

Understanding the role of the mass media in the EU Referendum

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What role did the media play in shaping the result of the UK's EU referendum? [Mike Berry](#) writes that the media was both the venue where each campaign concentrated their primary efforts, and a crucial mechanism for setting the political agenda. He notes that the Leave campaign generally navigated the media more effectively than the Remain side throughout the campaign.



The mass media played two key roles during the campaign. First, it was the site where representatives of the two sides attempted to win the battle for public opinion. Leave campaigners employed a classic KISS (Keep it simple stupid) strategy. They concentrated on a simple message – ‘Take Back Control’ which was repeated at every opportunity. The message was effective because it was both easily understood by different social groups and open to multiple interpretations.

As the PR specialist Greg Delaney [noted](#) ‘it resonated across the extraordinary Leave patchwork of parliamentary fundamentalists, elderly nostalgics and quasi racists as well as large sections of the discontented working poor. In a world where very few people other than the very rich feel they have much control over their lives, it promised an alternative future.’ The Leave campaign also [invested heavily](#) in targeted messages delivered via social media. Mirroring the [successful social media strategy](#) employed by the Conservatives in the 2015 General Election, the Leave campaign designed a variety of messages delivered to specific audiences.

In contrast the Remain campaign lacked a clear, simple narrative on the benefits of EU membership that could resonate at both a rational and emotional level with different audiences. A key reason for this was that Labour and the Conservatives were running largely parallel campaigns with conflicting messages on key issues such as immigration and the economic consequences of Brexit. This inability to coordinate core messages also prevented advertising agencies from producing an effective campaign. Despite the official cross-party ‘Stronger In’ team hiring top agencies such as Saatchi and Saatchi and WPP, [infighting prevented](#) the most hard hitting messages being deployed.

Second, the media played an agenda setting role during the campaign by focusing on particular politicians and issues. As [research](#) from Loughborough University in this edited collection shows, the news media largely reported the campaign as a ‘Tory story’ and there was more coverage of Leave arguments.

The longer term impact of media narratives

Although most commentary tends to focus on the impact of the campaign the more powerful effects of the media are actually via long term processes of political socialisation, where voters are exposed to messages many times. Here it is important to consider how both the EU and the key issues linked to evaluations of the EU – particularly immigration – have been reported over many years.

[Research](#) on how the EU has been reported in the press has been unequivocal. Outside the Independent, Guardian and Mirror press reporting has been relentlessly hostile to the EU. From meddling ‘pointy head Eurocrats’ squandering our membership fees to the European project the press has employed a shifting selection of negative themes. However, [research](#) shows that the broadcast media has failed to offer a counterpoint. Broadcast reporting has tended to be dominated by summits, disputes between the EU and UK or domestic political conflict. This has meant that when the EU is reported it tends to be framed as being in a conflictual rather than collaborative relationship with the UK. Furthermore, since most broadcast reporting is dominated by the main two parties – and Eurosceptic Tories have been more vocal than Europhile Labour MPs – audiences have been more exposed to arguments against the EU than those in favour.

Immigration reporting particularly in the tabloid press has tended to be extremely negative, with a steady stream of stories about immigrants ‘sponging’ off the welfare state, ‘bleeding’ the NHS dry and being involved in criminality. These negative themes can become linked to other issues in the minds of the public. In my own research on public reactions to the 2008 Financial Crisis, many respondents thought the public deficit had been created by immigration. One told me “Don’t let them in because, I’ve nothing against them or anything like that but they’re just taking all the money. They’re taking all the money and they’re bleeding it dry.” In this way immigration can act as a lightning rod catching discontent on a range of issues and then transferring these to perceptions of issues that are linked like the EU.

Therefore, in understanding how the media influenced the referendum result it is important to recognise that before the campaign even began the large parts of the public had been primed by the media to be Eurosceptic. During the campaign the Leave campaign was able to build on this through appeals that highlighted long-established themes around sovereignty and immigration. In contrast the Remain campaign was unable to build a positive case for Europe partly because those narratives had not been comprehensively established in the past by media and politicians. Therefore, even if Remain had consistently put forward arguments about the social and cultural and benefits of EU membership they would have not resonated effectively because they lacked social currency. In this way the media played a powerful long and short term role in influencing the result of the referendum.

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