***What was the media’s role in consolidating fiscal realism in the General Election 2015****?*

***An analysis of the televised election debates.***

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***Abstract***

The Global Financial Crisis in 2008 marked a shift in Britain’s political and economic climate, shaping the formation of the coalition government in 2010. The subsequent creation of a dominant economic narrative, fiscal realism, paved the way for drastic fiscal deficit reduction in the form of austerity. Fiscal realism continues to dominate British politics, evident in the general election campaign of 2015. This paper is centred on the notion that the media consolidated these normative economic assumptions in the four television election debates, thereby facilitating the Conservative election victory. By applying the dominant approaches in media analysis to economic policy, this paper will discursively analyse how the media failed to critique fiscal realism in the debates. The pervasive rhetoric of the politicians, the media’s pre-selection of audience questions alongside the management of the debate by the presenters established a frame through which the economy was understood. The politicians’, through their use of scaremongering and provocative rhetoric, were able to evoke feelings similar to a war-time struggle. This in turn manufactured a patriotic media, echoing the government’s neo-liberal stance. This discourse consequently controlled, distorted, and narrowed the economic debate in the run up to the General Election. Alternative narratives have become almost impossible to produce, and are rejected by the government, by the media and by the public, demonstrating a shift in the window of public opinion. This paper will call in to question media impartiality and media education in terms of economic uncertainty, and will demand a wider debate unrestricted by fiscal realism.

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Introduction

The power of the media to frame and shape the public’s perception of politics must not be underestimated. Our opinions and beliefs are moulded by journalists, presenters and other representatives of the press. As a result, the media play a fundamental role in the democratic process of elections. The Conservative victory in the British General Election 2015 was momentous because it was long predicted that no single party would win an overall parliamentary majority. Britain seemed doomed to another hung parliament and another five years of fragile coalition. The Labour Party subsequently concluded that their loss was due to the electorate’s lack of trust in their economic capabilities; the people instead chose the Conservatives, who had carved themselves out as the party of fiscal responsibility. This unexpected outcome provokes the question: to what extent did the British media facilitate such a result?

The four television debates, *Cameron & Miliband Live: The Battle for Number 10* 26th March 2015*, The ITV Leaders’ Debate* 2nd April 2015*, The BBC Election Debate* 16th April 2015*, The BBC Question Time Special* 30th April 2015, were deemed to be the most influential media source for voters, outscoring both newspapers and social media (Thelwell 2015). The deficit and public spending were the only topics to come up in all four debates, being the subject of thirteen questions, and emerging as the most pressing matter for the electorate (Cowley and Kavanagh 2016, p.288). As a result, the media had a significant responsibility to ensure balanced, accurate and impartial debates for the voters watching at home to form their opinions objectively.

This study will thoroughly analyse the role the media played in the consolidation of fiscal realism, thereby directly shaping the election result. Fiscal realism is centred on the notion that it is imperative to drastically reduce the fiscal deficit by means of austerity. This argument has been taken by the Conservatives and cultivated into a pressing moral necessity. It is the only responsible economic measure when we, as a nation, have ‘maxed out our credit card’ and must learn to live within our means. The question of ‘how can we reduce our deficit’ has become the only frame through which the economy can be approached (Roberts 2015). The assumptions of fiscal realism have been internalised, shifting the window of public opinion. As a result, the dominance of this viewpoint has rendered it near impossible to propose alternatives.

The notion of fiscal realism draws inspiration from Mark Fisher’s (2009) concept of Capitalist Realism. He asserts that capitalism has successfully presented itself as the only feasible political and economic system. Poverty, famine and war are therefore an inevitable part of our reality and those who strive for their elimination are deemed to be utopian fantasists (Fisher 2009, p.16). Fisher concludes that both the politics and the economics of free market neo-liberals have become the mainstream.

The dominant approaches of media analysis concerning media-state relations during war (Robinson et al 2010; Hallin 1986; Bennett 1990; Entman 1991) have yet to be applied to an analysis of media behaviour during economic and electoral uncertainty. Distinct parallels are revealed in the media’s performance during the television debates. As is often evident during times of conflict, the media becomes deferent to what is known as the elite-driven model, a model that posits unquestioning media support of the government’s stance during combat (Robinson et al. 2010). Since the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) struck in 2008, most of the mainstream British media has complied with this model. This is partly as a result of their dependence on official sources and viewpoints as opposed to the use of independent academic experts, who have largely been excluded from the mainstream debate. Much of the mainstream media, excluding the BBC, has vested interests in their reporting. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky’s (1988) propaganda model remains relevant in media analysis as the size, ownership and profit orientation of much of the mass media, such as Rupert Murdoch’s media empire, impedes impartiality in favour of high profits and newspapers sales. Yet, what became most evident in the four televised debates was that the British media has largely sacrificed news objectivity in favour of patriotic news reporting. This has arisen from the scaremongering, war-like rhetoric calculatedly employed by political leaders. Their incendiary language has promoted an atmosphere of not only economic crisis, but also national crisis, necessitating immediate action according to fiscal realist solutions.

This study attempts to shed new light on the relations between the state and the media, applying the dominant approaches of media analysis to an economic and electoral scenario, and presenting original research. While Mike Berry (2012, 2016) analyses months of BBC coverage and radio broadcasts to establish a broad scope of analysis, this study is distinct in its narrow focus on the four debates, and can therefore provide a more precise evaluation of media performance. Furthermore, the strong influence of the debates on voters’ decisions combined with a Conservative victory founded on their perceived economic credibility demonstrates the importance of an in-depth analysis of the media’s contribution to the economic debate leading up to the election.

**Methodology**

This study will analyse the media’s perpetuation of fiscal realism in the television debates by drawing on the precepts of critical discourse analysis (CDA); attempting to understand the nature of social power and dominance through the use of language (Van Dijk 1993; Fairclough 1995; Philips and Jørgensen 2002). The purpose of my analysis is to provide a political critique of the media and politicians responsible for the perversion of economic discourse. This study will detect the consolidation of narrative in the repetition and frequency of value assumptions, the representation of social events and rhetorical mechanisms. I will proceed to thematically structure my argument to provide clarity in my analytical approach. I accept the inevitability that my own theoretical stance, values and beliefs will partially shape my research, yet this will not impede my analysis of the media’s dutiful role.

In order to evaluate the role of the media, one must first consider how politicians establish a narrative through provocative rhetoric. I will analyse the creation of a manipulative economic narrative through three distinct elements of their discourse. The first is the recurring trope of a catastrophic economic inheritance, with politicians frequently assigning blame to the previous Labour government’s profligacy. The second is the repetitive use of inflammatory language and metaphors that emphasise this economic chaos. The politicians frame specific economic terms in such a way as to alter their accepted meaning (Entman 1991). The concepts of spending, borrowing and taxing are politically and semantically transformed to appear extreme, out-dated and even dangerous for the economy. Thirdly, I will analyse the politicians’ frequent, misleading, economic comparisons of Britain to Greece. The distinct lack of effective or informative challenges by the media to this onslaught of scaremongering rhetoric, either due to political expediency or lack of economic knowledge, reveals inadequacies in the mediators’ performance, calling into question the impartiality of those involved in the management of the debates.

This study will go on to analyse the media’s role in sealing the dominance of fiscal realism through their pre-selection of questions submitted and asked by the studio audience. Those regarding the economy exclusively concerned the deficit and the procedural and technical responses to its reduction, thus remaining entirely within the confines of fiscal realism. They reflect the pervasive rhetoric of the politicians and continue to narrow the economic debate. Furthermore, the questions are sterile in nature; they do not engage with the moral implications of economic policy and therefore politicians are not sufficiently held to account. The composition of the audience will be scrutinised to ensure demographic representation.

To conclude, I will examine the management of the debates, revealing a performance that fails standard expectations of the media’s respected and unbiased role. The recurrence of personal attacks and the frequency of interjections while specific leaders are talking demonstrate a lack of impartiality. This significantly restricts the audience’s capacity to participate critically in the debates and understand their wider political implications. This study will demand the widening of the economic debate, one unrestrained by fiscal realism, and will call for an independent, educated and challenging media.

Literature Review

The dominant approaches in media analysis (Robinson et al 2010; Hallin 1986; Bennett 1990; Entman 1991) concern media and state relations during war-time. The role of the media is pivotal in shaping an audience’s perception of the justification for war, the way in which it is fought and how it should be resolved. Therefore, normative assumptions regarding its dutiful role during national crises are justly scrutinised. However, these approaches are not confined to war and combat; parallels are revealed by analysing media performance in alternative events of national crisis, economic crises. Yet, in order to understand the concept of fiscal realism more thoroughly one has to discuss the events of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC).

**The Global Financial Crisis 2008**

The GFC brought an abrupt end to stable growth in the global economy and its destruction paved the way for the establishment of fiscal realism. It is considered to be the most severe financial crash since the Great Depression of the 1930s. It was triggered in 2007 as a liquidity crisis when BNP Paribas blocked withdrawals from three hedge funds. As a result, investors began to panic and savers tried to liquidate assets in highly leveraged financial institutions. A property bubble developed in the US, the UK, Ireland and Spain where borrowers and banks came to believe that property prices would continue to rise. Billions were lent to those who should not have qualified for mortgages due to their credit history or lack of stable income, and sub-prime mortgages were bundled together in packages and sold on by banks to other investors. When this bubble burst, property prices were insolvent and in the UK and there was a run on Northern Rock, a former building society which sourced cheap money from abroad to lend for unsuitable mortgages. In the US, Lehmann Brothers and Bear Stearns went bust in 2008, inducing panic in the market. Economies worldwide suffered an abrupt halt to their prosperity and growth and millions of people were left unemployed. The Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission Report (2011) concluded that it was fundamentally unavoidable, that there were widespread failures in financial regulation and supervision, excessive borrowing, risky investments and a lack of transparency. These factors combined proved devastating to the stability of the global financial market.

The UK suffered substantially due to its reliance on the financial sector. The economy initially went in to reverse and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) decreased by 6 points. The GFC ceased lending in Britain as banks and large financial institutions became increasingly concerned about their balance sheets and the values of their assets (Gamble 2012, p.36). The Prime Minister Gordon Brown chaired an effective summit of the G20 in London in 2009 which aimed to coordinate the international response to the crash. A trillion US dollar stimulus package was agreed to improve international finance, credit, trade, economic stability and recovery. In October 2008, Brown contained the crisis in the UK by declaring a £500 billion bank bailout package, nationalisation, fiscal stimulus and the dropping of interest rates close to zero (Gamble 2012). The plan aimed to restore market confidence and help stabilise the British banking system but it triggered a recession, creating large amounts of public sector deficits. The political opposition were quick to oppose the extent of the bailouts and stressed the need for fiscal responsibility, developing an effective line of attack that ‘the state of public finances was Labour’s fault and a result of its stewardship of the economy over the past ten years’ (Gamble 2012, p.40). This came to define fiscal realism.

**The coalition government 2010**

There was no party that won an overall majority in the General Election 2010 and as a result the Conservatives joined a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. The legacy of the 2008 financial crisis shaped the formation of their government, with economic credibility and fiscal responsibility at the heart of their mandate. The five months of the Labour leadership contest, alongside the candidates’ reluctance to defend Labour’s economic record, meant that the coalition was free to create and reinforce its own narrative about the economy, summarised by the line that they were ‘cleaning up the mess’ that they had inherited (Cowley and Kavanagh 2016, p.71). The Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, cancelled and criticised Labour’s capital spending programmes and called for the implementation of austerity economics to balance the books and restore confidence in the British economy. The emergency budget in June 2010 announced the first in a series of cuts to the public sector. There was an immediate halt to infrastructure projects, restrictions on entitlements to welfare benefits, a VAT increase from 17.5% to 20%, child benefits frozen for three years and a two-year public sector pay freeze (Cowley and Kavanagh 2016, p.6).

Crucially, the severity of these cuts was presented by Osborne as being essential to his plan to drastically and imminently reduce the deficit. Those on the political right argued that a country running significant budget deficits, as were nearly all national economies after the economic crisis, was at risk of defaulting on its debts and becoming like Greece, entangled in a debt crisis (Krugman 2010). Osborne heavily stressed that the government was not imposing these cuts for ideological purposes, but as Andrew Gamble summarises, ‘Labour’s profligacy in spending and incompetence in regulation of the financial system had made these cuts inevitable’ (2012, p.42). This distorted economic narrative was constantly reinforced to inculpate Labour whilst simultaneously legitimising the coalition’s governance and policy. The US economist, Paul Krugman (2010), remarks that when the economic crisis struck in 2008, ‘almost every government – even Germany – introduced some kind of stimulus programme, increasing spending and/or cutting taxes.’ Osborne’s drastic changes in economic policy were therefore deemed by Krugman, and many other economic experts, to be an enormous experiment in macroeconomics. David Blanchflower, a former member of the Bank of England’s Monetary Policy Committee forebodingly remarked that ‘Every other country will be watching […] to ensure they don’t repeat the same mistake as George Osborne’s wildly unnecessary, misguided, doctrinaire and potentially dangerous spending cuts’ (2010). Osborne and the ‘austerians’, those holding these particular economic beliefs, have countered these criticisms by framing austerity as undesirable, yet unfortunately, the only option. They presented themselves as being simply decisive, making difficult but necessary decisions in a time of crisis. These ‘difficult decisions’ are to be shared by everyone and are the most suitable option for protecting the British economy. It has become the dominant narrative in the economic debate.

**Fiscal realism**

Fiscal realism is centred on the notion that it is imperative to reduce the fiscal deficit in times of recession by cutting public sector spending. This assertion has been developed by the Conservatives and established into a pressing moral necessity. Inherent in this belief is the assumption that if a government appears to be serious about reducing its debt, it will attract business by appearing fiscally responsible. Increases in borrowing, spending and taxing are therefore considered to be irresponsible as we must live within our means by rapidly tightening fiscal spending. The narration and explanation of the GFC by the Conservative opposition in 2008 and the consequent coalition government perpetuated the belief that Labour mismanaged the economy by overspending, allowing too much immigration, and by being ‘soft’ on welfare thieves, thereby creating the ‘mess’ they were left to clear up. This narrative has become hegemonic due to a lack of a credible defence from Labour as well as a complacent and unchallenging media.

Significantly, the assumptions that constitute fiscal realism have been internalised; they have become the norm and are widely accepted by the public. This is conceptualised by the ‘Overton Window.’ A theory by Joseph P. Overton, it denotes what is deemed to be possible or reasonable at a certain time whilst remaining within the political mainstream (Jones 2015). Since 2010, the coalition has shifted the terms of acceptable political and economic debate. Fiscal realist discourse is convincingly projected by the political right and is reinforced by much of the mainstream media. Alternatives to this narrative have not only become near impossible to produce, but are also rejected by the government as well as the media and the public. The economic and political debate has been reframed to one that operates within the parameters of fiscal realism.

**Dominant approaches in media analysis**

The traditional approaches in media analysis (Hallin 1986; Bennett 1990; Entman 1991; Robinson et al 2010) scrutinise media and state relations during times of war and combat. Given the newly globalised environment of the news media, it has become central to the phenomenon of war. Piers Robinson et al. (2010) compile an informed and systematic analytical framework in their research of British media’s performance during the Iraq War 2003. It consists of three distinct models of analysis, applicable to media behaviour during this study. The first is the elite-driven model. Grounded in Realist international relations theory, it posits a supportive government stance taken by the media that produces news accordingly. It draws on the work of Daniel Hallin’s (1986) sphere of consensus denoting the political mainstream and Gadi Wolfsfeld’s (1997) ‘faithful servant’ role. There is a reliance on official sources which dominate news coverage, offering a narrow news agenda, and journalists often sacrifice their objective role and engage in patriotic news reporting (Robinson et al. 2010). The second is the independent model where balanced and impartial news is the ideal mode of reporting. It is conceptualised by Hallin’s (1986) sphere of legitimate controversy, where critical reporting is encouraged especially in times of elite dissensus. A range of sources are utilised and political elites are expected to be challenged based on the differing viewpoints presented. The third is the oppositional model where the news media aim to significantly confront the government’s aims and policies and perhaps even align themselves with anti-war opinion. It draws on Hallin’s (1986) sphere of deviance which denotes what is excluded from the political consensus.

The independent model serves as the most convincing of the three in terms of scrutinising media performance. The role of journalists during war or economic crises is to educate and inform its citizens whilst holding the government to account. Rights and privileges have been afforded to these journalists in return for commitments to responsible journalism (Tambini 2008, p.6). The government is not to be blindingly trusted in its decision making as it has been known to make considerable policy errors.

**Media analysis in relation to UK economic policy**

At an aggregate level, Robinson et al. (2010) find that the British media aligned themselves with the elite-driven model during the Iraq War. The elements that contributed to this deference are evident in the media’s performance regarding economic policy implemented in 2010. To begin with, there is a reliance on official sources and viewpoints that dominate news coverage. Mike Berry (2016) maintains that the British Broadcasting Company’s (BBC) handling of the GFC exhibited this tendency; the high-status official sources in new accounts dominated. The fact that the deficit was caused by a global financial crisis, not Labour profligacy, had almost vanished from BBC coverage, as did the culpability of the City of London (Berry 2016). This can be conceptualised by Lance Bennett’s (1990) indexing hypothesis that posits that the media is able to ‘index’ or reflect elite debate. However, the BBC’s treatment of City voices as experts rather than representatives of a specific area prevented a thorough economic debate and restricted the public’s ability to form their opinion impartially. As expected in times of crisis, an oppositional public sphere arises with alternative perspectives and solutions on economic policy (Boyce Kay and Salter 2013). The presence of such voices, trade unions and pressure groups, largely disappeared from the media in the UK. Berry asserts that ‘this, together with the weakening of traditional social democratic parties, has meant that neoliberal perspectives have become increasingly dominant in economic reporting’ (2016, p.5). The media’s capability to report in a balanced manner and to present material impartially is called into question as it often is during war-time.

Robinson et al. (2010) reveal that patriotism further elucidates media deference to the elite-driven model during war. Carefully utilised discourse and framing are crucial for this concept. In Iraq, the linguistic distinction between ‘our soldiers’ and ‘the soldiers’ clearly demonstrated the potential for bias. When events are perceived to threaten the existence of state and society, journalists may sacrifice their commitment to professional journalism for the national community (Robinson et al.2010, p.37). This results from calculated scaremongering rhetoric utilised by the government as a form of political strategy (König and Wenzelburger 2014). The presentation of the economic crisis by the political opposition in 2008 and by the coalition in 2010 resembles that of a serious threat. The political right argued that a high public sector deficit was dangerous for the health of the economy, and therefore the nation, and that its immediate reduction was imperative (Berry 2016). Without deficit reduction, Britain faced interest rate rises, currency devaluation and a possible bailout from the International Monetary Fund (Berry 2016, p.3). Furthermore, the case of Greece became the ‘disaster’ austerians were looking for. They had a clear demonstration of the dangers they were trying to prevent, legitimising their cause (Krugman 2010). This stress for immediate action resembles a decisive government during war-time.

Economic security has become synonymous with national security and both were deemed to be at risk after the GFC. When George Osborne declared that “we’re all in this together” at the Conservative Party Conference (October 2012), he attempted topromote an atmosphere of controlled crisis where the burden would be evenly suffered. This inclusive, patriotic discourse helped detract from the, in fact, extremely divisive economic policy for which he still calls for. This discourse continues to be utilised by the Conservative government, evident in their attack on the new Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn in 2015. David Cameron warned, “The Labour Party is now a threat to our national security, our economic security and your family’s security” (2015). This scaremongering and provocative rhetoric attempts to both discredit and demonise the political and economic alternative, whilst simultaneously reinforcing Conservative economic credibility. The Conservatives and their economics since 2010 have been presented as the only viable option for keeping our nation ‘safe’.

In a controlled atmosphere of national and economic crisis, the media has responded in a way that draws parallels to the elite-driven model. An analysis of the BBC’s discursive framing of the Coalition’s cuts agenda by Jilly Boyce Kay and Lee Salter (2013) disclose that neoliberal economics have been normalised by the media, not necessarily as desirable but as inevitable. They highlight Robert Entman’s (1991) concept of framing in media performance, that specific properties of the economic narrative have been presented by the media in a certain to way to encourage specific understandings of them. Economic problems were found to be framed as being ‘technical’ rather than ‘political’ in nature, radically limiting the extent to which the problems could be ‘understood and tackled, as well as delimiting the proper role of citizens in decision-making’ (Boyce Kay and Slater 2013, p.763). In the coverage of the GFC and the subsequent policies introduced by the coalition government, the media implicitly endorsed the government’s stance by failing to critique the potential responses to the crisis thoroughly. By framing the cuts as an unfortunate inevitability, there was a lack of critical analysis of the very systems from which the crisis emerged (Boyce Kay and Salter 2013). The media continues to perform this way, as was evident in the election campaign, failing to adhere to its expected, democratic role. Fiscal realism has continued to develop and has been preserved as a result of media deference to the elite-driven model, as argued by this study. It looks unlikely to change without a clear and organised political opposition or without a challenging media, ready to pose difficult questions and raise alternative viewpoints. The current climate of public opinion remains hostile to alternatives, representing a shift in the Overton Window - a success of right-wing political rhetoric and a failure of the British media.

Research

**Politicians’ rhetoric**

Fiscal realism was established by the political opposition in 2008 and codified by the coalition government from 2010 onwards. In order to analyse the media’s role in the consolidation of fiscal realism, it is essential to consider the ways in which this exclusive narrative is established by politicians. Crucial in this regard is the evocative rhetoric made use of by politicians that manipulate the debate and mainstream opinion.

**The concept of a disastrous economic inheritance**

The first and most prominent rhetorical theme is the notion that the coalition inherited a catastrophic economic situation in 2010. It is evident throughout the four debates, but most distinct during the *BBC Question Time Special*. Only two minutes into his thirty-minute questioning, Cameron declares, “While we had to take difficult decisions and we have, we were left an absolute nightmare situation to clear up” (BBC QT Special, 2:40). From the offset the tone is established; the coalition did what was absolutely necessary because of the profligacy of the previous Labour government. This line is used as a retort to challenging questions posed by the audience and reinforced by the moderator, David Dimbleby, regarding Cameron’s past five-year record and his proposed spending cuts for future government. As his session progresses, Cameron cuts his answer short regarding the £12 billion of public sector cuts and invites the audience instead to “step back a second” and “remember what we inherited” (BBC QT Special, 6:40). He distorts the nature of the question, distracting the audience, assigning total economic blame on to the previous Labour government, thereby legitimising his economic policy. He reassures the electorate that he is fixing the problems left behind and should therefore continue “finishing the job” (Cameron BBC QT Special, 10:50). Cameron refers to this inheritance twice more in his thirty minute interview (8:24; 17:46) to fully emphasise his predecessors’ mistakes, sanctioning the past five years of ‘recovery’, and hopefully consolidating an election victory for the next five years to come. Dimbleby implicitly enables the continuation of this economic narrative by consistently failing to challenge this distorted economic history.

Clegg reinforces Cameron’s line of argument during his interview in the *BBC Question Time Special*. He asserts that when the Coalition came into government, “there was no money left” and they had been working hard to clear up the “unholy mess” they inherited (Clegg BBC QT Special, 1:02:39; 1:12:55). Evidently, both leaders were eager to defend their record at the expense of Labour’s and effectively did so by utilising dramatic, even righteous language alongside this recurring theme of a disastrous inheritance. This rhetoric was further consolidated by the dramatised utilisation of the note, or prop, left behind by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury under Gordon Brown, Liam Byrne. The note reads, “Dear Chief Secretary, I’m afraid there is no money. Kind regards – and good luck! Liam” (2010). In *The ITV Leaders’ Debate*, Cameron declared that it represented the “truth about cuts” and he goes on to claim that “when people talk about cuts, we had to make these decisions” (ITV Leaders’ Debate, 24:00). Again, the difficult decisions of rapid fiscal reduction are justified due to Labour’s economic incompetency and, indeed, unprofessionalism. He goes on to say in the *BBC Question Time Special*, “I became Prime Minister at a time when there was no money left, and I bring this with me everywhere, then note that the Treasury Minister left, and there it is, ‘Dear Chief Secretary, I’m afraid there is no money’” (Cameron BBC QT Special, 6:50). The calculated utilisation of what was meant to be a ‘friendly gesture’ to Byrne’s successor became an extremely effective line of attack that helped to shatter electoral trust in Labour and thoroughly discredit their economic record (Byrne 2015). Cameron asserts that it is essential to bring the note everywhere as it represents a warning - if Labour regained power, the economy would be mismanaged and become as chaotic as it was in 2008. Cameron concludes, holding up the note, “I never want us to go back there again” (BBC QT Special, 7:44). Indeed, the media helped ensure that we did not.

This pervasive discourse underpins the debate. Labour under Gordon Brown was, and remains, the perfect scapegoat for questions and challenges regarding fiscal policy in the past five years. This goes substantially unchallenged by the other political leaders, despite their attempts, but most significantly, it is unchallenged by the mediators. Upon Cameron’s fourth reminder of his economic inheritance during the *BBC Question Time Special*, Dimbleby jokily remarks that the audience is getting tired hearing about when he became Prime Minister (BBC QT Special, 17:46). It is not an established confrontation to Cameron’s distortion of events; it is a mere gimmick that pleases the audience and he moves swiftly on.

**Inflammatory, dramatised language**

The use of inflammatory language is notable throughout the four debates, and is particularly evident in Cameron and Clegg’s rhetoric. It manifests itself in dramatic metaphors used to describe past economic events in order to further tarnish Labour’s record. In the audience segment during *The Battle for Number 10*, Cameron maintains that he became Prime Minister “at a time when the economy was close to the brink” and refers to it a second time towards the end of the audience section (The Battle for Number 10, 29:16; 42:08). He refines the notion that the economic situation was completely anarchic, so much so that the country could have fallen off a metaphorical economic cliff. He solidifies this idea when he claims that his recent policies have ensured that when the next crisis hits, “we don’t get pushed over the edge” as that would be “so irresponsible” (The Battle for Number 10, 30:17). This metaphorically incendiary language furthers the theory that Labour irresponsibly crashed the economy. The scaremongering imagery, similar to war-time rhetoric, acts as a warning; the Conservatives are the only option for keeping our economy, and therefore our nation, safe. In this way, they retain economic authority and credibility. In the *BBC Question Time Special,* Cameron’s language becomes more challenging as the election approaches and claims he was left with, “an absolute nightmare situation” (BBC QT Special, 2:46). The unrelenting quality of this political message is still unchallenged by the media and, as a result, becomes inescapable for the electorate. The constant reinforcement establishes it as a truth.

Clegg’s language is perhaps the most provocative. He testifies that the UK had a “terrible heart attack in our economy back in 2008” (BBC QT Special, 1:05:40). He repeats this medical metaphor in a list of problems he inherited in 2010: “this massive black hole in our public finances, a broken banking system, the biggest heart attack in our economy in a generation” (Clegg BBC QT Special, 1:13:02). The personification of the economy and its medical diagnosis is an extremely powerful linguistic tool as Clegg, Cameron and public service cuts are subsequently presented as the suitable cure being simply and non-ideologically motivated. The simplicity of this metaphor, evident in the coalition government’s comparison of the budget to a household’s budget, appeals to the electorate but is ultimately inaccurate, unhelpful and misleading. The economic debate is sterilised and confined to neoliberal remedies, demonstrating the hegemony of fiscal realism. This rhetoric again goes unchallenged by the mediators.

Clegg’s metaphors progress and become more thrilling and dramatic. He claims that he created a stable government at a time of “an economic firestorm which could have engulfed the country” (BBC QT Special, 1:16:17). His use of the word ‘firestorm’, a word coined after the allied bombing of Hamburg during the Second World War, is especially evocative of patriotic war-time struggle (Dear et al. 1995). This explicit link between the economic crisis and World War II stirs up the memory of the British war-time media. It collaborated with the government’s foreign policy aims to keep up morale on the home front, deferring to the elite-driven model. Dimbleby’s lack of confrontation to this scaremongering enables Clegg to unite the audience with false ideas, sealing the dominance of this economic narrative. Yet his exaggeration of the economic state of affairs promotes an atmosphere of controlled panic; he is a trustworthy leader having got the economy back on track and can therefore continue the task. This recapitulation as a calculated political strategy again goes uncontested by the mediators and the debate is further distorted.

The use of manipulative rhetoric is also evident in the reassigned meanings of three terms: spending, borrowing and taxing. They are constantly referred to by Cameron, Clegg and sometimes by Nigel Farage, yet are framed in such a way that presents them as being exclusively harmful to Britain’s economy (Entman 1991). During *The Battle for Number 10*, Cameron presents himself as the only suitable choice as “all my political opponents have been saying we should borrow more, we should spend more, we should tax more, that’s the alternative you face with Ed Miliband and his approach” (The Battle for Number 10, 9:42). This idea is furthered in *The ITV Leaders’ Debate* when Ed Miliband is painted as wilfully ignorant or even deceitful by still thinking “the last Labour government didn’t tax too much, borrow too much, and spend too much” (Cameron The ITV Leaders’ Debate, 18:33). This line of attack is more intensely repeated towards the end of the debate, culminating with the accusation that because of Labour, we had “out of control welfare, out of control debt and out of control spending” (Cameron The ITV Leaders’ Debate, 18:31; 1:34:30). The economic alternative to fiscal reduction is framed by Cameron as thoroughly dangerous for stable economic growth. Therefore, the political alternative is just as irresponsible. These three terms have been reframed and are presented as having created the economic mess in 2008. They are depicted in this way in order to prevent a wider economic debate.

Farage supports this notion, that there is “no question that spending got completely out of control under Labour” (The ITV Leaders’ Debate, 20:50). Conclusively, the acts of spending, borrowing and taxing have all been relegated from Hallin’s (1986) sphere of consensus to the sphere of deviance. They have been excluded from the mainstream. In *The ITV Leaders’ Debate*, Cameron equates tax and spending to “waste” to fully solidify this economic stance (The ITV Leaders’ Debate, 11:51). Yet this position is fundamentally flawed; borrowing money to spend on public services is a form of investment that yields returns. This can manifest itself in a higher quality of public services, more public sector jobs and a decrease in inequality. Higher taxes on the wealthiest in society help provide funding for such services and facilitate better social equality. The confrontational deficiency of the media calls into question their economic education. They fail to confront the politicians’ narrative in order to seek factual clarification. These three terms have been coloured by the political debate and have been given a new status; they are no longer suitable economic measures. As a result, fiscal realism has become the only viable economic narrative.

**Comparisons to the Greek economy**

The use of political rhetoric is most shocking in the frequent comparisons of the British and Greek economies. The constant, inflammatory remarks and metaphors regarding the coalition’s catastrophic inheritance are used as a political strategy to deflect blame from the past five years and to completely assign it to the Labour. Yet, the use of the Greek economic crash as a comparison to further emphasise Labour’s blame is totally inappropriate as the economies are fundamentally different. In his interview with Jeremy Paxman, Cameron asserts that “Britain’s budget deficit was forecasted to be bigger than Greece’s” and he repeats this claim during the audience segment with Kay Burley (The Battle for Number 10, 13:19; 29:20). Originally, it was thought that Britain and Greece had a similar budget deficit of around 11% of GDP in 2010, yet this was revised and Greece’s deficit ended up being around 15.7% (Nardelli 2015). This fact is carefully omitted from Cameron’s performance as is the much needed confrontation from Paxman, who should be aiming to factually evaluate Cameron’s answers.

In the *BBC Question Time Special*, Clegg repeats, “we could have been Greece. We could have been Greece. Our deficit was almost as big as Greece’s, our banking crisis was a whole lot worse” (BBC QT Special, 1:05:09). His repetition demonstrates an attempt to highlight the seriousness of how close we came to a Greek-style economic crash, yet despite his scaremongering reiteration, this comparison is not illustrative of the facts. Britain was not as Clegg claims “the next domino to fall” after Greece, Portugal and Spain (BBC QT Special, 1:16:24). The UK entered the financial crash with relatively low public debt, about 70% in comparison to Greece’s 120% (Nardelli 2015). In addition, Britain has its own central bank, the Bank of England, which can print money and sell Government debt in the form of stocks which Greece is unable to do. Britain consequently has a floating exchange rate that controls the value of the pound and furthermore, has much stronger economic institutions than Greece. The UK has not defaulted on its debts for hundreds of years. Through this disastrous political comparison, the politicians have constructed a atmosphere of hysteria, similar to that of war.The frequent referral to this national and economic disaster as a form of political strategy is just that, strategy. Its factual inaccuracy should have been highlighted and challenged by the mediators. This failure not only calls into question their impartiality, but also their economic education and their capability to perform their role in the debates. Therefore, the media implicitly enabled a distorted debate that wrongly informed the electorate. A member of the audience took this role into their own hands during the *BBC Question Time Special* and tackled Clegg’s claims: “It’s nothing like Greece our economy, and you know it, our economy was nothing like Greece’s” (BBC QT Special, 1:16:29). Their frustration at the Liberal Democrats constitutes a frustration of the media to fulfil their expected role.

Political rhetoric is undeniably central to the political debates as it serves as a method of electoral persuasion. Yet the economically incorrect, dramatised and scaremongering language should be contested and challenged by the media. Their confrontational deficiency enabled the politicians’ rhetoric to shape the formation of public opinion and consolidate the shift in the Overton Window.

**Pre-selected audience questions**

This study will discuss the make-up of the various audiences to ensure that they were demographically representative and therefore democratically effective. It will go on to analyse the relevant pre-selected questions that structure the debates in accordance with thematic discourse analysis. These questions only concern the deficit and fiscal reduction and therefore contribute to the narrowing of the economic debate. This study will focus on seven out of the thirteen questions that relate to public spending and the deficit during the debates as they prove to be the most appropriate for my analysis and reveal the dominance of fiscal realism.

**Audience composition**

At an aggregate level, the arrangement of the audience for all four debates was sufficiently demographically representative. *The Battle for Number 10’s* studio audience of 100 was selected by the research company Survation to ensure balance of opinion. The audience was selected by voting intention comprising of one-third Conservative voters, one-third Labour voters and one-third undecided voters (Mason 2015). The questions were then carefully chosen by a panel in the attempt to ensure a fair selection to frame a balanced debate. *The ITV Leaders’ Debate* was comprised of 200 people selected by the polling company ICM, 80% of whom expressed voting intention at the time of their recruitment with 20% being undecided (Cummins 2015). *The BBC Election Debate’s* audience was chosen by an independent polling organisation to represent the balance between all parties in the debate. Nigel Farage notably claimed a left-wing bias and pressured the BBC to release the exact audience figures: of the 200 strong audience, 58 were Conservative or UKIP supporters, 102 were left-leaning, and the rest were undecided (Gosden et al. 2015). The make-up of the panel, containing more left-leaning political leaders, reflected the make-up of the audience and so remained demographically represented but proved to be more hostile to UKIP’s rhetoric. The *BBC Question Time Special’s* audience was composed of three lots of 25% voting for Clegg, Cameron and Miliband, with the remaining 25% being undecided or voting for other parties. Miliband’s team furiously complained to the BBC about the audience’s selection process which they claimed produced an anti-Labour bias in the audience (Cowley and Kavanagh 2016). Yet, the media ensured technically equal representation to limit the potential for bias and as a result, the questions were expected to reflect such variability of opinion.

**The pre-selected audience’s questions**

The economic questions put forward to the leaders were specifically focused with fiscal policy, indicating widespread public concern with the deficit.

1. ‘How will you reduce the budget deficit – what will it be in 2020?’ (The Battle for Number 10, directed to Ed Miliband).
2. ‘As a seventeen-year-old student of politics, I would like to ask, how do each of the party leaders believe they’ll be able to keep their promises of eliminating the deficit without raising certain taxes or making vast cuts to vital public services?’ (The ITV Leaders’ Debate, directed to all leaders).
3. ‘Five years ago, the outgoing Labour Treasury Minister left a message, “there’s no money left”, how can we trust the Labour party with the UK economy? (BBC QT Special, directed to Ed Miliband).
4. ‘Is a vote for you a *carte blanche* to see the welfare bill sky rocket?’ (BBC QT Special, directed to Ed Miliband).

Question 2, posed by the seventeen-year-old student during *The ITV Leaders’ Debate* is the first and only question regarding the economy. It is asked in the critical first half hour when audiences are most attentive, demonstrating its electoral significance (Cowley and Kavanagh 2016, p.286). It sets the tone for the debate, asserting the drastic need to eliminate the deficit but demonstrating the conflict in opinion over the means by which to do it. This task must be done without raising certain taxes or cutting key public services, yet implicitly accepts that some cuts and some increases in taxes are undesirable, but inevitable. The limited range of neo-liberal solutions presented by the student demonstrates the confines of the economic debate. Increased borrowing or spending as a form of investment is purposefully omitted from the question as it is not deemed to be politically permissible to combat this economic problem. The fact that even a seventeen-year-old student has become so concerned with reducing the deficit exposes the impact of scaremongering rhetoric and the dominance of this economic narrative.

When combined, these questions reveal a notable lack of trust in Ed Miliband and therefore in Labour regarding the economy. Question 1 is the third question posed to the Labour leader by the studio audience in *The Battle for Number 10*. The strict, imposed, arbitrary deadline of 2020 implies that Miliband must prove his economic credibility and trustworthiness by attesting how he can reduce it in those five years. This is presented as the only measure of economic reliability and therefore political capability. One is led to believe that if his answer alluded to more gradual deficit reduction with higher levels of investment and public spending, the audience would have been unsatisfied. It reflects Paul Krugman’s (2009) idea of ‘deficit hysteria’; there is an illogical obsession with its reduction as a result of the dominance of this economic narrative.It has punctured mainstream public opinion and it has come to be believed that our economy and our nation will only be stable, and therefore safe, if we drastically reduce the deficit.

Question 3 is the first to be directed at Miliband in his thirty minute segment in the *BBC Question Time Special* and the issue of trust is the central matter. Miliband is held directly responsible for the supposed overspending in the previous Labour government under Brown and for the callous note left by Byrne, the very same that was held up triumphantly by Cameron in the first third of the programme. He is expected to prove his party’s credibility due to their past even though the same is never expected of Cameron in relation to Margaret Thatcher’s deregulation of the banks. This is because deregulation is not deemed to have been the crux of the economic problem in 2008. The notion of irresponsible overspending has thoroughly dominated the presentation of economic history. There is no consideration of international context in the question, demonstrating that the audience member holds a misinformed view of the British economy and the economic history to which they refer. Despite this, the question is chosen by the organisers of the debate, thus legitimising its central premise. The question indicates the success of five years of intense and relentless blame avoidance as a form of political strategy (König and Wenzelburger 2014). The question sets the tone for Miliband’s thirty-minute section and he is ferociously interrogated for his party’s economic past.

Question 4 not only demonstrates the confines of the economic debate in terms of neo-liberal solutions, but it also reveals the sterility of the debate. The notion that a vote for Miliband would signify a blank cheque for the welfare bill is incredibly insensitive and thoroughly untrue. There is a fundamental lack of understanding in the question alongside a lack of moral engagement with the question itself. Cuts to welfare that have been implemented by the coalition government have made the poorest in society poorer. Even Jeremy Paxman challenges Cameron on the 421 food banks in Britain with 900,000 people taking food parcels a year; a drastic increase since the coalition came to power (The Battle for Number 10, 1:58). Osborne’s budget in March 2016 proposed such drastic cuts to disability benefits that Ian Duncan Smith resigned as Minister for the Department of Work and Pensions, even after having presided over a host of extreme cuts. Austerity is extremely controversial as it has increased wealth inequality. However, the question insinuates that spending on welfare is wasteful and unimportant and therefore its increase would signify a wasted vote. It perpetuates fiscal realism whilst also furthering the harmful narrative of a deserving poor; those who help themselves versus those who do not.

In addition, the questions posed by the audience regard the procedural tactics to combat the issue of a high deficit. They concern cutting and increases in spending:

1. How intense will cuts to public services be from a majority Conservative government? (The Battle for Number 10, directed to David Cameron).
2. As someone about to enter the job market, do you think it’s fair to increase Government spending like so many of you plan to do, when my generation will be left to pay off the debt? (The BBC Election Debate, directed to all leaders).
3. Will you put to bed the rumours that you plan to cut child tax credit and restrict child benefits to children? (BBC QT Special, directed to David Cameron).

The Conservatives did not specifically set out the £12 billion of cuts in their manifesto and so question 5, posed to Cameron, is representative of a common concern at the General Election. To a certain extent, this question holds Cameron to account over his future economic policies, forcing him to clarify his stance. However, this criticism is procedural rather than substantive; it concerns the methods and the extent of Cameron’s policy rather than challenging the justifications for the policy itself. This is also evident in question 7 which challenges the cuts to child tax credits which seems to be a cut that has gone beyond the realms of acceptability. This procedural criticism reveals a further parallel of media performance during economic crisis and war-time. It was evident in the British media’s conduct during the Iraq war, noted by Robinson et al. (2010). Journalists seemed to show far greater willingness to criticise tactical matters concerning battle strategy rather than substantive claims regarding humanitarian justifications (Robinson et al. 2010, p.110). This is reflected in the narrowed economic debate. There is a lack of substantive challenges to fiscal realism, the justifications for it implementation. The public has accepted that the fiscal deficit must be drastically and immediately reduced and that this must be done through austerity measures. Question 5 demonstrates this, framing cuts as inevitable, only questioning their intensity and severity. The economic debate needs to be widened to include these substantive challenges, to decisively hold politicians to account. This is not to discredit the procedural nature of the question, yet the challenge is somewhat superficial in nature as it fails to address the wider implications of the debate.

Question 6 is convoluted in its premise. The audience member perpetuates the Conservatives argument that spending will only lead to a greater deficit and higher debt and is therefore irresponsible and unfair for future generations to come. The question perfectly embodies the confines of fiscal realism and is fundamentally flawed in its premise. The purpose of increasing spending is to invest in public services, to invest in better welfare and to invest in the lives of future generations so as to yield an eventual return. Public spending facilitates greater levels of social equality and aids people into well-paid employment. In the long-term, this would mean that fewer people would be forced to claim welfare and subsequently the government’s welfare bill would fall. For all the cuts in benefits, the total welfare bill actually increased under the coalition due to the protection given to pensioner entitlements, demonstrating the audience members’ lack of knowledge or understanding (Cowley and Kavanagh 2016, p.8). Furthermore, the question is centred on the notion of ‘fairness’. This is arguably paradoxical in nature as the audience member fails to engage with the moral implications of their question. Fairness is equated with the numerical aspects of the deficit and debt reduction. It does not regard the ethical or emotional consequences of the economics they call for. Even modest increases in public spending and welfare could support the poorest in our society while its decrease could see thousands more forced to claim welfare or forced to use food banks. It demonstrates the sterility of the debate and the lack of moral consideration inherent in fiscal realism.

The media’s pre-selection of questions effectively demonstrates the shift in the Overton Window that has been facilitated by political rhetoric. In this sense, the questions can be seen as somewhat representative of public opinion. However, the questions do not sufficiently challenge the politicians due to the lack of substantively framed questions. The debate was restricted to the procedural tactics of reducing the deficit, a debated limited to the confines of fiscal realism.

**Management of the debates**

The failure of the media to critique fiscal realism is revealed by the way the debates are managed. Firstly, this study will analyse the frequency of attacks on the leaders revealing personal biases and a detraction from the political nature of the debate. It will go on to scrutinise the mediators’ recurrent interjections in specific leaders’ answers and statements that further enforce this bias.

**Frequency of the mediators’ attacks**

These attacks commence with Kay Burley during the audience segment of *The Battle for Number 10* and are almost exclusively directed to Ed Miliband. She forebodingly remarks on his opening applause by the studio audience: “Let’s see if they’re still applauding by the end of this eighteen minute section” (Battle for Number 10, 48:06). The hostile tone is established from the offset, the implication being that Miliband’s answers may not be deserving of approval later on in the programme. A pre-selected question asked by an audience member reads: “Do you not think that your brother would have done a better job? He was better qualified and better positioned” (The Battle for Number 10, 54:24). This harsh, personalised attack attempts to belittle Miliband as a politician as his political ideas, policies and leadership skills are overlooked in favour of futile gossip. He remains overshadowed by the personal drama between him and his brother, David Miliband, despite having won the Labour leadership election in 2010. The media’s selection of this question reveals a lack of professionalism as Cameron is never asked a question similar in nature. This amateurish behaviour is reinforced by Burley’s persistent engagement with the topic. She interjects five times during Miliband’s answer, prompting a discussion about his personal relationships with his brother and his mother (Burley The Battle for Number 10, 55:26). This debate is not the correct forum to discuss personal affairs; it is unprofessional and restricts the audience’s capacity to engage critically with the debate.

The most notable attacks by the mediator occur during the interview in *The Battle for Number 10*. It is the most intimate section out of all the four debates, containing a one-on-one interview with Jeremy Paxman. Labelled the ‘Paxman treatment’, he is infamous for his intense and unrelenting interrogation of politicians. Although both leaders received a thorough questioning of their policies, Miliband noticeably received far more attacks, ranging from the political to the highly personal. This counters the imminent media response to the debate that reported that Cameron had been ‘mauled’ by Paxman and that Miliband had defended himself better (Wintour and Mason 2015). A linguistic analysis by Sylvia Shaw (2015) reveals that overall, during Cameron’s eighteen-minute-and-twenty-six-second interview, he speaks twenty-two per cent more than Miliband in his sixteen-minute-and-forty-five-second interview. Cameron’s longest, uninterrupted sentence is 244 words long in comparison to Miliband’s 96 word sentence (Shaw 2015). Already, we can infer that Paxman defers to Cameron’s authority, allowing him to speak more freely without as many interruptions.

From the start, the tone of Miliband’s interview is hostile as demonstrated by Paxman’s mockingly relaxed stance, leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed ready to disparage the Labour leader. Miliband defensively anticipates his advances and counters them by prematurely announcing that he will not make “a false promise” on immigration and instantly accepting multiple times that Labour had previously “got it wrong” (The Battle for Number 10, 1:08:56; 1:09:06). Paxman ridicules Miliband for this and continues to when he attempts to start discussing new topics. He accuses him of steering the debate: “I haven’t mentioned the European Union! […] You’re making up a question to yourself!” (Paxman The Battle for Number 10, 1:10:27). This embarrasses Miliband as Paxman successfully elicits laughter from the audience. However, later on in the interview the Labour leader subscribes to Paxman’s tactics and begins to fights back: “now you’re asking yourself questions!” (Miliband The Battle for Number 10, 1:13:15). Furthermore, he unforgettably asserts, “you may be important Jeremy, but you are not that important!” (The Battle for Number 10, 1:20:09). He receives significant approval from the audience. Yet despite these retorts, Paxman’s approach reveals bias; Miliband is relentlessly criticised and dismissed in a way that Cameron is not made further evident by Paxman’s mockery of Miliband’s choice of wording. Miliband asserts that Labour’s spending is “likely” to fall, an answer deemed to be inadequate and “a weasel word” (Paxman The Battle for Number 10, 1:16:39; 1:16:42). These hostile comments regarding the strength of Miliband’s answers attempt to reveal a weakness of character and a consequent lack of electability.

These dismissals develop into highly personal attacks. Paxman highlights a public concern that people do not find him tough enough as a leader to which Miliband fiercely replies, “hell yes, I’m tough enough” (The Battle for Number 10, 1:21:57). This mockery escalates and Paxman argues that he’s seen “as a North London geek” (The Battle for Number 10, 1:23:36). This kind of personal interrogation borders on a taunting reference to his Jewish background and is both unprofessional and significantly inappropriate. Miliband repeatedly retorts, “Who cares? Who cares? Who does?” attempting to steer the interview from this topic yet Paxman is relentless (The Battle for Number 10, 1:23:41). This is markedly different to when Cameron is questioned on his personal involvement with ‘rich people’. Paxman politely asks, “I’m going to be personal if I may for a second” to which Cameron permits: “you can” (The Battle for number 10, 6:27). This mitigation indicates considerable preferential treatment as Cameron is regarded with superior authority.

Paxman goes on to consider whether it would have been better if Miliband’s brother were Labour leader instead, imitating the question previously asked (The Battle for Number 10, 1:23:54). This reveals a marked contrast of interview management. This line of attack attracts booing from the audience as Paxman has clearly resorted to inappropriate attacks which detract from his rightful role. It was later revealed that more than 400 people complained to the media regulator Ofcom and Channel 4 regarding perceived bias in Miliband’s treatment (Plunkett 2015). Paxman defers to Cameron’s authority in a way that he does not with Miliband, and therefore Cameron is presented as entitled and authoritative. This frequency of attack specifically towards the Labour leader indicates that the Paxman did not respect him as a political leader. The media were thus able to manipulate the public’s view of him, facilitating a shift in public opinion.

**Frequency of the mediators’ interjections**

The media’s role in perpetuating fiscal realism is further revealed by the varying frequency of interjections during specific leaders’ answers during the debates. Burley interjects during Miliband’s answer regarding the apparent demonisation of middle-class high-rate taxpayers. She inquires, “If you’re a socialist does that mean you’re anti-wealth creation?” (The Battle for Number 10, 50:22). This challenge is fundamentally flawed in its premise thereby making it misleading. Socialists believe in higher levels of wealth distribution to tackle and reduce social inequality but are not against the actual creation of wealth itself. Burley is being intentionally provocative, attempting to stigmatise Labour’s values in front of the audience in the studio and at home, further distorting the economic debate. Burley’s most significant interjection occurs when Miliband details his three-point deficit reduction plan. The third point focuses on increasing living standards, an area that has fallen under the coalition, so as to yield higher tax revenues. Burley steers the debate, restricting Miliband’s critique by deliberately reassigning economic blame to Labour. She asserts, “Let’s not talk about the Conservatives, let’s talk about what you do. I’m sure all our audience remember with Liam Byrne and the note that was left behind” (Burley The Battle for Number 10, 52:09). Miliband’s attempt to explain the necessity of his policy in relation to the past five years is deemed unfair and is thwarted. Burley’s interjection attempts to put him in his rightful place as the leader of a disgraced political party that must therefore prove its credibility. She facilitates the distortion of economic history and therefore enables the consolidation of fiscal realism in the debate.

Paxman’s fierce interviewing treatment remains constant during his interview with Cameron. On the loaded question of the economy, Paxman asks, “how much money have you borrowed?” (The Battle for Number 10, 8:35). Cameron hesitates, unable to give an exact figure, and consequently Paxman interjects three further times to provoke him. The number is revealed to be £500 billion; much more than the previous Labour government and far too much regardless. This line of questioning demonstrates the disproportionate composition of the economic narrative as even its most staunch advocate are challenged by it. These interjections are more ferociously directed at Miliband who is relentlessly blamed for Labour’s economic past. While being questioned on his party’s previous policy errors, Paxman interrupts three times to ask Miliband whether they borrowed too much and a further time to ask if they spent too much. Paxman concludes with mocking laughter having not received a dutiful acceptance of blame, the answer that he clearly desired (The Battle for Number 10, 1:12:16). This specific method of interrogation perpetuates the distorted economic history which is then directly presented to the electorate. Interestingly, when Miliband attempts to claim credit at the expense of his predecessor Tony Blair, being the first Labour leader planning to significantly reduce spending, Paxman remarks, “what Tony Blair did is Tony Blair’s affair, isn’t it?” (The Battle for Number 10, 1:16:10). Paxman’s hypocrisy is notable as Gordon Brown’s economic affairs rest solely on Miliband’s shoulders.

David Dimbleby interjects frequently during all three leaders’ thirty-minute sections in the *BBC Question Time Special*, attempting to seek factual clarification from the leaders’ statements and answers. For example, Dimbleby exerts considerable pressure on Cameron to clarify his stance on tax credit cuts due to his avoidance of the question. However, there are far more frequent interjections during Miliband’s section, especially when it regards the economy. The Labour leader is thoroughly questioned by the audience from Leeds, as made evident by Miliband’s first question, question 3, regarding economic and electoral trust after the recession alongside the note left by Liam Byrne. Dimbleby interjects to bolster this challenge:

But if you look back, and the question was looking back, why should we trust Labour in the light of what happened before? For six years before the crash, you increased borrowing year on year on year on year. Why should people believe that you’re going to get it down? (BBC QT Special, 33:07).

Again, Miliband is held personally responsible for the increases in spending deemed to have caused the economic crisis in 2008. To compare, Cameron is never asked to defend Thatcher’s deregulation of the banks which, arguably, was far more damaging. The reiteration of the annual increases in spending emphasises a sense of collective outrage at this irresponsible economic policy, judging it to have significantly eroded electoral trust. In addition, Miliband is asked the loaded question from an audience member: “I’ve just got a really simply question, do you accept that when Labour was last in power, you overspent?” (BBC QT Special, 37:55). Miliband declines, attracting quiet unrest from the audience. Dimbleby interjects with a sense of disbelief: “even with all the borrowing? Year on year on year?” (BBC QT Special, 38:08). Again, the repeated emphasis of yearly increases perpetuates the notion of economic recklessness and untrustworthiness. Dimbleby’s interjections mimic the hostile environment of the audience, yet he contributes to this economic myth, shifting public opinion and consolidating fiscal realism.

**Summary**

The political rhetoric employed by the more right-leaning politicians in the television debates establishes the confines of the economic debate according to fiscal realism. The recapitulation of certain themes and phrases is a form of calculated political strategy that convinces the electorate of their distorted economic narrative. The recurrence of this scaremongering, reminiscent of government war-time rhetoric, becomes inescapable for the electorate as a result of the media’s failure to effectively challenge and confront it. The economically limited pre-selected questions reflect the confines of the debate and the shift in the Overton Window. The mediators’ personal biases, revealed by frequent interjections and specific attacks ranging from political to personal, demonstrate to the audience who is politically credible.

Discussion

I was leaning towards Labour…but then when I heard Ed Miliband, in the Question Time debate, unwilling to admit that Labour overspent when in Government, I just knew then I couldn’t trust him on the economy. So I voted Conservative for economic security (BBC Television Election night live coverage 2015, cited in Roberts 2015).

Labour’s unwillingness to counter fiscal realism since its creation in 2008 majorly contributed to their electoral downfall. Ed Miliband was unable to reassert Labour’s political and economic credibility throughout the entire election campaign, let alone during the television debates, due to a lack of effective political confrontation since his Labour leadership victory. Yet, as demonstrated by this study, the media during the televised debates was central in shaping the election results by failing to critique the idea of fiscal realism, thereby consolidating this distorted economic narrative. This study will now go on to discuss the findings of the research, shedding light on the broader implications of fiscal realist hegemony.

**The organisation of the debates**

The varying structures of the four television debates distinctly influenced the manner in which fiscal realism was consolidated. My research predominantly scrutinised *The Battle for Number 10* and the *BBC QT Special,* as both these debates included far more one-on-one interaction between the politicians and the mediator and fewer politicians were involved. The back-and-forth nature of the discussion enabled the mediators to steer the debates according to their own personal opinions, or indeed, what they constituted an exciting or interesting debate. This draws on Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky’s (1988) concept of a propaganda model. It asserts that the media is likely to sacrifice independent news reporting in order to maximise profit or to suit the elites that control its ownership. The television debates were evidently not only political in nature; they were meant to be entertaining. This constitutes a further conclusion in my research: the question over whether the media consolidated fiscal realism due to personal opinions, or because of a desire to increase viewing ratings. Fiscal realism dominated nonetheless. I do not intend to reduce the media’s role in the larger debates, as their lack of intervention, as well as the pre-selected questions throughout, reflected the confines of fiscal realism.

The fewer politicians there were in the debates, the more pervasive and dominant their rhetoric. The highly interactive nature of *The ITV Leaders’ Debate* and *The BBC Election Debate* allowed for more frequent and provocative challenges between the party leaders, advancing the debates’ democratic function and allowing for more discursive dialogue. The inclusion of the Green Party’s Natalie Bennett, the Scottish National Party’s (SNP) Nicola Sturgeon and Plaid Cymru’s Leanne Wood facilitated a much more diverse economic debate, convincingly confronting the hegemony of fiscal realism. They rallied together, forming an anti-austerity alliance and attempted to dispel the economic myths repeatedly voiced by the more right-leaning politicians. In *The BBC Election Debate*, Sturgeon asserted,

Well I believe that it’s really important to get the deficit and the debt down but I also believe that economic policy is not an end in itself, it’s a means to allow people to live healthier and happier and more prosperous lives. And if that policy, the policy of austerity is driving more people in to poverty, including more children, if its undermining our public services, and its actually holding back economic growth, then I think it’s time to change that policy (The BBC Election, 13:05).

Evidently, there were, in fact, challenges by other leaders to this economic narrative yet they were most powerful in the absence of David Cameron and Nick Clegg. In *The ITV Leaders’ Debate*, the smaller parties remained present and involved, yet they were discursively overshadowed by these right-leaning leaders and their pervasive rhetoric. Furthermore, *The BBC Election Debate* only attracted 4.7 million viewings in comparison to the total 8.8 million viewings of *The ITV Leaders’ Debate*.There was, then, a cohesive economic alternative to fiscal realism, but it was only seen and heard by a fraction of the British electorate, the rest of which was convinced by the fiscal realist argument.

**An impartial and educated media?**

Through the use of critical discourse analysis, it is clear that inescapable scaremongering rhetoric employed by the right-wing politicians underpinned fiscal realism and dominated the television debates. Cameron, Clegg, and often, Nigel Farage, created an atmosphere of national and economic crisis through the use of inflammatory language, provocative metaphors and misleading analogies. Labour was deemed to have created an “absolute nightmare” after the GFC, leaving behind a “massive black hole in our public finances” (Cameron BBC QT Special, 2:46; Clegg BBC QT Special, 1:13:02). The recapitulation of these phrases legitimised the notion that 2008 marked the “biggest heart attack” in Britain’s economy, forcing the coalition to create a stable government at the time of an “economic firestorm” (Clegg BBC QT Special, 1:13:04). This intentionally incendiary language evoked feelings similar to that of a war-time struggle, elucidating the media’s failure to counter their claims. This study has drawn key parallels to Robinson’s et al. (2010) elite-driven model, which is explained by the media’s reliance on official sources rather than a broad range of viewpoints and, most importantly, due to their commitment to patriotic news reporting. During the election campaign, in this time of national struggle, the media partially sacrificed their journalist objectivity in favour of more patriotic news reporting. This can be conceptualised by Mueller’s (1973) ‘rally effect’ where the media, aiming to assist troops in combat, promotes government foreign policy to induce patriotism and support from citizens.

Patriotic news reporting during the debates is demonstrated by the sheer lack of effective challenges from the mediators in response to incendiary political rhetoric. The dominance of fiscal realism was codified in these debates as it was never substantially confronted by the media. However, what is most crucial to discuss was when media representatives actively engaged in this scaremongering themselves. Kay Burley’s interjection in Ed Miliband’s audience questioning during *The Battle for Number 10*, reminding the audience of the insensitive note left by Liam Byrne, was an instance of active participation in this rhetoric. She emphasised Labour’s responsibility for the ‘mess’ that they left behind. Again, Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) propaganda model may be of relevance here: Burley is noticeably more interventionist when Miliband comes on stage and she is perhaps attempting to ‘liven up’ the debate, making provocative statements that the audience both in the studio and at home would find more exciting to watch. In this attempt to maximise profit and viewing ratings, impartial news reporting may have been forfeited. On the other hand, Burley’s own personal views may have impeded her dutiful, democratic and impartial role, explaining her one-sided political stance; Cameron was, in contrast, treated with far more respect and authority. Arguably, media representatives such as Burley rallied around the Conservatives aims and projected the narrowed economic narrative to ensure a ‘safe’ and ‘stable’ government with supposedly responsible economic policies for the next five years to come.

The nature of the television debates not only calls into question the media’s impartiality but it raises doubts as to the economic education of the media’s representatives. Macroeconomics is certainly a complicated topic, but the right’s distortion of economic history as a form of political strategy should not have gone uncontested. The media’s duty is to provide informative and accurate reporting and they consequently have a responsibility to train and select mediators capable of penetrating political rhetoric. The distinct lack of confrontation of Cameron and Clegg’s frequent economic comparisons to Greece highlights this tendency. As previously explained, this comparison is inappropriate due to its simple inaccuracy. The emphasis on how close Britain came to a Greek-style economic crisis further evoked an atmosphere of a war-time struggle, legitimising the past five years of difficult but necessary austerity, and provoking a patriotic response from the media. In addition, the framing of the economic terms, borrowing, taxing and spending to present them as irresponsible and even dangerous to the UK, additionally calls into question their economic education. This was simply a form of political strategy of the avoidance and assignment of blame (König and Wenzelburger 2014). The media both implicitly and explicitly endorsed fiscal realism thereby consolidating it. This in turn shaped the election results, demonstrating their failure to present an impartial and balanced debate.

**A shift in the Overton Window**

The limited range of audience questions, pre-selected by media representatives, demonstrated the confines of the economic debate. The economic questions were asked at the beginning of the programme or were the first questions put forward to specific leaders, indicating their importance to the electorate. Each of them involved the deficit and interrogated the leaders on the correct and responsible methods of reducing it as quickly as possible. They perpetuated fiscal realism due to their narrow focus on neo-liberal assumptions that, in reality, have been argued to be fundamentally flawed. Despite this, they were chosen by the organisers of the debate, providing a platform which legitimated their premise. This reveals a failure on behalf of the media to select questions that could structure a balanced and representative debate. Instead, time was wasted by leaders answering questions that were poorly phrased or simply inappropriate.

The apathetic or sterile nature of the economic questions was also notable. This restricted the audience’s ability to engage with the moral implications of fiscal economic policy. Cuts were accepted as an inevitability - an issue that superseded the importance of more investment, higher quality public services and better welfare. The reality of austerity is that large sections of society, often the poorest, the unemployed, and the disabled, lose public services or welfare that are vital for them to live their everyday life. The fiscal realist narrative that dominated the debates measured recovery, progress and growth in terms of purely numerical terms and figures. As long as we continue to debate economics in this way, we are stuck with contradictory statements. The debate needs to be reset to acknowledge a sense of wealth in public services, infrastructure, social services, democratic and educational institutions. An audience member became frustrated with this moral deficiency during the *BBC Question Time Special*, asking: “Mr Cameron all of these questions you’re being asked, have a moral dimension, and you keep answering them in terms of economics. I’d like you to engage a little bit more with the moral dimension that these questions have asked” (BBC QT, 25:45). The sterile and simplistic political rhetoric has adjusted the Overton Window.

Unfortunately, the election debates did not live up to their potential of shattering the Overton Window that was installed in 2010. Rather than assigning equal political importance to the wide range of opinions found across the richly diverse political spectrum, they instead ignored anything that did not fit within the much narrower confines of neo-liberal economics. Indeed, the Overton Window was reinforced during this debate, rendering it seemingly impenetrable to any outside economic force.

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