

A Rise and a Fall: The Right-wing Press during the 2017 General Election

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Abstract

This paper will explore the role of the right-wing press during the 2017 general election campaign. Historically, newspapers are highly partisan in their support for one or other of the political parties, with the majority of the national and daily press endorsing the Conservative Party. During this election campaign publications such as the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun*, aware of their solid and far-reaching readership in both print and digital format, ran personal and vitriolic attacks on Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party to support their endorsement of Theresa May. We look at the readership of the right-wing press and their political affiliations, as well as the nature of the newspapers' publishing and editorial strategy during the campaign and its successes and failures in the light of the highly unexpected election result.

Key Words

Newspapers; Politics; General Election; News Consumption; Right-wing Press

Introduction

According to the National Readership Survey, 91% of adults aged 15 or above in Great Britain – approximately 47.8 million people – consume a newsbrand of some form, either in print or digital format, every day (2017). 36.4 million of these consumers choose a “quality” newsbrand, such as the *Guardian*, the *Telegraph*, or the *Financial Times*; 34.4 million a “mid-market” one such as the *Daily Mail* or the *Daily Express*; and 38.5 million a “popular” one, such as the *Sun* or the *Daily Mirror* (National Readership Survey, 2017). These statistics indicate two key pieces of information: that newspapers in print and digital form have a staggeringly broad reach across the majority of the British public, and that most adults are likely to consume more than one type of newsbrand on a daily basis.

These pieces of information are key to understanding the importance of newspaper publishers during political campaigns such as those preceding the 2015 and 2017 general elections (resulting in, respectively, a Conservative win and a highly unexpected hung parliament), and the 2016 general referendum on whether the UK should remain a member of the European Union, in which the public voted to leave the EU by a tiny margin of 4%. With voter turnout increasing steadily since the historically low election year of 2001, and with the referendum turnout historically high, it is clear that the population is choosing to actively engage with politics and therefore, it can be reasonably assumed, is actively engaging with some political discourse via their chosen newsbrand.

This article will explore the ways in which newspapers, particularly those with a right-wing slant, played a part in the most recent general election in June 2017. We will begin by looking at whether readers' political affiliations are a direct result of the respective newspapers they choose to access; followed by a discussion of the tactics used by right-wing newspapers in the run-up to and immediate aftermath of the June 2017 general election to endorse their chosen party; and finally, by discussing the outcome of the right-wing press' campaign strategies.

Newspaper readership and their political affiliations

How does the public decide which newspaper brand or title to consume, particularly during politically charged periods of time when opinions and viewpoints – whether academic, analytical and professional in nature, or amateur and discursive – are available in newspapers of every calibre as well as across social media, via the radio and television, and in day to day conversation? As Negrine asks, “do people choose newspapers because they reflect their own politics or do they buy newspapers and then their politics?” (1989, p.206)

It is an important question to consider. Do readers choose to peruse as many newspapers as possible, assessing each endorsement individually before arriving at an informed conclusion and heading out to vote for whichever party they feel has been presented in the best light?

It seems unlikely that many people approach elections in such a dispassionate, academic way. Do they in this case buy the publications which adhere to the worldview they already hold, thereby validating it further? This seems more likely, although it is doubtful many readers are consciously choosing their news source in this way. Certainly “newspaper readers tend to vote for parties that broadly represent their interests, in the same way they buy newspapers that broadly speak to their interests” (Felle, 2015). This is supported by a YouGov report quoted in the *Independent* shortly after the 2017 general election which showed that “newspaper readers largely followed the party allegiances of their favourite publication” (Roberts, 2017).

According to Felle, there are two opposing views on whether newspapers are able to influence public opinion: the “agenda setting view”, in which newspapers influence public opinion by setting an agenda, and the “reinforcement view”, in which newspapers choose to publish material which reinforces the ideas their readership already has (2015). Certainly both of these views have substance. British newspapers are “traditionally partisan in their approach to politics” (2015) and it is highly unusual for a newspaper to alter which political party they have historically shown support for. The *Daily Telegraph*, for example, has only ever endorsed the Conservatives, and the *Daily Mirror* likewise for the Labour Party, with the *Times* having the most mixed history of party endorsement (*Newspaper support in UK general elections*, 2016). The *Guardian* has backed a combination of the left-leaning Labour and Liberal Democrat parties or, as in 1983, “declared themselves against a Conservative victory rather than in favour of either the Labour Party or even the SDP” (Negrine, 1989). In general, the majority of national and daily press has supported the Conservatives historically and currently, but despite this acknowledged and distinct lean to the right within the UK press, the Labour and Conservative parties have actually been voted into power for nine terms each over the last 70 years (Felle, 2015). This would suggest that we cannot assume that all readers of a right-leaning news source are also Conservative voters, or that they selected their news source on this basis.

Ofcom's most recent report, *News Consumption in the UK: 2016* tells us that the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun* – two uncompromisingly right-wing publications – are the UK's most widely-read print newspapers, with survey respondent shares of 26% and 22% respectively (2017). The *Daily Mirror* and the *Guardian*, the UK's only consistently left-leaning newspapers, come in with a considerably smaller share of the country's newspaper readers at 11% and 9% respectively (2017). When taking into account consumption of a newspaper title in both print and digital format (and it is worth mentioning that readers who are accessing the five most popular titles are doing so in vastly larger numbers in digital format than in print) the *Daily Mail* leads the charge with a monthly readership of just over 30,000 with the *Daily Mirror* coming in second at just over 28,000 (2017) – an almost equal share of the readership. However, when the other eight titles included in Ofcom's report are also considered alongside which political party they have traditionally endorsed, the numbers accessing actively right-leaning news sources are vastly higher than those accessing left-leaning ones.

Whilst it is clear that the majority of those who do vote do so for the party endorsed by the newspaper they read, there is also evidently a growing disparity between the political views of the public and those that headline many – particularly right-wing – news publications. It is also the case that it is almost impossible to know for certain whether newspaper readers vote for the party their favourite publication supports because they have been convinced by its editorial stance, or whether they read that publication because they know that it supports their preferred political party.

A rise and fall at the hands of the right-wing press

Disparity between the politics pushed forward by newspaper publishers and the true political opinions of the voting public has been particularly evident over the last couple of years, and became unavoidably apparent on 9th June 2017, the day after the most recent general election. Called by the Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May, she hoped to

increase her parliamentary majority and believed it would “‘strengthen [her] hand’ in Brexit negotiations” (BBC News, 2017), giving her a stronger mandate to lead her party and the country. Polls consistently suggested it was highly likely that she would be successful – until the exit poll was announced, indicating a result almost identical to the final outcome in which the Conservatives lost 13 seats and the Labour Party, led by Jeremy Corbyn, gained 30 (Apostolova *et al.*, 2017). Although the Labour Party patently did not win the election, the number of seats they won and the unexpectedness of the result were deemed a huge success by many. Peter Mandelson referred to the result as a political “earthquake” and Len McCluskey, leader of the trade union Unite, went as far as suggesting that “Labour now has to prepare for government” (BBC News, 2017); strong sentiments considering he was openly concerned about Corbyn’s leadership prior to the election result.

In the run-up to the election the national and daily press in large part supported the Conservative Party, running a determined campaign against the Labour Party and particularly against Jeremy Corbyn himself. The day before the election, the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun* ran now-infamous front page and multi-page inside spreads on Corbyn’s alleged “jihadi comrades” (Cole, 2017) and his “befriending [of] Britain’s enemies and scorning [of] the institutions that keep us safe”, urging the electorate to “vote to save Britain!” (*Daily Mail*, 2017). A perusal of either newspaper’s online archive, or that of the *Daily Express*, shows sustained and often highly personal attacks on Corbyn for various offences of a similar nature to those quoted from the headlines above.

The atmosphere created by these daily attacks was one of supreme confidence that this outrage is justified and, most importantly, shared by the papers’ readerships. However, Roy Greenslade argued shortly before the election that these continued attacks on Corbyn were actually a symptom of right-wing “disenchantment” with the Conservative election campaign and Theresa May’s increasingly “embarrassing” public appearances (2017). Greenslade contends that whilst “publishers and editors [wanted] her to win, of course, and win big” they altered their strategy from promoting and praising various Conservative policies and speeches to criticising and lambasting Corbyn and the Labour party instead;

“persuading readers to avert their gaze from a beleaguered prime minister and imbibe the negative stuff about Labour’s lacklustre leader instead” (2017). The ‘Jihadi Comrades’ (Cole, 2017) and ‘Apologists for Terror’ (*Daily Mail*, 2017) articles were the culmination of a bombardment of similar headlines over the course of a week, each using language designed to draw on readers’ emotions and fears: for example, ‘Corbyn’s sly death tax trap’ (Martin, 2017) from the *Daily Mail*, and ‘He Jez doesn’t believe in Britain’ (Cole, 2017) from the *Sun*. Each article drew on actions taken by Corbyn throughout his political career as well as alluding to current manifesto policies, whilst frequently ignoring the equally rich offerings proffered by May’s stonewalling and U-turns. Publications less inclined towards the hyperbolic were discreetly critical of the Tories, for example regarding a lack of costings in their manifesto, albeit whilst “castigating Corbyn over his spending plans” (Greenslade, 2017) in order to draw attention away from May’s failings.

In stark contrast are the headlines of the day following the election. The *Sun* led with “Theresa Dismay” whilst the *Daily Mail* ran “Theresa on ropes as her big gamble backfires” (Ruddick, 2017). The onus was on May rather than Corbyn all of a sudden, the decision to call an election being presented as a needless gamble rather than a brave step towards securing a stronger mandate. Since then headlines in the right-wing press have continued to maintain their negative slant on May that was avoided so studiously during the election campaign, with regular speculation as to how long she will remain in power and whether she has retained any authority over her Cabinet. In taking the Prime Minister to task over her failure to secure the mandate so many believed she would secure, the right-wing press have adhered in many ways to the theory of the freedom of the press and the notion of the press’ role in “taking the government to task and protecting the public interest as well as representing public opinion” (Negrine, 1989, p.24). By angrily questioning the reasoning behind May’s decision to hold a general election they are reflecting the views of a similarly perturbed public, many of whom were already weary of elections and campaigning having been through the EU referendum in June 2016 and the previous general election in May 2015.

A hall of mirrors

The most damning reaction to the right-wing press' election campaign strategy was arguably from the left-wing press. The *Guardian* in particular was scathing of the u-turn in their support for Theresa May whilst simultaneously ensuring they upheld their standards for unbiased journalism as far as possible. In a piece the day after the election the newspaper's media editor, Graham Ruddick, highlighted the right-wing press' immediate lack of support on learning there was no possibility of a Conservative majority, reminding readers that they had "heavily criticised Jeremy Corbyn and supported May" as well as posing "questions about the influence of Fleet Street on the electorate, given the majority of national newspapers strongly backed her and the Conservatives" (2017). This shows a certain element of glee at the failure of the right-wing press to secure the result they wanted through their editorial stance. This is a stance echoed by George Monbiot, who wrote (albeit again in the *Guardian*):

There is no point in trying to hide or minimise this: the election has been a disaster for mainstream outlets. They missed the moment because they were constitutionally destined to do so. The issue that caused this disaster is the one that eventually fells all forms of power: the media has created a hall of mirrors, in which like-minded people reflect and reproduce each other's opinions. (Monbiot, 2017)

He suggests that the issues faced by newspapers and the media as a whole stem from an insistence on pushing a single agenda (in this case the support of the Conservative party) to an extent where only views encouraging that agenda were considered worthwhile editorial content; within this echo chamber of opinions the right-wing press were so intent on vilifying the leader of the opposition that they did not see the extent of journalistic (and, apparently, political) potential in his leadership. In doing so they arguably failed in providing the public with that service of protecting the public interest and representing public opinion.

Felle believes that “the British media has always had a pack mentality, and tends to latch on to issues” (2015), and that therefore the agenda-setting view on the importance of influencing public opinion is still relevant. However, although Felle does not say so, this notion would also support the continued relevance of the reinforcement view which articulates that the press will “latch on” (Felle, 2015) to issues that are clearly becoming important to the electorate and shine a light on them. This both contrasts with and supports Monbiot’s view. Whilst Monbiot believes the press to have been too insular, there was clearly appetite for the type of articles the right-wing press were publishing as evidenced by the popularity of right-wing newspapers in both print and digital format. Issues addressing particular topics will sell well and editors are then likely to continue addressing those issues, in essence marketing their newspaper directly to the demographic that wants to read about them. In doing so the right-wing press becomes insular and protected from alternative viewpoints, operating within an echo-chamber to such an extent that a ground-breaking story, such as Corbyn and the Labour Party’s unexpected late surge in the polls and at the voting booths, is missed.

Conclusion

The role of the right-wing press in the 2017 general election was both extremely important and decidedly unsuccessful. Newspapers in digital and print form were hugely invested in the election result and ran extensive editorial content about it during the election campaign. The announcement of a general election at all was unexpected, and this combined with the implications of the result for Brexit negotiations meant the right-wing press were unanimous in their support for Theresa May’s continued leadership. Headlines castigating the Labour Party and Jeremy Corbyn personally were a daily occurrence, even once it became apparent that May’s popularity was declining and her ability to deliver an effective campaign and manifesto was called into question. The sheer number of members of the public accessing news sources in print and online meant this barrage of negative publicity was far-reaching; however, the outcome of the election in which Corbyn’s party gained 30

seats and May's lost 13 signifies that the public patience with a majority right-wing press, incredibly and unapologetically vocal in their support for the right and dismissal of the left, has dissipated to a great extent. Although the Conservative party won the election, they lost seats and failed to secure the majority they initially thought was inevitable; the right-wing press in failing to notice the likelihood of this occurring failed utterly in their attempt to turn the public against Corbyn and his left-wing brand of socialist politics. As Moniot wrote: "the rightwing press threw everything it had at Jeremy Corbyn, and failed to knock him over. In doing so, it broke its own power. Its wild claims succeeded in destroying not Corbyn's credibility but its own" (2017).

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