



**MEDIA REFORM
COALITION**

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

The Bias of Objectivity

An analysis of coverage of the 2016 London Mayoral Race in the
London Evening Standard



26 April, 2016

Executive Summary

London's regional newspaper market is, by any measure, extremely concentrated. A population of over 8 million is served by just one daily general interest newspaper – the *London Evening Standard* (*ES*) – controlled by Alexander Lebedev. Its only indirect competition is the morning freesheet *Metro*, a national-focused title controlled by Associated Newspapers, which also owns the remaining 24 percent stake in *ES* not in Lebedev's hands.

That level of concentration is of particular concern during election periods, which is why the Media Reform Coalition – in collaboration with Goldsmiths, University of London – analysed the paper's coverage of the 2016 London Mayoral Election campaigns run by the two leading candidates: Zac Goldsmith (Conservative Party) and Sadiq Khan (Labour Party).

In line with the paper's outspoken editorial line in previous elections, our findings reveal a consistent editorial slant favouring the Conservative candidate's campaign. This would be less concerning if the bias was concentrated in editorial and comment pieces where we generally expect newspapers to voice their support for, or endorsement of, individual candidates or parties. But in fact the research shows that a systematic editorial imbalance was *more* concentrated in news reports, manifest in the way that different stories were selected, framed and prioritised by the paper during two crucial months in the election build up.

Overall, articles focusing on one or both candidates were almost twice as likely to favour Goldsmith over Khan, and Khan attracted twice as many negative headlines. Nearly all of these appeared within the first 10 pages of the paper where they would be most likely to be seen. Three of them were on the front page.

At the time of publication, Khan maintains a significant lead in the polls suggesting that the paper's editorial slant may not have been effective in swaying voter intentions (although some 25 percent of voters remain undecided). In any case, this does not erase the problem of concentrated media power. The London news market is a major platform to influence not just Londoners but also the national news and political agenda. One of the newspaper's 'exclusives' centred on alleged links between Khan and Islamic extremists, a theme that was taken up explicitly by the Prime Minister in Parliament.

Whilst social media and grassroots channels of communication offer some challenge to the power of local press monopolies, they are hardly enough to level the playing field. Indeed, the bulk of research in this area suggests that the social media news agenda is largely sourced from newspapers and broadcasters. The *ES* is given away free across the commuter network and read by upwards of one million people on a daily basis, an unrivalled degree of market penetration. Our research further underlines the urgent need for media plurality reform to ensure that news consumers and citizens are exposed to diverse political voices at all levels: local, regional and national.

Methodology

This research was conducted over a two month period between 8 February and 15 April 2016. An initial sample was generated using separate keyword searches on newspaperdirect.com, based on the surname and then first name for each candidate. The sample was then further refined to exclude articles that were not directly focused on one or both candidates.

This yielded a total of 121 articles that were then carefully coded for things like page number(s), type of article (eg news report, opinion editorial, etc), headline focus, article positioning, primary source, and issue focus. The coding schedule was designed to minimise interpretation by the researcher. For the most interpretive categories, the researcher had to make a judgement as to whether the headlines or article text were either overtly positive or negative in respect of either candidate. To test and ensure reliability a second coder analysed a sub-sample (20 percent), yielding a 91 percent agreement rate overall, and 85 percent specifically for the two more interpretive categories.

As a supplement to the above, concurrent news releases from each of the official campaign websites were coded for issue focus and then matched to any articles with the same issue focus appearing in the *ES*, either on the same day or in the subsequent edition.

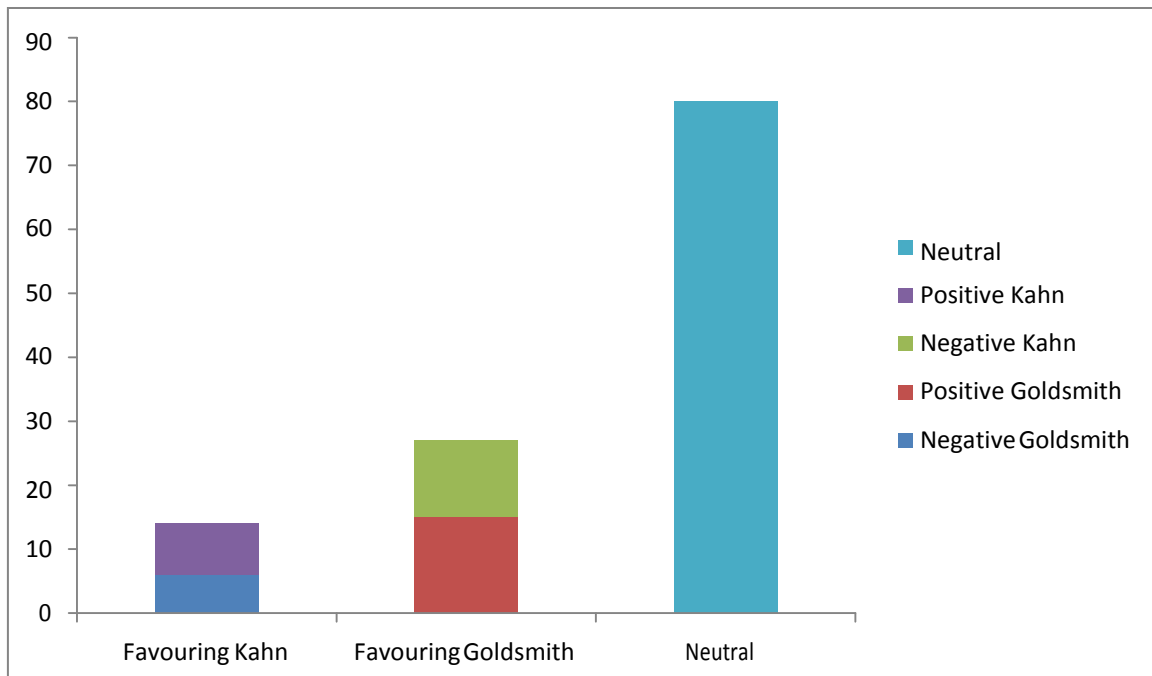
Finally, a more in-depth qualitative analysis of articles with headlines coded as positive or negative was then carried out in order to corroborate, contextualise and add depth to the quantitative findings.

All in a Headline

Figure 1 shows that the vast majority of headlines were coded as neutral (neither positive or negative in respect of either candidate). This reflects the cautious approach taken by researchers in coding headlines as positive or negative only when this was overtly apparent. It also suggests that the newspaper, on the whole, sought to adopt at least the appearance of balance in its reporting.

However, out of the headlines that did exhibit overt bias, these were almost twice as likely to favour Goldsmith compared to Khan. The total number of headlines in the sample that were positive in respect of Goldsmith and/or negative in respect in Khan totalled 27. This compared to just 14 that were positive in respect of Khan and/or negative in respect of Goldsmith.

Figure 1. Positive, negative and neutral headlines



When matched to concurrent news releases on the official websites for each candidate, headlines also revealed the extent to which the paper had its ear to the Conservative campaign. A total of 13 out of 15 news releases were picked up (a sample of which is shown in Table 1), many of them reproducing headlines almost verbatim. By comparison, just 3 out of 8 news releases from the Khan campaign were covered.

Table 1. Selected headline matches between *ES* and backzac2016.com

Date*	News release headline	ES headline
9 February	<i>Council tax hike for every London family under Khan experiment</i>	<i>Goldsmith: Khan would fund fares freeze with 59% rise in council tax</i>
15 February	<i>Zac’s pledge to restore and protect war memorials</i>	<i>Zac vows to save war memorials</i>
7 March	<i>Zac: 100 pocket farms will bring countryside to the class room</i>	<i>Zac brings country to the city with farm pledge</i>
23 March	<i>Zac: My plans to build a better London</i>	<i>Goldsmith pledges ‘housing czar’ to deliver more homes for Londoners</i>

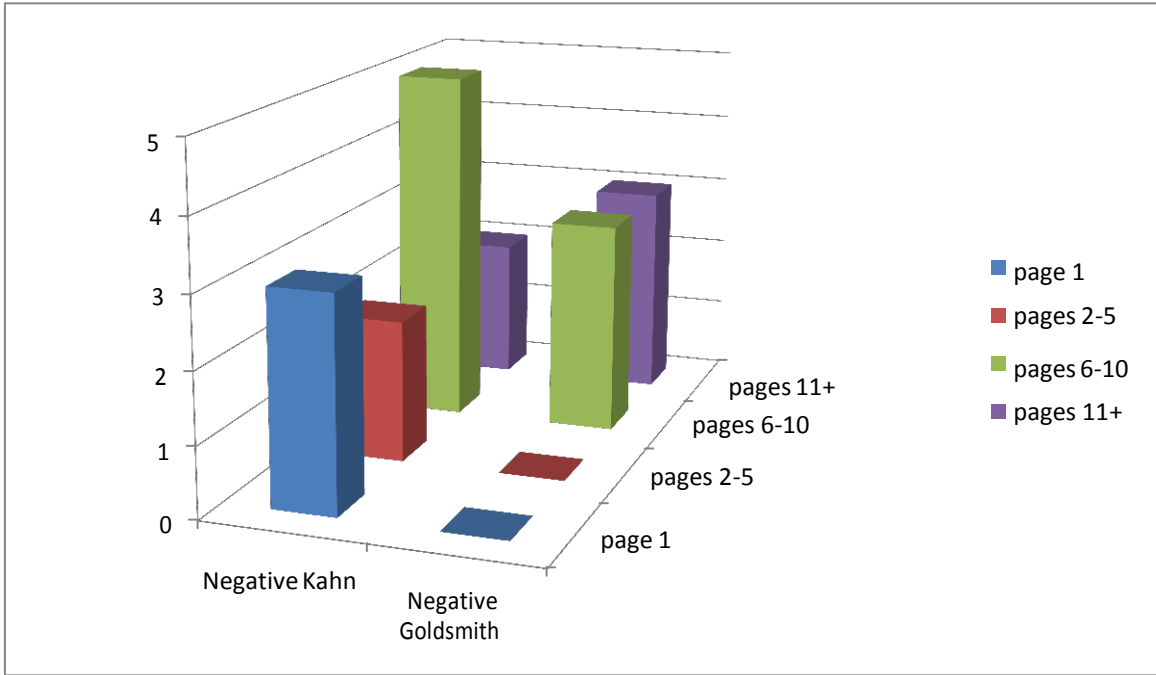
5 April	<i>Zac: I will take a zero tolerance approach to gang leaders</i>	<i>Goldsmith's school for gang leaders</i>
12 April	<i>Zac pledges half a million more jobs for Londoners</i>	<i>Goldsmith vows to create 500,000 jobs as he puts economy top of manifesto</i>

*of ES edition in which headline appeared

Spotlight on Negativity

When we drill a little further into the analysis, we find that the headlines favouring Goldsmith were also given considerably more **prominence** in the paper. This was particularly the case in respect of negative headlines which is where the mobilisation of bias tends to be concentrated in electoral coverage. As shown in figure 2, Khan attracted twice as many negative headlines compared to Goldsmith (12 versus 6 respectively). Of these, three appeared on the front page of the newspaper and six appeared on the first five pages. In contrast, none of the six negative headlines for Goldsmith featured on the front page and only one in the first five pages.

Figure 2. Location and number of articles carrying negative headlines



Articles with negative headlines for Khan were also given considerably more **attention** compared to those that carried negative headlines for Goldsmith. This was reflected in the relative amount of news print that the appended articles accounted for. Of the 12 negative headlines for Khan, four were spread across, or featured on more than one page. In contrast, none of the six articles with negative headlines for Goldsmith featured any such spread.

Among the negative stories there was one personal 'issue' that persistently dogged each campaign. For Goldsmith, this concerned the on-going controversy over his personal tax affairs whilst Khan came in the firing line for his alleged links to Islamist extremists. These articles warrant closer attention since historically, personal controversies have been the bedrock of press 'campaigns' during election periods.

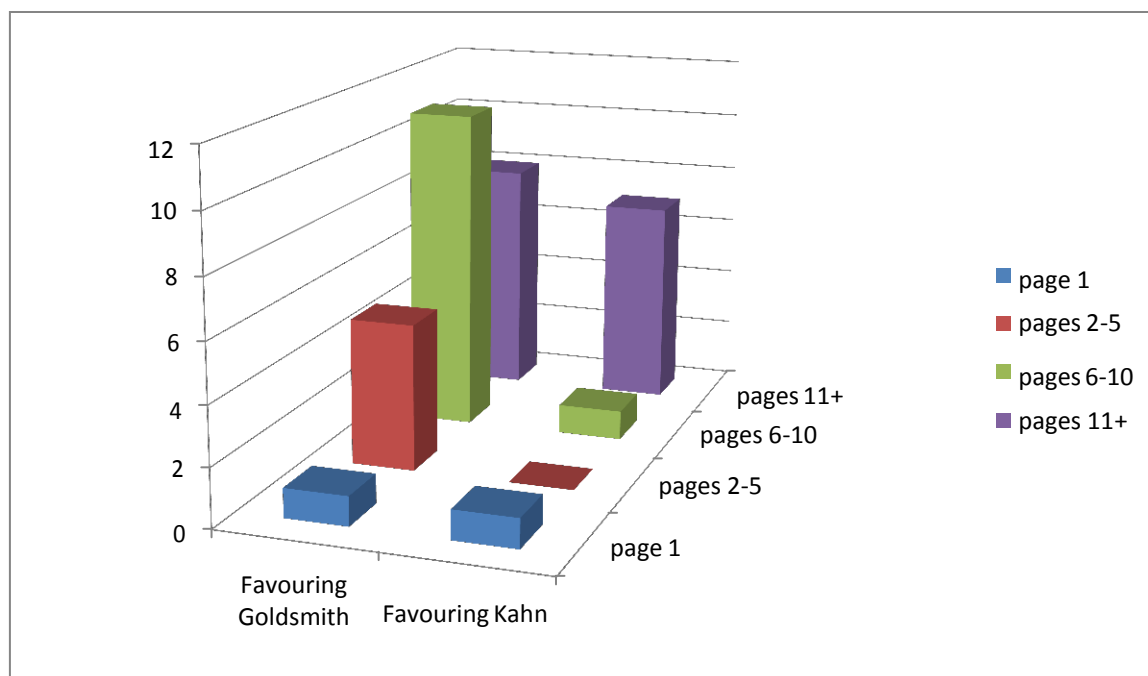
In total, there were 11 articles concentrated on one or other personal controversy with the majority (seven in total) focused on the Goldsmith's personal tax affairs. But of these, only two carried a headline that was negative towards Goldsmith. Four were neutral and one was actually positive for Goldsmith. By comparison, all four of the articles concerning links to extremism carried a negative headline for Khan. Furthermore, three of these articles appeared within the first five pages compared to just one of the articles on Goldsmith's tax.

Qualitative assessment also revealed the extent to which the articles themselves betrayed bias in favour of Goldsmith. In particular, the tax articles were predominantly centred on Goldsmith's defensive response to allegations, particularly the publishing of his personal tax return. But the extremism articles gave comparatively little attention to the Khan campaign's vociferous defence in response to the allegations, focusing instead on the allegations themselves, most of which appeared to stem from the newspaper.

Taking Positions

When we move beyond headlines to look at the substance of articles, the imbalance is even more accentuated. As shown in Figure 3, articles favouring the Conservative candidate (either positive towards Goldsmith or negative towards Khan) outnumbered those favouring his opponent by more than three to one. Goldsmith favouring articles were also twice as likely to feature in the first five pages and more than three times more likely to feature in the first 10 pages, compared to articles favouring Khan.

Figure 3. Number and location of articles favouring either candidate



Once again, the imbalance was especially noteworthy in respect of negative articles. So, for instance, the average page number for articles that adopted a negative position in respect of Khan was page five whilst the equivalent for Goldsmith was page 23.

As with headlines, the majority of articles were neutral in respect of one or both candidates. But on closer analysis even here there was evidence of an editorial leaning in favour of Goldsmith. In particular, eight of the neutral articles carried a headline that was negative towards Khan, compared to just three that were negative towards Goldsmith.

The research also found that bias was concentrated in actual news reports over opinion editorials or comment pieces. This is striking because we would normally expect the opposite trend, with newspapers using commentary to express their support or endorsement of a particular candidate, whilst striving to be more objective in news reports. In fact, the exact opposite appears to have been the case. Indeed, Khan himself penned two comment pieces in the sample analysed, whilst none were written by Goldsmith. Out of the 28 remaining editorial or comment articles, just two carried a headline that was positive or negative in respect of one of the candidates; specifically, one editorial in support of Goldsmith and one comment piece that was critical of him.

Conclusion

While the majority of news reports were framed as neutral or balanced in respect of the two main candidates, a significant proportion of these did betray a clear bias. It's worth emphasising that this bias was not manifest in the expression of opinion, as is typical for editorial or commentary pieces, but rather in the selection of particular stories, issues and language that *overtly* favoured one campaign over the other. Consistently and overwhelmingly, these articles favoured Goldsmith.

Although outnumbered by neutral or balanced headlines and articles, those that exhibited bias – and especially those that were negative towards Khan – were given comparatively greater prominence

and attention. This raises the important question of story impact. A news story that features relatively early on in the edition is likely to have more impact on readers compared to those that appear further on. We might also speculate that bias in news stories themselves may have greater impact than opinion editorials precisely because they are generally expected to be – and often dressed up as – objective in comparison.