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### **The Tartan Other: A qualitative analysis of the visual framing of Alex Salmond and the Scottish National Party in the British Press**

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MSc in Media and Communications

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**Dissertation submitted to the Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, August 2015, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MSc in Media, Communication and Development. Supervised by Dr Damian Tambini.**

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Published by Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science ("LSE"), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

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# **The Tartan Other:**

## **A qualitative analysis of the visual framing of Alex Salmond and the Scottish National Party in the British Press**

**Ross Longton**

### **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation explores the presence of media bias in the British online press. Through a visual analysis of the framing of the Scottish National Party (SNP) prior to the independence referendum of 2014, the meanings and implications of reoccurring visual motifs in photojournalism are analysed – revealing how the construction of online visual content is conducive to the generation of media bias and journalist subjectivity.

The main findings of this enquiry present evidence of a prevalent and effective media bias in online visual content. Through an analytical framework that focuses on media use of semiotic signs, codes and visual frames, it was found that both Alex Salmond and the constituents of the Scottish National Party were presented typically as arcane and esoteric threats towards the British political status-quo. In essence: as discordant, antagonistic and unpredictable outsiders challenging British politics. As Others.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Young men and women who are new to journalism had – like they do in Putin’s Russia – to fight their way through crowds of protestors, frightened as to how they do their jobs. Nick Robinson, BBC Political Editor. (20<sup>th</sup> August, 2015)

On October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012, amid growing social and political disenchantment, an increasing percentage of the Scottish population declared they ‘no longer feel part of the Westminster system’ (Ascherson, 2015) and consented for the First Minister of Scotland, Alex Salmond, and the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, to sign the Edinburgh Agreement: a legislative contract dedicated to providing an independence referendum that ‘meets the highest standards of fairness, transparency and propriety’ (Scottish Government, 2014).

Subsequently, on September the 18<sup>th</sup>, 2014, the Scottish National Party successfully instigated a nation-wide vote to determine whether Scotland should secede from the United

Kingdom and become an independent sovereign state. Residents of Scotland were asked to answer either 'Yes' or 'No' in response to the question: 'Should Scotland be an independent country?' – concluding with a majority of 55.3% voting no in opposition to 44.7% voting yes (BBC News, 2014a).

With the world 'warily watching on' (Ayed, 2014) the referendum was both heralded as a 'revival of British politics' (Gardiner, 2015: 2) and feared as a harbinger where 'the political generation cower with dread at the rise of the separatists' (Ayed, 2014). During this process, the campaign gained extensive media exposure on both a national and global level – generating not only worldwide commentary (Winch, 2014) but also inviting comparison to other politically volatile regions pushing for their own reforms such as Spain's Catalonia (Mas, 2014) and the South Asian region of Kashmir (Whitehead, 2014). Notably, the European Commissioner Karel De Gucht, even went as far as stating: 'If Scotland had chosen independence, it would have been a political landslide of the nature of the break-up of the Soviet Empire' (Channel 4 News, 2014).

However, much of the media discourse during these months conveyed both subtle and explicit prejudicial motifs in its portrayal of the political contest between the Scottish Nationalists and the British Unionists – ranging from equivocal nuances such as the BBC's political editor, Nick Robinson, carefully editing a press conference concerning Alex Salmond (Carrell, 2014), to explicit fear mongering from leading politicians such as Boris Johnson: '... the Scots are on the verge of an act of self-mutilation that will trash our global identity' (Johnson, 2014).

Despite this, *The BBC*, amongst others, continues to purport claims of: 'holding all political leaders to account - no matter which party they represent - as one of the cornerstones of impartial journalism' (The Press Association, 2015a). However, condemnation from journalists such as *The Guardian's* George Monbiot, who denounced the British media as acting as part of a collaborative and punitive media framework that functions as a: '... chamber of the corrupt heart of Britain, pumping fear, misinformation and hatred around the body politic' (Monbiot, 2014), encapsulates the increasingly austere narratives being generated in the press when a YouGov poll in the *Sunday Times* placed the Scottish Nationalists in the lead for the first time at 51% in September of 2014 (Davidson, 2014).

Even a perfunctory discourse analysis of British media sources substantiates such claims of partisan journalism: with Dominic Lawson of the *Daily Mail* comparing Alex Salmond and the 'threat' of independence to that of Hitler (Lawson, 2014); *The Telegraph* equating him to



Robert Mugabe (The Telegraph, 2014); Simon Heffer's patronisingly entitled '*Little Scotlanders*' article in *The Spectator* which generalises the Scottish populace as: '... addicted to welfare... embracing the something for nothing society... never leaving because they know we subsidise them, and Turkeys do not vote for Christmas' (Heffer, 2014) and Melanie Reid in *The Times* sneering: 'What spoilt, selfish, childlike fools those Scots are... They simply do not have a clue how lucky they are' (Reid, 2014). Additionally, Dr John Robertson of Media Politics at the University of West Scotland this year published an extensive content analysis of televised broadcasts. Having watched, transcribed and coded over 640 hours of British coverage of the referendum over the course of a year, the research project evidenced: '... a preponderance of anti-independence statements, a majority of anti-independence evidence and a heavy personalisation of the debate around the character of Alex Salmond with the latter being portrayed as selfish and undemocratic' and decisively concluded that: '... mainstream coverage of the independence referendum campaigns have not been fair or balanced' (Robertson, 2014).

Since then, a petition demanding an independent enquiry into BBC bias has now achieved 80,000 signatures (Moore, 2015), Scottish politicians frequently appeal for a devolved media structure (Johnson, 2015) and large-scale protests have been co-ordinated outside the BBC Scotland headquarters in Glasgow (BBC, 2014b) - the sentiments of betrayal and anger felt across swathes of the Scottish population towards the British media encapsulated by the inquiry of *The Sunday Herald's* editor, Richard Walker: 'I don't understand why we are the only newspaper that sees independence as a viable option, when so many people across all sections of Scottish society are supporting it' (Chisholm, 2014).



**Fig. 1** 'Scottish Independence: Yes protest at BBC 'bias', The Scotsman: 14/09/2014

This research paper therefore seeks to question the editorial integrity of the British online press – investigating how a self-professed elevated public service, dedicated to acting as a ‘resource of judgement, for the cognitive aesthetic and moral analysis in our confrontation with the world’ (Silverstone, 2007: 44) - is instead following the pathologies of an autocratic media agenda. One damningly acknowledged even by *The BBC*’s own economic editor Robert Peston: ‘... the media is completely obsessed by the agenda set by the newspapers... if we think *The Daily Mail* and *Telegraph* will lead with this, we should. It’s part of the culture’ (Brown, Deans, 2014).

This objective will be achieved by a visual analysis of online visual content across a range of digital British newspaper websites during the three months prior to the Scottish referendum. Interestingly, despite prevalent journalistic and academic literature discussing media bias present within the referendum already existing – with leading journalists such as Paul Mason stating he had not seen the ‘corporation’ operating in such all-out propaganda mode since the invasion of Iraq (Kelly, 2014), and George Monbiot sombrely reflecting: ‘... one of the roles of *The Guardian*, which has no proprietor is to represent the unrepresented... On Scottish independence I believe we have fallen short’ (Monbiot, 2014) - the themes of representation are often focused only on textual narratives such as newspapers or the rhetoric of political speeches.

Therefore, in order to contribute to the academic arbitration of the media-political phenomenon of the Scottish referendum, this dissertation offers a perspective that focuses exclusively on the formation of visual content – seeking in particular to scrutinise how Alex Salmond and the SNP were ‘othered’ through the framing techniques and visual constructs of digital news articles. It will consider the influence that photojournalism has achieved during the proliferation of online digital content in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Hill, 2015: 3) and ultimately offer a visual analysis of how overly personalised portrayals of SNP values and policies were created to impact the ‘Yes’ campaign’s prospects in negative terms. For as stressed by Grau:

The digital image represents endless options for manipulation... to manage this deluge, a competence in images is vital, but this is lacking in our culture that is still dominated by writing. Illiteracy has largely been overcome, but aniconism – the ability to interpret images adequately - has not yet even been a matter of public concern (2011: 7).

Finally, whilst the intention of this research is to offer a new perspective on the existing scholarship that concerns itself with the proximity of photojournalism and media bias - it does not purport to identify an absolute and unequivocal truth from the data collected, but

rather, offers only an account of the author's own observations. However, it does remain ambitious in its hope that the identification and analysis of such semiotic signs, codes, and visual frames will elicit a greater level of public inquiry and scepticism towards the British media institutions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For as stated by LSE's Professor Patrick Dunleavy: 'The U.K has been united for 300 years... one way or another, we're going to have five years of constitutional chaos' (Associated Press, 2014) - and during a time of such media-enforced paralysing political acquiescence, it remains crucial that society continues to critique those who operate and control these rarefied positions of media and political power.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The media and representation**

'Impartiality, trust and independence' (Riordan, 2014: 1) have long been perceived as the centric principles of journalism. However, modern surveys dictate that this trust is misplaced and journalism is now consistently ranked amongst the least-trusted professions of society (Chakelian, 2015). Furthermore, with such a proliferation of technology and science fundamentally transforming the profession, the way narratives and significant events are reported is becoming both more progressive, but also more complex.

As a society, our understanding of the world and those within it is now based on representation – we continually learn, visualise and imagine those around us through the media (Van Dijk, 2000: 36). As Anderson explains: '... the members of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (1991: 6) - meaning that this 'imagined' representation is both created and defined by a media discourse that permits the visualisation of others.

Representation is increasingly becoming defined by a digitalised format, and as such, a new form of media literacy is required – that is, an awareness and examination of the institutions, technologies, techniques and agendas of corporate media involved during the creation of meaning (Shepherd, 2002: 6). Or as defined by Livingstone, the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate information in any variety whilst processing an image or text (2004: 3). Similarly, Hall recognises the concept of representation is now an important consideration in the study of culture as a theory that bridges the generation of meaning, symbolism and language within society (1997: 15) - and as Rose notes, recently Western

society has become so over-saturated with visual content that images now dictate the way in which we perceive the world and interact with it (2012: 4).

This indicates that a new form of media literacy is now required more than ever as society increasingly surrenders greater amounts of trust to media discourses to depict the truth and represent others both accurately and objectively. However, it still remains a dangerous perquisite to leave such power unchallenged, especially within politics, as a space in which meaning is communicated to the general public (Schlesinger, 2001: 259). As cautioned by Lester and Ross - when we allow the media to perceive individuals or groups in certain ways – that is, as entertainers, criminals or even threats – it becomes easy to perceive unrepresentative illustrations of the group as reality (2003: 3). Likewise, Barry also warns of the ability of the visual content in our news media to evoke emotive rather than critical reasoning processes (Barry et al. 2005: 45).

Representation must therefore be understood as a form of symbolism – one where textual, visual or linguistic signs and constructs are necessary to depict those around us. Whilst it provides a ‘conceptual map’ of others and a society different to our own (Hall, 1997: 18) it also ultimately enables the receiver of the visual content to perceive the world in a manner where they are ‘told about it... before they can see it’ (Lippmann, 2012: 90). In essence, the media is significant as a central institution in disseminating ideology and meaning throughout society – orchestrating every day consciousness through its pervasiveness, accessibility and symbolic capacity (Gitlin, 1992: 2). However, as cautioned by Lewis, as an audience we consent to these media frameworks of domination willingly – perceiving them ‘not as something oppressive’ but as something ‘experienced as fun’ (2001: 86) – meaning crucially, the media must first be understood as an agent of symbolism and meaning construction.

### **The importance of images in making meaning**

Increasingly, academic discourse is becoming more concerned with the fundamental association between visual content and how knowledge is produced. Donis stresses the importance of understanding the ubiquitous presence of images around us: ‘... from nearly our first experience of the world, we organise our needs and pleasures, preferences and fears, with great dependence on what we see’ (1973: 1). Whilst Fyfe and Law similarly recognise that it is through ‘... depiction, picturing and seeing’ that society primarily interprets the world around it (1988: 2).

Today, society continues to remain routinely defined by this visual culture – one of imagery, symbols and colour (Liu, 2013: 1). Importantly, as this becomes a societal norm, non-verbal content is transforming from an agent of illustration, to one of meaning making - and therefore, emerging as a new cultural site (Duncum, 2004: 259).

However, even this preliminary understanding of visual content is subject to continual challenges. Rapid technology advancements unceasingly impact the methods of human communication and how meaning is being generated, and consequentially, society is facing a problem where the distinction between what is perceived and what is actually known is becoming increasingly hard to discern (Jenks, 1995: 1-3).

Interestingly, Kress and Van Leeuwen note a ‘staggering inability’ of society to consider in a serious or sustained way how these symbols of meaning are communicated by images (1990: 3). This in itself remains one of the paradoxes of modern journalism - whilst the public is quick to scrutinise the intentions of textual and linguistic narratives and thereafter quickly provide condemnation if perceived as subjective or biased - often the natural reflection of reality purported by visual content means that the fact the press photograph is: ‘... an object that has been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed and treated according to professional, aesthetic or ideological norms in which are so many factors of connotation’ - remains overlooked entirely (Barthes, 1977: 19). This discrepancy between the scrutiny of written texts and visual media is unsurprising, Lippmann notes: ‘... photographs seem utterly real. They come, we imagine directly to us, without human meddling... they are the most effortless food for the mind conceivable’ (2012: 50) and consequentially, the ability of photographic content to purport a natural reality over textual narratives is infinitely more complex (Batziou, 2011: 17).

As a process that enables the ‘selecting and filtering of photographs and contributing to the creation of ideologically charged products’ (ibid, 20) there is a necessity to deconstruct these symbols – that is, to understand how society is being influenced and programmed towards subconscious dispositions. Recently, Hill and Schwartz summarised this necessity in that: ‘we have so integrated news pictures into our everyday access to the world that we hardly pause to understand their operations, both as points of entry into the present and as windows into the past. Because we employ news pictures as orienting tools, we rarely set them down and look more closely at their workings’ (2015: 2). Likewise, this is supported by Wardle who identifies the role photographs play in reinforcing the myths of objectivity (2007: 265) and Barthes who notes the press photograph as an object that has been: ‘...worked on, chosen,

composed, constructed, and treated according to professional, aesthetic or ideological norms which are so many factors of connotation' (1977: 19).

### **Why photojournalism needs semiotic analysis**

Having established that photojournalism objectivity is frequently not as impartial as or as transparent as society would like to believe, it remains necessary to challenge the underlying assumptions that a subject must necessarily exist in the same way it is depicted in journalistic content (Sontag, 1977: 5).

Lasica states that society gives credence to a photograph more readily than they would a text due to trusting what is visualised more than what can be cognitively processed (1989: 25). Similarly, Tirohl also recognises that photojournalism has avoided the same scrutiny as the rest of the journalistic profession – enduring due to its ability to 'feed off a history of photographic deceit... leaving no trace of its own identity' (2000: 337). Therefore, visual semiotics - identified by Rose as: '...offering a very full box of analytical tools for taking an image apart and tracing how it works in a broader system of meaning' (2001: 69) – is required to enable this scrutiny of visual content.

The term multimodality is used often in semiotics as a means of identifying society's increasing tendency to 'combine semiotic modes... as a communicative artefact' (Van Leeuwen, 2005: 28). It not only articulates how every semiotic mode contains meaning potential – whether visual, auditory, verbal or pictorial (Liu, 2013: 1259) - but more importantly, also signifies of the increasing speed with which meaning-making is evolving in a social, economic, technological and cultural context. Appropriately, Crystal therefore perceives semiotics as being able to 'deal with all patterned human communication in all its modes and in all its contexts' (1987: 399), whilst Dyer similarly notes it as a central means of questioning the interpretations of all forms of communication – scrutinising how and to whom they impose meaning (1982: 115). Essentially, semiotic analysis is an effective system of explaining the relationship between denotation and connotation – describing the interconnection between the signifier of visual content and what it actually signifies. In very simplistic terms: 'denotation is what is photographed, connotation is how it is photographed' (Fiske, 1982: 91).

Hodge and Kress continue to develop this method further through their work on social semiotics - a means of approaching the study of such visual content whilst recognising that symbolism cannot be studied in isolation (1988: viii). This means that communication and

representation must not only be restricted to linguistic codes, but the ‘multiplicity of visual, aural, behavioural and other such codes’ must also be recognised for their ability to pervasively create meaning (ibid, vii). Similarly, Van Leeuwen and Jewitt support this more holistic development of semiotics, proposing that it is not only crucial in answering what images represent, but also how and in what way they convey meaning (2001: 92). Finally, Kress and Van Leeuwen suggest that there are three communicative meta-functions of linguistics - ideational meta-function, interpersonal meta-function and textual meta-function (1990: 41) – all which can all be extended to visual communication as ‘grammars’ of analysis (Liu, 2013: 1260). How these grammars operate are explained in detail through the tables in appendixes 2-7, explaining more clearly how interactive, compositional and salience meanings are constructed through a range of symbols, methods and characteristics in visual content.

From this analytical framework, it is proposed that when all the compositional and interactive aspects of an image are examined simultaneously, only then are themes such as power, interaction, othering, and bias understood properly as ‘meaning potentials’ (Aijmer, 2013: 12). In essence, our ability to recognise how society perceives images is fundamentally connected to the wider political, social and cultural contexts in which we reside (Sturken, Cartwright, 2001: 21).

Ultimately, semiotics must be understood as a crucial method in the analysis of how images create meaning. That is, how they are capable of constructing ‘mental pictures’ of person or events that may not necessarily exist (Gamson et al. 1992: 374).

### **The role of visual framing in photojournalism**

Today, framing has particular significance due to its ‘cultural resonance’ and ability to select, promote and choose narratives that endorse particular political perspectives (Entman, 2010: 391). Gamson and Modigliani emphasise its functionality in creating meaning - recognising it as an interpretive schema that transforms media phenomena in the world by: ‘taking on their meaning and by embedding them in a frame or story line that organises them and gives them coherence’ (1989: 157). Whilst there is no objection to this organisational method in principle, it still remains crucial to understand that within this process is also a propensity for certain meanings to be promoted as others are simultaneously obscured - that is, how the media is able to covertly influence and determine how an issue or subject is characterised and understood by society (Scheufele, Tewksbury, 2007: 11). In summary, Robert Entman provides the most comprehensive definition of the framing process: ‘To frame is to select

some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in communicating a text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment for the recommendation described' (1993: 52).

The method therefore has a variety of descriptions: Silverstone labels it as media 'boundary work' (2007: 19), Lakoff describes it as powerful mental structures that 'shape the way we see the world' (2004: xv) and Ross identifies it as a combination of words, narratives, juxtapositions and images (2003: 31-32). What is clear however is that its primary objective is to emphasise certain perspectives of a narrative whilst obscuring others. That is, constructing a visual reference point that encourages the receiver to perceive an issue, theme or occurrence in a particular way (Kuypers, 2006: 8).

This research is therefore particularly interested in how framing is able to promote a particular problem definition – and more significantly, just how important this process is in condensing multiple interpretations of news media and acting as a central and defining agent in our news coverage. For it follows that, if framing is able to influence what people think, it must also be able to dictate to us what to think about (Entman, 2010: 392) (Kuypers, 2006: 11).

### **Bias and Othering in the political media**

Kuhn warns of the ability for visual content in journalism to appear as an adequate stand in for the human eye – connoting truth, authenticity and managing to appear representational - ultimately leading to a misconception, where the validity of a photograph is grounded in the fallacy that 'seeing is believing' (1985: 27). It is within these frames – the end product of editorial direction, emphasis and dismissal – that those in power generate marginalising effects and nuanced prejudices. For as argued by Hall, such a process is not only an effective method of framing meaning, but also evidence of a 'systematically structured over-accessing to the media of those in powerful and privileged positions' (Hall et al. 1978: 58).

Entman also supports this notion – stating that, at the direction of editorial management, not only do journalists tend to steer away from policy substance and fail to place high priority on confirming the truth of claims (2010: 395) - but also have a tendency to feed on the existing reputations of the political elite and perpetuate them further - setting off a downward spiral of depictions of weakness and unpopularity (ibid, 393-396). Kuypers further identifies this as an omnipotent process in politics - used centrally as a means of introducing, enhancing or demeaning public perceptions towards a political movement (ibid: 391) - creating a 'filtered



reality' (Kuypers, 2006: 8) loaded with manipulative symbols and concealed agendas that evoke stereotypes – whether textual or visual (Shah et al. 2002: 367). For as stated by Gitlin, one of the important tasks of the ideology present in media symbols, is to: 'define away its opposition' (1992: 1).

In essence, this means the media is able to manufacture public policy and discourses of political elites into the private space of the citizen – determining who to endorse or who to 'other' at a local, national and global level through its political narratives (Evans, 2015: 3). Not only does this ultimately decide which ideology is manifest and which is masked (Gitlin 1992: 2), but more significantly, the concept of the other is nurtured through the ability of the media to empower and demean, and to support or remove notions of a collective sense of belonging (Anderson, 1991: 5-7).

In summary, othering is primarily concerned with the attribution of faults to another (Evans, 2015: 3). This is achieved when 'modes of signification' (Barthes, 2000: 109) become emphasised through discourse concerned with strangeness, separation and exclusion (Baumann, 2005: 21) - creating a narrative where the 'selective subtraction of certain desirable properties' is carried out and the 'other' is deprived of some essential positive characteristics 'whilst the self escapes lightly' (Brown, Theodossopoulos, 2004: 6). Alarming, Van Dijk identifies that this process often happens without the awareness of the recipients (2000: 276) – leaving society in a reductionist state where emotive narratives of 'us' against 'them' prevail. As groups become constructed in specific ways, stereotyping emerges as individuals or the collective are defined by a few essential characteristics (Hall, 1997: 257) - ultimately leading to binary representations where the self and the other are ordered by 'what is good is lacking in them' or even, 'what is lacking in us is still present in them' (Baumann, 2004: x).

## **RESEARCH QUESTION AND CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND**

### **Nationalism and the SNP: A case study**

Cairney and McGarvey identify the media as key filters of information that substantially influence how people perceive politics in Scotland (2013: 22) noting that 'traditionally at election time, tabloids become almost comical in their bias' and that media coverage in general becomes a 'simplified process rife with partisanship and personalised accounts of politics' (ibid, 33). Therefore due to the 'nefarious possibilities' and 'freewheeling exercises of

pure manipulation' in photojournalism (Druckman, 2001: 1041), this research will exclusively focus on scrutinising the assumed objectivity of visual content in the British press.

Interestingly, both the SNP and the Better Together parties have claimed the creation and use of media symbols in the referendum in order to subvert their positions. As recently as August 21st, 2015, the dispute was still on-going – with Nick Robinson acknowledging 'sources of regret' regarding media policy during the referendum, but also - in a similar vein to Alex Salmond - claiming to be a subject of 'intimidation and bullying' through the media (McNab, 2015). Most significantly however, is Robinson's direct reference to the central purpose of this investigation, to analyse symbolism and meaning through the news media: 'Alex Salmond was using me as a symbol. A symbol of the wicked metropolitan Westminster classes sent from England, sent from London, in order to tell the Scots what they ought to do' (ibid).

Furthermore, the rationale for selecting Alex Salmond and the SNP as the focus of this dissertation is twofold. Firstly, the referendum was of huge political and societal significance. The earlier derision of David Cameron in 2010 when he belittled the SNP and its ambitions for Scotland as inconsequential - lampooning their existence as nothing more than a contingent 'living in a perpetual episode of Braveheart' (Hepburn, 2010) – is certainly now invalid. Whilst this is not the first time political elites sought to 'systematically 'other' the Scottish, Irish and Welsh' by referring to them as marginal groups of 'ignorant country folk unable to cope with city ways' (Porter, 2001: 105) or as 'stupid, lecherous, cowardly and quarrelsome' (ibid, 115) - the significant difference is that this time 97% of the population registered to take part in the vote - a total of 4,285,323 citizens – making it the largest electorate the country has ever known (Brooks, 2014a). As a result, people who were not exercised by any kind of politics saw the referendum as 'an opportunity to change the organisation of society' (ibid).

Therefore, not only did this research see the most significant resurgence of genuine political enthusiasm in Scotland in a generation as an opportunity to qualitatively analyse an emotive, genuine and exciting media phenomenon, but it also viewed the referendum as a unique circumstance in which to scrutinize the malleability of the media in a modern context.

Secondly, the subject matter of this dissertation was inspired by a particularly powerful article in *The Guardian* by George Monbiot, who concluded in his column: '...one of the roles of *The Guardian*, which has no proprietor, is to represent the unrepresented - and it often does so to great effect. On Scottish independence I believe we have fallen short'

(Monbiot, 2014). Therefore an interest in media policy towards Alex Salmond and the SNP became more than just one of personal curiosity, but also an opportunity to truly question and scrutinise the editorial policies of the contemporary British news media. In essence, seeking to question the sagacious narratives of our media structures - scrutinising how the formation of these 'truths' were generated, and how the symbols perpetuated allowed both the production of hegemonic meanings and the development of counter hegemonic ways of seeing (Carragee, Roefs 2004: 227-228).

Finally, this research ultimately has ambitions of not only helping the scrutiny of photojournalism gain a greater foothold in academia – but more significantly, drawing attention to the pressing need to hold the increasingly visual genre of new media and journalism to account - especially as society transforms from a typographic era to one dominated by visual content. For as Callaghan and Schnell assert, the media shape the way the public thinks about politics and 'alters the criteria by which political players are judged' (2005: 2). That is, by increasing society's knowledge of how to properly deconstruct these images and symbols, it will not only be able to progress beyond a rudimentary understanding of visual content in our news sources, but also - if the current anti-Europe and anti-immigration sentiments of Britain are anything to go by (The Economist, 2015) - will better hold to account future British media in portraying debates in an impartial and objective manner.

This dissertation therefore seeks to answer the following research question:

'How was Alex Salmond and the Scottish National Party framed in online visual content within the British news media during the three months preceding the independence referendum of September 2014?'

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

From conception to completion, this dissertation has tried to remain conscious of its own research agenda and the intrinsic biases of its author. To counter such a disposition, it has remained as reflexive as possible - endeavouring to at least be aware of, if not challenge, the assumptions that enter or affect the research. For as stressed by Neuendorf, any scholastic undertaking should attempt to minimise the predispositions of the author (Neuendorf, 2002: 11) and any research carried out should seek to explicitly examine how our subject, location, personal beliefs and emotions enter into our analysis (Hsuing, 2008: 212).

As a starting point however, it is important to acknowledge that the primary research objective of this dissertation - to prove the existence of an anti-independence media bias – is in itself, biased. Independent research projects are by nature, an exercise of academic curiosity and personal intuition and therefore already formed on a basis of personal motives. Furthermore, trying to claim complete objectivity, whilst conducting such qualitative research, is difficult, for latent variables remain more subjective than those that are manifest (Potter, Levine-Donnerstein, 1999: 265).

Consequently, this research has attempted to negate this effect in the following ways: by focusing the research exclusively on visual data; disengaging the research as much as possible from extended newspaper, radio or TV debates and avoiding direct or indirect contact with proponents or politicians on either side of the referendum. These criteria were incorporated throughout all stages of this research with a view of arriving at as objective an analysis as possible - despite the inevitably subjective, emotive and contested nature of the topic in question.

Furthermore, rather than perceive such intrinsic author-biases exclusively as a methodological weakness - rather paradoxically - it can also be viewed as one of the research's strengths. Existing academic literature notes the benefits of such author subjectivity: citing that free-ranging academic licence and a refusal to be prescriptive about methodology encourages analysts to draw on references of personal experience and further underpins the validity of cultural studies (Van Leeuwen, Jewitt, 2001: 90) and that it is both beneficial and inconceivable to undertake such qualitative research without recognising our inherent propensity to look at visual data with an individual 'identity' (Lister, Wells, 2001: 64).

Therefore, whilst the author is aware of the intrinsic predispositions in effect during this research, the task of finding meaning in visual analysis fundamentally remains a biased procedure - but one absolutely necessary for the completion of this research. For as summarised by Collier, whilst visual analysis requires us: 'to trust our feelings and impressions' (2001: 39) it is also: 'both legitimate and necessary to allow ourselves to respond artistically or intuitively to visual images' (ibid, 59).

Nonetheless, this still renders the line between what the research hopes to prove and what the researcher hopes to find increasingly indistinct – and the following sections therefore aim to justify as fully as possible the rationale for the scope, depth, selection process and visual framework used to substantiate this research.

*Why visual analysis?*

Van Leeuwen and Jewitt note that visual analysis not only provides a study of visual content both with and without their context, but more significantly, is a means of analysing the dynamic unfolding of specific social practices in which non-verbal communication and images play a significant role in society (2001: 3). Similarly, Dyer also sees the method as a crucial means of understanding: 'the simple interpretation of objects and forms of communication to investigations of the organisation and structure of artefacts, and in particular, to enquire how it produces meaning' (1982: 115). Finally, Wardle also argues that the ability of photographs to 'both capture and create reality' and 'the role news images play in reinforcing the myth of objectivity' underscores the importance of examining visual constructs in journalism (2007: 265).

*Why not other methods of analysis?*

Whilst quantitative research methods, such as content analysis, have a range of empirical research benefits (Holsti, 1969: 14), it ultimately reduces research findings to the average or median position on key questions (Macnamara, 2005: 18). Consequentially, such a method that examines only the recurrence of data does not necessarily help capture the context within which a media text becomes significant (Newbold et al. 2002: 84), but instead attempts to extrapolate meaning on the basis that the value or subject that appears most frequently is the most important (Burgelin, 1972: 319) (Holsti, 1969: 6).

In essence, it is conjecture to assume that quantitative measures of value, such as frequency, size, occurrence or positioning equate to meaning or significance when conducting visual analysis – and as Newbold states: 'it would be too simplistic to base decision in this regard on mere figures from a statistical content analysis' (Newbold et al. 2002: 80). Thus, in very simplistic terms, quantitative investigation methods were excluded for their inability to effectively explore the concealed constructions of meaning in visual content.

*Why semiotics?*

Despite conventional academic disciplines often treating semiotics as a peripheral methodology (Mick, 1988: 20), it remains crucial as a method in both situating and problematising the processes of media representation. As such, it enables a more holistic understanding of the ability of media representation to generate bias and influence through visual content – in particular providing a close analysis of the surface of media images to reveal the deeper layers of meaning concealed within.

Furthermore, whilst semiotics is a huge field and no treatment of it can claim to be fully comprehensive – it is recognised not only as the predominant methodology most concerned with representation (ibid, 20) but also as addressing a central concern for meaning-making (Chandler, 2007: 21). Therefore, its ability to illustrate the relationship between denotation and connotation – showing how the compositional dimension of meanings are generated through the grammar of images (Halliday, 1994: 101) - and how visual representation can nuance subconscious meaning just as effectively as words (Kress, Van Leeuwen, 2006: xxx) ultimately provides a means of analysing photojournalism free from visceral emotion.

#### *How will the data be analysed?*

As identified by Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, over emphasis or too rigid an application of systematic methodology for visual analysis is self-defeating, but rather it should be a plural, messy, contested and even creative process (2001: 73). Therefore, this analysis is based on a fusion of semiotic theories and methods that best illustrate not only what images represent, but also how they signify and convey meaning (Hall, 1997: 41).

These processes of signification are analysed through two key phases:

Firstly, an initial denotative analysis is employed in which the ‘obvious’ description of the visual content is provided as a means of identifying the main ‘signifiers’ portrayed. This will be supported by the compositional framework of Rose, who delineates five criteria for when looking at the denotative composition of an image: content, colour, spatial organisation, light, and expressive content (Rose, 2012: 79).

Secondly, a semiotic analysis is thereafter employed to closely examine the connotative implications of the visual content. This is used to deconstruct the images more closely, analysing how broader systems of meanings are created through the use of more obscured and nuanced symbols – scrutinising how they determine which meanings are legitimised and which are concealed. This second step of the analysis is based on a combination of both the semiological analysis checklist created by Dyer (appendix no.1) and the social semiotic principles proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (appendix no. 2-6).

#### *Data Selection: Why digital news articles?*

Firstly, on a very pragmatic level, online databases are hugely extensive and contain a greater depth of raw data to be explored – one that is more easily accessed, processed and stored digitally than traditional print. Secondly, the internet has embellished digital news articles with greater significance as media products that are now able to transcend traditional

boundaries of time and space and become accessible on a global scale (Knox, 2007: 20). Additionally, as a study of meaning-making, digital news sources provide a greater multimodality and can now convey a variety of linguistic, verbal or visual symbols than print genres are unable (Lemke, 2002: 301).

Lastly, not only is the digital revolution provoking an ideological and discursive new era of journalism, but it is also hugely significant as a cultural and social phenomenon. The ability of digital content to provoke socio-ideological differences into contest as it crosses national and cultural boundaries not only has lasting implications for the profession, but also makes the format a much more compelling study than that of traditional press. For as concluded by Duncum, there is 'no avoiding the multimodal nature of dominant and emerging cultural sites' (2004: 259)

### **Limitations of visual semiotic analysis**

Firstly, the visual analysis of images is largely polysemic – meaning that perceptions are subjective and therefore open to multiple constructions of meaning (Rose, 2001: 16). It remains a highly intuitive practice - one where inference and understanding of visual content is routinely dissimilar from one observer to the next – and whilst the same subject may be perceived, it remains unlikely its significance will be understood homogeneously. Accordingly, one of the shortcomings to therefore be aware of is the inclusion of influences of culture, race, education and societal characteristics as a determining variable when analysing data. For as noted by Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, different perspectives on text, context and social practice have significant implications for the way in which the producers and viewers of images may be included or implied in the analysis (2001: 7).

Secondly, the ambiguous methodology of visual analysis can make it difficult to justify ahead of more accredited academic practices - such as content analysis. Indeed, the use of an indistinct visual analysis framework over the structured approach provided by quantitative methods is cautioned by Newbold, warning that the analysis of latent meanings and privileging them over more obvious ones is often both unnecessary and has a propensity to 'tell people what they already know in a language they don't understand' (Newbold et al. 2002: 249).

### *Data Selection: Justification*

The research objectives of this dissertation intentionally did not consider, nor attempt to discuss, the pros and cons of Scottish independence, nor provide an extensive historical or contextual discussion of the politics of the referendum, but focused solely on the visual

portrayal of the debate. The decision to consider a range of news media sources was made due to the fact that the inclusion of a more substantial data set circumvents accusations frequently levelled at semiotic practices - where an exhaustive analysis of only a small database of visual content and images is conducted and studies thereafter face accusations of being unable to account for their representativeness (Rose, 2012: 144).

Accordingly, the data set was determined by Rose's definition of a sign as 'any unit of language, whether visual or verbal' (Rose, 2012: 113). However, if the analysis were to include every 'sign' in an online article that references Alex Salmond or the SNP from each of these media sources, the data set would be overwhelming, and certainly require more time and analytical depth than this dissertation is permitted. Therefore, this data set was condensed by 'how conceptually interesting' the researcher found the material (Rose, 2001: 73). This allows the academic credibility of the research to depend on the quality and integrity of the analysis, rather than on the range of data collected (ibid, 73). For as suggests Hall, the best way to analyse such contested subjects, is to justify in detail what meanings they seem to you to be producing (1997: 9).

However, whilst qualitative analysis is not required to meet the same provisions as quantitative analysis, it cannot be totally speculative either - for data simply drawn indiscriminately may fail to yield relative data and undermine the central purpose of the research to investigate certain issues or particular themes in detail (Macnamara, 2005: 17). For as summarised by Miles and Hubermann, qualitative research in particular must prioritise a conceptual question over concerns of 'representativeness' (1994: 29) and furthermore, rich detail is of limited value if not articulated in meaningful conclusions (Collier, 2001: 58).

#### *Data Selection: Process*

The data set sought to include an illustrative sample of British digital news resources – that is, without purporting to be absolutely representative, still comprise a range of media sources in both readership and political affiliation as a means of establishing a divergent data set.

Firstly, for the many accusations it is now facing of bias in the referendum, *BBC News* was selected. With availability in over 200 countries, it remains one of the oldest bastions of media power and a cornerstone of the British media - one that is central to British culture and politics (Naughton, 2004: 1) (Haenen, et al. 2001: 332).



Secondly, *The Guardian* was selected due to not only having ‘no proprietor’ (Monbiot, 2014) but also because it invested the most resources in its online news products (Lewis et al. 2008: 9). Similarly, *The Independent* was also selected for similar reasons, however it is worth noting the owner Tony O’Reilly also sees the importance of print journalism and still invests heavily on its traditional format (Lewis et al. 2008: 10). Finally, *The Daily Mail* was selected not only on a pragmatic level for its huge array of visual content (Brooker, 2012) but also its success in ‘reinventing popular journalism in the digital era’ and ‘pushing a news agenda intended to create, then exploit fear’ (Sturgeon, 2012).

Therefore, the above listed online news sites were selected in order to arrive at as varied and extensive a field as possible - ranging from established media institutions and ‘independent’ broadsheets, to the tabloid press. Furthermore, each website was also chosen with consideration to online website traffic – with web page visits being taken as an indicator of popularity and perceived trust by the British public (appendix no.7-8).

*The BBC*: 14.1 million

*The Guardian*: 7.7 million

*The Independent*: 2.5 million

*The Daily Mail*: 13.6 million

(Web Page Visits, Turvill, 2015)

Finally, the database of visual content analysed was also subject to the following restrictions imposed by the researcher:

- All visual content must be located through the search key words of: ‘Alex Salmond’; ‘SNP’; ‘The Scottish Referendum’ or ‘Scottish Independence’.
- The article must be made available online to the general public.
- The sample must be in the format of a digital news article.
- The article must be exclusively authored by: *The BBC*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent* or *The Daily Mail*.
- The article must contain at least one prevalent image.
- The article must be produced within the dates: 18/06/2014 - 18/09/2014.

## **ANALYSIS**

As explained in the earlier literature, due to ‘the convergence of many different signifying systems’ (Kress, Van Leeuwen 1990: 265), the signification of the images will be analysed as the end products of a coalition of meaning structures – each operating simultaneously as multimodal and multidimensional mode of visual production.

From the four sources chosen – *The BBC*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *The Daily Mail* – a myriad of news articles concerning Alex Salmond and the SNP were published during the period stipulated. By adhering to the requirements of the selection process as stated in the methodology, upwards of 130 images were initially selected. However, this number was reduced to 48 as duplications were removed and the data sample was narrowed to only include images believed to be the most pertinent and representative of the themes identified.

The 48 images that create the data set for this analysis is therefore composed from the following sources:

*The BBC: 24      The Guardian: 5      The Independent: 14      The Daily Mail: 5*

The quantity of images was decided upon due to the emphasis this research places on framing. Not only does a wider data set allow a greater representation of the images used during the specified time period, but it also enables reoccurring imagery, symbols and framing to be more readily identified across a varied spectrum of British political media. Additionally, as the main purpose of this research is to identify the occurrence of biased photojournalism – the fact that any symbol or image was reoccurring gave credence to claims of identifying partisanship - with reoccurrence signifying that any motif analysed was not an outlier or anomaly, but evidence of a repeating and representative feature within the data collected.

Therefore, the analysis was conducted through the following steps:

- An exemplar image was analysed in depth - identifying the main symbols denoted and meanings connotated.
- The significance of the meaning created and the construction of narratives within the image were scrutinised.

- Any motifs identified within the exemplar were thereafter supported by other similar samples found in the research data in order to substantiate claims of reoccurrence.

**Theme 1. Alex Salmond as Independence: The personification of a political debate.**

In the data collected, one of the most prevalent and reoccurring motifs was the personification of Alex Salmond as the political debate itself. Repeatedly, visual content rendered his image as the human embodiment of the referendum – ignoring other members of the SNP and constructing a perception of the debate as being one of only his own ambition and political aspirations.



**Fig. 2**

Figure 2 is the first selected ‘exemplar’ image. The photograph depicts Alex Salmond, standing alone, outside a building and holding a beverage. Although its denotations are simple – the connotations remain much more significant. Firstly, his portrayal or ‘representation’ is one of isolation: his manner is detached from that of the camera and his eyes are locked on to some distant view or internal thought. He is depicted as being completely disengaged from the viewer - not returning the gaze of the camera, nor engaging intimately with the viewer - but rather, staring off into the distance. The connotations of this lack of eye contact create implications of a taciturn and unapproachable individual. Furthermore, the perspective of the camera requires the viewer to physically look up and towards his person – a technique identified by Royce as placing the viewer in an inferior position to the subject (2007: 72). Not

only does such a perspective enhance an individual with ambitious and prodigious attributes, but it also creates impressions of superiority and an unchallengeable authority. All such physical constructions, and the connotations subsequently created, are therefore an effective means of isolating Alex Salmond as an individual that is both unapproachable and formidable.

Secondly, the background compositional framing of this image is also of particular significance, for as notes Dyer, ‘settings are carriers of meaning and are rarely value-free’ (1982: 105). This is indeed relevant, for the portrayal in Alex Salmond in this picture is loaded with damaging connotations.

As a starting point, attention must be given to the stone bastions on the left and right side of the image. Almost acting as secondary frames themselves, the stone structures included in the image are dark, mortared and ancient. It is not building material that would invoke perceptions of contemporary or conventional dwellings, but rather has an appearance of something fortified, resilient and venerable. Therefore, although the image may simply denote Alex Salmond positioned in front of a building, the connotations of it are much more profound – he is in essence, standing in front of a castle. Furthermore, standing alone, the image has heavy connotations of power, ambition and regality - that is, Alex Salmond is nuanced as a King of Scotland – one determined, dangerous and attempting to challenge the reigning monarchy of the United Kingdom. Through such a depiction - the referendum, the SNP and the vote for independence is effectively rendered as one where power is being contested only by a strange, unfamiliar and ambitious individual - not a widely supported and legitimate political party.

Furthermore, the banner stretching across the top of the image encourages these connotations further. Hanging just above Alex Salmond’s head, in a notable colour and distinctly tartan design – and thus exclusively Scottish association - the image is symbolic of a banner of war. This connotation of conflict is emphasised most effectively by the script actually depicted on the banner: ‘*Tartan Arms*’ - the wording containing powerful connotations of a political referendum that will be one of physical violence and state-wide destruction.

As such, when the compositional characteristics and framing of this image are taken into account, it is revealed as an effective means of personifying the referendum and the policies of the SNP to that of Alex Salmond. Furthermore, it is not even a conventional impression

that is rendered but one where Alex Salmond is under a physical banner of war – one tartan, emotive and symbolic as standard against the powers of Britain. Such a depiction could almost be an extra from Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*, where the cultural, social and political divisions between the Scottish and English are reduced to dividing battles lines of 'us' vs. 'them'. That is, during the referendum, there can be neither consensus, nor co-existence possible as a viable alternative, but a 'conflict' needing to be fought in which there will be victors and losers.

### *Supporting Images*

This personification of Alex Salmond, not as a participant in the debate, but as the debate itself, is explored more expansively through the following set of images. In figures 3 – 18, two key frames are used in particular to achieve this.

Firstly, through figures: 3, 4, 5, 8, 11, 13, 16, 17, 18, Alex Salmond is often juxtaposed in front of or alongside the Scottish saltire. As the sovereign flag of the Scottish state, the saltire contains significant symbolic power and the repeated association of Alex Salmond in proximity to it seeks to associate the two unconnected subjects as one entity. It should be noted that the saltire was never a bona fide representative of either side of the argument, but became closely affiliated with the SNP through this indoctrinated motif in the media.

In so doing, visual constructs were created that were able to effectively create connotations of Alex Salmond as being the symbol of Scotland himself. This anchoring of Alex Salmond as part of the saltire fundamentally undermines the cause of the SNP and the purpose of the referendum – a response to widespread social and political disenchantment with the government systems of Westminster - not just the dissatisfaction of one man.

In essence, this personification of Alex Salmond as the saltire - and vice-versa - is a damaging means of reducing a complex political grievance to a particular individual. Not only does it effectively distort the debate, but it also enables an effective means of associating negative traits regarding his personal character directly with the SNP's political policies and ambitions.



**Fig. 3**



**Fig. 4**



**Fig. 5**



**Fig. 6**



**Fig. 7**



**Fig. 8**



**Fig. 9**



**Fig. 10**





**Fig. 11**



**Fig. 12**



**Fig. 13**



**Fig. 14**



**Fig. 15**



**Fig. 16**



**Fig. 17**



**Fig. 18**

Secondly, in images 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, this motif of personification is further enforced through his repeated portrayal as a solitary figure. This remains extremely significant on a semiotic level, for as notes Entman, frames are important in creating representations which not only decide what to show, but also, what they decide to obscure or exclude (1993: 54).

Through repeated denotations of Alex Salmond as a singular representative of the political party, connotations are created of SNP policies and the referendum being of archetypal ambitions and individual aspirations. Consequentially, the political validity of the SNP becomes significantly more questionable when their representation is continually perpetuated as the ambitious impulses of a solitary figure.

Therefore, rarely, if ever, was Alex Salmond or the SNP displayed in photojournalism in a relatable, conventional and familiar social context – one where the framing included mass social support displayed by regular and genial members of Scottish society.

### **Theme 2. Alex Salmond – Alone in the dark.**

The next photograph to be examined in detail depicts Alex Salmond sitting alone in the dark, hunched forward and appearing tired, defeated and overwhelmed. Whilst these are the immediate and obvious descriptive characteristics of the image - the visual elements of meaning creation often proceed unnoticed and therefore a closer scrutiny of the representational structures involved is also necessary.



**Fig. 19**



The play between dark and light as a compositional meta-function is highly effective. Often, as is the case in such an image, the darkness from which Alex Salmond emerges is not only an effective means of providing a clandestine thematic presence around him – but also its use is a means of decontextualizing his person from the arguments and the people he is representative of. Through this frame - one where he is depicted as a product of the darkness itself - there remains no opportunity for the observer to engage with the wider symbols of Scotland or its people on a visual level. Salmond is depicted as an isolated figure and one devoid of human relationship, support or trust.

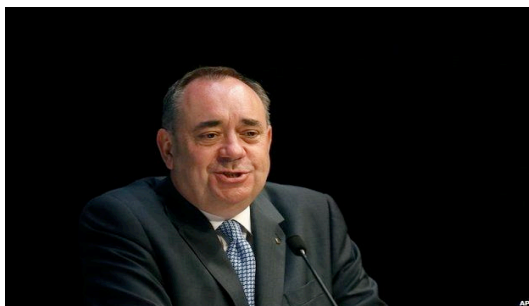
Furthermore, such an image, one so un-engaging and unaware of the camera lens, empties the image of personal connection - creating distance and themes of non-communication and isolation. This prevention of eye contact is also an effective signifier in its own right. Rather than observe a gaze that is reciprocal and understood, the viewer is placed in a position of power where Alex Salmond as a subject is watched and scrutinised rather than engaged with communicatively - his inability to return eye contact depleting the image of confidence or emotive connection.



**Fig. 20**



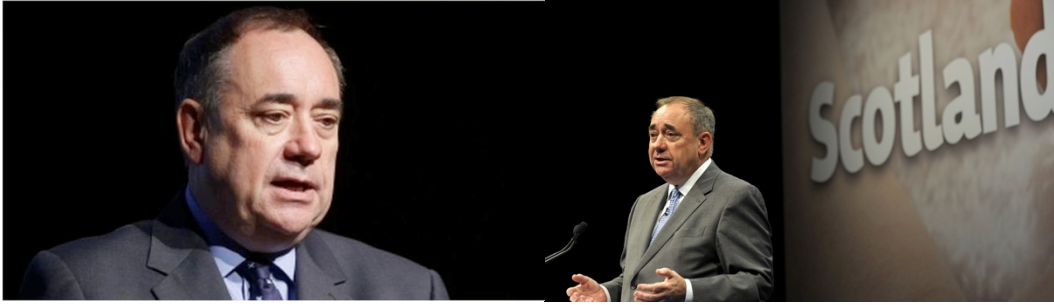
**Fig. 21**



**Fig. 22**



**Fig. 23**



**Fig. 24**

**Fig. 25**



**Fig. 26**

**Fig. 27**

The selection of images from 20-27 further lends credence to claims that Alex Salmond was frequently demonised within the British media as a figure to be feared – one unknown, mysterious and dangerous (McGee, 2014). As the above images show, his persona was continually subjected to a compositional and representational similarity in photojournalism. Certainly, when conducting a denotative overview of such images, the immediately apparent and reoccurring motif is evident – frames of total darkness surrounding a personal and close-up view of his face.

Furthermore, within these representations the semiotics of colour is employed heavily to create several effective signifiers. Firstly, with the contrast of an illuminated or intimate portrayal of Alex Salmond's face in comparison to the blackness of his surroundings a spotlight effect is created, presenting the impression of Alex Salmond as a man continually under pressure, scrutiny and tension.

Secondly, when images such as 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, depict Alex Salmond's face as the exclusive subject of a photograph, visual spheres of intimacy are created. This crosses the debate from one of political understanding to one of personal interpretation, within which Alex Salmond is routinely depicted as looking defeatist and introspective. The creation of such visual spheres are central in portraying Alex Salmond only as a figure that is isolated from public support and unsuited to challenge the political status quo of the United Kingdom.

Finally, figures 26 and 27 also carry strong thematic connotations of darkness versus light. Alex Salmond is presented continually as a character absent light, whereas Alistair Darling is framed as its source. This is in essence a highly effective symbolic display in which the intimidating SNP challenger emerges from the darkness to challenge the ideal, radiant and luminous Better Together candidate.

Throughout all these images, Alex Salmond fails to be presented as a head of state validated by wide ranging support, but is instead depicted routinely in a private sphere, where darkness, ambiguity and uncertainty are the prevalent characteristics that surround him. Consequentially, the political motives of the SNP are reduced only to a representation where its sole proponent is a nebulous outsider of British politics and one totally devoid of political and social legitimacy.

### **Theme 3. The SNP as Violence.**

One of the main visual constructs used to undermine the validity of SNP policies was the depiction of their supporters as being militant, confrontational and unable to integrate peacefully with the rest of society. The British media regularly made efforts to question the credibility of the Scottish Nationalists by associating 'violence' with their political campaign (Brooks, 2014b). However, it should be noted that such claims have since been dismissed as 'preposterous' by Police Scotland – stating the debate was in reality one that was untroubled and without acrimony (Sparrow, 2014).



**Fig. 28**

However, this did not prevent the media from continuing to portray violence as a central feature in the debate – as depicted in figure 28 where a member of the public is being angrily confronted by an independence supporter in the street. The metaphysical construction of the image is powerful – the *No* supporter appears to have his political identity pressed closely against him, thereby not only creating connotations of a personal and intimate political affiliation, but furthermore appears to be holding the placard almost as a symbolic divider between himself and the aggression of the SNP supporter. The denotations of the image created are highly effective – the British unionists are portrayed as calm, sensible and amicable figures in the face of an antagonistic and emotive independence campaign.

Importantly, the physical construction of the *No* campaigner is also effectual. His arms are depicted in a non-threatening manner by being held in a lowered position – thereby creating connotations of an assured confidence and rationality. In comparison, the *Yes* campaigner is depicted as leaning forward aggressively with his hands raised towards the man's face – with one clenched hand indicative of violence and the other open palm pushed towards his face as a means of preventing argument or response.

The construction processes involved in this image are therefore both highly effective and hugely symbolic. It is a means of inviting the viewer to compare and contrast the differences of how the two opposing identities react when confronted – one reasonable, democratic and assured - the other, violent, emotive and intransigent.



**Fig. 29**



**Fig. 30**





**Fig. 31**



**Fig. 32**



**Fig. 33**



**Fig. 34**



**Fig. 35**



**Fig. 36**



**Fig. 37**



**Fig. 38**



**Fig. 39**

**Fig. 40**

This motif of violence is a prevalent and recurring symbol throughout the images sampled. Figures 31 and 32 depict Alex Salmond and his rival Alistair Darling almost physically

sparing on a personal level during a political debate – whereas in figure 29, Britain is depicted as a clenched fist crashing towards an opposing Scottish version – suggesting the inevitability of violence.

Furthermore figures 30, 35, 39, 40, display a range of different frames strongly connoting themes of war - the first of which depicts a gravestone stating *Bannock Burn*: a famous historical conflict between Scotland and England in which significant swathes of the population perished on both sides. Figure 40 continues this narrative further depicting the ‘Red Coats’ of the English army slaying and setting fire to a Scottish village - whilst both images can then be juxtaposed to the ominous and modern connotation of conflict created by the submarine clandestinely submerged in the water in image 35. Furthermore, violent uprisings on a national scale are depicted in figure 39 which show separatists in India engaging in a flag burning process, further insinuating that any detachment from the United Kingdom through the SNP would not be achieved through legitimate political policies but only through uprising and violence.

Figures 33, 34, 36, 37, 38, continue to develop these denotations of conflict further within a modern political context. Figures 33 and 34 depict street skirmishes, verbal harassment, public abuse and egg throwing at public speakers, whereas figures 36 and 38 depict media scimmages around politicians with members of security personal present in the background. Finally, figure 37 although simply denoting a slash of paint across a ‘No Thanks’ sign – it remains symbolic in its bright red colour and has strong connotations of bloodletting and physical harm towards ‘no’ campaigners.

Therefore the semiotics of manner are crucial in understanding how political identity is performed throughout these images. Continually, the *Yes* campaign is perpetuated as violent, antagonistic and unreasonable, whereas comparatively, the *No* campaign is depicted as calm, reliable and reassuring. Such semiotic connotations are therefore crucial in creating compelling political narratives, and essentially, labelling the entire SNP political movement as one only of intimidation, bullying and harassment.

#### **Theme 4: Scotland the ‘Other’.**

Pickering summaries ‘othering’ simplistically as: the other ‘them’ versus the established ‘us’ (2001: 47-8). In essence, as a form of unwillingness by the established ‘in’ groups of society to change or recognise another’s differences in a non-reductionist manner. Often, this reluctance manifests itself as emphasising perceived differences in clichéd stereotypes or

banal characteristics as ‘real’ representations of the other, effectively removing the identity and individuality of the person behind it. Figure 41 was chosen as the final image to be analysed in detail for such reasons.



**Fig. 41**

The image depicts a young, unidentifiable, Scottish male, raising a large saltire into the air whilst looking towards the camera aggressively. Dyer's semiotic checklist is particularly useful in analysing the different meanings created in this image. Firstly, the photograph has been taken from close range – such a technique being used to create strong connotations of intimacy (Dyer, 1982: 101). Through this, the viewer is given a close up view of a perceived ‘normal’ supporter of Scottish independence. Topless, snarling, and wandering the streets at night, the subject becomes a symbol used to create hostility and violence. This not only affiliates the SNP as proponents of conflict, but also transforms the norm of any of their voters into something that is alien and absurd. Furthermore, as noted by Batziou, the portrayal of groups of men outdoors often creates strong thematic narratives of violence and subconsciously generates thoughts of defence and avoidance in the viewer of the image (Batziou, 2011: 73-4). In essence, the arrangement of the picture is intentionally constructed to juxtapose the perception of a typical Scottish Yes voter as something as antagonistic and unrecognisable as possible to the rest of society.

Furthermore, when subjects are perceived from a distance, they become unidentifiable as individuals and instead become representative of a nondescript group. In this case, the



majority of the crowd behind the main subject all have their faces turned away or are obscured by the compositional arrangement. The effect is that this associates all within the frame of the image with the attributes displayed by the only subject – in this case, as an aggressive, quarrelsome and frightening member of the SNP.



**Fig. 42**



**Fig. 43**



**Fig. 44**



**Fig. 45**



**Fig. 46**



**Fig. 47**



**Fig. 48**



**Fig. 49**



The above figures from 42-49 however show that othering has a variety of forms when it comes to creating biased meanings of representation. Ranging from nuanced differences to explicit stereotyping, each time the othering process is invoked, framing is used to ensure demeaning attributes are created and varying forms of banal symbolism are perpetuated.

Figures 42, 43, 44, 46, 49, are again representative of such othering frames. This is achieved through an emphasis on the cultural differences between the Scottish Nationalists and the rest of the United Kingdom. In figure 46 a young unidentifiable male holds a saltire defiantly towards the embodiment of British aristocracy and political power - Westminster Palace. Additionally, figures 42 and 43 both use the portrayal of bagpipes and traditional Scottish attire as a means of emphasising the cultural disparity between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

Furthermore, lampooning and hackneyed clichés of nationalism are also readily invoked. Figures 45, 47, 48, are employed as a means of continuing deeply engrained prejudices and misleading information about the SNP. Figure 45, is a facetious, gore-covered screaming image of William Wallace from Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*, whilst figure 47 perpetuates perceptions of Scottish citizens in overused and contrite signifiers such as 'Tam O'Shanter' hats, tartan, and blue face paint. Figure 48 even goes as far as to satirically invoke comparisons of dictatorship, despotism and madness by imposing the face of Alex Salmond on to the distinctly recognisable form of North Korean dictators.

Therefore, the role of the media in depicting the proponents of the SNP within a context of extremism or uncivilised practices is used to invoke a demonising and abasing stereotype into existence. Through such portrayals, the average Scottish citizen becomes rendered as a roaring, confrontation-seeking barbarian from the north - one unsuited for proper debate or deliberation and unable to connect with the viewer of the image on any level.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research therefore marks a departure from traditional academic enquiry concerned with framing in the British news media. By adopting a visual focus over that of a verbal or textual narrative, it sought to emphasise how easily the visual genre is able to create effective antagonistic, debasing and prejudiced perceptions of others.

A semiotic analysis was adopted to achieve this, not only aiming to explore the relationship between the camera lens and reality, but also seeking to determine whether our news media can be trusted as a referent of reliable and objective information. As discussed in the literature review, academia has shown how effectively symbols in the media can be wielded as a hegemonic force, narrowing societal perceptions and thought processes to create convictions of differences and alterity.

The results of the analysis reveal that visual frames were often invoked as a means of creating scepticism, insecurity and even fear of Alex Salmond and the SNP. Frequently, these visual frames perpetuated an unbalanced power relationship of the Better Together Campaign and the SNP – the former often benefiting from both nuanced and explicit damaging photojournalism practices concerning the latter. In essence, the average Scottish resident who championed the cause for independence was rarely portrayed – their existence being reduced almost exclusively to the personage of Alex Salmond – and when they were represented, were generalised as bellicose, outlandish and incompatible with the rest of the British public. Fundamentally, as ‘others’.

Importantly, it should be reiterated that in such research, there is no sole arbiter of what is or isn't ethical, or what is or isn't biased, and even if there were, the line would often be indistinct. This research should accordingly be perceived as an initial enquiry towards a potentially verified theory. Therefore, although external scrutiny of this research may criticise the analysis provided as being systematically flawed, the conclusions presented still remain relevant in that they submit the convictions of the researcher – offering at least a new perspective to permeate the vast lacunae that prevails in current academic discourse on media bias and visual framing in political discourse.

However, moving forward, future academic enquiry into this research would benefit from considering both visual and textual framing together; the combination of which may reveal supplementary features of analysis and motifs that are yet undiscovered in our political media. Additionally, with the referendum now concluded and a ‘crisis’ of the past, it would be of interest if future research were to replicate this investigation and analyse whether the British press has altered its conduct towards Alex Salmond and the SNP since - and importantly, if so, whether it is indicative of our media process as an inconsistent and capricious force.

Finally, this investigation remains optimistic in its hope of making a meaningful contribution to research on the political media practices of the United Kingdom. Its ultimate ambition

however still remains to provoke a reinvigorated public interest in our modern journalistic practices – evoking a dialogue where the public more readily scrutinises the ethics and powers of our media as we attempt to navigate an increasingly complex, and often misleading, information society.

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## IMAGE SOURCES

**Fig. 1**

<http://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/top-stories/scottish-independence-yes-protest-at-bbc-bias-1-3541445>

**Fig. 2**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-29219165>

**Fig. 3** [http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2014/09/10/1410387340345\\_wps\\_15\\_epa04393788\\_Scotland\\_s\\_Fi.jpg](http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2014/09/10/1410387340345_wps_15_epa04393788_Scotland_s_Fi.jpg)

**Fig. 4**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-28159326>

**Fig. 5**

[http://news.bbcimg.co.uk/media/images/77684000/jpg/\\_77684239\\_salmond.jpg](http://news.bbcimg.co.uk/media/images/77684000/jpg/_77684239_salmond.jpg)

**Fig. 6**

<http://static.guim.co.uk/sysimages/Guardian/Pix/pictures/2014/9/16/1410877198720/Scottish-independence-ref-014.jpg>

**Fig. 7**

[http://i.guim.co.uk/static/w-620/h--/q-95/sys-images/Admin/BkFill/Default\\_image\\_group/2011/9/9/1315586247358/alex-salmond-007.jpg](http://i.guim.co.uk/static/w-620/h--/q-95/sys-images/Admin/BkFill/Default_image_group/2011/9/9/1315586247358/alex-salmond-007.jpg)

**Fig. 8**

[http://news.bbcimg.co.uk/media/images/76764000/jpg/\\_76764725\\_76764724.jpg](http://news.bbcimg.co.uk/media/images/76764000/jpg/_76764725_76764724.jpg)

**Fig. 9**

<http://i.guim.co.uk/static/w-640/h-360/q-95/sys-images/Guardian/Pix/audio/video/2014/9/15/1410791299057/Alex-Salmond-010.jpg>

**Fig. 10**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-29170924>

**Fig. 11**

<http://i100.independent.co.uk/image/27060-b19q14.jpg>

**Fig. 12**

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/scotland-decides-yes-campaign-feels-heat-as-salmonds-nhs-claims-come-under-furious-attack-9727762.html>

**Fig. 13**

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/scottish-independence/alex-salmond-the-rocks-would-melt-with-the-sun-before-id-ever-set-foot-in-the-house-of-lords-9746710.html>

**Fig. 14**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-27609162>

**Fig. 15**

[http://www.independent.co.uk/incoming/article9716397.ece/binary/original/Alex\\_Salmond.jpg](http://www.independent.co.uk/incoming/article9716397.ece/binary/original/Alex_Salmond.jpg)

**Fig. 16**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-26997887>

**Fig. 17**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-28732882>

**Fig. 18**

<http://www.independent.co.uk/incoming/article9647943.ece/alternates/w620/Salmond-Getty-v2.jpg>

**Fig. 19**

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/scotland-decides-yes-campaign-feels-heat-as-salmonds-nhs-claims-come-under-furious-attack-9727762.html>

**Fig. 20**

[http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2013/02/02/article-0-121C0617000005DC-875\\_468x382.jpg](http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2013/02/02/article-0-121C0617000005DC-875_468x382.jpg)

**Fig. 21**

<http://www.independent.co.uk/incoming/article9650099.ece/alternates/w620/salmond.jpg>

**Fig. 22**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-28689012>

**Fig. 23**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-27241489>

**Fig. 24**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-28134259>

**Fig. 25**

<http://static.guim.co.uk/sys-images/Guardian/Pix/pictures/2014/9/11/1410444975655/31f8949f-cefc-4324-a34a-fe47e3db33dd-2060x1236.jpeg>

**Fig. 26**

<http://www.independent.co.uk/incoming/article9555156.ece/alternates/w620/Salmond-Darling-PA.jpg>

**Fig. 27**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-28607002>

**Fig. 28**

<http://static.guim.co.uk/sys-images/Guardian/Pix/pictures/2014/9/12/1410502866715/cba8398f-f812-431f-b237-foe6db74cc0c-2060x1236.jpeg>

**Fig. 29**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-29052665>

**Fig. 30**

<http://i100.independent.co.uk/image/22647-1vmttcv.jpg>

**Fig. 31**

<http://static.guim.co.uk/sys-images/Guardian/Pix/pictures/2014/8/26/1409044369468/Scottish-independence-ref-014.jpg>

**Fig. 32**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-28929057>

**Fig. 33**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-28986714>

**Fig. 34**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-28986714>

**Fig. 35**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-29135269>

**Fig. 36**

<http://www.independent.co.uk/incoming/article9730590.ece/alternates/w620/Alex-Salmond-2.jpg>

**Fig. 37**

[http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2014/09/16/1410901893940\\_Image\\_galleryImage\\_DD\\_Poster\\_vandalism\\_in\\_Cr.JPG](http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2014/09/16/1410901893940_Image_galleryImage_DD_Poster_vandalism_in_Cr.JPG)

**Fig. 38**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-29226816>

**Fig. 39**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-29204977>

**Fig. 40**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-28088409>

**Fig. 41**

[http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2014/09/19/1411092686814\\_wps\\_11\\_A\\_supporter\\_of\\_the\\_Yes\\_ca.jpg](http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2014/09/19/1411092686814_wps_11_A_supporter_of_the_Yes_ca.jpg)

**Fig. 42**

<http://i100.independent.co.uk/image/30639-1s5ni5a.jpg>

**Fig. 43**

[http://news.bbcimg.co.uk/media/images/77489000/jpg/\\_77489157\\_77488982.jpg](http://news.bbcimg.co.uk/media/images/77489000/jpg/_77489157_77488982.jpg)

**Fig. 44**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-29272728>

**Fig. 45**

<http://www.independent.co.uk/incoming/article9741031.ece/alternates/w620/william%20wallace.jpg>

**Fig. 46**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-27655496>

**Fig. 47**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-28088409>

**Fig. 48**

[http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2014/09/12/1410478544440\\_Image\\_galleryImage\\_Alistair\\_Darling\\_compares.JPG](http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2014/09/12/1410478544440_Image_galleryImage_Alistair_Darling_compares.JPG)

**Fig. 49** <http://i100.independent.co.uk/image/22647-1061puf.jpg>

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1. Semiological checklist (Dyer, 1982: 96-104)

<i>'Props and Settings'</i>	Clothing, Fashion, Accessories, Objects, Environment, Background
<i>'Body'</i>	Age, Health, Fitness, Stature, Attractiveness, Height, Size
<i>'Representation'</i>	Manner, Expression, Emotion, Eye Contact, Pose, Positioning
<i>'Activity'</i>	Movement, Gestures, Touch
<i>'Practical Composition'</i>	Camera Use, Colour Scheme, Composition, Satire, Photoshop

### Appendix 2. Representational visual structures (Royce, 1999: 58)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· · Action (Actor + Goal)</li> <li>· · Reactional (Reactor + Phenomena)</li> <li>· · Speech &amp; Mental</li> <li>· · Conversion</li> <li>· · Geometrical symbolism</li> </ul>
	Circumstances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· · Setting</li> <li>· · Means</li> <li>· · Accompaniment</li> </ul>
Conceptual Representations	Classificational Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· · Covert</li> <li>· · Overt (Single or multi-levelled)</li> </ul>
	Analytical Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· · Unstructured</li> <li>· · Structured</li> </ul> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Temporal</li> <li>2. Exhaustive and inclusive</li> <li>3. Conjoined &amp; compounded exhaustive Structures</li> <li>4. Topographical and topological processes</li> <li>5. Dimensional and quantitative topography</li> <li>6. Spatio-temporal</li> </ol>
	Symbolic Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· · Attributive</li> <li>· · Suggestive</li> </ul>

**Appendix 3.** Interactive meanings (Royce, 1999: 72)

Contact	Image Act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· · Offer (Information)</li> <li>· · Demand (goods/services)</li> </ul>
	Gaze	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· · Direct (degrees of Engagement)</li> <li>· · Indirect (degrees of Disengagement)</li> </ul>
Social Distance	Size of Frame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· · Close (Intimate/Personal)</li> <li>· · Medium (Social)</li> <li>· · Long (Impersonal)</li> </ul>
Attitude	Subjective Image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· · Horizontal angle (degrees of Involvement &amp; Detachment)</li> <li>· · Vertical angle (degrees of Power to the viewer, to the represented participants, or a relation of equality)</li> </ul>
	Objective Image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· · Action Orientation (frontal angle)</li> <li>· · Knowledge Orientation (top-down angle)</li> </ul>
Modality	Colour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· · Colour saturation</li> <li>· · Colour differentiation</li> <li>· · Colour modulation</li> </ul>
	Contextualisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· · Absence of background</li> <li>· · Full detail</li> </ul>
	Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· · Maximum abstraction</li> <li>· · Maximum representation</li> </ul>
	Depth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· · Absence of depth</li> <li>· · Maximally deep perspective</li> </ul>
	Illumination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· · Full representation of light and shade</li> <li>· · Absence of light and shade</li> </ul>
	Brightness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· · Maximum brightness</li> <li>· · Black and white or shades of light and dark grey</li> </ul>
	Coding Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· · Technological</li> <li>· · Sensory</li> <li>· · Abstract</li> <li>· · Naturalistic</li> </ul>



**Appendix 4.** Size of frame and social distance (Royce, 1999: 76)

FRAME SIZE	CHARACTERISTICS	SOCIAL RELATION
very close up	less than head and shoulders of subject	intimate
close shot	head and shoulders of subject	friendly or personal
medium close	cuts off subject approximately at waist	social or 'one of us'
medium shot	cuts off subject approximately at knee level	'familiar' social
medium long	shows full figure	general social
long shot	human figure fills half image height	public, largely impersonal
very long shot	and anything beyond (wider) than half height	little or no social connection

**Appendix 5.** Interrelated compositional structuring principles (Royce, 1999: 95)

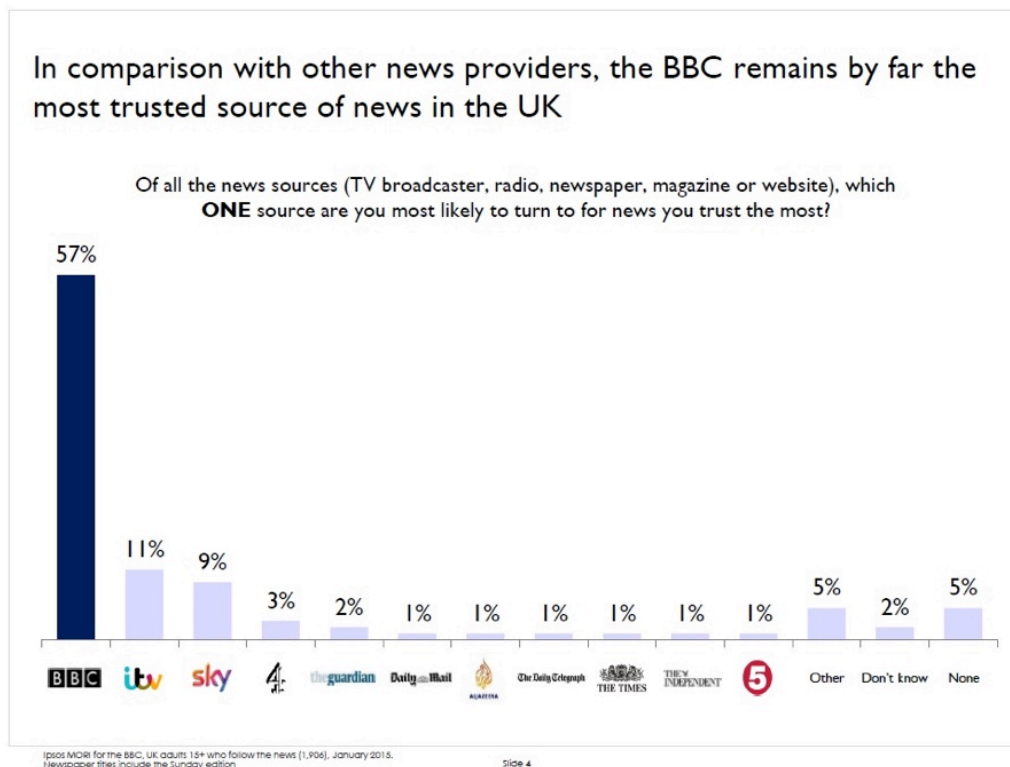
COMPOSITION SYSTEM	GENERAL FEATURES
Information Value	The placement of the elements (participants and nystagmus that relate them to each other and to the viewer) endows them with specific informational values attached to the various 'zones' of the image: left and right, top and bottom, centre and margin.
Salience	The elements (participants and representational and interactive syntagms) are made to attract the viewer's attention to different degrees, as realised by such factors as placement in the foreground or background, relative size, contrasts in tonal value (or colour), differences in sharpness, etc.
Framing	The presence or absence of framing devices (realised by elements which create dividing lines, or by actual frame lines) disconnects or connects elements of the image, signifying that they belong or do not belong together in some sense.

**Appendix 6.** Visual compositional salience features (Royce, 1999: 102)

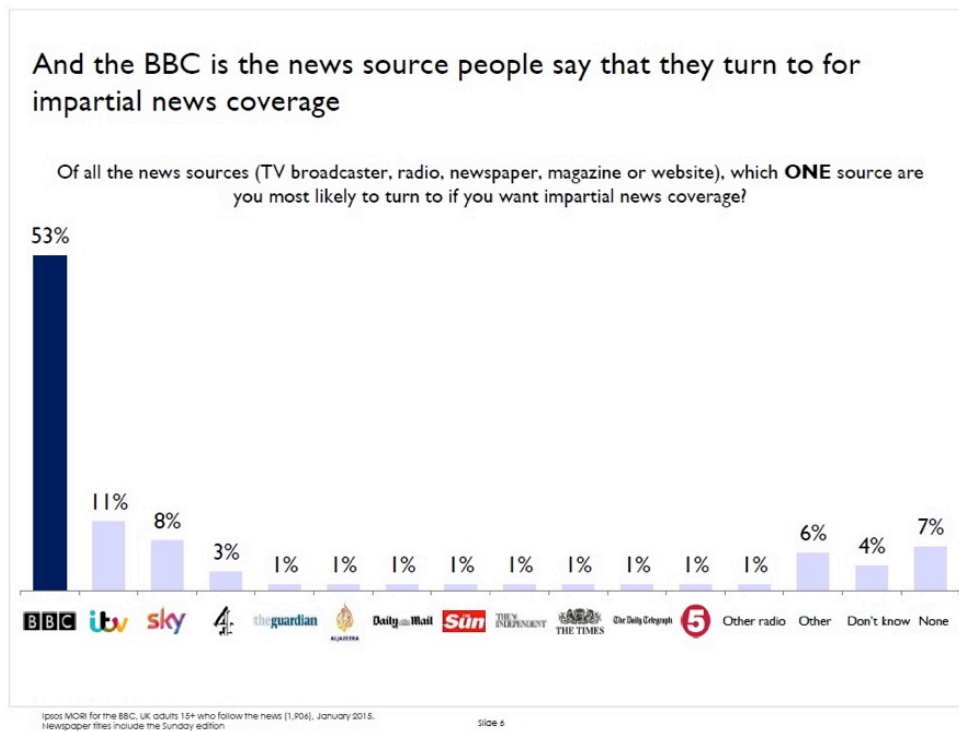
SALIENCE INDICATOR	FEATURES
Size	larger objects are more easily noticed by the eye than smaller ones.
Sharpness of focus	objects are more clearly seen because their features are in sharp focus and are more easily noticed by the eye than those which have their features less sharply focused.

Tonal contrasts	areas of high contrast, for example black borders placed on white spaces are higher in salience than a grey-shaded, less distinct border performing the same dividing function.
Colour contrasts	the contrasts between highly saturated colours and softer muted colours, or the contrast between red, white and blue.
Placement in the visual field	the aspect of visual ‘weight’ - objects are ‘heavier’ when close to the top, and ‘heavier’ when placed on the left.
Perspective	objects or entities placed in the foreground are visually more salient than those in the background, and elements which overlap others are more salient.

**Appendix 7.** Comparison of trust in UK news providers (Chakelian, 2015)



**Appendix 8.** Comparison of impartiality in UK news providers (Chakelian,



2015)



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