

He Left Them on the Beaches

Political advertising and opinion research, AI, and the catching up regulation has to do

UNSDG Relevance



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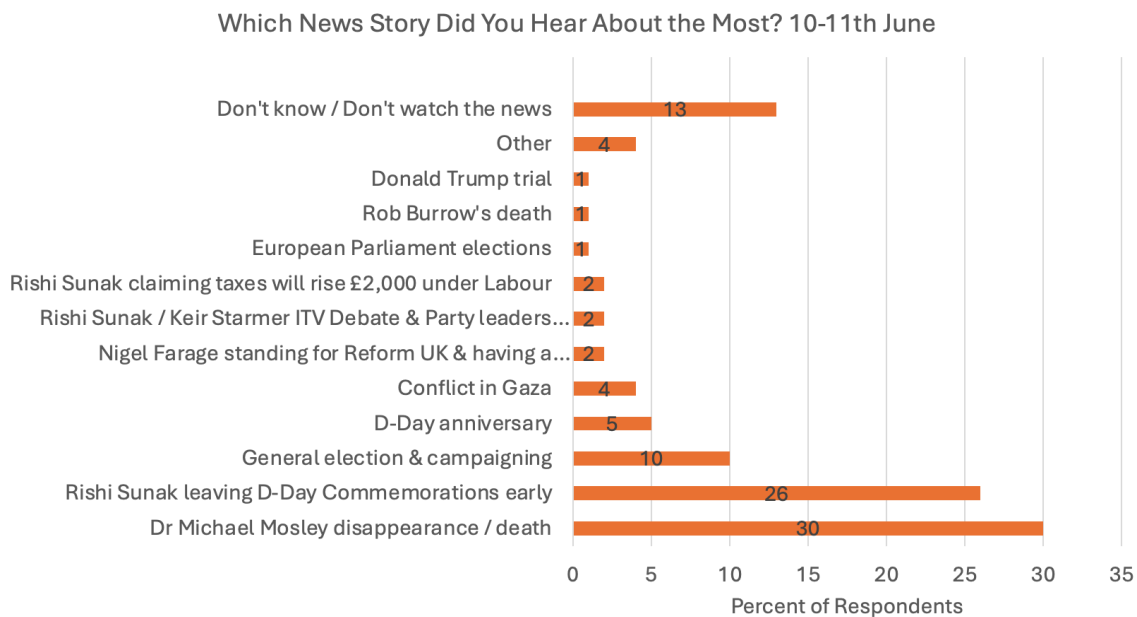
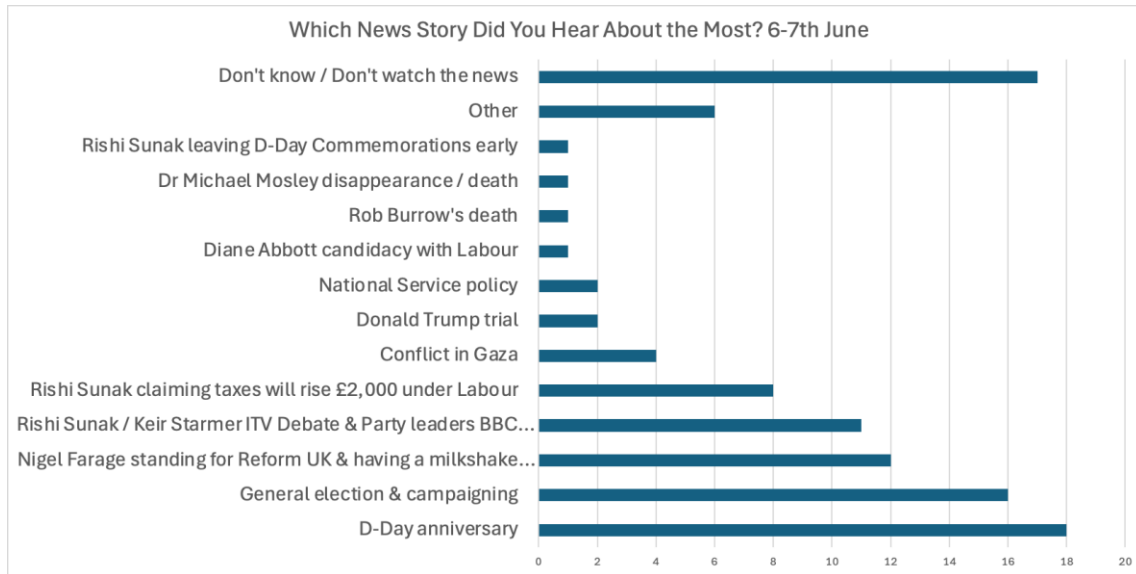
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On the 22nd of May 2024, the UK Prime Minister – Rishi Sunak – called a general election for the 4th of July. Parliament was dissolved, and campaigning began. A large part of such campaigning is essentially forms of marketing activity – opinion research, branding, advertising/persuasion efforts and so on. This latter can be door to door by party volunteers who talk to voters, by leafleting, online - especially via social media - and of course by communications messages in public spaces, to be seen by passersby alongside hoardings and posters for the next big band in town.

You probably know You Gov for the opinion polls they produce in respect to the relative popularity of political leaders and parties. What you might not know is that they want to be commercially active even when there is no election coming, so they use their opinion research skills on behalf of brands and charities to gain insight into the thoughts and opinions of their stakeholders. This could be by focus groups, interviews or most often an online survey. One of the ways that You Gov keep themselves in the eye of the public and clients is by producing regular reports on which media stories the general population is aware of.

On the 6th of June, Rishi Sunak left the commemorations of the 80th anniversary of the D-Day landings early. The reasons and the rationale for this decision aren't something to be considered here, but as you can see from the charts, this story went from one almost no one recalled to being right at the top of the scale.

You Gov News Salience – 67th June and 10/11th June



You Gov UK Election 2024 Hub

One of the immediate outcomes of this was that a political advert was created to exploit Sunak’s vulnerability on the issue by an Australian, Ben Golik who works at an advertising agency called Uncommon. This particular work wasn’t done to meet a client brief, but only on an informal basis. He was interviewed about the process by the Advertising Industry publication The Drum:

“The first that came to mind were the Churchill words, ‘We should fight them on the beaches.’ With that, it fell into place quite quickly,” he explains. “It’s not hard to write a good headline when you’re referencing Churchill, who himself was referencing Shakespeare. I’m standing on good shoulders there...In terms of typography and layout, Golik knew that he wanted to make a very deliberate reference to Saatchi & Saatchi’s

famous ‘Labour isn’t working’ line from 1978. “Almost as a call back to that sort of political advertising of before”

A Simple Message, Well Executed



There is one further important thing to know about this poster. **It never existed.** All the mocking up was done on a computer screen, and then an AI image generator called Midjourney was used to give it a realistic context of brickwork and urban grubbiness. It was never printed or displayed and no one ever walked past it on the street. Nevertheless, the image went viral across a number of social and other media platforms and the simple, effective image and strong attack line was seen by millions of people who were about to cast their vote.

This raises important issues – advertising in newspapers and the like is regulated and controlled, and communications placed there by political parties have to be attributed to them. This image though avoided all that oversight and legal control, but it was still seen by a large audience. The Drum comments on this process:

Golik says he is very aware that the advertising industry has a love-hate relationship with ‘scam work’ which is why he wanted to be clear right from the beginning that the idea isn’t running in real life. “The poster is a mock-up,” he says. “But the idea is very real.”

But of course, when an ad is shared as often as Golik’s has been, retweeted endlessly beyond its original source and shorn of its context and disclaimer, the lines between what’s real and what isn’t soon become blurred.

A key part of the problem here is that the rules and regulations of the advertising industry are having real difficulty keeping up with technological innovation, especially AI. This isn’t

limited to advertising – here’s a final quote from You Gov about how all those responses to their news story salience surveys are processed:

Previously, open text responses have been analysed manually, but this is a vastly time-consuming task, and can create inconsistencies in the interpretation of people’s responses. Topic modelling streamlines the process of identifying themes and classifying responses. Additionally, it makes the process replicable and transparent, where anyone can re-run the model and obtain the same results... Artificial intelligence can offer new insights into information that was already available, but has not been analysed systematically, until now.

The poster wasn’t real. Do you think You Govs research is more real?

Case Questions

1. When you saw the poster, had you seen it before and were you aware it was an AI assisted mock up?
2. Have you seen other images you think might be AI-generated being used in advertising by brands or even amateur creators? Where did you see them and did you find them concerning?
3. How would you change regulations to help them account for these situations? What role would professional bodies and platforms for advertising like social media companies play in this adaptation?
4. The raw data that has fed into You Gov’s analysis was processed automatically by an AI system. Does this concern you and make you question the impartiality and credibility of the research? Should such research outputs be labelled as being dependent of AI processes?

References and Sources

You can read the complete article on the salience of news stories in June 2024 here: <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/49694-general-election-2024-what-news-story-is-the-public-hearing-about-the-most>

The interview and commentary with Ben Gulik in The Drum can be found here: <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2024/06/10/rishi-s-running-poster-isn-t-the-real-story-behind-d-day-attack-ad>

You can try the AI image generator Midjourney for free here: <https://midjourney.co/generator>