

Letters of Intent: Election Campaigning and Orchestrated Public Debate in Local Newspapers' Letters to the Editor

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Drawing on the findings of an extensive study of local and regional newspaper reporting of the 2001 UK general election, this article contests the widely held view that readers' letters' pages provide a public forum for discussion and debate initiated by readers. The article argues that during election campaigns, local parties may become highly influential in shaping the contents of letters pages as part of their broader media based campaigning strategy. For their part, editors select letters not simply according to their newsworthiness but to reflect the identity of the newspaper, to meet the perceived preferences of readers, as well as the more prosaic requirements of availability of space and editorial imperatives concerning balance. A fivefold typology of readers' letters is constructed and illustrated by reference to newspaper discussions of, among other matters, British membership of Europe and issues around taxation.

Keywords British local newspapers, orchestrated debate, party election campaigning, readers' letters

The greater part of both academic and industry research on letters to the editor assumes and concludes that while newspaper letters pages are only “hazy reflections of public opinion” (Grey & Brown, 1970) they nevertheless constitute an indispensable forum for public debate (Bromley, 1998; Franklin & Parry, 1998; Jackson, 1971; Tunstall, 1977, 1996). In explaining the success and popularity of letters sections in newspapers, the limited number of academic studies on this subject have tended to either adopt a “letters page as a public forum” metaphor (Hynds, 1991, 1994) or else focus on a particular aspect of letters to the editor, such as humor (Lockyer & Pickering, 2001) or argumentation (Jackson, 1987; Richardson, 2001; van Eemeren, 1987; van Eemeren et al., 2002). Adopting the dominant metaphor, Wahl-Jorgensen (2001, p. 305) affirms that “journalism scholars, journalists and editors alike view the letters section as an essential public forum because it facilitates public discussion.” Similarly, in a study of the local and

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provincial press, Jackson (1971, p. 152) states that the “correspondence column is seen by editors as a means of promoting reader participation and of obtaining useful guidelines about local opinion.” Thus, in an ideal form, Wahl-Jorgensen (2002), among other writers, assumes that letters to the editor “allow for members of the public to introduce topics, and open them up to the critical scrutiny of public debate” (p. 72).

While acknowledging that this “public forum” metaphor may account accurately for the construction of newspapers’ letter pages during “peacetime,” in election periods and other times of heightened party political activity, letters to the editor cannot be assumed to represent “public opinion,” even in a “hazy” way. Drawing on the findings of a study of British local and regional newspapers’ election coverage, we argue that political parties orchestrate letter writing campaigns armed both with relevant and “newsworthy” evidential claims consonant with their ongoing campaign and the cultural and linguistic capital necessary to frame “their contributions in the most effective wording” (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999, p. 484).¹ While we are unable to draw categorical conclusions regarding authorial responsibility in all sampled cases, our analysis reveals a significant presence of party political campaigning in the “public forum” of readers’ letters.

Local Letters: Research and Theoretical Considerations

A number of research studies illustrate the significance of local and regional newspapers in setting, as well as articulating, issue agendas for local debate (Franklin & Richardson, 2002a, 2002b; Golding, 1989; Neveu, 2002). The close relationship between local newspapers and local communities becomes more evident on newspapers’ letter pages, which represent an intersection of “everyday talk” and “mediated discourse.” They stand as an indication of newspapers’ differential perceptions of “the ideological boundaries of *legitimate* or *fair* comment” (Allan, 1999, p. 93), reproducing and disseminating the individual, personal, and often anecdotal insights of readers on contemporary events. On this point, Hall et al. (1978, p. 120) have argued that letters’ pages try to include the “readers’ opinions in their least mediated form.” One corollary of allowing “the public” to speak on issues the paper considers important is that the public uses the letters’ page not only to spark political debate but also to declare grievances and tell stories of a much more personal nature. The local newspaper, in its desire to serve and profit from the community, accommodates such letter writing, often turning the letters page into a “public bulletin board” (Franklin, 1988, & Ringham, 1990, cited in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, p. 318). These “dispatch letters” have great importance for newspaper and reader alike, since they “enable both the press and the readership to keep an ear to [the] ground and listen in to some of the leading themes of local conversation” (Jackson, 1971, p. 174).

There is a danger, however, in moving from the above findings—a recognition of the “community building” function of local newspapers’ letters’ pages—to concluding that these letters’ pages represent or *reflect* the opinions of the (local) newspaper buying public. The majority of academic studies into readers’ letters have concluded that letter writers tend to be older, better educated, wealthier, and more politically conservative than fellow newspaper readers who don’t indulge in writing letters to their editor (Grey & Brown, 1970; Renfro, 1979). More derogatively, Max Hastings, the editor in chief of the British broadsheet newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* for 10 years, has recently declared:

Many of those who dispatch letters for publication to newspapers are not entirely sane, and this seemed especially true of our correspondents. The

Telegraph postbag was dominated by readers complaining about falling standards or service/lack of respect among the young/criminal justice/the presumptuous ambition of black men to govern themselves, or a combination of these issues. . . . Today . . . I am amazed that so many veterans of the Crimea, together with their prejudices, survive to dominate the columns. (2002, p. 53)

In short: Letters published in newspapers suggest a great deal about the paper and the community it serves. However, as Grey and Brown (1970, p. 454) have illustrated, “the letters columns are clearly not representative of public opinion” and in fact more closely reflect the opinions and arguments of an “articulate minority” (Gallup, 1958). Therefore, assuming any direct connection between the views of local communities and the opinions articulated on local newspaper letters’ pages is problematic for at least two reasons: first, the selective and mediating role of newspapers and their capacity to shape rather than simply represent public opinion (Hall et al., 1978), and second, the potential for individuals and groups endowed with sufficient social or linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) to orchestrate letters campaigns. These problematic issues will now be considered in greater depth, with particular reference to periods of electoral coverage.

Theoretical Framework

A useful tool in analyzing mediated texts is Goffman’s (1974, 1981) “production format” of utterances (by which he includes text and talk). In any communicative event, Goffman (1981, p. 144) argues that the speaker/writer role can be broken down into three functional roles: the animator, the author, and the principal. Taking each of these in turn, Goffman suggests: The author is realized by “someone who has *selected the sentiments* that are being expressed and the words in which they are encoded”; the animator is the “body engaged in acoustic activity,” or the “individual[s] active in the role of *utterance production*,” whilst the principal is “someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken, someone whose beliefs have been told, someone who is *committed to what the words say*” (Goffman, 1981, p. 144, italics added).

Adapting such a model to newspaper texts, and specifically to letters to the editor, Scollon (1998, p. 199) posits a production format along the following lines.

Production format role	News story	Letter to the editor
Author	Reporter	Reader
Animator	Subs/news staff	Subs/news staff
Principal	Editor	Reader

Consequently, in the case of news reporting, the reporter adopts the role of the “author” of the news story; editorial news staff—as “animators”—edit and format these reports and place them alongside other texts within the newspaper; and the editor retains ultimate responsibility for the content of the reporting and therefore accepts the role of the “principal.” In contrast to this news reporting framework, Scollon (1998) argues that “the writers of letters to the editor *retain* principalship and, therefore, may be held responsible for what is printed within the spaces allocated to them” (p. 199, italics added). While acknowledging that “contributions tend to be selected and edited for publication in accordance with editorial policy, or with an eye to political and commercial interests”

(Bromley, 1998, p. 150), what is at stake, Scollon (1998) argues, is the ultimate “responsibility for the contents” (p. 199). Continuing, Scollon argues that the byline of a news report: “indicates responsibility is at least partly shared with the reporter by the newspaper’s editorial staff, but the signature [on a letter] indicates that the newspaper’s editorial staff relinquishes such responsibility to the author whose name appears at the end” (p. 199).

Adopting a similar assumption regarding the agency of readers’ letters, Wahl-Jorgensen argues that the “letters to the editor section is one of a few arenas for public discussion by regular citizens and can be seen as a key institution of the public sphere” (2002, p. 69, italics added). Drawing on theories of deliberative democracy as a model of evaluation and critique, Wahl-Jorgensen (2002) suggests four criteria of “newsworthiness” that letters editors use in selecting or rejecting readers’ letters. These criteria of selection—in turn, the rules of relevance, entertainment, brevity, and authority—are:

shaped in part by concern for the public interest and in part by the need for newspapers to succeed in the market, [and] play a central role in helping letters editors to decide which contributions from readers have a legitimate place in the newspapers’ column. (p. 73)

While accepting the validity of the four (and perhaps more) selection criteria, we suggest that agency or responsibility for the printed content of readers’ letters is a great deal more imperspicuous in each of these production format roles. First, contra Scollon (1998) and Wahl-Jorgensen (2001, 2002), letters editors are not merely gatekeepers who ratify letters in accordance with “newsworthiness” selection criteria. Rather, letters are selected and edited in accordance with the identity of the newspaper, the (often only perceived) preferences of the readership, and other more mundane requirements of space and balance. During this process, editorial teams regularly change the order of sentences and paragraphs, purposefully place readers’ letters in relation to other letters (Bromley, 1998; Goldgar, 1994), and, by doing so, construct debates within and between letters and contiguously signal the pertinence of the included letters to the “debate,” thereby acknowledging and on occasion (depending on how the letter is being *used*) legitimating their contents (Richardson, 2001). Consequently, the form and content of these “debates” reflect what is seen as justifiable, acceptable, or “normal” comment by a newspaper’s editorial team.

Second, the indeterminacy of responsibility across production format roles becomes both more pronounced and more consequential during periods of heightened political activity such as election campaigns. While Wahl-Jorgensen rightly states that “letter writers are not representative of the general population” (2002, p. 70), since the four identified rules of selection act to “create an exclusive public forum” (p. 78) precluding readers/writers who “lack the kind of competencies required to gain a voice” (p. 78), she leaves the “principalship” of readers’ letters uninterrogated. During “typical” periods of newspaper production, it *may* be acceptable to assume that a letter’s signatory is both the “author” and “principal” of its content (an assumption explicitly stated by Scollon, 1998, but which Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, 2002, leaves implicit in these terms) but, as we will show, such an assumption is unsustainable during election campaigns. Political parties are highly effective in coordinating letter writing campaigns to the local press during elections as an adjunct to more “above the line” electioneering. One party agent interviewed suggested that party involvement in orchestrated letter writing formed a taken-for-granted assumption in constituency campaigning:

You can either get somebody to write all the letters themselves, in which case during a campaign there isn't enough time; or you offer them some copy that they might like to look at, play with, and put their name on . . . often there are one or two points that you have to make and perhaps journalists won't cover them for you or won't pick up on your stories, so then sometimes the only thing to do is to write letters. (regional election coordinator)

Implicit in the above excerpt is the acknowledgment that editors *do* attempt to avoid campaign letters (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001)—why else would the agent need to conceal party political “copy” in the letters of the professedly nonpartisan public if not to avoid being spiked by discerning editorial staff? Nevertheless, confronted with, for example, “10 letters from different people that all said ‘this candidate’s helped save our swimming baths’, there would come a point that even the editor wouldn’t feel happy about throwing them all in the bin, because this is starting to look like news” (regional election coordinator).

The remainder of this article analyzes the letters’ section of local newspapers as the outcome of this contention for space among party, public, and press.

Research Design

This study forms part of a unique longitudinal analysis of local and regional newspapers’ reporting of the constituency campaign in 10 selected West Yorkshire constituencies in the North of England during the UK general elections of 1987, 1992, 1997, and 2001.² The choice of these constituencies was informed by a desire to achieve political balance: In 1987, the 10 constituencies were represented by four Conservative, four Labour, and two Liberal Democrat members of Parliament. The Labour Party landslide victory in the 1997 general election radically shifted this political map, with Labour candidates winning all 10 parliamentary seats.

The newspapers studied represent a comprehensive sample of local and regional newspapers circulating in the chosen 10 electoral constituencies. More specifically, the sample composed three formats of local and regional newspapers: free weekly local newspapers (for example, the *Aire Valley Target* and the *Dewsbury Weekly Advertiser*), bought weekly local newspapers (for example, the *Colne Valley Chronicle*, the *Holme Valley Express*, and the *Huddersfield District Chronicle*), and bought daily newspapers (the *Halifax Evening Courier* and the *Yorkshire Post*).

In the national setting, newspapers make their partisan preferences clear and advise readers, typically in eve of poll editorials, to support a particular party. Such explicit partisanship is rare in the local press. Of the sampled newspapers, only the *Yorkshire Post* is openly partisan. Launched in 1866, the *Yorkshire Post* was owned by The Yorkshire Conservative Newspaper Company Ltd. until its merger with United Newspapers PLC in 1969, and the paper retains a close identification with the Conservative Party. Editors of the other newspapers universally rejected any suggestion of partisanship, although our previous work (Franklin & Richardson, 2002a, pp. 48–49), which analyzed press election coverage, revealed that their commitments to fairness and impartiality in reports were not always met. Some newspapers favored the Conservatives, others Labour, in their editorial pages.

Additionally, semistructured interviews were conducted with journalists and editors as well as political candidates, their agents, and press officers for the three major political parties (Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat) in the 10 chosen constituencies.

Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 2 hours, followed a semistructured schedule, were conducted face to face, were directly recorded with a tape-recorder, and were transcribed verbatim. The broad concerns of the interviews included: the interactions between the newspapers and political parties, their assessments of the fairness of electoral coverage, any changing editorial assessments of the newsworthiness of the election story, and the newspapers' editorial policies for dealing with parties' increasingly assertive election strategies. We were, of course, interested in gauging interviewees' opinions on readers' letters and on the letters campaigns organized by political parties. In this regard, the journalists interviewed were especially useful in contextualizing their practices of selection and placement, as well as the construction of dialogue and (implicit) debate between readers' letters. The journalists we spoke to all affirmed that the numbers of letters to the editor received increased during general election campaigns. Interestingly, while there is an embargo on publishing letters during the last week of election campaigning in the U.S., editors in the UK judge the success of their political campaign reporting by the size of their mailbag.

In 2001, 1,250 election related items were published in the 24 sampled newspapers (news articles, $n = 934$ [74.7%]; editorials, $n = 64$ [5.1%]; letters to the editor, $n = 252$ [20.2%]). These recorded items were all coded for 38 variables (including, for example, partisanship in coverage, incumbency status of candidate, type of newspaper, number and content of photographs) and the data were analyzed using SPSS. This article focuses exclusively on the 252 readers' letters coded.

Local Letters, National Agenda: Localness, Partisanship, and Issues in Election Letters

Analysis of local newspapers' election coverage established the prominence of "localized" election reporting (733; 58.6%) above items focusing on "national" issues (517; 41.4%). This prevalence of local stories reflected, in part, journalists' perception that a good election story is a *local* election story combined, as we argue elsewhere (Franklin & Richardson, 2002a), with the special efforts that local parties made during the 2001 general election to stress the local nature of their candidates. The resulting flurry of localized newspaper stories is therefore attributable to local parties' substantial campaigning efforts in emphasizing the local credentials of candidates.

However, the issue of local to national coverage proved a little more complex than this simple binary suggests. Table 1 shows the significant divergence between the proportion of local to national focus across the three principal editorial formats in newspapers and the degree to which the communities of journalists and readers appear to pursue distinctive issue agendas.

While almost 70% of articles report local news and localized stories, only 25.8% of readers' letters shared this local concern; by contrast, 74.2% of readers' letters were nationally oriented. This, as we show later in the article, is because readers' letters present much more general arguments drawn from points of value and principle than the localized "event based" focus of news reporting in the sampled papers. Thus, while a news article may report a candidate's "keep the pound" campaign activities in the constituency, a reader's letter is much more likely to support or criticize the principle of the campaign against the euro itself. In this way, the function and focus (though not necessarily the argumentative style) of letters to the editor more closely approximate the summative, argumentative approach of newspaper editorials than that of news articles.

Table 1
Local and national emphases in election coverage by editorial format

Item type	Type of issue reported in the item, N (%)		Total
	Local	National	
Article	646 (69.2)	288 (30.8)	934
Editorial	22 (34.4)	42 (65.6)	64
Readers' letter	65 (25.8)	187 (74.2)	252
Total	733 (58.6)	517 (41.4)	1250

Looking next to the thematic focus of letters to the editor, the two key single issues were Europe (16.0%) and taxation (11.8%). Letters written on, by, or about “candidates” were similarly high (11.3%), a mid-placed grouping of three themes received significant attention (welfare and social services, 8.8%; “race,” immigration, and asylum, 7.2%; and health and NHS, 6.2%), and the remainder of the top 15 themes drew less frequent mention.³ If the thematic priorities of the sampled letters are plotted across the 5-week election campaign, we start to get a sense of the way readers’ letters are used as a campaign medium.

Certain trends concerning the use of readers’ letters are suggested by viewing Tables 2 and 3 in conjunction with each other.⁴ First, the relationship between letters written on the two most frequently cited—taxation and Europe—is interesting. Letters on taxation represent a remarkable 43.7% of letters during Week 1—the highest weekly percentage across the whole of the campaign—and are contiguous with the highest mean average of negative comments about the Labour Party. The letters printed in this first week of the campaign averaged 1.5 negative comments about Labour per letter, in contrast to 0.5 comments criticizing the Conservative Party per letter. The Conservative successes in this first week of campaigning were also clear at the time: Labour Party election agents attributed this Tory dynamism to “the very simple reason that . . . our people were all in Westminster and theirs were all in the constituencies. . . . It was very noticeable that they had the first week to rush around having all sorts of events, because our people were all back in London thinking ‘How am I going to get the fax machine home on the train?’”

The proportion of letters written on taxation dipped over the following weeks, simultaneously accompanied by a gradual increase in letters on Europe and the euro. In the previous two general elections, taxation was the single most significant issue, with the Conservative Party traditionally being seen as “the party of low taxation.” With the election of Tony Blair as the leader of the Labor Party in 1994, the (now *New Labour*) Party began to contest this ground and by 2001 was presenting *itself* as “the party of low taxation.” The second significant issue in recent general elections, which in 1997 split the Conservative Party in the months prior to the election campaign (and especially during the campaign itself), has been the precise terms of Britain’s membership in the European Union and the future of European economic unity (in the form of the euro currency) in particular. In the 2001 general election, the Conservative leader, William Hague, focused his party’s electoral strategy around a “Keep the Pound” campaign. He

Table 2
Thematic priorities of letters across the campaign

	Week of campaign, N (Col. %)						Total
	6–12 May	13–19 May	20–26 May	27 May–2 June	3–9 June		
Multiple issues	1 (6.3)	3 (11.6)	12 (17.9)	11 (20.4)	5 (16.1)	32 (16.5)	
Europe	2 (12.5)	4 (15.4)	6 (9.0)	9 (16.7)	10 (32.2)	31 (16.0)	
Taxation	7 (43.7)	5 (19.2)	4 (6.0)	5 (9.3)	2 (6.5)	23 (11.8)	
Candidate	1 (6.3)	3 (11.6)	11 (16.4)	5 (9.3)	2 (6.5)	22 (11.3)	
Welfare/social services		2 (7.7)	6 (9.0)	5 (9.3)	4 (12.9)	17 (8.8)	
Race/immigration/asylum	2 (12.5)	2 (7.7)	5 (7.4)	3 (5.5)	2 (6.5)	14 (7.2)	
Health/NHS		1 (3.8)	5 (7.4)	5 (9.3)	1 (3.2)	12 (6.2)	
Apathy/alienation			1 (1.5)	5 (9.3)	2 (6.5)	8 (4.1)	
Regional policy	3 (18.7)	1 (3.8)	3 (4.5)		1 (3.2)	8 (4.1)	
Economic management			4 (6.0)	2 (3.7)		6 (3.1)	
Public expenditure			5 (7.4)		1 (3.2)	6 (3.1)	
Crime/juvenile crime		1 (3.8)	3 (4.5)	1 (1.8)		5 (2.6)	
Education		2 (7.7)	1 (1.5)	1 (1.8)	1 (3.2)	5 (2.6)	
Prescott and the egg protest		2 (7.7)	1 (1.5)	2 (3.7)		5 (2.6)	
Count (Column %)	16 (100)	26 (100)	67 (100)	54 (100)	31 (100)	194 (100)	
Row %	8.2	13.4	34.5	27.8	16.0	100	

Table 3
Positive and negative evaluation of parties across the campaign

	Week of campaign						Total
	6–12 May	13–19 May	20–26 May	27 May–2 June	3–9 June		
Negative comments about Labour							
Meansum	1.521 (21)	1.033 (33)	.654 (54)	1.180 (80)	1.049 (49)	.9237 (237)	
Negative comments about Conservatives							
Meansum	.57 (7)	.413 (13)	.541 (41)	.431 (31)	.732 (32)	.5124 (124)	
Positive comments about Labour							
Meansum	.45 (5)	.26 (6)	.110 (10)	.318 (18)	.420 (20)	.259 (59)	
Positive comments about Conservatives							
Meansum	.46 (6)	.311 (11)	.112 (12)	.321 (21)	.316 (16)	.366 (66)	
<i>N</i>	<i>N</i> = 14	<i>N</i> = 33	<i>N</i> = 86	<i>N</i> = 71	<i>N</i> = 48	<i>N</i> = 252	

was ultimately not supported by the electorate on this issue, but in the final 2 weeks of the campaign the issue of “the euro” was a strong theme in readers’ letters (16.7% and 32.2% in Weeks 4 and 5, respectively). Again, this aggregation was accompanied by a rise in negative comments about Labour compared to the previous week (0.6 per letter in Week 3; 1.1 and 1.0 per letter in Weeks 4 and 5, respectively). A Conservative Party election agent explained that this concentration in the final 2 weeks was quite deliberate, with the crusade to “Keep the Pound” having been allocated a “slot in the campaign, a fortnight to 10 days before polling day.” The orchestrated nature of letters on this subject had not escaped the notice of many of the journalists we spoke to—they had, in the words of one editor, come to “know the same typewriter [. . . writing] some very boring letters” on the pound—but ultimately, seemingly against journalists’ better judgment, the volume of letters warranted recognition and inclusion.

By comparison with the Conservatives, the Labour Party’s letter campaign remained relatively underdeveloped. In the words of one Labour Party election agent: “We know we should be doing it and we *want* to do it, but [. . . this time] we didn’t really do as well as we could have done.” While we must be careful not to assume that the “principalship” of all “knocking” letters can be traced back to the political parties (indeed we would expect the Labour government and incumbent candidates, all of whom were Labour, to receive a higher degree of criticism purely because they were in power), Figure 1 clearly illustrates the disparity in these sampled readers’ letters’ appraisals of the two main parties. In the remainder of this article, we explore *how* these positive and negative comments were expressed in readers’ letters.

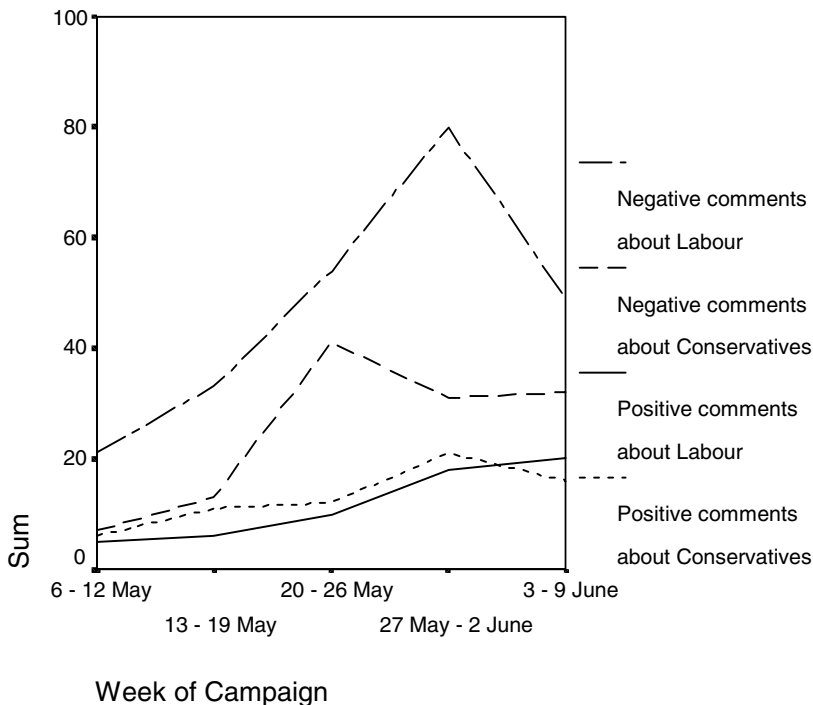


Figure 1. Positive and negative evaluations of parties across the campaign.

Readers' Election Letters

If party originated letters are excluded, election letters fall into one of two categories that can be termed “cynical” and “negative” letters. The former argue that politicians are essentially all the same, or that outcomes will be equally bad irrespective of which party wins the election. In a model example of this type of letter, Marie Griffiths argued: “As I, and many other people see it, the two main parties, Labour and Conservative, are both as bad as each other” (*Reporter Group*, May 18, p. 6). The author supports this claim by citing evidence of the way both Blair’s and Major’s governments failed the “ordinary man” before ending on a resonant entreaty to the workers of the world: “The politicians are promising voters the world and once they get into power they take it from us!”

By contrast, “negative letters” argue against one political party without offering any alternative, a format that broadly fits with Jackson’s (1971, p. 171) “tub-thumping” letters and Wahl-Jorgensen’s (2002, p. 74) “flame throwers.” These letters function as (usually strident) criticisms, and as such their internal logic is occasionally flawed or stretched to extraordinary lengths. Take the following letter, which starts with a coherent, albeit in-temperate, argument, but whose ending is quite simply bizarre:

Anyone who has a few eggs to spare can give me some for when William Hague comes to Halifax. As he supported the anarchy of an unelected group of people called a petrol lobby who last year created mob rule in our country, he does not deserve to be Prime Minister. . . . Let us have democracy but let us be civilized about it. Anyone who throws eggs today could throw bombs tomorrow. E. Owens (*Evening Courier*, May 21, p. 6)

Not only is the “slippery slope” that Owens suggests in the final sentence implausible to the point of caricature, the first line of his letter necessarily places *himself* at the *top* of this slope—he is, by admission, an egg thrower and as such one step from being part of a bomb throwing mob.

Few of the “flamer” letters were as peculiar as the previous example. For example, Peter Broadley specifically cites 4-year-old spending figures in his criticism of Labour (again, criticisms offered without alternative):

I ask the pensioners: Were you deprived of at least £10 per week for the last four years—over £2,000—as a result of Gordon Brown’s first budget? Did you enjoy the 75p a week that Gordon gave you in last year’s budget? . . . If the above apply to you, then you have to thank New Labour, including our local MPs Alice Mahon and Chris McCafferty. Peter Broadley (*Evening Courier*, June 4, p. 6)

This particular letter exemplifies the problems encountered in disaggregating authorship and principalship (Goffman, 1974, 1981) in readers’ letters. If analyzed purely in terms of its manifest content, the letter appears to have been written by a reader raising the pertinent issue of state pension provision and—most importantly—doing so because *he* regards the issue to be pertinent (thereby signifying his principalship). However, a more detailed knowledge of the letter writer (Peter Broadley is a letter writing regular, with five letters of his own and a reader’s riposte to one of his previous letters printed in this 5-week sample alone), and specifically his advocacy for the Conservative Party in several of his other letters, necessarily complicates matters, not least the decision about whether to approach his letter as an individualized contribution or as part of a party campaign.

Political Parties' Campaign Letters

Political campaign letters were less equivocal concerning their partisan loyalties, making their identification less problematic than the letters discussed above. The remainder of this article provides examples of three forms of political campaign letters. First, we analyze party member (*partisan*) letters, concentrating on letters written about Europe and the euro; second, we analyze *informed letters* on and about taxation, which bear all of the hallmarks of a centralized party campaign; and third, we conclude by discussing *official letters* written by candidates.

Partisan Letters

“Partisan letters” argued in support of one particular party and were ostensibly written by either a member of the public or by a self-motivated party member. Criticisms of the political party defined as “the enemy” still dominated these letters but, in contrast to the letters of the previous section, were accompanied by compliments for the party the letter writer supported. Consider the following letter:

Life under the Tories was truly miserable. *Things have certainly got better* under Labour and now we have the chance to be *lifted* even further out of the mire that was the very long 18 years of Tory government. . . . Please, please, please don't waste your valuable vote on June 7. Cast your vote for Alice Mahon. Stanley R Sutcliffe (*Evening Courier*, June 1, p. 6; italics added)

The above letter is an unambiguous pronouncement in favor of the Labour Party. While it may (of course) be wholly attributable to the signatory, two factors activate suspicions of the closer involvement of the Labour Party in the construction of the letter. First, the imploration not to “waste your valuable vote” represented the key Labour strategy in the final week of the campaign, worried as they were by the (Labour) voter perception that since Labour was going to win, there was little point in turning out to vote. This strategy was repeated across a range of campaign materials, including leaflets, Party election broadcasts, and a controversial “mail-shot” video posted out to wavering Labour voters in marginal seats. Second, the italicized words in the upper part of the excerpt are derived from the two Labour election campaign songs—“Things Can Only Get Better” by D:Ream in 1997 and “Lifted” by the Lighthouse Family in 2001. Such sublime intertextuality bears closer correspondence to an orchestrated campaign than to the individualized plea of a concerned citizen.

Europe was the most frequently cited single topic of these readers' letters ($n = 31$; 16.0%), with a particularly strong presence on these letters' pages in the final 2 weeks of the election campaign (16.7% of letters in Week 4; 32.2% of letters in Week 5). These “euro letters” shuffled “the standard pack of dogmas and platitudes” (Jackson, 1971, p. 172), and did so to a greater extent than any of the more straightforwardly “party political” issues. Silver (2002, p. 17) suggests that the euro is one of the few subjects (along with religion and sexuality) “certain to send the green ink gang scrambling for their stationery.” True to form, readers criticizing the European Union, the threat to British sovereignty that the EU (assumedly) represents, and the “Save the Pound” campaign were vocal forces across the letters' pages of the sampled local papers. “Euro letters” were overwhelmingly negative (negative comments outnumbering positive by a ratio of 7:1), with the vast majority of these negative comments being directed at the Labour Party (76.6%). Remembering the campaign role of “the euro” identified by the

Conservative Party election agent (cited above), the authorial stamp of the Conservative Party on these letters is clear.

Interestingly, the majority of these (predominantly negative) letters lacked specificity, relying instead on rhetorical argumentative techniques that drew evaluative comparisons between “Britain” and “Europe”—the anti-euro letters elevating the former and devaluing the latter and the (four!) pro-euro letters restricted to elevating the latter, given that devaluing “Britain” is usually counterproductive when arguing to a British audience. Such an emphasis on “values” is to be expected, given Sillars and Ganer’s (1982, p. 192) suggestion that arguments based “on values rather than specific beliefs can be used to unify diverse groups” such as the readership of a newspaper or, more generally still, an electorate. Indeed, it is precisely by keeping specific belief propositions as much as possible out of the terms of an argument that enables “value”-based argumentation to perform its rhetorical function (McGee, 1980, p. 77). For these sampled “euro letters,” those positioned *against* the euro and the European project as a whole emphasized the value of sovereignty in their arguments, and those positioned *for* the euro placed greater emphasis on the value of state-provided social security and the greater social provision found in continental Europe. For each position, the favored value formed a warrant—the deductive proof that taking certain claims as a starting point, the step to the letter’s conclusion “is an appropriate and legitimate one” (Toulmin, 1958, p. 98).

Frequent expressions of what Billig (1995) terms “banal” nationalist pride extolling the virtues of Britain were employed. M. K. O’Sullivan, for example, asked whether pro-Europeans would want “to see British soldiers in a European Army” (*Yorkshire Post*, June 5, p. 12), while Peter Broadley argued that unless we vote Conservative we will “have to pick up pensions or benefits from the Post Office in Euros” (*Evening Courier*, June 1, p. 6). Similarly, on the same day as Broadley’s letter, Tim Wood (of the “Old Colonial Club Debating Society”) argued that closer relations with the continent represent the thin end of the wedge, that “in the next few years we shall all witness the abolishment of the pound, the imperial pint will follow . . . and we shall all have to drive on the right hand side of the road” (*Dewsbury Reporter*, June 1, p. 6). The success of these “quasi-logical” arguments (Perelman, 1968) is dependent, first, on a value system which deems that while everything “British” (as usual, a highly selective version of “Britain”) is good, all that is “European” (not even *continental*) is unacceptable, and second, on the presupposition that the letter writers are “ethnic managers” (Hage, 1998) with the ability to decide what will be admitted and what will be excluded from “Our” British national space. In these letters, Britain’s sovereignty is rhetorically elevated to the level of a “destiny,” fitting with Anderson’s (1983) claim that a key criterion in the imagining of nationhood is continuity, in terms of time and space. The nation, Billig (1995) continues, needs to be “imagined as a community stretching through time, with its *own* past and *own* future destiny” (p. 70, italics added). This imagined “future heritage” of a Britain free from European rule is central to the argument of anti-euro letters.

The rhetorical argumentative approach of the minority pro-euro letters differs slightly from the letters discussed above. While argument was still located at a level of values, pro-euro letters did not argue *against* the social value of sovereignty proposed in anti-euro letters, but rather placed sovereignty in relation to other social values which, they suggested, were of more importance. Thus, in Rescher’s (1973) terms, pro-euro letters were not directed toward value abandonment and acquisition, but toward an attempted *value rescaling* in which a level of social provision in line with mainland Europe was deemed to be a more desirable value to strive for. The following letter was the archetypal example of this value rescaling:

I am sick of the Tories' Europe bashing. . . . As a person, my identity does not depend on the pound. I want my children to enjoy the same standards I see every time I travel to the mainland. I would welcome European levels of taxation if the results are European standards in pensions, health, transport, etc. C. McPherson (*Yorkshire Post*, June 2, p. 14)

Here the letter writer misrepresents the Tories' anti-euro argument, implying that they, rather absurdly, believe that their identity "depends" on the pound in order to degrade the value they place on fiscal sovereignty. In contrast, he suggests Britain could "enjoy" (not experience) the "standards in pensions, health, transport, etc." (there are more he could add to this list), which he sees "every time" (consistency, reliability) he visits "the mainland"—itself an inclusive noun phrase entailing that Britain is an additional "part," a non-mainland section, of Europe. Further, and significantly, McPherson suggests that he does not wish such benefits for himself, but for *his children*, a strategy that helps to dispel potential accusations of a selfish "stake" (MacMillan & Edwards, 1999) in arguing for better social provision.

Informed Letters: Taxation

Second, "informed letters" aimed to illustrate the differences between Labour and Conservative governments, focusing on a specific topic such as unemployment, taxation, or spending on public services. Letter writers presented specific and often detailed figures to demonstrate the differences between the two main parties:

Over 270,000 people under 25 have been taken off benefit and into work through New Labour's New Deal. The Conservatives opposed the New Deal and would scrap it if elected into power. . . . The Labour Government has cut hospital waiting lists by 125,000. The last Conservative Government increased waiting lists by 400,000. The NHS now employs 7,000 more doctors and 17,000 more nurses under Labour. . . . Once again the Conservatives opposed this additional funding. Does anyone still believe that there is no difference between the Labour and Conservative parties? Ian Innes (*Evening Courier*, June 4, p. 6)

In letters of this type, the detail, the persistent parallelism, and—most importantly—the remarkable similarities between letters published in different newspapers and on different days are highly suggestive of a centralized campaign.

Letters on taxation focused predominantly on (assumedly) high Labour taxes, "stealth taxes" (inconspicuous forms of taxation, for example, taxing pension funds), and the "U-turns" of the Labor government with regard to taxation. For example:

I remember this promise at the time of the last General election: "We will not put up taxes." This must be one of the biggest lies of all time. . . . Even Dick Turpin wore a mask! Peter Broadley (*Evening Courier*, June 2, p.11)

This, in combination with their repetitive and highly detailed content, strongly suggests that the majority of letters on taxation can be attributed to Conservative Party supporters. Indeed, anti-Labour comments outnumbered anti-Conservative comments by almost five to one (1.22 and 0.26 negative comments per letter, respectively), and there was not

one pro-Labour comment in *any* taxation letter (compared to six pro-Conservative). Of course, letters targeted against Labour do not necessarily entail that these letters can be sourced to the Conservative *Party*; to make such an argumentative claim, we need to look at their content in greater depth.

Letters written on and about “taxation” corresponded very closely with the two approaches to party political letter campaigns suggested earlier by the regional election coordinator: First, letters were “ghost written” by party members with signatories inserted afterward, and, second, letters were written using information provided centrally. In order to illustrate the second of these strategies, the following letters need to be quoted at some length (numbered and positioned side by side for ease of reference):

<p>1. We now have a New Labour slogan: “Means testing—from the cradle to the grave.”</p> <p>2. I exaggerate? I think not, unless you missed the little fact that the proposed Baby Bond won’t go as [a] right to every baby.</p> <p>3. If those poor innocent babes are unfortunate enough to be born of parents who are “better off” they will only get half the Baby Bond.</p> <p>4. “Better off?” By whose judgment? And by what yardstick?</p> <p>5. Money . . . has been taken out of our pockets in 45 tax increases over the past four years, 26 of them on individual taxpayers, 19 on businesses.</p> <p>6. Those tax increases totaled £22 billion last year.</p> <p>Alan Carcas (<i>Guardian & Herald Newspapers</i>, 5 May 11, p.10)</p>	<p>1a. The proposed Baby Bond won’t go as [a] right to every baby.</p> <p>2a. If those poor innocent babes are unfortunate enough to be born of parents who are “better off” they will only get half the Baby Bond.</p> <p>3a. “Better off?” By whose judgment? And by what yardstick?</p> <p>4a. We now have a New Labour slogan: “Means testing—from the cradle to the grave.”</p> <p>5a. Not a word about “who pays?”</p> <p>6a. Before the last election Tony Blair said that he had no intention of raising taxes, yet Gordon Brown has imposed 45 stealth and other tax increases costing ordinary families £22 billion in a year.</p> <p>Gerald Jarratt (<i>Morley Advertiser</i>, May 23, p. 6)</p>
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When presented in such a manner, the consistencies between these two letters are quite striking. With the sole exception of line 5 in Jarratt’s letter, every argumentative claim is present in both letters, either in exactly the same form (cf. lines 1 and 4a, lines 2 and 1a, lines 3 and 2a, lines 4 and 3a) or else rephrased and represented (cf. lines 5–6 and 6a). The possibility that this equivalence is mere coincidence, and these letter writers are not singing from the same centralized hymn sheet, must be extraordinarily slim. Yet, because they were printed almost 2 weeks apart, in different newspapers and in slightly different forms (and remembering that the sections above are excerpts), their orchestrated nature was not picked up on—either during our primary data collection or, presumably, by journalists.

In accordance with the first strategy of orchestrated letter campaigns, newspapers also printed “ghost written” letters, as the following example makes clear (again, numbered for ease of reference; italics added).

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|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In September 2000, the country was made clearly aware of the difficulties caused by the Government's policy on fuel taxation. 2. There were spontaneous demonstrations involving a very wide range of interests with hauliers large and small participating in a variety of ways. 3. <i>The economy was almost brought to a standstill.</i> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1a. In September 2000, the country was made clearly aware of the difficulties caused by the Government's policy on fuel taxation. 2a. There were spontaneous demonstrations involving a very wide range of interests with hauliers large and small participating in a variety of ways. 3a. <i>The protest had widespread public support and the economy was almost brought to a standstill.</i> |
|--|---|

Clive Hoyland (Director, M&B Haulage & Waste Paper Courier LTD, *Yorkshire Post*, May 28, p. 12)

David Collett (Managing Director, R. Collett & Sons, *Evening Courier*, May 19, p. 11)

We can speculate about whether the small differences between these two letters are a product of extra material put *in* by the letter writer (author control) or a result of material being taken *out* by an editorial team (animator control). However, these two excerpts—this time quoted verbatim without suspension points—display an even closer equivalence than the previous example, suggesting that the published letters were derived from the same sent material and that their differences derive from editorial cuts.

Official Letters: Candidates

Third, “official letters” were printed that were signed by a prospective parliamentary candidate (PPC), a councilor, or a high-ranking member of a local political party, thereby making their party origins unambiguous. Frequent contributors of letters in this category included Ruth Spencer-Mitchell, the deputy chair of the Dewsbury Conservative Association (six letters), and Roger Taylor, conservative counselor for Northowram and Shelf (four letters). Letters signed by the PPCs themselves were also often printed during the 2001 election campaign.⁶ Although this encroachment into the letters page may appear to run counter to the general “public service” that the format allegedly performs, one journalist stated that when newspapers print letters from PPCs, they

are not just helping the candidates. Remember, the whole point is to help the readers themselves. Not to persuade them which party to vote for, but to show them what this person would like to do, or *could* do, for them and this community. (reporter on local newspaper)

In keeping with such a philosophy, journalists allowed PPCs to “soapbox” their election manifestos in the letters sections of their newspapers. Through cross referencing newspapers, we found no evidence that the letters had been edited or cut in any way after they had been received—a finding that supports Wahl-Jorgensen’s (2001, 2002) claims that editorial teams desire and hence show more consideration for letters displaying authority and relevance.

For the most part, letters from prospective candidates were detailed, well written, and critical without being severe. The following letter is a particularly good example:

Do you remember Tony Blair's promise that New Labour would "think the unthinkable" on welfare reform? . . . Labour's obsession with means-testing everything in sight is making the tax and benefits system more complicated, more expensive to run and increasingly unfair. Their stealth tax rises—45 of them since Labour took office—are hitting people where they never expected to be hit. Labour's policies might have been "unthinkable" four years ago. Now they are all too real. James Walsh (conservative PPC, Halifax, *Evening Courier*, May 15, p. 6)

In this letter James Walsh—a man with extensive speech-writing experience gained during his time working at Conservative Central HQ—willfully conflates two subtly different meanings of Blair's phrase "think the unthinkable" for rhetorical effect. In contrast to the original meaning ("unconventional" or "innovative thinking"), and through citing the assumedly *intentional* outcomes of New Labour's policy approach (a tax system that is not only "complicated" and "unfair" but also "more expensive to run"), Walsh recasts the expression to mean "thinking the iniquitous" or "thinking the unjust." In this impressively structured argument, Walsh therefore manages to criticize New Labour and implicitly suggest that inequitable welfare reforms would be "unthinkable," and therefore *absent*, under the Conservatives while simultaneously keeping the Conservative issue of taxation—or, more accurately, "stealth taxes"—on the election agenda.

Prospective candidates also used the letters page to forward themes and issues that they felt were not being accorded the emphasis they deserved. In characteristically eccentric fashion, and in direct contrast to our findings (see Table 2 and Franklin & Richardson, 2002a), Helen Martinek (UKIP) argued on more than one occasion that "Europe" and Britain's membership in the EU were issues being ignored in mainstream politics:

None of the big parties want to question our membership of the EU. So they will try to "manage" to debate by shouting "xenophobic" at anyone who dares to say that we should get out of the EU. . . . It is a stark choice: Do we want to live in a region of the EU superstate with almost no chance of throwing out its government? Or do we want to live in a free, tolerant, democratic and independent UK trading with the whole world? I want an independent UK. Helen Martinek (UKIP PPC, Halifax), *Evening Courier*, May 21, p. 11)

An identical argumentative approach (although focusing on a different topic) was taken in a letter written by the racist British National Party (BNP). It is interesting to observe that, following its successful use of a nationally transmitted party election broadcast during the 1997 general election campaign (see Malik, 2002, pp. 81–82), the BNP appears to have embraced the dominant thread of political marketing and localized its campaign:

Mr. Alan Fletcher (Letters, 4 May) says that the agreement between the Labour, Conservative and Liberal parties to veto discussion on race and immigration is "a denial of free speech." Which of course it is. Not one of the major parties is willing to engage in a grown-up debate on these very important

matters, why? . . . The British National Party will be standing in the Dewsbury constituency at the General election and again the people of Dewsbury will be offered a very real alternative to the increasingly dishonest major parties. A vote for the BNP will be a far more effective means of registering protest than will abstention. Paul Buckden (secretary, Dewsbury BNP, *Dewsbury Reporter & Mirfield Reporter*, May 18, p. 6)

As in the 1997 campaign, journalists justified the inclusion of BNP campaigning through a “classic bystander logic” that “emanates from the liberal tenets of freedom of speech, democracy and mediated tolerance” (Malik, 2002, p. 81). A journalist working for the newspapers that printed this letter typified such an approach, arguing that when it came to the BNP, while the paper was “looking to ensure that there’s nothing racist or too inflammatory, they have a right to have their say as well. . . . It’s true what they say: if you let people say things, people know what they are voting for.”

Conclusion

We have argued that the function of letters’ pages in local newspapers, certainly at times of heightened political activity typified by general election campaigns, is greater than simply the provision of a “public forum” for the unmediated discussion of issues of public concern triggered by readers. Local political parties, activists, and party press officers have ambitions to influence and shape the selection and publication of letters by orchestrating letter writing campaigns to highlight key policies and themes in party platforms. We have suggested that readers’ letters form a fivefold typology in which three categories—partisan, informed, and official letters—reveal evident party influence. The remaining two categories—cynical and negative letters—whose principalship can be more directly located with newspapers’ readers, represented a minority of letters printed during the election campaign.

Readers’ letters are typically understood to be the last remaining area within a newspaper that provides opportunities for individual and amateur authors to contribute to public debate in a spontaneous and uncoordinated way. The present research casts doubt on this commonsense assumption. The suggestion that letters’ pages constitute a public forum is part but certainly not the whole story of local newspapers’ letters’ pages. We have shown that during the 2001 United Kingdom general election campaign, the letters’ pages of local newspapers were colonized by political parties as part of their broader media based campaign strategies. The letters produced by party-orchestrated letter campaigns were selected and shaped by editorial teams whose motives were not driven by the dictates of deliberative democracy but by the need to fill the page in a balanced and interesting way. Such prosaic concerns cut across the prevailing academic and professional conceptualizations of the letters’ page as a public forum for deliberative debate. They signal a growing professionalization by both journalists and letter writers in the co-construction of the letters page.

Notes

1. The authors acknowledge with gratitude the support of the Nuffield Foundation in funding the studies conducted in 1992, 1997, and in 2001 (Nuffield Foundation Award SGS/00584/C).
2. The electoral constituencies studies were: Batley and Spen, Bradford North, Bradford South, Colne Valley, Halifax, Leeds East, Leeds North, Leeds West, Pudsey and Wakefield.

3. The thematic contents of letters were coded for 29 issues/themes. Table 2 lists the 15 most frequently occurring themes. Percentages are calculated for this particular table rather than for the total sample of 252 letters. An incident—“Prescott and the egg protest” ($n = 5$)—which perhaps attracted more attention than others during the campaign involved an egg being thrown in protest at the Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, who then responded by punching the protester. Many journalists, voters and letter writers approved of Mr Prescott’s action, viewing it as a justifiable and spontaneous response to provocation. This story is alluded to in a later letter.

4. Despite coding the negative and positive comments for all three major political parties—Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrats—Table 3 only presents data for the first two of these parties. This is due to the remarkably low frequency of letters either criticizing or praising the Liberal Democrats and hence the insignificance of these data.

5. This letter was printed in both the *Spenborough Guardian* and the *Heckmondwike Herald*.

6. The Labour Party did not have any letters to the editor printed with their incumbent candidates as signatories. As one election agent put it, “We think it’s a bit demeaning as the MP to write to the local newspaper, and [we] only write in if there is a strong point to rebut.” The Liberal Democrats also had no letters to the editor printed with their candidates as signatories.

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