

# **Television News and Elections: Lessons from Britain and the U.S.**

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## **Television News and Elections: Lessons from Britain and the U.S.**

British and American broadcast media systems began with different origins and have evolved in important and distinctive ways (Hallin & Mancini 2004). One commonality is the central place occupied by television news in election campaigns, which has remained a constant despite the evolution of technology over the past decades. TV news in elections remains central because of the fact that most citizens in Britain and the U.S. still claim to rely on it as their primary source of information about politics at election time, just as in the 1950s and 1960s when citizens had, at most, only a few channels to choose from. Political marketing on television was in its infancy in both countries at that time, and broadcasting policy meant that political advertising took very different forms on television (Semetko & Scammell 1995). At that time in Britain there was no option for citizens to turn to another channel to escape the monotonous ten minute Party Election Broadcasts or PEBs (read free advertising), as broadcasting policy dictated that PEBs were to be aired at the same time on all channels. Participant observation based studies of the BBC newsrooms in elections in the 1970s and early 1980s continued to reveal the power of the public service broadcasting (psb) policy and its impact on editorial and reporting decisions each day of the campaign (Blumler, Gurevitch & Nossiter 1986), and this was quite different from television newsrooms in the U.S. where psb was not the norm.

Research investigating the balance of power between politicians and journalists in the presentation of campaign agendas in television news in elections both countries revealed some striking differences in the early 1980s, based on comparative content analysis of main evening television news programs:

“British election coverage on television is almost *comprehensively* different from campaign news on U.S. television...it is more ample, more varied, more substantive, more party oriented, less free with unidirectional comment, and more respectful. By contrast, American election television is more terse, concentrated, horse-racist, guided by conventional news values, ready to pass judgment, and ready to be occasionally disrespectful in passing such judgement ” (Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch & Weaver 1991: 142).

American journalists exerted more “discretionary power” over the campaign agenda than their counterparts in the U.K., and evidence of this was found in the ways in which U.S. reporters commented on candidates’ statements and activities on the campaign trail, often emphasizing events as “staged.” This kind of reporter commentary was rarely evident in Britain, however, probably because political marketing was not as developed there. The Conservatives have been credited with introducing “designer politics” in Britain under Mrs. Thatcher’s leadership (Scammell, 1995, 1998, 1999a). British reporter commentary about a smiling Mrs. Thatcher sitting in a field with a newborn calf for a photo op reacted mildly to the early years in the process of professionalization of campaigning. It is a world away from the cynical discussion of “spin” by reporters in the elections that

ushered Labour under Tony Blair into office for a first, then a second, and now a third time (Scammell 1999b, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2002).

In Britain, as in the U.S., as political marketing has developed, political parties and politicians have been challenged by the array of choices available to citizens to tune into, or turn away from, election campaigns. Over the past three decades, the opportunities to reach undecided voters via the flagship news programs during prime-time have declined markedly, mirroring the decline in audiences for those programs. Since 1981, audience share on Britain's two main flagship television channels has declined continuously from 39% and 49% on BBC and ITV respectively, to 25% and 23% in 2004 ([www.barb.co.uk](http://www.barb.co.uk)). As audiences turned to other channels available via cable and satellite, and more recently digital, news programs once aimed at mass audiences are now aimed at smaller and often demographically distinctive audiences (Semetko 2000).

Over the past decade especially, the abundance of media choice in Britain has led to changes in the schedules of prime-time television on the country's two flagship channels (BBC1 and ITV or Channel 3). Public service broadcasting traditions, which guided both BBC and ITV reporting in election campaigns since the 1950s, were dealt a serious blow in the 1990s as effects of market competition led to the evacuation from prime-time of hard news and documentaries. Although most people continue to name television as their number one source for information about politics at election time, by 2005 there was less during prime-time available on the two flagship channels for those interested in politics and even less chance of coming across something political that might capture the attention of the uninterested.

The push to the margins of prime-time has also meant more noticeable changes in the content of election news by 2005, as audiences for early evening programs and late evening programs are now distinctly different not only in size but also in demographics. Audiences are smaller for ITN's 10.30pm bulletin than they had been for News at Ten, and men are more predominant. The early evening news on both channels is viewed by more women and, as a consequence, according to one reporter, the late evening news contains more "hard politics coverage that men are interested in, whereas the early evening news contains less *hard* politics and more of the kind that appeals to women and families." In sum, structurally speaking, British television has expanded exponentially with the digital age, but politically speaking only those awake, equipped (digitally), and interested (politically), stand a real chance of finding more political information on television at election time.

We focus on one of the most important trends to emerge from our time-series of television news content analysis data in recent British election campaigns: the shrinking window for political news. Systematic comparisons are possible because of the previous studies conducted in Britain by the authors, with funding from the ESRC and other sources (see for example, Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch & Weaver 1991; Semetko, Scammell & Nossiter 1994; Semetko & Scammell 1995; Nossiter, Scammell & Semetko 1995; Semetko, Scammell & Goddard 1997; Goddard, Scammell & Semetko 1998; Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell & Semetko 1999; Semetko 1989, 1991, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2003a, 2003b). As the 2005 content analysis is still underway and the data are incomplete, our focus is on the trends appearing in the three previous elections.

## Methods

The study draws upon three content analyses conducted during the campaigns prior to the last three general elections in the UK in 1992, 1997 and 2001. The codebooks from the three analyses employ identical measures for the relevant variables used in this study. That makes a comparison of these data and an analysis using combined data from the three periods possible and valid.<sup>1</sup> Below we provide more detailed information on data collection, handling, and analysis.

### *Outlets*

The news outlets that were content analyzed are the main evening television newscasts on the BBC and ITV. Specifically that is the BBC1's Nine O'Clock News in 1992 and 1997, the BBC News at Ten O'Clock in 2001, and ITV's News at Ten in all years. The entire news outlets were analyzed, excluding weather reports. The unit of coding was the individual news story.

### **Periods of Analysis**

The three periods of analysis used for the present study consist of the three to four week 'official' election campaign period in each year. Weekend editions of the newscasts were not included in the samples. Specifically, in 1992 all newscasts between March 16 and April 8 were analyzed (18 days coded). The period in 1997 was from April 1 to April 30 (22 days coded) and in 2001 it was from May 8 to June 6 (22 days coded). In total n=1219 BBC news stories (1992 n=321; 1997 n=485; 2001 n=413) and n=894 ITV news stories (1992 n=224; 1997 n=363; 2001 n=307) were coded. Most of our descriptive analyses rely on average measures or on proportional measures per year, which allow comparisons across the years even though the length of the period of analysis slightly differs between 1992 and the other years. For those analyses that do not rely on averages or proportions we reduced the periods of analysis for 1997 and 2001 to 18 days, which compares to the 1992 period.

### **Measures**

Throughout the years identical measures have been employed to code the content of the television newscasts. A range of general information was coded for each news story, such as the date of appearance, or the length of the story in seconds. Each story was coded as 'political' if it included political actors, issues or institutions, and each story was coded for whether it mentioned the 'campaign'. For each story, the main issue was also coded.<sup>2</sup> This enables us to look at the changes in issue visibility over time. All actors, political and non-political, were coded in political stories. Up to four actors could be coded per story, depending on their prominence within the story, i.e. the four most prominent actors of the story were coded.<sup>3</sup> Using this measure we analyze the visibility of political actors versus non-political actors. In political stories, we also coded 'soundbites' from actors in the story, as to the length of time an actor was speaking in a story. This is used to investigate the prominence of political actors.

## **Analysis**

In order to provide statistical analyses, the data sets from the three periods were merged into one. Only those variables that are comparable over the years are used in the merged data set. The first analyses presented below act on the level of the news story using the merged data set. In order to provide statistical analysis on the actor level, the merged data set has been stacked, so that each case represents one of the up to four actors coded per story.

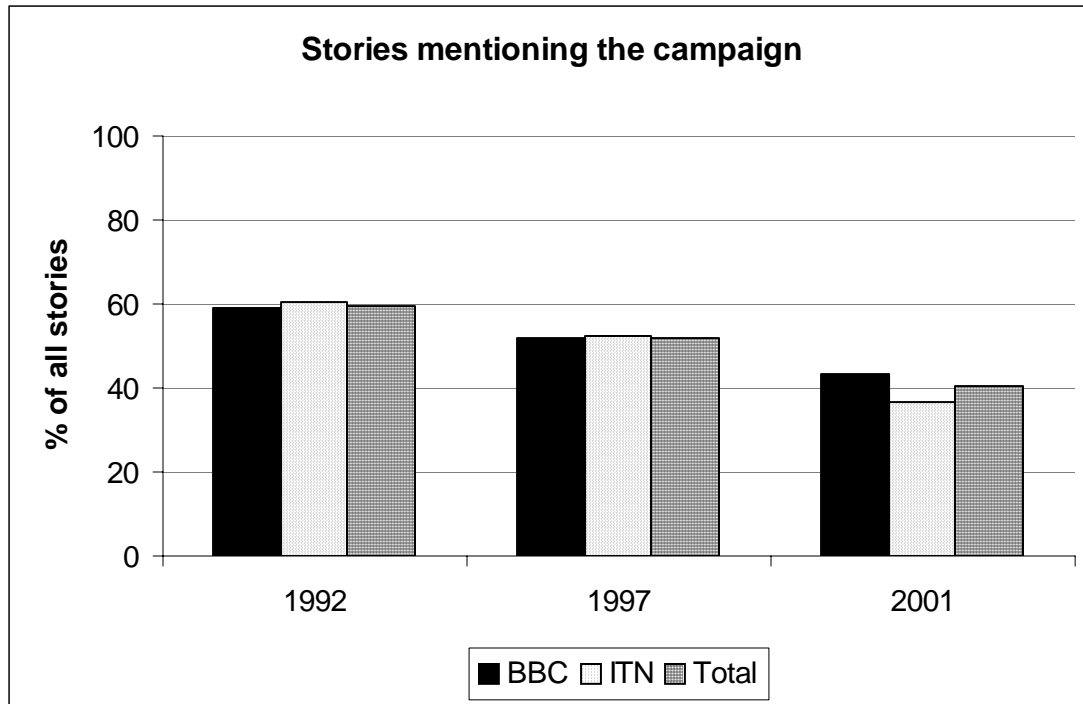
## **Findings**

### **The Shrinking Window for Political News**

Comparisons of election campaign news in Britain and the U.S. in the 1990s found that much of the political news at election time was campaign news, as the campaign was often mentioned in any news story in which political leaders or politicians were seen (Semetko, 1996). It is reasonable to assume that during election campaigns in Britain, political reporting is often campaign reporting. If there is a bias in news reporting during election campaigns in Britain, it would be over-representing political news. With this in mind, we discuss an important trend over the past decade in the visibility of political news.

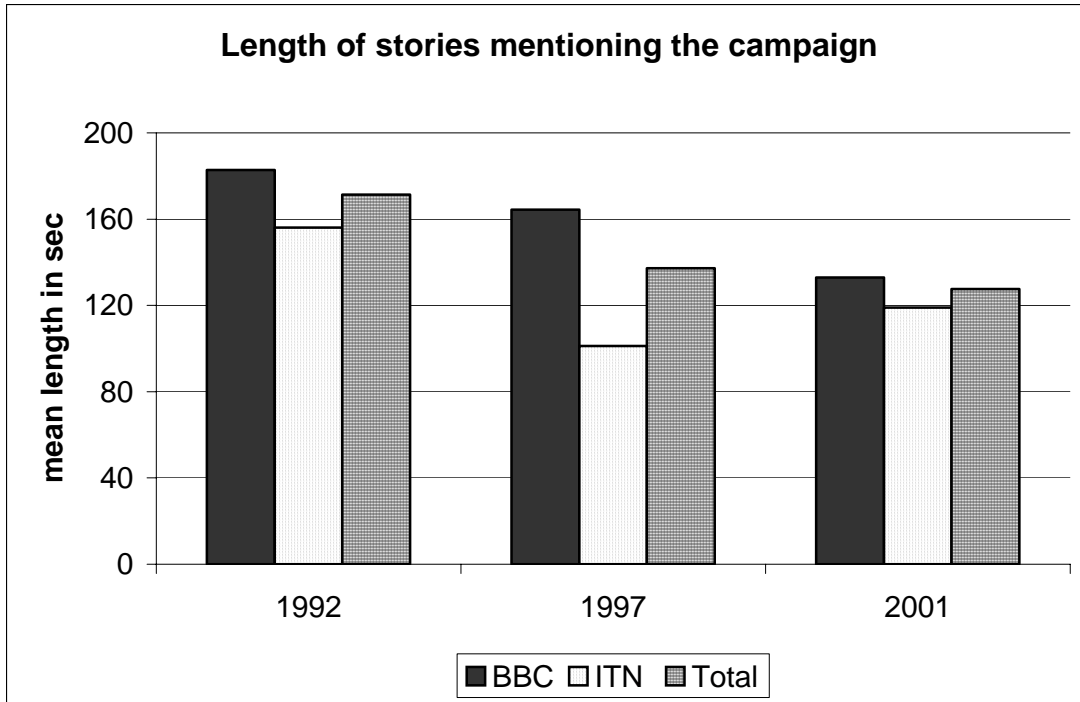
As shown in Figure 1, the proportion of news stories mentioning the election campaign decreased by about one-third over the past decade: from nearly 60 percent in 1992 and 52 percent in 1997 to 40 percent in 2001. The differences between the BBC and ITN are not large overall, except for 2001, when ITN devoted 37 percent of its news to the campaign, compared to 43 percent on the BBC.<sup>4</sup>

FIGURE 1



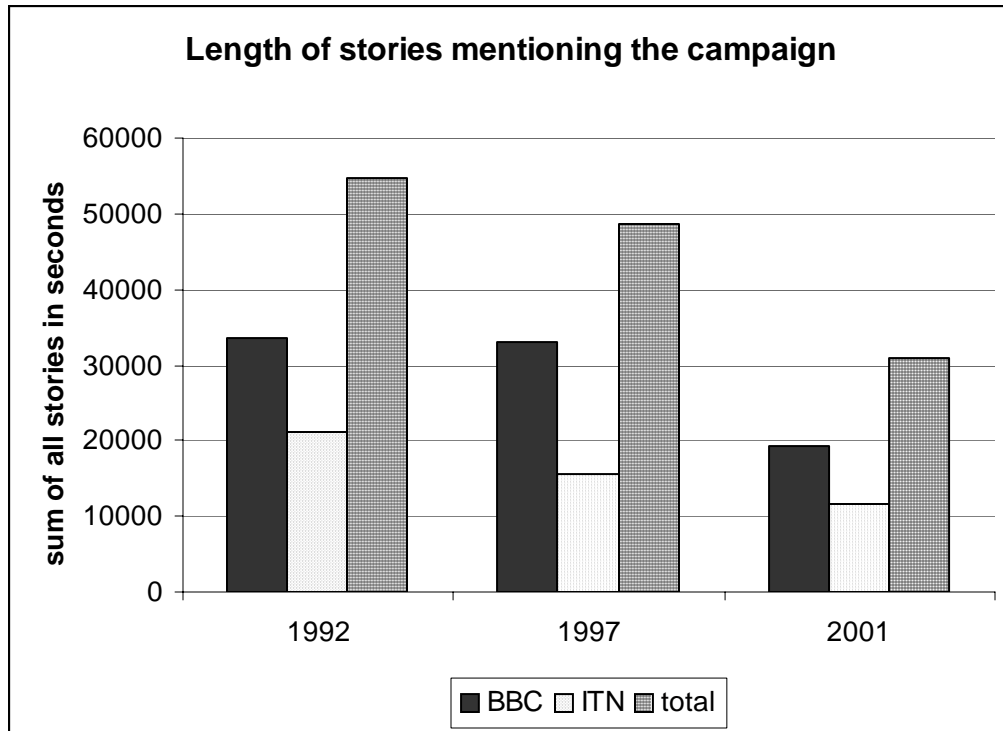
The length of stories mentioning the campaign has also declined over this same period. Figure 2 displays the decrease in attention for campaign news considering the mean length of stories mentioning the campaign. Again the trend in the total bar shows that the mean length of campaign news stories declined about 25 percent over the past decade: from 171 seconds<sup>5</sup> in 1992 and 137 seconds<sup>6</sup> in 1997 to 127 seconds<sup>7</sup> in 2001. The mean differences are significant for the BBC<sup>8</sup> as well as for ITN<sup>9</sup> and the total values<sup>10</sup>. Whereas this decreasing trend is rather linear for the BBC<sup>11</sup> it is less clear for ITN where we see a sharp decrease in the length of campaign stories between 1992 and 1997, followed by a slight increase in 2001.<sup>12</sup>

FIGURE 2



In order to illustrate the decline of political news reporting in a different way, Figure 3 displays the sum of the length of all campaign news stories in seconds. Since we are not using proportional measures here, the breakdown is based on an 18-day period for all three years under analysis to make a valid comparison. Looking at the sum of both channels, we see a clear decline in the length of campaign news reporting by about forty percent in terms of the overall time devoted to campaign news in the flagship news programs: from about 55 thousand seconds (approximately 15 hours) in 1992 to 31 thousand seconds (approximately 8.5 hours) in 2001. Whereas the decline on ITN was rather linear throughout the years, the BBC reporting remained stable between 1992 and 1997, only then dropping rather significantly.

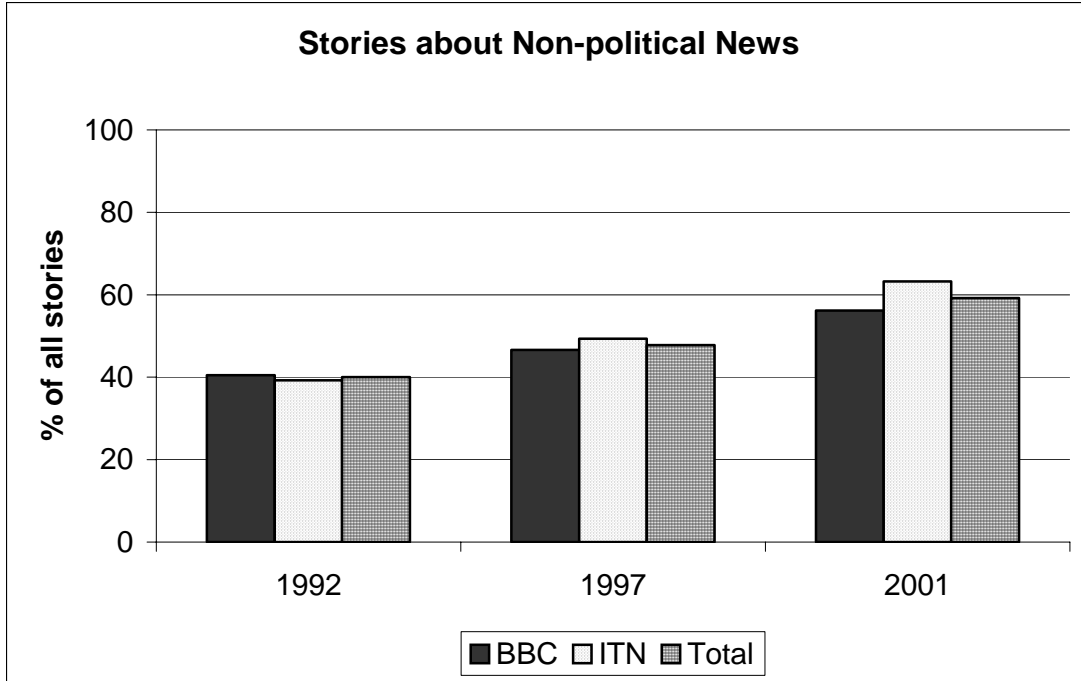
FIGURE 3



In sum, over the past decade, political news, as measured in the context of elections campaigns which should in theory represent a high water mark for political coverage in the life of democracies, has declined substantially and significantly on the country's two main evening flagship news programs on BBC and ITV. The declines are dramatic, consistent, and similar on both channels, and are evident in the proportion of news stories, the average length of stories, and the overall total amount of time devoted to campaign news.

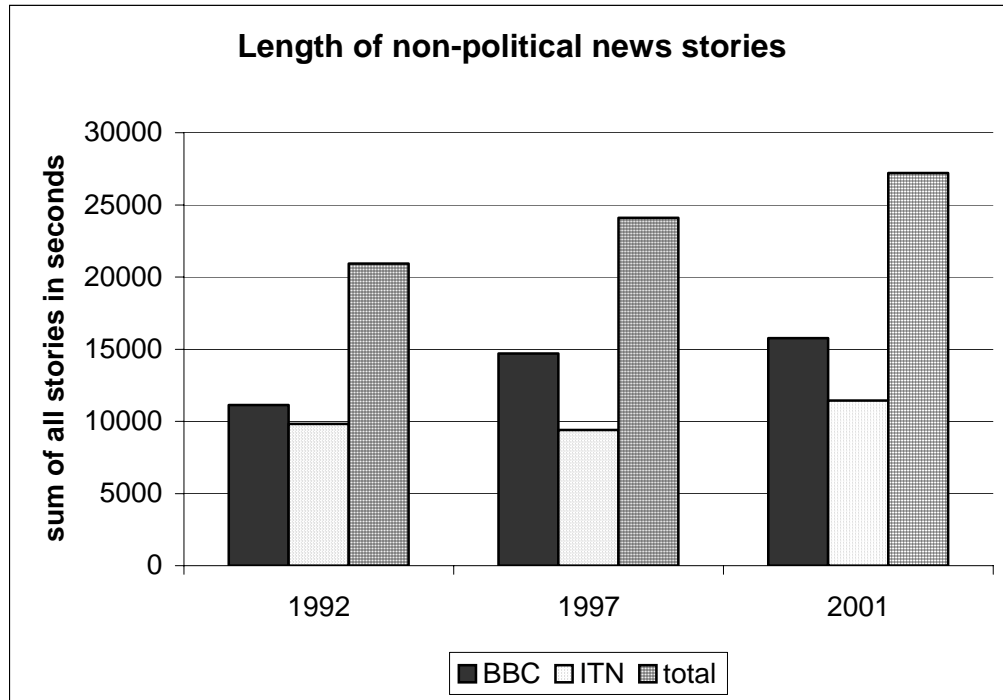
Along with this decline in the coverage of the campaign, we see a corresponding increase in the coverage of non-political news in the flagship evening programs. Figure 4 shows a considerable increase in non-political news stories. The correlation for all years between campaign stories and non-political stories on both channels is  $-.962$ , significant at  $p < .01$ , indicating that almost all political news stories would have mentioned the campaign. Looking at the total bars we see an increase of non-political news stories from 40 percent of all stories in 1992 and 48 percent in 1997 to 59 percent in 2001. Whereas in 1992 the difference between the BBC and ITN is marginal, ITN shows a slightly higher proportion of non-political news stories than the BBC in 1997 and 2001.<sup>13</sup>

FIGURE 4



Almost mirroring the trend shown above, Figure 5 displays the sum of length of all non-political news stories in seconds. Again, for reasons of comparability, the analysis is based upon an 18-day period for all years, since we are not using proportional measures here. Looking at the sum of both channels, we see a clear increase of the visibility of non-political news from about 21 thousand second (approximately 5 hours and 50 minutes) in 1992 to more than 27 thousand seconds (approximately 7 ½ hours) in 2001. Interestingly, this trend is less pronounced for ITN compared to a steeper increase on the BBC.

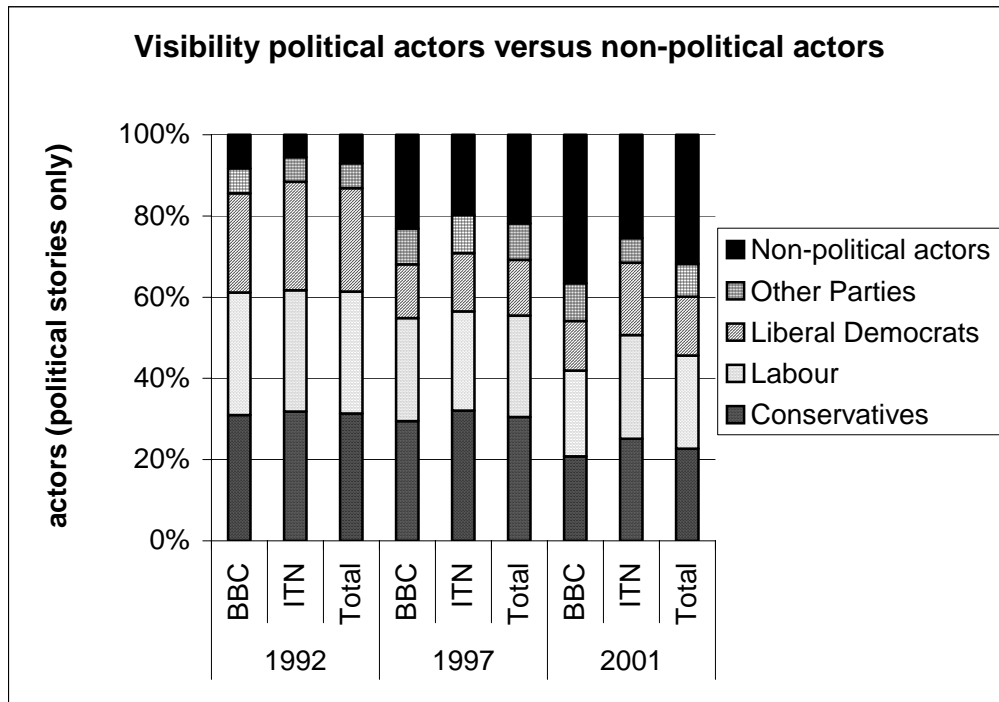
FIGURE 5



As the window for political news has been closing over the past decade, so have the opportunities declined for political actors to be seen and heard in the main evening news. Up to four actors appearing in a political news story were coded. The following analyses are conducted on the actor level, making use of the stacked data set. A total of 3346 actors appearing in the BBC and ITN news during the three periods of analysis have been coded.<sup>14</sup> These actors in political news stories include political actors as well as non-political actors. Figure 6 displays the visibility of political party versus non-political actors throughout the years.

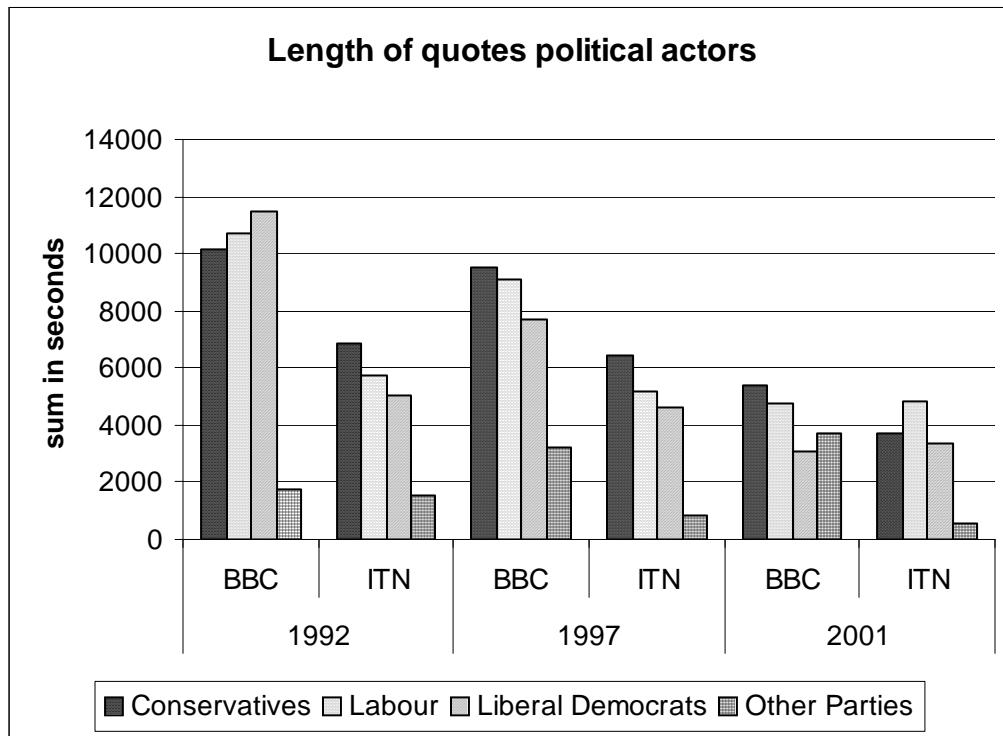
As shown by the black parts of the bars, the proportion of non-political actors in political news stories is clearly increasing over the years. Whereas the proportion of non-political actors was only seven percent on average in 1992, it increased sharply to almost 22 percent in 1997 and almost 32 percent in 2001. This increase is even more pronounced on the BBC than on ITN, where the proportion of non-political actors was more constant between 1997 and 2001. This increase in non-political actors is significant at  $F(2, 3344) = 64.580, p < .001$  between the years. Interestingly, the visibility of actors from other, minor parties increased from about six to about eight percent between 1992 and 2001.<sup>15</sup> Non-political actors that became more visible over the years include the media correspondents themselves, as well as citizens and experts.

Figure 6



Another indication of the decline in the visibility of party political actors in political news stories is shown in Figure 7, by summing the length of soundbites from political actors.<sup>16</sup> We believe this to be a rather valid indication of the visibility of political actors, although we do not rely on proportional measures here and therefore we refrain from reporting statistical significance.

FIGURE 7

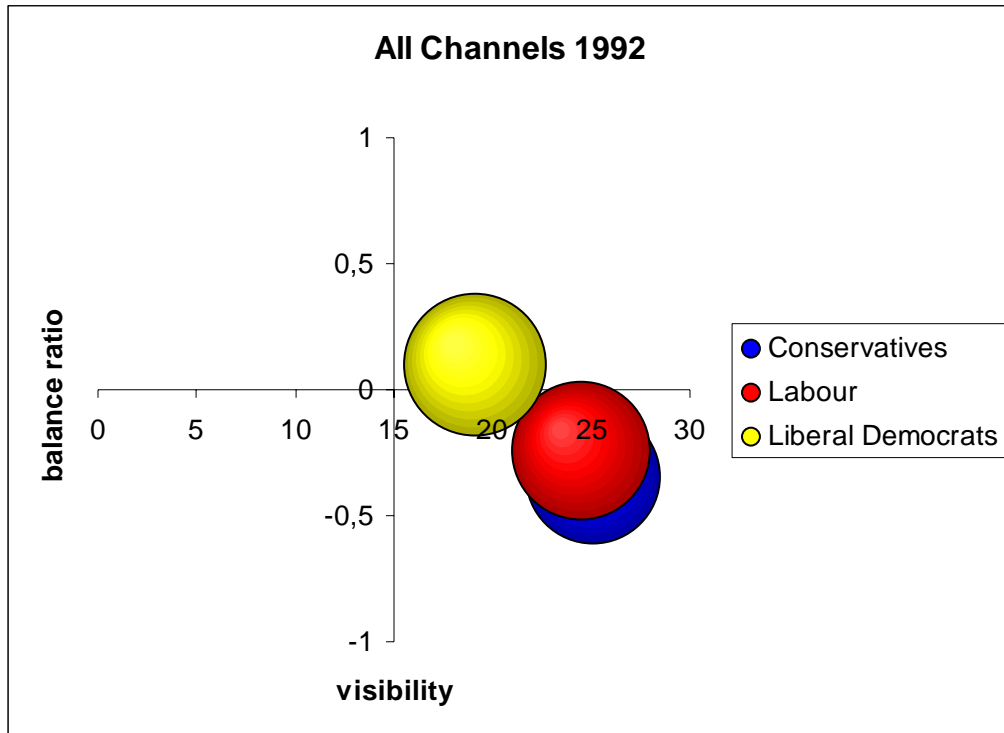


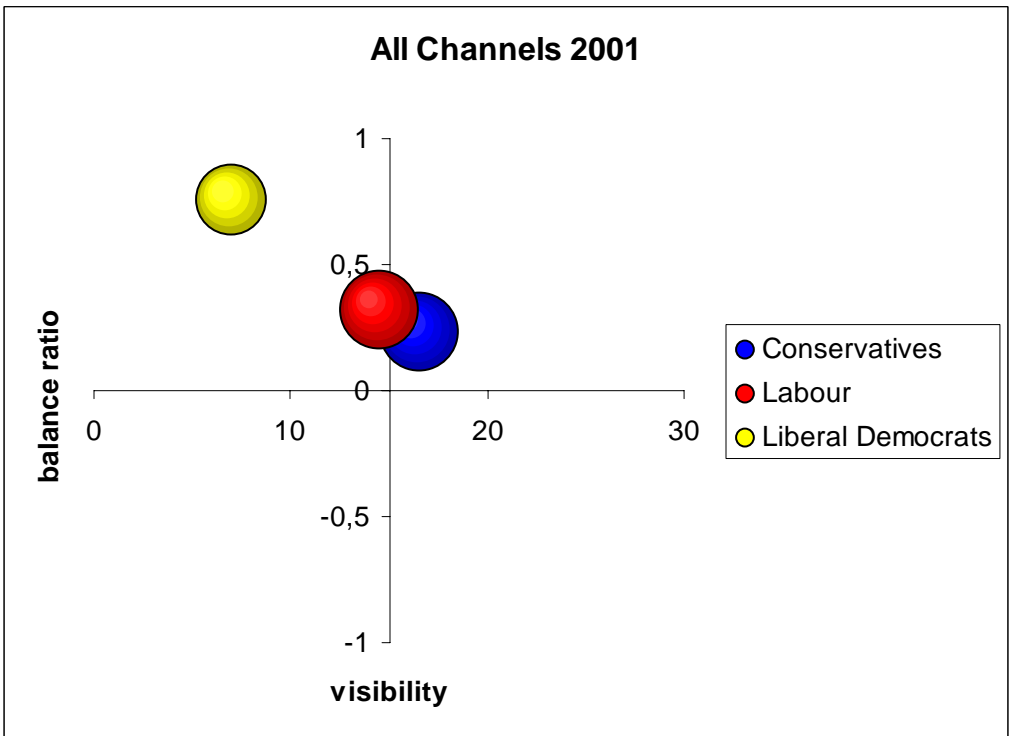
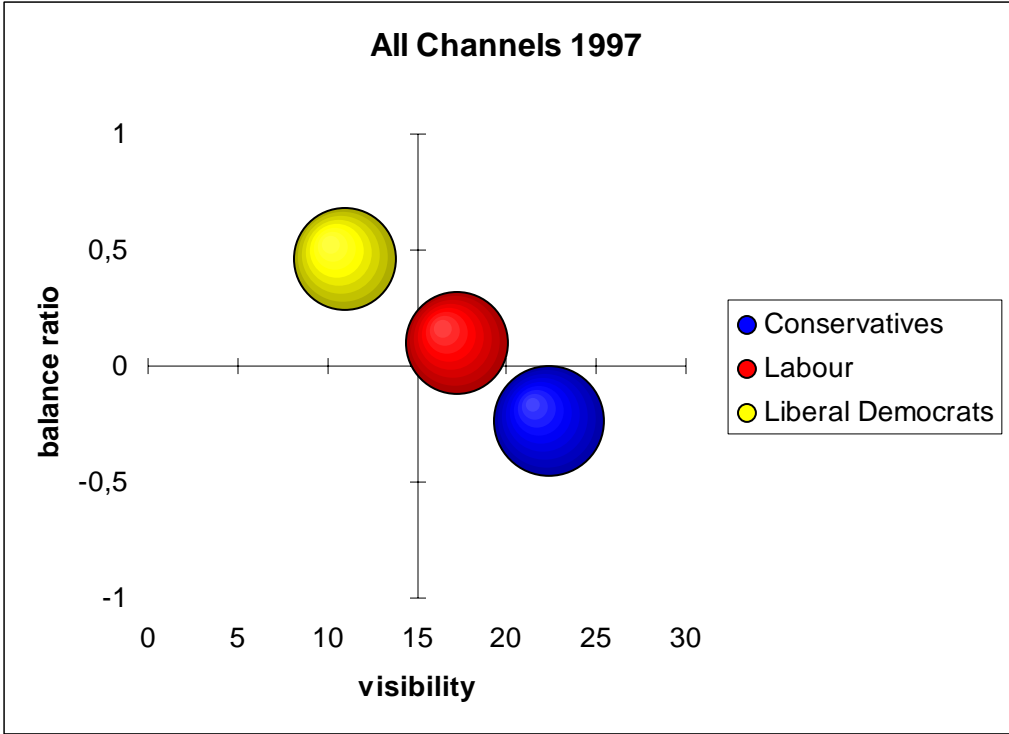
As shown in Figure 7, the length of soundbites from political party actors greatly decreased overall throughout the years on both programs. The trend has been more pronounced on the BBC than ITN. On BBC there is one interesting difference to note for actors of other, minor, political parties—the total soundbite length for minor party spokespersons actually increased quite significantly over the years.

Finally, we turn to the tone of election news. We draw upon balance ratios to display the changes in balance of coverage for each party over each election year. Quadrant 1 is top left and refers to less visible and more favourable news, Q2 is bottom left and refers to less visible and more negative news, Q3 is bottom right and refers to more visible and more negative news, and Q4 is top right and refers to more visible and more favourable news. This trend in the tone of the news towards the parties is displayed in Graph 1. Each bubble represents a party, the size of the bubble represents the relative volume of news about the party, and the position of the bubble is based on the tone summarized as the balance ratio (positive minus negative news).

Graph 1

BBC & ITV Main Evening News 1992, 1997, 2001: the volume and tone of the news towards the parties in balance ratios (source: Semetko & Scammell 2004).





Our comparison of main evening television news coverage of 1992, 1997 and 2001 British elections on BBC and ITV reveals the following statistically significant trends (Semetko & Scammell 2004):

1. There is less news about the campaign; the percentage and length of stories mentioning the campaign has declined on both channels, at each election campaign;
2. there is less news about politics; the percentage of stories about politics has also declined on both channels while the corresponding percentage of stories about non-political news has increased over time;
3. there is less visibility of political actors in the news;
4. there is more attention to the main party leaders in comparison with other party spokespersons;
5. there is less time devoted to sound-bites from political actors;
6. there are similarities between the channels in the tone of the news about the parties and leaders; and balance ratio comparisons of the tone of the news towards each of the parties reveals that while there was less news about the parties and their leaders in 2001 than in previous campaigns, the news was more favourable towards each of the parties, with the most favourable news about the Liberal Democrats.

### **Discussion**

The trends over the past decade suggest that the window for political news in the UK has been narrowing on both flagship evening news programmes in a consistent fashion. Within that narrower space for political coverage there is less campaign news, less opportunity for the parties to get their messages across in their own words, less visibility for politicians to be seen as main actors and a greater emphasis on party leaders relative to other party spokespersons. These trends to some extent parallel the trends in television news coverage of U.S. presidential election campaigns, though in the British case visibility declines from a higher level of election news coverage than the U.S.

Accompanying the decline in the volume of election news on both channels, however, is the rather surprising finding that runs counter to some of the research on trends in US news coverage of presidential campaigns that news has become more negative over time (Patterson 1993; Lichter 2001). In the UK, by contrast, the tone of news about the three main parties has moved from more unfavourable to more favourable over time (Semetko & Scammell 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> Although high inter-coder reliability was evident in the three individual election analyses, we cannot report inter-coder reliability between the different analyses. We believe, however, that relying on identical measures throughout the years, and the fact that the main investigators (who supervised and trained the coders) did not change throughout the years, provides a high degree of comparability of the data.

<sup>2</sup>For political stories up to six issues could be coded per story. For non-political news, however, only the main issue was coded.

<sup>3</sup> In 1997 and 2001 up to ten actors could be coded per story, however, in order to make valid comparisons we restricted the analyses in those years to the first four actors coded).

<sup>4</sup> An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze the differences between the mean scores for each year. It shows a significant decrease of the amount of campaign news on the BBC  $F(2, 1216) = 9.072, p < .001$  and on ITN  $F(2, 891) = 17.168, p < .001$  as well as of the total amount of campaign news  $F(2, 2110) = 24.629, p < .001$ . ANOVA post hoc tests reveal significant differences between all years. For BBC and ITN only for the years 1997 and 2001.

<sup>5</sup> (N=319; SD=102)

<sup>6</sup> (N=442; SD=115)

<sup>7</sup> (N=290; SD=62)

<sup>8</sup>  $F(2, 611) = 11,104, p < .001$

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<sup>9</sup>  $F(2, 434) = 15.273, p < .001$

<sup>10</sup>  $F(2, 1048) = 17.172, p < .001$

<sup>11</sup> With a significant difference between 1997 and 2001 for BBC.

<sup>12</sup> Mean difference post hoc test yields two subsets with significant difference between 1992 and 1997/2001.

<sup>13</sup> The increase in non-political news is significant for the total values  $F(2, 2110) = 24.313, p < 0.001$ , as well as for the BBC  $F(2, 1216) = 9.442, p < 0.001$  and ITN  $F(2, 891) = 15.938, p < .001$ . Significant mean difference between all years for total values and ITN, significant mean difference for the BBC only between 1997 and 2001.

<sup>14</sup> (FOOTNOTE: BBC 1992: N=507; BBC 1997: N=1010; BBC 2001: N=451; ITN 1992: N=415; ITN 1997: N=651; ITN 2001: N=314).

<sup>15</sup> On BBC a significant decrease for the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives and weakly significant for Labour. On ITN a significant decrease for the Liberal Democrats only.

<sup>16</sup> The period of analysis slightly differs between 1992 (18 days) and 1997 and 2001 (each 22 days). An analysis based upon 18-day periods for all years shows generally the same pattern as Figure 7