Balance and Bias in Radio Four's Today Programme, during the 1997 General Election Campaign.

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ABSTRACT

This research considered aspects of balance and bias in radio broadcasting, focusing on thirty-nine editions of the Today programme (Radio Four) during the last general election campaign period. The rationale for such a selection was that during a campaign, broadcasters are under the greatest obligation, both morally and legally, to ensure overall 'balance' in their coverage.

In Chapter One, a literature survey compares different perspectives on balance and bias, both professional and academic, and relates them to public controversies about political coverage in the period preceding the election. In Chapter Two, the survey extends to interviewing techniques and the presence of confrontation in political interviews. Both chapters set Today in a wider context.

Chapter Three considers the research methodology. Attention is paid to the potential for reflexivity in such an analysis, and the possibility of textual readings being distorted through additional hermeneutic layers.

During the campaign period, a self-selected but coincidentally representative group of listeners provided both quantitative and qualitative feedback via an original questionnaire. This is reported in Chapter Four as producing some interesting conclusions about audience reading of radio texts and perceptions of balance and bias. These data were compared with readings by a party political monitor whose role during the campaign was to analyse political coverage on Today.

Chapters Five and Six present a detailed textual analysis, by both quantitative and qualitative means, of the programmes themselves. Emphasis is placed on the objective rather than the subjective, determining common points of reference and comparing like elements.

Finally, a number of specific conclusions are reached, about the conduct of the programme makers themselves and about more general practices in political coverage by broadcasters.

CONTENTS

LIST OF CHARTS AND TABLES

CHAPTER ONE: THE ACHIEVABILITY OF 'BALANCE'

> "Due impartiality lies at the heart of the BBC. It is a core value and no area of programming is exempt from it."
>
> BBC Producers' Guidelines, 1996, 14

The idea that impartiality is possible and a quality to be striven for runs throughout not only the BBC's own literature, but also the welter of technicist manuals which attempt to set the parameters within which journalists and broadcasters operate.

The purpose of this research was to examine the extent to which 'due' impartiality was achieved over the critical period of the 1997 general election campaign in one of the BBC's most important radio programmes: Radio Four's Today. The BBC's own Guidelines defined 'due' as meaning "adequate or appropriate to the nature of the subject and the type of programme" (ibid, 14). Today, as a news magazine, itself covers in each daily edition a vast range of subjects, and discussion of its own 'impartiality' frequently assumes importance in the nation's news agenda. Issues of rationale and generalisability are pursued later, but this first chapter will attempt to establish how achievable 'impartiality' actually is, both in broadcasting in general and on Today in particular.

The notion of impartiality in broadcasting can be traced back to the first Director General, John (later Lord) Reith, who saw it as essential in a public service which was then intended to enjoy a monopoly of broadcasting. With the use of the radio frequency spectrum then much less efficient than today, the liberal tradition as manifested by the

existence of a free press with a variety of titles and a diversity of ownership was deemed inappropriate for a new medium benefiting from only a very limited number of possible channels.

The early development of the medium has been chronicled by a number of media historians - their work ranging in scope and detail from Briggs' meticulous first volume (1961) to Scannell & Cardiff (1991) and Crisell's brief excursion (1994) through the key events. Other commentators have written from a more sociological perspective: typically, Thompson, who noted that the concentration of provision of radio broadcasting - 'ownership' in today's terms - meant that in the 1920's a new interpretation of the liberal tradition was considered necessary:

> "(The BBC) could sustain the traditional liberal idea in this new context only by remaining scrupulously neutral with regard to political parties and organized interest groups, and by insulating itself from the government of the day by the mechanism of the licence fee, which provided (it) with a source of revenue independent of government-allocated funds." (1990, 258)

Only then could such a privileged and monolithic organisation claim to be acting in the public interest. However, Thompson identifies immediate and repeated compromise in practice of this 'operative ideal' (ibid, 258). Reith himself abandoned his own principle of neutrality during the 1926 General Strike. Crisell (1994, 20) described the then British Broadcasting Company as "broadly pro-government", but since the episode pre-dated the establishment of the Corporation under a Charter, Reith's move is characterised by some as more pragmatic than party politically-motivated. Resisting calls for the BBC

to be 'commandeered' for the duration of the national emergency, he instead chose to support the government against the strikers:

> "If the Government be strong and their cause right, they need not adopt such measures. Assuming the BBC is for the people and that the Government is for the people, it follows that the BBC must be for the Government in this crisis too." (quoted in Thompson, 1990, 258)

Whether pragmatic or not, adopting such a position may have set a damaging precedent. What, after all, constitutes a crisis so important as to abandon 'neutrality'? One could further ask whether crises come in degrees, each perhaps demanding partial abandonment. Who are 'the people' if they do not include large sections of the working population who, in 1926, chose to strike? (Reith probably had in mind a notion of an 'establishment', or a ruling class, rather than the whole population.) In what way was the government 'for' the people, and what, then, would be the role of Her Majesty's opposition?

The reality is that Reith chose - albeit perhaps out of necessity - to temporarily align the BBC with the government, thus adopting a partial stance. Thompson blamed the "difficulty of defining the public interest" in times of crisis (ibid, 259) and identifies this as the 'hidden risk' of public service broadcasting:

> "The point is not simply that, on the occasion of the General Strike and on various occasions since then, the BBC has favoured the government or bowed to pressure from the government or other agencies of the state; rather, the point is that the principle of public service broadcasting... *carries with it the risk* that the neutrality sought for... will be compromised in practice by the systematic favouring of the concerns and perspectives of officials of the government and state." (1990, 259)

As regards the specific context of the Today programme: Donovan (1997) chronicled its development from an initial proposal by Robin Day in July 1955 to the subsequent programme's fortieth anniversary in 1997. His analysis of the question of bias (ibid, 201-6) suggests that by 1997, balance had become less controversial than during the early to mid-1990s - a phenomenon which he attributed to "both the Tory leadership and... BBC culture (being) less partisan and more consensual in approach" (ibid, 201). Although the BBC in general and Today in particular had by the 1980s begun to attract more criticism for attacking government than for supporting it, Donovan quotes Conservative interviewees - their party then in power - as denying the existence of any *systematic* bias in Today. That, though, does not exclude the possibility of bias being sporadic - nor as such, its being unconscious rather than intentional.

Echoing Reith's earlier alignment of the Corporation with the government of 1926, as late as July 1968 presenter Jack de Manio began the Today programme thus:

> "Good morning - and let's start the morning by raising our hats to the London policemen, who once again have had their weekends mucked up by a lot of silly hooligans." (in Donovan, ibid, 29)

De Manio's 'hooligans' had been in London's Grosvenor Square, demonstrating against the war in Vietnam. Even if, as the uncrowned king of the on-air *faux pas*, his comment is viewed charitably, it was not made as result of a set editorial policy regarding Vietnam, demonstrations, dissent or freedom of expression: this presenter was reflecting a reactionary, 'establishment' view of a controversy, and lending that view a legitimacy not intentionally accorded to any counterbalancing opinion.

To the proposition, though, that the BBC is and always has been pro-establishment in its policy and its outlook, a counter argument could be mounted that Reith's attitude to the General Strike was not a precedent, and that De Manio was indeed a maverick (Donovan, ibid, 24). One might further argue that nowadays times have changed, that the BBC at all levels fiercely guards its 'neutrality', and that election periods, anyway, are clearly not times of crisis or civil unrest but moments in broadcasting which require particular care over representation. Much of this might be a fair representation of the BBC's position, but rebuttals such as those have not been uncontroversial: critics of its reporting of such episodes as the Falklands conflict, the American bombing of Libya and the Gulf war alleged that the Corporation took its role as an impartial commentator too literally and sometimes lent credibility to the claims of Britain's enemies in the different conflicts - and even revealed vital personnel and weaponry movements which the military would have preferred to be kept secret.

However, the zeal for so-called 'even-handedness' remains inconsistent: as regards the special status of election periods, for example, in 1995 only court action initiated by opposition parties prevented the broadcasting in Scotland of an uncritical Panorama interview (BBC 1) with the Prime Minister just three days before local elections were to be held there. (The BBC insisted then that to transmit the programme was part of a normal balance of reporting over a period of time, while the Labour, Liberal Democratic and Scottish Nationalist parties insisted that their leaders should receive equal exposure at such a crucial juncture. (Observer, 2/4/95, Times, 4/4/95))

How, though, should the BBC 'remain scrupulously neutral'? Watson and Hill (1963) cite the Pilkington Report (1962) as defining three criteria for the achievement of 'balance' in broadcasting: the widest possible range of subject matter, the fullest treatment to be given to each subject, and scheduling which spreads items evenly around the day without creating its own imbalances through concentrations inside and outside peak times. However:

> "Balance has a more controversial, political connotation, when it is seen as a device to counter and control *bias*. More than any other medium public broadcasting aspires to equilibrium." (Watson & Hill, 1993, 12)

Just what is meant by 'equilibrium' is unclear, in that it is hard to scientifically prove or disprove whether it has been achieved. The one physically measurable dimension in broadcasting is time - a stopwatch is all that is required to reduce programmes or programming elements to finite durations which can then be added or subtracted, multiplied or divided at will. Qualitative judgements about which of those seconds might counterbalance another - and whether it does so in whole or in part - are more difficult to make, and may inevitably depend upon one's own standpoint.

There is, though, an ideological position held by many in the BBC as an institution and the broadcasting industries in general, which maintains that the route to equilibrium, and therefore impartiality, lies through 'professionalism'.

As the body representing the majority of BBC journalists, the National Union of Journalists has a Code of Professional Conduct. On the subject of balance, the Code is unequivocal:

> "A journalist shall strive to ensure that the information he/she disseminates is fair and accurate, avoid the expression of comment and conjecture as established fact and falsification by distortion, selection or misrepresentation." (discussed in Boyd, 1988, 171)

Why, then, do politicians routinely make charge and counter charge against the broadcasters in general, and Radio Four's Today programme in particular, claiming that part or all of their output has been biased in some way?

Even between general elections, the atmosphere is highly charged. With a possible two years left for the current Parliament to run, the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury Jonathan Aitken "...marched out of the studio and into the offices of the Today programme, complaining he had been stitched up." (Guardian, 27/3/95) The episode was to inspire a frenzy of political comment and media interest over the next week, in which the latent introspection of the media - including the Today programme - once again became apparent: the political agenda became, briefly, dominated by the reporting (and discussion) of how it is reported. Specifically, the issue was balance.

Today has a very high profile, explained by former Conservative Party Director of Communications, Hugh Colver, as being because it is the programme with which many of the country's top politicians begin their day (my interview, 2/4/96). So a damning

indictment of its editorial policy by a senior member of the Cabinet was arguably of high news value. Other press reports confirmed the BBC's vulnerability to attack from all sides:

> "Michael Howard, the Home Secretary, criticised the prominence given by Radio 4's Today programme to a Labour survey on crime. The attack followed forays against the BBC by cabinet ministers Jonathan Aitken, Gillian Shepherd, Malcolm Rifkind, John Gummer and John Redwood." (Guardian, 29/3/95)
>
> "It (the BBC) was also criticised by Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish Nationalists for giving John Major a Panorama interview tomorrow before this week's local elections in Scotland. The opposition parties argue that their leaders should also be interviewed. Labour is particularly insistent that the BBC has broken its own guidelines on balance." (Guardian, 2/4/95)
>
> "Labour also believes that Radio 4's Today programme, which interviewed Labour leader Tony Blair yesterday, has in the past couple of days been too supportive of the Tories.
>
> They point to (Sue) MacGregor's 'soft' interview with Mr Howard, the Home Secretary, on Friday and to its review of the papers, which left out the allegations about Mr Aitken and an arms company." (Guardian, 2/4/95)

Here, then, was suspicion that there are greater and lesser instances of bias - each requiring a value judgement: is 'stitching up' a politician by asking about something previously agreed as off the agenda likely to cause more or less harm than avoiding an issue for that politician's convenience?

The BBC's public response to this controversy was robust, probably because the Corporation now considers a key to the perception of impartiality is not to be seen to bend to pressure from whichever direction:

> "In the wake of last week's criticisms, Tony Hall, (then) managing director of BBC news and current affairs, declared: 'It's election time and the pressure is on.

> The phone calls have begun, as well as the faxes, the complaints, the refusals to take part in programmes - especially if it is on a subject with which they feel unhappy.' Mr Hall went on to say that 'our viewers and listeners expect us to be impartial'." (Guardian, 2/4/95)

There is an inevitability to that pressure. To a politician, seeking to affect the news agenda - and the way journalists approach it - is a legitimate part of the political process. The speeches and the denunciations of what the broadcasters do or don't do are applications of force intended to cause movement with some political advantage as the intended prize.

Flattery might seem an unlikely political tactic, but John Humphrys's recollection of an incident on 8th December 1988 suggests it might be effective. He said:

> "I'm never sure how you judge the importance of a programme, but I must admit we were pretty pleased with ourselves - not to say a little disconcerted - when a certain lady 'phoned us during the programme a while back and asked to be put on the air. It was hard to say no because the lady was one Margaret Thatcher and she was calling from Number 10." (Today, BBC Radio Collection, 1998)

Although in a matter of days the Aitken/Humphrys affair was overtaken by some other, less introspective controversy, the next Conservative Party conference was the scene of another critical speech, citing the Today programme as a particular example of the BBC's 'left wing bias'. Again, Tony Hall leapt to the programme's defence, proclaiming faith in the professional integrity of the journalists involved.

In April 1996, Conservative chairman Dr Brian Mawhinney was considered by commentators such as George Jones, Political Editor, The Times, as having 'lost his temper' during a Today interview with (the previously 'soft') Sue MacGregor:

> "He said that her 'disgraceful, smeary' questions were typical of the Today programme's style...
>
> A BBC spokesman countered that the questioning was 'justified and pertinent', adding: 'it is our duty to test firmly the views of all parties and our interviews will continue to be demonstrably rigorous and fair to all." (18/4/96, my emphasis)

The Producers' Guidelines do concede that "...due impartiality does not require absolute neutrality on every issue..." (1996, 14) a clarification which might certainly accommodate McGregor's positioning as devil's advocate in this instance - especially if balanced elsewhere. However, counter-balance elsewhere should be apparent.

On 28th June 1995, for instance, the then Deputy Prime Minister, Michael Heseltine responded to John Humphrys's questioning thus:

> MH: "Oh come off it - trying to help me, you? On this programme, the BBC destroying the Government day after day. You tell me you're trying to help me."
> JH: "Just a teeny weeny bit over the top I think, the BBC trying to destroy the Government. The BBC doesn't try to destroy anything, you know perfectly well."
> MH: "You spend your whole time trying to undermine what is going on in Government. You know you do, you're paid to do it."
> JH: "Well you told me it was some of your own MP's who've been doing that, but anyway, there we are..."
> MH: "!You told ME! I said I didn't know." (Today, 28/6/95)

In the face of such ardent criticism as is evidenced above, can all these 'spokesmen', journalists, managers and so on be correct in such stout defence of their own and each

other's impartiality as is by now routine? They sometimes seem to be unshakably confident in their infallibility. The notion that the BBC and those whose work constitutes its output are all impartial is to the BBC's Charter, the Producers' Guidelines, and the NUJ Code like a creed is to a collection of holy scriptures. Religious adherence sometimes requires denial of imperfection in the creed, lest the whole edifice of beliefs, scriptures and institutions should come tumbling down as a result: in this case the edifice is either the BBC or the concept of broadcast journalism as 'professional' or both.

Adherents rarely tolerate criticism of the creed: for example, the late Brian Redhead expressed his surprise (whether real or synthetic) at being 'exposed' by Nigel Lawson, thus:

> BR: "These aren't real jobs that you used to talk about in back in 1979 and 1980."
> NL: "Well, you've been a supporter of the Labour Party all your life, Brian, so I'd expect you to say something like that."
> BR: "Do you think we should have a one-minute silence now in this interview, one for you to apologise for daring to suggest that you know how I vote, and, secondly, perhaps, in memory of monetarism, which you've now discarded?"
> (Today, 18/3/87)

In the event, on that occasion the edifice did not crumble - perhaps because Redhead's response was to refute the allegation that he should have ever revealed his own political allegiance. Lawson's heresy was not rebutted but it was dismissed summarily.

In many of the world's different religions, the validity of the creed is maintained through the adoption of ritual as a constant which provides security. Philip Schlesinger's study of the processes taking place in the BBC's radio and television newsrooms provided a useful

insight into what is, in effect, a relatively tiny elite which researches, sifts, editorialises and finally imparts on the public's behalf information about the world in which we live. Schlesinger documented then the BBC journalists' attempts - some routine and some contrived - to achieve the impartiality required of them.

> "The concept of impartiality finds practical expression in a balancing of competing definitions of problems, the interviewing of opposing spokesmen, the presentation of differing claims about the truth. Newsmen (sic) feel reassured about their impartiality when they receive 'equal' pressures and complaints from right and left ('both sides') of the political spectrum. This empirical 'proof' of impartiality is as old as broadcasting itself." (1987, 171)

Whether an 'empirical proof' can really be attempted will be explored in greater detail later, but there are clearly a number of difficulties here - as exemplified by the Guardian's own (brief) analysis (29/3/95):

> "Ironically, yesterday's Today programme featured three Tory and one Labour MP. But one of the Conservatives, Sir Edward Heath, offered little comfort to the BBC bashers. Cabinet ministers should 'shut up about the BBC and what it does and get down to the brass tacks of answering the points which have been made'."

What empirical value, then, might be placed upon a Conservative who disagrees with the others? It is arguable whether Heath's critical intervention was necessarily a balancing voice with Labour against the other Conservatives - or whether that made the 'score' 2-all instead of 3 to 1. If Heath was only partially balancing, (in that he might also have said other things to support a Conservative analysis,) to what extent was he partially adding weight one way or another? It is likely that Labour politicians would have rather spoken for themselves, rather than have another Conservative 'balance' the dominant Tory position. It could also be argued that another Conservative voice offers a reassuring

alternative with which a listener could identify on failing to empathise with the other two (as if to connote that there is at least one welcoming wing of the 'broad church' that is that particular party). An alternative reading could be that a Conservative criticising a Conservative might be more damning and therefore have greater impact per second than criticism from Labour.

Of course that Guardian analysis does not consider the absence of third or fourth party representation - by Liberal Democrat, Green, nationalist or even Raving Loony voices. Even a slightly more sophisticated notion of balance required by the discourse above suggests two poles between which lie an infinite variety of positions, but it is still too simplistic a model if it pretends politics can be reduced to a duopoly of cognitive and expressive polemics. Rather than the 'see-saw' analogy, which operates in but two dimensions, more appropriate would be one capable of recognising a third. That is: for the child's simple see-saw, substitute a spinning top: the peak of its axis wobbling off balance one way, then another, then another.

A flaw in this new analogy, though, would be that the motion of a spinning top is neither erratic nor restricted in some directions - whereas broadcasters' movement around the notional centre of political 'balance' is restricted in part by legislation, questions of taste and decency and so on. Thus is their own 'spinning top' prevented from completely counter-balancing certain authodoxies.

The press comment above is indicative of the problems faced by those who wish to work in, or to analyse broadcasting. Clearly, and not only because of difficulties over measuring it, the ideal of impartiality is more of a holy grail in actual practice. There are a number of reasons for this, as discussed by - among others - Watson & Hill:

> "Being fair to all sides can have paradoxical results: if one programme, for example, condemns the destruction of Amazon rain-forests, must the balance be sustained by a programme which defends that destruction? It is questionable whether fairness is actually achieved by giving air-time to ideas which flout the very principle of fairness." (1993, 12)

Watson and Hill chose the Amazon rain forest debate to make their point, but an albeit unfashionable case could be made that Brazil derives some greater economic benefit from a belated 'progress' which would have continued unopposed if it were in the West: that such moral preaching by industrialised nations is hypocritical and they are wrong to condemn Brazil's own 'industrial revolution'.

However, they might have constructed a more poignant example around an anti-racist demonstration: if an anti-racist position may be given airtime, then the logic of 'balance' would seem to demand an overtly racist, but 'balancing', attack on minority ethnic groups, (even though a considerable majority of the population would certainly find such a response abhorrent). We know that second item would not be broadcast - not merely because the Public Order Act 1986 proscribes any broadcasting in which hatred is likely to be incited against any racial group (section 22), but also because of the self-censorship required of broadcasters by the notion that professionalism carries with it a 'responsibility' compatible with certain consensual norms.

The NUJ Code itself dictates that:

> "A journalist shall neither originate nor process material which encourages discrimination on the grounds of race, colour creed, gender or sexual orientation." (Boyd, 171)

To avoid ambiguity here: this thesis is *not* arguing for a perverse 'freedom' to broadcast racist material in order to counterbalance the anti-racist argument, and the author would consider to do so anathema. Rather, the aim is to demonstrate the impossibility of this ideal of achieving total 'balance' at all times: clearly, compromises have to be made. The questions of which compromises, when, why and how, lie at the heart of this research - as do the effects of these compromises on the political processes: the internal and external diegeses of the Today programme and the wider political context.

Those particular diegeses are analysed in some of the literature: Schlesinger, for instance, identified impartiality as the central tenet of the BBC's corporate ideology. (1987, 163) There is a repertoire of terms - objectivity, balance, responsibility, fairness, freedom from bias - whose role is justificatory:

> "The concept of impartiality summarizes the practical and cognitive limits faced by the BBC's personnel in producing news and current affairs programmes.
>
> Officially, the BBC's news output is value-free, which means that those who produce it... must somehow appear to be free from the influence of values... This myth of value-freedom is essential for public consumption, and believed in by those who propagate it." (203-4)

Even without a law limiting expression of certain opinions, often the routine decisions to be faced are not easy ones, as Watson & Hill explained:

> "Balance might ultimately mean always sitting on the fence: it may indicate a position which considers all standpoints to be tenable. Yet the balanced position - the fulcrum, as it were, - from which other viewpoints are presented has to be decided by *someone whose impartiality in turn might be questioned by others.*" (Watson & Hill, 12)

Just as Brian Redhead was accused by Nigel Lawson of being a Labour supporter, Today presenter John Humphrys has at times been accused of bias - of straying from the fulcrum. He accepts the role of 'impartial' professional with zeal and claims a lack of political bias that is beyond reproach:

> JH: "We're not megaphones, for our own views, we're mirrors.
> I, leave, my, political views at the door of the studio when I go into that studio and I can tell you this: anybody who suggests that in my interviews, (and I speak for myself now, but I know I also speak for my colleagues on the Today programme,) *any*body who suggests that I use the Today programme or On the Record or any other programme that I do to propagate my own personal political views is lying through his teeth. I don't. It is simply not true." (Medium Wave, Radio Four, 28/1/96)

If that should really be true of all those involved in the programme - and political affiliations of the broadcasters will be considered later - it is only a denial of any conscious, politically-motivated distortion of balance from a crudely party-political perspective. What of the sub-conscious positioning of the fulcrum which occurs due to a variety of different counter-weights? (Again, this positioning might not necessarily be along a simple axis, but perhaps instead at a point somewhere within a polydimensional construct, more reflective of the complexities of the political sphere. Just as the toy spinning top struggles to keep its balance despite gravitational pulls in different directions, so politics is much more than a simple dichotomy of the right versus the left: degrees of allegiance to particular positions vary and different issues might engender

differential positioning within parties - for example, 'euroscepticism' (or 'eurorealism') often having been said to divide the Conservative and Labour parties.)

What, then, *is* a reasonable, commonsense, consensus position to adopt in a given controversy, and so where should a fulcrum be positioned? Inevitably, when found, such a position is often self-perpetuating.

The Glasgow Media Group (1976, 267-8) analysed television news broadcast over six months and concluded that bias not only exists, but is born of 'inferential frameworks' which favour establishment positions and assumptions. It could also be that the language of broadcasting is similarly culpable, as was observed by Burns:

> "... the distortion arises, I believe, not from 'media stereotypes' of trade unionists and car workers (along with stereotypes of 'the City', 'Whitehall', 'university students' and others) but from a coherent set of attitudes, expectations, truisms and commonplaces which television journalists must impute to their audience (in) order to communicate with it.
>
> 'Bias' implies conscious design, intention. The problem would be much simpler if it were simply a matter of accounting for bias... it is the continuity, the 're-contextualising' which drives the broadcaster to resort to the imputation to the audience of the corporate idea of its stockpile of common assumptions and beliefs." (1977, 203)

Burns (ibid, Ch. 4) also found that BBC journalists (among others) are most influenced in their work by other BBC journalists:

> "Because, the argument runs, the attestation of their professional fitness comes from their seniors and their peers in the profession, they can regard their standards, their competence, ethical code and values as independent of all 'amateurs' or 'laymen' - or, indeed, of the organisation they work for...

> It is this conception of professionalism as conferring a mandate of autonomous judgement which has made the mantle of professionalism so attractive..." (ibid, 137)

Professional journalists, then, adopting a 'reasonable', 'balanced' perspective in reporting an issue, may well consider themselves beyond reproach other than by their peers. That perspective, unless challenged by a peer or a manager, is likely then to become a truism - both within the BBC and among its audience as it becomes naturalised through repetition. Burns detected such a tendency in his research:

> "... the presuppositions which go to make the accounting frame for news stories can only be assimilated from other journalists." (ibid, 202)

The Humphrys Medium Wave interview was conducted by Roger Gale MP and billed as 'turning the tables' on a presenter considered by many, at least in their rhetoric, to be the high priest of confrontation and interruption:

> RG: "Let me ask you to consider the last time that you heard a Conservative backbencher speaking in support of a Minister and his point of view, er, or indeed a Labour backbencher speaking in support of a Labour front bench spokesman. What the people who set your programme up go for is *conflict*. Because it makes good radio, but it's not fact."

Roger Gale's choice of the word 'conflict' to describe the relationship between interviewer and interviewee is an interesting one. Most of its synonyms are bellicose - battle, clash, fight, for example - while alternatives he might have chosen include controversy, polemic or even argument.

In reply, Humphrys recalled that in 1995 the Conservative Party hierarchy had repeatedly denied the party was 'at war with itself', only to be confounded by a leadership challenge. Then:

> JH: "Now, we don't make it up Roger, and you know we don't make it up, we report what is going on out there - it may not always be palatable to you because of COURSE it's in your interests to present a vision of a united party, but, with the greatest of respect that isn't always the truth is it?"

Thus, the problems associated with positioning an 'impartial' fulcrum in coverage of rain forests and racism are eclipsed by those posed on entering the party political arena. Debates over the environment and ethnicity are at least cushioned to some extent by a fairly general consensus, however fragile, that the planet must be saved and minorities should be allowed freedom within the law to be different. These are both now truisms, (discussed at length by, among others, Thompson (1990, chapter 1) but defined by Watson & Hill as "the 'common sense view'" (1993,89)), and broadcasters operating within these fields do so in the knowledge that few - particularly within their peer group - will challenge those basic tenets even if the means to the ends may be controversial.

When entering the party political arena, however, consensus can be elusive. Clause 13(2) of the BBC's Licence and Agreement, by which it operates under powers delegated by Parliament, required the organisation to broadcast:

> "an impartial account day by day prepared by professional reporters in both Houses of Parliament".

On radio, the result of this imperative is Yesterday in Parliament, in 1997 part of the Today programme, as well as the late evening Today in Parliament. Although, (as Parliament was prorogued during most of the general election campaign,) this segment falls only partially within the remit of this research, it is useful to consider its effect on this notion of impartiality which lies at the heart of the BBC. The Producers' Guidelines (1996, 147) carry this reassurance: "The BBC... invariably reports the day's proceedings in both the Lords and the Commons."

The word 'invariably' might be intended to mean every day without exception, but alternative meanings are connoted: without variation implies a qualitative consistency in addition to its quantitative meaning; it is unwavering in its faithfulness to present the proceedings as they happen. Furthermore, the impossibility of 'reporting the day's proceedings' in the two Houses without some editing is manifest. The (almost verbatim) transcript published daily when Parliament is sitting, Hansard, runs to hundreds of pages in each edition, and even contemporaneous transmission of both Houses and associated Committees would, at times, require several dedicated channels.

To produce, then, a 15-minute report clearly involves sifting, prioritising, selecting, editing, summarising, paraphrasing and, to conclude, positioning the fulcrum in a number of different places, all of which are claimed to be 'impartial'. Inevitably, at times, the reporter adopts a 'common sense' position born out of a set of assumptions that could be expected to occupy some sort of common ground or neutral territory.

The validity of such 'neutrality' is not generally accepted by media theorists: for example, Len Masterman summarised the perspective of most media educators when he considered that:

> "...communication forms are not 'innocent', and transparent carriers of meaning. They are impregnated with values and actively shape the messages they communicate". (1985, 27)

In fact, the phrase "the Prime Minister had a difficult time at the despatch box" may really be more contentious than expected, particularly if, as John Humphrys noted (Medium Wave, Radio Four, 28/1/96), what is reported may not be palatable to the ruling party, which might prefer to put a different complexion on the event. Its preferred reading of the 'difficult time' may be that the Prime Minister gave a robust performance under heavy, but ineffective fire from the opposition.

That the BBC attempts to present 'an impartial account', however, is an act of legitimisation of that notion that such a thing may be possible. The 'record' is produced and broadcast and if there were anything wrong with it, it may be assumed, one or other of the parties would have complained by now - or at least, complaints from one or more quarters would be more frequent, more strident, or more effective. This dominant ideology, then - that broadcasters can be impartial - is one which a Marxist analysis might present as:

> "...the view of the ruling class translated by repeated usage through channels of communication into wisdom as apparently natural as the fresh air - a process sometimes referred to as *mystification*." (Watson & Hill, 1993, 89)

Consensus can be seen in an equally sinister way, as Stuart Hood explained:

> "It is the essence of the idea of consensus that it attempts, at a conscious and unconscious level, to impose the view that there is only one 'right' reading. This assumption derives from the view that we - that is the audience and the broadcaster - are united in one nation in spite of class or political definition." (1980)

The BBC, and those who work within it, explain the apparent ease with which it is possible to achieve 'balance' by repeated reference to 'professionalism'. This is legitimised by the reference in Clause 13(2) of the BBC's Licence and Agreement to the impartial account being prepared by 'professional reporters'. As if the process is one of certainties - of clear blacks and whites, rights and wrongs - merely being professional is all that is needed to eliminate all controversy over where those many different fulcra should lie.

It is inevitable, though, that in the heat of an election campaign the question of balance should become even more crucial. (Indeed, Gunter (1997, 56) identified election coverage as a prime focus of research into media 'balance' over fifty years.) This heightened interest was foreseen by the BBC and its policy was spelt out in the thirteen pages of chapter nineteen of its 1996 Producers' Guidelines. Its approach was prefaced thus:

> "There is no area of broadcasting where the BBC's commitment to impartiality is more closely scrutinised than in reporting election campaigns." (1996, 154,)

In addition to its perceived duty of impartiality, the majority of the BBC's precise policy details are derived from the requirements placed on all broadcasters in the United Kingdom by the Representation of the People Act 1983, Section 93. In fact, the law is limited in its effect:

> "The provisions of the RPA which affect broadcasting relate solely to *candidates* taking part in a programme. If a programme does not include any *candidates*, there is no risk of our infringing election law.
>
> The law is designed to prevent candidates securing unfair advantage through 'personal electioneering' on the air. If the law is broken the candidate taking part in the programme may be prosecuted, and so may the BBC." (BBC, 1996, 154)

So, the BBC necessarily places great importance upon observance of the Act's provision that if one candidate in a constituency (in any election, local or general, or a by-election) should take part in a programme, then all others should do so in the same programme. Difficulties arise here when one candidate refuses to take part or is not active in the campaign and is difficult to contact. Producers must get written consent forms signed if candidates agree to programmes going ahead in their absence.

The effect of this legislation, though, is much less far-reaching than it might at first appear. Firstly, equal rights to appearance do not, it seems, compromise editorial decision making once a programme has commenced:

> "The law says nothing about the way time is allocated between candidates in a programme. Such decisions are a matter for *careful editorial judgement*." (ibid, 1996, 158, my emphasis)

Secondly, although most of the major political figures one would expect to hear on a national radio network will each be a candidate in one constituency or another somewhere in the editorial area, they may appear in any programmes without their own constituency opponents provided that:

> "...they do not talk about issues specific to the constituency, and that they do not electioneer on their own behalf." (ibid, 160).

This latter point means that, in the BBC's interpretation of the Act, although a candidate in an election, a politician can appear as a party spokesperson at the discretion of the producer. The one piece of legislation, then, that might be considered relevant to election coverage really deals only with the margins of broadcasting. These are the constituency-based debates which are more typical of local stations than the networks, because the more parochial nature of the often little-known issues and candidates render them of only marginal interest to a national audience. As a result the mainstream of political debate at general election time takes place above and independently of the detail of constituency campaigning.

In the absence of legislative pressure, the BBC's stated policy is to aim for 'fairness':

> "There is an absolute obligation for the BBC's journalism to remain impartial as the people of the United Kingdom exercise their right to vote...
>
> These guidelines offer a framework but cannot cover every eventuality. No formula can guarantee fairness. Editors must make, and be able to defend, individual programme decisions on the basis that *they are reasonable and impartially-reached...*

> Daily news-based programmes will continue to be driven principally by news judgements in their editorial decision-making... Editors should ensure that, through the course of the campaign, their coverage has proved wide-ranging and fair." (ibid, 162-3, my emphasis)

This last requirement of fairness had earlier been clarified in a 1995 revision of the then current 1993 Guidelines. 'Fairness' was to give:

> "...due weight to the main parties and to any party contesting a substantial number of seats and with substantial proven electoral support."

Interestingly, that clarification was removed from the 1996 edition. In the event, Today's 1997 general election coverage largely ignored all but the three 'main' parties - Conservative, Labour and SLD. Yet, a reading of these guidelines, and the routinisation of the editorial decisions they intend to influence have the effect of naturalising the concept that balance may, with care and professionalism, be achieved. One is encouraged to assume that because the Corporation makes balance a goal, its output is therefore balanced. How, though, is a broadcaster to achieve the goal? On an instructional level, Boyd's advice is precise - if confusing:

> "Complete impartiality is like perfection; an ideal for which many will strive but none will wholly attain. Even the most respected journalist can only be the sum of his/her beliefs, experience and attitudes, the product of his/her society, culture and upbringing. No one can be free from bias, however hard they may try to compensate by applying professional standards of objectivity; for objectivity itself, subjectively appraised, must by nature be an unreliable yardstick. *The journalist's duty is to recognise the inevitability of bias, without ever surrendering to it."* (1988, 160-1, his emphasis)

While at first appearing to recognise professional fallibility, Boyd's argument returns to the idea that if really professional a journalist may remain somehow unsullied by it: not 'surrendering'. Other instructors are less circumspect:

> "The reporter... is fair. Having no editorial opinion of his own, he seeks to tell the news without making moral judgements about it. He is the servant of his listener... To help guard against the temptation to insert his own views, reporters should not be recruited straight from school, but have as wide and varied a background as possible..." (McLeish, 1994, 92-3)

To Chantler and Harris the avoidance of bias is routine - a critical piece at 8am on Monday might be countered by a reply the same time the next day:

> "A balance may not necessarily be achieved within one bulletin, but over a period of time... This allows both sides of the argument to reach the same audience, albeit on consecutive days." (1992, 39)

This was the essence of the BBC's own policy in the 1993 Guidelines:

> "Impartial journalism does not necessarily mean that all sides must have an opportunity to speak in a single programme or news item. A narrow focus with only one side of an argument may be justified. A sense of impartiality must still dictate the way the story is told and the questioning of who is interviewed." (BBC, 1993, 23)

However, elections were recognised as special circumstances, requiring "reasonable balance within individual programmes over a short space of time." Again, the 'key' was professionalism:

> "A reporter may express a professional judgement but not a personal opinion... Judgement is most appropriate when offered with the authority and credibility of an experienced correspondent or commentator, and when it is backed with clearly

> presented evidence. ...Good journalism will help people of all persuasions to make up their own minds." (BBC, 1993, 21)

Part of this 'good journalism' lay then in the BBC's policy on the proportion of airtime given to the different parties. The decision taken had been to reflect "the support received by the parties at the previous general election" (1993, 109). It was not stated, though, whether this meant the total number of votes cast or how, through the electoral system called 'first past the post', those votes had been translated into seats in the House of Commons.

Perhaps because of this inconsistency, by 1996 that part of the policy had become simply:

> "No formula can guarantee fairness. Editors must make, and be able to defend, individual programme decisions on the basis they are reasonable and *impartially reached.*" (BBC, 1996, 163, my emphasis)

In fact, according to Roger Mosey, former Editor, Today, the planned policy in determining how exposure might be apportioned was to aim for a fixed ratio between the three main parties, in the proportions they were by then to have agreed amongst themselves and with the BBC and ITV as appropriate for their own Party Election Broadcasts on radio and television (my interview 2/4/96).

This was clearly intended to be a consensus position - one of common sense around which 'everyone' should unite. The consensus is, though, really a compromise: it was the policy of the Social and Liberal Democratic Party to contest the validity of the present electoral system, championing the adoption instead of proportional representation under

which they would undoubtedly have won a greater proportion of seats in each national ballot.

Furthermore, basing representation in an influential medium upon past successes is essentially supportive of the status quo - those in a position of dominance in the political sphere influencing the extent and the nature of mainstream political debate by ensuring their own relative prominence. It could be argued, then, that the broadcasters are thereby aiding and abetting certain politicians in discriminating in one sense against underrepresented, new or alternative voices such as nationalists, Referendum candidates or the Natural Law party. A suitable riposte might be that those favoured by the 'consensus' position are those chosen by the people for such privilege in the previous election, and that 'common sense' prevails again in the best democratic tradition.

As regards regional parties, the argument is that a national programme such as Today cannot let the different political agendas and political profiles of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland dictate too heavily its own content - intended as it is in terms of simple demographics primarily for an English audience. Although the regional issue was recognised in the Producers' Guidelines as anomalous (1996, 163) the policy was therefore potentially flawed in two notable respects before even the election was called: although some would argue, unavoidably so.

Often, the clockwork operation of the routine is interrupted by the intrusion of the machinations of the 'real' world of politics. Philip Harding, then the BBC's Chief Political Adviser identified a problem not of the broadcasters' making:

> "All politicians are rightly concerned that we are fair and impartial in our coverage. That is only right. But do politicians for their part do everything they can to help us in that respect? I'm not sure it actually helps a producer or editor to be faced by two or three politicians all saying that they won't come onto a programme unless they can be guaranteed the last word on a subject. ...some politicians refuse to take part in any debate with members of opposing parties, or refuse to appear with various other politicians because they regard them as of insufficient rank." (in VLV, 1996, 10)

Political pressure is, too, a potent force:

> "(It) is perfectly proper and to some extent it is what the parties are there for. Certain people are paid to apply it, and there is nothing wrong with that... But that should not mean that broadcasters are expected to deal with a blizzard of complaints about our coverage - some serious, some trivial." (Philip Harding, in VLV, 1996, 10-11)

Pressure might take a number of different forms, from the telephone call to the editor, via the media outburst to the official complaint. Certainly, although the setting of the licence fee, the appointment of BBC Governors, and the statutory control of the Corporation are within the gift of the current government, its independence in editorial matters is supposed to be unqualified.

Over the past decade the only Charter renewal has been limited in its effect, with further reviews promised, but frequent suggestions have been made of fragmentation and privatisation. A change of government promised perhaps more change and uncertainty

and so the delicacy of the BBC's position in the 1990's has been evident. What effect it might have had on the pursuit of impartiality and fairness would be difficult to quantify. However, either one adopts the position that it has had no effect at all, or that it has had some effect. The parties themselves acknowledge that pressure is applied, as did Philip Harding. In 1995, Hugh Colver's high profile resignation from the Conservative Party, where he was Head of Communications, was partly because of his own unwillingness to apply 'enough' pressure on the broadcasters:

> "One of my problems at Central Office was that I did very little of that, but I was under enormous pressure to do so... I found it frankly uncomfortable to be under pressure to try and ring people to try and influence their programmes on a day to day basis. I blame the Labour Party for this, because the only reason I was under pressure to do it was because everybody knew that the Labour Party were doing it on a grand scale... They will say 'look at the effect that the Labour Party have had! Can't you see that there is now a definite sense that the Labour Party are winning and gaining ground?' And we can't underestimate those natural pressures." (in VLV, 1996, 73)

However accurate those Conservative assertions of Labour tactics and their effectiveness, Colver's testimony lends weight to the hypothesis that his successors would have been using them before and during this election. To Richard Clemmow, then Head of BBC Political Programmes, though, what Colver describes is nothing sinister, but a quite natural part of programme making:

> "...It's perfectly proper for a press officer to have a conversation with a journalist to give them information, so the journalist can take an editorial decision about whether that warrants coverage, and what sort of coverage it warrants if it does deserve a place in the programme. That's not spin doctoring, that's not pressure, it's just the normal process of exchange of information which has gone on for many years and must go on in any journalistic process." (in VLV, 1996, 74)

Working within the parameters of what is policy and what is practical, then, decisions have to be taken which place demands upon those taking them. Andrew Hawken, then Assistant Editor, Today, expressed some confidence in the notion of professionalism:

> "You can't do it on a simple stopwatch, or a simple numbers thing... that's the point, that's why it doesn't work to say you must have this number (of interviewees) and they must be on for that long. It doesn't work like that because you are not being fair by doing that. If there's a huge Tory row then there are going to be more Tories on because some of them are going to be attacking the Government. It's just one of the things that you have to kind of factor in to your negotiations, but I think most of us are on the whole pretty clear of when we are being fair." (my interview 2/4/96).

That kind of reasoning suggests manufacturing 'a huge Tory row' might result in disproportionate coverage for Conservative points of view. Television and radio coverage of the battle for the succession after the Thatcher resignation in 1990 was hugely dominated by talking Conservative heads confessing allegiance to one candidate or another. Opposition parties received little media exposure and the Conservatives' standing in the opinion polls subsequently recovered significantly. Little, if any study has been done to determine how much this recovery in Conservative fortunes was due to the change of party leader or the amount of exposure in the media.

Certainly, though, that rise in opinion rating would appear to contradict the often articulated belief that divided parties are unattractive to the electorate: the Conservatives had been split into the three camps around the three leadership contenders.

What, then, of the effect of a manufactured row, in which disproportionate airtime is won by a party by its apparent embracing of a number of views? One of the instruments of textual analysis in later chapters will therefore deploy the concept more readily understood through the French phrase 'avoir la parole' - or 'to have the floor' - literally 'being able to articulate' one's opinion. Van Leeuwen identified 'having the floor' as an aspect of political interviews in which each participant vies to dominate the other in an attempt "to silence the other and to assert the self"(1999, 67). Paradoxically, a discussion involving two Conservative viewpoints could, ultimately, allow that party twice the airtime it might have had in a confrontation with, say, Labour. In short, Conservative views are being expressed, so that party has 'la parole' for longer.

This, and other dilemmas, must be confronted by the broadcaster wishing to remain true to the creed of impartiality. How, though, are we - and the reporter concerned - to differentiate between 'professional judgement' and 'personal opinion'? While the two may in theory be antitheses, in practice the distinction between two might be better described as blurred. This was suggested by Fink, who, in identifying what he calls the 'credibility gap', asserted that in the United States:

> "...(the) absence of any generally accepted, practical codes of ethics throws onto each journalist the responsibility for ethical behaviour. ...little has changed since Aristotle put on each individual the burden of personal responsibility for virtuous conduct." (1988, 13).

To some commentators, for example, Roger Gale MP on Medium Wave (28/1/96), in fact the agenda of the Today programme is not to report realities such as backbench support for front bench positions, but to create conflict "because it makes good radio".

Fink (1988) called for a clear distinction to be made between 'fair and accurate reporting' and 'advocacy journalism': a distinction that should be overt and dictate the shape of a journalist's career. By his reasoning, a newspaper leader writer can be selective and biased and work to promote the interests of a particular party or pressure group, but he or she should not masquerade as an objective reporter on the Today programme. Certainly, many 'objective' journalists do themselves have political views: for instance some assist political parties and others even become candidates for election.

It could be argued that where they have, their private political stance could be made more overt, so that their work might be judged more fully from a better-informed viewpoint. Conversely, one could argue that former MPs, such as Brian Walden, David Mellor, Edwina Currie and Robert Kilroy-Silk should not be allowed to reposition themselves in the role of broadcaster. The 1996 appointment of a former Conservative Councillor and Chairman of the Bow Group as Chairman of the BBC might then become indefensible. As if to reinforce the point, two years later and subsequent to the change of government, the new Conservative Leader of the Opposition, William Hague, criticised the Labour government's proposed appointment of Deputy Chairman of the BBC on party political grounds (Prime Minister's Question Time, Radio Five Live, 8/7/98).

Similarly, in 1999 the BBC Governors' choice of Greg Dyke as Director General drew heavy fire from the Conservatives. They questioned Dyke's impartiality, as a big financial contributor to the Labour Party - as well as a member. In the public debate which ensued, some argued that this openness would be beneficial because his private views being known would cause him to be visibly even-handed. Others thought he might favour the Opposition in order to be seen not to be helping the Government, while several of his peers claimed that as a professional, Dyke had always been impartial at work in the past and so there was nothing to fear.

In the manner of that very public discourse, while newspaper journalists are largely free of the requirement placed upon broadcasters that they should be impartial in their reporting, (themselves sometimes being expected to produce material which supports the proprietor's political stance,) should print journalists such as Robin Oakley and James Naughtie be allowed to metamorphose from Times and Guardian journalists respectively into holders of senior posts at the BBC?

This question was considered by Fink, and answered thus:

> "It is unethical and irresponsible to blur the distinction between advocacy journalism and objective reporting... If advocacy is your choice, openly put your advocate's label on now and display it for all to see. ... don't masquerade under the title 'objective reporter', or secretly carry your crusade into a newsroom that is trying to do an objective job of reporting." (1988, 18)

Of course, there is no suggestion here that the journalists named above have actually acted in any improper way or done their jobs other than with the utmost 'professionalism':

in a new role one can adopt different standards. There is, however, an argument for critical analysis of their output - and that of everyone else - which should be informed by all relevant information and characterised by a rigour which demands not just analysis by anecdote but both qualitative and quantitative evaluation of their product. Data collection by journalists and researchers alike must be by the most empirically accurate means, and every conclusion must be thoroughly tested.

Clearly, this research is itself an act of mediation in which fulcra have had to be positioned, assumptions have had to be made - but the invitation to the reader is to judge it with as much attempted 'impartiality' as that with which they would wish themselves to be judged. For Fink recognised a common fallibility:

> "True objectivity is impossible to achieve. Each of us is shaped by background and experiences that inevitably influence how we see things and act as journalists. That influence cannot be denied; but objectivity is a worthwhile *goal*, and as an ethical journalist you must recognise - and overcome - the very human tendency to let personal feelings influence your reporting and writing." (1988, 18)

As *everyone* has a background and a set of personal values and beliefs, the impossibility of 'true objectivity' should be recognised and then adopted as an informed standpoint from which to consider, to measure and to analyse data subsequently produced. Otherwise, no election coverage would ever be broadcast, and nor would any research ever be done.

Apparently recognising this, on taking up his post as Chairman of the BBC, 'self-made millionaire and businessman' Sir Christopher Bland conceded the following:

> "... the idea that governors have no political affiliations is plainly ridiculous. Everyone except a (political) eunuch is going to bring *some* sort of political baggage with them. The important question is whether you're going to let that influence you. I'm absolutely clear that it's the Chairman's job to be impartial. ...I'm known for a number of things, not all of them good, but one is that I'm my own man, an independent spirit. Plenty of card-carrying members of the Labour Party have already stood up and said so - Melvyn Bragg, Greg Dyke, Margaret Jay - they've all worked with me and know me well. Ask *them* if they think my judgment is likely to be impaired." Radio Times, (30/3/96)

However, one of Jonathan Aitken's central complaints about John Humphrys in March 1995 was that he had, in his own time, chaired "a question time-style rally at Westminster, organised by protesters against the teachers' pay award". It followed therefore that:

> "John Humphrys was conducting the interview (with Chancellor Kenneth Clarke) not as an objective journalist seeking information but as a partisan pugilist trying to strike blows." (Guardian, 27/3/95)

Different Conservative politicians responded in different ways to the charges against Humphrys:

> "I can't see what on earth the fuss is about. John Humphrys is an absolutely splendid interviewer, one of the best. If any politician can't give him or (Jeremy) Paxman as good as he gets, then he shouldn't be in the business." Jerry Hayes MP (Guardian, 29/3/95)

So, the potential for differential readings is clear, even among political allies. When other journalists are invited to comment on the professionalism of their peers, though, they are often fulsome in their endorsements:

> "Any suggestion John is partisan is quite ludicrous and nobody who watches him doing his job would ever think that is a fair accusation." Co-presenter James Naughtie (Guardian, 27/3/95)

Naughtie's assessment of his colleague should be read alongside Burns's thoughts about 'professionalism':

> "The increasing salience of such preoccupations is a further, and definitive, mark of the transition of broadcasting from an occupation dominated by the ethos of public service, in which the central concern is with quality in terms of the public good, and of public betterment, to one dominated by the ethos of professionalism, in which the central concern is with quality of performance in terms of standards of appraisal by fellow professionals; in brief, a shift from treating broadcasting as a means to treating broadcasting as an end." (1977, 125)

However individual presenters may be regarded by their colleagues or their public, it is worth examining how important they themselves actually are in controlling what is broadcast. While their own talent and background knowledge may make each presenter more or less effective in carrying out a given interview, or their personality may make that interview more or less pugilistic, some of the more colourful popularly held beliefs about Today are at least denied by the unheard, controlling influences who run the programme. To Andrew Hawken, the programme's then Assistant Editor, the presenters had their own distinctive styles and they were recognised by the public as individuals, but the programme is structured according to a corporate strategy which eschews the influence of individuals:

> "The decisions (as to which presenter does which item) are made by the night editor; the presenter comes (in) to a running order which is prepared by the night editor. They get here about four, those decisions are largely made at about one or two in the morning... there is no question of nicking (plum) interviews by getting here early. You also have to achieve a balance between the presenters otherwise if a presenter disappears for fifteen minutes... and the convention is they don't do things back to back." (my interview, 2/4/96)

In the case of Today, then, the responsibility for balance and impartiality lies with the editors as much as with the presenters, all of them every day balancing conventional practice and professional ideal. All members of the team play their part in preserving the integrity of the creed. The public reassurances in the BBC Charter, the Licence and Agreement, the technicist manuals and the NUJ Code are the holy scriptures. Observance of the creed, though, for all the adherence to the ritual may be more evident in professional pride and peer assessment than in any empirical 'proof' of impartiality.

CHAPTER TWO: CONVERSATION OR CONFRONTATION? - THE NATURE OF THE TODAY INTERVIEW

> "...that is a ludicrous and indefensible question and if you think I'm annoyed with you it is because it is that kind of smeary question by Today programme presenters which so annoys people who listen to this programme up and down the country.
>
> Dr Brian Mawhinney, Today, 17/4/96

> "There are occasionally times when politicians ought to make it clear to the British public that they consider some questions, even by professional journalists, to be illegitimate and to say so. That's what I did."
>
> Dr Brian Mawhinney, The Times, 18/4/96

The interview is the mainstay of Today. It is not only the way in which the vast majority of the material is gathered and prepared for broadcast, but also the public interface between the programme and the politician, between institutions: the BBC and the party, and between the individual players: the broadcasters and the personalities whom the listeners hear engaged in verbal exchange.

It follows therefore that much of the balance to which the programme aspires must be attempted within (if not throughout) its interviewing. The previous chapter examined accusations of bias against interviewers, but a distinction must be drawn between instances of bias which are 'counterbalanced' by others (as described by Chantler and

Harris, 1992, 39) and the notion that there is a general imbalance favouring or disadvantaging one or more viewpoints.

When senior politicians make accusations of bias against the programme, they do not necessarily make clear that distinction in their analyses: the reactions of Brian Mawhinney and Jonathan Aitken were to specific interviews in which they were taking part, not to systematic analysis over 'reasonable periods of time'. What is the nature of the political interview, then, and how might even-handedness be achieved within interviews? Alternatively, how should counterbalancing take place?

It would be an oversimplification to characterise interviews as merely 'hard' and 'soft' (Guardian, 2/4/95, see Chapter 1) as they are in essence complex and polysemic. Interviewers, too, are themselves variables as exemplified by the declared Labour Party perception of Sue MacGregor's 'soft' interview with Michael Howard (Guardian, 2/4/95) and Dr Mawhinney's criticism of her above.

If they are to avoid such criticism, how are broadcasters reasonably expected to perform? In his highly regarded instructional manual, Radio Production, former BBC Radio skills trainer Robert McLeish aspires to a purity in interviewing in which its aim is straightforward:

> "...(it) is to provide, in the interviewee's own words, facts, reasons or opinions on a particular topic so that the listener can form a conclusion as to the validity of what he or she is saying...

> It follows... that the opinions of the interviewer are irrelevant, he should never get drawn into answering a question which the interviewee may put to him - an interview is not a discussion. ...it is solely the interviewee who must come through and in the interviewer's vocabulary the word 'I' should be absent. Deference is not required but courtesy is: persistence is desirable, harassment not. The interviewer is not there to argue, to agree or disagree. He is not there to comment on the answers he gets. He is there to ask questions. To do this he needs to have done his homework and must be prepared to listen." (1994, 37)

That prescription, then, if adhered to by interviewers, could be sufficient to neutralise accusations of bias. Few of the interviews quoted in this study meet all of McLeish's criteria, though, and the examples were not chosen for their atypicality. In practice, no interview is 'neutral' - devoid of value beyond the superficiality of 'A talking to B about C'. Interviewees may well represent an institution or be speaking from an individual perspective, but they must inevitably adopt a position *vis a vis* the subject. That position may be defensive if, for instance, A's position is calculated to 'balance' that of B. A negotiation takes place, either before or during the encounter (or both), as to the different parameters within which the discussion is to take place. The discourse may then confine itself to the subject or even stray beyond a declared or previously agreed agenda, as in the Mawhinney interview quoted above.

It is worth noting that the 'oppositional' voice of most interviewers will raise questions only from within a particular paradigm: for example, there is rarely any questioning of authodoxy from the standpoint of the anarchist. Most programme makers are themselves positioned within that authodoxy: for example, it would be unusual for a budget speech to be followed by a discussion of the positive and negative aspects of capitalism. Certain positions are not challenged, certain questions are not put, and certain perspectives are,

thus, excluded from the re-presentation offered. This is contrary to the Corporation's assertion that "No significant strand of thought should go unreflected or unrepresented on the BBC." (Producers' Guidelines, 1996, 14)

Yet, in April 1996 the then Conservative Party chairman, Dr Brian Mawhinney, still found the questioning to be inappropriate. Reacting to questions from Sue MacGregor, he insisted he was voicing concerns over interviewing style which have often been expressed by both participants in and listeners to Today. Each programme features a number of such live interviews, some of which are of major importance in 'setting the agenda' for the rest of the day (most of the national newspapers reported Dr Mawhinney's comments and the Labour Party's subsequent playing of a recording of the interview at their own press conference later that morning, for the 'benefit' of any journalists who might have missed it (18/4/96).)

If broadcasters stray from the McLeish prescription for 'proper' interviewing, though, do not the interviewees have a right to complain? At what point does conversation become confrontation? Dr Mawhinney complained bitterly at a suggestion by Sue MacGregor in the course of her questioning that elements within the Conservative Party were secretly plotting a new leadership challenge to Prime Minister John Major. Although there had already been one such challenge, by Cabinet resignee John Redwood the previous summer, Mawhinney responded angrily to the suggestion. His charge of improper questioning would imply that confrontation began with the question, whereas an alternative reading might be that confrontation began with his loss of temper.

Dr Mawhinney's perception of the incident was by no means uncontroversial. Even the Conservative-supporting Daily Telegraph cited accusations by anonymous 'colleagues' of his "of having chosen the wrong target in attacking a respected journalist with a reputation for fairness" (18/4/96). The Times, too, reported the BBC's response that "listeners who had telephoned their views were three-to-one in Ms MacGregor's favour" (18/4/96).

What, then, is it about the political interview which can cause such controversy? From an institutional standpoint, broadcasters themselves express little surprise at the incidence of controversy. For example, to Richard Clemmow, then Head of BBC Political Programmes, the very nature of the political interview, on Today in particular, made conflict inevitable:

> "The Today programme, in a sense, is the apotheosis of the love-hate relationship which exists between journalists and politicians." (in VLV, 1996, 85)

Far from the neutral encounter, or simple conversation, this analysis identifies a polarisation of competing paradigms or vocations: certainly, journalists and politicians need each other - the one as raw material and the other as a conduit to the electorate - but the relationship is not always an easy one. In his analysis, Clemmow also acknowledged that political interviews have, over time, become "highly stylised processes of attack and defence" (ibid, 83):

> "We saw this process taking place when the encounters between presenters and politicians became more than just the sum of their parts - they were encounters which were theatrical in themselves... But I don't think that is all the interview is."

What, then, *is* the political interview? A simple exchange of questions and answers? Attack and defence? Theatre? Agenda setting? In practice it can be all of these. What role, though, does it enjoy in the programme making and political processes? What is the relationship between interviewer and interviewee - between broadcaster and politician? Certainly, he may have objected to a particular line of questioning, but at least the interview about which Dr Mawhinney was complaining was live and therefore broadcast without editorial alteration: he could not claim his comments had been taken out of context.

In a sense, the **live interview** is the most transparent form of broadcast interview. It will usually be preceded by a short introduction - or 'cue' - in which the presenter sets up the encounter by establishing the topic, the parameters for the discussion and what previously known information he considers material to the exchange, before finally introducing the interviewee. The agenda-setting nature of the cue is not, though, always uncontroversial, as the then Foreign Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, commented on his live Today interview with John Humphrys on 16th April 1997:

> "Look as your opening comments yourself said, in both the Conservative and Labour parties it is well known there are a significant number of MPs in both the Labour party as well as the Conservative Party who have already made up their minds against the single currency. That's that's not news. BBC normally concentrates on news and that's been known for a couple of years." (8.18 am)

As demonstrated by Malcolm Rifkind and Brian Mawhinney alike, when live the interviewee has a degree of latitude unavailable in a number of other contexts. However, even cursory analysis of a small number of editions of Today reveals that there are several other formats for individual programme items within which interview material may be used and in which freedom to dissent from imposed norms is more limited.

Recorded 'as live'

This is the interview that is recorded and then subsequently broadcast 'as live'. More honest use of this technique, (as is apparently practised - at least some of the time - on Today,) will involve some acknowledgement in the 'cue' material which precedes it that the interviewer "spoke earlier to..." the subject. What is rarely ever admitted is whether the encounter is being broadcast exactly as it happened or in edited form. When the latter is the case no edits are intended to be apparent and so the listener is probably unaware of the act of mediation which has taken place. McLeish's instructions on editing read thus:

> "The purposes of editing can be summarised as:
>
> (1) To rearrange recorded material into a more logical sequence.
> (2) To remove the uninteresting, repetitive, or technically unacceptable.
> (3) To compress the material in time.
> (4) For creative effect to produce new juxtapositions of speech, music, sound and silence.
>
> Editing must not be used to alter the sense of what has been said or to place the material within an unintended context." (1994, 31-32)

One would hope a true broadcasting *'professional'* would, of course, follow those rules precisely, but as 'professional' edits are not apparent, the listener's belief that no change of meaning has taken place in a recorded interview is necessarily an act of faith. Given the possibility of differential readings of media artefacts (Hall, 1981, 67), the possibility does exist that meanings remaining unchanged to the person who edits may indeed be changed meanings to one who listens. Certainly, as the eventual 'cue' material to a recorded piece might not necessarily be recorded in the presence of the interviewee - often being written and read afterwards - dissenters from the discourse within which they are subsequently placed (such as Malcolm Rifkind, above) would then be unable to comment immediately on that placing.

McLeish's fourth point is his only recognition of the role of editing in the *construction* of meaning. Producing 'new juxtapositions' - even if motivated by creativity alone - can create new meanings which may be intentional or not, and the power thus wielded by the broadcaster is considerable. The potential of new juxtapositions is discussed below.

Quoting selectively

A third possibility is that interview which is recorded and extracted from - selected quotes ('sound-bites') perhaps being used to illustrate a longer, if not necessarily wider discourse. The latter might form part of a 'package', 'wrap', 'feature', 'documentary' or 'mini-doc', the term used, depending on the institutional context and the duration. Here, broadcast journalists are in an especially privileged position akin to that of their print colleagues

who may also quote selectively, needing to give little or no indication of what may have been said before or after the quotation used, of the premise assumed or any further development of the argument which ensued.

This ability is potentially more powerful when the 'soundbite' is broadcast rather than printed, because listeners may place a greater value on what they hear someone saying than on a written quotation. Of course, professionalism demands that a journalist will always represent an interviewee 'fairly', but the potential for abuse - either intentional or not - is there, if not always in the perception of the listener, working to make a reading of the text.

Recorded stimulus/live response

A common application of the recorded interview on Today, among other programmes in the genre, is the playing of a short extract chosen from encounters with one or more individuals putting briefly an 'expert' or oppositional point of view, as a catalyst or scene-setter to a main, live interview which might run many times longer than the recorded pieces. The live interviewee is free to agree with or refute at relative leisure any points made by those who went before. They, now silenced by their temporal and physical displacement, cannot intervene to develop their own argument or reiterate their position, and the apparently unequal status of individuals involved in this kind of item is discussed in later chapters. Clearly, a programme item which represents two different positions,

individuals or parties with a time ratio of, perhaps, 1:10 is not in itself 'balanced' (although it may of course be claimed there is a 'balancing' item elsewhere).

Multiple interview or discussion

The multiple interview may be live - or it may have been recorded and then perhaps edited before being broadcast as if live. The Today team distinguish between 'discos' held in the studio and 'doughnuts' moderated by a reporter on location (Donovan, 1997, 175 & 177). In each case, the presence of a number of interviewees, presumably present because they have differing views they have been invited to articulate, creates particular problems for the interviewer who now has to balance their conflicting interests in such a way as to minimise criticism of the item on grounds of fairness. Not everyone can have the last word. There are obvious similarities to the 'round table' discussion programme, and characteristics of such examples of that particular genre as Any Questions (Radio 4) may be heard. The rules of a formal debating society may be implemented to some degree, although the time and attention span imperatives in radio mitigate against over-cumbersome procedures.

The Two-way

This is the industry term for the often more contrived interview with a reporter or specialist correspondent. In 1997 Today mainly used them in the opening segment of the programme from 6.30am, partly as a briefing on main stories to be followed up later, but

also perhaps because fewer people are listening at that time and the more important items are better saved until later. Exceptionally, in the case of two-ways, it is not uncommon for the whole interview to be planned by the interviewee, whose suggestions as to what the questions might be are much more likely to be taken up by the presenter than in an interview with someone other than a colleague. The reporter has a clear agenda in terms of what information and comment can be offered to the programme and the questions merely provide a framework within which they can be smoothly delivered.

It is precisely the semblance of relative informality in a two-way interview which allows the reporter to indulge in greater speculation than would be appropriate in a report. It would be counter-productive for the presenter to encourage the reporter to be indiscreet in the way a politician might be pressed to reveal more than he or she intended. Both parties are likely to respect each other's editorial judgment. (However, it was in just such a two-way that Today broadcast erroneous speculation that the explosion at the Olympic Games in Atlanta had resulted in forty one fatalities, while previous and subsequent news bulletins in the same programme restricted themselves to the correct figure, two (27/7/96).)

Remote interviews

Live or recorded as live (and so, perhaps, edited), remotes place a great distance between interviewer and interviewee. Eye contact is impossible, as is communication by body language, and, if circumstances allow, the only opportunity for informal communication

before and after the interview is verbal - as 'lines' are being established and tested and before they are cut again after the piece by engineers or studio managers. If the interviewee's voice is of studio quality, then he or she is likely to be in a contribution studio such as at Westminster or at any one of the BBC's many local or regional radio stations or production centres.

Alternatively, a radio car might have been driven to a location that is more convenient to the contributor and instead of landlines or satellite a VHF link will have been established between the car and a relay point.

The BBC, in common with other broadcasters, is making increasing use of ISDN lines which deploy digital/analogue converters and high-quality lines to bring studio quality sound from less permanent locations. The converter (or codec) needed at the remote end is, however, expensive and it needs to be in situ before the interview can begin. ISDN is, therefore, unlikely to be very useful in getting immediate reactions from individuals early in the morning at short notice.

Telephone interviews

With its inherent lack of studio quality and susceptibility to crossed lines (to which landlines are not immune either) the telephone does offer the broadcaster an unrivalled flexibility. Early morning contributions can often be more easily secured if the interviewees have only to pick up their own telephones. The technical characteristics of

the telephone balancing unit required at the interface between the 'phone line and the studio mixer do, however, alter quite significantly the power relationship between interviewer and interviewee. McLeish (1994, 139) described the problem thus:

> "... it becomes necessary to... control the sound levels of the different sources. In this respect an automatic 'voice over' unit for the presenter is particularly useful, so that when he speaks the level of the incoming call is decreased. It must however be used with care if he is to avoid sounding too dominating."

Detailed textual analysis reveals that in no other circumstance (with the likely exception of a breakdown of studio and personal etiquette) is it considered acceptable to lower the voice of an interviewee so the interviewer may be heard more clearly. Items may be ended abruptly by the quick fading (potting) of a guest's microphone, but only during a telephone interview does the presenter have an automatic right to talk down the interviewee. If both should speak simultaneously, the voice of the interviewer prevails. It is not even possible for the interviewee to persist with the "...if I can just finish this point..." with which so many live studio interviews are punctuated. It is simply not heard or understood.

This technical, but also moral, advantage is not used sparingly. For instance, on the 25th March 1997, listeners to the Today programme heard James Naughtie interviewing the then Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind, speaking on the telephone from Rome, 'head to head' with his opposition shadow, Robin Cook who was in the studio:

> JN: "So you'd be prepared to scupper the treaty on those grounds."
> MR: (fades up quickly) "'ere is no way we're going to transfer responsibility for example for a sensitive issue like immigration to majority voting under the

Council of Ministers with the ultimate decision being taken by the Commission in the European Court of Justice..." (quick fade down, continues indecipherably)
JN: "!Right, Mr Cook."
MR: (quick fade up, as he is still talking) "...(indecipherable) there are other issues like defence, like majority voting on foreign policy where a British government has to stand up and say 'no, we will not feel able to accept the views even if we are by ourselves'..." (quick fade down)
JN: "!Now, Mr Cook..." (8.13 - Programme extract 1)

It was clearly incumbent upon Naughtie, as referee or moderator over the encounter, to ensure 'equal' airtime to the two participants, yet if Malcolm Rifkind had been in the studio he might have been able to express his point more effectively. Later in the discussion it was Rifkind's 'turn' again:

MR: "...and you get a deal, because once it's clear that you are prepared to stand up and fight for British interests and to be isolated if necessary, countries recognise that and start looking for a compromi..." (quick fade under, continues barely audibly throughout JN's intervention)
JN: "!Mr Cook, just quickly, on that point, would you prepare, would you be prepared i-er" (pauses so MR is audible again)
MR: (quick fade up) "...'et me just finish what I'm try..." (quick fade under)
JN: "!Okay, sorry, I wanted to put the isolation point to Mr Cook."
MR: "That is the point, because Mr Cook and Mr Blair have gone round the country in the past..." (continues audibly for sixteen seconds) (Programme extract 2)

Again, even though his protestation became fully audible during Naughtie's pause, Rifkind was less able to resist the former's control than if he had been in the studio. However, it is worth noting that Naughtie's interruption (programme extract 2, line 6) was motivated by content, rather than time considerations: he had wanted a reaction from Robin Cook but instead Rifkind's appeal to be heard was successful and the latter was allowed to continue for another sixteen seconds before it became Cook's 'turn' again.

Certainly, agreeing to a remote or a telephone interview can often benefit a contributor - listeners to the exchange above heard a re-presentation of a busy Foreign Secretary taking time out from defending British interests at an important summit in Rome, and an opposition spokesman with time to come into the studio. Often, though, the remote or telephone interviewee is at a particular disadvantage, especially if in a multiple interviewee situation against others who do have eye contact with the presenter and the ability to send and receive body language signals that will not be apparent to the listener ("I want to interject...", "It's my turn").

When, for example, Malcolm Rifkind wanted to react to Robin Cook's description of the Conservative Party, his voice was barely audible (between "board" and "left" in lines 2 and 3 below), whereas Cook was much better able to make himself heard and to pursue his point:

> RC: "Oh, the problem you see for the Conservatives is that they are isolated across the board. They have no allies, they have no friends left. And indeed if I may say so, er the problem that they have in getting taken seriously when they say we must keep external border controls is that Malcolm Rifkind has already threatened to veto the outcome on three or four different issues."
> JN (over Cook who continues until addressed by name): "!But can I just put to you no Mr Cook can I just put you to (sic) this specific point that Mr Rifkind put that when you're in Europe you say look, we're not going to be isolated like the present government is, and when you come back here..."
> RC: "!No"
> JN: "...you say to the British people..."
> RC: "!No"
> JN: "Well this is just, no, just put it to you that..."
> RC: "!No that that that I'm very sorry Jim it's quite wrong to suggest that we say different things (indecipherable)...
> JN: "!No, well I I'm asking you to respond to the point, I'm not telling you what the answer is!"

RC: "Er well I I thought I was starting to answer it Jim. It's quite wrong..." (continues) (Programme extract 3)

Thus, while neither power relationship was equal because of the centrality of the interviewer, that between Naughtie and Rifkind was significantly different to that between Naughtie and Cook.

The remote or telephone contributor may also suffer from inferior audio quality heard 'down the line', perhaps mishearing words or points that are made by others. Conversely, though, in the above exchange, Naughtie was also unable to use visual clues which might have indicated to him whether Rifkind was ending his point or pressing ahead with the intention of taking up more time than his (political) opponent, Robin Cook.

Listeners may sometimes confuse broken or delayed responses from remote interviewees with hesitation, uncertainty, ignorance or evasiveness, perhaps to negative effect. Today is a relatively complex production in radio terms, but listeners may well perceive it as particularly beset by technical problems with this type of material. For example, while Labour's Ken Livingstone and Brian Wilson were debating the party's tactics over the annual Shadow Cabinet elections (Today, 29/7/96) Wilson was suddenly 'lost' when invited to counter a new point made by Livingstone. Although the presenter, Sue MacGregor, attributed his disappearance to his having been 'lost' prematurely and ended the item without further comment, the Conservative Party's public interpretation was that, lost for words, Brian Wilson had chosen to withdraw (Evening Standard, 29/7/96). Of course, either interpretation may be true, but Wilson is a robust politician, not known for

being 'lost for words', and the main point here is that the format chosen for the item *allowed* such a controversy to arise - a negative example, perhaps, of the programme's 'agenda setting'.

Beyond the simple, though important, mechanics of how an interview is physically arranged, there are many other determining factors which affect its nature. Firstly, power relations within interviews of many kinds have been explored in a wealth of social scientific literature. Less has been written about the radio interview within the specific generic context of the topical news magazine. However, in his general analysis, E.N. Goody considered that the exchanges of questions and answers in interviews were like the swapping of gifts:

> "The gift, like the question, demands a return. Both may be seen as social devices for compelling interaction, for forcing two people to enter into a social exchange. Malinowski and Mauss emphasised that... a debt relationship binds the two partners in unequal bonds. The giver is socially in credit, while the recipient is socially a debtor. The time-scale of a question-answer sequence is, on the contrary, collapsed into the briefest of conversational pauses... Thus questioning binds two people in immediate reciprocity." (1978, 23)

This analysis assumes a self-regulating social contract between the two sides. The distinction between conversation and interview was explored by Bell and van Leeuwen. They found that in conversation the roles of interviewer and interviewee are also exchanged:

> "In conversation, the advantage of the question is shared out equally. Each participant is now questioner, now answerer, now creditor, now debtor. In interviews, however, this is not the case. Interviewers, and only interviewers ask the questions; interviewees, and only interviewees, give the answers. Interviewers

> receive, interviewees give. If this rule is broken, friction inevitably results. For the interviewer to give an answer is a refusal of the gift, hence a refusal of the social bond. For the interviewee to ask a question is a denial of the debt." (1994, 9)

Thus there may exist positional and operational conventions in media interviews which do not apply to conversations between equal participants. If the question is an 'advantage', then Bell and van Leeuwen's analysis places the interviewee at a disadvantage in the exchange. While sociologists such as they may appear more aware of status in such exchanges, though, from the perspective of the broadcaster the interview seems much more innocent: setting parameters within which others should operate, skills trainer Robert McLeish described the radio interview thus:

> "(It) is a conversation with an aim. On the one hand the interviewer knows what the aim is and he knows something of the subject. On the other he is placing himself where the listener is and is asking questions in an attempt to discover more." (1994, 41-42)

In fact, in an interview, it is often contended that the questions are being asked by proxy - on the listener's behalf. (Of course, mass radio audiences really consist of multiples, rather than the singular, positioned, listening individual which broadcasters prefer to imagine they are addressing and to whom McLeish refers above. It is, however, more useful to develop the argument from the same premise.) If that job of representing the 'listener' is not being done well enough, the only recourses open to the listener are to complain or to switch off. That could form the basis, then, of Dr Mawhinney's allegation that on Today 'illegitimate' questions may at times be asked which annoy listeners. The

friction that occurred then may have been the result of the disruption of the normal relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

Far from listeners switching off, it is worth considering the possibly beneficial effects to the programme of such colourful encounters. It would be naive to imagine that audience ratings do not matter in the public service monolith that is the BBC. Even in 1977, (before even Thatcherism and its supporters' repeated calls for privatisation of the BBC,) Burns described the effects of poor ratings performance on Corporation personnel (albeit working in television drama):

> "The shock of a (low audience figure) ...was enough to disrupt the first hour or two of rehearsal of a subsequent production. Very little work was done. The atmosphere of dejection deepened with every new arrival...
>
> For a sociologist, it was rather like watching the whole practice of medicine being reduced to the use of the thermometer. But its significance lay not so much in the importance attached to a statistical index as in the lack of curiosity about its meaning, in the damage this particular return inflicted and in the way the damage was repaired." (1977, 141)

Some nineteen years later, with BBC radio's total audience 'reach' vacillating either side of the fifty per cent mark, compared with commercial radio, ratings success was clearly a consideration. In its desire to maintain the Today programme's position at the cutting edge of news and current affairs coverage, to receive such a large amount of free publicity in all the other news media must indeed be gratifying. If a few politicians are provoked into such a public display as was Dr Mawhinney, then that is perhaps considered a price worth paying. The episode may even have satisfied Mawhinney's own personal or party agenda as well.

However, both Bell and van Leeuwen (1994) and Scannell (ed.) (1991) identify *political* interviews as deserving of separate chapters. Goody's simple analysis above is, clearly, not always appropriate when experienced politicians assume the role of interviewee. Sue MacGregor's question to Mawhinney was whether he thought a leadership challenge to Prime Minister John Major was likely, given that his party had responded to previous unpopularity by 'getting rid of' Margaret Thatcher as leader. She asked a (perhaps difficult) question; he in turn responded with an angry accusation, subverting the usual debtor/creditor relationship.

Subversion can by definition defy classification: it is not necessarily predictable or rational. The assumption by media commentators about Dr Mawhinney's April 1996 interview was that it was a genuine loss of temper. Equally, it could have been another example of the 'indirection' Harris found in over 60% of the politicians' responses in her data set (discussed in the chapter Evasive Action: How Politicians Respond to Questions in Political Interviews (in Scannell (ed.), 1991, 76-99).

Taking evasive action is one response of which interviewees are increasingly accused. The political interview is not itself unchanging: for example, Bell and van Leeuwen identified a former, perhaps 'golden', age when such encounters were gentler:

> "In the early years of television, political interviews did not have the combative, adversarial tone to which we have become so accustomed. Interviewers asked polite, deferential questions, often let their interviewees nominate the topics of discussion, and went through several rehearsals... They saw themselves as

> facilitating the transmission of information, as a conduit between the country's leaders and the public." (1994, 129)

Such motives as they describe might have been laudable if they had resulted in greater transparency of the material broadcast - less mediation or re-presentation taking place then, than in today's more probing encounter. Whether those interviewers better justified the trust of their audiences, though, representing them properly in the studio as their 'proxy', is doubtful. Now, rather more likely is the 'adversarial interview' which, for example, Bell and van Leeuwen recognised as "far more demanding than the open-ended requests for information we normally call questions." (1994, 145-6) An experienced politician operating in today's context should know what to expect from an interviewer, because confrontation is not new. Notions of a 'golden age' are contradicted by, for example, Television producer Allan Martin, who said the following in 1968:

> "A public affairs producer needs a bit of a crusading spirit. It is not his job to start a revolution, but he must have a sense of justice, of what is wrong, and what needs changing." (quoted in Bell and van Leeuwen, ibid, 133)

Of course, in the interests of 'balance', opposition politicians should expect similar treatment to government ministers. By subjecting the claims, opinions and record of every politician who is interviewed to an equally rigorous examination, it is argued, fairness and balance will be achieved. This, though, was likely to be problematic when, in terms of the 1997 general election battleground, central government had been the exclusive preserve of one party alone in eighteen years. To question the main opposition party, Labour, on its record up to 1979 was to invite charges of irrelevance or to court accusations of unfairness by implying inexperience. None of the other opposition parties

could be reasonably challenged on its own record. So, would evenhandedness have required total amnesia on the part of the interviewer and permitted no one's record to be examined, including the Conservatives'?

Interestingly, following the 1997 election of Labour to power, the newly-appointed Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Chris Smith, claimed to support challenging questioning:

> "When (BBC Director General) John Birt made that speech criticising aggressive questioning I thought it very important to leap to their defence... In a democracy it is important for a politician to be subjected to aggressive *and sometimes unfair* questioning." (Guardian, 26/8/97, my emphasis.)

This important concession was in the dawn of a new government then enjoying the vitality of the 'honeymoon period' following an electoral upheaval. However, while legitimising robust questioning, it does reaffirm that a distinction exists between questioning that is either 'fair' or 'unfair'. While how that distinction should be drawn was not made clear, Smith was unequivocal about the relationship between interviewer and interviewee:

> "If you are a politician going onto that sort of programme (Newsnight, BBC 2) you have to expect direct questions you don't want to answer... You have to think of a way of answering." (Guardian, 26/8/97)

The same comment from the previous Secretary of State (of the then Department of National Heritage) might have sent a signal to broadcasters which would have affected

the conduct of election coverage only months earlier. Instead, the Chairman of the ruling Conservative Party had identified 'illegitimate' questions as being unacceptable.

Just as expectations of the broadcasting professional may shift as a result of a political sea-change, so might the audience's perception of interviewers alter as they are repositioned by changes of context. For instance, it has been suggested that if a member of the audience simultaneously approves of an interviewer and interviewee who disagree, that listener's attitude towards one or other of the participants may have to change. A different accommodation might have to be reached if an interviewer listeners approved of and a politician they disapproved of were in agreement. Furthermore, it is pertinant to ask how much an audience really does empathise with an interviewer, and whether they really consider themselves to be lending that individual a mandate. Alternatively it could be that listeners consider interviewers to possesses an automatic authority by virtue of their position.

Scenarios such as those above would require listeners to reconcile their own fixed personal positions in political argument and the changing context of the interviewer's work by altering their perceptions of the interviewer. In this way, the listener may at times disown his proxy in the studio (the presenter) and consequently feel disenfranchised. This does not account for cherished beliefs held by many listeners that one presenter 'is' left-wing, pro-government or Scottish Nationalist in outlook (see Chapter Four). Alternatively, a sophisticated listener might appreciate the difficulty inherent in maintaining 'balance' across different interviews.

The first proposition was supported by Hugh Colver, based upon his experience as former Conservative Party Director of Communications:

> "The test a lot of the time is audience reaction, and whether people are enjoying it... or whether they are getting angry in the morning. I have to say I listen to the Today programme every morning and I get angry *sometimes* about John Humphrys and his style. But I actually quite enjoy getting angry... I think it's quite important. I think if it all became terribly soft, and the question was "and would you like to share your thoughts with us?" people would be turning off wholesale." (in VLV, 1996, 106)

Why Colver (and others in the continuing public discourse about Today, interviewing and the BBC in general) should so often choose to highlight John Humphrys is unclear. As a regular presenter, Humphrys has a higher profile than Anna Ford or Alex Brodie had, and his other television exposure (On the Record, and Nine O'Clock News, BBC1) increases his recognition factor, compared with the usually unseen Sue MacGregor or James Naughtie. Many would perceive his newsreader role as being 'neutral', though, as it consists mainly of linking reports and telling the news 'like it is'. Many of the On the Record interviews are longer and less confrontational as they lack such a demanding time imperative as much of Today.

That colleagues such as James Naughtie and the BBC's management should so readily rise to the defence of Humphrys's professionalism (as documented in Chapter 1) suggests that in spite of his higher profile, Humphrys is beyond any greater reproach on such a scale than his colleagues, and a rather greater complexity of audience reading might be at work than the notion of 'eavesdropping' described *inter alia* by McLeish (1994, 37).

This relegation of the listener to the status of benign eavesdropper 'listening in' fits the industry's almost routine denial of the possibility of mediation in the production and reception of its messages. The analogy is, however, inappropriate because for it to have no effect on the conversation, an eavesdropper's presence would have to be unknown to the participants: the listening in would have to be done secretly and only then would the exchange be untainted by outside influence. Conversely, a radio interview is conducted *for* the listener and the studio or portable recording equipment and such other devices as cues, time constraints and headphones all serve to remind those taking part of its purpose and that it will be heard by others.

So, the presence of the paraphernalia and ritual of broadcasting probably means the participants will alter their behaviour as if conscious of the presence of an eavesdropper: the broader public context of the radio interview means this can be no ordinary chat.

What, then, is the context in which this debtor/creditor relationship takes place, 'governing the behaviour' of both participants? Undoubtedly, the presenter is supposed to set the agenda for the interview. With a running order to follow if the piece is live, or a completion deadline to meet if it is recorded, he or she will have planned to a greater or lesser extent what kind of questions may be needed to encourage the interviewee to 'satisfy' the curiosity of the listener. The wearing of headphones which receive communications from the control room, the possession of the running order and script, and the presenter's role in linking the programme convey to the interviewee just who is 'in

charge' of the event. The latter has been invited into the broadcaster's world, to be heard by the broadcaster's audience, only to have such privileges terminated at the end of the 'item'.

The presenter is part of a team, a collective, while the interviewee is in a perhaps unfamiliar environment, is alone, physically isolated from any peer group, and being 'managed' in terms of where to sit, how to sit, when to speak and when to stop. The live interview is punctuated by the presenter who opens the item and introduces the topic with a 'cue' which sets the scene - and defines parameters within which the interview is supposed to proceed - then posing questions designed to elicit particular answers. A location recording may require the interviewee to squash into the radio car, or be positioned by the reporter for optimum acoustic and recording performance. The latter will hold the microphone (other than a tie-mic, one each of which would be clipped to their clothing), and thus retain an obvious physical control over the means of communicating the message to the audience.

The media interview is in essence, then, an unequal encounter as it is constituted. How the interviewee chooses to deal with this inequality can be anything on a scale ranging from quiet, cooperative complicity to annoyed disruption of the conventions such as the Mawhinney outburst or a flamboyant 'walk out'.

Somewhere on that scale is the covertly subversive but apparently accepting pursuit of an alternative agenda, in which whatever the question, the interviewee takes it as a cue to say something else - whether it be related or not to the question posed.

Control of the agenda does not always remain in the hands of the interviewer, however. Later in James Naughtie's Today interview with Malcolm Rifkind and Robin Cook, the latter demonstrated that the interviewee can sometimes refuse to be deflected from his intended direction:

> RC: "That's why a Labour party will drop the opposition of the Conservative government to an employment chapter which would make sure all the policies of Europe have to be measured against its impact on jobs..."
> JN: "!No"
> RC: "!Now, i, i, i, if I can just come, finish off Jim..."
> JN: "!(indecipherable)..."
> RC: "!I'm coming back (indecipherable).."
> JN: "!I wanted to come back to that point."
> RC: "!Well indeed, you may you may well do so but let's just get tackle the question of immigration. The trouble is ..." (Today 8.15 25th March - Programme extract 4)

Such nimble footwork on the part of an interviewee is neither common nor frequently very effective: Naughtie might otherwise have pressed his own point more forcefully - and different readers might construe from this different causes and effects. Was this an example of a 'soft' interview of the kind previously attributed to Sue MacGregor? Naughtie interrupted Cook's flow three times before giving way, but Cook (presumably satisfied with his treatment) was not moved to complain either 'on air' or, apparently, via the press.

It is much more common for the interviewer to prevail, though, and it is perhaps this inequality between interviewer and interviewee which contributed to the high level of 'indirection' found by Harris (in Scannell (ed.), 1991, 76-99). For example, in John Humphrys's Today interview with Stephen Dorrell on 11th April 1997, Humphrys tried to assert his 'right' as the interviewer to set the agenda and determine the direction:

> SD: "We've made it clear we're in favour of a Europe of sovereign nation states - grown up nation states cooperating because together the economic gains which can come from the single market... are huge both to this country and to other members of the European Union."
> JH: "Yeah but you're ducking the question Mr Dorrell, you're ducking the question. I'm talking about a diminution or if you like a pooling of sovereignty... are you in favour of that or not?"
> SD: "Well, it may be what you're talking about - it's not what Mrs Browning was talking about, which is where this er conversation began. She was talking about the end of sovereignty which she is against and so is the Conservative Party.
> JH: "!Yeh, well I'm not that, I, I, I'm not talking about an end of sovereignty. I'm asking you what I understood her to be saying, which is... whether that would be acceptable as the price for entering a single European currency?
> SD: "Once again as you said in the introduction to this conversation, every, er, both ourselves and Labour are committed to looking at the conditions at a time a decision has to be made. What the Conservative Party is explicitly against is a federal Europe and the end of sovereignty. Mrs Browning has made that clear, the Prime Minister has made that clear."
> JH: "Well what about what the Chancellor says? Ken Clarke has said and I quote, 'there is a pooling of sovereignty in transferring monetary authority'... absolutely clear about that... do you accept that? - it sounds this morning as if you don't.
> SD: "No, I'm, what I'm doing is demonstrating to you that Angela Browning was being clear that she was against the end of sovereignty."
> JH: "!I'm asking you for your view on the *diminution* of sovereignty."
> SD: "Yes, but, er, well, you invited me to come in to talk about Angela Browning's views, Angela Browning has made clear her opposition to the end of sovereignty - I'm sure that if you asked Ken Clarke whether he was in favour of the end of sovereignty..."
> JH: "!Well of course he would, if you asked if he was against sin, he'd say he was against sin, he's in favour of applehood and mother pie (sic), but that isn't the question that I'm posing this morning Mr Dorrell."

SD: "Well, but, you started off by saying there was a difference between Mrs Browning's position and that of the Conservative Party, I think we've demonstrated in the course of the conversation that there isn't."
JH: "Well, let's be quite clear about this: if we enter a single European currency, there will be according to your own Chancellor a pooling of sovereignty... now, given that that is what the Chancellor believes to be the case, are you as a member of the Government... saying 'yes that is the position as I understand it as well and I go along with that position'?"
SD: "Of course it is true when a country signs a treaty, that there is a limitation implied in the treaty to its freedom of action, of course that's true, but that isn't, I say again, where this conversation began. It began with the assertion"
JH: "!Well conversations move on and that's what I'm doing, I'm developing the thoughts..." (8.10 - Programme extract 5)

It is unlikely that Stephen Dorrell did not understand the difference between the ending of sovereignty and its diminution - yet it is more likely that he simply preferred not to engage with the question of diminution, instead talking only about complete loss. The effect on the listener of any evasiveness by the interviewee is considered later - as is the legitimacy of any departure by the interviewer from any parameters previously agreed with the interviewee. Dorrell certainly implied that he had agreed to be interviewed about Angela Browning's views and not his own, and that that prior agreement, reinforced by the cue preceding the interview, freed him from any obligation to reveal his own views, however much John Humphrys might have wished to move forward the agenda.

In the context of (if not necessarily because of) such robust posturing by experienced politicians, during the 1997 campaign, Today attempted to further legitimise the interviewer's authority or 'mandate' by promoting in advance live interviews to come later in the programme and then inviting listeners to telephone in questions they would like to be put 'on their behalf' to the interviewee. On occasions, this allowed further 'evidence'

to be put to the politician - for example, John Humphrys said to Labour's Gordon Brown on 7th April:

> "...it's not only me that's confused, we had a call this morning from somebody who works as an air traffic control engineer and HE says Labour's transport spokesman told him and his colleagues not to worry because Labour will not sell off air traffic control."

Inevitably cynics might doubt the authenticity of that particular contribution because of the omission on this occasion of the caller's name (it may, of course, have been a confidentiality being observed at his request in order to avoid disciplinary action by his employer). More often, though, the listeners' questions were more routine - for example, after the main Stephen Dorrell interview quoted above, John Humphrys put to him, as the then Health Secretary, a listener's question about the NHS.

Each time, the device was unlikely to have been used to cover a shortfall in inspiration on the part of the interviewer, but more to reinforce the legitimacy of the question asked. The impression thus generated of 'empowerment' of the listener was not countered by any proffered transparency in the process of question selection: of the (presumably) large numbers of questions 'phoned in, very few were used. Those that were used were the results of a mediation of the pool of questions proposed - yet, without any knowledge of the selection criteria, on hearing the questions used, the listeners might have construed notions of them as being the most popular or the most 'important' ones asked. Thus was constructed yet another re-presentation of the course of the general election.

Yet, one can further challenge the notion of asking questions on the listener's behalf (whether the proxy is real or assumed) as being over simplistic:

> "The act of representing the listener involves an attempt to connect with the listener's perspective of a topic or news event by applying textual devices that promote audience comprehension and relate that topic effectively to listener interests. ...the questions break the topic down into assimilable component 'issues' and prompt a particular type of explanation from the interviewee to make these issues clear to the listener. Thus a 'devil's advocate' role adopted by a political interviewer is not an assumption that listeners are sympathetic to an opposing viewpoint. It is a device that seeks to make the politician accountable to the public... (and) counter the coaching that many politicians are given in the art of evasiveness." (Wilby and Conroy, 1994, 132)

The visual codes evident in a television interview - such as framing, spatial relations, and walking in and out - are of course absent on radio. Other codes which might be present include atmosphere (background sounds), voice quality (a 'telephone' sound denoting remoteness from the studio), music (in a wrap, feature item or package) and the presenter's spoken cue (or scene-setting) material. The latter can be seen as the most important of the 'anchoring devices' used to establish the context of the interview. The structure given to the encounter by the way the questions are formulated and the dialogue is 'controlled' 'signposts' the material and indicates the frame of reference in which the content is to be read.

If interviewees object to this mediation being imposed upon the content of the interview, they are likely to want to subvert the process either overtly or covertly. Similarly, interviewers are likely to perceive it as their role to provoke their interviewees into actually answering the question put 'on the people's behalf', to prevent evasiveness and

indirection. Often, driven by a crusading zeal, they will repeat questions remaining unanswered to their satisfaction, question contentious claims and, sometimes, push the interviewees too far.

This is the 'rudeness' of which some commentators, including politicians and the public alike, can complain. Even veteran radio and television interviewer Sir Robin Day claims that rudeness has become more common in media interviews:

> "...the fact is that if I had ever asked people questions in the manner that Humphrys and (Jeremy) Paxman (BBC 2) do I would not have lasted a moment. You cannot find a single interview I ever did - and many of them are transcribed - where I was anything like as offensive." (in VLV, 85)

Question types

Beyond the prescription of such instructors as McLeish on 'good' question technique (1994, 41-48), theorising the process inevitably demands a systematic analysis. Bell & van Leeuwen suggested questions in political interviews can be divided into categories: soliciting opinion; checking; challenging; entrapment; and release (1994, 148-157). These categories will all aid the later textual analysis (Chapter 6), so a briefer description of the characteristics of question 'types' is attempted here:

Open and closed questions

Who, what, when, where, why, how, and which are all recommended as 'open' and likely to elicit a fuller and more interesting response than one which is 'closed' (Will you raise taxes?) and which requires only a 'yes' or 'no' in response.

This distinction is perhaps not lost even on some inexperienced radio interviewers - for example, on 19th April 1997, Yasmin Ali (a member of the live audience at one of the Saturday morning part-outside broadcast editions of Today, and described by Sue MacGregor as a lecturer). She put this **open** question to Labour's Jack Straw:

> "I'd like to be able to pay more taxes, to improve services. Why aren't I being offered that choice?" (8.44 - Programme extract 6) (preamble omitted)

The simplicity of the question is striking, particularly when compared with some of the later examples of question framing by professionals. It has a simple statement, in which she positions herself within a particular paradigm, and then a direct open question asking "why". Straw's answer was full, courteous and directly relevant to the question (although it could be argued that he was being polite to a novice):

> "You are (sic) being offered that choice because we believe that the British people are now taxed overall at such a a level that they would find it unacceptable be to be taxed anymore. And let me say, and I understand exactly what you're saying, I would like to see huge sums more spent on all sorts of public services, but that's not the world in which we live. And we can only spend on public services what can reasonably be raised in taxation. Now, at the last election, all sorts of people said to me 'Mr Straw we're backing you: we agree there should be an immediate increase in pensions and child benefits and in the health service', but the simple fact of the matter was the people would not vote for that approach. And since then there have been twenty-two separate tax increases as well and the tax burden is higher than it was..." (Straw continues for twenty-three seconds with interjected "But" from Sue MacGregor after fifteen seconds) (Programme extract 6)

Unlike MacGregor, Ali did not try to interrupt - interruption being one of the most-frequently articulated complaints made by the public against interviewers. The question was, then, effective in minimising the airtime taken up by the interviewer and maximising that available to the interviewee: a triumph of content over process. Very often, though, the open question is answered more cynically by the interviewee, and so interviewers often deploy other question types in the hope of discouraging replies that are tangential to the programme's agenda.

Bell & van Leeuwen called **closed** questions 'polar' (1994, 149) because of the polarity of the invited responses. Bull's survey (1994) of political interviews on television found the closed question to be the most commonly used type. McLeish valued the latter when a simple confirmation or denial is all that is sought but warned of possible loss of control, as "it leaves the initiative completely with the interviewee" as to whether to venture more information than that which was requested. In each case:

> "On the one hand the interviewer knows... something of the subject. On the other he is placing himself where the listener is and is asking questions in an attempt to discover more. This balance of knowledge and ignorance can be described as 'informed naivety'." (McLeish, ibid, 41-42)

However informed or naive the question, few experienced politicians will answer 'yes' or 'no' if they do not wish to, or resist the opportunity to take the initiative and speak according to their own agenda if allowed (for example, Stephen Dorrell, above, lines 8-14). Even the inexperienced interviewee can quickly learn how to exploit the situation -

for example Richard Cousins, a member of the Tatton Conservative Association interviewed by John Humphrys:

> JH: "I take it you are not this mysterious person who volunteered to stand."
> RC: (Pause 1½ seconds) "No, indeed I'm not."
> JH: "But do you think it's a good idea that there should be somebody standing against er Mr Hamilton, another independent Conservative?"
> RC: (Pause 2½ seconds) "Well I think it's very important to er realise that er Labour should not take any succour from er the result last night. Er I think that they cannot be trusted er equally well and erm I think that there's no er no real advantage to them in the result last night."
> JH: "No but what about from your point of view..." (7.14 9/4/97 - Programme extract 7)

Thus, Cousins took the opportunity to make his point that Labour 'could not be trusted' - a frequent Conservative theme in the campaign - in a context in which the claim could not immediately be answered by Labour. Furthermore, he was not prevented from doing so by Humphrys and so by this tactic was the discourse temporarily diverted from the Conservatives' division over who should stand in the Tatton constituency to their preferred theme of Labour's 'untrustworthiness'. In the phrase of the 'spin doctors', Cousins was allowed to be 'on message' at least for that part of the interview. As was often the case, Humphrys did not attempt to represent the position of the absent party (in this case Labour) who were being spoken about and reply for them by refuting, say, the charge of untrustworthiness - and neither were any other viewpoints represented. In this instance, the conduct of the interview gave Cousins considerable latitude and the apportioning of such opportunities across and within the political parties will form part of the later textual analysis (Chapter 6).

Multiple questions

Further loss of control is engendered by asking two or more questions at once: McLeish warned that the direction becomes unclear and the interviewee is allowed the freedom only to answer the points he chooses. Muddled questions are sometimes 'clarified' to little effect by the interviewer, adding further layers of confusion and indirection. (1994, 44)

Despite the experience and ability of the Today presenters, who would doubtless reject suggestions of becoming muddled, certainly their questioning can sometimes become convoluted, if only by the desire to confront interviewees with evidence in support of the challenge to their positions - for example, when John Humphrys interviewed Tony Blair in the final week of the 1997 election:

> JH: "You may well feel, as you felt then, in the early days of your time in the Labour Party, that it was necessary to say certain things at that time, even though you believed other things - I mean, you go back to 1983, don't need to go that far back, go back to 1987 when you signed an early day motion applauding the fortitude and resolve displayed by men on the Wapping picket lines. Now it's inconceivable to imagine the modern Tony Blair doing that, saying 'those guys on the picket line are doing a brilliant job'. The same people incidentally who fought er Rupert Murdoch; you now are a friend of Rupert Murdoch - his papers, his tabloid newspapers support you. Now what people are entitled to ask and many people do ask this question still, Mr Blair, notwithstanding the interviews you've given, is: is what he is saying now, really what he believes or might he change again, might it be expediency?" (Today, 8.12 28/4/97 - Programme extract 8)

Far from being trapped by the mass of information put to him by Humphrys, Blair could choose then any one of a large number of different responses, each of which could have sounded at least partially relevant as a reply. For instance, he might have answered:

"I always say what I believe, and this is what I do believe right now..."
"The industrial relations scene has changed since 1987..."
"Fortitude and resolve are often seen as virtuous, as can be expediency..."
"When I joined the Labour Party I joined because..."
"Actually, several newspapers support the Labour Party now..."

The degree of entrapment (see below) was small because of the latitude the breadth of the question allowed for the response. In the event, Blair's actual chosen reply could be read as betraying a measure of triumph - much as a boxer might feel triumphant on ducking a right hook:

> TB: "John, the answer to that is that the process of change has been one way, towards modernisation...(continues)" (Programme extract 8)

To begin his response with "the answer to that" is in a sense to recognise the debtor/creditor relationship described by Bell and van Leeuwen and their notion of the 'demand' function of a question (ibid, 8-9). Despite the length of Humphrys's question, the plurality of its content and the interviewer's apparent conviction that his use of evidence would strongly support the charges of 'incredibility' and 'expediency', Blair clearly felt that his response was going to be sufficient to meet the demand.

It is difficult to measure the effect of such questioning in terms of being 'hard' or 'soft', or its role in a 'friendly' or 'hostile' interview, (we have already discredited the notion of neutrality,) particularly because the latitude afforded to Tony Blair could be offset to some degree against the negative effects of the statements made by John Humphrys as his 'evidence'. Reminders of past 'Old' Labour stances on industrial disputes were unlikely to have been among 'New' Labour's preferred campaign themes in 1997. How much one

might balance the other could be a matter of individual reading by each listener, with the multiplicity of variations which that implies. Had he chosen to address the references to the Wapping picket lines, Blair would most certainly have been 'off message'. He did not.

Leading questions

Worse than muddled, McLeish considered these to be lazy, inexperienced or malicious by nature. They are loaded with perhaps incorrect assumptions which the interviewee must accept or deny. Denial can cause indirection and the loading of a question can actively position the interviewer on an issue:

> "Adjectives which imply value judgements must be a warning signal... that all is not quite what it appears to be. Here is an interviewer who has a point to make, and in this respect he might not be properly representing the listener." (1994, 44)

Whether McLeish's assessment is fair or not, (and by taking a position the interviewer may actually be representing some listeners rather better,) if the interviewer can be accused of embracing a position, he is open to attack - as in this exchange between John Humphrys and Malcolm Rifkind on Today:

> JH: "No, no, I don't have views as you well know."
> MR: "!Of course, I never dreamt otherwise! (laughs)"
> JH: "Precisely! Here here here's here's the difference, here's the difference: here we have a member of the Government saying, his considered thought, I am opposed to the Euro etcetera etcetera you know the rest of it, I don't need to remind you. Are you as Foreign Secretary - whose job it would be if you were

Foreign Secretary in the nes gov, the next government, to pursue the government's policy - are you saying Mr Horam should not have said that?"
MR: "I'm saying that ministers should be extremely careful that they do not use language that can be misrepresented by people like you. But when it comes to the question as to whether they should continue in the Government, that depends on whether they accept Government policy. Mr Horam has said explicitly that he does, and I am satisfied with that."
JH: "Right, so then anybody - in the Cabinet even - from now on can say: 'I loathe this idea of a single European currency, I hope we never go into it, on the other hand I do accept the Government's view that we're going to wait and see, we will negotiate before we reject it'."
MR: "I think Humpty Dumpty would have been proud of you Mr Humphrys because you live in a fantasy world of your own. You've just invented a statement which I have not said..."
JH: "!No! (indecipherable)"
MR: "...which no Conservative has said..."
JH: "!No!"
MR: "...but which represents your (unintelligible) garbled representation of what you think other people have said."
JH (under Rifkind until first 'great'): "!W w with great, with great respect it wasn't a statement, it was a question. What I am saying is: can members of the Cabinet - or indeed can any other member of the Government in future say 'I am opposed to a single European currency, but I support the Government's policy'. (pause) Would that be alright?" (8.12 16/4/97 - Programme extract 9)

In trying to characterise a Conservative candidate's position (Horam), whether John Humphrys considered his first attempt to be a leading question or not, that is how it was in turn characterised by Malcolm Rifkind, leaving Humphrys open to a further charge of detachment from the 'real' world. Humphrys's second attempt was then deliberately followed up with an actual question ("Would that be alright?") in response to what he himself understood to be Rifkind's charge of making statements instead of asking questions.

Non-questions

These, then, do not begin with the usual interrogatives, but they are mere statements put forward by the interviewer for confirmation or rebuttal, or as prompts to begin talking on a subject. Notwithstanding the entertainment value of the above exchange - apparently conducted fairly amicably - Humphrys did paraphrase in order to confront Rifkind and provoke a response: in the event the response was immodest and colourful. Later in the same encounter, Rifkind added:

> "Of course (ministers) should not make additional remarks that will be taken out of context by BBC interviewers, misrepresented, and er enable you to have a bit of fun at our expense!"

Whether used mischievously or not McLeish perceived non-questions as inviting indirection, too (1994, 45). They can, however, be used effectively in the role of checking questions, putting assertions to interviewees which they then might feel obliged to correct. For example, Sue MacGregor's Today interview with Nigel de Gruchy, General Secretary of the NAS/UWT on 11th April 1997 used almost exclusively non-questions (responses omitted from written text):

> "Nigel de Gruchy, your union won the battle over the exclusion but it seems to be NOW at a terrible cost to the school."
> "Yes, but, look at what happened as a result of this battle over this boy: twenty-one pupils have been removed from the school, a lot of parents (NdG interrupts indecipherably) a lot of parents feel that that was because of the dispute and that it's done the school untold harm."
> "Weren't you scapegoating this boy because of your own union battles?"
> "But you and the NUT have had your own battles er about your own attitude to excluding children and this was, one of the parents said, a recruitment battle on your behalf." (8.26 - Programme extract 10)

In the case of each of the three non-questions above, de Gruchy was forced to refute the allegation, using evidence of his own to support his own arguments, albeit without reference to fantasy worlds or nursery-rhyme characters.

Soliciting opinion

Typified by the opening "What do you think of...", Bell & van Leeuwen saw these as 'cooperative' questions:

> "They do not require the interviewee to be on the defensive. (He) can answer them in the knowledge that they will not be challenged, either because both 'yes' and 'no' are likely to be acceptable to the interviewer , or because the answer he prefers is likely also to be the answer preferred by the interviewer. The issues are, as yet, issues on which interviewer and interviewee agree." (1994, 149)

Viewed less charitably, the interviewer might of course be soliciting the interviewee's opinion now, in preparation for a more searching follow through. In the 1997 general election campaign, it is unlikely that an experienced journalist would have been unable to anticipate a given politician's response on an election issue, given the polarisation of debate, the toeing of party lines and the repetition of a limited number of themes: Europe, sleaze, taxation, trustworthiness and so on.

Variants include such formulae as John Humphrys's question to Ulster Unionist leader David Trimble, on 22nd March 1997:

> JH: "What's your message to the Council going to be?"
> DT: "Well obviously we're looking er towards the elections but we're looking beyond the elections and indeed actually one of the things I hope to do this

> morning is to to sketch out er our ideas for what we would regard as an acceptable outcome to this whole process, because er I think it's time that we we got our eyes ert up and looked to the horizon to where we should be going in the long run." (Today, 7.33 - Programme extract 11)

Trimble's response, though long, betrayed little about his position except that his party was going to consider the future. On narrowing the line of questioning, Humphrys received less expansive replies:

> JH: "Do you accept that before real progress can be made there must be another ceasefire and that it must last and that therefore you, yourselves, the Unionists have to make concessions?"
> DT: "To what? To whom?"
> JH: "To Sinn Fein."
> DT: "Why?"
> JH: "Because there is another body of opinion in Northern Ireland that wants to do things differently from the way you want to do things." (Programme extract 12)

Thus it can be argued that the freedom enjoyed by an interviewee whose opinion has been solicited contrasts sharply with the restriction imposed by more precise questioning. Trimble responded quite differently to the latter, even subverting the process not in a Mawhinney-style temper, but by reversing the roles of interviewer and interviewee - itself a form of defence by attack.

In fact, soliciting opinion was more common than challenge during the regular 'election panel' debates held in the final half hour of the April editions of Today. Here the presenters probably considered their role to be more one of facilitating discussion than of interrogation. For example, John Humphrys said the following to Daily Telegraph editor, Charles Moore, on 3rd April 1997:

> "Quick thought about opinion polls - yesterday your newspaper suggested that the gap might be starting to close; this morning the Times does the exact opposite." (Today)

Moore's unguarded response could be argued to be a reflection of the absence of challenge in soliciting opinion - he had just been asked for a 'quick thought':

> "Yes, I, I don't know. We, our own is coming today, we'll, we we c', we can tell you later. I mean, it's bound to move in the Tory direction, erm, though it would be quite unprecedented if it moved enough in the Tory direction for them to win."

This kind of question is also used as a prompt to another journalist in a two-way - again, the interviewer's role is one of facilitating rather than controlling:

> Reporter: "...They will of course need the approval of the Channel Tunnel Safety Authority to do that."
> John Humphrys: "And are they going to get that, do you think? That's crucial isn't it?" (Today, 3/4/97)

Checking questions

Bell & van Leeuwen's analysis presented these as less cooperative as they demand only affirmation of specific facts or opinions. Usually closed, they will seek a polarised response, as in "So interest rates are coming down then?". Their analysis characterized them thus:

> "...interviewers are testing whether interviewees have worked out their policies and strategies. Negative answers will make the interviewee seem indecisive or, at best, non-committal...
>
> In checking, interviewers prepare the ground for their later challenges and entrapments. The issues involved are no longer issues on which interviewer and

> interviewee can agree... Before attacking, the interviewer seeks to commit the interviewee to an agreement with the premises of later challenges." (1994, 149)

Challenging questions

There is some parity with checking questions, which can also involve confrontation. The interviewer can object, contradict or confront the interviewee. Bell & van Leeuwen regard these to be mainly non-questions,

> "in which the interviewer offers information that could, if not adequately countered by the interviewee, weaken the interviewee's position." (1994, 153)

For example, on Today John Humphrys put a series of consecutive challenging questions to Labour's then Chief Whip Donald Dewar, about the Conservative candidate for Tatton, Neil Hamilton, and the sleaze issue (responses and Dewar's interjections omitted):

> "It is a gimmick, isn't it?"
>
> "Yeah but look, if they don't want him; the voters of Tatton don't want him because they think he is tainted in some way or another then they can vote for your man or the Liberal Democrat. I mean that's the way it works isn't it? If they do want him, they'll vote for him, and that's also the way it's meant to work."
>
> "Well no, but I mean you're doing your best to to make it abnormal. I mean, look, we've had plenty of instances in the past where candidates have er - how can I put this - not been totally respected by everybody because of the way they may or may not have behaved. In those cases the electorate has a very clear choice. And it's not as if they don't know what the allegations against er Mr Hamilton are, and they have a very very clear choice: they can either vote for him or they can vote against him. So for you to do this is really just to turn it into a gimmick isn't it?"
>
> "Well all right, who do you want..." (Dewar interrupts)
>
> "Oh, well, come on now if you didn't want it to be the case you'd have hardly made this announcement yesterday, would you?"
> "Are you honestly telling me that you're not trying to keep alive this whole sleaze thing because it's doing damage to the Tories and therefore helping your cause? That isn't er"

> "!But you're keeping it alive. Good heavens, er I mean it it, it would be disingenuous wouldn't it to suggest the Labour Party is not consciously, deliberately keeping this issue alive."
>
> "All right who who do you want to run against him? A local vicar, a schoolteacher, who? A beer drinker? We, we heard Richard Branson's name this morning."
>
> "!Well who do you want?"
>
> "!Well what kind of person? You must have thought it through." (8.10am, 29/3/97, Programme extract 13)

Dewar's responses to the first, second, third and fifth questions began with straight denials using the word 'no' - so great was his need to refute the allegation being made by Humphrys. The latter, in representing perhaps the Conservative perspective, or perhaps some notion he might have had of the 'commonsense' perspective on the issue, positioned himself as an adversary of Dewar, often adopting a tone of incredulity at his replies.

Entrapment questions

Bell & van Leeuwen identify these as best demonstrating the power of the interviewer:

> "(they are)...unanswerable challenges, statements with which interviewees can neither agree nor disagree without losing face, or... to which they can neither say 'yes' nor 'no' without contradicting themselves." (1994, 155)

The MacGregor question which provoked such an angry response from Brian Mawhinney fits this description: his party had previously unseated its former leader in similar circumstances, so was it about to do so again? The existence of the possible precedent could not be denied, and to denounce it as wrong then would be to undermine the current

leader: Mawhinney was trapped. Bell & van Leeuwen found that entrapment was more likely to engender 'judicious verbal sidestepping' than an admission of defeat, although they expected the reputation of a politician to be diminished as a result.

Thus, in military terms, when cornered by the interviewer, the interviewee can either succumb or respond with a counterattack. This must inevitably be anticipated by an experienced interviewer, whose level of preparedness for such a response might depend upon how expected was the opportunity.

The risk to the interviewee is huge: a split-second calculation must be made as to the appropriateness of the response - what psychologists might term 'fight or flight'. Bell & van Leeuwen described the inequality of the contest as particularly damaging:

> "... the illusion that interviews are as spontaneous as conversations, plus the requirement that guests do not upstage their media hosts, work against interviewees when they are successfully entrapped. The audience will not remember what they say, but may recall their general competence and 'mediagenic' presentation - or absence thereof." (1994, 156)

A further example of entrapment is discussed in Chapter 4 (17/4/97: Portillo & Naughtie)

Release questions

Citing the narrative convention of return to equilibrium, to Bell & van Leeuwen the ending of an interview with an opportunity for the interviewee to re-establish his authority was the norm:

> "Politicians are 'talent' - they must be interviewed again and again, and not be given the coup de grace prematurely... (but be allowed) ...to fly out of the trap without inflicting mortal injury. He (the interviewer) does this by returning to the cooperative tone of the opening of the interview..." (1994, 157)

When the interview ends without release - as in Anna Ford's Today interview with Kenneth Clarke on 16th September 1996 - the resulting disequilibrium can spell trouble. Following an exchange for which BBC Director General John Birt later apologised by letter, Ms Ford ended the item with the words: "So you are not going to elevate the debate?" The contrast with the more usual expression of the interviewer's thanks at the end of an interview was startling. Allowed no immediate chance to reply to Ford's rhetorical question - his microphone was off and her co-presenter had begun the link into the next item - in one Parthian shot, Clarke's whole discourse had thus been described pejoratively: typified as low in tone. As Conservative Party Chairman, Dr Brian Mawhinney subsequently wrote to John Birt, calling Ford's question "...a disgraceful lapse from impartiality into blatant editorialising." (Independent, 17/9/96)

In terms of Bell & van Leeuwen's analysis, Ford dealt Clarke a premature coup de grace, preventing a return to equilibrium and unleashing forces which then surfaced in a number of different media. Her ending on confrontation while using the inequality of the studio power relationship to prevent comeback resulted in diegetic disharmony and external controversy. Newspaper articles quoted a Conservative spokesman as describing Ken Clarke as "...'shell-shocked' by the 'sneering' tone of Ms Ford's interview." (Independent, ibid) Such extreme reactions and letters of complaint are rare, so if the interview had instead ended with the more usual release, harmony and return to equilibrium, Ford might

not have later found herself being described by commentators as compromised by John Birt's eventual reply to Mawhinney's letter.

Despite the professional advice given by such radio trainers as McLeish, it seems unlikely that radio broadcasters consciously plan interview questions according to the labels given them above - structuring the interviews in advance being done while keeping a tally of leading or entrapment questions, multiple ones or open ones. However, the question-type analyses by McLeish, Bell and van Leeuwen do afford a useful structure for an academic study of the texts to begin. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis of questions put to interviewees can provide a rationale for an evaluation of their role in achieving or compromising 'balance'. The use of open, closed, multiple, leading and non-questions is a measure of the freedom or otherwise being afforded the interviewee. (McLeish also discussed question width and narrowness as a measure of freedom to reply (1994,43))

Similarly, the ratio of soliciting and checking questions to those which challenge or entrap might suggest how difficult the interviewer intends the interview to be for the interviewee. The presence or absence of release questions can be measured, too. Mere classification and counting of the question types, though, does ignore the possibility of levels of difficulty within categories - and somehow this must be addressed.

Certainly, Dr Mawhinney's 'furious' letter of complaint compared and contrasted with the Kenneth Clarke interview with another with Tony Blair:

> "The Tories yesterday complained about the 'hostile' and 'caustic' way the Chancellor, Kenneth Clarke, was interviewed on Radio 4's Today programme while claiming that Tony Blair was interviewed 'with kid gloves'... (alleging) disparities in separate interviews on the same programme.
>
> ...(Quoting Mawhinney) 'By contrast Jim Naughtie treated Mr Blair with kid gloves. Mr Blair was barely interrupted at all. The exchange *started and ended gently and was not conducted with the caustic manner* that Ms Ford used in her interview with the Chancellor.'
>
> He called on the BBC to take action to correct what he described as similar lapses by Today presenters and to remind them to pay more than lip service to the guidelines regarding equal treatment between the parties." (Independent, 17/9/96, my emphasis)

How, then can different broadcasters with different personalities, in different moods at different times and with different subject matter to ask about, avoid the charge of 'lapsing from impartiality'? Andrew Hawken, then Today Assistant Editor, identified good intent as a safeguard:

> "All we argue is that we are doing our very best to be impartial, rigorous, fair in our treatment of everybody. Now we're not going to say we are purer than anybody else in the entire world and have no thoughts and feelings about anything. But what we are saying is, we will do our utmost to rigorously test everybody's plans with equal rigour and stick by what the BBC thinks is right in an election campaign." (my interview 2/4/96)

Likewise, Australian television interviewer Paul Lyneham told Philip Bell that he, of course, treats his interviewees equitably:

> "The general rule that I apply is to seek to put to all parties the hardest and most robust line of questioning that their opponents, were they there, would put to them. And it seems to me that if that's applied at all times, then you can't go

> wrong. Now, you will always go wrong to the extent that half the people watching are going to think you're a bastard because they all vote for this bloke or his party, or her party... the better you do your job the more some people watching are going to think you're a dreadful person, and biased..." (1994, 175)

Lyneham reiterates the importance of professionalism in impartiality but he also acknowledges a burden of public contempt, (albeit partial and temporary,) inherent in even-handedness.

Logically, though, if politicians of all complexions were given equal exposure to each interviewer, then each of those interviewers would in turn invite equal contempt from listeners. The complexity of political positioning, (third parties, minority parties, party factions and so on,) would preclude a simple 50:50 ratio of 'good' half the time and 'bad' for the other half, but at least ignominy would be equally distributed.

In practice, this is not so. Listeners and participants in the programme alike do cherish impressions that one presenter is pro-Labour or Scottish Nationalist or whatever, or that a whole programme is anti-government. Such beliefs may be illogically or unfairly conceived, but it is arguably part of the remit of a public service broadcaster such as the BBC that every attempt should be made to *appear* impartial in the public's perception, as well as being satisfied in its own collective consciousness that it is sufficiently professional to fulfil that aspiration in deed.

It is possible that the institutional environment places constraints on the professional which "contribute to the shaping of output and the form of the final product" (McNair,

1994,57). To ignore the effect of deadlines, resources and so on would be to produce an incomplete study. However, the individual, too, is necessarily implicated in the production of meaning, and bears at least some responsibility for what is produced:

> "Journalists hold beliefs and assumptions about who are the most authoritative and credible sources in the construction of a given story; about what is a most important story on a given day; about how a story fits in with 'consensual' ways of seeing the world." (McNair, ibid, 57)

Following the fragmentation of dominant values, McNair considered that interviewers become part of a 'dynamic, conflictual process', within which they must take up a position.

It is those positions, taken up by the interviewers on the Today programme during the 1997 general election, which will be problematised later. How their interviewing affects the programme output will form a large part of the textual analysis which follows. The rationale for doing so was provided by Bell and van Leeuwen (1994, 2), who thought interviewing had previously been taken for granted. They themselves sought to correct a wrong by studying them:

> "...only (to do so) can provide answers to such critical questions as, when are interviews merely instruments for the production and reproduction of ideological consensus? When are they genuine, open, public exchanges of knowledge and experience? When are they techniques of power rather than tools for radical questioning?"

Less obvious is the methodology by which that analysis should take place.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO BALANCE

> "...even as we sit, grown men with tax-deductible suits, somewhere else in this building, are sitting down... determining whether each joke is not only of equal length, but of equal comedy..."
>
> Alan Coren speaking about The News Quiz (Radio Four), Today, 22/3/97

The difficulties facing Alan Coren's (no doubt mythical) arbiters of broadcast humour are manifold. Determining how 'funny' a joke may be would necessitate consideration of in whom the amusement is to be measured, and how representative they might be of the wider audience. Although Coren's point was, of course, meant to be frivolous, it suggested that what should matter in discerning political bias in comedy is how amusing it is. That is to deny polysemy in broadcast talk. In fact, a statement may not be at all funny, yet it may nonetheless make a political point. To underrate its impact, then, because the humour is lacking, would be to abdicate a responsibility - the responsibility to apply the serious, thorough, critical evaluation that can only be found in analytical rigour.

While attempting such an analysis of the Today programme demanded less emphasis on humour, however, the polysemic nature of much that is broadcast had to be recognised and accounted for. Gunter's review of methodological approaches to measuring bias on television (1997, 5) acknowledged many of the pitfalls inherent in such a study. He contended that both quantitative and qualitative analyses would be, themselves, inadequate, and the concept of bias would be "difficult to pin down and virtually impossible to define in any single fashion." Yet Gunter identified a large number of such

studies, carried out by academics, broadcasters and regulators alike - each of which having its own constituency of sponsors and audiences.

To satisfy its own constituency, the credibility of this research had to be established by methodological rigour, the highest academic standards and as much attempted 'impartiality' on the part of the professional researcher, as the professional broadcasters aspire to bring to their own work. It is for others to evaluate, in turn, this account.

Ontology and epistemology

The proposition that a relationship exists between the calling of the 1997 general election and the content of a news and current affairs programme, such as Today, would probably not be contentious: verbal cues to programme items referred to 'the election', politicians made manifesto promises and criticised those of other parties, assessments were offered as to the state of the parties, and so on. A second, undoubtedly more controversial, relationship exists between the programme content and the audiences who hear it - a relationship which, in political terms, ultimately concerns only how on polling day it may have affected the way listeners each cast their vote. In other words, how did what was broadcast affect the outcome of the election?

Politicians, broadcasters and their regulatory bodies and even listeners will all have an interest - great or small - in the second relationship, but the act of determining what it is demands an epistemological framework suited to the task.

The methodology adopted in any research is the bridge between the epistemic and the ontological. Any epistemology is, however, essentially problematic, as noted by Bhaskar (1989), (whose discussion of the relationship between ontology and epistemology was further analysed by Scott & Usher):

> "...reality is ontologically stable and thus any description we make of it does refer to an intransitive phenomenon, but (sic) epistemologically unstable. Thus our knowing of reality is always subject to social and political arrangements which are transitive." (in Scott & Usher, 1993, 63)

In this context, if the ontology we seek to examine is a disputed 'reality' of broadcast output occupying time within set spatial and temporal parameters, as well as its effect upon listeners, the parallel epistemology is the knowledge system which permits us access to that 'reality' - or at least an understanding of it. That philosophers can debate ontological validity in any supposed 'reality', notwithstanding the existence of professional or political motives, suggests that whatever the epistemological framework adopted here, for some readers it will not be adequate. Indeed, Gunter identified a number of different methodologies already used - and sometimes disputed - by other researchers in this field (1997, Ch 1-2).

For example, determining what a given item *meant* when it was broadcast may depend as much upon who created it as who heard it (c.f. Gunter's distinction between output perspectives and audience perspectives, (ibid)). That is, the representation of 'the election' offered by the Today programme was a 're-presentation' of a 'reality' often

contested vigorously in ontological terms by journalists and politicians alike. Obvious examples would be the state of the parties in terms of support (opinion pollsters often disagreed), the record of the then incumbent government, the state of the economy and so on. In producing their reports, broadcasters have investigated that 'reality' and synthesised a re-presentation of it for immediate or subsequent consumption by the 'audience'.

Understanding by the latter of the programme content - and thus of the 'reality' being presented - is, of course, an act of media-literacy performed individually, and often in isolation. Within an audience, 'readings' of any programme text are made from individuals' own diverse standpoints: therefore the existence of differential readings must be inevitable. The results of this research, however produced - and by whomsoever - were themselves always going to be problematic.

Epistemological problems are inherent, though, in *any* piece of qualitative research: witness the discomfiture of any positivist with any qualitative study in the social sciences. Under such a metaphorical microscope is the interaction of real people, not mere chemical compounds definable only by mass, formulae and laboratory-controlled conditions of interaction. The appeal of the certainties and generalisabilities claimed by the positivist researcher is obvious. Unfortunately, if positivism is accepted to be inherently yet exclusively virtuous within its own limited jurisdiction, it can conversely serve to discredit all interpretive work. To concede to such rhetoric, though, would be to end all research beyond the purely empirical. Important questions would never be put.

However, it can be argued that only rarely can data - qualitative or quantitative - be atheoretical, because most researchers will automatically employ theories in data collection. Furthermore, using data often involves theorisation. The positivist paradigm has spawned many a new scientific discovery which has been subsequently contested by further research: consider the mass of conflicting advice regarding what constitutes a 'healthy' diet. Somehow, fallibility is inherent in part of the positivist agenda - and it can only be minimised through thorough evaluation of the methodologies employed in theory generation, data collection and conclusion forming. Let us, then, continue to put important questions which require qualitative analysis in order to produce answers - but let us also exercise caution in the qualitative domain, and borrow where possible some of the 'legitimacy' of positivism.

Where, then, were the pitfalls? Reflexivity, (not a rare phenomenon,) is the writing of the researcher into the research design and process. Any interview or questionnaire data may be located somewhere within the double hermeneutic framework Giddens (1984) contends characterises all interpretive research. His point is that the social actors being studied are reflexive in their own interpretations - which are then interpreted by the researcher. Each individual is located somewhere within or outside any discourse, and may consciously or unwittingly be influenced by that positioning. Respondents' and researchers' knowledge is often incomplete and perceptions may be based on partial information. In creating a summative written text of multiple research data and findings, any researcher is therefore guilty of 're-presentation' via a text itself probably worthy of close textual analysis.

Taken individually, each of these wider problems was intrinsic to this specific research: firstly, theories were influential in the research design, (from audience theory to often political assumptions made about how to analyse the data,) and also, to construct a hypothesis is to construct or borrow a theory. Useful theories were developed by others, such as Fairclough (1989) and Scannel (1991). Others were original: emergent during the course of the research. Secondly, both the programme team and the listener/respondents were aware research was being done into 'general election coverage on Today' and the questionnaire asked about questions of bias, so the main areas of interest were probably apparent, if not already obvious. However, the listener reactions could not have been gathered without their knowledge, as no form of covert data gathering could have been achieved over such a large geographical area. The interview with then Editor and Deputy Editor Roger Mosey and Andrew Hawken, in July 1996, and subsequent pre-election correspondence with the BBC were perhaps unwise in retrospect: however, the programme makers would have been aware of other intended monitoring of their programming, anyway: by political parties, by academics, by other media.

The truthfulness and motivations of the listener/respondents who co-operated can only be guessed at. Why does a person volunteer to a stranger to undertake unpaid work, monitoring and reporting on a series of broadcasts according to that stranger's parameters? Several felt they should explain their interest - even though they were not asked to - and declared they had found it to be 'good fun' to do; a small number confessed to being members of a political party. (One respondent asked for four more sets of

questionnaires once the election campaign had begun, but these extra replies were excluded from the analysis in case the intention was to deceive or to distort. One wrote in for the questionnaire, eager for the opportunity to report on "those opera-loving twits".) Furthermore, aside from questions of motivation, the respondents were perhaps being asked to think more deeply about the programme items they monitored than would otherwise have been the case, and they might not otherwise have been listening for 'bias'. Some may have been influenced by their notions of the purpose of the research, or the use to which its results may now be put.

Certainly, the explanations on the questionnaire may have increased their media literacy - they were asked to distinguish between different item formats, as follows:

> "I have also asked you to classify each item as an extra fail-safe. The types are as follows:
>
> Single interview: presenter interviews one interviewee (live or pre-recorded)
> 2/3 interviewees debate with presenter
> Package (multi-voice): one reporter links clips from several interviews
> Regular item: Thought for the Day, business, sport, papers or news bulletin"
>
> (Appendix)

The writing up of the research findings has been done with as much care and accuracy in re-presentation as is possible. That does not of course exclude the possibility of subsequent controversy or unintended readings of this final text. (An example might be the 1996 Scott Report into arms sales to the Middle East: rival interpretations of that text were hotly contested by those named, by the author, and by the various political parties and interest groups.)

Of course, the researcher is himself located somewhere within the political discourse of the 1997 general election - but then, so is everyone, from the broadcasters to the listeners, with the unlikely exception of any 'political eunuchs' as posited by Sir Christopher Bland (Chapter 1).

There is, anyway, some scepticism about attempts by social scientists to 'decontaminate' their research by attempting to eliminate reflexivity. Such scepticism is exemplified by Scott & Usher:

> "... it is difficult to imagine that those decontaminating devices do in fact separate off the researcher from what is being researched. All types of research involve selective and thus value-laden interventions of different types during their conduct." (1993, 59)

If reflexivity were to be considered an insurmountable barrier, though, no qualitative research would ever be done. It is in acknowledging the nature of any research, then, that its strengths can be appreciated, as well as its weaknesses.

Generalisability

The intention in the practical research was to test the hypothesis that 'balance' and 'impartiality' - however much they may have been intended by the producers of Today - were not achieved in practice on the programme between the calling of the 1997 general election on 17th March and polling day on 1st May. Why, though, that hypothesis?

The unlikelihood of a consensual 'balance' being achieved was explored in the earlier literature survey, (as discussed in the two previous chapters,) with reference to broadcasting in general, and often to Today in particular. To be worthwhile, research must be valued, and it is often valued in terms of its internal and external validities: the latter relates to whether the research findings can be generalised to wider contexts. The internal validity of this research project is proportionate firstly to the epistemological authenticity of the findings and conclusions reported. Secondly, the importance of Today in often setting the political agenda and reaching influential radio audiences is considerable. Thus is demonstrated a powerful rationale for undertaking the project, *per se*.

In terms of external validity, the research idea has strengths, as well as weaknesses: a strength is that the value of conducting an exercise such as this during an election period lies in the extra obligation imposed then upon the broadcasters to be 'fair' over the course of the campaign - that is, between tightly defined start and end points:

> "Editors should ensure that, through the course of the campaign, their coverage has proved wide-ranging and fair." (BBC, 1996, 163)

Election time is very important, and if 'balance' is ever achievable, it should be achieved then. Clearly, an imbalance at peak breakfast time may not be offset by another item during another time period: fewer people will hear the second and the audiences of different programmes are likely to consist of different people. A large breakfast time audience (2.4 millions at 8am - source: Guardian 18/6/97) being repeatedly exposed to

one particular imbalance, could not always be mitigated by a different audience receiving an equal and 'opposite' slant.

To analyse the total output of one series of programmes, then, broadcast in the same time slot across the whole campaign should be a fair test of impartiality in one team of broadcasters. In short, if they cannot manage impartiality and balance at election time when it really matters - both in terms of their own professional and Charter commitments and the increased scrutiny of interested parties in the media and politics - what chance do those twin virtues have the rest of the time?

The scope of this research, though, is limited to Today: one programme team under one editor, produced for one national network within but one broadcasting organisation. Others may have been more successful in meeting their obligation to be impartial - and there may well be others still whose performance has been worse. Hence, it may be reasonable to generalise from this research about the year-round performance of Today under the stewardship of its then editor, while it may not be possible to do so about other programmes and other broadcast media. However, the programme's reputation and that of its production team suggests that their peers do not suspect their standards and practices are lacking in the 'professionalism' to which others aspire.

The Times editor's opinion of the programme suggests it is worthy of study, anyway, irrespective of any possibility of generalisability:

> "The Today programme of 1997... is an avowedly superior programme (than that of a suggested 'golden age' when it was presented by Jack de Manio). The interviews are informative, dramatic and the best of their kind anywhere in the world. It is Britain's wake-up call; neither politicians nor newspaper editors can afford to miss it; and almost everyone agrees that this is so." (Peter Stothard, writing in the Guardian, 1997)

Interpretive research and grounded theory

A close analysis of the texts themselves - thirty-nine complete Today programmes recorded off-air - may necessarily be largely interpretive. Each listener who hears a text will make his or her own interpretation (reading) of what is heard, assessed from his or her own standpoint. The inclusion of actual interpretations from real listeners is intended to be illustrative. Where a range of different readings has been made of one particular item, it proves not that one reading is correct and all others are deviant, but that alternatives are possible. Some textual items will inevitably be read similarly by all as alternatives have been closed off. If, by contrast, a majority of listeners tended towards one reading, however, the residual possibility of alternatives should not reduce the assumed impact of the likely majority view: that is, a damning criticism of one party ought not to be claimed to be self-balancing because a deviant reading of it might be positive.

It would be pointless to produce several thousands of words of my own readings of the texts, as the likely existence of alternatives would count against the internal and external validities which are being sought. Often, those who read or respond to research value it only insofar as it reveals a set of 'truths' about part of a measurable 'real world': such is the

positivist agenda, one which expects 'reality' to exist only in measurable or quantifiable terms. Qualitative analysis is often perceived to be 'tainted with subjectivity' because *everyone* makes a textual analysis from a specific standpoint - even if they do not themselves recognise where that standpoint is located.

Tempting as it might have been to produce a purely quantitative account, many experienced researchers will argue for the inclusion of interpretive data:

> "However, without taking account of the way actors interpret and thus understand their worlds, sociological explanation is left empty and devoid of meaning. (Not to do so assumes) ... a way of seeing which reduces human beings to the role of 'unwitting dupes' of structural forces beyond their comprehension and influence." (Scott and Usher, 1993,67)

There is, of course, a role for quantitative analysis in this research, too: seconds of 'airtime' have been counted, mentions of parties and politicians have been totalled, and like has been compared with like. There is much to satisfy the demands of positivist readers who can compare their own conclusions with mine, on the basis of the figures and the empirical 'reality' which they present. For example, the under-representation of all but the 'three main parties' (compared to regional factors and seats contested,) is plainly quantifiable.

No doubt others will also have engaged with this kind of enterprise: Professor David Butler at Oxford University and the Centre for Media Research at Leicester University, among others, produce statistical analyses of wider cross-sections of broadcast output - some of it during the campaign itself.

However, positivist readers should also consider the rest of the material, not least because there are, in fact, contradictions inherent in the positivist tradition - as discussed by Levy:

> "We shun the thought that scientific knowledge may be ideologically flavoured... We prematurely separate data and theory, sometimes calling data 'fact'... And we are tempted to speak of such things as objectivity, truth, proof and methodology where I believe we mean to refer to the more human and social qualities of communicability, generalizability, plausibility and interpretability." (Levy, 1981, 269)

Often, old certainties in the scientific world are displaced by new discoveries:

> "...observation-statements, 'facts', were already impregnated with theory... but... this implies that the same critical phenomenon may be read differently - by some as falsifying, by others as merely constituting 'a problem'..." (Walsh, 1994, 5)

The more appealing principles of positivism, while sometimes remaining appropriate to the experiments and observations of scientists, usually lack compatibility with social science in their purest form. How could a broadcast comment's exact distance from a putative fulcrum be measured and thus compared with another, supposedly 'balancing' one, in purely scientific terms? To attempt to do so would be as likely to succeed as Alan Coren's measurers of political humour in their determining of how funny particular jokes were.

In their attempts to acquire the 'legitimacy' enjoyed by positivists, though, in their own sphere of social science, some qualitative researchers developed their own 'grounded' theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990, etc) - essentially a

methodology for the collection of data and the formulation of theory which is grounded in rigorously encoded information. (Described accessibly by Priest (1996, 190-1).)

In seeking to acquire that legitimacy, the methodology used to analyse these broadcast texts owed much to grounded theory. Each text was recorded on audio and video tape, the latter because a five-hour video tape recording at half speed accommodates ten hours of audio - the only picture recorded being black with the date and time automatically superimposed on it as an easy referencing device. The audio tapes, (with only forty-five minutes capacity per side and requiring regular tape changes and turnovers,) were held elsewhere as a back-up. Simultaneously, detailed content analysis was produced in real-time. The occurrence of 'election issues' and political speakers was noted, wherever they appeared, and accurate timings were subsequently made and compared, (although what constituted an 'election issue' is discussed later). The calculations of airtime minutage were done according to party allegiance, after the election campaign, as were other quantitative measurements, all being described in greater detail in the relevant chapters.

It became apparent that - among others - a number of new issues were worth exploring, and so the main research questions became as follows:

1 How much air time was given to the parties, in the sense of being allowed to 'have the floor'?

2 How much of the programme's output was intended as 'election coverage'? Conversely, what was broadcast under the guise of 'other material', which might have been considered pertinent to questions of balance?

3 What representations were BBC correspondents making about politicians and their policies and prospects - and what effect might this have had upon the whole picture?

4 How much credibility was being given to parties (and individuals) other than the Conservatives and Labour as potential victors in the final ballot? How did this compare with the record number of candidates who were standing for election, and the presence of strong support for smaller parties within particular regions? This was of particular interest because of the possible effect upon floating voters, tactical voters and suchlike, of any suggestion - either overt or covert - that their first choice of candidate might not be a pragmatic one. (In fact, it became apparent from early on in the campaign that it was the opinion of the programme that the election was a three-cornered fight.)

5 What representations were being made in the 'election panel' debates in April, and who was being used to represent left-wing, right-wing and alternative positions?

6 How did coverage of like events compare? (For example, the manifesto launches by each of the different parties.)

Questionnaire data

Close scrutiny was applied to the semi-structured interviews and the qualitative reaction data supplied by listeners via the questionnaire. Where quantitative analysis of questionnaire responses was possible, this was done, using SPSS software to produce charts as appropriate (Chapter 4). Before its release on 17th March 1997, the

questionnaire had been piloted where possible among known individuals - colleagues and academics - and subsequent alterations made.

The design of the questionnaire itself was informed by the relevant literature - for example, Foddy's checklist (1993, 13). Symbolic interaction theory suggests respondents will try to discern the motives behind questions and thus the question/response transaction is itself a negotiation between the polarised positions of ethnographer and social actor (Blumer, 1969). De Vaus (1991, Chapter 6) discusses the importance of piloting a questionnaire first, in order that some of the ambiguities may be detected and eliminated.

The use of any such instrument in research requires the identification of a set of respondents, who must by definition either be selected or self-selecting. It would have been impractical to obtain data from the whole population of Today listeners, and any sampling of a population inevitably involves compromise. Probability sampling usually involves making assumptions - about how likely the sample set is to be an accurate representation of the wider population. The main aim has to be to try and consciously avoid bias while achieving the maximum amount of precision within the available resources.

A sample which included colleagues, neighbours, relations and friends could undoubtedly be argued to be concentrated within certain geographical, social, professional - or even ideological - groupings. They were all, therefore, excluded.

An attempt to recruit Radio Four listeners as randomly as possible via the independently-produced Feedback programme drew a negative response from the producer, Viv Black, who suggested to carry an appeal for participants on-air would be contrary to the BBC Producers' Guidelines. ("You could write to the BBC direct but I think your chances of success are very slim indeed." Letter, 25th November 1996)

The BBC-owned Radio Times was much more helpful: in response to a written request, the following announcement was included in the Noticeboard (1) section:

> "**WOULD YOU** provide reactions to general election coverage on Radio 4's Today programme? Please send an sae to Guy Starkey, Farnborough College of Technology, Farnborough GU14 6SB." (27th April-3rd May 1996 edition)

The response was large, and although many replicants chose to add either critiques of politicians or the Today programme or even to write copiously about their own backgrounds, all were written to and included in the sample. At that stage, no further element of selection was used. Of course, these may be better described as including Radio Times readers who were prepared to listen to Today for the purpose of this research - who may be distinct from regular listeners in some way. In fact, the respondents were asked about their listening habits via the questionnaire. At best they are all listeners to Today who read that specific issue of Radio Times and again, they may as a result be argued to be unrepresentative. However, their responses were not, primarily, used to test the main hypothesis: instead, the main purpose of their involvement was to further investigation of the possibility of differential readings of the

same items. The conclusions drawn by the questionnaire group have not been generalised to the whole listenership.

In order to recruit respondents who might have made an even more diverse set of readings - and to widen the base of the listener research - a similarly worded announcement in the journal of the pressure group Voice of the Listener & Viewer produced a smaller (and probably statistically insignificant) response. More interestingly, Stephen Mitchell, then Editor, BBC Radio News Programmes felt moved to write:

> "Naturally as the individual responsible for the journalism on Radio 4 I am interested in your research - if only to stress the obvious point that I would not regard subscribers to the VLV as "typical" listeners." (5th August 1996)

I replied on 16th August:

> "I fully appreciate your point about Today listeners who are also readers of the VLV quarterly Newsletter, although neither you nor I would probably consider ourselves 'typical' readers of that publication, either!
>
> ...I have, however, a keen research interest in your own notion of what *does* constitute a 'typical' listener to the programme. Would you, please, tell me - and perhaps consider allowing me access to the research which informs that notion?"

His reply promised: "an audience profile of sorts... but I fear any concept of 'typical' is interesting but *unscientific*." (18th September, my emphasis) Clearly, although the broadcasters can be characterised as social scientists in their own reporting of social phenomena, positivism is not far from their own agenda. Stephen Mitchell's later conversion to the audience theorist's notion of listener atypicality is interesting, though, in a working broadcaster, whose daily routines are geared to producing types of material for

types of people. This could be interpreted as a future defence strategy being set up in anticipation of adverse research findings.

The 'audience profile' which was subsequently sent to me by David Bunker, Radio 4 Research Analyst, was raw audience research data from RAJAR Ltd, the industry body entrusted by the BBC and Independent Radio stations to produce audience ratings. Gender, age, region and social grade analyses were included, but this was not the 'thumbnail sketch' of the 'typical listener' our correspondence might have suggested.

Such concepts certainly do exist in the BBC: Radio Four's Invitation to Tender circulated to independent production companies interested in programme commissions for the April 1997 to March 1998 period was also prepared by a David Bunker:

> "The typical Radio 4 listener is
>
> - in their early 50s (the average age is 53)
> - upmarket (around three-quarters are in the ABC1 social grades)
> - living in the south of England (although this is because the south has more ABC1s in it)...
>
> ... - news times have a fairly even sex balance...
>
> They tend to read broadsheet newspapers (particularly The Guardian) and are more likely than the average to read specialist publications such as New Scientist, Which, The Economist, National Geographic.
>
> They are lighter than average television viewers, and when they do watch they are more likely than average to watch news programmes, documentaries and arts and travel programmes."

Although perhaps reluctant to spell it out to this researcher, the institution does, then, make a series of assumptions about the nature of the audience - and this is quite a (probably necessary) common practice throughout the media. Without any corrective intervention, (that is, initial selection or subsequent exclusion by quota), the questionnaire sample, though modest, fitted the BBC's own profile at least in terms of age (mean: 52.23 years), gender (45.16% male) and region (highest density: south of England).

Crisell (1994, Chapter 10) capably distils much of the literature of audience theory as it relates to the possible effects of radio broadcasts. He even questions the status of 'listener', thus:

> "...what constitutes a listener?
> Someone who owns, or has access to a radio set?
> Someone who listens to a whole programme?...
> Someone who listens to a minimum proportion of a whole programme (say, 50 per cent)?
> Someone who listens for a minimum amount of time in the day (say, half an hour)?
> Someone who listens for several hours a day but whose listening span corresponds to no complete programme, possibly because she switches between stations?"
> (ibid, 202)

These different levels of listening habit suggest some listeners may be better equipped to decode what they hear than others - however it is for other academics to discover whether regular listening to a particular programme or type of programming would make one more or less reactive or passive in response to what one heard. Certainly, it is not new that broadcasters should claim a distinction between 'authentic' listeners who are somehow representative of the majority and therefore qualified to comment on a

particular programme, and those who are unqualified because they are unrepresentative of 'ordinary' listeners.

When politicians or self-appointed guardians of public morals complain about inappropriate violence, language or sex in broadcasting, the broadcasters often respond that the complainant did not see - and probably would never watch - the offending programme on first transmission, anyway, and that is used as evidence that the material was targeted at a dissimilar audience group who would not have found the material offensive.

Media literacy does involve skills which are transferable between texts and types of text, but the Today audience is likely to include listeners with differing levels of media literacy and although the possibility of differential readings may have skewed the broadcasters' attempts at achieving political balance over the series of programmes, none of this renders the reactions of the sample invalid. However, it seemed reasonable that this research should exclude respondents who would not have listened to Today if it were not for the purpose of completing the questionnaire. This exclusion was not on the basis of media- (or more precisely) Today-literacy, but because it would have been more difficult to distinguish between positive and negative motives.

A whole army of respondents who had altered their early morning routine to listen and report back might have been a far less authentic representation of those who would have heard the programmes otherwise. The regular listener - irrespective of how long they

might normally listen - who volunteered to feed back information to this research, could at least be described as someone who might have been listening anyway, and undertook to assist in some research: the eventual outcome of which might be of further interest to them.

Participants

The likelihood of differential readings among the social actors in the 'reality' being re-presented on Today, necessitated contact with the political parties themselves. The three largest political parties (Conservatives, Labour and Social & Liberal Democrats) were contacted two weeks before the election was declared, and asked for access to the results of their own monitoring of the programmes. One of the main criticisms made later is that the programmes placed too much emphasis on these three parties, to the exclusion of other, alternative perspectives. It could be argued that this research made the same mistake. However, my reason was one of practicality: these three parties were probably the best resourced and a triangulation could be attempted between their perspectives. There was no incumbency upon this researcher to re-present the election in such a way as to further, rather than hinder democracy, but merely to re-present the Today programme's re-presentation of it. In retrospect, the decision was rather apposite.

The Conservative Party claimed it did not have the information I was seeking (letter from Alex Aiken, Head of News, undated but received October 1997).

The smaller and relatively modestly-funded Social & Liberal Democrats certainly had the information I was seeking, intending, they said to keep it until after the next general election. They invited me to their headquarters to view the material (19th February 1998) and I was then allowed an astonishingly unrestricted access to the original General Election Monitoring Forms which were completed by a team of party workers over the election period. They covered a number of different channels - both radio and television - and timeslots: from Sky News's Sunrise, Radio Five Live's breakfast programme and BBC1's Breakfast News to Radio Four's six o'clock news, GMTV, and the BBC's bi-media Election Call. Even an edition of Farming Today had been monitored and the form filed.

Often the writing, produced under time constraints, was hurried, and the time calculations in the margins were sometimes cryptic. In general, though, there were methodological similarities with my own contemporaneous notes: descriptions of the programme content, who was speaking and what was being said, with the monitors' remarks annotated on the texts or as brief summative reports. (On April 23rd, the monitor commented "Has dry mouth"; on April 24th, "Ashdown comes across as a bit of a character".)

Communications Officer Louise Fish (who had worked there during the election campaign) explained that the monitors were volunteers and that Today was covered mainly by one dedicated individual. Spending the whole afternoon, largely alone and unsupervised, in the party's wood-panelled conference room with the large ring-binders

spread out on the tables, I was able to make whatever notes I wished about what I read. It was here that the party had held its London press conferences during the actual election.

The usual Today monitor, probably a journalist, was in two respects atypical: he often wrote his contemporaneous notes on plain lined paper rather than on the forms completed conscientiously by his colleagues, and he also used some shorthand to put information down quickly. (His name was not concealed from me.) This might suggest a greater measure of individuality and that the intended readership for the contemporaneous material was limited - perhaps even to himself. On some occasions, he picked out "KEY POINTS" probably for a wider audience, for example:

> "- Obsessed with Tatton
> - Programme was a policy-free zone
> - Lib Dems and Labour badly discriminated against
> - 14 minutes of Tories talking - less than one minute of either LAB or LIB DEM
> - Des Wilson accused Lib Dem + Labour of cynicism" (9/4/97)

I wrote seven pages of notes - copying down all the interpretative material I could find about Today, for later analysis and comparison with readings from other perspectives. I also read every Media Monitoring Report produced by the night team as part of the early-morning briefing for the fourteen people most central to the running of the campaign. Inevitably, most of this material related to evening and night-time broadcasting. This commentary, however, did provide evidence (if it were needed) within the party of a considerable degree of media literacy and a sense that media representations might have an effect upon the course of the election:

> "The monitor listening to the Brian Hayes phone-in on Radio 5 noted that the consensus of the public was that the Lib Dems were irrelevant to the TV debate, the lone voice piping up for us turning out to be an 11 year old." (2/4/97) (2)
>
> "Liberal Democrat coverage:
> Discussions were had with the Today programme and BBC 9 o'clock about the level of coverage. A chicken featured highly." (3/4/97) (3)

In the time calculations made within the notes, an interesting distinction was drawn between party representatives 'talking' and parties being 'talked about' by some one else - presumably including commentators and other politicians. The timings were further divided by a separate device explained by the annotation: "Circled figures indicate wholly negative coverage." (27/3/97 et alia)

This blunt yet significant method of analysis allowed for none of the differentiation between shades of party allegiance discussed in Chapter 1, although the smaller Liberal Democratic party has by definition fewer mavericks and malcontents within its ranks than the bigger Conservative and Labour parties - with their deposed front-benchers, pro- and anti-European factions, sidelined pretenders to the leadership and so on. The Liberal Democrat voice was perhaps considered so united as to not require such differentiation. Their own analysis, though, as to the others 'talking about' them was limited to qualitative statements among the 'KEY POINTS'. (For example: "Robin Oakley very positive on LD's 'tax the price of civilised society'" (2/4/97)) There is certainly scope for greater sophistication in their monitoring methodology in the future, if they consider it worthwhile in terms of resources. Their textual analysis of Today during the election, though, provided a lot of very useful data which is considered in later chapters.

The Labour Party did not reply to letters before or immediately after the election, but telephone calls in early 1998 secured a more promising response. Data was available, but it later emerged that access to it was not to be *allowed.*

Norms of discourse analysis

Beyond the obvious, time and party label analysis, some methodologies which have suited other commentators in the past were deployed - and thus the works of Schlesinger, Burns, Scannell, Elliott and others confer by implication some of their own legitimacies upon this.

Perhaps with some justification, McNair saw an intention in such literature to demonstrate the existence of bias in the media, which - although this researcher would claim merely a desire to investigate such a possibility - often came to similar conclusions as my Chapter 1:

> "...the 'objectivity assumption' remains powerful and prevalent amongst journalists. Thus, media sociologists have sought to 'prove' bias, by means of content analysis." (McNair, 1994, 33)

His critique (ibid, 34) identified content analysis by others as revealing a tendency in the media to reflect the interests of the advantaged over those of the disadvantaged. The dangers for anyone attempting such an analysis were stark: as exemplified by the experience of the Glasgow University Media Group whose monitoring of television news output over a six month period in 1975 was 'both influential and controversial':

> "The broadcasters themselves rejected its findings (at least in public), while every anti-establishment group with a grudge against 'the meejah' used it as a weapon with which to beat the journalists. Consequently it was the subject of a sustained counter-attack, led by... the intellectual right... (who) set out to prove it was the GUMG who were ideologically biased... (and their) evidence could not... be trusted." (ibid, 34)

However, while their motivations and perspectives might have been characterised by their detractors as inherently 'Marxist', their methodology was perhaps less unattractive to right wing opinion, as McNair describes the Conservative Party's later borrowing of much of the GUMG's approach for its own Media Monitoring Unit (ibid, 68). 'Comparative content analysis' was used to produce the so-called 'Tebbit dossier' which the then Conservative Chairman claimed showed the BBC had been less than impartial in its coverage of the American bombing of Libya in 1987.

McNair's (very useful) chronology of content studies concludes (ibid, 38) that the focus of interest has in many cases changed from attempts to 'prove' the existence of bias.

> "Consequently, media sociologists have turned increasingly ...(to) investigating the factors involved in the production of journalistic accounts of the world".

This was quickly seen as a desirable further dimension to this research, illuminating, in turn, the influence on Today of the spin doctors, the party press conferences and the rest of the media. Previous literature contributed, then, to this. For example, Golding and Elliott (1976, 16) explored the relationship between news and comment:

> "...broadcasting journalism had come to terms with the highly regulated distinction between fact and comment which it was constrained to observe by its centrality, close relationship with government, and constitutional position... the

> distinction between news and comment was institutionalized in organizational form by the separation of news and current affairs."

Likewise, Schlesinger's institutional discoveries about the production processes, though dated (1978, 247), illuminated that relationship between news and current affairs:

> "While an absolute distinction between fact and comment is philosophically dubious, its institutional reality in the BBC is inescapable...
>
> News is supposedly about fact alone, current affairs coverage providing the forum for explicit evaluation, commentary, contextualization, informed speculation."

Thus was established the basis for comparison between the often different agendas of the news bulletins contained within Today and the bulk of the programme.

Earlier literature afforded the opportunity to compare methods of transcription and analysis of broadcast texts (more follows later on transcription). Martin Montgomery (in Scannell (ed.), 1991, 139) provided an overview of discourse analysis while that and other chapters exemplified approaches to more detailed study of speech on radio in general and even election coverage (albeit with reference to 1987).

The latter chapter originated in the Strathclyde Linguistics and Politics Group (an apposite juxtaposition of two often quite separate disciplines). It provided a number of very useful models for comparative content analysis, arguing as it did that

> "...what our research seems to indicate is the long-term continuity of certain common-sense discourses, imaginary scenarios and popular metaphors, which are deeply rooted in the political process. Some of these discourses (e.g. 'The Bully Script') have been in circulation for over a century. In this respect television continues to reproduce a type of 'public forum', in which politicians and the press

> also participate, and which has a very long history of decidedly detrimental effects for the articulation of progressive political positions." (ibid, 116-7)

Their identification of 'common-sense narrative frameworks', ('the bully script' among them,) as devices used by politicians - often for the pejoration of a policy or a position - was helpful in the classification of elements of discourse. A more contemporary example from 1997 might be the repeated articulation of the 'sleaze' charge against the Conservatives. The 'sleaze script', (that the superficial evidence of corruption in the Conservatives was symptomatic of a more widespread problem,) then guided the discourse of numerous opposition politicians, media commentators and outlets, and consequently BBC reporters and presenters.

Similarly, the identification of key signifiers (for example, 'the Tartan Tax') which 'organise the developing discourse' (ibid, 111) and the perceived development of metaphor and metaphorical transfer in the Strathclyde analysis proved relevant to Today in 1997 (again, pugilistic language often dominated scriptwriting as Labour "made advances and the Tories were in retreat - not least in their 'battlebuses').

Intertextuality

If the Today programme as a re-presentation of the world including the course of the general election campaign can be seen as a construct of the production team, the validity of that construct might legitimately be measured against other texts created by other producers. Hence the close comparisons made with the 8am news bulletin on Classic FM.

This alternative construct was targeted at a similar demographic to the Today audience - roughly: national, up-market, professional, middle aged. Broadcast as the Today programme is in full swing, (just after the half way point of most of the programmes,) the 8am bulletin is compiled from the resources of Independent Radio News (now a part-subsidiary of ITN) after usually 'light' editing by a duty editor/newsreader at Classic FM itself.

Since any competent news editor will defend his right to prioritise the available stories - there being few absolutes in terms of information hierarchy - it is difficult to argue that any one bulletin on either Radio 4 or Classic FM was itself 'correct' and the other 'incorrect'. This was explained by McNair, thus:

> "News and journalism, in short, are social *constructions*. The point (or something similar) has been made so often in the media studies literature that it has become a commonplace, but it remains central to the sociology of journalism: news is never a mere recording or reporting of the world 'out there' , but a synthetic, value-laden account which carries within it the dominant assumptions and ideas of the society within which it is produced." (McNair, 1994, 30)

However, how the BBC's own 'social construction' broadcast at 8am differed from that offered by its close rival at the same time was of interest: and the analysis proved a useful one because of the trends discovered - most notably, but not exclusively, the BBC's dogged refusal to lead on opinion polls: a refusal born in the wake of their 1992 election coverage and the importance given by them to a rogue exit poll.

Whatever the current state was of the institutional division between news and current affairs (as explored by Schlesinger, 1978, 247), the Today programme items originated and developed around the bulletins by its own production team, were to some extent a reflection of their perception of the 'world' out there, that was being reported to that audience by the newsroom. The whole of the BBC's 'social construction' that made up the Today programmes during the election campaign was influenced by the guidelines and news values that also shaped the bulletins. One can only speculate as to the differences which would have been apparent if a different set of news values and guidelines were being applied.

To measure the Radio Four output against that of another BBC network would, by contrast, have been largely self-defeating: by definition, no other BBC outlet is targeted at the same audience, and so their respective 'news values' would necessarily have been different. Comparison with television news would also have been less valid, as the latter is often driven by pictures, its agenda being distorted by either their absence or if they are available, their likely impact. The print media, with their longer lead times and their different mode of delivery served only as an indication of what was being reported by more overtly partial organisations: the Daily Telegraph and the Guardian were more closely monitored than the others, each one as a convenient record of analysis from right and left-wing standpoints respectively. (4)

Intratextuality

That the whole of each Today programme should be examined, though, seemed axiomatic: it would not have been credible to exclude parts of the programmes from the analysis in case elements which could later be argued to be 'balancing' or 'unbalancing' occurred - those elements would have been heard by the audience even if in the 'wrong' places. Interestingly, during the election campaign presenter John Humphrys perceived a clearer demarcation between the political and the apolitical:

> "I wondered if I'd become politicianed-out, especially doing On the Record (BBC1) as well. Some people will be fed up, but they don't have to listen. We took the conscious decision that less than half the programme should be political, but we have to report the campaign in detail." (Radio Times, April 1997)

That decision over the ratio of 'political' to 'apolitical' was one that merited examination. However much the programme makers might wish to contend that elements of the broadcasts should have been left out of the analysis, because they were apolitical, to ignore the Thought for the Day talks because they were the religious slot, or the sport, business or weather because they, too, operated in discrete, apolitical worlds would, again, have been to deny the polysemy of verbal expression.

Prior to the election, presenter Anna Ford prefixed an interview with John Butterfield MP thus:

> "The private member's Bill to harmonise time in Britain and the continent is unlikely to become law as the Government has decided not to support it - of course it's fiercely contested in Scotland - but *putting politics aside*, is it right to tamper with nature and time..." (Today, 19/12/96, my emphasis)

To some, the very notion that one can 'put politics aside' when interviewing a professional politician - and hence, afford him airtime which by default is not being given to another - will seem absurd. To a politician, merely attracting publicity can be an end in itself, as it can help create or reinforce an impression of being effective, hard working, a good communicator and so on. Performing in so public an arena as the prestigious Today programme is to perform to a number of audiences - the constituency, party managers, and other media producers ever keen to identify interesting subjects are among them. That the parliamentary Bill was soon to be voted upon by MPs, some of whom would have been responding to lobbying by constituents, pressure groups and others, rendered the interview material in political terms.

Of course, spoken discourse can arguably be less considered than a written treatise: in spontaneous dialogue one's words can sometimes betray an ignorance of their likely effect, whether or not to the point of absurdity. Ms Ford did cause one of the greatest controversies of the 1997 campaign when, on 1st April, she described an Archers (Radio Four) character, Simon Pemberton, as "a bit of a shit".

The introduction to the item about time harmonisation was likely to have been scripted, as are most 'cues' or lead-ins. The presence of a script does not, of course, preclude the possibility of the ad-lib - and it is in departing from the script that often the biggest blunders may be made.

Thus arose the question as to whether or not a distinction should be drawn in the subsequent textual analysis between apparently considered, scripted speech and the impromptu. This would, perhaps, 'forgive' the spontaneous remark while implicating only the prepared. This would have been not only impractical, but undesirable.

In order to genuinely distinguish between the script and the ad-lib, either I would have had to be there to perform the role of observer or I would have had to have access to all the scripts used on the programme. While the production team under the previous editorship of Roger Mosey had been outwardly supportive of my initial approaches for information about their work, it was made clear then that there were boundaries which would not be crossed, (for instance, my suggestion to Andrew Hawken of an anonymous poll of the presenters' voting intentions was politely - and perhaps not surprisingly - refused). Although I did not request observer status or access to all the programme scripts, by 1997 I had already decided to disengage from all contact with the programme team until after the period was over, in order to avoid any possibility of further corrupting the research data by my presence.

To draw a distinction between script and ad-lib would otherwise have involved a difficult and probably controversial study of paralinguistic clues, (for instance, inflection,) as to the precise origin of each word or phrase. To adequately render the results of such a study on paper would have been problematic although not impossible - but it could have disproportionately consumed both time and space which would otherwise have been more productively spent in the political rather than the linguistic paradigm.

While such an analysis would undoubtedly provide worthwhile potential for further research elsewhere, to attempt it now would actually have been to miss a central point about media study. If anything that is broadcast has any effect on its audience, it is the icon itself which carries a message, not the degree of reflection behind its inception. Put bluntly, for a broadcaster to be able to disclaim responsibility for something that was broadcast, on the grounds of absence of reflection, would be to claim irresponsibility as a right. (Carelessness is not a very viable defence in a libel action, for instance, and so trainers in broadcasting skills often teach that broadcasters should "engage their brain before opening their mouths".) What matters is what is broadcast - and however carefully considered, even the previously written treatise can with the benefit of hindsight appear inappropriate to the author, as exemplified by Len Masterman's confession:

> "...I now find the unconscious sexism in the language of my earlier book, Teaching About Television, written just eight years ago, so offensive as to be virtually unreadable." (1985, 211)

Authorship and gender

Not wishing to render this text unreadable to any degree, I, too, was confronted with the dilemma as to how to avoid being offensively sexist, while managing to eschew the awkward linguistic gymnastics offered by some authors as their compromise in this era of relative enlightenment. However, the world is evidently not populated exclusively with females anymore than Masterman's earlier use of only masculine forms (he, his, himself) might have suggested the opposite. Conversely, recent years have witnessed a backlash

against what is sometimes seen as over-zealous 'political correctness' - if most often among right-wing newspaper columnists.

The need for a middle way moved a Guardian leader writer to comment thus:

> "Inventing a non-gender specific pronoun to embrace men and women has so far proved elusive. The obvious solution would be to take one letter from "his" and insert it in "her" (or vice versa) to produce "hir"." (11/3/98)

Even to that writer, "hir" solution didn't sound right. Consequently, where possible in this text the singular has become the plural: "reporters themselves" being preferred to "a reporter himself or herself". Where plurality is inappropriate, the singular has been preserved - although an unscientific attempt has been made to apportion gender roles approximately equally throughout the text. Perhaps some future social scientist will discover a plethora of interesting connotations here and (he or she will) inevitably draw some conclusions, given that the masculinity of the author is not open to negotiation.

Transcription

Inherent in any discourse analysis is the problem of transcription. While both the syntax and the vocabulary of oral expression can often be rendered successfully on the page, the existence of paralinguistic characteristics in speech does impede the neutral transmission of spoken language via a word-processor and a photocopier. Although there is relatively little literature, some linguists such as Cook (1995) and Jefferson (1985) have problematised the issue. In summary, there is no standard method of transcription:

individual academics must choose or devise the approach which best suits their own research.

The technique adopted in Scannell (1991) is to preface the analysis with a key to symbols - which, in a paradigm content to recognise and legitimise the concept of the convention, does display some logic, especially given the constraints of book publishing. Those constraints include copyright, finance and the physical format by which the work is disseminated. Scannell indicates a rising intonation with '?', the stretching of a vowel or consonant sound by colons, and a terminal falling intonation with a full stop.

Here, though, is another double hermeneutic: any act of transcription is also one of interpretation - as is the consumer's act of reading the written text subsequently produced. For example, in practice a rising intonation may well simply denote a question - or it may instead be an expression of surprise or even irony. Scannell's symbol - ? - does not permit a distinction to be drawn by either interpreter. Furthermore, he puts in upper case words which are said with 'extreme stress', but the scale upon which such an extreme is measured is not explained. Scannell does recognise some of the inadequacies of the sign system, while ignoring others:

> "( ) If empty, indicates indecipherable utterance;
> otherwise best guess at what was said."

Yet, in Scannell 'heh' indicates a 'laugh token'.

Because a laugh may connote much more than innocent amusement, one symbol for all laughter is clearly inappropriate here. To devise a system of symbols which offer such a diversity of expression that incontrovertible anchoring of all paralinguistic meaning may be achieved, may not be impossible (Johansson, 1994) but would the use of such a system be desirable? Deciphering a piece of text which necessitates the mastery of a hundred symbols or more would become tedious for the reader - and the depth of detail may not always be pertinent to the point being made. Thus a rationale might prevail for using a number of modes of transcription, depending on the level of paralinguistic detail necessary at a given time.

The University of London regulations on thesis submission permit the inclusion of 'illustrative material', secured in a pouch inside the back cover. This is permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, which waives normal copyright restrictions in the context of private study and examination.

To have overlooked such an opportunity and then to have engaged in often tortuous transcription of paralinguistic elements in the broadcasts would have been time-consuming and unnecessary. Therefore, the standard adopted throughout, has been to transcribe speech in terms of its linguistic (lexical and syntactical) content only. Where the text makes some point about paralinguistics, (such as imputing meaning to a rise or fall in intonation,) the reader is referred to a numbered item on the accompanying compact disc. Many programme extracts have been included on the compact disc, anyway, for greater clarity and interest.

A question mark in transcribed material indicates merely that a question appears to have been asked. Interruption by latching (immediate follow-on by a second speaker to the words of a first) has been denoted by the words of the second speaker being *preceded* by an exclamation mark. Where the first speaker continues, so both speak simultaneously, this has been described, depending on where the interest lies. (For example, Chapter 6 begins with an analysis of interviewer speech, rather than interviewee responses, so van Leeuwen's more complicated graphical representation is unnecessary (1999, 67).) Pauses, coughs and throat-clearing have also been described. This means that where a mood (for example, temper) is discerned and considered relevant, readers can hear it for themselves on the compact disc. Thus, by including recordings, I have attempted to achieve greater transparency through the lifting of two hermeneutic layers.

(1) Mainly used by programme producers for recruiting members of the public who have specific experiences to relate.

(2) The TV debate referred to must be the proposed televised debate of party leaders, or the wider debate as to whether two or more party leaders should take part in it.

(3) Various animal and bird costumes were worn at politicians' walkabouts - usually by uninvited hecklers wanting to make a political point.

(4) Each declared open, if not always unequivocal, support for either the Conservatives or Labour respectively during the campaign.

CHAPTER FOUR: AUDIENCE READINGS OF TODAY

"I... will be a first-time voter at the general election, but I have been extremely interested in politics for several years."

"I have considerable experience of radio, being a presenter on London Network Radio at the Whittington Hospital."

"I consider myself to be reasonably politically aware and always vote in elections. However I am something of a floating voter and do not always vote for the same party. I am not a member of any political organisation."

"As a background to my qualifications for this work, I can inform you that I was a former Labour Leader of Liverpool City Council so I have a good knowledge of electioneering."

"As an articulate man whose heart and upbringing was in the Rhondda Valley - son of a miner (dead at 46) - and a habitual Labour voter - as my father's family flirted with Communism - I feel I have a unique outlook on the sway of the South Wales Valley constituencies."

"I would like to give my reactions to election coverage by those opera-loving twits on Radio 4, who seem to exist in a media bubble so far removed from real-life, not unlike the grey man who carps on about how hard life was in Brixton. I am a 48 year-old man who has been out of work for 12 months and subjected to the ordeals of Jobcentres, Job seminars, Job Clubs and the other measures used by government to conceal the social divisions of Britain."

extracts from letters in response to the
Radio Times Noticeboard appeal.

The main instrument for the study of audience readings of the broadcasts was the questionnaire, distributed to a group of Radio Times readers as detailed in the previous chapter. It is reproduced as the Appendix, and some of the main findings produced are represented in the several charts of quantitative analysis which follow.

The diversity of the set of questionnaire respondents was unexpected, yet immediately apparent, as evidenced by some of the more colourful comments extracted above.

Clearly, broadcasters' notions of 'typical' listeners are in essence reductive, ignoring as they surely must extra layers of identity and experience such as one's political career, one's father's exposure to the grim realities of mining or one's simple antipathy to opera. Some of these respondents felt a real need to justify their suitability to take part in this research, whether the justification was experiential or demographic. Many more others simply expressed a willingness to take part. In fact, (as discussed in Chapter 3,) the raw demographic breakdown of this strange coalition was very similar to that of the wider Today audience, as follows:

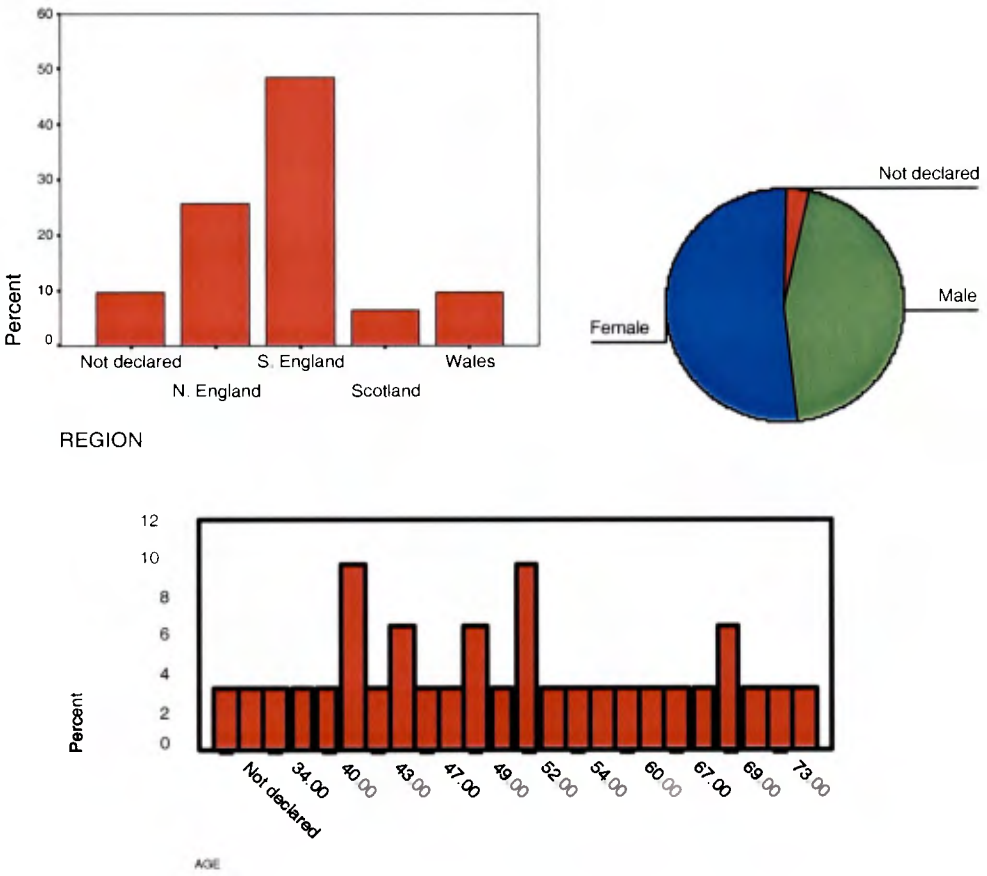

FIGURE 1: Region, gender, and age of questionnaire sample.

The completed questionnaires revealed - or at least claimed - a high level of media literacy among some respondents. For example, some offered their own summative assessments of Today:

> "Overall the Today interviewers' bias was against fudge - so Labour's people generally got pressed harder. But this was their fault, not bias on the part of interviewers."
>
> "The Today programme was less effective during the Election campaign - it tried to be even handed yet, on some days, it became pro-pro CON or pro-pro LAB. I felt the guests generally manipulated the topic coverage esp Dobson and Harman when they were featured. Obviously it worked to their advantage but the audience lost out."
>
> "...we became very concerned at apparent bias on several occasions involving Michael Heseltine, and wrote to one of the presenters. To our surprise and pleasure we had a long thoughtful reply."
>
> "Overall Today did its usual professional job, covering the issues, providing entertaining vox-pop pieces (especially James Naughtie's progress north).... they coped admirably with the sheer length of the campaign."

The voting patterns of these respondents also suggested a sophistication often ignored by psephologists. When commentators study opinion polls of population samples in excess of a thousand, this sophistication in individuals necessarily becomes minutiae which is easily overlooked. Just as the stereotype is rarely transferable to individuals, so does classification by voting intention eschew detail: some of which can be highly relevant.

Interestingly, the first respondent did vote Labour, despite his negative perception of their politicians - his allegiance was to the Liberal Democrats but he voted tactically against the Conservatives. The second was a disaffected Conservative who voted Referendum, and the third a 'lifelong' socialist who voted Labour. That from their various perspectives they should each make differential - and sometimes mutually exclusive - readings should

be no surprise to any student of the media, but it was the range of reactions and the explanations offered which proved interesting. Positioning of listeners clearly affects reading: otherwise how could overall impressions be of bias towards competing politicians?

Using a very simple measure of voting intentions at the start of the campaign and votes cast in 1992 and 1997 to measure positioning by party allegiance, the sample group defined themselves as follows:

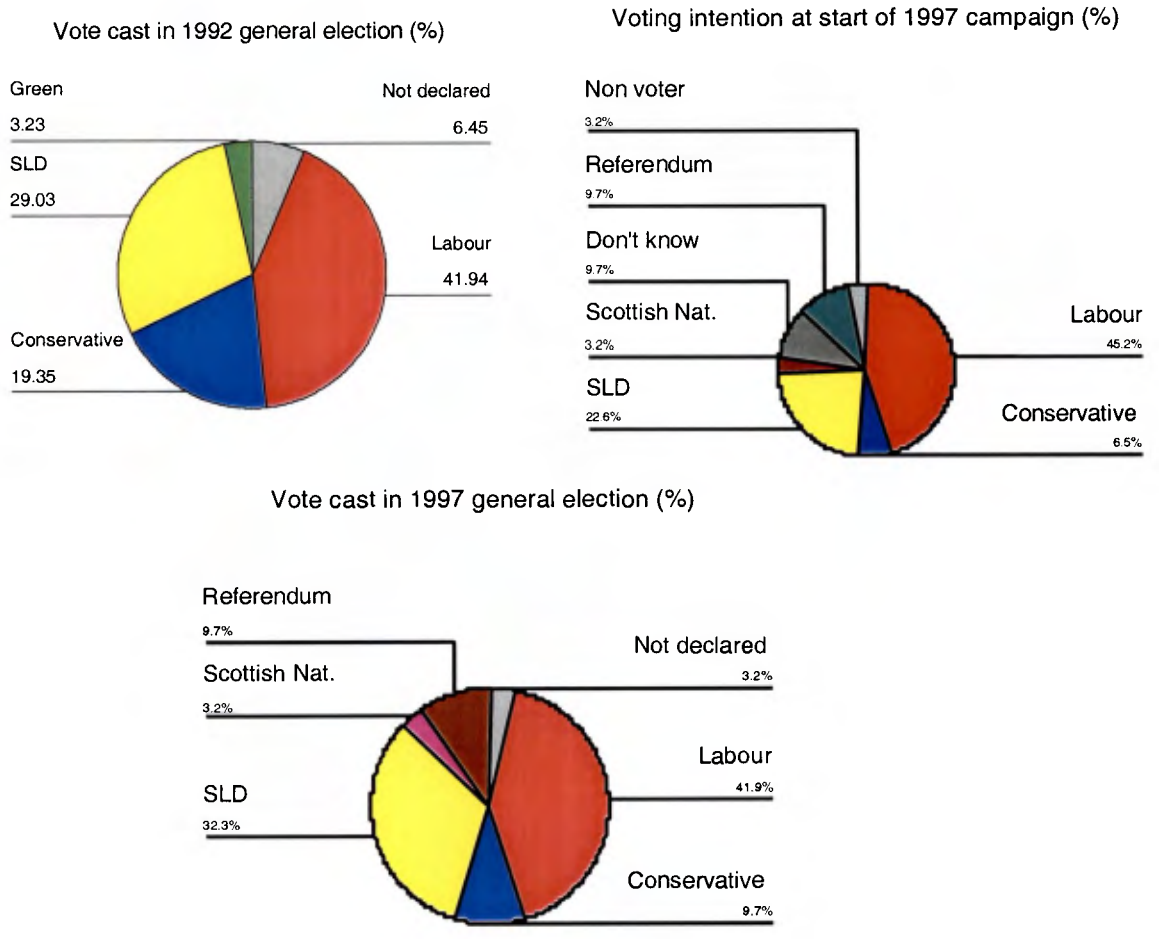

FIGURE 2: Respondents' declared votingrecord/intentions in 1992 and 1997.

This research is *not* claiming the questionnaire data is necessarily generalisable to the entire population, as opinion pollsters would expect a much larger sample of at least a thousand. However, as well as their similarity in demographic terms, the profile of votes cast by the sample group in 1997 matches quite closely the BBC's own analysis of the Radio Four audience as being broadsheet readers, "particularly the Guardian" (see Chapter 3). While Conservatives were underrepresented in the sample, compared to the total number of votes cast, a predominance of Guardian reading would suggest a similar skew among the Today audience.

Focus group research often being conducted with much smaller numbers, and the fact that this sample is not, then, wildly unrepresentative, could indicate that some responses can be assumed to represent substantial numbers of the Today audience. Certainly, in common with much research in the social sciences, the responses of these individual social actors were a source of some interest.

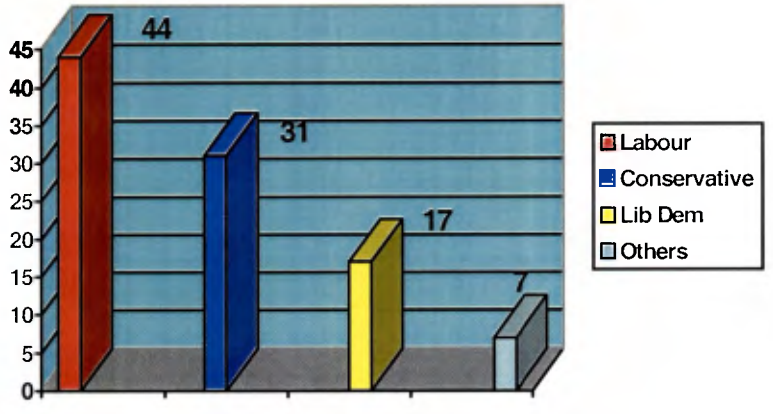

FIGURE 3: Total votes cast in the 1997 general election (per cent).
Source: The Guardian

Opinion polling over the period did reveal some shifting in party allegiance as, for example, Labour's lead fell back from its initial high of 28% to 13% (Gallup). However, again apparently in common with the wider electorate, relatively few of the questionnaires revealed voting intentions had changed by May 1st 1997 (29%). Among those who did change was the fourth respondent quoted above who changed from Labour to Liberal Democrat because she considered Labour to have moved too far to the right. In all, one third of those sampled who were planning to vote Labour said they migrated for similar reasons although the party did acquire votes from smaller parties and don't knows.

Not a single respondent cited anything heard on the Today programme specifically as the reason for changing or not changing the vote cast, although several referred to general party policies or presentation. (Answers to question 7 suggested 16.15% thought their vote had been affected by something on the programme.) However, apart from the Guardian, no other part of the media was singled out either, even though the Labour party's success has often been attributed by political commentators and journalists to the changing allegiances of a number of newspapers.

Again, many responses suggested high levels of media/political literacy:

> "I heard nothing from Major or Blair to bring me back to the Conservative agenda." (a 1992 Conservative voter changing to Referendum)

"I am a socialist and there was no realistic alternative, but I had to think about it." (voted Labour)

"...the infighting and sleaze in the Tory party and then as Labour's policies began to (sic) those of the Tories I decided to go for common sense and honesty..." (a 1992 Conservative, intending to vote Labour then changing to Liberal Democrat)

"...mainly during last week of campaign JM gave impression of telling the truth - more human - rather than TB's almost false bonhomie and man of the people act - form over substance." (a 1992 Conservative planning not to vote in 1997 but finally voting Conservative)

"I got heartily fed up with the personal abuse/lack of cohesion/dignity shown by the two main parties. Paddy Ashdown was impressive throughout, as was our local candidate." (a Labour voter turning to the Lib Dems)

"I believe in socialist, rather than capitalist principles (so why am I voting Labour?)" (a Labour voter)

Some explanations were disarmingly honest in their simplicity, for example:

"Nothing changed my views, if anything, the campaign made my (sic) more than ever not to change. I could never vote for any other party." (a Conservative voter)

"I am a member of the SNP." (a Scottish National Party voter)

Yet, a small number were confusing, for example:

"This vote is heartfelt and tactical." (a Lib Dem voter)

Question 3

Although all the respondents had strong views to express at least somewhere on the questionnaire, when asked about the Today programme in general, nobody was prepared to 'agree very strongly' with the proposition that the programme was biased. Only 15% chose the second category: 'agree' (albeit not very strongly). The five-point Likert scale

used afforded considerable equivocation, but the neutral response 'neither agree nor disagree' was chosen by only 22.6%. A convincing 61.3% of the sample chose to disagree with the proposition, 47.3% of whom actually disagreed very strongly.

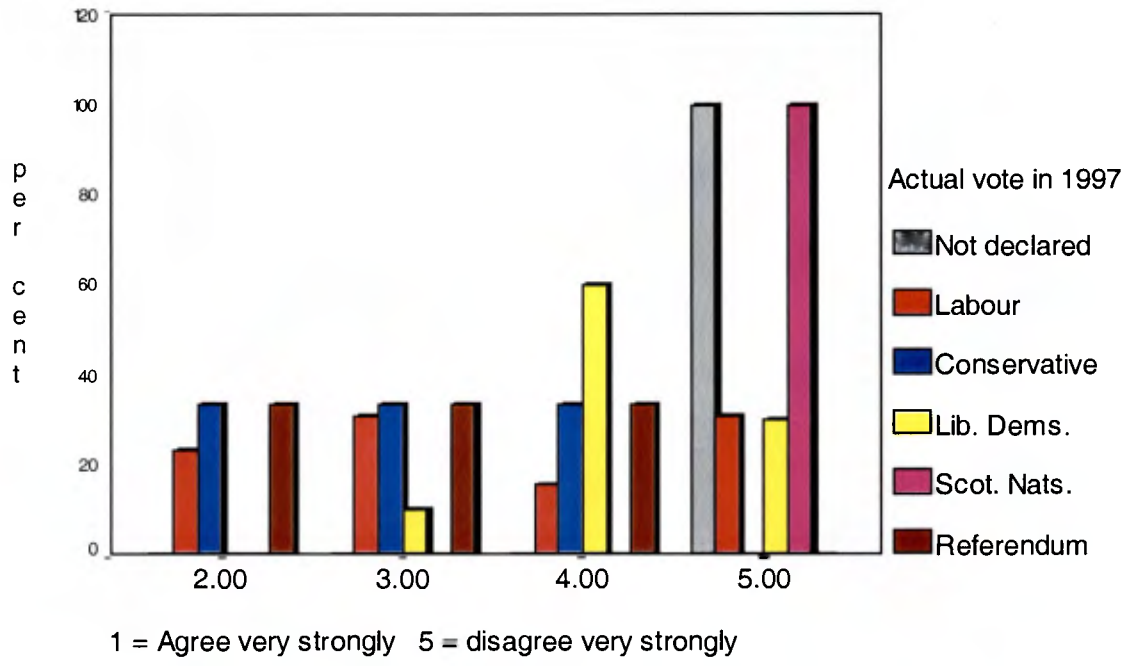

FIGURE 4: Reactions to the proposition that, overall, Today was biased (shown by percentage of vote cast for each party).

This result may to some extent have been affected by loyalty towards the programme or its presenters. Alternatively, the reasons for such a reaction may not be apparent - for example, one respondent disagreed very strongly with the proposition and added this comment:

> "It seems to be (sic) that the questions that are asked are the wrong ones for the politicians to answer." (a SNP voter)

Here lies exposed the essential inadequacy of any questionnaire - that the questions asked are not always the right questions, or that they prompt the revelation of only partial

information. If a question had asked whether Today was biased not politically, but against common sense, the response might well have been at the other end of the scale.

Several respondents revealed they had noticed the adversarial nature of political interviews, and said the polarity between broadcaster and politician might account for any accusations of bias. One who disagreed (although not very strongly) in response to question 3 commented thus:

> "... the interviews with political figures are equally rigorous and... the interviewers should actually be *tougher* with them about answering the question set. It might seem like political bias, but it's because the politicians don't answer the question." (a Labour voter on each occasion surveyed)

Incumbency was cited as a likely cause, among some of those who perceived bias: another three-times Labour voter agreed (although not very strongly) with the proposition, saying:

> "Any interviewer must push Govt Ministers of the day into explanations of on-going policy. Perhaps we have had a Conservative Govt for so long that interviewers often appear to support the Opposition."

Having identical voting records, yet making diametrically opposed assessments of this one aspect of the programmes, the two respondents above themselves provide evidence of the likelihood of differential readings even within demographic sub-groups. Their separation by geography (approximately 150 miles) and age (26 years) could alone account for their different perspectives, but it is perhaps more likely that other experiential and cultural factors also influenced their opinions.

Of course, again it is possible that the respondents' readings were simply irrational. For example, a three-times Liberal Democrat voter disagreed that the programme was biased (although not very strongly) then commented that:

> "The only bias I can generally detect is towards opposition to the party in power *because* they are the party in power, not necessarily because of their policies. Possibly Ashdown had a slightly easier ride."

That this respondent 'detected bias' and then disagreed that the programme was biased seems to defy logic, yet it might be explained by either the loyalty factor (to the programme) or an intention - whether conscious or not - to distort the survey's findings. It was perhaps unexpected that a Liberal Democrat supporter should consider that party's leader to have been given an 'easier' interview than the others, but individuals' allegiances to parties or politicians do require another act of positioning: placing themselves somewhere along a continuum which extends from fanatic to floating voter. The rigour with which the party leaders were interviewed is considered later, but it may also be that Ashdown simply did have an easier 'ride'.

A 1992 Liberal voter turned Referendum supporter also disagreed (not very strongly) in response to question 3, but then acknowledged the multi-dimensional nature of bias, thus:

> "The interviews are nearly always challenging... but the 3 main parties plus the Referendum Party are the only ones interviewed, so perhaps Today is biased in favour of those four, and leave out the fringe parties."

Far from being irrational, then, this respondent (and perhaps the previous one) has made assumptions about the definition of the bias being asked about, responded accordingly on

the Likert scale, and then offered a further definition of bias worthy of a different, perhaps, preferred response on the scale. If that is the case, her preferred response is not accounted for in Figure 4 above. It is interesting to consider, too, what assumptions some respondents may, like her, have made about the question asked, about the researcher's own definition of 'bias' and what they were being asked to report on. This is the double hermeneutic Giddens (1984) discussed (see my Chapter 3). (A further surprise is that a Referendum Party supporter should appear to have considered her party to have received parity of treatment with what, inevitably, she herself called the 'three main parties'.)

A 'life-long' liberal and three-times Liberal Democrat voter was similarly equivocal, disagreeing very strongly with the proposition in question 3 and then not only identifying bias in favour of the "two big parties" but also attributing it to the "...power they have to put pressure on the BBC. Unfortunately this ignores regional variations."

This cross-referencing, then, of responses on the Likert scale with related qualitative comment does suggest a higher level of unreliability in question 3 - arguably the most important 'headline' question in the whole questionnaire. Less superficially, though, it also lends weight to this whole research area: the question of bias is evidently problematic - understanding of what constitutes bias is not universal and individual readings which confirm or deny the presence of bias are not always incontrovertible.

Of the smaller number who said via the Likert scale they perceived bias in Today generally, they were more likely (ratio 3:1) to vote for an Opposition party than for the

incumbent Conservatives. This greater tendency among anti-Government voters to perceive bias can be reconciled with not only the 'stopwatch' calculations in later chapters, but also such individual explanations as were offered via the questionnaire. For example, the ruling party had a more recent record in office to be scrutinised, or they were in a position to apply political pressure on the BBC - but these two explanations are, of course, mutually exclusive.

One very simple explanation for some listeners' perceptions of bias could be political defensiveness or even party paranoia - for example, one committed Conservative commented that: "I do feel that when I do listen, the presenters are left wing". Few respondents offered such unsophisticated accounts of their perceptions, though.

Question 4

This question invited respondents to offer judgements about individual presenters. The choice of presenter was left to them and in this way a possibility of reflexivity was excluded from the questionnaire design. The presenters were not 'prioritised' in any way by the question - so no hierarchy of relative importance, professional competence or even researcher malevolence could be construed from a prior arrangement of the names.

Only 6.45% of the responses identified each of the programme's five anchors - although space was allowed for three analyses, respondents were invited to use a continuation sheet if necessary. The three most regularly appearing presenters, James Naughtie, John Humphrys and Sue MacGregor were assessed by almost two thirds of the sample, while

much smaller numbers reported on Anna Ford and Alex Brodie. The rest preferred not to report on individuals. However, all of those who abstained from question 4 did answer question 3 and the other general questions about themselves and about interviewing styles, so this lower response rate might be explained in some cases by an unwillingness to personalise their comments. As all but one question 4 abstainer had already denied bias existed in the programme generally, though, it could simply be that they considered the next question redundant.

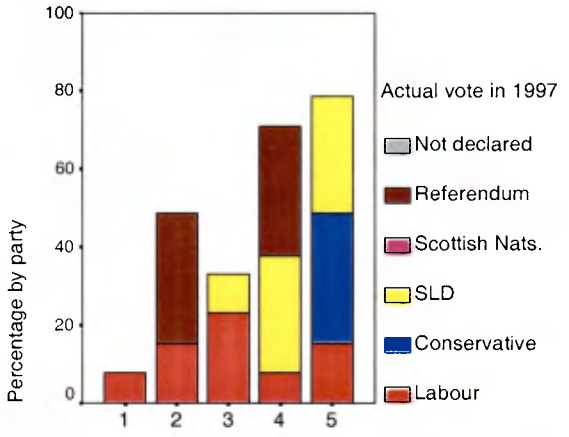

FIGURE 5: Respondent perceptions of bias in John Humphrys ("Presenter was biased": 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

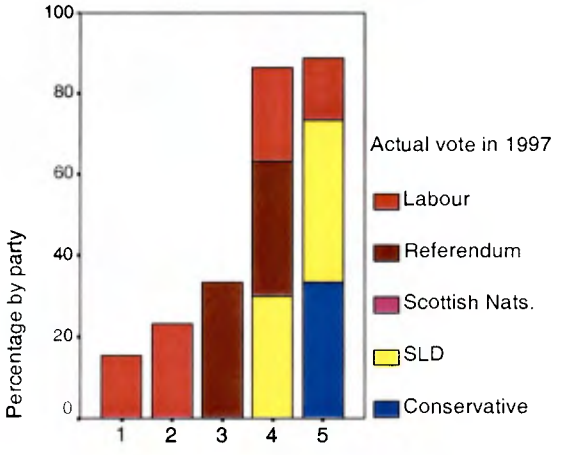

FIGURE 6: Respondent perceptions of bias in James Naughtie ("Presenter was biased": 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

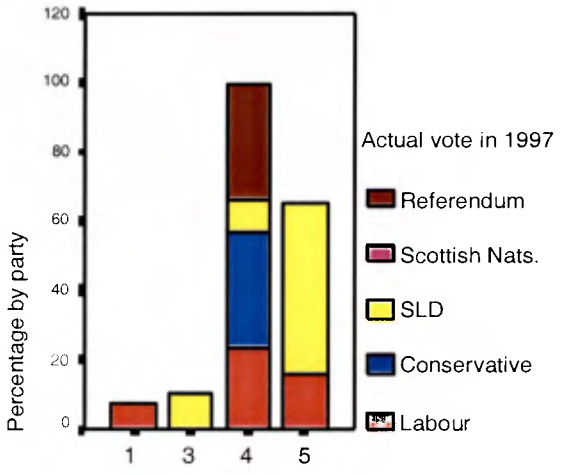

FIGURE 7: Respondent perceptions of bias in Sue MacGregor ("Presenter was biased": 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

The analysis above reveals proportionately far less equivocation over James Naughtie and Sue MacGregor than over the Today programme generally. The suggestion that John Humphrys might be biased was neither agreed nor disagreed with by the largest number of respondents - and they were broadly in line with the response to question 3. Interestingly, Humphrys is cited in earlier chapters as a more controversial interviewer than, for example, James Naughtie. Far more said the presenters were unbiased than agreed with the proposition.

On the negative side, here again were irregularities: one 49 year-old Labour voter agreed very strongly that James Naughtie was biased, and then wrote the comment "Very even-handed in most interviews". Almost all the other respondents seemed to understand the system because there was greater consistency elsewhere between rating and comment.

The question did allow some discrimination between presenters. For example, another 49 year-old who voted Labour agreed very strongly with the proposition that John Humphries was biased, adding: "Too 'chummy' with Conservatives. Argumentative/interrupts with Labour/Lib Dems/Scot Nat". He disagreed (not very strongly) that James Naughtie was biased, however, adding that he "Has the Brian Redhead ability to pursue the weasel-words that politicians use." Anna Ford was rated 1 without comment.

The sporadic nature of this kind of audience reading is illustrated by a 61 year-old Labour voter who rated Naughtie a 2, as "...the person more acceptable to the Conservative hierarchy and can be trusted not to be too aggressive towards them". That same respondent rated John Humphrys 3 and described him as "...certainly aggressive but this is his job and way of coping (with interviewees)"

Differences in age and location between the two Labour voters, again, are unlikely to be the sole reasons for their differing opinions. It is possible that their different listening experiences may of course account for their different impressions of the two interviewers, but both respondents did report their usual listening times to be roughly similar, and they did complete questionnaire reports on some common items. It is most likely that this kind of judgement is so subjective that even heard from broadly similar positions, different individuals will persist in making highly individual readings of the same radio texts.

Some responses to question 4 revealed a sensitivity to paralinguistics (as discussed in Chapter 3). For example, a 69 year-old Green party sympathiser commented on John Humphrys, thus:

> "...his opinion shows more in the tone of his farewells - ironic if he doesn't like them, incredulous if he's got nowhere, polite if he agrees with them - but he usually has a go at most people."

The final qualification at the end of her assessment earned Humphrys a rating of 3. That same respondent considered James Naughtie (rating: 4) to be "more even handed altogether - quite difficult, sometimes, to know what he does think", and Sue MacGregor (rating: 3) was "more inclined to deference than anything else, although I felt she changed a bit..."

Some chose to identify a single presenter, perhaps out of frustration with that individual - for example:

> "James Naughtie, 2, Frequently allowed Conservative politicians to end interviews with as long as two minutes, uninterrupted party political broadcasts." (a Labour voter)

Another Labour voter discerned in Sue MacGregor a difference in approach towards different interviewees:

> "She takes a subtle critical stance with Labour MPs but appears to give Conservatives the benefit of the doubt."

Interestingly, two respondents declared a presenter to be biased in *favour* of the party they themselves supported. Few respondents thought any presenter favoured Labour -

bias, if perceived, was usually towards the Conservatives. One even positioned herself at the putative fulcrum of British politics:

> "Not being politically dedicated (sic), I think I am reasonably objective, and I am amazed at the number of Conservatives who say it is very left-wing biased and vice versa."

Many of the comments made from these individual positions were favourable, for example:

> "John Humphrys, 4, good interviewer - will not be railroaded by interviewees
> James Naughtie, 4, good, calm collected interviewer
> Sue MacGregor, 4, good interviewer - some interviewees tried to be patronising because she is a woman" (a 46 year-old Labour supporter)

That this (female) respondent should empathise with MacGregor because of her gender was not inevitable, but it could be another example of positioning affecting reading: no male respondents commented likewise.

Others were fulsome in their praise - for example, a 53-year-old lapsing Labour supporter moving to the Liberal Democrats awarding ratings of 4 and 5 with the comment "extremely skillful and professional" to Naughtie, MacGregor and Humphrys. She also drew a distinction between Humphrys's being "not so much biased as opinionated... allows more of himself to come through". While this respondent declared herself very satisfied with Today, rating the programme 5 in question 3, her later replies might offer less comfort to the Labour party. She cited John Humphrys's 28th April interview with Tony Blair as undermining Blair's credibility and being:

> "...probably *the* most significant single interview on Today. It certainly confirmed for me that the Labour Party was no longer socialist, not one I wanted to support."

If Humphrys demolished Tony Blair's reputation and standing in that listener's opinion, one could ask whether he ought to have done the same to the other party leaders, in her or someone else's opinion. Her response is certainly in line with Labour's falling opinion poll lead: one could consider whether Labour's drop in support over the election period was inevitable or the result of the media scrutiny to which he and his party's policies and record were being subjected. Again, we are in the realms of the unmeasurable, as equal and opposite balancing effects may exist, undetected, elsewhere in the audience.

However, at least one respondent might disagree, declaring her belief in the presenters' ability to achieve balance over time, and explaining it thus:

> "There was slight perceived bias in individual items, but overall these cancelled each other out."

Without prompting, others acknowledged confrontation as a possible cause of accusations of bias, offering such explanations as:

> "I would not say that any of them are basically biased - though all of them can head in that direction if interviewing a difficult politician - and particularly, they can react against a patronising attitude from either side!"
>
> "...the programme is fairly balanced notwithstanding the presenters pursuing politicians in a vigorous manner."
>
> "I feel (John Humphrys) is confrontational which can be misconstrued as being politically biased, depending on who he is interviewing."

"(Sue MacGregor) Also excellent at persistence. (It is not 'biased' to insist on an answer!)"

Question 5

That understanding of the media interview was confirmed by responses to the subsequent question, in which reactions were sought on a Likert scale to statements about interviewing styles. It is perhaps unlikely that many of these reactions were untainted by frequent media discussion of alleged aggression and evasiveness (typified in Chapter 2), but the uniformity of response to two of the statements was striking.

Only 6.7% dissented from the suggestion that 'evasive politicians should be cornered by the interviewer', and of those who agreed, three times as many did so 'very strongly' than chose to moderate their response. It seemed that the controlling/enforcing role of the interviewer was accepted overwhelmingly, while conversely defying any notion politicians may harbour that the interview should be an opportunity to pursue their own agendas regardless of the questions asked.

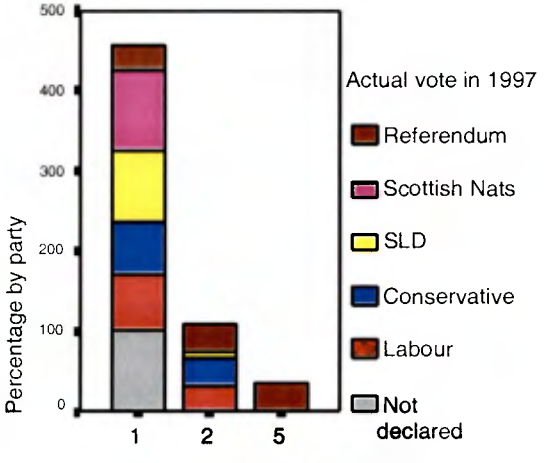

FIGURE 8: "Evasive politicians should be cornered by the interviewer" (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

The suggestion that such 'evasive' politicians should 'expect rough treatment', though, met with more ambivalence (16.7%). The other respondents agreed 'very strongly' rather than 'less strongly' with a ratio of 5:1.

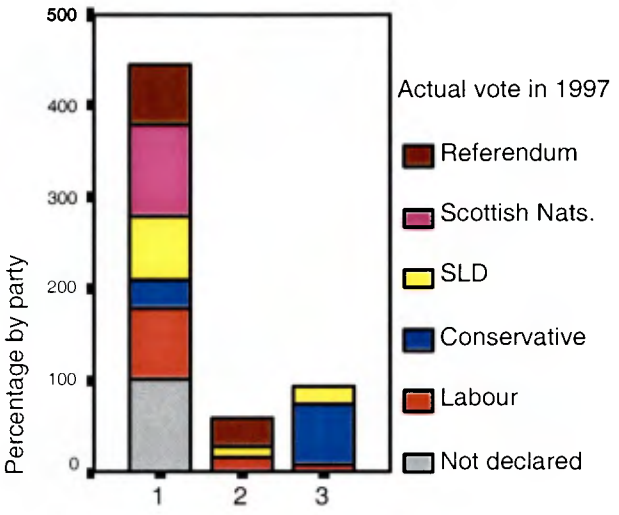

FIGURE 9: "(Evasive) politicians should expect rough treatment"
(1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

Some correlation was achieved between those responses and the earlier invitation to consider the partially contradictory suggestion that 'interviewers are often too aggressive' - although it was perhaps the inclusion of the word 'often' in the statement which prevented these scores from being equal and opposite:

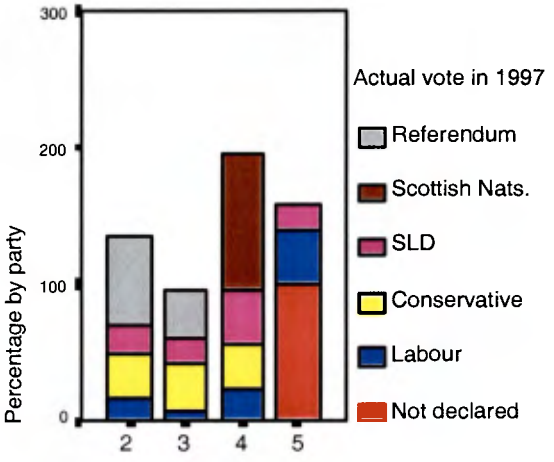

FIGURE 10: "Interviewers are often too aggressive"
(1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

No one agreed 'very strongly', although 12% did agree. Similarly, it may have been the word 'often' which provoked a greater variety of responses to the statement 'Politicians are often able to be evasive' which was intended to investigate the degree of latitude afforded to political interviewees, but could instead have been read as inquiring about their evasive skills:

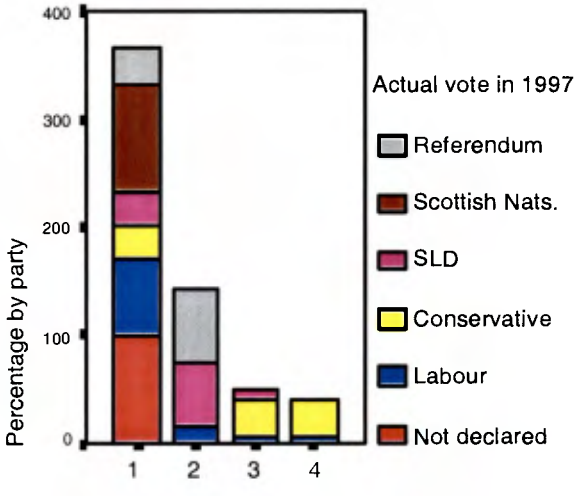

FIGURE 11: "Politicians are often able to be evasive"
(1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

When invited to assess whether 'interviewers are good at being even-handed', the sample's responses were much more diverse, with only a quarter choosing to equivocate:

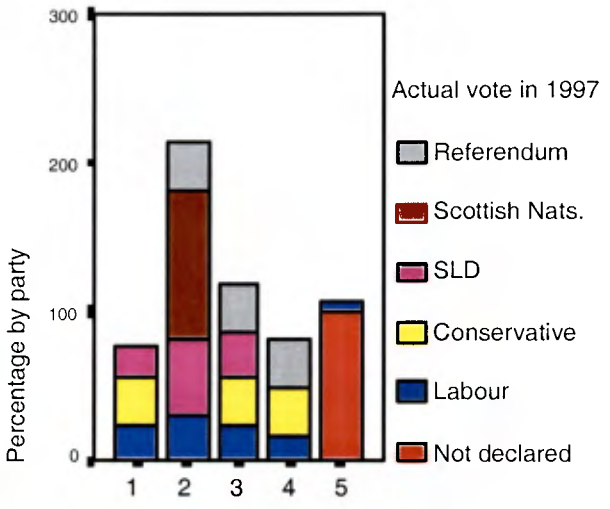

FIGURE 12: "Interviewers are good at being even-handed"
(1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

Twice as many agreed as equivocated, though, (albeit mostly not very strongly,) and less than a quarter disagreed. This finding suggests an inconsistency between listeners' satisfaction with interviewing styles and that of certain high profile commentators such as Dr Brian Mawhinney whose public generalisations about the Today programme (Chapter 2) appear from this limited sample to be more typical of a minority.

A number of qualitative assessments of interviewing styles were offered by respondents, too, more often in defence of the broadcasters:

"... the interviews with political figures are equally rigorous and that the interviewers should actually be *tougher* with them about answering the question set. It might seem like political bias but it's just because the politicians don't answer the question."

"Politicians are perfect at answering questions with their own answer (sic), despite the question/s asked."

"Politicians are well known for evading answers to pointed questions - they MUST be cornered sometimes into giving a direct answer."

"Unless interviewer is aggressive most politicians are always evasive, waffling on but, in effect, saying nothing."

"Politicians will always be evasive and it is the duty of the interviewers to show evasions for what they are, if necessary by rough handling."

"The treatment isn't rough, although none of the politicians should be afraid of interviews which must be challenging. Aggressive interviewing is sometimes needed to cut through the hype."

"I feel all the interviewers carried out their work with diligence and alacrity..."

"Interviewers are often in a no win situation - too tough and they're biased, too soft and they're biased, too careful and they're bland!"

"High calibre interviewers such as those on Today generally use the right amount of aggressiveness."

Question 6

Such responses suggested a disdain for politicians which contrasted with confidence in the Today programme - a confidence which one respondent qualified with the following answer to the subsequent question, asking for an overall assessment of 'how balanced the Today programme was during the general election campaign':

"Quite well balanced. Appeared to favour Lib/Dem and possibly Labour, but... from the content of the programmes rather than from the interviewers."

Such loyalty to the heard presenters rather than unheard editors and producers is consistent with claims often made about the nature of the medium and the relationship which is said to often exist between listeners and presenters and which can assume varying degrees of familiarity - even intimacy (Crisell, 1994, 12). Sometimes that relationship manifested itself in admiration:

> "Putting my own opinions aside, (I couldn't possibly be as fair in interviews as the Today presenters,) on the whole they show no obvious bias."

In answering the previous question 5, some respondents had understood the confrontation element in political interviews to be quite appropriate to the construct:

> "(Both) are skilled professionals. Both groups understand and can 'play' the game they are involved in."

> "I don't like the idea of 'rough ' treatment - it may be the only way however!"

Others wanted the interviewers to even more tenacious and some admitted to the partiality of their own perspective:

> "Politicians should be pushed a lot harder. If they're evasive it should be pointed out mercilessly to the listeners."

> "As I heard Jeremy Paxman (BBC2) say recently the public is entitled to an answer, or to know that the politician is not going to answer."

> "I'm afraid one's answer is somewhat coloured according to one's sympathies. I welcome the aggression if it takes that to get an answer - but I don't like a Green getting picked on! - if there ever are any!"

Another respondent's answer may also have been 'coloured' by her positioning:

> "Sometimes the attacking, negative campaigns, especially the Conservative one, made it difficult to actually get information of policies." (a Labour voter)

Despite their different party allegiances, though, only one respondent sought to defend the politicians, while only one other found fault with the interviewers:

> "Generalist interviewers (as opposed to, say, Oakley or Rosenberg,) often seem to bring poor briefings to interviews. Then they cling to trite popular beliefs despite being given contrary information which could be taken up."
>
> "It seemed that interviewers expected politicians to be evasive so they adopted the same aggressive attitude to all - even where a politician was genuinely trying to present a reasonable point of view."

Such affinity with the politicians or dissatisfaction with the interviewers were, like Dr Mawhinney's, clearly minority views. In answer to question six, though, (in which they were asked for an 'overall assessment of how balanced the Today programme was during the general election campaign',) the answers of the last two respondents respectively were quite different:

> "Balance retained throughout."
>
> "Unbalanced - Labour politicians were constantly challenged about future policies but Conservatives were very rarely asked to account for their failures and record of 18 years in government."

Generally, the responses to question six revealed the ratio of overall impressions of balance to bias to be 3:2. Of those who perceived overall balance, some were fulsome in their declarations of satisfaction, and others recognised the likelihood of the presenters themselves being positioned in the debates:

"Extremely well balanced."

"Very impressed with overall balance. Very impressed with the editor - appeared as fair as humanly possible."

"I consider the programme very reasonably balanced to the point of excellence."

"As balanced as possible I would say. Bearing in mind that the presenters are human and have their own baggage, I have not noticed any showing during the campaign coverage."

"As it was difficult to judge which side they were on, it must have been a good balance."

"Overall balanced - occasionally this came across as forced and unwarranted (eg on sleaze issue) in order to avoid accusations of bias."

"..Often the interviewers had difficulty in pinning down the evasive politicians, but coped well tempering patience with firmness and usually hiding their frustration! N.B. Perhaps too much Europe."

When framing the questionnaire, and when answering it, I and most of the respondents probably made the easy assumption that balance and bias should be interpreted as positioning *within* the spectrum of political argument: for example, did Conservatives get a fairer hearing than, say, Scottish Nationalists? However, the latter response suggested a more considered view that 'balanced' coverage of the election should be measured *across* different issues, as well as within them. The respondent's example is of one issue (Europe) being more heavily emphasised in the broadcast representation of the election than its real importance deserved. The prominence of different issues will, therefore, be considered later, although there is a real difficulty in distinguishing between Today as a representation of the election and, in common with many other media artifacts, Today as an element of it. Really, it was both.

From the more obvious, party political perspective, of those respondents who discerned bias overall, many used a variety of criteria, sometimes contradicting each other:

> "I feel that I didn't hear a lot of Lib Dem items in the time frame I listened."
>
> "The minor parties could have got more coverage, otherwise very balanced."
>
> "For Cons, Labour and Lib Dems it was very balanced. My main grouse, as you would expect, was NO GREENS (or any minor parties), NOT ONCE - the electorate never had a chance to know anything about us."
>
> "I found the few programmes I did listened (sic) to were left-wing inclined."
>
> "It was mainly concerned with the two main parties with very little coverage of others."

Other respondents seemed to want to answer favourably, perhaps out of loyalty to the programme, but the detail of their responses defied the overall assessment they were making and so in the comparison made above, they were counted as discerning bias:

> "Bearing in mind the first two weeks of the six-week campaign were given over to the 'sleaze' factor, once that was out of the way I felt Today was as balanced as these sort of programmes can be."
>
> "On the whole, very even-handed except that undue prominence was given to Eurosceptics in the numbers of them selected for interviews."
>
> "I think they did their best to be balanced and to give people a fair hearing but they were too easy-going with Bill Morris of the TGWU who was very evasive and got away with it by being charming."
>
> "Generally well balanced with views from all parties, although I seemed to listen to more Tories than Labour or Lib Dem. Don't remember any minority parties except SNP and Referendum Party mentioned."

Unsystematically, this respondent had identified the predominance of Conservative voices 'having the floor', detected by other, more scientific analyses - such as this one and that by Loughborough University's Communications Research Centre (Guardian 5/5/97; Denver, 1998) (see Chapter 5).

Interestingly, this specific point was not made by any other members of the sample in such explicit terms. This suggests that few listeners will have been sensitive to an overall imbalance in the programming, yet more reacted to specific items - either where they were asked by the questionnaire to do so, or they did so anecdotally such as in the reference to Bill Morris, above.

Question 7

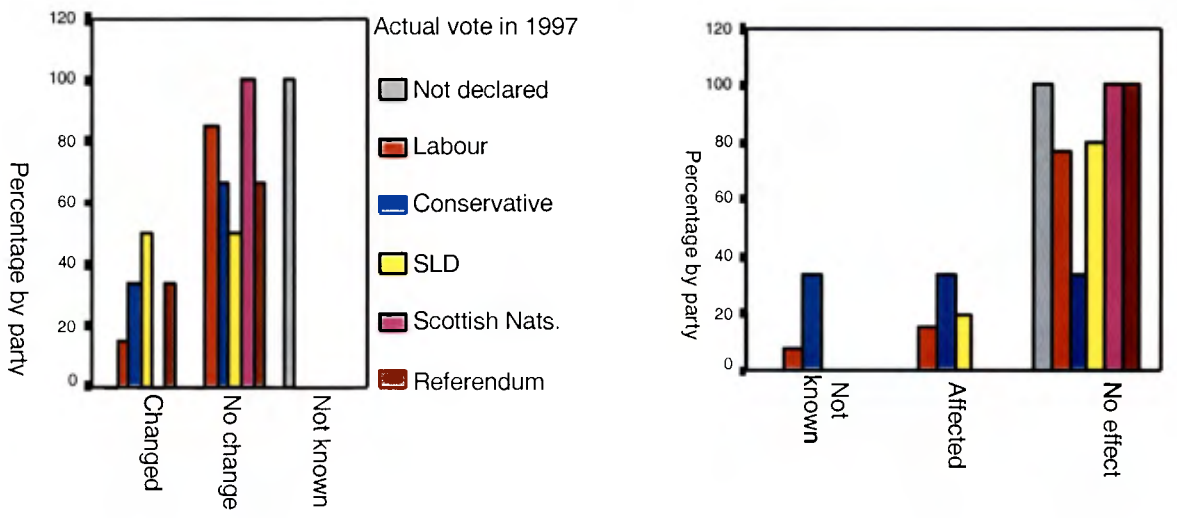

FIGURE 13: Respondents changing their voting intention during the 1997 campaign, and whether or not their change was affected by anything heard on Today.

This question asked whether anything heard on Today affected how the respondents used their own votes. 16.1% agreed something had, while 87.1% said nothing had had such an effect. Unfortunately, the questionnaire did not ask for any explanation as to what or why.

Question 8

The next question, though, did ask what - if anything - respondents felt was unfair about the programmes, and some chose to answer with varying amounts of detail:

> "Very abrupt."
>
> "Not enough women interviewees."
>
> "Nothing - a thoroughly professional job over a very long campaign."
>
> "Nothing really, although I would have preferred more mentions of minor parties and the local elections."
>
> "I didn't really notice any unfairness except perhaps the really minor parties were not given much airtime (Greens etc.) Sometimes it was difficult to assess if an item was biased..."
>
> "Nothing."
>
> "Not much measured sensible debate from Conservatives although there were several sensible contributions from other two parties, apart from all emphasizing their own battle cries." (a three-times Labour voter)
>
> "1) 2 weeks spent deliberating over the 'sleaze' factor - this was media hype at its worst. It was obviously going to come up, but after a couple of days the programme should have switched to the *real election issues.*
>
> 2) Picking over the minutiae. i.e. a comment made months earlier by an unsuspecting Politician which probably is negligible, and then blown up out of all proportion by John Humphrys, in particular." (my emphasis)

> "Politicians were constantly interrupted so that either any real information was lost OR in the case of Conservative politicians, they just 'talked over' the interruption with whatever comments they wished to make." (another three-times Labour voter)
>
> "The campaign was too long so the same ground was covered too many times giving the impression of harassment."

The unfairness of that respondent's blaming the Today team for the length of campaign contrasts with another's admission of the fallibility of her own assessment:

> "Nothing (was unfair) from what I heard, but I didn't hear all the interviews or articles."

One respondent, without prompting, perceived an unfairness in the 'recorded stimulus/live response' type of item identified in Chapter 2, "...as the first idea (sic) didn't have a chance to reply and got lost." Although, as elsewhere in the questionnaire, most respondents expressed well reasoned if conventional opinions, some readers might consider this response rather arcane:

> "Mr Bill Bush of (the BBC's Political Unit) should say 'undecided voters' not 'don't knows'. His reports on the Polls did not mention how likely respondents were to vote."

The ratio of replies indicating unfairness, to those either saying 'fair' or nothing at all, was almost even (48.4% to 51.6%). More (16.2% of the sample) expressed concern about the under-representation of minor parties, than about any other issue:

> "We, in fact, were leaked a BBC memo to producers that put us amongst a group (inc. BNP) where it was stated it was unnecessary to include us (because of low results previously - and whose fault is THAT, I wonder!) in anything but our PP

> broadcasts and the launch of our manifesto. Which resulted in there never being an opportunity for a Green Party representative ever to be questioned."
>
> "I would like to hear ALL parties with genuinely relevant views interviewed on each occasion that a particular topic was discussed, to ensure a fair airing of all opinions."
>
> "That hardly any time seemed to be allocated to any groups who weren't headline making or controversial, yet their manifestos are just as relevant to some listeners as the main parties."

Interestingly, these were not mainly supporters of minority parties, but Liberal Democrat and Labour voters, too. Their number (16.2% of the sample) was disproportionate to the size of the national vote in 1997 for 'other' parties (7%), although the representation of 'others' among the questionnaire sample was itself higher (12.9%). Either perceptions in the wider population of Today listeners of unfairness towards minority parties were similarly elevated, or this evidence of political altruism among non-minority party respondents was not representative of the external reality. (1)

The remainder of the questionnaire data indicated individuals' readings of specific items broadcast on a number of days which were determined as the election was called. Neither I nor the respondents could have foreseen what the items were to be, as the practicalities of asking the sample in advance to report simultaneously on the same items and thus allow comparisons to be drawn between their different reactions, meant the dates and times had to be chosen beforehand.

The dates were deliberately spread over the election period, to avoid bunching at any particular point in the campaign, and in each case respondents were asked to report on the

first items after the 7am and 8am news bulletins respectively: prime time for the programme and for Radio Four generally, as audience research indicates some of the largest audiences to be listening to the network then, on either side of the 8am peak.

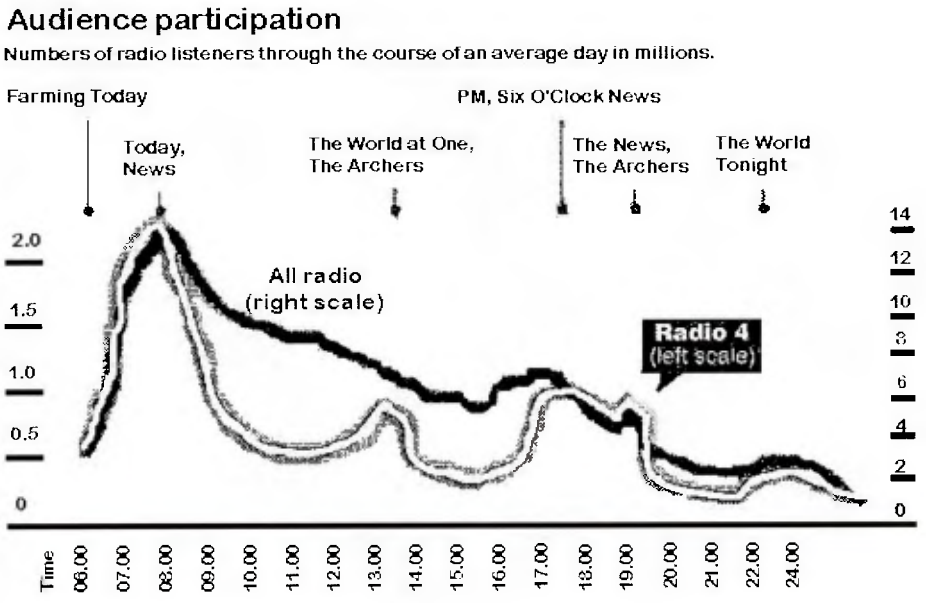

FIGURE 14 Newspaper representation of the Radio Four audience, compared with total radio listening. (The Guardian, 18/6/97; computer enhanced)

Although it was inevitable that individuals within the sample would miss some reporting occasions, this section of the questionnaire provided some very useful qualitative feedback on specific items rather than general impressions of the period as a whole.

Programme 9: Thursday 27th March 1997

At 7am and at 8am the Radio Four news bulletins led on 39 mass suicides in San Diego, as did Classic FM's 8am bulletin. In each case the second item was a shooting in Northern Ireland and so the election was pushed into third place with the Conservative

former minister, Neil Hamilton, resisting calls to stand down as candidate for the Tatton constituency over allegations of 'sleaze'. The Sun newspaper had made allegations against another Conservative candidate, Piers Merchant, and in the BBC 8am bulletin there was a further reference to nine Conservatives facing questioning by their party. Health was the main policy issue to feature in the bulletins.

The first Today item after the 7am news was, then, the San Diego suicides, and all but two of the respondents reporting on that time period realised that it was the second item - James Naughtie's interview with Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown - which would be of greater interest to this research.

When asked to describe the subject of the item, although it appeared to be Paddy Ashdown's wish to discuss fuel bills, more characterised it as about 'sleaze', cash for questions or the conduct of the election than the only other description given it by respondents: 'Paddy Ashdown' (ratio 10:7). The latter identification by interviewee was, in this minority group, probably either intended as a value-free identifier or a recognition that this was one of this party leader's few 'set piece' interviews.

That the majority of the respondents reporting typified it as about sleaze, cash for questions or the conduct of the election was unsurprising, given the way the item was set up in the 'cue':

> JN: "Well, the Times this morning calls on two more Conservative MP's to stand down after the announcement by Tim Smith in Beaconsfield that he's pulling out of the election - caught in all these cash for questions allegations. He blames a press campaign for ending his political career. The opposition parties

> have argued those who've admitted taking undeclared sums to further the interests of companies should go. Well the Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown is here - he's got a plan for fuel bills he's announcing today - but, Mr Ashdown, sleaze is impossible to wipe off the front pages."
>
> PA: "Yes and I think the election is getting all the worse for that, and the sooner we can get back to discussing the real issues that matter to people..."

Although half way through the item, after three minutes, Ashdown redirected the conversation to fuel bills, not a single respondent chose to label the item as such. The impression that this was about something other than fuel bills, though, may have been compounded by the absence of struggle to set the agenda: there was none of the interruption or dispute about what course the interview should be taking, as exemplified in Chapter Three. In fact, Ashdown's acquiescence in Naughtie's concentration on the issue of sleaze was reinforced after 1'15" of explanation of the Liberal Democrat proposal to reduce fuel bills among the very poor, by a second redirecting - or, perhaps, a correction - of the discussion back to the original topic:

> JN: "How can you, just briefly, how can you get the emphasis of the campaign away from the stuff that we were talking about a moment ago, to this? How do you do it? 'Cos everybody wants that to happen."
>
> PA (interjecting before Naughtie's "'Cos), then: "Well very simply, let's start talking about the issues. The more we have er two, two political parties, Labour and the Conservatives, as close to each other as possible, saying roughly the same things the more it will turn on scaremongering of the sort that we have seen about the unions like we have seen in the past two or three days or personality attacks and insults..." (Programme extract 14)

At party headquarters, the Liberal Democrat monitor's written notes taken during this interview included the following comment:

"First 1'30" on sleaze
Asked about Merchant, switches agenda to 'real issues'."

The notes expanded the notion of 'real issues' as encompassing education and health, which were also mentioned in the discussion. Yet, however much the Liberal Democrat monitor might have perceived much of the interview as being away from that party's published agenda item for the day (fuel bills), Paddy Ashdown himself did not seem discontented in the interview with the really only cursory attention given to a major manifesto proposal. His collusion with Naughtie in discussing the sleaze issue allowed him to reiterate another Liberal Democrat theme which they later characterised as a Punch and Judy-style contest between the two main parties.

Some commentators also suggested that it was considered by Labour to be to their advantage to allow sleaze to dominate the early stages of the campaign. The Loughborough study of several media, for example, found that 'election conduct' was the most widely covered issue of the campaign (32%) and that 'sleaze' was the third (10%). Together amounting, then, to 42% of Loughborough's sample of election coverage, the dominance of these two issues in this edition of Today was hardly surprising and the programme could not fairly be described as deviating from what appeared to be the norm. If the 'sleaze script' did really help the opposition parties and hinder the Conservatives, though, it could be argued that allowing it such a high profile in the election unbalanced coverage against the latter party.

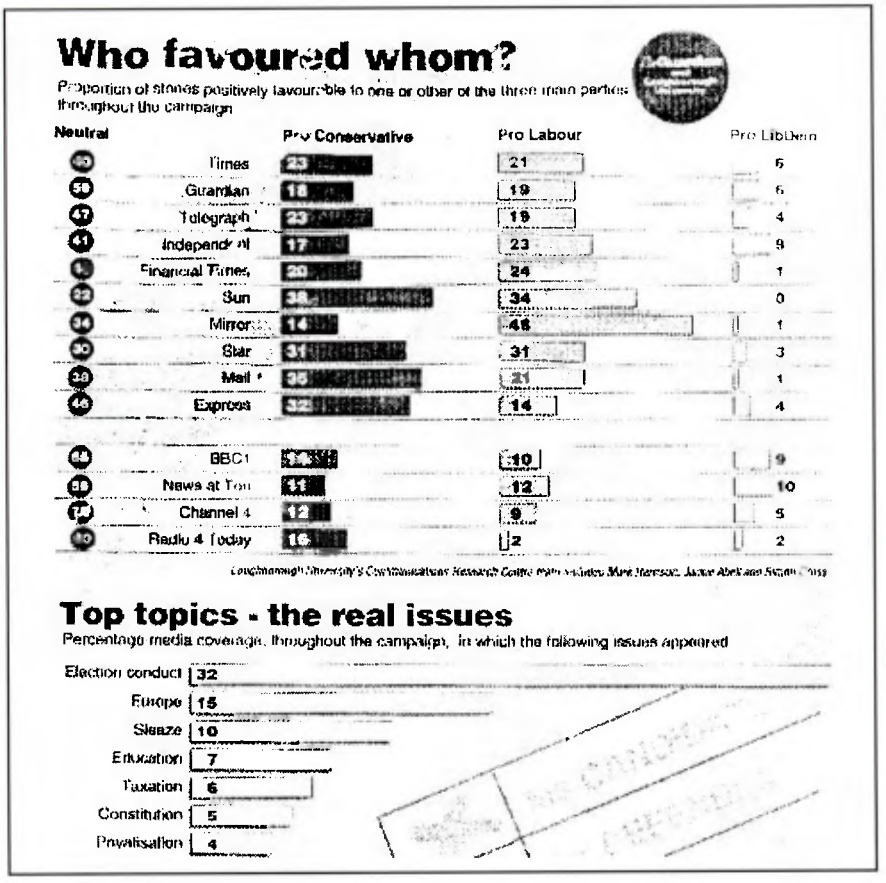

FIGURE 15: Graphical representation of selected findings by Loughborough University's Communications Research Centre (Guardian, May 1997)

However, just over half the questionnaire respondents disagreed 'strongly' with the proposition put to them that the item was biased, while the rest were spilt almost evenly between simply disagreeing and expressing neutrality (Likert scale responses 4 and 3).

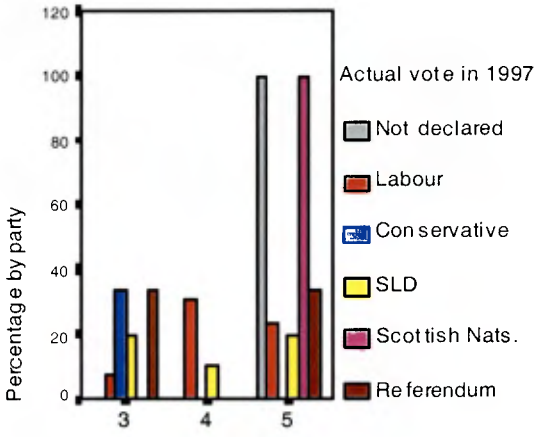

FIGURE 16: Respondent perceptions of bias in 7.10am item on 27th March 1997 ("Item was biased": 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

The detailed feedback from the respondents was interesting in that it revealed a variety of responses from different perspectives. For example, a Conservative voter complained that Ashdown was not cross-examined closely enough and he was "...allowed to get away with sweeping generalisations about the state of our schools and hospitals" - yet this same respondent felt the item would have very little effect on the election because of the minority status of the Liberal Democrats.

A Scottish Nationalist dismissed the item as "..just a routine party political broadcast... Not very interesting, nothing new" and as such unlikely to have any electoral effect. A Labour voter seemed to typify this as a reading of the 'sleaze script', and as such likely to "Maintain dissatisfaction with Tories over cash for questions and promote Lib Dems", saying that would be at the expense of the Conservatives. Her reading of this text also discerned a personal motive behind Paddy Ashdown's assertion of an important

distinction between the public, financial 'sleaze' issue surrounding Neil Hamilton and the more private question of sexual morality attached to Piers Merchant.

In contrast to those who found the item bland or uninteresting, one Labour voter thought the item too short, and allowing little time "...to enlarge on plans for more long term issues - teachers, NHS, poverty...". She thought it would have little electoral effect, although the piece allowed the impression to be created that the sleaze issue was caused by Prime Minister John Major's poor judgement.

Again, some respondents contradicted themselves - for example, a Referendum party voter disagreed strongly that the item was biased, yet thought the Liberal Democrats would gain most electoral advantage from the item. She added that it was:

> "one of the best comments (sic) I have heard so far and hits the nail firmly on the head as to what electioneering is about."

Another Conservative voter considered that any item this remote from the actual vote could have little effect on the result, although this view was unique and another Liberal Democrat thought that, far from having no effect, "PA must have made some impression with his commonsense view - people are fed up with sleaze."

Two other respondents chose to describe the interview as 'anodyne' and typical of the few comments on interview style were the following:

"It was a very mild, low key interview by James Naughtie."

"Interviewer almost apologetic for asking questions on subject to the extent of allowing Mr Ashdown to blatantly change the subject to his own advantage."

That last response was from a Labour voter who thought the item might have benefited all opposition parties. Certainly a common assumption was that it would harm the Conservatives, reinforcing their close identification with the sleaze issue.

As if to confirm that individuals within audiences will make what would otherwise be seen as rogue readings, one Liberal Democrat voter thought no viewpoint was effectively expressed, no party would gain electoral advantage from the item, and even commented:

"Does anyone understand these arguments on Europe?"

Quantitative data from that respondent, (and the reports of two others who confused this item with one on another occasion about the future of grammar schools), were excluded from the chart above.

By the time of the 8am bulletin, (in an early example of how the media's coverage of events can quickly overwhelm the events themselves,) BBC news was quoting from the Ashdown interview as the third party leader's 'call to end personal attacks on individuals' - sleaze, they said, not being the public's main concern. Ashdown's proposals on fuel bills were not reported in the BBC bulletin, however, and the rival network Classic FM either did not hear the Ashdown interview or considered it less newsworthy than its final item about protesters occupying the site of the planned second runway at Manchester airport.

The questionnaire respondents were, however, more numerous in responding to the 8.10am item - inevitably about sleaze. This was in the recorded stimulus/live response format, with Richard Branson's comment on the election campaign as a 'disinterested Briton overseas' juxtaposed with Conservative Deputy Prime Minister Michael Heseltine's response as an 'interested party caught up in the action'. (Branson's 'disinterest' might be hard to appreciate, given the size of his business interests in the United Kingdom.) James Naughtie's preamble anchored the debate firmly in the realms of 'sleaze':

> "So Tim Smith MP for Beaconsfield will not stand again. His admission that he took undeclared cash from Mohammed Al Fayed to advance his interests in Parliament has brought him down. And that decision, which was described by the Tory Chairman Brian Mawhinney last night, as a judgement with which many people would agree, has put pressure on his colleagues caught up in the cash for questions affair..."

Almost all respondents who reported correctly identified the initial 2'26" recording of an interview with Branson as associated with the subsequent live exchange with Heseltine. Reactions to this item were much stronger than to the Ashdown interview an hour before, yet they were more diverse. Far fewer disagreed strongly with the proposition that the item was biased, and one in seven agreed that it was biased - although these were not Conservative voters in 1997.

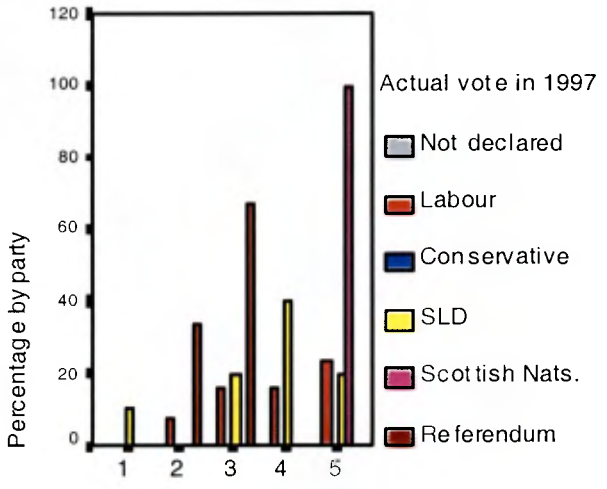

FIGURE 17: Respondent perceptions of bias in 8.10am item on 27th March 1997 ("Item was biased": 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

Of those reporting, 81.6% characterised the item with a reference to the 'sleaze' issue, while the remainder chose to label their reaction form 'Michael Heseltine' or, in one case, 'Govt majority'. The latter, perhaps sanitised, reference to the abuses of power, was from a former Conservative voter turned Referendum supporter - who commented that the "Reflected (sic) programme was anti-Conservative at this stage". He commented that the item would be of most benefit to the Conservatives and that the most effectively expressed viewpoint in it was that the "small majority has not affected the formulation of CON policy".

Such a benign reading of the two interviews from an admittedly right-wing perspective contrasted sharply with the majority reaction, typified by the following responses:

"Showed the arrogance of the Government. Morally bankrupt."

"Sleaze is a serious matter and an embarrassment to the Tories."

"Point out even more strongly how empty and incompetent the Tories have become."

"Adversely affect Tory chances - Mr Heseltine very evasive and keen to blame media/Labour Party for stories."

"Michael Heseltine is so hilarious now it's time for him to go, the fact that he blames the 'Labour' Sun for Tory indiscretions is ludicrous. A 'Labour trick' - oh dear!"

"Confirm my total lack of respect for Conservatives."

When asked which party would gain most electoral advantage from the item, the sample indicated the Opposition parties rather than the Conservatives by a ratio of 11:4 - mainly benefiting Labour (ratio of Labour to Liberal Democrats and 'all opposition parties', 8:1:1). As these were not Conservative voters, though, this suggests a significant minority, themselves unsympathetic to the Conservative message, perceived the granting of 'airtime' to Michael Heseltine as beneficial to him. This is evidence of an ability in some listeners to assume reactions in others which are dissimilar to their own. To discover on what they might base their assumptions, and how accurate they might be would require further research in this domain.

Assessments of the likely effect of the item on the election were, not surprisingly, mixed: few, if any, members of the sample would have been political commentators, yet they were often expansive - and, it could be argued, perceptive - in their comments:

"Reinforced diehard Tories' vote - maybe alienated some wavering Tories."

"Little or none except perhaps on a purely local level." (a reference, perhaps, to the 'sleaze' MP's constituencies)

"Further swing away from Tories if it has an effect."

"Provided there are no more allegations or counter-allegations against Labour I think Labour will gain."

"Reduced anti-Tory feeling."

"Possibly none."

It is worth considering, then, how an item can adversely affect a party's chances of being elected, yet be read as unbiased by its listeners. It could be the subject and/or content of the item was inherently damaging to the Conservatives, yet it was handled 'without bias'. However, no respondent appeared to consider whether it is fair to include an item which, although handled fairly, is inherently damaging to a party by the very fact of its being given airtime. To choose to include or exclude an item or a topic can certainly be to position programming somewhere on the multi-dimensional continuum discussed in Chapter 1. If the inclusion of such an item as this, then, positioned part of Today momentarily away from the notional fulcrum or centre of balance, it could be argued there ought to be a corresponding and equal re-balancing item in an equally prominent part of the programming.

This is why the politicians themselves each had their respective positions on the 'sleaze' question and whether it should have been given airtime. Many of them perceived an importance to the 'sleaze script' in the way it may have been affecting the conduct and outcome of the election, and the Loughborough group found that in media reporting of the campaign generally, only about a third of all stories were mainly about a party

presenting its policies to the electorate. So, on 27th March 1997, just as at 7.10am Paddy Ashdown had seemed prepared to discuss 'sleaze' instead of his own campaign theme of fuel bills, an hour later Heseltine seemed keener to change the agenda. Just 1'45" into a nine minute interview announced as being about the allegations of sleaze, he asserted to John Humphrys that they were not a 'real issue', thus:

> "But of course, I'm the first to recognise, let's let's not mince our words on any of this, these revelations, accusations, er, headlines, they are a damaging diversion in an election campaign and I very much hope that er the people will recognise that what we are talking about is the big issues about the booming economy and the dangers of Labour blowing it, that will influence them over the next five years."

At 5'50" into the interview, Heseltine repeated this theme, acknowledging the role of reporting in setting the news agenda:

> "I hope to goodness there's not a pattern emerging. I mean the Labour party were in deep trouble over the unemployment figures which were so good, and the Guardian comes up with a sleaze story, now the Labour party are in deep trouble over their relationships with the trade unions and the Sun comes up with this story (about Piers Merchant). Now, the fact is that I don't think people are going to be diverted from the main issue of the general election..." (interrupted)

A minute later he added this: "It is an embarrassment and it is a diversion from the real issues of the election campaign".

Despite his questioning of the validity of 'sleaze' as an election issue, Heseltine did engage at length with Humphrys's questions about the controversial Conservative candidates. The final part of the interview was steered by Humphrys onto allegations made previously by the then Home Secretary Michael Howard against Labour leader

Tony Blair - more a question of campaigning style than sleaze. Although Heseltine responded with a repetition of Howard's allegations and an explanation of them, the respondents' lasting impression about the interview was that it was about sleaze.

Although a minority of the sample reporting on the item did consider Heseltine's engagement with the sleaze issue to be positive airtime for the Conservatives, the opposite, majority view would lend credence to the argument that on balance, airtime spent on sleaze was negative for the Conservatives and positive for their opponents. In short, the 'sleaze script' was read by most listeners as meaning 'there is something sleazy in the Conservative party'.

The styles of both the interviewer and the interviewee were commented upon in detail by some respondents:

> "Heseltine dominates conversation and is very difficult to interrupt, even by Humphrys."(a Labour voter)
>
> "Again all very polite - let them chunder on, but they had nothing new to say." (a Lib Dem voter)
>
> "Interviewer stuck to subject and would not allow M Heseltine's diversionary tactics, but this is within his brief to clarify Conservatives' involvement with cash for questions." (a Labour voter)
>
> "John Humphrys didn't press Mr Heseltine over the delaying of closing Parliament so that the Downey Report could be published; I felt he should have."
>
> "Michael Heseltine for once spoke in a fairly measured way. Unusual for him on the Today prog. He was able to get in virtually no attack on Labour until the end. He seemed to engage in damage limitation rather than attack or electioneering." (a Labour voter)

> "Very probing with Michael Heseltine who didn't cope very well. Lost for words and stumbling - he tried to get onto more 'comfortable territory' but wasn't convincing." (a Labour voter)
>
> "The relative positions of Michael Heseltine & Richard Branson meant that Michael had a great opportunity & time to put his point of view." (a Labour voter)
>
> "Deputy PM was unable to shift discussion away from sleaze." (a Labour voter)

That such a variety of readings, some of them contradicting others, should be made by a group of listeners with some broad commonality of perspective, confirms the polysemic nature of broadcast speech.

Not every respondent agreed with the proposition that 'sleaze' was not a 'real' election issue, much as it might have suited the opposition parties to concentrate on the Conservatives' record in office - for example:

> "Mr H got away with it far too easily. If you remember how hard he was on Sarah Tisdale for leaking documents, he was very soft on corruption... Cash for questions is very undemocratic as it gives rich people power without them having to be elected. Mr H was allowed to brush this aside."

Interestingly, at his party headquarters, having previously noted that the Radio Four 7am news bulletin devoted 50" to sleaze, the Liberal Democrat monitor merely summarised the Heseltine interview in his notes - making no comments about interview style, diversionary tactics or the legitimacy of the subject or the questions asked. By contrast, one questionnaire respondent seemed to despair at the conduct of the election so far:

> "A day wasted, so far as Today and the election is concerned. Resignations *are* interesting to a point, but it goes on and on..."

Thursday 17th April 1997

This, second, reporting occasion provoked another interesting set of responses, although, again the Liberal Democrat monitor made no comment in his notes. At 7am Radio Four news was leading on stories from Israel and Mecca, followed by an initiative on Europe from Prime Minister John Major. Classic FM led on the Major story, leaving both Israel and Mecca to the end of their bulletin. The news values of the BBC and its commercial rival were on this occasion quite different: the one promoting international news to the top of the bulletin, and the other relegating them to second and third positions, after 3'09" of election news, where they were followed by a story about cigarette imports.

Each news bulletin within this edition of Today led on Israel rather than Major, but the actual programme chose domestic election stories for the key slots immediately after the news, leaving Israel to 7.18 and 8.21 am. This apparent clash of news values between the different editors of the BBC news bulletin and the Today programme was surprising in that it was unusual - generally one story leads both the bulletin and the programming which follows it. Donovan had observed a series of the programme team's planning meetings in January 1997 and commented thus:

> "The 7am and 8am bulletins... are not under the editorial control of Today but of the Newsroom, and this has always been the case... But the fact that they are sacrosanct does not obviate the need for liaison between the Newsroom and the programme: it would sound very strange if the stories on Today bore no relation to what listeners were hearing in the bulletins." (1997, 178-9)

At 7.09 am John Humphrys began with a cue into a package produced by reporter Jeremy Adams who had "been to the constituency of Itchen and Harpenden in Hertfordshire" apparently to find out whether Europe was to be an issue which would determine the outcome of the vote two weeks later. The item included audio recorded with doorstep canvassers for the Conservative candidate Peter Lilley, Conservative party workers watching John Major's election broadcast the previous night (his 'initiative' on Europe having been to replace the intended PEB with a piece to camera contrasting his own party's approach to Europe with claims he made about Labour's), and the views of various party workers in the form of vox pops.

Then Adams gave a summative assessment of what he had found:

> "There was a convincing degree of support for the Prime Minister amongst the Conservatives of Itchen and Harpenden last night and a perhaps slightly less than convincing belief that the whole Tory party would now rally round him."

Listening to the item, though, the questionnaire sample drew sharply differing conclusions. Further demonstrating the scope for respondent error, three reported on the next item which began at 7.14am (actually an interview with Chris Smith about the NHS) and two confused the date entirely and wrote about another day's interview with trade union leader Bill Morris. Everyone reporting on the Europe item did, however, correctly classify it as a 'package (multi-voice)', and it may have been the absence of a more usual single interview as the opening item after the news that disorientated those respondents who wrote about Smith instead.

Again, the way respondents chose to characterise the item displayed a variety of approaches, from the simple "Europe" to "How the Conservative campaigners are handling the European issue on the doorstep." Other variants included:

"Conservative Party and European question."

"Major's strategy on Europe."

"Europe scepticism - Peter Lilley's agent."

"Europe/Hitchen & Harpenden."

"Tories policy towards Europe."

Asked for a simple response on the Likert scale, by a ratio of 8:5 they disagreed that the item was biased, rather than agreeing with the proposition. Again, though, there were inconsistencies in these readings - for example, disagreeing strongly did not preclude two respondents from supposing that one party or another would gain electoral advantage from it. They were divided in that impression between perceiving an advantage for the Conservatives and their main opponents.

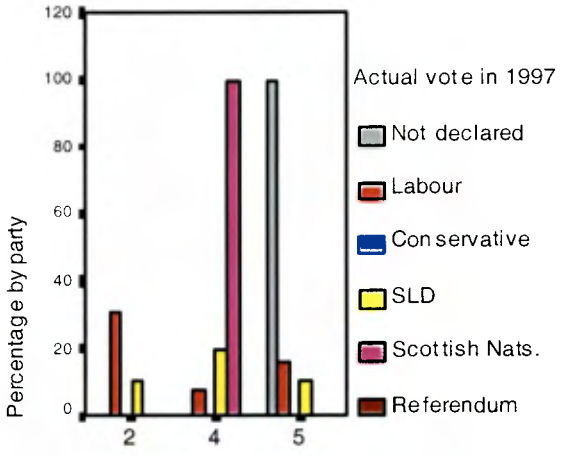

FIGURE 18: Respondent perceptions of bias in 7.09am item on 17th April 1997 ("Item was biased": 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

Of those who did perceive bias, by a ratio of 3:2 they considered the Conservatives more likely than other parties to derive some electoral advantage. When asked which, if any, viewpoint was most effectively expressed in the package, their replies were diverse:

> "Conservative policy (or lack of!) on Europe with the accent on Eurosceptics."
>
> "Conservatives as determined Eurosceptics."
>
> "Support for referendum after election."
>
> "That Major would benefit if he made it policy to oppose single currency."
>
> "Conservative party are in disarray over question of Europe despite attempts to present unity to electorate."

Similarly, among those who did not consider the item biased, there was little agreement as to the dominant view expressed:

"The Conservative policy on Europe."

"The support of Peter Lilley in Hitchen & Harpenden constituency."

"The Conservatives are not supporting their anti-Europe supporters."

"Eurosceptics."

"Perhaps the reporter's view that the Conservatives are hopelessly split over Europe - if that was the reporter's view."

"The problems facing campaigners who do not know what line they are allowed to take."

That with this item, audience readings should have been so much more diverse than with the previous two studied, might result from the more complicated item structure of the package: its changes in sub-topic, the use of short interview clips with a large number of different voices, the realia of aural pictures (atmosphere) and the summative mode of address by the reporter linking its many constituent parts together, may all conspire to defy prescriptive anchoring of meaning by the broadcasters.

If such items are generally read with a greater diversity of understanding, so must their incorporation into radio programming increase the difficulty of producing an 'impartial' account, which 'balances' alternatives either internally or externally. That is: how is a reporter or the programme editor to know how to balance the item within itself or by the inclusion of contrasting material later on, if the very nature of the format diffuses audience readings?

This variation in readings was further evidenced by the respondents' opinions as to what electoral effect the item may have had, for example:

"May have a limited effect in favour of the Tories."

"None"

"None - probably only spin doctors were listening."

"Gave the impression that a key issue on the doorstep is Europe - does not accord with my perception (incidentally I live in Hitchen & Harpenden as featured)!"

"Not much - it might increase waverers' uncertainty about Conservative policy on Europe!"

"Increase the apathy and/or irritation of voters."

Interestingly, many of the respondents' summative comments on the item betrayed dissatisfaction with either the package itself or the format: with some elements of it leaving a more lasting impression on them than others - for example:

"An unstructured ramble from door to door on the canvassing round - vox pop rarely adds much to clarify the situation."

"Sloppy - didn't probe enough on what the candidate actually stood for."

"I felt the agent received too favourable an item."

"This piece seemed insignificant due to the presentation - not very forthright or informative."

"The 'random' voters interviewed seemed to be idiots."

"Trivial - the pursuit of one or two snippets of 'radio verite' in place of thorough research."

There would appear to be an inverse relation between the greater effort consumed by the production of such a package (compared with a single live interview in the studio), and the audience's satisfaction with it as a listening experience. Certainly, if this was an

attempt to feature more typical people talking about 'real' election issues, instead of the relative introspection studied in the first two examples, it was poorly received by most of the respondents reporting on it.

By contrast, the Liberal Democrat monitor made no comment about the item on his logging sheet.

The 'real' issue of Europe also dominated the more conventional 8.10am 'set piece' interview by telephone with John Redwood, then a backbench Conservative, described by John Humphrys as "a member of Mr Major's cabinet until he resigned to challenge him for the leadership nearly two years ago". In fact this was so 'real' an issue that Humphrys's cue ascribed to it an element of drama, as follows:

> "When the history of this election campaign comes to be written it may be that the first couple of weeks will be seen as a phoney war: the biggest issue was scarcely discussed - the one that always threatened to blow the Conservatives apart. Well, now battle has been truly joined, within the Conservative party itself, and the issue is of course Europe...
>
> The crucial question of course is whether we should rule out NOW joining a single European currency. Mr Major says no, we should wait and see - negotiate and decide - most of his party seems to think otherwise."

Although Redwood immediately answered "no" to Humphrys' first, closed, question asking whether he could ever vote for a single European currency, his qualification that "the overwhelming majority" of the Conservative party wanted to retain the pound sterling was followed by this challenge to Humphrys's cue:

JR: "...but I do disagree with your introduction. Er, Labour is deeply divided on this issue..." (continues under Humphrys)
JH: "!Oh I don't dispute that."
JR: "!...but you don't er take much interest in that..."
JH: "!No no I (indistinct) exactly that yesterday, in fact we we we we discuss that on a number of occasions as you know, but at, but at the moment..."
JR: "!but I just erm to put the record straight, this is an issue which has caused considerable trouble in the Labour and Liberal parties..."
JH: "!Indeed, and we put precisely that to Mr Blair yesterday but er"
JR: "!...and er in the Conservative Party we are all strongly behind the Prime Minister when he says he wants the beef ban lifted, he wants a better deal on fish, he would never surrender the veto, he doesn't want our social policy decided in Europe, he is against a federal Europe - that is exactly what the party wants and on all those issues he very clearly leads us and speaks for us on that particular point."
JH: "But not on this particular point..." (Programme extract 15)

Despite this fundamental disagreement on the premise of the interview, the exchange continued with Humphrys questioning Mr Major's leadership and asking whether the battle being fought was over a possible leadership contest following an electoral defeat.

By a ratio of 2:1 the majority of the questionnaire respondents who reported chose to consider this single interview together with the subsequent item in which James Naughtie interviewed the then Cabinet member, Michael Portillo - also about Europe, a juxtapositioning which probably explains the contrasting approaches. Among the minority group of those who treated the interviews as separate items, one demonstrated the scope for maverick behaviour by social actors involved in research data production by choosing to report on the Portillo interview as a single item rather than the first exchange between John Humphrys and John Redwood.

Perhaps wishing to avoid a second premisory disagreement, Naughtie gave this subsequent interview only a minimalist cue, so the transition between items may not even have been too apparent to someone hearing but not concentrating on the programme, as follows:

> JN: "Nearly a quarter past eight and the Defence Secretary Michael Portillo's in our Westminster studio, morning Mr Portillo."
> MP: "Morning James."
> JN: "Er are your electors right to think that you might vote for a single currency?"
> MP: "Er my electors know that I support the Prime Minister in his policy, they know that the Prime Minister has stuck to this policy through thick and thin, and deserves support and now has it. And they also know, I think, in increasing numbers that British sovereignty is threatened in the near term, it is threatened by the European summit in June of this year, a few weeks after the election, and if Tony Blair by some mischance is our Prime Minister at that time he would go ready to surrender vital national interests, ready to give up our national veto on important subjects such as employment, social policy, the environment, the regions and so on and that our Prime Minister has made it absolutely clear that he will not contemplate a diminution of British sovereignty."
> JN: "!But to return, to return if I may to the question, are your electors right to think that you in the future might vote for a single European currency?"
> MP: "James, the Prime Minister has proven unshakable..." (Programme extract 16)

Portillo's evasiveness on the simple, repeated, closed question about his own voting intention, and the latitude afforded both to him and previously to John Redwood to make allegations about Labour's intentions without any challenge as to their veracity, provided the questionnaire respondents with considerable scope for making alternative readings. Despite both interviewees' attacks on the opposition, it could be argued that the juxtaposition of a former challenger to Major with a Cabinet loyalist exposed or reinforced the existence of differential standpoints within their party as if to substantiate the 'civil war' metaphor. An alternative reading could have identified an act of balancing

the programme on a fulcrum positioned within the Conservatives' obvious internal debate. Both politicians, despite their different political credentials, used the opportunity to support the Prime Minister's policy. Conversely, a pro-European, (whether or not a Conservative,) could express dissatisfaction that only Euro-phobia was articulated.

Yet, only 28% of respondents agreed with the proposition that the item was biased (split evenly between between responses 1 and 2) while the rest either disagreed or expressed ambivalence. The majority response was therefore to perceive the item as balanced, despite the multiplicity of political positions, represented and unrepresented, within it.

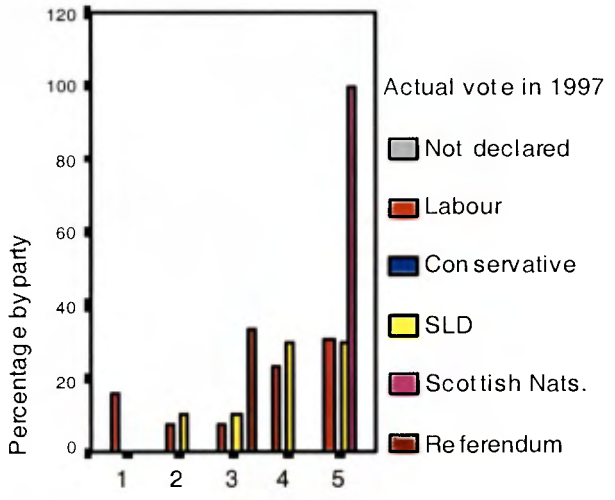

FIGURE 19: Respondent perceptions of bias in 8.10am item on 7th April 1997 ("Item was biased": 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

Perceiving bias, the minority thought either the Conservatives or no party would gain electoral advantage from the item (ratio - 1:1), and commented on whose viewpoint was most effectively expressed, thus:

"Simply Tory propaganda."

"Portillo, as usual, with his expression of support from (sic) John Major."

"Scaring electorate about Labour on Europe. Dilemma of Cons. over Europe... next leader of Conservative party."

"It added to the constant anti-Tony Blair misinformation."

A greater diversity of qualitative comment was offered by the majority grouping, whose inability to perceive bias in one or both of the interviews did not preclude their identifying a wider range of likely beneficiaries of any electoral effect. Thus was the likelihood of differential readings among audiences confirmed. While 20% of them felt the Conservatives might enjoy such an advantage, most thought Labour, the Liberal Democrats, or the Opposition collectively would benefit. One wrote, perhaps in desperation, that she was "almost tempted to say Monster Raving Loony". Some of the more striking comments were as follows:

"A clear indication of the schisms which exist in the Conservative party. (It will) increase the irritation of voters."

"John Humphrys's (viewpoint) *on behalf of the electorate* against common currency and fact that Cons. party so split." (my emphasis)

"Somewhat unbalanced choice of interviewees - little difference in opinion expressed." (This respondent voted 5 on the Likert scale.)

"Very little (effect) - I don't think voters have Europe at the top of their political agenda."

"Both Redwood and Portillo demonstrated the Euro-split in the party... Illustrated right-wing anti-European 'threat' agenda perfectly. Also showed Major's vacillation on the single currency vote. This could not be satisfactorily explained and will play badly with floating voters who want strong leadership..."

"...emphasised the dominance of the Euro-sceptics such as John Redwood."

As well as articulating reasoned comment on the political content, just over one third of the respondents offered their own textual analysis of the performances of interviewer and interviewees - for example:

> "Interviewer not incisive enough - but then she (sic) was pursuing an item of little worth. ...Portillo.. came over as very shifty."
>
> "Portillo... was aggressive... in that he was determined to carry on until he was finished, even when interviewer tried to interrupt to ask another question."
>
> "Mr Portillo very evasive... fair if tough questioning but few convincing answers. Long silences suggested great deliberation but ultimately evasion."
>
> "Interviewer (sic)... let Redwood put his point but was rather more aggressive with Michael Portillo."
>
> "This was well interviewed. I particularly liked James Naughtie's final question to Michael Portillo!"

In Naughtie's final question were all the ingredients of Bell & van Leeuwen's definition of 'entrapment' (see Chapter 3), as follows:

> "The Prime Minister... also talked about Mr Blair and he said that one of the key questions in this campaign, and who can deny it, is that Mr Blair said things in the 'eighty, 'eighties about privatisation for example, which he's now abandoned and is saying something else. The Prime Minister says that is a perfectly legitimate area for political questioning and for the electorate to make a decision. Isn't it legitimate for us to say to you that you used to say that a single currency would mean giving up the government of the UK - you now won't say it: you've either changed your mind or you're scared to say it - which is it?"

This use of entrapment, as Bell and van Leeuwen had warned, might well have contributed to the opinion expressed above that the interviewing was more aggressive

with Portillo. In the event the latter - no doubt unwilling to agree with either option offered him, chose to respond thus:

> "It is neither of those James, it is about conducting the government of this country..."

The item ended with Portillo repeating his allegation that Labour would sign away the British veto at the forthcoming Amsterdam summit, and this was again unchallenged. Again, the Liberal Democrat monitor made no comment in his log. Access to the reactions of the Conservatives' and Labour's monitoring may well have revealed a more critical response to the item, as they were more directly involved in the exchanges.

Programme 33: Thursday 24th April

The first item after the 7am news bulletin was another departure from the more usual 'set piece' interview with a key politician. BBC news was leading with a ferry dispute that had left lorries stranded. British integration and relations with her European partners were also prominent issues within such other contexts as the single European currency and fishing rights. Sue MacGregor began the segment at 7.09am with interviews with managers of the ferry company P&O and a road haulier. At 7.14am John Humphrys interviewed a spokesperson from the French Foreign Ministry. This was followed by a 'live cross' to James Naughtie in Leeds where he gathered the views of voters and 'party workers', whom he described as showing nerves with one week to go to polling day.

By a ratio of 4:1 the respondents reporting at this time chose mainly to ignore the ferry/fish item and report instead on Naughtie's piece from Leeds. Nothing in their instructions had explicitly suggested they should do this, but they clearly decided it was the Leeds item which would be of greatest interest to this research, probably because of its more overtly party political nature. This 'critical autonomy' they exercised betrayed the respondents' likely perception of an item which does not discuss issues along party lines as less political. This was confirmed by the comment of one respondent in the minority group who queried on the questionnaire thus:

> "Was this the one we were supposed to do? The 7.12 one (sic) was more political."

In fact, far from being a potentially 'neutral' item, (if this was the majority perception,) there were indeed aspects to it which could well be considered to favour one part of the political spectrum over others. One such example might be the discussion of the time taken by the French government to compensate British lorry drivers for the previous industrial disruption which had caused them delays in that country. At least subliminally, this could well have reinforced the Labour argument expressed elsewhere in the campaign that the then government was not sufficiently well regarded in Europe to get the best out of Britain's partners.

The issue of effects of apparently apolitical items will be considered in the next chapters. Two other respondents in the minority group recognised the possibility of such effects, and commented as follows:

> "No direct relevance to the election per se, yet containing the potential to reinforce anti-European feeling. By fuelling anti-European feeling and prejudices it could possibly bring a few waverers back to the Conservative Party."
>
> "It may show our government as weak and ineffective because the victims haven't yet received compensation for the previous blockade."

Neither of those last respondents perceived bias in the item, answering 4 and 5 on the Likert scale respectively. However they did perceive the Conservative Party as being, in one case, advantaged by it and, in the other, disadvantaged by it. In so doing, they called into question their own understanding of the word bias: logically, if an item may have anything other than a neutral effect on the political process, which they both acknowledged it may have had, how can it not disturb the equilibrium in some way - even if counter-balanced elsewhere by another item or items? It was starting to become clear that some respondents consider bias to exist only in the treatment - favourable or unfavourable - of party politicians. The inclusion of material, be it fact or opinion, it seems, can be perceived as impartial simply because of the coolness of its delivery and the absence of conflict.

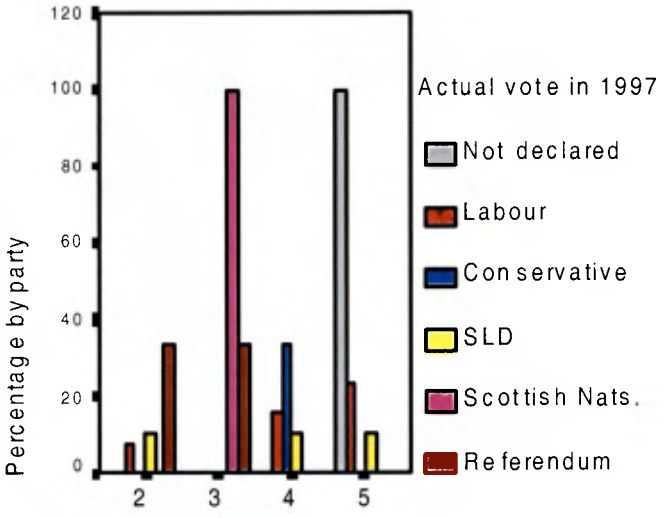

FIGURE 20: Respondent perceptions of bias in 7.16am item on 24th April 1997 ("Item was biased": 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

The majority group who instead chose to report on James Naughtie's later item from Leeds were also inclined to consider that item unbiased, although 16% discerned bias and a further 16% equivocated (answers 2 and 3 respectively). To Naughtie's credit, half considered no party would derive any electoral benefit, and the rest thought in equal numbers that Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats would benefit most. From the perspective of the political journalist, this even distribution of perceived impartiality benefiting each of the three main parties may well be the apotheosis of 'professionalism', (as discussed in Chapter 1). This may be especially true as by 24th April it had become clear that the Today team (and others) had decided to represent the election as a three-cornered fight with only two serious contenders for majority government.

Closer examination of the questionnaire data, though, revealed a greater sophistication of audience reading than the headline 'beneficiary' question had suggested. For example, responding 3 on the Likert scale to the proposition that the item was biased, (and therefore neither agreeing nor disagreeing,) these listeners commented:

> "It was biased in a way, in that it concentrated on the two main parties. Paddy Ashdown got only a very fleeting mention."
>
> "I mistrust these interviews involving several people as it is possible that, say, 15 could be interviewed and the 'biased' comments of, say, 8 people would be broadcast."

These respondents answered 4 on the Likert scale, so had disagreed that the item was biased:

> "Diverse views but on balance more were anti-Labour."
>
> "Reflected mood in Leeds very well, but no input from any ethnic minority groups."

It could be that these inconsistencies were symptomatic of the length of the campaign - by now into its sixth week. For the first time, some respondents were beginning to reveal their frustration, thus:

> "Who cares after so long a campaign?"
>
> "(The item) really pointed up the general apathy."
>
> "I'm getting bored (with the campaign). Aren't there any new subjects to discuss?"

The Liberal Democrat monitoring the programme for his party made no comment on either of the 7.10am items, remarking only on how well Paddy Ashdown had sounded in a brief soundbite at 7.17am.

Whether or not the lack of comment at Cowley Street was as a result of the likely spread of election fatigue, at 8.10am on Today the subject was again Europe. This was another 'set piece' studio-based interview, this time with the then Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, Kenneth Clarke. (The distribution of these high profile slots among the different parties is discussed in Chapter 5.)

In fact, the theme of European integration was recurrent throughout the thirteen-minute interview by John Humphrys, yet the discussion was wide-ranging - covering the dissident Conservative candidates who were refusing to support the Clarke/Major accommodation on Europe, and also Clarke's handling of the economy. The BBC's 7am and 8am bulletins were leading on the Conservatives and Labour attacking each others' policies on the economy and according to Humphrys's cue, the economy was at the top of the Conservatives' agenda:

> "The Tories will try to switch the election debate to the state of the economy, today, so will Labour for that matter. It's odd that we've heard relatively little about the economy so far in the election - in MOST elections the economy is THE issue. But then, in most elections we haven't had Europe pushing everything else into its shade. Kenneth Clarke is at the centre of both debates: the Chancellor many Tories credit with rescuing the economy, but also the man they say would sell us out to Europe given half a chance. He is the rock in the sea of European politics around which the forces of Conservative scepticism swirl and then move past, leaving him battered but still standing there - still insisting that Europe is more than just a trading club without any political dimension."

While the Liberal Democrat monitor could have noted that his party's theme for the day - women's rights - was being sidelined (he didn't), both Conservatives and Labour could have derived satisfaction from their preferred topic being accorded such prominence. Labour, of course, was not being given the airtime to put its case with the latitude afforded Mr Clarke (who was able to claim the economy was the most successful in thirty years and that in seven days "all could be thrown into mayhem" if Labour were to win). However, Humphrys's cue seemed designed to establish a negative agenda for the interview, characterising as it did the Conservatives as divided and the Chancellor himself as isolated.

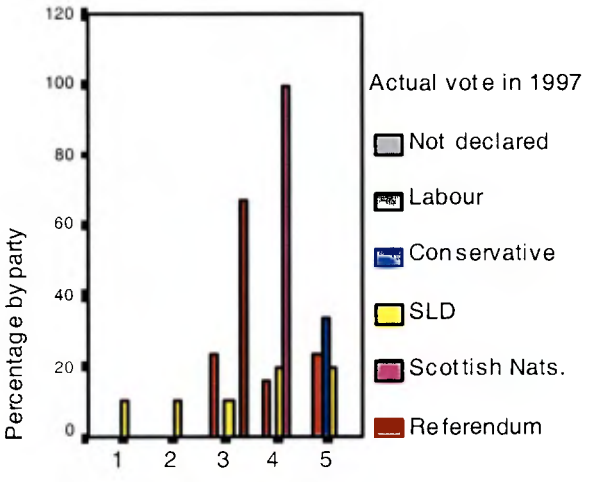

FIGURE 21: Respondent perceptions of bias in 8.10am item on 24th April 1997 ("Item was biased": 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

Yet, Humphrys's approach both to the cue and to the rest of the encounter was successful in convincing 80% of the respondents reporting on the item that they should not agree with the proposition that it was biased (responses 3, 4 or 5). However, more than two thirds of this majority group considered that the Conservatives would have gained most

electoral advantage from the item. This apparent contradiction might confirm an understanding of bias which ignores as a criterion the question of whether a disequilibrium is being created: that is, if this interview was not biased, yet the Conservatives derived electoral advantage from it, to these respondents bias must mean something other than airtime simply favouring one party or viewpoint over the others.

Again, that reluctance to discern bias may derive from an absence of the conflict so often perceived in live political interviews and the overt selection involved in other types of item, such as the package (as discussed above). For example, a Labour voter who responded 4 commented thus:

> "The Chancellor spoke most eloquently on how the economy was improving. I feel the interviewer allowed the Chancellor to make his points without undue interruptions."

He expected the item might cause a "slight swing to the Tories". Such a mixed response might be accommodated by the listener perceiving that airtime given to a Conservative would inevitably favour the Conservatives if he was allowed freedom of expression, and that bias if it existed could only be against the interviewee's *ability to express himself* - or, perhaps to use his allocated airtime. Hence the references to conflict, above. By contrast, then, such a perspective might hold a confrontational interview to be biased as the interviewer adopted a hostile stance. However, as a Conservative expressing Conservative views must have some value in the re-presentation of the election, such a system does lack the analytical sophistication sought by this research, which would wish to consider the act of balancing necessary to return the programme to an equilibrium, following an albeit 'non-confrontational' interview.

Although the majority of respondents commenting on the item considered it unbiased, they made widely differing readings of the performances of both Humphrys and Clarke. For example:

> "John Humphrys gave him a long, uninterrupted innings - it was more like a speech! - was this because a) he was biased, b) he likes him, c) because he mostly answered the questions? He was only challenged on splits - how could he retain his views and have a job in the Government?" (Notwithstanding his recognition of the possibility of alternative 'a', this person responded '3')
>
> "Quite controversial with John Humphrys dredging up some old chestnuts and working himself up." (responded 3)
>
> "Affable, civilised discussion for a change. Interviewer did not try to score points - think he sneakingly likes interviewing the Chancellor." (responded 2)
>
> "Nothing was said about the ERM mess, nothing was said about electors' genuine fears about VAT on more items, on the grossly unfair regulations and penalties imposed on British entrepreneurs." (responded 3)
>
> "This was a somewhat bland, mechanistic, although professional interview... There was a sense of game-playing about this item with no fire or enthusiasm on KC's part - he seemed to be full of reasonableness and resignation." (responded 4)
>
> "Mr Clarke is difficult for any interviewer to browbeat as he seems to relish a fight." (responded 5)
>
> "Clarke was not his usual ebullient self. He sounded a bit bored and uninterested. Humphrys was unable to bring him to life." (responded 5)
>
> "Kenneth Clarke is a superb interviewee, very likeable - shame about his politics!" (responded 3)

Considering the diversity of these assessments of style, mood, professionalism and so on, among a sub-population who almost exclusively failed to discern bias, it is perhaps surprising that they shared such an affinity for the item, for Humphrys and for Clarke.

It could be argued that to identify issues not raised with the Chancellor, and yet to equivocate on the Likert scale (as did the fourth respondent above), is itself a contradiction which, if generalisable to a wider population of radio listeners, perhaps discredits their ability to always make valid judgements of balance and bias. Not raising issues such as the ERM and the possible extension of VAT could well be seen as giving Clarke a good 'innings', not least because these could have been perceived as negative for the then Government. The act of choosing to raise or not raise an issue will be further considered in later chapters.

Programme 38: Wednesday 30th April

On the eve of the poll, as Sue MacGregor spoke of 'election fatigue' (6.35am), BBC News was leading at 7.0am and 8.0am with a 'loyalist' takeover of the Maze Prison, relegating the last day of the campaign to the second item. Classic FM, by contrast, led on the election and ran the Maze second.

At 7.09, MacGregor chaired a discussion between Sir Crispin Tickell, Paul Johnson and Sir Klaus Moser. Occupying the 8.10 slot was a multi-voice package examining the campaign retrospectively - the absence of any prime time 'set piece' interview with a single politician perhaps avoiding the charge of having reserved such a slot for a preferred party. (In fact, the final set piece had been an interview in Downing Street with John Major, the previous day – see Chapters 5 and 6.)

In the first item, Sue MacGregor described the three guests respectively as "the former ambassador to the U.N. and warden of Green College, Oxford", "the Deputy Director of the Institute of Fiscal Studies" and "the founder of the independent National Commission on Education". They were billed as academics reflecting on election issues. Except to the very well-informed, these apparently neutral descriptors may have suggested some element of political neutrality, although more critical listeners might have had prior knowledge of the individuals or their organisations. Some may have wondered, for instance, of what the latter organisation might have been considered 'independent'. It is likely that, unless these were the 'political eunuchs' previously evoked by BBC Chairman Sir Christopher Bland (Chapter 1), they each occupied a position some distance removed from the putative political fulcrum.

This contrivance of 'neutrality' was quickly challenged, though, during the discussion, when Sue MacGregor qualified Sir Klaus Moser as having "...made no secret of your Labour leanings..." and he declared his intention to vote for that party. She also described Sir Crispin Tickell as a former adviser to Margaret Thatcher on green issues - but he refused to declare his voting intention, claiming 'political chastity' through having worked for "people of all parties". (There was no such positioning of or by Paul Johnson, and listeners who might have given the matter any thought were left to wonder unaided.)

However, only 5.5% of respondents reporting agreed with the proposition that this item was biased, and the same number equivocated: everyone else disagreed or disagreed very strongly. To the respondent group, then, this item was very balanced. By contrast, one

third thought that either Labour or the Liberal Democrats would benefit from the item (the benefit split evenly between the two parties). This apparent contradiction was explained by one as follows:

> "These were well-respected people putting forward their views. The item was not intentionally biased - a sad reflection on this Government." (responded 2)

The academic standpoint they adopted drew two common responses - either they were very fair and 'balanced', reflecting 'all' sides of the different issues, or they were muddled and confusing. For instance:

> "It came across as almost too balanced. Even the conclusion was inconclusive - too careful."
>
> "Vague and confused message on a difficult subject."
>
> "I felt they articulated very accurately the wider views of the public."
>
> "Interesting but neutral in electoral terms."
>
> "They sounded like three 'old farts'."

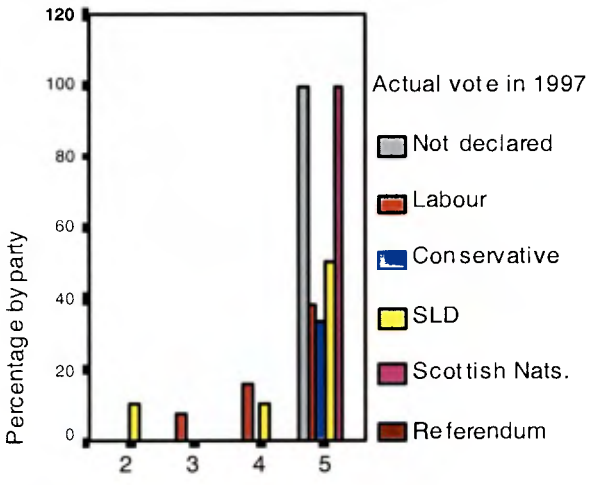

FIGURE 22: Respondent perceptions of bias in 7.10am item on 30th April 1997 ("Item was biased": 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

Despite the respondents' reluctance to score the item as biased, among the third who thought it might yet have some electoral effect, two explained their contrasting views as follows:

> "Had I been undecided, it would have made me vote Lib Dem."
>
> "(No effect) other than to bolster the don't knows." (an SNP voter)

The Liberal Democrat monitor made no comment on either that item or the later multi-voice package at 8.10am. This was the first of two items featuring predominantly Conservative voices: in a campaign retrospective, the package included party workers in Luton, John Major and a Conservative councillor, all giving their assessments of the campaign. Reporter Jeremy Adams set out to discover, in the words of the cue material:

> "...what it's like for the poor bloody infantry fighting in the trenches, when their generals back at headquarters are often fighting among themselves."

Although Adams's script identified the Conservatives as behind in the polls and divided, one was described as "Churchillian" in his perseverance. The following item, a telephone interview with Conservative Eurosceptic Sir Teddy Taylor, was related to the package - in the manner of the recorded stimulus/live response format. 22% of the reporting respondents chose to confuse the two, identifying the 8.10am item by Sir Teddy's name. Many of the others described the slot as 'overview of campaign', 'campaign', 'campaigning' or some other such descriptor which does not reveal whether they were reporting on the package alone or the interview with it.

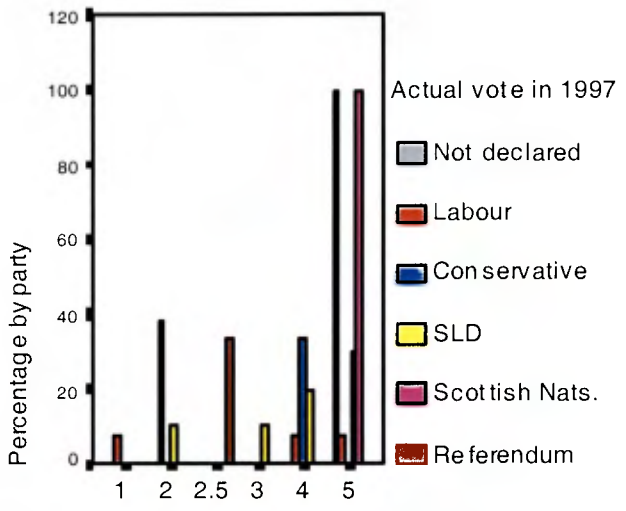

FIGURE 23: Respondent perceptions of bias in 8.10am item on 30th April 1997 ("Item was biased": 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

Among the respondents there was much less of a consensus about this item than the other. Despite the by now usual reluctance to answer the bias proposition with a 1 (agree very strongly), 22% replied 2 (agree) and only 11% chose to equivocate (response 3). Those who discerned bias were Labour or Liberal Democrat voters (by a ratio of 2:1), while those who disagreed with the proposition were much more likely to vote Liberal Democrat than for any other party. Minor party supporters (Scottish Nationalists and Greens) also responded 4 or 5. This was the first occasion on which such a clear trend was evident, for reactions to divide along party lines.

The most common response when asked which viewpoint was most effectively expressed, was that Conservatives were pessimistic about the result, but few indicated in any detail why the item/s were met with so relatively little consensus. Two respondents who did not discern bias responded thus:

"A rather pointless item. Everyone said the expected things, with nothing new that would influence anyone."

"This was a rather weak piece for this prime slot, however it was followed by the Teddy Taylor interview, and the discussion between Mandelson, Home and Willetts which were stronger pieces albeit with the same message."

Summary of questionnaire findings

In summary, then, the questionnaire responses confirmed and illustrated the potential not only for differential readings of the same audio texts, irrespective of such factors as demographics and political standpoint, but also for assumptions of balance and bias which can appear at odds with their own justifications.

Generally, there was a greater tendency to find the programming more impartial than biased, and to defend the programme and its presenters against charges of bias. When considering individual items, though, this tendency began to break down. Many of the respondents displayed some sophistication in media literacy, and they expressed occasional preferences for certain types of item over others as truer reflections of 'reality'. There were many contradictions, though, and given a much larger sample of respondents the frequency of 'rogue' (or at best surprising) responses may possibly be less: future response testing could be done to investigate this emergent hypothesis.

One major result of the survey was to demonstrate the existence of polysemy. Certainly, polysemy in media messages has long been acknowledged as a possibility by academics, but those who publicly make claims about bias and impartiality usually deal in absolutes

rather than possibilities. Broadcasters, for example, who claim absolute impartiality as a product of their professionalism, do not generally recognise that that quality may be no more than a perception of their own – one possibly also held by some of their audience. Politicians who make accusations against the broadcasters want to highlight their own 'certainties', without diluting their message with caveats. For example, if the BBC's stated policy in its Producers' Guidelines were to appear impartial *to some, but not to others*, confidence would be undermined in the Corporation's ability not to exercise undue influence. Dr Brian Mawhinney's allegation that some of the questions on Today were 'smeary' or 'illegitimate' would have had much less impact rephrased as "..that's the kind of question *some* people might find smeary and it might annoy *sections of* the audience...".

It could, of course, be that the questionnaire respondents who made such a range of comments did so only because they felt they were required to say *something* – and perhaps some felt that that something had to be controversial. The questionnaire design certainly encouraged them to consider aspects of bias, and it therefore concentrated attention on bias - yet their answers often betrayed perceptions beyond this single issue. Some, for example, revealed an awareness of balance as being infinite in the possibilities and the subtleties of its nature – a phenomenon not always capable of representation on a bar chart.

Their readings could have coincided or conflicted by chance rather than due to some system of impacts and reactions. If, though, the responses of participants in social

scientific research are to be disregarded or devalued because they might be fallible or because those participants are aware they are contributors to the process (reflexivity), little research will be done.

In a field such as media studies, where a central interest is how texts are received, there is little point in carrying on research which ignores the existence of the audience, and concerns itself merely with the creation of the texts.

However, from this survey, partial measurements of audience perceptions alone would appear to be an unreliable measurement of balance. Until some future methodology is devised whereby *whole audience* responses can be reliably gathered and convincingly contextualised, this area is unlikely to be without controversy. (One could imagine a future world in which a high level of connectivity ensures an immediate verdict is given on an item by everyone who hears it: if a large majority say it is unbiased, perhaps it is.)

More practically, one certainty to emerge from this part of the research, though, is that readings by individuals often amount merely to interpretations that are not universally held, even within quite narrow socio-political strata. This means that the publicly expressed impression-responses of individuals, be they politicians or broadcasters, are therefore fallible and they require more detailed, stopwatch-based textual analysis in order to test their veracity. In short, the general finding of the sample that, overall, Today was unbiased is not, in itself, sufficiently reliable. That result was derived from impressions gained over a period of time, and like much qualitative data, it was

subjective, being based upon feelings, and possibly corrupted by loyalties and such like. The findings in the next chapters result from a more empirical approach – one which may better meet the expectations of the positivist reader.

(1) On polling day, 75 Members of Parliament were elected from parties other than the Conservatives and Labour. They included, extraordinarily, one 'independent', Martin Bell, although he had received during the campaign disproportionate publicity across the media, as well as the endorsement of Labour and the Liberal Democrats whose candidates withdrew in the Tatton constituency.

CHAPTER FIVE: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS BY QUANTITATIVE METHODS

> "I recommend a written complaint to Tony Hall after this week. Today was the worst. The Conservatives had spokespeople on for 15 mins., Labour had 4/15 & supportive voters. Lib Dems had 2/40 but only after 0830 when audience declines sharply."
>
> 'Key points' in Liberal Democrat monitor's notes, 11/4/97

Anyone making empirical measurements of broadcast texts must have a number of absolutes, just as measurements of distance, weight and capacity relate to internationally agreed standards. The short extract above, taken from his log sheets, reveals that the Liberal Democrat monitor was using at least the following parameters in his analysis:

- duration of time allowed to representatives from different parties
- whether supportive voters were given airtime
- scheduling of items as it relates to audience size.

The desire to quantify impartiality, though, requires greater depth than that, as discussed in previous chapters. The same monitor's written 'key points' recognised this, as they continued thus:

> "Before 0830, Lib Dems were accused, with Labour, of being 'Federalists' with no right of reply. Brown had an easy ride, preceded by very sympathetic voter voices.
> If Europe is the story, Lib Dems should be given prime-time chances to defend their policies. Maddock wasn't asked about it. Oakley didn't mention what Paddy had said about it . Only Bill Bush mentioned what Nick Harvey had said."

Here the monitor considered the effect not only of the allocation of airtime

to express one's position, but also that of being talked *about* – that is, being characterised one way or another by an opponent, or by a commentator such as Robin Oakley or Bill Bush.

If being labeled a 'federalist' on air is considered harmful to a party's prospects, then it will consider being unable to challenge such a description as a setback to its prospects. In the opinion of that particular Liberal Democrat monitor, this was a cause for complaint on grounds of impartiality.

With no access to either Conservative or Labour monitoring of the broadcasts, it was not possible to establish whether they reacted in the same way to similar circumstances. It would be surprising, however, if they had not.

For this - intentionally meticulous - textual analysis a set of absolutes was required, against which measurements could be made. They needed to be both reliable and meaningful, but also practical in their application. They also had to be exhaustive, in that conclusions drawn from the results would have to be valid, rather than incomplete and thus vulnerable to criticism as themselves presenting only a partial account. It would invite controversy, for example, to examine the number of appearances of each party, and not the number of times their preferred message was broadcast. For example, the Conservatives might not have welcomed a monopoly of the airtime available, if all that time had been taken up by tough questioning about the allegations of sleaze against them. Conversely, unfettered opportunities to explain their own policies and criticise Labour's would presumably have been very welcome.

Consequently, in the first instance simple counts were made of the following:

- appearances of each party's official representatives
- allocation of prime slots following news bulletins – the 'set piece' interviews
- incidence of other interviews with party representatives – outside prime slots
- incidence of different election issues
- frequency of all 'apparently complete' interviews
- sequencing of main parties in bulletins
- incidence of non-party interviewees who may be sympathetic to particular parties
- references to parties in newspaper reviews and Yesterday in Parliament.

This was followed by stopwatch-based analyses of a number of other variables:

- duration of 'set piece' interviews
- duration of other 'apparently complete interviews'
- total durations of all 'apparently complete interviews'
- durations of appearances by representatives of different parties.

The next chapter will deal with such other, essentially qualitative, issues as hard and soft interview techniques, question types, challenge and entrapment, the nature of repeated patterns of discourse, paralinguistics and so on.

Count 1: appearances of each party's official representatives

It very quickly became apparent that only what the broadcasters themselves termed the 'three main parties' would be represented other than in passing In fact, the Guardian subsequently identified no fewer than 168 'parties' as fielding candidates (3/5/97),

many of whom were represented by one solitary 'joke' candidate or someone seeking publicity for a campaign on a single issue, (ranging from the All Night Party to the West Cheshire College in Crisis Party,) and clearly no realistic attempt to represent them all in a national programme would have been either practical or deserved.

The Guardian's own definition of minor and major parties is itself questionable, as it considered the Referendum, Natural Law, UK Independence and Liberal Parties 'minor', yet each of them fielded sufficient candidates (at least fifty) to merit their own Party Election Broadcasts on radio and television. In the event, it was to the three 'largest' parties, (Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats,) that the BBC was to accord the vast majority of the available airtime on Today, as demonstrated below. This BBC definition of 'largest' may in the event have been based on membership, funding or some other criterion, but it certainly coincided with representation in the previous Parliament, which had previously been the broadcasters' declared intention and BBC policy (Chapter 1). The results of this first simple count are shown below:

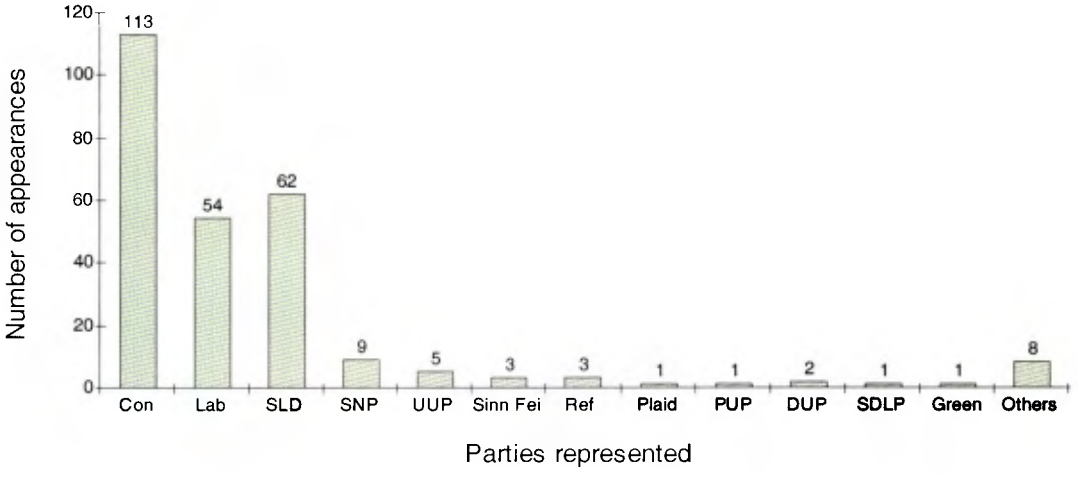

FIGURE 24: Number of appearances by party representatives during the period

It should be noted that this measure did not consider the duration, context, scheduling, content or outcomes of appearances, but merely their occurrence. This caveat is of some significance, because an 'appearance' in this count could amount to an extended 'set-piece' interview with a party leader lasting eighteen minutes, or a brief appearance of just a few seconds such as those accorded to the 'others' in the table: what were called 'minor parties' in Lance Price's two multi-voice packages about them (6.44am, 18/4/97 and 6.43am, 23/4/97). These were one appearance each for the UK Independence, Natural Law, Pro-Life Alliance, Rainbow, Socialist Labour, BNP, Liberal, and Loony parties.

Excluded from the count were news bulletins on the hour and the half-hour, as well as the four editions of Yesterday in Parliament between the calling of the election and the proroguing of Parliament on March 21st, because these are analysed separately later in this chapter.

Even cursory examination of the chart reveals two quite striking results. Firstly, the concentration on three 'main parties' gave them a massive advantage over the others. Such an advantage was inevitable if Parliamentary representation was to be the main criterion. Secondly, though, and most surprisingly, there was a very large imbalance *between* the three 'main parties' which did not at all reflect their representation in the previous Parliament. The Conservatives were accorded more than twice the number of Labour's appearances, and they – in turn – were even beaten to Today's microphones by the Liberal Democrats, whose representation in the previous Parliament had been tiny even in comparison to Labour's, as the then largest opposition party.

To Labour's total could be added a very small number of appearances by trade unionists (eighteen), at least some of whom were probably also Labour Party members. However, to do so would have itself been a distortion because they appeared not as party representatives, but in their capacity as trade unionists, threatening, for example, industrial action over planned cuts to the fire service in Essex: not at all a message Labour party strategists would have welcomed, as an unhelpful reminder of past industrial strife in the last Labour government of the Wilson/Callaghan era. Similarly, appearances by members of the CBI or the Institute of Directors, or appointees of quangos were not counted as Conservatives even though they were statistically more likely to be members of that party than of Labour.

There is, then, no obvious reason for Conservative Party representatives appearing on Today more than twice as often as Labour's. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the programme's editors could have been unaware that they were favouring the incumbents so heavily over the main challengers. Common professional practice is for broadcasters to keep at least a rough tally of how they are allocating their available slots between parties. It is of course possible that Labour opted out of some opportunities to appear on the programme, perhaps preferring not to engage in any discourse which they perceived as damaging to their own campaign – the so-called 'empty chair'. One would, however, have expected such refusals to have been made known on air by the presenters (or at least some of them), in order to explain any apparent bias being shown. Making such acknowledgments has more recently been the BBC's practice when Labour in government has refused to contribute to a programme.

A further possibility might have been that Labour's appearances, although fewer in number, had on average been twice the duration of the Conservatives' – thus evening out actual exposure between the two main contenders for government. This was not so, as is demonstrated later.

Therefore, this first quantitative analysis revealed an early indication that Today was not even-handed in the way it accorded opportunities to the Conservatives and Labour to represent themselves. For whatever reason, it seemed at *prima facie* that a clear advantage was given to the ruling party. The minor parties were also discriminated against – often in ways which defy logic other than, perhaps, adherence to a news value agenda which ignored the balance imperative. According to such an agenda, however, the Scottish Nationalists must have merited nine times the exposure given to their Welsh equivalents, Plaid Cymru. The one party had certainly not enjoyed nine times the number of seats of the other in the previous Parliament. While the count did not reflect scheduling, it is also worth noting at this stage that the single, brief appearances by the 'other' parties in Lance Price's two reports (identified above) were all before 6.50am, and would have been heard only by some of the smallest audiences to the programme.

In fact, it was incumbent upon Today's editors to maintain some element of fairness, such as that described by Roger Mosey (Chapter 1) and indicated in the BBC's Producers Guidelines. This responsibility appeared to have been unfulfilled, in a way unnoticed in the 'unscientific' assumptions of the questionnaire sample, but of course detected by the more systematic Loughborough survey (Denver, 1998). It might have

been tempting, then, to cry 'foul' at this early stage, and accuse the programme of bias towards the Conservatives, and against Labour and the smaller parties.

This simple count of appearances, however, was too reductive an analysis to be considered *alone*. For instance, the Conservatives' greater number of appearances could have been doubly gruelling interviews than Labour's. Alternatively, many of the Conservatives' appearances could have served as unwelcome reminders of the sleaze issue, and could therefore have been perceived by Labour as beneficial to their own prospects. So this result had to be qualified by the further analyses to be carried out, both quantitative and qualitative, before any final conclusions could be reached. Conclusions, that is, about both the construction of the programmes and the reactions to them of the questionnaire sample.

Count 2: allocation to parties of prime slots following news bulletins

Dubbed the 'set piece' interviews, the importance of these prime-time slots derives from their placing at what broadcasters call the 'top' of the hour. They follow the main news bulletin of the hour, which is of particular interest to large numbers of listeners tuning in and wishing to catch up on events as the day begins. The most prestigious interviewees were very often lined up for this slot, rather than positioned elsewhere in the programme running order, amongst the sport, Thought for the Day, business bulletins and so on. The timing of this slot also allowed for the item to be extended when considered appropriate, whereas items which precede the news were often abruptly curtailed in order to accommodate the weather and programme trails. An example of this was the exclusive live interview with the Prime Minister, conducted on location in 10 Downing Street (2/4/97) which ran from 8.10 to 8.28am.

It would have been inconceivable for such an event to be placed between the 'God slot' and the Met. Office and thus, due to the time constraints imposed by the programme's regular format, greatly reduced in duration to five minutes.

The results of this second count indicated that the apportioning of 'set piece' interviews to the main parties was as follows: 52.4% to the Conservatives, 28.6% to Labour, and 9.5% to the Liberal Democrats. How these were distributed is indicated by the chart below:

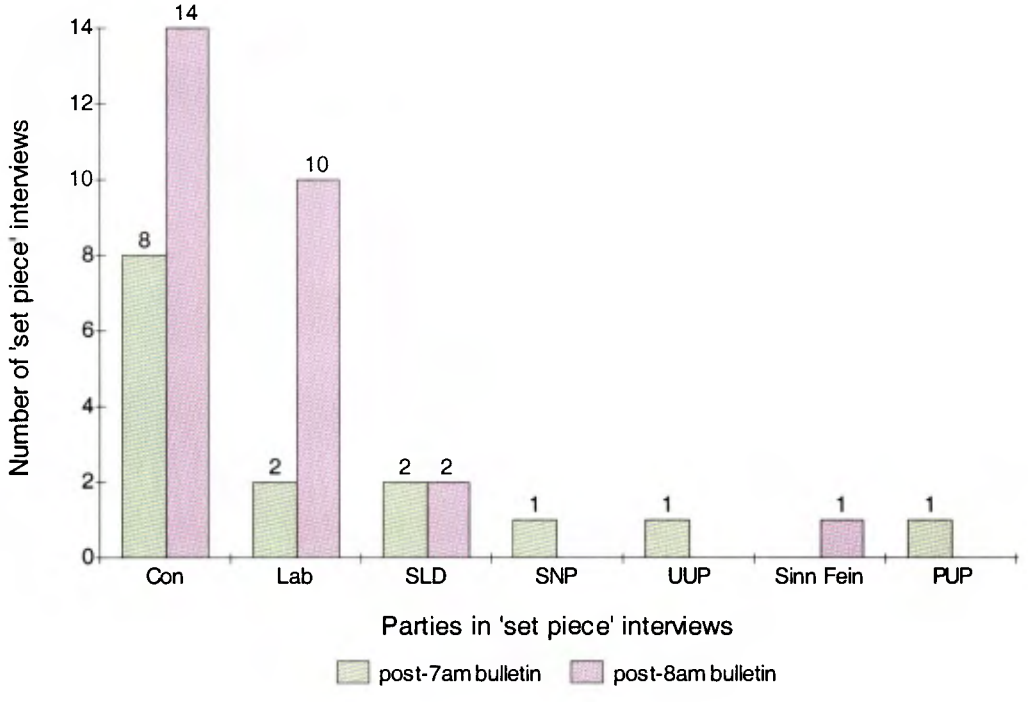

FIGURE 25: Count of 'set piece' interviews allocated to each party

As demonstrated in the following tables (FIGURE 26), only a minority of the post-7am news slots in the period were taken up by set-piece interviews with politicians, while in the later slot, post-8am, this format predominated. On other occasions, the slot was occupied by other item formats, (such as multi-voice,) or other individuals

speaking from a personal or a 'professional' rather than a party-political standpoint. These were of course excluded from this count - and so was the 16th April interview with Conservative ex-minister Ian Gilmore because his contributions were mainly critical of John Major's leadership and stance on Europe. However, the 19th April interview with Lord Howe, (himself billed as 'credited with the downfall' of Margaret Thatcher as the previous Conservative leader,) *was* included because he positioned himself on air as strongly supportive of the incumbent, John Major.

Inevitably, on some days when the first post-news item was a feature or a response to some other news event, (such as on 21st April when the police and the BBC Travel Unit reacted live to the disruption of IRA bomb chaos,) the 'big' single interview with a politician was displaced to second in the running order. On 21st April, for example, John Prescott appeared for Labour at 8.15, yet this item was excluded from the count because it was not the first item after the news. This does not, however, account for the massive imbalance towards the Conservatives revealed above. Similarly, it would be wrong to imagine that the programme had a policy of interviewing Conservatives first, then the other parties in some descending order – and this was not the case, as was demonstrated by other counts.

Notwithstanding those caveats, the allocation of set-piece interviews favoured one party over even the other two 'main parties' as well as the minority parties, most of whom were not featured at all. Unlike the regional parties, the Green, Referendum and UK Independence parties were national parties with candidates in most or all of the constituencies in England, and yet they were deprived of an important opportunity to make themselves heard. Put simply, the Today programme accorded the

Conservatives a huge advantage over the other parties in its allocation of the most important slots in prime time. Labour, as the only real contender for an overall majority in the House of Commons, was again disadvantaged on Today.

The 'set-pieces' identified in the count were as follows:

Post-7am bulletin on:	**Interviewees were:**
Tues 18/3	Alan Duncan (Con) *2'11"* and Peter Mandelson (Lab) *2'15"*
Thurs 20/3	Quentin Davies (Con) *2'25"* – following 29" of David Wilshire (Con)
Mon 24/3	Ken McGuinness (Ulster Unionist) *4'22"*
Good Friday 28/3	Beckenham Constituency Deputy Chairman (Con) *2'59"*
Easter Monday 31/3	David Irvine (PUP) *4'25"*
Fri 4/4	Alec Salmond (SNP) *1'54"* and George Robertson (Lab) *4'50"*
Mon 7/4	Party Organiser in Tatton (SLD) *3'28"*
Fri 11/4	Angela Browning (Con) *1'08"* and Sir Peter Tapsell (Con) *3'35"*
Tues 15/4	Menzies Campbell (SLD) *2'44"* after 42" of two Conservatives
Fri 18/4	Stephen Dorrell (Con) *5'02"*
Sat19/4	Lord Howe (Con) *4'29"*
Mon 21/4	Gillian Shepherd (Con) *10'08"*
Tues 22/4	Michael Howard (Con) *8'07"*

Post-8am bulletin on:	**Interviewees were:**
Tues 18/3	Paddy Ashdown (SLD) *5'10"*
Thurs 20/3	John Prescott (Lab) *3'48"*
Sat 22/3	Peter Shore (Lab) *4'08"* – following two short Conservatives 37"
Thurs 27/3	Michael Heseltine (Con) *9'40"* - following 2'30" of Richard Branson

Good Friday 28/3	Brian Mawhinney (Con) *5'36"*
Sat 29/3	Donald Dewar (Lab) *6'32"*
Easter Monday 31/3	Martin McGuinness (Sinn Fein) *6'25"*
Tues 1//4	Edward Heath (Con) *5'44"*
Weds 2/4	John Major (Con) *17'37"*
Thurs 3/4	Tony Blair (Lab) *15'40"*
Fri 4/4	Paddy Ashdown (SLD) *13'37"* – following 'wavering SLD voter' 41"
Tues 8/4	Peter Lilley (Con) *3'32"* & David Blunket (Lab) *3'40"*
Weds 9/4	Michael Heseltine (Con) *7'42"*
Thurs 10/4	Michael Jack (Con) *3'23"* & Alistair Darling (Lab) *4'18"*
Fri 11/4	Stephen Dorrell (Con) *8'32"* – plus Lord Tebbit aside (Con) 1'50"
Sat 12/4	John Prescott (Lab) *9'43"*
Mon 14/4	David Blunkett (Lab) *7'44"* – with live stimulus and aside from Robert Belchett 2'05"
Tues 15/4	Edwina Currie (Con) *3'12"*
Weds 16/4	Malcolm Rifkind (Con) *8'47"*
Thurs 17/4	John Redwood (Con) *3'50"*
Tues 22/4	Sir Leon Brittan (Con) *3'22"*
Thurs 24/4	Kenneth Clarke (Con) *12'10"*
Fri 25/4	Douglas Hogg (Con) *4'35"* – following Gavin Strang (Lab) 27"
Mon 28/4	Tony Blair (Lab) *18'17"*
Tues 29/4	John Major (Con) *19'49"*

FIGURE 26: 'Set piece' interviews and durations on Today during the election period

It can be seen from the table above, that Labour's two post-7am appearances were both in combined items with other parties. By contrast, Conservatives were interviewed alone or with other Conservatives in seven post-7am slots. It is also worth noting the placing of these items: in the final three weeks of the campaign, (arguably

the most important as they more immediately preceded the poll itself,) the ratio of Conservative interviewees to others in these slots shifted even farther in their favour. Critics of the programme might construe from this that there was a desire to over-represent the Conservative Party, and that that desire grew as the poll approached.

However, as in Count 1, the relative *durations* of each party's appearances might have been more equitable than a simple count would suggest. This will be considered later in the section on timings.

Count 3: incidence of other interviews with party representatives

Outside the 'set-piece' opportunities to 'have the floor', some political parties benefited nonetheless from what was famously once called the 'oxygen of publicity' gained from only partially restrained access to the programme's microphones. Scheduling these interviews outside the prime slots may have reduced exposure - and thus impact. However, their lesser importance does not obviate the need to consider their effect on the overall balance within the programmes.

In order to assist comparison with the results of Count 2, this analysis excluded brief appearances in multi-voice packages or as brief stimuli before or during longer, live interviews. News bulletins and the election panel debates with which the majority of the programmes ended, are considered later in this chapter. In this count were what have here been called 'apparently complete' interviews – in that each one began and ended with some form of welcome and expression of gratitude respectively, whether in the studio or involving some live link - although in the case of recordings, any editing would not have been discernible. The results are shown below:

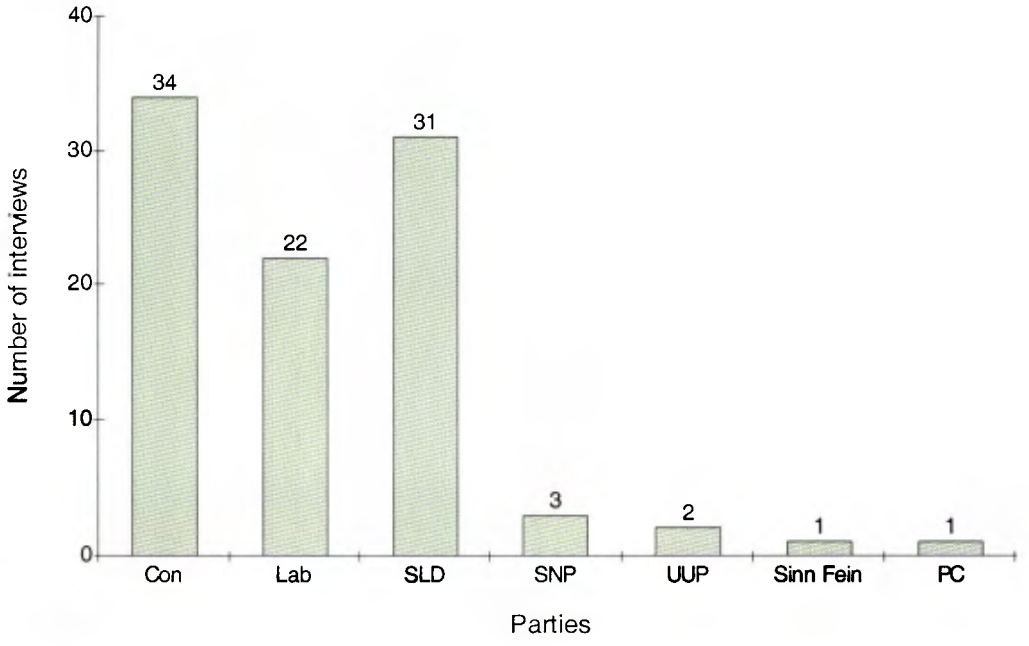

FIGURE 27: Count of other 'apparently complete' interviews with party representatives (i.e. not in post-news slots)

This count was mainly of what can be termed party representatives, in that almost all were present or former spokesmen or women for their party, who might happily have been put up for interview by their leadership. Each of them appeared to be broadly supportive of their own parties' campaigns and critical at times of their opponents.

Again, in this result there was a significant imbalance, with the Conservatives receiving a disproportionate advantage in frequency over Labour. So the imbalance created in the prime slots, discovered in Count 2, appeared to be compounded across the rest of the programmes, albeit to a lesser extent. The Social and Liberal Democrats, however, although very poorly represented in the prime 'set-piece' slots, were allowed to appear more often than Labour. It can be seen, then, that SLD representatives were much less likely to be interviewed outside prime time than in it,

while only four of the regional parties were accorded 'apparently complete' interviews at all.

Again, it must be remembered that this was a simple count – incidence rather than duration – and these interviews were timed and total durations calculated later.

Count 4: total count of all 'apparently complete' interviews

Adding together Counts 2 and 3 produced a total of all 'apparently complete' interviews allotted to the different parties. This is represented in the chart below:

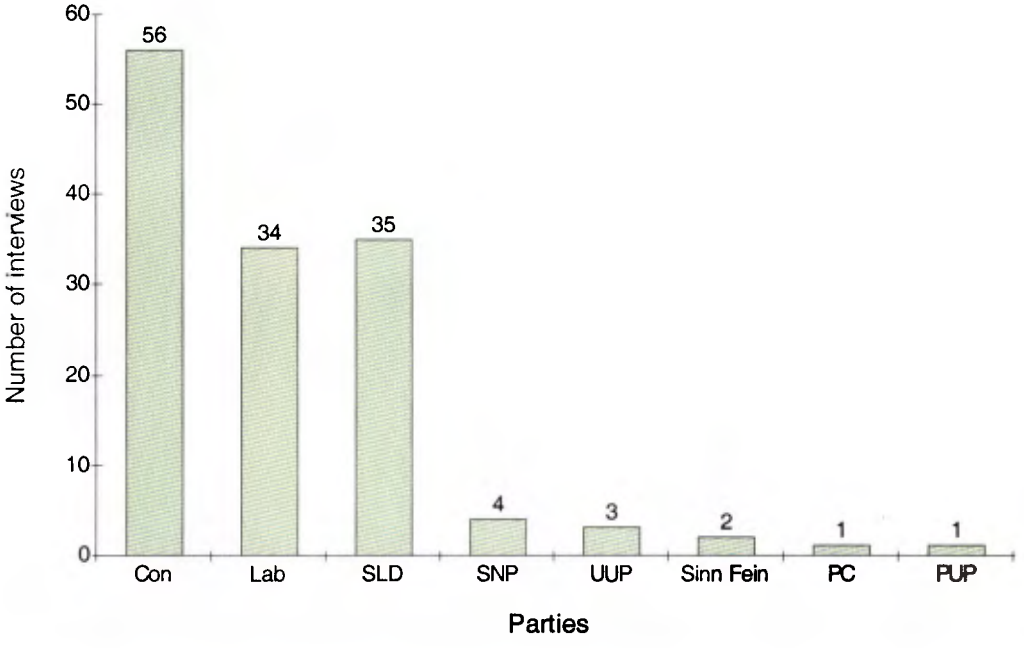

FIGURE 28: Total count of all 'apparently complete' interviews with party representatives (including 'set pieces')

Inevitably, the Conservative advantage over Labour remained when the total number of 'apparently complete' interviews was calculated. This advantage was nearly 2:1. Extraordinarily, the third party – the SLD – enjoyed more total opportunities to be

interviewed in this way than Labour, a result clearly at odds with the parties' previous shares of vote or Parliamentary representation.

Count 5: incidence of non-party interviewees who may be sympathetic to particular parties

Of course, party representatives did not make up the totality of all interviews on the programmes. There were other players in the game, and who they were and what they said also have an importance. However, the difficulties inherent in such an analysis of the texts are considerable. Identifying which speakers are sympathetic to which party without on-air explanation would require a large amount of detective work. Usually, the relationship between speaker and party was left unexplained, and so listeners had to draw their own conclusions from prior knowledge - if they were at all sensitive to the relationship. That, too, is problematic: for example, the Essex fire fighters - were their appearances supportive of Labour, or likely to cause an electoral disadvantage?

Paradoxically, the Labour Party had for years been actively courting business leaders and the party had secured the support of some of them. It would not have been as safe in 1997 as it had been ten years earlier, to assume that business and the CBI were automatically sympathetic to the Conservatives.

Without an on-air declaration, then, the listeners were left to make disparate – and inevitably, often incorrect – assumptions. Only rarely were they assisted in this by other participants in the programmes, an example being David Blunkett's intervention with John Humphrys on 14th April (8.10am):

JH "...Stay on the line if you would, I'll er I'll put those points to David Blunkett. Mr Blunkett good morning."

DB: "Good morning John, let's erm make sure your listeners know that Mr Belchett is not only er, a leading member of the Tory Party, but he shared the platform at the Tory Party conference with Gillian Shepherd, but his organisation is directly funded by the Government and he receives funding as a member of the FAS itself."

JH: "Well, fine, but what he is saying has been said also by the headmaster of er..."

DB: "Well he issued a, he issued a statement yesterday deploring that, the misuse of his words and, er, indicating it was quite wrong for an individual child's school to be used and I agree with him."

Blunkett's assertions about the other's allegiances were only challenged by John Humphrys, and not by the speaker himself. Humphrys, however, can be read as trying to legitimise the juxtaposition set up by the programme, of Belchett and Blunkett, even though his justification was in turn also subject to a challenge by Mr Blunkett. Had the latter not spoken up, an important consideration in the audience's reading of the item would presumably have been left out.

In this analysis, then, the assumptions of allegiance are left to the reader: the count has been done by category alone – categories devised according to grounded theory (Chapter 3). The definition of any set of categories can inevitably be problematic because it can create an additional hermeneutic layer. When, for instance, does a businessman become a business leader? For this reason, these categories are as broad as is usefully possible.

This analysis considered only 'apparently complete' interviews as defined for Count 3, above - and of course, politicians were excluded, as they were accounted for in Counts 2 and 3. Furthermore, issues with no obvious relevance to the British general

election, (such as Israel, mass suicides in America and the Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan,) were also ignored. The results are recorded below:

trade unionists	18
businessmen or women	12
university academics	8
newspaper editors (pro-Labour)	8
newspaper editors (pro-Conservative)	0
newspaper journalists/columnists	8
magazine editors	5
market analysts	2
government economic adviser	1
economists	2
Institute of Fiscal Studies	1
Centre for Policy Studies	1
OECD	1
judge 'supports SLD'	1
policemen	2
architect (pro-Labour)	1
playwright ('wrote cynical play about Labour')	1
US drugs czar	1
novelist	1
writer	1
fisherman	1

SLD voters	3
Conservative voters	1
'likely' Labour voters	3
don't knows	4
bishops	5
barristers	1
charities	1
QUANGOs	10
privatised utilities	3
pressure groups	5
advertising industry	1
spokesman for Mohammed Al Fayed	1
grant maintained schools association	1
headteachers	3
gay foster parent	1
pupils	2
parent governor	1
student union president	1
Fawcett Society	1
British Veterinary Association	1
Safeway	1

archeologist	1	hereditary peer	1
council officer	1	lobbyist (Ian Greer)	1
health visitor	1	environmentalist	1
abattoir manager	1	children's author	1
benefit claimant	1	loyalist	1
foreign nationals	4	comedian	1

FIGURE 29: 'Apparently complete' interviews not *billed as party representatives*

While the number of categories above might appear to be absurdly large for some purposes, the main intention of this analysis was to provide a basis for analysis of bias. As in the vast majority of cases the party allegiances of interviewees was not declared, it would, however, not be useful to further combine categories and therefore lose information about individual cases.

While we can make certain assumptions from the descriptors in the table and aspire to a certain level of accuracy, redefining some categories might decrease the reliability of any assumptions made. However little Labour may have welcomed airtime being given to trade unionists, for example, most of the interviewees in that category could be assumed to be Labour supporting as that is the party to which most of their unions are politically affiliated. Similarly, whatever their personal views, it was possible for the relatively media literate to make assumptions about the on-air contributions of editors of Labour-supporting newspapers. As there were no appearances in this context from the editors of either the Mail or the Telegraph, the fifth category has, exceptionally, a zero value. Again, reasonable assumptions may be made about those

voters described as 'Conservative', 'SLD' or 'likely Labour', if those on air descriptions were correct.

Again, in the context of the 1997 election, it would have at best been unsafe to assume businessmen or women to all be Conservative supporters. With no further indicators, the majority of the remaining descriptors offer few clues as to party allegiance (if any) or ideological positioning. (A small number of exceptions included the 'right-wing' Centre for Policy Studies.) It is clear, though, that there is a distinction between having the opportunity to speak oneself, and being characterised by someone else, however sympathetic. The eighteen trade unionists and however many others of these interviewees one might wish to associate with Labour, do not adequately mitigate the unsatisfactory airtime allocation across the three main parties themselves.

Timing 1: duration of 'set-piece' interviews

The simple count of these items had earlier identified a 13:7 imbalance in the allocation of these prime slots, favouring Conservatives over Labour. However, it had been possible that the vast difference in the *number* of 'set-pieces' was compensated by Labour's allocation being of a similar total *duration* to the Conservatives'.

Therefore, the durations of each party's 'set-pieces' were added up and totaled. (Short stimulus material, where broadcast, was acknowledged in the Count 2 table (FIGURE 26), but it does not appear either in the count or the timings, hence the distinction in the table between normal and italic type. Cues were not included, but interviewers' questions were.) The results of the calculations are shown below:

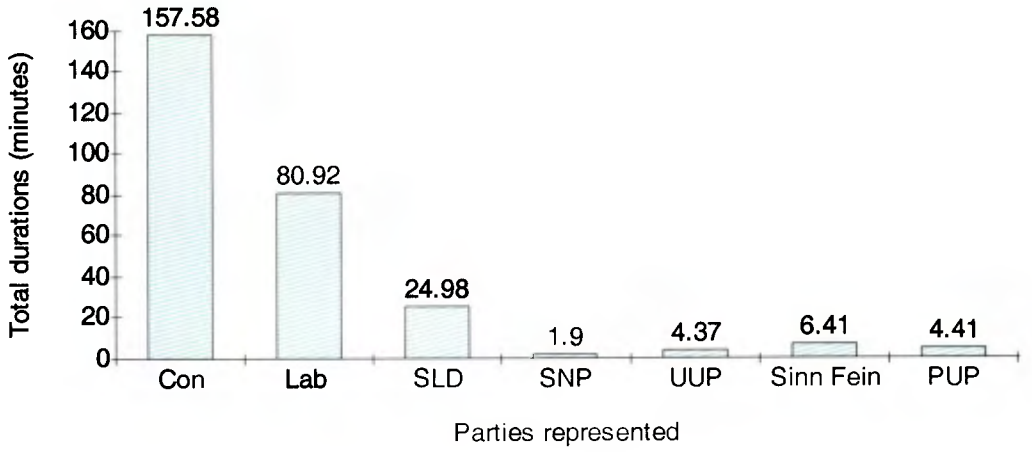

FIGURE 30: Total durations of 'set piece' interviews allocated to each party

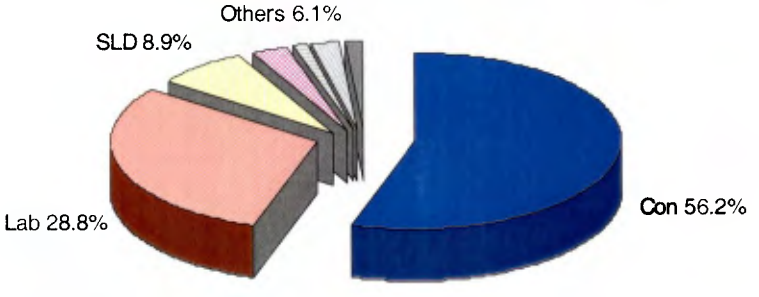

FIGURE 31: Share of total 'set piece' interview time allocated to each party

From the above, it is evident that the same two patterns emerge, as were revealed in the earlier analyses. That is: in the durations of the prime time 'set pieces', the Conservative Party was favoured over Labour quite disproportionately to most notions of 'balance', and that smaller and regional parties were disadvantaged compared with what Today called the three 'main' parties. The percentages in the pie chart are, however, more easily reconciled with the share of *seats* in the previous Parliament than with the share of the votes cast in the 1992 general election which had distributed those seats. The appropriateness of basing on-air representation on that in Parliament

was discussed in Chapter 1, (as opposed to basing it on votes cast,) but it certainly seemed at this early stage that incumbency might have been a valuable advantage in accessing airtime on Today.

Timing 2: duration of other 'apparently complete' interviews with party representatives

The imbalance discovered in Count 3, favouring the Conservatives in the frequency of these non post-news slots was mitigated by this later analysis of total durations. The mean running time of each party's slots was as follows: Conservative 3.4 mins; Labour 4.73 mins; SLD 3.21 mins (including questioning but not the cues). Inevitably, Labour's greater average durations allowed them to achieve a more balanced access to the programme's microphones than was at first thought, as shown below:

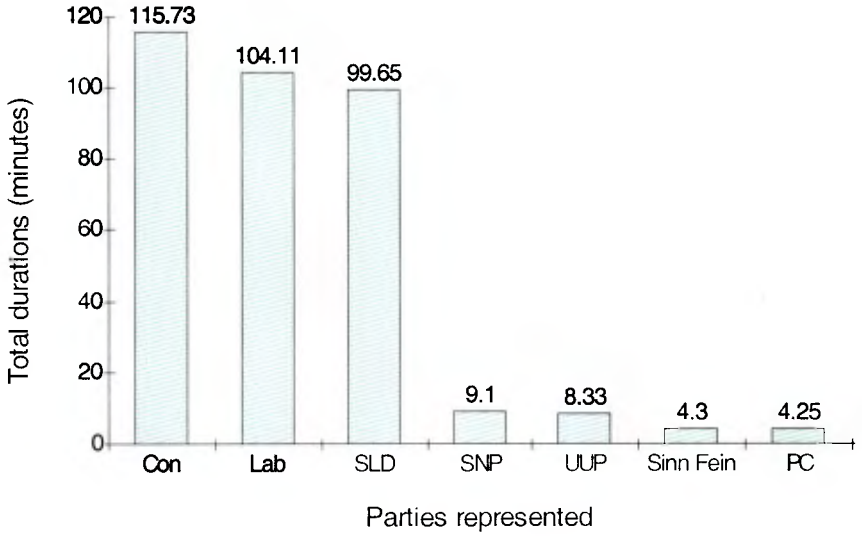

FIGURE 32: Total durations of other 'apparently complete' interviews allocated to each party

This tendency to interview Labour representatives for longer, if less often, did improve the overall shares of 'apparently complete' interview time across the three 'main' parties, taking the post-news 'set-piece' slots together with the rest. The share of time allocated to the parties within this interview format overall was as illustrated below:

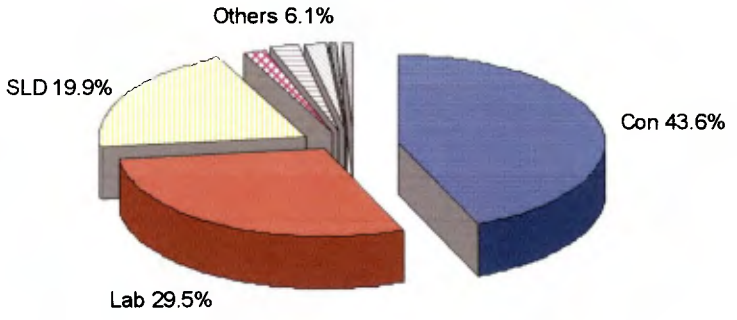

Figure 33: Share of all 'apparently complete' interviews with party representatives (post-news and at all other times).

This new ratio of time allowed to 'have the floor' was much closer to the 1991 share of votes cast, and hence fairer than anticipated by the earlier analyses - however Labour's figure was still lower than in that previous general election (33%) and the SLD's higher (13%). Although the advantage accorded by Today to the Conservatives did not now appear so great as it had done earlier, it was still present. Furthermore, although not so badly disadvantaged as had previously seemed, Labour and the Liberal Democrats were much less likely than the Conservatives to be interviewed in the prime, post-news slots at the top of the main hours.

In terms of being interviewed, then, according to every parameter used there was an imbalance towards the Conservatives and against Labour and the minority parties which can only be partially justified by the 'previous votes cast principle'. When

scheduling is considered, too, a considerably disproportional advantage was accorded to the Conservatives, who were given far more than their share of prime slots.

Here, in one respect, appeared to be a vindication of Prime Minister John Major's decision to establish an unusually protracted election period of seven weeks. Despite the Conservatives' landslide defeat, the opinion polls did show Labour's lead narrowing over the campaign. Had Major known that Today, and maybe others, would allow his party's representatives such generous invitations to the airwaves to put across their points of view compared with those accorded the challengers, Labour, he might have been well advised to extend the period even further.

Count 6: occurrence of different election issues

The agenda for the election campaign – and hence coverage of it - was set by a variety of factors. Among them were politicians, party workers, pressure groups, individuals and, inevitably, the media themselves. A common complaint voiced on air in the first few weeks was that sleaze was given an unjustifiably high profile. As Labour was probably the main beneficiary of voter dissatisfaction with the Conservatives' record in office, and the several allegations of sleaze surrounding them, it was very often the Conservatives who made those complaints.

John Humphrys' cue to an interview with Labour's Donald Dewar about Tory MP Piers Merchant, for example, revealed Today's awareness of who would benefit from any part of the media concentrating on sleaze:

> JH: "There was a moment earlier this week when it looked as though this election might be about the sort of things we used to talk about in campaigns, when the Tories bashed the Labour Party over its plans for trade union recognition. Didn't last long. The Sun came to Labour's rescue with allegations about a Tory MP and a nightclub hostess and sleaze was back at the top of the campaign agenda. Yesterday Labour did its best to try to keep it there." (29/3/97, 8.10am)

A day earlier, Dr Brian Mawhinney had spelled out to Humphrys what he, as Conservative Party Chairman, thought were the main issues:

> JH: "It looks as if it won't be until next Tuesday so it's going to drag on all over the Easter weekend, which isn't very good for you is it?"
>
> BM: "I think, er, most people in the country recognise that this election will be decided on the economy, on Mr Blair's secret deal with the trade unions, er on our determination not to take this country into a federal Europe, and Mr Blair's determination that we should be part of a federal Europe..." (28/3/97, 8.11am)

On which 'election' issues, then, did Today concentrate? The Loughborough University/Guardian analysis of election coverage across *a number of media* (Chapter 4) had found that election conduct (32%), Europe (15%) and sleaze (10%) were the top three issues. Consequently, the domestic policy areas of education (7%), taxation (6%), constitution (5%) and privatisation (4%) languished at the bottom of their table.

A key problem in so closely defining the 'subject' of any broadcast item, though, is the possibility of its engaging with dual or multiple subjects – either intentionally or as a result of digression by one or more of the parties involved. For this present analysis of Today's output, it was decided to firstly examine the *intended* subject and in doing so to recognise the role of the cue in characterising the nature of item it was written to precede. Many 'apparently complete' interviews will have been wide ranging – for example those with the three 'main' party leaders, but many were with a party's

spokesperson for a particular policy area, which then dominated the exchange. At other times some interviewees may have succeeded in subverting the interviewer's agenda. This element of subject drift will be considered later (Chapter 6). Other types of item, such as 'two-ways' with correspondents and multi-voice packages tended to stick quite rigidly to the agenda in the cue, while the 'round table' debates were more inclined to veer between issues. Generally, though, it was often possible to discern the intended coverage of the item from its cue: hence this particular count.

The chart below shows the results of this initial analysis of cues, with 'main' issues sub-divided between item types. The definition of issue categories was initially derived from the Guardian graphic of the Loughborough analysis, with many more categories being added as they became necessary.

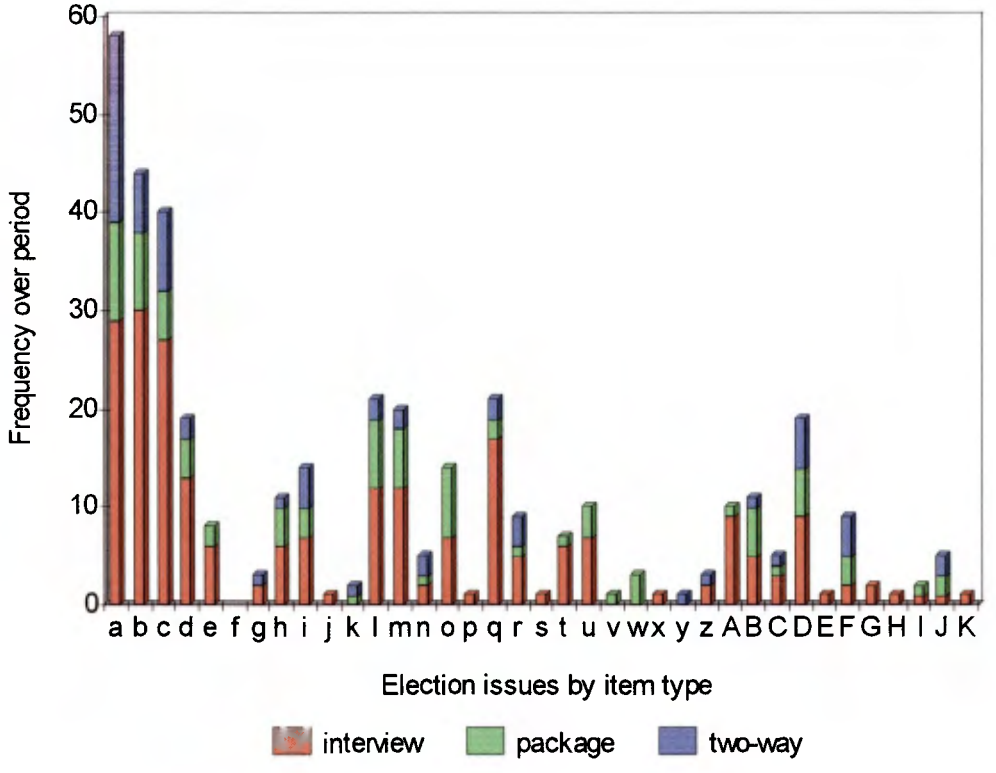

FIGURE 34: Election issues on Today as precursored by item cues (key overleaf)

It was immediately evident from this analysis that in terms of items about election issues, the 'apparently complete' interview format predominated over the multi-voice package and the two-way discussion with a BBC journalist, by a ratio of approximately 23:9:7. The reasons for this may lie in the relative ease with which the former can be produced – a multi-voice package requires significantly more preparation time – and the listener fatigue which would inevitably result from a predominance of discussions with the same pool of BBC journalists.

The categories in the chart are shown in the table below. Beginning with Loughborough's top seven categories, a further twenty-eight emerged in this analysis:

		interview (a/c)	package (multi-voice)	two-way (correspondent)
a	election conduct	29	10	19
b	Europe	30	8	6
c	sleaze	27	5	8
d	education	13	4	2
e	taxation	6	2	
f	constitution			
g	privatisation	2		1
h	agriculture	6	4	1
i	fishing	7	3	4
j	foreign policy	1		
k	defence		1	1
l	economy	12	7	2
m	health (inc. food safety)	12	6	2
n	newspaper allegiance	2	1	2
o	environment/water	7	7	
p	hunting	1		
q	multiple	17	2	2
r	unemployment	5	1	3
s	minimum wage	1		
t	law & order (inc. terrorism)	6	1	
u	devolution/independence	7	3	
v	immigration		1	
w	leaders' profiles		3	
x	Labour's 'inexperience'	1		
y	TV debate			1
z	morality	2		1
A	trade unions/strikes	9	1	
B	voting intentions	5	5	1
C	legal affairs	3	1	1
D	Northern Ireland	9	5	5
E	homosexuals	1		
F	manifesto launches	2	3	4
G	policing	2		
H	parliamentary procedure	1		
I	transport	1	1	

FIGURE 35: Key to categories used in classification of items by 'election issue'

Inevitably, there were differences between us in the act of classification - in terms of the methodologies used, and any reflexivity implicated in the two separate analyses. This is illustrated by their 'constitution' category being rated zero in the table above: if they had discovered such an item on Today, it would probably have appeared as 'devolution/independence' in this present count – which seemed a more appropriate

label for the items monitored here. The exception to this likelihood would be if Today was significantly out of step with the rest of the media the Loughborough group studied. Another disparity is that one measurement is of issue frequency, while the other appears to be duration-based ('percentage of coverage'). This does not, in itself, however, render comparison irrelevant.

So, while acknowledging the differences in research methodologies suggested above, it is useful to make a comparison between Loughborough's cross-media analysis and this one, of Today. The chart below suggests that Today was only half as likely to raise election conduct, as was the range of media studied by Loughborough.

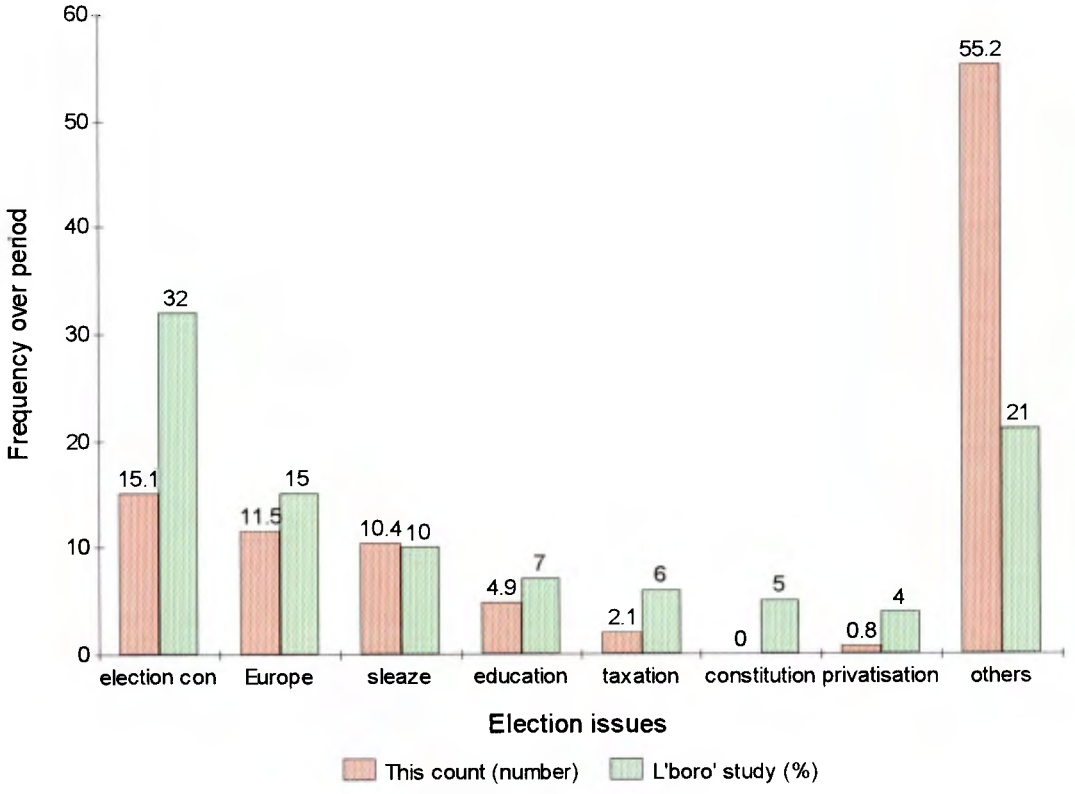

FIGURE 36: Comparison of 'election issue' findings here and by Loughborough

Conversely, Today was more than twice as likely to raise other issues than Loughborough's 'top seven'. Other comparisons might be devalued by the margin of error inherent in the different research models, but is interesting to note that, at *prima facie,* Today did not appear to raise the issues of sleaze (10.4% and 10.0%) or Europe (11.5% and 15.0%) significantly more or less than did Loughborough's wider sample. In fact, ignoring the margin for error, Today chose to discuss Europe slightly less often than the 'other media'.

These latter two issues were the key negatives for the Conservatives during the campaign. The appearance that in exercising its news judgement, Today did not place any greater importance on those two issues (than did the range of media surveyed by Loughborough), seems to discredit one of the programme's possible defences. That is, the airtime advantage accorded to the Conservative party (and discussed above), might have been 'balanced' in the broadcasters' estimation by that party being interrogated more searchingly on their key negative issues. In fact, while these were more commonly the second and third most discussed issues of the campaign, Today appears to have covered a far wider range of policy issues than other media – and done so in greater depth. This could even be interpreted as a dilution of Today's coverage of the issues which ran counter to the interests of the Conservative Party.

Count 7: order of parties in news bulletins

It was apparent that some analysis should be done of news bulletins, hereto excluded from this study. While some distinction can be made between the news and the programming, headlines and bulletins broadcast during the Today programme can be

perceived as part of it. Near the 'top' of almost every bulletin would inevitably be an election story, either on what the BBC considered the most important election issue, or a summary of the three 'main' parties' activities or plans for the day.

Just as the ordering of stories within a bulletin reflects prevalent news values, the order in which the parties were placed in a bulletin could also be interpreted as a prioritising of the main protagonists. The antithesis of such a proposition would be that always placing one party first would be of no consequence, and therefore acceptable. Always beginning with the SLD may at least have caused questions to be asked by Labour and the Conservatives, if not actually provoking a complaint. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, in the measurement of balance few factors can be relied upon to have only a neutral value. The media literate in the audience may have encountered the principle of most important items coming first. In this, they and others may at least have been subjected to some subliminal effect.

Initially, then, the study considered just the *order* in which the parties were mentioned in the news bulletins – simply to establish, on each occasion, which party came first. Making 'the lead' was not necessarily positive for a party, though. For example, during the first two weeks of the campaign the bulletins were dominated by sleaze stories about the Conservatives. Many of those lead stories about them were likely to be negative, and sleaze was often cited by voters as a reason for switching allegiance to Labour or the SLD. So, it became clear that it was important to establish not only *how often* parties were mentioned first in news bulletins, but also *the context* in which it occurred. The table below shows the results of this analysis:

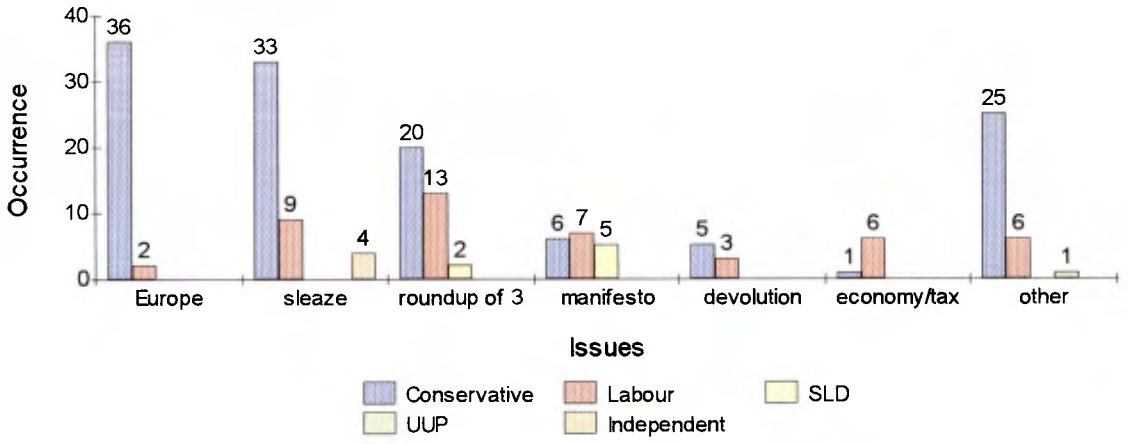

FIGURE 37: Parties' first mentions in bulletins, with occurrence classified by issue

The bulletins surveyed were those at 6.30am (not Saturdays), 7.0, 7.30, 8.0 and 8.30, read, in each case, by a newsreader and incorporating other audio in the form of reports and interview clips. (This definition excluded the brief presenter-read headlines usually occurring around a quarter to the hour.)

It was probably to be expected that the Conservatives would be mentioned first on more occasions than any other parties. The BBC did have a declared policy of acknowledging their greater success in the previous general election. That one party's dominance of this analysis should again be quite so disproportionate was another surprise. In all, they were mentioned first almost two and a half times as often as Labour, and more than seventeen times as often as the Liberal Democrats.

It could be argued that this phenomenon was without consequence, or could not have been deliberate. However, assuming it was not deliberately intended to favour the

Conservatives, that such routine prioritising of one party over others should be allowed to occur on such a massive scale does suggest that this is a factor that should have been considered by scriptwriters.

It is worth noting that the only independent to be elected, Martin Bell, also benefited quite disproportionately, too – because of the newsworthiness of his entry into the election as a candidate. Of the 'other' parties, only the Ulster Unionists were ever prioritised in a bulletin. Even on the days their manifestos were launched, the other minor parties did not ever make 'the lead', and no other independent candidates ever featured in bulletins.

Only on thirty five occasions out of one hundred and eighty four, was the first election story to mention a party in the manner of a 'roundup' of how the Conservatives, Labour and the SLD were campaigning. (Although, on 8th April, the 'roundup' didn't even include the SLD.) Far more often, it was a particular issue which led the BBC's reporting of the election. That the top two issues by a wide margin were Europe and sleaze – often the Conservatives' key negatives – might suggest that the bulletins were in fact themselves largely negative for the one party and positive for the Opposition. For the manifesto launches, by contrast, the three parties were treated broadly equally according to this criterion. It is certainly possible that positive stories for the Conservatives were being balanced by their own negative items, rather than by opposing voices from other parties (see Chapter 1).

However, the treatment of different issues was far more complex than that: both sleaze and Europe could be presented as negative *and* positive stories for the Conservatives.

One example is "Two Tory MPs have won the backing of their constituencies..." (22/3/97). While classified above as 'sleaze', this received headline may have been 'read' by different listeners in at least two different, quite opposite ways (see Chapter Four). Firstly, that these were two Conservatives standing firm against what they held to be innuendo and rumour, and being supported in doing so by their colleagues, all protesting righteous indignation. Secondly, perhaps instead it may have been an unwelcome reinforcer of the notion that some Conservatives were implicated in sleaze. Similarly, "The Tory MP, Piers Merchant, has been called to explain himself, and shows no sign of standing down despite calls... from (Major and Heseltine)..." (28/3/97) could equally be interpreted as having a positive or a negative 'spin'. The Conservative leader and deputy leader were standing firm against an alleged rogue – or, the MP was behaving 'badly' and the Conservative leadership was ineffective in removing him. One could argue here, too, that the prominence in the sentence afforded by Merchant's being named first was a deliberate focussing on the negative, rather than a more positive slant to the copy, which could have been achieved by: "The leadership of the Conservative Party have called on Piers Merchant to stand down". Choosing between two such alternatives has the effect of using emphasis to promote a preferred reading.

Neither was Europe always a negative for the Conservatives. For a short period from 17th April, for example, the lead election stories became their attack on the Labour leader Tony Blair - whom they had depicted in a newspaper advertisement as a ventriloquist's dummy, sitting on the knee of the German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl. For a time, this made Labour's relationship with Europe, rather than Conservative 'divisions', the dominant discourse within the issue of Europe.

In the style of the Loughborough, study, then, the parties' first mentions in bulletins were re-classified – not according to issue, but according to whether the story itself would most likely be positive or negative in terms of listener perception. Of course, creating an extra hermeneutic layer (*'most likely'*) may have added distortions of its own, but this further analysis of news bulletin content did provide another useful insight into the programmes. It was recognised in previous chapters that usually a multiplicity of positions exist within a discourse, rather than simplistic, twin polarities – a right and a wrong, a left and a right, a positive and a negative. Here though, a single test was applied: whether the party's main election strategists might reasonably have approved of the spin given to the story. If yes, that story was coded positive; all others were negative. This removed any need for further categories or any notion of a 'neutral' value. The results are shown in the chart below:

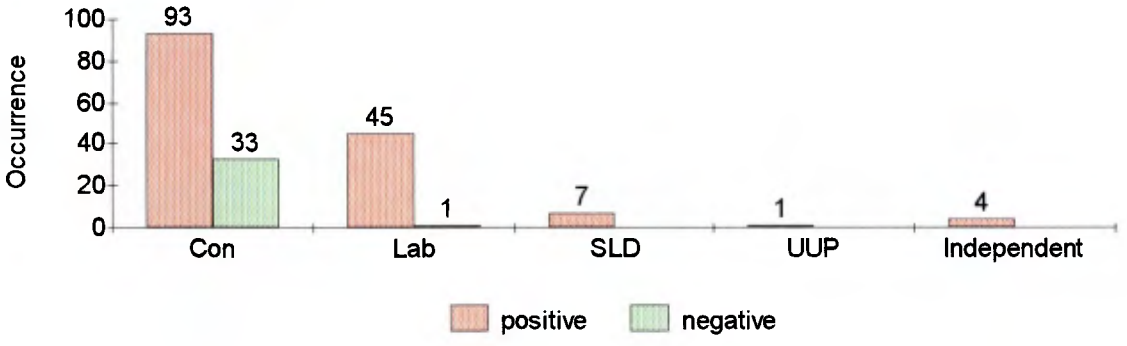

FIGURE 38: Parties' first mentions in bulletins, classified as positive or negative.

This new analysis indicated some reduction of the Conservatives' advantage indicated by the previous count. Although Conservatives were prioritised more than twice as often as Labour, on one third of those occasions, it was likely to be to their detriment.

Crudely subtracting Conservative negatives from their positives leaves them with a net advantage of sixty prioritisations, compared with Labour's net of forty-four and the SLD's 7. This compares more favourably to the two biggest parties' relative shares of votes in the 1992 poll, but even by that criterion it leaves the SLD badly under-represented.

Although (and perhaps because) the Conservatives were much more likely to be prioritised than Labour, they were also more likely to prioritised negatively. Labour was only prioritised negatively once, which could be understood as a greater tendency to lead on stories harmful to the governing party than their principal contenders. Again, this could be interpreted at *prima facie* as a balancing of Conservatives by Conservatives, rather than by Labour. However, it should be noted that many 'Conservative/positive' stories, while positive from their own point of view, were also negative for Labour, and vice versa. This occurred where the copy reported one party criticising the other.

This problem could necessitate further analyses of the phenomenon of prioritisation within news bulletins, with ever increasing levels of sophistication. Significant as they may be, however, the need for further hermeneutic layers might render their interpretation increasingly contentious. There is much more to a single news bulletin than such an increasingly time-consuming investigation would reveal, though, and it seemed more profitable to move on. The main point is that which was quickly established: this was another example of Today favouring one party over the others, however much mitigation might lie as yet undiscovered. Broadcasters can be more overtly even-handed than was the case here.

Count 8: items in the daily newspaper reviews

Another important aspect of Today is the review of the day's newspapers. Whereas overt partisan support of one party over the others is not an option open to either the BBC or licensed commercial broadcasters in the United Kingdom, it is the bread and butter of the newspaper industry. While broadcasters often do distinguish between the reporting of facts and the conveying of opinion, their print colleagues are free to mix the two at will, constrained only by the strictures of their style books. Lacking any statutory obligation to be impartial, newspapers may favour whomsoever or whatsoever they like, being responsible only to their readers and their proprietors. This is power without public responsibility, and newspaper editors wield it with relish. After the 1992 general election, the Sun proclaimed it was they "what won it" for the Conservatives.

Today's newspaper review is, then, a chance for the programme to comment on comment, to editorialise over the editorials and generally to produce a mediated view of the posturing of the dailies. The slot's timing is an indication of its popularity, not least with the programme's producers, who in 1997 broadcast two different versions each programme – at approximately 6.40am and 7.40. Notions of balance perhaps extending beyond the party political, might dictate an equilibrium between coverage of tabloids and broadsheets, across different titles, and over proprietors. Certainly, the programme's own perception of its listeners (Chapter 3) would imply a predominance among them of broadsheet (and perhaps, Guardian) readers, however the item is not seen as reviewing the listeners' chosen newspapers – but rather a range of what the country at large is reading over its breakfast.

A three-minute script read cannot hope to accurately convey the whole content of ten national newspapers – nor should it try. However, the limitations of the 'review' in reflecting the content of the press are almost never raised on air. The act of mediation which takes place in the scripting of the item is, therefore, another act of power wielding. All that a Today listener who does not buy The Sun may know of its content could be what Today told him or her that morning. How the review characterises their content should therefore be of concern not only to the newspapers themselves, but also to the parties.-

In the 1992 general election, only the Mirror consistently supported the Labour Party; the others overwhelmingly championing the Conservatives – with the clear exception of the Financial Times, which backed Labour on the eve of polling. In that election, reviews seeking a balance between titles and types of publication would have carried little material in support of the Opposition. However, in 1997, the situation being altered, and with more newspapers overtly backing Labour, it should have been at least easier to achieve a party political balance as well. (By the poll, The Sun, The Daily Star, The Guardian, The Independent and The Scotsman had all declared their support for Labour, while The Daily Telegraph, The Daily Mail and The Times remained loyal to the Conservatives.)

What, then, did the reviews say? In the quantitative analysis performed for this chapter, firstly the items within the reviews were counted and classified according to subject. This was in itself problematic, as the scriptwriters sometimes drifted between topics within the same sentence. Where the subsequent material implied a change of

category, such transitional devices were taken to be a bridge between items. Again, devising categories consistently proved difficult, and re-labelling and subsequent re-allocating of topics between categories became necessary. This act of mediation was itself another hermeneutic layer, and as such not uncontroversial. However, the results found were interesting.

Of three hundred and ninety-nine identifiable items, two hundred and thirty-two were not of any direct relevance to the election or to United Kingdom politics (including world news). It would be wrong, though, to assume that in terms of *duration* the reviews were less about election issues than other topics because most 'other' items were placed at the end, and dealt with more briefly. A common example would be a humorous article in a single newspaper, included in the review for its amusement value – whereas the main election issues would most often occur as longer, comparative accounts of coverage in a range of publications.

The mean of 3.03 'other' items per bulletin suggests that, typically, there would be three such items per review. However, sometimes there was only one, often there were five, and on the 21st April there were six – perhaps being symptomatic on that day of election fatigue either in the newspapers or the reviewer, or both. 'Other' items were excluded from the graphs of initial results shown below, and categories with values of three or less were re-distributed (seven items) or excluded (ten items).

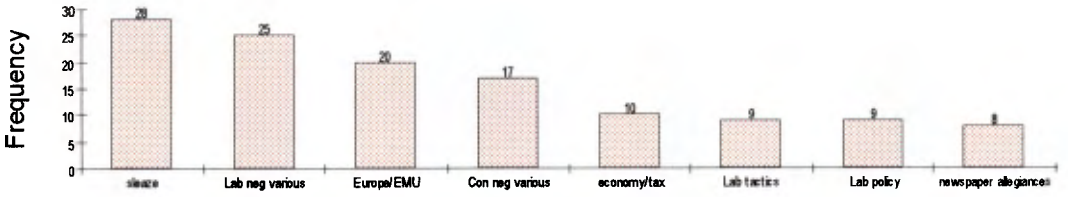

FIGURE 39: Occurrence of most frequently-included election topics in reviews

The most frequently-observed categories were sleaze – a key negative for the Conservative Party – and 'Labour negative various'. As noted earlier, the next category, Europe/EMU, was not necessarily always negative for the Conservatives, given their anti-Labour advertisement, but in many cases it will have served to remind listeners of Conservative divisions.

However, the top four categories, representing eighty-five out of one hundred and seventy-seven categorised items all represented 'bad' news for either Labour or the Conservatives. Other categories in FIGURE 39 will have included negatives for the Conservatives, too – for example 'newspaper allegiances' – largely concentrating on The Sun's surprise swing to Labour. Only amongst the less frequently-observed categories were more constructive comments more common. These results are shown in the second chart, below:

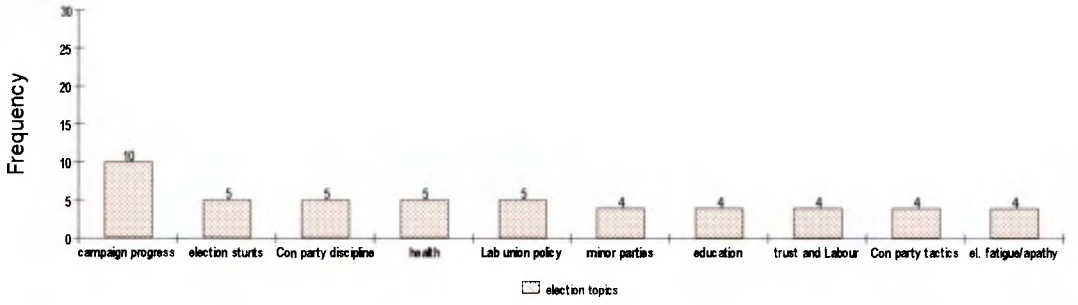

FIGURE 40: Occurrence of less frequently-included election topics in reviews.

The tendency in the majority of the newspaper reviews was, therefore, to highlight negative reporting. However, interpretation of these data to determine the existence of equilibrium demands a greater reliance on further knowledge of the scripts themselves than is possible through broad categorisation. For example, what was the effect of the inclusion of 'election stunts', and who will have benefited from the discussion – albeit infrequent – of 'health'?

For this reason, a second analysis was carried out, by returning to the recordings, listening to the scripts and re-categorising each inclusion as 'positive for Conservatives', 'positive for Labour' or 'neither'. (Defining the third category 'neither' avoided the mistake of using 'neutral' as a descriptor: exclusion from the first two not necessarily implying an item to be value-free.)

Again, the test applied was whether party managers were likely to have approved of the content, in terms of how it could reasonably have been considered to affect their own prospects. (As the first analysis had revealed little content specifically relevant to the Liberal Democrats, and as in this election executive power was eventually

transferred from the Conservatives to Labour, for the purposes of convenience, they were excluded from consideration. It is recognised, though, that in many constituencies a negative for the Conservatives may have translated into a positive – and decisive – increase in the SLD vote.)

The results are shown in the chart below, and even with some considerable margin for hermeneutic dispute, they demonstrate a far greater tendency for items to be included in the newspaper reviews if they were positive for Labour, than if positive for the Conservatives:

FIGURE 41: Election topics in newspaper reviews, classified by party advantage

A possible reason for this could have been the preponderance of bad news stories over the campaign for the Conservatives – the campaign did, after all, precede a huge landslide victory for Labour. This was, viewed with hindsight, Labour's campaign, and it is inevitable, then, that with the Conservatives struggling to divert attention away from sleaze and their divisions over Europe, that they should have suffered from the worst 'press'. It is interesting, though, to compare this with the many other aspects of Today's coverage and the Loughborough survey of a range of media (Chapter 4).

Loughborough's study used a similar definition – of stories being 'positively favourable' to particular parties. Surprisingly, it found an approximate balance between stories favourable to Labour and the Conservatives in all the national newspapers but the Mirror, the Mail and the Express. By Loughborough's definition, the Mirror published almost four times as many pro-Labour stories than pro-Conservative, while the other two favoured the Conservatives by ratios around two to one.

It is less easy to understand why Today's newspaper reviews should have been so emphatically favourable to Labour – by a ratio of two to one. Unless this was deliberate, there had to be some circumstancial reason. An early theory was that, in accordance with the BBC Guidelines, it may have been due to the review avoiding newspapers' reporting of opinion poll findings - every time Labour's poll lead narrowed, it was a positive story for the Conservatives. An example might have been the Guardian's April 23rd headline 'Bombshell for Labour', in which that newspaper chose to sensationalise a poll in the Telegraph and downplay contradictory findings in its own survey (which later proved to be a better indicator).

This explanation, though, bears little critical examination, especially as that Guardian story, while prevented by the Guidelines from appearing in the BBC's news bulletins, was actually *included* in that morning's newspaper review. (This was inevitably a cause of frustration in the BBC's newsrooms at the time – on that day, the corporation was alone in instead running as its lead a story about Peru. However, on this occasion, the Guidelines on reporting polls as news did prevent what transpired to be a rogue

poll being reported sensationally throughout its bulletins. This caution did avoid further dissemination of a distorted account of the state of the parties, a trap into which most other media fell, including Classic FM.)

More crucially, although the polls themselves usually percolated into the lead item in most newspapers, they did not often provide the *focus* of the story. For example, during the period the Guardian only headlined poll results on four occasions (one of which was positive for Labour), and the Conservative-supporting Telegraph did so on five occasions (positive for Labour once). (Certainly, party allegiance can manifest itself unexpectedly in newspaper coverage: the Guardian 'supported' Labour, yet splashed large front-page pictures of Tony Blair only three times, compared to John Major's nine such appearances.) Therefore, avoiding opinion poll stories, if not actually excluding them altogether, could not account for the pro-Labour emphasis in a series of reviews of newspaper coverage, when the coverage itself was generally balanced between Labour and the Conservatives.

Today's newspaper reviews, then, were at odds in their favouring of Labour over the Conservatives with the rest of the empirical measurements taken so far in this study. They also contradicted the trend identified by Loughborough's partial study of Today, which considered the programme eight times more likely to favour the Conservatives.

It is pertinent to ask whether these arguably pro-Labour items redress the imbalance found elsewhere in the programmes? As the two reviews in each programme amounted to little more than six minutes out of a total duration of up to one hundred and fifty, the answer has to be negative. In addition, these items served to reinforce

the under-representation 'on air' of the SLD and the minority parties – although they were, themselves, poorly represented in the newspapers.

Count 9: frequency and allegiances of contributors to 'election panel' debates

On weekdays from April 1st, Today featured a daily 'election panel' consisting of invited guests, some regular, and some either occasional or appearing just once. Introducing the first – not obviously intended as a contribution to All Fools' Day - in her cue Anna Ford described the panel members as "not politicians, but they do have a keen political interest". However, it is worth reflecting briefly on what constitutes a 'politician'. As explained below, some panel members were indeed practising politicians – or they had been – in the party political sense.

It may not be necessary to be a member of a legislature or a candidate for election to be a politician, as a common dictionary definition of the word requires only 'active engagement in politics'. Certainly, to take part in a discussion on national radio and characterise one party as not wanting to talk about policies (1/4/97) might be reasonably construed as a political act. Similarly, being the editor of the Daily Telegraph would not be considered by many to be an apolitical occupation (Charles Moore). In another humorous embellishment of the introductory cue, John Humphrys commented on 7th April that the panel members were 'sleaze free'. However sleaze free they may have been, it is unlikely that they were *value* free – indeed, they would probably not have been invited in to the studio, if unable to voice strong opinions.

Whatever the intention was, behind constituting such a group, in effect certain individuals were afforded the luxury of a prime national radio slot on which to voice

their opinions. Each day, the format of these items cast one presenter amongst three such 'guests'. The table below reveals the frequency of appearance of each guest:

Name	*Described by Today as*	*Appearances*
Bill Bush	Head of BBC Political Unit	15
Ian Hargreaves	editor, New Statesman	11
Charles Moore	editor, Daily Telegraph	10
Des Wilson	been a great campaigner, now a campaign analyst writing a commentary for the New Statesman	3
Professor Lisa Jardine	of Queen Mary's College, University of London	3
Warren Hogue	of New York Times	3
John Harris	Select magazine	2
Laura Marks	Association of Quality Researchers	1
Bob Worcester	MORI (opinion polling)	1
Petronella Wyatt	of New Statesman	1
Dr James Holland	of London Medical School	1
Tina van Houts	of Dutch television	1
Hilary Wainwright	editor, Red Pepper	1
John Bird	editor, Big Issue	1
Roger Hayward	Kestrel Communications ('a marketing man')	1
Jall Hall	GGT Advertising	1
Professor Steve Jones	a geneticist	1
Sir Crispin Tickell	former ambassador to the UN, warden of Green College, Oxford, diplomatic driving force behind the Earth summit and many other things	1
Armando Ianucci	BBC producer of Election Night Armistice	1
Simon Brook	ex-Head of Broadcasting, Conservative Central Office	1
Darcus Howe	New Statesman columnist	1
Zacu Bidanai	Council of Imams & Mosques	1

FIGURE 42: Guest appearances on 'election panels'

While the most frequent panelist was the BBC's researcher, Bill Bush, the next and the only two other very significant contributors in terms of their frequency of appearance, were Ian Hargreaves and Charles Moore. Bush's role was often stated to be as a 'neutral' observer – a representative of the BBC - while one might suppose the predominance of Hargreaves and Moore was because they were intended, as binary opposites, to represent left and right-wing opinions respectively. No other contributor appearing more than thrice, no one else assumed the same importance in the constitution of the panel as these three. Certainly, an approximate balance was achieved between these two editors in terms of frequency of appearance (but not necessarily in terms of duration 'on air' or freedom of expression), but their relationship to the parties and to the wider election needs some further consideration.

Editorially, the New Statesman was close to 'New' Labour and its leadership, as exemplified in, following the Labour victory, its sponsoring a commemorative issue of the party's membership magazine (New Labour, New Britain, June 1997). However, it would be wrong to assume that Hargreaves represented precisely the Labour leadership's position on *every* issue, any more than Charles Moore was a true reflection of the Conservatives: the Daily Telegraph did criticise the Major government, although advocating its re-election. Neither commentator represented the Liberal Democrats, although the third party were not entirely unrepresented: Des Wilson, described as a 'political analyst' on air, had formerly been a campaign manager for the SLD. Generally, these allegiances or former allegiances were not made explicit in the programmes, and so listeners were only able to anchor contributors to potential political predispositions where their prior knowledge allowed them to, or where such a suggestion emerged in the course of the discussion.

Making complex but accurate deductions about possible political positioning of all the other contributors is as difficult now as it was in 1997. One certainty, though, is that usually the description given to at least most of the panelists was inadequate to allow an informed reading of what they then proceeded to say. For example, the sum total of Laura Marks' personality, value system, experience, ideological influences, and so on is likely to be greater than can be summed up by stating her relationship with a professional body. John Humphrys hinted at this in his description of Sir Crispin Tickell, *without* stating his role as an advisor on ecological matters to the Conservative government (see FIGURE 42).

Of course, certain of the other journalists, like Bush, might have been expected to provide an 'objectivity' founded in disinterest: the New York Times and Dutch television being sufficiently removed from the contest to afford their contributors the status of 'impartial observer' – at least in the minds of the asceptical.

Conversely, the Big Issue and Red Pepper are domestic publications with left-wing editorial stances, and so these panelists were unlikely to be read as particularly 'impartial' by *listeners who recognised the titles*. The sophistication required here of listeners is, though, considerable: although left-wing, neither magazine would consider itself to be Blairite or even close to 'New' Labour thinking.

Such vague descriptions as 'a marketing man' and a 'geneticist' are reductive in the extreme, and although these contributors were probably invited to provide a certain

perspective on particular issues of current interest, pretending that neither could have any political preconceptions or allegiances would be absurd.

Finally, where left and right opinions may have been represented, there was little attempt to overtly represent minority parties or traditions. The single inclusion of Zacu Bidanai as a muslim might suggest that if that one religion was represented, so should others have been: where, for instance, was the jew, the hindu and so on – and if they were among those listed above, why was their spiritual status not made explicit? While the Big Issue editor may have represented a sub-section of the homeless, (that is, those who are positively engaged in an initiative to improve their lot,) other sub-sections were not. No one overtly represented the unemployed, the Scottish, the Welsh the Irish Republicans and so on.

The concerns expressed above need to be expressed, and are symptomatic of any informed recognition that representation through mediation is a distortion of the reality being claimed to be presented. However, producers in this medium, as in most others, do have to make choices dictated by inherent limitations on time and space. The most important calculation to be made from the perspective of the political parties, however, is whether any of them were being excessively disadvantaged by the choice of the various contributors. To do this, one would have to accept the premise that the 'impartial' contributors, primarily Bill Bush, actually managed to be just that. Making such an assumption is rendered less easy by Mr Bush's own move in 2000 to a new job at No 10 Downing Street, as head of a new Political And Intelligence Unit (Guardian 2/3/00). Tickell also subsequently proved unexpectedly enigmatic, in that he became an adviser to the incoming *Labour* government.

If one does accept the premise, the result is fairly clear. In the case of the Liberal Democrats and the minority parties, the answer would appear once again to be positive, while it would seem that neither Labour nor the Conservatives were likely to derive a great advantage over *each other* on grounds of frequency.

Count 10: positive and negative references to parties in Yesterday in Parliament

The final four days of parliamentary proceedings between the announcement of the election on 17th March and prorogation on 21st March were accorded the usual daily coverage in the Yesterday in Parliament segment of Today, at the time broadcast on both FM and long wave. These programmes within a programme were not considered in any of the earlier analyses for this chapter, and the importance of considering them here is twofold.

Firstly, this was and still is an important strand in Radio Four's daily programming, and the opportunity to examine the BBC's approach to achieving impartiality in it was welcome. Over just four editions broadcast in an election period, the notion of balance should have been sharply focused in the minds of its producers. Secondly, as part of Today, to exclude it would have been to distort, even slightly, this study.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the reduction of a day's proceedings in two chambers and associated committees into such a fifteen-minute report demands huge acts of omission. Conversely, the act of including an item or a reference has the effect of promoting the original phrase or deed to an importance far in excess of its original

impact in Parliament. Each edition was therefore analysed in three ways: the first being a simple count of positive and negative references to a party *by the reporter.*

For example, on 21st March extracts from the final Prime Minister's Question Time were described thus:

> "We were treated to a venomous confrontation between the party leaders, which would have given the opposition food for thought, and the government hope." (8.41am)

The extracts consisted of statements by the three 'main' party leaders (and no other 'leaders'), who each put forward rhetorical points over the despatch box, to often noisy support from their own sides, and dissent from others. The reporter's reading of the exchanges as positive for the Conservatives and negative for Labour was unlikely to have been echoed in alternative readings by the Government's opponents. Without disputing the validity of his reading on this or any other occasion, it was important to establish how often each party was being characterised positively, enabling assumptions to be made about at whose expense that might be. In categorising references to parties and politicians, then, this analysis used the previous test of whether a party's campaign managers would have been most likely to broadly approve of the manner in which a reference was made to it. The chart below shows the results:

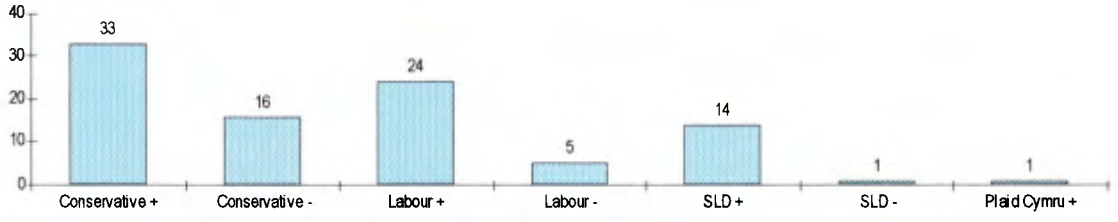

Figure 43: References by reporter to parties in Yesterday in Parliament

Again, the Conservatives were more likely than any other party to be referred to, although approximately one third of those references were negative. The then Government was attempting to complete the passage of a number of Bills through Parliament in the very short time that was left, but that alone does not account for its domination of these reports. Labour and the SLD, although mentioned less frequently, were much more likely to be referred to positively if at all, and of all the minority parties represented in the Commons, only one – Plaid Cymru – was mentioned, and then only once. It may be considered that the greater tendency to include negative references to Conservatives mitigated in part the advantage afforded them by being talked about the most.

The second count was of actual 'appearances' by party members - or more precisely, the inclusion of audio recordings of speech extracts. Again, these were unevenly distributed amongst the three 'main' parties, to the advantage of the Conservatives, and again, minority parties were seriously disadvantaged, as shown in the chart below:

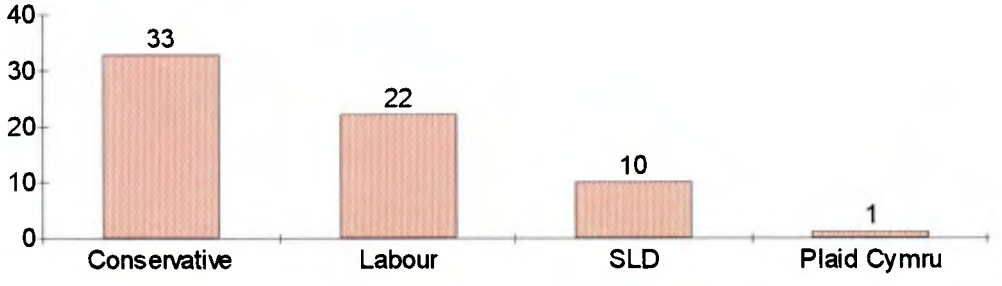

Figure 44: Frequency of audio recordings in Yesterday in Parliament

Clearly, as far as Yesterday in Parliament's coverage was concerned, the Scottish Nationalists and the Northern Ireland parties might have more profitably gone campaigning in their constituencies, because their presence in the two chambers was

not noted in any way. Again, a certain degree of mitigation might be allowed by the fact that a small number of the Conservative contributions were 'dissenting' peers objecting to provisions in the Crime Bill. Whether or not 'off message' Conservative voices may be considered to 'balance' more mainstream ones is more controversial.

Timing 3: durations of inclusions of parliamentary speeches in Yesterday in Parliament

As in earlier analyses in this chapter, an important distinction must be drawn between *frequency* of inclusion and *duration*. Timing the various audio clips revealed another large advantage given to Conservatives: they spoke longer and therefore had longer to make their views known. The results are shown below:

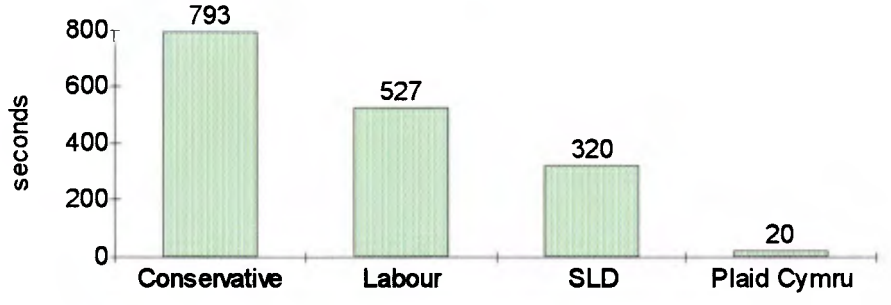

Figure 45: Total duration of audio included in Yesterday in Parliament by party

The Labour disadvantage was once again disproportionate to their representation in 1991 when compared to the SLD, who on such a measure would have been vastly over-represented on air. So, by each of the three criteria used, in Yesterday in Parliament Today continued its policy of favouring the Conservatives.

Quantitative analyses of Today: a summary

In most, if not all, of the quantitative analyses performed in this study, the programme was seen to have given the incumbent governing party a considerable advantage over the others – and its main challenger for office in particular. Regional and minority parties were also under-represented to the extent that they were often not even in the running. Even national parties such as the Referendum Party, with candidates in every seat, were denied the respectability of coverage afforded to others. The programme's producers seemed to pay little attention at times to their obligation to achieve a 'balance', whatever that might be.

Having access to only one party's monitoring of these broadcasts meant that only the complaints of the SLD monitor, above, were available to be recorded here. However, it would be a reasonable assumption that the other parties who were disadvantaged by Today, if measuring that disadvantage empirically, would have been dissatisfied by their treatment.

Quantitative means of analysis, however interesting, (and however damaging are some of these particular findings,) cannot be the entire story. In the polysemy of balance and impartiality, there are other phenomena which need to be studied.

The ease of comparison though, of seeking balance and counter-balance, that can be achieved when working with digits alone, is very valuable and not easy to disregard merely because other forces may be at work.

"8.10 HUMPHRYS 'PARTY ATTACKS' PRESTCOTT (sic) ON THE PHONE. TRYING TO DISCUSS POVERTY... PRESTCOTT STRUGGLES WITH ARGUMENT...

8.35 CHARLES KENNEDY i/v AT PEBBLE MILL UNCONTENTIOUS, COMPARED WITH PRESTCOTT. GOOD QUESTION & ANSWER SHOW.
DURATION: CHARLES HAD 12.23 SECS COMPARED WITH PRESTCOTT 9.12 SECS EARLIER".

Liberal Democrat monitor's notes, 12/4/97

The 'other forces' at work in any broadcast text are often no easier to measure by qualitative means than by quantitative methods. This is the realm of words and meanings, of discourse analysis and paralinguistics (Chapter 3). (Inevitably, though, this chapter will also involve numerical analyses.) It is here that comparisons must be made between *related* events, because comparing the dissimilar would in most cases achieve nothing. Comparing elements within different interviews with party leaders, for example, might achieve much more than comparing one such interview with a Thought for the Day, because to do the latter would be to operate with few normative points of reference.

The Liberal Democrat's qualitative comments (above), as distinct from the comparison of durations, appears to draw the following conclusions:

- the interviewer's style was more combative with Labour's John Prescott than with the Liberal Democrat, Charles Kennedy;
- Prescott had greater difficulty in articulating his point of view;

- the Kennedy interview was altogether more positive for the Liberal Democrats than the Prescott interview could have been for Labour.

The previous discussion of interviewing styles and techniques (Chapter 2) suggested that the presence or absence of conflict, (and whether an exchange might be considered 'a good question and answer show',) has some relevance to the notion of balance. The monitor quoted above also noted the use of the telephone in one interview. If these were indeed 'alike' items, suitable for comparison, it would seem that from the Liberal Democrat's perspective, his party may have gained more from Kennedy's interview, than Labour may have gained from Prescott's.

Admittedly, this was one reading from a single perspective, but to the monitor and his party, it was an important one: they had done well in an apparent lottery of positive and negative coverage. This time there was no written recommendation of action – of a complaint or some other such contact with the programme. It may be useful to speculate whether a comparable, and so, *negative* reading was being made simultaneously at Labour's headquarters - together with, perhaps, a decision to complain.

Arriving at overall conclusions from such a limited analysis would, however, be problematic, because to generalise from this one comparison would be inappropriate. For example, on 31st March, the same monitor commented thus:

> " - Labour bias shown by two very positive interviews with 'experts' – head of Blunkett's numeracy task force, Prof. Pete Hennessy.
> - Ashdown profile by Robin Oakley fair but balanced by other party leaders on other days.

- Tories also have cause for complaint."

This next set of analyses, then, attempted to compare significant, alike items using common criteria. The monitor, (himself a journalist,) was sufficiently media literate to consider interviewing styles, patterns of discourse, paralinguistics, and even technical advantages derived from location and method of connection to the studio - all of which have been discussed in more general terms in earlier chapters. The difference between talking and being talked about was acknowledged, as was the possibility of references being either negative or positive to a party's chances in the subsequent election.

Final interviews with party leaders

The previous chapter found that the programme had routinely prioritised its three 'main' parties above all the others, and so this analysis only considered interviews with the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat leaders as suitable for comparison. That lesser parties were clearly disadvantaged in terms of frequency and duration of coverage was now considered proven.

Although Paddy Ashdown benefited from an additional interview on the first programme of the campaign on the 18th March, 'apparently complete' appearances by these three party leaders were otherwise relatively infrequent, being broadcast in two cycles, as shown in the tables below:

Weds 2/4	8.10am	John Major (Con) *17'37"*	by John Humphrys
Thurs 3/4	8.10am	Tony Blair (Lab) *15'40"*	by James Naughtie
Fri 4/4	8.10am	Paddy Ashdown (SLD) *13'37"* – following 'wavering SLD voter' *41"*	by John Humphrys

Fri 25/4	8.17am	Paddy Ashdown (SLD) *12'50"*	by James Naughtie
Mon 28/4	8.10am	Tony Blair (Lab) *18'17"*	by John Humphrys
Tues 29/4	8.10am	John Major (Con) *19'49"*	by James Naughtie

Figure 46: Dates, times and durations of interviews with three 'main' party leaders

Disparities of duration and scheduling are immediately apparent: in the first cycle, all three were broadcast in the prime post 8am news slot, whereas, in the second cycle Ashdown was relegated to second item, being preceded by a recorded interview with Labour's Gavin Strang. John Major, as the Conservative, had two obvious advantages, in much longer durations than the others, and in being scheduled on both occasions to his advantage. In the first cycle, Major came first, while Ashdown had to wait until last, but in the second cycle, when proximity to the actual poll was a far greater issue, Major had the 'final word' of the three. Meanwhile, in the second cycle the intervening weekend pushed Ashdown back to the previous Friday, as many as six days before polling took place. There is no legal reason why this second cycle could not have begun on the Monday, allowing even Ashdown the ability to speak at length to Today listeners in the final week.

The privileges of incumbency extended to Major on a second dimension: both his interviews were clearly billed on air as being conducted "in 10 Downing Street". Given that trust and fitness for office were key issues in the campaign, (both Blair and Ashdown lacking Major's experience of government,) for the programme to place such an emphasis on location could be seen as according the Conservatives a further advantage. Even if the programme had to travel to Downing Street to interview

Major, it did not *need* to reveal the logistics of its operation, but it *chose* to do so for effect.

The semiotic richness of John Humphrys's introduction "I am in Downing Street with the Prime Minister" (2/4/97) could not have been lost on party managers. For a televised interview they would undoubtedly have preferred as a backdrop the stately setting of this historic seat of government to a television studio. This contrasts with James Naughtie's description the following day of Tony Blair as being interviewed "at his campaign headquarters" – a binary opposition of which an extreme reading might place the king in his castle and the guerilla leader in his lair.

Today also chose to positively identify Major as 'the Prime Minister' rather than the equally correct, but politically more neutral 'leader of the Conservative Party'. This policy ran throughout the campaign, as the status of other Conservative interviewees was consistently reinforced as 'the Home Secretary', 'the Foreign Secretary' and so on, where more neutral descriptors were readily available. An early example was James Naughtie's cue to a pre-recorded interview with the then Secretary of State for Defence, Michael Portillo: "I spoke to him NOT about the election, but about his Russian visit." (7.51am, 18/3/97) (Neither that day's Telegraph nor the Guardian newspapers had covered the visit.)

By consciously choosing to do this, the broadcasters were reminding the audience of the nature of the status quo – although it could be argued that this may have worked against the Conservatives in those listeners who were inclined towards change. (It should be remembered, though, that Labour's poll lead fell, rather than rose, over the

seven weeks of the campaign.) With less value-laden possibilities at their disposal, for 'impartial' broadcasters to systematically choose language which is more likely to favour one party, can be seen as negligent or malign, depending on one's perspective. Certainly, such a policy cannot easily be interpreted as even-handed.

Only Paddy Ashdown was deliberately placed after a 'wavering voter' having doubts about supporting his party. Neither Major nor Blair was subject to such a challenging juxtapositioning of recorded stimulus/live response. This may not be considered to be of any consequence, each party leader being challenged to some extent (if only by the interviewer), but it is another example of an opportunity for equal treatment of alike elements being passed over in favour of disadvantaging one or another. Again, it was not to the detriment of the Conservatives.

The choice of interviewer was interesting in each case, too. Whether by accident or by design, each leader was interviewed once by James Naughtie, and once by John Humphrys, but in each cycle Tony Blair was treated differently from the other two (FIGURE 46). It would be a brave, even foolhardy commentator who would impute any overt party political leanings to either of these two experienced journalists (see Chapter 1). Inevitably, though, as they are different *people,* the experience of being interviewed by one is likely to differ in at least some respects from being interviewed by the other.

Supposing Humphrys were the 'easier' interviewer, Blair might have been given an easier ride in the crucial second cycle – or if the reverse were true, he would have been subjected to a more searching scrutiny just before the poll. Interestingly, Sue

MacGregor was not called upon to interview any party leader in either cycle, and neither were the other two presenters, Alex Brodie or Anna Ford. MacGregor's interviewing style had previously been described as 'soft' (Chapter 2) and had she been included in these cycles there could have been greater scope for differential treatment – or at least for it to be *perceived* and, hence, publicly criticised. Perhaps, then, as a result of simple logistics, or perhaps by design, the six most important interviews of the period were all conducted by the programme's two highest profile men.

How 'hard' or 'soft' *were* the different interviews, then? Using the descriptors discussed in Chapter 2, firstly the questions asked in the second cycle were classified, and then the frequency within each category was determined, before more qualitative work was done. Classification was found to be problematic, though, as some questions were long and involved. Not for the first time, the practice was difficult to reconcile with some of the certainties of the theory – in this case that of both McLeish (1994) and Bell & van Leeuwen (1994).

For example, Naughtie's third question to Paddy Ashdown combined several different elements in one:

> "If it's an argument about strength in Europe, aren't you proposing a weak position by saying, in effect, that if you were to go to Amsterdam by some peculiar erm outcome of the electoral system, you would make the kind of progress at integration which the other parties are saying they wouldn't?"

At *prima facie* 'closed', rather than 'open' ("aren't you"), closer analysis suggests the conditional first clause could involve leading the interviewee into agreeing with a contentious premise. Naughtie's value judgement about Ashdown's chances of

becoming Prime Minister, (although at the time justified on the balance of probability and subsequently proven correct in the actual poll,) also fitted McLeish's definition of a leading question (1994,44). Ashdown could be considered to have been, in effect, challenged to 'object, contradict or confront' Naughtie (Chapter 2), if not actually 'entrapped' with an unanswerable challenge (Bell & van Leeuwen, 1994, 155).

In fact, had he chosen to do so, Naughtie could easily have solicited Ashdown's opinion on a suitable negotiating stance at the EU Amsterdam summit *without* using any element of leading, challenge, or entrapment. A simple, open question which would have sufficed and been politically more neutral might have been: "What should Britain's negotiating position be, in Amsterdam?" Undoubtedly, though, if sustained, such a sanitising of the interview would have removed some of the perceived 'entertainment value' inherent in confrontation.

In this analysis, then, rather than being placed in mutually exclusive categories, each question asked of the three party leaders has been coded as *displaying characteristics* of any of the following descriptors: open; closed; multiple; leading; non-question; soliciting opinion; checking; challenging; entrapment and release. The interviewee responses were not transcribed, due to constraints on space, but they were timed so that the duration allowed for responses could be shown below.

A further problem arose, though, in that the interviewers' speech was often not confined to questions. Therefore, this analysis shows other interjections by interviewers, sometimes clarifying, sometimes defensive, sometimes directing, and usually reasserting their primacy as in control of the encounter. For example, in the

case of Ashdown and Naughtie, below, it can therefore be seen that Naughtie allowed the other only three seconds to answer that third question, before he issued a supplementary direction (item four) as to how he wanted that question answered. As such, by McLeish's definition (1994, 45) it was a non-question.

The preliminary results of this analysis of the Naughtie/Ashdown exchange are shown in the table below:

(Key: O = open, C = closed, M = multiple, L = leading, N = non-question, S = soliciting opinion, Che = checking, Cha = challenging, E = entrapment, R = release)

1	"The security alert: do you think that the activities of, we assume the IRA, in the last few weeks is going to have an effect on policy after the election, whoever is in Number Ten, and what is that effect likely to be?" 30	O C M S
2	"I wanted to talk to you about Europe anyway, and of course we've had another development on the beef story this morning. Do you accept what Mr Hogg says, that although this is not a wonderful piece of news, in the letter from the Commission, it is, a sign of progress?" 36	C S
3	(above) 3	C L Cha E
4	"Let's not talk about the Conservatives, let's talk about you." 12	N
5	"But the problem that you've got (PA interrupts) is em, where are the sticking points in this treaty?" 45	O Cha
6	"!What about border controls?" 15	O Cha
7	"But surely it is the case that your party sticks to the old Liberal dream of what you used to call, although you don't in this manifesto, a federal Europe? A Europe which is something quite close, to, what is called, pejoratively by others, a United States of Europe?" 2	C L Cha
8	"Oh not a super state, but a state in which there is so much co-operation and integration that many things are done (PA interrupts) er across borders." 5	N
9	"!I understand the difficulty of the word 'federal'. Everyone now understands that." 2	N
10	"Right" 16	N
11	"!But you, sorry to interrupt, on the single currency, you, you're only going to be able to take that position as a result of the opt-out which John Major negotiated." 52	N Cha
12	"Let's talk about the constitution at home, briefly, since we've talked about it in Europe. Would you regard it as 'failure', if a Labour government were elected and by the end of its first term there wasn't a commitment to a referendum on PR?" 1	C
13	"Well, if it, it hasn't come very close?" 2	N

14 "Well things, such things have happened in government before, have they not?" 6	C L Cha
15 "Right." 4	N
16 "So, so let's be clear, this is a sticking point for you, is it?" 7	C Che
17 "!Ah, right, no but you see the point I'm getting to: this is an absolute touchstone of your policy, always has been, you've got a deal from Labour, you think. Are you saying that if Labour were to renege on the commitment to a PR referendum in office, any other cooperation that you might give them on other matters would cease?" 6	C Cha
18 "Good." 13	N
19 "Right." 7	N
20 "!Well let me put to you, er one of our listeners, Andy Braeburn, has called our campaign line, he says he's a committed Liberal Democrat s-supporter somewhere in London, and he says many Liberal Democrats in his area are going to vote Labour to get rid of their local Conservative. And then he asks a rather pertinent question for you: reverting to that old phrase is he wasting his vote?" 2	C Cha
21 "!So they're right to vote Labour." 1	N
22 "!Okay. Well I want to interpret what you're saying." 8	N
23 "Right." 15	N
24 "!But if you want to get rid of the Government in a seat where Labour are challenging the Conservatives you'd vote Labour wouldn't you?" 1	C Cha
25 "!Well." 30	N
26 "Let me put to you (PA concludes) let me put to you, what Mr Blair says in his interview in the Times this morning (quotes interview) From your conversations with Mr Blair, what do you think that means?" 21	O S
27 "Well." 10	N
28 "Right." 4	N
29 "!Do you believe (PA concludes point) do you believe that if there's a change of Government, next Thursday, that kind of cooperation – no one's talking about coalitions – that kind of cooperation between you and Mr Blair will be likely across a range of policies?" 7	C Che
30 "Work together?" 35	N
31 "!But, (PA concludes) but you're talking about a slight difference from the normal business of opposition, of course opposition parties sometimes support the Government (PA interrupts) well hang on, we all know there are negative policies, there are bits of policy where there is cooperation, and you've occasionally supported this Government on bits of Bills. As I understand it you're talking about something different, you're talking about cooperation which would mean discussions about Bills beforehand. Now is that something that you have reason to expect from Mr Blair if that's the kind of result?" 7	C L Cha
32 "Until, until ten o'clock on next Thursday night." 18	N
33 "!Do you (PA concludes) do you think Mr Blair believes that?" 32	C S
34 "That would mean two terms wouldn't it? (PA queries) Two terms." 25	C Che
35 "!Do you (PA concludes) do you think that this election, putting all	C O M S R

that we've heard and seen behind us, and looking ahead to the next sixty-eight days, do you think that this election will be decided in the next six days? And if so, what will decide it?" 30	

Figure 47: Questions and non-questions from James Naughtie to Paddy Ashdown (25/4/97)

Although this method of analysis requires an element of interpretation, the limited amount of transcription, above, enables that interpretation to be overt and easily subjected to critical analysis by others. It is interesting to note that seventeen out of thirty-five contributions to the interview from James Naughtie were non-questions, that only five were open questions, compared to fifteen which were closed, and that Naughtie did end the item with an act of release. Challenging questions outnumbered the related checking questions by a ratio of 3:1.

However, the interest in how a single interview was conducted was easily eclipsed by that in a comparative study of how the two different interviewers, Naughtie and Humphrys, treated the three different interviewees. Thus, comparing the treatment of the three 'main' party leaders in their final interviews allowed some real conclusions to be drawn about balance between them and the existence of bias against some of them.

The following table describes the Blair interview, for Labour, three days later (key as FIGURE 47):

1	"Mr Blair, when did you realise that the Labour Party's policies on so many of the most important issues were wrong?" 38	O L
2	"I understand when you say that about values, but obviously to achieve those values, you have to have a set of policies. (TB agrees) And you don't deny obviously that your policies, and the policies you supported have changed (TB begins) over the last many years." 48	N
3	"But you've made the claim that you more than anybody in the party er and you're the leader now so therefore that's substantiated to that extent erm, were responsible for turning the party around, for changing those policies, so therefore you must have realised before most in the party that they were wrong, and the question is when did you come to that realisation and that's important if we're to understand you now." 35	O L Cha
4	"!I never made that suggestion." (TB continues over) 20	N
5	"!But what I'm trying to understand is whether when you said some of the things you mentioned trade union laws just a moment ago, whether when you said some of the things you said at that time you believed at that time that what you were saying was right." 6	N Cha
6	"!Well yeh but I." 25	N
7	"!Yeh (TB finishes 2) But it's vital for them to know when they go into that polling booth on Thursday morning, whether the things you are saying now are being said because you believe in them now or because you believe it is necessary to get you elected. Now let me just go back to" (TB interrupts) 12	N Cha
8	"!Oh no, never suggested that for a moment." 13	N
9	"!Yeh but that's Mrs Thatcher, I'm talking about you (with TB under) personally, you Tony Blair who wants to be Prime Minister." 16	N Cha
10	"!No, no, no er er er er you use the word 'unprincipled', I didn't. I'm trying to establish (TB interrupts) No, no, no because you may well feel, you may well feel, as you felt then, in the early days of your time in the Labour Party, that it was necessary to say certain things at that time, even though you believed other things - I mean, you go back to 1983, don't need to go that far back, go back to 1987 when you signed an early day motion applauding the fortitude and resolve displayed by men on the Wapping picket lines. Now it's inconceivable to imagine the modern Tony Blair doing that, saying 'those guys on the picket line are doing a brilliant job'. The same people incidentally who fought er Rupert Murdoch; you now are a friend of Rupert Murdoch - his newspapers, his tabloid newspapers support you. And what people are entitled to ask and many people do ask this question still, Mr Blair, notwithstanding the interviews that you've given, is: is what he is saying now, really what he believes or might he change again, might it be expediency?" 12	C L Cha
11	"!Well you certainly zig-zagged on Europe." (TB continues over) 40	N Cha
12	"!Yeh, but." 20	N
13	"!Well, talk about Labour people. I had a call this morning from a Rami Ranger (?) from Harrow who is a company director. 'The traditional left' he says, 'has been', he's suspicious you see, 'the traditional left has been silenced during this campaign' he says, 'has	L C Cha

New Labour cut them out of the party altogether?'" 3	
14 "!He's thinking of people like er Short and Mr Meacher, from who he hasn't heard during this campaign. (TB interrupts) And he wonders if they've been shut up and wonders why they've been shut up." 15	O C M
15 "!Well (unintelligible) many people don't even understand what that means. Many people listening to this programme won't understand and I'm not sure I understand quite what." 34	N Cha
16 "!Yep." 11	N
17 "!Well, depends the extent to which this happens, doesn't it. (TB interrupts) If one wing of the party is entirely silenced for a very long time people are entitled to say 'it's a little odd, isn't it'." 10 (TB begins over)	C L Cha
18 "!But you see, they, they're a bit puzzled" (TB continues) 4	N
19 "!But some of them say they are muzzled, they tell us they're muzzled. (TB interrupts) !I'll speak to you on May the second, they say." 3	N Cha
20 "!Not?" 8	N
21 "!All right (TB concludes) !So therefore when you say 'I am going to be a lot more radical' in government as you said yesterday to the Observer 'I'm going to be a lot more radical in government than many people think', people think 'Well, ah, maybe that's why they've been silenced, because perhaps then you're going to do something to them that you're not telling us about that'." 38	N L Cha
22 "!Well (TB tries to continue) er er an odd sort of figure that because it includes one parent families and all the rest of it, so it's an exaggerated figure, (TB challenges) the impression it delivers is exaggerated (indistinct)." (TB interrupts) 12	N Cha
23 "!And many wouldn't, so the figure is slightly suspect (TB disagrees). Well, all right. (TB interrupts) You, you you you said earlier that my charge, my suggestion to you was unfounded because what you had not done is zig zaged on policies. Well, that is precisely what you've done with what might be the most important policy of all and that is Europe. You were totally against Europe at one stage when you came into Parliament, you were arguing for us to pull out (TB interrupts). Indeed it was, indeed it was. You then er became as far as most of us were concerned much more er enthusiastic about Europe. Now you talk about 'slaying the dragon of Europe in the Sun newspaper (TB contests) now if that isn't, if that, (TB contests) well all right, you were talking about a federal Europe (TB agrees) and slaying that dragon. But the tone (TB interrupts) but the tone of the piece was entirely different from something you would have written one, two or three years ago." 22	N L Cha
24 "!But the language you use: 'Labour will give bulldog Britain a new lease of life, we'll see off the Eurodragons, (TB interjects) now that's a direct quote from the Sun newspaper." 13	N Cha
25 "!Not even suggesting that, nobody is suggesting that." 2	N
26 "!Mr Major's not suggesting that." 14	N
27 "!Right." 7	N
28 "!I take that poi-" 34	N

29 "!We had er we had an undecided voter in a marginal seat on this programme an hour ago: chap called Bernard Howes, and he said he might vote for you but he doesn't know what you stand for, in this particular case, in Europe, he said: 'Look, I know', he understands, he's a bright guy, marketing manager and all the rest of it, he understands perfectly well that economic conditions have to be right, and convergence criteria have to be there and all that as far as single European currency is concerned, but he said 'He won't tell me' and I had this problem, if (laughs) problem it is, with Gordon Brown on this programme ten days ago, he won't tell me whether he is predisposed towards a single European curr, whether he thinks, if everything else is right, it's a good idea. Do you?" 4	C L Cha
30 "!But" 8	N
31 "!But whether there is a single European currency in Europe must be a subject on which all intelligent people have thought about a great deal, and" (TB interrupts) 4	N L Cha
32 "!What, look, (over TB) all right tell me, help me out, tell me what your opinion is." 10	O S
33 "!No, right, that is not the issue." 5	N
34 "!(Unintelligible)" 10	N
35 "!I understand that but are you saying when you say that that you believe that in principle that a single European currency is good for the whole European project?" 1	C
36 "!I don't see why you can't answer that question." 10	N Cha
37 "!Two years ago you said, if convergence can be achieved and other countries go ahead and so on and so on, it would be folly not to recognise the danger of exclusion. Is that still your view?" 2	C
38 "!So it would be dangerous for Britain not to go in (TB interjects) if the other countries go ahead, that's what you said in '95." 5	N L Cha
39 "!It would be folly not to recognise the danger of exclusion." 30	N
40 "!All right, but if you" 4	N
41 "!Oh!" 2	N
42 "!If you ask most British people they would have a clear view as to whether they wanted to dump the pound to put it in very crude language or to keep the pound. What you're saying to me is ah er I" 1	N L
43 "!Well, that's er" (TB continues) 3	N
44 "!They were overwhelmingly against." 2	N
45 "!The single European currency." 21	N
46 "First radical thing you're going to do in power, I know you don't want the hundred days, the first radical thing you're going to do when you get through the doors of Number Ten is going to be what?" 2	O R
47 "!(mumbles) Education." 18	N

Figure 48: Questions and non-questions from John Humphrys to Tony Blair (28/4/97)

Being almost five and a half minutes longer than the Ashdown interview in the same cycle, it was inevitable that Humphrys would speak more often in Blair's interview than Naughtie had to the Liberal Democrat leader. That he should speak on twelve more occasions was a little disproportionate to the extra duration. Humphrys used 1,362 words to Naughtie's 735 – almost double - and this difference is quite disproportionate to the extra length of the interview. (Blair spoke uninterrupted for a total of 655 seconds, while Ashdown had spoken for 510 seconds.)

Clearly, Humphrys's style was very different to Naughtie's, and not just in the number and length of interventions, but also in the manner of those interventions. There were only five open questions to Tony Blair (the same number as to Ashdown in a slightly shorter interview), and only seven closed questions (compared to fifteen to Ashdown). In fact, for the majority of the time, Humphrys wasn't asking Blair any questions at all: thirty-six items were non-questions of one sort or another (compared to seventeen to Ashdown). Eighteen of Humphrys's interventions were categorised above as 'challenging', contrasting with ten such contributions from Naughtie.

The margins of difference on all these indicators, between the two interviews, are so large that they do have a significance beyond the margin of error which might be introduced to any such analysis by the nature of anyone carrying out a subjective reading of two texts. Humphrys spoke more, challenged Blair more frequently, and asked Blair far fewer actual questions than Naughtie had done to Ashdown, preferring the challenging statement which, leading in character, must be either refuted or agreed with by default. Naughtie began with a soft, soliciting question and allowed Ashdown thirty seconds to answer it, whereas Humphrys began hard with an open but leading

question which implied he had made a great (and possibly duplicitous) policy 'U-turn'. Interestingly, though, Humphrys did end with a release question, as Naughtie had done three days earlier.

In order to establish how the last of the three interviews - by James Naughtie with John Major - compares on all these parameters, it was analysed in the same way, with the results shown below. (As it had been pre-recorded shortly before transmission, the first two questions were repeated indirectly in live cues - and because the actual questions were not broadcast, their classification is bracketed.) (Key as FIGURE 47.)

1	"But, as we began, news again arrived of security alerts and disruption, so I asked the Prime Minister first of all what effect he thought such episodes might have." 43	(O S)
2	"So to the campaign and the approach of polling day. I asked John Major if with two days to go he didn't think that people had made up their minds." 15	(C)
3	"It's one thing to find people who are nice to you in the street. Maybe they quite like you, but they don't like your government , do they?" 32	C L Cha
4	"But won't they look at the last five years and deduce from the experience of your government that it is a weak government, and that if it were to be be re-elected they couldn't be sure the way it would go on some of the crucial issues of our time?" 7	C L Cha
5	"!Oh, by by (JM protests) doing deals, by withdrawing the whip, by all kinds of manoeuvres which (JM interrupts) in the end made you look weak." 12	N Cha
6	"Of course. I didn't interrupt." 27	N
7	"Er well, the word 'equally' is one that perhaps isn't appropriate there. But you mention Europe, (JM interrupts) you bring up Europe, well let me just put the straightforward question on Europe which people deserve to have an answer to. If you were to win, two days from today, which party would negotiate at Amsterdam, the party of Michael Howard and Michael Portillo, or the party of Ken Clarke?" 43	C Cha
8	"Well let me put to you what Ken Clarke said in April (quotes Clarke). Now Mr Howard says that he believes that the agenda at Amsterdam which goes much beyond not single currency questions, hang on, puts the nation state at question, now er er in doubt. Now	N L E

look, Ken Clarke, as everyone knows, believes something different about Europe, from the belief that is held by many of your Cabinet colleagues. And if you don't accept that and admit it, surely it's an insult to the intelligence of our listeners in the audience." 10	
9 "Well. (JM objects) Okay (with JM over) carry on, no no absolutely." 44	N
10 "!No I understand that (JM continues) were about the single currency." 4	N
11 "!Of course they don't." 12	N
12 "You've said that you want to keep your open mind going, on the single currency. Your electors in your constituency know that you might vote for it, you might abolish the pound. More than two hundred of your candidates have pledged to the electors in their constituencies that they will never do it. Having to accept that division publicly has been an obvious sign of weakness, hasn't it?" 17	C L Cha
13 "!Well, more than (indistinct)." 7	N
14 "!Many of whom aren't standing at this election." 2	N Cha
15 "!I'm not defending the Labour Party, I'm simply pointing out for you to make (JM interrupts) no, I'm sorry, Prime Minister, for you to (JM interrupts) use a year old thing" 2	N Cha
16 "That was a pig's breakfast of a comparison (JM continues over) if I may say so." 32	N Cha
17 "There's a question that underlies this whole argument about Europe, Prime Minister, and it is this: win or lose, can you stop your party lurching to the right?" 22	C L Cha
18 (under JM) "!The er artificial terms are used in your party rather widely." 47	N L Cha
19 "Is that what the one nation party now stands for?" (JM begins over indistinct) 4	C
20 "!Weup. (JM finishes) You're setting up" 17	N
21 (indistinct) 7	N
22 "!But let me ask you. (JM continues) All right. (JM continues) All right." 8	N
23 "!Well I want to talk to you" (JM continues) 3	N
24 "I want to talk to you about the campaign just in a moment, but arising from your remarks there about the classless society and opportunity. You claim as a government credit for any improvements, for example in education. Now you've been in power for twenty two out of the last twenty seven years as a party, as the one nation party. Fifty per cent of eleven year olds not hitting the target in English and maths, the top fifteen per cent from schools doing very well; the other eighty five per cent in your own words frankly not doing well by international comparisons. Don't you have to accept responsibility for that state of things now, as well as to claim credit for good things that have occurred in the last few years?" 75	C L Cha
25 "Isn't the best way to lose an election, to present the electorate with a divided party?" 8	C L Cha
26 "Well (indistinct under JM) it's presented itself as divided very often	N Cha

in the course of your premiership." 21	
27 "!But" 3	N
28 "!And (JM continues) you've been talking about it throughout this look (JM interrupts) let me just ask (JM interrupts) no no" 2	N Cha
29 "Prime Minister, with respect, it's you who's been going on and on about it for the last twenty minutes. And the problem, if I can suggest this to you, with your campaign is that you've been going on and on about it, and every time you go on and on about it your two hundred and thirty candidates who disagree with you profoundly because they don't believe you're taking the right line about the single currency stand up and say it, and Edwina Currie picks up the phone to the Express and pours it all out and you blame us (JM interrupts) for saying you're a divided party." 7	N Cha
30 "!Well I just did and (JM over) I allowed you to give a long answer." 9	N Cha
31 "!But but Prime Minister (JM concludes) well look we're at the climax of a very long campaign, a campaign which is long because you chose that it should be long, and in the course of that cim campaign, to those of us watching, you decided to concentrate all your fire on Europe. Now, it's a bit rich with two days to go, miles behind in the polls to say 'Oh dear everyone's talking about Europe' (indistinct)." 2	N L Cha
32 "I have." 4	N Cha
33 "!I I have read your speeches (JM continues) I sat a very long evening in Plymouth (JM interrupts) and I noticed how much time you spent on Europe." 2	N Cha
34 "Indeed." 11	N
35 "!And indeed you changed (JM continues) a couple of broadcasts to (indistinct)" 73	N
36 "No one listening to us will be in any doubt that you must have contemplated what you do if you lose. Have you?" 2	C L Cha
37 "Because they understand human affairs (JM laughs) they understand politics (JM interrupts) they understand a government they understand a government that's had a very rough time and is miles behind in the polls as you head towards (JM interrupts) the finishing line." 7	N Cha
38 "!No, they know you." 25	N
39 "!If" 7	N
40 "I understand exactly what your case is on those immeasurable improvements, to use your phrase. Why is it, that when you've been talking about that for six weeks, people appear to have been unwilling to give you the credit for the improvements they've seen?" 11	O L Cha
41 "!Thank you." 25	N
42 "!Do you (JM continues) do you" 5	N
43 "Do you trust them to give a fair verdict on the record of your government on Thursday?" 7	C
44 "Do you want them to give a verdict on you as a leader and as somebody who might give them something in terms of leadership after the election, or on you as a government collectively which has	C R

gone about doing things in the way that it has in the last five years?" 46	

Figure 49: Questions and non-questions from James Naughtie to John Major (29/4/97)

Despite the release question at the end and the repeatedly formal address, whereby Naughtie called Major 'Prime Minister', this was another relatively combative interview. Interestingly, of the three interviews analysed in this way, this was the only one with a question meeting Bell and van Leeuwen's (1994,155) definition of entrapment – question eight. So great was the effect of the entrapment that it provoked insults between interviewer and interviewee: Major immediately called Naughtie's assertion a 'pig's breakfast of a question' and then Naughtie returned the insult later.

Although this was one and a half minutes longer than the Humphrys interview with Tony Blair, Naughtie intervened less frequently than Humphrys had done (forty-four times, compared with forty-seven) using 1,189 words. This amounted to considerably more questions and non-questions than in Naughtie's own, shorter interview with Paddy Ashdown, but still 173 fewer words than Humphrys had put to Blair. Major was confronted with eleven closed questions and only two that were open, fewer of each type than Naughtie had asked Ashdown. Major's treatment could be argued to have been significantly different to Blair's in one other respect, being asked four more closed questions.

However, both Ashdown and Major were asked soliciting opinion questions about the security alerts taking place on the days of their interviews, (the coincidence of which,

a generous reading could ascribe to fate), while Blair was immediately challenged on a controversial aspect of his policy development. Again, actual questions were in the minority: there were thirty non-questions, six fewer than to Blair, but just over twice as many as Naughtie had put to Ashdown. In this respect, while recognising that differences in interviewing style would inevitably have occurred between Naughtie and Humphrys, it was interesting to note that Naughtie's own style differed between his two interviews.

Twenty-two questions and non-questions were categorised above as challenging, highlighting a further difference in style between Naughtie's interviews with Major and with Ashdown (ten challenging). As challenges to Blair were slightly fewer in number, it could be said that in this respect Major was given the most difficult interview.

The commentary above demonstrates that arriving at some overall conclusion about the treatment of these three party leaders is rendered difficult by the multiple variables involved. Arriving at some formula which might reconcile the full range of indicators used and produce an overall value in terms of toughness or interviewer impartiality would inevitably produce its own set of controversies. Consequently, no such attempt has been made here. In general terms, though, it may seem reasonable to conclude that although allowed less time, Ashdown was challenged and interrupted less, while Blair and Major were met with two differing, but more confrontational styles than Ashdown met.

A purely syntactical approach does, however, present only a structural dimension. It should be considered alongside the content and style of the exchanges. For example, many questions and non-questions were classified as 'leading'. What (and how potentially damaging) were the premises that were put to the interviewees, then, which they would have needed to refute to retain credibility?

To Paddy Ashdown, James Naughtie put the following assertions:

- your position on Europe is weak; you would make greater progress on European integration; you would only gain power in peculiar circumstances (item 3)
- your party is outdated and dreams of a federal Europe (item 7)
- your argument is weakened by past experience (item 14)
- you intend to cooperate more than usual with a Labour government (item 31)

To Tony Blair, John Humphrys asserted the following:

- you realised many of Labour's policies were wrong (items 1 and 3)
- you have said things you didn't believe; you are a friend of Rupert Murdoch; you may not be truthful now (item 10)
- the traditional left has been silenced (items 13, 17 and 21)
- the left has been silenced for a very long time (item 17)
- your intention to be more radical is attributed by people to deception (item 21)
- your argument is diminished by reality; you were wrong earlier to say you have not zig zagged on policies; your zig zag on Europe is very important; your position has changed since one, two or three years ago (item 23)
- an intelligent, key voter does not know what you stand for; you are hiding something from him and so is Gordon Brown (item 29)

- all intelligent people must have thought about a single European currency (point incomplete) (item 31)
- it would be dangerous to remain outside a single European currency, as you said in 1995 (item 38)
- most British people have a clear view about dumping or keeping the pound (item 42)

Thirdly, Naughtie made the following assertions to John Major:

- your argument is diminished by reality; whatever your personal rating, people don't like your government (item 3)
- the electorate deduce from your government's record it is weak; they do not know your intentions in key policy areas (item 4)
- important members of your cabinet disagree on a key issue; if you do not accept this you are insulting the intelligence of the audience (item 8)
- you are undecided on the single currency; your electors know you might abolish the pound; accepting dissent in your party is a weakness (item 12)
- your party will lurch to the right (item 17)
- your argument is diminished by reality (item 18)
- you claim credit for improvement in education, without accepting responsibility for weaknesses (item 24)
- your party is divided and is likely to lose (item 25)
- you concentrated on Europe, yet you blame others for concentrating on it (item 31)
- you must have contemplated failure (item 36)
- people seem unwilling to acknowledge the successes you claim (item 40)

An aspect of Naughtie's change in style between the Ashdown and Major interviews is apparent from a simple count of the assertions put to the two men. In terms of frequency, Humphrys's style was closer to Naughtie's tratment of Major. Given that leading questions present interviewees with oppositional statements which must be accepted or refuted (Chapter 2), to pose a leading question or to put an alternative which is not leading is a conscious act (at least in the formulation) by the interviewer. That act is one of positioning – either at or some distance on the other side of the notional fulcrum of balance discussed earlier (Chapter 1). To so consistently oppose Major in this way, having opposed Ashdown less, could reasonably be read as to treat one interviewee more gently than the other.

The sum of such assertions put in leading questions amounts in part to a thesis – albeit limited in scope and depth. This invites comparison with the 'Bully Script' in Montgomery's analysis (in Scannell (ed.), 1991, 139), where a discourse is presented as a given. The oppositional discourses above could reasonably be read, and summarised, as follows:

- Ashdown and his party are weak on Europe, opportunist and unlikely to be elected
- Blair is deceptive, evasive, weak on Europe and suppressing dissent in his party
- Major is weak, he avoids responsibility and his party is divided, moving to the right and unpopular.

It would court controversy to attempt a judgement as to which of the three theses might have been the more damaging. None could be characterised as positive, but that is the nature of challenge. Strength or weakness on Europe was an important consideration for many in the electorate in 1997, although it should be recognised that

many Liberal Democrat supporters (and those of other parties) were in favour of closer European integration. The only direct charge of dishonesty, though, in an election where trust was an important issue, was against Blair. This was also Humphrys's opening move, without the softening of the gentle openings given to the other politicians. However, Naughtie's challenge to Major may have been more damning in that it was an examination (albeit superficial) of the Conservative goverments's record in office.

In choosing the oppositional stance to adopt in an interview (or at least part of it,) the interviewer must select a target – its effect being more or less wounding. If dishonesty is a legitimate charge, true political opponents, (rather than broadcasters playing the 'devil's advocate',) might have put it to each of the party leaders, rather than just one of them.

By contrast, Naughtie's assessment of John Major seemed to be one of a decent man leading a disliked party – his honesty was not questioned, merely his grip on power. This characterisation was reinforced by references to 'people' and their opinions, with no recognition that such generalisations were both vague and unsubstantiated. Only with Ashdown and Blair did the interviewer seek the legitimacy of a named listener's question.

An important aspect of interviewer style was the manner and frequency of interruption. Allowing the interviewee the latitude to continue to develop his own thesis or argument would contrast markedly at other times with the interrupting,

limiting, qualifying, challenging and general punctuation of his discourse by the interviewer.

While noting the limitations of the transcription method, (where the dividing of interviewer speech into discrete questions and non-questions necessitates some subjectivity where interruptions occur,) the following analysis was carried out:

	Average length of interviewee speech (seconds)	Frequency of interviewer interruption/total questions and non-questions
Naughtie/Ashdown	14.57	13/35
Humphrys/Blair	13.97	43/47
Naughtie/Major	17.47	19/44

FIGURE 50: Temporal latitude allowed 'main' party leaders in final interviews

The table shows that Major was allowed to speak without interruption for significantly longer than the other two interviewees, and Blair was the most constricted. That is, even allowing for some margin of error in the transcription method, (which could have inflated the number of question and non-questions in any or all of the three interviews.) Although Naughtie was more inclined to interrupt Major than Ashdown, Blair was the most interrupted by a wide margin. This last point may, of course, be a result of the answering style of the three politicians, but Blair's shorter average answering times do suggest that John Humphrys was significantly less inclined to allow the Labour leader to finish his answers than Naughtie had been with the others. This result accords with some earlier indications that Blair might have had the most difficult interview.

In summary, then, when comparing these three important 'alike' events, the interviewers' approaches were found to contain sufficient dissimilarities to make different effects far more likely than neutrality – or balance. By varying the duration, content, presuppositions, lines of attack and styles of questioning so widely, the broadcasters lost another opportunity to be even-handed towards competing social actors in the election. Greater attention to planning and delivery could reasonably have led to a more uniform experience for the three political leaders, and thus enhanced the programme in terms of balance.

A study such as this must acknowledge the practicalities of the situation: live interviewing necessitates a certain amount of reactive questioning, and the formulation of questions could not always be done to quotas of different types of question. However, broadcasting cannot be free of either constraints or responsibility – and leaving too much to chance may allow chaotic outcomes, to the possible detriment of democracy. Instead, the same presenter could have interviewed all three politicians involved in alike events, and an amount of preparation could have involved reflection over approaches to be used in the interests of fairness.

Repeated patterns of discourse

The suggestion, above, that interviewers presented limited theses to interviewees is compatible with an understanding that several different theses, or representations of the election, the state of the nation, the economy, and so on, were put to the listeners by a wide variety of participants in the programmes. Repetition of such positions,

whether challenged or not, has a potential for naturalisation – that is, listeners may begin to consider as fact, assertions which have only a limited basis in reality.

Such theses may be formalised in the kind of formulaic 'script' defined in Scannell (1991, 116-7) as 'common-sense narrative frameworks', or something less organised. In the case of presenters and other contributors, if not actually *calculated* to affect the outcome of the election, a benign origin of these patterns of discourse might be the discursive reserve described by Robert Ferguson (2000). In the case of party politicians, whose aim would certainly have been to affect the result, the inner party machinery will often have been the origin: the notion of being 'on message' is one of saying only what is perceived to best promote the party's own campaign, and a common practice in at least the larger parties is to provide regular briefings to those members receiving exposure via the mass media.

For example, regular examples of politicians' claims about their opponents in the 1997 general election included the following:

- The 1992 Conservative Party manifesto contained ninety-two broken promises.
- There were twenty-two 'Tory tax rises' up to 1997.
- The Conservatives have been overtaken by sleaze.
- John Major is a weak leader, who is not in control of his party.
- Labour is inexperienced in government, having been out of office for eighteen years.
- Tony Blair cannot be trusted.
- Labour is controlled by union bosses, who will soon emerge from the shadows if the party wins.
- Labour will break up the United kingdom, through its plans for devolution.
- Tony Blair would betray Britain at the forthcoming European summit.
- Liberal Democrat policies can be unrealistic because they cannot win outright.

Each of the above claims, if accepted even subliminally by listeners, could have been potentially very damaging to the target's chances of being elected. That is, of course,

why many of the most experienced political interviewees repeated them whenever possible, and all the claims listed above were found repeatedly in the Today programmes studied. Only sometimes were statements about opponents challenged by the interviewer. The counter to this argument might be that the level of political literacy in Today listeners might innoculate them against such crude attempts to influence their vote – and such a position might prove attractive to some observers. What chance, though, would even the most politically- (and media-) literate listener have had of discounting bias in those not overtly labelled as being affiliated to any particular party?

Few who spoke on Today, be they politicians or others, can have really been 'neutral' commentators. For example, the newspaper journalist Matthew Parris, asked to comment on the then Prime Minister's prospects in a possible televised debate with Tony Blair, made the following oblique but potentially wounding (and unchallenged) remark:

> "John Major is used to taking questions from ignorant people: he does that twice a week in the House of Commons." (8.41pm, 21/3/97)

Whether the imputation of ignorance was to Tony Blair, Labour politicians or other politicians in general, he seemed to imply that Major was sufficiently distinct from them to meet the challenge. Alternatively, rather than political mischief-making, this could have been an ill-considered joke, but asides such as this could be as potentially damaging as direct attacks. Each one, direct or indirect, is a piece in the very large and complicated jigsaw that was the programme's representation of the election.

That the audience should treat external contributors with some suspicion might be considered reasonable. However, some might be less likely to challenge assertions

made by the programme's own staff. In the second programme of the campaign, on 19th March, Today's sports journalist made an apparently impromptu comparison between an item in the sports bulletin and the Labour manifesto. Both were, he said, "saying what you can and will do from a position of experience" (8.27am). Although there were no further direct references to the election in the next six and a half weeks of the programme's sports coverage, (as if instructions had been newly given to avoid doing so,) this served as a timely reminder that repeated patterns of discourse can emerge in even the most unlikely places. Especially when ad libbed and unplanned, they are less likely to have been 'balanced' by corresponding interjections elsewhere.

The frequent 'two-way' pieces between presenter and reporter or correspondent accounted for a considerable amount of the programme's overt election coverage. These were items *about* the election: often about the issues being discussed, and also frequently about the conduct or the course of the election itself. Occasionally, these would concern themselves with the role of the media in the election campaign, and in this way journalists create a vicious circle of reflexivity – with the way the media is reporting the election, (at least temporarily,) assuming a greater importance than the extra-media events of the election itself.

An example was the Sun newspaper's switching of allegiance to Labour. Such introspection was, of course, limited to discussing the conduct of other media producers, because at no point in the campaign did Today consider its own output in any great length from such a perspective. Few current affairs broadcasters would entertain the notion of declaring on air their own allegiance to one party or another, (although in a controversial move, the breakfast presenter and owner of Virgin Radio,

Chris Evans, did later promise 'on air' financial support to one of the contenders in the 1999 London mayoral contest). Particularly in the case of a public service broadcaster such as the BBC, one of the key principles in maintaining credibility as a purveyor of information, is to seldom (if at all) express doubt over the processes and outcomes involved in producing that information. Speculation over yet to be established fact can be indicated as such where certainty is impractical, but a Today programme heavily impregnated with such caveats would quickly lose its agenda-setting reputation. While over the thirty-nine programmes there was not a single two-way with Robin Oakley which discussed how Today had been put together, or why one item had led the news bulletin rather than another, a wide range of other topics were covered. (In making the above point, it has to be recognised that few, if any other media practitioners would have been so self-critical before their own audience.)

The first two-way, with John Pienaar on the 18th March at 6.35am, was described in the cue as an election preview. Pienaar immediately characterised the election, only in its infancy, as a 'two-horse race' between the Conservative and Labour parties (whose own perspectives on the election he then attempted to summarise, Conservatives first). As an example of the BBC establishment presenting a contentious thesis, this is one which merits close attention. In its most reductive sense, yes, the general election *was* a struggle for an overall majority in the House of Commons. Such a numerical advantage over the other parties represented there does bestow the right to form a government, and the power to pass legislation through the house, as long as the majority remains intact.

However, Paddy Ashdown's subsequently published diaries revealed some pre-election collusion between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, as scenarios other than the emergent Labour landslide were being considered by the two party leaders. Other potential outcomes surrounded the position of the Conservative leader, John Major. Had his party not been so heavily defeated, he may have felt able to continue as Leader of the Opposition, rather than resigning at the first possible opportunity.

The Liberal Democrats, too, even if always unlikely to win an overall majority, did double their representation in the Commons in 1997, an outcome which presented them with an opportunity to further develop their position in national, regional and local government. To reduce the whole election to a 'two- horse race' was effectively to discredit the myriad of other potential outcomes, for individuals and parties alike. Pienaar was, of course, not alone in this, as the 'two-horse race' script was repeated frequently on Today and in other media. (For example, even if not articulated so unsubtly, this pattern of discourse can be read as having influenced the position taken by James Naughtie with Paddy Ashdown in their 25th April interview (see Figure 47, question/non-question numbers 20, 24, 29, 31 and 34).)

The repetition of this pattern of discourse, in Today and elsewhere, may have served to depress the vote for the Liberal Democrats and all the other smaller parties and individuals standing for election. Of course, sections of the electorate did vote for them in sufficiently large numbers for more of them to win seats, and in 1997 tactical voting against the Conservatives was supposed by commentators to have been more widespread than usual. However, the Liberal Democrats have been unable to eschew

the appearance of a mere 'third' party, a home only for tactical votes, and one whose best hope of power lies in a hung Parliament. Repetition, it seems, does foster naturalisation, and most parties in an election could be expected to have strong views about what theories about them they would wish to, and prefer not to, have naturalised by the broadcasters themselves.

It is possible that listeners may impute greater authority – and therefore, credibilty – to more senior figures in the BBC's hierarchy of political journalism. An assertion by John Humphrys or Robin Oakley may carry even more weight, when spoken by the Corporation's then Political Editor, compared with a more junior journalist. There is scope for further research into such a question.

The regular contributors to the daily Thought for the Day slot at approximately 7.47am might have been expected to be the 'loose cannons' in this regard. Encouraged to express personal opinions on topical matters which can be related to theological questions (however tenuously), they could well have editorialised the election and its participants with a large degree of latitude. Few of them would have been short of opinions on the election. In the first programme of the campaign, Elaine Storkey referred very generally to 'party machinery' and representations of the election in the media, while in the second, comparisons were drawn between mysticism and politics, lofty ideals and pragmatism. However, as if very conscious, (either through self-censorship or editorial control,) of their responsibility to be balanced, few Thoughts for the Day referred either directly or indirectly to political *issues* in the United Kingdom. Soon the slot firmly established itself on the safer ground of questions of life and death, a coma victim's life support, suicide among sikhs and cult members, jewish perceptions of Easter, and so on.

The main bulk of the references to United Kingdom politics, though, were in the political interviews carried out by the presenters, reporters and correspondents. For example, although the 'sleaze script' was absent from the final interview with John Major (Figure 49) (and its inclusion or exclusion could be an important issue in determining balance), it was a major factor in earlier interviews with politicians of the three 'main' parties.

The operation of such 'scripts', though, is often complex – particularly when an interviewer is attempting to be impartial. For example, on 28th March, John Humphrys interviewed the retiring Conservative MP, Sir Nicholas Scott and the 'Labour supporting' political editor of the Sun about that newspaper's revelations of indiscretions by the Conservative MP and candidate, Piers Merchant. (Neither interviewee seemed disadvantaged by the method of his connection to the studio – one being in the radio car and the other on a land-line from a remote studio.)

The exchange began thus:

> JH: "So what do you make of all this?"
> NS: "Erm, I don't know the facts, yet, and, er, I don't think you do either, so I think we leave it to, er, er Mr Merchant's constituents to make up their mind about his, er future. Piers, er I've known of course for many, many years, he was an excellent, IS an excellent parliamentary private secretary to Peter Lilley, he was part of a first class team at the Department of Social Security, and he's a very good friend of mine and I wish him well."
> JH: "Well, you say we don't know the facts, we do know what's been reported in the Sun, there's another two pages of er, extremely compromising photographs er in the Sun this morning, we know that the Deputy Prime Minister feels that Mr Merchant's an embarrassment and has let the party down."
> NS: "Yes, and I gather the Sun get their information from the odious er Max Clifford, er the man, coiffeured, self-important, threatening more er revelations between now and the next election, and the man, no doubt, who persuaded the

> Sun to switch their support to the Labour Party in this election, so, don't let's er be er quite so toffee-nosed about it as you seem to be, John."
> JH: "Well, I'm trying not to be toffee-nosed, merely factual..."

There followed a brief discussion of the appropriateness of Humphrys's asking about the allegations, and then he turned to Kavanagh, as follows:

> JH: "Well now, look, what about the point that Sir Nicholas is making, there, I mean basically you stitched this man up didn't you?"
> TK: "No, I don't think we did, he stitched himself up. Erm, Max Clifford had absolutely nothing to do with this, er whatsoever, I'm surprised that Nick Scott ran down that road, (NS mock laughter) erm, he knew nothing about it either..."

It was the Piers Merchant episode that added an extra dimension to the Conservative troubles over 'sleaze'. By this, the tenth programme, some listeners may have become used to the 'cash for questions' and other similar allegations of unprofessional conduct, but this unexpected development contained not only deception, but sexual intrigue.

In his first, unusually open question, Humphrys invited Scott to venture whatever opinion he chose about the matter. Despite Scott's rebuttal, Humphrys's follow up, a non-question, reasserted sleaze as an issue, his understanding of the situation and his right to ask about it. He cited extensive coverage in the Sun, 'extremely compromising' photographs and the Conservative Deputy Leader's having criticised Merchant's actions. Scott's denial amounted to an anti-thesis: he positively endorsed Merchant's character and past record, disputing the allegation as unproven, and then attacking Humphrys, the Sun and the publicist Max Clifford in response to Humphrys's persistence.

Despite Scott's personalising of the exchange, his questioning of the premise and his pejorative remarks, Humphrys was able to abandon the 'common-sense narrative

framework' he had initially adopted with his first interviewee, and to play a different 'devil's advocate' role with Kavanagh. As the interview progressed, he dispensed with his own incredulity at Merchant's alleged actions and Scott's support for him, and adopted a second 'script': one which could be labelled the 'deceipt script'. In this act of 'balancing' his own attack on the Conservatives, Humphrys began to destroy his own previous argument, as follows:

> JH: "Didn't you say just as a matter of interest, erm, 'young lady why have you come to us at this stage, unprompted'?"
> TK: "We did."
> JH: "And what'd she say?"
> TK: "Well, she tells us that she feels that she's been used by a man old enough to be her father. Now, whether she's a sensible and er sober young lady is another matter but she certainly is young enough to deserve his protection."
> JH: "Well, but but but presumably, somebody who wants to er work for a soft porn channel or whatever, or somebody who works as a hostess in a Soho nightclub, erm, isn't actually the the the most delicate little flower in the whole universe, is she?"
> TK: "No, and we're not pretending that she is. But er all of those things you would think would have raised some sort of alarm signals in the mind of er Piers Merchant before he started walking around his constituency with her and behaving in the way he did in the photographs that we've taken."
> JH: "And have you got lots more of this sort of s-stuff to come out?" (Programme extract 17)

Humphrys's shift from one script to another, competing one is a feat that must be practised routinely by any broadcaster striving to be 'impartial'. The playing of twin and contradictory 'devil's advocates' demands the ability to sound as convincing in one, as in the other: and unless genuinely equivocating over an issue, to do so requires a degree of deception. Somewhere within Humphrys's own psyche there may have been a set of values or assumptions that caused him to feel, whatever superficial attitude he may have managed to express, that one position rather than the other was the more reasonable (Ferguson's discursive reserve, 2000).

Whichever position Humphrys most favoured internally, (if any,) he could not show it, lest the treatment of the two competing protagonists be too easily perceived as unfair. It is likely that if one position were put more convincingly than the other, informal and formal analyses (such as this one) would be quick to perceive bias. In the event, in both cases Humphrys used a technique of distancing himself from the argument by putting to one interviewee the contention of the other ("We do know what's been reported in the Sun/What about the point that Sir Nicholas is making?"). This even amounts to 'script representation by proxy', as Humphrys could not permanently endorse either position, needing to assume the same level of detachment from both positions.

If balance or imbalance is to be discerned in the microcosm of this single item, (and leaving aside the question of the imbalances found in the macrocosm of the seven weeks of programmes,) one would have to find or disprove parity across a range of values, as follows:

- that the two interviewees balanced each other, in spite of their different roles in the election, as politician and journalist, as 'signed-up-yet-retiring-from-Parliament Conservative' and 'Labour-supporting' journalist;
- that they were given equally challenging treatment and opportunities to put their responses;
- that Humphrys represented each one's position to the other with equal vigour and conviction.

Again, without absolutes, with which to measure most of the above, arriving at an incontrovertible reading, which evidences balance or imbalance, would be unlikely. With greater certainty, though, it can be said that Humphrys himself might have a

difficult time trying to prove absolute parity across those values. (See later section on paralinguistics.) In the event, his act of closure was to ask one if he would like 'to come back on that?' – an offer which, if genuinely put to both sides *ad infinitum* could have maintained the item in perpetuity.

Politicians, however, are not expected to be 'even-handed' over a controversy. For Labour, the 'sleaze script' was a powerful campaign tool, because an important tactic in the campaign was to depict the Conservative Party as corrupt, and hence, unfit to remain in office. For Labour, that day's allegations worked well, even when they did not have a chance to articulate them themselves: the newspaper review twenty-two minutes later quoted the Daily Mail calling them a 'savage blow to the Tories' and the Guardian depicting John Major as 'spineless in dealing with sleaze MPs' and Merchant himself as 'foolish to have been set up' by the Sun.

As the 8.10 slot that day was given to the Conservative Chairman, Dr Brian Mawhinney, who was followed by Professor Anthony King on standards in public life and an item about fox-repelling luminous sheep, Labour's first chance to comment directly on the issue on Today was the *following* morning. Then, Donald Dewar repeated the 'sleaze script' in the context of a different controversy, over the then Conservative MP and candidate for Tatton, Neil Hamilton, as follows:

> DD: "I certainly am not aware of, I've certainly never experienced anything like this, where no one can get past erm er the problems er of er Mr Hamilton and er a small group of of of other MPs who have been involved. It's become the dominating factor in the in the election (continues 2")"
> JH: "!Well all right, who do you want to"
> DD: "!None of us, none of us, none of us, in fact, want that to be the case erm er"
> JH: "!Oh, well, come on now, if you didn't want it to be the case, you'd have hardly made this announcement yesterday, would you?"

> DD: "!No, well, frankly it, I think it's in the interests of public decency that in fact this matter is settled (JH interjects) this is a way of settling it, then we can get on (continues 2")"
> JH: "Are, are you honestly telling me that you're not trying to keep alive this whole sleaze thing because it's doing damage to the Tories and therefore helping your cause?"

Dewar's approach, challenged by Humphrys, was to claim a moral high ground of seeking to cleanse the campaign of the distracting and inappropriate elements of the sleaze issue. Humphrys himself seemed to consider (although this may just have been a convincing representation of an antithesis) that merely the repetition of the sleaze allegations served Labour's cause. In this way, it can be seen that the 'sleaze script' (and others) was complex and not always articulated according to the same formula. Different methods of articulation, though, may have had broadly similar electoral effects, even in those who did not admit to having changed their vote as a result of what they heard.

Other common patterns of discourse could be described as the 'soft on Europe script', the 'tough on crime script' and the 'NHS in crisis script'.

Paralinguistics

Because this is the realm of linguistics and paralinguistics, though, devising an objective test of the conviction which John Humphrys put into representing the two opposing views (above) about Piers Merchant's conduct, would be as difficult as measuring the other parameters listed above. If Humphrys did favour one position over the other, or found one more credible, he would still have to attempt to put equivalent amounts of credulity in his representations. The rise and fall of intonation, the spacing of words and phrases, the conviction conveyed in each thesis put to the

interviewees would have to be finely balanced beyond reproach, in order for complete impartiality within the item to be demonstrated (at least, according to *that* parameter).

For reasons discussed earlier, such a determination, if one is to be made, has been left to the listener of the accompanying compact disc. While many measurements, comparisons, juxtapositionings and, yes, representations of Today's version of the election have been made in this work, the impossibility of producing a complete and incontrovertible paralinguistic analysis of the thirty-nine programmes has been acknowledged. Indeed, every mention of the Conservatives could have been said with a sneer, every reference to Labour with a benevolent smile, but (if undetected) such a balancing effect would be impossible to quantify and offset against the extra exposure given to the Conservatives, in terms of opportunities to 'have the floor'.

Although this picture is therefore incomplete, it does contain many of the most important elements, which should be considered in determining balance. The mechanical and the quantifiable are more accurately and more comprehensively measurable than the implicit. What have been clearly established are the number and diversity of the parameters involved.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has considered just one series of programmes on one radio network, which operated among many different media forms received by the British public at the time of the 1997 general election. It seems unlikely that Today either won the election for Labour or lost it for the Conservatives. However, the phenomena uncovered here may have had some effect on the outcome of the political process, and, if repeated more widely by others, that effect may have been magnified. In fact, although there is no evidence to prove it, Today may have contributed to the shortening of Labour's opinion-poll lead over the long, seven-week campaign.

Every democracy is complex: where political power over a whole nation-state can be won by the victor in one set of elections, it should be important that the operation of those elections and the disparate influences on the electorate are governed by the highest democratic principles. Of course, in most democracies they are not. Newspapers and other parts of the media are controlled by those who would seek to influence the outcome, large and small parties have different levels of funding with which to pay for advertising, leafleting and other promotional activities, and individuals normally find it hard to campaign effectively against parties.

A democracy such as ours does expect public service broadcasting, at least, to be 'fair'. That is, to aspire to 'fairness', *and* to achieve it. Many people depend on sources such as the BBC for the information upon which they are to make their decisions – and how to cast

their vote. Politicians, too, expect at least fairness, where advantage cannot be bought. Furthermore, the BBC should set standards to which others can aspire; it should be a principled foil to the corruption and partiality of the press.

In this research, there were several key findings, some of which are original and extend the sum of knowledge beyond what was already known about the under-theorised area that is radio broadcasting. Among them were the results of the literature survey, which set in context the subsequent more detailed – if not exhaustive – study of how Today itself performed during the election. The survey considered not only academic and professional literature written around notions of balance and impartiality from the different but not unrelated perspectives of informed listener and skilled practitioner. It also related that more formal commentary to a number of more spontaneous press and political reactions to public controversies before the election was declared: a more public discourse which formed a part of the climate within which the campaign was then fought, and the contest which, in turn, was itself represented by the media.

The conclusion arrived at was that 'balance' must be determined between an infinitely complex number of positions, and that 'impartiality' requires broadcasters to position themselves at a fulcrum more elusive than simply a mid-point between left and right. Other literature surveyed suggested that, like political perspectives, political interviews are also heterogeneous, consisting of several related and unrelated phenomena which, both systematically and chaotically, can result in disparate performances and positionings.

That, and the textual analyses subsequently carried out, provide a body of evidence to suggest that the achievement of *complete and incontrovertible balance* in radio (and other media forms) is probably an impossibility – as would be its exact measurement. The subtleties and nuances in verbal expression, in linguistics and in paralinguistics, in interaction and in interpolation all combine with the infinity of political positioning to ensure a complexity with which no instrument could cope. Impartiality is a professional ideal, but in practice only compromises may be achieved. In its absence there is, by definition, bias, whether intentional or not.

There are, though, simple measurements which can be made, as much by producers as by listeners or academic researchers, and which can provide at least a partial assessment of how close to nominal fulcra a programme or a series has reached. Those measurements can be made in advance, and not just months or years later from 'recordings off transmission'. Examples include frequency of appearance, duration of appearance, approaches to questioning, inclusion of actuality and so on. In short: care can be taken by broadcasters in the planning stages of production over how long and how effectively access to their microphones is shared out, and over how they depict the issues, events and participants involved. Many broadcasters make this a part of their routine already.

The role of repeated patterns of discourse should be acknowledged, too. Care should be taken with sweeping generalizations, such as the 'two-horse race' script, which are reductive and potentially damaging in the extreme. Depictions of an election which are

misleading do little to serve democratic processes, and in fact impede them. Unfortunately, the cliché is also in many broadcasters routine.

The various forms of textual analysis reported in the final two chapters demonstrated that the Today programme consistently ignored some of the few basic rules. The programme chose to promote the interests of three 'main' parties over all the others seeking election, and chose to disadvantage Labour in favour of the Conservatives according to several important criteria, and in favour of the Liberal Democrats according to the BBC's 'share of vote' rule. There is little evidence that such Conservative advantages were 'balanced' by other aspects of the programming, or even that the news agenda being followed highlighted Conservative negatives in sufficient measure to reduce their positive advantage.

The limited listener survey also suggested, though, that the respondent group were broadly either unwilling or unable to provide summative assessments of the programmes which perceived such bias by Today towards the Conservative Party. Whether that bias was intentional or accidental, the audience's apparent ignorance of it may be the reason Today managed to conduct itself thus with such impunity. Only where other researchers used empirical means to quantify elements within coverage, did they also discern an overall imbalance.

The respondents in the listener sample group did, however, provide substantial and often interesting evidence of differential readings being made of particular items from similar

perspectives. They acknowledged parts of the programmes as likely to benefit certain parties, with little recognition that those parts affected balance over the whole series.

Broadcasters may well be able to put one party to air more often and for much longer than another, over a seven-week period, without such an imbalance being noticed or complained about by listeners. If such an ability to bias output exists, though, it should not be accepted as proper or professional. Of course speech broadcasting is a demanding occupation, and much live radio is spontaneous and only achieved in spite of considerable technical and practical obstacles. However, if broadcasters are to exercise due professionalism in their work – in the terms of their regulators and their peers - they should work hard to achieve fairness according to the measurable parameters as well as the immeasurable. The existence of the immeasurable does not excuse them ignoring the measurable. If total impartiality is an impossibility, pragmatic approaches to its near-achievement should be embraced enthusiastically, rather than displaced by insouciance. If not, the conclusions drawn may indicate intention, rather than inattention.

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APPENDIX

The *Today* Election: Research Questionnaire

PART A: ABOUT YOU

Please answer the following questions as accurately as you can. They are purely to help me understand your own standpoint and enable me to compare your own views with those of others in the survey. No information about you as an individual will be disclosed to a third party. You will not be identified in the report.

Sex: M/F Age:..... years Region:.....

Voting intention at the start of this election campaign:.....

Vote cast at the end of this election campaign:.....

I changed/did not change my voting intention at this election because.....
.....

Vote cast at 1992 general election:.....

I changed/did not change my vote between elections because:.....
.....

ARE YOU WILLING TO IDENTIFY YOURSELF TO ME?

Please leave out this information rather than drop out of the survey. Many people understandably do not wish to reveal their opinions to others, and if you wish to remain anonymous, please do. However, it would be very useful if I could telephone some people for detailed immediate reactions, so if you would be willing to talk to me *during* the election campaign, please leave a message now on (01252) 391228.

If you are willing to be interviewed by telephone, *after the election*, when I have read your completed questionnaire, please write your details here:

Name:..... Telephone:.....

Otherwise, there is *no* need for me to know your name.

PART B: YOU AND THE *TODAY* PROGRAMME

This section is about your general impressions of *Today*, the programme and its presenters. There has been a lot of controversy about interviewing styles and even some suggestions that individual presenters harbour political sympathies for one side or another. I am interested in what YOU think because of what you have heard, rather than what anyone else may have written or said. Again, this information will be held IN CONFIDENCE and your comments will not be identified to any third party.

1 I **usually** listen to *Today* on: MON TUES WEDS THRS FRI SAT
(please delete)

2 I **usually** listen between these times:..... and .....

3 Please circle the number which best describes your own reaction to the following statement:

"Generally, *Today* is politically biased"

I agree very strongly	1	2	3	4	5	I disagree very strongly

Please comment.....
.....
.....

4 Are any of the presenters politically biased in any way? Please explain what you mean, rating the presenter on the same scale of 1 to 5. "Generally, presenter X is politically biased."

Presenter ..... Rating .... Comment .....
.....
.....

Presenter ..... Rating .... Comment .....
.....
.....

Presenter ..... Rating .... Comment .....
.....
.....

please continue on a separate sheet if necessary

5 Interviewing styles differ between the *Today* presenters and individual items. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	I agree very strongly				*I disagree very strongly*
Interviewers are often too aggressive	1	2	3	4	5
Politicians are often able to be evasive	1	2	3	4	5
Evasive politicians should be cornered by the interviewer	1	2	3	4	5
Those politicians should expect rough treatment	1	2	3	4	5
Interviewers are good at being even-handed	1	2	3	4	5

Please comment.....
.....
.....

6 Please give an *overall* assessment of how balanced the *Today* programme was during the general election campaign.
.....
.....
.....

7 Did anything you heard on *Today* affect how you used your own vote?

YES NO DON'T KNOW

8 What, if anything did you feel was unfair about the programmes?

.....
.....
.....

PART C: *TODAY* AND THE 1997 GENERAL ELECTION

This section of the questionnaire will provide the detail of this part of the research. I am asking everyone to react to certain specific items so I can make comparisons between large numbers of responses. Those items will be in the 'prime' slots at 7.10 and 8.10 a.m. on each of four dates: they are five weeks, two weeks, one week and one day before the election. (The dates are on the actual forms.) If you are unable to report on those specific items, your other contributions will also be very valuable.

Please feel free to use as many sheets as you can, and also to report on any items at other times and on other days - including *Thought for the Day*. These sheets may, of course, be photocopied - and I will be happy to send you more copies if you leave me a message on (01252) 391228. **Once again, thank you very much for your help with this research.**

NB In order to ensure correct identification of the items on which you comment, please note the importance of the date and time on each report sheet. I have also asked you to classify each item as an extra fail-safe. The types are as follows:

Single interview: presenter interviews one interviewee (live or pre-recorded)

2/3 interviewees debate with presenter

Package (multi-voice): one reporter links clips from several interviews

Regular item: *Thought for the Day*, business, sport, papers or news bulletin

After 1st May please return your completed questionnaires and report forms as soon as possible to:

Guy Starkey,
EMS Division,
Farnborough College of Technology,
Boundary Road,
Farnborough,
Hampshire
GU14 6SB.

(01252) 391228

THE *TODAY* ELECTION: ITEM REACTION FORM

Date 27March 1997 Time 7.10 (after news) Item*: Single interview
2/3 interviewees
Package (multi-voice)
Regular item
*please indicate

Subject.....

"Overall, in my opinion this item was BIASED" 1 2 3 4 5
agree strongly — disagree strongly

Which, if any, viewpoint was most effectively expressed?
.....

Which, if any, party gained most electoral advantage from this item?
.....

In your opinion, what effect, if any, is the item most likely to have had on the election result?
.....

Your comments on the item:
.....

Date 27 March 1997Time 8.10 (after news) Item*: Single interview
2/3 interviewees
Package (multi-voice)
Regular item
*please indicate

Subject.....

"Overall, in my opinion this item was BIASED" 1 2 3 4 5
agree strongly — disagree strongly

Which, if any, viewpoint was most effectively expressed?
.....

Which, if any, party gained most electoral advantage from this item?
.....

In your opinion, what effect, if any, is the item most likely to have had on the election result?
.....

Your comments on the item:
.....

THE *TODAY* ELECTION: ITEM REACTION FORM

Date ..... Time ..... Item*: Single interview
2/3 interviewees
Package (multi-voice)
Regular item
*please indicate

Subject.....

"Overall, in my opinion this item was BIASED" 1 2 3 4 5
agree strongly — disagree strongly

Which, if any, viewpoint was most effectively expressed?
.....

Which, if any, party gained most electoral advantage from this item?
.....

In your opinion, what effect, if any, is the item most likely to have had on the election result?
.....

Your comments on the item:
.....

Date ..... Time ..... Item*: Single interview
2/3 interviewees
Package (multi-voice)
Regular item
*please indicate

Subject.....

"Overall, in my opinion this item was BIASED" 1 2 3 4 5
agree strongly — disagree strongly

Which, if any, viewpoint was most effectively expressed?
.....

Which, if any, party gained most electoral advantage from this item?
.....

In your opinion, what effect, if any, is the item most likely to have had on the election result?
.....

Your comments on the item:
.....