

Mainstream and social media in Brexit campaign

Did the Mail and Sun help swing the UK towards Brexit?

Years of campaigning by UK newspapers have paid off – but debate rages over whether they reflect or influence public views

Jane Martison, *The Guardian*, Fri 24 Jun 2016



Was it the Sun wot won it?* In a text less than an hour after the victory for leave was declared, Sun editor Tony Gallagher** told the Guardian: “So much for the waning power of the print media.”

The Sun, which came out last week with a union jack-draped front cover urging its readers to “BeLeave in Britain” and at 6am on Friday published “See EU later”, did not rise against the EU alone. British newspapers were overwhelmingly in favour of Brexit, with the *Mail*, *Telegraph*, *Express* and *Star* accounting for four times as many readers and anti-EU stories as their pro-remain rivals. “If you believe in Britain, vote leave,” urged the *Mail* on Wednesday, lambasting the “lies” and “greedy elites” of a “broken, dying Europe” on its front page.

Such headlines were not just the hallmark of an increasingly bitter referendum campaign – with its relentless focus on anti-immigration stories – but came after years of anti-EU reporting in most of the British press.

In February, the *Mail* front page asked simply “Who will speak for England?”, highlighting the causes of independence and nationhood that have so helped the leave campaign. As the UK considers the far-reaching consequences of leaving the EU, it seems as good a moment as any to consider who has

now spoken for England – the people alone or a Eurosceptic press that has campaigned against Brussels for decades.

In recent weeks, as the polls got closer, the desire to highlight what newspapers considered the worst excesses of the EU’s freedom of movement laws led to some horrible errors. The *Mail* was forced to run a correction to a front page story that claimed that a group of migrants were from Europe when video footage showed members of the group, which included three children, say they are from Iraq and Kuwait. Other papers, including the *Sun*, reported the same story.

Like most pro-leave politicians, the editors of these newspapers say they have simply reflected the fears of the British electorate, fears that were largely ignored by the “establishment” made up of politicians and other papers such as the *Guardian* and the *Financial Times*.

This argument - that the “liberal elite” professed expertise but were out of touch with real people – was made not just by newspaper editorials but by Ukip leader Nigel Farage. As another tabloid editor said: “If you’d listened to Twitter or Facebook there would have been a massive vote for In.”

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**** "It's The Sun Wot Won It"** was the headline that appeared on the front page of United Kingdom newspaper The Sun on 11 April 1992. It is regularly cited in debates on the influence of the press over

politicians and election results and has since become a British political catchphrase.



*** **The Leveson Inquiry** was a judicial public inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the British press following the News International phone hacking

scandal, chaired by Lord Justice Leveson, who was appointed in July 2011.

A series of public hearings were held throughout 2011 and 2012. The Inquiry published **the Leveson Report in November 2012**, which reviewed the general culture and ethics of the British media, and made recommendations for a new, independent, body to replace the existing Press Complaints Commission, which would have to be recognised by the state through new laws.

Prime Minister David Cameron, under whose direction the inquiry had been established, said that he welcomed many of the findings, but declined to enact the requisite legislation. Part 2 of the inquiry was to be delayed until after criminal prosecutions regarding events at the News of the World, but the Conservative Party's 2017 manifesto stated that the second part of the inquiry would be dropped entirely, and this was confirmed by Culture Secretary Matt Hancock in a statement to the House of Commons on 1 March 2018.

UK Media: Who Owns Who?

An explainer from *A News Education*, Lily Meckel, Oct 29, 2021

A News Education is a non-profit organisation on a mission to engage young people with media literacy. In a climate of fake news, biased reporting and sanitised history lessons, we want to provide young people with the tools they need to read and (actually) understand the news.

Media ownership is increasingly becoming concentrated in the hands of few, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. A [report](#) by the Media Reform Coalition found that in 2021 90% of national newspapers in the UK were owned by only three companies.

So, what does media ownership in the UK look like? What impact does this have on media pluralism and public opinion? Here's a summary of who owns who, and what this means for the British media landscape.

What is media pluralism and why does it matter?

Media pluralism is a central principle to the functioning of a democracy. It means having multiple voices and opinions represented by different outlets. How does this relate to media ownership you might ask? Well, the more concentrated ownership is, in other words, the more outlets are owned by fewer companies, the less diversity there is in what messages are being spread and which voices are being heard. Given that the ownership of the UK's media has become more concentrated, it poses a threat to the diversity of opinions that are represented and has the potential to create monopolies that can single-handedly sway public opinion. According to the EU's [Media Pluralism Monitor](#), the risk of news media concentration in the UK is very high at 70%, a trend also seen in other parts of Europe, such as Spain, Finland, and some parts of Eastern Europe.

So, who owns who?

Whilst there are still plenty of public broadcasters, which are meant to serve the public rather than commercial interests, including BBC, Channel 4, and more, a lot of media outlets are being privatised, often bought by large media conglomerates. In the last year, many corporations have taken over smaller media outlets, with no intervention from the relevant authorities. Here is an overview of the media landscape in the UK today:

National Newspapers

DMG Media: DMG Media, a subsidiary of the multinational company Daily Mail and General Trust (DMGT), owns the Daily Mail, Metro, The Mail on Sunday and i News as well as their respective websites, accounting for 38.26% of weekly newspaper circulation, the most of any company.

News UK: News UK comes second in its share of weekly newspaper circulation with 32.16%. The Sun, The Times, and The Sunday Times are amongst their publications. News UK belongs to News Corp, which used to be part of Rupert Murdoch's media empire News Corporation. This company has ventured into radio stations, and television channels as well.

Reach: Coming third with 19.42%, Reach owns the Daily and Sunday Mirror, the Sunday People, the Daily and Sunday Express and the Daily and Sunday Star newspapers, amongst others.

Local Newspapers

Newsquest: Newsquest owns 23.2%, which is around one-fifth of local newspapers in the UK, thereby leading the top three companies.

Reach Plc: Reach doesn't only own national newspapers, it owns 20.7% of local newspapers, so also around a fifth of the market.

JPI Media: Coming third in the highest share of local titles, JPI Media has an 18.0% share, again one-fifth of the market. These top three dominate the market, accounting for a total of 61.9% of local news across the UK.

Besides these three companies, three others, Tindle Newspapers, Archant and Cliffe media have a share of around 7% of the local newspaper market, and the remaining 50 publishers together own less than one fifth, 16.3% to be exact, showing the stark contrast in ownership.

Effects of concentrated media ownership in the UK

The increasingly concentrated newspaper ownership has greatly influenced UK politics and public opinion. The monopolisation of the local newspaper industry has decreased the prevalence of 'public interest journalism', meaning the news is not as informative to the community as it used to be, which includes coverage of local elections.

Additionally, the digitalisation of information has made it harder for smaller publishers to stay in business, forcing them to shut down or be bought out. All these issues have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Concentrated ownership has also impacted the UK's political trajectory. Rupert Murdoch, the media mogul who owns News UK, including the most widely circulated newspaper *The Sun*, was accused of meddling in UK politics* by consistently supporting Brexit before the referendum in the biggest publications he owns. This is an example of how fewer owners can influence opinions and outcomes.

Whilst there are entities responsible for regulation, such as Ofcom, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), and the Independent Monitor on the Press (IMPRESS), there needs to be stronger and more frequent regulation of media concentration. Ensuring BBC and other public broadcasting outlets receive enough funding to compete with privatised media and setting limits to ownership shares need to be considered for a balanced media landscape. What is sure, is that action needs to be taken to limit media concentration for the preservation of a healthy and pluralistic democracy.

*Much more to come on the Murdoch Empire

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/03/magazine/ruPERT-murdoch-fox-news-trump.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/03/magazine/murdoch-family-investigation.html>

Quick Guide - How the Cambridge Analytica story unfolded

> In December 2016, while researching the US presidential election, Carole Cadwalladr came across data analytics company Cambridge Analytica, whose secretive manner and chequered track record belied its bland, academic-sounding name.

Her initial investigations uncovered the role of US billionaire Robert Mercer in the US election campaign: his strategic “war” on mainstream media and his political campaign funding, some apparently linked to Brexit.

> She found the first indications that Cambridge Analytica might have used data processing methods that breached the Data Protection Act. That article prompted Britain’s Electoral Commission and the Information Commissioner’s Office to launch investigations whose remits include Cambridge Analytica’s use of data and its possible links to the EU referendum. These investigations are continuing, as is a wider ICO inquiry into the use of data in politics.

> While chasing the details and ramifications of complex manipulation of both data and funding law, Cadwalladr came under increasing attacks, both online and professionally, from key players.

The Leave.EU campaign tweeted a doctored video that showed her being violently assaulted, and the Russian embassy wrote to the Observer to complain that her reporting was a “textbook example of bad journalism”.

> But the growing profile of her reports also gave whistleblowers confidence that they could trust her to not only understand their stories, but retell them clearly for a wide audience.

Her network of sources and contacts grew to include not only former employees who regretted their work but academics, lawyers and others concerned about the impact on democracy of tactics employed by Cambridge Analytica and associates.

Cambridge Analytica is now the subject of special prosecutor Robert Mueller’s probing of the company’s role in Donald Trump’s presidential election campaign. Investigations in the UK remain live.

Explainer The Cambridge Analytica files: the story so far

What is the company accused of, how is Facebook involved and what is the Brexit link?

Patrick Greenfield, *The Guardian*, Mon 26 Mar 2018

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/26/the-cambridge-analytica-files-the-story-so-far>

What are the allegations against Cambridge Analytica?

The data analytics firm used personal information harvested from more than 50 million Facebook profiles without permission to build a system that could target US voters with personalised political advertisements based on their psychological profile, according to Christopher Wylie, a former Cambridge Analytica contractor who helped build the algorithm. Employees of Cambridge Analytica, including the suspended CEO Alexander Nix, were also filmed boasting of using manufactured sex scandals, fake news and dirty tricks to swing elections around the world. The social media company has received a number of warnings about its data security policies in recent years and had known about the Cambridge Analytica data breach since 2015, but only suspended the firm and the Cambridge university researcher who harvested user data from Facebook earlier this month. A former Facebook manager has warned that hundreds of millions of users are likely to have had their private information used by private companies in the same way. On Sunday, Facebook ran adverts in several major UK and US newspapers apologising for the data breach, and said it was investigating other applications that had access to large amounts of user data.

What has been the reaction to the scandal?

Investigators from Britain’s data watchdog raided Cambridge Analytica’s London offices over Friday night, and the main consumer protection body in the US is reported to have opened an investigation into whether Facebook has violated privacy agreements. Billions of dollars have been wiped off Facebook’s stock market valuation this week as a growing #DeleteFacebook movement and regulatory fears have spooked investors.

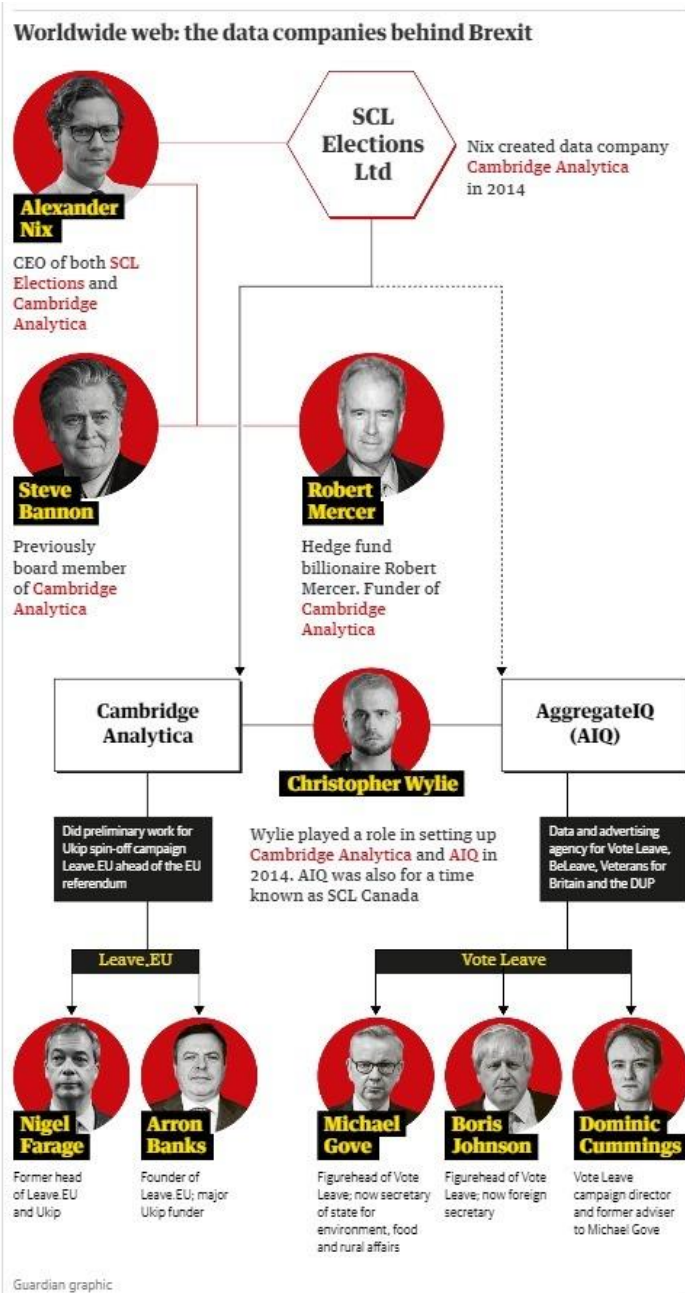
What is the Brexit link?

During the Brexit referendum, a digital services firm linked to Cambridge Analytica received a £625,000 payment from a pro-Brexit campaign organisation which had been given the money by Vote Leave, potentially violating

referendum spending rules. Shahmir Sanni, a pro-Brexit whistleblower, told the Observer newspaper that he had passed evidence supporting his claims to the police and the Electoral Commission. Separately, around £3.4m was spent by different Brexit Leave campaigns with Canadian data firm AggregateIQ during the run up to the EU referendum, including £2.7m by the official Vote Leave campaign (40% of their total budget). Christopher Wylie says he played a role in setting up AIQ in 2013, around same time he worked for Cambridge Analytica. AIQ have say they have never entered into a contract with Cambridge Analytica and had no communications with them during the referendum campaign.

Why is the Electoral Commission involved?

British electoral law forbids co-ordination between different campaign groups, which must all comply with strict spending limits. If they plan tactics or co-ordinate together, the organisations must share a cap on spending. Sanni has alleged that key figures in the Vote Leave campaign may have violated referendum spending rules and then attempted to destroy evidence. According to him, the £625,000 donation Vote Leave made to a pro-Brexit youth campaign group, who then spent the money on digital campaigning services with a Cambridge Analytica-linked firm, was not a genuine donation. Sanni also alleges that when the commission opened an investigation into Vote Leave last March, key Vote Leave figures tried to hide the possible co-ordination by removing themselves from the Google drive both campaign groups shared.



Poor coverage of Britain's withdrawal from the European Union risks creating a democratic deficit and storing up resentment for the future.

By Helen Lewis, ***The Atlantic***, OCTOBER 24, 2019

Three words encapsulate the British media's collective failure to report on the country's withdrawal from the European Union: *Get Brexit done*.

It was the official slogan of this year's Conservative Party conference, that odd gathering of lobbyists, politicians, and party faithful that takes place every autumn. And unlike any other party-conference slogan I can remember, it resonated. In the past few weeks, several otherwise normal-seeming people have said it to me, unprompted: *Me thing is, we just need to get Brexit done*.

Here's the problem: The slogan is meaningless. As my colleague Tom McTague has pointed out, Brexit is forever. If and when a deal setting out the terms of Britain's departure from the EU is passed by Parliament, the argument simply moves on to their future relationship. That will involve interminable discussions. After all, which is trickier—agreeing to divorce, or splitting up shared assets and arranging custody of the children? Additionally, whenever post-Brexit Britain makes trade deals on its own, it will face pressure to change its laws and regulations to accommodate the demands of its trading partners. That might include lowering product standards, such as accepting the U.S.'s infamous chlorinated chicken, or offering preferential treatment on visas to countries such as India.

So why has "Get Brexit done" gained such traction? Because of an unspoken pact between politicians and the media over the framing of the process. It has been presented as a tense drama that will lead to a satisfying end-of-season finale—a series of "knife-edge votes" that will eventually deliver a deal, at which point Britain can revert to its pre-2016 reality of ceasing to care much about the existence of the EU. That approach turns everything into a high-stakes drama, which makes sense on a daily basis for hard-pressed editors—Brexit is undeniably complex, its details can be boring, and journalists are also covering an array of other important stories. But when the volume stays turned up to 11, month after month, most viewers feel the urge to change the channel. There are also partisan reasons for the persistence of

this "crunch vote" framing. The biggest and loudest voices among Britain's still-powerful printed press supported Brexit. For these newspapers—the *Daily Mail*, *Me Sunday Times*, and *Me Daily Telegraph* among them—as well as their readers and Brexiteers generally, the intractable nature of the negotiations has increased their fears that Brexit could slip away, that Britain could become stuck in an endless transition, or that a second referendum could overturn the 2016 result. Creating momentum toward the exit is an effective counterpoint to these tendencies.

In the House of Commons on Tuesday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's new Brexit deal passed the second of the three readings needed to enshrine it in law. Immediately afterward, however, a majority of lawmakers voted against the government's rushed timetable for all further scrutiny of its details.

Johnson has now asked the EU for an extension beyond October 31, when the U.K. was due to leave. As has now become common in British journalism, an anonymous "Number 10 source" quote was issued to journalists, fulminating against this turn of events. "Today Parliament blew its last chance," it read. "This Parliament is totally broken."

Except Parliament has not blown its last chance. The legislation is merely paused, despite empty government threats to scrap it entirely. ("Boris Johnson to Pull Brexit Bill If Timetable Not Approved," read the headline on the BBC's credulous story.) It is entirely possible that the deal could be approved, when Parliament feels it has had enough time to review the details. The government had offered it only three days to unpick the implications of a 115-page bill.

This is democracy functioning as it should: ensuring that big decisions are taken only after due consideration. Yet the implication of several recent newspaper front pages has been not only that Parliament must make the "right" decision—but that it must be made *right now*, because any delay is antidemocratic. In this climate, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that the October 31 deadline was always

arbitrary. (The EU is undoubtedly tired of Britain's long uncoupling, but it still appears to prefer extensions to a No Deal scenario.) Meeting the October deadline was a political choice. So was triggering the Article 50 process, which brought with it a two-year countdown to Britain's exit, in March 2017.

The idea of a ticking clock has proved an extremely powerful weapon for advocates of Brexit. It has shaped the conversation even among broadcasters, which have a legal duty to be impartial. At a special Saturday sitting, Parliament voted to give itself a greater ability to block No Deal, at which point the government chose not to contest its main motion, which sought general approval for Johnson's Brexit agreement. Sky News then sent a news alert reading: "Did your MP scupper Brexit deal vote [sic]?" It was a leading question, playing into the narrative that *any* delay to Brexit is equivalent to sabotage. The "Brexit deal vote" returned to Parliament three days later. (Sky's online headline, which was the same as the news alert, was later changed because it "fell short of Sky News' editorial standards.")

That is not an isolated example. This weekend saw a perfect execution of the Number 10 strategy to encourage the media to adopt its framing of Brexit. Having failed to pass his deal, Johnson was legally obliged by an earlier piece of legislation to send a letter to the EU requesting more time before Britain's exit. He had long claimed he would rather be "dead in a ditch" than do this. And yet, by law, he had to do it. So late on Saturday night, Number 10 "sources" told leading broadcasters and Sunday-newspaper journalists that Johnson had in fact sent *three* letters, one of which restated his desire to leave on October 31, and had not signed the letter he was legally obliged to send—as if that affected its validity. In one final flourish, at least two journalists were briefed that Johnson was willing to go to court over his actions. Of course, this legal showdown—with a martyred prime minister facing those who would dare to obstruct "the will of the people"—never happened, for the simple reason that the lack of signature was irrelevant; with or without it, the letter was an official communication. Johnson's actions therefore complied perfectly with what he was legally required to do. The president of the European Council, Donald Tusk, confirmed that fact when he soberly tweeted: "The extension request has just arrived. I will now start consulting EU leaders on how to react."

Still, the strategy worked, as far as British media management went: *Me Sunday Telegraph's* front-page headline was "Johnson Refuses to Sign Brexit Delay Letter." *Me Sunday Times* went with "Boris Fights 'Brexit Wreckers' With Three Defiant Letters to the EU." From their tone, you would think that Johnson had tattooed *SCRZWO, BRUSZLS* on a bulldog and thrown it out of a Spitfire over the European Parliament.

The past week has also seen another common bias: a preference for "horse-race journalism"—who's ahead, who's behind, what are the odds of each possible outcome—over interrogations of policy. The BBC produces an enormous amount of political coverage, including podcasts, online articles, radio packages, and nerdy television programs such as *Newsnight* and *Politics Live*. (Often take part in these programs.) But its flagship offerings are its evening news bulletins, "the Six" and "the Ten." Watching the Six on Friday, two days after Johnson's new deal was revealed, I was struck by how much attention was paid to whether it would pass the Commons, with slick graphics about likely rebels, and how little attention was paid to its contents. The whole section totting up the parliamentary numbers was, to be blunt, a complete waste of time—the vote was effectively abandoned. As a publicly funded broadcaster, the BBC is undoubtedly nervous: For years it has been the focus of right-wing attacks about the license fee—the annual payment from households that funds it—and more recently, it has also come under pressure from the left for its alleged bias against the Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn. By making judgments about Brexit, it risks angering one side or the other. Already under attack from both the right and the left, and perpetually worried about its long-term funding arrangements, asking "What happens next?" or "Will this vote pass?" is a lot less fraught for the BBC than analyzing whether the assertions made by politicians are true. It looks like neutrality, when it is really favoring the side making large, unsubstantiated claims.

But by providing so little context to the vote, the bulletin failed to make sense of the numbers in that slick graphic. Johnson's deal lost the support of the Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland because it puts a customs and regulatory border in the Irish Sea (whatever the government might claim). It could never have attracted the support of Labour, the

main opposition party, because reassurances that workers' rights will not be eroded by Brexit are now not in the (legally binding) withdrawal agreement, but in the (debatable) political declaration. Without the substance, the horse race doesn't make sense.

The fake countdown, the straightforward pro-government partisanship of some papers, the horse race—all these failures of coverage risk creating a real democratic deficit, and storing up resentment for the future, even among those who voted to leave the EU. The veteran pro-European lawmaker Ken Clarke once compared Brexit to the Iraq War, suggesting that if it worked out badly, then voters would forget they had supported it at the time. There are other parallels: That war was mounted in a needless hurry, which left little time for scrutiny either of the evidence for invasion or the plan for its prosecution. Then, as now, the role of a “patriot” was to accept the government's line; anyone who questioned it risked being branded a “traitor.”

In the case of Johnson's new deal, there is as little evidence that it will improve Britain's prospects as there was that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. The government has repeatedly refused to publish a new economic-impact assessment, even though Johnson has brought back a much “harder” deal than his predecessor, one that suggests Britain and Europe will have a more distant (and more competitive) relationship in the future. His chancellor, Sajid Javid, has insisted that there is no need to conduct a new analysis, and under the government's hasty timetable, there was also no time. The government's previous assessment suggested that using a basic free-trade agreement as the basis for EU withdrawal would shrink the economy 4.9 to 6.7 percent over the long term.

If that happens, and jobs are lost and Britain becomes poorer, there will be little sympathy for the idea that Britain simply had to “Get Brexit done.” Instead the question might well be: Why didn't politicians, and the journalists who cover them, also care about getting Brexit *right*?