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Beneath the bias, the crisis: The press, the independent media and the Scottish referendum

ABSTRACT

This article examines the coverage of the Scottish referendum of 2014 by the press in the context of a multi-nation state with diverging political cultures. Evidence of press bias is assessed but the article argues that the more interesting question is why, despite the bias, there was considerable neutrality or even pro-independence views, given that the referendum posed an existential threat to the British state? The article argues that the political crisis was also a crisis for some sections of the press, who in a complex and contradictory context had their un-reflexive unionism mitigated. Signs of historic re-alignments among the Scottish electorate – especially the working class vote – threw the press on the defensive. The article also considers the impact of the independent media and the use of the Internet and social media to facilitate a grassroots campaign for independence, which again made the press look out of touch with popular currents. The political and media crisis is situated in the context of the contest between neo-liberalism and social democracy and draws on a Gramscian framework to analyse this.

KEYWORDS

Scotland
referendum
press
British State
independent media
Gramsci

INTRODUCTION

On 18 September 2014, the Scottish referendum on whether to stay a part of the United Kingdom or become an independent country came to a climax. It only dawned very late, both for the Westminster political class and the wider public in the rest of the United Kingdom, that the British state might be on the verge of breaking up – or, perhaps more accurately, continuing its slow-motion break-up, since a precedent had already been set with the secession of the Irish Free State in 1922 (Torrance 2013: 35). Such a momentous decision – on whether to continue the union between the two nations, established in 1707 – demands a momentous debate. In August 2013, the *Daily Telegraph* reported on an IPSOS-Mori poll that found out that 44 per cent of respondents had yet to make up their mind, one way or another (Johnson 2013). This large pool of undecided voters might have expected the media to live up to the normative principles that have been formulated by philosophers and media critics to think about the democratic importance of 'the public sphere'. This public sphere is conceived as a political–discursive space made up of institutions that 'construct and sustain an effective space for the formation of public intelligence', as Michael Higgins puts it in a nice phrase (2006: 26). *Public intelligence* can be developed (or retarded) by a range of institutions in civil society, such as political parties, educational organizations, trade unions, cultural institutions and the media. The news and reportage genres of the latter are particularly important for the formation of opinion and knowledge on the political issues of the day. Ideally, the media help in the process of deliberation by giving access to what Graham Murdock calls 'the broadest possible array of arguments and conceptual frames' relevant to understanding a given situation or process (2003: 30).

Unfortunately, the normative principles thus elaborated have forced media scholars to conclude that *actual* media practice has all too frequently been found wanting. There is a well-established critique of what has been called the 'corporate media' and its various filtering processes (Herman and Chomsky 1994, McChesney 1997). Ownership structures, sources of funding, internal hierarchical structures, ideologies of professionalism, links with the upper echelons of the dominant party political machines and state institutions as well as immersion in the dominant ideologies of the day – all, critics have argued, limit the extent to which the media can play a properly democratic role. In short, as civil society organs, the press are too fundamentally shaped by their own economic interests on the one hand and the political power of the state on the other (the legislative and executive bodies, as well as coercive apparatuses such as the judiciary and the police, for example).

In the case of the Scottish referendum, yes supporters claim that there was bias within the media – broadcasting and press alike – but with the existence of the British State at stake that is perhaps hardly surprising. What is more surprising is that at least in some quarters there was more heterogeneity within the dominant media than supporters of the Yes campaign acknowledge. This, I will argue, is not because of an internal predisposition towards democratic debate. The critique of the corporate media is basically sound in my view but there is a 'functionalist' version of that critique that is popular among grassroots media activists, social media and online forums such as Media Lens. This functionalist stance implies a strategy of complete dis-engagement with the dominant media and the development of a parallel media using digital resources. My argument is that parts of the British press in Scotland were

thrown on the defensive by three interrelated factors that disrupted their unreflexive unionism. These three factors were (1) the diverging political cultures within Britain, specifically the renewed political legitimacy of social democracy within Scotland; (2) the articulation of this social democratic vision to the question of independence; and (3) the changing loyalties and alignments within large sections of the working class that began moving from the neoliberal devolution unionism of the Labour party to independence.

Situating the British press in a context of crisis allows for a more nuanced reading of their performance, a more realistic account of their power and the pressures, tensions and contradictions they operate in. This in turn suggests that while developing alternative media in tandem with grassroots campaigns is important and a critique of the dominant media absolutely necessary, this need not be conceived as an either/or strategy. Instead, the pressures of alternative media content and audiences for that content can open up spaces within the dominant media for more critical, sceptical or questioning voices. Given the audience reach of the dominant news media this seems important.

In order to examine this question I will draw on a Gramscian analysis to think about the press and its role within civil society, its relationship to the State and the question of moral, political and intellectual leadership. I will also consider the impact of the alternative digital and social media, which was articulated to a grassroots political campaign for Scottish independence. The scale of media output, generated by a two-year referendum campaign, poses a methodological problem concerning representativeness. The quantitative analysis that has been done so far gives some idea of overall trends but is lacking in precisely the sense of contradiction and crisis that I want to tease out in this article. Given the limits of a journal article, the qualitative analysis of media texts that I offer here must necessarily be illustrative only of the broader political, historical and theoretical framework that I develop below and on which the persuasiveness of my argument rests.

A GRAMSCIAN FRAMEWORK

As is well known, Gramsci distinguished between the State and civil society; the latter Gramsci described as the '"private" fabric of the State' (2011: 153). Describing civil society as the 'private' fabric of the State suggested both a connection and a distinction between the two. For Gramsci, civil society refers to all those institutions outside the State proper that while they are influenced by the State (through the law and politics, for example) are 'private' institutions in a variety of senses. They may be 'private' in the economic sense that Marx used the term, referring to private capital, private ownership of property, the market for labour-power and the competitive individualism characteristic of capitalism. But Gramsci seems to now reclassify this sphere as the 'economic structure' of society and instead fills the term 'civil society' with a new content that includes a range of institutions that are private in the social sense (the family) or entered into through personal choice and preferences (religion) or used, consumed or engaged with as consumers or citizens (the media, social clubs, hobbies, education) or, from the point of view of the institutions themselves, organized by their own distinct set of concerns, not directly subordinated by the State but relatively autonomous from it. Gramsci's account of the relationship between civil society, the economic structure of society and the State helps sharpen up politically those debates concerning the public sphere that have been popular within media studies.

Gramsci writes of hegemony forming at least in part through a kind of decentralized process of individual or 'molecular' initiatives working broadly within the direction of the predominant social relationships (1988: 250). Civil society in this definition works to organize 'the "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group' (Gramsci 1998: 12). The concept of hegemony is one of the centre-pieces of Gramsci's political science. It specifically denotes the mode of consent, compromise, persuasion and enticement by which a social group achieves a *moral and intellectual leadership* over society as a whole. The 'development and expansion' of a particular class interest is translated into and presented as being 'the motor force of a universal expansion, of a development of all the "national" energies'. When a particular group with its particular economic interests can make itself stand for the interests of all the other classes and class fractions, then it has achieved a leading position in society. This means that enough of the other groups can identify with the dominant group's way of framing national identity and see themselves in and find a 'home' or place within, that representation (Gramsci 1988: 205). But this ethical–cultural and ultimately political authority is not and cannot be merely a matter of representation. It has to have an economic component. The 'leading group makes some sacrifices of an… [economic] kind' (Gramsci 1967: 155).

Political parties are key instruments for forging the degree and quality of historical self-consciousness that individuals and social classes have in the 'real and effective historical drama' (Gramsci 1967: 137–38). However, Gramsci was very aware that political cultures more generally, through media representation as well as in everyday life – the exercise of opinion-formers within peer groups, for example – were also influential in forging degrees of consciousness about one's place within a historical situation or context or 'drama' such as the Scottish referendum. Gramsci, for example, cites the role of some newspapers as having leadership functions for a party, a sort of 'intellectual High Command' (Gramsci 1967: 147). The main political parties straddle both the State and civil society. As mass party organizations depending on voluntary membership, political parties extend into and are part of civil society. But to the extent that they participate in the legislative and executive branches of government, they are also part of the organs of the State. Therefore, the State and civil society are connected but the distinction is important since it indicates a real relative autonomy of the latter from the former and, as a result, greater latitude as a site of struggle and contestation in the production of moral and intellectual leadership (Hall 1988: 48).

This Gramscian sketch allows us to understand the nature of the crisis that the referendum represented. The roots of the current crisis in the political–cultural integrity of the British state go back to Thatcherism's break with the post-war social democratic order. Where once Empire, industry and war had bounded the British nations into a multinational State (Kumar 2006: 432–33), in the post-war period social democracy had played this key role. Thatcherism's reconfiguring of the post-war political economy of Britain stress-tested fracture-lines that had a significant geographical dimension – known as the North–South divide (Harrison and Hart 1993). Gramsci noted that hegemony always has a economic component, and in this case the economic component relates to the bifurcated political economies of Britain: between the tendential skews towards heavy industrial capital located in the North and more 'rentier' forms of capital in the South, based on finance and

property, with 'lighter' and more advanced industrial capital also a feature in the Midlands and South. The Conservative party's explicit abandonment of One Nation Toryism stress-tests this bifurcation within the political-cultural integrity of the multi-nation national state as conservatism orientates itself to the southern economy. This compounded the deterioration in the party's electoral fortunes in Scotland after the decline of the Empire had already hit it in the 1960s (Clements et al. 1996: 31). In 1983 they won 21 seats in Scotland but this dropped to ten seats in 1987. It should be noted that because of the blunt first-past-the-post system of counting votes this drop in *seats* happened on the basis of a loss of *less than* 100,000 votes. Nevertheless, following the 1987 General Election victory this collapse in seats initiated the beginning of a debate about whether the Conservatives had the democratic legitimacy to run Scotland from Westminster.

In the early 1990s a cluster of civil society groups organized themselves into the Scottish Constitutional Convention that took the initiative to press for devolution and drew the initially reluctant Labour party (which feared it could be a step towards independence) and the SNP (which feared that devolution would satisfy the Scots and kill off independence) into its wake. A system of PR for a new Scottish Parliament was conceived that would make it highly unlikely that any one party could achieve a majority, thus seemingly preventing the nationalist SNP ever being in a position to pose a referendum on Scotland's independence. The Labour party saw itself as the beneficiary of the new Parliament, running it in coalition with the Liberals. In 1997 the Conservatives were wiped out completely in Scotland, winning no seats in the General Election and with a now sharper fall in the share of the vote (less than 500,000 compared to 800,000 in 1983). Labour formed the government at Westminster, and following the setting up of the new Scottish Parliament (after a referendum), Labour and the Liberals dominated it between 1999 and 2007.

But the Iraq War and Scottish Labour's devotion to following the neo-liberal agenda of the Labour party at Westminster lost it support. The SNP occupied the centre-left ground of social democracy abandoned by New Labour and became a minority administration in 2007. Of course, the SNP has been criticized by both the right and the left for trying to square commitments to social equality with neo-liberal policies on low corporation tax (see Torrance 2013: 73–74 and Davidson 2010: 352). But irrespective of the SNP's conflicting political cultures, the popularity of its modest social democratic policies helped build support so that they won an absolute majority at the Scottish Parliament in 2011. The nightmare scenario for the Unionists had arrived. In October 2012 the Scottish and British governments agreed to hold a referendum on whether Scotland wanted to become an independent nation.

Gramsci insisted that an economic crisis does not translate automatically into any given set of political outcomes. Such a view qualifies as an example of economism. Instead political leadership makes choices within a given set of circumstances and tries to forge a new consensus as to possible solutions. This is what the SNP managed to do, moving into the social democratic space vacated by the neo-liberal Labour party and articulating it with their historic mission of achieving independence. The SNP offered leadership, and on such key issues within the Scottish context as tuition fees, it offered a different moral vision of the good society. A crisis in hegemony ensues when the economic settlement can no longer be framed by the dominant political cultures as necessary or just. The SNP in effect argued that the economic concessions from the dominant groups, which are an underpinning

component of any hegemony, were too meagre within neo-liberalism. The SNP government's referendum document, *Scotland's Future* (2013), sums up the key points of difference with what it calls the 'Westminster' system (the neo-liberal political economy essentially). These include an economy orientated overwhelmingly towards London and the south-east, Westminster's indifference towards manufacturing, its attacks on public services, the anti-democratic imposition of Westminster policies rejected by Scottish voters, the lack of a written constitution, on-going attacks on the Welfare Benefits system and the growing and unnecessary inequality associated with neo-liberalism:

> Under the Westminster system, Scotland is also locked into one of the most unequal economic models in the developed world: since 1975 income inequality among working-age people has increased faster in the UK than in any other country in the OECD.
>
> (Scottish Government 2013: 5)

The politics of the referendum would turn decisively on the breaking up of the alliance between the working class and Labour's neo-liberal devolution unionism in the search for a return to a social democratic settlement. At the end of the twentieth century, Philip Schlesinger had argued that in the context of devolution 'the dominant model of the nation-state as a unitary political community, as a stable locus in which we speak to ourselves about politics and public affairs, is breaking down' (1998: 56). How much truer was that in 2014 when the convergence between social democracy and national independence posed an existential threat to the unitary British State?

YES VS. THE MEDIA

In the case of the Scottish referendum, the press have indeed been heavily criticized for their proximity to the dominant political cultures represented by, what was at the time, the three main parties of the Westminster Parliament. Labour, the Liberals and the Conservatives joined together to promote the cause of unionism against the 'Yes' campaign for independence. Pat Anderson's book *Fear and Smear, the Campaign against Scottish Independence* (2015) sums up what many on the Yes side thought of the media's role. Anderson argues that the twin propaganda strategies of making people unreasonably fearful and traducing the reputation of opponents was much in evidence, especially in the press. What would happen to health, pensions, the economy and defence, for example, were key fears that the 'No' (to independence) campaign played upon, and these concerns were certainly recycled in the press very extensively. One could make an argument that these were legitimate questions to raise, although whether they were properly or fairly debated is another matter. The Yes campaign dubbed this 'Project Fear' and by the end of the debate many supporters of the No side criticized their own campaign for being too negative. This suggests, however, that as a propaganda strategy the inducement of fear was not entirely successful.

More problematically, the press did appear to often focus the question of independence on the personality of the SNP leader and First Minister of Scotland Alex Salmond, and then imply that he had dictatorial tendencies that subtly linked him and the SNP to dark nationalistic political currents, even, absurdly, fascism (Anderson 2015: 18–22). Writing on the independent pro-Yes website Bella Caledonia, Kevin Williamson noted that 'Personalities are

more vulnerable than ideas, and easier to attack or ridicule. This approach is the standard propaganda model used internationally against all ideas or ideology which threaten to challenge the status quo' (Williamson 2012). The reference to the 'propaganda model' is an example of the popularization of the Chomskian critique of the dominant media, which is widespread among the independent media with close links to grassroots campaigns. The academic research that has been published so far suggests that the BBC – whose role in the referendum was a matter of controversy for the Yes campaigners – also tended to reduce the referendum to the personal desires and ambitions of Alex Salmond (Robertson 2014), perhaps following an agenda set by the press. *The Guardian*'s columnist George Monbiot criticized his own paper's unthinking unionism and the rest of the British press for its coverage of the referendum: 'The Scots who will vote yes have been almost without representation in the media', he suggested (2014). Citing the daily summaries of the big news stories drawn up by the PR agency Press Data, the journalist Iain MacWhirter suggests that anti-Yes reports dominated by around three to one (2014: 78). That there was a bias against Scottish independence, unremitting in certain quarters, has also been backed up by quantitative analysis conducted by David Patrick. This research has yet to be published in a peer review context but preliminary results have been presented, both in the form of a written summary for the website Scottish Constitutional Futures Forum (Patrick 2014) and in the form of a video (called 'Writing Off Scotland') hosted by the Bella Caledonian website. In the video, Patrick presented his research as evidence of a strong dominant media hostility to the Yes campaign. On the Futures Forum website, Patrick outlines the scope of the research. It focused on eight papers sold in Scotland between September 2013 and March 2014, and analysed a total of 1578 front-page articles, editorial and comment pieces. Yet, Patrick's evidence is open to different conclusions. On headlines, 61.8% 'showed *no* obvious bias towards either side' (Patrick 2014). While the remainder showed a 4–1 bias against independence, the stand-out figure, it could be argued, is the neutrality of 61.8%. In the main body of the text analysed, 48.4% were defined by Patrick as 'neutral', the rest showing a 3–1 bias for the Union. If the evidence of bias must have been frustrating for Yes supporters on an issue of such importance in a close-run vote, Patrick's evidence suggests that it was far from uniformly so. Therefore, we need a framework that can account for this despite the fact that the British State with which the media are inextricably linked as organs of civil society faced potential destruction in its present form.

THE BRITISH PRESS IN SCOTLAND

The trends towards devolution of power to legislative bodies make it harder not to recognize that 'Britishness' consists of a plurality of national communities. Most of the national press, including even the staunchly Unionist *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*, have conceded this and tried to address the issue of speaking to a multinational Britain by developing their Scottish editions. Indeed, in a sense, devolution has not been kind to the indigenous Scottish press. In bringing a whole new apparatus of government into existence, daily coverage of the political class in the Scottish Parliament, the lifeblood of political journalism, became necessary (Schlesinger et al. 2001), but that encouraged more investment by the London-based titles in their Scottish editions. The middle-market English papers such as the *Daily Express* and the

Sales (July–Dec 2014)		Change from July–Dec 2013	
The Herald	37,000	–5%	Scottish Based Titles
The Scotsman	26,300	–11%	
Daily Record	197,900	–10%	
Sunday Herald*	32,200	+35%	
Scottish Sun	235,000	–9%	
Daily Express	53,700	–13%	London Based Titles
Daily Mail	91,500	–4%	
Daily Telegraph	17,000	–9%	
The Times	18,800	+1%	
The Guardian	9,700	–10%	

Source: BBC (2015).

**Sunday Herald* is the only Sunday paper listed here, all the others are national dailies.

Table 1: ABC figures for average Scottish sales in the period July–December 2014.

Daily Mail have, with their Scottish editions, made significant inroads into the audience share of the indigenous Scottish press, as Table 1 shows.

I have differentiated the Scottish national dailies between those titles grounded ideologically in Scotland (i.e., based there) and those that despite their Scottish editions take their ideological compass from their London/England headquarters. While the latter can address their audience as specifically Scottish and assume an addressee that is intimately aware of the specifically Scottish issues and events they deal with, they make few ideological concessions to the decline of conservatism in Scotland. In the General Election of 2010 the Conservative Party won 412,855 votes, that is, 16.7 per cent of the votes and just one MP. While this is electorally disastrous, the numbers indicate that conservatism as a political culture remains substantial enough to support conservative mid-market and broadsheet titles. With average sales figure per day in Scotland at 91,500, the *Daily Mail* (Scotland edition) has almost twice the sales of its nearest rival, the *Daily Express*.

On Monday 8 September 2014 the *Daily Mail* published no less than thirteen articles hostile to the Yes campaign, three that could be described as neutral and *none* that could be evaluated as pro-independence. This was the Monday after the *Sunday Times* had published a poll showing that Yes were ahead, 51–49 per cent for the first time in the campaign, and with only a resonant 'Ten Days' to 'save' the Union. An article by Jim Murphy, the Blairite Labour Party MP who was a leading figure on the ground for the 'Better Together' campaign, had a long 903-word article in the paper, an indication of the close links between the press and the unionist parties. Although the headline for the article is 'Don't Panic If you Love the Union – But Do Get Out To Vote Next Week', Murphy continually stresses the uncertainty and insecurity of a world 'driven by change' against which constitutional change would be an 'enormous' risk (2014). But Murphy's article – a classic example of 'Project Fear' – looks like the epitome of cool reason against some of the works of the *Mail*'s staff writers. Although the paper is easily lampooned for

its hysteria, rage and apparent bewilderment at events going on around it, all these traits are sadly on show in the sample from Monday 8 September. Apocalyptic visions abound – sterling is about to go into 'meltdown' (Roden 2014) – whereas in another the leader of the Labour party (Ed Miliband) is lashed for his inability to keep Labour supporters loyal to the union (Slack 2014). Meanwhile, the prospect of a Yes vote elicits an extraordinary howl of despair from Chris Deerin for whom it is the 'final dissolution of a small-ish island that once had the flair and audacity to rule the world; the snuffing out of a bright lamp of civilization, democracy, tolerance and solidarity' (2014). Here one glimpses the deep psychic wound that a loss of 32 per cent of the territory of Britain would have inflicted on unionism. Ideologically, there was virtually no difference between the Scottish *Daily Mail* and its English or rest of the UK editions. However, the same could not be said for *The Sun*.

The *Scottish Sun* occupies an indeterminate position between the London-based titles and the Scottish-based titles. *The Sun* launched its Scottish edition as far back as 1987, but apart from sport, much of the Scottish edition duplicated the edition for the rest of Britain. However, with devolution *The Scottish Sun* properly 'editionized' with a 'printing plant and substantial editorial presence in Glasgow' and engaged in a vicious price war with the 'indigenous' Scottish paper, *The Daily Record* (owned by Trinity Mirror), for the working-class market (Hutcheon 2008: 67). However, *The Scottish Sun* was not in a position to duplicate the ideological position of its English counterpart, as the *Scottish Mail* was, for the simple reason that its readership had long abandoned conservatism for Labourism, but until the referendum had remained steadfastly unionist. But it was also clear, since the 2007 Scottish Parliament election, that the working-class vote was no longer habitually bonded to New Labour but was shifting to the SNP, not only as a party of government but on the ultimate question of independence. This fault-line between the nation states of Britain had to be negotiated by the tabloid press.

The Sun showed a subtle ability to speak to a Scottish audience on the one hand and the rest of the United Kingdom on the other during the referendum campaign. On Sunday 7 September, when the Murdoch-owned *Sunday Times* poll put the Yes campaign two points ahead, the British edition of *The Sun* ran a story under the headline, 'SHOCK AYE THE NOO. SCOTTISH POLL BOMBSHELL. Yes leading by 2%. Queen's "great concern"'. This headline speaks from a position of traditional Britishness, in which the English nation has dominated. Hence the invocation of a stereotypical linguistic phrase rarely used by Scots ('och aye, the noo' meaning 'oh, yes now'), the fact that the bombshell is 'Scottish' (implying some distance from 'us') and that the Queen, according to a royal source, is both a unionist and, therefore, concerned. Despite the implications of the story for all that the English edition of *The Sun* holds dear, the paper could not quite stretch itself to enquiring too deeply into the matter, as the item was only 293 words long. But without exploring how things could have got to the current position, the paper left its readers in no doubt that they ought not to think this was a positive development. 'It leaves just 11 days to save the 307-year old union', wrote the author Craig Woodhouse (2014). The item cited one SNP MP as saying that the poll was 'hugely encouraging' but against that cited Alistair Darling, the Labour MP leading the Better Together campaign ('Separation is forever'), Jim Murphy, the MP leading the Labour No campaign ('independence is an enormous, uncosted risk') and a statement from trade union leaders (rarely cited approvingly in *The Sun*) suggesting that independence would damage

workers rights. This one-sided presentation must have left readers wondering why then the 307-year-old union was in danger of being ripped up if the issue was so straightforward. The visibility of Scotland to the rest of the United Kingdom, even at this moment of crisis, seemed faint, and the country's possible decision on the referendum, inexplicable.

The Scottish edition of *The Sun*, written by Craig Woodhouse again, and another writer, Chris Musson, presumably adapting the copy in Glasgow for a Scottish audience, gave a rather different slant on the same story. First, it had a front-page teaser into the main story in the inside pages. The front-page headline was 'AYES FRONT: YES POLL LEAD SENSATION'. Unable to give up on its mobilization of linguistic puns, this one is at least less potentially offensive than 'SHOCK AYE THE NOO', while it also stresses the impact for the Yes campaign. By contrast, the English/national edition headline focalized the implications of the story through the No campaign. Such headlines are good examples of how national identity is constructed unconsciously in the banal small words the press use, which indicate a presumed familiarity with the material or a presumed distance, and a presumed attitude to what is happening 'here' and 'there' (Law 2001 and Billig 1995). In the case of 'AYES FRONT' there is no need to signal national specificity since the poll referred to is not happening 'over there'; it is not a 'Scottish Poll Bombshell' but 'here' as it were, where 'we' live.

The story on the inside page is more extensive for the Scottish edition than the English, stretching to 644 words (Musson and Woodhouse 2014). While it cites the Queen's 'concern', as in the English edition, it then goes on to cite three SNP sources on the story instead of just one: the then SNP Deputy First Minister Nicola Sturgeon; the same SNP MP as in the English edition; and then an anonymous 'senior party source' for a third quote, which includes a line about the referendum being 'the biggest opportunity the people of Scotland will ever have to build a fairer society and more prosperous economy'. This is the sort of line that would never make the British edition of *The Sun*. The Scottish edition then cites Rupert Murdoch's rather gleeful tweet about the poll being a 'huge black eye' for the establishment – which would have been completely out of place with the British edition's pro-union concern. Although the article does go on to give some copy space to the Better Together campaign, the handling of the article is much more a careful positioning of the paper towards a cautious neutrality on the issue. *The Scottish Sun* dare not foreclose on the issue and declare independence to be unequivocally negative for 'us'. The constituency for social democracy, which has found organized political expression in Scotland, means that the straightforward defence of the constitutional status quo would be a commercially risky option, and instead, some recognition of the possibility of civic reform (Murdoch's tweet, positioning himself disingenuously as outside the Establishment) and political change is accommodated. Although this ideological positioning of the Scottish edition of *The Sun* is quite far from the traditional home turf of News UK's press titles (their usual combination of economic liberalism and conservatism), they have sufficiently adapted to prosper north of the border.

THE 'INDIGENOUS' SCOTTISH PRESS

As short a time ago as the turn-of-the century, academics studying the Scottish media scene could point to a distinctive 'indigenous' Scottish press that was more popular than the English-based press in Scotland (see Law

2001: 303, Schlesinger 1998: 62–63; Meech and Kilborn 1992: 255). All that changed remarkably quickly just a decade into the new century, as the London press developed their Scottish editions as something more than mere appendages to their 'national' titles. The figures from table 1 show the mid-market Scottish papers *The Herald* and *The Scotsman* being comprehensively beaten by the *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail*, whereas the once leading paper in Scotland, *The Daily Record*, trails *The Scottish Sun*. Table 1 also shows a familiar story of press circulation in decline: down 5% on the previous year for *The Herald*, down 11% for *The Scotsman*, down 10% for the *Daily Record*. The economic vulnerability of the Scottish press, suffering industry-wide decline but with a smaller market and less capital investment than the London-based titles have available to them, was likely to make them more sensitive to potential ruptures with their readership over something as seismic as the question of independence.

The rise of the SNP disrupted the political culture the press were operating in more than the decline of conservatism. It raised the twin prospect of social democracy contesting the neo-liberal consensus *and* independence, which challenged the unstinting unionism of the press. In the run-up to the elections for the Scottish Parliament in 2007, with the SNP's lead holding firm in the polls, some papers modified their traditional hostility towards the party and while not endorsing the party's goal of independence were prepared to give them some support as a reforming administration working within the devolved Scottish Parliament (McNair 2008: 238–40). This cautious support was tested out in a time-worn kite-flying manner for the press, through the titles' Sunday papers, namely, *The Sunday Herald* (sister paper to *The Herald*) and *Scotland On Sunday*, the sister paper to *The Scotsman*. Both *The Daily Record* and the *Scottish Sun*, however, continued to support New Labour's neo-liberal devolution unionism in 2007. By the time of the SNP's second and decisive electoral triumph in 2011, which *The Scottish Sun* supported (although not independence), *The Daily Record*'s owners announced 40 per cent cuts in its editorial staff. A number of commentators invited by *The Sunday Herald* to discuss the *Record*'s plight wondered whether its uncritical support of New Labour, even as the party's support base was crumbling, was harming it commercially (Schlesinger 2011).

When it came to the referendum on independence in 2014, neither *The Herald* or *The Scotsman nor The Daily Record* advocated breaking with the union. The only paper to lend its unequivocal support to independence was *The Sunday Herald*, under the editorship of Richard Walker. Perhaps unsurprisingly, having a monopoly on the pro-independence position, *The Sunday Herald* saw its circulation rise by a staggering 35 per cent in the July–December 2014 period, as readers sought out perspectives that differed from the dominant press agenda. After months of supportive coverage the paper declared itself officially pro-Yes on Sunday 4 May 2014. Whether the fact that the owners of *The Herald* and *The Sunday Herald*, Newsquest, is a subsidiary of a US firm Gannett, was a factor in the decision is hard to say. Nevertheless, it seems likely that had the paper been owned by a London paper or even by Scottish capital (it was owned previously by Scottish Media Group), the decision to back the Yes campaign might have proved harder for the editors to achieve.

Even though neither of the three national Scottish dailies advocated independence, their declining commercial positions vis-à-vis the better funded London-based rivals meant that in the face of a vibrant Yes campaign, they

could not afford to be as unhesitatingly hostile to the Yes campaign as the *Scottish Mail* – which seems to have cornered, along with the *Express*, the market for vitriolic conservative unionism. The Edinburgh-based and conservative-leaning *Scotsman*'s coverage of the referendum on Monday 8 September may serve as an example of this. *The Scotsman* was undoubtedly weighted towards the No campaign and had nine items on the day that make some substantive reference to the referendum and which could be judged as negative towards a Yes vote. Some of the headlines alone give a sense of this, for example, those that stress the feared economic instability of a Yes vote such as 'Urgent need to clip wings of capital flight' or 'Pound slumps after Yes lead'. Other items played on the supposed weakening of the defence capabilities: 'Scottish independence link to ISIS hostage' or 'Robertson: SNP will wave white flag beside Saltire'. All of this fits into a 'Project Fear' framing of the issues.

Other items could be read as pro-No articles because they focused on the new powers to Scotland that the No campaign had started to promise as a response to the surge in support for Yes. However, reflecting the difference between an indigenous broadsheet small 'c' conservative-liberal Scottish paper supporting No but closer to the native political culture than *The Scottish Mail*, *The Scotsman* did have five items that day that could be judged as positively disposed towards the possibility of independence. Again the headlines alone give a flavour of this: 'Half of Scots say oil finds are kept secret' – an article on the suggestion that big new oil fields have been recently discovered but were being repressed in order to undermine the economic case for a Yes vote. Another article brought readers' attention to Hollywood star and Scottish actor Alan Cumming's recommendation for a Yes vote. The other three items were headlined as, 'Scottish independence: More informed favour Yes', 'Scottish independence: NHS staff sign Yes letter' and 'Scottish independence: The drive for a Yes vote', focusing sympathetically on Yes campaigners. While clearly leaning heavily (almost two-to-one) towards the No campaign, *The Scotsman* could at least acknowledge that a case for Yes was a legitimate position within the debate taking place.

The Labour-supporting *Daily Record* was also far from being monolithically hostile to the Yes campaign – nor could it afford to be. Leaking readers to *The Scottish Sun* it would have been aware that the unionism of Labour's working class base was crumbling. An article in *The Herald* as early as 19 July was headlined, 'Sands shift ominously for Labour in the heartlands' as support for the union started to ebb. The article, in a paper supporting the union but highly critical of the No campaign, noted that a recent survey found that 28 per cent of Labour voters were going to reject the party's advice and vote Yes (*The Herald*. 19 July 2014). In this context the already wounded *Daily Record* could no longer unreflexively polemicize on behalf of Labour, despite a very long history of close ties with its patronage networks, including even financial donations to the Scottish Labour party (MacWhirter 2014: 73). For example, the paper took the innovative decision to give the leaders of the two campaigns, Alex Salmond and Alistair Darling, editorial control of the paper for an issue each, so that they could lay out the arguments over the first seven pages of the paper. *The Daily Record* also had multiple opinion columns every week by a former journalist and SNP Member for the Scottish Parliament, Joan McAlpine. On Monday 8 September, *The Daily Record* included six substantive articles about the forthcoming referendum. These included an article by Ed Balls, Shadow Chancellor for Labour, arguing that a No vote would lead

to more autonomy, and an editorial demanding a clear and coherent plan from the unionist parties for Home Rule. The latter was scathing about the No campaign's complacency and arrogance, admitting that at least the Yes campaign was offering a prospectus, a 'home for hopes and dreams' (Philip 2014). Another article also pointed to the political ambiguity of a Yes vote for both the SNP and the Labour party, with a poll showing that the latter was likely to make a comeback and form the first government of an independent Scotland, once they were unshackled from following the Westminster party (read the neo-liberal consensus) (Philip 2014: 7).

THE PRESS VS. SOCIAL MEDIA

The dominant media, including the broadcasting news media, have indexed their perspectives to the discourses and institutional practices of an increasingly out of touch political elite, and on major political issues of the day, risk in turn their own legitimacy with their audiences as a result (Wayne et al. 2010). The Scottish journalist Iain MacWhirter, who wrote for the pro-independent *Sunday Herald*, detected a substantial 'degree of alienation from the press, shared by hundreds of thousands of Scottish voters' following their performance during the referendum, and concluded that this 'should be causing alarm, not just in editorial offices, but in the political parties which are losing their ability to communicate' (MacWhirter 2014: 88).

This is what Gramsci would call a crisis of hegemony. Accompanying and exacerbating this crisis in the persuasiveness of established political communications are alternative media practices that were organically linked to a vibrant grassroots campaign.

Clearly, talk of 'Twitter revolutions' and the like forget that to be effective new media communications must be articulated with genuine political organizing. In the case of the Scottish referendum this was indeed the case, and thus it is not a form of Left cultural romanticism to highlight the progressive role of social media in this instance. A plethora of civil-society organizations were set up providing the backbone to bottom-up political canvassing, often with no connections with either the SNP or the official umbrella organization coordinating the independence campaign, Yes Scotland. I noted earlier Gramsci's conception of civil society as a loose network of 'molecular' initiatives, and it would seem that digital media and the more 'liquid' forms of organization and leadership they facilitate (Gerbaudo 2012: 135) give new life to Gramsci's thought. Here was the infrastructure for a counter-hegemonic civil society politics, which a referendum is more likely to stimulate than a General Election. Within Europe, in recent years, referendums have often exposed the gap between political elites and the wider population, enabling 'otherwise fossilized political systems to adapt to new conditions by stimulating realignment' (Bogdanor 1994: 97).

Using Twitter, Facebook and websites to coordinate their activities, groups such as National Collective – which ran an imaginative artistic campaign promoting Yes – and the left-wing Radical Independence Campaign – which engaged with an alienated working class in a voter registration drive – showed how the organizational capacities of a dynamic civil-society campaign could be facilitated by digital media. Websites such as Wings Over Scotland, Bella Caledonia, Newsnet Scotland and The National Collective were particularly popular where a virtual mediated public congregated which would have had a much more limited means of extensive self-constitution without the

social media. This self-constitution is what Italian autonomous Marxism has dubbed 'potenta' or 'power to' (Hands 2011: 8). This 'power to' contested the established political-media nexus of 'power over'. National Collective's 'Yes Because' twitter campaign, for example, was seen by three million (MacWhirter 2014: 55). Elizabeth Linder, Facebook's politics and government specialist, suggested long before the dominant media realized it that the vote would be close, based on Facebook chatter and the fact that network friends were potentially more influential than communication channels of the big vertical media companies (MacWhirter 2014: 88). Once again this would have been recognizable to Gramsci who was alert to the importance of peer influence, with his argument that everyone is a philosopher in some way, with their own conception of the world (1967: 58).

What was the impact of this counter-power in civil society compared to the dominant political-media axis that can play such a significant role in defending the status quo? A You-Gov poll commissioned by News UK (Rupert Murdoch's rebranded UK print media operation) generated some interesting data on the question of information sources and public opinion formation in the referendum. *The Press Gazette* announced the results as something of a triumph for the press. The poll found that 60% of the respondents had gathered information on the referendum from newspapers or their websites. This was only bested by the 71% recorded as using TV and radio among its sources for information. The *Gazette* seemed particularly pleased that 'only' 54% had got their information from social media and alternative websites, whereas 44% said they took information directly from the Yes and No campaigns. Mike Darcey, chief executive at News UK, was quoted as saying,

> Just think about that for a minute. In the recent Scottish referendum, held at a time when the digital revolution was in full flow, newspapers played a more significant role than either social media or the political campaigns.
>
> (Ponsford 2014)

But another way of reading the results of the poll is to think what an amazing achievement it was to register such high figures for the direct political campaigns and social media as sources of information for the public. Given the dominance of the dominant media in most contemporary elections and the carefully managed and limited contact that the modern politician and political campaign has with the electorate, to get a figure of 44% for the political campaigns bucks the trend towards a fully mediatized public relations politics. Similarly, for social media to achieve a 54% reach against 60% of the press, with virtually zero capital outlay (but some success in crowd-funding) compared to the huge resources the corporate media have at their disposal, is again some achievement.

However, the *Gazette* did not publish some of the other data that the poll found that explored the relationship between sources for information and *actually* forming opinions that influenced voting behaviour. Here, the press did less well, hence presumably the *Gazette*'s silence, but an online marketing site, The Drum, gave further details of how persuasive the different media were. The Drum reports (and celebrates) that 39% of the respondents found that the social media were influential in their voting decision, whereas 34% cited the press as exercizing an influence on the actual vote. It appears that the social media did not have any credibility problem with users who clearly

did see it as a legitimate source of knowledge on which to base their judgements. Indeed, the social media were only slightly behind television and radio, which were the strongest source for 42% of the people (Haggerty 2014). All of this suggests that neither the hyperbole about this being a digital age that has consigned newspapers to declining reach and influence nor conversely that alternative digital media are marginal to a public sphere still dominated by the traditional corporations will quite do. Instead, it is more a question of battle joined between the dominant media and an emerging counter public sphere.

CONCLUSION

In the end, the No campaign won the referendum by 55 per cent to 45 per cent. The role of the British press in contributing to the debate that led to that outcome was more nuanced than nationalist critics had suggested. A Gramscian framework that identifies a political crisis in terms of a crisis of hegemony helps in explaining why. Inside the Scottish public sphere and outside the London-based conservative mid-market dailies such as the *Scottish Daily Mail*, the situation was complex and the output heterogeneous, even if still biased. Unlike its sister paper, *The Sunday Herald*, the *Herald* did not advocate independence but it was not blindly or homogeneously unionist either. The positioning of the two biggest tabloid papers that together had average sales of over 432,000 a day was likewise complicated. Neither of them, whatever their editors or owners might have wished, was in a position to come out polemically for the No side. *The Scottish Sun* had to develop a political line different from its English counterpart. *The Sun* speaks to split nations, not one unified British one. *The Daily Record* likewise had to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Yes side in the debate to some degree despite its historic links to the Labour party. The rise of the SNP and the de-alignment between the working class and neo-liberal devolution unionism could not simply be ignored by these papers, without potentially harming themselves commercially.

Despite this more nuanced picture of the press than has been suggested by disappointed Yes supporters, there was an evident thirst for a media less reluctantly engaged with Yes arguments and perspectives. Working in conjunction with real political organizations, social media could go 'toe-to-toe' with corporate media power on a specific issue and demonstrate its efficaciousness over a period of time. This is what Gramsci calls 'counter-hegemony', and a crucial terrain for its organization, as with hegemony itself, is civil society. Gramsci's own prioritization of this concept is given fresh relevance by the civil society orientation of many contemporary social movements. At the same time, the changing political construction of class identities and loyalties, namely, the de-alignment of a segment of the working class from neo-liberal devolution unionism reminds us that Gramsci's focus on the political and ideological construction of class formations and identities is not out of date either. The limited diversity within the press coverage of the referendum does not, of course, let the corporate press off the hook of normative expectations that they should serve their public's intelligence, rather than the interests of the power elite. However, as Gramsci reminds us, hegemony is always not just ethical-political, but also economic, and thus it is hardly surprising that the corporate media consistently fall short of these normative principles even as the crisis opens up these communications as sites of contestation. The battle between the dominant media and an independent digital media

is probably in its early stages. The battle between neo-liberalism and social democracy is an important context within which to understand the development of the media today.

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