

**The University of Liverpool**  
**Department of Social and Environmental Studies**  
**School of Politics and Communication**

Class: COMM 113 – Research Methods for Media and Politics

Lecturer: Dr. Neil Gavin

**Essay:**

**Compare and contrast the ‘contemporary history’ method used in Butler & Kavanagh 1997 with the sort of analysis undertaken in Norris et al. ‘On Message’.**

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Course: MA Politics and Mass Media

Deadline: 17/01/2003

An election is an event with several winners. Firstly, and most obviously, the election winner himself (less often herself), secondly the TV stations and newspapers, as campaign coverage, especially on election eve, guarantees big audiences and readership, and thirdly, the social scientist, or generally, the researcher interested in elections. There are, of course, different methods available for this undertaking, and two possible ways of dealing with an election and its outcomes are subject of this essay. The first one is the contemporary history method applied in Butler and Kavanagh's "The British General Election of 1997"<sup>1</sup>, the second one is the more social scientific method of experimental and content analysis applied in Norris et al.'s "On Message"<sup>2</sup>. We will see how far their objectives differ from each other, what strengths and weaknesses the particular methods have. And how these methods can be compared.

To write about events in the recent past – which is what contemporary historians do – is at the first glance a 'mission impossible'. Especially when dealing with events in the media world or with events covered by the media, there is such a vast amount of information that it seems unfeasible to find a way through this jungle of data. The crucial point then, to arrive at a meaningful account of the events, is to "select relevant and important sources"<sup>3</sup> and to consider which of the available material is the "most significant and most revealing"<sup>4</sup>. It is obvious that such a methodology encompasses a great piece of subjectivity – namely, which of the information is being considered as meaningful. Smith, rather in regard to a history which is studying more past events, but also applicable to the studies examined here, finds that it is important that the historian recognizes that the account he/she writes is "only *a* history of communication, not *the* history of communication."<sup>5</sup> The result is, Smith says, quoting Gottschalk, that the researcher seeks a "*verisimilitude* rather than *objective* truth."<sup>6</sup>

Nord has suggested two ideal types of historians, which are at the extreme ranges of historic research. The first one is the "humanist historian". He is

"primarily interested in unique events or sequences, seeks to understand an event by understanding its context in a particular place and time. [He] may borrow ideas and methods from social science but is not interested in contributing to social science

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<sup>1</sup> Butler, David & Kavanagh, Dennis (1997): *The British General Election of 1997*. Basingstoke: MacMillan Press.

<sup>2</sup> Norris, Pippa et al. (1999): *On Message. Communicating the Campaign*. London: SAGE.

<sup>3</sup> Berger 2000, p. 130.

<sup>4</sup> Berger 2000, p. 132.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, p. 317. Original emphasis.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, p. 317. Original emphasis.

theory. The mode of description and explanation is often, though not always, narration.”<sup>7</sup>

The other type is the social science historian, who is rather interested in general processes, using generalizations and social science theories and methods to help build social theory.<sup>8</sup> There is, however, Nord hastily adds, practically no historian who would operate on these extremes. Most are rather scattered along the full range between the dichotomies.

The habit of telling history in a narrative imposes some problems. Of course the text should be factually correct and not skewing events, but Historians also want their books to be well written and to contain some drama and suspense. This “may lead to simplifications or exaggerations or other deviations from the reality of situations being dealt with.”<sup>9</sup>

Like all research, the history method has to deal with the questions of generalizability and representativeness. Consulting Nord in this matter, this problem seems to be solved fairly quickly:

“As a philosophical problem this issue is now dead or at least comatose. It now seems clear that all historians generalize, whether they want or not. (...) The reason has to do with the goals of history. (...) The goal is not to generalize but to understand a particular event in a particular place and time.”

Indeed, or so it seems, there is not even a possibility for history to be generalizable. Exactly the point that a single event is chosen to be told makes the act of generalizing impossible. As the event scrutinized is a singular event and there will never be the same event again, it is not possible to generalize the findings of this particular event further. There can be, of course, questions asked what the events mean. But this is not necessarily the task of the historian. The historian asks ‘what happened’. If the questions at stake were at some more social scientific level, the task of generalizing the findings would be accomplishable; it would even have to be done. One could therefore conclude that ‘humanist historians’ are in no need to generalize or produce generalizable findings, while the ‘social science historian’ would indeed have to be. Depending on where in this range between the dichotomies the historian situates himself, he would have to generalize accordingly.

When looking at the articles by Harrison and Scammell & Harrop in the Election book, it seems obvious that both accounts of the election fall into the category of humanist history; or

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<sup>7</sup> Nord 1989, p. 294.

<sup>8</sup> Nord 1989, p. 294.

<sup>9</sup> Berger 2000, p. 135.

at least they are at this end of the continuum rather than at the other. Using Nord's definition of a humanist history, one finds that the events are narrated, that the authors try to use elements of drama and suspense, and that they do indeed borrow from social science theory but are not directly interested in contributing to the theories themselves. The authors present some figures and tables showing, for example, the share of time each party had in the television news, they show which issues or topics had been most important to the press and television or which politician from which party featured most often on television. It is unfortunately not directly clear how the authors arrived at some of these figures – for some they provide the source – as they do not spell out the methodology used for it.

The two earlier mentioned types of historians can also be described in a different way. Smith distinguishes between an empirical historian and an impressionistic historian. The empirical historian is characterised as one “who asks open-ended questions about past events and answers it with selected facts which are arranged in the form of an explanatory paradigm.”<sup>10</sup> The crucial point here is that this paradigm “consists of a reasoned, systematic examination of surviving record happenings, written in a spirit of critical inquiry seeking the whole truth.”<sup>11</sup> It is the application of system and rigor to the study of the past. The impressionistic or “scissor-and-paste” historian on the other hand “labors over notes about an event ..., shuffles them into topical areas, adds the literary polish ... and tacks a summary at the end.”<sup>12</sup> The central difference to the empirical historian is that the impressionistic historian did fail to apply a system and the initial question: “to what end is this note taking directed?”<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately the texts of Scammell & Harrop and Harrison seem to fall in the latter category, even if not of the worst kind. Their only goal is to tell what happened (which might already be called a systematic question, though) which results in a very broad and unfocused account of the events. The texts themselves are structured in a sense, but the analysis is unsystematic. Harrison, when talking about television news and their reporting about the campaign, offers a broad overview of what happened in terms of coverage. It is unsystematic in the sense of not offering clear definitions or units of analysis. The comparison between the particular TV stations and their news is not brought forth in a systematic, somehow reproducible way but seems to rely on Harrison's own experience as a long-term election observer rather than on

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<sup>10</sup> Smith 1989, quoting Fischer, p. 317.

<sup>11</sup> Smith 1989, p. 317.

<sup>12</sup> Smith 1989, p. 317.

<sup>13</sup> Smith 1989, p. 317.

real scientific methodology. This is especially obvious when Harrison values the different TV channels and their coverage. For instance, he calls the Radio 5 Live coverage “jaunty”<sup>14</sup>, Radio 1’s Newsbeat “made a *brave* bid to reach a youthful audience”<sup>15</sup>, and calls much reporting “bland and unadventurous.”<sup>16</sup> These are valuations that are very broad and seem to spring rather from Harrison’s own values of reporting and news coverage than from a somehow reproducible analysis or method. The analysis of the Political Elections Broadcasts (PEB), however, is different, as Harrison tries less to comment on them but rather gives a simple depiction of the single broadcasts. Still, he cannot resist analysing the events from his experience rather than through methodology, for example when he calls a spot by Socialist Labour “very much Old Labour at any previous election.”<sup>17</sup> He attempts to give the whole text more credibility by quoting reporters, television presenters or politicians. This helps in the particular instance he uses them, but not, however, on the macro level.

The article by Scammell and Harrop deals with the events in a similar fashion. They analyse the press during the election campaign of 1997. They show which parties the individual papers supported, how they covered the campaign and which issues were the most covered of all. This happens in a similar style as Harrison does it. They also give figures to proof some of their findings: they have numbers for partisanship of newspapers, they have numbers about the parties supported by the readers of the newspapers, they list up all headlines that occurred in all national newspapers during the last month of the campaign, they analyse press content – though rather in numbers than in terms of content –, and they count the number of photographs of politicians that appeared in the papers. Furthermore they list the amount of political advertising that was printed by the papers. All these numbers are each time compared with the respective numbers of the election in 1992. This has the effect of showing quite well in how far the newspaper coverage and the newspapers themselves have changed during the previous five years. However, the narration and analysis of the events that Scammell and Harrop bring forth is just as Harrison’s more an interpretive account than an analytic one. It also seems to be immoderately relying on the author’s own experience regarding newspaper election campaign coverage. There are ever so many instances in which the authors value something after their very own yardstick, which is mostly not pursuable, at least not in scientific terms. For instance, they call the Daily Mail’s campaign “spirited” and find them

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<sup>14</sup> Harrison 1997, p. 137.

<sup>15</sup> Harrison 1997, p. 137. My emphasis.

<sup>16</sup> Harrison 1997, p. 141.

<sup>17</sup> Harrison 1997, p. 151.

working “with some vigour but little originality”<sup>18</sup>, the Daily Telegraph’s editorials were “powerful”, “distinct”<sup>19</sup> and some of their columns were “unmissable”, while the Guardian’s deemed to be “rarely the most enticing.”<sup>20</sup>

Again it has to be noticed that Scammell & Harrop did not have an objective other than to tell what happened. The comparison with the 1992 election do open up a historical dimension which makes the results of their work more comprehensible than otherwise. But what the results, both of Harrison and Scammell & Harrop, finally mean is not explained. On the contrary, the real questions about the impact of these developments described are only just asked at the end. They ask if the fact that newspapers switched their support from Conservative to Labour could possibly have influenced voting decision or if the decision to switch is rather based on changing readers’ preferences, in order to gain a larger share of the circulation pie? They cannot answer it, but they did not ask this questions in the first place, after all.

Just the opposite approach go Norris et al. in their book ‘On Message’. They ask questions first and answer them later. Now what exactly do they do?

The part of the Norris book analysed here comprises of experimental studies. Norris et al. set up two experimental designs in which they want to find out whether the public’s agenda is influenced by the newspapers agenda and whether television news, be they bad or good news, have any effect on party preferences of the audience and what this effect comprises.

The great strength of experimental studies is that it is a direct causal analysis. It is a “quantitative approach to ferret out cause-and-effect relationships.”<sup>21</sup> It can “provide very strong evidence that a given independent variable ... actually has any effect that might have been discovered.”<sup>22</sup> Also, as there is a control group which is not subject to the variable, it is highly probable that the discovered relation is not the result of another, unrecognised phenomenon.<sup>23</sup> There is, of course, as always, a catch. The biggest problem for experiments is that it is conducted under unreal conditions, i.e. in a laboratory or other non-natural

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<sup>18</sup> Scammell & Harrop 1997, p. 167.

<sup>19</sup> Scammell & Harrop 1997, p. 169.

<sup>20</sup> Scammell & Harrop 1997, p. 170.

<sup>21</sup> Christensen 2001, p. 61.

<sup>22</sup> Berger 2000, p. 213.

<sup>23</sup> Berger 2000, p. 213.

situation.<sup>24</sup> This imposes the inevitable question of the possible generalization to a real-world situation.<sup>25</sup> One needs therefore, as Norris et al. find, “other components in the research design to relate these findings to the real world...”<sup>26</sup>

Norris et al. find, with regard to their question about television news influencing the public agenda, that “the experiments ... suggest that exposure to television news has the potential capacity to influence the public’s issue, but (i) the effects of a single exposure design remain modest, and (ii) the impact varies according to the initial salience of the issue.”<sup>27</sup> To verify the findings and make them more ‘real’, they compare two more methods and their findings with their own work. Relying on content analysis Norris et al. compare the major issues during the campaign with the public’s campaign agenda found by the British Election Campaign panel survey 1997. These studies seem to bear no evidence that the public agenda is influenced by the news agenda. Norris et al. can, however, explain this deviation by giving some quite convincing and reasonable arguments. They cannot give an absolute answer, though.

The second experimental study Norris et al. carry out is dealing with the effects of television news coverage on party preferences of the audience. They perform video experiments with pre- and post-test questionnaire to verify various hypotheses, which they state at the beginning of the chapter. These are: Positive coverage increases the support for a party, negative coverage reduces support; greater exposure for a party increases, less exposure reduces support; coverage of issues which can be attributed to a particular party (issue-ownership) work in the advantage of that party.<sup>28</sup> After conducting the experiments they find, however, only significant proof for the hypothesis that positive coverage increases support. All the other findings show only non-significant changes in party preferences. In their words: “...the only significant television news exposure effects are those relating to ... Positive news. ... none of the other exposure types exerts a significant effect on voter preferences.”<sup>29</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the problem with experimental studies is that the question remains how ‘true’ the actual findings are in the real world. Norris et al. recognize this problem for the above study as well and apply a control mechanism with numbers and statistics from the

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<sup>24</sup> Berger 2000, p. 213.

<sup>25</sup> Christensen 2001, p. 70.

<sup>26</sup> Norris et al. 1999, p. 123.

<sup>27</sup> Norris et al. 1999, p. 122.

<sup>28</sup> Norris et al. 1999, pp.131.

<sup>29</sup> Norris et al. 1999, p. 143.

actual election campaign. They find, finally, that there is no evidence that television news coverage had any effects on the actual voter's decision during the 1997 campaign.<sup>30</sup> This does not mean that their findings are wrong – it simply shows that there are just too many factors that influence voter's decisions that it is not reasonable to ascribe changes in the preferences to only one of them.

The two types of election research presented here are obviously two completely different approaches. The historical approach has his narrative and very rich and detailed description of events. It is a very broad assessment, though, and in the case of the study in question here also a very unsystematic and unstructured approach. There is apparently no direct goal the researchers wanted to strive for except for simply telling the events. The question at stake is simple: 'what happened?' It is therefore a very traditional piece of historical research and is, inevitably, a rather interpretive description of the election. It also seems to be biased in a sense, as the authors' very own standards on television or newspaper reporting are applied rather than a reproducible standard of analysis. The question of generalizability appears to be a problem: it is crucial for research to be generalizable, to see what the individual findings say for the larger picture. But the very nature of historical research prohibits this measure. A historical event is a completely singular event that will never be repeated exactly the same. History does not reiterate. And therefore, indeed, the question of generalizability is solved. A historian needs not necessarily generalize.

It seems to be justified to enquire about the validity of the findings. How truthful an account is the analysis? This is exactly another problem historical research has to face. There are, of course, facts which cannot be opposed, but the very interpretive mode of description encompasses the fact that the findings will not be repeated the very same way again.

Experimental studies in contrast are a very different approach. It is highly structured and has an apparent inherent logic. The question is: 'something happened, now what does this mean?' Starting with questions to be answered, the research goes the straightforward way to the answers. Conducting the experiments, comparing the findings with the questions, finding the conclusion. The focus is, therefore, very narrow. The researcher does not want to explain the whole picture but concentrates on a very small piece of it and explores what this could possibly mean. As the experiments are very logically composed, the findings are easily reproduced, highly valid and to a high degree generalizable. The obvious problem of a

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<sup>30</sup> Norris et al. 1999, p. 147.

transfer to the real world is in the present case solved by multi-method approach that relates the experimental findings to the real world. Unfortunately then, the conclusion is that the particular outcomes are significant in the experiment, but do not impose a very high effect in the real world. The overemphasizing of cause-effect-relations is dangerous when not compared with outer-experiment factors.

Being two different approaches, the historical analysis and the experimental studies can hardly be directly compared. Ultimately, they offer the best of two worlds, respectively. On the one hand a very detailed and in-depth description, albeit very broad, partly unstructured and interpretive; on the other a very narrow focus on a singular topic, but with highly reliable findings. The best way might be to take the historical analysis, get a good overview, and then narrow down the own focus of interest and move on to the experiments. Always bearing in mind, of course, which advantages and disadvantages each method offers.

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