

Decision time: Sky News and the numbers that delivered an election night shock

Sky News editor Nick Phipps gives an insight into the hive of data analytics and visualisations in use at Sky News during the UK's 2015 General Election

Introduction

9.41pm, 7 May 2015.

I am sitting in my chair in the Sky News gallery when the phone rings. I'm expecting the call. 'Sky News?'

My colleague, managing editor Peter Lowe, is on the phone. 'I have the exit poll numbers, Nick' he says. 'Are you ready? Conservatives three one six. That's three... one... six...'

I nearly fall off my chair. Really. I feel like I've had a mild electric shock, the type you get from a farmer's fence, and lurch forward. I recall the times during our rehearsals when we worked through this scenario. I had dutifully included versions where a party was on the verge of victory, while accepting the campaign narrative that it was never going to happen. This poll would energise election night and I was one of the few people who knew it.

Nineteen minutes later, millions more would share my shock as the exit poll commissioned by Sky News, ITV News and the BBC was released. These numbers became a 'where were you when you heard?' moment and would define the election.

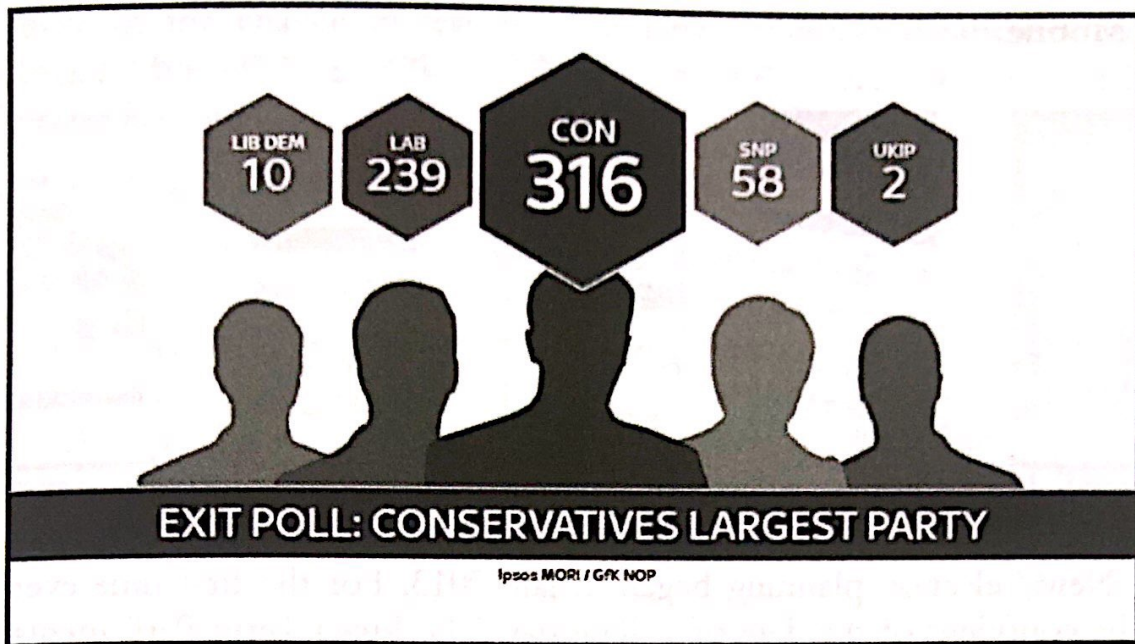


Figure 32: The news graphic used on election night to announce the exit poll. *Courtesy Sky News*

The FA Cup Final of News

'Unscripted drama' is the phrase the chief executive of the Premier League, Richard Scudamore, uses to describe his product's appeal. In my business, election night delivers the ultimate in unscripted drama, a Premier League decider and FA Cup Final rolled into one. The principles governing both are the same:

- a pursuit, the aim of which is to win (football, democracy)
- rivals teams (Chelsea, the Conservatives)
- accepted rules (offside, First Past the Post)
- key players (Wayne Rooney, Ed Miliband)
- running statistics (goals scored, seats won)

The Premier League and election night share another similarity. They have been utterly shaped by live television. Every editor asked to prepare their channel's election night programme knows that showbiz and spectacle are part of the DNA. Viewers brought up on a diet of 'swingometers', cutting edge computing power and big building projections expect no less. At Sky News, we included plenty of pizzazz in our election night coverage. We delivered 138 live simultaneous video streams – an official Guinness World Record - filmed by our network of video stringers based at election night counts across the United Kingdom. An 'X marks the spot' light show lit up Sky headquarters. For our story-telling inspiration, though, we turned to the digital world.

The second challenge to the election night convention was to come from the Scottish National Party (SNP). During discussions in early 2014 the party's inclusion in the front rank was not a foregone conclusion. In recent decades the Scottish electoral landscape, at general elections at least, had been placid. In 2010 every single seat went to the same party that had won it at the previous election. In our internal discussions at Sky News, and external discussions with our partners in the exit poll, the consequences of the September referendum were considered uncertain and so it was agreed we would assess the SNP's status post-referendum.

The first polling evidence of the change wrought on Scotland's political landscape came on 29 October 2014, when Ipsos MORI carried out a poll for STV that put the nationalists on 52 per cent. The SNP's consistent polling performance through late 2014 and early 2015 led us to conclude that Scotland's likely political earthquake needed to be brought to the fore of all graphics across Sky News platforms. Hence, for the first time at a general election, we decided to take the SNP's seat and vote count out of 'Other' and give the party a primary listing alongside the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats and (for 2015) UKIP.

Thus the consequence of the twin UKIP/SNP surges for our viewers and users would be an increase in the number of 'primary' parties highlighted in results coverage. Rather than our traditional designation of four (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Other), we would now have six (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, UKIP, SNP, Other). What had traditionally been a story of linear swing had developed multiple dimensions. In an interview with *the Guardian* in early May, the author described the prospect as 'like 3D chess... so multi-faceted' (*the Guardian*, 4 May, 2015). How we presented these numbers on screen was the next challenge.

Primary information: the 'Lower Third'

The multi-dimensional nature of the 2015 General Election forced us to prepare for many different outcomes and narratives of the night. We needed to be ready to explain outright victory, coalition and minority government, all in a variety of different party political colours. The key challenge, though, was ostensibly the most simple. What primary information should we deliver to our viewers and users? What combination of data and editorial would tell them, instantly and at any moment, the story of the election so far? For this, we developed our 'Lower Third'.

The Lower Third is so-named because it appears to TV viewers as if it takes up the lower third of the screen. It allows us to deliver information graphically while still bringing viewers the latest video or live reports from presenters and reporters. In deciding the design of the Lower Third, we considered first the key stages of the election narrative. We needed to be able to tell viewers the story at every stage. These stages (with approximate timings) were:

- The exit poll moment and aftermath (22:00-23:00)
- Early results (23:00-02:00)
- The results 'rush-hour' (02:00-06:00)
- The election outcome (06:00 onward)

To describe events during these stages, we split the Lower Third into four key areas, which we termed 'modules'. Each module could 'take over' the entire Lower Third area when needed.

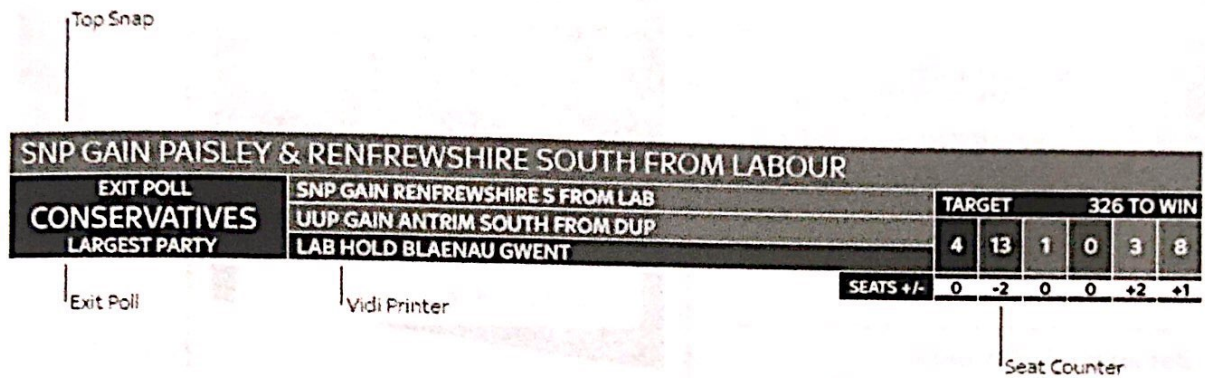


Figure 34: Lower Third used on election night. *Courtesy Sky News.*

Table 3: Lower Third text explainers

Module	Normal state	Takeover state
Exit Poll	Primary description: 'Conservatives Largest Party'	Full numbers: Con 316, Lab 239, SNP 58, LD 10, UKIP 2, Other 25
Vidi Printer	Latest results: 'Lab Hold Blaenau Gwent'	Key result: 'Ed Balls loses seat'
Seat Counter	Totals so far for primary parties: MPs elected + change Share of vote + change	Final result: Con 330, Lab 232, LD 8, UKIP 1, SNP 56, Other 23
Top Snap	Breaking news: 'SNP gain Paisley & Renfrewshire South from Labour'	Major breaking news: 'Conservatives win election'

In designing our digital product, we followed the same modular approach. Each element was mirrored and surfaced at all times in the user's mobile and desktop experience.

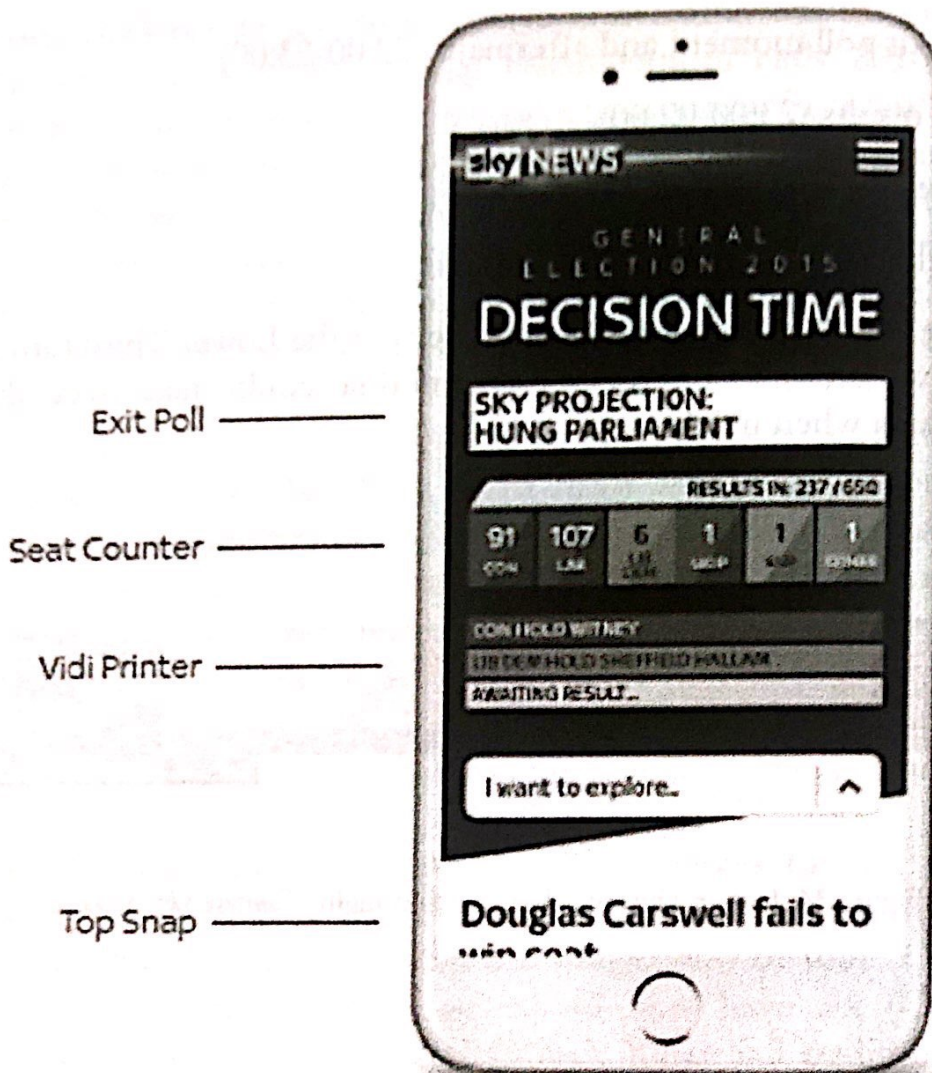


Figure 35: The mobile app layout on election night. *Courtesy Sky News.*

Interactivity: The election toolkit

Our move away from the convention of linear Labour-Conservative swing in 2015 was wise, in the light of the election results. Seen purely through that traditional metric, Labour marginally *improved* its position compared to 2010 with a 0.4 per cent swing to the party from the Conservatives. The SNP's landslide in Scotland and the Liberal Democrat collapse, notably in its heartland of the South West of England, would deliver the unexpected Conservative victory but the picture could have been very different. We needed the tools to tell every conceivable story.

We devised sequences of graphics, all fed by live data, which could be presented through the Sky News studio 'big screen'. The big screen consists of 24 monitors, each 1x1.5m in size, fed by a 4K graphics engine. Our results presenters were able to direct the output of the screen using an iPad controller, allowing them to lead the viewer wherever the night's narrative was moving.

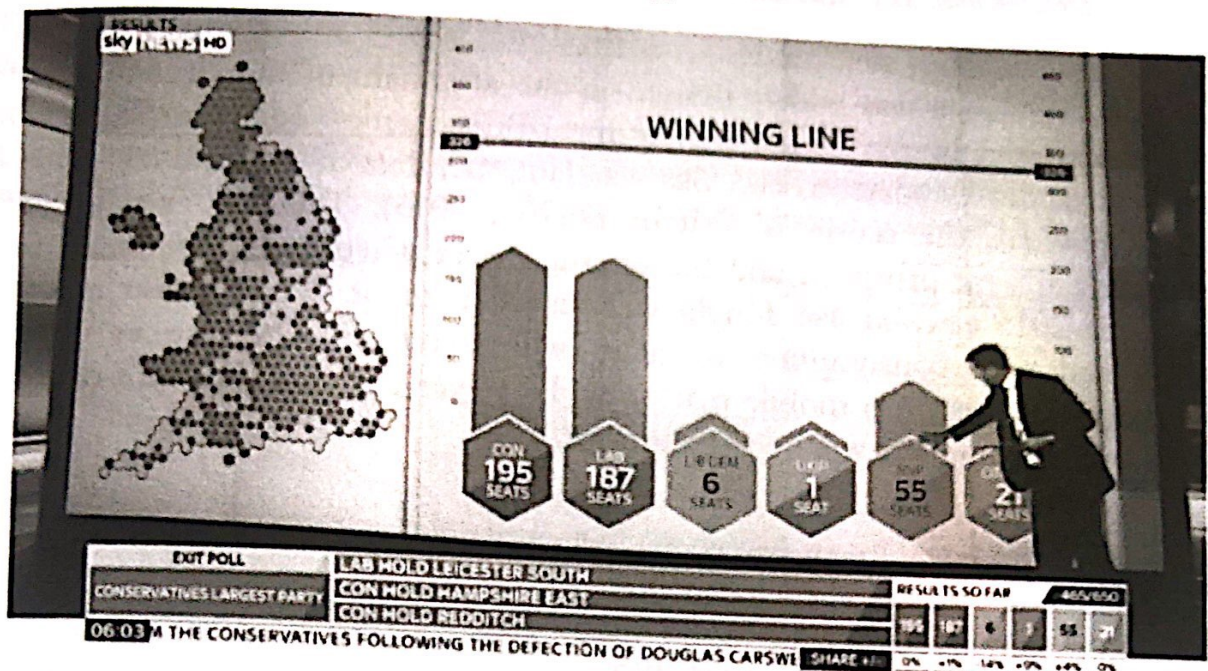


Figure 36: Screenshot from Sky News 'big screen' live on election night. *Courtesy Sky News.*

Screen option	What you see	What it helped us tell
Seat Map (pictured)	Every constituency represented by an equal sized hexagon	The geographical spread of results
Winning Line (pictured)	The totals for the major parties	Which party was in the lead
The Grid	All 650 seats listed alphabetically, coloured in live as they declare	How far through the night we were
Gains and Losses	Total gains and losses by party, with toggle to show which other parties the gains and losses have come from/gone to	The real battlegrounds of the night e.g. most Con gains coming from Lib Dems
Coalition Builder	A representation of the House of Commons and the parties' latest seat totals	By moving the parties around, we could build and break coalitions – as it turned out, not needed
Con/Lab battleground	Seats organised by per cent swing needed to flip control	Labour's failure to take key target seats e.g. Nuneaton
SNP Targets	Every Scottish seat sorted by per cent swing the SNP needed to take it	The SNP landslide
UKIP Targets	20 potential UKIP targets	UKIP's failure to break through
Lib Dem Seats	Lib Dem seats from most to least marginal	The Lib Dem collapse

Table 4: Explaining Sky News' 'Big Screen'

The result

Sky News coverage was widely praised in the aftermath of the election. In a review organised by the Media Society the BBC's election editor in 2001 and 2005, Alexandra Henderson, said 'Sky was fantastic, fleet of foot and had a feel of being where the action is' (Media Society, 2015). The 2020 election is currently a distant prospect, and the question over whether the conditions in which the 2015 election was fought will sustain is moot. What is clear is that viewer and user consumption of news will continue to change as usage increasingly moves onto mobile platforms. However the next election's results are consumed, numbers will be at their heart.

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