

# REPORTING THE NEWSPAPERS: EVIDENCE OF BIAS SKEW IN THE BBC'S SELECTION OF TITLES, STORIES AND GUEST DISCUSSANTS OF NEWSPAPER COVERAGE, 18<sup>TH</sup> APRIL TO 21<sup>ST</sup> MAY 2017

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## SUMMARY

### BACKGROUND

We are in a General Election Period. The BBC is required by its Charter and Ofcom's amended Broadcasting Code, to provide high quality and distinctive material to support all audiences in participating in the democratic process as informed citizens. It is also required to treat politics with due accuracy and due impartiality, and during elections to balance coverage against past and current evidence of electoral support. This guidance applies to all of the BBC's election coverage, including its regular citation and reviews of national newspaper headlines.

### METHODS

The broadcast versions of "The Papers" and web versions of the "Papers Blog" for every day from the General Election Announcement on 18 April to 21st May 2017 were obtained and analysed to assess the number of days on which different newspapers outputs were mentioned, and discussed, and the time given for discussion of each newspaper, on a daily basis. The primary party endorsement which each newspaper gave to Parties at the May 2015 General Election was obtained. Papers were then categorized as Conservative, Labour, Other Party or No Party endorsing. Information provided by the presenter of Guests (name, job, and organisation) invited as discussants on the Broadcast version "the Papers" was recorded. These guests were classified as affiliated with the same categories of Party as above using evidenced methods. The proportional distribution across Party affiliated organisations was calculated and compared across Party categories and the extent to which they were balanced with respect to published voter proportions for each Party in the 2015 General Election was estimated. Confidence estimates were placed on all estimates using standard statistical techniques.

### RESULTS

Across both its daily Broadcast programme "The Papers" and in the "Papers Blog" the BBC is giving between sixty nine and ninety five percent more coverage and discussion to papers supporting the Conservative Party than is balanced, using 2015 election voting as a reference. It is doing this at the expense of other parties who polled similar numbers at that election. Further, in its selection of Guests to discuss the newspaper outputs in its broadcasts, it is giving almost twice as much airtime to Guests affiliated as individuals or from organisations linked with the Conservative Party. No trade unionists or charity representatives were featured in the sample, and no politicians except from the Conservative party. The statistical probability that this could occur by chance if the BBC were

genuinely fulfilling its criteria to achieve balance on 2015 voting is across our measures less than one in ten thousand ( $P < 0.0001$ ).

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## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide strong evidence suggesting that the BBC, during the course of a General Election, is violating its Charter and sections 5 and 6 of the amended Broadcasting Code<sup>1</sup>, by the way it re-disseminates selected facts, events and opinions published by an already imbalanced spectrum of national newspapers. It is failing to give due weight to the coverage of parties during the election period by not taking account of evidence of past and current electoral support, as proscribed by Ofcom's amended guidelines. Finally, through the selection of Guest discussants of newspaper coverage the BBC is failing to represent proportionate and diverse political perspectives, taking due account of the particular funding sources and editorial stance of organisations represented.

## BACKGROUND

The BBC's mission and purposes under its Royal Charter<sup>2</sup> include acting in the public interest in delivering news which is duly impartial, high-quality and distinctive and which builds people's understanding. It should offer analysis and content not widely available from other UK news providers, so that all audiences can engage fully with major issues and participate in the democratic process, as active and informed citizens. The BBC is also required by Ofcom to treat all matters of politics with due accuracy and due impartiality in news and other output and to give due weight to the coverage of parties during elections, based on evidence of past and current electoral support. Further, The BBC's *Election Guidelines for the June 2017 General Election*<sup>3</sup> state that the Corporation needs to take all reasonable steps to be sure and that they have taken account of how organisations are funded. They also state that in reporting on press coverage of the campaign and in newspaper reviews, they should also take account of any relevant subjective editorial stance.

Ofcom Data suggest that newspapers remain (just below the internet (40% vs 41%)) as an important source of news and information to the voting age population in the UK, with greater use by older age groups and among those not in employment<sup>4</sup>. There is also good evidence that the party people vote for is strongly associated with the political endorsements of the papers that they read, although it is not clear which direction (if any) the causality might operate<sup>5</sup>.

Research on coverage of the 2015 General Election demonstrated the sensitivity of broadcasters to an issue agenda shaped largely by a Conservative-leaning national press.<sup>6</sup> There has also been a considerable amount of concern about the impartiality of the BBC news coverage in relation to the Labour Party, since Jeremy Corbyn became leader in 2015.<sup>7</sup> Studies of the EU referendum have also demonstrated over representation of the Conservative Party in broadcasting coverage.<sup>8</sup>

The credibility of these findings is significantly enhanced by the astonishing broadcast of comments made by Sir Michael Lyons, previously Chairman of the BBC's highest body, the BBC Trust. On 12<sup>th</sup> May 2016 he said on the World at One: *"I don't think I'm alone in feeling that the BBC has sought to hedge its bets of late. There have been some quite extraordinary attacks on the elected leader of the Labour Party. I mean quite extraordinary. I can understand why people are worried about whether some of the most senior editorial voices at the BBC have lost their impartiality in this"*.

The Democratic process relies on a legitimate election system. But it also relies on those voting having a balanced view of the issues at stake, and on the position of the Parties on those issues. By any measure the British national press remains highly concentrated, both in terms of ownership and partisan editorial stance. Clearly the BBC as a public services broadcaster has a role to play in balancing the potential disinformation, at both the narrative and factual level, which may be communicated to the voting public by this lack of plurality.

Aside from the influence newspapers are said to wield on the BBC's overall news agenda, fixed slot airtime is devoted to reviewing national newspapers on a number of its flagship and peak time news programmes. These include the Andrew Marr Show on BBC One, the Today Programme on Radio 4, and Radio 5 Live. In addition, the BBC presents a daily blog (The Papers Blog) on its website devoted to re-disseminating headlines from national newspapers.

This study aims to provide reliable quantitative empirical evidence of the coverage of "The Papers" daily broadcasts as well as the "Papers Blog" since the announcement of the current General Election as well as the affiliations of the individuals invited onto the "The Papers Programme" and to consider whether these findings are consistent with the BBC's Royal Charter, its current election guidelines, and the requirements of the Broadcasting Code.

## METHODS

### OVERVIEW

The broadcast versions of “The Papers” and the Papers Blog” were downloaded from the BBC Iplayer website<sup>9</sup> and the BBC Blog site<sup>10</sup> on a daily basis between the 18 April and 21 May 2017. The primary endorsements to Political Parties provided by each paper at the May 2015 General Election was obtained from the Wikipedia website<sup>11</sup>. References provided in support of endorsements were checked in the references cited on the page to confirm validity. Papers were then categorized as Conservative, Labour, Other Party, or No-Party endorsing.

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### DATA COLLECTION

#### “THE PAPERS” BROADCAST

For each day the broadcast episode(s) were carefully reviewed and the following information was recorded: a) whether each paper was mentioned (*Paper Mentioned*); b) whether each paper was discussed (*Paper Discussed*); c) for how long each paper was discussed (*Time Discussed*); and d) the name of each guest and the presenter’s description of the guest’s role and organisational affiliation.

For each episode the procedure for collecting these data was as follows. At the beginning (introduction) of the programme there is a screening of images of the front page of several papers, with the Presenter stating (usually rereading) the paper’s name and restating or rereading the main headline for 10 seconds or so. For each paper image screened, named and headline read or restated, a binary number (0,1) (variable *Paper Mentioned*) was recorded against the paper name. Generally the next occurrence is the Presenter introducing Guests by their names and their organisational affiliations; or as a commentator or freelancer with no organisational affiliation stated. Next, the Presenter chooses a headlines from one of the papers for discussion; and a discussion commences. The time this occurred was recorded as *Discussion Start Time* and allocated to the paper, At some point the presenter draws the discussion of this headline/paper to a close. This time was recorded as *Discussion End Time* and allocated to the paper). The Presenter then moves on to raise a new discussion. This point is again recorded as *Discussion Start Time* and allocated. Paper/headline for the new discussion focuses on either: a) another paper (most often) and another headline (can be same topic); or b) the same paper (occasionally) and another headline (different topic). Sometimes, the presenter will go back to a paper which has previously been discussed, focussing on one of its headlines which is not the same headline from the same paper that was discussed previously. Where this occurred *Discussion Start Time* and *End Time* were recorded as a separate period allocated against the paper. Occasionally, the Presenter introduces an image of a paper which was not screened, or named at the beginning, restates its name and headline and commence a discussion. When this occurred, the binary variable *paper mentioned* was updated to 1. All these new discussions are recorded against papers as Discussion Start and End Times. This continues for the remaining 15-20 minutes of the show. Where a paper was discussed, but not presented in the introduction, binary variable paper mentioned was updated to 1. For each paper, the total time (seconds) was estimated for all periods allocated to the paper and aggregated across periods to produce a variable *Time Discussed* for that paper-episode. If a paper was discussed for any number of periods, a binary variable *Paper Discussed* was coded as 1 if the papers was discussed (independently of the number of periods), and 0 if it was not discussed during the episode. Reviews were repeated threeer times without the reviewer having access to previous data recorded.

Guests described as having jobs associated with 2015 Party endorsing papers were then categorized as affiliated with the parties endorsed their newspaper. All other guests we categorized as having no clear affiliation. This produced a categorisation of guest affiliation: *Affiliation from 2015 Endorsements*. All Guests and the organisations with which presenters associated these across the period of the study were then extensively reviewed on the internet. Where there was overwhelming evidence of the Guest, or their organisation currently supporting a political party, then the guest/organisation was reallocated as affiliated with that Party. This produced a second categorisation of guest affiliation: *Adjusted Affiliation*.

The variables *Paper Mentioned*, *Paper Discussed* and *Time Discussed* were then aggregated across the whole period for each category of guest affiliation; both for *Affiliation from 2015 Endorsements* and for *Adjusted Affiliation*.

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## THE PAPERS BLOG

The archived online versions were carefully reviewed and the following information was recorded for each paper for each day: a) whether the paper was mentioned and b) the number of times the paper was mentioned/discussed. Each paper was categorised as affiliated according to its endorsement of parties at the 2015 election endorsement. Whether mentioned and the number of times mentioned were then summed over the entire period, for each endorsement.

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## 2015 VOTING DATA

Data was obtained from the Electoral Commission website<sup>12</sup>. These were aggregated into numbers and percentages of valid votes at the election cast for three groups: a) Conservative candidates, b) Labour Candidates and c) other Party Candidates

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## ANALYSIS

The coverage of papers (*Paper Mentioned* and *Paper Discussed* for the period 18<sup>th</sup> April–21<sup>st</sup> May) was calculated as numbers and percentages in both the “The Papers” and the Papers Blog” for each affiliation category. Percentages for guests were calculated by affiliation category in two ways: a) as proportions of all guests who appeared, and b) as proportions of all guests with attributable affiliation to political parties. Standard errors for these proportions and 95% confidence intervals were estimated using standard methods<sup>13</sup>. The same was done for invited Guests. The total daily time of discussion for each paper category for each episode ( $T_{c_e}$ ) was combined with the average per-episode time for that category over all episodes ( $\bar{T}_c$ ) to calculate standard errors for  $\bar{T}_c$  with confidence intervals. These were then converted in average of daily discussion time contributed by each category (with confidence intervals), and the percentage excess/deficit of fair estimated by applying 2015 voting proportions to  $\bar{T}_c$  were obtained.

In order to assess the appropriateness of the level of coverage in relation to previous elections (see Ofcom guidance<sup>14</sup> and BBC guidance<sup>3</sup>), the percentage of each paper’s coverage by Party endorsement category 2015 was calculated as a ratio to the percentage of votes cast in the 2015 General Election for the parties corresponding to the category. For example, if the percentage of mentions of Labour affiliated papers was 55% and the percentage of votes cast in 2015 for Labour was 28% then the ratio was calculated as 55/28, or 1.96. From this ratio the excess coverage of fully “fair” was taken (in this example 0.98), and the findings presented as a percentage (in this case a 98% excess). Confidence intervals on the estimates these represented of the true underlying selection distribution the BBC was sampling from, were calculated on these excesses and deficits using standard statistical methods. The same was done for invited guests using the Party Affiliation data. For time the percentage excess/deficit of fair estimated by applying 2015 voting proportions to  $\bar{T}_c$  were obtained and used in the same way.

Further,  $\chi^2$  tests were used to assess the probability that deviation for 2015 Election balance in proportions would have occurred by chance in sampling. Finally, because some days had several episodes and there was the likelihood of correlation between the variables in these episode, a sensitivity test was carried by excluding the shorter of two episode on the same day, discussed by the same guests. This gave only very marginal changes to the findings and their associated P values.

## RESULTS

### PERIOD COVERED

This paper covers the period from 18th April 2017 to the 21st of May 2017.

### AFFILIATION BY NEWSPAPER ENDORSEMENTS AT GENERAL ELECTION 2015

The categorization of Newspapers to groups defined by Party endorsed at the 2015 General Elections is shown in Figure 1 below. This produced nine Conservative, four Labour and three Other Party endorsing papers.

**Figure 1: Affiliation of Newspapers by Party Endorsement 2015**

Endorsement 2015	Newspaper
<b>Conservative</b>	The Sun
	The Mail
	The Mail on Sunday
	The Times
	The Sunday Times
	The Telegraph
	The Sunday Telegraph
	The Star
	The Financial Times
<b>Labour</b>	The Sunday People
	The Mirror
	The Guardian
	The Observer
<b>Other Parties</b>	The Sunday Express
	The Express
	The Independent
<b>No Endorsement</b>	The I
	Independent on Sunday
	The Metro

### VOTING DATA

The proportions of valid votes cast at the 2015 General Election, as published by the Electoral Commission<sup>15</sup> was **Conservative Party: 37%**, **Labour Party: 30%** and **Other Parties 33%**.

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#### AFFILIATION OF GUESTS FROM 2015 ENDORSEMENT AND AS ADJUSTED AFFILIATION

The affiliation of guests from endorsement of their organisation for political party at election 2015, and adjusted for research on their organisations is shown in Table 1 below. Reallocation to give the Affiliation was as follows.

Conservative Peer, Conservative Woman, Politics Home, Reaction Digital Media, The Spectator, Arbuthnot Banking, and Bell Pottinger were adjusted to Conservative based on either stated affiliation, or history of funding or current or previous ownership. The New Statesman was reallocated to Labour. Two freelancers were reallocated, one to Labour and one to Conservative on the basis of stated affiliation during the broadcasts.

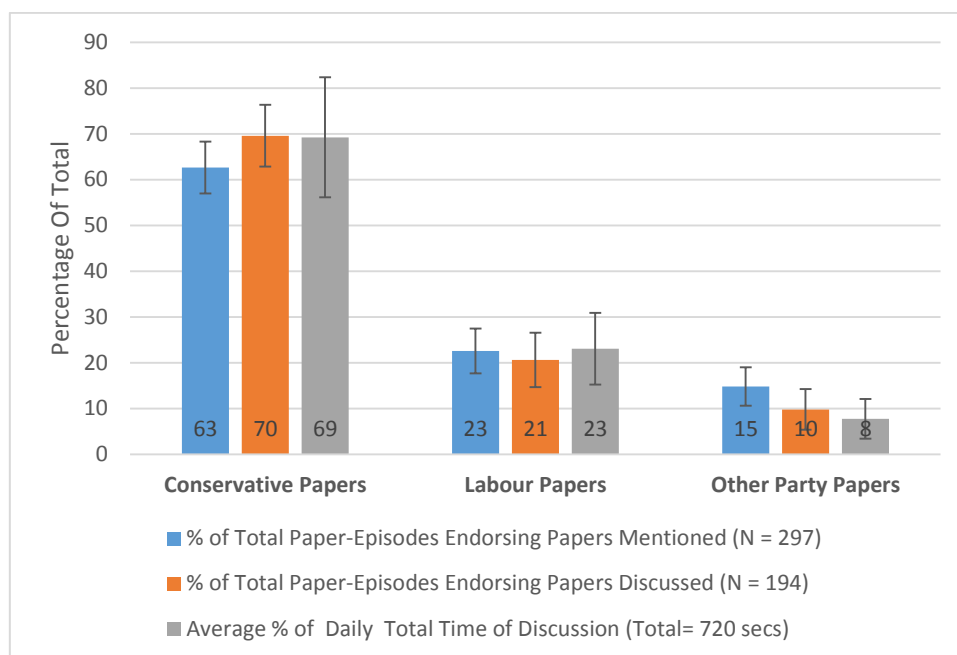
**Table 1: Affiliation of guests from 2015 endorsement and Adjusted Affiliation**

	<b>Times invited</b>	<b>Affiliation from 2015 Endorsement (nationals)</b>	<b>Adjusted Affiliation</b>
<b>National Newspapers</b>			
Evening Standard	6	Conservative	Conservative
Independent	6	Other	Other Parties
Financial Times	5	Conservative	Conservative
Telegraph	5	Conservative	Conservative
Times	5	Conservative	Conservative
Express	4	Other	Other Parties
Mirror	3	Labour	Labour
Sun on Sunday	3	Conservative	Conservative
Guardian	1	Labour	Labour
Sun	1	Conservative	Conservative
Sunday Express	1	Other	Other Parties
Sunday Mirror	2	Labour	Labour
Sunday Times	1	Conservative	Conservative
<b>Other Media</b>			
Politics Home	4	Media Other	Conservative
Conservative Woman	3	Media Other	Conservative
France 24	3	Media Other	No Clear
Huffpost UK	3	Media Other	No Clear
New European	3	Media Other	No Clear
Buzz Feed	2	Media Other	No Clear
Record	2	Media Other	Labour
Herald	1	Media Other	No Clear
New Statesman	1	Media Other	Labour
New York Times	1	Media Other	No Clear
Reaction Digital Media	1	Media Other	Conservative
Spectator	2	Media Other	Conservative
The I	1	Media Other	No Clear
<b>Other Organisations</b>			
Arbuthnot Banking	2	Org Other	Conservative
Bell Pottinger	1	Org Other	Conservative
FTI Consulting	1	Org Other	No Clear
Pepperdine University	1	Org Other	No Clear
Conservative Peer	1	Org Other	Conservative
<b>Independent</b>			
Freelance	23	Freelance	No Clear (but one reallocated to Labour and one to Conservative)
<b>Unknown</b>			
	1	No Clear	No Clear



Figure 2 shows the coverage of newspaper articles and headlines by the political affiliation of the papers at the 2015 General Election.

**Figure 2: Distribution of Coverage of Endorsing Papers in Broadcasts**



Of 297 total paper-episode mentions of endorsing papers during the period, Conservative Papers represented 63% (95% CI: 57-68), Labour Papers 21% (95%CI: 18-28) and Other Papers 15% (95%CI: 11-19).

Of 194 total paper-episode discussions of endorsing papers during the period, Conservative Papers represented 70% (95% CI: 63-76), Labour Papers 21% (95%CI: 15-27) and Other Papers 10% (95%CI: 5.3-14).

Of an average of 720 seconds per day of total discussion of endorsing papers and their headlines/features (excluding initial showing of front page image), Conservative Papers represented 69% (95% CI: 56-82), Labour Papers 23% (95%CI: 15-31) and Other Papers 8% (95%CI: 3.4-12).

Overall for paper-episode mentions,  $\chi^2$  (2df) = 87.35 over the three categories of papers with expected values calculated from 2015 election support. The probability that the distributions of paper episode-mentions across categories would occur by chance if the underlying distribution conformed with party voting proportions at Election 2015 was  $p < 0.0001$ .

For paper-episode discussions  $\chi^2$  (2df) = 91.97 over the three categories of papers. The probability that the distributions of paper episode discussions across categories would occur by chance if the underlying distribution conformed with party voting proportions at Election 2015 was  $p < 0.0001$ .

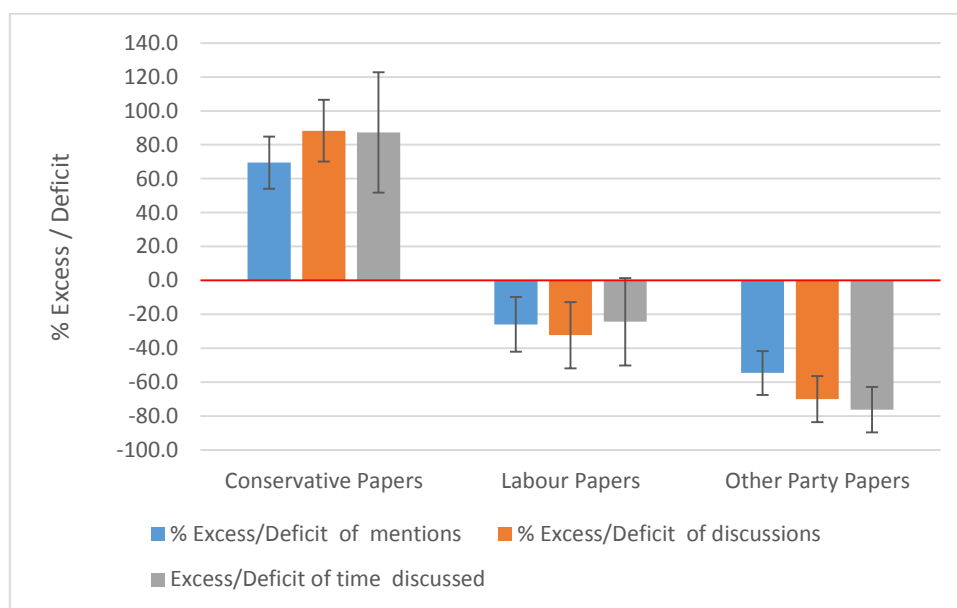
**The Excesses (positive values on vertical axis) or Deficits (negative values) of coverage of endorsing papers measured against 2015 General Election Party voting are shown in Figure 3.**

Conservative Papers had a 69% (95%CI: 54-85) excess of mentions, an 88% (95%CI: 70-106) excess of discussions and an 87% (95%CI: 52-123) excess of daily discussion time over fair balance as defined by 2015 voting.

Labour Papers had a 26% (95%CI: 9.8-42) deficit of mentions, a 32% (95%CI: 13-52) deficit of discussions and a 24% (95%CI: 1.4% excess-52% deficit) of daily discussion time over fair balance.

Other Papers had a 55% deficit of mentions (95%CI 42-67), a 70% deficit of discussions (95%CI 56-84) and a 76% (95%CI: 63-90) deficit of daily discussion time over fair balance.

**Figure 3: Distribution of Excess/Deficit of Coverage of Endorsing Papers in Broadcasts**

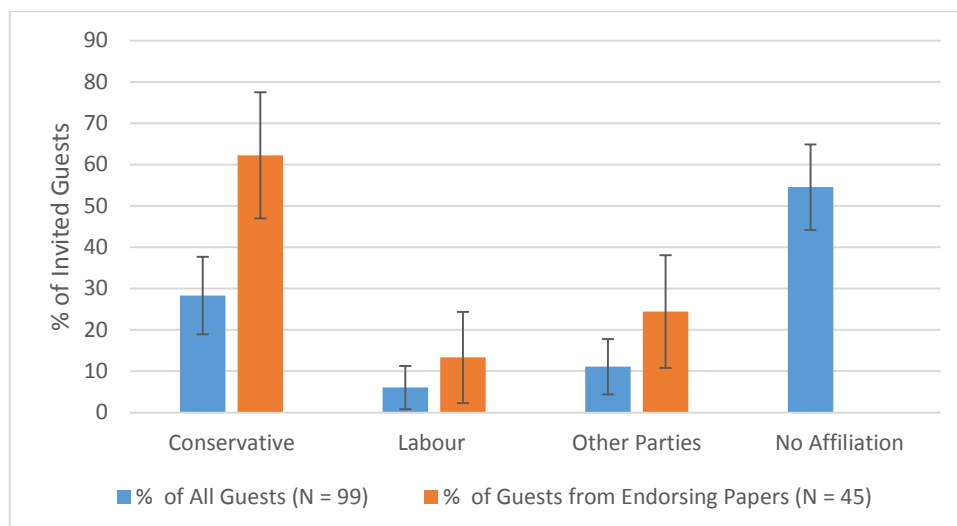


**Affiliations from 2015 Election Endorsements from Organisations of Invited Guests are shown in Figure 4 as proportions of both all Guests; and of just those from Newspapers with endorsements.**

Of all 99 Guests invited during the period, those from Conservative Papers represented 28% (95% CI: 13-34), Labour Papers 6% (95%CI: 0.86-11), Other Papers 11% (95%CI: 4.4-18) and those who were freelance or from non 2015 Endorsing Daily papers comprised 55% (95%CI: 45-65).

Of the 45 Guests invited during the period who were from 2015 Endorsing Papers, those from Conservative Papers represented 62% (95% CI: 47-77), Labour Papers 13% (95%CI: 2.3-24) and Other Endorsing Papers 24% (95%CI: 11-38). Overall for affiliation of invited guests' organisations,  $\chi^2$  (2df) = 30.11 over the three categories of papers with expected values calculated from 2015 election support. The probability that the distributions of affiliation of invited guests' organisations across categories would occur by chance if the underlying distribution conformed with party voting proportions at Election 2015 was  $p < 0.0001$ .

**Figure 4: Distribution of Affiliation of Invited Guests' organisations**

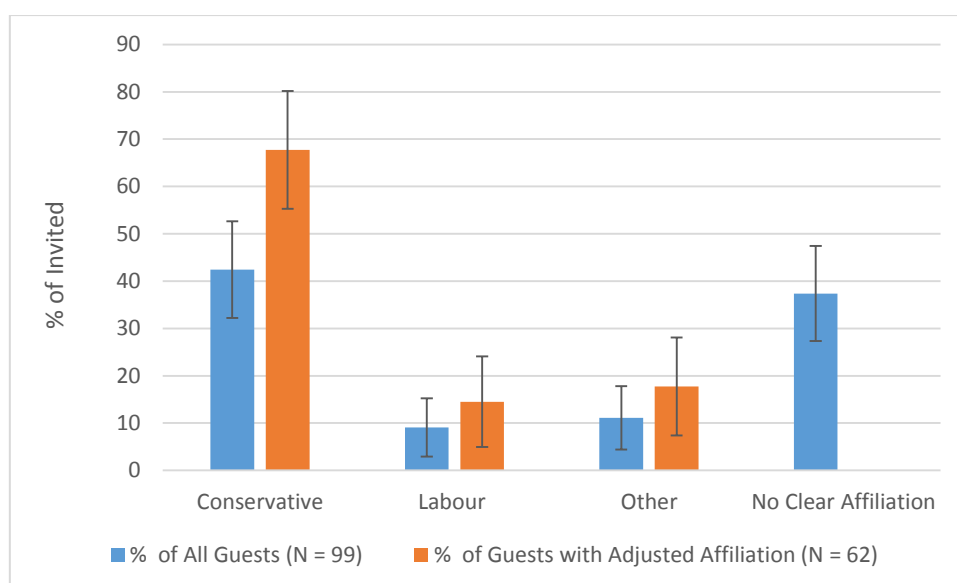


**Adjusted Affiliations of Guests based on their organisations' or their personal Adjusted Affiliations (See Table 1) are shown in Figure 5 as proportions of both All Guests; and of just those with organisational or individual Adjusted Affiliations.**

Of all 99 Guests invited during the period, those from Conservative Affiliated Guests represented 42% (95% CI: 32-53), Labour 9% (95%CI: 2.9-15), Other Party Affiliated Guests 11% (95%CI: 4.4-18) and those with no affiliation represented 37% (95%CI: 27-47).

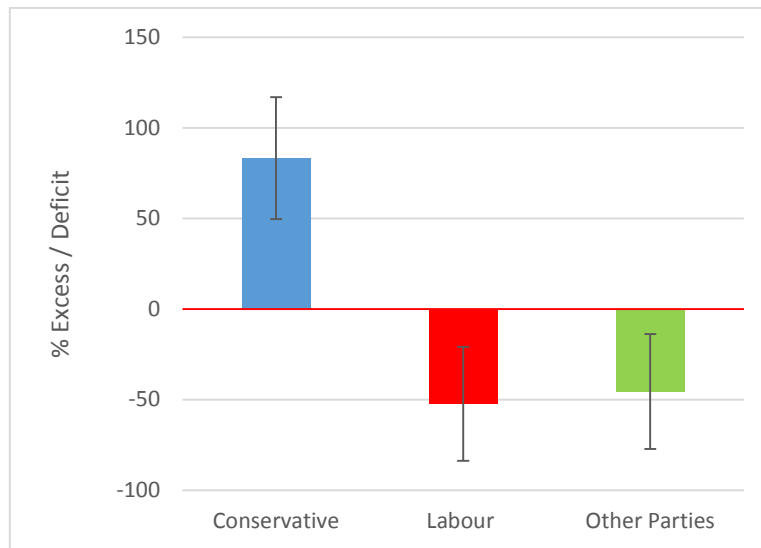
Of the 62 Guests invited during the period for whom Adjusted Affiliation with a Party was identified, those from Conservative Papers represented 68% (95% CI: 55-80 Labour Papers 15% (95%CI: 4.9-24) and from Other Endorsing Papers 18% (95%CI: 7.4-28). Overall for guests for whom Adjusted Affiliation with a Party was identified,  $\chi^2$  (2df) = 81.47 over the three categories of papers with expected values calculated from 2015 election support. The probability that the distributions of affiliation of invited guests' organisations across categories would occur by chance if the underlying distribution conformed with party voting proportions at Election 2015 was  $p < 0.0001$ .

**Figure 5 Distribution of Adjusted Affiliations of Invited Guests**



The Percentage Excesses (positive values on vertical axis) or Deficits (negative values) of selected Guests in relation to Fair Selection by 2015 Voting as measured against 2015 General Election Party voting are shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Distribution of Excess/Deficit of representation by Guests on Adjusted Affiliation

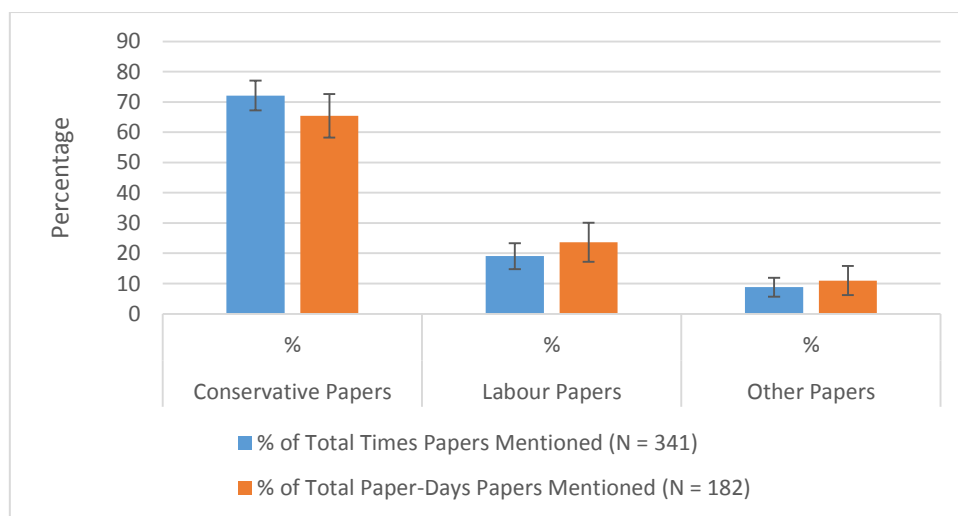


Of all 62 Guests with Adjusted Affiliations, Conservatives had an 83% (95%CI: 50-117) excess of mentions, Labour a 52% deficit (95%CI: 21-84) and Other Parties a 46% (95%CI: 14-78) deficit of invitees.

THE PAPERS BLOG

Figure 7 shows the Coverage of different Newspaper in The Papers Blog daily web pages by categories of Papers defined by Election 2015 Endorsement. Both percentage of total mentions over the period, and percentage of total paper mentions (ie if a paper is mentioned several times on a day, this is counted as the 1 paper-day) are shown.

Figure 7: Coverage of Different Papers in the Papers Blog by Election 2015 Endorsement

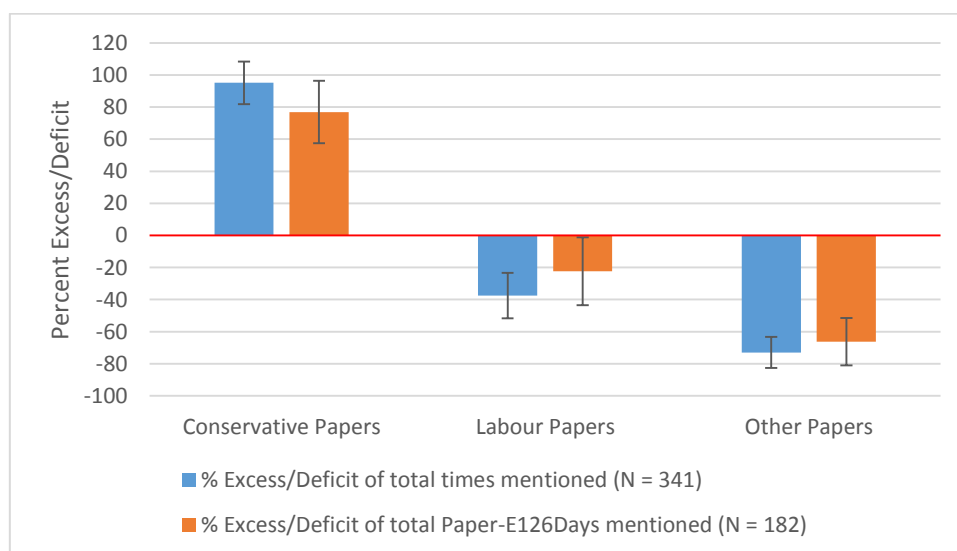


Of 341 total individual-paper mentions during the period, Conservative Papers represented 72% (95% CI: 67-77), Labour Papers 19% (95%CI: 15-23) and Other Papers 9% (95%CI: 5.6-12). Overall for individual mentions,  $\chi^2$  (2df) = 188 over the three categories of papers with expected values calculated from 2015 election support. The probability that the distributions of individual mentions across categories would occur by chance if the underlying distribution conformed with party voting proportions at Election 2015 was  $p < 0.0001$ .

Of 182 total paper-episode papers were mentioned during the period Conservative Papers represented 65% (95% CI: 58-73), Labour Papers 24% (95%CI: 17-30) and Other Papers 11% (95%CI: 6.2-16). For paper-days mentioned  $\chi^2$  (2df) = 69 over the three categories of papers. The probability that the distributions of paper-days mentioned across categories would occur by chance if the underlying distribution conformed with party voting proportions at Election 2015 was  $p < 0.0001$ .

**The Excesses (positive values) or Deficits (negative values) in the Papers Blog of coverage of endorsing papers measured against 2015 General Election Party voting are shown in Figure 8**

**Figure 8: Distribution of Excess/Deficit of Coverage of Endorsing Papers in Blogs**



Conservative Papers had a 95% (95%CI: 82-108) Excess of total times mentioned, and an Excess of a 77% (95%CI: 57-96) in total paper-episode Mentioned over fair balance as defined by 2015 voting.

Labour Papers had a 37% (95%CI: 23-52) Deficit of total times mentioned, and a Deficit of 22% (95%CI: 1.3-44) Deficit in total paper-episode Mentioned over fair balance as defined by 2015 voting.

Other Papers had a 73% (95%CI: 63-83) Deficit of total times mentioned, and a Deficit of a 66% (95%CI: 51-81) in total paper-episode Mentioned over fair balance as defined by 2015 voting.

## DISCUSSION

This paper has used reproducible, transparent and opinion free approaches to data collection and analysis study to examine the balance in the BBC’s re-broadcasting and dissemination of the news and events put out daily by the national newspapers. It has demonstrated that across both its daily Broadcast programme “The Papers” and in the “Papers Blog” it is devoting highly and significantly disproportionate coverage and attention to papers supporting the Conservative Party, using 2015

election voting as a reference. Further, in its selection of guests to discuss the newspaper outputs in its broadcasts it is giving similarly highly, significantly and disproportionate coverage to guests who support the same Party. During the sample period analysed, no trade unionists or charity representatives were selected, and no politicians except from the Conservative Party. The statistical probability that this could occur by chance if the BBC were genuinely fulfilling its criteria to achieve balance on 2015 voting is in most cases less than one in ten thousand.

Democracy relies upon informative and high quality news and discussion disseminated through the media to inform voters during election periods.

But much of the media – and especially the press – is controlled by a small number of companies or very wealthy individuals who potentially have vested interests. Broadcasters subject to public service regulation – and the BBC in particular – have a profoundly important role as a counterweight to the largely unregulated press and online news media. The degree to which they are fulfilling their obligations during election periods – particularly in respect of due impartiality and proportional representation of parties – is a critical issue for established democracies across the developed world.

Given the apparent widening of news sources with the growth of online consumption, it is not clear why the BBC continues to devote daily and regular airtime to amplifying the voices of a highly concentrated and predominantly Conservative-leaning national press. These airtimes cast an uncritical spotlight on the branding, headlines and opinions of newspapers. Furthermore, this study strongly suggests that the BBC further skews the coverage in favour of the Conservative Party through its selection of papers and headlines, as well as guest discussants who offer secondary interpretations of the coverage.

The findings of this study provide strong evidence to support the charge that the BBC, during the course of a General Election, is violating its Charter, the requirements placed on it by Ofcom, and its own Election Guidance by the way it re-disseminates the selected facts, events and opinions published by national newspapers.

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<sup>1</sup> Ofcom's rules on due impartiality, due accuracy, elections and referendums. March 2017. Retrieved from [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0030/98148/Due-impartiality-and-elections-statement.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0030/98148/Due-impartiality-and-elections-statement.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Royal Charter for the continuance of the British Broadcasting Corporation. December 2016. Retrieved from [https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/about/how\\_we\\_govern/charter.pdf](https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/about/how_we_govern/charter.pdf)

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