

Mediating Populism

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CONTENTS

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	7
1 Mediating Populism in Britain	10
2 The German Media's Response to Populism	48
3 Comparative Analysis: British and German Media	73
4 Conclusions and Ways Forward	78
References	85

FOREWORD

The internet's increasing function as a source of political news means that traditional media now operate in a much more convoluted and contested environment. Citizens are overwhelmed with information from a wide variety of sources, much of it lacking ratified credibility or even actively promoting misinformation. At the same time, media organisations must navigate the rise of populist leaders and their divisive or potentially dangerous views - many of whom share natural affinities with media conventions favouring conflict, strong personalities and dynamism. In light of both of these trends, there is a greater need than ever for the media to be more exacting and robust, and to uphold its traditional gatekeeping role, and yet its capacity to do so appears to be more constrained than ever.

Over the past two years, as Western politics has reeled from a series of seismic shocks, there has been a surge in the scrutiny paid to social media platforms for their responsibility in opening the information marketplace to new actors with different practices and standards. While the digital age has profoundly reshaped the media environment and the relationships between outlets and audiences, citizens continue to largely consume content from traditional providers. Considerably less attention has been paid to the role and responsibility of these organisations in the contemporary 'populist moment'.

This paper seeks to peer behind the curtain of the British media, to better understand how the growth of new media is transforming news practices, and how the rise of populism is reshaping the power dynamics between politicians and media institutions - and the democratic implications of these developments. In particular, we explore the role that traditional media organisations have played in the legitimisation and discreditation of populist parties, and the impact of these institutional decisions in the formation of public opinion towards them.

There are two particularly unique aspects to this project. Firstly, our research is based around scores of interviews we have conducted under full anonymity with journalists, producers and editors – to hear their candid perspectives on the challenges they face both in their day-to-day work, and also in exceptional circumstances such as the European Referendum. Secondly, we have partnered with Das Progressive Zentrum in Berlin, who have interrogated the same themes from a German perspective, producing a valuable comparison point of the commonalities and distinctions shaping two European media environments.

It is clear that both British and German journalists now operate in a considerably more demanding ecosystem than in previous decades, and that this can make it difficult to create space for nuanced and expansive internal conversations around the moral and ethical decisions they must take on a daily basis. Commendably, many individuals and newsrooms are making time to develop clear positions and safeguards to ensure the social and democratic missions of their profession are upheld against this backdrop of change. Our interviews revealed acute levels of self-awareness amongst journalists of their capacity to exert power and influence, and the responsibilities this brings to uphold certain moral

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and ethical frameworks. With this paper, we recognise and celebrate these examples of professional excellence.

Yet, it is also clear that the specific challenges of the 'populist moment' on both the Left and the Right of politics have not always been addressed in a proactive or conscientious way by the media. There is considerable uncertainty about how best to strike a balance between representing legitimate perspectives outside of the political mainstream and effectively maintaining a position as the 'fourth estate' of our democracies. The natural affinity between news values and the campaigning style of populist candidates of all political persuasions necessitates a considerably greater level of robust and critical analysis of journalism in the populist age.

Believing hugely in the importance of a confident, active, pluralistic and competitive media environment, we hope this report provides an opportunity for these conversations to take place.

Sophie Gaston

Deputy Director, Demos

March 2018

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.¹ 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.² 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 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:

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- 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.³

- 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.

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INTRODUCTION

Any contemporary exploration of the populist turn in Western politics seems inherently bound up in questions of media representation. News organisations have been at the 'frontline' of documenting and analysing the political shocks that have ripped through Europe and America in recent years, playing a key role in shaping citizens' understanding of these events in the process. Populist politicians themselves have typically adopted a somewhat schizophrenic relationship to the press, simultaneously looking to attack and co-opt the traditional news media. On the one hand, major media organisations are prime targets within their wider anti-establishment critique, while on the other, they still represent the best route to public profile. At the same time, the media has come under growing criticism from the liberal centre, with some positing 'media complicity' with populist politics, through skewed coverage and/or an alignment of interests and discursive styles.

For journalists, the challenges of reporting in such turbulent political times cannot be separated from the deep structural and technological changes transforming the industry. Both within and beyond the newsroom, the digital age and commercial pressures are fundamentally transforming media practice, with journalists operating in ever more contested and convoluted environments. In the search for new business models and new audiences, journalists have taken on myriad new responsibilities, while at the same time trying to maintain the long-held journalistic values that underpin the media's core democratic functions. Citizens are now bombarded with information from a wide variety of sources, much of it lacking ratified credibility or even actively promoting misinformation. And while public trust in institutions is generally been falling, the crisis of trust is seemingly most acute in relation to both politicians and the press.

It is at the intersection of new and 'old' media that the ground for populist politics seems most fertile. In seeking public attention, the media's long-standing affinity to controversy, conflict, and crisis is now supercharged by cycles of outrage emanating from social media. Attempts to frame policy debates in simple 'us versus them' parameters are aided by reduced verification capacities within stretched newsrooms, and bolstered by information provided by new alternative media sites. And within such contested and fragmented media-political environments, even core tenets of good journalistic practice – such as balance, accuracy, and fair representation – can be upended in service of a more divisive politics.

Defining Populism

Academic and public interest in populism has risen dramatically over the last ten years, yet the term is often applied in a variety of different ways, denoting among other things: a political style, a strategy, a way of organising, an ideology, a political logic and a discourse. Cas Mudde has famously defined populism as "a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite'".⁴ And while a multitude of other definitions exist, it does seem that there is some scholarly convergence around these two core aspects of populism – its (often exclusionary) construction of 'the people', and its anti-elitist critique of the 'establishment'. The ideological thinness of populism also means that its

construction of 'the people' and their enemies can incorporate more concrete political ideas from both the political Left and Right (i.e., Right – political elites and immigrants; Left – big business, and “the one percent”).

Perhaps most significantly from the perspective of this research, populism has also been defined as a style of political communication, and one that seeks to frame public and political discourse along the anti-establishment lines described above. This means that while the label of 'populist' is often applied to specific political figures or parties, it rather acts as a far more diffuse communicative framing, which can take root across and beyond the political sphere – a point made by German academic Carsten Reinemann and others:

“Populism is most reflected in the oral, written and visual communication of individual politicians, parties, social movements, or any other actor that steps into the public sphere (including the media and citizens).”⁵

While rising populism has been a topic of much debate in both Germany and the UK, the growth and impact of anti-establishment politics has been heavily mediated by national context. In Germany, charting the fortunes of populist politics has principally been a matter of analysing support for Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) from its emergence in 2013, to success in regional elections in 2014 and 2016, and finally to its entering the Bundestag in 2017 as the third largest party (albeit with growing support to AfD's right from the PEGIDA movement).

In Britain, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) would seem to be broadly analogous to AfD, however, in part due to the British voting system, UKIP has struggled to gain a foothold in parliamentary politics. Instead, the Party's impact has been one of discursive influence and alignment with sections of establishment parties. In a broader sense, populist political communication has taken root both within and outside of mainstream parties, including the self-described left-wing populism of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party.

This Report

While much has been written about populism's relationship to the media, in both challenging and utilising 'establishment' news⁶, what this means for the daily practice and function of journalism has been under-explored. This study therefore aims to foreground the experience of journalists, through data gathered from roundtables and scores of one-to-one interviews conducted with journalists in the UK. And, through a case study prepared by Das Progressive Zentrum (DPZ) in Berlin, to compare and contrast these observations with the German media.

In selecting these two countries, we assess how similar structural, technological, and political trends have played out in two quite distinct media and political systems. We also investigate how major political events, which have proved watershed moments for populist politics in both countries – namely, the EU Referendum in the UK, and the migration crisis in Germany – have challenged journalistic practice and provoked an unprecedented level of self-reflexive analysis.

Below we provide evidence from our qualitative research into journalists' experiences in the UK (Chapter 1), structured across four broad sections. In the first section, we explore the context of changing practice in the contemporary media landscape. In section two, we examine how these changes are shaping the interaction of political and media spheres. In

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the third section, we look how journalists are responding to populism, assessing the extent to which the contemporary political-media environment and associated journalistic practice is contributing to the legitimisation and de-legitimisation of populist narratives. In the final section, we look in detail at journalists' assessment of media's coverage of the EU Referendum vote.

This is followed by the German case study from DPZ (Chapter 2), which also explores similar issues in the German national context, and highlights the 2015-16 refugee and migration crisis, and the recent Bundestag elections, as examples of the populist challenge stressing the media industry.

We bring our findings from both pieces of research together in Chapter 3, making comparisons between Germany and the UK. In Chapter 4, we draw on our conclusions from the research to assess ways forward to creating a more enabling environment for journalists to critically engage with populist politics across both national contexts.

MEDIATING POPULISM IN BRITAIN

Introduction

In their widely cited *Three Models* typology of media systems, academics Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini place the UK within the North Atlantic or Liberal model (see figure 1), distinct from other systems in Southern and Northern Europe.⁷ This liberal model is characterised by 'a dominant role of commercial media: limited state involvement [...], and a relatively high level of journalistic professionalism.' The UK does reflect this 'ideal-type' in certain respects, particularly in its commercially-owned, and campaign-driven, print media. However, the UK differs from other countries within this category due to the far larger influence of publicly-owned media companies, predominantly through the BBC, and state ownership of broadcaster Channel 4.

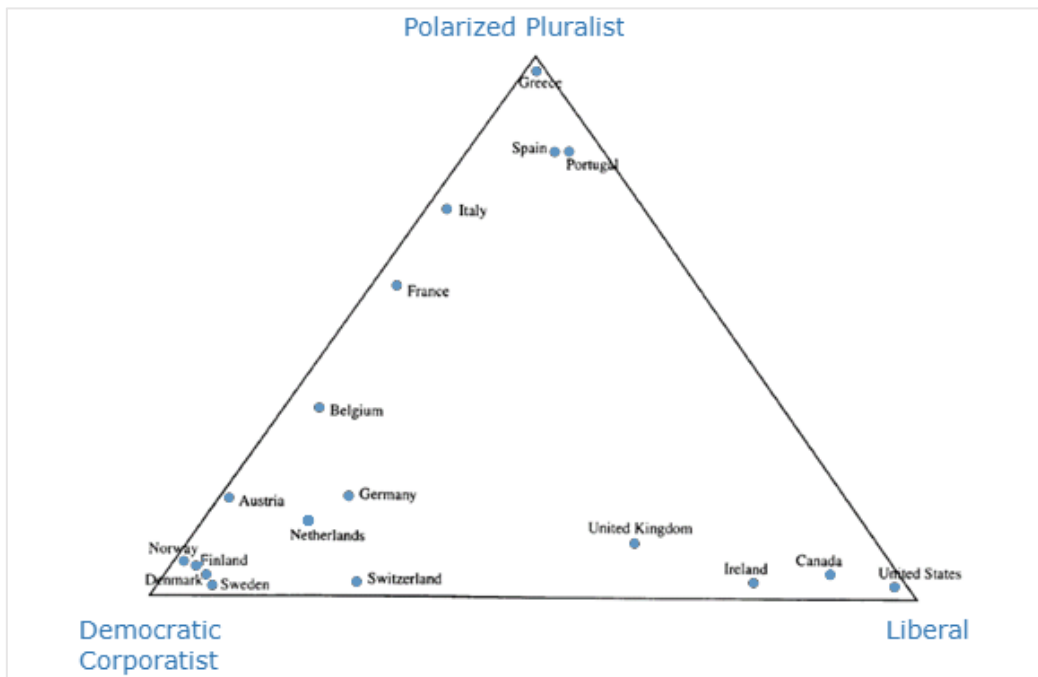


Figure 1. Relation of national media landscapes to the Three Models typology⁸

The UK has often been characterised as one of the most politically divided and partisan media systems in the Western world.⁹ In particular, British tabloid newspapers, are internationally known for their politically-charged and adversarial reporting style.¹⁰ Analysis of the wider media landscape by the Reuters Institute, assessing the political leanings of the (online) audience of major news brands, reflects these political cleavages, albeit with the central anchoring force of the BBC, which is the most widely consumed media outlet.¹¹

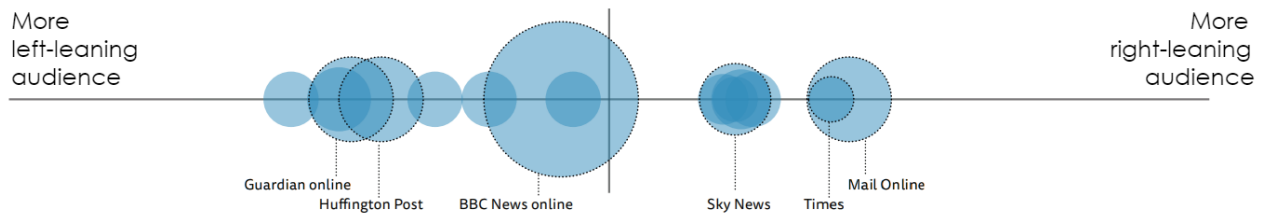


Figure 2. Reuters Institute online media audience map, United Kingdom¹²

Diversity in political positioning is not, however, reflected in media ownership, which is highly concentrated in the UK. According to a 2015 study by the Media Reform Coalition pressure group, three companies - News UK, Daily Mail & General Trust, and Trinity Mirror - control 71 per cent of the national newspaper market.¹³ This condensed ownership picture holds for the wider media industry, with analysis by Deloitte finding that the largest 10 media organisations control 70 per cent of a £96 billion industry.¹⁴

While this overarching media landscape of a politically fragmented print media and a large non-partisan public broadcaster seems little changed over decades in the UK, the stability of this picture masks what is in fact a 'rapidly changing media ecosystem'.¹⁵ For political journalism in particular, the simultaneous transformations of technological change, shifting consumption habits, and the emergence of new kinds of political actors is fundamentally destabilising business models and established modes of practice.

In addition, the industry has also seen a major shake-up to the regulatory environment, following the Leveson Inquiry into the 'culture, practices and ethics of the press' in November 2012, itself triggered by the 'phone-hacking scandal' which came to light in 2011. The Inquiry's recommendations led to the closure of the then regulator the Press Complaints Commission, and its replacement by the Press Recognition Panel (PRP) which would overlook and accredit any future independent self-regulating press bodies.

So far, only one press regulator, IMPRESS, has been approved by the PRP. Yet IMPRESS only counts a small number of newspapers among its members. Most of the UK's largest newspapers have joined the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), an industry-created body, which has not been recognised (nor applied for recognition) by the Press Recognition Panel. Other publications, for example the *Guardian* and the *Financial Times*, have held back from joining any regulator and have appointed their own internal readers' ombudsmen under a model of self-regulation.

Technological and Consumer Disruption: New Media and Changing Consumption

Broad trends in media consumption in the UK are those of declining print media circulation, steadily rising news consumption via social media, and significant bifurcation of preferences on the basis of age and socio-economic background.

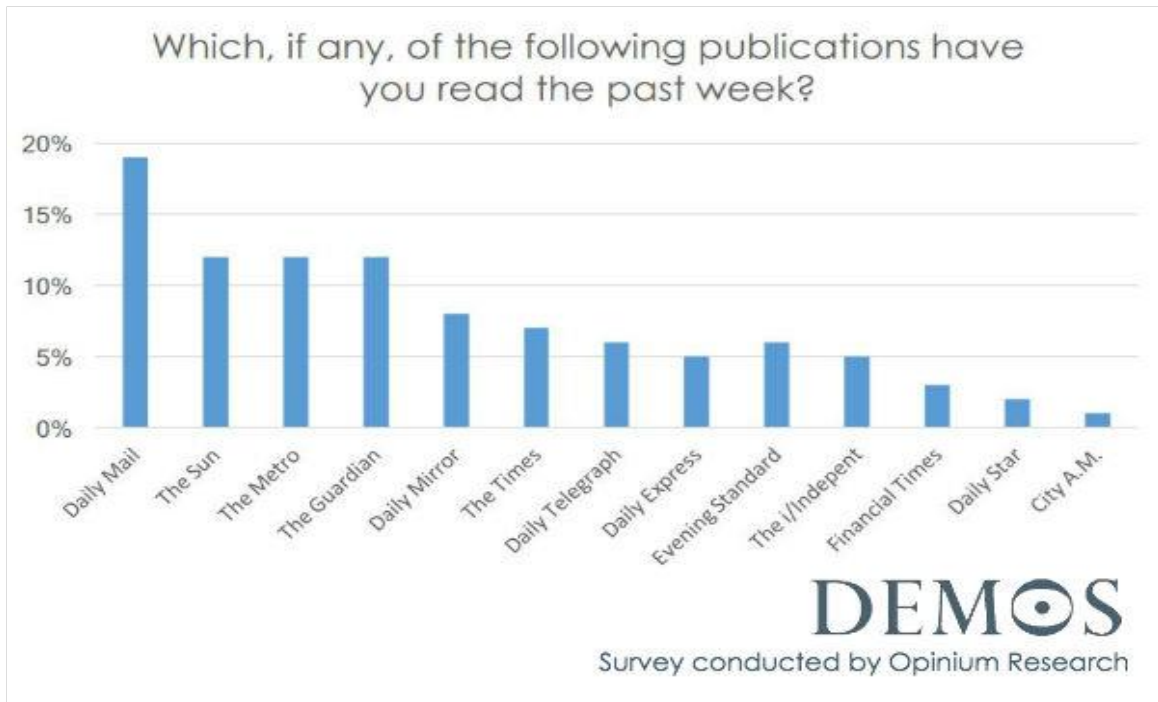


Figure 3. Readership per publication in % of the UK population, Demos/Opinium survey, 2017

A survey undertaken by Demos with Opinium Research in January 2018 asking, 'Which, if any, of the following newspapers (and/or their Sunday equivalents) do you currently read (ie. have read at least once in the past week), found that the *Daily Mail* was reported as the singularly most read press title across the country (19 per cent), 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, compared to 39 per cent of men. There were also clear age differences, with the young most likely to read *The Guardian* (20 per cent) than any other title, the bulk of the working-age population (35-54) considerably more spread across multiple titles, and *the Daily Mail* especially dominant amongst those over 55 years, at 25 per cent - more than 15 per cent higher than the next title, the *Metro*.

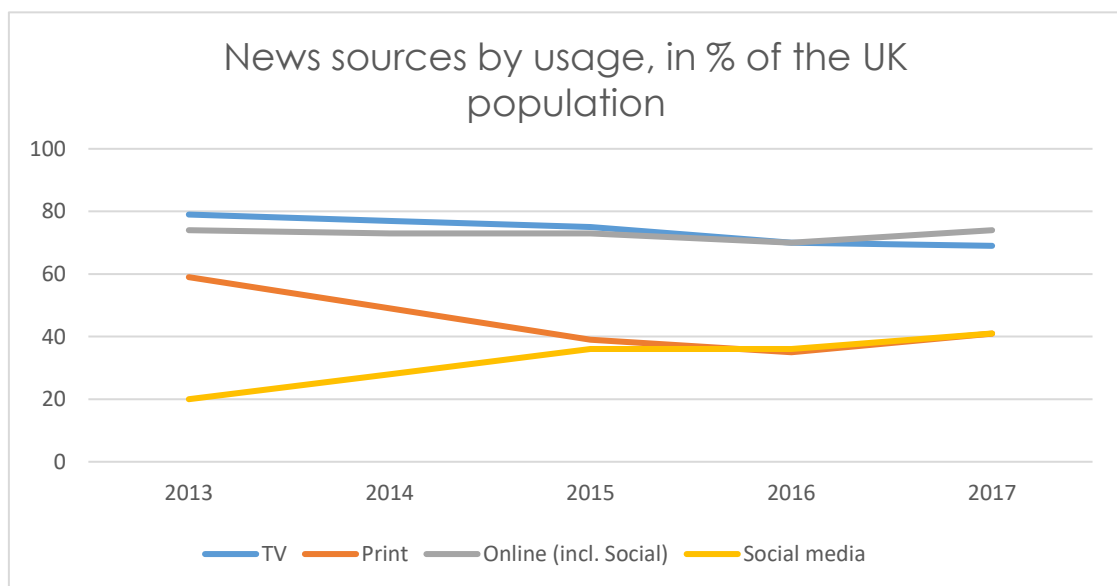


Figure 4. Changing news consumption by media type, 2013-2017¹⁶

Overall, the circulation of national daily print titles has continued its sharp decline in recent years, falling by more than a third from 9.2 million in 2010 to 6 million in 2016.¹⁷ Furthermore, print media's other main source of revenue, advertising, has seen similarly rapid falls. Between 2014 and 2015 alone, national newspaper brands lost £155m in print advertising, with sales for broadsheet titles falling by 9.6 per cent, and for tabloids by an even greater 16.2 per cent.¹⁸

In response to these trends, many print titles have developed widely-consumed online brands around more flexible and targeted advertising models, the most successful being the *MailOnline* and *theguardian.com*, with daily averages of unique readers of 14.8 million and 8.8 million respectively in 2016.¹⁹ Despite this, however, the promise of sustainable new business frameworks based on online advertising have not been realised to alleviate the shortfall in traditional models – *The Guardian* remains loss-making, and the *Telegraph*, *The Sun* and *Daily Mail* have seen revenues fall by 40 per cent in the past decade.²⁰

The longer-running shift to online news consumption has more recently been boosted by a rapid expansion of social media as an information platform. According to Ofcom, Facebook is now the second most widely used online news source in the UK, with 27 per cent of Britons accessing news through Facebook, although this remains significantly behind the BBC at 56 per cent.²¹

Traditional news organisations constitute a key component of the social media news landscape, with much of the content originating from established outlets. However, they are now competing in a far more diversified and fragmented media environment, with the emergence of online-only 'mainstream' news sites (eg, *Buzzfeed* and *Business Insider*), as well as more recent 'hyper-partisan' sites (eg, *Breitbart* and *The Canary*). Social media is also providing these new entrants with some degree of equivalence with mainstream outlets, both in terms of reach and visual presentation – ultimately making the distinction between mainstream and alternative news sources less clear. Analysis of the 2017 UK General Election, for example, found that while 11 of the 20 most shared articles came from traditional news outlets, the rest came from so-called 'non-traditional' sources.²²

All of this change is putting huge pressures on the long-term sustainability of traditional news organisations' business models, most evidently seen in the closure of *The Independent's* print titles in 2016. And while individual organisations are experimenting with new revenue streams from pay-walled services or membership subscriptions, there remains no silver bullet to ensuring long-term financial health.²³

Political Disruption

While the media environment has been undergoing major structural change, so too has the UK's political landscape, which has experienced a series of shocks that have become emblematic of the wider populist turn in European politics.²⁴ Populism has been described as a 'difficult, slippery concept' and this seems particularly the case in the UK context, with anti-establishment politics of insurgent politicians and political movements, at times merging with more established sections of mainstream political parties.²⁵

The UK Independence Party is the most clearly visible manifestation of populist politics in the British party-political system. Founded in the early 1990s by a group of Eurosceptic academics and disillusioned ex-Conservative party members, from 2010 the Party began to take a more overtly populist and anti-establishment line. This approach gave pre-eminence

to UKIP's charismatic leader at the time, Nigel Farage, who was successful in fusing its core Eurosceptic agenda with a broader anti-immigration critique.²⁶ However, despite notable success in the 2014 European Elections, UKIP's direct impact on domestic electoral outcomes has been limited. The Party won just one seat in the 2015 General Election, followed by an electoral annihilation in 2017, losing its representation in Parliament, and seeing its vote share plummet from 13 to two per cent.

UKIP's success has instead been one of discursive influence, issue capture, and policy adoption, predominantly by the Conservative Party – but also some Eurosceptic and/or socially conservative elements of the Labour Party.²⁷ This is most starkly shown by tracing the chronological line from David Cameron's dismissal of the Party in 2006 as a collection of 'fruitcakes, loons, and closet racists' to his pledging an in/out Referendum on European Union membership at a speech at *Bloomberg* in 2013, and finally to the UK's vote to leave the EU in June 2016. UKIP's success in achieving its central goal was, therefore, built on finding common ground with the Eurosceptic wing of the Conservative Party, who were equally instrumental in developing and promoting the anti-establishment line of the Leave campaign.²⁸ The disproportionate influence Nigel Farage on this process has led even staunch Conservative Europhile Ken Clarke to described him as 'most successful politician of my generation'.²⁹

The bleeding of the populist style into mainstream politics is not, however, confined to the Conservative Party. Jeremy Corbyn's surprising election to the Labour Party leadership in 2015 was seen by some as the left-wing variant of Britain's 'populist moment'.³⁰ By early 2017, Corbyn's own team were promoting a 'populist relaunch', in a bid to counter dire poll ratings. This new strategy aimed to emphasise Corbyn's anti-establishment credentials, adopt more a more populist rhetorical style (e.g., focusing on tackling the 'rigged system'), and launch explicitly populist policies steeped in redistribution, such as funding universal free school meals by taxing private school fees.³¹

In their coverage of these political shifts, the UK news media has been attacked both as part of the 'establishment' and as complicit in facilitating the kind of populist issue capture discussed above. Anti-establishment critiques of the media have been less intense than Trump's attacks on the American media, or the *Lügenpresse* branding of the media from Germany's far-Right. However, a key part of Corbynism (particularly after the 'populist relaunch') has been to mount a sustained critique of the Right-leaning press, and wider 'mainstream media', as fundamentally corrupt and biased towards the Right, and to mobilise supporters – whether citizens, or sympathetic organisations – against it.

The groundswell of digital action harnessed behind Corbyn's causes has proved sufficiently powerful to encourage a number of advertisers to pull out of deals with certain media outlets, including stationery firm Paperchase's promotion in the *Daily Mail*.³² Corbyn's approach constitutes a significant break with attempts to court and engage with Right-leaning newspapers under previous leaders, especially during the New Labour leadership under Tony Blair.³³

Media critique from the liberal centre have focused on the media's direct or indirect legitimisation of populist discourses and political outcomes. Much of this critique has been directed at the so-called 'media populism' of sections of the print media, defined by Benjamin Krämer as a stylistic and ideological approach which favours:

“The construction and favouritism of in-groups, hostility toward, and circumvention of the elites and institutions of representative democracy, reliance on charisma and (group-related) common sense, and appeal to moral sentiments (thus on an emotionalizing, personalizing, and ostentatiously plainspoken discourse).”³⁴

Given its prominence within the British media landscape, the BBC has come under particularly scrutiny for its approach to the covering a range of divisive issues, not least of all the EU Referendum – with accusations the organisation simply ‘reduced everything to claim or counter claim’, inadvertently creating a sense of perceived undue equivalence between the campaign messages³⁵. Both sides of this issue are discussed in further detail in the UK Referendum case study from page xxx.

The Intersection of Media and Political Change: A Crisis of Trust

Journalists and politicians have for some time been among the least trusted professionals in national surveys, with Ipsos Mori’s latest Veracity Index finding them trusted by just 27 and 17 per cent of the public respectively.³⁶ While certain media outlets continue to enjoy relatively high levels of trust – 83 per cent of *Guardian* readers and 61 per cent of BBC viewers regard these organisations as trustworthy – others have far lower levels.³⁷ Just 39 per cent and 30 per cent of *Daily Mail* and *Sun* readers respectively believe their papers are trustworthy. Looking across all print media titles, the UK appears to be an outlier, with the lowest levels of trust of any European country (see figure 5).

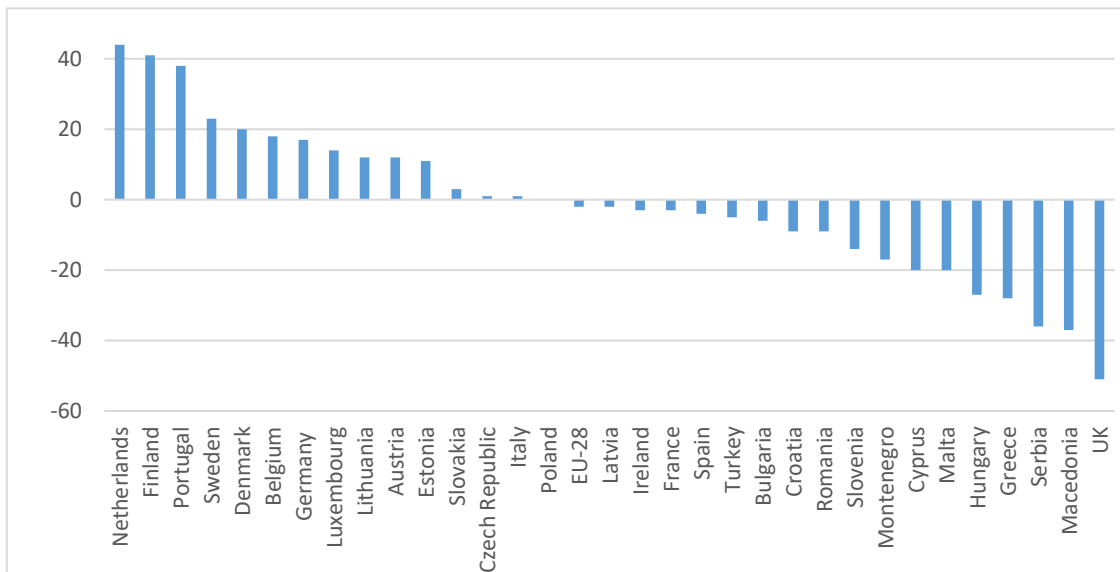


Figure 5. Net trust scores in print media, by European country³⁸

Despite these longer-running trends, it appears that the substantial turbulence in media and political environments (and the interaction between the two) is feeding into a deeper crisis of trust. The impact of the EU Referendum, and its coverage in the press, has been posited as a factor in sharp declines in trust recorded over 2016, which saw the percentage of Britons expressing trust in the news falling from 50 per cent to 40 per cent.³⁹ In addition, rising news consumption through social media has not been associated with growing public confidence in the medium, with only 18 per cent of UK adults considering news seen on Facebook as trustworthy.⁴⁰

The entanglement of the new media landscape and populist politics is creating a new environment for the propagation of misinformation and so-called 'fake news', which is likely draining public trust away from both spheres still further. Recent Demos research has, for example, found that 67 per cent of British adults are concerned about misinformation online.⁴¹ Another survey by market researchers Kantar, found that the impact of hearing about fake news had a detrimental effect on trust of both social media platforms and the print press, albeit with a greater impact on the former. Nearly 60 per cent of those surveyed said they now trusted social media less (compared to just eight per cent that trusted it more), and 22 per cent said the same for printed daily or Sunday newspapers (compared to just 11 per cent who now trusted them more).⁴²

The overarching picture is, therefore, one in which politicians and media are competing for public attention in an ever more contested landscape, with citizens increasingly sceptical about the veracity of many, if not most sources. Within the context of a crisis of trust, but also a crisis of financial sustainability, there are clear questions for journalists about how best to engage audiences, and the extent to which this supports or challenges ideas around the social function of journalism.

Changing Practice in the Digital Age

While media organisations have always had to adapt to changes in consumer behaviour, social and political structures, and technological innovation, there is general consensus that the current era represents a step-change – one of fundamental transformation for the industry.⁴³ The broad structural trends that we reviewed in the introduction – of falling revenues, increased competition, digitalisation, and information and media abundance – are not simply threatening traditional business models, they are also, in the words of media economist Robert Picard 'forcing negotiations of values, norms, and practices'.⁴⁴

Some of these changes appear to reflect relatively straightforward outcomes of new media environments, such as the steep increase in journalists publishing exclusively online (rising from 26 to 52 per cent between 2012 and 2015).⁴⁵ However, others seem more fundamentally transformative to the practice of quality journalism. A recent survey of journalists in the UK for example, found that 86 per cent said that the time available for researching stories had decreased, and just over half (52 per cent) felt increased pressure towards sensational news production.⁴⁶

Changing environmental factors, combined with new internal processes and practices, may also raise deeper questions about the very function of journalism in advanced democracies. How, for instance, do traditional journalistic values of professional autonomy and editorial independence adapt to new impulses around audience feedback, participation and collaboration? More fundamentally, what constitutes authentic and credible journalism in a context where its monopoly over democratic functions of 'bearing witness, holding to account, and opinion leadership' is now shared across a multiplicity of new media actors and platforms?⁴⁷

In this section, we present journalists' perspectives on how the practice and function of journalism is adapting to wider environmental and industry-driven change. In the context of our broader investigation into the media's response to rising anti-establishment and populist politics, these questions are central to understanding how sectoral transformation is

DEMOS

influencing the ability of journalists to conduct journalism of value, and, perhaps more significantly, influencing conceptions of what is, or what should be, valued in the first place.

Extrinsic Change: Information Abundance, Social Fragmentation & Resource Scarcity

For individual journalists, the single most demanding aspect of the changes taking place within the media industry is the sheer breadth of information they must now navigate on a daily basis. The democratisation of content and the rise of social media platforms have offered some positive consequences, in considerably improving the ease of the process of news gathering, ameliorating the speed at which journalists can contact sources, validate information and identify new leads to pursue.⁴⁸

Twitter can actually be quite helpful because you used to have to phone people to get background and quotes, and now you can pull from your Twitter feed. It gives you a pretty good sense of who wants to be quoted and what the views are. That has made political journalism...in some senses...easier.

I find it far easier to get closer to the story, if I'm trying to track someone down, I guess, if you're talking on that basic level. [...] I used to do good old-fashioned phone bashing, and look someone up in the phone book or something, and now you get them on Twitter, and I can be speaking to that person within, you know, a minute and they could be on the other side of the world and I can get them up on a phone line or in a studio, so I mean I think that's obviously a strong advantage.

While the proliferation of information and media in the digital age is, therefore, clearly presenting opportunities for journalists in terms of newsgathering, it's also leading to what has been described as 'cognitive overload'.⁴⁹ The toll on journalists of having to constantly manage their online presence both proactively and reactively, to sieve through the abundance of news content for valuable insights, and to create mental and emotional space to produce compelling stories, is placing considerable strain on their health and relationships.⁵⁰ For journalists with decades under their belt, the "shift from an age of information scarcity [...] to information obesity", has been particularly challenging to steer.

As one journalist explained:

The biggest challenge I face on a daily basis, by, by far a long way is the sheer volume of information I have to cope with. It's completely changed everything. Because I am now waking up, the first thing I do, like every other journalist I know, is to go to the phone and I turn on the BBC website, that's the first page I look at, and then I look at Twitter [...] I then will put on Sky News on one telly, and I'll have the radio on [...], I'm looking at every single website, that connects with politics. Plus, I'm getting four or five morning emails, from various news organisations. This does not stop for the rest of my day, and I have to monitor all of it.

The proliferation of information and the additional responsibilities now bestowed on print journalists, who are now expected to also maintain dynamic public profiles as broadcast media personalities, has not been met with any concurrent investment in staff resources, nor substantive increases in salaries. Many journalists expressed concerns that the abundance of news and the ever-growing expectations of their content output was

DEMOS

producing an environment of “churnalism”, while threadbare staffing was sometimes compromising the quality of their output. As one described, “We are constantly understaffed...you don't have the time to talk to anyone about it [the story]. Often, I write a story and they don't even edit it, just proof read it, because we don't have enough people.”

There are now fewer people doing more work. In the past, as a print journalist, you had one or two deadlines a day. Now, there is no deadline. Journalists are competing with each other, constantly, not just for stories in the paper but also on Twitter.

Simply, there is more demand for content and less time to produce it. There's less time to think and work up a story than you did in previous decades.

As a journalist, you know that something can probably be disproven, but now you don't have the time or the resources to really check. More than anything else, it's because of timing. Journalists tend not to work now in an environment that supports the idea that they should and could make their own judgement as an individual.

Another impact of their escalating workload has been to reinforce existing demographic imbalances in news rooms, with the slow progress towards greater representation of women and other groups to whom these responsibilities may present barriers to entry, largely only achieved through affirmative action practices.⁵¹ One former broadcaster explained that “only wealthy individuals can afford to be journalists, so in news rooms you find mainly upper-middle-class and upper-class white people, and in positions of power – editorial positions – it is much the same.”

At an organisational level, the growth of social media platforms and the democratisation of online news production, have both accelerated the existential crises of competition and declining profit streams that have been plaguing the media industry for almost two decades. The constant strategic restructuring and the relentless focus on bottom lines this has inspired is exhausting for journalists, who are frequently “walking on eggshells” and face considerable uncertainty about the security of their employment. While many younger journalists have never known any other type of environment, as one noted, “You cannot underestimate the resistance to change from some older journalists”.

One journalist explained the anxiety of working for a newspaper waiting for an “elusive business model” creating profitability in the digital age to materialise. A UK correspondent for an international broadsheet felt the sustainability of the British media environment was particularly dire, with commercial pressures compromising the depth and quality of media reporting. “They had a role in investigating scandals, or imbalances in society and so on,” they observed. “That is now certainly more difficult”.

Another broadsheet journalist explained:

Even greater than the changes caused by widespread technological change are the changes taking place within the UK's news economy and within organisations themselves. News organisations still have considerable power to shape how they respond to this new landscape.

A further challenge to media organisations lies in the fragmentation of audiences and their shifting loyalties, with profound generational splits and the range of new platforms

rendering the concept of a 'mass audience' increasingly obsolete. This is discombobulating to many organisations whose practices and identity had been forged around their capacity to communicate, unimpeded, with an audience dependent on the media as the sole gateway to information.

The press is confused in a world where its monopoly of public discourse is being challenged.

This seems particularly significant for British newspapers, which have long held a form of a social contract with their readers, traditionally providing an articulation of collective voice based on broad class and political party-based loyalties.⁵² This new fragmented and individualised landscape necessitates a profound shift in mentality and strategic approach, as one tabloid journalist described:

We're trying to re-fashion our relationship with the public, and recognise perhaps, that the more traditional understanding of the public is now diversified into publics, in the plural, and there are multiple, a myriad array of them, all of which have different kinds of interests and priorities.

One journalist explained how their newspaper is now shifting their attentions solely to subscriptions and their registered readers, and that this was having a "direct impact" on the type of content that is featured. The emphasis now is on producing material that would either encourage new subscribers or maintain the existing subscriber base, shifting the focus from controversial content seeking social media engagement to reinforcing viewpoints within a particular segment.

Therefore, the journalists we spoke to had a clear sense of being caught between fundamentally antagonistic trends in the wider economic and social environment in which they are working. While they are being asked to do more to effectively engage in new media environments, the organisational resources and personal capacities to do so are being squeezed further and further. Some news organisations are looking to resolve these tensions by shifting towards new business models, but this is yet to feed through to the day-to-day working practices of the majority of journalists that we spoke to.

Intrinsic Change: Metrics, Popularity & Public Service

The external challenges news organisations are facing to build sustainable business models and competitive advantage in a crowded and contested landscape, have manifested in the development of new internal operational practices. For journalists, the most pertinent of these is the focus on metrics as a feedback loop to measure the reach and appeal of media content.

Four, five years ago, there was quite a lot of concern about how people were going to be getting their news – particularly a lot of thinking about social media – and what digital advertising would look like. It's was all about multi-channel content, getting across as many platforms as possible. That ushered in the era of metrics, of search engine optimisation. People were hired specifically to chase these metrics.

Journalists have mixed feelings about these metrics, with some holding the belief that it has afforded them "much more knowledge...about that the audience is looking at, or what

DEMOS

they're doing", which can be hugely beneficial in terms of building proximity with their readership. For others, the emphasis on digital metrics was imparting a narrowing effect on the process of journalism, as the most 'successful' social media content may exhibit characteristics more in common with entertainment than news. This is reflected as much in the structure and presentation of stories, with journalists describing shorter headlines, "more provocative" content and the need to "react quicker" to events of the day.

You absolutely set out to write things that are going to get read, which often means going to get read on social media, specifically...the whole shape of the [newspaper's] website is based around what is being read.

This new market-based measurement prism directly impacts the nature of the content journalists are compelled to produce, meaning, "there are some topics that...I think anyone in my organisation is just much less likely to write about, because you know that readers won't read about it." While topics deemed to be "objectively important" will always be given space, those perhaps exhibiting greater nuance or exploring 'niche' issues without mass popularity can be de-prioritised.

The significance metrics afforded in newsrooms also shines a different type of spotlight on journalists' work, providing a daily numbers-based assessment of the reception their writing received, including "how many clicks, what subscriptions were sold, how many people bought a subscription because they want to read a specific piece", but also the length of time readers spent on stories and which were read in their entirety. The consequence is that contemporary journalists are judged on much more comprehensive, stricter and measurable criteria than their forebears, imbuing their positions with a considerably greater sense of precariousness.

There has been a very exhausting focus on measuring page views and engagement. It's very crude. The question is, what all this is measuring?

From the audience perspective, some journalists felt that the hyper-intensity of the feedback loop afforded by metrics was empowering for their readers, with one describing the *Mail Online* landing page, which updates the position of stories based on their active readership, as "democratic" in nature. Other journalists were optimistic about the consequences stemming from the imperative to compete for readers' attention in the online marketplace, feeling it has encouraged "journalism to get better, because you have to offer something beyond". The quest for 'distinctiveness' and competitive edge has encouraged many newspapers to invest in comment and analysis.

The distinctiveness becomes comment, more comment and less straight information [...] by giving added value to the audience, and you do that by putting your interpretation, your analysis, on the story.

We don't do news anymore, we now do comment, comment, comment or analysis.

Nonetheless, the evolution of the practice of journalism is calling into question its capacity to fulfil core public service functions, which constitute what has been termed the 'occupational ideology'⁵³ of journalism.⁵⁴ Many of the journalists we spoke to were, for example, sceptical about the conflation of measurement of content by its "popularity" as being a "democratic" act, feeling these two characteristics represented "an important

DEMOS

distinction to maintain". Others questioned the validity of valuing news by digital engagement, due to the ambiguity surrounding the interpretation of the findings:

A click –what is it actually measuring? Is it measuring the public service of the news item, or is it measuring something else?

In moving beyond what is simply the most popular, several interviewees stressed the need to develop a more considered negotiation of journalism's dual responsibilities to shine light on society, while also educating and leading the development of understanding. This for some required a more nuanced conception of journalistic objectivity - which it was felt, had often (and particularly within stretched newsrooms) been skewed towards simply reporting verbatim what sources had said. However, this approach was seen by some to ultimately fail both objectivity and public service tenets of journalism, if this was not accompanied by a deeper analysis of the issues in question.

As a democratic media, you have to take responsibility to educate the people [and] also the responsibility to reflect all the views.

Shouldn't they do both? I mean isn't that the difference between reporting and commentary, in a way? I think they should do both and I think that they do, do both.

While many argued that shifting media, political and societal landscapes required a re-focusing around these long-standing representational and educational functions, others felt that the contemporary context necessitated a more fundamental refashioning of core public service tenets of journalism. For some this meant proactively responding to the 'age of information obesity', in particular by supporting audiences to navigate increasingly noisy, contested, and fragmented information environments.

I think people crave for help for how to understand news and through a certain guidance, that's why I think papers like the Financial Times or the Economist [...] are still valued and still successful economically because people want somebody to explain to them what is actually going on.

As well as supporting public understanding, others felt that reconceptualising public service also meant journalists involvement in actively engaging in current political and societal challenges. In particular, this meant thinking through how to respond to the current crisis of trust both in the media itself, and in wider political and public institutions. Although few respondents had a definitive sense of the way forward, most who voiced this opinion believed it was about fostering practice that actively sought to build trust, as described by one participant at our roundtable:

We are a moment where perhaps the idea of public service should be at the forefront, rather than a vague idea of democracy [...] because we are at a very particular political moment where there's a lot of mistrust of, of the political system, there are a lot of vulnerable populations, so perhaps we should really focus on that as a priority, value right now in, in deciding what to publish.

Politics and the Media

In the quest for public attention and control of the political agenda, politicians and the media have long maintained close working relationships – typified by political journalists' collective labelling as 'the Lobby'.⁵⁵ In the post-War period these relationships have, however, been regularly revised or reconceptualised in the face of political, social and technological change. In the most widely-cited account of the post-war dynamics of political-media relations, UK-based academics Jay Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh identify three successive (if overlapping) eras of political communication⁵⁶:

- 'Age one': In the early post-war period politicians held the dominant position. Voters acted in accordance with relatively stable class-based political preferences, and a diverse and partisan print media served to transmit political messages to specific groups.
- 'Age two': Power dynamics were reoriented by the arrival of mass TV consumption in the 1960s, with broadcasters reaching a larger share of the electorate, and facing greater regulatory requirements around balance and neutrality. Politicians and political parties therefore had to work harder to justify their positions in relation to other political actors.
- 'Age three': The arrival of satellite television and 24-hour news, and then subsequently mass online news consumption, created an era of 'media abundance, ubiquity, reach, and celerity'. This new, diverse and highly competitive media environment stimulated a major intensification of what other academics have termed 'mediatisation' – a process by which media considerations become central to political and policy decision making.⁵⁷

In the UK, New Labour was in many ways the pioneer of the contemporary approach to political communication, institutionalising highly mediated approaches to policy development through the creation its Strategic Communications Unit in 1998, and the elevation of its press secretary, Alastair Campbell, to the newly created role of Director of Communications and Strategy in 2000. This approach, which sought to 'control or co-opt the media in the task of selling New Labour to the electorate', has been emulated by subsequent governments and opposition parties.⁵⁸

However, some of the trends observed in the previous section, particularly the rise of new media, and associated political strategies, may be beginning to destabilise this model, bringing about a distinct 'fourth age' of political communication.⁵⁹ In this section we explore journalists' perspectives on the consequences of these political and technological trends. We assess the extent to which relationships between journalists and politicians are changing within transformed media and political environments, and the implications of this for the drivers of the political and public agenda.

Relationships between Politicians and the Media

In describing the relationship between the New Labour Government and the media, academic Raymond Kuhn argues that it was one of 'mutual interdependence', which included elements of both 'bargaining' and 'adversarial contestation' – as Labour sought strategic deals with specific outlets, while both sides ultimately competed over who set the agenda and terms of the debate.⁶⁰

Our findings indicate that this simultaneously close and confrontational relationship continues to be a key feature of the UK's contemporary political-media ecology. In our interviews with both British journalists and London-based correspondents for international newspapers, many were keen to emphasise the intensely critical tone of political reporting in the UK, and its role in creating what many see as a uniquely accountable political culture:

I can certainly say that politicians are interviewed much harder, and much more controversially on radio, on the BBC than they would be in Germany or Switzerland [...] So no, I think it's, it's healthy in a way, it's robust.

The British press is fantastically critical of politicians and it's a hugely important thing that we do not have a deferential media, which you often see in other countries.

However, many of the journalists we spoke to also confirmed the simultaneous closeness of the Lobby – which has been described as a 'club atmosphere' – to politicians and political parties. Many processes are now deeply institutionalised in the working practices of both government and political journalists, as described by one Lobby journalist:⁶¹

If there's a big Government announcement, and it's a big staged one, the whole Lobby will get a release saying that the Prime Minister will say something. If it's something to be presented to the Parliament, for example, there will be a call round of the political editors. But it's a selective group.

I would compare the current relationship to the Major years, where the Government was getting a lot of criticism, but not against the individual practitioners. You won't hear Lobby colleagues complaining hugely about the spokespeople, for example.

Lobby journalists were seen to be protective of their favoured sources, while whole media organisations also maintained particularly close working relationships to certain politicians or political parties organised largely along ideological lines. On this latter point, foreign correspondents pointed out how the open partisanship of certain outlets was alien to media-political cultures of some other (particularly Northern European) systems.

It's far more evident that certain publishing houses support this politician or another. I mean the Daily Mail supporting Theresa May or in the days of The Sun supporting Tony Blair - that's something you wouldn't find. I mean only recently, the FT Deutschland when it still existed was the first paper ever in Germany ever to endorse a party. It was a scandal.

A new Political-Media Environment?

There are signs, however, that this mediatised, mutually-interdependent environment is being challenged by extrinsic changes brought about by new media, emerging media strategies of individual politicians or political parties, and a destabilising impact of insurgent political and media actors. For some this unwinding of political-media interdependence was set in motion as much by political events as technological change. A number of journalists pointed to the impact of the Expenses Scandal of 2009⁶² as a key event both in

fundamentally weakening trust in government, and exposing the dangers of “cosiness” between MPs and political journalists. The majority of the journalistic work to expose the misuse of expense came from outside of the Lobby, something which investigative journalist David Hencke has described as an ‘indictment of the lobby system’.⁶³

One of our interviewees also argued that the Expenses Scandal acted as a precursor to the anti-establishment framing and tactics that would be central to the Leave campaign’s success in the EU Referendum. Firstly, the collapse in public trust provided the context for growing anti-establishment sentiment. Furthermore, a number of key members of the future pro-Leave campaign team tested and honed their approaches through involvement in campaigning around the Expenses Scandal, most notably staffers of the small-Government pressure group, The TaxPayers’ Alliance (TPA).

The TPA and the Expenses Scandal set everything in motion. They represent the great infiltration of the far-right into the Conservative Party, and now into the highest echelons of government and business. It’s been the most consequential development in Westminster over recent decades.

The TPA’s mission statement argues that its distinct approach to public sector scrutiny and transparency should in fact strengthen the credibility and efficacy of Government practices – an ambition on which all sides of politics would find common ground⁶⁴. What has been especially transformative about this organisation and the myriad offshoots it inspired is their dogmatic approach to political campaigning, which frames the Government as an inherently suspicious institution, capable of deceit, corruption and waste at the expense of citizens’ wellbeing.

This effectiveness of this approach has since been adopted by numerous other political parties and campaigns, and is evident in the contemporary media strategy of the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn. A number of the journalists we interviewed as part of this research asserted that the communications tactics promoted under his leadership are fundamentally distinct from previous approaches, unsettling and reframing traditionally close relationships in favour of direct communication and grassroots campaigns.

Corbyn’s media strategy, although incrementally developed over the course of his leadership (in partnership between his office and campaign group Momentum), crystallised following his ‘populist relaunch’ in early 2017. The relaunch emphasised an explicit attempt to adopt Donald Trump-style media tactics, and abandoned efforts to court the establishment press or ‘mainstream media’.⁶⁵ Instead, the Corbyn team have invested heavily in their digital strategy (including £1.3m over the course of the 2017 election), aiming to connect directly with voters through the promotion of large volumes of both ‘organic’ and ‘inorganic’ social media content.⁶⁶ ‘Organic’ content has been seen as particularly key with the Corbyn team looking to directly or indirectly leverage a whole ecosystem of pro-Corbyn alternative media outlets, which initially coalesced around the #WeAreHisMedia response to perceived anti-Corbyn bias in the mainstream press.⁶⁷

The impact of this new operating style on established working relationships between political parties and the media has been significant, and this was vividly described by one national newspaper journalist:

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The biggest change is in Corbyn, by a long, long way. And up till then, there was a kind of, a system, an architecture for journalists working with politicians. So, for example, I would be able to know exactly which person to talk to in the Leader of Opposition's team, or even in Downing Street [...] And then Corbyn came along and with a completely new approach. One, he doesn't work to the same rhythm of the way newspapers traditionally work, and two he realised that actually his message could be distributed, probably better, using social media in many cases, than it could be through traditional media.

While Corbyn is seen as a 'pioneer' of this approach, journalists have observed politicians from all parties adopting similar strategies, either independently or in response to Labour's performance in the 2017 snap election. This for some is fundamentally undermining the interdependence that has built up over many decades between journalists and politicians, with the latter no longer seeing the media as the central route to connect with voters and as gatekeepers to the public.

When it comes to backbenchers, there are some, where they're just, you can tell they just feel they don't really think they need it anymore, they've got a following on social media and they don't need the media.

I know it's happened to colleagues, that they will call up [...] a backbencher, and say "Oh, we've got this story, have you got any thoughts? Do you want to give us a quote?". And the MP will say, "Oh I didn't know about that, yes that is interesting, here's what I think". And then will go and tweet exactly what they just told the journalist, which is entirely within their right, of course, [but it's] annoying when you think you have an exclusive quote and you only have it for five minutes.

While, a number of individual MPs across the Commons are shifting their attention from established media organisations to social media, this is, however, a far from universal trend. Previous Demos research, during the 2017 General Election, found that while a number of MPs and prospective candidates (including Labour MP Jess Philips and Lib Dem candidate, Richard Gadsden) were prolific in communicating directly with voters over Twitter (eg, through tweets and replies), they were outliers, with most MPs' engagement being far more limited.⁶⁸

Therefore, while new media has not entirely displaced working relationships between journalists and politicians, now journalists have to work harder to productively utilise these connections, with MPs concerned with what Blumler terms 'multi-dimensional impression management'.⁶⁹ It seems this multi-dimensionality is also being institutionalised within political parties, most notably the Labour Party, but also within the Conservatives, as one UK journalist described:

I think the Conservative leadership is still quite focused on engaging with the traditional media, and is still concerned about what's on the front pages, and what's on the BBC and ITV bulletins. But, they're also putting increasing amounts of effort into direct communication, in a way that they probably weren't before the rise of Corbyn, actually.

Agenda-Setting in the Digital Age

A considerable cannon of academic research has been produced on the question of who sets the political agenda in contemporary society.⁷⁰ While evidence is mixed there is some consensus that the media do help to shape the 'symbolic political agenda', influencing what politicians say, but not necessarily what they do.⁷¹ There is also relatively strong evidence that the media's impact is contingent, and that it is more influential on some issues rather than others.⁷²

In the context of the changing relationships between politicians and the media described above, it could, therefore, be seen that the agenda-setting power of the traditional media is on the wane. However, a number of recent high-profile resignations following stories broken by the mainstream press, most notably Cabinet Ministers Michael Fallon and Priti Patel in November 2017, were seen by interviewees as underscoring the continued influence of established outlets:

It's easy to, to overstate the decline of the traditional media. Look at the last two weeks in British politics; one Cabinet Minister was essentially forced to resign by The Sun [Michael Fallon], another cabinet minister was essentially forced to resign by the BBC [Priti Patel]. Several other senior politicians see their careers on an absolute knife-edge, because, mostly because of reporting by traditional newspapers and broadcasters. You know, I mean that is setting the agenda by anyone's metric.

I think sometimes newspapers over-estimate their direct influence on citizens, but what is absolutely true is that the British newspapers often the set the agenda for the BBC and then that sets the political agenda.⁷³

Despite this, most of the journalists interviewed for our research did recognise that the new media environment is creating greater scope for the public to influence the agenda. This growing influence is felt both through direct communication with politicians, and through an increased sensitivity from within the media to public opinion and input. This for some is inverting previously top-down efforts to 'set' the political and public agenda.

It used to be the case that a lot of journalists and the pushy editors and the editors of the main broadcast bulletins, set the agenda, and that's still largely the case, but that power is being eroded, if you like, which is probably, generally a beneficial thing, because the politicians are able to take a little bit more control through more direct involvements with the general public, so it's probably beneficial for democracy but very challenging for journalism.

It's now a lot less top-down, so you know in the, in the good-old, or bad-old days, competitors, correspondents used to say that well this is what we think's important and these are the arguments for and against, [...] and now that's not really a viable model, because people are reacting in the digital world very quickly, contributing to the story, and so, it becomes a more democratic tool than it used to.

As a result of a more horizontal power dynamic between politicians, the media, and the public, agenda-setting is therefore seen as more of an emergent phenomenon. The

interaction of different actors, at different levels, is now what shapes when a story emerges and how it develops, as described by one roundtable participant:

Social media, certain news outlets [...] work with one another [...] they play off one another and [...] a story it gets developed on social media, and then it gets picked up again and it flows.

This new interplay was seen to have both positive and negative consequences for the political agenda and the wider democratic function of journalism. The most commonly-cited positive example was the recent exposure of widespread sexual harassment and abuse in the entertainment industry and subsequently within Westminster. A number of interviewees felt that it only achieved the impact and reach that it did through the interaction of investigative journalism by mainstream outlets, and public testimony through the #MeToo social media campaign. However, a number of other participants also cited potential downsides of this interplay, in one case referencing the feedback loop between public interest and coverage around Jacob Rees-Mogg:

The obvious example in politics [recently] has been Jacob Rees-Mogg. That, the media writes about him because the readers are interested, [...] and that's created this feedback loop where the media covers him more and more, and it makes people more and more interested.

Therefore, this greater horizontalism between the media and the public, as well as more direct communication between politicians and citizens, in many ways provide the public with more opportunity than ever before to shape news and political agendas. While this has significant democratic potential, particularly around public accountability, the continued decline of public trust in the media and politics may hint at the limitations of public engagement within the new media environment.

Comments from journalists in our study, in particular, revealed the simultaneously narrowing and amplifying effect of feedback loops between media organisations and certain forums of public interest and expression. This arguably presents a space of opportunity for insurgent or previously marginalised political movements, leveraging this circular interaction to maximise coverage and impact. In the following sections, we explore how these processes have influenced how the media have responded to Britain's 'populist moments', with a particular focus on the rise of populist narratives within British party politics, before a detailed analysis of the media's response to, and impact on, the EU Referendum.

Reporting on Populism

In the previous sections, we presented journalists' perspectives on the changing dynamics of their work, driven by an ever-increasing abundance of information, intense competitive and resource pressures, and greater horizontal interaction between the public, the media and politicians. While these changes clearly have implications for political communication

in broad terms – exemplified by emerging scholarly work on the ‘fourth age of political communication’ – there is a sense in which the impact of this transformation coalesces most intensely around the relationship between the media, and populist political movements or politicians. Factors such as heightened sensitivity towards audience feedback, a shift from ‘straight’ reporting to sensational commentary, and reduced resources for verification have all been seen to ‘increase the opportunity structures for the dissemination of populist messages’.⁷⁴

However, despite a growing interest in the nature and impact of populism on British politics⁷⁵, and, from some quarters, a latent sense of ‘media complicity’⁷⁶ in recent political shocks, empirical research has so far been limited. This compares to the empirical scrutiny given to media coverage around Donald Trump’s presidential campaign in the US, including research positing to quantify \$2 billion worth of ‘free media’ leveraged from Trump’s media-friendly provocations.⁷⁷

According to British academic James Stanyer, there currently exists only a ‘meagre amount of literature’ in this area, with the research that has been conducted largely focusing on the media approaches of clearly-identifiable populist parties, generally of the Right/far-right.⁷⁸ Arguably the largest body of work exists on UKIP, with research into the level and tone of media coverage of the party⁷⁹, and assessments of its strategic and ideological convergence with sections of the British press on key policy areas, notably immigration and Europe.⁸⁰ How populism acts as a more diffuse communicative style across the political spectrum, and the influence of the British media in this regard, has been far less explored. So too has an assessment of changing journalistic practice and values in reinforcing or undermining populist narratives.

In this section, we draw on existing literature on media and populism in the UK context, while looking to go beyond previous analyses by foregrounding the perspectives of UK-based journalists. We assess how some of the changing contextual and organisational factors reviewed above have contributed to both the legitimisation and de-legitimisation of populist politicians and discourses. And we focus, in particular, on highlighting practitioner perspectives on the challenges of covering populist politics in contemporary media-political environments.

Legitimising Populism through the Media

Populist candidates and parties often find a welcome, if often unacknowledged, congruence with conventions and incentive structures of media organisations.⁸¹ This applies both to long-standing journalistic values such as taking a critical perspective on the political establishment, as well as more recent impulses around distinctiveness and popularity. This alignment of interests is often exploited by insurgent political movements through the deployment of proactive communications techniques. Their capacity to shock, to entertain, and to offer a kind of telegenic celebrity presence stands in sharp contrast to the myriad ‘managed’ politicians and the complex topics of governance. This affinity between news organisations and populists creates a default pathway to legitimisation, and places a considerable emphasis on the decisions taken within news organisations to challenge or resist this ‘platforming’ of views.

A number of the interviewees we spoke with for this project, however, emphasised that it was unusual for the media, tasked with scrutinising other forms of power, to be forced to be

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self-reflexive about its own practices. There was a feeling that perhaps much of the recent interest in social media organisations and their responsibility in propagating populist or 'fake news' narratives was driven in part by an inability to confront the traditional media's own complicity in building an environment receptive to populism.

A lot has been pinned on social media organisations by the press - but the news media needs to look in the mirror.

The press has never held itself to any serious obligation to be careful with its own power. Now the power to bully...is more evenly distributed.

Media self-reflectivity has also been hampered by a lack of consensus on whether specific candidates or political parties can be definitively described as 'populist'. While this arguably reflects the diffuse and nebulous nature of populism in the British political context, a lack of a common understanding of the term and its application has seemingly prevented any significant debate within and across news organisations. In our interviews, many journalists questioned the term, and there was significant disagreement across the political divide about whether certain politicians – particularly, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn – could be defined as 'populists'. These conflicting opinions about the necessary characteristics of populism can foster a kind of exhaustion with the term itself; one journalist described it as "almost meaningless".

Normally when people use it, they talk as if they are insightfully puncturing some great wickedness, but really they are just revealing that they are envious or resentful of their opponents' success. Populism is just something popular that the speaker doesn't like and wishes was unpopular.

However, while the term was disputed and challenged by some journalists, its description of a communicative style with natural affinities to certain media norms around controversy and conflict, mean that it has warranted significant academic and journalistic interest in some, albeit quite specific areas. The main focus of this work has centred on coverage received by UKIP from 'mainstream' broadcasters and newspapers. In *Revolt on the Right*, analysis by Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin found that annual mentions of UKIP in UK newspapers rose from just over 2,000 in 2008 to 23,000 in 2013, dwarfing the coverage of other fringe parties (see figure 6).⁸² Much of the explanation for this heightened coverage has been attributed to the populist style and charisma of UKIP's dominant figure, Nigel Farage, who was re-elected as leader of the party in 2010.

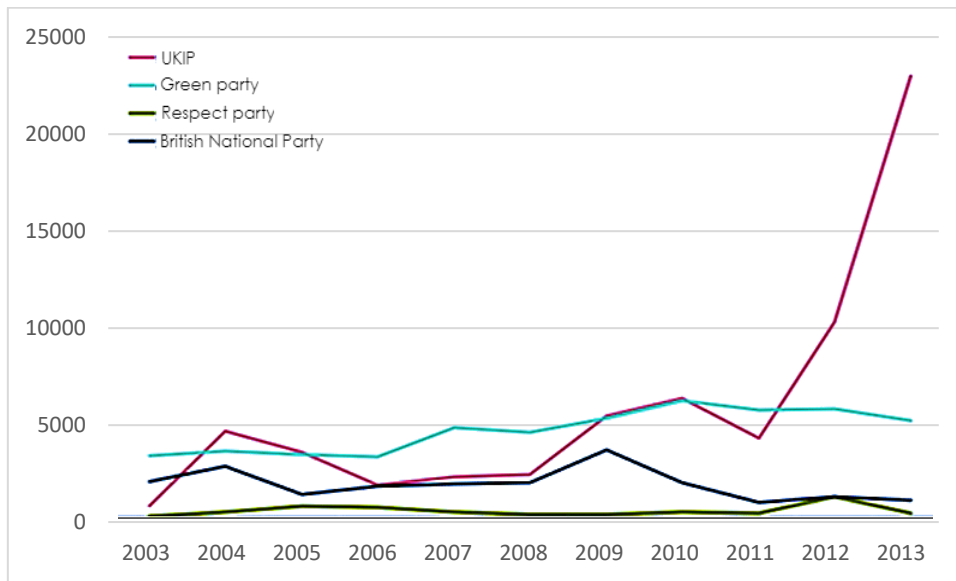


Figure 6. Mentions of UK fringe parties in UK newspapers 2003-2013⁸³

Journalists seem keenly aware of Farage's charisma as a media guest, and many acknowledged that this privileged his airtime over other, less engaging, political figures. As one former broadcaster explained, "his electoral success...did not match the amount of coverage he received".

Nigel Farage in particular, is the best, certainly the best pro-Brexit media performer, who hasn't been a government minister, or something like that. [...] And he's box office TV, and he gives great quotes [...] he makes that case much better than anyone else.

Nigel Farage is bloody good, he is very good, he is one the best communicators in Britain I think, I mean...Boris is very good, but Farage is excellent; he knows how to play the audience very well and that's why they get him on.

Farage has spent almost two decades debating the EU and every single point I would put to him about the EU, he would have a pithy one-line response. It doesn't matter who's right, he would wipe the floor with us in a televised debate.

When one journalist at a major television station questioned why Farage was given such a prominent platform, their colleague who had been involved in the decision – from a privileged background themselves – responded that "Nigel Farage represented the working class". While this journalist, living in a working-class area, had greater exposure to such communities, and did "not believe that the working class did view Farage as their voice", they watched with consternation as their employer continued to give space for his views for precisely this reason, "and then it went on to become a self-fulfilling prophecy".

It is not only the personalities of populist leaders themselves that find a comfortable home in the media, but also the policy positions they propose. Unshackled by the constraints of the complexities of governance and the responsibility to deliver on a programme of work, populists are able to offer impossible, 'silver bullet' responses, which naturally appeal to a

public weary of high rhetoric and sceptical of the capacity of politicians to address their concerns.

They often promote solutions, which are really quite simple; for example... leaving the EU, or nationalising the railways, are fundamentally difficult processes but simple ideas, in a way that quantitative easing is not. And so, in that way it makes it, them easier.

[Populism] is a kind of faith-based politics, where we say that things aren't happening not because of all these complex structural problems, but because people in charge don't want it hard enough.

For some of the journalists we spoke to, Corbynism was seen to be the starkest contemporary example of this kind of populist policy-making:

The most obvious populist in British politics at the moment is Jeremy Corbyn. His headline-grabbing populist policies on, for example, student fees, went down well with the public during the election, yet afterwards voters learned they had been duped. Corbyn makes a major play of holding rallies, producing viral social media content and focusing on his personality - all classic populist tactics.

In the context of the increasingly fraught financial and competitive situation of many 'establishment' news organisations, the decision to give space to populist candidates or ideas is particularly vexed, as their dynamic personalities draw in audiences, rendering them "good for trade". In the US the economic value of Donald Trump to media organisations has been a topic of intense discussion.⁸⁴ A number of the journalists we spoke to directly referenced the comment by the director of the US broadcaster CBS that Donald Trump's (at the time) candidacy "may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS", as partially reflective of the situation in the UK.

Farage gets viewers. I mean that's the cynical answer, but sadly is that not the case?

These choices cut to the heart of the delicate balance they are compelled to strike between representing the interests and attitudes of the public, while strengthening – not undermining – the institutions underpinning British democracy. A former journalist described "a desire to create spectacle" as the wedge between these two responsibilities. A current journalist described an instance where a story exploring some of the challenges of immigration was given a sensationalist headline by the editor on duty, to dovetail with rhetoric associated with a growing populist backlash towards migration in the hope of achieving greater online engagement.

Another journalist explained:

There's a built-in audience on social media [...] a large subset, who will just, because it's a simple, easily understandable idea, will pick up on that, will want to read about that, will share it, you know, will drive traffic to your website and increase your readership.

The jury is, however, still out on the extent to which media coverage has led or followed public support for populist politicians or parties. Returning to UKIP, a quantitative analysis by academics at the University of Southampton, found evidence of heightened media coverage during periods of stagnating support for the party, which they conclude helped push public support subsequently higher, and meant that 'media coverage [...] played a unique causal role in increasing support for UKIP'.⁸⁵ Conversely, a 2016 study by David Deacon and Dominic Wring, for example, argued that while coverage of UKIP did rise sharply, most national newspapers (other than the *Daily Express*) took a broadly critical position on the party.⁸⁶ On this basis, the authors concluded that 'the resilience of UKIP support despite trenchant editorial critique challenges traditional assumptions about the power-broking role of national news organisations'.

However, this latter point, about success in the face of criticism, arguably speaks to the most intractable aspect of legitimisation for many media organisations – that negative coverage may well foster increased public support, only serving to bolster 'us against the mainstream' messages.⁸⁷ This paradox led one of our roundtable participants to conclude: "the press is being played way too perfectly".

Citizens' Views on Media Coverage of Non-Mainstream Voices

In a survey Demos conducted with Opinium Research, we asked citizens whether 'The amount of attention the media gives to political voices outside of the mainstream is too much, just enough or not enough'. The results revealed that 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.

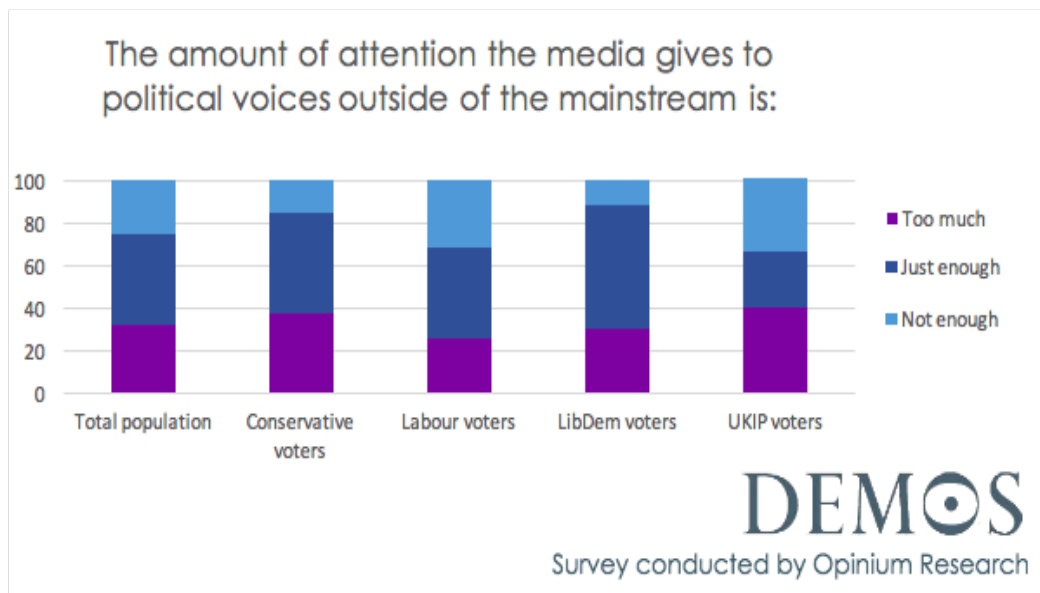


Figure 7. Attention given to political voices outside of the mainstream, Demos/Opinium, 2017

Men and women differ somewhat in their views, with men more likely to believe that not enough attention is being given to non-mainstream voices (28 per cent to 22 per cent). There are also considerable difference by age, with 40 per cent of those over 55 believing

that the media is too accommodating, compared with 27 per cent of under-55s. Londoners are the most satisfied, with 50 per cent believing the balancing is 'just right'. Those in Yorkshire and the Humber (37 per cent) are most likely to think fringe views get too much airtime, and those in the East Midlands that they have too little (31 per cent). Northern Ireland stands out as particularly hostile to voices outside of the mainstream, with 55 per cent of respondents believing they are afforded too much space, and only 12 per cent believing they should be further favoured.

Most interestingly, voters from the Right of the political spectrum are considerably more likely to think voices outside the mainstream are given too much space in our media, with 38 per cent of Conservative and 40 per cent of UKIP voters believing this, compared to 26 per cent of Labour voters and 20 per cent of Greens. Only 15 per cent of Conservatives think fringe voices are not given enough space, compared to 32 per cent of Labour voters; and yet UKIP voters are divided at 34 per cent, perhaps reflecting both the Party's own status as 'outsiders' and its voters' preferences for conservative politics.

In light of these shared and conflicted opinions amongst the two most heavily Leave-backing parties, it is particularly interesting that Leave voters, overall, are more likely to believe that non-mainstream voices are given too much space in the media (36 per cent to 29 per cent of Remain voters). Another curious result in this survey is that, despite their Party commanding relatively marginal political representation, Liberal Democrat voters surpass even Conservatives in being the least likely to believe non-mainstream actors are given insufficient media coverage, at only 12 per cent.

These results suggest that citizens' views on this question are fundamentally shaped by their interpretation of where the needle lies on the mainstream media establishment, and whether or not this reinforces or is perceived to exclude their own political values.

The Media as an Instrument of Populism

The British press has long been characterised by its emphasis on political coverage and its social contract with its readers, manifest in its overt 'campaigning' to champion particular issues and candidates.⁸⁸ There is a unique level of self-awareness in the industry as to its influence regarding political matters, with newspapers proudly declaring their victories – whether to prevent a tax on pies and pasties⁸⁹ or to install a particular Government in power.⁹⁰

While much of the tone of the British press has been critical of populist figures on both the Right and Left, recent years have also seen an increased entrenchment in the partisanship of the nation's newspapers, which has coincided with, and arguably reinforced, growing polarisation among the British electorate. Sections of the press have found common ground on certain policy areas (notably Europe and immigration) and in communicative style with populist leaders. This alignment of interests and tone have most starkly been shown in press attacks on the judiciary as 'enemies of the people'⁹¹ to calls to 'pull up the drawbridge' on immigration, all of which confirm to the typical populist dichotomy of a conflict between the 'pure' people and the corrupt and obstructionist elite.

These developments intensify longer-standing questions as to whether certain British publications can themselves be described as populist in nature, or at least categorised as an instrument of populism.⁹²

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I think there is a shift there, and I think it's an alignment of the media in more explicitly partisan terms [...] newspapers and the like in the past might have felt some obligation to at least, more or less acknowledge that there's two sides to every story, or at least present some sort of, you know, contextualising things a little bit; now, quite unabashedly feel that it's quite alright just to present one interpretation.

By volume, in terms of readership, the UK news media certainly can be populist. They trade on a kind of pugnacious, deliberate stupidity. To say that the world is simple, or can be simplified, with a good left hook. And if you don't like it, you are clearly an ally with the forces trying to prevent the world from being simple.

One tabloid journalist described the environmental effects of working in a newsroom with such partisan viewpoints, and the disassociation they experience between the content they produce and their own active viewpoints on various issues:

You sort of go into a mode of thinking where you are just writing up the stories as they are and you can avoid that type of analysis or commentary. But we get so used to representing them through a kind of prism, that you don't even realise you are anymore.

I don't think people quite understand the extent to which viewpoints are suppressed in the industry. I learned very quickly that people in the organisation didn't want to hear my opinion.

The partisanship of the press is also manifesting in attacks on other news organisations; in 2017, spats between the right-leaning *Daily Mail* tabloid and the left-leaning *Guardian* newspaper escalated, with both newspapers launching blistering rebukes of one another. *The Guardian* denounced the *Mail* as “purveyors of hate” and its columnist Owen Jones described the tabloid as a “vindictive bully”, while the *Mail* retorted that the “fascist Left” *Guardian* promotes “fake news”. To its credit, *The Guardian* published a letter to the editor from a reader of both papers, accusing the broadsheet of having “plumbed the depths of left-wing hatred – and blinkered ignorance – towards the ‘ordinary’ people who choose to read the *Mail*”.⁹³

It is the BBC that has come under the greatest scrutiny from other media organisations, with the tabloids particularly explicit in their forceful allegations of political bias, falling standards and elitism. The *Daily Mail* sought to bring down two of its competitors in one fell swoop, publishing an outraged expose of the newspaper circulation of different papers at the BBC, which accused the national broadcaster of “left-wing bias”.⁹⁴ *The Sun* tabloid published a story of BBC News Online workers allegedly sleeping at their desks during shifts, accusing them of “wasting taxpayers' cash”.⁹⁵

New online websites explicit in their support for Momentum and Corbyn's Labour Party have also repeatedly accused the BBC and its Chief Political Correspondent Laura Kuenssberg of bias in favour of the Conservative Party, with *The Canary* generating widely shared but misleading story about her alleged invitation to join a Conservative Conference panel.⁹⁶

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We're just seeing the collapse of the media middle, in the same way [that] we're seeing the collapse of the political middle [...] In the 2017 Election, one of the really striking things was the BBC was being attacked from the Left and the Right. I mean, the Squawk Boxes and the Novara Medias and all those... they were as aggressively going for the BBC for being partial, as the right-wing press was.

Therefore, there is a sense from a number of journalists that we spoke to, that they are operating in a fundamentally more populist media environment. For the elements of the establishment press, changing incentive structures and practices favour a shift towards a more populist tone and framing. And furthermore, these organisations are operating within a wider environment also now populated by more openly partisan new media organisations.

Challenging Populism

Populism presents two fundamental intrinsic challenges to news organisations focused on producing quality, ethical and objective reporting. The first is that populists' anti-establishment position upsets the balance between the media and politics, by removing the capacity for the media to exert power through negative coverage, which only emboldens their claim to be authentic 'outsiders'. The second is that the separation between the irresponsible simplicity of their policy proposals and the traditional standards we expect from those in positions of governance renders their arguments especially difficult to refute and balance.

I mean, how do you deal with an outrageous statement that gets a lot of support, which has absolutely no policy, [and] there's no basis of fact. What do you do with it? How do you present both sides? There are no two sides.

Referring to Donald Trump's campaign promise to build a wall between the United States and Mexico to reduce immigration, one journalist explained:

How do you assess that as a policy? It's actually really hard. As an idea, it's quite easy because it's quite instinctively easy to understand, but as an actual policy? I don't know how you analyse that [...] that's the problem, that's the problem for journalists, and indeed for voters.

In light of these constraints, there appear to be two possible responses for news organisations: to limit coverage of populist candidates, campaigns and policies, or to take a more active stance in delegitimising their viewpoints. A BBC producer explained how the issue of presenting even-handed arguments around climate change, when scientific consensus is overwhelmingly fixed on one 'side', had caused the organisation considerable "torture". After many years of internal debate, "finally, the official view is that we should treat climate change naysayers as the loonies they are".

However, each of these strategies in turn presents its own challenges. As one journalist remarked, "You have to give them airtime. I think it's worse not to give them air time, because then you will be blamed again for being biased and not telling the public the truth." Another explained that restricting the visibility of populists could backfire, "because if we restrict them, they will restrict us". This point was echoed by one of our interviewees who felt strongly that 'no-platforming' would always ultimately be counterproductive.

I'm nervous about no-platforming people with divisive views, because it becomes a slippery slope towards silencing controversial or "divisive" figures who hold perfectly acceptable views. [...] When sunlight has been shone on the likes of Nick Griffin and Tommy Robinson the public has by and large rejected them. No-platforming won't work anyway - the notoriety will just help the person in question gain more attention and they will always be able to reach huge numbers of people on the internet anyway.

A number of journalists referred to attempts to censor the IRA during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, which were seen generally to be counterproductive and anti-democratic. This most notably took the form of a broadcast ban on supporters of paramilitary groups between 1988 and 1994, intended in the words of Margaret Thatcher to deprive 'terrorists of the oxygen of publicity'.⁹⁷ Analysis shortly after the ban, by the pioneering Glasgow Media Group, found that while it did serve to marginalise the democratic activities of Sinn Fein, there was 'little evidence [...] that the ban hampered the military activities of the IRA', and in fact it may have 'bolstered those sections of the Republican movement in favour of a more straightforward military strategy'.⁹⁸

The effectiveness of similar no-platforming strategies within current digital media landscape seems even more questionable. Reflecting on the Northern Irish broadcast ban Owen Bowcott of the Guardian has argued, for instance, that 'enforcing a broadcast ban in the modern-day, global media jungle – where information moves rapidly through internet links across blogs, video-clips, Twitter, YouTube and established news organisations – will be a far harder task.'⁹⁹ This was recently demonstrated by the impact of Donald Trump's retweeting of material from far-right group Britain First, boosting their membership.¹⁰⁰ In digital, globalised media environments no-platforming by the British press can easily be circumvented.

Our interviews revealed that newspaper comment desks now semi-regularly receive pitches for opinion pieces from far-right political candidates and operatives, members of the alt-right and controversial figures associated with the Trump campaign and administration. One journalist explained how older colleagues felt that publishing such pieces would help readers to understand the "intellectual tradition" from which these movements are stemming. Another felt compelled to warn colleagues weighing up the decision that "publishing the piece would only serve to legitimise the views and make them more mainstream and give them more weight".

Farage, whatever you think of him, has never incited hatred. He had parliamentary success in the European elections. Suppressing him, and his party, would not be helpful.

The question then becomes where to draw the line in terms of platforming populist viewpoints. Rather than a dichotomous 'platform' or 'no-platform' approach, a number of journalists spoke about the need to carefully think through how controversial figures were framed and presented. In particular, while many journalists saw a plurality of views as central to a healthy, democratic public discourse, the real danger was seen in presenting more extreme viewpoints as somehow representative of a wider group or consensus.

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If anything, we should be no-platforming people who pretend their opinions represent some kind of consensus - that's far more dangerous than being divisive. In a democratic society division and debate and disagreement is how we learn and improve.

A number of journalists made this point in relation to coverage of radical Muslim preachers and commentators. For some, the failure of media organisations to effectively, and forcefully, distinguish the views of these marginal figures, from those of the wider, moderate Muslim community played a significant role in stoking Islamophobic sentiment.¹⁰¹ While the right-leaning tabloid press has previously been criticised for inflaming anti-Muslim tensions, some of the journalists we spoke to argued that liberal news outlets were equally culpable, particularly in drawing a tacit association between the extremists and the mainstream.

One area where I would criticise the decisions of TV producers is when the likes of Anjem Choudary, Mo Ansar and Asim Qureshi were often used by the BBC and Channel 4 as representatives of a Muslim point of view. That always seemed hugely irresponsible to me and probably did more to stoke anti-Muslim sentiment than any tabloid newspaper story.

In taking these decisions, journalists must wrestle with their own individual consciences, the organisational direction and their understanding of society's moral code. One journalist explained that their first thought is with the views of their subscribers, and while the issues at stake are tremendously complex and difficult to navigate, there is some professional assurance in knowing that "we are standing up for our end of politics, for our side of the world." Others spoke about the need to draw on their own personal moral code, and those embedded in the newsrooms in which they worked.

Morality and conscience are hugely important in the newsroom - when you are writing sensitive stories that are going to affect people's lives you can't park your conscience at the door. For example, I've spiked many stories over concerns for the protagonists' well-being, even though I had ample evidence to publish. It's about striking a balance between doing your job, publishing stories in the public interest and being able to live with the consequences of the stories you write.

If you're able to "park" certain morals, then they aren't your morals. It's certainly possible for some journalists to have different ethics to others, and for some to have lower ethical standards than others. Short of committing crimes, this is a question only really for whether you can sleep at night and whether readers are still willing to buy something they disapprove of.

We have to draw a line somewhere, but it's incredibly difficult to know what that is.

All I can come back to is my own personal morality and consider whether I can justify giving a platform to these perspectives.

For us to say, this is where the line is, are we creating a midpoint between two sides of voices? In which case, the line is arbitrary, and reflects a contest of power in our society and not much more.

A former broadcaster drew on a legal framework for guidance, firmly stating that “hate speech should not be given a platform”. Other press journalists we interviewed also concurred that the importance of protecting open reporting in a democracy was so critical, that the judgement for platforming could only be made within the definitions of the law.

It's simple – you have laws on inciting racial hatred, and if they overstep them, you come down hard. Otherwise, it's free speech and we should just make sure that we highlight where they fail.

Transformation within and beyond the media industry is for many journalists, then, simultaneously incentivising greater coverage for populist figures, fostering some degree of alignment with anti-establishment positions, and making strategies for delegitimisation more challenging. In responding to these pressures many individual journalists are falling back on their own sense of good or, even moral, journalistic practice. This by its individualistic nature is clearly open to a wide range of interpretations, from not promoting criminality, to accurately reflecting the views of readers, or to building wider trust across society.

The EU Referendum and the Media

The UK's vote to Leave the European Union on 23 June 2016 has been described as the 'coming of age' of the 'populist era in Western politics'.¹⁰² This characterisation is, in part, a reflection of the success of UKIP in pushing EU membership up the agenda, in the context of a pro-European majority in the House of Commons and, until a few years ago, a largely indifferent public.¹⁰³ However, understanding Brexit as a victory for populist politics also reflects the deeper anti-establishment, nativist, and at times, authoritarian framing of pro-Brexit campaigning before and in the wake of the vote to leave – features which have been identified elsewhere as core components of the 'thin ideology' of populism.¹⁰⁴ As the clearest example of the UK's populist turn, Brexit, therefore, presents an ideal case study for assessing the implications of populist politics for the British press and for journalistic practice.

Furthermore, while the European Referendum represents a defining political event for the United Kingdom, it also stands as a watershed moment for contemporary British journalism. The Referendum and subsequent Article 50 process have seemingly intensified the populist tendencies of sections of the British press. Brexit has been described as 'the revenge of the tabloids' and both Brexit-supporting tabloids and broadsheets have been active participants in shaping anti-establishment ('us vs them') narratives – most notably demonstrated by the *Daily Mail's* 'Enemies of the People' and the *Daily Telegraph's* 'Brexit mutineers' headlines.¹⁰⁵

At the same time, the context of the Referendum has exemplified some of the wider challenges faced by the industry – for example, information overload surrounding rapidly changing political events; problems of verification in complex policy areas; and deep public polarisation in terms of opinion, knowledge, and engagement. Perhaps most significantly, reporting on Brexit has exposed some of the central tensions and debates around the contemporary function of journalism, such as how to balance reporting with educating; how to reflect the spectrum of opinion and the weight of evidence; and how to negotiate the press' simultaneous position as members, and chief critics, of the 'establishment'?

In this section, we review journalists' personal experiences of covering the EU Referendum, as well as presenting their assessments of the performance of the industry as a whole. Initially, we focus on journalists' attempts to navigate the challenging set of circumstances thrown up by the Referendum. Secondly, we assess the impact of press partisanship on coverage and individual journalist's own experiences of reporting on the vote. And finally, we look at how the Referendum challenged some of the principles of good journalistic practice, and what this might mean for the future of the industry.

A Challenging Context

In April 2016, on the eve of the launch of the official Remain and Leave campaigns, UK-based journalists faced a uniquely challenging set of circumstances. With this most consequential of campaigns stretching over just a matter of months, journalists scrambled to refocus resources and reorganise their daily practices around a vote profoundly different to a national election. News organisations could draw on recent experience of reporting on the 16-week campaign preceding the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014. However, the EU Referendum was distinct in the complexity of the relationship, the exceptionally poor level of public understanding about many of the most significant issues at stake¹⁰⁶ and in the open disunity stoked within both major parties.

Some journalists assess that the media overall performed as competently as it could have done in the circumstances, and particularly many of those who individually support the outcome regard the soul-searching as an indulgence on the part of the losing side.

I think the UK media did alright with the Referendum. I think we explained the issues, we explained what was at stake. Both sides tend to think the media was biased against them.

I don't really know what else journalists could have done.

I don't know what we could have done differently: our readership was split. We tried to cover it fairly. I thought we'd lose readers, but we didn't.

There was a significant part of the media that was campaigning for one side, and we couldn't have done anything 'better' because it would have involved fundamentally changing tactics.

Others feel that it is misplaced to judge the media too stringently for its involvement in the Referendum, when the parameters were largely set by the politicians involved in taking the decision to stage the vote.

I wouldn't blame the media entirely because it was a ridiculous Referendum to call, a short-term tactic for Conservative Party management, and the question was clearly going to need a lot of nuance, and everything was set on its course.

Nonetheless, it is evident that the circumstances of the campaign were highly unusual, and the consequential nature of the result and the events that have flowed from it necessitate an active level of scrutiny.

A key element of this was the speed from the announcement of the date of Referendum on 20th February, to the vote some four months later. While the Prime Minister had included the promise of a referendum in the Conservative Manifesto at the 2015 Election, the result

of the Election – an unexpected Conservative majority – took many by surprise.¹⁰⁷ Added uncertainty and urgency was provided by the Prime Minister's intention to renegotiate the terms of Britain's membership before putting this to a vote – a renegotiation which itself was set with the wider turbulence of the refugee crisis and continued economic precariousness at the EU-level.¹⁰⁸

The pace at which a mooted referendum had become a genuine political reality meant that journalists were afforded only a matter of weeks to bring themselves up to speed regarding the EU and its structures and processes. These early moments of the campaign saw snap decisions having to be made regarding staff resourcing, travel schedules, and also the issues that would be addressed, the voices that would be heard, and the frame through which they would be covered.

As the only game in town, journalists assigned to the Referendum found themselves covering topics they had never previously addressed; reflecting on the campaign, many journalists admitted they felt ill-prepared to write confidently about the EU, nor to take decisions about the veracity or weight of particular arguments.

There were a lot of areas that, as a journalist, I was personally ignorant of.

A lot of journalists didn't know enough about the EU to really challenge politicians. There was a time when an MP made a completely untrue claim and Andrew Marr at least asked them if it was correct, but he didn't correct them.

We didn't, ourselves, know enough about Europe. We're learning it now. We should have recognised our lack of understanding, and been more balanced on the arguments. I went back through and we didn't really even talk about Northern Ireland. We didn't know what to write about.

I don't think we really thought Leave would win, in some way. It was such a different campaign. It's only now that time has passed, that I feel it all. We didn't cover the issues well. We didn't think about so many issues - there wasn't time.

The problem was the subject itself: the EU is complicated, and balance and nuance is difficult territory for tabloids.

A number of journalists mournfully recalled the lack of attention they and their organisations had given to particular issues during the campaign, with Northern Ireland standing out as an area of special regret.

On Northern Ireland...this is real people's lives. The fear, it's all so raw, and we were so detached from it all, thinking it wasn't happening, or unreal, or somehow not our battle. We didn't realise what we were setting in motion.

The single market didn't stick, the ECJ was barely mentioned at all, regulations were lost in the mist. As a journalist I feel personally regretful that we didn't, I didn't, talk about Northern Ireland more.

Northern Ireland absolutely was not considered a big issue in the Referendum. It is absolutely false to claim that we gave that enough coverage.

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I didn't really think about it enough, the weight of it. I knew it was madness but I was writing these pieces a few times a week that put out a line. A forceful line sometimes. It was like a game.

Overall, there was a sense from many journalists, then, that the complexities of the issues at hand dwarfed the level of preparation and resource dedicated to thorough investigation, a set of circumstances which set the agenda for the coverage of the campaign throughout April, May and June.

Partisanship and the Referendum

As well as the pace of political events, and the complexities of the issues, journalists also felt partially handicapped by the weight of decades of negative coverage towards the European Union. Many acknowledged that much of this negative tone, and misinformation in relation to the EU's competencies, emanated from within the media itself. This meant that journalists were seeking to build nuance and understanding into hard-wired, long-held assumptions.

Reflecting on the challenge his British counterparts faced during the Referendum, one UK-based correspondent for an international newspaper sympathised with the information environment journalists contended with: "Compared to other countries...I think there is far less factual information there about what is going on in Brussels". Some journalists working for papers that had also been complicit in the spread of misinformation over previous decades felt acutely aware of the impossibility of dismissing these past accusations as par for the course.

We were trying to repair damage from 30 years of strident Euroscepticism.

We were contending with 30 years of stories. And they are little stories, but over 30 years they have some weight. There was so much misinformation, curly bananas...everything Boris was writing. It was too big to shift in a matter of months.

By the time of the Referendum, the British print media had broadly moved from a position of what academic Oliver Daddow describes as 'permissive consensus' in 1975 when only the *Morning Star* backed a 'no' vote, to one of 'destructive dissent', with four of the eight biggest selling daily papers coming out in favour of Brexit.¹⁰⁹ Separate studies into the coverage of the Referendum by Loughborough University and the Reuters Institute both found evidence of a significant bias towards Leave across print titles.^{110 111} Of the articles with explicit reference to the EU Referendum, the Reuters analysis found that 41 per cent favoured leaving the EU, whereas only 27 per cent of articles supported remaining in the EU. The Loughborough study also weighted its analysis by readership numbers, finding that this widened the bias still further to 80 per cent in favour of Leave. In addition to the weight of pro-Brexit content, analysis by King's College London on the 'tone' of the press coverage found that Leave-supporting outlets commonly 'framed the campaign in populist terms, presenting the 'Establishment' in distinction to - and against the interests of - the people'.¹¹²

Many journalists who supported Remain on a personal level, therefore, found themselves working for newspapers supporting Leave during the campaign. One described their hope that "we would be able to balance the arguments and keep going through the campaign that way...I didn't think we had to take a stand". In reality, the level of partisanship was

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seen by many as having direct consequences for the media's ability to inform and educate the public on the issues at stake, particularly for those only subscribing to one particular news outlet. One journalist described a moment of realisation after the campaign about how they and their colleagues' own reading habits as professionals working in the news industry may have been more balanced than the perspective they presented to their newspaper's readers.

As a journalist, I read a lot of different publications. So it's actually quite hard to assess what readers only focusing on our view of the world would have seen and made of it. I know, for example, that this and that were false. I know, because I read widely.

The impact of this partisanship was not, however, only felt by the audiences of pro-Leave publications. While overall coverage was weighted towards pro-Brexit positions, other outlets took an overtly pro-Remain stance, with the *Daily Star* the only national daily not to come out for either side (leading with 'In or Out: You Decide'). Partisanship on the Remain side was also felt by some to have been detrimental to educational value of the coverage. One journalist, for example, argued that the disproportionate coverage of populist spokespeople, particularly Nigel Farage, was at least in part fostered by pro-Remain outlets who wrongly believed that more exposure would ultimately be damaging to the Brexit campaign.

During the Referendum, Farage definitely received an undue level of attention from pro-Remain news organisations who believed giving him more airtime would hurt the Leave campaign. Farage was not on Vote Leave - the official campaign - so he shouldn't have been anywhere near the TV debates. Yet ITV gave him a platform, to the justified fury of Vote Leave.

The inadvertent promotion of Leave positions by Remain-supporting media was also observed in their attempt to challenge the Leave side's promise to repatriate £350 million a week to the UK following Brexit. A number of journalists spoke about the foregrounding of this claim by Remain-supporting outlets – intended to spotlight misinformation and 'fake news' – as ultimately supporting the Leave campaign to get its message out.

Think about the £350 million figure in the Referendum - it was artfully chosen and communicated precisely to get Remain to fall into a trap of just repeating a big cost in relation to the EU. Remainers like to talk now as though it got loads of publicity because it was "on the side of a bus" - if they were honest they'd recognise it got loads of publicity because they banged on about it so much.

However, overall many of the journalists we interviewed certainly consider that the media's support for the Leave side of the campaign was consequential, describing "the sheer weight of the Brexit-backing papers" as decisive in the outcome. Asked how they felt when their own newspaper declared its support for the Leave campaign, one journalist responded, "I felt sick. I felt sick to my stomach. This paper, of all papers, should be on the side of the people. And this felt wrong, it didn't feel pragmatic. It didn't feel safe. We should have highlighted the need for reform but we could have asked people to take the safer route, the status quo."

Furthermore, there is a sense that the media populism unleashed by the Referendum has not dissipated since the vote. In fact, many of the most vivid examples of populist

commentary have come in the weeks and months after the June 2016. Many of the most partisan pro-Brexit outlets have seemingly maintained a campaign footing, both to prevent what they see as backsliding by politicians, and to maintain the energy and impact of their pre-Referendum coverage. And the implications of this for wider social cohesion seen as a significant concern by one of our interviewees.

I actually think we should be more concerned about the coverage that took place in the six months after the Referendum, where anything less than a Hard Brexit is treated as Remainer treachery. There's been a speed and totality to which many publications have turned, away from quite hard portions of their readership. It was the opposite of a buyer's remorse...a buyer's commitment.

Challenging 'Good' Practice – Balance, Accuracy, and Objectivity

Despite the positioning of much of the print press, a third major complication for the media as a whole was the overwhelming alignment of political and economic 'elites' with the Remain side. This differed substantively from the Scottish Referendum, in which all the non-separatist parties, as well as the majority of newspapers, supported the 'In' position. For media organisations on the Brexit side, or for those seeking to promote 'balance' between the arguments, the consequence of this imbalance of weight in expertise would see auspicious voices of expertise competing with the opinions of low-ranked politicians and celebrities, affording the impression of equal weight.

For a number of journalists we spoke to, this surface level understanding of balance actually undermined broader journalistic principles around critical analysis and education:

It was a failure of journalism – they were balancing serious arguments with silly ones. They have to take a stand, to intervene, to have a view. They should have held an inquiry into their coverage.

Collectively, as the media, there was a litany of failures. But broadcasters are particularly responsible - I cannot recall one interview where the right critical questions were asked of the Leave campaign. It was a total failure - this was a serious and complex issue and needed forensic analysis. It really angered me - they treated it like show-business.

With such an explicit responsibility for 'even' coverage, the BBC was especially exposed to the challenges wrought by this unique situation. In the aftermath of the vote, the BBC has received significant criticism for its interpretation of balance – Oxford academic Timothy Garton-Ash, for example, accused the BBC of having had a "fairness bias" which "reduced everything to claim and counterclaim", rather than giving its audience a sense of where the weight of evidence lay on key issues.¹¹³ This view was echoed by a number of journalists we spoke to:

The Referendum was extremely badly covered. You can't over-estimate the role that the BBC and the other broadcasters played in this vote. The role of a journalist is not to just present differing views, but to show what is the reality.

The BBC and broadcasters could have been more robust in not repeating things that were tendentious and misleading facts and to identify the problems. The

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absolutely crucial issues we are now confronting now were never confronted in the Referendum.

The most problematic thing in the Referendum, was that the whole political establishment was veering one way, and Nigel and, as it turns out quite a few million people were veering the other way. And, you know, I think the BBC got it wrong there.

However, not all of those we spoke to were critical of the BBC, with some arguing that its privileging of balance, was the right decision, and fundamentally upheld its statutory duty on impartiality.

The BBC in particular was excellent - for an institution that stereotypically would have been considered full of Remainers there was no bias in their coverage. The BBC's decision not to have Farage on their TV debate shows [...] they followed their impartiality guidelines rather than any agenda.

By and large I think the media did a pretty good job in the Referendum. Speaking as a Leave voter, I expected us not to get a 50/50 fair ride, particularly in the broadcast media, and we didn't, but I was pleasantly surprised that it was mostly much better than normal. The BBC deserves credit from Leavers for the fact that it genuinely did work quite hard to become more self-aware about its in-built biases and skewed assumptions.

However, the emphasis on balance and impartiality, combined with the stretched nature of many newsrooms, may also have skewed another journalistic principle – that of 'accuracy' – from the interrogation of the veracity of statements, to simply the accurate reporting of different viewpoints. This may be one factor that explains a focus on politicians, and the politics of the campaign, rather than the more substantive issues. A content analysis of TV news during the referendum campaign by Cardiff University, for example, showed that (despite Michael Gove's protestations), independent experts were given very little screen time during the campaign.¹¹⁴

In the view of some journalists, this meant that an environment of misinformation surrounding the campaigns was at best left unchallenged, and at worst actively enabled:

The campaign rules were based on an election, where most people aren't disagreeing on facts but rather on policy solutions. But here, people completely disagreed about the facts, the reality of the choice.

I can't remember another contest where one side has gone out and used a figure it knows is wrong and kept on using it, knowing it would focus attention even if it was rebuked. We are in a different era.

One of the weird things about the Leave campaign is that it was a mix of populism and something more reassuring. Farage was actually quite honest about the costs. But the campaign itself was promoting having your cake, and straight-out untruths like the idea of Turkey joining the EU – there was a post-truth element to it all.

The EU Referendum, therefore, helped provide the most visible example of the collision of populist political communication, partisanship within the press, and wider challenges around resourcing, competition, and public engagement. In responding to this some of our interviewees called for a strengthening of the regulatory framework surrounding news organisations – or “some kind of obligation to not repeat claims that are demonstrably untrue”.

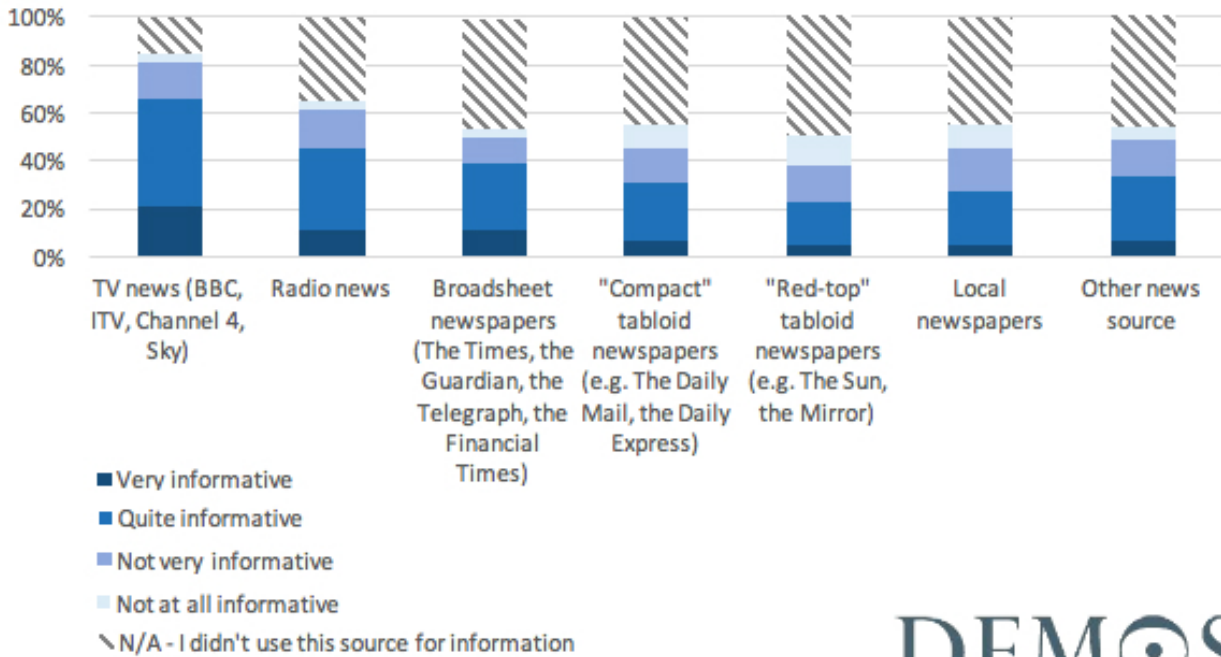
However, many felt that the challenges thrown up by the Referendum required deeper thinking about the role of journalism in contemporary political, social, and technological environments. While the Referendum helped to expose unintended consequences of certain journalistic norms, in many ways it also reinforced the importance of core journalistic tenets of autonomy, objectivity and public service. A key challenge for the industry is how to translate and embed these principles into such contested and increasingly fragmented media-political contexts.

Citizens' Perspectives on EU Referendum Coverage

To complement our investigation into the EU Referendum from the perspective of frontline journalists, we partnered with Opinium Research on a nationally representative survey of UK adults, to better understand citizens' assessments of media performance. We provided an opportunity for respondents to identify if they did not consume various types of media, to better showcase the views of those who do depend on them for information within such contexts. Broadly, we found that citizens felt the media they depended on for information were informative and useful in this regard. Citizens were, however, highly critical of their (lack of) balance, with only a minority of viewers and readers assessing the media had succeeded in presenting fair and impartial coverage during the campaign.

Overall, television news was not only the most used news source (with 85 per cent of people watching), it was also considered the most informative during the Referendum – 78 per cent of its audience felt it was informative, compared to 70 per cent for radio. Broadsheet newspapers and 'compact' tabloids (including the Express and the Mail), each consumed by around 55 per cent of the population, were seen to be informative by 73 per cent and 57 per cent of their readers respectively. The 'red tops' of The Sun and The Mirror were the most likely to face rebuke: more citizens (55 per cent vs 45 per cent) felt that these were uninformative than informative during the campaign.

'Thinking back to the EU Referendum coverage, for each of the following, would you say the coverage was...'



Survey conducted by Opinium Research

Figure 8. Quality of information during the referendum across media, Demos/Opinium, 2017

The survey also asked respondents to assess the extent to which these news organisations were 'fair and impartial' in their coverage. Television news was considered to be 'completely or mostly' fair and impartial by 42 per cent of those who used it for information, compared to 26 per cent who felt it was 'not particularly/not at all fair and impartial'. The remainder of its audience assessed it to be 'about as fair and impartial as other sources'. Broadsheet newspaper readers were even further split, with 31 per cent declaring their coverage decidedly fair, and 33 per cent feeling it was decidedly unfair. Compact and red top tabloids fared even more poorly – just 21 per cent and 17 per cent of their readers respectively considered their coverage to have been fair, and three times as many of their own readers believed them to have been actively 'unfair'.

The discrepancy between these two points 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. In considering the democratic performance of the media, it is impossible to exclude the views of citizens themselves, and we conclude that there is considerable scope for further research in this area.

'Thinking back to the EU Referendum coverage, for each of the following, would you say the coverage was...'

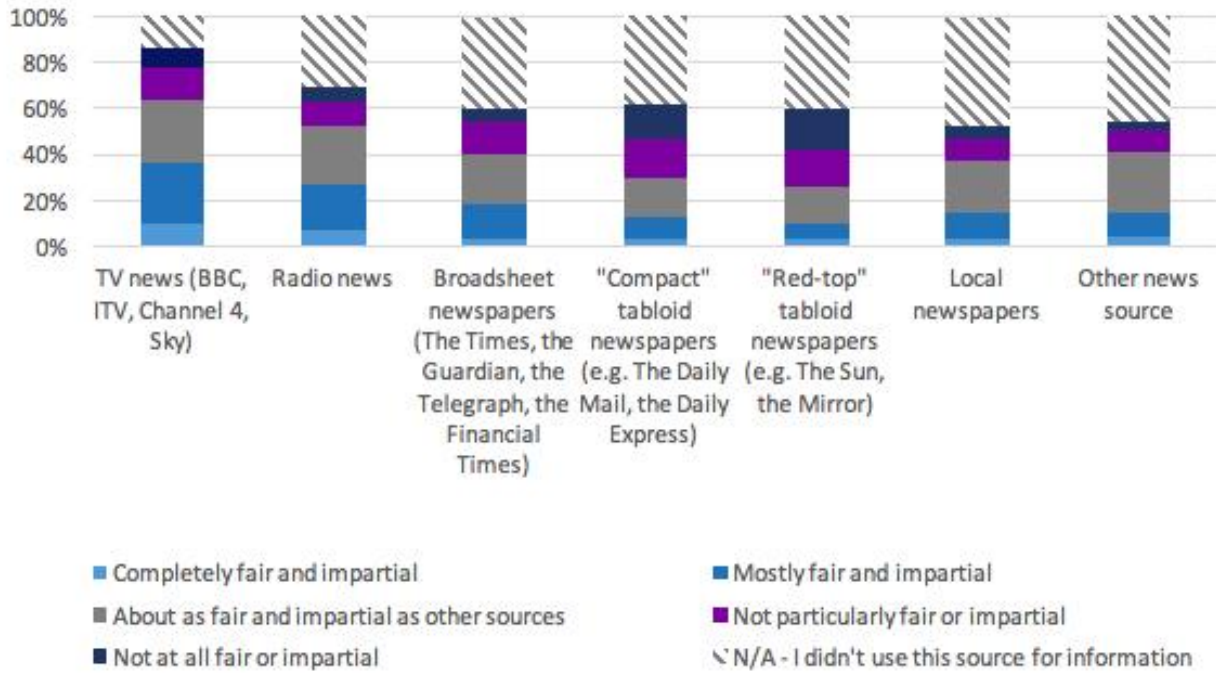


Figure 9. Fairness and impartiality of different media, Demos/Opinium, 2017

The German Media's Response to Populism

A case study prepared by Das Progressive Zentrum, Berlin.

Joris Niggemeier and Philipp Sälhoff.

Introduction

Germany's far-right populist parties do not play by the unwritten rules of public debate. Their disruption of the status quo poses serious challenges to the broader media landscape, as it grapples with a new climate of partisanship and the spread of misinformation. Traditional news organisations must reinvent themselves in order to uphold their role as a gatekeeper, information provider and watchdog of democracy.

The rise of populist forces has coincided with greater competition in the German media landscape, as new online publications strive for their share of the audience and social media platforms chip away at traditional funding models, making these particularly challenging times for traditional news organisations. On social media platforms, viewers and readers are given new ways to discover and interact with information, which media organisations generally see as a positive development, but they do fear viewers are becoming fickle. A wealth of alternative channels, blogs and content is only ever a few clicks away. Given the relatively high levels of trust in quality media and public broadcasting in Germany, traditional journalism nevertheless plays a central role in 'mediating' populism for citizens.

The German Media Landscape

According to the *Three Models* typology proposed by the academics Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini, the German media system is a Democratic Corporatist Model (see figure 1)¹¹⁵. This system is characterised by a historical coexistence of commercial media and media tied to organised social and political groups, high newspaper circulation numbers, a highly professionalised media sector, a low level of political parallelism¹¹⁶ as well as a relatively active but legally limited role of the state – guaranteeing the protection of press freedom and the representation of all important social groups within public broadcasting.

German levels of radio and television consumption are relatively high, ranging above the European average, with an average of around 9.5 hours of media use per day (including radio, television, internet, books, newspapers, magazines, CDs and videos)¹¹⁷. The most important media used on a daily basis are television (80 per cent), radio (74 per cent), internet (46 per cent) and print media (33 per cent)¹¹⁸.

The broadcasting sector operates a dual system of public-service media (PSM) and commercial organisations. Public broadcasting is organised at the federal level. There are eleven state networks operating under the umbrella of the ARD broadcasting organisation, in addition to nationwide broadcaster ZDF, set up as independent organisations and financed primarily by licence fees paid by households.¹¹⁹ PSM aim to operate as a reference for the public debate, providing fundamental services within the trinity of information, education and entertainment¹²⁰. State intervention in public broadcasting is limited to ensuring that the PSM are distant-of-state.¹²¹ For a long time, the public service media had a television monopoly, which ended in the year 1984, when television broadcasting was liberalised and commercial organisations started to televise their own programs¹²²

The print media landscape is defined by large media houses and regional publications. The five big media conglomerates,¹²³ which commanded 42 per cent of the market in 2016¹²⁴, are complemented by a multiplicity of independently-owned local and regional

newspapers. Apart from nationwide newspapers such as the quality newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* or the tabloid *Bild*, the German readership is largest at the regional level.¹²⁵ Studies find that “reading local reports about my region” continues to be the most important reason for subscribing to a daily newspaper¹²⁶. By the start of 2018, the nationwide quality newspapers and tabloids together had a circulation of about 3.3 million, while Germany’s 312 local and regional newspapers account for 11.5 million copies.¹²⁷

Despite the importance of party-affiliated media in the past, the German media system is only weakly partisan. The only notable linkage between parties and the media in Germany is the media holding company DDVG, owned fully by the Social Democratic Party, which holds shares of several publishing companies¹²⁸. Figure 10 depicts a strong orientation towards the political centre, as no notable political camps can be identified in the online audiences of the major news outlets¹²⁹. Visible alliances with political parties or party endorsements are highly unusual and frowned upon. For instance, the Financial Times Germany’s endorsement of the CDU in the 2002 election was met with harsh criticism.¹³⁰

State intervention in the press is confined to a discrimination-free media policy and a fiscal privilege for press enterprises, with a strong focus on institutionalised self-regulation. Ethical standards are set in the Press Codex of the self-governed German Press Council, which is made up of an equal number of representatives from journalists’ organisations and publishers’ organisations (28 in total)¹³¹.

Recent debate on state involvement centres around the new hate speech law, which came force on 1 January 2018. The new law obligates social media sites to swiftly remove hate speech, fake news and illegal material. It is however fiercely debated among internet experts, politicians of all parties, legal experts as well as journalists, as some fear it incentivises companies to err on the side of censorship rather than risk multi-million euro fines¹³².

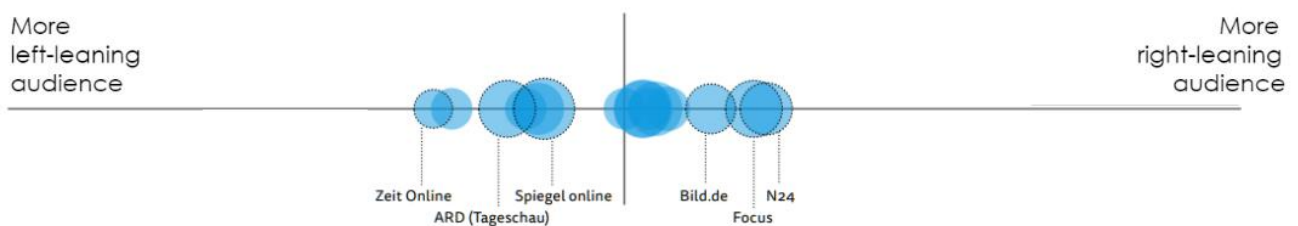


Figure 10. Reuters Institute online media audience map, Germany¹³³

Meanwhile, patterns of media consumption are changing. Large-scale survey research reveals a stable consumption of television news and to a lesser extent of online news. Meanwhile, the growth in social media news has levelled off and print news steadily declines (figure 11), as is also visible in declining numbers of subscribers. From 1997 to 2017, newspaper subscriptions in Germany decreased by 40 per cent¹³⁴. Public broadcasting, too, seems to fail to bring in a younger audience. While private broadcasting channels have average consumer ages of 42 (ProSieben) to 51 years (Kabel Eins), the audience of public broadcasting channels varies between 62 (ARD) and 63 years (ZDF)¹³⁵.

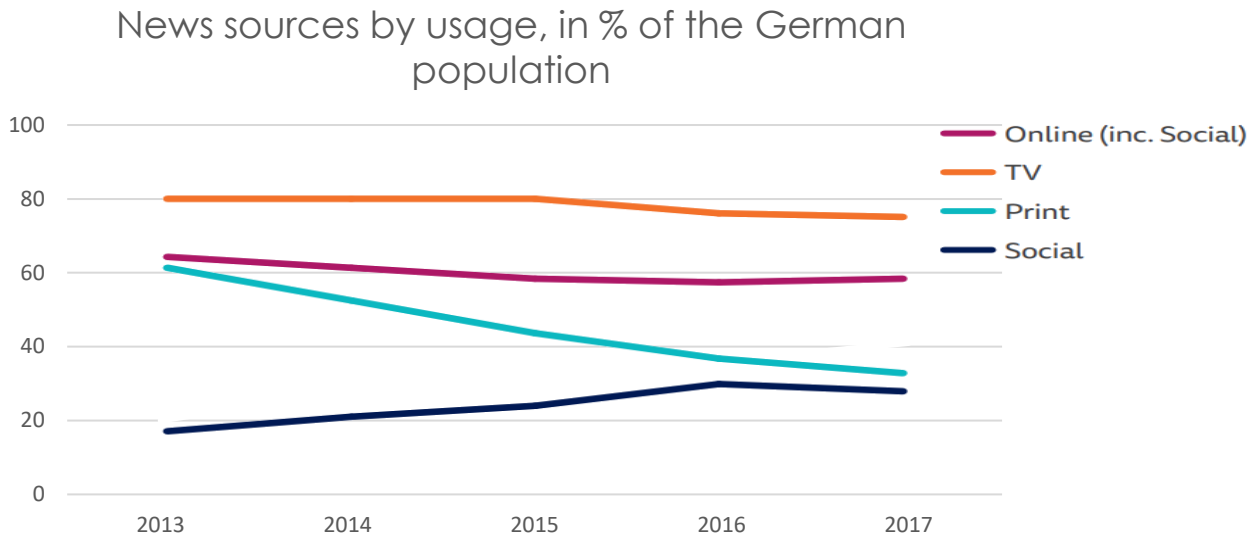


Figure 11. Media Consumption in Germany, Reuters Digital News Institute¹³⁶

Despite these worrying trends, media trust in Germany remains somewhat above the median for industrialised nations.¹³⁷ Compared to commercial broadcasting, public broadcasting and the traditional press are well-trusted both on- and offline, while online-only websites and social media tend to be mistrusted¹³⁸. Journalists themselves, meanwhile, are severely mistrusted. According to the German professional prestige index, journalists and politicians are among the least trusted professions in Germany, trusted by only 36 and 14 per cent of the public respectively¹³⁹.

Populism in Germany

When far-right populist parties such as the Front National, Lega Nord and the FPÖ gained a foothold in various European countries in the 1980s, Germany was thought immune to their appeal¹⁴⁰. Despite regional successes, parties to the Right of the Conservative parties were unable to enter federal Parliament. This changed when the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) entered the Bundestag as the third-largest political party in 2017. With its emphasis on the corruption of elites and threats to “the people”, the AfD has made populism part of its core ideology.

The party, which was founded in 2013, transformed right-wing populism in Germany from a marginal phenomenon into a major political force. Starting out as a relatively monothematic Eurosceptic party, they have evolved to become a broader socio-economically conservative and socio-culturally right-wing platform – filling the political space to the Right of the CDU and CSU parties. Using the window of opportunity provided by the Eurozone and migrant crises (see footnote on terminology)¹⁴¹, the AfD has responded to fears of social decline and uncontrolled immigration, resulting in significant electoral success.

The AfD was not the only organisation which seized its opportunity in this heated political climate. 2014 saw the rise of the PEGIDA movement – ‘Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West’. Calling on citizens to help avert the purported threat of Islamisation, PEGIDA organisers have brought together concerned but fairly apolitical

citizens and actors of the far-Right. They succeeded in facilitating vast anti-establishment demonstrations on a regular basis; first in Eastern and later in Western Germany, though at a much smaller scale¹⁴². The movement has occasionally hosted rallies side-by-side with the AfD and even formed political alliances with the party in some regions.¹⁴³

Since 2014, the AfD has entered 14 state parliaments with vote shares ranging from 5.5 per cent in Bremen to 24.2 per cent in Sachsen-Anhalt. At the European elections of the same year, they commanded 7.1 per cent of the vote and seven mandates in the European Parliament, an achievement which has since been diminished by the secession of six MEPs. The year 2017 marked the first major electoral success of the AfD on a federal level, obtaining 12.6 per cent of the votes - an increase of 7.9 per cent in comparison to 2013. Looking at the AfD's steady gains, and in light of the collapse of the Social Democratic vote share, a measurable shift to the Right can be detected in German politics.

Reporting on populist parties such as the AfD carries a set of challenges for journalists. Even critical news coverage may serve to further spread the populist message and allow populist parties to frame themselves as the victims, silenced by the politically correct mainstream media. Meanwhile, supporters of populist parties may feel ridiculed and belittled. Strict neutrality and value-free reporting on the other hand may popularise illiberal stances and normalise prejudice. For instance, how to report on AfD deputy leader Beatrix von Storch's tweet about "barbaric, gang-raping hordes of Muslim men"?¹⁴⁴

The debate on strategies for populist delegitimation encompasses proposals such as reporting on policies and deeds instead of rhetoric¹⁴⁵, rigorously fact-checking assumptions and proposals and applying common reporting rules on the AfD¹⁴⁶. As the AfD, which issues frequent provocative statements, offers a seemingly infinite amount of material for journalists, media organisations need to find a way to determine when and how to pay attention to them.

Journalistic Practice in the Digital Age

For journalists, these questions occur in the context of extensive changes in the workplace. Technological advances and organisational changes have led to a profound transformation of journalism in Germany, with far-reaching consequences regarding the function and role of journalism within society. One of the most visible changes noted by journalists interviewed for this report was the dramatic reduction of newsroom staff in recent years. According to a 2017 McKinsey publication, permanent newsroom staff numbers in German public broadcasting were cut by 11 per cent between 2010 and 2014 and are due to be cut further the next years.¹⁴⁷ Public broadcaster ZDF for instance announced it would cut over 500 of its 3730 jobs before 2020.¹⁴⁸ Meanwhile, journalists highlight that the pay gap between the 'established few' and the 'precarious majority' in their profession has been widening considerably, while precarious freelance employment is on the rise.¹⁴⁹

Journalists further note an increasing pace of technological innovation in the sector due to changes on the production side. An editor-in-chief for a regional newspaper explains that, prior to the digital age, innovation was controlled and curtailed by the requirements of the printing process:

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Technological innovation was always dependent on the needs and capacities of the printing company. [...] The publishers supplied us with computers as soon as their printers were able to process computer typesetting.

Some suggested that editors had taken too long to embrace technological innovation, with print media especially failing to respond appropriately to the rise of online news:

The turning point, what we might call the decline of newspapers, happened around 1990. The internet therefore can't be at fault. For a long time, the media in Germany were not at the technological forefront. [...] They neglected professional reform for too long. It took a long time before newspapers actually started to process these changes and to ask themselves 'What does this mean for our daily work?'

This shift away from the old environment dominated by the printing company, towards a more competitive, innovative media landscape led some editors-in-chief of newspapers to question their personnel resources and business models:

When we became less dependent on the printing company, when newspapers started to turn into media houses, when we started a whole new range of activities, journalism in Germany changed significantly. If we had been honest at that point in time, we would not only have had to tell ourselves 'We have to learn everything from scratch'. We also should have asked ourselves whether the personnel we had assembled for the print-world was still fit for the future digital world.

These developments change not only the context in which journalists work, but also the work itself. One of the reasons journalism is different in the digital world is the vast increase in the amount of information available to journalists. As one editor-in-chief explains:

Back then, in 1980, I was supplied by five press agencies, with 150-250 reports each, daily. Today, you have some five to eight thousand news items to review every day.

But while the amount of information available increases, some argue that the quality of such information is decreasing because of the 24-hour news cycle:

I think the flow of information gets broader, to the point where it is omnipresent. But the density of information is decreasing. People are reporting even if nothing is actually happening.

The broad coverage of the 2017 exploratory talks between the CDU/CSU, the Greens and the FDP can be interpreted as an example for this trend towards relentless "breaking news", with uninterrupted coverage and extensive reporting even when little was happening.¹⁵⁰

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As there is a large premium on speed, extensive fact-checking and contextualisation may come at a high opportunity cost. While this dilemma has always accompanied journalism, it has become more acute in recent years. A senior public broadcasting journalist explains:

You have less time. You have to be quicker and better with fewer people. This leads to a lack of time for certain important matters. You also lack the specialists you used to be provided with in editorial offices back in the day.

The developments sketched by this editor seem to have resulted in a deteriorating work environment for journalists in Germany: a study from 2016 highlighted that 83.4 per cent of the interviewed journalists experienced worsening working conditions, caused mainly by increasing time pressure and job insecurity.¹⁵¹

Democratisation of News

The third major development in journalism, besides the reduction of newsroom staff and the digitisation of news, is the rise of social media. Not only have social media become an important source of news and information for significant parts of the population¹⁵², they also offer opportunities for new, online-only publications. Readers can pick and choose their preferred media and are able to interact with news content in new ways, by commenting, sharing and contributing. This phenomenon is often referred to as a democratisation of news, as two editors-in-chief explain:

This 24-hour news cycle, combined with all kinds of journalism and adjacent areas [such as citizen journalism, independent blogs and social media pages] has led to the audience experiencing a major democratisation of news. They are empowered to supply themselves with information, that nearly made them think that journalism was superfluous.

To me, the most central development is that the whole consumption and reception of news by readers and viewers has changed towards a less vertical and more horizontal distribution of news. A multiplicity of sources appear on an equal footing on the web. This completely changed the distribution of news and led to a further fragmentation of our society. People nowadays can completely disconnect from the mainstream of society and to live in seemingly separate realities.

Due to the abundance of media outlets, blogs and news portals available online, viewers and readers are more empowered than ever to create their own individual “media basket”. As one journalist put it, “finally the reader decides, what he wants to read”. The consequences are visible in increasingly fickle readerships and audiences, especially when it comes to younger people.¹⁵³ “The audience is changing by the month”, one online newspaper journalist felt.

In such an environment, the function of traditional news media is not only to provide facts, but also to select and contextualise information. Journalists of traditional “quality” media feel that audience want not only quick information, but also explanations and contextualization.

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A journalist needs the courage to pose questions and to be critical of what he is told. Quick information is easily accessible on the internet. The role of journalists is to create a space, where this information is explained. Journalists are needed to organize facts and to answer the classic questions of 'Who, When, Why, What'. You need good research and an adequate background. You seldom find that for free online.

In a 'democratised' news environment, the role of journalism changes. Instead of relying on a news monopoly, their 'reason for existence' is now the curation of relevant information for their own specific audience. A newspaper editors-in-chief explains:

If you consume information without a journalist as an intermediary, you may end your day totally over-newsed and under-informed. The journalist's role is much more important in a 24/7-world than in the world before. We have to give our audience the impression, that we arrange the real world for them within this world of digital media that is growing increasingly confusing.

Meanwhile, social media platforms have also opened new channels of direct feedback. Every news article shared on social media receives both emotional feedback (e.g. 'likes' on Facebook) and vast amounts of commentary. Journalists feel that this feedback must be treated with caution, as these "miniature polls" may draw a distorted picture of society's political orientation. Professionals from public broadcasting describe being targeted by hate speech and degrading commentary:

The conversational tone has become unbearable. It can be gruesome, what people take the liberty of saying. This has changed. Back in the day, when viewers had to write letters, there was a higher threshold. The role of journalists has changed, also because populists often attack the media as a substitute for politics.

This has led several media outlets to shut down or at least partially limit feedback on social media:

We became increasingly responsible for all content and comments on our channel and had to keep up with moderating. Furthermore, we noticed a pattern of 'special' comments coming from right-wing networks and had the impression, that they were posted automatedly.

Many traditional print journalists, on the other hand, see this enhanced interaction with their readers as enhancing the practice of journalism, but only if civilised exchanges could be fostered. An editor-in-chief highlighted the value of citizen journalism and the ways in which readers may complement a newspaper's reporting, for example by providing information on current events or on topics relevant to a regional audience.

Public Trust in the German Media

At its best, journalism can offer a common ground and a shared basis for public debate to take place on. But this shared basis becomes increasingly fragile when trust in the media declines. Polarisation and viewership fragmentation suggest that the common ground for debate may be eroding. Professionals from public broadcasting point out that they suffer from a loss of credibility within certain groups of viewers, who see them no longer as an independent actor, but as a part of 'the establishment'. A journalist working in public broadcasting explains:

What we see is that on the one hand we have viewers who like us and like to see us, mainly older viewers. But there is also a group with the view that we lost credibility. Some viewers don't see us as a 'Fourth Power' but more as a part of the establishment. Even if we commit little errors or mistakes, we are incredibly sharply criticised. For them, it is a sign that we are not on the right side. That we are lying. There are all kinds of conspiracy theories around this.

An editor-in-chief of a regional newspaper stresses the importance of upholding an evidence-based culture.

There are always people that try to denounce us as the "lying press", who check our work critically. If we get this kind of criticism, we always try to answer in detail, no matter how polemic the charge was. Because we are able to present evidence backing up our reports. Even if we made a mistake, we just admit it and correct it.

A recent case in which public broadcasters arguably made mistakes was a homicide in Kandel¹⁵⁴, where a teenage Afghan refugee stabbed his 15-year old German ex-girlfriend to death. The news was initially picked up by regional but not national news, to the outrage of the AfD, who alleged a cover-up.¹⁵⁵

The day after the murder, the news program Tagesschau received so many complaints on social media, they decided to explain their editorial decision in a blog. As far as they were concerned, this was violence in the context of a (former) relationship, which they generally did not report on. The fact that minors were involved made the editorial board even more hesitant, they wrote.¹⁵⁶ Critics argued, however, that That evening, the case was briefly featured on primetime national news after all.¹⁵⁷ This case highlights both the importance and difficulty of re-evaluating judgment calls and issuing corrections. A journalist explains:

You can see that for example, when a public broadcaster corrects itself, immediately, the right-wing starts its smear campaign, using the correction as an argument for their claim that public media is lying again. This leads to a harmful situation in which acknowledging mistakes and to questioning oneself is no longer rewarded with credibility.

Some journalists feel they are being assessed not on their ability to present the facts, but on their compatibility with readers' ideologies:

The credibility of media often depends on whether the audience regards the report as compatible within their world view.

In some cases, this mistrust of the media turns violent. Journalists have reported an increase in physical assaults. In 2015 alone, there were 39 violent attacks on journalists, often at right-wing demonstrations and their counter-protests, spurred on by the incendiary rhetoric of movement leaders who brand mainstream journalists as traitors and the media as the "Lügenpresse"¹⁵⁸. A number of journalists confirm that they have experienced violence in the pursuit of their work:

Reading the comments under your articles as an online journalist, if you dare, is quite infuriating. Apart from the hate online, I was stalked and threatened back then.

I know colleagues who are seriously concerned about sending journalists to these PEGIDA demonstrations. Because journalists are threatened, are attacked there.

These are of course extreme examples. But they are indicative of an environment in which journalists do not enjoy the public trust they once did. Journalists reporting on controversial topics, disclosing their political stance or using specific, politically sensitive terms, face harsh criticism. As news consumption becomes more fragmented and polarised, common societal discourse becomes more difficult and the risk of parallel realities or "filter bubbles" increases. An expert of political communication detects a development of citizens either moving towards unconditionally trusting the media or towards mistrusting 'mainstream' or traditional media in general, with the middle ground dwindling:

What is shrinking is the critical middle. And maybe this middle is the democratic ideal: people who do not believe everything which is out there in the media, but who are critical of the information communicated by journalists, even by trusted media.

Journalism – Perceived Professional Bias

In Germany, journalists as a group frequently face the accusation of holding an inherent left-wing bias in their perspectives, including from fellow journalists and editors.¹⁵⁹ Political parties such as the AfD accuse journalists of creating propaganda and spreading fake news with a political slant.¹⁶⁰ Accusations of political bias can only partly be dismissed, as studies show that political journalists in Germany are more highly educated and more left-leaning than the average population¹⁶¹.

Diversity is a heated topic of debate in the sector. These discussions concern not only the composition of editorial boards and staff rooms, but also who should be invited to feature in talk shows and interviews. Interestingly, industry professionals have the impression that private, market-driven media handle this problem far better than public broadcasters:

They started to feature presenters with a migration background much earlier. They pay much more attention, not only to those people who may be voting for AfD, who go to PEGIDA rallies, but they also pay attention to their viewers with a migration background. And they don't only want to see negative stories about themselves in television. They also want to see themselves and their stories reflected.

For many journalists, the priority is to involve more ethnic and religious minority contributors, who currently have little access to public media¹⁶². A former newspaper journalist argues that public television frequently neglects the viewpoints of minority groups:

Watching the public television talk shows talking about migration, you hardly ever see any migrants. And if you have migrants, there are only people critical of migration. I think, we listen very much, too much, to those people who are critical of migration policy and we don't listen enough to those people affected by this criticism of migration policy. Refugees, Muslims, migrants.

However, as several editors-in-chief of regional newspapers pointed out, as a newspaper there is a duty to consider and partly to adapt to the viewpoints of your regional audience. It is not a matter of either/or, one editor-in-chief argues, because a newspaper which is trusted by its local audience has more leeway in its reporting:

You can't publish a newspaper against a majority. If the majority of our readers doesn't recognise itself and its interests in our coverage, it will not work. But this comes with a certain privilege, a trust which we have to use to emphasise, that in our democracy, the majority has acknowledge minorities and not make it invisible. When it comes to real minorities, we have to use our societal role responsibly in order to exercise a protective function. This is how I interpret our democratic system and also our role as media. [...] If you make a newspaper that is very audience-oriented, you gain the privilege of being allowed to surprise your readership with reports or perspectives they did not know or expect.

Other editors-in-chief of regional newspapers saw their regional audience as a minority within the whole nationwide public:

Big, nationwide news are not our brand essence, not our core identity. We have to try to get as close as possible to the lived reality of our regional audience, the people living here. We have to specifically aim at local and regional news, while making nationwide news relevant for our region.

The position of journalists in public broadcasting is different. Having a very broad and not regionally limited audience, they feel less restricted regarding their choice of perspectives and viewpoints. Some in public broadcasting are more willing to adopt a minority viewpoint, as a senior public broadcasting journalist describes:

It cannot be our responsibility to reproduce the opinion of the majority. It is my duty to inspire the public discourse. This means looking into every possible angle.

A rich public debate requires different aspects and perspectives. [...] It is my job to say: 'I have to look, where others are looking away.'

Reporting on Populism

Populism as a political phenomenon is a topic of discussion in the German public debate, but many journalists feel the present use of the term, both by journalists and by citizens, is problematic, and lacks a common understanding. As described by one participant of our roundtable:

The term populism has become very problematic. Populism is a catch-all term. People use it and seem to agree on what they are talking about. It has become a strategic descriptor over the last two and a half years. You tweak the term and you instrumentalise it.

Other journalists see the term as a label that can be applied whenever a more specific classification of a party, a politician or a statement would be too demanding or too risky:

I think that populism is used by the media as an umbrella term, in order to avoid having to provide a clearer classification. In my opinion, you could call the AfD, and this is the party you are mainly talking about when it comes to populism in Germany, extreme right-wing or radical right-wing. Or you could call parts of the AfD the "New Right". But if you did that, you would have to precisely examine who and what you are talking about. The term populism offers a solution for this situation, because you don't have to make that judgment and can get away with only describing their political presentation or style. You can avoid making yourself vulnerable and get less criticism.

As the terms 'populism' and 'populist' are used frequently and with changing contexts and intentions, they have evolved from academic terms to pejoratives for any actors who may appear untrustworthy, provocative or outside of the mainstream. However, as the FES study "Gesplante Mitte – Feindselige Zustände" revealed, extreme right-wing, anti-Semitic and anti-establishment attitudes are not a fringe phenomenon and exist throughout society¹⁶³. Some of the journalists we interviewed highlighted that the broad appeal of certain populist positions should not be underestimated:

Many views, which are articulated in a very harsh way by the right-wing populists are shared by a wide spectrum of the population.

Accusations of populism are not reserved uniquely for the AfD. When asked for the most prominent populist politician, a senior journalist from public broadcasting mentioned Christian Lindner, front-runner and party leader of the German Liberal Democrats (FDP):

Of course, not everyone who is popular is a populist. I would call someone populist as soon as the performance is more important than the political substance. It is not populism if I have political principles and try to convey them in a clear, comprehensible way – Herbert Wehner was able to do this, Strauß was able to do this, Johannes Rau as well – it is no populism. They had political beliefs

as a basis for their politics and were able to communicate to the people and to capture great majorities.

But if I think of Christian Lindner, or Sebastian Kurz, to take a more drastic example, I doubt that they have these kinds of beliefs.

Similarly, there are active debates as to whether Sahra Wagenknecht, parliamentary party leader of Die Linke, should be considered a left-wing populist¹⁶⁴. On topics related to migration, she has often taken the same position as the AfD, arguing for instance that those who “abuse Germany’s hospitality” should be deported,¹⁶⁵ which caused some to brand her a left-wing populist.¹⁶⁶

For many journalists, the rise of the AfD touched upon a fundamental debate about the democratic role of journalism. Since the Second World War, the country has developed a tradition of “Politische Bildung” or civic education, which is also reflected in a strand of journalism which aims to educate the audience about public affairs and the workings of democracy. Many journalists we interviewed still felt strongly they had a civic duty to educate, but did not want to tell the audience what to think.

It is important, several journalists said, to trust that the audience, given enough facts and context, will make well-informed judgements. Journalists’ task is to supply the public with information required to form a qualified opinion. As two public broadcasters put it:

We have to inform and to highlight the perspectives, which regular people are not able to see. This is linked to a certain educational approach, though the educational aspect is limited to saying ‘We hope that the people take in this information and that they reach their own conclusions’.

We have the responsibility to pick up multiple perspectives in order to construct a bigger picture within a report. We have to present the facts while keeping in mind that we don’t own the truth and only are able to depict a limited number of perceptions and perspectives. In this day and age, public broadcasting has the duty to explain, to correct fake news, to offer context and to teach media literacy.

Legitimising Tendencies

In practice, lofty and admirable ideals of educating and inspiring the public can be difficult to sustain. The journalists in our focus groups wanted to uncover wrongdoings, reflect on prominent debates in society and offer bold, interesting perspectives. Populist actors have often proven skilful at using these ambitions to their own advantage. As a result, the same publications that aim to delegitimise populists may end up amplifying or legitimising their views instead.

One example, according to our interviewees, is the emphasis on negative stories. Positive, optimistic and everyday stories are often not seen as newsworthy or proper journalism, while ‘negative reporting’ about crime, corruption and scandals creates appealing, attention-grabbing stories. Unintentionally, this may strengthen a populist narrative of decline and corruption.

A former print journalist explains:

Our self-image is that we want to criticise what is going wrong in society. We want to talk about scandals and problems. If you talk about migration policy, we never talk about the things which go well. And a lot of things go well.

The very structure of news formats necessitates outlining an underlying problem: one private television journalist states that even if you try to offer 'constructive news', you first have to present an underlying problem.

A second issue is the way journalism deals with controversy. Some of the journalists we interviewed felt there was a "populist playbook" of sorts which capitalised on this. It works as follows, they said: firstly, a highly provocative statement is issued. The ensuing discussion does not revolve around the policy or issue itself, but around the breach of taboo and whether it is justified or not to condemn the statement or the responsible politician. This strategy is fruitful for populists precisely because the media response is predictable. A journalist working for an international news agency argues:

For example, Geert Wilders says something outrageous. Then the entire following year is shaped around some comment about how there should be fewer Moroccans. I think this is the fundamental challenge: How can you stop these people? Someone is always prepared to say outrageous things, trying to thereby own the discourse. And it is very difficult to police that.

When outrageous statements manage to generate significant noise on social media, journalists often find themselves unable to simply ignore a seemingly calculated provocation, despite the original statement not necessarily being newsworthy in their view. Print journalists agreed:

*If the provocation is big and opens up questions of societal relevance, if there is a notable public response, we can't ignore the issue. We have to respond in some way.
We are no longer the people who set the agenda. There is another community which sets it: the internet.*

Competing for the attention of the public and their peers, politicians are incentivised to make themselves attractive for news formats and reports, and making scandalous statements is one way to do it. The consequences are highlighted by a Berlin-based newspaper journalist:

Such politicians are attractive for some media, because they guarantee visibility and offer bold statements. If you can get controversial statements, as a journalist, you don't have to put further effort into making the report newsworthy and profitable.

Practical reasons contribute also to the legitimisation of the AfD as a mainstream party. Editorial boards in urgent need of statements from experts or politicians often find that populist politicians are willing to appear on camera when others are not. A tabloid journalist explains:

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There are some experts/politicians that are easier to get in front of a camera. We ask them nearly every day for comments or interviews. And that of course makes a difference. And if the first row of SPD, CDU and the Greens is not willing to do the interview that day, but you need someone, we have to ask the third row – or parties that you wouldn't interview in the first place. You just depend on these people to come to your camera.

Apart from being available, populist politicians are often seen as appealing interview or talk show candidates, as clarified by a senior public broadcasting journalist:

They have mastered the game of the media. They offer a certain mix of performing well on screen and satisfying societal desires. They talk in a certain way, so people understand them. [Whereas most] political language often is communicated in a way normal people are unable to understand.

Journalists often refer to this interplay as a “symbiotic relationship”, because at least in the short term, both sides profit from eye-catching populist content. This influences journalists' choice of interviewees or talk show guests, as provocations are often rewarded with coverage and attention. Even when interviewing common citizens in a vox pop, people with extreme views have a higher chance of being featured than moderates, as they are not only more willing to be questioned but also produce more exciting content. A private television journalist states:

We do 'Vox Pops'. This is kind of the same structure: people who talk to us very often have 'extreme' opinions. Those that don't have extreme opinions simply don't talk to us.

Even if audience do not share these extreme views, many are thankful that the AfD put certain topics prominently on the political agenda.

Many of my readers told me: “I disagree with the answers given by the AfD. But we have to talk about the questions they raise!”

Journalists highlight that this mode of populist agenda-setting was inadvertently enabled by the other political parties in Germany, who avoided vigorous debate and polarising topics. An editor-in-chief of a regional newspaper pointed out that in the 2017 parliamentary election campaign, too many parties focused on the political centre:

With their complete focus on the political centre, politicians failed to point out actual differences and alternatives. All parties, except the AfD and Die Linke, were so close to each other politically as to be virtually indistinguishable to the public. Especially Angela Merkel contributed with her famous “asymmetrical demobilisation” [an alleged strategy of Angela Merkel's to depoliticise issues so as to depress turnout for her political adversaries].

This was exacerbated by a depoliticised media landscape. Even though German journalists consider ‘not reporting along party lines’ to be an important guiding principle, some

newspaper journalists fault themselves for failing to facilitate constructive political debate in various policy fields:

A lot of issues which people are really concerned about have been neglected. There has not been enough debate about real pension system reform. There has been no real debate about the housing shortage in Germany. But this is what hurts people, even in the middle and upper middle class. As the media, we were at fault for not intensifying the debate on these topics. We were complicit in sedating the political discourse.

According to research by Monitor, a German television program, there was no lack of attention for topics such as immigration and integration on German public television. In 2016, some 40 out of 141 political talk shows broadcasts on public television dealt with the topic of refugees and refugee policies, 15 with Islam and violence and 21 with the topic of populism¹⁶⁷, altogether involving more than half of all programming. This resulted not only in more attention for the AfD's core topics, but also for the AfD itself.

Journalists debate whether these themes can be discussed at all without strengthening far-right populism.

One problem we have [...] is: the AfD only has one topic which is migration; focusing on migration problems and integration problems. We always have to ask ourselves: 'Do we help the AfD?' As we have a big impact, it's always problematic for us. How can we discuss migration without doing the AfD a favour? We handled it badly in the beginning: The AfD won ownership over the issue. We idiots abandoned the topic, and no longer reported on it from our own perspective, leaving the topic to the AfD. This was completely wrong.

Populist parties clearly have not only affected the political agenda, but also the everyday dynamics of journalism, as journalists are now very conscious of the risk of producing content which may be instrumentalised by populists.

Some online and newspaper journalists offer the opposing view that to some extent, populism may be a refreshing and even necessary element of a liberal democracy.

Populists can break open political taboos and address seemingly unaddressed issues:

Mostly, the label "populism" just means that the establishment is not pleased with certain positions or statements. Sometimes, populism is even, neutrally speaking, something refreshing, because it is some form of necessary objection. [...] I think, populism has its merits as a start of conversation or to signal 'We have to talk'. Populism itself is not offensive to me. It is the very aim of politics to participate in the development of a public will, to recognize and to take into account the public interests. The next step is to derive policies from that.

Even if traditional media refuse to facilitate populist agenda-setting, populists can increasingly rely on associated or sympathetic online-only platforms. The AfD is even planning to start its own newsroom, to counter the unfair coverage and "fake news" about the party.¹⁶⁸ At first glance, these online environments may appear to reflect quality journalism, but in reality, these platforms often operate with considerably lower standards of professional conduct. Many journalists view the formation of these alternative channels with

suspicion, and are particularly concerned that they could lead to a further deterioration in trust in the media. One tabloid journalist states:

A major problem with populist parties is that they are using their own channels. A large audience is following them. They have a different means to spread their message. There is no framing, there is no evaluation, there are no journalists nor anyone contextualising what they are saying. A large number of people are no longer used to a journalistic way of providing information.

However, a regional print journalist remarked that the usage of own media channels is not a phenomenon inherent to populism, as politicians from all parties have always held an incentive to promote themselves, either on social media or on private blogs:

Social media offers an additional channel to influence the public debate – one where politicians themselves can decide which content to publish and which audience to address – of course focussing on what may improve their public image.

Delegitimising populism

Journalists are divided on whether the AfD should be treated differently than other parties. The argument in favour of treating the AfD differently is based upon the view that, despite being democratically elected into the Bundestag, they fail to uphold the standards expected of a party in a democracy. According to this line of reasoning, the rhetoric of AfD politicians is at odds with the German “Freiheitlich demokratische Grundordnung”, the constitutional ‘free democratic basic order’. Referring to AfD positions that reject minority rights, pluralism or basic liberties such as religious freedom, some journalists assert that it would be unethical to offer the AfD a platform to spread its ideology.

A second line of argument accepts the premise of the AfD being a non-democratic party, but proposes a more proactive approach to its politicians and policies. As the ideas, frames and central topics of the AfD are already present within the public consciousness, ignoring far-Right populists cannot be a reasonable course of action. As long as the AfD continues to set the tone of the debate, excluding them from traditional media platforms may only contribute to their presentation as victims of the media.

A third position is to oppose ‘special treatment’ of the AfD altogether, as it is seen as a democratically elected party that has not yet been forbidden by the Federal Constitutional Court. A private television journalist proposes that having entered the federal parliament, their parliamentary representation should be treated the same way as the other parties.

It took us some time to get clear how to deal with AfD for example. Until we got to the point where we said: it's a party, a democratic party. At this point we have to deal with it as a democratic party, so far.

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Another tenet of this strategy is to invite AfD candidates to political talk shows and interviews, but only in proportion to their share of the votes and in a critical setting, where their views can be challenged.

As a journalist, you should talk to everyone – but by your own rules and with a healthy self-confidence.

While there have been suggestions that investigative research could seek to delegitimise or even 'unmask' the AfD, journalists are divided as to the meaningfulness of such efforts. Nonetheless, as numerous cases of personal as well as ideological connections between the AfD and the radical Right have been revealed, many argue that it is their responsibility to dig further.

We have colleagues, who, let me say this with a little bit of irony, 'are always searching for another Nazi' who has joined the ranks of the AfD, [for example] hiding his past. Me and other colleagues think that this is not enough. That this perhaps isn't even the right way. Because it became a very normal phenomenon to vote AfD. We have found no method for handling this problem. How to present the subject "populism" in our magazine.

Another strategy for delegitimation is to thoroughly fact-check claims and statements. Yet this method is seen as only partly effective, as fact-checking formats require a level of general trust in the fact-checker, which is often lacking.

We have to just realize that a certain part of the public is not interested in whether the facts are right or wrong. You could see it with Trump. That even though there was a lot of criticism, the criticism helped him. Just because it was a big show. (...) The more he was criticised, the more he was at the heart of the discussion. (...) We have to find a way out of this kind of trap.

Newspaper journalists tend to be more positive about the usefulness of fact-checking formats:

For us newspaper journalists, fact-checking may be a sensational chance to demonstrate our reason for existence. We can show that everything that we publish is reviewed and true, in contrast to what is published on questionable blogs. For print, it is a very useful instrument.

Public broadcasting journalists too highlight the importance of not letting false information remain on the internet go unchallenged:

I think that it is wrong to leave fake news on the internet without debunking it. The more often you read fake news without coming across a refutation, the more likely you are to believe in it. This way, we can at least limit the impact of fake news.

For live broadcasting, however, the scope for fact-checking is limited, as research in complicated areas usually cannot be conducted within seconds or minutes.

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Within live broadcasts you have less wiggle room, because you have to react within real-time. Therefore you have to prepare meticulously before conducting an interview: you have to know the facts, know the numbers, have the most recent information at hand.

Fact-checking has its limits with regard to speed. This live-fact-checking that recently has become quite popular can itself lead to new mistakes, as you could see in the TV-duel [the electoral one-on-one debates] in Germany. Often, you need time in order to do fact-checking, because some statements or claims are complex and can't be quickly reviewed.

The potential of fact-checking is further curbed by the importance attributed to emotions and storytelling in political reporting. Focusing only on 'getting the facts right' while neglecting the necessity of making news appealing may only lead to losing more readers and viewers to "alternative media". The challenge is to put emotions into the reports while still transmitting all necessary and contextual facts. A private broadcasting journalist explains:

Sometimes it is really difficult to find the balance between the rational and the emotional part of reporting. [...] To present facts and still make it interesting and appealing to the viewer, in my case, on an emotional basis. [...] Those are the discussions we are having in our editorial meetings: how can we put the emotion in the reports and still convey the facts.

Regulating or seeking to ban populist discourses by legal means is viewed critically by leading journalists of public broadcasting. Such efforts would be counterproductive and self-defeating, many feel:

I think that any legal action and regulations can only help to a very limited extent. It is very difficult to regulate something like this. Of course, it is the right thing to do to take action against hate speech. The question is just how to do this without leaving the decision on what and what not to sanction in the hands of private companies.

Numerous journalists made a case for openly denouncing politicians if they overstep red lines of basic human decency or political civility. One editor-in-chief cautioned, however, that rather than condemning the whole 'populist' electorate, criticism should be addressed towards the party officials, and should be well evidenced. Another editor quotes the famous German journalist Hanns Joachim Friedrichs¹⁶⁹ and states:

For a long time, I was convinced of Hans-Joachim-Friedrichs' adage, 'What makes a good journalist is that he never fights for a cause, not even for a good one, and that he is everywhere, but belongs nowhere.'. But now, I think this is wrong. When dealing with AfD, we should have looked into its criminal structures much earlier and much more in depth. Nowadays, I am convinced that this is a party that is openly opposed to this state and that wants to destroy it by any means. Therefore, you must not stay neutral as media.

DEMOS

We as media clearly have a responsibility to take a stance on certain developments within society and politics. We have to tell the people what we think about this. Media has to tell people 'This is not acceptable. This is antidemocratic behaviour, we can't let this pass.

The challenge of fake news in Germany

Like 'populism', 'fake news' is a controversial, highly politicised term in Germany. Journalists sense that the phenomenon of fake news will be of increasing importance within coming years, even though the phenomenon has not been as influential as elsewhere yet:

When I compare the situation in Germany for example with the Brexit campaign, I have the impression that it played a bigger role in the UK. Or for example within the context of the elections in France, the US or in Poland.

Although fake news is perhaps not convincing to most viewers and readers, it might fragment the common ground of political discourse, informationally separating a significant minority from mainstream society. A public broadcasting editor outlines the present status of fake news in Germany:

In Germany, there is a part of the public which informs itself mainly via social media. This group has disconnected mainly from the public mainstream and is hard to reach. They are very vulnerable to fake news and tend to only believe things that confirm their worldview. I would guess that this part of the public encompasses about 10 per cent of the whole population. However, there are not that many coordinated campaigns of false information spread on a larger scale. This is also a consequence of the existence of supervisory bodies within our media landscape, that are limiting the effects of fake news.

Journalists fear, however, that 'fake news' may become a swear word for adversarial reports or media outlets one does not like. Other journalists, especially more seasoned professionals, find the term misleading, as there always have been untruthful news items, either unintentionally due to journalistic malpractice or as a result of bold public relations work.

I don't get to complain about some people trying to filter or to whitewash information. This is an age-old business. A lot of public relations activity is the deliberate spread of false information. But in the past, this wasn't called fake news. What is new about this phenomenon?

Of course, there is false information in established media as well. Often there are technical mistakes, but I wouldn't call those fake news. However, there are intentionally wrong reports and misleading public relations activities. It is difficult to draw the line between those and fake news.

Public broadcasting journalists propose one central criterion for distinguishing between false information and intentionally created and distributed misinformation:

The most important criterion for identifying real fake news is whether this made-up information serves a certain purpose and whether it supports a certain larger narrative. In Germany, this narrative is closely bound up with the so-called refugee crisis and predicts that the German population will be replaced by refugees. A part of the German population believes in this narrative. It is a very powerful narrative. And everything that fits into this narrative is believed by this part of the population.

Case Study: The Refugee Crisis and the Media

Journalists agree that there is no precise starting point to the common use of the term 'refugee crisis'. Senior editors especially argue that this term, which nowadays is often interpreted as "a crisis brought to European countries, especially Germany, by the influx of refugees, with negative consequences for both the German population and the refugees", originally had a different meaning:

In the beginning, we didn't relate the term "refugee crisis" to ourselves at all. What we referred to as a "refugee crisis" was the fate of the refugees in the Mediterranean Sea. But we didn't associate that with us. Neither the German media, nor the German people did. In the year 2014, nearly no one associated these pictures from the Mediterranean Sea to a soon-to-be accommodation of many refugees in Germany. The term initially expressed, that there were refugees who experienced a crisis. And not that "we Germans have a crisis of refugees".

Until 2015, the so-called "refugee crisis" described the situation of refugees fleeing from war and prosecution. Only when rising numbers of refugees applied for asylum in Germany and the refugees became increasingly visible, the crisis was redefined as a phenomenon directly affecting the German population (figure 12).

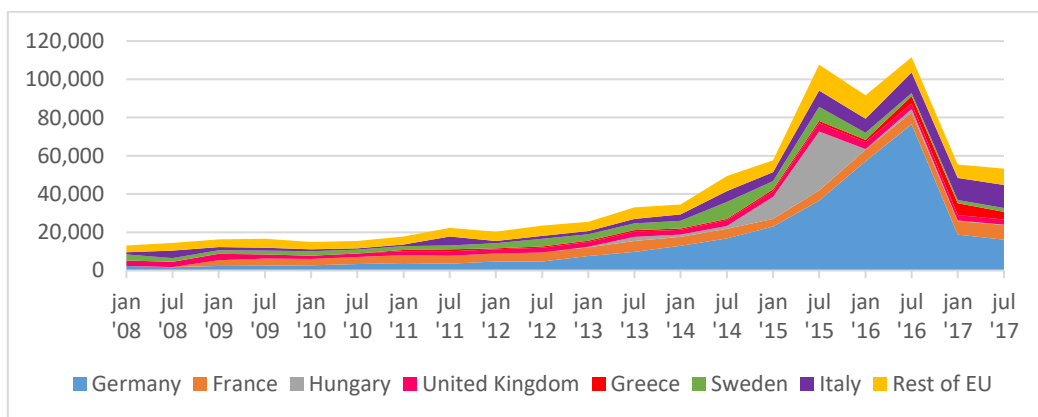


Figure 12. First-time asylum applications in the EU per month, by country of application, 2008 – 2017¹⁷⁰

Journalists from public broadcasting comment self-critically on their reporting during the refugee crisis, regretting both their use of dehumanising terms, but also the promotion of a sentimental style of reporting.

DEMOS

We have failed in two aspects: We failed when we spread terms like 'refugee wave' or similar terms and gave up our neutrality. But we also failed in the way we reported about this German welcoming culture. When in Dortmund people went to the train station and gifted teddy bears and such – we were complicit in this sentimental atmosphere and neglected pointing out problems. In both directions, we as media have been too emotional and not rational.

In the beginning, we also spoke about the refugee wave or the refugee crisis. That you are empowering a right-wing argumentation with that term slowly gets clear within processes of self-reflection. (...) We soon ruled out these terms for ourselves. But in the beginning, we were not aware of the implications of these terms.

Some senior professionals related the current discourse to the asylum debate in Germany in the 1990s, highlighting the learning processes within the field:

Let me put it like this: the term 'refugee crisis' was fortunately a much friendlier term than the common term 'Asylum Flood' (Asylflut) in the 1990s. I believe that this may have affected many of us, both within politics and media: this terrible period of asylum debate of the late 1980s and early 1990s; when refugee centres were set on fire, when there was murder. We all feared that we would retreat to this time, if a large number of poor, foreign people came to Germany.

Another example of the relatively considerate tone this time around was the language of the CDU about the 'refugee crisis': back in the day they did not have problems with campaigns such as Jürgen Rüttger's 'Children instead of Indians'¹⁷¹ or the 'Where can I petition against foreigners?'¹⁷² by Roland Koch. For them, it was clear that they must never go back there again. I remember the 90s, when there was a huge eruption of racist violence in Germany. You could clearly see how the media have played with fire as well. Today, the media are a bit more careful. Especially the Bild tabloid, which played a very inglorious role in the 90s. Now they demonstrated something like a sense of responsibility. Yet there still have been a lot of questionable terms such as refugee wave or refugee current.

With memories of this period looming large in the minds of journalists, some journalists argued that their approach was based on a belated sense of guilt. One editor-in-chief concedes that there still is potential to improve when it comes to the visual imagery used to talk about refugees:

This vocabulary of natural disasters. Refugees never appearing as individuals, but as a flood, as a swarm. Always using these images of water. But how do you react properly to a flood? You contain it. Or you will drown in it. But compared to the 1990s the German discourse has matured significantly. I have the impression, that everyone is eager to avoid such excesses.

Failures of Journalism

Many German journalists agree there was a severe media failure in reporting on and shaping the debate regarding what is now known as the 'refugee crisis', including adequately explaining its origins:

The Syrian civil war for example is also a big media failure. So it's not explained that this is the biggest massacre in our lifetime. That is connected in a way. I think the media failure during the war is a bigger story.

In terms of the reporting about the migrant inflows to Germany, many journalists felt they had ceded too much ground in the overall narrative. After a period of positive and welcoming news frames, some felt that the media became complicit in promoting more negative angles. In particular, they did not sufficiently facilitate a fruitful debate about religious freedom, secularism and multiculturalism, nor debate the advantages and also difficulties of an open, liberal society. Instead, journalism limited itself to mainly reporting on short-term problems and scandals related to the immediate integration of migrants:

The debate with or about populists has gone wrong, because the populist rhetoric, their terms and phrases have been mainstreamed too often without comment or context. There is a massive reduction or even a collapse of knowledge and empathy in parts of society, in millions and millions of people. A big failure is that this potential success story of the summer 2015, this transformation or societal project, was captured, was hijacked. Was let go by mainstream media. Mainstream media became complicit in something that is deeply reactionary. And I think that there has to be a reckoning on parts of private and public media, more or less of everybody.

Many journalists asserted that the negative framing of migration found particularly fertile ground against a backdrop of increasing public concerns around inequality, social injustice, political stagnation and demographic change. It is argued that political apathy and disaffection was especially strengthened by the absence of notable political confrontation between the two major parties and their candidates Martin Schulz (SPD) and Angela Merkel (CDU). This lack of polarisation can not only be attributed to the political parties, but also to the media being unable to enforce confrontation or to carve out differences between the political parties.

The media's absorption into the AfD's framing of the refugee crisis became apparent in the single TV debate held between the two front-runner candidates in the 2017 elections, as about a third of the debate time was spent on discussing ways to respond to the problems connected to migration and refugees. Instead of exploring practical instruments and strategies of integration, both migrants and refugees were presented primarily by the candidates as problems, or even likened to natural catastrophes. The TV debate was condemned in harsh terms by all the journalists interviewed:

One of the main traps in reporting about migration is to accept the framing of the right-wing populists. If you remember the TV-debate between Schulz and Merkel,

DEMOS

there was 30 minutes of debate on this issue. And it was completely within the framing of the AfD, which is: 'migration framed as a natural disaster.'

Disastrous. The way they facilitated this duel, no discussion and no debate was possible. If I put the candidates in such a tight corset, this won't work.

The whole parliamentary election campaign and especially this TV-duel showcased that the whole refugee topic and the immigration topics of the AfD were so dominant while other topics totally disappeared.

More broadly, many journalists felt that reporting on the crisis over the previous two years has come to suffer from an inherent one-sidedness, as well as a failure to display a wider range of perspectives, besides the Government perspective.

And the government was Seehofer, Merkel and Gabriel. He said: "Other voices were not heard that much." The voices of those people who were concerned with the migration politics, but also the refugees. Even Michael Haller is very critical of that [one-sidedness]. The question is, what do we talk about if we say "The media in general was too positive about refugees"?

A study by the Otto Brenner Stiftung supports this claim. They examined the mode of reporting, the central actors and the perspectives of news coverage and political commentary on the topic of refugees in Germany and came to the conclusion that political journalism in Germany had neglected to represent the views of both the incoming refugees and the German citizens, while concentrating on the views and perspectives of politicians.

In addition to the general reporting on the topic of refugees in Germany, journalists highlight the failure to establish and uphold transparent rules of reporting about migrant-related crime:

We have been discussing our journalistic principles a lot when it comes to reporting about crime. When it comes to whether or not to mention the nationality of the suspect, we have not been prepared well. We established norms which later on we were neither able nor willing to uphold. People began to suspect that we didn't work according to journalistic principles, but in the course of a political mission.

I noticed that within the last few years there has been a development towards nation-wide reporting on offences, that would not have been picked up above the regional level in the years before. After the incidents of New Year's Eve 2015/2016 in Cologne people have been anxious to avoid criticism and accusations of public broadcasting covering up refugee crime. Now there is reporting about cases which actually don't have a nationwide relevance.

DEMOS

Public broadcasters criticise not only the method, but also the amount of reporting on refugees and migration, claiming that the refugee debate has nearly suffocated all other political debates:

I have the impression, that in Germany we have talked far too much about refugees and not enough about other topics. We have joined the populists' game, in which every other discourse had to be sidelined in favour of debating refugee policy.

Journalists assess that this excessive attention for refugees, their accommodation and their integration challenges, not only narrowed the scope of public debate, but also led to many people feeling neglected by the media:

Of course, there were people that are disadvantaged within our society that had the feeling 'Not only do these refugees get the money we have been waiting for, for many years, but now, in addition, everyone is only talking about those refugees. About us, in the North of Essen, no one is talking anymore.

Comparative Analysis: British and German Media

In this section, we draw together the findings from these two case studies, and explore the extent to which trends and outcomes have been similar between the UK and Germany.

Changing Practice in the Digital Age

Our interviews revealed broadly similar impacts of digitisation on media environments, newsrooms, and individual journalistic practice in Germany and the UK. Journalists repeatedly spoke about the challenges of 'information obesity', with senior journalists in particular depicting a dramatic increase in the editorial demand for content, and the need to filter through large amounts of externally-produced information. While digitalisation has enhanced certain aspects of journalist practice (eg, source identification), the demand for content, coupled with resource pressures at news organisations, means that journalists regularly reported a reduction in the time available for researching stories. Growing pressures around output, including demands for journalists not simply to produce news but also to 'perform' it, as media personalities, connecting with audiences across a range of platforms. These rising and broadening demands coincide with a more generalised sense of precariousness among journalists, particularly among younger and freelance staff concerned about the future of the industry and their place within it.

The relationship of journalists to their audience is also changing in similar ways across the UK and Germany, in response to technological and social shifts. Growing sensitivity to audience feedback through social media and editorial analytics is viewed with both enthusiasm and caution by British and German journalists – from one perspective, democratising and destabilising top-down communication, while on the other skewing reporting towards only the most 'popular' topics, often at the expense of more objectively 'informative' subjects.

Despite the similarities, there is evidence to suggest that these transformational effects may be stronger in the UK context, due to a greater level of source fragmentation. In particular, the levels of public engagement with digital news sources is far higher in the UK. Some 74 per cent and 41 per cent of British citizens get their news online and through social media respectively, compared to just 60 per cent and 29 per cent of the public in Germany.¹⁷³ Germans on the other hand 'remain heavily attached to television news' – particularly public service broadcasters *Tagesschau* and *heute* – with 77 per cent of citizens watching TV news, compared to 69 per cent in the UK.¹⁷⁴

This heightened engagement with digital news in the UK compared to Germany does not, however, seem to be reflected in the policy responses of the respective national governments, with the former broadly favouring a 'lighter touch' model of self-regulation. In January 2018, the British Prime Minister announced the establishment of a "dedicated national security communications unit" to counter fake news and state-sponsored disinformation; however the Government has thus far avoided legislating on these matters¹⁷⁵.

By contrast, there has been a far stronger response from the German Government around associated risks brought by the digital environment, particularly in relation to 'fake news' and misinformation. In July 2017, the Federal Government passed legislation targeting

misinformation and hate speech on social media platforms, and threatening social media companies with fines of up to €50 million for failure to remove illegal content.¹⁷⁶

The greater engagement with digital news in the UK, and weaker regulatory regime, may partly explain lower levels of public trust in the media than in Germany (43 per cent of UK citizens say they have trust in the media, compared to 50 per cent of Germans).¹⁷⁷ Public confidence in the trustworthiness of news on social media is particularly low, so it's likely that a greater engagement with this medium may have deleterious effects on trust in the media more broadly.¹⁷⁸ There may also be specific longer-run effects from the impact of media malpractice in the UK, particularly in relation to the extensive visibility given to the phone-hacking scandal of 2011.¹⁷⁹

However, it seems that more recent events have played a far greater role in undermining public trust in the UK, with trust falling by seven percentage points over 2016 alone in the UK, compared to just two percentage points in Germany.¹⁸⁰ As alluded to by a number of our interviewees, then, it seems like this crisis of trust in the UK is driven by a myriad of contextual factors and trends, in part related to processes of digitalisation, but more so in their interaction with recent political shocks and longer-running progressive acceleration of mistrust in the press.

Politics and the Media

In both Germany and the UK, political journalists maintain close working relationships with politicians and political parties. These arrangements are pejoratively described in Germany as the 'Berlin bubble', and institutionalised in the UK in the form of the Lobby. Even though their power has been challenged by technological and social disruption, German and British media organisations still hold significant agenda-setting power – particularly with regards to political priorities – and continue to be a central focus for political actors seeking to shape the terms of the public debate. In both countries, agenda-setting has, however, become increasingly less top-down and more emergent between the interplay of traditional and social media. Journalists within both countries highlight that even though platforms such as Twitter may not be representative of the broader population, they can compel traditional media to report on certain issues that circulate online.

By contrast, some of the clearest contextual differences between the German and British media systems relate to the political positioning of news organisations, with far greater political polarisation and partisanship evident in the UK. This feature of the British media, particularly the print media, was thrown into sharp relief by a number of our interviews with UK-based foreign correspondents, with one comparing the one-time 'scandal' of a German paper openly backing a political party, to a practice which is routine in the UK and a thoroughly embedded practice during election campaigns.

Within these respective media environments, there are also differences in the relative political position of public broadcasters, with the BBC sitting broadly at the centre ground, while German channels (eg, ARD) are further to the Left of the spectrum. Despite these differences, our interviews demonstrate the salience of accusations of bias and 'unfairness' towards public broadcasters in both countries, from all sides of the political spectrum. Claims of perceived left-wing bias are especially common, but our research also reveals

criticisms from the centre and Left, and from within the media industry itself, on the coverage and framing of certain news events by public broadcasters.

Accompanying the partisanship of the British press, its style and tone is generally regarded by outside observers as far more adversarial and confrontational than many other media cultures. By comparison, this style of reporting in Germany is more commonly associated with more recently established and peripheral news magazines, such as the pro-AfD *Compact* magazine. The journalists we spoke to were, however, somewhat divided on whether this adversarial approach was beneficial for British democracy and public discourse more generally. For many, the British press enables a more 'robust' and less 'deferential' approach to holding politicians and Government to account, and the level of persistence behind its campaigning style and its 'social contract' with its readers is seen by a large cohort of journalists as a source of immense pride.

However, a number of interviewees also cautioned against the ease with which critical journalism could slide into a relentless focus on 'scandal' and political personalities, at the expense of more policy-focused reporting essential to helping citizens to understand complex issues and trade-offs at stake. Reflecting on the survey assessing the extent to which the British media was seen to be 'informative' during the EU Referendum, it is clear that citizens see considerable room for improvement on this educative function, and this perceived weakness and propensity for acrimonious reporting could to some extent be consequential in fuelling mistrust in the system as a whole.

Reporting on Populism

In both countries, there is concern from some journalists that a symbiotic relationship has developed between parts of the media and populist politics, with wider competitive pressures increasing the media appeal of controversial or provocative figures. Journalists in both Germany and the UK spoke about the tendency to faithfully report statements from politicians across the political spectrum, but the failure to properly contextualise or interrogate these comments, often linked to wider resourcing constraints within newsrooms. The lack of contextualisation was posited by some as the major cause of populist rhetoric being 'mainstreamed' and legitimised through the media, with fringe parties coming to dominate the framing of key issues, despite relatively limited public support compared to mainstream parties.

While these broad trends are recognised in both countries, this research has revealed some striking differences in the national dynamics of populism and its relationship to the media. Part of this stems from fundamental differences in the political contexts of both countries. Jeremy Corbyn's 'populist relaunch' saw the British Labour Party under his leadership perform more successfully than had been anticipated in the June 2017 General Election, indicating the salience of populist framing continues to perform strongly in both contexts. Nonetheless, the past year in particular has exemplified the diverging electoral fortunes for British and German populist parties on the Right, and perhaps more significantly, the electoral fortunes of new political parties. Over the longer-term, the UK's first-past-the-post voting system has meant that UKIP has never been able to gain a significant foothold within the British parliamentary system, during a period in which AfD has steadily grown its influence through success in regional elections.

This divergence in the parliamentary representation for new political parties is significant, as it cuts to the heart of debates around what constitutes fair and proportionate coverage of populist politicians. A number of journalists in the UK argued that Nigel Farage should not have been given a platform in TV debates in the run-up to the EU Referendum due to his party's size and lack of accredited involvement in the official campaign. These kinds of arguments seem less justifiable in the context of AfD's substantial regional and, now, federal parliamentary influence. That said, some German journalists did argue that no-platforming strategies were justifiable in AfD's case, largely on the basis that the party was fundamentally anti-democratic by openly challenging basic constitutional rights (eg, those related to religious freedoms). However, for the majority, there was some consensus that no-platforming strategies could well be counter-productive, and challenging the AfD's ascension required more constructive and critical engagement.

Significant differences between Germany and the UK also emerge when more diffuse elements of populism (beyond clearly identifiable populist parties) are considered. In particular, the contrast between the approach of the UK press during the EU Referendum and that of the German media in relation to the refugee and migration crisis revealed fundamentally different dynamics at play. In Germany, a number of journalists felt that the media had allowed the crisis to be framed by the AfD and other voices on the radical and far-Right. But crucially, this was seen as a largely unintended consequence of the challenges associated with reporting politically sensitive subjects, and self-conscious attempts to refute claims of left-wing bias within the industry.

By contrast, in the UK, while a number of pro-Remain journalists similarly spoke about media failures in relation to the EU Referendum, there was fundamentally not the same consensus that the industry as a whole had been inadvertently co-opted by the populist Right. Instead, journalists described how sections of the press in particular had taken an active and leading role in the negative framing of the EU, both during the campaign, and for much of the preceding few decades. In this sense, populist Eurosceptic narratives emerged from within the media itself, and in alliance with elements of the Conservative Party, and UKIP – an example of so-called 'media populism' which is far less evident in Germany.

Finally, more subtle differences between the two countries emerged from our discussions with journalists around how the industry should cover populist politics in a constructive and responsible manner. In both the UK and Germany, journalists occasionally referred to ideas associated with the social or democratic function of journalism – such as holding power to account or public service. In the UK, these ideas were often defined in an abstract sense, and many journalists argued that making decisions about what to cover, and how to cover it, ultimately came down to their own personal judgement. This was, therefore, a highly individualised process related to each journalists' own moral code.

However, for German journalists, conceptions of the democratic function of their work arguably took on more concrete form, thanks in part to the legacy of 'politische Bildung' (civic education). While citizenship education was made compulsory in English schools in 2002, in Germany it has a far longer history, institutionalised through The Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, BPB), which was founded in 1952. The agency, which aims to promote democratic engagement and political knowledge, also has a far broader remit than the teaching of civic education in schools, and this includes working directly with journalists. The BPB's 'Local Journalism Programme', for

DEMOS

example, provides training to local and regional news reporters, promoting 'responsible' journalism that supports the democratic and political education of citizens.

In this sense, German journalists were able to tap into a clearer collective understanding of journalistic responsibility and good practice, when thinking about how to cover populist politics or controversial subjects, rather, as seems more common in the UK case falling back on their own moral judgement.

Conclusions and Ways Forward

In many discussions on the impact of the broadcast and print media in reporting on key political issues such as the refugee/migration crisis and the EU Referendum, news outlets have often been portrayed as directly complicit in facilitating the progression of populist narratives up the public agenda. However, by speaking to journalists, we have seen numerous examples and ample evidence of sound, ethical journalistic practice, and significant levels of introspection – both at an individual and organisational level – in thinking through how journalism can constructively respond to the challenges raised by populism.

While there are clear cases of alignment in interests and values between populist parties and some news organisations, many of the problems seemingly emanating from within the media – around disproportionate coverage, a privileging of personality politics over substantive issues, and a collapse in public trust in institutions – result from a challenging collision of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The work of journalism, and the technologies and business models which underpin it, are fundamentally changing. Journalists' relationships with politicians and the public are also shifting, destabilising long-standing norms in processes and power dynamics.

Responding to populism, therefore, isn't solely about confronting clear examples of media and populist 'collusion', it's about thinking through how the wider environment in which journalists work can influence their ability to critically engage with a politics that looks to present simple solutions as effective responses to complex problems, and aims to wedge cleavages between groups of citizens and divide society. In this chapter we, therefore, assess options to develop a media environment more conducive to positive, nuanced, and evidence-based public discourse, across five broad areas: time and resources; agency and expertise; values and ethics; journalists and citizens; populism and platforming.

Time and Resources: creating more sustainable working practices and investing in high-quality journalism

While it is outside the scope of this study to make comprehensive recommendations on the long-term financial sustainability of the news industry, any intervention into the practice of journalism must consider the reality of journalists' daily working lives. Throughout our discussions with journalists, we heard about the intense time and resourcing pressures affecting newsrooms, as media organisations (particularly newspapers) search for the 'elusive business model' amid falling revenues, intensifying competition and rising demand. The implications of these structural conditions for the journalists we spoke to included: a shift from factual reporting to comment; a lack of time and resources for thorough investigation and verification; and an absence of any 'bandwidth' on the behalf of individual journalists to reflect on their own choices and behaviour.

Clearly, there is intense soul-searching going on within the media industry around how to proceed, with organisations variously experimenting with subscription models, a diversification of digital channels, and the modernisation advertising strategies and offers. One road favours a race to the bottom, driving down resource and human capital costs, and privileging the kind of 'churnalism' critiqued by many of our interviewees. The other

leverages journalistic and investigative expertise, supported by new business models, to continue to hold power to account and serve the public interest. In the search for new business models, news organisations, therefore, need to resist the aspects of change that threatens journalists' capacity to conduct valued, quality journalism.

There is, however, also a need to recognise 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, with rigorous guidelines around impartiality and public service. In addition, there's a clear role for private philanthropic funding to play a stronger role in facilitating independent investigative journalism, or reporting into overlooked communities or regions.

According to a recent review by researchers at Cass Business School, philanthropic funding for journalism in the UK currently tends to be 'fragmented, disparate, and wide', with particular clusters around training and education, community journalism, and civil society organisations aiming to hold media organisations to account.¹⁸¹ The impact on resourcing at mainstream news organisations is therefore generally indirect at best. *The Guardian* has, however, pioneered partnerships with major grant-making trusts, including the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, which in 2017 brought in \$6 million in multi-year funding commitments.¹⁸² These partnerships have allowed *The Guardian* to invest in what it calls 'social justice' journalism across a range of issue areas, providing a model for other media organisations looking to fund constructive journalism on socially relevant and under-resourced topics.

Agency and Expertise: enabling journalists to deepen subject expertise and have a say in editorial decision-making

One of the casualties of increasing time and resource pressures has been journalists' own sense of agency, both to deepen their expertise on current policy debates, and to influence the editorial agenda at their organisations. In our interviews, we heard from a number of journalists who that felt this had hampered their ability to critically engage with populist discourses and the wider policy contexts in which they were situated. In the UK, this lack of agency was described most acutely in reflecting on the Referendum, with a number of our interviewees lamenting either their own lack of knowledge around key issues (such as the Irish border), and/or their inability to influence their organisation's approach to covering the campaign.

There's a pressing need, therefore, for news organisations to provide structured opportunities for journalists to deepen their level of policy expertise. Civil society organisations have a role to play in filling in the gaps around education on topics for which they have long-running expertise, 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 policy areas. This can also help counter some of the problems with solely reactive fact-checking (principally, that once misinformation has been spread, it's difficult to undo the salience of its message). In the UK, fact-checking organisation *Full Fact* has experimented with this approach, producing a series of EU 'explainers' in partnership with EU legal experts.¹⁸³ Similarly, Berlin-based *Mediendienst-Integration* aims to support the accurate reporting of immigration issues by providing information and resources to journalists.¹⁸⁴ German public television program *Tagesschau* has also developed a fact-

provision portal for citizens and journalists, *Faktenfinder.de*, which includes media literacy tutorials for the general public.¹⁸⁵ Our interviews suggest that the impact of this work has so far been limited, so there's clearly space to increase the resources available for journalistic information provision, and to embed these new sources of information into journalists' everyday working practices.

More broadly, news organisations must address the current dearth of mid-career training and continuous professional development (CPD) within the industry, with many journalists receiving 'little or no training since first joining the organisation.'¹⁸⁶ A 2013 report by the UK's accreditation body for journalism courses, the NCTJ, for example, found that one third of UK journalists said the volume and quantity of learning provision in their organisation was inadequate. The report concluded that mid-career training was needed in a range of areas including 'ethics', 'quality control and fact checking', 'managing workload skills', and 'audience relationship skills'. In an industry undergoing such rapid technological and structural change, training opportunities must be provided beyond the first few years of employment, both in terms of policy knowledge, and journalistic skills.

A number of journalists interviewed for this research also felt a sense of powerless in their ability to influence editorial decisions based on their understanding of the issues at hand, and their relationship to readers. There has rightfully been a focus by IPSO and IMPRESS in the UK, and Presserat in Germany on creating safe channels for whistleblowing by individual journalists in instances where they feel under pressure to breach editorial/ethical standards.¹⁸⁷ However, reporting unethical practice shouldn't be the only mechanism by which individual journalists can influence editorial decisions and practice. News organisations, with support from journalist unions, should, therefore, look to embed clear channels of communication to enable journalists to inform, and if necessary challenge, editorial decision making.

Values and Ethics: negotiating balance and objectivity, and embedding ethical practice

Our findings revealed how populist politics is challenging certain longstanding journalistic norms and values. In particular, negotiating the twin tenets of balance and objectivity has, for many journalists, become increasingly difficult in the context of highly polarised policy debates. Some of the journalists we spoke to felt that reporting in the public interest on issues like the AfD or Brexit required journalists to 'take a stand'. However, for public service broadcasters, in particular, bound by requirements on impartiality, 'taking a stand' can appear an unviable option.

There is a need to develop a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between balance and objectivity. Firstly, many of the journalists that we spoke to argued that balance and impartiality should be about reflecting a range of views, rather than simply two sides of an argument. In particular, journalists should look to shine a light on opinions and communities that have been traditionally overlooked or under-represented. This has been the approach taken by German national newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, which set up the SZ Democracy Lab, aiming to promote voices from Germany's geographical or social periphery.¹⁸⁸ Secondly, impartiality shouldn't just reflect representational balance, but also the balance of evidence. This is a position the BBC is moving towards, particularly around less contentious issues, such as human-induced climate change.

These challenges around objectivity and balance, reflect a broader need for greater transparency, education, and journalistic ownership over the ethics that guide news reporting. This goes beyond regulation and editorial codes of conduct, which are principally about preventing *bad* practice in a relatively narrow set of circumstances. Instead there's a need for guidance which looks to foster *good* practice and civically responsible journalism. In Germany, the work of the Federal Agency for Civic Education (*Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*) has helped to encourage somewhat of a collective understanding of civically responsible practice. In the UK, however, journalists were more likely to say that they fell back on their own moral codes when confronted with ethical dilemmas.

This reinforces the need for continuous professional development that includes ethics training. In the UK in particular, there is a role for regulators, in partnership with accreditation bodies, and journalism schools, to develop and promote guidance and training on ethical practice, both for early- and later-career journalists. It's crucial, however, that any major programme of work on media ethics isn't viewed as an attempt to 'educate' journalists from afar. Instead, this must be a deliberative process, an ongoing and transparent debate between journalists about ethical practice in contemporary society. This is crucial to ensure relevance and buy-in, as explained by Phil Harding, former controller of editorial policy at the BBC:

*'Good, effective and credible ethics training has to be journalistically led. It is important that ethics is seen as something that journalists should worry about and that they should "own" the issues.'*¹⁸⁹

Finally, and most significantly, in recognising the hugely transformative landscape in which journalism is currently operating, it is absolutely crucial that a more responsive internal appetite is fostered within news organisations for reviewing practices and standards in the context of changing political environments.

Journalists and Citizens: widening engagement and deepening the concept of the 'public interest'

The media's relationship to citizens is undergoing somewhat paradoxical changes. On the one hand, media organisations are losing their monopoly on information provision, and are engaging with the public in less top-down, more horizontal ways. However, public trust in many news organisations, and 'the media' as a whole, is low, and has fallen particularly steeply in the UK. Mainstream news outlets have been regularly attacked as being part of the political establishment, too deeply imbedded in Westminster or Berlin political bubbles. By their own admission, journalists we spoke to felt some degree of disconnection with certain sections of the public, and many journalists in both countries voiced their personal surprise at the popular appeal of the AfD and the Leave campaign.

Current forms of engagement are, therefore, not feeding through into renewed trust. Part of the problem lies in the relatively narrow and superficial modes of engagement employed by media organisations – chiefly, the sifting and selection of social media content, and the use of editorial analytics to evaluate and promote stories on the basis of frequency and duration of views. Moving towards more well-rounded analytical approaches, and avoiding the so-called 'single-metric fallacy' is an imperative for news organisations.¹⁹⁰ The BBC, for example, is developing its analytic capabilities to monitor its

reach among 'under-served groups', principally 16-34 year olds, BME, and working-class audiences.¹⁹¹ There's also a need to extend participation opportunities to those who aren't regular social media users. There's scope for media organisations to experiment with different forms of engagement, such as creating space on editorial boards for rotating 'citizen members', a practice utilised by several regional news outlets in the US.¹⁹²

While increasing public engagement with the media is clearly part of the solution, rebuilding trust requires deeper structural change in the industry. At a very fundamental level, advances in remote working technologies should mean that journalists are given more opportunities and encouragement to physically venture into a much broader range of communities – enabling them to develop more nuanced understandings of social dynamics and areas of institutional abstraction between media and social narratives.

There's also a pressing need to address the major diversity problem in German and British newsrooms. In the UK, a national study on social mobility found that 'journalism [had] shifted to a greater degree of social exclusivity than any other profession'.¹⁹³ And in our German case study, journalists spoke at length about the impact of a lack of diversity in German media organisations, affecting the framing of stories, the selection of relevant voices, and ultimately cementing the view of news outlets as establishment institutions. The German case study also revealed a need to address regional divides, with the majority of the large regional news outlets based in the West. There's a clear need, then, for more resources to be channelled into efforts to recruit journalists from diverse backgrounds. While there are diversity initiatives in both Germany (eg, Neue Deutsche Medienmacher) and the UK (eg, the Journalism Diversity Fund), clearly the size and scope of these programmes need to be significantly expanded.

In rebuilding trust, there's also space to develop a deeper sense of the public interest. Too often, acting 'in the public interest' has largely been a question about whether other considerations, such as those around privacy, can be superseded to uncover an issue of public concern. While this remains important, there's also a need to develop a more positive sense of the 'public interest', ie, what kinds of reporting and content can help tackle existing social issues and facilitate more positive public discourse.

One area of promise in this regard has been called 'constructive' or 'solutions-focused' journalism. This involves shifting the emphasis of journalism from a narrow focus on problems and controversy, to an examination of 'instances where people, institutions, and communities are working toward solutions'.¹⁹⁴ This isn't about focusing only on the positive, but is instead about equipping journalists with the tools and incentives to investigate and evaluate different solutions to entrenched social problems. In our interviews, a number of journalists said they felt powerless to criticise or challenge some of the simple policy 'solutions' put forward by populist politicians. Constructive approaches to journalism, therefore, provide journalists with a way of critically analysing these proposals and putting them into a wider context. A solutions focus can also act as a hub for public engagement, encouraging the public to input ideas for positive change.¹⁹⁵

While a wholesale shift to solutions-focused journalism may be some way off, a number of news organisations are beginning to introduce these approaches to their reporting mix. These include the *New York Times*' 'Fixes Column', the work of Ulrik Haagerup at the Danish Broadcaster DR, as well as emerging BBC interest in this area.¹⁹⁶ By adopting constructive approaches, journalists can, therefore, serve the public interest in a deeper sense. Firstly,

through a shift from a relentless focus on the dramatic negative events, journalists can give the public a more realistic and more hopeful view of the world. Secondly, journalists can actively contribute to the interrogation and evaluation of policies and ideas which have the capacity tackle social problems and improve lives.

Finally, while the onus is clearly on news organisations, and individual journalists, to reconnect with citizens and restore public trust, there's also a need to recognise that journalists can themselves be vulnerable, and are frequently targeted by abuse and even threats of violence. These dangers are perhaps exacerbated by changing practice, requiring journalists to have more individualised public personas on social media, and by a more adversarial political atmosphere. In our German case study in particular, the branding of journalists as 'Lügenpresse', and a rise in violent attacks on reporters covering far-right demonstrations, was a major concern for many of those involved in our research. News organisations must, therefore, put employee physical and mental well-being at the forefront of their employment practices, offering professional and practical support for journalists targeted by abuse.

Populism and Platforming: challenging the affinity between populist politics and the news media

Our interviews and roundtables confirmed the pull of populist politicians on mainstream news organisations. This was often driven by an implicit alignment of interests, with journalists discussing the performative qualities of populist leaders, the impact of populist controversies on readership and sales, and the compounding effect of their loyal and vocal grassroots supporter bases. From one perspective, this has been viewed as the media being 'played' or 'manipulated' by anti-establishment politicians, reflecting the media's attraction to 'the novel, the unusual, the unexpected, and the deviant'.¹⁹⁷ For others, the media has been an active participant, typified by the comment from CBS director that Donald Trump's campaign 'may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS'¹⁹⁸.

These different perspectives have consequences for how we think about the media response to populism. In the former case, if the media is being manipulated, then the onus is on all news organisations to think about how they can restore the balance of power fundamental to their democratic role. If instead, certain news organisations are consciously complicit in the promotion of populist figures and narratives, then it seems wishful to expect them to voluntarily introduce policies that may run counter to editorial and commercial interests. In this latter case, it could be concluded that responsibility lies with regulators and policy-makers to set the agenda. It is likely, however, that both the British and German systems are experiencing a combination of both of these phenomena, and therefore a singular response will be insufficient in comprehensively addressing the issues at stake. Moreover, particularly in the case of regulatory proposals, these could have drastic unintended consequences that would constrain the media's capacity, through its independence, to fulfil the very democratic function they are intended to protect.

Whether emerging from within news organisations, or legislated by regulators, 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 can receive. Firstly, this means being open and honest about the mission,

values, and priorities of each news organisation, with any overt partisanship made expressly clear to readers.

There's also an increasing need to be transparent about the metrics and analytics that drive editorial decisions on what to cover and the prominence given to each story. Academic Brent Mittelstadt, based at the Oxford Internet Institute, has, for example, argued that 'algorithm auditing' should be an ethical duty, although major challenges remain in making this information accessible and comprehensible to non-experts.¹⁹⁹

Finally, news organisations need to be conscious of, and open about, the level and tone of coverage given to respective political parties and politicians. There's scope for analytics to be deployed to help quantify coverage – particularly for publicly funded organisations – and editorial teams should regularly review these figures, as well as publishing them in annual reports. Crucially, news organisations, which often aim to make practices visible to the public in other sectors should recognise that, in the words of former Head of News at BBC Scotland 'disclosure is a two-way street'.²⁰⁰

Beyond transparency, the thinness and flexibility of populism as an ideology and a discourse means that there are no individual 'silver bullet' solutions to challenging its propagation through the media. Instead, responding effectively to populism requires a multi-pronged approach, which brings together key elements discussed above. Hence, by giving journalists the time, training and expertise to critically engage with substantive policy debates, by providing clear guidance around balance and wider ethical practice, and by taking a solutions-focused perspective on the public interest, the media industry will be in a better position to support a public discourse which builds trust, rather than sows division.

NOTES

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METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

To inform this research, Demos held roundtables and conducted long-form interviews with dozens) of journalists, producers and editors in Britain. Every major press title and broadcasters were represented, capturing both Leave- and Remain-supporting news organisations. To protect identities, and to create space

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for candid reflections, all interviewees have been completely anonymised within the research. Das Progressive Zentrum followed the same methodological approach for its research in Germany.

Demos worked with [Opinium Research](#) to conduct nationally representative polling online. The question regarding platforming of non-mainstream voices was conducted in 22-25 September 2017, through a survey of UK adults aged 18+ (n=2,001). The other questions were polled in a survey run on 26 January 2018, of UK adults aged 18+ (n=2,000). Results are weighted to be nationally representative where relevant.

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