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RETHINKING ELECTION DEBATES: WHAT CITIZENS ARE ENTITLED TO EXPECT

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Introduction

This article explores the function of televised election debates and how their democratic role may be enhanced. Going beyond narrow accounts of the 'information needs' elections debates may serve, we identify five key democratic capabilities that we argue citizens are entitled to expect the political actors and media organisations involved in election debates to promote. These capabilities provide both a normative yardstick to evaluate election debates and a guide to thinking about how to reimagine and reconfigure them in future.

The research reported here constitutes the first stage of a larger project, which is developing an open-source, web-based platform that incorporates a suite of visualisation tools that will help citizens to make sense of televised political debates.[i] Establishing a cognitively efficient model for this heuristic strategy entailed the development of a theory of civic capabilities based upon debate-viewers own articulations of their needs as democratic citizens. We explicate this theoretical model in what follows.

1. The democratic functions of televised election debates

The role played by televised election debates in making political democracy more intelligible to citizens has been the subject of an extensive literature, much of which has focused upon the effectiveness of these 'media events' (Katz and Dayan 1992) as disseminators of political information to mass audiences. This emphasis upon information delivery has led researchers to evaluate debates in terms of their effects, two kinds of which have dominated research findings. The first relates to voter choice. Since the Kennedy-Nixon televised debates in 1960 a mainly US-centred body of research has attempted to evaluate the extent to which debate-watchers' voting preferences are affected by what they have witnessed live or heard about the debates through subsequent media reports. The evidence of such effects is mixed and complex. Like much else that people watch on television, what they see is more likely to tell them what to think *about* than what to *think*. Presented with rival viewpoints, viewers are more likely to pay attention to the perspective that is closest to their own and use the information derived from debate-watching to reinforce their original position. Jamieson and Birdsell's (1988: 161) claim that 'debates don't very often convert partisans from one side to the other' is supported by a convincing body of research literature (Holbrook 1996, Benoit et al. 2001, Holbert 2005, Holbert et al. 2009). Other survey-based research findings suggest that the picture is rather more complex and that televised debates do have independent effects upon politically undecided citizens; upon voters with a weak allegiance to one party or candidate; upon viewers' assessment of the character strengths and weaknesses of candidates, especially when the latter have had minimal media exposure before the debates; and upon close electoral races in which a relatively small number of votes might make a difference to the result (Katz and Feldman

1962, Becker and Kraus 1978, Chaffee and Choe 1980, Geer 1998, Blum-Kulka and Liebes 2000, Pfau, 2002, McKinney and Carlin 2004, McKinney et al. 2007). While it is difficult to think of more than one or two quite exceptional examples of a televised leaders' debate determining an election outcome, it would be unwise to conclude that debates merely reinforce pre-existing preferences.

A second type of effect has been rather easier to identify. This involves a general heightening of debate-viewers' interest in and engagement with the election campaign. What Wald and Lupfer (1978) refer to as 'the presidential debate as a civics lesson' points to a broader social effect that goes beyond individual voting behaviour. For example, debates have been said to stimulate citizens to seek out additional information, talk to others about problems, policies and ideas raised within them and experience an enhanced sense of confidence in their own political knowledge and capacity to engage in political action (McLeod et al. 1979, Lemert, 1993, Zhu et al. 1994, Benoit et al. 1998, Jamieson and Adasiewicz 2000, Weaver and Drew 2001, Patterson 2002, Benoit and Hansen 2004, McKinney and Chattopadhyay 2007, McKinney and Rill 2009, Cho and Choy 2011, McKinney et al. 2013, Pickering and Rill, 2013).

Both politicians and broadcasters argue that televised election debates fulfil a valuable democratic function by enabling voters to evaluate potential leaders and their policies. Whether as aids to simplifying voter choice or incentives to becoming more aware, confident and engaged citizens, debates are conceived in terms of the provision of information needs. In the case of both effects – voter choice and civic engagement — information needs are assumed to be clear-cut. But are they? Could it be that both of the widely-discussed effects of televised election debates are blurred by a persisting assumption that democratic information needs are normatively settled and unambiguous. In the context of both kinds of debate effects, such certainty is misplaced.

Firstly, from the perspectives of politicians and party strategists, televised debates are hardly regarded as an innocent process of information dissemination. For political actors, the debates offer a competitive opportunity to assert the validity of their own messages, while dismissing the information-value of opposing points of view. This often entails the public circulation of messages designed to misinform debate-watchers about policies and records, cast doubt upon the trustworthiness of rivals and evade complex reasoning for the sake of winning attention and gaining instant appeal. As persuasive strategies, of the sort usually associated with advertising and public relations, such approaches may well have instrumental value, but it would be difficult to reconcile such value with the cause of enhancing public political education. It is hardly surprising that media reporting of televised election debates is all too often framed in terms of tactical game-playing, with a focus upon 'winners', 'losers' and the potential for 'knock-out blows' (Norton and Goethals 2004, Coleman et al 2011). Such metaphors are consistent with the ethos of narrowly-conceived Machiavellian politics, but it would be difficult to make a case for these strategies as means of satisfying the information needs of people who are often confused, time-limited and weary of negative rhetoric.

Secondly, when it comes to determining the civic effects of televised election debates, this is not a simply empirical matter. Generally speaking, civic effects have been understood as referring to people's willingness to engage in the political process by voting, joining parties and interest groups and informing themselves by following the news rather than their partisan allegiances and actions. But this notion of 'civic effects' is open to theoretical contestation, for the norms of democratic citizenship are neither fixed nor uncontroversial. In its most parsimonious sense, engaged citizenship is manifested by adherence to the rules and roles of the political system. 'Good citizens' are informed to the point of being able to perform their systemic duties. But what if democratic politics requires citizens to do more than keep up with the news agenda, find their proper place within the dominant narrative and forever rehearse the role of an occasionally cheering and sometimes booing chorus (see Ranciere 2004)? While the orthodox model of civic information is based on the paternalistic assumption that the public cannot know what they need to know, but will benefit from the right information if it is placed before them, a radically different approach to democracy suggests that citizens, rather than being mere subjects, are knowledge-makers as well as knowledge-receivers; actors upon the dynamics of social power as well as victims of hegemonic structures, hierarchies and beliefs.

In short, the notion of information needs, upon which most debate effects studies are based, is theoretically limited. What might a different theoretical approach involve? One alternative way of thinking about people's needs in relation to media is offered by the 'uses and gratifications' approach (Katz et al. 1973a; Katz et al. 1973b). This approach begins by asking people what they want to gain from their media use and examines whether their preferences are met in practice. By emphasising the views of media users themselves, the uses and gratifications approach challenges top-down approaches to defining information needs as well as narrow accounts of media use and effects. However, as a theoretical account of people's needs, the uses and gratifications approach is limited for a different reason. The uses and gratifications approach tends to assume that people's stated preferences are a reliable indicator of their needs. This fails to take account of the way preferences are socially shaped and in particular of the problem of 'adaptive preferences', where the preferences of groups who are socially disadvantaged may be constrained by their social situation and the limited real possibilities available to them (Elster 1985, Nussbaum 2003).

Rather than focus on uses and gratifications, we advocate a different view of needs based on the idea of 'capabilities', as this has been developed in theoretical accounts of social justice (Sen 1973, 1992, 2009, Nussbaum and Glover 1995) and interpreted subsequently by media theorists (Garnham 1997, Mansell 2002, Couldry 2007). This approach asks what things people should be able to do or be — what capabilities they require — in order to function as a member of society and to lead a fulfilling life. Given the problem of 'adaptive preferences', these capabilities cannot be limited to the stated preferences of individuals. As Nussbaum (2003: 34) argues, we must be 'willing to make claims about fundamental entitlements that are to some

extent independent of the preferences that people happen to have, preferences shaped, often, by unjust background conditions'. In this view, some capabilities are so important that they should be made available to all citizens as 'entitlements'. How particular capabilities can be secured for different social groups in a meaningful way is a complex policy question. But, as is the case with rights, if a capability is understood as an entitlement, then obligations are placed on public authorities as well as other actors to recognise and help to promote that capability (Garnham 1997).

One way to assess televised debates, therefore, is to ask which democratic capabilities they enable and which capabilities citizens are entitled to expect them to help realise. But how then can we decide what these entitlements are? While we cannot rely on the subjective accounts of media users alone, it would be problematic to impose an objective list of entitlements from the top down that is uninformed by the perspective of citizens and may indeed be refractory to them. We take two responses to this problem. Firstly, following Sen (2004) in emphasizing the importance of public deliberation and reasoning in deciding upon and evaluating capabilities, we adopt an epistemological and methodological approach that is intersubjective, rather than either subjectivist or objectivist (Bernstein 1983). As we describe in the next section, we elicited the views of media users through focus groups, where we asked participants not only to reflect on their existing experiences but also to think beyond the constraints of the current realities of political communication and imagine what televised debates could and should be like. Through group deliberation, participants were encouraged to reflect on the views of others as well as their own and so develop and enlarge their original perspectives. Secondly, we used democratic theory to help us both to pose questions to our participants and to thematise the accounts they gave, such that theory and our data informed one another. As a result of this process, we arrived at a set of key democratic capabilities that we argue citizens are entitled to expect televised debates and the political and media actors involved in them to enhance.

2. Method

In order to explore the views of citizens, we conducted focus groups where we asked participants to reflect on their experience of watching or hearing about the British televised election debates that took place in 2010, involving Gordon Brown (Labour Party leader and then Prime Minister), David Cameron (Conservative Party leader), and Nick Clegg (Liberal Democratic Party leader). We then asked them to consider how future debates could and should be designed.[ii] Focus groups are useful for exploring people's views and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way. In our case, focus groups enabled us to approach the research in an open-ended manner, allowing citizens to express views in their own terms and not be constrained by fixed questions and responses. Also, as noted above, the deliberative aspect of focus groups was important to our research. Unlike a social survey, where participants are limited to individual responses to questions, focus groups encourage individuals to reflect upon, clarify and enlarge their perspectives through discussion with others and careful facilitation and probing by the moderator.

We conducted twelve focus groups in total, each comprising eight participants aged between 18 and 70 from the Leeds area and lasting between 60 and 90 minutes in length. Our aim was not to select a sample of people that is representative of voters in the UK in a statistical sense. However, we wanted to select a diverse enough set of groups to capture the *range* of views people have about televised debates, even if we cannot know how particular views are *distributed* within the broader population (Morrison et al. 2007: 10). The groups comprised the following main categories:

1. Disengaged Females - mainly non-voters and not interested in politics
2. Disengaged Males - mainly non-voters and not interested in politics
3. Committed Female Party Supporters
4. Committed Male Party Supporters
5. Undecided Female Voters
6. Undecided Male Voters
7. First-time Female Voters
8. First-time Male Voters
9. Male Advanced Digital Technology Users
10. Female Advanced Digital Technology Users
11. Female Performers
12. Male Performers

The final four groups warrant further comment. We selected groups of advanced digital technology users, defined as those who use at least two different software applications and devices (see Dutton and Blank 2013: 10), since we were interested in our broader project in exploring how digital media could be used to complement and enhance televised election debates. The final two groups consisted of people who are involved in some way in the performing arts (music, drama and dance). These groups were selected since, within the broader research project, we were also interested in their observations on the performative and rhetorical strategies adopted by political leaders in the debates. However, we will not isolate and discuss their specific perspectives here.

All the focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Data analysis was conducted through a close reading of the transcripts in which we explored responses to questions that referred to participants' frustrations at not being able to relate to, make sense of or meaningfully act upon the debates and to their expressed desires for debates to serve them better and for debaters to perform in different ways. Identifying key themes in the data and connecting these to relevant ideas in democratic theory, we then identified a number of democratic capabilities that participants sought to realise that seemed to be consistent with the most recurrent and intense patterns of participant expression. In the next section of this paper we set out our findings and in the final section we draw some conclusions about the relevance of our research for the organisation and mediation of future televised election debates.

3. Democratic entitlements

When we asked focus-group participants to recall the first ever British televised prime ministerial debates, their responses broadly confirmed the findings from the five audience surveys that were conducted immediately after polling day in 2010. Approximately two-thirds of survey respondents had said that they learnt something new from the debates; three-quarters felt that they knew more about 'the qualities of the party leaders' after seeing the debates; and as many as 70% felt that they knew more 'about the policies of each party'. 87% of survey respondents reported talking about the debates with others – and this increased to 92% amongst younger voters (Coleman et al. 2011:4). Focus-group participants explained that they liked seeing the party leaders on one platform, making their pitches to the electorate and exchanging views with one another:

> *It gave you an understanding of how they were able to react to questions in real time and … a measure of how down to earth and how relatable they are to the UK general public. (First-time male voter)*

Several participants recalled the debates as social occasions: not merely spectacles to be observed, but opportunities for sharing views with others:

> *I watched the whole thing, but then talking to like my partner and stuff about what we thought, rather than listen to every word. It was kind of like the general how they were coming across … (Undecided female voter)*

> *I watched the debates, yeah, and also was looking at Twitter at the same time … and I remember a lot of things about Cameron doing his anecdotes. So he'd sort of say, 'Oh I met a person the other day from…' and then would use these little personal anecdotes and there were quite a lot of jokes about that, about his style in those debates. (Female advanced user of digital communication technologies)*

A recurrent reference used by focus-group participants was to the debates as a 'job interview' in which politicians (as potential hired servants) had to prove their worth to their employers, the voters:

> *I see it's like a job interview. They want to run the country, so if you go for an interview you get asked questions and you have to answer them. (Disengaged male)*

> *Ultimately, it should be the hardest job interview that they've ever had to sit, and they should have to demonstrate their credentials to you. (Committed female party supporter)*

Each time that this image was conjured it was greeted with much vocal support. Some participants suggested that the debates should be modelled on the gruelling final-show interviews in which candidates on the BBC TV show, *The Apprentice,* are put through their paces by Sir Alan Sugar's advisers. That, of course, would be a

quite different media event, and one in which few political leaders would agree to participate, but that is not the point. Desire is often first articulated in terms that seem fantastic. The idea that the debates should be moments of public accountability to a critical and demanding electorate, rather than performances that are both designed and managed by the debaters and their advisers, serves to reframe the contest towards a more explicitly democratic orientation. With this in mind, we saw the focus groups as opportunities to probe further what viewers wanted the debates to offer them in order that they might realise the kind of confidence, autonomy and discrimination that they associated with the metaphorical role of 'electoral job interviewer'. By sensitively unpacking the capabilities that focus-group participants sought to realise, we began to distinguish between what viewers and voters are told they need to know in order to be 'good citizens' and what they think they are entitled to be able to do in order to exercise democratic agency. Our analysis led us to identify five key entitlements that were articulated by participants in our focus groups (subsequently referred to as 'participants').

i) I am entitled to be respected as a rational and independent decision-maker

Participants were well aware that political leaders took part in televised debates with the aim of persuading a mass audience to support them. But they drew a line in their minds between persuasion and manipulation. The former entails being urged to support a particular outcome; the latter involves the use of language that is less than transparent to promote outcomes that are not clearly identified. In their evaluation of the debates, participants returned repeatedly to their concerns about being addressed by political leaders in ways that appeared designed to manipulate and confuse them. They felt that political leaders used language strategically, to secure electoral success, rather than communicatively, to promote reasoned discussion and shared understanding (Habermas 1987, Klemp 2012). In strategic communication, as Chambers (1996: 100) argues, listeners are treated as means to an end rather than ends in themselves: 'Strategic actors view their dialogue partners as means — as either limiting or facilitating their pursuit of their ends. Communicative actors view their dialogue partners as ends — as autonomous agents whose capacity for rational judgment must be respected'. Participants were not naïve: they acknowledged that the language of persuasion should always be regarded critically. But they felt entitled, as democratic citizens, to be addressed by would-be leaders in ways that are not dominated by manipulative communication.

While some participants hoped that witnessing exchanges between the leaders in a live context might cut through manipulative political talk, most felt that the debates failed to achieve this. Debate talk sounded 'rehearsed', 'scripted' and 'staged'. The language used by the political leaders seemed not to be their own, but something carefully selected and constructed for effect by teams of professional advisers. Distaste for over-rehearsed presentation was prevalent:

> *It felt like they knew exactly what was going to be asked before they were asked that question. So it felt a bit rehearsed for me, which is possibly why I didn't continue to watch it. (Committed female party supporter)*

A desire to 'catch them out' led participants to look for ways of creating trip-wire moments: ways of forcing the debaters into more authentic performances. Several participants wanted more direct answers to questions and were frustrated by what they referred to as 'politicians' answers':

> *I got frustrated by the end with some of it, because there was a lot of going round in circles and there were a lot of classic politicians refusing to answer the question, which always drives everybody nuts. (Committed female party supporter)*

Several participants suggested that the debate moderators should play a more active role in challenging the leaders when they engage in manipulative strategies and fail to answer questions. Others suggested that viewers themselves, via the 'red buttons' on their television sets or some other forms of interactive technology, should be able to vote on whether questions had been answered adequately by the political leaders.

For many of the participants, however, countering manipulative speech seemed to be too difficult to do in real time and the work of deconstructing the political rhetoric should be left to more elaborate post-debate analyses (see the next section). In general, participants saw manipulation as much more than distorted speech. They were concerned about the strategic ways in which the debaters presented themselves beyond the words they uttered. Several participants talked about their need to make sense of the performative styles of the debaters, including non-verbal communication:

> *I don't like them stood behind things, I thought that was…gives them a bit of a shield, I feel they'd be more exposed and you see more body language if they were not stuck behind something. (Undecided male voter)*

> *It's that real monotone thing when they're talking […] They just need to sort of draw the audience in somehow. I don't know how, but they definitely need to sort of be more expressive or something in the way they speak. (Female advanced user of digital communication technologies)*

It was quite clear from these repeated allusions to performance and the self-presentation of political leaders as 'real people' that a key function of the televised debates is to provide 'look into their eyes' moments. Participants wanted the debates to be occasions in which it is difficult for leaders to manufacture images. As one disengaged female non-voter put it,

> *It seems that everything they say and the way that they say everything is behind some kind of plastic sheet. Everything they say is really well vetted and written by people. Just let's see who you are a little bit.*

Another participant in the same focus group (disengaged females) urged the debaters to '*Just be human instead of this little machine that's been programmed*'. A

commonly-expressed wish to be addressed by speakers who are not programmed to manipulate ran through all of the focus groups. In addition, for some participants it was important that political leaders should not only talk straight, but reveal something of themselves as motivated human beings. A key entitlement articulated by debate viewers, then, is that they are enabled to see beyond the plastic sheet; that instead of being addressed by the disembodied voices of calculating performers, they are addressed in ways that respect them as rational and independent decision-makers.

ii) I am entitled to be able to evaluate political claims and make informed decisions

Knowing what or who to believe is a formidable challenge for citizens. Beyond the debate performances, how are potential voters to decide which claims are credible and which are not? While the arguments between leaders helped some viewers to make up their minds about who or what was right, many participants felt that they lacked sufficient information with which to understand and evaluate competing claims. Participants were therefore eager to have opportunities to assess claims with reference to relevant background information and ways of challenging or correcting claims that they considered false or unproven.

One proposed way to encourage such critical evaluation would be to allow the moderator to intervene with a view to pushing the debaters to justify unsubstantiated claims. Participants referred to the weekly BBC *Question Time* programme in which the moderator frequently performs this role. Others wanted the same real-time probing to be conducted by the studio audience or the viewers, using interactive technologies. But it was generally accepted that real-time evaluation of debate claims would be hard to make happen and difficult to trust. Most participants acknowledged the need to distinguish between the immediacy of real-time debate performance and the longer-term, reflective process of post-debate evaluation. They were optimistic that, having watched the debates, tools could be made available to them that would simplify the process of making sense of debaters' often complex claims and counter-claims.

Participants asked for help with three key questions:

- What did claims made in the debates mean?
- How factually valid were claims made in the debates and consistent with the leaders' political records when in office?
- To what extent do arguments made in the debates (both by and between individual speakers) add up to a coherent plan for governing the country?

On the first question, participants wanted *technologies of translation* that would take the often convoluted verbal constructions of rhetorical speech and make them accessible as meaningful policy proposals. They wanted to be able to make informed voting decisions based upon a clear sense of what the political leaders intend to do if elected:

I think sometimes they could explain things in less political jargon and more sort of everyday speak so that people understand them. I've watched some of these programmes when they've been on Question Time and things like that, and you just sit there and you think, 'I have not got a clue what you've just said' because they've spoke how they may be speaking in Parliament or something like that, but it doesn't mean anything to the normal person and if they explained things more clearly I think we might have a better understanding and we might engage a bit more with them. (Female advanced user of digital communication technologies)

On the second question, participants wanted *evaluative tools* to help them to assess the claims of political leaders. Participants wanted a way to assess the accuracy of the figures and statistics politicians cite:

So, if they're talking about certain numbers or picking out certain figures that there's nothing there to say, "You're wrong" or "why have you picked that statistic when there's another one that says the opposite?" You find it a lot when you read the news a couple of days later. The one that they've picked is like not a true reflection. (Male advanced user of digital communications technologies)

So, it would say 'Is this particular claim true?' and then they'll give you a set of statistics and explain a bit … about where that information comes from. So you never kind of get a definitive answer. They'll say these are the different statistics that they're using in the programme … and this is where it comes from. So, I like it because it gives you a bit more of a background about the figures and things. (Female advanced user of digital communications technologies)

Participants were also clearly frustrated by what they perceived as a conflict between what politicians say they will do and what they did in the past. They also wanted evaluative tools, therefore, that would answer critical questions about the relationship between current claims and past action:

If there was an app and they could bullet-point what they have said they're going to do. When they previously went into power, what they said they were going to do and where they are at with that now. That would be quite interesting to see. (Disengaged female)

Several participants pointed to Nick Clegg's failure to honour his debate pledge regarding student tuition fees.

Participants were aware that televised debates are just one part of an election campaign, which in turn is just one part of an ongoing political process. They wanted to know how the barrage of information (and sometimes misinformation) received as they watched the debate cohered into a meaningful and convincing programme of action. Seeing the debates as a key moment for weighing up claims and

arguments, they wanted the clarity of these statements to be made more vivid to them. They wanted to know how voting for one party rather than another would make an overall difference. Participants were looking for what we might call *sense-making technologies* that could help them to track, clarify and visualise the key arguments. They were not expecting that their democratic responsibilities could somehow be rendered simple, but that the complex challenge of deriving meaning from technically complex and rhetorically-charged speech-making, often only witnessed fleetingly in real time, could be diminished.

We shall return in the final section to the challenge of designing technologies that might support this democratic entitlement. But we should note that, while several participants were enthusiastic about the creation of such tools, most recognised that the task of supporting citizen evaluation would inevitably be sensitive, calling for a considerable degree of public trust in whoever was providing such support. Given the ways in which background information can itself be manipulated, few participants believed that the debate broadcasters were sufficiently independent to provide such a service – although several tended to have more confidence in the BBC than other broadcasters. But most were in favour of having access to a much wider array of background material than is available to them at present.

iii) I am entitled to be part of the debate as a democratic cultural event

Consider the following exchange between three women in one of the advanced internet users' focus groups:

> *F8: All I can remember is it seemed like a very bare studio, not much colour and quite spaced out.*
> *F5: Like statues.*
> *F8: Yeah, dead boring, yeah. Even if they had some kind of pictures behind of streets or British life or something in relation to what they were talking about.*
> *F7: Yeah, I think they need to modernise it more, make it more modern. It's probably been like that for years and years and years.*
> *Moderator: So what would it mean to make it more modern and interesting?*
> *F8: Better visually.*
> *F7: Yeah. To make it look more like a debate rather than looking so professional…*

What did participant F7 mean by making it 'look more like a debate'? What was it about this televised event that appeared to be so professionally-managed, visually dull and uninviting to people wanting to participate? What should a real democratic debate look like?

As 'media events' (Katz and Dayan 1994), election debates provide a space outside everyday routines for citizens to engage with and discuss politics. While some viewers felt a connection and sense of involvement with the debates, others found them to be more remote and inaccessible. Instead of feeling involved in what was billed as a democratic event, they felt like onlookers upon an elite spectacle.

We noted earlier that the 2010 debates resulted in a general heightening of viewers' interest in and engagement with the election campaign. Several participants (but by no means all) recalled the debates as social occasions: not merely spectacles to be observed, but opportunities for sharing views with others. But there was a sense of separation between the two discussions: the formal one taking place behind podiums and the casual ones taking place in countless living rooms and workplaces. Because those involved in the latter had no way of directly connecting with the former, their responses to the debates ran along a spectrum ranging from political engagement to detached spectacle.[iii] This exchange between male committed party supporters illustrates the diverse ways in which viewers felt themselves to be involved in the event:

> *M1: It was more of a spectacle in terms of the way I discussed it with most of the people that I did talk about it with. If the thing you're driving at is did it actually stir debate amongst people? No, it didn't, not the people I spoke to.*
>
> *M6 The three ladies I work with, they have no interest in politics whatsoever. They were more interested in the spectacle and it was kind of, 'This is something new,' so they, like me, watched the first one and it was more around the visual element rather than listening to the content that was more of a discussion. And in the end, they just thought, like me, that it just became almost laughable.*
>
> *M4 I think it was a talking point that made it easier to talk about politics. There was something to reference and it made it more accessible in that form …*
>
> *M5 It was humorous with my father, to be honest with you. He rang me up, 'Have you seen that?' and expletives, basically, and that was it!*
>
> *M2 All my colleagues at work – we're an educational charity – said the whole thing about tuition fees was really important for us at the time.*

Others felt like outside onlookers who had stumbled into someone else's conversation:

> *Someone coming in not really knowing a lot about it, it felt like I couldn't get into what they were talking about because it did feel like they were having personal conversations between each other rather than explaining to the audience what they were talking about and what they meant and what they were trying to do. They just didn't explain it very well, it were like almost a personal joke, if you can use that term, like between themselves and you couldn't really get into it. That's what I felt like anyway. (Female advanced user of digital communication technologies)*

Participants proposed various ways of involving the public. One suggestion, repeated across focus groups, was that members of the public should pose questions for the

political leaders to answer. Another suggestion what that the public could vote before the debates for the questions they were most eager to have answered. A suggestion, considered in more detail in the next section, was for different social groups to be able to communicate with the political leaders in order to tell them about their lives, values and preferences. All of these suggestions are perhaps more important in terms of what they tell us about people's sense of what a genuine democratic debate involves than as a practical proposals for format change. In the era of digital interactivity, a significant section of society – perhaps a majority – expect there to be opportunities to engage with public events, both while they happen and afterwards. The terms of such involvement need to be thought through, but to dismiss this entitlement as a mere add-on to the one-way transmission of a broadcast debate may well be a recipe for alienating significant sections of the electorate.

iv) I am entitled to communicate with and be recognised by the leaders who want to represent me

Elections are moments in which the public decide how they want to characterise themselves; how they want to be seen and represented and what sort of people they consider to be most appropriate to speak for, with and to them (Coleman 2013). As one female party supporter put it,

> *I need to know from the things that they say, the way that they say it and the way that they present themselves, that they do have a clue about the average people living in an average house in an average street in the middle of England and that they're not up there. (Committed female party supporter)*

Participants were broadly skeptical about the extent to which political leaders were able to relate to the lives, values, and preferences of 'ordinary' people. Given the glaring gap between the backgrounds and experiences of the leaders and themselves, several participants wanted opportunities to communicate with the debaters with a view to fostering a more direct form of representation (Coleman 2005).

Participants wanted to see leaders who were in some ways more like themselves. They suspected the leaders of being similar to one another, but different from the people they hope to represent:

> *They're all white men of a certain age and from a certain background so I found that quite striking when you saw them all lined up together on podiums, that they all are very similar. (Female advanced user of digital communication technologies)*

> *They've got similar family lives; they've been to similar schools whatever party they're from. They've had similar education, similar backgrounds. (First-time female voter)*

In the light of this, the televised debates are an opportunity for the party leaders to show how they differ from one another, not only in terms of backgrounds, but also values. But political communication is not simply about politicians making themselves understood. It was clear from the focus groups that representation and recognition is understood as a two-way relationship. Participants wanted demonstrable ways of enabling the party leaders to listen to the people they wish to represent. One way of relating the debates to the experiences of viewers and voters that was suggested by several participants would be to link the central event to a number of venues around the country where ideas discussed by the debaters could be related to local conditions. An intriguing suggestion along these lines was to take the public to the debate by inviting a diverse range of individuals to produce short videos about their lives and challenges. After seeing these films, the political leaders would be asked to say how a government led by them could make a difference to people in the situations depicted:

> *So you make short films, about 20 different people that you know have all got different stories - and make them completely different. So don't just focus on the single mum, and that's great; do one about her, but don't just do single mums. Do an elderly couple who have been married for 50 years – like my grandma and granddad – now my grandma has Alzheimer's and they can't pay for her treatment; they can't do it and they're getting no help. (Female performer)*

While it is doubtful whether the parties or broadcasters would accept these format interruptions to the real-time debates, there is a strong case for adding them as post-debate features that could help viewers make sense of the differences between the policies and values of the competing parties and leaders. The recorded debate could be reshown, but this time as seen and discussed in various venues across the country. Short video life-stories could be inserted into the debate recording and debaters (or party representatives) invited to respond to them. The debates could be re-run on social media sites, inviting people to comment on specific claims and policies and encouraging the party leaders to join in the discussion. A man in one of the performers' focus groups put into words this prevalent aspiration to change the dynamics of debate communication:

> *I would want those people who sit at home, who are disillusioned by politics because they either don't think that they're eloquent enough to be allowed to speak … I want those types of people standing up and asking the questions in their way, not dressing it up, not being eloquent, not being nice, totally, totally saying what they want to say with no fear of political correctness and no fear of anything like that, and really putting them on the spot.*

v) I am entitled to be able to make a difference to what happens in the political world

The fifth entitlement, which was widely articulated by participants in the focus groups, relates to what political scientists refer to as political efficacy: people's belief in their ability to make a difference to what happens in the political world in which they live. The capabilities we have discussed above can all contribute to political efficacy, but there was another significant way the debates may affect political efficacy that we have not yet discussed. In the context of the televised debates, a sense of inefficacy, which seemed to be at a low level across the board, from the most disengaged to the most politically committed and from first-time voters to long-time voters, was related to the limited options that seemed to be on offer. Participants' perceptions were that all of the debaters were remarkably similar politically:

> *[…] they are all, as everybody's said, very similar these days. There's very little distinction between the three points of view. (First-time female voter)*

> *[They need to be…] clear about the differences in their policies because there's a lot of fighting over the middle ground over very narrow sort of area. (Female advanced user of digital communication technologies)*

When choices at the ballot box seem insignificant voters understandably switch off. Are there ways of making the choices clearer? One participant suggested that each of the debaters should be required to

> *… name one positive thing you're going to bring to this government. Who is that going to involve? What are you going to do? How are you going to do it and why? And I'd want them to also answer: tell us one negative thing that you're going to change? Who is going to be involved in that? Why are you going to be doing that? Which is a key question. And how that's going to work? (Disengaged female)*

There is much to be said for this idea – and when we put it to subsequent focus groups, most participants agreed with it. In short, there seemed to be an appetite for bringing real political trade-offs into the debates, rather than perpetuating the strategy of median appeal based on the illusion that one policy fits all. Critically important here, particularly as televised debates come to be institutionalized, is a desire to see a clear relationship between claims and promises made before the election and tangible differences brought about after the election.

4. Conclusion

How might the findings we have presented here contribute to productive ways of rethinking televised election debates? We approach this question from four angles.

Firstly, without being naïve about the strategic considerations that preoccupy both broadcasters and politicians when planning debates, we would hope that our findings might be taken seriously by some actors within both of these groups insofar as they not only indicate the features of current debates that frustrate many

viewers, but point towards communicative principles that could make future debates more appealing.

Televised election debates, as we have known them for half a century, have been products of negotiation between political parties and broadcasters. They are justified as events that will serve members of the public by providing them with the information they need to become well-informed voting citizens. But, as we have pointed out, these needs are largely determined by political elites and skewed by strategic interests. Let us imagine what televised election debates would be like if they were designed from the perspective of citizens rather than political elites. For this to happen, they would need to be designed in ways likely to enhance agreed principles of public or civic value. The five entitlements that we have outlined could provide a strong foundation for the elaboration of such principles.

Secondly, even if we were to resign ourselves to more pessimistic expectations regarding the willingness of political elites to democratise televised election debates as bilateral events, designed in accordance with an architecture of reciprocity, the findings presented in this article could still contribute to public understanding of debates in the crucial days or weeks between the live media event and polling day. This is a period in which potential voters need to make sense of the claims and counter-claims, as well as cognitive, affective and semiotic appeals that pervade their experiences of the debates. For many citizens, the post-debate period of spin and counter-spin is irritating and confusing. It is here that they might benefit most from what we have referred to as technologies of translation, evaluation and sense making. As we noted in our introduction, the research reported in this article is part of a larger multidisciplinary research project in which we are producing an accessible digital platform that will make such technologies freely available. The outcome of this research is the *Democratic Replay* platform which offers citizens a range of resources whereby they can monitor debaters' performances in relation to the five capabilities. In this sense, we are seeking to 'slow down' democratic discourse and enable people to scrutinise it at their own pace.[iv]

Thirdly, we hope that our analysis will help to problematize traditionally essentialist studies of information needs by providing a new normative vocabulary for the examination of media-politician-citizen relations. Rather than thinking of 'informing the public' as a linear, top-down process of benign – and sometimes manipulative – edification in which needs are defined and evaluated for people by an external body, we favour moving the focus of 'information needs' to people's own sense of their capabilities as morally-autonomous social actors who are capable of making a difference. Building upon theoretical work on social justice (Sen 1973, 1992, Nussbaum and Glover 1995) that has been highly influential in recent studies of education (Walker 2005, Biesta and Priestley 2013), well-being (Sen 1993, Kingdon and Knight 2006), global inequality (Crocker 2008) and the media (Garnham 1997, Mansell 2002, Couldry 2007, Oosterlaken and van den Hoven, 2011), the capabilities' perspective insists that the utility of information must be defined from the actor's point of view, in terms of the extent to which such information enables her to realise her full potential within a particular social context. Whereas earlier scholars pointed

to the injustice – or inefficiency - of individuals and social groups having unequal access to useful information resources, the capabilities' approach goes further, suggesting that the determination of what constitutes necessary and valuable information should be just as much a matter of social equity as opportunities to access information that others deem to be necessary and valuable.

In the context of televised election debates, the capabilities' approach compels us to turn the usual effects questions on their head. Traditionally, researchers have asked whether debate-watching leads to outcomes that we (scholars and policy elites) have defined as being politically important. This approach is unsuitable from a perspective of democratic justice because people often adjust their reactions to expectations that are limited by their social position, i.e., by the range of capabilities they already have. Instead, we are bound to ask what viewers feel entitled to gain from the debates and the extent to which these capabilities are enhanced, diminished or unaffected by debate-watching. In taking this approach, it is to be hoped that we shall not only acquire a richer sense of how citizens relate to televised election debates in various ways, but a deeper understanding of how people imagine themselves as democratic citizens and how the development of self-determined civic capabilities might impact upon broader patterns of civic engagement and disengagement.

Fourthly, our findings are intended to contribute to a growing critique of the 'methodological consensus' within political communication studies, which has not only over-focused upon quantitative methods of investigation, but has limited the range of questions asked (Karpf et al, 2015:1889). Critics of this consensus have been attempting to make 'a case for a new era of qualitative research, especially firsthand field research in the contexts where political communication occurs through methods such as observation, participant observation, and in-field interviews, as well as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and process tracing' (ibid: 1890). Our concern in this article has been to explore how voters feel (Author, 2013) and how their sense of what they are capable of doing in the political world comes to bear upon their behaviour. Acknowledging that performances of citizenship entail a relationship between what people think is expected of them and how far they perceive themselves to be potent democratic agents leads us to abandon functionalist accounts of political subjectivity and, along with others (Eliasoph 1998, Coole 2005, Perrin 2009), point towards a more nuanced account of the dynamics of political engagement.

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[ii] We acknowledge the limitation of our qualitative research, insofar as it is confined to experiences of debate-viewing in only one country, the United Kingdom. We accept that similar research in other countries may well produce different data, generating other conceptions and formulations of civic capabilities. At the time of writing, there are plans for conducting similar focus groups in the United States and Argentina.

[iii] Work by discourse theorists on interpretive repertoires and narrative positioning cast valuable light upon the ways in which citizens experience and articulate experiences of agency. See Bamberg, 1997; Wetherell, 1998; Golden and Pomeranz, 2015.

[iv] In this respect, we are interested in helping citizens to move between what Kahneman (2011) refers to as system 1 (intuitive) and system 2 (reflective) modes of thinking in their encounters with political claims and information. See http://edv-project.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/EDV-briefing-2014.02.pdf for more details about the technological process.