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## Ripples of mediatization: Social media and the exposure of the pool interview

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## ABSTRACT

During the 2011 UK public sector protests, controversy ignited over the “Miliband Loop”, an unedited video from a pool interview showing Labour leader Ed Miliband to have provided largely the same answer in response to six questions. The interviewer subsequently complained in a *Twitter* post that the incident epitomized the clash of public relations and journalism. In this paper we unpack the practical production of the pool interview as a delamination of the interview-as-lived from the interview-as-media-production-mechanism. We then explore professional and public understanding (or lack thereof) of exposure of this delamination issue and its relation to politics. While the controversy did not directly affect Miliband’s position as leader, it is clear that the Internet is a dangerous place for the old rules of mediatization.

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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between politics and media has increasingly become seen as one of symbiosis, where journalists need content and politicians need the oxygen of publicity. This mutual dependency has been described by Strömbäck (2008) as the mediatization of politics. The struggle for control of the message within an inescapable frame of co-production is all-consuming but operates through publically asserted rhetorical positions of mutual mistrust and independence. Journalists thus represent their work as being motivated by notions of accountability and objectivity on behalf of the audience, filtering the political messages which are tainted through manipulative spin doctoring. Politicians characterize their relationship with the media in terms of the difficulty of getting a clear unfiltered message through to the voters while being hampered by selective and skewed reporting for the sake of news values. Until recently research on this symbiotic relationship has been largely confined to examining media output or interviewing journalists and politicians (Strömbäck and Esser, 2014a, 2014b). However social media platforms now provide an outlet for those interested in posting actual examples of mediatization.

The behind-the-scenes clips of fluffed lines, gaffes, and slips posted on social media now mirror those previously filling

television out-take programs. Examples include extended footage of a politician swearing while trying to get a recorded speech down<sup>1</sup>, or of a doorstep interview where the politician responds aggressively to the reporter<sup>2</sup>. And, of course, social media also provide for commenting on such clips, either sent along with a link in platforms such as *Twitter* or *Facebook* or within video viewing platform such as *YouTube*. While the reasons for posting clips may range from serious to humorous, they also provide a new way for researchers to explore the practical production of mediatization and the reactions of various audiences to its exposure. This paper seeks to understand these issues through an exploration of the “Miliband Loop” during the 2011 public service *J30* strikes.

## 2. The Miliband Loop

On June 30th 2011 public sector workers in the UK held all-day national strikes and protests directed at government spending

<sup>1</sup> Leaked video of Australian Prime Minister swearing. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-a3jxa5Dbhs>)

<sup>2</sup> The then Australian Opposition Leader Tony Abbott’s extended silence when asked questions (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJ9y1c73-IM>), and an example where a politician dances silently when asked a question by a journalist in Queensland Australia, perhaps not aware that his voice recorded interview was also being video recorded. (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/22/queensland-mp-dances-bizarre-response-questions-conflict-of-interest>)

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cuts. As is the case with news coverage of such unfolding events, that day's news cycle involved seeking comments from various interested parties, one of whom was Labour opposition party leader Ed Miliband. A sound-bite clip of Miliband was aired on all the major networks' lunchtime bulletins.

However, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) website report Miliband's response went two steps further than just providing the sound-bite. The page provided a brief summary of Miliband's position but also editorialized that Miliband "refused to elaborate when asked further questions." The page did not explain the context or content of these "further questions" or the manner of Miliband's refusal, but did provide a 2 min and 29 s video of the pool interview – much more than the lunchtime bulletin sound-bite clips. We present the 2:29 min version of the video below, as it appeared on the BBC website (Fig. 1; See also Appendix A1 for a contextual screenshot of video as it appeared on the BBC website).

The video shows Miliband providing largely the same answer in response to six questions. An unknown time later that evening the video began to be shared directly through social media along with at least one copy uploaded to YouTube, the first copy most likely being that on Max Farquar's channel (Farquar, 2011). By midnight that evening, the pool reporter, Green (2011), had been alerted to the sharing of the video and decided to expose the interview further through TwitLonger. TwitLonger is a service that allows an author to write a post that begins by using the 140-character limit of Twitter and then provides a URL to a longer blog post. In the TwitLonger post, Green reveals that Miliband's PR team worked to control the interview setup and that Miliband's overt message discipline subverted Green's expectations about the interview as "a conversation", filling him with a sense of "existential doubt" and "shame" (See Appendix A2 for Damon Green's full TwitLonger Post).

Green lauded the sharing of the video and complained about the clash of the goals and practices of Public Relations (PR) with those of professional journalism. He ultimately claimed that Miliband's agenda to provide a sound-bite was potentially destructive of the accountability of politicians to the Fourth Estate and, ultimately, democratic society:

"If news reporters and cameras are only there to be used by politicians as recording devices for their scripted sound-bites, at best that is a professional discourtesy. At worst, if we are not allowed to explore and examine a politician's views, then politicians cease to be accountable in the most obvious way."

Green's complaint was reported the next day by *The Guardian* (Sweeney, 2011) as a damning behind-the-scenes revelation. The YouTube video went viral as Green's TwitLonger complaint and



Fig. 1. The BBC video showing an extended version of Ed Miliband's June 30 pool interview. Click on the image to view the video on the BBC website." (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-13971770>).

*The Guardian's* report were subsequently re-reported by other news organizations such as the *Huffington Post* (Linkins, 2011). The issue then became the subject of comedy articles about "Ed Milibot" (News Thump, 2011) and the subject of professional PR blog posts about the shortcomings of media training and message focus (Singleton, 2011; Corporate Media Services, 2011; PRmoment.tv, 2011).

Contemporaneously, Twitter users tweeted links to Green's complaint, the BBC and YouTube videos, and many of the newspaper articles above. They also commented on the YouTube version of the video. These tweets and comments sometimes just retweeted the video links or one another's comments, and sometimes offered commentary on the situation. As such, while the interview and Green's TwitLonger complaint provided the initial exposure of the mediatized event, the ripples extended well beyond.

### 3. The Pool Interview: mediatization as a practical accomplishment

The Miliband Loop ultimately turns on a perceived problem of sound-bite politics. While early forms of mediatization were dominated by politicians rather than media demands, this power is seen to be shifting as politicians become increasingly reliant on the media's self-referential, internal, and professional ontologies to tailor and enhance the communication of their messages (Strömbäck, 2008). Indeed, immediately after the events discussed in this paper, the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal and subsequent Leveson Inquiry forensically exposed the extent to which the government of the day courted positive media coverage, provoking much public outcry. However, despite such extreme examples of co-dependency, the routine working relationship between politicians and journalists continues because there is, for many reasons, no viable alternative. Moreover, these everyday professional accommodations have developed routine practices organized where efficiency, short cuts, and "taken for granted" knowledge are embedded in professional practice. That is to say, while the public reeled at the revelations of the mutual entanglement emerging from the phone hacking scandal, mediatization is to be found in the routine mundane practices of background briefings, doorstops, press conferences, studio interviews, and, in our example, pool interviews.

The pool interview is one of the purest forms of deliberate collaborative mediatization (Strömbäck, 2008 p237–239). In a pool interview a single reporter is tasked with gathering material on behalf of a collective of news organizations (the "pool"). The reporter is expected to remain off-camera, gather the response/s, and provide the material to the pool as rapidly as possible. That material will then be edited and disseminated by each individual organization as its own and as it sees fit. Given this context, the pool interview's expectations of efficiency extend to the nature of the questions and responses. Since a number of organizations will be using the material, questions are expected to be obvious and given that the response by the interviewee is likely to be the same for all interviewers, conducting just one interview is the most efficient way for politicians to get out the "message of the day". In this way responses tend towards the construction and deployment of sound-bites.

As Russomanno and Everett (1995) point out, the sound-bite is a particular point of professional struggle, especially within a frame of mediatization. Journalistic editorial practice assumes the right to reduce political appearances to the shortest possible responses. Professional communication fields, most notably Public Relations (PR), have developed strategies and tactics in an attempt to wrest back control of the information agenda. The well-crafted

sound-bite must provide as full a statement of the political position as possible while resisting editorial cutting for length or news values. However, even a well-crafted sound-bite must be accomplished through co-present talk. This brings us to a central practical distinction in the production of mediatization: the link between talk as a lived experience versus talk as a media production mechanism.

### 3.1. *Lamination of the interview-as-lived and the interview-as-media-production-mechanism*

The use of the term “interview” in “pool interview” is somewhat misleading if it is taken as equivalent to a live or recorded interview. The difference lies in an unspoken distinction between the “interview-as-lived” and “the interview-as-media-production-mechanism”, and how the two may be laminated or delaminated. An interview-as-lived is conversational in the sense that it is a serial set of turns-at-talk instantiated with sequential progressivity. Clearly, though, an interview is not merely a conversation. An interview is produced in the context of broadcast to an audience, so an interview is a media production mechanism.

Studio interviews, press conferences, and “doorstop” interviews involve the lived experience of the conversation occurring in parallel with the mechanism of media production (with differing levels of liveness). We describe this parallelism as a “lamination”. Lamination in this context refers to the joint awareness held by all parties the production of turns-at-talk is going to be treated as an observable-reportable part of the media experience, such that all that is said is heard (and possibly seen) by an audience as manifesting the aggregated sequential collection of the interviewee’s views on the topic at hand. Thus we describe this as the “interview-as-lived” being laminated onto “the interview-as-media-production-mechanism”.

However, as interviews become less live and more edited, the interactional experience is separated, “delaminated”, from the mechanisms of media production and broadcast. Delamination in this context refers to the joint awareness held by all parties that the production of turns-at-talk is *not* going to be treated as an observable-reportable part of the experience, such that an audience will see only the interviewee’s proposed representative summary view of the topic at hand. Pool interviews are media production situations in which the known goal of all involved is the recording of variations of responses to a single concept from which each individual news organization will decide to show the single answer (or single question and response pair) that best fit its commercial/ideological agenda and audience demographic. Answers are given in the context of being succinct, safe, and robust enough objects to withstand the editorial process of multiple media organizations. This means that the interviewer does not “own” the question or the answer, or the pair for that matter. Questions are “on behalf of the news organizations” while answers are “for all news organizations”. Thus we describe pool interviews as situations in which the “interview-as-lived” is delaminated from “the interview-as-media-production-mechanism”.

The crucial distinction between laminated and delaminated interview situations, then, is that collaboration is of a different order. For laminated interview situations, collaboration assumes both parties attend to the retrospective–prospective nature of all turns and a sense of multi-turn temporality in which all prior turns are relevant and retrievable. For delaminated interview situations, temporality can be ignored and collaboration assumes both parties attend instead to well-fitted self-contained pairs. Assumed and un-remarked-upon delamination, then, is perhaps the purest enactment of the collaborative, co-dependent, mediatization.

Of course, as collaborative as the pool interview may be in general, there is still a struggle for control of the information agenda at the production level. In our terms of mediatization, this struggle is about the exposure of assumptions about lamination and delamination. What makes the “Miliband Loop” an interesting case is not just that researchers can see the practice of delamination in action and a journalist’s after-the-fact reaction, but that this exposure rippled out across the Internet.

### 3.2. *The Internet and mediatization*

The relationship between governance and the Internet has been an enduring sociological research theme since the speculation of *The Network Nation* (Hiltz and Turoff, 1978) and more recently with *The Information Age* trilogy (Castells 1996). Internet technologies such as the Web, YouTube, and Twitter are changing political campaigning (Stromer-Galley, 2014) and governance issues more generally (Weller et al., 2014). Within this milieu the day to day relationship between politics and the media is also transforming, as the Internet’s heterogeneous amplification mechanisms challenge politicians’ and traditional media organizations’ abilities to craft and control messages (Brants and Voltmer, 2011; Finnemann, 2014; Davis, 2013). While politicians are increasingly attempting to embrace new forms of message control, most notably US President Barak Obama (Katz et al., 2013), others are able to extract and amplify their critiques of political messages and highlight the perceived gaffes independent of traditional media and what politicians offer in new media.

It is important, then, to understand not only the routine production of mediatization – and how Internet media may allow us to explore and unpack it – but also the “ripples” of mediatization, the way in which moments of mediatization start at one point and then move out through various audiences via different Internet services. While virality can certainly be traced (Freelon and Karpf, 2014) and visualized in projects such as the Australian Twitter News Index (Bruns, 2014) and the Truthy project (McKelvey et al., 2012), our interest turns toward considering how mediatization itself is treated as an accountable phenomenon. The Internet makes such accountability of mediatization potentially far more transparent than pre-Internet, and open to investigation by far more interested parties than just media academics. The question, then, is whether and how the exposure of mediatization is treated as an accountable matter across a range of Internet media and networked publics – What does exposure look like? Do different groups deal with the exposure of mediatization in different manners? And, ultimately, does it matter?

## 4. Method

The data for this article consists of a range of content types gathered from the Internet from June 29 2011 to August 31 2011:

- The unedited pool interview video downloaded from the BBC website
- Damon Green’s Twitlonger complaint
- 18 online newspaper and blog posts
- 504 tweets of Green’s complaint
- 548 tweets of the BBC video
- 484 tweets of the YouTube video
- 785 YouTube comments.

After being alerted to the YouTube video of the incident, we searched the BBC website for the unedited interview. A web search on the incident found the Damon Green Twitlonger

complaint. The newspaper and blog posts were found via a combination of search engine searches and the links in Twitter posts, and represent the most complete set of online posts that presented the story with more than a brief description. All tweets were found using the Topsy.com archive service searching all tweets between the relevant dates and with an exhaustive set of keywords and hashtags related to the event (many of which are discussed in the Twitter analysis below). More tweets were found than were relevant, so manual sorting was used to remove unrelated tweets. As such, we believe the tweets remaining represent almost the totality of tweets relevant to the incident. The YouTube comments were scraped from the relevant video pages in their totality. Retweets and simple repetitions in both Twitter and YouTube comments were accounted for (as noted below) but analysis was also conducted reducing repetitions to single instances for the purpose of Discursis analysis, so as not to bias thematic relevance.

We organize our analysis of the Miliband Loop from four perspectives. We first unpack the disjunctive laminated versus delaminated orientations of Green and Miliband (respectively) in the interview and TwitLonger complaint. To do this we use a combination of a visual text analytics (Angus, Rintel, and Wiles 2013) with attention to progressivity of the turns-at-talk (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974; Stivers and Robinson, 2006; Greatbach 1988, Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Llewellyn and Butler, 2011; Ekström and Fitzgerald, 2014) and discursive comparison to its description in Green's TwitLonger complaint (van Dijk, 1985; Fairclough, 1995, Jaworski et al., 2004).

We then use visual text analytics to explore the ripples of exposed mediatization in over 1500 news and blog posts, tweets, and YouTube comments, drawing on visualizations from Discursis and Leximancer. Our ripples here are, of course, metaphorical—we are not proposing that our description literally proposes phased times or forms of responses, as many of these ripples in fact overlap in time. However, they do take place in distinct discursive modes and as such represent reasonably discrete vernaculars of accountability.

Discursis (Angus et al., 2012a, 2012b) is a visual text analytic software platform that was designed to aid the interpretation of conversations, specifically focusing on patterns of conceptual (non)engagement. At a high-level Discursis works by accepting a conversational transcript as an input, using the text contained in the input transcript to build a computational language model, and then displaying patterns of conceptual overlap between conversational turns using this computational model. Discursis has been used to study conversational interactions across a wide variety of social and professional settings, including doctor/patient conversations (Angus et al., 2012), dementia/care provider conversations (Baker et al., 2013), flight recordings (Angus et al., 2012a), and media discourse. The triangular recurrence plotting visual output of Discursis is a particularly good way of visualizing the temporal dynamics of conversational interaction.

There are other visualization strategies that can be employed to aid in the interpretation of interview, online journalism, and social media data. The standard “Leximancer plot” is a conceptual map which places the computationally modeled concepts derived from the input text on a two dimensional map, their location determined by their degree of similarity. The Leximancer map is a useful way of exploring notions of framing as the conceptual similarities are drawn wholly from the input text, rather than through the use of a manual code-set or ontology.

Social network graphs are another visualization strategy particularly well-suited to the visualization of the spatial (conceptual) relationships between online journalism pieces. In the social network graph used in this study, the Leximancer computational language model is used to determine the conceptual content of

online news articles, and these articles are then arranged in a graph based on a combination of the date of publication and their conceptual similarity, with vertices (lines) connecting the most highly conceptually similar articles.

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1. The pool interview and TwitLonger complaint

Green's TwitLonger complaint turns on the issue that after one “acceptable” repetition of his position due to overlapping external sound, Miliband continued to use “the same” answer in response to Green's four further interview questions. In terms of the interview-as-lived, the checkerboard motif from Discursis below (Fig. 2) indicates that conceptual recurrence across responses is indeed extremely high. Miliband's recurrence stems from using precisely the same primary content words regardless of their order and the framing needed to produce his turn as answering the question. Green's turns show some conceptual recurrence as well, although his recurrences revolve around the inescapable need to reuse certain terms to ask the questions – today, riot, unions etc.

While we might lament with Green the apparent “cynicism” with which Miliband treats the questions as variations on a theme rather than a sequential series of turns-at-talk, it is also important to note that such conceptual recurrence is also evidence of Miliband's orientation to the delaminated nature of a pool interview. This orientation was not Miliband's alone. According to *PR Week* (Singleton, 2011):

“Miliband was asked by all TV news programmes to provide a 20-second clip for the lunchtime bulletins. The Labour leader's office were reluctant as Miliband was heading to the LGA conference and had planned to put out a message at that. However, they did what was asked.”

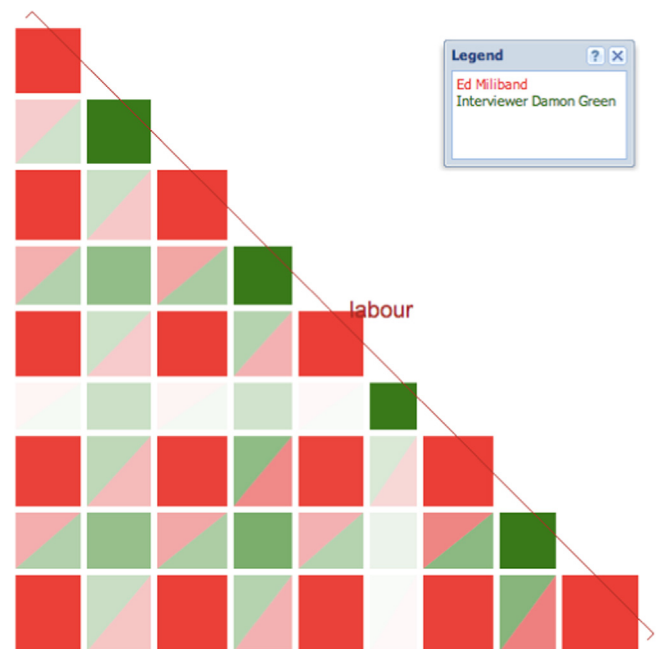


Fig. 2. Discursis checkerboard motif showing high conceptual recurrence by Miliband (red) with his own turns and limited but still recognizable conceptual recurrence with Green's turns (green). (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

Green's *TwitLonger* complaint initially squares with this routine professionalized orientation of the pool interview as delaminating the interview-as-lived from the interview-as-media-production-mechanism:

"Buggins' turn for me was a round of interviews at Westminster, hoovering up political reaction to the public sector strikes. Ministers drift like smoke around the corridors of 4, Millbank where the broadcasters have their offices, and you grab them on the stairs or the landing. We found Francis Maude and he said his piece obligingly, but we had to be quick: at nine was a sit-down interview with Ed at his office in Portcullis House and we scampered across to find him. The interview was a "pool" arrangement-to be shared by the three main broadcasters to save time and resources-and I'd been named to do it for ITV News.

There is an etiquette involved in pooling, which everyone understands. Ask the obvious question, and get the obvious answer. Don't try to be too clever or esoteric, either with your questioning or your camerawork. Make sure the material is usable by everyone (reporters: stay out of shot) and relay it as soon as the interview is done."

However, despite opening his complaint with apparent recognition of his own role to be played in the collaborative fiction of mediatization, Green then begins a narrative of being the "victim" of mediatization. This starts with a narrative of how Miliband's PR staff attempted to overtly control the interview conditions (see the full complaint in [Appendix A1](#)) and then turns to a turn-by-turn account of the interview-as-lived. His complaint starts by psychologizing his experience of the third question-answer set:

"The third time... the third time I was struggling a little bit. I'd asked him how his opposition to the strikes fitted with his position as leader of the Labour movement. I thought it was quite a clever question. Silly me."

Green's description of his personal feelings ("struggling" and "Silly me") frame the reader's understanding of Miliband's response as an out-of-the-blue and bizarre repetition of prior content rather than what "should" have been a new response defending an accusation of hypocrisy based on the prior content. However, the transcript shows that Green's gloss of similarity does not attend to the form of Miliband's answer. Miliband's initial sound-bite version took the following form:

EM: These strikes are wrong at a time when negotiations are still going on. But parents and the public have been let down by both sides because the government has acted in a reckless and provocative manner. After today's disruption I urge both sides to put aside the rhetoric, get around the negotiating table and stop it happening again.

In this "third" answer Miliband responds to Green's accusation of hypocrisy by reversing the clauses in his first sentence (compare lines 1–2 to 17–18) to indirectly reframe the accusation as premature by emphasizing the pragmatics of negotiation over standing on principle. Miliband then continues with the remaining content points of his desired message. Miliband's response is thus topically well-fitted to the question-as-asked even though it disregards both topical and structural similarity to his prior answer. In this way Miliband establishes his orientation to the delamination of the interview-as-lived from the interview-as-media-production-mechanism.

DG: Um, I listened to your speech in [inaudible] and you talked about the Labour Party being a movement. A lot of people in that movement, uh, are the people who are on strike today and they'll be looking at you and thinking "Well, you're describing these strikes as wrong, why aren't you giving us more leadership as a leader of the labour movement?"

EM: At a time when negotiations are still going on, I do believe these strikes are wrong. And that's why I say both sides should, after today's disruptions, get around the negotiating table, put aside the rhetoric, and sort the problem out. Because the public and parents have been let down by both sides and the government has acted in a reckless and provocative manner.

Green's *TwitLonger* complaint then frames the unfolding sequence of turns as a desperate attempt to receive a different answer in response to different questions, asking the reader to identify with the experience of the interview-as-lived and to regard Miliband as a non-compliant interview subject.

"I asked another question. Something about Francis Maude, and his tone of conciliation. Not very good, I know, but the best I could manage. Get him to say something about Francis Maude, I was thinking... his hairstyle, his glasses, the way he peers over the top of them as he drones on, anything, just stop already with the strikes are wrong while negotiations are underway, and the rhetoric has got out of hand..."

Green's next question asks about public versus private opinions of the government, finishing with the tag question "would you say?" (30–31). Miliband again orients to the question-as-asked by beginning with a mirror of Green's tag question (from "Would you say" (31) to "What I say" (32). Using the structural fitting of a mirrored response may be less artful than the topical fitting of Miliband's prior response, but again, for the audience not privy to the prior responses this response would be hearable as compliantly adjacent to the question.

DG: I spoke to Francis Maude before I came here and the tone he was striking was a very conciliatory one. Do you think there's a difference between the words they're saying in public and the attitude they strike in private in these negotiations? Are their negotiations in good faith would you say?

EM: What I say is the strikes are wrong when the negotiations are still going on. But the government has acted in a reckless and provocative manner in the way it's gone about these issues. After today's disruption I urge both sides to get around the negotiating table, put aside the rhetoric, and stop this kind of thing happening again.

Heightening the drama from desperation to "existential doubt", Green's *TwitLonger* complaint then emphasizes his experience of the interview-as-lived as bewildering:

"I'm not sure what I asked next. Frankly I was in danger of losing it. On my own, with the eyes of Ed Miliband and his three handlers boring into me but apparently oblivious of my presence, I was getting twinges of what I can only describe as existential doubt. So I said some words. And Ed told me that the strikes were wrong, and the rhetoric was out of hand, and both

sides needed to sit down... That was the worst one, I think.” In the first of these final two questions, Green again asks about the public versus private opinions of union leaders. It is phrased in a very similar manner to the prior question, again finishing with the tag question “would you say” (40–44). It is not surprising, then, that Miliband reuses the structural mirror tactic, although in his case he also reproduces Green’s topical distinction of public versus private to frame his position as being above hypocrisy (45).

DG: Um, it’s a statement you’ve made publicly and you’ve made to me and this will be broadcast obviously. But have you spoken privately to any union leaders and expressed your view to them on a personal level, would you say?

EM: Well, what I say in public and in private to anybody involved in this is; get around the negotiating table, put aside the rhetoric, and stop this kind of action happening again. These strikes are wrong because negotiations are still going on. But parents and the public have been let down by the government as well who’ve acted in a reckless and provocative manner.

Green’s final question asks about parents’ attitudes and the effect that the strike has had on them (53–58). Miliband topically matches Green’s notion of affected parents twice in two sentences (59–60 and 61–64), in each case agreeing with Green and then producing reasoning. This reasoning is the same as that used to support the topically different prior questions but the similarity is not hearable in the single fitted question and answer pair.

DG: You’re a parent, I’m a parent, a lot of people who are watching this will be parents. Um, has it affected you personally this action? Has it affected your family and friends I mean and what is the net effect of that going to be on parents needing to take a day off work today?

EM: I think parents up and down the country have been affected by this action and it’s wrong at a time when negotiations are still going on. Parents have been let down by both sides because the government has acted in a reckless and provocative manner. I think that both sides, after today’s disruption, should get around the negotiating table, put aside the rhetoric and stop this kind of thing happening again.

In sum, then, Green’s TwitLonger complaint demonstrates that Miliband and his team oriented to the delamination of interview-as-lived from interview-as-media-production-mechanism from setup through to completion. In the interview talk itself, what Green framed as cynical is Miliband highlighting the professional goal of all parties to record pre-prepared interviewee talking points artfully fitted to the content and phrasing of an interviewer’s questions so as to be suitable for later editorial choice.

Green also reveals in the TwitLonger complaint that he lacked both preparation and technique, especially for dealing with apparent non-compliance to questioning:

“...we turn to the topic: ‘What questions are you going to ask?’

I hate being asked that. Partly, because it is none of their business. But mostly, if I am honest, because I don’t really know. I

don’t have an interview “technique”, and this lack of technique has been honed constantly since my earliest days of not using it at the *Bermondsey News*. Its absence never troubled me until yesterday. You see, getting a “grab” for a television report is a simple enough business. You say the first thing that comes into your head. The interviewee responds with the first thing that comes into his head. And you take it from there. Almost like, well, a conversation.”

While Green reveals his own naivety and unprofessionalism in the later TwitLonger complaint, from the perspective of Miliband and his team during the pool interview itself Green’s actions may have been treated as displaying an affiliated professional orientation to delamination. In the turns at talk themselves, Green does not directly point out Miliband’s repetition as either stand-alone comments upon Miliband’s answers or in follow-up questions. Indeed, Green’s report to be grasping for new information by providing each question with a different topical frame is entirely retrospective. In the lived experience, the effect of never directly referencing prior questions or Miliband’s repetition was structurally well-suited to receiving answers as variations-on-a-theme – the precise practical instantiation of a pool interview.

## 5.2. Ripples of exposure 1: professional commentary

The morning after Green posted his TwitLonger complaint, and for several days thereafter, news and blog reports about the complaint and the video appeared in the UK and US. Fig. 3 shows this reportage in the form of a plot of the conceptual closeness of the articles over time. Green’s TwitLonger post is in the center of the plot and the articles are placed in concentric circles representing the days that follow. The lines between the articles indicate conceptual links between articles.

For the first four days, reportage and commentary was primarily oriented towards largely repeating Green’s version of events scaffolded with a rhetoric of Miliband’s ineptitude and the “sorry state of politics”. On July 1st there were five articles published that stem from Damon Green’s original TwitLonger post (published the night before). Of these the Sweney, Seidl, and uncredited *Huffington Post* articles share highest similarity with articles that are published in the days following, largely due to these articles focusing on the bizarre repetition of the interview, whereas the other articles focused more on the issue of the strikes, and used the incident to attack the Labour Party. On July 2nd Rob Cooper expanded on the narratives of Thompson and the *Huffington Post*, largely around the topic of the interview being bizarre:

“...one of the most unsettling I’ve seen with any politician, let alone the Leader of the Opposition. I’ve had people asking me if it’s a fake; it’s not.” (Thompson, 2011)

“Whatever your view on the strikes yesterday, Miliband’s muddle was excruciatingly painful to watch.” (Cole, 2011)

“U.K. Labour Leader Miliband Takes Message Discipline To New Heights Of Absurdity” (Linkins, 2011)

Brooker (2011) actively sides with Green and links this single incident of sound-bite repetition to others that he finds and brands them all “terrifying”:

“...Alistair Darling spent five minutes repeating an identical phrase about “global recession” over and over. At the time I’d figured it was a one-off. Clearly it’s not. It’s a standard gambit. All three clips are terrifying. First you think you’re hearing things. Then you wonder whether time itself has developed hiccups. Finally you decide none of these people can possibly be human. Because they look absolutely, unequivocally insane.”

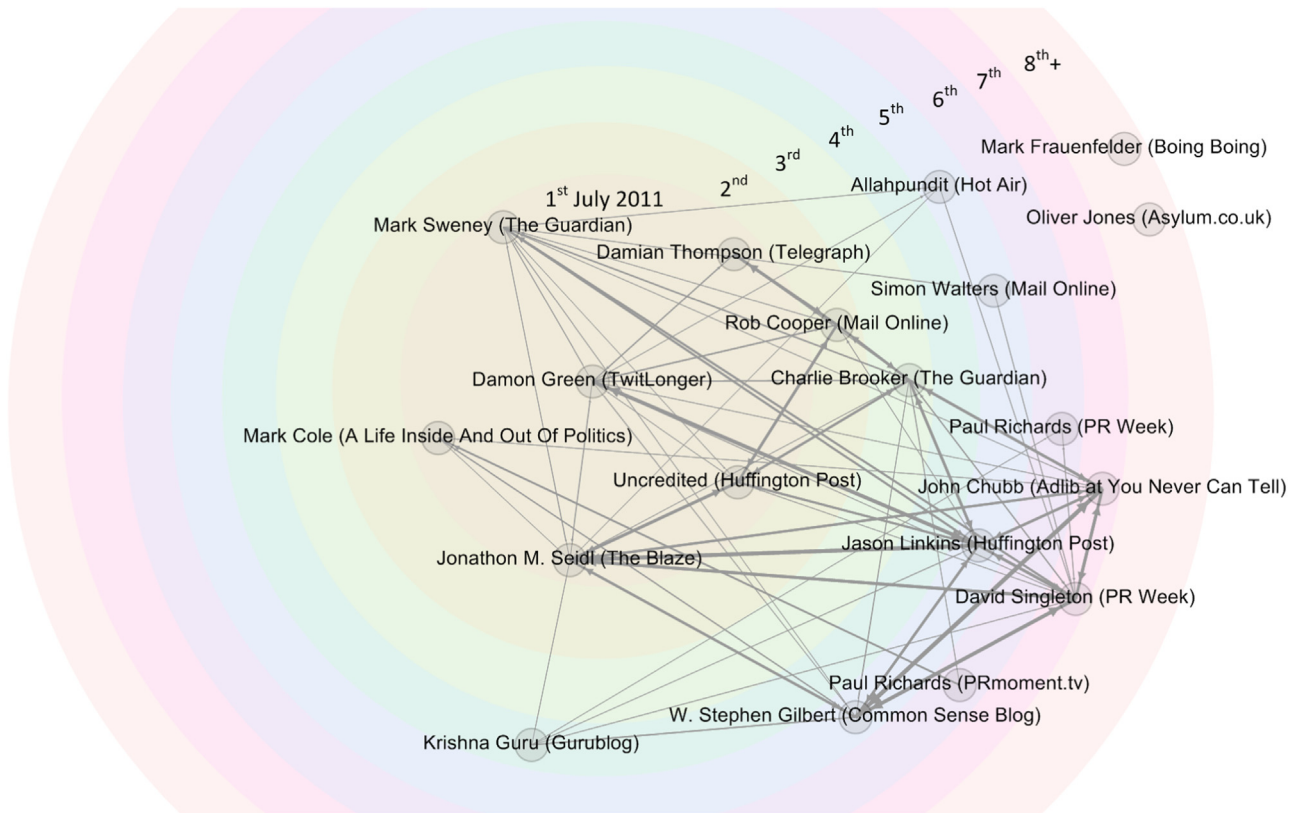


Fig. 3. Gephi plot of news articles showing conceptual similarities overlaid over time.

Unsurprisingly, most journalists do not mention any professional culpability on the part of Green or the media more generally. Sound-bites are a product purely of public relations and mediatization is “exposed” only to the extent that it feeds the news value of dramatic celebrity downfall. Brooker's July 3rd article is highly conceptually linked to several pieces that follow in the next week, largely due to these pieces also commenting on the nature of the interview itself, and the intersection of the media, PR and politics. Some of these articles are serious while others are short humor stubs or reference the video or TwitLonger post as part of longer lists of humorous video gaffes.

The PR articles that begin a few days after the initial reportage (Frauenfelder, Jones, Allahpundit, and Walters) are less conceptually connected to the journalistic reportage but take the journalistic narrative of Miliband as inept and bizarre as largely definitive of the situation. The PR articles shy away from the political hyperbole of the more news-oriented publications but comment on the pragmatic issue of media training and message discipline in the age of social media:

“Is this the end of media training as we know it?” (*PRmoment.tv*, 2011)

“Politicians have been advised they can no longer rely on sound bites to get their message out following Ed Miliband's “robotic” TV interview on public sector strikes. [...] Richards [...] praises Miliband for sticking to the line. But with the footage unexpectedly going viral, he argues that politicians will now have to adapt their interview technique or risk the humiliation of a viral YouTube hit.” (*Singleton*, 2011)

In the PR articles, Miliband is to again to blame for not being flexible enough – but not for the technique itself – and that social media is seen as requiring new strategies. The one exception is *Gilbert* (2011), who on July 5th, takes almost all the actors in the event to task (he mentions Miliband, Green, and Thompson and

progressive commentators reporting the story) for avoiding the issue of mediatization. While we do not have figures for the reach of Gilbert's *Common Sense Blog*, we can be sure that they are less than the combined views of the major professional outlets involved (*The Guardian*, *Telegraph*, *Huffington Post*, and *PR Week*). Further, none of these articles question the manner by which the pool interview video was released, even though this would appear to be an editorial decision by the BBC. Green is also not criticized in these articles for his journalistic naiveté either in the interview or in releasing a disingenuous complaint the following day. The two professional groups ignore each other's commentary, focusing all problems on Miliband rather than expose their own roles.

### 5.3. Ripples of exposure 2: Twitter users share the video and TwitLonger links

Twitter users – combining feeds from journalistic and PR outlets, professional journalist's personal accounts, and the general public – shared and commented upon the TwitLonger post, BBC video link, and YouTube video link, largely along the lines of mediatization being a one-way street. A Leximancer analysis of these tweets – around 1500 in all – shows that the general trend was for concepts about sound-bites tend to be directly related to the cynicism of politics, politicians, and Miliband himself. Journalism as a whole is not treated as having a role, the BBC is not noted for its apparent editorial decision to release the video, and Green is lauded as a hero far more than he is naïve or himself cynical. The tweets to different links have related but subtly different conceptual orientations to the meaning of the event (see Fig. 4). The TwitLonger link and the BBC video link tend towards the concepts around repetition, strangeness, and apparent behind the scenes insight, while the links to YouTube tends more towards how the interview reflects upon Miliband's fitness as opposition leader.





### 5.3.3. Humor-oriented responses

“This is like an interview with a sat nav stuck on a roundabout. [http://bbc.in/kKStYN\(via%20@user\)](http://bbc.in/kKStYN(via%20@user))”

“Oh dear. Ed Miliband has just spectacularly failed the Turing Test: <http://j.mp/kKStYN>”

“10 STRIKES ARE WRONG 20 PEOPLE LET DOWN BY RECKLESS GOVT 30 BOTH SIDES ARE SILLY 40 GET ROUND TABLE 50 GO TO 10 <http://t.co/S2x6yrW#Labour>”

“S’cuse me Ed Miliband, do you think the govt has acted in a reckless and provocative manner? <http://t.co/MOQdTZV>”

### 5.3.4. Politically-oriented responses

“<http://bbc.in/jEfwBf%3cThis%20video%20sickens%20me>. He talks like the rest of them. So disappointed. Repeating the same buzz-phrases over and over. Jun 30, 2011 12:35 GMT”

“Labour supporters. Watch this interview with RedEd and tell me you genuinely think he’ll one day be Prime Minister. <http://t.co/d4Lak8L>”

“Embarrassing: <http://t.co/7tBcgrr> What’s the point of Ed Miliband? I mean, not personally, sure he’s lovely, but as leader of Labour party?”

### 5.3.5. Technique-oriented responses

“I’d like to see Ed Milliband try this interview technique with Jeremy Paxman. <http://t.co/IraqmZF>”

“Still baffled Ed Miliband leads the opposition after this interview from last June. It’s the inverse of Paxman v Howard <http://t.co/IYsmvmWM>”

“Clever, off-the-cuff answers to an interview (or, the complete trolling of an interviewer): <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-13971770>”

The YouTube video link is shared with the most political commentary, albeit largely crude anti-Labour and anti-Miliband ad hominem. As with responses to the BBC link, many users treat the video as laminated. The BBC, it appears from these tweets, is assumed not to editorialize in its presentation of journalistic reportage. These tweets also repeat the robot meme and parody Miliband by repeating his words. Once again, Jeremy Paxman is raised as being a journalist who might prevent such sound-bite repetition.

### 5.3.6. Humor-oriented responses

“So now we know what Labour’s been doing since the election defeat, manufacturing a robot that looks like Ed Miliband: <http://t.co/jll65Ov>”

“I think he’s saying the strikes are wrong and that the gvt is reckless and irresponsible, but i’m not sure: <http://t.co/tH1lbCc>”

### 5.3.7. Politically-oriented responses

“Oh God this is too painful to watch. We’re doomed to a lifetime of Tories RT @iainaitch: Ed Miliband interview. <http://youtu.be/PZtVm8wtyFl>”

“What this country needs is strong and effective opposition. Instead we get this fella.. <http://t.co/U9Tclp1> Dearie me. #EpicFail”

“So we’re all in agreement that Ed Miliband’s leadership is over now, right? <http://t.co/WdvWh09>”

“I just tore up my Labour membership card. It was a mistake to rejoin. Milliband is an utter waste of space. <http://t.co/iAc26gO>”

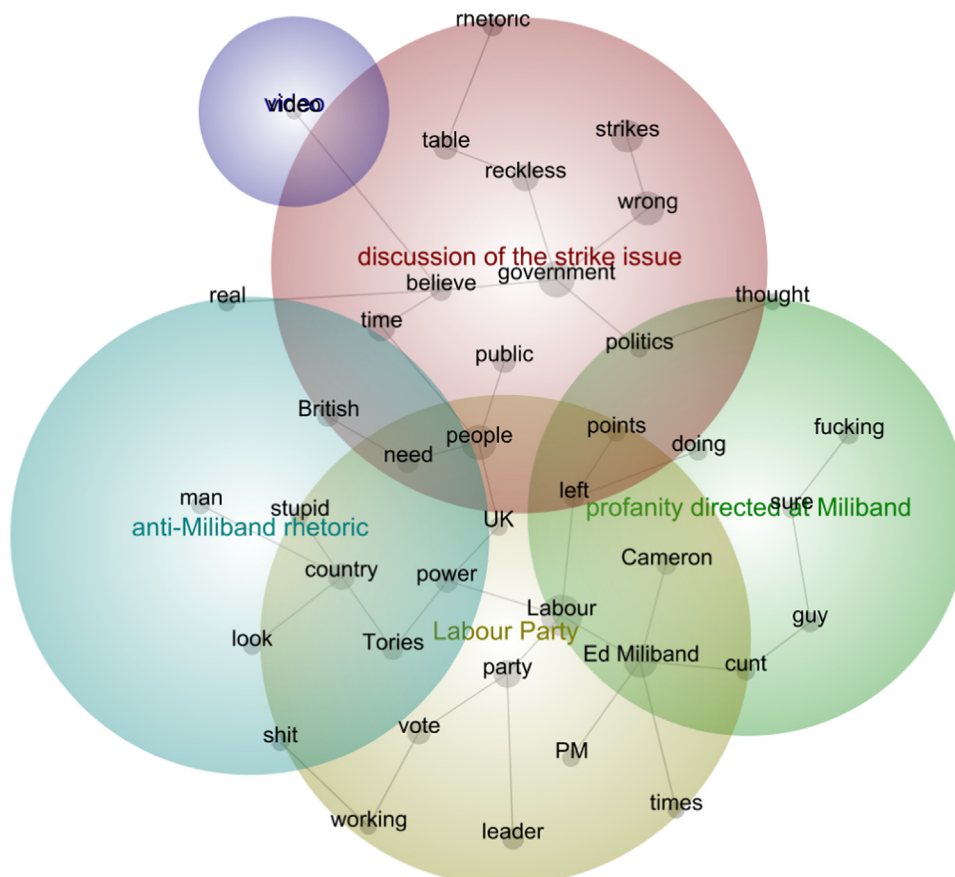


Fig. 5. Leximancer concept map of YouTube comments under Max Farquar's Miliband Loop video.

“Here’s that clip of Ed Miliband on “auto-repeat”. Amusing and embarrassing, but also indicative of politicians today!? (<http://tiny.cc/4ulku>)”

5.3.8. *Technique-oriented response*

“Paxman, give Ed Milliband a grilling, yeah? (<http://t.co/geJrTRR>)”

Sharing a link – without or including associated commentary – is an inherently Internet-oriented action. Whether or not anyone actually reads someone else’s Tweet with a shared link, the ability to share the precise version of an event such as this, as opposed to merely describing it, provides users with evidentiary capabilities that exceed those pre-Internet. This does not, of course, correlate with the ability to say anything about the event and, perhaps more importantly, the ability to share a particular piece of evidence has less value without the associated context. Since many video sharing commentators were unaware that the video was a pool interview – and even those that were aware did not treat this as a relevant issue – the responses associated with the links are almost entirely anti-sound-bite, anti-Miliband, and anti-PR, with little to no critique of the media’s complicity in co-creating the environment of mediatization.

5.4. *Ripples of exposure 3: YouTube comments*

The YouTube comments have a somewhat different character to the Twitter comments. While they share the robot meme and anti-Miliband sentiment, they have more discussion in terms of the relationship of the event to the general state of politics at the time (Fig. 5).

YouTube comment threads are routinely littered with various profane comments and the Miliband video is no exception. In this case many YouTube commenters call Miliband all manner of derogatory names, mostly playing off how silly he appears in the interview. Much of the commentary delves into the Labour party brand with commenters revealing themselves as anti-Tory and pro-UKIP but questioning whether Miliband is the right person to lead the Labour party:

“I’m not a fan of the Tories by any-means but there is no way I’ll ever vote Labour with this clown as a leader. He has as much backbone as a mollusk.”

“This shows that there is no democracy in Britain, just extreme right wing parties under names like labour and conservative, with very little interest in common people and a priority to suck up to rich corporations, patronise the British people and to keep left wing politicians out of politics and public attention at all costs by branding them as commies and reds.”

As in the Twitter responses, there is much literal repetition of Miliband’s words as a method of parody, but also some discussion of the merits on Miliband’s position on the strikes. Unlike the Twitter responses, there is a significant amount of racist discourse: especially anti-Semitism directed towards Miliband as well as a decidedly anti-immigrant stance:

“Do Ed Miliband loyalty lye to Britain or Israel?”

“Just fuck off together with those other socialist cunts Blair and Brown that fucked this country with mass uncontrolled immigration”

Racist discourse was often met with resistance, from the brute “fuck off racist” to longer attempts, some of which were reasonably polite. Rather than dwell on this, however, it is important to note that the large amount of such material outweighs a small proportion of YouTube comments that acknowledged the journalistic role in mediatization. Four comments were critical of Green’s journalistic abilities:

“I think the biggest issue raised by this video is why the journalist didn’t just say ‘Why do you keep repeating everything I say?’”

“A REAL DOUCHEBAG...AND WHAT A STUPID INTERVIEWER”

“The journalist is as bad, he obviously isn’t listening to the answers.”

“why is he doing politics i thought he was a sports journalist?”

Three commenters actually attempted to contextualize the process of the pool interview for the many incredulous commenters who were either asking whether the video was a fake or simply vilifying Miliband:

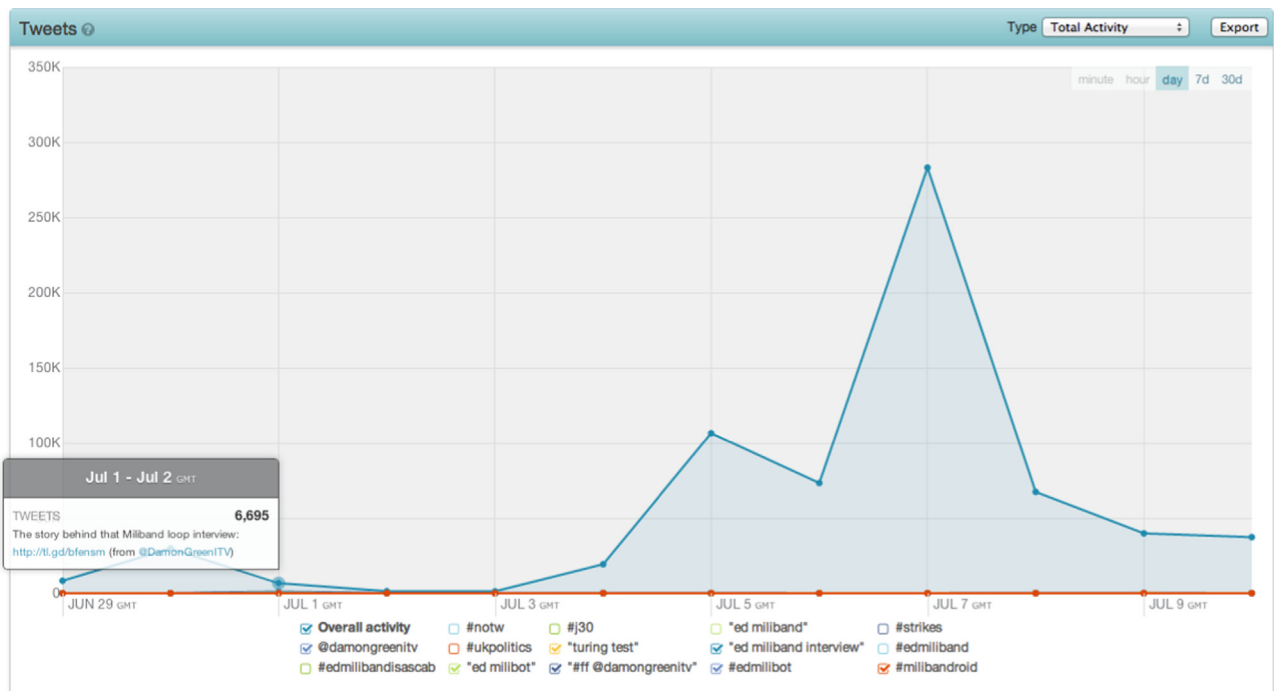


Fig. 6. Total Twitter activity (posts, retweets, favorites) associated with the Miliband Loop incident (Source: Topsy).

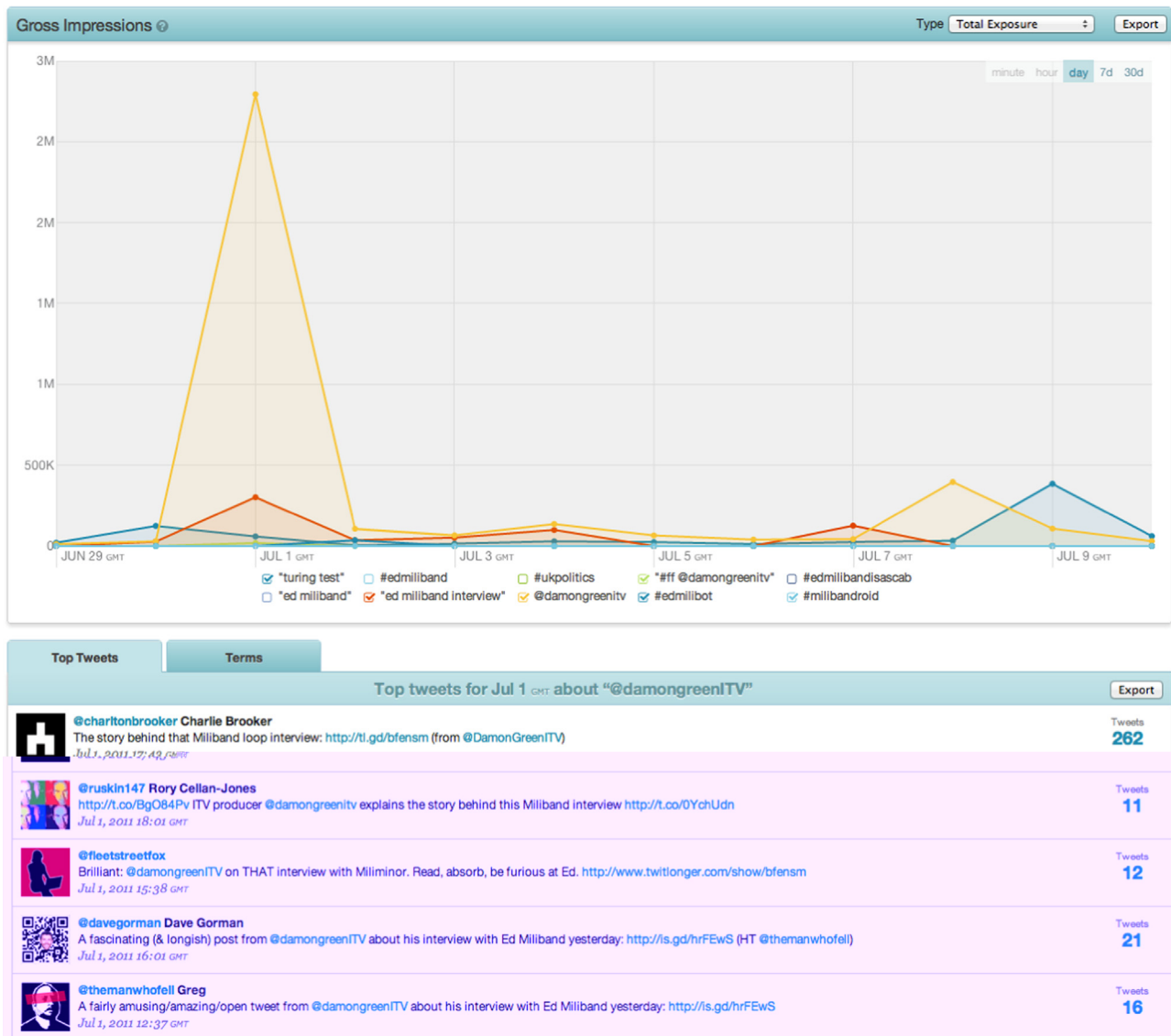


Fig. 7. Gross impressions of the Miliband Loop incident on Twitter (Source: Topsy).

“Ed Miliband is being interviewed by a member of the BBC’s news team. An interview like this isn’t meant to be shown in its entirety, it will be edited heavily and inserted into the various news programmes the BBC produces. Ed Miliband will have been briefed (by a Labour advisor) to tell him which points need to be highlighted to remain on message. 1;strikes are wrong. 2;negotiations are important. 3;Government is reckless. By repeating the points, there’s more chance they’ll be broadcast.”

“You are aware why this happened right? The media when broadcasting these interviews edit out a load of the interview so often, a lot of important shit said never gets put in. This was Miliband’s attempt at making sure the important points got into the broadcast. So he repeats himself to increase the odds of the key parts getting in. But hilariously, all the repeated points were included in the broadcast making the bloke look like a robot. It isn’t his fault. Good not to jump to conclusions.”

“No, no editing involved.

This is from the BBC website exactly as the interview actually happened.

The interviewer was FURIOUS afterwards that his time had been completely wasted.

Ed obviously had a point to put across-sound-bites & all that-but seemingly was not capable to rephrase his point, or even attempt to answer the questions more succinctly, & was is so dim as to not realise how he, & his party, would come across. Millibot was determined that only one message should come out of this interview.

My father was interviewed for political reasons many times. I can’t tell you how many times the interviewer would come in with a set of questions designed to get a sound-bite that would frame his own agenda. Ultimately, my father would be mis-quoted and his meaning twisted. I understand Millibot’s logic here and I applaud him for not being afraid to look foolish in order to accomplish his goal.”

The differences in the YouTube comments from the Twitter comments may be in part ascribable to the different technological affordances of the two services to allow video and other comments to be used as conceptual resources for comments. The most obvious difference is that YouTube is designed for the watching of video, such that comments focus attention on the video and its content, whereas Twitter is about commenting to the world about events of which video makes up one evidentiary resource. There are other more mundane differences, notably the character limits

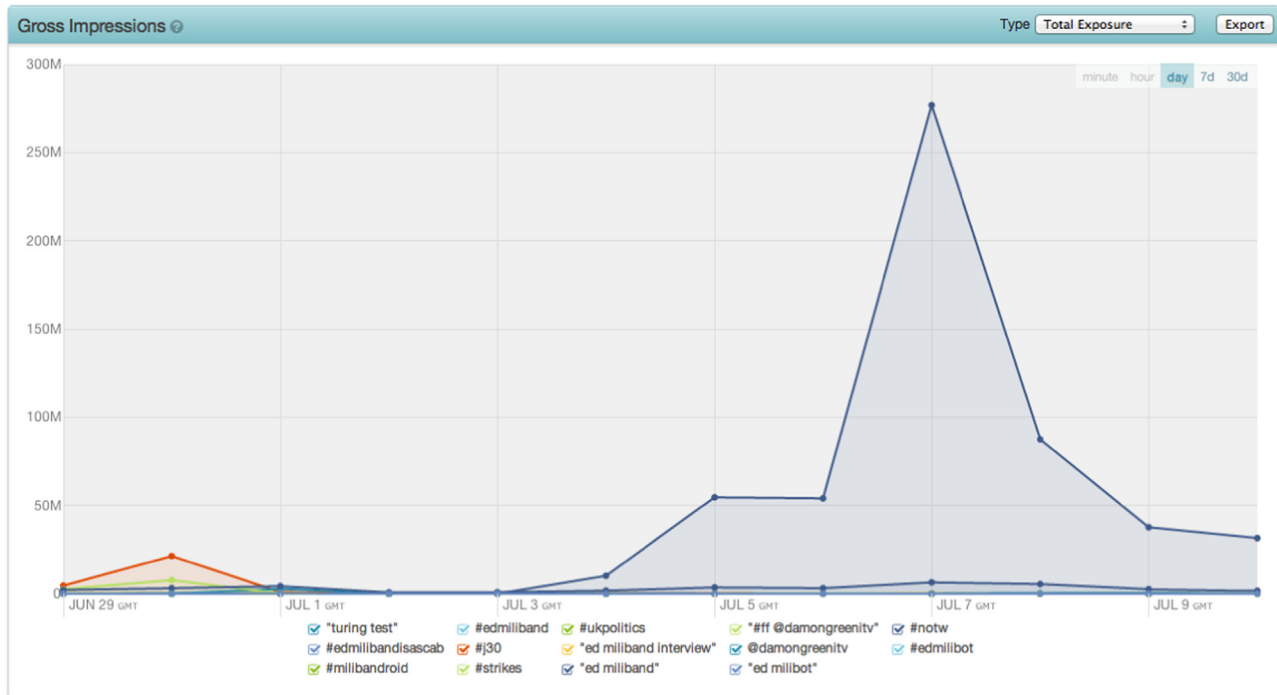


Fig. 8. Comparison of the Miliband Loop gross impressions to the J30 and News of the World gross impressions (Source: Topsy).

of the two services (up to 160 characters for tweets, and YouTube at the time had a 1000-character limit for comments) which limit explanation. YouTube has also has threaded comments under each video that cannot appear linked to other videos, as opposed to Twitter's stream that is only "collected" if a search is undertaken by term or hashtag such that all manner of conceptually different tweets are findable with respect to any given video – or multiple videos. Further, in 2011 (and is still the case for some users at the time of writing) Twitter did not enable in-line viewing of videos, separating the experience of watching a video from commenting upon it. The sum of these differences means that mediatization may be more visible – and hence more discussable – in a YouTube comment stream than in Twitter. However, whether anyone see and works their way through a YouTube comment section is, of course, highly debatable. All but the most dedicated users are likely to simply see the YouTube video as a result of clicking through Twitter (or some other social media link), such that only the simplest version of the event is amplified to viral status.

##### 5.5. The big picture

Having considered the content of the ripples of exposure, it is worth getting a sense of the reach of the exposure. The social media statistics service Topsy shows that the total activity associated with the incident approached 7000 posts, retweets, favorites etc. (Fig. 6). The most significant terms associated with the incident were those establishing or repeating the meme of Miliband acting robotic in the interview (turing test, ed miliband interview, ed milibot, #milibandroid, #edmilibot) and Damon Green's Twitter username (@damongreenity, #ff @damongreenity [#ff means "Follow Friday", a Twitter cultural phenomenon encouraging the reader to follow the named account]).

At a gross level Topsy shows almost 2.8 million impressions were made, which is not a measure of users seeing the tweets but rather instances in which tweets were potentially visible (Fig. 7). Damon Green's username accounts for the most impressions –

orders of magnitude larger than Miliband. This is likely because of Charlie Brooker's posting of Green's *TwitLonger* complaint (and naming Green) given Brooker's journalistic prominence and the size of his Twitter following. All of Brooker's followers are counted as impressions, as are all the followers of the 262 accounts that retweeted his post.

This reach is quite significant, but to put these numbers in perspective the Miliband Loop incident was dwarfed by the J30 protests themselves (approaching 20 million gross impressions) and the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal breaking just a few days later (reaching almost 300 million gross impressions) (Fig. 8).

The upshot of the big picture view is that despite being dwarfed by other events, sharing of the incident among Twitter users alone is indicative of the strong potential for virality of the exposure of mediatization. Of course much of this virality lies simply in humor or hand-wringing rather than serious political discussion for most users. Miliband himself, despite going on to lose both the next election and the party leadership in 2014, was not seriously damaged by this publicity at the time, and mediatization practices have not obviously changed.

Nevertheless, as has been seen in the viral social media sharing of other political gaffes such as Romney's "binders full of women" comment, when the viral publicity connects with the right group at the right time (swinging voters during an election) there will be consequences. PR professionals will naturally look to mediatization strategies that minimize risk but also attempt to opportunistically make use of unexpected virality. Indeed, Damon Green tweeted about discussing this very issue with Miliband's PR representative in the aftermath of the Miliband Loop incident:

@damongreenity Damon Green

Before I wrote the blog, I contacted EdM's PR. He said "no worries" about the itvw going viral: "it means we are getting message out".

Jul 1, 2011 14:52 GMT

## 6. Conclusions

In this paper we have sought to provide a glimpse of mediatization-in-action as well as highlight how issues of mediatization increasingly extend beyond the confines of the closed world of media and politicians, albeit not necessarily to much lasting effect.

The “Miliband Loop” video and Damon Green’s *TwitLonger* post provide a rare glimpse into the practical production of mediatization. While much discussion and research has concentrated on the conceptual level of mediatization, this data highlights the ways in which mediatization is a manifestation of economic and working realities which, for the most part, suit both professions. While there may well be a struggle for control of the message, this is a matter of routine negotiation and routine practices. Central to the pool interview, we have shown, is an orientation to the delamination of the interview-as-lived from the interview-as-media-production-mechanism. What makes the Miliband Loop event unusual is not this delamination, but rather its understated apparent editorial revelation by the BBC and the journalist’s naïve psychological realization of his powerlessness in mediatization – at least until after the fact. As we said above, in the lived experience of the interview Green never directly called Miliband on his repetition. Green’s *TwitLonger* complaint re-casts his actions as having assumed a professional “right” to the interview as a laminated event, and thus Miliband’s actions as a cynical and one-sided delamination that deserved public ridicule. But whatever Green may have intended, he provided the essential structural resources for the sound-bite politics that he later claimed to abhor.

It is certainly the case that the video releases and Green’s *TwitLonger* complaint exposed the delamination of the interview-as-lived from the interview-as-media-production-mechanism to professional and public scrutiny – but as it turned out this had little effect on professional or public recognition of mediatization. Journalists and PR professionals ignored one another’s commentary and the issue of mediatization as a whole except to reinforce their existing rhetorical positions – journalists as defenders of the truth against cynical politicians and PR professionals as practical message-crafters. It is not surprising, then, that Twitter posts of articles, the *TwitLonger* complaint, and links to the video tended to reinforce those professional narratives rather than question the manner by which the issue was surfacing. The potential exists for a loss of control by the professional organizations involved, but it is not yet clear just what the threshold will be for this to matter in a larger political sense.

There is potential for important loss of control when an issue such as this attains the status of an Internet meme (Schifman, 2014; Rintel, 2013a). The negatively humorous epithet “Ed Milibot” briefly circulated as a result of the exposed mediatization, and makes a reappearance once in a while even years later. However, not all memetic gaffes are of equal problematic value. Mitt Romney may have lost a US Presidential election due to “binders full of women” (Haberma, 2012; Helms, 2012) ending up as a negative reflection of his conservative stance towards women. On the other hand, Tony Abbott was elected to the office of Prime Minister in in the 2013 Australian Federal election despite similarly publicized negative reflections on his conservative stance towards women, not to mention many other linguistic gaffes such “nobody is the suppository of all wisdom” (Rintel, 2013b). Romney and Abbot’s gaffes were made at times of public choice to award power, but the Miliband Loop occurred outside of an election period, so potentially limiting its damage even further.

Nevertheless, while this particular instance may have ended up mattering little in the “real world”, we have provided an example of using a combination of analytic and visualization methods to examine the ways in which mediatization issues diffuse through

different media platforms as well as observe the ways in which themes evolve, morph and coalesce. This form of analysis will, we believe, become more important as the mediatization of politics itself increasingly diffuses online, opening up new possibilities for transparency to audiences and even intervention.

## Acknowledgments

The authors thank Griffith University and the University of Macau for their support of the two Media Talk symposia in which this work was discussed. We especially wish to thank Jacqueline Ewart, Kate Ames, and Martin Montgomery for organizing both symposia, and, with the addition of Paddy Scannell, also for their stewarding of the Special Issues resulting from the symposia. We also thank participants of the symposia for their comments, and the Editor and reviewers for their help in shaping the final manuscript.

## Appendix A1. : The BBC news page report of Miliband’s J30 response

The screenshot shows a BBC News article from June 30, 2011. The headline is "Ed Miliband: 'These strikes are wrong'". The article text reads: "The Labour leader Ed Miliband, has expressed his disapproval at both the unions and the government over the strike action taking place around the UK. Picket lines have been set up by public sector workers, to protest at planned pension changes, resulting in the closure of almost half of state schools across the UK. Mr Miliband said 'these strikes are wrong at a time when negotiations are going on', but refused to elaborate when asked further questions." Below the text is a "Share this page" section with social media icons and a "13K" share count.

## Appendix A2. : Damon Green’s full *TwitLonger* post

To a TV reporter, political PRs can seem incredibly fussy, often to the point where it takes vast tact and patience not to pick them up bodily and hurl them off the nearest tall building with a joyful shout. Common sense, they say: you could be laying a trap, hiding a loaded question, trying to make us look silly. But occasionally a politician needs no help at all to look silly. And that is how it turned out with Ed Miliband yesterday.

Buggins’ turn for me was a round of interviews at Westminster, hovering up political reaction to the public sector strikes.

Ministers drift like smoke around the corridors of 4, Millbank where the broadcasters have their offices, and you grab them on the stairs or the landing. We found Francis Maude and he said his piece obligingly, but we had to be quick: at nine was a sit-down interview with Ed at his office in Portcullis House and we scampered across to find him. The interview was a “pool” arrangement – to be shared by the three main broadcasters to save time and resources – and I’d been named to do it for ITV News. There is an etiquette involved in pooling, which everyone understands. Ask the obvious question, and get the obvious answer. Don’t try to be too clever or esoteric, either with your questioning or your camerawork. Make sure the material is usable by everyone (reporters: stay out of shot) and relay it as soon as the interview is done.

To me it seemed simple enough. But I hadn’t bargained with the team of three handlers waiting for me in the Opposition Leader’s office.

They demand control of the interview location. Well... OK, we are in Ed’s office, fair enough. They want him in front of his bookcase, with his family photos over his left shoulder. Er... sure, is he going to be long? We are running late.

It isn’t that unusual for political PRs to demand control over the composition of an interview shot. I gather that David Cameron’s people will never let him be filmed in front of anything expensive, or ornate, or strikingly Etonian. But it isn’t until our shot has been checked by all three press officers – all peering into our viewfinder and offering helpful advice about framing and depth of field (a term they turned out not to understand, as my cameraman Peter Lloyd-Williams triumphantly established) that we turn to the topic: “What questions are you going to ask?”

I hate being asked that. Partly, because it is none of their business. But mostly, if I am honest, because I don’t really know. I don’t have an interview “technique”, and this lack of technique has been honed constantly since my earliest days of not using it at the Bermondsey News. Its absence never troubled me until yesterday. You see, getting a “grab” for a television report is a simple enough business. You say the first thing that comes into your head. The interviewee responds with the first thing that comes into his head. And you take it from there. Almost like, well, a conversation.

But when your interviewee has only one answer, and repeats it back to you whatever you say, things go downhill very fast.

Ed Miliband thinks that the strikes are wrong at a time when negotiations are still underway. The government has acted in a reckless and provocative manner, but it is time for both sides to set aside the rhetoric and get around the negotiating table and stop this from happening again.

I know this because he told me six times. His PR must have known that was what he was going to do. And yet he still went through a convincing charade of pressing me on my line of interrogation, urging me to keep my questions brief, and even – this was a macabre touch – placing a voice recorder on the table beside me as a kind of warning not to try and misquote his boss.

As it turned out, the first take was drowned out by a passing siren on the Embankment, but seemed like a thoughtful and precise position for a Labour leader to take. Clear in his condemnation, hopeful of a negotiated settlement. Not partisan, but engaged. Detached, but not aloof.

The second time it seemed like a less original statement. The strikes are wrong... the rhetoric has gone too far... parents across the country... But then, I’d heard it before and it was useful to have a clean version, unspoiled by a siren.

The third time... the third time I was struggling a little bit. I’d asked him how his opposition to the strikes fitted with his

position as leader of the Labour movement. I thought it was quite a clever question. Silly me. The strikes were wrong at a time when negotiations were still underway. The government had acted recklessly. It was time for rhetoric to be set aside. Some reporters like to have their questions written on a piece of paper, and tick them off one by one as they are asked. It’s something I’ve never done, but at this moment I wished fervently that I had a piece of paper in my hand, just to give me something to look at, and scratch away thoughtfully just buy some time.

I asked another question. Something about Francis Maude, and his tone of conciliation. Not very good, I know, but the best I could manage. Get him to say something about Francis Maude, I was thinking... his hairstyle, his glasses, the way he peers over the top of them as he drones on, anything, just stop already with the strikes are wrong while negotiations are underway, and the rhetoric has got out of hand...

I’m not sure what I asked next. Frankly I was in danger of losing it. On my own, with the eyes of Ed Miliband and his three handlers boring into me but apparently oblivious of my presence, I was getting twinges of what I can only describe as existential doubt. So I said some words. And Ed told me that the strikes were wrong, and the rhetoric was out of hand, and both sides needed to sit down...

That was the worst one, I think.

If news reporters and cameras are only there to be used by politicians as recording devices for their scripted sound-bites, at best that is a professional discourtesy. At worst, if we are not allowed to explore and examine a politician’s views, then politicians cease to be accountable in the most obvious way. So the fact that the unedited interview has found its way onto YouTube in all its absurdity, to be laughed at along with all the clips of cats falling off sofas, is perfectly proper.

Afterwards, I was overcome with a feeling of shame. I couldn’t look him in the eye. But before I dried up completely, and had to be led out of Westminster with my mouth opening and shutting, I had an opportunity to ask one last question. I had an urge to say something so stupid, so flippant that he would either have to answer it, or get up and leave. “What is the world’s fastest fish?” “Can your dog do tricks?” “Which is your favourite dinosaur?” But, of course, this was a pool interview, and I had no wish to feed out the end of my television career to Sky and the BBC.

I realize now, of course, the perfect question to ask, to embarrass him and to keep my job. I should have asked was whether the strikes were wrong, whether the rhetoric had got out of hand, and whether it was time for both sides to get round the negotiating table before it happened again.

Because that was the only answer I ever got.

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