however they did have choices on how they were set up, how speakers and audiences were positioned and how the moderators led the debate. The prominence of the game frame in these as well as in much of the other coverage of the final month was a more complex matter.

'Where box office meets politics'

It has often been argued that the strategic game frame is engaging for audiences (Iyengar et al., 2004) and this also emerged from the interviews. Discussion at the seminar explored whether framing the referendum as a competition was a response to audience emotion. Even if direct policy outcomes may not have followed after the referendum result, perhaps there was a reward for voters in their 'side' winning the competition, or the leader of the campaign they supported 'winning' the televised leaders' debate. Still, there is no conclusive evidence on what attracted viewers to watch these debates – whether it was the competition, or the fact that they were promoted as 'milestones in the road to the vote', at a time when voters were increasingly looking for information on what each side had to say, as decision date approached. What is certain is that both broadcasters saw these events as television's contribution to the democratic process and were pleased with the audience figures they attracted. According to a participant at the seminar, 'for us, this is where box office meets politics effectively [...] People wanted to see it in a way that was entertaining as well as informative.' The prominence of the game frame was therefore partly connected with its perceived attractiveness for the audience. Another reason had to do with journalistic perceptions of balance.

Balance as juxtaposition of opponent views

Balance was a highly controversial issue during the campaign, and a key concern for broadcasters during and after the referendum. Indeed participants at the seminar were keen to

discuss whether television coverage was balanced, whether one of the two sides was favoured by the order in which sources appeared, and why parts of the audience felt that broadcasting coverage was unfair towards the Yes side.

The purpose of this study was not to evaluate balance in the coverage and no attempt was made to theorise or operationalize it. However it was an issue often mentioned by the interviewees themselves particularly in relation to what they saw as the obligation of broadcasters during a referendum campaign and how journalists chose sources for their coverage. All interviewees in the research mentioned that fairness and balance are key requirements for broadcasters in reporting contested political events, and indeed they are central in both Ofcom's Broadcasting Code and in the BBC's mission and guidelines. Therefore balance was a major consideration for both television channels and their reporters. Interviewees involved directly in the coverage stressed that they ensured that for each news or current affairs item they consulted both sides of the argument, and particularly the two official campaigns. They said that this is standard practice in everything they cover and not just in the case of the referendum. Indeed the content analysis revealed an equal number of sources supporting Yes and No in the final month of the campaign, on both channels.

This understanding of balance as a fair opportunity for competing views to be heard on the same issue is standard among both broadcasters and their sources. Although it is not taken in the strict sense of every single programme having to quote both sides or give them exactly the same airtime, in the broader coverage over several weeks, broadcasters were keen to maintain a balance between the space given to the Yes and No campaigns. Fairness may be understood in other ways as well: indeed protests during the campaign did not focus on the opportunities sources were given to be represented, but on the questioning of sources. Yet although, according to the interviews carried out for this research, regulators would ask questions if one side was given a tougher interview than the other, it would be difficult to apply generalizable rules to all cases and each case would need to be examined separately.

Clearly an understanding of fairness as giving equal opportunities and space to competing views makes it easier to apply and measure but, at the same time, it encourages a constant juxtaposition of Yes and No sources and an emphasis on the competition between them. As one seminar participant suggested:

'If you have another referendum tomorrow with Yes and No, as we will do, that will be the kind of prism through which we'll inevitably end up seeing it. That is the compact between broadcaster and regulator, that's what the language effectively comes down to.'

Established ways of running and covering campaigns

Interviewees external to the two broadcasters suggested that the strategic game frame is common in the way in which much political contest is reported nowadays. They therefore thought that it was easy for reporters to construct the referendum through a 'competition' frame, with which they were familiar. As Jay Rosen (2008) argues:

'Who's-gonna-win is portable, reusable from cycle to cycle, and easily learned by newcomers to the press pack. Journalists believe it brings readers to the page and eyeballs to the screen. It 'works' regardless of who the candidates are, or where the nation is in historical time.'

The regulatory requirements, the structure and day-to-day process of covering the referendum were similar to elections, with the key difference being that there were only two sides in the referendum and many more in an election campaign. Although interviewees stressed that they were sensitive to this difference, as well as to the fact that this was a one-off, historical event that engaged voters more than any election so far, the practical aspects of daily reporting and of running the official media relations campaigns were not that different from an election. According to a communicator from one of the political parties:

‘I think there was an understandable tendency to cover things in the way that you know.’

Conclusion

The 2014 Scottish independence referendum was a historical event whose impact is ongoing in Scottish political life. It was at the same time an opportunity for self-determination, a matter of national identity, the possibility of a split of a long-standing union, a celebration of democracy, an opportunity for Scotland to claim more powers either within or outside the Union, it was about social justice and it divided opinion like few other events before it. Above all though, according to the Scottish television coverage of the event, it was a competition between two political camps and a pragmatic decision on policy.

By defining what an event is about, frames also define which considerations are relevant in making a decision. The strategic game frame suggests that the choice should depend on which camp voters thought performed better and the policy frame on which option would make voters better off and deliver the policies they wanted. By stressing these two understandings, news coverage did not necessarily tell voters what to vote, but how to make their decision.

The way in which these frames emerged in the coverage was determined by liberal democratic views of the media as presenting voters with a ‘market stall’ of ideas, where political elites have more space for their ‘products’. As discussion at the seminar suggested, it would be unrealistic to expect broadcasting to operate with a model other than the liberal democratic one, given that most broadcasting principles, including its understanding of fairness and balance, are constructed around this model.

The question is whether broadcasting may still operate with the same principles but provide balance and equal space not only to contrasting elite perspectives, but also to elite and non-elite discourses; not only to opponent campaign groups but also to different interpretations of ‘what is going on’ and ‘what is relevant here’. In a television news report following the second televised leaders’ debate in August 2014, a long discussion about the performance of the contestants and analysts’ views on who had won was followed by a couple of minutes of vox-pops with audience members who felt that the debate was a ‘shouting match’ and that they did not feel better informed as a result. If that news report was not about who had won the debate, but instead about politicians’ success or failure in providing substantiated information on issues the public felt were important; if the questions asked during the leaders debate were not primarily about policy, but equally about what national identity (Scottish or British), social justice, a split of the Union, or self-determination meant for the campaign leaders; would such a construction of the debate be any less balanced or liberal?

Digital media have allowed the emergence of more spaces where debate takes place, in parallel to the mainstream media, and they played a very significant role during the referendum in providing platforms for discussion between actors who were less prominent on television and the

press. Online debate is not restricted by the same constraints as that on 'old' media and is not dominated by the same liberal rationale. Whether this translated into more diversity and a wider reflection of a range of frames online would be the subject of another research project. Perhaps though online media have the potential to push the boundaries of inclusivity of arguments and discourses on other media platforms too. This should not and does not need to put into question the requirement for broadcasting to be fair and impartial, but perhaps it could lead to a rethinking of how we understand journalistic values like inclusivity, balance, newsworthiness, and credibility.

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