

# Mediating Populism

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the febrile contemporary political climates of many Western democracies, journalists have been increasingly seen as part of the political story rather than simply its narrators. Insurgent 'populist' political movements have placed major media organisations at the centre of their anti-establishment critique, while opposing forces have posited 'media complicity' in the promotion of divisive discourses and populist misinformation. All the while, traditional media organisations are being rocked by deep structural and technological change that is fundamentally shifting the practice of journalism and changing their relationship with an increasingly sceptical and polarised public.

While much has been written and discussed about the media's role in the 'populist turn' in Western democracies, the actual experience of journalists in responding to these turbulent political times has been little explored. The following analysis, therefore, aims to foreground the perspectives of print, broadcast, and online journalists working in the UK – and to contrast these against the experiences of the German media, through a case study prepared by Das Progressive Zentrum in Berlin.

In selecting these countries, we assess how the evolution of journalism practice has played out in two quite distinct media and political systems, particularly through a focus on two unique recent operating contexts: the European Referendum in the UK and the refugee and migrant crisis in Germany. We explore the extent to which traditional norms of journalistic practice share natural affinities with populist politics and discourses, and ask in what ways can journalists be better supported and equipped to critically engage with divisive political movements in the digital age.

### Key Findings: United Kingdom

The UK has often been characterised as one of the most politically divided and partisan media systems in the Western world.<sup>1</sup> In particular, British tabloid newspapers are internationally known for their politically-charged and adversarial reporting style. Open support and campaigning by the press for political parties is commonplace, in stark contrast to the media in Germany.

This partisanship is not, however, reflected to the same extent in broadcast media, which face higher regulatory requirements around impartiality and balance. The BBC in particular has strict, statutory guidelines around impartiality, and is by far the most widely consumed online and broadcast news outlet.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, these organisations also face challenging decisions in treading the difficult line between promoting 'balance' and 'objectivity', particularly when expert or institutional opinion can be heavily weighted in one direction.

- Many journalists, particularly those working for commercial print organisations, feel caught between antagonistic trends of information obesity and resource scarcity. Additional responsibilities around monitoring and engaging with social media have not been met by a concurrent investment in staff resources.
- A key part of these new technological and competitive pressures involves a major re-fashioning of journalists' relationships with their audience. There is now a far

greater sensitivity to audience feedback, and news organisations are searching for greater distinctiveness in their content offer, often privileging comment pieces over straight reporting.

- The new media landscape is also shifting the relationship between the UK press and politicians. While news organisations still retain significant agenda-setting power, politicians are increasingly looking to more direct forms of communication with voters.
- There remains a lack of consensus around whether specific candidates or political parties can be definitively described as 'populist'. This has prevented a cohesive debate within media organisations about how to respond to this phenomenon, on both the Right and the Left of politics.
- Yet, 'media populism' is clearly a feature of the contemporary British media landscape, most starkly shown in press attacks on the judiciary as 'enemies of the people', and politicians as 'Brexit mutineers'. For journalists working within these organisations, overt partisanship can sometimes be difficult to reconcile with their own personal viewpoints.
- When journalists do look to challenge populist narratives or policies, many feel a sense of powerlessness, as they lack a clear framework or tools for critiquing this style of politics. While 'no-platforming strategies' are widely dismissed, traditional methods of critique are also seen as ineffective, often serving to reinforce anti-establishment narratives.
- While the EU Referendum represents a defining political event for the United Kingdom, it also stands as a watershed moment for contemporary British journalism. Within a challenging context, a number of journalists argued that the British media ultimately performed well. A considerable number of journalists, however, admitted that they personally felt ill-prepared to write confidently about the EU, limiting their capacity to take decisions about what to cover, and the veracity or weight of particular arguments.
- The Brexit campaign was seen by some to intensify the populist tendencies of sections of the press, harnessing and activating a growing mistrust with establishment institutions.
- The Referendum also exposed weaknesses in traditional norms of good journalistic practice. The BBC especially came under particular criticism for its interpretation of balance, which many argued failed to give citizens an understanding of the weight of evidence or expert and institutional opinion.

## British Public Opinion

Nationally representative surveys Demos conducted for the project with Opinium Research (see notes, 92) provide another textural layer to the research, shining light on citizens' perspectives on media choices around representation of political actors in Britain, as well as broader consumption patterns and assessments regarding journalism quality and impartiality during the European Referendum. We find that:

- The *Daily Mail* is reported as the singularly most read press title across the country (by 19 per cent of citizens), followed by the *Metro*, *The Sun* and *The Guardian*, all on 12 per cent. Women were, generally, less likely to report having read newspapers, with 51 per cent having not read any title in the past week, compared to 39 per cent of men, and clear differences in title preferences were evident between age groups.
- In assessing the level of coverage given to 'voices outside the political mainstream', the largest group of Britons (43 per cent) believe that the media is hitting the right note, giving the correct amount of coverage to representatives from the fringes. By comparison, 32 per cent feel they are given too much airtime, and a quarter (25 per cent) believe the media should do more to accommodate them. There were significant differences based on citizens' perceptions of where the political mainstream sits, with Conservative and Labour-supporting voters diverging considerably in their assessments.
- Reflecting on the EU Referendum campaign, citizens tended to believe the media they consumed had been 'informative', but they were highly critical of its 'fairness and impartiality'; only a minority of newspaper readers and television viewers assessed that the media had succeeded on this point, across all sources. The discrepancy between these two positions suggests that many citizens do not regard partisanship and the capacity to educate as mutually exclusive – in contradiction with the views of many of the journalists we interviewed as part of this project.

## Key Findings: Germany

The German media ecosystem exhibits significantly less polarisation and partisanship than in the UK. There is also less of a tradition of the 'tabloid' press, with *Bild* being the only commonly recognised national tabloid – and itself sitting closer to the political centre than many British tabloids. The German system is also characterised by the far greater influence of regional news organisations; public broadcasting is decentralised along federal lines, and comprised of 11 state networks. The German print press is also stronger at a regional level, with the circulation of local and regional newspapers standing at 11.5 million in 2018, compared to an equivalent figure of just one million for national print titles.<sup>3</sup>

- German journalists report similar experiences of structural and technological change to their counterparts in the UK. Falling staff numbers, an intensification of the pace of work, and an over-abundance of information were all commonly referenced by interviewees. However, there was also a sense that structural change had catalysed improvements in the industry or given journalism a new relevance. In particular, digitalisation was seen as a much-needed shock to listless establishment organisations, and meant quality journalism was served an increasingly important social function:
- Journalists spoke about a renewed impetus to connect with citizens (particularly marginalised groups), at a time when media organisations were often portrayed as part of the 'establishment'. Socio-economic homogeneity within the industry was seen as a significant factor in creating distance between journalists and citizens.
- The media is now seen by journalists as more vulnerable to populist provocation due to pressures on newsrooms and from social media. Journalists referenced the

media's affinity to controversy, but also spoke about practical considerations, with the constant need for content working in favour of more marginal political figures.

- There is some debate among journalists about how to report on the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), and whether the coverage they receive should reflect that of any other political party with similar levels of electoral support. As in Britain, few journalists support 'no-platforming' strategies, but many feel the AfD does require a deeper critical engagement due to its open challenge to core constitutional rights.
- In critically engaging with populists, fact-checking and verification were seen as important journalistic tools, and ones that showcased the value of quality journalism. There was, however, also a recognition that a narrow focus on 'the facts' could only go so far, and could limit the emotive power of good journalism.
- Like Brexit in the UK, the migration crisis has been seen as a key test for the German media, with debate among journalists centred on the media framing of the crisis. While many journalists were critical of the German media's performance – arguing that it had allowed AfD-style framing to dominate – others felt improvements had been made on past reporting of large-scale immigration.
- Journalists' attempts to counter AfD-style framing were, however, also seen as problematic, leaving them open to accusations that genuine issues linked to the refugee crisis were being under-reported. This further exposed the media to its depiction as part of the 'liberal establishment'.

## Conclusions and Responses

Our findings show that the media's response to populism is bound up in a host of other economic, social, and technological changes emanating from both within and beyond newsrooms. To enable journalists to more critically engage with populist politics we, therefore, assess options across five broad areas:

### **1. Time and resources: creating more sustainable working practices and investing in high-quality journalism.**

Any intervention into the practice of journalism cannot ignore the intense time and resource pressures affecting newsrooms. These pressures have often influenced journalistic affinities to populist narratives and approaches, such as a shift from factual reporting to comment, and a lack of capacity for verification. In the search for new business models, news organisations, therefore, need to resist changes that weaken journalists' ability to conduct quality journalism. There's also a need to recognise, however, that that socially-valuable journalism may not always be commercially profitable. This underscores the importance of maintaining the strength and reach of public broadcasters in both Germany and the UK, as well as the role that private philanthropic funding could play in supporting investigative and constructive journalism.

### **2. Agency and expertise: enabling journalists to deepen subject expertise and have a say in editorial decision-making.**

In our interviews, journalists repeatedly spoke about a lack of agency in responding to populist politics, both in their ability to critically assess policy proposals, and to influence the

editorial agenda at their organisation. News organisations must address the mixed landscape of mid-career training within the industry, and create clear channels for employee consultation around editorial decision-making. Civil society organisations also have a role to play in supplementing resources towards investigative research, and there's scope for fact-checking charities to shift towards more proactive fact-provision, which can act as a resource for journalists to rapidly upskill on new and emerging policy challenges.

### **3. Values and ethics: negotiating balance and objectivity, and embedding ethical practice.**

Our findings revealed how populist politics is challenging certain long-standing journalistic norms and values. In particular, negotiating twin tenets of balance and objectivity has, for many journalists, become increasingly difficult in the context of highly polarised political debates. There's a need for a more nuanced understanding of balance that both accurately reflects a wider diversity of perspectives, rather than simply two adversarial sides of an argument, and also captures the balance of evidence. This reinforces the need for continuous professional development for journalists, and a more responsive internal appetite for reviewing organisational practices and standards in the context of changing political environments.

### **4. Journalists and citizens: widening engagement and deepening the concept of the 'public interest'.**

Greater engagement with the public through social media, as well as a heightened sensitivity to audience feedback through editorial analytics, has not fed through into increased public trust in the media. In fact, journalists interviewed in our study spoke about a growing disconnection to certain sections of the public, and many expressed a sense of personal shock at the popular appeal of the AfD and Brexit. There is, therefore, a need to create a more expansive understanding of citizen engagement with the media, particularly extending participation opportunities to under-represented groups, and creating more space for journalists to physically reach a wider number of communities in their research. Rebuilding trust also requires deeper structural change through continuing to invest in addressing the evident 'diversity shortfall' in the journalistic profession.

### **5. Populism and platforming: challenging the affinity between populist politics and the news media.**

The first step in challenging the affinity between the media and populist politics, has to be greater transparency over the practices and process which may influence the level of coverage certain politicians may receive. This includes transparency around: the mission and values of news organisations; the metrics and analytics that drive editorial decision-making; and the level and tone of coverage given to leading politicians and political parties. Beyond transparency, the thinness and flexibility of populism as an ideology and a discourse means that there are no single, 'silver bullet' solutions to challenging its propagation through the media. Instead, responding effectively to populism requires a multi-pronged approach outlined covering issues of resourcing, training, ethics, and citizen-engagement outlined above.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Axelrod D, 'UK media most partisan I have seen- even more than Fox News', *The Guardian*, 7 May 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/may/07/david-axelrod-uk-media-most-partisan-fox-news>

<sup>2</sup> Ofcom, 'News consumption in the UK: 2016', 2017,

[https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/103570/news-consumption-uk-2016.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/103570/news-consumption-uk-2016.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Bundesverband Deutscher Zeitungsverleger (BDZV), 'Die deutschen Zeitungen in Zahlen und Daten 2018', 2018, [http://www.bdzv.de/fileadmin/bdzv\\_hauptseite/aktuell/publikationen/2017/ZDF\\_2017\\_web.pdf](http://www.bdzv.de/fileadmin/bdzv_hauptseite/aktuell/publikationen/2017/ZDF_2017_web.pdf)



