

Parallel Session 17: Communicating with decision makers

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Is there a mandate for science?: Examining science policy debates during a UK general election

This paper presents findings from research which has examined the content and production of representations of science during the 2001 UK general election. Using qualitative research methods, with a particular focus on key informant, semi-structured interviews, this paper discusses research that has analysed both the dynamic interactions between leading actors from government, NGOs, scientific institutions and the media and, linked to this, their ability to influence the content and production of representations of science. Here, we provide evidence to illustrate that although campaigning on science policy issues was a feature of the general election campaign, these policy issues were rarely a feature of mainstream party political campaigns or national media coverage. Instead, the agenda for science policy was generated largely by a minority of NGOs campaigning on specific platforms. The implications of the research findings in contributing to important current debates will be drawn out. These include debates documenting the politicisation of science, as well as those considering the relationship between representations of science and the formation of public policy. Does, for example, the exchange of ideas within the context of an election campaign influence the shape of public policy? Finally, implications of the research findings for debates examining the contemporary relationship between science and society, in particular the calls for improved dialogue and consultation as a means of enhancing levels of citizenship and engagement, will be considered.

Background

The recent UK House of Lords Select Committee Report on Science and Technology highlighted the complex and increasingly problematic relationship between contemporary science and society, particularly in the field of biotechnology (H.M.S.O. 2000). It also highlighted that many of these concerns were seen to be the result of a perceived lack of transparency, by the public, in the relationship between science, industry, public policy and the public as consumers (ibid.). This report suggested a key role for communication as a way of reducing tensions between science and society by increasing levels of democracy through greater dialogue and consultation (ibid.). These ideas have been developed in further research (Office of Science and Technology and The Wellcome Trust 2001), in wider theoretical considerations about the governance of science (Fuller 2000) and in a further House of Lords report examining school science.

A healthy democracy needs a public with a broad understanding of major scientific issues, one that can engage critically with issues and arguments – which involve both scientific knowledge and the limitations of science. (H.M.S.O., 2001)

For many science and society researchers these ideas are not new (e.g. see Irwin 1995; Irwin and Wynne 1996), but they are welcome, particularly as they replace the well-documented limitations of the ‘deficit model’ (e.g. Gregory and Miller 1998; Miller 2001; Thomas 1997). Indeed, in recent years the importance of democratic regulation of scientific advances has been increasingly recognised on the part of both government and the academic community. That ‘dialogue’ and ‘debate’ – terms now firmly established in the ‘science and society’ lexicon – are regarded as key aims, reflects a range of overlapping imperatives. We have noted that in general terms, the implementation of greater “dialogue” between science and society is regarded as a key route to a healthier, more vibrant democracy, improved decision-making and better decisions. When linked with science policy in particular, however, the benefits of dialogue have tended to acquire a particular resonance.

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The reasons for this are several:

- science is a pervasive feature of everyday life and scientific knowledge is regularly employed to inform decision making processes at many different levels.
- newly published scientific knowledge is open-ended, uncertain and contingent (Macnaghten and Urry 1998). Observers emphasise the need for public engagement in situations of uncertainty, particularly when ethical issues are central.
- dialogue is seen as one route to the easing of tensions between contemporary science and society in the context of what has been described as a "crisis of confidence" (H.M.S.O. 2000)
- dialogue and debate are seen as a route to a more sophisticated debate between science and society leading to various benefits, both to democratic citizenship and to individual decision making.

We consider the shift from deficit towards dialogue to be a welcome and useful development in investigating the relationship between science and society, opening the way to new and innovative approaches to studying science in society. It is our intention to contribute to these debates by considering how a range of actors used science communication during a key 'space and time for dialogue' between science and society; the May 2001 UK general election campaign (see also, Holliman et al. 2002).

We start from the premise that the communication of 'science' will not require a simple translation of reality to different audiences in the electorate, but will be the result of complex interactions that will mediate this information (Miller 1999). As such, consideration of who gains regular access to channels of communication and the use of promotional strategies becomes paramount. We also start from the premise that the electorate rarely, if ever, gets the opportunity to examine issues of science policy. We believe that the election campaign therefore presents a rare, but powerful 'space and time for dialogue' for science.

Communication of science is fundamental to informing the public about all aspects of our lives, including science and politics. It is therefore a key factor in shaping ideas the relationship between democracy and science. As Castells has argued:

[...] electronic media (including not only television and radio, but all forms of communication, such as newspapers and the Internet) have become the privileged space for politics. (Castells, 1997, p. 311)

It has also been noted that media coverage is where most people will first hear of advances in science (H.M.S.O. 2000). Further studies have shown that media influence, although complex, is particularly important where little is previously known (Philo 1990). This highlights the importance of studying science communication as a way of shaping public debates. It also suggests that media coverage is particularly significant.

Methods

This research combines quantitative and qualitative methods to study the complex relationships that constitute representations of science. More specifically, this paper

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examines a range of actors and their involvement in debates about science during the May 2001 UK general election. Initially this involved a detailed content analysis of a range of public documents which referred to science.

This archive includes comprehensive coverage of eight national UK newspapers (including broadsheet, mid-market tabloid and tabloid newspapers) and the early and late television evening news bulletins from all five UK terrestrial channels for the period of the election campaign. The archive was collated from the 9 May 2001 (the date the announcement of the election was reported in the media) to the 7 June 2001 (the date of the election).

We developed an inclusive definition of science news that included issues of science policy by searching for articles with *explicit* scientific content, including the scientific process, scientific research and/or findings, and scientific controversy. Although the majority of the article selections proved unproblematic, others required an element of judgement and it is worth clarifying our approach to these. This is particularly the case given the breadth and diversity of issues which *might* be termed science issues.

On the subject of health, for example, scientific content was interpreted as including new medical discoveries or research into the causes or nature of specific illnesses. It excluded, however, the numerous stories on the state of healthcare provision or policy and those articles – often published as part of dedicated health pages – which dwelt on personal health or lifestyle issues with no reference to science or scientific processes. Stories on the environment were treated in a similar way. For example, we included articles discussing scientific evidence for climate change, but excluded articles with passing references to “green” issues.

A special mention should also be made to stories relating to foot and mouth disease. Clearly this issue held a particular resonance for the current study, if only because it led to the postponement of the election and continued to be a reasonably visible news story throughout the campaign. However, applying the same rules of inclusion ensured that our sample was not skewed. So, for example, stories discussing the controversial scientific models attempting to predict the likely spread of the disease were included, whereas the raft of articles relating to the political implications of the outbreak or the impact on the tourism industry were not.

The coding frame used to facilitate analysis of the sample included the name of the newspaper; the date; the title of the story; the page number; the name and type (if any) of the correspondent; graphics, if any, and their caption; and any sources quoted directly.

In addition, we sampled a range of current affairs and relevant fictional programming, and party political broadcasts for this period. Further to this we collected press releases from a range of industry sources and NGOs, information from relevant Internet sites, relevant reports, policy documents, manifestos, campaign speeches and public information materials.

Drawing on initial content analysis on these documents, we then identified a number of ‘relevant actors’¹ who were invited to participate in an interview study. In more

¹ We define a ‘relevant actor’ by their (proactive or reactive) involvement in debates about science, in

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detail, this interview study examined the strategies of actors in proactively (e.g. through the use of 'information subsidies' (Gandy 1982), publication of campaigning materials, the Internet, public meetings and direct actions) or reactively (e.g. through interviews) contributing to debates about science during the general election campaign.

This involved semi-structured interviews. These interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analysed for important themes using the NUD*IST computer software package. Initial results from these analyses are presented in this paper.

Results and discussion

The initial results presented here indicate that media coverage of the UK general election was not seen as an effective space and time for dialogue. This argument is supported by initial results from the content analysis which indicate that reporting of scientific research generated much of the overall coverage of science. The following sub-sections provide examples from the interview study which further illustrate this argument.

Media professionals

Media professionals had a significant mediating role in the coverage. The following quote illustrates how a science journalist saw their role during this period; effectively, to provide articles on science that did not report on the election.

"[...] it's actually a relief and a pleasure for a news editor to suddenly find a story which is a) readable and enjoyable and b) has absolutely nothing to do with politics at all."

Interview with science journalist, 13 June 2002

Further to this, this interviewee indicated a shift in emphasis, away from issues of science policy, from the 1997 to 2001 UK general elections.

"[...] the election before, the scientists were mobilised [...] but in this election, in the columns written by scientists, even the scientists said we want better pensions and more money for single mothers."

Interview with science journalist, 13 June 2002

These results indicate that science policy was not something reported on by science journalists. Indeed, they suggest that science journalists actively avoided issues of science policy. Rather, they reported science that was considered apolitical, in part because they considered this to be an additional and attractive news value during the election campaign.

Scientists and scientific institutions

Our analysis of election documents showed that there was less coverage of science policy issues when compared to scientific research. We did, however, note that scientists and scientific institutions were proactive in lobbying for science, both prior to and during the election campaign. For example, the NGO Save British Science (SBS) was proactive prior to and during the election campaign. Many of these

this instance during the May/June 2001 UK general election campaign.

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activities did not involve media coverage (for example, SBS ran a series of public meetings to discuss science and they produced an manifesto-style document (see, Save British Science Society 2001)). Their representatives were involved in the coverage though.

“[...] my job actually during the election campaign, was to make sure that discussions about science weren't squeezed out and that when we were having a discussion about the NHS, we didn't forget to have a debate, some kind of discussion about the scientific research of the NHS for example.”

Interview with Save British Science, 13 June 2002

This example shows that scientists and scientific institutions were involved in mediating information as a way of influencing media coverage of science and policy debates during the election campaign. This, coupled with their proactive strategies, both prior to and during the election campaign, illustrate the importance this organisation placed on lobbying political parties on behalf of their membership.

Decision makers

The interviews with decision makers illustrate the competitive nature of an election campaign as a space and time for dialogue. In essence, MPs have a large number of competing roles, agendas and issues to consider in a very short space of time. As the following example shows, MPs are expected to campaign for their own constituencies, as well as discuss issues specific to their specialist briefs.

“[...] you're talking to a candidate in a marginal seat who spent most of his time in people's gardens... I certainly wasn't called as science spokesman to do any national media work.”

Liberal Democrat science spokesperson, 24 April 2002

In addition to the competitive nature of this period there were also ongoing concerns raised about the nature of science. For example, a further interviewee noted that few MPs feel confident discussing science.

“[MPs] don't feel comfortable with things like science and medicine [...] I don't know why, they just see it as a specialist area.

Labour MP, 17 April 2002

Further to this, analysis of the interviews also showed that the context of this election was an important factor, in part because the result was considered to be a foregone conclusion. As a result, one MP noted that the controversial issues surrounding certain high-profile scientific issues, may have been avoided political parties.

“I think the Labour Party made the decision it was going to win the election and the less it said the better, and didn't commit itself.”

Labour MP, 17 April 2002

This example illustrates the importance of mediating information during an election campaign. Promoting issues, such as those on health and education, may well have taken precedence over complex and controversial issues, such as GM crop trials, which only generated a small amount of election coverage. Hence, political parties were proactive in their selection of the issues they were happy to debate.

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Non-governmental organisations and activists

Interviews with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and activists show that they worked reactively, to provide comment on issues as the election coverage progressed. In doing so they attempted to use the developing context of the election campaign as a way of gaining access to media coverage and promoting their views on science policy issues.

“[...] our plan was basically just about trying to get the issues somewhere in the debate and we’ve pretty much used foot and mouth as the chance to do that.”

Interview with Soil Association, 24 May 2002

Further analysis also demonstrates that they worked proactively to influence policy prior to the election. However, as the following example shows, mobilising resources proactively does not guarantee success in influencing science policy.

“[...] there were discussions [...] with the Number 10 Policy Unit. I had some conversations with the Conservative Party and the Lib Dems. about the content of their manifesto. I suspect we had virtually no impact on any of those.

Interview with Soil Association, 24 May 2002

Overall, these initial results illustrate that a number of actors were involved in mediating information relating to science during the May/June 2001 UK general election. They also illustrate that this was a contested and competitive space and time for dialogue, and introduce the question over whether an election campaign is the most effective time for dialogues on science to occur. These issues will be investigated in further analyses.

Conclusions

Despite widespread agreement on the desirability of dialogue and democracy we have found little evidence of these qualities in our studies of the 2001 UK general election. Indeed, it would appear from the evidence that we have analysed that the general election campaign was not an effective space and time for dialogue about science. Hence, while it is important to emphasise that elections present an important *opportunity* for meaningful public debate, we make no automatic assumptions that they have fulfilled this role. There are certain factors which might tend to mitigate against this process. For example, we note that UK election campaigns are relatively short and the timing is generally well-known in advance of the dissolution of Parliament. As a result the agenda for debate is highly mediated, often in advance of the general election (e.g. in the form of party political manifestos). There are also the exigencies of political campaigning to consider and in particular the perceived need for political marketing (as a route to electoral victory) which tends to dictate that parties focus their campaigns on just a few, carefully selected key issues, therefore avoiding others that may be considered too complex or problematic to debate. Examples of issues that were largely ignored by the main political parties include debates over the relative merits of GM technology and stem cell research, both of which featured heavily in the previous Parliament.

We also note that the media played a key role in reflexively shaping the political agenda during this election campaign. We found evidence that media coverage during the general election tended to represent the three main political parties in the UK, and in particular the leaders of these parties. Hence, the political parties retained an

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important position in defining the political and media agenda during the election campaign, a situation that was rarely challenged in media coverage. The evidence that some science journalists avoided issues of science policy in the election may go some way to explaining this. However, we did find evidence that environmental correspondents did report the issue of GM crop test sites. We note that this was partly due to the changes in the nature of interest group campaigning – with less focus on traditional fora (elections/established political parties) and greater use of direct action, in this case activists campaigning against GM crop test sites.

Against this background – and even disregarding strictly political arguments concerning the intrinsic value of elections and the need for politicians to address problems including declining electoral turnouts – it is worth emphasising that if elections are failing in their role as a space for public discussion, then additional weight could be lent to the argument for considering additional, novel methods of public participation.

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