

CITIZENS, READERS AND LOCAL NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF THE 2005 UK GENERAL ELECTION

STEPHEN CUSHION
BOB FRANKLIN
GEOFF COURT

Abstract

In this article we examine how, in newspaper coverage of the 2005 general election, journalists set out not only to connect with the political lives of “ordinary” citizens but to find an active role for them to play in news space. In recent years, the sharp drop in electoral turnout has made many news organisations rethink the style and nature of political programming and publications, having come under considerable attack – from journalists, political elites and scholars – for not informing and engaging readers, listeners and viewers. Journalistic assessments of media coverage of the 2005 general election suggested that news organisations improved the way they engaged the needs of the “average citizen.” Even to the extent where, according to one senior journalist, “getting closer to the real people got out of hand.” We enter this debate by looking systematically at the role citizens played in the 2005 general election in regional and local newspapers’ coverage. We examined every kind of source in election coverage – from police, politicians and pressure groups to citizens, business leaders and academics. Overall, we question the success of the regional and local press in achieving the type and level of engagement implied by many of the UK’s most distinguished journalists in post-election analysis. We conclude that finding ways to “get closer to the real people” remains a goal yet to be achieved despite journalistic protestations.

Stephen Cushion lectures in the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies; e-mail: cushionsa@cardiff.ac.uk.

Bob Franklin is Professor of Journalism Studies in the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies; e-mail: bobfranklin@uk2.net.

Geoff Court is a freelance researcher in Cardiff; e-mail: courtg@cardiff.ac.uk.

Introduction

Since the 2001 UK general election delivered the lowest turnout in over eighty years, interest in the political disengagement of citizens has intensified in elite circles. The 2001 election posed serious questions about British democracy, as 4 in 10 citizens decided not to cast their vote. In the news media, apathy became conventional journalistic wisdom to describe this disengagement. A *Guardian* editorial labelled apathy a “British disease” (25 March 2004), while BBC political pundit Michael Portillo said, “the reason for political apathy in Britain is that voters have spiritual interests that are not addressed by politicians” (*Sunday Times*, 7 November 2004). Juliet Lawrence Wilson of *The Mirror* suggested that “medical experts have discovered the reason for teenage apathy – their brains make them lazy” (4 March 2004). No longer, it seems, was psephology left to experts like the BBC’s Ivor Crewe or the excitable Peter Snow; reasons for so called apathy became common fodder for the political classes – whether journalists, politicians, spin doctors or pollsters – to chew over.

As the 2005 election approached, citizenship, as a result of voter disengagement, moved up the elite agenda. This was particularly the case in the news media. The role of the “fourth estate” came under increasing attack for its failure to engage and inform the electorate. Following the low turnout at the 2001 general election, for example, the BBC undertook a review of its political programming. It spent five million pounds on new programming in order “to reinvigorate...existing and valued coverage and create new and inventive ways of reaching audiences with an extra 36 hours of political programmes a year,” deputy BBC Chairman, Gavyn Davies, explained¹. Many of these shows were criticised, however, for making rather superficial and aesthetic changes as opposed to more structural ones.

Financial Times journalist John Lloyd (2004) was particularly damning of BBC journalism and other respected news media outlets, highlighting an apparent shift towards more sensationalist, glib, over-zealous reporting, with heavyweight interviewers adopting aggressive and adversarial postures that do little to inform the citizen, let alone live up to the ethos of journalism. Many senior figures in the news industry, by contrast, defended the role of news, and suggested it remains a thriving mediator of current affairs, improving our understanding of the world (Marr 2004; Mosey 2004). Indeed, Head of BBC Television News Roger Mosey (2004) even accused some media scholars of making unrealistic demands and promises about who the news media can reach and what they can achieve democratically.

We enter into these debates by looking at the way citizens are represented in the news and the influence they have on the news agenda. The important role which citizens play in the news was championed in the US by the civic journalism movement. As a response to the disengagement of citizens in community life throughout the 1990s, many in the movement argued that the news media had the potential to engender greater civic participation in social and political affairs (Fallows 1996; Friedland 2003; Rosen 1999). The most comprehensive history of the movement’s aims and objectives are traced in Jay Rosen’s *What Are Journalists For?* (1999). While this and similar literature on “civic” or “public” journalism certainly informs the current study, our approach is slightly different. The civic journalism movement, broadly speaking, is often associated with engaging readers’ views in a *particular* way. A Pew Center report, for example, which looked at more than

ten years of civic journalism projects (more than 600 in total), found that civic journalism began with election projects (Friedland and Nichols 2002, 6-9). These projects, they argue, experimented with new, inventive ways of engaging citizens that led to more community type projects, which addressed race, diversity, family and youth agendas (2002, 6-9). The authors write, "After early election successes, newspapers began to look for ways to deepen their coverage" (2002, 6). So, for example, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* took up the citizen voices project in 1999. The aim was to get citizens to contribute opinion pieces about the mayoral campaign and, in the words of the editor, to "enhance the civic conversation and enlarge the public's voice as Philadelphia chooses a mayor."²

Our aim, by contrast, is not to report on a *particular*, even if well intentioned, newspaper project to invigorate citizenship, nor to look at a particular section of a newspaper. Our aim is systematically to analyse *every* kind of citizenship contribution across a number of newspapers during a general election campaign, and *to draw conclusions based on what the data tell us about the role citizens play in newspapers' election coverage*. In other words, our approach is more systematic than selective. While the civic journalism movement is far more active in the US than the UK, recent studies on this side of the Atlantic have attempted to look at the relationship between citizenship and news media, in the context of asking whether a more citizen-led agenda can be fostered (Thomas et al 2004a; Brookes et al 2004; Lewis et al 2005; Franklin 2004a). Our research, we hope, builds on this emerging field of interest.

Finding the Citizen in the News World

While news journalists and editors, particularly in the newspaper profession, can often be heard asserting their fourth estate credentials as the "tribune of the people" (Barnett and Gaber 2001, 12-22), scholars have long argued that, for the average citizen, it is relatively difficult not only to appear in the news but to contribute meaningfully to whatever event or issue is being reported. In this context, news "may be *for* citizens, but it is not about them" (Lewis et al 2005, 1). In Galtung and Ruge's (1965) classic study on news values, for example, they argued that references to elite persons were likely to move a story up the news agenda. Forty years on, this observation is perhaps even more appropriate. A systematic content analysis of a fairly typical and uneventful two week period of 24 hour television news programming, for example, illustrated that it is politicians, business leaders, law and order officials and, perhaps surprisingly, other news media and journalists that appear *most* frequently on television news (Lewis et al 2005). The voices and the politics of the "ordinary citizen" are, according to Lewis (2001, 44-73), suppressed and re-constructed in news media and popular culture to appear more synchronous with the political elites representing "the public."

Even during election periods – a time when arguably the public should be maximally represented in media coverage – it is senior politicians rather than citizens who predominate (Thomas et al 2004). In a study of media reporting of the 2003 Welsh Assembly election, for example, it was primarily politicians – from the four main parties – who formed the main focus of journalists' coverage (Thomas et al 2004a). Citizens were largely redundant actors or mere bit part players in the election drama. This even extended to the nature of news reports: the majority

of stories provided little or no information about policies – a finding particularly perplexing (but perhaps unsurprising) given the low levels of knowledge about the role of the Welsh Assembly in Wales (Electoral Commission 2002). Instead, as previous studies have shown (Deacon et al 2001), the majority of election news focused on what has been dubbed the “horse race” elements of a campaign. Campaign momentum, personality prominence and conflicts, and other process led – rather than policy anchored – stories dominated print, radio and television coverage (Thomas et al 2003).

For scholars, particularly in the US (Entman 1989), opportunities for citizens to be part of the political public sphere are considered somewhat limited (Eliasoph 1998). In other words, the political agenda, for the most part, is an *elite* agenda. In a study on the representation of citizens, as well as public opinion generally during the 2001 General Election, for example, Brookes et al (2004) found that coverage was preoccupied with political elite concerns – not representative of public opinion. Consequently, joining the European single currency, for instance, was one of the most salient themes of election coverage. Yet, compared to systematic polling data, it was a peripheral issue of concern for the public. From this perspective, we might say that politics is considered a “spectator sport” (Croteau and Hoynes 2000, 236) or “like football, an armchair activity” in which “watching the match from a ringside seat at home has replaced the need to play the game.” For citizens, political participation is “essentially ersatz and vicarious” (Franklin 2004b, 14). On this account, elites battle against one another (although sharing similar ideological objectives), while citizens watch, listen and read (or increasingly not, as the case may be) about decisions and actions that ostensibly serve “the people.”

This is not to say that moments of democratic participation are not encouraged by news media. Gamson, for example, suggests the discouragement of citizenship in news media is, to some extent, based on the *issue* being reported. When American citizens took action on the Arab-Israeli conflict, affirmative action, nuclear power and abortion particularly, their contribution was, to different levels, encouraged by the US news media. Rather than accept “the media does nothing to encourage a sense of collective agency,” Gamson suggests that it “clearly does in many respects on many issues, but there is enormous variability and numerous cracks in the media monolith” (Gamson 2003, 72-3). One of these cracks was certainly evident in parts of the Welsh news media during the 2004 local elections in Wales. The majority of stories explored the question of public engagement in a positive rather than negative way, focusing on ways of persuading readers, listeners and viewers to vote. Indeed, as far as the authors claim, this was the first media election study that showed one television news channel, BBC Wales, representing citizen views more so than experts and politicians (Thomas et al 2004b). Coverage, in this respect, was bottom up rather than the usual top down.

While the 2004 local election study challenges the “media monolith” of political discouragement, as Gamson would suggest, it is probably, as many scholars concur, largely the exception than rule. In the largest and most systematic study of public opinion in non-election period, Lewis, Wahl Jorgensen and Inthorn examined US and UK television coverage of the role of citizens in the news world (Lewis et al 2004). They found that citizens are “shown as passive observers of the world. While they are seen to have fears, impressions and desires, they don’t, apparently, have

much to say about what should be done about healthcare, education, the environment...or any other subject in the public sphere" (Lewis et al 2004, 163). The authors, overall, paint a picture of an apolitical, disengaged mediated citizen.

Context and Method

The journalistic context of the 2005 election was very much foregrounded by these kinds of debates. Resuscitating the political life of UK citizens was therefore, on the eve of the election, a job taken very seriously by most sections of the news media. The attention paid to citizens during election coverage was demonstrated by retrospective analyses made by many distinguished journalists in a *Media Guardian* special (9 May 2005). *Sky News* presenter, Julie Etchingham, for instance, admitted "Everybody was aware that the 2001 coverage had bored people, so I was interested to see how each broadcaster had scratched their heads." David Mannion, Editor in chief of *ITV News*, commented "We did try and get out there, presenting from the doorsteps of floating voters (Ballot Box Jury)," while Tina Weaver, Editor of the *Sunday Mirror* said "We tried to offer readers lively coverage and bring some levity to some of the serious issues." Sam Baker, Editor of *Cosmopolitan*, "asked the readers questions they thought the politicians weren't addressing that were so central to their lives." *Sky News's* emphasis on the average citizen, according to Head of News, Nick Pollard, left many "sniffy above our attempt to talk to ordinary people." Indeed, Chris Shaw, Senior Programme controller of *Five*, suggested that "the idea of getting closer to the real people got out of hand." Whether the editorial agenda was informed by citizens to the extent implied by some of the most senior journalists in the UK is the central focus of our analysis.

In this study, our concern is to look extensively and systematically at the role citizens played in the 2005 general election coverage. Following a similar methodological framework to Lewis et al (2004), our aim was to record every kind of citizenship representation – from passive forms of engagement like a journalistic inference about what a citizen might think about a political party, to more active ways of participation through vox pops interviews or letters to the editor. We are interested not only in the *extent* of citizenship representations during the election period, but the *ways* in which citizens contributed to election debates, the *nature* of citizenship contributions, and whether this engagement was addressed by the *elite agenda*. Our study works under the assumption that if citizens can be more active players in shaping news media agendas, then citizenship becomes a more meaningful concept that can, in theory, deliver a more vibrant, deliberative and participatory public sphere.

By looking systematically at whether citizens – rather than elites – are sourced in election stories, we enter into debates about the *access* both groups have to news organisations. We therefore recorded every kind of source – from the police, politicians and pressure groups to citizens, business leaders and academics – either quoted or referred to by journalists in an election news item. This, we suggest, provides an interesting indication about how and where election news is tracked down, as well as a guide to who helps journalists interpret, explain and analyse an election issue.

While studies at election times are primarily concerned with national media agendas (Brookes et al 2004), our media content analysis is based on regional and

local coverage of the 2005 general election. Our focus is on newspapers in Yorkshire-based constituencies – a sample of newspapers that have been a part of a longitudinal study of election coverage since 1987.³ From April 4 to May 7 2005, a thirty day monitoring period, these newspapers produced 1466 elections items, with many thousands of direct and indirect sources present (3493 in total). We now present the findings of our content analysis in the context of discussing whether coverage was designed to engage readers and encourage active citizenship in election issues. We acknowledge, however, that a content analysis can *only* provide a quantitative description of data (rather than telling us how citizens could be engaged if coverage was different). Nonetheless, we do, on occasions, refer to readers' letters to provide some insight into how citizens related to general election coverage. The aim, in short, is to examine *the role of citizens in election coverage* at arguably the most contested time for both citizens and elites to access news space.

Entering the World of Political Elites

If, as we would agree, newspapers provide a discursive site for contested groups to advance their own opinions in society (Fowler 1991), then it is clear who the winners were in coverage of the 2005 general election in the regional and local press: election related items were very much informed by what political elites said and did. Picking up a newspaper in this period would, in other words, have meant entering a world of – and, as we go on to suggest, perhaps even for – political elites. Table 1 indicates the top 12 sources journalists directly quoted in election stories.

Table 1: Most Frequently Cited Direct Sources in Local Press Coverage of the 2005 UK General Election⁴

Directly quoted sources	Percentage
Politicians	69.5
Citizens	11.7
Media	4.7
Law and Order	4.7
Business	2.5
Friend/relative	1.6
Pressure group	1.5
Showbiz	1.5
Academy	1.5
Not identified	0.8
Total	100.0

As Table 1 shows, politicians account for nearly 7 in 10 quotes that occurred in election coverage – an overwhelming presence that tells us much about who journalists think (or are told) should be sourced in an election item. Such a presence might be partly explained by the importance journalists pay to constructing “balance.” So, for example, if one political party representative is quoted, it is good journalistic practice to ensure the other two mainstream political parties are also represented (even if this offers a fairly narrow ideological choice, which excludes the growing number of smaller parties and independents). Curran (1991) raises this as an issue in relation to “rethinking the public sphere”: while “balance,” “objectivity” and “impartiality” need to be protected by regulators of

news media, more ways of accessing the voices of the politically marginal need to be implemented. Indeed, we coded which party was the most prominent in every article we examined: the three main political parties – when a party was prominent – accounted for 91.3%. Of course, by quoting each mainstream party, this does, quite substantially, increase the frequency of political sources (which, as we suggest in a moment, might limit the *range* of other sources journalists could refer to). However, this does not explain the incidence of politicians overall: in the 1,466 election items we examined, 8 in 10 contained a direct source from a politician.

The dominance of political sources during election coverage is, to some extent, to be expected: in an election campaign readers need information about their political representatives in order to make informed choices about which party and candidate to vote for. By limiting the sources to politicians, however, we would suggest this *limits* the way politics is reported and the agenda that is being set. So, for example, apart from citizens (which we return to in a moment), politicians, news media, law and order and business sources, between them, account for 78.9% of sources overall. This ignores all kinds of professions that could add more clarity and greater understanding of an issue (the world of the military and intelligence, science and medicine, NGOs and pressure groups are, for instance, relatively unused sources of information).

On many issues can this politician-driven focus of politics be illustrated, but most striking of all is coverage on the NHS (National Health Service). Given this was a significant issue in the election and in news media coverage – it was the third most salient policy issue in our news articles and the most debated policy-based subject matter in the readers letters – medical sources are quoted just 15 times (0.7% of total sources). Yet, in an information climate that regularly misinforms citizens about the NHS (Toynbee and Walker 2005, 42-44), expert medical opinion could, in theory, provide more lucidity to health issues than party political squabbles that frequently revolve around the credibility of a particular set of health statistics. This, for example, was shown in a *Yorkshire Post* story on the way political parties would fund the NHS, and the impact this would have on reducing waiting times for operations or access to medical treatment (April 19 2005). Rather than refer to the experience and expertise of NHS managers, front line nurses or doctors, or perhaps even academics in the field, the article sourced seven (Labour and Conservative) politicians, who each offered conflicting statistics on funding and waiting times.

This fog of statistics, particularly on health, was picked up as an election issue by columnists, in editorials and in letters' to the editor. A reader's letter, for example, asked that journalists supply more independent and credible experts to help interpret and explain the facts and the causes behind MRSA-related deaths (*Holme Valley Express*, 22 April 2005). "It isn't a simple issue as the experts are now being allowed to tell us," complained the disgruntled reader, "and it is wicked of the Tories to pretend otherwise." More informed opinions from medical experts therefore may well provide a more rational and coherent perspective on health provision in the UK. Indeed, the same could be said about the different way crime is recorded and the statistics this generates, as a *Halifax Courier* editorial highlighted: "Crime figures have been rolled up into a political football... Making sense of these conflicting claims is not easy. Especially in the midst of an election campaign where politicians are none too fussy about which bits of data they cherry-pick to sustain

their arguments” (22 April 2005). Columnist Bernard Ingham, in a *Yorkshire Post* op-ed piece, suggested that the use of these statistics had fuelled a “Public cynicism over governmental claims ... as rife as it was in Soviet Russia” (20 April 2005).

Overall, then, we would suggest that while election news should necessarily source political party representatives to *ensure* journalistic balance as well as *inform* voters about each parties’ policies, the *extent* of their presence arguably limits the way election issues are interpreted and represented by journalists. Table 2 reinforces the data in Table 1, by signalling the number of indirect sources used by journalists in election items. These are based on journalists narrating or paraphrasing comments and actions rather than directly sourcing them. So, for example, “Tony Blair challenged Michael Howard to produce statistics on MRSA deaths...” would be a political source, while “Last night Jeremy Paxman from *Newsnight* embarrassed the Minister...” would be a media source.

Table 2: Most Frequently Cited Indirect Sources Used in the Local Press During the 2005 UK General Election

Indirect sources	Percentage
Politicians	61.3
News media	9.6
Citizens	9.1
Law and order	7.3
Business	3.3
Not identified	2.9
Pressure group	1.8
Medical	1.5
Academy	1.3
Showbiz	0.9
Friend/relative	0.9
Total	100.0

Table 2 provides further evidence of the relatively narrow and elite world of sourcing. While politicians (61.3%) and citizens (9.1%) are less regularly referred to than in direct quotations, between them, the news media (9.6%), law and order (7.3%) and business (3.3%) are referred to much more. Along with politicians, they account for 81.5% of all indirect sources – a finding almost identical to direct quotations (Table 1). While less establishment type sources (pressure groups) feature more prominently, environmental, scientific and technology-based sources are practically silent.

The most notable finding in Table 2 however, is the frequency with which other news media are sourced. 1 in 10 sources are based on other media from national television and newspapers. A front page story in the *Yorkshire Post*, for example, was based on four separate media sources – *Breakfast with Frost*, *Sunday with Adam Boulton*, *The Politics Show* and *The Mail on Sunday* (25 April 2005). Each media source was used in the context of political elites revealing something “new” and “exclusive” about an issue. Yet, in truth, more heat than light was often generated in stories driven by news media sources. In this example – and indicative of many other media sources – senior Labour and Tory politicians attacked each other’s campaigns rather than each other’s policies.

A more high profile media event that made its way onto the front pages of the *Yorkshire Post* and *Metro* was the *Question Time* debate featuring the three main political party leaders (29 April 2005). While the *Metro* labelled the debate “A damp squib,” the *Post* ran a headline reading “I’m a PM, let me out of here.” Indeed, the *Yorkshire Post* suggested that “Tony Blair was thrashed to within an inch of his life on *BBC Question Time* last night by 160 ordinary people armed with nothing but incisive questions.” The *Question Time* intervention into the elite agenda was, however, fairly unrepresentative of the nature of media sources used by the local and regional press over the election period. More typically, media sources were used as a means of running stories about personality spats between senior politicians or on the nature and style of party campaigning – a finding consistent with many scholars reading of political journalism on television (Barnett and Gaber 2001; Bourdieu 2001; Franklin 2004b).

The extent to which (or perhaps even a reliance on), the national media is able to generate front page or prominently placed stories in the local press, suggests that election stories are becoming more nationally than locally focused. With this agenda, however, comes the adoption of more national and personality based process-driven stories conducted by interviewers such as Jeremy Paxman or by tabloid agendas like the *Daily Mail*’s. Indeed, our longitudinal data (Franklin and Richardson 2004) supports these shifts as the frequency of local (58.6%) and national stories (41.4%) in the 2001 general election shifted substantially in the 2005 general election (32.7% local to 67.3% national) towards a stronger national emphasis.

Where Were Citizens Represented in Election Coverage?

Drawing on Table 1 and 2, we have so far focused on political elite sources that dominate election news. Our data perhaps only confirm what studies have long shown (Berkowitz 1997; Tuchman 1978; Fishman 1980): that newsrooms operate in very closed and establishment-led worlds. And, as Zelizer (1993) suggests, journalists act so collectively they form “interpretative communities,” meaning the news media very often interprets the world through the narrow prism of journalistic conventional wisdoms. In the context of reporting an election therefore, this can lead to a very elite electoral agenda – and one that might not be of interest to citizens which the news is ostensibly intended to serve.

From this point onwards, however, we depart slightly from the prevailing literature that says news is the single occupancy of the elite world, and suggest that citizens were represented relatively frequently and in a variety of active ways. That is, they managed, to some extent, to force their own agenda into the election (even if, as we explore later, this was consigned to the letters page). Despite Table 1 and 2 clearly showing the access political elites are granted in election items, citizens are sourced by journalists in roughly 10% of election items. Of the 1,466 election items, citizens featured in 38.3% of election news items. The level of citizen representation is far greater than the sourcing of citizens because of the high number of letters to the editors (27.6%) that appeared in the regional and local press. We decided to record only sources made by journalists (although, once citizens became letter writers we sourced what they said) because this would illustrate how an election story was understood, interpreted and reported by *journalists*. Table 3 records the type of election item – whether in a news article, an editorial or a readers’ letter – in which citizens were represented in coverage.

Table 3: Editorial Formats in which Citizens are Represented

Editorial format	Percentage of citizens represented in election stories
Article	21.7
Editorial	38.8
Readers Letter	81.7

As Table 3 indicates, citizens were represented most frequently in letters to the editor (81.7%). Given the letters page is a forum conventionally designed for and by readers, this might, at first glance, seem a curious finding. This is because we found evidence of an elite agenda infiltrating the public agenda (nearly 2 in 10 letters were from political elites). These were predominately party political operatives, such as councilors and party officials, who often reduced the letters page to nothing more than a “slanging match” between well established adversaries. Indeed, one page of letters in the *Dewsbury Reporter* was filled by political elites (29 April 2005): while Tory and Labour local campaign directors traded insults about how ostensibly “local” their candidate was, a Liberal Democrat councilor wrote a letter that read like a political advertisement – “We are going to take Britain up. We are ambitious for Britain. We want a fairer Britain....”

The *Holme Valley Express* policed its letters page early in the campaign, telling readers that “items with a political party slant will only be published if their public news interest is deemed worthy of inclusion” (8 April 2005). Whereas other newspapers, such as the *Morley Observer*, allowed elite letters to continue unabashed, much to the disgruntlement of one reader, who suggested that because “the content of these letters is usually ‘trench warfare’ between consenting Councillors and makes no difference to the voting intentions of the public at large, could you please put them in a ‘take out and throw’ supplement?” (15 April 2004). Much like the sentiment of this reader, the letters page did, however, offer citizens a critical role in election coverage and, in many ways, provided citizens with the opportunity to discuss and engage in debates which political elites largely shied away from during the campaign. We explore the kind of issues discussed in the letters’ page and compare this to the election stories journalists were reporting on in moment.

It was not just in the letters page where citizen voices could be heard, in other forms of election news items citizens were prominently represented – in editorials they were referred to in nearly 4 in 10 items and, to a lesser extent, in over 2 in 10 articles on the election. Many editorials (10 out of 75) paid particular attention to the issue of apathy and disengagement of both the election and coverage of it. As soon as the election campaign had “officially” started, the *Yorkshire Post* suggested that “the most significant challenges that will face every MP elected next month will be to counter the growing disillusionment of voters” (7 April 2005). Meanwhile, the *Heckmondwike Herald* reminded readers that a vote “is a right that should be treasured” (29 April 2005), as did the *Post* when it warned that the dangers of apathy could lead to the election of extremist parties like the British National Party (BNP) (4 May 2005).

While some editorials sought positively to engage readers in the election and warn them of the possible dangers triggered by apathy, others assumed that readers were bored and alienated from the whole event. The *Halifax Courier* appeared to be speaking for – rather than to – its readers when it asked: “Had enough of

the political argy-bargy, the war of the words on health, tax, schools, the war? Fed up with the importuning canvassers and garish election mail arriving on the doormat?" (2 May 2005). It finished by suggesting readers "take a break" from the election and go on a May Day walk to escape from "all those driven party activists ... for one blessed day." As editorials often provide the most insightful gaze into a newspaper's ideological leanings, it was unsurprising that this journalistic assumption of apathy was reflected in coverage overall.

In all election items, there was a more general trend that readers were disenchanted with politics. Table 4 shows data on every single reference to public opinion, and whether or not citizens were represented in a constructive or disenchanted way.

Table 4: Did Citizens Provide Constructive or Disenchanted Contributions to Election Related Items?

Comment type	Percentage
Constructive	41.1
Disenchanted	54.6
Not clear	4.4
Total	100.0

While four in ten election items represented citizens as constructively contributing to politics generally, ranging from if they planned to vote in the election (which accounted for the majority of these representations) and, to a much lesser extent, how a policy could be improved, Table 4 suggests that coverage overall represented citizens as a relatively disenchanted bunch. Citizens, in other words, were more likely to be represented as disengaged and apathetic with politics rather than constructively contributing to the issues and debates that, more broadly inform, shape and structure the election agenda.

The Engagement of Readers in Election Coverage

Research into the representation of citizens and how they participate in newspapers has primarily focused on the letters page (Wahl-Jorgensen 2006; Richardson and Franklin 2004; Franklin 2004b) and, to a much lesser extent, through public opinion surveys (Lewis 2001). Yet the ways in which citizens were represented in newspapers in the 2005 election took several forms. Table 5 shows the different formats used to express citizenship representations in newspaper coverage.

Table 5: Representations of Citizens' Engagement in Local Election News

Form of engagement	Percentage
Readers' letters	41.1
Vox pops	23.7
Inference	22.6
Poll	11.3
Demonstration	1.1
Article	0.1
Total	100.0

Citizens were represented in six different ways throughout election coverage. This veered from more active forms of engagement, such as writing a letter, which, as previously mentioned, was the most frequent (41.1%) way citizens were able to participate in election coverage (which we explore in more depth later), to more passive forms of representation like an inference (22.6%) – where a journalist inferred what the public might think about an issue. So, for example, often phrases such “the public are...” or “Voters feel...” would be employed by journalists to denote the “mood” of the electorate.

Inferences were most commonly used in the context of characterising citizens as apathetic: 56.8% inferences made about citizens by journalists was on the subject of apathy. While many citizens may well have felt disillusioned about the election campaign and politics generally, the frequency with which apathy was invoked is, from the point of the view of the citizen, a relatively limited form of representation. And holding such an assumption could, if continuously taken for granted, lead journalists down a path of self fulfilling prophecy, where journalists overestimate the lack of interest and disengagement of readers (and therefore “dumb down” content yet further to make it more appealing to readers – see Franklin 2005, 145–146). Rather than “Stirring up apathy,” a more constructive way than merely assuming disengagement would be to explore and question the reasons *why* citizens feel so apathetic towards the election campaign.

But while inferences are clearly a passive and impressionistic form of representation, the extent to which citizens are represented in this way is much less than similar studies on citizenship in the news have suggested (Brookes et al 2003; Lewis et al 2005). In this data, inferences amounted to between 40–45% of forms of engagement (although these were primarily based on TV news samples). Our data therefore suggest that the regional and local press offered citizens a more active form of representation and means of participation than the passive and disengaged image of citizenship that several studies have implied (e.g. Thomas et al 2004a; Brookes et al 2003; Lewis et al 2005). Indeed, by contrast with many of these studies, which recommend that polling data should be used more frequently in the news (e.g. Lewis et al 2005), we found polling to be one of the most limited and passive forms of engagement.

While we would agree that issue related polls could, in theory, bring a more representative agenda of citizenship based priorities into the public sphere (Lewis 2001), the vast majority of polls in local coverage were based on horse race polling – surveys that looked at UK levels of support for the three main parties (rather than the seats they are likely to win). In this context, citizens are reduced to mere consumers, choosing between the three main political parties, and contributing little by way of policy preferences (which arguably might influence parties to address particular issues). The style and nature of this kind of coverage was perhaps taken to the extreme when the *Metro* dedicated an entire page to reporting the betting odds on who would win the election. It first gave a summary on the history of political betting, before providing odds on whether John Prescott would punch anyone (5/1) or if Tony Blair would take part in a hunt (200/1). Charles Kennedy’s new born son, Donald, was also given shorter odds of being Prime Minister than his father!

By contrast, vox pops were a more frequent form of representation. While this is not as systematic a way of representing public opinion, it does provide citizens

with the opportunity to express themselves more articulately and specifically on an issue. So, for example, the *Yorkshire Post* provided weekly "Voter Panels" which allowed a cross section of the public – from businessmen and IT consultants to students and housewives – to voice what issues and policies they wanted addressing. This, at times, provided a more human-interest way of tackling politics than the techo-babble that politicians are often accused of speaking in. A 25 year old teacher from Birkenhead, Bradford, for example, commented that: "I'm eight months pregnant so obviously my husband and I are focused on things like our mortgage interest rate" (7 April 2005), while a 41-year-old business analyst from Chapel Allerton, Leeds, said "I was quite impressed with the Lib Dems for delaying publishing their manifesto until Charles Kennedy had his baby. The General election is important but the party is prepared to put things aside for more important things" (14 April 2005).

Newspapers, more generally, however, tended to use vox pops in features *about* public opinion rather than as part of the more routine, conventional, election story. There were, for instance, just 8 vox pops, reported in front page articles. This had the effect of categorising "public opinion" as something separate from policy discussions on, for instance, health, education and crime. While we would argue strongly against marginalising informed voices on these issues (such as Home Secretaries and Police Superintendents), there should be greater recognition of including the citizen in a story and therefore, we would suggest, making an issue more meaningful to readers.

In terms of which members of the public were represented, a range of social groups were directly addressed. This included students, young people and children, parents and business leaders, pensioners and "the grey vote." Particular emphasis was given to young people. "Students" (30.4%) and "young people" (24.6%), for example, made up over half the references to specific groups of citizens (we should note that in the vast majority of references, public opinion was invoked generally rather than specifically about social groups). While young people only featured in 2.7% of articles – 39 in total – the local press seemed particularly committed to positively representing young people in politics. This took a variety of different forms – from prominently reporting the moment when a student "burst the hermetically sealed bubble around Tony Blair" to confront and berate the PM in a shopping centre about New Labour spin and the war in Iraq (*Yorkshire Post*, 6 May 2005) to more staged events such as a special *Question Time* organised for young people (*Halifax Courier*, 30 April 2005). Meanwhile, the *Aire Valley Target* featured a front page story on how a "Bingley school will be transformed into a polling station as pupils take part in their own 'General Election'" (28 April 2005). The *Yorkshire Post* commissioned an article by a sixth form student about how young people, if they were in government, would change the world (19 April 2005). "The young electorate is looking for inspiration, for people with a dream of a better society worth following" wrote the sixth former. The *Spenborough Guardian* featured a vox pops special (in keeping with the separation of "public opinion" from conventional election articles) on young people's "First trip to the polls" (22 April 2005). While it would be unwise to extrapolate and generalise too much on the representation of young citizens given the sample size, it does, to some degree, appear to challenge the discouraging way young citizens have, in recent years, been reported when making political interventions (Cushion 2005, 2006).

The gender make up of citizens participating in the election is, by contrast, less encouraging coverage of citizenship, as the sex of citizens in the news follows the dominant male world of Westminster.⁵ When the sex of contributors to election coverage could be established, men (64.1%) were nearly twice more likely to be represented than females (35.9%). This is explained primarily by the high number of letters written by men – 73.3% of letters were written by males and 25.7% female. Whether this is a reflection of the readerships of our sample, the motivation of each group to write election-related letters or the selection process of letter writers is open to debate. What it does confirm and perhaps reinforce – despite recent improvements in the representation of women in institutional politics – is the image that politics is principally a male occupation.

What Did Citizens Contribute to the Election Coverage?

While we have suggested that political elites dominated the agenda during election coverage in the local press, we also argued that citizens were represented in a variety of positive ways which allowed them more access to news space (although men more than women) than other studies have suggested (e.g. Brookes et al 2004). It does not necessarily follow, however, that what they are represented discussing reflects their own political interests and priorities. Indeed, journalists may have asked citizens to comment on or referred to them in the context of quirky and human interest stories rather than in the more serious and policy-anchored reports. And this, to some extent, is evidenced by Table 6 which compares what journalists write about and what citizens are represented as discussing.

Table 6: Citizens' Comments and Newspapers' Electoral Agendas

	Citizens	Journalists
Issues	38.7%	43.2%
Candidate/campaign	61.3%	56.8%
Total	100%	100%

Over six in ten citizenship representations are candidate focused or campaign based stories. By contrast, citizens, according to the data, are less concerned with issues and debates: less than 4 in 10 representations from citizens were policy oriented. In comparison to the subject matter being reported on, citizens are therefore seen by journalists – consciously or not – as more interested in candidate or process driven stories than the cut and thrust of party policy. It may be that journalists turn to what Becker (1967) calls the “hierarchy of credibility,” meaning they look for the more authoritative sources when reporting what they see as the more “serious” political issues. Indeed, if we look at every in/direct representation of citizenship, 33.9% are used in issue-based stories, while 66.1% are used in stories about candidates and the processes of the campaign. This would suggest that journalists tend to marginalise the voice of citizens when reporting on the more serious issues. Citizens are therefore left, for much of the time, out of *the deliberation of policy*, which is primarily left to political elites not only to set but to argue about between themselves (indeed, elite sources increase when more serious rather than candidate-related articles are reported on).

If we go beyond the editorial agenda of newspapers, and compare this to the

agenda set by readers in letters to the editor (however much they might be mediated by different newspapers – see Franklin and Richardson 2004), we can see a far more policy-orientated agenda.

Table 7: Comparison of the 15 Most Frequently Cited Thematic Priorities of Articles and Letters in 2005

Article focus	Percentage	Rank	Letter	Percentage
Horse race/polls	40.6	1	Horse race/polls	21.3
Candidate focus	20.5	2	Health/NHS	9.7
Crime/voter fraud	7.6	3	Multiple issues	9.4
Multiple issues	6.0	4	Traveler/gypsy/asylum seekers	8.9
Traveler/gypsy/asylum seekers	4.1	5	Candidate focus	8.6
Health/NHS	4.0	6	Economic management	6.7
Iraq	3.3	7	Apathy	5.7
Education	2.5	8	Crime/voter fraud	5.4
Economic management	2.2	9	Iraq	4.6
Environment	2.2	10	Pensions	4.3
Apathy	1.6	11	Europe	3.8
Council tax	1.5	12	Leadership/trust	3.0
Pensions	1.5	13	Regional policy	3.0
Leadership/trust	1.2	14	Education	3.0
Taxation	1.1	15	Spending cuts/public expenditure	2.7
100.0		Total	100.0	

While journalists focus primarily on process-related stories (which account for 62.7% in the top fifteen articles) citizens are far more concerned with policy-based issues (64.5%). Tackling horse race subject matter or candidate related stories are clearly a priority in the editorial agendas of local and regional newspapers. This accounts for more than 6 in 10 election stories. When compared to the concerns of readers, however, the emphasis halves to just 3 in 10 stories. Indeed, election “issues” become more apparent in readers’ letters than articles, with the NHS (9.7%), race and immigration (8.9%), the economy (6.7%), concerns about turnout and disengagement with party politics (5.7%), voter fraud (5.4%), Iraq (4.6%) and pensions (4.3%) all debated much more than in the main pages of the newspapers. Whether this is a response to party political agendas, or the agenda of the national media, is open to debate. It might be, moreover, that citizens are asking question that political elites – or, for that matter, journalists – are simply not addressing.

If the issue of pension funding is taken as a case study, we gain an insight into the divergence between the agenda of journalists, politicians and citizens. Pensions are unquestionably a huge concern for many people, particularly the demographic profile usually found reading local and regional papers. Yet it barely registered on the list of editorial priorities during the election (1.5%), while citizens were three

times more interested (4.3%) in writing in and asking questions about an issue that none of the major parties addressed. This, at the very least, shows the power of the letters' page in managing to force, to some extent, an issue on the electoral agenda. Because the Labour Party actually deferred policy action on pensions until after the election, the pension debate became an issue consigned to the letters page (and barely making a lasting impression in the main pages). It follows that if political elites are not talking about pensions or, for that matter, any particular subject matter, local journalists tend not to engage so much with this issue.

This is the case even when the most systematic form of representation – public opinion polls – clearly states that the funding of pensions is of huge concern to what is, after all, an aging society. In all the main polling organisations⁶, pensions scored highly behind the standard concerns of health, education and law and order. Asked more specifically, however, and attitudes towards pensions drew some very interesting and revealing findings in a Mori poll: they listed a range of issues – from animal welfare, devolution and housing to the environment and unemployment – and asked people which party has the best policy on each.⁷ Pensions drew the most “none of these” responses – which implies that, across all the major political parties, the political elite is not addressing the concerns of citizens. Indeed, nearly a third of respondents indicated they “don't know” suggesting that it was an issue not immediately associated with any particular party policy. In another Mori poll, which asked how informed citizens felt about a range of issues, pensions – just behind the European Union – was the policy citizens felt the least informed about. Clearly, then, the letters pages in our sample tapped into issues not readily discussed by politicians and therefore, we suggest, not reported on by journalists.

Conclusions

We began this article by outlining how, in coverage of the 2005 general coverage, many journalists set out not only to connect with the political lives of “ordinary” citizens but to find an active role for them to play in election news space. We have suggested, however, that the success of the regional and local press in achieving this engagement is somewhat less than implied by many of the distinguished journalists we cited. While there has, in recent years, been an increased journalistic focus on how political coverage impacts on the average citizen, the extent to which readers are actually allowed to shape and influence coverage – and therefore to generate a more active and informed citizenship – in local papers is, we would argue, fairly limited.

From the point of view of the reader, it was the voices and the issues raised by political elites which, for the most part, journalists listened to and reported on. The dominance of politicians in election stories is our case in point: 7 in 10 direct quotations emanated from the mouths of potential MPs (of which the vast majority were existing senior shadow/cabinet members). This, we argued, marginalised a whole range of alternative and expert voices and, in turn, the flow and quality of information into the public sphere.

Beyond the dominant voices of political elites we found that citizens were, in a variety of formats, represented in both active and constructive ways. The letters page, for example, provided ample election related debates. Indeed, an array of issue based letters – as opposed to the campaigning focus in the news sections – were

addressed that could not be found in the editorial spaces of newspaper agendas. This, indeed, was supported by surveys on issues that concerned the public which appeared to share more resonance with the letters pages than with journalistic copy. The use of vox pops too, added an extra dimension to coverage, as a more human interest focus crept into election coverage, in a way that could have made more sense to the reader than the soundbites that allegedly characterise politicians' statements (e.g. Franklin 2004b). A superficial reading of newspapers would also indicate that many papers took the issue of apathy and disengagement very seriously. Across all the papers we examined, editorials were particularly concerned with turnout, political disaffection and the presentation of politics. This is especially the case with young citizens, who newspapers represented in a number of positive ways. In short, then, citizens, to some extent, forced an agenda on newspaper coverage that political elites largely ignored, while journalists appealed for readers to jettison any creeping signs of apathy, and be part of the democratic process.

In each case, however, well intentioned, the ways in which citizens were represented was not always conducive to advancing an agenda of citizenship making. The letters page – the space for readers to engage in debates – was, for example, infiltrated by political elites. More broadly than this, the issue of political disengagement may have been bemoaned in the editorials of many newspapers, but in practice, journalists tended to assume readers were apathetic and disaffected with political life. For the most part, readers were left – perhaps because it might be considered to bore them – out of the deliberation of policy. Instead, if public opinion was heard in election stories it was sidelined, away from the bread and butter issues of politics that so strongly characterised the letters, pages of each newspaper. While this might be a genuine attempt to engage readers in politics, it appears to have created a distance and lack of understanding between the political worlds of elite and citizenship concerns.

If journalists did try to address this divergence, it seems that political elites prevented any discussion. When journalists discussed whether they were addressing the needs of their readers, it was very telling how restricted – and perhaps even driven – their reports were by what political parties were prepared to discuss and openly debate. A senior journalist, for example, claimed his newspaper wanted to cover the council tax issue because “it is a very, very big issue around here which affects everyone.” But because one political party did not respond to a question the journalist had posed on this subject (probably the Labour party to not let the Liberal Democrats – who made reforming council tax a key election issue – set the agenda), coverage, on one particular day, was relatively limited. Indeed, it barely registered – across the 30 day monitoring period – on their news agenda. This is, of course, a problematic situation for the editorial direction of a local newspaper: how much can a paper report on particular issues of concern for readers if political elites and their press officers refuse to debate the subject?

The concept of “moral panics” has shown that on particular issues political elites *will* often (disproportionately) respond to the campaigning agenda of newspapers (Cohen 1980; Critcher 2004). Yet, in truth, these are issues often grounded *less* in the urgent problems and priorities of citizenship and *more* on the consumer-driven agendas of newspaper sales and their ideological leaning. Terrorism (Lewis 2004), asylum seekers (Buchanan et al 2003), youth crime and anti social behaviour

(Cushion 2006) are, to name but a few, recent issues high on the agenda of political and media elites that tend to prey on the fears and anxieties in society rather than address the arresting and fundamental problems of social justice. By looking at polling data and the letter pages of the local press – even if, as we suggested, this was mediated to some extent by newspapers – for example, we found issues high on the citizenship agenda not meaningfully addressed by journalists in news and editorial space.

In sum, then, if “the idea of getting closer to the real people got out of hand” in the national media, as a senior national journalist suggested, we would find it difficult to sustain this journalistic impression based on our systematic content analysis. In order for this contention to be, at the very least, entertained, there needs to be a greater awareness of the disparity between the agendas of journalists, political elites and citizens. We would therefore suggest that finding ways to “get closer to the real people” remains, despite journalistic protestations, a goal yet to be achieved.

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Notes:

1. Quote taken from a BBC Press Release: http://bbc.net.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2002/09_september/19/politics_initiative.shtml. Accessed on June 8.
2. Cited in <http://inquirer.philly.com/opinion/cv/about.html>. Accessed on 24 March 2006.
3. Our sample consists of 10 free local papers – the *Aire Valley Target*, *Bradford Target*, *Calderdale News*, *Huddersfield Weekly News*, *North Leeds Weekly*, *East Leeds Weekly*, *Weekly Advertiser* (Dewsbury), *Wharfe Valley Times*, 15 paid local weeklies – the *Brighouse Echo*, *Colne Valley Chronicle*, *Dewsbury Reporter*, *Hebden Bridge Times*, *Heckmondwike Herald*, *Holme Valley Express*, *Huddersfield District Chronicle*, *Mirfield Reporter*, *Morley Advertiser*, *Morley Observer*, *Pudsey Times*, *Spenborough Guardian*, *Todmorden News*, *Wakefield Express*, a daily newspaper, the *Halifax Courier* and two regional newspapers, the *Yorkshire Post* and *Leeds Metro*.
4. Intercoder reliability for single variables varies between 83.7 and 100 percent. We are grateful to Kerry Moore for carrying out the reliability study.
5. We should note that in 47.6% of cases, the sex of citizens could not be established.
6. See www.icmresearch.co.uk, www.mori.com or www.yougov.com.
7. See mori.com.

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