

Summary

The present study explores the discursive quality of the political coverage in UK newspapers. Given that the mass media are one of the cornerstones of public debates in modern societies, co-structuring the public sphere, thereby affecting public opinion and thus ultimately the legitimacy of political decisions, it becomes centrally important to get a better understanding of how their reporting is shaped. From the perspective of deliberative theory this translates into the general questions of whose voice is heard and which arguments receive uptake, how much space is given to different actors and how they relate to each other. In order to capture these different deliberative dimensions the present study develops a Discourse Quality Index of the Media (DQI_m) and, starting in 1960, conducts an in-depth content analysis of six different debates in four decades across a theoretical sample of five different newspapers.

The study is mainly interested in establishing the direction and strength of three different contextual factors:

1. If deliberation involves a learning process, can we see an increase in the deliberative quality of political media coverage over time?
2. Are there significant differences between those debates that are initiated or strongly driven by actors from the periphery – and which are thus preferable from a normative perspective – and those that are dominated by the political centre?
3. And finally, how strong is the influence of single actor groups and of discourse coalitions across actor categories on the deliberative quality of media discourse?

With respect to the first question the analyses confirm that although very small, we can indeed observe a statistically significant “learning curve” in the political coverage in the sense that more recent debates tend to score higher on the deliberative index than those of the 1960s. For the civil society actors as an important sub category the story is a more complex one: whereas they receive more uptake as speakers in more recent debates, the same cannot be said of their role as addressees and interlocutors of other actors: here, no clear trend is discernible and the development of their status in public debates is thus an ambivalent one. Thus while on the whole the deliberative conditions thus improve through times, this is not necessarily the case with respect to specific actor classes or specific deliberative roles as there are some opposing trends.

At the same time and relating to the second question, the descriptive results for the single deliberative dimensions suggest that in most cases there seems to be a systematic difference between periphery and centre driven debates. A closer analysis of the two public sphere types confirms the impression, though contrary to the hypothesis it is not always the normatively desirable periphery driven debates which perform better in terms of their discursive quality – at least not on all dimensions of the DQI_m. In fact, on all but one dimension of the index the seemingly deficient centre driven debates achieve higher scores. The results also indicate a trade-off between the two main dimensions which constitute the DQI_m, namely a democratic one – where periphery debates perform better – and a argumentative one, where centre driven debates are dominant. It appears thus that maximising the inclusiveness of actors is bought at the price of more complex argumentative structures, while in turn the more reasons and the more diverse perspectives are exchanged, the smaller the circle of actors. As a theoretical consequence of this, centre driven debates do not appear as flawed and imperfect as we might have thought; rather it seems that both

public sphere types come with their specific advantages and disadvantages and that there is therefore no single way to optimise their deliberative quality.

Picking up the last question it is easy to see that public sphere types ultimately are created by the actors in a debate and the effect they have on its discursive quality is therefore central to the analysis. To some extent the results for the actor groups mirror those of the public sphere types as actors of the political centre do not make any significant contribution in terms of enlarging the debates to other actors – their positive impact is limited to the argumentative dimension of the DQI_m . Almost the reverse is the case for civil society actors for while their effect on the argumentative variables is lower than that of the political actors, they have above all a significant effect on making the debates more inclusive; the media's role is similar.

Political contest, however, is not so much driven by single actor groups but by the discursive alliances between those who hold similar points of view, i.e. by discourse coalitions that cut across single actor categories. On a very general level we can identify three different such coalitions according to their relationship with a common addressee: conceived this way as ideal types, coalitions can either support a common addressee, utter demands or criticism. As the analysis shows, it is the latter, i.e. the criticism coalition, whose effect is the largest – and positive – on the discursive quality. While this might seem somewhat counterintuitive at first, sociolinguistically speaking criticism comes with a higher “argumentative burden” than, say, the support of a common addressee. It is this aspect that leads to the debate's becoming more intense and hence more deliberative.

On the whole the empirical investigation proves that deliberation is a means of reasoned conflict articulation – though it is beyond the scope of the present study to assess in how far this ultimately leads to the resolutions of conflicts. The study has revealed some ambivalent results, e.g. in relation to the changing status of civil society status, and led to several counterintuitive findings, above all with regard to the effect of public sphere type on the deliberative quality of the debates. And finally, we have seen that conflict is the motor of democratic debates: criticism is revealed as the central ingredient which requires the participants to expand their range of reasons and to take into account the perspective of others.