

Euro elections: newspaper websites break new ground in challenging radio and television

Almost lost amid the United Kingdom's minimal news coverage of the election campaign for the European Parliament and the English county councils were some significant developments within the British media landscape. Newspaper websites broke new ground in their bid to challenge other news outlets and showed they could compete head on with mainstream television and radio services.

On the morning of polling day a three-hour live discussion with politicians was broadcast by *Suntalk*, the online radio station of the *Sun*, demonstrating in an audio-visual format the freedom of the press to ignore the long-standing ban on partisan political broadcasting while voting takes place.

*Suntalk's* presenter Jon Gaunt insisted he had become "a most unbiased broadcaster" but his interviews and commentary were interspersed with repeated reminders to his listeners of the editorial in that day's edition of the *Sun* (4.6.2009) which recommended readers to vote Conservative as "the only way" to get Britain to hold a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty.

On most days of the campaign there was little if any direct reporting of European issues but the unprecedented level of news coverage about the ongoing scandal over the expense claims of MPs at Westminster provided further evidence of a continued acceleration in the 24-hour news cycle.

The most profound shift was in the ability of newspapers to use their websites to command the news agenda by offering an online introduction

to next morning's exclusive stories. Although the information was followed up instantly by other news outlets, the newspapers concerned still believed they could claim "ownership" of their exclusives.

During the four weeks when the *Daily Telegraph* published day after day fresh disclosures about extravagant and potentially fraudulent claims for parliamentary expenses and allowances, the paper's website regularly beat the rolling news channels at their own game.

At around 9pm each evening the *Daily Telegraph's* website carried a taster for next morning's exclusive story, revealing details about yet another groups of ministers and MPs caught up in a scandal that triggered the resignation of the Speaker of the House of Commons and threatened to unseat the Prime Minister.

So eager were *BBC News* and *Sky News* to keep viewers up to date with the latest developments that their journalists quoted live from the *Daily Telegraph's* website. As the broadcasters scrambled to keep up, the front page of [www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk) was often shown live on screen for several minute in order to illustrate the reporter's commentary.

By trailing its latest disclosures each evening in advance of the paper's publication next morning, the *Daily Telegraph* was giving a text book demonstration of the conviction of its editor Will Lewis that the only way the press can compete head on with television and radio is by going online and by stamping their authority on their latest story line.

Not only did the release of a summary of next morning's revelations help push up sales by whetting the appetite of potential readers but it also

secured almost limitless free advertising for the *Telegraph* brand and would have repaid many times over the reputed £100,000 outlay for a leaked copy of the disc containing four years' worth of MPs' expenses claims and receipts.

So great was the public's disgust over the abuse of taxpayers' money that by the final week of the election campaign the loss of faith in the government's ability to deal with the crisis began to fuel speculation about a challenge to Gordon Brown's leadership of the Labour Party.

When, on the eve of polling day, the *Guardian* published a damning editorial declaring that the Prime Minister had no vision and no plan and that it was "time to cut him loose", the paper drove the story forward by revealing on its website that rebel Labour MPs were being encouraged to sign an email calling on Brown to step down.

Events moved quickly that morning: at 10.30am the Communities Secretary Hazel Blears resigned and at 12noon [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk) revealed details of what was dubbed the "Hotmail plot" against the Prime Minister urging dissident Labour MPs to email their support for a change in the leadership. Yet again a newspaper's exclusive online output helped to shape the day's news coverage.

In the absence of any serious debate about European issues, the media focused much of its attention on the degree to which anger with the mainstream parties might generate a protest vote that would help UKIP and the BNP, two of the smaller parties committed to British withdrawal from the European Union.

Callers to *Suntalk's* election-day programme included several listeners who told Jon Gaunt they had cast a protest vote that morning against the established parties in the elections for both the European Parliament and the English county councils. Some said they had voted for UKIP because it was the only party which would get Britain out of Europe and stop the EU “wasting our money”.

Gaunt did all he could to encourage listeners to explain how they had voted because he said *Suntalk* was the only channel on the airwaves where politics was being discussed while the polling stations were open. “We are a newspaper of the air. The only place in Britain where you can talk politics today is *Suntalk*.”

George Pascoe-Watson, the *Sun's* political editor was the first on air guest and he claimed that if Labour finished fourth in the Euro elections it would be “curtains” for Brown. “The *Sun* has been urging people to vote Conservative because the Conservatives are offering a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty and no one else is”.

Nigel Farage, the UKIP leader, and the Conservatives' shadow Europe minister, Mark Francois, were both interviewed on the programme, underlining *Suntalk's* boast that it did not have to pay heed to the long standing convention that radio and television should be politics free while polling stations remain open. Farage was clearly delighted to have been afforded the opportunity and he congratulated *Suntalk* on making political history by broadcasting a live political debate as people were voting.

While it might be suggested that *Suntalk* probably had a minimal impact on voting intentions, not least because it was up against stiff competition

for the morning phone-in audience, the *Sun* did establish an important precedent and showed that a politicised newspaper could reinvent itself as an online radio station and freely debate politics on polling day.

Although the Conservatives have not gone as far as endorsing Rupert Murdoch's demand that the rules on political impartiality should be scrapped altogether, the party's latest policy document on public service broadcasting does recommend that newspaper websites which offer online radio and television services should be free to pursue the editorial lines of their choice once they become digital channels.

The significance of *Suntalk's* recommendation that listeners should vote Conservative was that it was a further illustration of the political realignment of the Murdoch press which had previously backed Labour in the 2005 general election.

During the build-up to polling day the *Sun* urged readers to sign a petition in support the Conservatives' demand for an immediate general election and subsequent editorials recommended voting Conservative in order to secure a referendum on the Lisbon treaty.

Likewise The Times (3.6.2009) urged its readers to vote Conservative as it was the only party that had promised the British people a referendum and would seek to withdraw from the "pointless internal deliberation designed to cement power centrally" within the EU.

Newspaper websites continued to influence news coverage in the aftermath of Gordon Brown's humiliation in the European elections,

when Labour finished third behind UKIP on a 15.7 per cent share of the vote.

In an attempt to answer criticism of the way she had damaged Labour's prospects by resigning on polling day, Hazel Blears chose to issue her apology via an interview on the website of her local evening newspaper, the Manchester Evening News (12.6.2009). Audio and video footage from the MEN site led radio and television news bulletins, demonstrating yet again the pulling power of newspapers in delivering agenda-setting stories.

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