BRITISH PARTY ELECTION BROADCASTS IN THE 1950s
What was the American influence?

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The debate about the American influence on political communication practices worldwide has raised a range of issues about how such a process might work. Much of the research in the field, however, has examined possible influences on practices in the last quarter of the twentieth century. By then, it could be argued, common global practices had become established in many Western Democracies. The aim of this paper is to explore a period before these changes had taken place, namely the 1950s and the 1960s, when television was still in its infancy in both Britain and the US, when new and different practices were being tried out and a period in which it might still be possible to look at influences at the dawn of political broadcasting. By focusing on the emergence and development of a specific form of political communication, namely, dedicated, unmediated, paid-for or free party election communication, in the US and in Britain in this early period, it might be possible to examine if, and how, American practices might have influenced British ones. Using unpublished work drawing on a range of archives and personal interviews that focus on interactions across the Atlantic, this paper argues that in this period, the two countries developed a range of different practices that cannot easily lend support to the idea of Americanisation. The paper concludes with a discussion of the need for more research into the domestic negotiations of transatlantic interactions.

KEYWORDS party election broadcasts; Americanisation; political television in 1950s; American influence on election broadcasts; Grace Wyndham Goldie; political parties and pebs in the 1950s

Introduction

In the 2010 British general election, the leaders of Britain's main political parties engaged in head-to-head debates for the first time. This was exactly 50 years after the televised Kennedy–Nixon US presidential debates. That it has taken so long to make this happen is a testament to the enduring power of specific cultural and political considerations within the British political environment, but it is also a reminder of how far 'behind' other countries British practices were since France and Germany have had such debates since the 1970s. Whether this commonality can be explained by referring to a version of the idea of Americanisation (see Blumler and Gurevitch) or as evidence of the emergence of a 'hybrid' model of modern campaigning styles (Plasser and Plasser 350) is still a matter of debate. What is less a matter of debate is the fact that by the twenty-first century, a particular almost universal model of 'modern campaigning' had become established in modern democracies (Swanson and Mancini).

Much more intriguing as a research question is whether one can identify *when* and *how* the processes of imitation or convergence took place. As I shall argue below, much research into the emergence of commonality draws on work undertaken from the

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mid-1960s onwards by which time change—in political parties, in television practices, in leadership styles—*had already taken place*. Little, if any, research has focused on 'transatlantic media interactions' (Wiener and Hampton 6) in the early days of television when election campaigning on television first emerged on both sides of the Atlantic and on whether those 'interactions' can reveal something about the imitation, adoption or adaptation of practices from one to another context.

The aim of this paper is, therefore, to explore the emergence of a specific form of political communication—Party Election Broadcasts (pebs)—in Britain in the 1950s and early 1960s with a view to identifying the different processes (and 'interactions') that fed into their development and, in so doing, reveal the direction and significance of flows of influences, if any, from the US. Whilst the focus on pebs as dedicated, unmediated and free election communication may seem rather narrow since it is only a minor part of the totality of political communication, it is important to remember that they represent the only ways in which political parties could communicate in an unmediated fashion with voters. In Britain, as in the US, they were/are the vehicles for the parties to use as they wish. Significantly, they are also those moments when political parties might be tempted to copy the skills and the professionalism of 'foreigners' especially if they were believed to be working in a more sophisticated and developed broadcasting and political environment such as the US. It follows that by looking at the nature of 'transatlantic media interactions' in the 1950s in the context of the development of election campaigning on television in both countries, it might be possible to shed some light on flows and directions of influences, specifically and discussions of Americanisation more generally.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part discusses the broad outlines of the Americanisation thesis and the research questions. The second explores the 'transatlantic media interactions' in the context of the development of political broadcasting and the third, the concluding section, raises key questions for further research.

Studying the American Influence

The broad outlines of discussions relating to developments of modern campaigning practices, of which political communication practices are a critical part, are fairly straightforward and essentially contrast positions that favour accounts of exogenous change, that is the American influence, and those that insist on the importance of endogenous factors. For some, the use of the idea of Americanisation is justified because practices observed elsewhere, including Britain, 'have been inspired by or (are) variations on techniques that emerged first in the United States' (Swanson and Mancini 248). Those who question the appropriateness of the term point out that countries other than the US can also be sources of innovations and their importance must not be underestimated (Swanson and Mancini 249). Furthermore, that one country has adopted practices from another country may be the result of factors that favour the adoption of such practices or even of technological change. So, whilst the 'diffusion theory' of Americanisation is essentially a unidirectional model whereby countries 'imitate, import or adapt' American practices, it contrasts sharply with those who argue that the Americanisation of election communication is 'the consequence of an ongoing structural change in politics, society and the media system' (Plasser and Plasser 16), that is of modernisation whereby societies

become similar in their political and social organisations. As Plasser and Plasser (18–19) also point out: In 'adopting selected innovations and techniques of American election campaigns', two different processes might be involved. One is 'the *shopping model*' whereby certain practices are selected and used. This gives rise to 'hybridisation' where new and old, domestic and foreign, practices are combined. The other is the 'adoption model' in which American practices are simply adopted in such a way as to ignore domestic considerations. This gives rise to 'standardisation' 'following the US role model of electioneering'.

Whilst such discussions have pre-occupied many, they have mainly drawn on research and literature from the 1960s, or later, and to a time when political and broadcasting systems and communication practices *had already* to an extent converged. It could thus be argued that from the vantage point of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s most of the 'features of modern campaigning' (Plasser and Plasser 350) such as the centrality of television had already become well-established in Western democracies. In which case, seeking to identify directions of influence was likely to be problematic since it would probably focus on processes that had already emerged.

To seek to study directions of influence, even from the US to Britain, one ought to go to a period when practices of political communication were in their infancy so that one could begin to observe how different practitioners in politics and communication interacted and responded to changes and challenges. The 1950s and early 1960s is just such a period. Apart from the fact that in both countries television was just emerging as a mass medium, the two broadcasting systems—and the approaches to political communication in general—were at their most different: Britain had, until 1955, a non-commercial public service monopolistic broadcasting system, the US a commercial and competitive one (Goldie *Facing* 311–13; Blumler and Kavanagh). When it came to election campaigning, whilst political consultants and advertising experts were commonly used in the US, advertisers—and not consultants-did not get involved in British election campaigning until 1959 (Negrine). Furthermore, in 1950s Britain, political parties were still very dominant political forces and the leaders of the parties occupied a less-presidential role than they do today (see Mughan). Discussions about the changing ideological nature of European political parties—something that made them similar to American political parties-only emerged towards the end of this period (see Epstein; Kirchheimar). To a significant extent, then, those making decisions about how to engage in political communication on both sides of the Atlantic would have to draw on either the growing body of evidence drawn from studies, for example from advertising or public opinion surveys, and/or their own judgements, rather than a specific understanding of key principles of 'modern campaigning' (Kelley 161). Importantly, those decisions could also, in theory, be based on knowledge acquired through 'transatlantic media interactions' (Wiener and Hampton 6).

It is in this early period of television, therefore, that one can begin to explore possible directions of influences. If one can show 'interactions' and connections between political communication practices in the US and in Britain then one can begin to identify how practices were, or were not, imitated. On the other hand, if such connections are difficult to find, then the limitations of the Americanisation thesis—however it is

understood—will become apparent and we might need to reconsider the importance of domestic considerations in developments.

Yet in setting out the research questions in such a simple way, namely, can one determine directions of influence, one inevitably sidesteps two key methodological problems. The first is a fairly obvious one: given the very different years in which the election broadcasts were made and their *very* different lengths, are comparisons meaningful? For example, how does one robustly compare a 20-minute peb with a 20-second US political spot and what do similarities, or differences, mean in that context? The second problem is, in essence, the problem of doing historical research. If comparisons of content prove to be difficult, can primary sources shed some light on the aims, objectives or intentions of those involved in the production of political communication? Unfortunately, there are challenges here also: archived documents may cite topics tangentially and the personal recollections of those directly involved (and surviving) may be hazy or recalled (hazily) with hindsight. More generally, while some documents may be available, one can never quite tell how much is missing. Finally, and since documents do not speak for themselves, how one uses them becomes a critical issue.

In spite of these challenges, there is much material available. Aside from secondary sources, this paper has drawn extensively on a range of primary sources, including archived papers and personal interviews.[1] Whilst none of these sources of information can, on their own, help to fully answer our research questions, when taken together they shed light on the development of political election broadcasting in Britain and in relation to developments in the US. Inevitably, though, our conclusions can only be tentative in the absence of the unattainable, namely, full, detailed and complete historical records and recollections.

Television Election Broadcasting and Interactions in the 1950s

Although television systems developed in the late 1940s, it was not until the mid- to late-1950s that it became a mass medium. At this stage, and in both countries, television and politics were still gingerly courting one another and political parties on both sides of the Atlantic were trying out different formats of political advertising or propaganda, ranging from the televised speech through to the 20-second 'political spot' (in the US) to communicate directly with voters. Political broadcasting in Britain was, in any case, generally limited and undeveloped (Seymour-Ure 167; Goldie *Facing*).

But there were significant differences between the two countries. Apart from the differences between a presidential and a parliamentary political system, differences which introduced their own dynamics, the broadcasting systems were also radically different. Whilst the US had many broadcasters, Britain had a single monopoly publicly-funded TV channel until 1955. In these circumstances, unmediated political communication in Britain could only take place on terms agreed between the broadcasters and the political parties. One consequence of this was that British 'political advertising/propaganda' in the form of pebs were a set length agreed to between the parties and the BBC, ranging from 15 to 30 minutes (Table 1), whereas American political commercials could vary in length depending on how much air-time was being bought (Table 2).

Table 1
Length of pebs for Conservative and Labour parties

Length of pebs	1951	1955	1959	1964
15 minutes	2		2	10
20 minutes		4	8	
30 minutes		2		
Total	2	6	10	10

Source: www.sheffield.ac.uk/journalism/pebs.

The introduction of a commercial television service in 1955 brought about a more robust approach to political television generally which, in turn, forced the BBC to review its own practices so that by the early 1960s there was, what Michael Tracey (59) has called, 'an ''epistemological rupture'' engendered by the transition from monopoly broadcasting with all the manifestations of Reithian paternalism to a competitive situation with all the manifestations of the commercial ethic'. The generally uninspiring and deferential approach to news provision on the BBC up to the late 1950s—sometimes enforced by restrictions such as the 14-Day rule which prevented it from broadcasting any controversial content (see Briggs 678; Negrine; Seymour-Ure)—began to change in the face of competition and as old rules and practices were swept away. As Seymour-Ure notes, 'politics began to adapt to broadcasting', in the 1960s and 'politicians became keener to use it . . .' (Seymour-Ure 167) so much so that one British newspaper columnist observed in 1964 that 'Mr Harold Wilson, who sometimes appears to regard ''The Making of the President'' [i.e. JF Kennedy] as a sacred text, has pressed for direct ''confrontations'' with the Prime Minister. In common with many others, he clearly believes that a good television image can help to ensure victory' (Preston).

It is thus within this period of about a dozen years—between the 'inauguration' of television and its 'coming of age' (Seymour-Ure 182–8)—that we can find political parties and broadcasters wrestling with how best to use the new medium of television. And it is within this period that we can begin to ask about the nature of the 'transatlantic interactions' that were taking place and whether these, in spite of systemic differences, hint at flows and influences from the US to Britain.

Table 2
Length of political commercials in the 1952, 1956 and 1960 US presidential campaigns*

	2–5 minutes	60 seconds	20–30 seconds	Total
1952 Eisenhower	3	2	30	35
1952 Stevenson	2	11	5	18
1956 Eisenhower	5	0	0	5
1956 Stevenson	8	2	2	12
1960 Kennedy	17	41	10	68
1960 Nixon	1	21	23	45
	36 (20%)	77 (42%)	70 (38%)	183

*Breakdown supplied by Professor Lynda L Kaid (personal communication, 2009–2010) drawing on Kaid and Johnson (2001).

'There Now Follows a Party Election Broadcast. . .'

Although 'the first paid television appearance by a presidential candidate occurred on 5 October 1948, when Truman delivered a speech' (Jamieson 35), the 1952 Presidential election saw a major change in the nature of political advertising with the introduction of the 20-second 'Eisenhower Answers America' political spots (Jamieson 82; Wood). Despite their novelty, other forms of paid political messages such as speeches continued to be broadcast (Wood 266). Adlai Stevenson's 'television strategy' in 1952, for example, was based 'on a series of eighteen half-hour speeches that aired' on weekday evenings (Living Room Candidate). Even in the 1956 presidential campaign, one could still find ads of different lengths with the majority being between 2 and 5 minutes (Table 2).

But by the time the 1952 US presidential election broadcasts had been aired, Britain *had already experienced* one general election [1951] in which the three main political parties had used television. Five points are noteworthy about these pebs. First, each of the three parties had been allocated 15 minutes, an allocation that reflected their electoral strengths and so reinforced practices first developed in the 1920s when party political broadcasts (ppb) on radio began (Briggs 617–8). Second, the broadcasters merely provided technical facilities for the political parties. Advice could also be forthcoming but it was up to the political parties to create their election broadcasts. Third, as in the US, party political communication in Britain has a history both on radio and on film (Hollins) that predated television. Fourth, because the political parties had been slow to appreciate the importance of television—radio was still the more important medium-they had turned down the opportunity to broadcast on television in the general election of February 1950 (Goldie *Facing* 61). Although this reinforces the point that, as with radio, 'the initiative [to use TV to make a direct appeal to the electorate] came from the Corporation (BBC)' (Goldie *Facing* 92), the nature of the offer was problematic. For although the BBC had offered to televise 'the main political speech of each of the Leaders in his own constituency' this went against the idea that *all* candidates, including party leaders, within each constituency should be treated equally and be given equal time (Barnes). In other words, it would not be possible to televise the speeches of one constituency candidate—the party leader-and not those of others.

Finally, the political parties had settled on formats that were intended to be informative and that conveyed *party* not individual positions. The first ever peb consisted of a 15-minute talk by Lord Samuel, Liberal Party, straight to camera. The Conservative Party used a professional television commentator/interviewer to ask Anthony Eden, then Foreign Secretary, questions; this was followed by a talk to camera from Eden (The Q&A had, in fact, been fully rehearsed beforehand [Cockerell].). The Labour Party broadcast consisted of an interview between an ex-Labour MP (Christopher Mayhew) and a Minister.[2] The leaders of the two main parties (Churchill, Attlee) were absent from these broadcasts. In choosing these formats, politicians and broadcasters had relied on what was familiar to them in the British context. So, for example, the interview format was favoured because broadcasters 'had discovered that the simplest situation in which to place someone inexperienced in television was that of being interviewed by someone more experienced' (Goldie *Facing* 96). Lord Samuel had declined to use this format—even though he had

previously taken part in interviews, as had many others (Goldie *Facing* 80)—and had preferred to extemporise. He overran and was cut off: an experience he shared with US Presidential contender, Adlai Stevenson, another 'old style' politician (Jamieson 62).

If the 1951 pebs used formats common to television and radio at the time, these were formats that were very unlike the slick 'professional public relations' (Kelly) and personalised approach that was to characterise American political advertising from 1952 onwards. The same would be true in later years when newer formats such as '*Press Conference*' (a format akin to *'Meet the Press'* used in the US from the late 1940s) launched in 1952, and '*Tonight*', a current affairs programme, launched in 1957, could be adapted for use in pebs.

By relying on tried and tested formats, the political parties were showing their uncertainties about the merits of pebs—they had rejected the BBC offer to carry television election broadcasts in 1950 and ppb[3] only began on a regular basis from 1953-and they were unsure about the benefits of television generally, and how to best use it (Goldie *Facing* 134–6). According to David Butler, the general reluctance and lack of knowledge about television, 'was only mitigated by the experience of a few leading politicians in both parties, who (in most cases during visits to the United States), had had experience of being televised and had realised its possibilities' (Butler 75; see also Goldie *Facing* 122, 134).

While David Butler is correct to draw attention to the importance of visits to the US, it is important to see these as only part of a broader set of interactions and also as only a small contribution to the more complex questions of whether or not these brought about imitations or exchanges of practices.

'Transatlantic Interactions': Visits and Connections

Instances of politicians visiting the US are well documented (Briggs 663, 667 fn.3, 665; Cockerell 15; Even 24) and some of these visits fed into reports on television in politics. Although archival records confirm these and other interactions across the Atlantic, they are not especially helpful when it comes to hinting at flows of influence. The American experience is usually noted and commented upon but there is little that suggests a desire to emulate or copy. Anthony Wedgewood Benn—a visitor to the US in the late 1940s—produced a report for the Labour Party in 1953 in which he extolled the benefits of television and included careful assessments of what worked and what did not. He argued, for instance, that the American experience showed that 'the personality of the speaker' had impact and that certain imagery such as of mass rallies was successful (Benn v). He also noted that there 'are already many highly developed broadcasting techniques that are capable of adaptation for Political purposes' (Benn iv).

At the Conservative Party, the Chief Publicity Officer reported back on the 1952 US presidential elections and highlighted those things that might be of use in the future but, at the same time, drew attention to the fact that the different cultures and organisational makeup of parties meant that things could not easily be adopted from one context to the other. He also observed that:

> We can find very little that we think is of value to us. I would say that this time they have learnt more from our propaganda. They are obviously trying to put out a type of ''Pocket

> Politics'' which I don't think is as good as ours, and also they have been using some of our slogans, such as ''It's time for a change''.

His comments on 'TV and Broadcasting' are brief: 'We have not found anything new. That does not necessarily mean to say that we are using all the ideas, but rather that we know about them' (CPA 'Memorandum').

In fact, in the Conservative Party Archive there are surprisingly few references to things American in the contents of over 60 files, dating from 1948 through to 1964, on topics such as 'General Elections', 'Broadcasting', 'US elections', 'Party Election Broadcasts'. One example has already been cited above; others are equally flimsy. A 1952 letter from an MP about the fact that 'Mr Harman Grisewood [BBC, Director of the Spoken Word] also expressed interest in the possibility of introducing more modern technique in the Party political broadcasts. In America, a straight broadcast by distinguished politicians is very often livened and lightened by methods such as discussion or interview' (CPA 'Letter' 23 May 1952) is simply copied to various people in Conservative Central Office. A 1955 reply to a query about the use of tele-prompters reads:

> Chapman-Walker (Chief Publicity Office, Conservative Party) tells me that the Television Section here have in the past looked at this matter very closely – indeed Chapman-Walker talked to Bob Montgomery, Television producer to President Eisenhower, who was the first person in the world to use a tele-prompter. All political parties were offered the use of a tele-prompter during the recent General Election [1955], but the offer was accepted by nobody. (CPA 'Letter' 25 June 1955)

By contrast, the importance of television *as a medium of political communication as practiced in the US* can be seen quite clearly in a 1952 script for a Conservative Party 'television film' about 'Television in Politics'. Those involved in the planning of the film included the Party's Chief Publicity Officer and other key players in the party's propaganda sections, for example Lady Maxwell Fyfe, Frank Wyndham Goldie. The script comprised a discussion of television's growing importance in politics interweaved with a selection of filmed excerpts of US politicians speaking and campaigning. These included Governor Stevenson speaking at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, Senator Taft being questioned by four journalists, and a meeting with Senator Kefauver (CPA 'Note Crum Ewing').[4]

A more intriguing source of information on 'interactions' in the early 1950s are the Grace Wyndham Goldie papers. In 1953, Grace Wyndham Goldie [then Talks Producer, BBC Television Service, and probably the most influential person in BBC political broadcasting in the 1950s] spent nearly three months in the US looking at American life in general but also 'to get some knowledge of American Television output and methods'. 'In view of my work in British Television', she added, her special subject 'should be the relation of mass media and particularly of television to political institutions' (Goldie *Visit*).

Her reports and notes juxtapose several themes. One theme is the great difference between the two countries: differences of scale, in the character of the people and, by extension, of broadcasting systems. A second theme is the importance, and negative effects, of commercialism on American television. The third theme is one of quality. Her notes on the trip are clear on this:

> Topicality in news is considered generally of the utmost importance. . . . .
>
> Nevertheless, I thought the American news programmes on the whole exceedingly bad. It was something to have them at all but certainly no-one has yet discovered in the US, any more than here, a really satisfactory method of handling news on Television. . . .
>
> . . . Apart from the Murrow programme ('See it now'), therefore, and the news programmes there are no programmes that I saw or heard of the kind that we have been doing with Christopher Mayhew and Aidan Crawley. (Goldie *American*)

And yet . . . in her 1976 account of the development of the *Tonight* programme in 1957, she returns to one of her experiences from the US. 'I had seen', she writes,

> some of the casually presented early morning programmes which included news, time checks, interviews with people who were pulled off the street . . . These apparently casual programmes were the result of highly professional skills and their styles were refreshing when compared with the more formal BBC presentation, not only of news, but of 'Press Conference' and 'Panorama'. This was what we wanted. A new style. (Goldie *Facing* 212)

As with broadcasters and politicians, journalists had also become aware of what was happening across the Atlantic. In June 1954, for example, Pendennis in *The Observer* discussed the importance of television in politics with Robert Montgomery, 'Eisenhower's adviser on the use of television in politics and public relations' who was passing through London at the time. Yet despite the fact that these visits generated an interest in the use of television in politics and alerted visitors to the US to the innovative use of television in campaigning, this is not evidenced in any of the 1955 British pebs. These were still based on familiar formats and practices: a 20-minute straight-to-camera monologue, a press conference format, interviews, politicians speaking straight to camera at considerable length, and so on. And they were long-of the six produced for the main parties, two were 30 minutes long and four were 20 minutes long (Table 1). As William Pickles wrote in the *Manchester Guardian* after the 1955 British general election 'both (political) parties . . . had paid close attention to the American model but neither can be accused of slavish imitation. The limitation to a total of two and a quarter hours for three parties . . . in any case imposed a pattern quite different from the American' (Pickles).

Systemic differences notwithstanding, there is some evidence that a few individuals did suggest innovative ways of using television in politics, perhaps as a result of a better understanding of how television worked or even coming out of interactions in the US. They often met with resistance. Tony Benn had proposed developing pebs in such a way as to maximise their impact but his ideas, like those of others, were not taken up or were 'vetoed by senior party politicians' (Even 23–24; Tony Benn, Personal Interview, 2007). They were 'somewhat advanced for the bulk of the parties to which [they] belonged' (Even 46) and party members, by and large, harboured 'a deep suspicion particularly within the Labour Party of politics being treated as entertainment' (Briggs 671; Wring 46). More critically, the fact that new ideas for pebs had been presented, and in 1959 put into operation, might also lead one to suggest that it was not simply a matter of cost that held political parties back. As we have seen, parties had not yet got to grips with television, broadly lacked the necessary expertise to use it more imaginatively and did not prioritise

it. This combined with a fear that politics would become a branch of entertainment, a view common amongst 'the Left'—and others[5]-who saw the incursions of things American in British public and political life as unwelcome. Plans to introduce commercial television in the early 1950s, brought this into sharp relief. As Wilson has written, for some, any incursions of commercialism into British life and 'the direction of ''Americanisation'' of British society . . . [was seen to speed up] the movement towards a society which would glorify middle class consumption goals and the commercialisation of all institutional and personal relationships and values' (Wilson 16; O'Malley). The much publicised insertion of commercials during the relay on US television of the Queen's Coronation in 1953 added to a sense of unease vis-a-vis broadcasting developments in the US (Briggs 471–3). Other critics of commercialism in broadcasting were not difficult to find (Briggs 304–5, 430, 887), including in the US amongst those who were concerned about the ways in which money distorted access to the airwaves and compromised the quality of broadcasting (Jamieson 94).

To suggest that an underlying anti-commercialisation and anti-Americanisation stance may offer a way to understand the continuation of a specifically British approach to pebs, and political broadcasting more generally, is perhaps to underestimate the importance of domestic professional considerations. When asked whether he had been influenced by the American experience when he became involved in making the Labour Party's election programmes in the 1950s, Tony Benn's response was clear: 'No, it certainly wasn't the Americans at all. But I suppose it was just doing it . . .' (Personal Interview, 2007). Such a response, and it is similar in kind to Goldie's comments above regarding the quality of 2007 American news content, highlights the extent to which British television producers—Benn had trained at the BBC before being elected to Parliament as a Labour MP, and he later helped to produce the 1955 and 1959 pebs—had themselves developed professional broadcasting skills that they wished to use in the very specific British political context and culture. It was not that they necessarily wished to distance themselves from the US but that their professional practices, understanding of the medium and what it should seek to do, especially within a public service tradition with its mission to educate and inform, pushed them in a different direction. As Goldie reminds us, television did begin to blossom in the 1950s when the informed professionalism of politicians such as Chris Chataway, Tony Benn, Woodrow Wyatt blended with their broadcasting activities. They 'were able to contribute to political communication by television something quite different from what was already being done by journalists and dons' (Goldie *Facing* 86; see also Cox 51).

This was most evident when the Labour Party stole a march on their rivals by producing pebs not only modelled on the BBC *Tonight* programme but also produced by the programme's Deputy Editor. With its many segments of music, short clips and interviews and generally fast pace of delivery, the pebs sought to retain the attention of the viewers as well as inform them. They combined style with comment and propaganda. Hence their effectiveness when compared with Conservative Party's rather laboured (Grist Election) pebs even though the overall length of the pebs were pre-determined and unwieldy (Briggs 678). Where Labour used short segments to overcome the cumbersome nature of the 20-minute broadcast, the Conservatives used usually longer segments. As John Grist, a prolific maker of pebs for the BBC, put it, in making pebs the Conservative Party was thinking in 'political terms, while

the Labour party thought in terms of Television . . .' (Grist Election 6). To give one example: Labour's fourth peb, 'Britain Belongs to You, 4', is held together by Tony Benn who offers links to more than nine distinct segments, one of which includes endorsements from celebrities; by contrast, the fourth Conservative Party peb, 'Britain Overseas', not only criticizes Labour's approach—Chris Chataway introduces the peb with the statement that unlike Labour 'we shall not be flashing up any gimmicky little cartoons, we shan't be dodging around from one topic to another every two minutes' (Conservative peb)—but is made up of three question and answer sessions, one filmed report, Chataway talking to camera and a concluding message accompanied by music. While the obvious segmentation of pebs made them different from those in previous elections, old-style party election propaganda was still the order of the day and this made them increasingly stale when 'viewed against a background of informal, independent analysis and possibly commentary' (Even 64–65) that was now beginning to populate television broadcasting.

If the formats and contents of the 1959 pebs had an air of familiarity about them, it is still important to note that they were very different from what had appeared in the US in previous elections. As in previous elections, British pebs reflected party programmes and the multifaceted organisational nature of political parties (Wring 47; Butler and King 175) and they tended not to ignore the cast of senior politicians competing for political power. Though party leaders were generally dominant—for example, they would often carry the last peb before the day of the election—the presence of others minimised the level of personalisation and presidentialisation of politics. This was also true of the pebs in the 1964 election, just as it was true of pebs in earlier general elections. The fourth Labour peb in 1964, 'The New Britain', is introduced by Shirley Williams, MP, and is followed by four senior members of the party talking straight to camera (Labour).

Generally, the pebs continued to employ traditional techniques—the long (15 minutes) straight-to-camera talk, lots of different cabinet ministers also talking straight to camera, filmed reports about members of the public or political achievements, and so on—but without the critical and questioning edge that made politics on television challenging. Attempts to introduce a new dimension to election communication by, for example, setting up debates modelled on the 1960 Kennedy–Nixon encounter always faltered because they involved tactical electoral decisions. The wishes of the public were secondary considerations. More importantly, perhaps, was the realisation that for politicians their appearances on current affairs and news programmes such as *Panorama* offered greater exposure and credibility than being seen in a peb (Clive Bradley, Personal Interview, 2008).

Butler and King (179) suggest that in 1964 the parties 'attempted to do things for which they had lacked experience or technical resources' although one could also read this as the parties' reluctance to think about, and truly engage with, television in politics. Rather than move away from what had been done before, politicians in 1964 seemed to have decided to continue to pursue a propagandist and educational approach involving more talking at, rather than with, people. It was as if the political parties had agreed to work grudgingly within a format that they disliked but they could somehow not imagine new ways of using it, in spite of experiences with television in the previous 10 years in Britain and in the US.

Discussion and Conclusion

In their work on Americanisation, Blumler and Gurevitch drew attention to 'the role of *indigenous conditions* both in sustaining unique features of national systems and in precipitating changes in such systems' (400. Emphasis in original) and it is perhaps fitting to use this comment as a way of organising the concluding discussion.

As we have seen, although British politicians and broadcasters were aware of American experiences in all forms of political communication through their 'transatlantic interactions', there are few instances where those 'interactions' can be seen to lead directly to change in the British context. While the longer format of the peb meant that shorter political ads could not be introduced, the segmentation of pebs was certainly possible and was arguably used successfully by Labour in 1959. These instances aside, the educational, informational and propagandist approach seemed to dominate pebs.

Why British political parties persisted with this approach to political communication is difficult to explain. Throughout the period examined, they sought more rather than less time to communicate directly with the public. They also, as we have seen, drew back from the more imaginative use of television that was possible. If the 1959 pebs were considered the most successful of that decade—fresher, more challenging, more televisual—the ones for 1964 are a throwback to the 1955 formats with minor alterations. Despite the addition of filmed reports and the occasional tune, the parties bludgeoned viewers with information (speeches, talks, reports). In 1964, as in the 1955 pebs, neither Labour nor Conservative Party leaders saw anything wrong in talking to viewers at length: in 1955 Eden gave a 19-minute talk straight to camera, in 1964 Wilson gave a talk for over 12 minutes and Home for 14 minutes. Whilst American strategists played with shorter formats, British politicians seemed to believe that the art of persuasion lay in talking to people at length.

Leaving aside systemic constraints—of length, of party considerations, of political systems—there is one other factor that comes out in the above discussion and that is often understated elsewhere, namely, the view, as expressed by Goldie and Chataway, above, for example, that there was something fundamentally sound and worthwhile in the *British* approach to politics and communication. That everything else was about 'gimmicks'. Domestic political cultures and professional broadcasting considerations, in other words, may need to be factored into accounts of change, or the lack of, much more prominently than they have in the past. Developments on both sides of the Atlantic thus took place along separate tracks—sustained by 'indigenous conditions' and by 'interactions'—for a considerable time after the emergence of television.

In one sense, those separate tracks have not really converged. Although pebs are now much shorter, for example they can be under three minutes, they continue to emphasise policies and positions, as well as leadership. Admittedly, they are now professionally produced, slicker, and carefully hewn devices to solicit support but these are characteristics that one would expect from any television production from the late twentieth century onwards. Unless, that is, one seeks to argue that the American experience has become so universal that it is deeply embedded into all aspects of communication. The contrary position, as in the 1950s and 1960s, is that we continue to see strong elements of a British approach to political communication in spite of the centralisation and professionalisation of political parties and actors. It is that particular

British cultural and professional approach to communication practices that perhaps needs more research so that we can better understand how individuals negotiated American experiences when 'interacting' with others across the Atlantic.

Dedication

In memory of Professor Lynda Lee Kaid who died in April 2011.

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Notes

1. Files relating to such topics as election broadcasting, campaigning, American elections, public opinion, television, visits to the USA, at the archives of the Conservative Party (at the Bodleian Library, Oxford), of the Labour Party (in Manchester), and of the BBC (at the Written Archives Centre in Caversham, Reading) were examined. Personal interviews were conducted with David Butler (2010), John Grist (2008, 2010), Clive Bradley (2008, 2010) and Tony Benn (2007). Lastly, three unpublished doctoral theses and one unpublished book manuscript were also examined.
2. British pebs can be viewed at www.sheffield.ac.uk/journalism/pebs
3. Party election broadcasts (pebs) are shown during the period of the election campaign. Party *political* broadcasts (ppb) are transmitted between elections but are allocated on the same principle of proportionality. The first ppb was broadcast in 1953.
4. This may be the same film 'about Television in Politics' referred to in a different file called 'TV can tell it'. (CPA 'Note Chief'). Only four copies were made and these were intended to be shown at party association meetings.
5. John Reith founder of the BBC and by no means a member of 'the Left', spoke of the introduction of 'sponsored programming' as a betrayal of 'heritage and tradition'.

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