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The take a break campaign? National print media reporting of the election

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The Take a Break Campaign?

National Print Media Reporting of the Election.¹

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Introduction

During the 1980s the so-called 'Tory press' played an influential role in shaping electoral discourse but this changed in the mid-1990s when many of the same newspapers abandoned their once vehement support for the Conservatives. The 'Tony press' that subsequently emerged and established itself in the 1997 and 2001 general elections was characterised by conditional endorsements which tended to focus more on Blair rather than his party (Wring, 2002). Events during Labour's often tempestuous second term further strained and, in some cases, ended certain national newspapers' allegiance to the government. Yet there has been no widespread swing back to the Conservatives and a reformation of the Tory press; rather print media reporting of the 2005 campaign was arguably less easy to generalise upon than at any time since the 1974 general elections. The longer-term trend for partisan dealignment appears to be continuing, although there have been significant fluctuations in the strength (or rather weakness) of different newspaper's editorial endorsements. This trend has been encouraged by declining levels of voter engagement if judged by the recent and marked falls in electoral turnout.

If sections of the public have abstained from voting, significant numbers have also stopped reading a daily newspaper. This underlying market uncertainty has heightened different competitors' sensitivity to their audience share and it is against this background that this chapter will explore the role of the national print media in the 2005 election. The opening discussion considers the partisanship of the national dailies and their Sunday sister titles. This serves as useful context for the following section which analyses the similarities and differences between the reporting of the election by the print and broadcast new media. Furthermore attention is devoted to

how the agendas of the so-called 'quality', 'mid-market' and 'popular' newspapers varied in relation to the campaign. Here discussion will focus on how the latter titles, in particular, appeared to increasingly avoid or even take a break from certain aspects of the election. The chapter ends by considering the role of a more specialist section of the print media, the women's weekly magazine market, that politicians felt might play a more prominent role in the campaign than they had ever before. The best-selling *Take A Break*, for instance, duly acknowledged the election was a news story worthy of comment and coverage. The nature of this magazine's reporting will be considered together with the contributions of others belonging to this growing and possibly influential sector of the print media.

'Disdain for the Other': partisan (de)alignment in the press

The final editorial declarations of national newspapers revealing who they support in an election do not necessarily reflect the tenor and range of their wider coverage. They do, however, offer a considered, authoritative representation of their partisan allegiances and are therefore crucial indicators of their political outlook. The mechanism by which different papers come to pronounce on major political issues varies: some give most weight to the views of the editor, proprietor, a small group of senior staff and/or a wider panel of journalists (Firmstone, 2004). Such decisions may be accompanied by internal and external consultations, some of which may be more cosmetic than influential. **Table 1** compares the final editorial declarations in the national press for the 2005 campaign with those for 2001. Taking the dailies and Sundays together, nine titles endorsed Labour this time compared with the six and two

papers that supported the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats respectively. In 2001 the corresponding figures were thirteen, three and none. Translated into circulation terms, Labour's percentage of daily press support reduced from 72 to 57 percent. The major reason for the nominal redistribution of party allegiances between 2001 and 2005 was the repositioning of the Express Group newspapers (*Daily Express*, *Sunday Express* and the *Daily Star*) during this time. In 2000 the titles were purchased by the controversial publisher Richard Desmond. The *Star* consequently further reduced its already limited political coverage and the *Express* abandoned its brief flirtation with liberal left causes but the group titles all backed Labour in 2001. By 2005, both *Express* titles had switched to the Conservatives which is not surprising given they had firmly shifted back to the right having devoted extensive coverage to what they perceived to be a growing asylum seeking crisis. In contrast *The Star* and *Star on Sunday* decided not to declare for any party this time.

There is a problem with defining a given newspaper as Conservative, Labour or whatever because it can potentially obscure more than it reveals given viewing party affiliations in categorical terms conveys nothing of their underlying strength. Just as commentators have identified the need to think of votes cast 'as though they are somewhere along a continuum from having definitely decided not to vote for a party to having decided not to vote for a party at all' (Norris et al, 2001: 160), so press allegiances can range from staunch advocacy to the most hesitant of endorsements or, still comparatively rare, none at all. Thus a qualitative evaluation of newspaper declarations offers a more nuanced insight into the nature and strength of each title's support (Deacon and Wring, 2002). Many of these editorials gave only qualified, circumspect backing to their chosen party. The titles who offered a more resounding

endorsement were the *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror* and their respective Sunday sister papers together with the *People*.

The reservations and qualifications expressed in most newspapers' election declaring editorials derived in part from an appreciation of the quality and legitimacy of more than one party. For example, although the *Independent* had many positive things to say about Charles Kennedy and his party, and eventually recommended 'an outcome in which there is a significantly larger force of Liberal Democrat MPs', their editorial stated 'it would be too simplistic for the *Independent* to argue for a blanket endorsement of the Liberal Democrats at this election.' Amidst an excoriating attack on the Prime Minister over Iraq and civil liberties, the paper conceded that his government 'has been admirably liberal on social matters' and that 'Britain has changed for the better under his watch, becoming a more modern, inclusive country' (*Independent* 4th May). It also cited the electoral system as a serious impediment to Charles Kennedy's chances of taking office but this did not diminish its enthusiasm for the party, a stance it underlined by the singular prominence it gave to retiring Labour MP Brian Sedgemore's defection to the Liberal Democrats as a 'signal moment' (26th April).

Like the *Independent* the *Guardian* and *Observer* also seemed caught in the gravitational pull between Labour and the Liberal Democrats before eventually recommending Labour but welcoming the prospect of a strengthened presence for the Liberal Democrats ('Voters with sitting Liberal Democrat MPs should return them.' *Observer*, 1st May; 'Voters should use their heads and hearts to re-elect Labour with an increased Liberal Democrat presence' *Guardian*, 4th May). *The Times*,

meanwhile, in a fairly tepid endorsement of Labour, acknowledged the appeal of the Conservatives manifesto in many areas before concluding: ‘The best result for Britain, we think, would be a smaller but viable Labour majority and a larger and renewed Tory opposition’ (*The Times*, 3rd May).

Table 1: Editorial declarations of the national newspapers

	2001		2005	
Daily Press		Circulation		Circulation
<i>The Guardian</i>	Moderate Labour	0.40	Weak Labour	0.34
<i>The Independent</i>	Strong Anti Conservative	0.23	Moderate Lib Dem	0.23
<i>The Times</i>	Very Weak Labour	0.71	Weak Labour	0.65
<i>The Telegraph</i>	Strong Conservative	1.02	Strong Conservative	0.87
<i>The Financial Times</i>	Very Weak Labour	0.49	Very Weak Labour	0.38
<i>The Daily Express</i>	Moderate Labour	0.96	Strong Conservative	0.87
<i>The Daily Mail</i>	Strong Anti Labour	2.40	Strong Conservative	2.30
<i>The Sun</i>	Weak Labour	3.45	Weak Labour	3.26
<i>The Mirror</i>	Strong Labour	2.79	Strong Labour	2.29
<i>The Star</i>	Moderate Labour	0.60	No Preference	0.85
Sunday Press				
<i>The Observer</i>	Moderate Labour	0.45	Moderate Labour	0.42
<i>Independent on Sunday</i>	Weak Anti Labour Landslide	0.25	Weak Lib Dem	0.18
<i>The Sunday Times</i>	Very Weak Labour	1.37	Weak Conservative	1.35
<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i>	Strong Conservative	0.79	Strong Conservative	0.65
<i>The Mail on Sunday</i>	Strong Conservative	2.33	Very Strong Anti Labour	2.37
<i>The Sunday Express</i>	Very Weak Labour	0.90	Very Strong Conservative	0.84
<i>The Sunday Mirror</i>	Strong Labour	1.87	Strong Labour	1.53
<i>The News of the World</i>	Moderate Labour	3.90	Very Weak Labour	3.64
<i>The People</i>	Very Strong Labour	1.37	Moderate Labour	0.9
<i>Daily Star on Sunday</i>	N/A	N/A	No Preference	0.46

Other newspapers' editorial hesitancy was linked to their significant reservations about the record and manifesto of their chosen party. For example *The News of the World* declared 'our first message is: Vote on Thursday. And our second is: Vote for Labour. We have thrown our weight behind Tony Blair's party. But not without some apprehension... If, as we expect, Labour form the next government we put them on notice this newspaper will be watching them closely' (1st May). This line was also evident in the editorialising of its sister paper, the *Sun*. Before the start of the campaign, the *Sun* announced it had not made up its mind as to who it would support (4th April), but by the second week had decided 'Tony Blair –warts and all – will be the only real choice for Britain on May 5' (21st April). But this was presented as 'one last chance' and the paper set out at considerable length their political differences and disappointment with the government in many policy areas (24th April). The decision by the *Sun* to maintain its support for Labour was, however, emboldened by its dismissal of the Liberal Democrats as 'a pathetic shambles' (14th April) and Conservative criticisms of Blair's handling of Iraq (25th April). The paper's growing enthusiasm for Labour culminated with an eve-of-poll interview in which editor Rebekah Wade and political editor Trevor Kavanagh questioned the Prime Minister and his wife Cherie. The encounter produced a now notorious quote, 'five times a night', a reference to Blair's supposed sexual prowess which was attacked on the grounds of taste in the *Mail* and elsewhere after the election. Significantly the phrase was not the Blairs' nor the relatively respectful Wade or Kavanagh but had been a question posed to the Prime Minister, alluding to his recent health problems, by photographer Arthur Edwards in a joking aside during the meeting (*The Sun*, 4th

May). The subsequent furore over the remark demonstrated the potential pitfalls for those courting publicity from more populist media outlets.

Another stated reason for some papers' equivocation was a cold and pragmatic assessment of the electoral prospects of their preferred choices. This was most evident in titles that expressed most sympathy with the Liberal Democrats, epitomized by the *Independent on Sunday's* conclusion that: 'Where the realistic choice is between Labour and Conservative, we prefer Labour, but the values for which this newspaper stands are best promoted "where they can win" for the Liberal Democrats' (1st May). This appeal to tactical voting reveals what was by far the most common reason for the muted endorsements of one or more party, specifically press antagonism towards the alternatives on offer. For, if some of the papers were subdued in their recommendations, they were more vehement in their declamations. For example the *Mail*, in outlining its support for the Conservatives, commented:

'The Tories may still seem something of a one-man band. But at least they offer the hope of restoring integrity to public life, of renegotiating more sensible terms with Europe, of restoring genuine prudence to the economy and re-energising the public sector. Yet if we're being honest, our support for a Conservative victory - which we concede is unlikely - is superseded by an even greater imperative: to diminish the power of an overweeningly arrogant Mr Blair and restore a healthy democracy to this country' (*Daily Mail*, 4th May).

'Disdain for the other' was also evident in the more leftwards inclined press. The *Guardian's* reservations about the possible switch of support from Labour to the

Liberal Democrats was in no small part based on an adamantly stated view that the Conservative party was ‘the worst answer to what is wrong with Britain... It is vital to stop the Conservatives’ (4th May). Similarly the *People* recognised that whilst: ‘There is much for Labour voters to be unhappy about’, the consequences would be ‘unthinkable’ should Michael Howard and his party ‘slither through the back door’ (1st May). The *Mirror* was similarly emphatic, depicting the Conservative leader as a vampire being vanquished on an election day front page headlined ‘Vote Labour: There’s Too Much At Stake’ (5th May). But such stridency among pro-government newspapers was comparatively rare in this election; rather caveats informed much commentary including that of the *Financial Times* whose editorial declaration stated:

‘There are good reasons for the nation’s disenchantment with Mr Blair – not least the loss of trust resulting from the Iraq war and his shambolically informal style of government. But Mr Howard’s Conservatives do not look like a convincing alternative. It is not yet time for a change’ (3rd May).

More Fog Horns than Dog Whistles: the divergent news media coverage

Partisan allegiances or possibly the lack of them helped to frame press reporting of the campaign but the favouring of one or other party appears to be increasingly less important as newspapers seek to make political interventions in other ways, most notably by trying to influence the wider media and public agenda. This can be seen in the way different titles have emphasised particular issues at the expense of others. Once again the dominant topic in both print and broadcast media was ‘election process’, a hybrid covering the reporting of public opinion polls, party strategies, publicity initiatives and related themes. The subject attracted even more attention than it had during a 2001 election whose agenda had been informed by extensive

media and opposition led criticism of Labour ‘spin’. Rather in this campaign the prominence devoted to the topic reflected a particular journalistic concern with the apparent rise of voter disaffection and how it might be analysed and better understood.

Table 2: Top 10 election themes in UK national news media²

	All media	%	Broadcast	%	Quality press	%	Mid market	%	Populars	%
1	Electoral process	44	Electoral process	42	Electoral process	49	Electoral process	28	Electoral process	46
2	Political impropriety	8	Iraq	10	Iraq	8	Political impropriety	17	Political impropriety	6
3	Iraq	8	Asylum/immigration	8	Political impropriety	7	Iraq	10	NHS	6
4	Asylum/immigration	7	Political impropriety	8	Asylum/immigration	6	Asylum/immigration	9	Crime	6
5	Taxation	5	Crime	4	Taxation	5	Taxation	7	Asylum/immigration	6
6	NHS	4	NHS	4	Economy	4	NHS	7	Education	5
7	Crime	4	Taxation	4	Education	3	Crime	5	Economy	5
8	Economy	4	Education	3	NHS	3	Education	4	Iraq	4
9	Education	3	Economy	2	Crime	2	Social Security	4	Social Security	4
10	Social Security	2	Social Security	2	Europe	2	Economy	3	Taxation	4

² This table covers electoral coverage from Monday 4 April to Friday 6 May (respectively, the day preceding the formal announcement of the commencement of the campaign and the day after polling). The broadcasting sampled included the following news media: BBC 1 10pm News, BBC2 Newsnight, ITV 10.30pm, Channel 4 7pm, Channel 5 7pm, Sky News 9pm, BBC Radio 4 Today 0730-0830 and BBC Radio 1 Newsbeat 1745-1800. The entire national newspaper market was also covered: ‘quality’ titles refers to *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Telegraph*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Financial Times*, *Independent*, *Independent on Sunday*; ‘mid market’ covers *Mail*, *Mail on Sunday*, *Express*, *Sunday Express*; and ‘populars’ means *Sun*, *News of the World*, *Mirror*, *Sunday Mirror*, *People*, *Star*, *Star on Sunday*. For more details on the study see Deacon, Wring and Golding, 2006.

The second most prominent theme was 'impropriety', a theme analogous to the 1997 category of 'sleaze', and 'politicians' conduct' (principally John Prescott punching a protestor) in 2001. Here the emphasis was on allegations relating to Tony Blair's (mis)conduct in office as well as new rules that had liberalised and thereby encouraged a great increase in postal voting. Significantly a timely and highly critical statement by Richard Mawrey, the judge presiding over a fraud case in Birmingham in which he likened the ballot rigging activities of Labour victors in the 2004 local elections to those of a 'banana republic' intensified criticisms of a government that had changed the system. The *Daily Mail* was particularly vehement in attacking ministers and claimed alleged evidence of a growth in postal voting irregularities amounted to a 'corruption of democracy itself' (5th April).

If 'impropriety' as a topic appeared to favour the Conservatives' agenda the third theme 'Iraq' reinforced that of the Liberal Democrats. Though not a major issue during the earlier stages of the campaign, the invasion became a key debating point in the closing stages of the election following the leak and then publication of a controversial memo in various newspapers by Attorney General Lord Goldsmith on the legality of Tony Blair's support for the US government's military action in the absence of UN sanction. Goldsmith's words were scrutinised and, more importantly, the wider issue revisited at arguably the most inopportune moment for Labour. The Prime Minister once again had his personal integrity called in to question by Michael Howard who labelled him a 'liar' and Charles Kennedy who renewed his criticism of Blair's judgement. Whilst broadcasters, the quality and mid-market press provided in-depth analysis of the controversy, the somewhat limited and dismissive coverage of

it in the pro-Labour *Sun* and *Mirror* was arguably useful to Blair strategists in limiting further public consideration of this damaging issue.

Whereas Iraq partly dominated the final full week of the campaign, the next placed item 'asylum and immigration' was more of an issue during the preceding fortnight. Media attention to the topic had been sustained by newspaper coverage of the issue going back some years which accused the government of failing to control inward migration. The claims were supported by lurid representations, especially in the *Express'* titles, of an asylum system in supposed chaos and the prominence afforded these issues was clearly reinforced by the Conservatives' own promotion of a subject where its draconian stance appeared to resonate with a section of the electorate. At times Tory chief strategist Lynton Crosby's supposedly subtle deployment of his 'dog whistle' on this and other issues came across more as a fog horn, particularly when the message was refracted through the more populist news media. The conviction of illegal migrant Kamel Bourgass for the killing of a police officer during the campaign further intensified press and rival parties' criticism of the government's handling of this issue with Simon Heffer of the *Mail* (28th April) claiming Britain was now 'crawling' with what the *Sunday Times* suggested were as many as 500,000 unlawful immigrants (17th April).

A telling feature of the election reporting was how little there was of substantive policy debate in the news. Even the so-called 'bread and butter' issues that politicians routinely claim are of most interest to the voters they encounter on the campaign trail appeared to be of marginal interest to the media, particularly of the national printed variety. Furthermore where there was coverage of health and education this tended to

focus on particular human interest stories involving the outbreak of the hospital superbug, MRSA, or the case of a frustrated patient waiting for an operation to the detriment of wider discussion about NHS provision. This partial attention was, however, substantially more than that devoted to other issues which had gained prominence in recent years, most obviously transport, Northern Ireland and housing. Europe, a topic that had greatly influenced the agenda of at least the last two general elections was given scant coverage and only ranked tenth as a theme in the quality press.

A Gendered Agenda? The campaign in the women's weeklies

Whereas there has been a notable decline in the circulations of national newspapers over the last two decades other printed media have experienced significant growth in their sales, audiences and influence. Publishers in the women's magazine sector have been particularly successful in gaining readerships and launching new titles. The burgeoning weeklies in this market offer an alternative kind of news media to the more established formats and one that principally serves a group of voters seen as a key target audience. Though dominated by popular culture, some of these titles have featured politicians with or without their co-operation. Significantly the 1987 interview in which Margaret Thatcher famously declared 'there is no such thing as society' appeared in *Woman's Own*, a leading journal in the sector at that time. Like Thatcher and immediate predecessor John Major, Tony Blair has also consciously attempted to communicate his message to women, particular demographic groups of whom are routinely portrayed as being essential to any party seeking to win office. During the run-up to 1997 the most prominent Labour target became 'Worcester

Woman’, a term representing the floating female voters living in the key marginal constituencies of so-called ‘Middle England’. Blair cultivated them in a variety of ways whilst wife Cherie helped out by guest editing an issue of *Prima* magazine. For this election the Prime Minister actually invited the British Society of Magazine Editors to a Downing Street reception in recognition of their cultural as well as potential electoral influence (*Guardian*, 11th April).

The 2005 equivalent of Worcester Women were the ‘School Gate Mums’ whom the Prime Minister sought to engage (or re-engage) through a ‘masochism strategy’ that involved him being seen to answer often irate voters’ questions on live broadcast programmes (Deacon and Wring, 2005). Disillusioned women played a particularly prominent role in these encounters and the identification of them as a distinct audience led politicians and their strategists to consider how they might better communicate with them. Popular female interest magazines were seen as a particularly useful conduit for political messages which duly appeared in various formats, including a major *Cosmopolitan* interview with Michael Howard in which he advocated reducing the period in which abortions could be legally performed (Childs, 2005). The prominent monthly also ran its own ‘high heel vote’ awareness raising initiative and encouraged readers to take a greater interest in the campaign. It was however the weekly titles, boasting a combined circulation of 8.5 million, which offered the more news driven format likely to be sensitive to the unfolding election.³

³ This study reviewed all of those magazines defined as ‘Women’s Interests: Women’s Weeklies’ by the Audit Bureau of Circulation barring one title primarily aimed at the Republic of Ireland. The sample includes all of the following issues published between 4th April-6th May (figures from ABC): *Bella* (circulation 422,963), *Best* (400,638), *Chat* (623,567), *Closer* (500,202), *Heat* (539,983), *Hello* (323,591), *My Weekly* (233,744), *New* (357,523), *Now* (597,827), *OK* (468,928), *People’s Friend* (341,506), *Reveal* (239,907), *Star* (176,983), *Take a*

The largest selling women's weekly, *Take a Break*, was feted as a potentially influential actor because of its massive circulation. Its eve-of-poll edition self-consciously proclaimed this by arguing its nearly four million readers could make the difference in what it suggested would be the 'UK's first Women's Election' (5th May). A major three page feature, 'Votes for Sale', concentrated on the issues deemed by editors to be their readers' priorities: childcare, pay, pensions, safety, health-care and, more specifically, abortion. Here each of the three major parties' stances was briefly elaborated but the only direct comments were from the leaders clarifying their policy on the particularly contentious latter issue. For its political coverage *Woman's Own* ran a feature over successive issues (11th and 18th April) in which two different groups of readers in their 30s and 40s asked Blair and Howard questions. The agenda differed from that of *Take A Break* and, reflecting the magazine's slightly older, perhaps more conservative readership, concentrated on crime and personal security. Howard rather than Blair received the decidedly warmer response from his interrogators. Charles Kennedy did not, however, participate.

Tony Blair consciously made an appeal to what his strategists termed 'hard working families' in an interview with Sophie Barton of *Closer* in which he acknowledged the 'stressful life' pressures facing those 'trying to bring up kids, work and pay off a mortgage' (30th April). He also promoted Labour's pledge to improve breast cancer treatment and spoke about a variety of subjects including his son Leo and Iraq. Barton noted Blair's recent heart problems and speculated as to whether he was quite

Break (1,211,016), *That's Life* (597,016), *The Lady* (34,419), *Woman* (512,158), *Woman's Own* (436,356), and *Woman's Weekly* (401,965).

as recovered as he seemed. The Prime Minister's personal appearance was the subject of the only election related item in *Heat*. The cultural agenda-setting magazine devoted its regular full page 'Torso of the Week' feature to Blair, offering a naked to the waste long range photograph of him taking a telephone call (7th May). On first sight the image could easily be dismissed as another trivial item but for the favourable subtitle 'Yes, it really is him!' and the clear impression it gave of a man in good physical shape for his age. Furthermore, and despite appearances, it was almost certainly a staged photo-opportunity because security implications would have made it highly unlikely a photojournalist would have been able to obtain close-up pictures of the Prime Minister without the consent of those guarding his safety and reputation.

Significantly the *Heat* feature reappeared as a footnote to Tony and Cherie Blair's highly favourable eve-of-poll interview with *The Sun* where it was suggested he had 'won' the 'Torso of the Week' acclaim. This misleading representation of the *Heat* item nevertheless reinforced Labour's desire to promote their leader as a man recovered from his recent health scares. Physical well being, this time of the nation's children rather than the Prime Minister, informed another, similarly favourable feature on Blair and demonstrated the publicity value of his incumbent status. By inviting Jamie Oliver to Downing Street the Labour leader acknowledged the importance of the chef's recent Channel 4 television crusade to improve the quality of school food. The event also provided a useful photo-opportunity and story in *Hello* that complimented Blair's pledge to spend an additional £280 million on catering for children's meals (11th April).

Aside from the coverage of the leaders the only other election related material in the women's weeklies consisted of three separate interview features which concentrated on non-intrusive aspects of their subject's personal lives and formative experiences. A *Hello* piece on Harriet Harman had photographs of the minister at home with her mother and sisters together with a brief review of her career trajectory and achievements. The interview steered clear of the campaign but touched on the issue of maternity rights and the difficulties facing a professional woman in developing a work-life balance (5th May). An interview with former Conservative minister Ann Widdecombe in *Woman's Own* hardly mentioned politics (25th April). Far more detailed was a *Closer* piece billed 'At Home With the Howards' which only featured quotes from the party leader's wife (9th April). The interview, conducted in their home, focused on the couple's family life and enabled Sandra Howard to present her husband Michael as a man far less austere than his popular image suggested. The reported discussion acknowledged the success of Jamie Oliver's campaign and touched on abortion law but there was a diplomatic avoidance of questions about the Blairs. This and Mrs Howard's many other media appearances were in striking contrast to those of her predecessor Ffion Hague who had often been seen but rarely if ever heard or quoted during the 2001 campaign.

The public relations efforts by the Conservatives in targeting the women's weeklies were also supported by an advertising campaign based on the core slogan 'Are You Thinking What We're Thinking'. The party was the only one to market itself in this way and pay for copy to appear in the best-selling title *Take a Break*, the more glossy *Hello* magazine together with its fierce rival *OK*. Featured messages 'Put Matron in charge and we'd soon get cleaner hospitals', 'How can my daughter learn anything if

teachers aren't allowed to discipline unruly kids?' and 'Seeing more police on the streets would make me feel safer' promoted concerns over health, education and crime rather than other prominent Conservative advertising themes dealing with immigration and Blair's untrustworthiness. Ultimately though the most striking thing about the election coverage in the women's weeklies' was the overall lack of it. 12 of the 19 titles sampled had no advert, photograph, story or mention of the campaign or any of those involved in it. Even the birth of Charles and Sarah Kennedy's first child Donald at the beginning of the election failed to generate the kind of human interest reporting that might have been expected across the sector regardless of the Liberal Democrats' co-operation.

Conclusion

Although the best selling magazine *Take A Break* proclaimed 2005 would be the 'first UK women's election' this was not borne out if measured by the scant coverage of the campaign in the burgeoning number of weekly magazines designed for a predominantly female audience. These titles' seeming indifference to electoral politics suggests the parties, politicians or the leaders' families were not viewed as subjects likely to increase or at least maintain sales in this highly competitive market. The realisation that reporting the election might not be a profitable story appeared to inform the approach taken by publications belonging to other, more traditional sectors of the news media. The *Star*, in particular, downgraded its already scant political coverage and had (like the majority of its non-voting readership) something of 'take a break' election by offering a daily version of the kind of human interest centred product that dominates the aforementioned magazine market. Significantly the newspaper has been the only national to significantly gain in readership terms, having added over 25% to its circulation since the previous campaign of 2001.

The recent success of the *Star* is all the more remarkable because the wider newspaper industry appears to be in decline if judged by falling sales and revenues. Consequently the paper's avowedly populist, celebrity driven format may signal that it is unlikely that the weekly magazine sector (especially that part of it serving a predominantly female readership) will embrace electoral politics as a topic of serious interest in the future. Rather commercial considerations are likely to dictate that national newspapers, particularly of the 'redtop' variety, continue their movement away from the heavily partisan (though not necessarily ideological) agenda that once dominated their reporting of general elections for nearly two decades during the era of

the 'Tory press' from the mid-1970s onward. It also leaves proprietors, notably Rupert Murdoch with something of a dilemma as he risks being accused of naked opportunism should he order the *News of the World*, *The Times* and *Sun* and his other titles to once again come out in support of the Conservatives in the future.

Arguably the now divergent reporting of the UK wide press has blunted its ability to influence and thereby help determine the election agenda. The main parties have responded to this by placing greater emphasis on cultivating more localised new media whilst simultaneously maintaining a similar level of interest in broadcasters who voters continue to regard as a source of more impartial coverage. To a certain extent the general election readers experienced depended on their choice of news media. The so-called 'mid-market' titles, the *Express*, *Mail* and their respective Sunday papers offered audiences less on the so-called 'electoral process' not to mention the 'bread and butter' issues (health, crime, education, tax, etc) and relatively more on the alleged shortcomings of Tony Blair in relation to the 3 'Is' of Iraq, impropriety and immigration. Although other media gave prominence to the latter topics, few did to quite the same extent. The exceptions were the broadcasters, who placed similar emphasis on Iraq as a story, and the populars who gave markedly less space to the same controversy. The latter newspapers' comparative neglect of this topic was arguably more useful to Labour than anything they actually published in support of the government.

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