**Alternative agendas or more of the same? Online News Coverage of the 2017 UK Election**

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**Introduction**

The results of the snap election have led to some debate that the influence of the press on the political process is declining. Coupled with the proliferation of new digital news platforms and outlets, this election was an interesting one in which to analyse online election news in the UK context. Much of the empirical literature about election coverage focuses on traditional broadcast and print media, particularly in the UK context, due to the continued influence and agenda-setting functions of these news forms. The literature that does address online news of election campaigns is somewhat scarce, despite that fact that audience studies have shown that voters are increasingly accessing digital news. Online news is increasingly important for a younger audience (Dennis and Sampaio-Dias, 2016) and the introduction of a number of digital-born sites like *Buzzfeed* with its own way of combing entertainment and news highlight the importance of analysing the extent to which online news may offer new ways of reporting and scrutinising politics. This chapter will assess to what extent online news differs from mainstream press and broadcast coverage by focusing on three important areas; the issue agenda, which candidates are most prominent, and the way women are represented in the coverage. These three aspects of the coverage shape the way politics is presented to the audience, constructing an understanding of which policy areas are most important, whose voices should be listened to and whether the political sphere is inclusive (or not). We will firstly set out some results from a content analysis of five online news sites. We discuss the overall issue agenda and most prominent campaigners featured in online news before setting out some differences between outlets. The chapter then goes on to discuss the gendered nature of the campaign coverage in more detail. This is especially important since women have traditionally struggled to be adequately represented in broadcast and print coverage and it would be telling if this pattern continues online.

We will argue that despite the overwhelming potential for online news to provide a unique issue agenda and to give space to a more diverse range of voices, looking at the online news that is actually consumed in the UK demonstrates that this potential is largely neglected and in fact these online outlets reflect a very similar set of priorities to their broadcast and print rivals and partners.

**Election news**

It is important to analyse news coverage of elections because they represent key moments in which politics and politicians are most visible and when citizens need reliable information about politics. Elections are therefore important moments when it might be possible to assess the quality of political news provided to ordinary voters (Cushion, 2012). The conventional wisdom about election news coverage is that it has become increasingly focused on reporting the tactics and strategies employed by political parties, more focused on the personalities and characteristics of politicians, in particular party leaders, at the expense of other interested parties and moving towards comment or interpretation rather than just reporting factually (Cushion, 2012). As a result empirical studies of recent elections have showed that substantive policy issues have been squeezed out by a focus on the political process and campaigning activities of the major parties (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Cushion et al, 2006; Deacon et al, 2006). There has also been scholarly interest in the extent to which political news is becoming more personalized or candidate-centred (rather than party or policy-centred). This change has been attributed to two interrelated factors, firstly the weakening of traditional party allegiances amongst voters and secondly, the changing media environment (Van Aelst et al, 2011). Election news also tends to be dominated by a narrow range of voices, so that non-political actors and women are often marginal to the campaign and its coverage. (Ross et al, 2013). We are particularly interested in the extent to which these patterns are also reflected in online news.

The content analysis assessed the top four most viewed online news outlets according to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* (Newman et al, 2017). Of these, three were online versions of legacy media outlets – the *Mail Online, the Guardian* and the *BBC News* website. The other one was a so-called ‘digital-born’ site, meaning that it originated online and there is no offline version – the *Huffington Post*. Since we were interested in whether digital-born sites in particular might reflect different issue agendas, we also included the next most highly ranked digital-born sites, the UK version of *Buzzfeed*. The political partisanship of these sites is very different to those displayed by the majority of the mainstream press. *The Guardian* and *Huffington Post* represent a centre-left perspective whilst similar conclusions have been drawn about *Buzzfeed*. The BBC website reflects its efforts to maintain due impartiality across its broadcast outputs. The only overtly-right-wing news source represented here is *Mail Online*. This alone might lead to assumptions that the online news agenda would offer an alternative set of priorities. We selected up to ten most prominent news stories on each website’s news page every weekday between 4th May 2017 (the official start of the campaign) and 7th June 2017 (the day before polling day). This gave us five weeks of coverage and resulted in 1001 news items.

**Online News: Issue and Personalities**

The results of this study demonstrate that clearly, despite the proliferation of ways to gain access to the news, when you examine the online news that most UK citizens say they consume then the issue agenda and sources they call upon remains remarkably consistent to those of mainstream print and broadcasters. Our study showed that the five news outlets tended to focus on the electoral process itself, accounting for almost 43% of the themes recorded (Table 1). This was by far the most prominent theme and indicates the appeal of the ‘horse race’ for online news. Although other studies of press and broadcasting indicated a decline in process coverage in comparison to previous elections (Deacon et al, 2017), online news outlets in 2017 continued to place a lot of emphasis on the day-to-day politics of the campaign. Process was the top theme for all outlets.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Brexit was the most salient substantive issue in the coverage. Brexit was either the second or third most prominent issue across all outlets, with the exception of the *Huffington Post* (where Brexit did not feature in the top 10 at all, perhaps surprisingly). However, despite this being undoubtedly the issue of the day and with many trying to frame this as the ‘Brexit election’, the depth of coverage about Brexit differed across online outlets. In order to determine the extent to which Brexit was discussed in a substantial way or was just a background issue we measured whether each item referred to it all, if it was mentioned in an incidental way (fewer than three separate sentences) or whether there was a substantial reference. This measure is different to the theme category discussed in Table 1 because it captures mentions of Brexit when it is alluded to in relation to other themes, such as immigration for example, rather than when it is the overall theme of the article. Overall, 60% of stories about the election failed to mention Brexit at all, and around a quarter mentioned it in passing, usually as an accompanying point to other main themes such as the economy (Table 2). Overall, only 16% of stories, gave substantial discussion to Brexit as an issue. Again, there were differences here between the online-only outlets and the other outlets. The digital-born outlets featured substantially lower levels of Brexit coverage than the other outlets. The *Huffington Post* mentioned Brexit substantially at half the rate the *Guardian* did. This might be an indication that although digital-born news outlets reflect the mainstream agenda in some ways, this is not always the case when dealing with specific issues. This also suggests that these more recently established news sources are less concerned with the substantive questions of the day, preferring to cover process and cover media reaction to process even more than their offline counterparts. This finding is also striking given the fact that digital-born sites appeal to younger voters who voted in higher numbers to remain in the EU than their older counterparts.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Returning to Table 1, the third most prominent theme was ‘media’ which we differentiated from political process coverage. In fact, for the digital-born outlets, media was the second most salient theme. In this case*, Buzzfeed* and *Huffington Post* seemed particularly interested in responding to what legacy media were reporting, featuring an abundance of stories about accusations of media bias, or stories assessing the public reaction to key election moments such as the *BBC* Leader’s Question Time specials or various interviews containing gaffes by politicians. One example of this would be Buzzfeed’s article explaining ‘how TV broadcasters are scrambling to cover the snap election’ (Buzzfeed, 9th May). Some items took the form of a series of tweets highlighting certain voters’ views that coverage had been biased or unfair and as kind of ‘virtual vox-pop’. These were particularly common after the televised leaders’ debates.

Beyond this, the other substantive issues which were covered with most frequency were social security, the NHS and taxation. These issues were largely discussed in the articles covering manifesto launches. The prominence of health and social security can largely be attributed to the Conservatives’ poorly received ‘dementia tax’ policy and the U-turn which followed. There was also much focus on Labour’s proposal to increase tax on those earning over £80,000. Law and order stories were prominent, mainly as a result of the Manchester and London Bridge terror attacks. There are some other notable differences between the digital born sites and those websites with a print or broadcast counterparts. On issues that could broadly be considered to be ‘left-wing’ or ‘right-wing’, these mapped onto the expected outlets. *The Guardian* gave greater focus to social security, public services and health and was the only outlet to feature education in its top ten themes. *Mail Online* on the other hand, was more focused on taxation, crime, defence and immigration. The BBC website reflected a mixture of these two agendas, with health, crime, immigration and social security all being prominent themes for them. The digital-born outlets appeared to give more prominence to progressive issues. *Buzzfeed* was the only outlet to have LGBTQI+ issues and ethnic minority issues in their top ten, and the *Huffington Post* was the only outlet to emphasis women’s issues in their top ten.

A similar story can be told about which political actors received most prominent in the online news. Again, although there were a few small differences across the different websites, there were very few differences to those actors who captured the attention of the mainstream press and broadcast media (see Deacon et al, 2017). The Conservatives and Labour sources dominated the coverage (Figure 1). The Conservatives were slightly ahead in terms of the proportion of coverage, on 27.5% compared to 25.3% for Labour, perhaps reflecting a small incumbency effect. This may be partly due to the Conservatives mishandling of the campaign after May seemed to attempt to reverse one of her own manifesto pledges after it was dubbed ‘the dementia tax’. The smaller parties gained much less coverage which lends some weight to the assertion that this election indicated a return to two-party politics - at least as far as online news coverage is concerned.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The two most prominent individual campaigners were the only realistic candidates for Prime Minister, Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn (Table 2). They appeared almost as frequently as each other, with May appearing in 37.3% of news items and Corbyn in 36.4%. This illustrates the highly presidential nature of the campaign in online news, and reflects May’s attempts to frame the campaign as a choice between herself and Corbyn. May and Corbyn were the top two actors for every outlet. There were however some differences in the extent to which these leaders featured on each website. *Mail Online* included May in 49% of all election items, compared to just 27% of items in the *Guardian*. Coverage of Corbyn followed a similar pattern, he appeared in 54% of items on the *Mail Online* compared to 24% in the *Guardian*. Although we did not formally measure the extent to which they received favourable coverage, a qualitative reading of the tone of the coverage makes it clear that the prominent focus on Corbyn in the *Mail Online* was largely negative, much like its print counterpart (Deacon et al, 2017). The partisanship of these sites might explain this tendency as the Mail Online was particularly keen to contrast the perceived competence of May against Corbyn whilst the Guardian might have chosen to downplay the leaders due to their recent lack of support for Corbyn after his two Labour leadership elections.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Beyond this, there was still a heavy focus on party leaders. Tim Farron, Liberal Democrat leader was the third most salient actor for each outlet except the *Daily Mail* and SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon also appeared frequently. Paul Nuttall, the leader of the UK Independence Party was in the top ten for three out of five outlets, as was Caroline Lucas, the co-leader of the Green Party. With very few exceptions leaders, former leaders and those occupying the Great Offices of State and their Shadows made up the vast majority of top ten individual actors overall as well as within the different outlets. Given the extent to which these people were deployed prominently on the campaign trail by their political parties, this is no great surprise. These findings show a striking similar to those observed in mainstream print and broadcast news (See Deacon, et al, 2017). What is strikingly, however is that six out of the ten most prominent individual campaigners were female, which given the over-representation of men in politics is worth noting. Previous research clearly demonstrates that women tend to be marginalised in mainstream press and broadcast news coverage of electoral politics (Harmer, 2017; Ross et al, 2013). This is problematic because in order for women to be taken seriously as political actors, and for their perspectives and views to be considered relevant to political debates, they need to be included in the public discussion of politics that takes place in media coverage of elections. Our analysis of online coverage, shows that women were marginalised and portrayed in stereotypical ways, which demonstrates once again that although online news has the potential to offer alternative perspectives on the election, this potential was largely unrealised.

**Gendered election coverage**

Despite the fact that six out of the ten of the most prominent campaigners were women, the other main way in which online news coverage was strikingly similar to the mainstream press and broadcast coverage, was the way in which women were portrayed. Given that this was the first election in thirty years since the UK has had a female Prime Minister along with the presence of numerous female party leaders, cabinet and shadow-cabinet members, this election had the potential for increasing the prominence of female voices. However, in practice online news consistently preferred male subjects and sources much like its broadcasts and print rivals (see Deacon et al, 2017).

From the very beginning of the campaign, May sought to present herself as a strong and competent leader. She light-heartedly evoked her colleague Ken Clarke’s description of her as a [‘bloody difficult woman’](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jul/05/ken-clarke-caught-camera-ridiculing-tory-leadership-candidates-theresa-may-michael-gove) suggesting this would be crucial in securing a good deal in the negotiations and perhaps attempting to emulate Hillary Clinton’s repurposing of Donald Trump’s ‘Nasty Woman’ jibe. As previously discussed, 2017 was a highly presidential campaign (Table 1) in digital news. In the online coverage, it proved to be difficult for any women who were not politicians (and particularly leaders) to gain a voice. Women accounted for just 36.8% of all individuals featured in the news coverage (Harmer and Southern, 2018). This is particularly striking as the most prominent politician in this coverage was the Prime Minister (who appeared in 37.3% of all items in our study). It is notable that despite May’s presence, women still did not receive parity with their male counterparts.

Although there were several women who were not party leaders who gained some prominence in the campaign - particularly Amber Rudd, Diane Abbott and Emily Thornberry - the traditional struggle for women to be heard seemed to be exacerbated by this highly presidential campaign. For parties with female leaders (or joint leaders) such as the Conservatives, Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru and the Green Party, female voices were well-represented even if they were the same voices (Harmer and Southern, 2018). Labour Party sources instead tended to be dominated by men (mainly their leader Jeremy Corbyn, again reflecting the presidential nature of the campaign) however, they managed better female representation, as evidenced by Table 3 when compared to other parties with male leaders- UKIP and the Liberal Democrats had the fewest women campaigners in online news (Harmer and Southern, 2018).

Women in non-political roles were very marginal in the coverage. Despite the presence of a reasonable volume of voices from other media and online platforms in online news coverage, just 29.7% of media sources and 20.8% of bloggers referred to were female (Harmer and Southern, 2018). Even female citizens, potentially the easiest group to represent, accounted for just 39% of all citizens featured in our study of online news, even though one of the most prominent ordinary person in the campaign was a woman called Brenda, who spoke for a nation when she declared ‘Not another one!’ (BBC, 19th April) when asked for her reaction on BBC news.

Most strikingly of all, every individual pollster or other kind of expert who received any mention or reference in the online news sources assess here was male. This dearth of women’s expertise is also reflected in the authorship of online news items. Just 31.8% of all items with a single author were authored by women. This shows, similar to studies of mainstream broadcast and print news coverage, that online political news is still dominated by male sources, authors and experts (Harmer and Southern, 2018). If we compare these figures with data from Deacon et al (2017) who analysed print and broadcast news, it becomes clear that in some ways online news may actually marginalise women even more. For example, their study showed that just more than 10% of experts featured were women. Given the increasing levels of online news consumption, this marginalisation of female political expertise in the coverage is dispiriting. Ignoring women as experts not only limits perspectives and the range of ideas that are considered relevant to the political sphere, but furthermore serves to reinforce the male dominance of politics, and impoverish our understanding of the political process.

Given the number of high profile female politicians, it is also important to note that tone of the campaign was somewhat mixed in terms of gendered coverage. From the very start, May chose to run on a highly personalised campaign. The Conservatives once again deployed the services of Lynton Crosby, whose penchant for repeating short soundbites at every appearance throughout the campaign (‘long-term economic plan’ in 2015) had served them so well in 2015. In a speech in Bristol on May 2nd, May asked ‘…who will lead Britain through Brexit and beyond? Will it be me and my team showing the strong and stable leadership that our country needs? Or will it be Jeremy Corbyn at the head of a coalition of chaos?’ (Conservative Press, 2017). ‘Strong and stable’ became a common refrain over the subsequent weeks. However, it soon became clear that this time the approach might have proved to be counter-productive. May’s repetition of the ‘strong and stable’ mantra played into the impression that she was wooden or even robotic. The phrase was much lampooned in the online coverage. Buzzfeed published five articles mocking the phrase including a quiz asking ‘How Strong and Stable Are You Actually?’ (BuzzFeed, May 11th) and another listing all the occasions she had said it in the past few days (Buzzfeed, April 28th). May’s efforts to portray herself as a strong leader is at odds with traditional gender stereotypes that code women as weak and emotional might help to explain why this tactic backfired (Harmer and Southern, 2018).

The Conservative campaign became characterised by its highly controlled, overly safe approach. As the campaign wore on, the narrative began to focus on Theresa May seemingly hiding from the electorate and avoiding real voters. A walk about in Cornish Fishing Village was cut short once May had been photographed quickly eating some chips, and a visit to Scotland where May was seen knocking on a handful of unanswered doors before leaving, was roundly derided. This impression was reflected in the online coverage with *Buzzfeed* running a piece titled ‘People are Getting Fed Up with Theresa May’s Campaign Being So Stage Managed’ (BuzzFeed, May 2nd (a)) decrying the fact that journalists had been locked in a separate room and that activists had been bussed in from 50miles away for the official campaign launch. Perhaps more problematically for May, this campaigning style was thrown into even greater relief by the seeming authenticity and numerous personal appearances by Jeremy Corbyn on the campaign trail. His apparent ease in talking to ordinary people as well as holding well-attended rallies and speaking at music festivals only served to highlight the aloof and cautious approach taken by May. In another widely commented-on campaign moment, May was unable to think of anything ‘naughty’ she had done in response to her interviewer Julie Etchingham of ITV except running through a wheat field when she was young. This provoked an amused reaction from many quarters including in the online coverage. *BuzzFeed* (BuzzFeed, June 8th) ran an article outlining the best social media reactions and a common theme was Theresa May’s ‘square’ personality in comparison to Corbyn’s ‘cooler’ or more personable one. For instance, May was mocked for her wheat field comments and for apparently not knowing what chips are called.

The perception of May as someone hiding from the electorate and having a cold personality was furthermore cemented over her handling of the BBC leader’s debate. Such debates are masculinised rituals that often result in highly gendered evaluations of candidate performances (Harmer et al, 2017) so it might not be surprising that she was reluctant to participate. May insisted she would not take part in the televised leader’s debates and chose to send Home Secretary Amber Rudd in her place. This led to accusations from the press that May was attempting to hide her defective personality from the electorate and that she was incapable of debating with the other leaders (Huffington Post, 31st May 2017). The weakness was highlighted further when Rudd was widely received as having performed well, despite the death of her father just a few days earlier. When news of the bereavement emerged, May was heavily criticised. The Conservative-friendly *Mail Online* (Mail Online, 1st June) avoided direct criticism of May instead praising Rudd for her being ‘tough’. However, they included quotes from a Labour source stating that May’s absence showed she was unable to ‘stand up for herself’. The best-rated comments under the Mail Online article were scathing. Some of the criticism was implicitly gendered including one calling her ‘heartless, self-centred, arrogant and nasty piece of work’ and questioning whether it is possible to ‘call yourself strong if you send a bereaved colleague to do your job?’. Another criticised her for lacking ‘compassion’. The assumption being that women ought to be caring and compassionate, demonstrating once again the gendered nature of expectations about political leaders (Campus, 2013). These more subtle forms of gendered coverage aside, although much of the coverage was personally critical of May and her performance there was actually very little overtly sexist or misogynistic coverage of the Prime Minister in the five online news outlets included in this study.

Other prominent female politicians on the other hand, were not so lucky. Diane Abbott came in for scathing coverage due to a gaffe she made in an interview with LBC radio. In the interview, she was asked about a manifesto promise on police funding and firstly gave an incorrect figure, then could not remember it at all, leading to an uncomfortably long silence. This prompted a savage response in the online press. *Buzzfeed* declared it ‘The most cringe interview ever’ and suggested that to compare it to a car crash was ‘unfair to car crashes’ (*Buzzfeed*, May 2nd (b)). The *Huffington Post* moreover suggested that the interview has ‘reduced her credibility’ (2nd May, 2017). Ross (2017) argues that the term ‘car-crash’ was almost exclusively reserved for discussing poor interview by women during the campaign, “implying a biological predisposition for incompetence” (Ross, 2017, p.80) even when other figures like Phillip Hammond and Boris Johnson made arguably worse mistakes. The right leaning *Mail Online* was even more brutal, declaring that Abbott was like a ‘frog man wading into cow manure’ (*Mail Online* 2nd May), but even the left-leaning Guardian stated that she had ‘embarrass[ed] herself’ (*Guardian*, 2nd May). Of the coverage analysed here, only the BBC (BBC News, 2nd May) used a more muted tone, stating that Abbott ‘mispoke’ and ‘gets her figures muddled’.

Interview gaffes then became a narrative around Abbott, the *Mail Online* followed up the initial piece with several other items about slip-ups during interviews: ‘ANOTHER toe curling TV meltdown’ (*Mail Online*, 5th June). The criticism became deafening and eventually she stood down from her prominent role in the last days of the campaign, citing ill-health (Independent, 7th June). It is furthermore notable that both Philip Hammond and Jeremy Corbyn had their own ‘brain fades’ (to use a phrased coined by Natalie Bennett, the erstwhile Leader of the Green Party, who forgot her own figures on a radio interview during the 2015 election). These received much less coverage than Abbott’s mistake and the tone was indeed different. Corbyn received some criticism for the prickly *Womens’ Hour* interview where he also forgot figures on funding childcare, but the tone was more neutral. Buzzfeed ran the headline ‘Jeremy Corbyn forgot how much Labour’s childcare policy would cost’ (BuzzFeed, May 30th). This is in marked contrast to the ‘most cringe interview ever’ for Abbott, even though the mistakes were comparable. Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Hammond got his figures for HS2 wrong by £20 billion, whilst this was picked up by the press (Mirror, 17th May), our sample of online news contained just two articles specifically about Philip Hammond the day after he made this gaffe and neither mentioned it (*Huffington Post*, 17th May; *Mail Online*, 17th May).

Research has shown that campaign coverage can be fraught with danger for women candidates, particularly those in leadership positions. The main risk is reinforcing stereotypical assumptions about the incompatibility between traditional understandings of femininity and conventional ideals of politics. Female politicians are often viewed as more compassionate, honest and warmer than men, whilst men are viewed as more competent, decisive and stronger leaders (Dolan and Lynch, 2013; Kahn, 1996). These differences are problematic because stereotypically masculine traits are more highly valued by the electorate (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993), which goes some way to explain the continued over-representation of men in politics. Therefore if women are already perceived to lack political competence, the consequences of reinforcing that assumption can be damaging. It is also important to consider that the harsh treatment of Abbott stems not only from her gendered identity, but also from the fact that she is the most prominent black woman in British politics. Ward’s (2016) analysis of US congressional candidates indicates that women of colour receive more negative coverage than white women or men of colour. She also finds minority women are less visible than their white female counterparts, and when they do receive coverage, it is twice as likely to explicitly foreground their gender. Gabriel (2017) argues that Abbott has often received coverage that emphasises her ethnicity as well as her sex and was subjected to more intense scrutiny than other candidates in similar roles. It is perhaps surprising that even considering the fact that women politicians have gained considerably prominence in the online coverage of this election that gendered coverage persists, albeit in rather subtle ways. It is also striking that since women politicians have managed to gain visibility, non-political women such as experts, ordinary citizens and pollsters struggled to receive similar levels of attention.

**Conclusion**

The 2017 election campaign was highly unusual in many ways. It was the first election after the historic referendum decision in 2016; the first election since 1987 to be called and contested by a female Prime Minister, and public opinion appeared to be strongly in favour of returning an increased majority for the Conservative Party for the first time in decades. In practice, the campaign was widely perceived to be a disaster for May and a triumph for Corbyn’s Labour party even though the actual results suggested otherwise. Our findings suggest that the online reporting of the campaign was highly presidential, with May and Corbyn dominating the coverage. The other most prominent campaigners were the leaders of other political parties or member of the Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet. Analysis of press and broadcasting revealed very similar trends (see Deacon et al, 2017). The issue agenda was also similar to that of the legacy media, although our findings show that online news featured a higher proportion of news about the political process than offline rivals. This was especially the case with the digital born sites who devoted a lot of coverage to the role of media in the campaign. Our analysis of the gendered dynamics of the campaign coverage show that once again online news is dominated by men, despite the fact that the Prime Minister is female. Our qualitative analysis of the portrayal of women shows that whilst May received some very subtle gendered coverage which constructed her as weak and robotic, other prominent women like Diane Abbott received much more overtly sexist coverage questioning her competence, demonstrating another way in which online news follows similar trends to its mainstream competitors.

This chapter has demonstrated that despite some small differences, UK online news coverage of the election shared many similarities with broadcast and press coverage. Previous research has noted that much of the content on online newspapers and websites of broadcasters tends to repackage their original content for the online environment (Quant, 2008), and this is particularly the case for the *Mail Online*, which might go some way to explaining the continuity of the mainstream news agenda online. With the advent of digital-born news providers we wanted to assess to what extent these newsmakers are following the mainstream agenda, or whether they are exhibiting a different range of stories. Our study did not include any of the new highly partisan outlets like *Breitbart* or *The Canary* that receive high volumes of shares on social media from their political supporters, but clearly going forward it would be useful to analyse such media alongside the mainstream journalism that already receives academic attention.

It is striking then, that our study demonstrates that online news sites reported the election in a very conventional way. The issues they covered were predictable and the range of voices included was typically narrow. Much has been said about the potential decline in influence of the British press and the importance of paying more attention to online news but if our results tell us anything, then it is that when the online news that British citizens claim to consume is analysed, there are remarkable similarities to the mainstream broadcast and press agendas.

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Table 1: Top ten most prominent themes, 4th May – 7th June 2017

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Theme** | **Percentage** |
|  |  |
| Electoral process | 42.6 |
| Brexit | 7.2 |
| Media | 5.9 |
| Social Security | 4.6 |
| Health / NHS | 4.5 |
| Crime / Law and Order | 3.3 |
| Standards / Corruption | 3.3 |
| Taxation | 3.2 |
| Immigration | 2.9 |
| Defence / Military  | 2.7 |

Table 2: Extent of Brexit coverage per outlet

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **BBC** | **Daily Mail** | **Guardian** | **BuzzFeed** | **Huffington Post** | **All** |
| **Not mentioned** | 59.9 | 69.5 | 40.5 | 66.7 | 63.6 | 59.7 |
| **Mentioned Incidentally** | 20.4 | 14.4 | 38.3 | 21.3 | 25.9 | 24.7 |
| **Mentioned Substantially** | 19.7 | 16.0 | 21.2 | 12.0 | 10.5 | 15.6 |

Figure 1: Appearance of politicians by party (%), 4th May – 7th June 2017

Table 3: Top ten most prominent campaigners, 4th May – 7th June 2017

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Actor** | **Percentage** |
|  |  |
| Theresa May | 37.3 |
| Jeremy Corbyn | 36.4 |
| Tim Farron | 9.9 |
| Nicola Sturgeon | 5.2 |
| John McDonnell | 4.6 |
| Amber Rudd | 4.4 |
| Paul Nuttall | 4.1 |
| Diane Abbott | 3.6 |
| Emily Thornberry | 3.1 |
| Caroline Lucas | 2.8 |