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Abstract

During a weekend in February 2010, just a few weeks before the most closely fought general election campaign in living memory, British prime minister Gordon Brown became the subject of an extraordinary media spectacle. Quickly labeled “bullygate,” it centered on Brown’s alleged psychological and physical mistreatment of colleagues working inside his office in Number 10, Downing Street. These were potentially some of the most damaging allegations ever to be made about the personal conduct of a sitting British prime minister, and bullygate was a national and international news phenomenon. This study provides an analysis of the processes of mediation during the affair. It is based on close, real-time observation and logging of a wide range of press, broadcast, and online material, as the story broke, evolved, and faded, over a five-day period. The study reveals the increasingly hybridized nature of news systems and argues that traditional understandings of the “news cycle” should now be replaced by a broader concern with the “political information cycle.” Political information cycles are complex assemblages in which the personnel, practices, genres, technologies, and temporalities of supposedly “new” online media are hybridized with those of supposedly “old” broadcast and press media. This hybridization now decisively shapes power relations among news actors. The combination of news professionals’ dominance and the integration of nonelite actors in the construction and contestation of news at multiple points in a political information cycle’s life span are important characteristics of contemporary political communication.

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During a weekend in February 2010, just a few weeks before the most closely fought general election campaign in living memory, British Labour Party prime minister, Gordon Brown, became the subject of an extraordinary media spectacle. Quickly labeled “bullygate,” the crisis was sparked by revelations in a then-unpublished book authored by Andrew Rawnsley, one of Britain’s foremost political journalists (Rawnsley 2010). Although some of the book’s contents had been leaked to the press three weeks earlier, and leaked once more during the afternoon of Saturday, February 20, extended extracts were printed in the paper edition of the *Observer*, one of Britain’s oldest and most respected newspapers, as part of its “relaunch” edition on Sunday, February 21, a week before the book’s official publication. The *Observer*’s extracts centered on the prime minister’s alleged psychological and physical mistreatment of colleagues working inside his office in Number 10, Downing Street. Bullygate was potentially the most damaging political development of the entire Brown premiership, not only because of its timing—on the verge of a general election—but also its shocking and personalized nature. These were potentially some of the most damaging allegations ever to be made concerning the personal conduct of a sitting British prime minister. The bullygate affair became a national and international news phenomenon, dominating the headlines in all British news media, as well as those on CNN, Fox, ABC, and CBS news in the United States, and hundreds of outlets across the globe.

During the course of that weekend beginning February 20, 2010, and into the early part of the following week, the bullygate affair took several momentous twists and turns. New players entered the fray, most notably an organization known as the National Bullying Helpline, whose director claimed that her organization had received phone calls from staff inside Number 10, Downing Street. This information created a powerful frame during the middle of the crisis. As the story evolved, events were decisively shaped by mediated interactions among politicians, nonprofit group leaders, professional journalists, bloggers, and citizen activists organized on Twitter, the online social network. Seemingly clear-cut revelations published in a national newspaper became the subject of fierce contestation, involving competition, conflict, partisanship, but also processes of mutual dependency, among a wide range of actors and in a variety of media settings. Over the course of a few days, doubts about the veracity of the bullygate revelations resulted in the severe dilution of their impact.

This study provides an analysis of the processes of mediation during the bullygate affair. It is based on close, real-time, observation and logging of a wide range of press, broadcast, and online material, as the story broke, evolved, and faded, over a five-day period in late February 2010. I provide a detailed narrative reconstruction of the interactions between politicians, broadcasters, the press, and key online media actors. The research presented here reveals the increasingly hybridized nature of news systems and

it raises the question of whether traditional understandings of the “news cycle” should now be replaced by a broader concern with what I term the “political information cycle.”

The Hybrid News System as Context

Britain’s political communication environment, in common with many others in the advanced capitalist democracies, is now best described as hybridized. It consists of a sometimes contradictory, sometimes integrated, mixture of old, new, and what Hoskins and O’Loughlin term “renewed” media (2007: 17). Old media, primarily television, radio, and newspapers, are still, given the size of their audiences and their centrality to the life of the nation, rightly referred to as “mainstream,” but the very nature of the mainstream is changing. While old media organizations are adapting, evolving and renewing their channels of delivery, working practices, and audiences, wholly new media, driven primarily by the spread of the Internet, are achieving popularity and becoming part of a new mainstream. Politicians, journalists, and the public are simultaneously creating and adapting to these new complexities.

This new hybrid environment creates particular uncertainty for old news media and elite politicians. The old media environment, dominated by media and political elites working in traditional television, radio, and newspapers, remains highly significant for British politics, but politics is increasingly mediated online. The Internet is creating a more open and fluid political opportunity structure—one that increasingly enables the public to exert its influence and hold politicians and media to account.

Dependency among actors in this environment is often mutual. News organizations increasingly capitalize on new media as a resource by tapping into the viral circulation of online content and weaving it into their news genres and production techniques. The new news media outlets are in the process of being integrated into what is becoming a mainstream digital political news system, and this is a journey that is likely to continue for many years. In this hybridized system, the old media organizations are currently still powerful. They have the collective financial and organizational resources to “out-scoop” exclusively new media upstarts, and to leapfrog new media outlets with the launch of expensive new initiatives, such as online television delivery, and ever more elaborate web environments that blend editorial authority with popular participation. Yet it is now clear that television’s monopoly on “24-hour” or “breaking” news is loosening, not only because online news sites are more prepared to take risks by publishing stories without the standards of verification usually required of professional journalists but also because the viral nature of online communication makes it much more likely that news will spread across interpersonal networks in advance of official press releases. Some big political news stories now break first online and are picked up by television and print journalists who obsessively follow their email, Twitter, and blog feeds in the hunt for new leads. As of October 2009, there were more than five hundred known U.K. journalists using Twitter (Davies 2009). By now there are many more, and it is probably safe to assume that several hundred use the service pseudonymously. At the same time, some television and newspaper journalists, for example the BBC’s most senior political

reporter, Nick Robinson, now often release their own scoops online, well before they officially file their stories or go into the newsroom to record a broadcast package for the evening news. Large dedicated news organizations, particularly the BBC, share vast amounts of content internally across their web and television divisions, and this provides them with an ongoing structural advantage when it comes to integrating and breaking news. But again, at the same time, journalists increasingly interact with members of the public online and they increasingly use online sources in their stories. This hybrid news system creates subtle but important shifts in the balance of power shaping news production. A crucial arena in which this balance of power now plays out is the “political information cycle.”

From the News Cycle to the Political Information Cycle

“News cycle” is a concept that is widely used but seldom theorized, despite the fact that much of the influential early work on the sociology of news production implicitly or explicitly describes cyclical routines and the importance of time in press and broadcasting environments (see, e.g., Galtung and Ruge 1965; Gans 1979; Golding and Elliott 1979; Molotch and Lester 1974; Roshco 1975; Schlesinger 1978; Tuchman 1978). Schlesinger (1977: 336), writing of how “time concepts are embedded in their production routines,” has even gone as far as to dub the news media a “time-machine.”

The pioneer studies of news production revealed much about immediacy, the professionalized mastery of deadlines, and competition between outlets over sources and angles, but none could have foreseen the extent to which journalism was transformed during the 1990s and 2000s. The emergence of “rolling” broadcast coverage and the Internet have generated heated discussion of the so-called 24-hour news cycle. New technological tools are said to have led to the compression of news time, and single daily news cycles are becoming rare. There has been a growing strategic awareness among politicians that timely intervention during certain stages in the gathering and production of news is more likely to produce favorable outcomes (see, e.g., Barnett and Gaber 2001; Sellers 2010; Young 2009) and the growing interpenetration of political and journalistic elite practice has to a great extent been driven by the temporal rhythms of radio and television (Barnett and Gaber 2001: 42-46). A small number of scholars has begun to focus on what the specificities of the relationship between new and old media actors entail for traditional models of agenda setting. For example, Davis’s case studies of professional journalists and elite bloggers illuminate the opportunities but also the constraints experienced by both groups (Davis 2009). Messner and DiStaso (2008) analyze the content of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the 120 most popular U.S. blogs and find some evidence of “intermedia agenda setting”: bloggers source from newspapers and journalists source from bloggers. While the news cycle has been the subject of some major critical studies (Davies 2008; Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999; Rosenberg and Feldman 2008), it is more common to see the “24-hour” prefix briefly mentioned in passing, as shorthand in normative analyses of the harmful effects of

journalists' clamor to be first to the story, and their incessant manufacturing of fresh angles to prevent things turning "stale," or their monitoring, duplicating, and "churning" of other outlets' content or PR releases, in a process that is said to lead to "content homogeneity" and poorly sourced stories (Bell 1995; Boczkowski and De Santos 2007; Davies 2008; Garcia Aviles et al. 2004; Jones 2009; Klinenberg 2005; Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999; Patterson 1998; Redden and Witshge 2010).

Irrespective of their approach, however, those who have explored the news cycle have hitherto been united by the fundamental assumption that the construction of political news is a tightly controlled game involving the interactions and interventions of a small number of elites: politicians, officials, communications staff, news workers, and, in a small minority of recent studies, elite bloggers (Barnett and Gaber 2001; Callaghan and Schnell 2001; Davies 2008; Davis 2009; Gans 1979: 116-46; Golding and Elliott 1979; Messner and DiStaso 2008; Molotch and Lester 1974; Patterson 1998; Roshco 1975; Schlesinger 1977, 1978; Sellers 2010; Stanyer 2001; Tuchman 1978; Young 2009). While these elite-driven aspects of political communication are still very much in evidence, I want to suggest that recent shifts require a rejuvenation of the importance of time, timeliness, and cyclical processes in the power relations shaping news production. Ultimately, however, this may require a different set of assumptions and observations about how things now work.

Political information cycles possess certain features that distinguish them from "news cycles." They are complex assemblages in which the personnel, practices, genres, technologies, and temporalities of supposedly "new" online media are hybridized with those of supposedly "old" broadcast and press media. How this hybridization process occurs shapes power relations among actors and ultimately affects the flow of news. The concept of assemblage, as it is used here, builds on and extends the senses in which it has been employed in some recent studies. In a participant-observation analysis of a New York primary, Nielsen (2009: 269) writes of activist participation in structures that comprise part of a campaign assemblage: "a whole made up of heterogeneous interdependent parts operating in concert relative to a specific project." Kreiss (2010: 204) argues that Barack Obama's 2008 campaign "developed new methods of convening and translating collaborative networks into electoral labor based on the power of extant assemblages of material, social, economic, and technological resources." Others have argued for the broader value for the social sciences of the assemblage concept. Key to this is the assumption that there are permeable boundaries between different modular units of a given collective endeavor. As DeLanda writes, "We can distinguish . . . the properties defining a given entity from its *capacities to interact* with other entities. . . . These relations imply, first of all, that a component part of an assemblage may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different." Assemblages, then, are "wholes characterized by *relations of exteriority*" (DeLanda 2006: 10 emphasis in original). It is this sense of multiple, loosely coupled individuals, groups, sites, and temporal instances of interaction involving diverse, yet highly interdependent, news creators that defines an assemblage as it is conceptualized in this study.

Certain points flow from this conceptualization. Political information cycles may involve greater numbers and a more diverse range of actors and interactions than news cycles as they have been traditionally understood. They are not simply about an acceleration of pace nor merely the reduction of time devoted to an issue, though these facets are certainly evident. They are characterized by more complex temporal structures. They include many nonelite participants, most of whom now interact exclusively online in order to advance or contest specific news frames or even entire stories, sometimes in real-time exchanges but also during subsequent stages of the cycle of news that follows a major political event or the breaking of a story. As has been noted in relation to digital media and mobilization (Chadwick 2007), the presence of vast searchable online archives of news content means that stories or fragments of stories can lay dormant for weeks or even months before new pieces of information erupt and are integrated into the cycle. The sources of these pieces of information may be very diverse (see also Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010: 30).

Broadcasters and the press increasingly integrate nonelite actions and information from the online realm into their own production practices and routines. The Internet enables nonelite activists to use digital practices to intervene in, and sometimes contest, television and press coverage of politics. Yet television and press journalists have also selectively integrated digital practices and online sources into their own coverage, as they seek to outperform new media actors in an incessant, micro-level, and often real-time power struggle characterized by competition and conflict, but also negotiation and interdependence. In contrast with the older news cycle, much of this now takes place in public or semipublic online environments.

Political information cycles work on the basis of cross-platform iteration and recursion, loosening the grip of journalistic and political elites through the creation of fluid opportunity structures with greater scope for timely intervention by online citizen activists. Some of these timely online interventions are at the individual-to-individual level and have previously fallen beneath the radar of studies of news, in both old and new media environments. The combination of news professionals' dominance and the integration of nonelite actors in the construction and contestation of news at multiple points in an information cycle's life span are important characteristics of contemporary political communication.

The remainder of this article analyzes the bullygate affair in order to illustrate these conceptual points and to show how the political information cycle in a hybrid news system works. What follows is based on the close, real-time observation and logging of a range of press, broadcast, and online material over a 5-day period in late February 2010.¹

Bullygate

The bullygate political information cycle effectively began with what is now a familiar dynamic in the political news environment: the publication of leaked content from a "tell-all" book (Rawnsley 2010) on the front page of the *Mail on Sunday* on January

31—three weeks before the *Observer* published its extended extracts on Sunday, February 21—and four weeks before the book’s official publication date of March 1. The *Mail*’s article reported that the book contained three specific claims about the prime minister’s behavior toward staff in Number 10. These were that Brown “hit a senior aide who got in the way as he rushed to a reception at No10”; “physically pulled a secretary out of her chair as he dictated a memo to her”; and “hurled foul-mouthed abuse at two aides in his hotel room in America in a state of semi-undress after reports that he had been snubbed by President Obama.”² Despite the appearance of the story on the front page of the *Mail*’s paper edition, its reception is best described as muted. The main Conservative Party supporting blog, *Conservative Home*, linked to the piece, and Britain’s most-read political blog, the right-wing libertarian *Guido Fawkes*, published a brief post,³ but the story effectively laid dormant until Saturday, February 20.

In the buildup to the publication of the Rawnsley extracts, the *Observer* was in the process of a widely advertised “relaunch” in a bid to reverse the long-term decline in its readership. This was, therefore, partly a matter of intermedia competition between the paper and its rivals among the Sunday press. The Rawnsley extracts were an opportunity to increase exposure and boost readership for the paper’s first relaunched edition. Indeed, this strategy was reflected in the paper’s deliberate exclusion of the extracts from its free online edition until two days after they had appeared in the printed edition, though, as we shall see, because of the widespread recycling of the story across all outlets, this tactic almost certainly failed.

Aware that the revelations were about to be published, in the run-up to the weekend of February 21, the Labour government took three steps to preempt what would likely become the dominant news agenda.⁴ First, a week earlier, Brown had appeared in an extended and highly personalized interview on the popular *Piers Morgan’s Life Stories* television chat show on ITV. This appearance was widely regarded as part of a strategy to “humanize” the prime minister in the wake of criticisms that he had kept too much of his private life hidden and lacked a “common touch” among the electorate. Second, Brown granted an exclusive in-depth interview to Brian Brady, the *Independent on Sunday*’s Whitehall Editor and a long-standing reporter on the insider politics of the Labour Party. The interview, which was broadly favorable to the prime minister and timed to coincide with the publication of the Rawnsley extracts, was used by Brown to deny the allegations that he mistreated his staff. Third, Brown attended a Labour Party rally at the University of Warwick—one of several such preelection events—at which he gave a headline-grabbing speech in front of reporters from both broadcasting and the press, as part of the official launch of Labour’s election theme: “a future fair for all.”

Soon after Brown’s Warwick speech had ended (at around midday Saturday) he participated in an exclusive recorded interview with the well-known Channel 4 News presenter Krishnan Guru-Murthy as part of a package for that evening’s television news bulletin to be aired at 7.10 P.M. Guru-Murthy quizzed the prime minister on whether he “hit” his staff. Brown strongly denied this, saying: “I have never hit anyone in my life.”⁵ As soon as the interview was completed, Oliver King, a program editor

for Channel 4 News, posted a message to his Twitter account stating that the channel had secured the “only network TV interview” with the prime minister that day, and that it would be shown on television that evening.⁶ The interview was in fact uploaded to the Channel 4 News website at 4 P.M., some three hours before the interview was actually broadcast.⁷ Its publication was accompanied by a Twitter update linking to the video from Ed Fraser, another program editor at Channel 4 News.⁸ The story of the prime minister’s first public refutation of the bullying allegations therefore actually broke online, three hours before the “exclusive” “broke” on television.

Within twenty minutes of the appearance of the Channel 4 video online, three essentially identical wire stories emerged on the websites of the *Daily Mirror*, the *Daily Star*, and the *Daily Express*. These repeated the allegations that had been leaked in the *Daily Mail* at the end of January, but added Brown’s refutation from the Channel 4 interview.⁹ By the time Guru-Murthy’s exchange with the prime minister was broadcast on Channel 4’s early evening news bulletin,¹⁰ the bullygate story’s momentum had already started to build, and it was spurred on by the fresh angle provided by Brown’s decision to address the allegations. The Channel 4 interview with Brown continued to provide fodder for other journalists in the run-up to the publication of the online editions of the Sunday newspapers at midnight.¹¹

But long before the Sundays appeared, further important details of the *Observer*’s extracts started to emerge on Twitter and blogs. Ed Fraser of Channel 4 News posted a message at 9.33 P.M. stating that Brown allegedly received an “unprecedented reprimand” from the Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service, Sir Gus O’Donnell.¹² This information was not yet in the public domain. Fraser had access to a “prerelease” of the *Observer* extracts and had decided to post this new information to Twitter—during a period when it was likely to have the greatest impact, and certainly before the *Observer* was publicly available.¹³ Within ten minutes, Fraser’s tweet had been widely recirculated (“retweeted” in the Twitter parlance) and had been linked to from the popular *Conservative Home* blog.¹⁴ A further potentially damaging piece of information—that Britain’s most senior civil servant had allegedly conducted an internal investigation into Brown’s behavior—broke on Twitter and was now driving the story, forcing Downing Street and the Cabinet Office to issue statements of denial to journalists at 10.27 P.M.¹⁵ The new revelations and Downing Street’s statement were reported in the *Daily Mirror*’s and the *Daily Star*’s online editions at 11.30 P.M.¹⁶

At this point, interactions on Twitter began to assume a much greater importance in the flow of events. At 11.14 P.M., Labour’s new media spokesperson, the member of parliament (MP) for Bristol East, Kerry McCarthy, started to use her Twitter updates to post the hashtag “#rawnsleyrot” to try to popularize the tag as a means of discrediting the allegations before they were published.¹⁷ McCarthy is one of the most popular MPs on the social network service, with more than 6,000 followers. Despite it being close to midnight on a Saturday evening, the #rawnsleyrot hashtag was quickly circulated among her followers.

As is now the norm among the British press, the broadsheet Sunday newspapers published their full online editions between midnight on Saturday and 3 A.M. on Sunday,

several hours before the printed editions were widely available across the country.¹⁸ The *Observer* carried a brief teaser as the lead item on its website, in the hope that readers wanting more would buy the relaunched paper edition at the newsstands, but there was sufficient detail in these excerpts for the public to be aware of the story's sensational nature. The article contained several key pieces of information. Aside from the by-now public allegation that Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell had investigated the prime minister's behavior and had warned him to change his approach, the article chronicled a series of alleged episodes. These included when an aide allegedly feared that Brown was about to "hit him in the face"; when Brown allegedly grabbed Gavin Kelly, his Deputy Chief of Staff, by his jacket and "snarled" into his face; and when Brown allegedly "roughly shoved aside" and swore at Stewart Wood, a senior adviser on foreign affairs.¹⁹ The broadly centrist *Independent on Sunday* ran its Brian Brady interview featuring Brown denying the allegations. The Conservative-supporting *Sunday Times* and *Sunday Telegraph* ran articles that had been updated at the last minute to include the details of the alleged mistreatment, Brown's Channel 4 interview from Saturday afternoon (the *Telegraph* embedded Channel 4's video), and Downing Street's late-night statement of denial.²⁰

On Sunday morning, a torrent of coverage appeared, as news outlets scrambled to cover the revelations for fear of missing the weekend's main story. Broadcast news plugged into the emerging assemblage. At 9.41 A.M., in an attempt to shape the news for the remainder of the day, senior figure Lord Mandelson, then minister for business and innovation and a key architect of the Labour Party's media strategy since the 1980s, appeared on the BBC's *Andrew Marr* show to defend the prime minister and to deny the bullying allegations. Mandelson's argument was that the *Observer*'s relaunch and the imminent publication of Rawnsley's book had created perfect PR opportunities for both author and newspaper, and that the story was essentially an overblown publicity stunt.²¹ This appearance had an immediate impact on the political information cycle. Within a couple of hours, the *Sunday Telegraph*, the *Independent on Sunday*, the *Sunday Mirror*, the *Sun*, and the *Sunday Times* had all reported Mandelson's television intervention. Mandelson's defense was in turn reinforced by the appearances of Harriet Harman, then-deputy leader of the Labour Party, on Sky News's *Sunday Live with Adam Boulton* at 11.30 A.M., as well as the appearance of the then-Home Secretary Alan Johnson alongside Andrew Rawnsley on the BBC's midday *Politics Show*.²² Both Harman and Johnson, as one would expect of cabinet colleagues, made strong statements in support of the prime minister. The dominant frame was therefore shifting away from Brown's personal denials and toward the supportive messages of the cabinet. The BBC's most senior political journalist, political editor Nick Robinson, posted what can best be described as a cautious article to his blog at 12.30 P.M., shortly after Johnson and Rawnsley had left the BBC's studios. In the absence of new information, Robinson effectively hedged his bets: "what is not in dispute here is the description of how the PM behaves," he wrote, but he also went on to state that "we don't and may never know" if there was an internal investigation into Brown's behavior.²³ Although things were finely balanced, the government and its supporters were successfully contesting the story.

Even though by this stage it was evident that this major political news, potentially the biggest for years, was receiving saturation coverage across all platforms, including the 24-hour television stations *BBC News* and *Sky News*, it still pivoted on who was more believable: Rawnsley or Brown and the government. This uncertainty was reflected in the coverage during the afternoon, as several further newspaper articles reported the allegations and Mandelson's refutations from the early morning *Andrew Marr* show.²⁴ The story appeared to be going nowhere.

Enter the "National Bullying Helpline"

It was at this point that the political information cycle took a remarkable twist, as interactions in the online and broadcasting modules of the assemblage drove the news production process.

Following MP Kerry McCarthy's late-night instigation of the #rawnsleyrot hashtag campaign on Twitter, an online community consisting of political activists eager to defend or attack the *Observer*'s revelations had quickly emerged on the service. They used a variety of hashtags, including #rawnsleyrot, #bullygate, and #rawnsleyright, among others. Elite bloggers had also joined the fray. For example, Conservative supporters Iain Dale and Tim Montgomerie continued to update their blogs and link to new developments via Twitter throughout the Sunday afternoon.²⁵ Many professional journalists were also engaged in the Twitter conversation, scanning updates in the hunt for tip-offs in advance of the Sunday evening television news bulletins.

But at 4.52 P.M., Lucy Manning, ITV News's political correspondent, posted the following to Twitter: "National Bullying Helpline tells ITV News they have had several calls from staff at Downing Street complaining about bullying culture."²⁶ This was the first time this explosive new information was made public. Although the BBC would later claim that it broke the story on television,²⁷ if breaking a story means being the first to make it public, it was actually Manning who broke the National Bullying Helpline (NBH) story—on Twitter. Fifty-six seconds later, the first person to retweet Manning's message was none other than the tell-all book's author, Andrew Rawnsley.²⁸ Within thirty minutes, Manning's tweet had been retweeted by 28 other Twitter users. These included Conservative Party Chairman Eric Pickles; Conservative MP David Jones; a Conservative blogger, Iain Dale; and a Conservative campaign assistant, Simon Smethurst-McIntyre. But the remainder were, to judge by their Twitter profiles, a mixture of journalists, local political activists, bloggers, and the politically interested from across Britain, all united by the fact that they followed the journalist Lucy Manning on Twitter.²⁹ Within an hour, 60 Twitter users had issued updates referring to the NBH. Although data on the number of followers each of these Twitter users had at the time are unavailable, it is safe to assume that while bearing in mind that the data are skewed by individuals with large followings—Channel 4 News presenter Krishnan Guru-Murthy has more than 20,000—the number of Twitter users potentially exposed to this information, before it came anywhere near a rolling news television screen, ran into the hundreds of thousands. Moreover, as we shall see, the interactions between professional

journalists and these various groups of online “amateurs” went on to have a decisive impact on events.

The NBH information was of crucial importance. No longer was it simply a case of Brown’s and the government’s word against Rawnsley’s. Now, there appeared to be an impeccably independent third party, a charitable trust working in a socially beneficial field, which it was presumed had kept a log of telephone calls that could be traced to Number 10. This had all the makings of a sensational development in the story.

The majority of the 60 Twitter users who engaged with ITV journalist Lucy Manning’s message during that first hour simply retweeted her original message breaking the new information. However, as the conversation developed, several individuals began to add their own information and comments. At 5.27 P.M., Twitter user, Sarah Nuttall, who is not a journalist but a copywriter based in Goole, East Yorkshire, commented: “Oh dear & the Patron of the National Bullying Helpline is. . . wait for it. . . Ann Widdecombe. Be afraid. Be very afraid Mr Brown!”³⁰ Ann Widdecombe is a well-known Conservative MP, television presenter, author, and former Home Office minister. Nuttall’s message was quickly retweeted by several others, including, at 5.30 P.M., Carole Benson, a mature student of history at Teesside University in the northeast of England. Nine minutes after Benson’s message, Krishnan Guru-Murthy, the Channel 4 News television presenter, intervened on Twitter: “been looking into ‘National Bullying Helpline’ after the Downing Street claim. they have 2 Tory Patrons and Cameron quote on website.”³¹

On the surface, these events appear to be unrelated. What do a copywriter from East Yorkshire, a mature student from Teesside, and a senior journalist from Channel 4 News have in common? The answer is this: Sarah Nuttall was the first to point out that the NBH had seemingly strong links with the Conservative Party. Carole Benson retweeted Nuttall’s message. Krishnan Guru-Murthy “follows” Carole Benson on Twitter and read her update.³² A few minutes later, Guru-Murthy sent out a speculative tweet to his 20,000 followers, pointing out the NBH’s Conservative links. Because of the size of Guru-Murthy’s following, a Twitter storm ensued, with tweets and retweets of Manning’s original tweet about the NBH and Guru-Murthy’s tweet about the “Tory patrons” of the NBH. A point that was to later emerge as important—that the NBH may have breached its clients’ confidentiality—was also raised by Sacha Zarb, a Labour-supporting events manager based in northern England.³³ New angles and information were therefore quickly introduced into the political information cycle and these were to recur as the NBH news went mainstream over the next few hours and into Monday morning’s headlines.

Inside the BBC and ITN newsrooms, journalists had been considering if, when, and how, to run with the NBH information. The head of the NBH, Christine Pratt, had contacted BBC and ITV news earlier in the day.³⁴ But it was not until 5.48 P.M. that the BBC, in an effort to preempt Lucy Manning’s scoop destined for arch rival ITV News’s bulletin at 6 P.M., posted online video in which Pratt claimed that employees inside Number 10 had called her organization.³⁵ Two minutes later, the BBC Politics Twitter account linked to the BBC news website’s video of Pratt. At precisely the same moment,

BBC television “broke” the NBH story when its news channel, which was in the middle of running a live special broadcast of film and TV stars on the red carpet at the London BAFTA awards, updated its foot-of-screen news ticker with the message: “The BBC understands that staff working in the prime minister’s office have called an anti-bullying charity to complain about the way they have been treated.”³⁶

At 6.04 P.M., ITV News featured Lucy Manning’s bullygate package as its top story and the anchor went live to the journalist outside Number 10 as she revealed a statement from Christine Pratt. The statement read: “The calls we have received suggest there is a culture of bullying within Downing Street. Whether Gordon Brown is the perpetrator or not, we cannot say. We know that someone who works at No. 10 has been off sick because of the effect of this on their health.”³⁷

The BBC and ITV were therefore confident enough about the veracity of the NBH claims to run with this as their main story for the evening news. However, Channel 4 took a different approach. Recall that their presenter, Krishnan Guru-Murthy, had become aware during his engagement with Twitter users that the NBH had the prominent Conservative MP Ann Widdecombe as one of its patrons. Channel 4 News ran with bullygate as its top story and featured an interview with Rawnsley, but at no point was the NBH mentioned, even though the Channel 4 team was aware of the information.³⁸ Clearly Channel 4 News had access to the information because it and ITV both get their news from ITN, albeit from separate divisions. An editorial decision was therefore taken to hold off on the NBH development because of uncertainty about the source. Although it is impossible to say with absolute certainty that the journalists’ interactions on Twitter were the cause of this decision, at the very least we can infer that it was a factor.

Once the NBH news had appeared on the BBC News Channel’s ticker and the ITV’s 6 P.M. bulletin, it was immediately picked up by the press. At 6.29 P.M., the *Telegraph* became the first newspaper to report the NBH story on its website.³⁹ It was not until 7.02 P.M. that the BBC presented a full package including, for the first time, a video interview with Christine Pratt and extended live-to-anchor commentary from the BBC’s deputy political editor James Landale.⁴⁰ Landale’s report also included a second denial of bullying from the Cabinet Office, this time explicitly stating that the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Gus O’Donnell, did not speak with the prime minister about his behavior. As soon as Landale’s report had ended, his senior colleague, Nick Robinson, posted an update to his blog arguing that Lord Mandelson’s defense of the prime minister earlier in the day had “backfired,” but once again the blog post made no mention of the NBH.⁴¹ The frame was shifting, and this was a period of uncertainty. Two minutes later, the *Telegraph* added further material to its story originally published at 6.29 P.M., fleshing out the NBH claims.⁴² This was followed by a number of new articles published in quick succession, as the press scrambled to integrate the new information. Over the next four hours, the *Star* (7.19 P.M.), the *Mirror* (7.30 P.M.), the *Mail* (8.31 P.M. and 10.46 P.M.), the *Sun* (9.19 P.M.), the *Financial Times* (10.27 P.M.), and the *Times* (11.18 P.M.) all added the news about Christine Pratt and the NBH. And yet, not one of these press articles raised the issue of the contested origins and status of the organization.⁴³

But it was doubts about the NBH's status that led Vijay Singh Riyait, an IT engineer and Labour-supporting activist with his own blog (www.sikhgeek.com) to send a Twitter message to Channel 4's Krishnan Guru-Murthy at 9.16 P.M. Riyait pointed to an anonymous blog that had been set up some six months earlier, in August 2009, to act as a channel for those with grievances against the NBH. Labeled "The Bullying Helpline: the last thing you need if you're being bullied," the blog raised questions about the NBH's working practices, in particular its relationship with a company, HR & Diversity Management, owned by Christine Pratt and her husband.⁴⁴ The link to this hitherto obscure blog was first posted to Twitter earlier that evening by Jo Anne Brown, the head of Dignity Works, a rival management consultancy specializing in workplace "bullying and harrasment."⁴⁵ The link had been recirculated in the emerging Twitter storm, which now centered on the NBH's alleged Conservative Party links, its charitable status and working practices, and the publicity-seeking behavior of its chief. Riyait had picked up Jo Anne Brown's link and decided to forward it to Channel 4 News via Guru-Murthy.

Within the space of a few hours, therefore, the NBH's motives had been called into question. A new set of news actors from the charity and management consultancy sector were now plugging into the assemblage. These individuals were seeking to use bullygate as a means of publicizing their own work and to criticize a rival for its alleged breach of ethics on client confidentiality. Twitter enabled these actors to intervene and shape the flow of news because their expressed skepticism served to heighten awareness of the NBH's organizational status among journalists and bloggers monitoring their Twitter feeds.

This increasing skepticism soon began to be reflected in the mainstream. The first hint was a cautious blog post from the BBC's political editor, Nick Robinson, at 9.35 P.M. Robinson reported the doubts (without attribution) about the NBH, and mentioned that there was a supportive statement from Conservative leader David Cameron on its website. He also reported that Downing Street had issued a response to the NBH allegations, stating that they had never been contacted by the organization. It was also revealed that the Labour MP Anne Snelgrove had helped publicize the NBH when it was established but had severed her links when she became aware of complaints that the helpline was allegedly referring calls to the private consultancy business run by Christine Pratt's husband. Robinson went on: "Colleagues checked the status of the charity and questioned Ms Pratt's claims. We can't, of course, verify the truth of her allegations—merely report them and Downing Street's response to them."⁴⁶

Shortly after Robinson's blog post, Bullying UK, another anti-bullying charity, intervened. It issued a strongly worded press release on its website criticizing the NBH for breaching confidentiality and sent a message to Nick Robinson's Twitter account informing him.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the volume of comments had been building on Robinson's blog from readers pointing out the potential lack of credibility of Christine Pratt as a source.⁴⁸

At this point, however, no professional journalist was willing to publicly question the NBH's testimony. As the evening drew to a close and the next day's newspapers were in the process of being finalized, the NBH's claims seemed set to dominate the headlines

as the political information cycle moved into Monday morning. The frame was finely balanced.

“Who Are the National Bullying Helpline?”

Late on Sunday evening, at 11.28 P.M., there was yet another decisive shift. Left-of-centre blogger, Adam Bienkov, posted an article to his well-known political blog *Tory Troll*, entitled “Who are the National Bullying Helpline?” Bienkov wrote that the NBH story “immediately smelt funny” and he criticized the BBC for failing to check its facts. He had spent the evening researching publicly available online sources such as the Charity Commission’s website and the Internet’s Whois database, which lists the owners of web domain names. These sources showed that a number of senior Conservatives were associated with the NBH, that the NBH had a number of informal links with the Conservative-controlled Swindon local council, and that the organization was late in filing its accounts and had “registered just £852 in expenditure since they were established.”⁴⁹ Bienkov then posted a link to the post on Twitter. A few minutes later, at 11.39 P.M., Labour MP Kerry McCarthy retweeted Adam Bienkov’s blog post to her 6,000 followers, and this was in turn retweeted many hundreds of times late into the night.⁵⁰ Bienkov’s blog post assembled in readable form what had, until then, been a dispersed and fragmented set of messages and countermessages on Twitter.

During the early hours of Monday, February 22, the newspapers’ digital editions were uploaded as the political information cycle moved into a decisive final phase. Uncertainty over the NBH angle continued, and was revealed in the lack of consensus in the mainstream press over whether to cover it. The *Independent* and the *Guardian* still made no mention of Pratt’s allegations, though they did publish pieces on the Rawnsley book.⁵¹ It was not until 7.00 A.M., when the *Guardian* published a commentary piece by Jonathan Freedland, that the paper mentioned the NBH, and even then it was in neutral terms.⁵² By now, however, the focus had shifted once again to the broadcast studios. Pratt appeared on the two major early morning national television shows, GMTV and BBC Breakfast, to defend her claims. More significantly, she also appeared alongside Labour MP Anne Snelgrove on BBC Radio Four’s highly influential *Today* program. As part of the interview, *Today*’s presenter, John Humphrys, read out extracts from e-mail messages from disgruntled clients of the NBH and suggested that Pratt’s husband’s company had been “angling for business” with people who called what was supposed to be a charitable organization. These e-mails had been handed to Humphrys by Anne Snelgrove.⁵³ It was clear that the frame was now shifting toward outright skepticism about the NBH.

Pratt’s television and radio appearances then fed into new stories for the press. The *Daily Star* and the *Daily Telegraph* simply reported Pratt’s appearances.⁵⁴ In the background, however, things were shifting. At 9.29 A.M., the BBC’s political correspondent, Laura Kuenssberg, posted on Twitter that one of the patrons of the NBH, Professor Cary Cooper, had resigned from its board.⁵⁵ Cooper is a prestigious scholar in the field of management and workplace studies and is well known for his media appearances. This was, therefore, a major blow to the entire bullygate frame.

Perhaps sensing that the power of the story was beginning to recede, the Conservative Party leader, David Cameron, attempted to seize the initiative. At 10.45 A.M., while speaking at a preelection conference in east London, Cameron suggested during questions that there ought to be an official inquiry into the bullying allegations inside Downing Street. He recommended that the former Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, Sir Philip Mawer, should conduct the inquiry. Immediately, Tim Montgomerie, editor of the Conservative Home website and an attendee at the conference, broke this information on Twitter. Half an hour later, the BBC's Laura Kuenssberg tweeted the news that Cameron had called for an official inquiry.⁵⁶ Understandably, Cameron's intervention had a huge impact on the news agenda. At 11.34 A.M., the *Times* published an article stating that the paper had been in contact with Pratt the night before, when she had told their reporter that "they [staff in 10 Downing Street] had been in contact by e-mail, by phone and that they [the NBH] could see the computers used to download their literature."⁵⁷

The unfolding story was now being mediated almost in real time. Two minutes later, at 11.36 A.M., Laura Kuenssberg tweeted that Labour minister Lord Mandelson had accused the Conservatives of "directing" Christine Pratt. At 11.47 A.M., *Times* journalist Jenny Booth reported that Cameron, and now the opposition Liberal Democrats' leader, Nick Clegg, had both called for an official inquiry. At 12.52 P.M., Laura Kuenssberg, who had clearly been in contact with the Conservatives to ask them to confirm or deny Lord Mandelson's allegations, tweeted that the Conservatives "totally reject idea they had anything to do with charity allegations."⁵⁸

Once again, the focus shifted back to broadcasting. BBC Radio Four's influential *The World at One* led on Lord Mandelson's remarks from midmorning and reports that the Conservatives had strongly denied the allegation that they had links with Pratt. The show's presenter, Martha Kearney, interviewed Peter Watt, former general secretary of the Labour Party, who spoke of Brown's occasional bad temper. Kearney also interviewed Professor Cary Cooper, who stated that he had resigned from the NBH on the grounds of its breaches of client confidentiality. The head of the NBH's rival organization, Bullying UK's Liz Carnell, who was also interviewed, reported that she had asked the Charity Commission to carry out an investigation into the breach of confidentiality by the NBH.⁵⁹

At 2.04 P.M., Christine Pratt appeared on *Sky News* in what was to prove her last live television interview of the bullying affair, only about 22 hours after her initial intervention. At 3.25 P.M., Downing Street released a third statement of denial and at 4.24 P.M. Laura Kuenssberg tweeted that Sir Gus O'Donnell had again confirmed that he never raised any concerns with Brown. At 4.37 P.M., Andrew Rawnsley responded directly to this denial on Twitter: "Sir Gus O'Donnell spoke to the Prime Minister about his behavior. My source for that could not be better." Then, Gordon Brown used an interview with the *Economist* magazine to further deny the allegations.⁶⁰

Meanwhile, the NBH was falling apart. Its three remaining patrons announced their resignation from its board: Sarah Cawood, a television presenter, Conservative councillor Mary O'Connor, and, more importantly, Ann Widdecombe, the Conservative MP whose association with the organization had led to the suspicions regarding its

alleged alignment with the Conservatives and which had sparked off the investigations by Twitter users and the blogger Adam Bienkov. By the early Monday evening, the press began reporting the patrons' resignations rather than Pratt's confirmation of the events alleged in Rawnsley's book.⁶¹

By the time of Britain's most-watched news show, the *BBC Ten O'Clock News*, later that Monday night, the bullygate story was effectively finished. The BBC led on the story. While it repeated Cameron and Clegg's calls for an official inquiry, it reported that the Charity Commission was now investigating the NBH. It sent a reporter, John Kay, to the NBH's headquarters in Swindon, in order to show that its offices were next door-but-one to those of the local Conservative Party. Though the BBC did not draw its own conclusions, it reported that this was likely to add to speculation that Christine Pratt may have been politically motivated. Nick Robinson pointedly stated that the BBC had "broken the story" about the NBH, when in fact this was not the case. In his final piece to camera, Robinson said: "It is now official. There was no bullying in that building behind me [Number 10], there will be no inquiry, the cabinet secretary gave no warning, at least by the latest statement that he has issued."⁶² Robinson went on to say that the story raised broader concerns about the prime minister's character, but the fact that he began his report with the official denials is an indication of how far the initial story had evolved over the course of three days.

On February 25, the Charity Commission issued a press release stating that it was conducting a formal investigation of 160 complaints about the working practices of the NBH. Meanwhile the NBH temporarily suspended its operations.⁶³

Conclusion

The mediation of the bullygate affair has been used here to illustrate the concepts of the hybrid news system and the political information cycle. This sensational political news story received cross-media saturation coverage across all outlets for an entire weekend, as the personnel, practices, genres, technologies, and temporalities of new online media were hybridized with those of broadcast and press media. There was a book whose contents were leaked to a national newspaper three weeks before it was excerpted in a rival national newspaper as part of that rival's relaunch strategy. There was a prime minister who tried to preempt the revelations, by appearing on a television talk show a week earlier, granting an interview to a further rival national newspaper, and using an exclusive interview with a television news program to deny the allegations the day before they were published. There were journalists operating in a hypercompetitive environment, interacting with each other and ordinary citizens in public, breaking stories and new information on the web, on their own blogs, or on Twitter, hours before they appeared in scheduled broadcast news bulletins. Some journalists clearly picked up valuable information in online interactions with ordinary members of the public. A backbench MP orchestrated a Twitter hashtag campaign in order to attack the story's credibility, forcing the book's author to respond directly on Twitter in order to defend

himself. A blogger conducted online research—encompassing the archives of a seemingly unrelated anonymous blog set up some six months earlier by a disgruntled former client of the NBH—in order to reveal the dubious credibility of a source that most, though not all, mainstream news journalists appeared not to have questioned.

The hybridized ways in which important political news events are now mediated presents new opportunities for nonelite actors to enter news production assemblages through timely interventions and sometimes direct, one-to-one, micro-level interactions with professional journalists. Contrary to much of the skeptical commentary, bloggers and social media users are not always “parasitical” on the “mainstream” media. Equally, professional journalists do not slavishly chase every last online utterance by bloggers and social media users. As they did in the past, journalists use their considerable power and professional resources to influence news agendas, control the flow of information, outdo their rivals, and undermine the new media upstarts. But at the same time, online activists and news professionals alike are now routinely engaged in loosely coupled assemblages characterized by conflict, competition, partisanship, and mutual dependency, in the pursuit of new information that will propel a news story forward and increase its newsworthiness. Much of this activity is episodic and it occurs in real time as a story unfolds. It is therefore easy to miss and can only be reconstructed through the real-time observational method adopted in this study.

Political information cycles contain pockets of engagement that may momentarily bring greater numbers of players into news-making assemblages, but this is not “crowd-sourcing” or the “wisdom of crowds” (Howe 2008; Surowiecki 2004). Intraelite competition is a dominant feature of this environment and the nonelite actors in this study were mostly, though not exclusively, motivated and strategically oriented political activists—or those with at least an interest in following politics—whose behavior suggests an awareness that carefully timed interactions with elite politicians and professional journalists will occasionally be able to play a role in shaping the news. Small numbers of individuals made the truly decisive interventions, and we need to pay careful attention, as this study has done, to decipher who actually does the powerful “work” in this environment. At the same time, however, we should not lose sight of the fact that ordinary citizens, operating away from the elite political–media nexus, can, on occasion, affect the meaning and flow of news. It is therefore too simplistic to conceptualize this new environment as “relatively insular and exclusionary” (Davis 2010).

Future research should begin from the assumption that the construction of political news is now a much more fluid and dynamic process than it was during the heyday of linear broadcast television. In this new environment, it is difficult, but as this study has shown, not impossible, to trace and accurately document who does what, when, where, and to whom, as well as the difference made by discrete actions. Detailed narrative case studies will capture rich and useful data in this emerging environment; so, too, will more quantitative approaches. But narrative will prove particularly advantageous for staying “close” to the events that matter for illustrating the role of assemblages as they operate in hybridized news systems. Increasingly sophisticated and publicly available

archives of online services will make studies of the political information cycle more achievable and transparent. Cross-national research will be able to compare and contrast how the modalities of the political information cycle and news system hybridity are modulated by specific national cultures, embedded institutional norms, routines, genres, and technological practices, among other variables.

As mass market online news enters its second decade, the current political communication environment has come to seem like the natural order of things. We need to capture what is changing during this chaotic period of transition. Fast-moving episodes like bullygate reveal deeper trends that we must document and interpret to reveal the ongoing evolution of mediated politics.

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Notes

1. A note about method. The hybrid news system presents significant challenges to researchers. Newspaper journalists now frequently post multiple updates to stories throughout the day and night, and news sites have widely varying archive policies. The technological limitations of journalists' content management systems as well as editorial policy determine whether and how updates, additions, headline alterations, and picture replacements are signaled to readers. Most blogs and a minority of mainstream news outlets, such as the *Guardian* and the *Financial Times*, are transparent about an article's provenance. However, practices vary widely and it is common to see outdated time stamps, the incremental addition of paragraphs at the top or bottom of stories, and headline and URL changes to reflect new angles as they emerge. Sometimes entire stories will simply be overwritten, even though the original hyperlink will be retained. All of these can occur without readers being explicitly notified.

Several "forensic" strategies were used to overcome these problems. In addition to monitoring key political blogs and the main national news outlets' websites, the free and publicly available Google Reader was used to monitor the RSS feeds and the timings of article releases from February 20 to February 25, 2010, for the following outlets: *BBC News* (Front Page feed), *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Star*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Independent on Sunday*, *Mail on Sunday*, *News of the World*, *Observer*, *Sun*, *Sunday Express*, *Sunday Mirror*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *Sunday Times*, and the *Times*. Links were followed back to newspaper websites to check for article modifications,

updates, and deletions. Google Reader consists of an effectively unlimited archive of every RSS feed dating back to when a single user first added it to Google's database. Evernote, free and publicly available software, was used to store selected press articles: see <http://www.evernote.com>. Readers may email the author for a link to this archive, which has been deposited online.

The broadcast media archiving service, Box of Broadcasts, was used to store content from Channel 4 News, BBC News at Ten, the BBC 24-Hour News Channel, and ITV News, enabling the analysis of pivotal moments during the flow of events on February 20, 21, and 22. This service is available to member institutions of the British Universities Film and Video Council. See <http://bobnational.net>. Nonsubscribers may e-mail the author for copies of these video files. Where they exist, links to public transcripts of television and radio shows have been provided.

The Twitter search function at <http://search.twitter.com> was monitored in real time using a number of queries, such as "national bullying helpline," "#rawnsleyrot," and "#bullygate." Since the Twitter search service began, the company has only made public the results from approximately three weeks prior to running a query, and, at the time of the fieldwork in February 2010, no robust and publicly available means of automatically extracting and archiving individual Twitter updates existed. To circumvent these limitations, screen outputs of selected Twitter searches were captured in real time and stored in Evernote. Readers may e-mail the author for a link to this online archive. In April 2010, after the initial fieldwork was conducted, Google launched its Google Replay Search. At the time of this writing (July 2010) this enables searches of the Twitter archive going back to early February 2010 and it presents the results in a timeline format, though it cannot automatically account for changes to the names of individual Twitter accounts; these must be followed up manually. Where possible, the Google Replay Search service has been used to track and present publicly available links to key Twitter updates. Google's time stamps are correct, but differ from those in Twitter archives by one hour due to different servers' time zone configurations. Twitter updates are reproduced throughout in their original, often ungrammatical and incorrectly punctuated, form.

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news. Yet “the Sundays” are now essentially published well in advance as online editions are released to the web throughout Saturday evenings. As a result, the Sundays now play an increasingly important role in defining the news agenda for the equally influential Sunday morning television, particularly the BBC’s 9 A.M. *Andrew Marr Show*, but also Adam Boulton’s 11 A.M. show on *Sky News*, and the BBC’s midday *Politics Show*.

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