



Election Debate Visualisation

A Novel Method for Capturing Instant, Nuanced Audience Feedback to Televised Election Debates

EDV Project Briefing 2014.04

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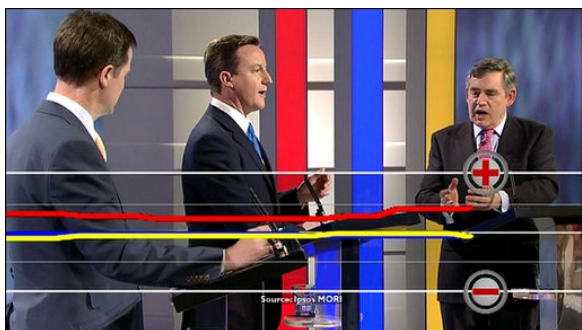
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In the past, spin-doctors and pundits would appear on TV screens immediately after the televised election debates, telling viewers who 'won' and who 'lost'. New social media technologies are changing the audience experience. Viewers' instant feedback during and immediately after the debates has shifted power from experts to citizens. But are feedback technologies such as 'the worm' or Twitter able to capture more than crudely one-dimensional reactions? We present an alternative method of instant feedback capable of reflecting the multidimensionality of audience responses.

Towards a new understanding of audience feedback to televised election debates

Social media are changing the ways in which people watch television. While audiences have always been active in their consumption of news and political debate – commenting and talking to others as they watch –, social media networks like Twitter and Facebook enable viewers to join up their conversations and force media presenters and producers to acknowledge this constant flow of live feedback. In the context of televised election debates, this allows people to share critical

responses to implausible claims and inauthentic performances and to form collective judgements before 'experts' have a chance to influence them. The added sensory streams afforded by social media enlarge the audience experience, but do they help viewers and voters to arrive at better, informed decisions? Do they capture the richness of citizens' diverse reactions to the debates? We think not. In the televised debates for the 2010 UK General Election, broadcasters introduced the so-called 'worm': 'a squiggly line that often accompanies televised election debates' and 'is supposed to represent the views of undecided voters, moving up



when a candidate says something which the voters endorse, and down when a candidate says something which they don't like'ⁱ. We agree with the view of the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications that 'the use of the worm might distort the viewer's perception of the debate'ⁱ. One reason for this is that the sample of undecided voters used to produce the worm in 2010 was far too small to have any scientific plausibility: ITV involved only 20 people and the BBC involved 12. A second reason is that the worm simply asks people to indicate whether they liked or not the candidates' performances, without any reference to why that might be so. Analyses of Twitter are rather more sophisticated, often using so-called 'sentiment analysis' to map the changing mood as expressed in tweets sent during the debates. But, here again, little is learned about which aspects of the debaters' performances trigger responses or why they do so. If instant audience feedback is to be a new fact of political life, we need better tools for capturing and interpreting what viewers and voters are thinking.

A key research aim for the EDV project has been to devise and test a new method for capturing instant, nuanced audience feedback to televised election debates. This involves four key objectives:

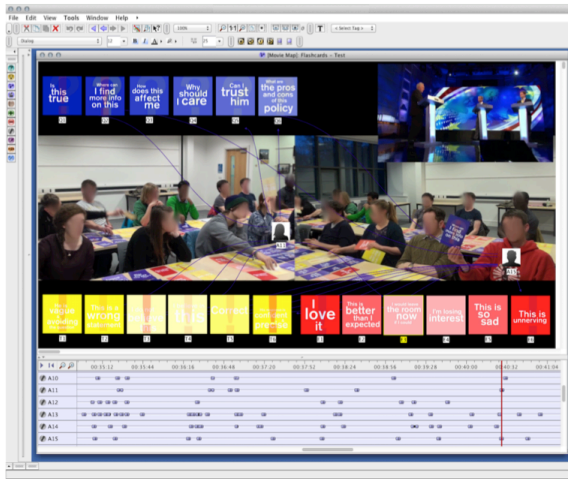
1. **promoting active audience engagement with the debates by enabling people to respond to them in real time;**
2. **harnessing viewers' reactions as collective intelligence that can be analysed both in terms of the immediate viewer experience and longer-term shifts in political preferences;**
3. **understanding the complex and nuanced nature of collective and individual responses to the debates;**
4. **providing new ways to assess the debates as both 'media events' and 'democratic opportunities' and developing ways of making future televised election debates more cognitively, affectively, critically and aesthetically appealing to voters.**

Experimenting with ways of capturing instant and meaningful audience feedback to the debates

We designed an experiment in which audience reactions were captured by using flashcards. Flashcards consist of paper cards containing textual statements and are often used in learning contexts for memory training. We used them as prompts, designed to capture a range of viewer responses to the debates. The colour and typographic style of the cards were carefully designed with a view to helping participants to focus on a range of different kinds of reaction. As a test bed, we used the second debate between Nick Clegg and Nigel Farage on whether the UK should be in or out of the European Union: a one-hour live debate hosted by the BBC on 2 April 2014 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-26443312>). We recruited 15 students from the University of Leeds. This was in no sense a representative sample of the UK electorate (or even of Leeds

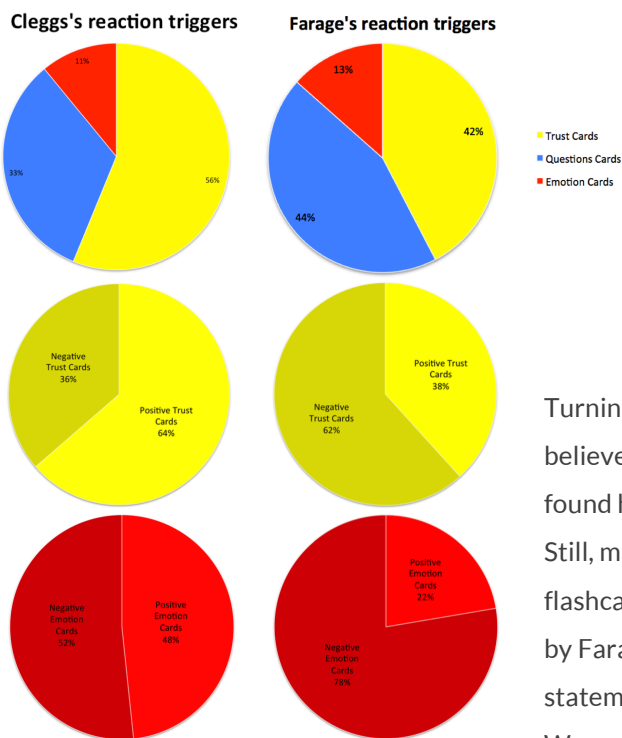
students) and we make no claims about the representativeness of their responses. Our sole purpose in this experiment was to see whether the simple feedback mechanism worked. The participants were each given a pack of 18 flashcards and asked to raise any card in the air if it expressed their thoughts or feelings at any point during the debate. The aim of the cards was to elicit three kinds of response: the need for more information; questions of trust; and emotive reactions. Participants were encouraged to raise any of the cards as often as they wanted. The experiment was video recorded, allowing us to analyse responses at both an individual and group level.





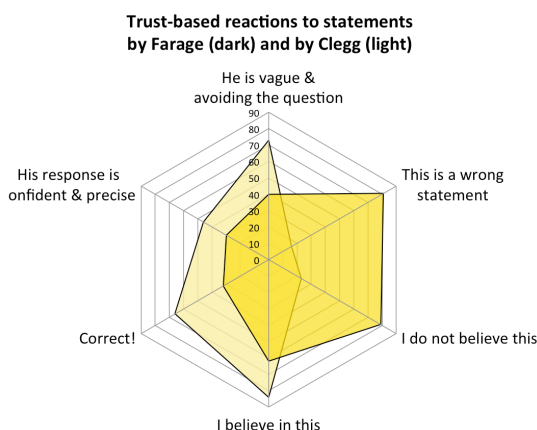
The video was then analysed, initially to code, timestamp and annotate each occasion on which a card was raised. We used Compendium (left), a hypermedia knowledge mapping tool with support for synchronised video annotation (<http://compendium.open.ac.uk/>).

Participants raised over 1,470 flashcards during the one-hour period of the debate. We have produced visual analytics to show how often flashcards were displayed, their distribution over time and their correlation with what was being said in the debate. We have analysed the responses of the entire group, as an illustration of collective intelligence; individual patterns of response, which can be correlated with information regarding individuals' demographic and political profiles; and patterns of group response to the nuances of individual debaters.

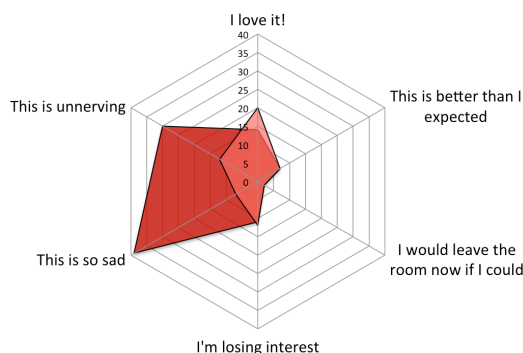


Initial results from our quantitative analysis show that, overall, Farage provoked stronger emotional reactions than Clegg and these were mainly negative. When Clegg was speaking, he triggered more trust-related reactions and these were mainly positive (see pie charts on the left; the bottom rows show the portion of positive and negative audience reactions to each speaker).

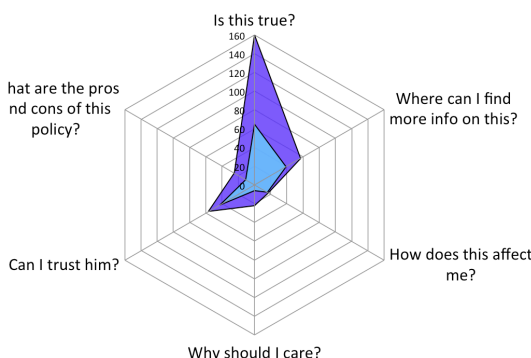
Turning to the spider diagram below, overall, the participants in our experiment believed what Clegg said (84 flashcards reading 'I believe this' were raised) and found his statements to be correct (66 flashcards reading 'Correct!' were raised). Still, many considered Clegg to be 'vague and avoiding the question' (73 such flashcards raised). In contrast, participants expressed doubt about claims made by Farage (79 flashcards reading 'I do not believe this' were raised) and his statements were sometimes considered to be wrong (81 such flashcards raised). We can see that the audience questioned the credibility of Farage's statements over four times more often than they questioned the credibility of Clegg's statements (160 cards suggesting this were raised following statements made by Farage, compared to 39 following statements made by Clegg). A similar analysis can be made based on the diagram at the top of the next page, which shows that negative emotive responses to Farage's statements were significantly more numerous than those to Clegg's statements (69 and 19, respectively).



Emotion-based reactions to statements by Farage (dark) and by Clegg (light)



Information need reactions to statements by Farage (dark) and by Clegg (light)



Seeking to go beyond questions of affect (how viewers felt about each of the debaters) and trust (how credible debaters' claims seemed to viewers), we were interested in what viewers believed they needed to know in order to evaluate the debate effectively. Generally speaking, cards asking for more information about a claim or policy were rarely raised. But if we turn to the timeline below, showing the colour of the cards raised over the duration of the debate, we can see that there were several critical moments in which viewers felt confused and wanted more information to help them make sense of what was going on. For instance, between minutes 7:19 and 8:09 of the timeline, a spike of blue cards saying 'Is this true?' and 'Where can I find more info on this?' is conspicuous. This was precisely the point in the debate at which Farage claimed that 'unless we get reform, then the time has come to leave the EU'. Similarly, a peak of yellow and red cards (relating to emotive and trust reactions respectively) is noticeable between minutes 27:06 and 27:58, coinciding with a short period in which both Farage and Clegg contradicted basic claims made by one another. Viewers became unsure about whom to trust and irritated by the position they were being put in.

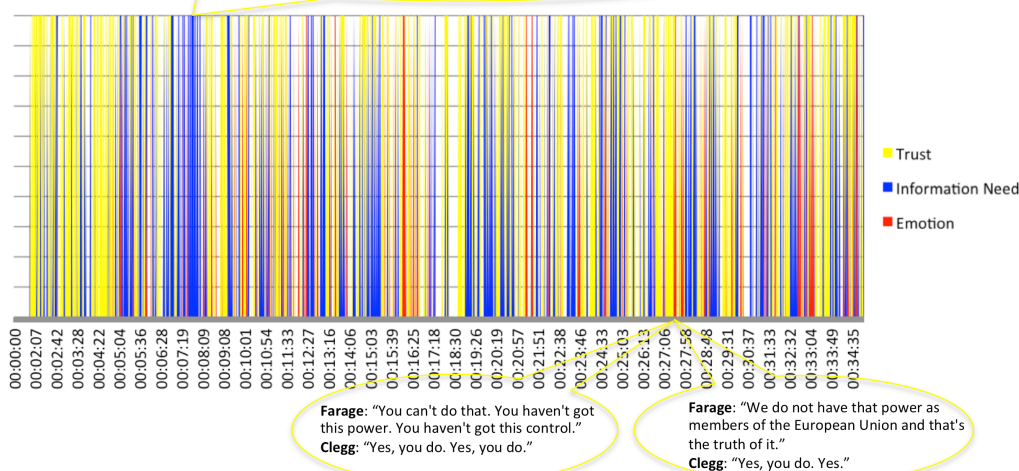
The responses of the entire audience can be also analysed as an illustration of collective intelligence, plotting individual patterns of response, which can be compared with the patterns of group. The graphic at the top of the next page shows the flashcard raising profile of each participant and the group mean (in orange). In addition to providing an insight on the behaviour of the audience as a collective,

Farage: "...actually sixty-two percent of the people that were surveyed in that British car manufacture interview they want serious reform within the European Union if they're gonna stay as members. So, far from the top line being true, two-thirds of them are saying unless we get reform then the time has come to leave the EU."



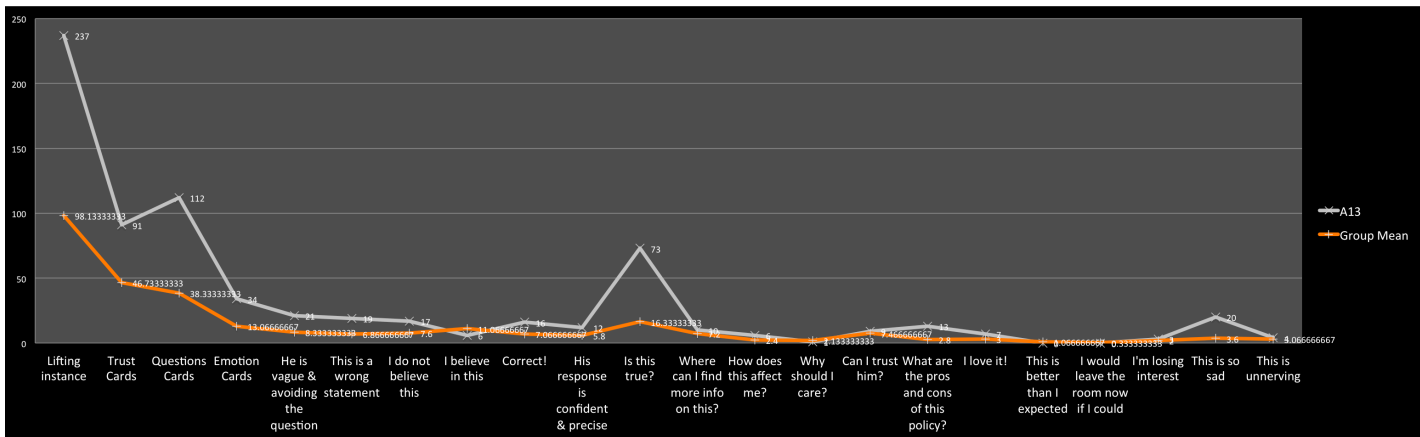
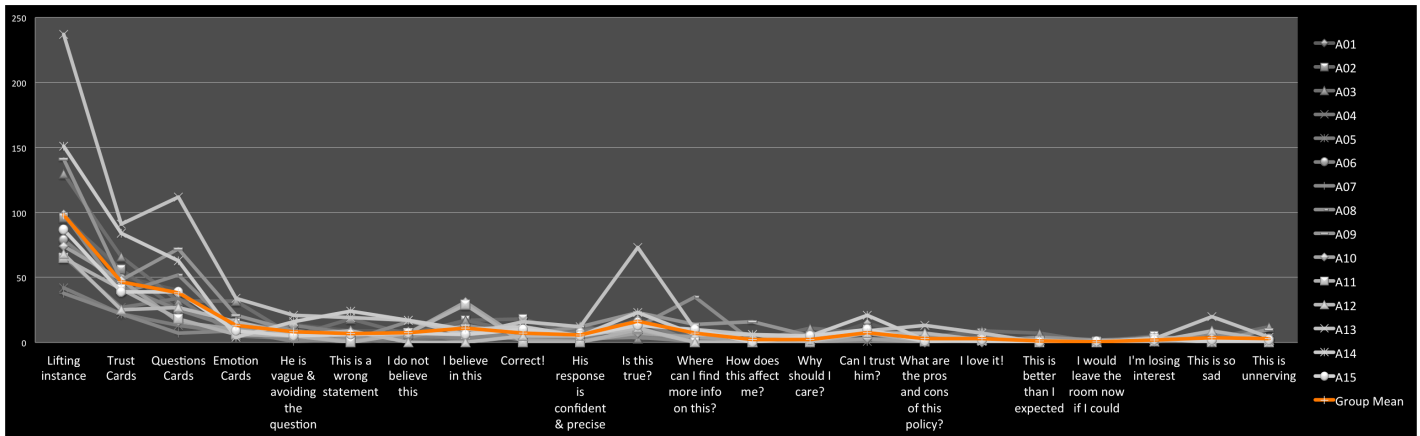
this representation allows for the detection of outliers and other interesting cases.

Moreover, the second graphic, which derives from the first one, could be presented to individual viewers to encourage reflection on their responses with respect to those around them. These are just a few examples of the analytical and interpretation power of the method we designed.



Farage: "You can't do that. You haven't got this power. You haven't got this control."
Clegg: "Yes, you do. Yes, you do."

Farage: "We do not have that power as members of the European Union and that's the truth of it."
Clegg: "Yes, you do. Yes."



We are currently undertaking research to compare the wide-ranging and often nuanced audience reactions to the debate captured by the flashcards with live reactions via social media captured by techniques such as sentiment analysis. We hypothesise that, while the latter might point to broad trends of audience approval or disapproval of the debaters, it will not be able to capture the multidimensionality of the audience response; it will not be able to explain why viewers approve or disapprove of debaters' claims and performances; it will not be able to point to ways in which viewers feel confused and in need of specific kinds of information; and it will not be able to provide detailed accounts of how specific individuals respond to the debate. In contrast, the method that we have designed has the potential to provide all of these aspects of analysis – and more.

Harnessing audience feedback on a mass scale

Of course, the experiment that we have described is very limited. The use of paper flashcards in a face-to-face setting can only capture a small number and range of reactions to a televised debate. The number and type of people in our sample

cannot be regarded as representative of a wider population. (And that is why repeat that we draw no political conclusions from what our participants told us; our sole aim was to test a methodological concept).

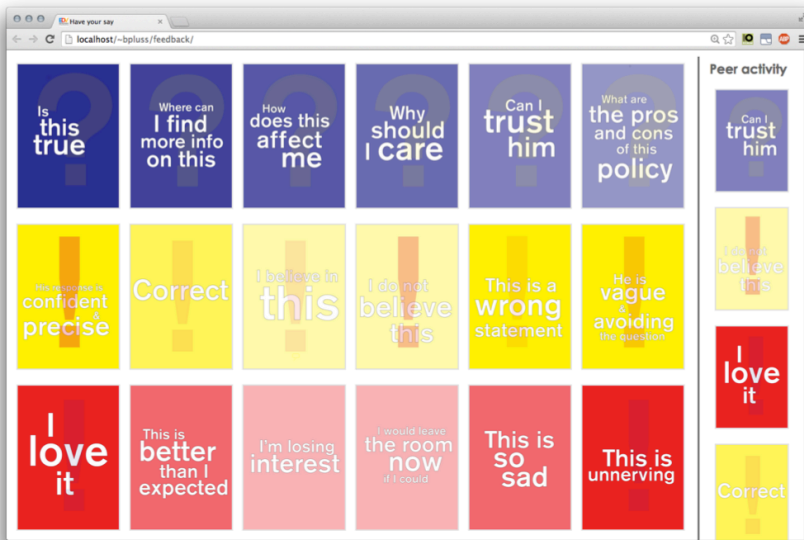
We are aware that many people will be watching the 2015 election debates online – or on a TV screen at the same time as accessing other digital media. For this reason, we have developed a mobile app that will be used during the 2015 debates. This will enable us to gather feedback from a large, nationally representative sample of debate viewers. The app replicates the successful designs used in the paper flashcard experiment (such as colours, layout and typography), but have been revised to relate directly to the democratic capabilities and entitlements we have derived from our

audience research (see EDV Project Briefing 2014.01 for details of what these are and how we arrived at them).

Following the 2015 election debates, we shall publish an analysis of how viewers' demand for specific democratic capabilities and entitlements were triggered at specific moments in the debate in relation to particular topics and themes. We shall produce such an analysis at both a macro (aggregate) level and a micro (individual) level. Our aim then will be to refine the process and make it freely available for use in other contexts.

EDV Research Team

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ⁱ House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, 2014. 'Broadcast General Election Debates - HL 171, 2nd Report of Session 2013–14'. The Stationery Office Limited, paragraphs 163/4).