

Mats Ekström & Andrew Tolson eds. *Media Talk and Political Elections in Europe and America*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013. 249 pp. £55.00.

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A truism of political communication is that its lessons must continually be relearned by each new generation of politicians. Fifty five years after Kennedy beat Nixon, British Labour Party leader Ed Miliband still seemed uncertain how best to use the opportunity presented by the 2015 televised election debates. While not unshaven, he did appear stilted. He was unsure whether to talk to the studio audience or the voters at home. His political message was, perhaps, too nuanced for the simplicities demanded by television. And when challenged by members of the public he lacked the communication strategies to allow him to either admit past mistakes with grace or assertively to challenge mischaracterisations. Following his defeat, and with more time on his hands, Mr Miliband might consider taking a look this edited collection by Mats Ekström of The University of Gothenburg and Andrew Tolson of De Montfort University.

The book seeks to apply the techniques of discourse analysis to differing mediated forms of political communication. It takes in televised debates, political interviews – and faux political interviews – through to the studied calls to action of digital communication with political supporters. The pressure cooker atmosphere of the election debate seems well suited to the techniques of discourse analysis. The close reading of what is said by candidates, its implications, assumptions, and modes of expression all provide fertile territory for exploration and analysis.

Neil Washbourne provides a compelling analysis of the presidentialisation process and the cult of the celebrity politician focusing on “Cleggmania”, the moment when a relatively unknown party leader was catapulted to national fame by the first UK televised debates in 2010. It’s impossible to read at this remove without reflecting on Nick Clegg’s struggles to find an independent voice as Deputy Prime Minister and the subsequent virtual annihilation of the Liberal Democrats at Westminster during 2015. While David Cameron and Gordon Brown may have agreed with Nick, it’s often the ordinary citizen who asks the awkward question that trips up politicians or exposes the cosy relationship between the journalist interrogator and his subject.

Mats Ekström and Goran Eriksson analyse the use of citizen participation in journalistic discourse during the 2010 Swedish campaign. Their analysis of the nature of the multiplatform political interview and the opportunities it provides for greater citizen involvement in the democratic process hints at the ways in which new forms of media may provide tougher scrutiny and more accountability in the future.

In this collection, though, the dominant personality is that of Barack Obama. Compiled in the run up to his re-election for a second Presidential term, his achievements as an orator, communicator and campaigner, are carefully examined. Prior to his first election Obama was no stranger to the pain strategy – taking the worst the media could throw at him to get past negative audience perceptions. His interview with Fox News’s Bill O’Reilly is analysed here in detail. It’s important to remember just how damaged Obama appeared to be by allegations that he associated with members of the radical left and controversial evangelical

preachers. The allegations were gaining traction with a group of voters who distrusted the mainstream media. The decision to appear on Fox News was not about convincing them that Obama was a trustworthy candidate but to use the confrontational nature of the “No Spin Zone” to win over less dogmatic viewers when the interview was picked up by other news sources. Ian Hutchby’s close reading of the interview shows a masterclass in the techniques O’Reilly uses to keep his audience on-side. Footing shifts, witnessing and hypotheticals are all employed to keep the interviewee off-balance and defensive during encounters that display characteristics more associated with entertainment programmes than news shows.

This hybrid interview form is also analysed in Geoffrey Baym’s work on *The Daily Show’s* extended interviews. A Marmite section of Jon Stewart’s programme, sometimes the celebrity interview fails to excite much interest when compared to the satirical fireworks of the rest of the show. But when they ignite they deliver headlines as well as laughs. Baym looks at the extended cuts placed on the website, and concludes they are neither infotainment nor fake news but, perhaps, an emergent form of accountability journalism that uses humour to sugar the pill for viewers.

Much of the work in this collection draws inspiration and builds upon Max Atkinson’s work on political rhetoric and televisuality. But it is also heartening to see authors applying close reading and discourse analysis to digital communications. Nuria Lorenzo-Dus and Pilar Garcés-Conjeos Blitvich comprehensively analyse the triggers for action in Obama’s 2008 E-Campaign. His team’s emails have set a template for electronic communication with political bases and, importantly, driving action and influencing behaviour. The chapter quantitatively establishes the multimodal techniques being employed to persuade supporters to donate time and/or money to help the cause.

With a little more than half the chapters of the collection based on papers delivered at a De Montfort University symposium in the summer of 2012, there’s a tendency to cluster analysis on the UK general election of 2010, as well as Obama’s first presidential campaign. There are, though, several chapters devoted to political activity in other European states, including Spain, Sweden, Austria and Greece. The collection draws together three key themes that will be relevant to analysis of elections during the coming years: in a time of change, what is the continuing impact of broadcasting on political discourse?; how do broadcasters present and package political personalities?; and what is the changing nature of citizen involvement in the process of mediated communications? All three themes look likely continue to be in flux and competition with each other for years to come.