

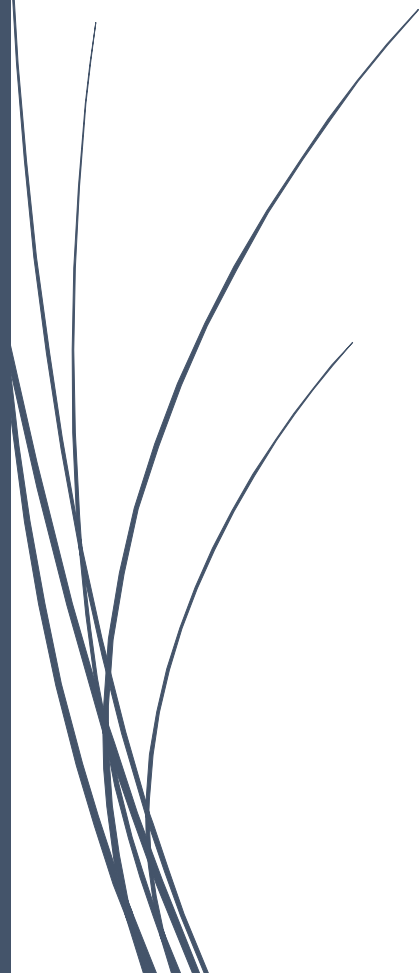
Partisanship in the Brexit News Media – A Content Analysis of Newspapers of Record in Britain, Ireland and Northern Ireland

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Declaration

I, Patrick Reid, declare that this research is my own original work and that it has never been presented to any institution or university for the award of degree or diploma. In addition, I have referenced all literature correctly and used only reputable sources.

Signed: *Patrick Reid*

Date: *20 July 2020*

Abstract

The representation of Brexit in the news media has been a point of debate since the referendum announcement by then UK Prime Minister David Cameron in February 2016. Formal studies by academics, academic institutions and news organisations, in addition to anecdotal reports, have scrutinised coverage and dissected news and opinion across the UK and beyond.

This study explores Brexit-orientated articles from *The Irish Times*, *The Times* (UK edition) and *The Belfast Telegraph* in the week leading up to the Brexit referendum, providing a comprehensive insight into Brexit coverage in three newspapers of record in key jurisdictions across the UK and Ireland.

This study organises predominantly quantitative data to collate and categorise a large body of articles from across the five days prior to the referendum and to a lesser extent, adopts a lighter qualitative approach to examine the data more closely.

The study attempts to ascertain whether the newspapers' overarching preference tilts toward Remain or Leave and whether examining articles in three different segments – political, financial and human-interest – reveal partisanship. It also examines the prevalence of key quoted individuals and the quantity and coverage afforded to each side.

The study finds that empirically, all three newspapers appear to favour a Remain result to varying degrees, but that coverage of each side, individuals and their respective campaign messages is mixed, with a slight tilt toward Leave.

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1. Introduction

This study will map and discuss the level and sentiment of Brexit coverage in a section of the print media in the days just prior to Brexit and the day after (June 20 - 24, 2016). Three widely read newspapers have been sampled for the study – *The Irish Times*, *The Belfast Telegraph* and *The Times* (UK edition).

It aims to quantify the level of coverage through cumulative quantitative data research, under the primary question: Is there a quantifiable level of partisanship in 2016 Brexit referendum coverage when comparing British, Irish and Northern Irish newspapers of record? It also poses a number of sub-questions, outlined in the next section.

Through this research, the study will demonstrate that the print media outlets of record in Britain, Ireland and Northern Ireland approached the topic from unique viewpoints, reflecting their readership and editorial position through their unique representations of similar events. This study is intended to be used for academic and statistical purposes by future students and other interested parties.

This study will note prior comment and opinion on similar topics from studies already undertaken, from academic journals and from literary sources. It will compare and contrast its findings against similar work conducted by other Brexit researchers in its conclusion.

1.1 Reason for Study

This study is intended to serve as a reference point for a) future studies into Brexit reporting bias, b) content analyses relating to *The Irish Times*, *Belfast Telegraph* and *The Times* and c) to contribute to the existing discussion pertaining to Brexit reporting.

1.2 Motivation for Study

The study was motivated primarily by the researcher's curiosity, piqued by three years (2016 to 2019) of reading about the Brexit process through various media, publications and writers.

While cultural and political biases are the norm in many media titles – “There is no doubt that media bias can be real; in all sorts of overt and subtle ways, media can prejudice one argument over another” (Ariyanto, Amarina, et al, 2007, p.266) – the researcher believed it was possible to quantify and examine biases across the different cultural and political leanings in Ireland and the UK and provide a comprehensive and detailed overview of the different sets of attitudes and beliefs held by some of the publications covering Brexit closest. In addition to being newspapers of record it was judged that these titles were most suitable for several reasons discussed in more detail in the Methodology section – and had similar news values (Galtung and Ruge, 1965), discussed in more detail in the Literature Review section.

1.3 Research Questions

This dissertation will answer one primary question and three sub-questions.

Primary - Is there a quantifiable level of partisanship in 2016 Brexit referendum coverage when comparing British, Irish and Northern Irish newspapers of record?

Secondary Q1 Is Brexit portrayed as an opportunity, risk or neutral for Britain?

Secondary Q2 Is there a bias in opinion-based and/or human-interest reporting in each title?

Secondary Q3 Which side received more exposure in the three titles studied?

1.4 Research Question Validation

Primary – Partisanship in Brexit reporting has received much attention since the referendum took place. Multiple studies, industry reports and academic readings have been produced, though none – to the best of the researcher’s knowledge – have compared the content in the three established newspapers of record across Ireland, Northern Ireland and Great Britain. Throughout the UK, academic institutions sought to comprehend how the

Brexit result could pan out the way it did, and how predictions could be so wide of the mark (Salter, 2018, p. 468).

The results and analysis section of this dissertation will determine whether biases exist in each paper, analyse how the findings compare to research and comment already published where possible.

Secondary Q1 – As discussed in the Literature Review and Results and Analysis sections, the impact of Brexit on the United Kingdom – on its economy in particular – has been subject of much debate. This dissertation will quantify the reporting in *The Irish Times*, *The Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph* relevant to risk outlook and compare it to other readings and research.

Secondary Q2 – The content contained in human-interest and opinion pieces can act as a mirror on a publication's political stance. This sub-question will allow us to closer scrutinise the results of the main question more closely by examining the columns over which editors and contributors have most control.

Secondary Q3 – This question will provide empirical evidence to analyse which campaign – Leave or Remain – received most media attention in the newspapers studied and on a more granular level, which individual politicians received most coverage in which publication.

It was decided to wait until after the Brexit process had been formally completed in order to begin the study, in order to be able to process and analyse the data with a full degree of hindsight and to have the opportunity to comment on results with the clarity and certainty afforded by a finalised process. The reasons for selecting the method of media studied and the specific titles chosen are discussed in greater detail in the Methodology section.

1.5 Scope of Study

The study was completed over a total of 22 weeks from the beginning of February 2020 to the end of July 2020. The study began one week after 'Brexit Day' – January 31, the day the UK officially left the European Union.

The presentation, which will accompany this study (presented on August 31, 2020) will discuss each of the chapters in seriatim, in the following order –

- Introduction
- Literature Review
- Methodology
- Results – Quantitative & Empirical
- Results – Qualitative Observations
- Conclusion

2. Literature Review

This literature review will examine several avenues of thought pertaining to the related dissertation proposal by a) providing an overview of the subject matter, its background and recent academic discourse, and by b) examining related audience theory.

The aim of this dissertation is to firstly examine the quantity and label the coverage dedicated to the Brexit coverage in *The Irish Times*, *The Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph* in the lead up to and one day after the Brexit referendum, and secondarily to examine the sentiment of that coverage. Such research is being undertaken as there is a gap for an academic study, surprising given the prevalence of media coverage devoted to the topic in recent months. Similar studies to this may be undertaken in the coming years.

In order to research the environment in which the referendum took place, to provide context, it will be necessary to examine readings pertaining to Brexit sentiment at key points during the UK's time in the EU and the sentiment of media and the electorate during those times. This will be discussed in the first two sections 'UK-EU relationship prior to Brexit' and 'Nationalism/Patriotism in the UK media'. The review will then discuss readings pertaining to audience theory that is applicable to the topic.

Before discussing the topics at hand, it is important to note the need for objectivity and the removal of a researcher's internal bias from a study – 'Researchers have opinions about the problems in their field and often have pet viewpoints to which they are committed' (Machi, McEvoy, 2016, p. 21).

It is worth noting that while compiling this literature review, sources referencing demonstrable empirical evidence were viewed as more suitable for inclusion than opinion or those without.

2.1 Fractious UK-EU relationship prior to Brexit

Since its accession in 1973, the United Kingdom's relationship with the EU has been turbulent. The UK first attempted to join the common market in 1963. Its entry was vetoed by French President Charles De Gaulle, who expressed scepticism about the UK's ability to integrate with continental powers. France was the only country which had opposed the UK joining the European Economic Community (EEC), the precursor to the European Union (EU). "The Present Common Market is incompatible with the economy, and as it now stands of Britain" (Charles De Gaulle, 1967).

The UK's application for accession was accepted on its third attempt in 1973. The Conservative Party, under the leadership of Edward Heath, was in power at the time. Two years later, a new government under the stewardship of Labour's Harold Wilson held a referendum on whether to continue membership. In the 1975 UK referendum 67.2% of voters voted to remain in the EU; this compares to the 48.1% who voted to remain in 2016.

Andrew Glencross, a lecturer at Stirling University and author of *The Politics of European Integration* (2014) argues that there are many similarities between the campaigns in 1975 and 2016 and that a testy media landscape is among the factors that, writing in 2015, could appear cumbersome for the Remain side. 'A pro-EU campaign today is likely to face significant obstacles: a lack of headline-grabbing renegotiation goals, a querulous media environment and populist opposition from Eurosceptic Conservatives as well as UKIP' (Glencross, 2015, p.27).

In his book *Why the UK Voted for Brexit: David Cameron's Greatest Miscalculation*, Glencross points out that in 1975, every UK newspaper – aside from *The Morning Star* (a Communist publication) was in favour of EU accession (Glencross, 2016, p.18). The landscape was more polarised in 2016. Glencross suggests that the northern English and

Welsh vote to leave could be explained by socio-economic reasons, with the poorer regions voting to leave – and more affluent areas such as London choosing to remain. The author points out that the vote in Northern Ireland was split.

It isn't just in recent years that the UK-EU relationship has become strained: numerous studies have been conducted and have found that the relationship has been 'reluctant' and 'awkward' (George, 1998).

On its way out of the EU, the UK is being met with tough talk, much as before it entered. EU Parliament President Donald Tusk told reporters on June 26, 2016 (European Council, 2017) that – 'Leaders made it clear that access to the single market requires acceptance of all four freedoms, including the freedom of movement. There will be no single market à la carte.'

From the perspective of the US – who view Northern Irish peace as paramount – Brexit risks the UK becoming an 'awkward inbetween' in transatlantic relations (Oliver, Williams, 2016).

2.2 Nationalism/Patriotism in UK Media

A rise in populist nationalism has been noted in both the US and UK, with media crediting the election of Donald Trump as president and vote for Brexit as totems encouraging right-leaning groupings, though this cannot be confirmed without further study.

A groundswell in nationalism/patriotism in the UK may have been a factor in what led to the build-up of Leave momentum in the final days of campaigning in the UK. The tabloid press in particular, and their portrayal of the EU, coloured voters' opinions (Startin, 2016, p.316). Startin argues that since as far back as 1973, the British media have in a variety of ways facilitated first 'permissive consciousness' and later 'dismissive dissent' among the electorate.

In his paper, Startin examines the UK press portrayal of the EU, titled 'UK press portrayals of the EU: the lop-sided playing field in the EU'. In his notes (p.321), the author points out that that he omitted any Northern Irish publication from his study – mentioning *The Belfast Telegraph* by name – in addition to Welsh and Scottish titles.

In 'Better off Without You? How the British Media Portrayed EU Citizens in Brexit News', the author points out that in a supranational grouping like the EU, the media acts as a valuable resource for finding out information about fellow EU citizens (Walter, 2019, p.1).

Her research found that foreign EU nationals are less likely to be mentioned in Northern Irish or Scottish media than English or Welsh media (p.221). She also found that EU nationals are more likely to be mentioned in an English or Welsh – Leave voting countries – news story if the content was negative. Walter theorises that the strong nationalist tones of the Leave campaign and in some media coverage may have led to an 'us versus them' mentality among voters (p.225). UK voters display a 'relatively low' knowledge of EU affairs, and are consistently ranked below fellow member states (Menon and Fowler, 2016, p.5).

While media have been used to promote a culture of division and polarisation – particularly the local media, which Walter was studying – other news providers and platforms have enabled the sharing of inclusionary news and opinions too, and have been utilised in recent times to hold politicians to account. The inadequacy of Westminster's political class became 'glaringly evident' due to the utilisation of 24/7 news and social media reporting events, a report by the London School of Economics suggested (Burleigh, 2019, p. 14).

Another author in the report notes that – 'There was a sudden realisation in English media and political heartlands that the Irish question (Irish unity) was re-entering British politics and could radically constrain the UK's options on Brexit' (Gillespie, 2019, p. 39). This statement was in reference to the emerging realisation that the UK looked more insular and parochial in contrast to a united and cosmopolitan Europe with which Ireland was aligning itself. British media realised through 2017 that the Northern Irish issue might limit their negotiating power with the EU (p.6).

2.3 Media Declarations of Support

Many UK newspapers declared their position on Brexit prior to the vote. *The Times* – the only mainland UK publication studied here – backed Remain. *The Sunday Times*, its sister publication printed on a Sunday, backed Leave. The other News Corp. owned publication in Britain, *The Sun*, also supported the Leave campaign. *The Mail* and its sister paper, *The Mail on Sunday*, experienced a similar split to *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, with *The Mail* declaring its support for Leave and the *Mail on Sunday* backing Remain.

According to *The Huffington Post*, newspapers supporting the Leave cause had an audience of approximately 4.8 million, while those backing Remain were read by just over 3 million (*Huffington Post*, 2016).

The volume of coverage political factions received during the campaign has been subject to study. Seventeen per cent of the politicians cited across UK newspapers in the lead up to the referendum were Labour party members, compared to 64% Conservative (Levy, Aslan, Bironzo, 2016, p.6).

UK News Coverage of the 2016 EU Referendum, written by David Deacon of Loughborough University's Centre for Research Communication and Culture asserts that a 'coverage gap' can be detected in British media's Brexit reporting (Deacon, 2016, p. 1). The author states that national press coverage was 'highly polarised' and that an 80:20 split in favour of Leave commentary can be observed. Social media (Hanska and Bauchowitz, 2017, p. 30) followed the same pattern.

Newspapers backing the Leave campaign appear to have appealed to their readers' patriotic sentiment, publishing headlines such as 'Cameron's Migration Deception' (*Daily Mail*, 2016), 'BeLeave in Britain' (*The Sun*, 2016) and 'We Must Get Out of the EU' (*Daily Express*, 2016). 'Why Remain is Best for Britain' (*The Times*, 2016), 'Vote Remain' (*Metro*, 2016), and 'Project Reunite' (*Daily Mirror*, 2016) are examples of Remain headlines from the same time. Remain campaign headlines appear less colourful and expressive, and less targeted than Leave, though further research on this subject is needed to confirm this.

British media outlets embraced the ‘high ground of Anglo-American imagery in their portrayal of a Leave scenario’ (Zelizer, 2018, p. 148).

2.4 News Values

As lightly touched upon in the Introduction, news values are the primary drivers behind what makes a news story relevant to a particular publication and its target audience. In the middle of the 20th century it was postulated (Galtung and Ruge, 1965) that several basic factors determine whether a story is newsworthy. Chief among them and relevant to this study include the proximity of the event, the persons involved – whether they are of note, how many were impacted – how negative the news was (the more negative the greater the chance of the story being published) and how much conflict is involved.

It must be remembered that while one element of Brexit, i.e., the impact of trade tariffs on farmers in border regions may not be of particular interest to *The Times* readers, it would be critical to any mainstream Northern Irish publication, i.e., *The Belfast Telegraph*, *Newsletter* or *The Irish News*. Similarly, a publication which has declared its allegiance to Leave may not deem a story about landmark European Court of Justice rulings as valuable to its reader base.

Unambiguity is one of Galtung and Ruge’s core news values. They argue that the more straight-forward a story is to digest, the more likely it is to be listened to. In this instance, Brexit appears to be an exception to the rule. Throughout the Brexit process claims, counter claims and confusion led to doubt and mistrust among the public and media in the UK. Among the most infamous instances of confusion in the Brexit campaign was a pledge plastered on the side of a pro-Leave bus that Brexit would save the UK National Health Service £350 million. ‘Brexit Won’t Save the NHS’ declared one paper (McKee, *The Guardian*, 2016), ‘The £350 million line on the Brexit bus was wrong. The real figure is much higher’ (Steerpike, *The Spectator*, 2018) asserted another publication. As per Galtung and Ruge’s theory Brexit events, particularly contested campaign processes, do not fit their model. ‘How UK Businesses Are Coping with Brexit Uncertainty (Euronews, 2020); ‘Brexit Uncertainty Drives Up Job Losses and Holds Back Economy (Partington, *The Guardian*, 2019)

and 'Brexit Uncertainty is Down - But Not Out' (Wallace, *The Telegraph*, 2020) typify Brexit uncertainty in a more general sense.

2.5 Related Audience Theory

2.5.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and gratifications theory researchers ask why media users seek out a particular type of content, assuming that the user will derive gratification as a result. While a healthy, vigilant and informed population is essential to a functioning democracy (Lee and Chyi, 2014, p.1), it is possible that misdirected media consumption in a society where media are framed and can be manipulated through bias, could be used to manipulate users.

Through the Brexit campaign – and indeed any two-sided polarising campaign – each side attempts to present its arguments favourably. News organisations often use content to encourage gratification, i.e., 'satisfaction, usefulness and enjoyment' (Chen, Chock, Gozigian, Rogers, Sen, Schweisberger, Steinhardt and Wang, 2011, p.25). Depending on a publication's usership, this is likely to draw users – voters in this instance – towards already formed opinions, furthering embedding their beliefs and leaving less room for critique or challenge.

These beliefs can be reinforced by persons in positions of influence – politicians and interest groups are often called upon to provide a measure of 'gratification' to their followers, reinforcing their beliefs. Findings on studies into emotions and politics challenge the traditional assumption that voters cast their ballots based on 'cold consideration of non-affectively charged information' (Glaser, Salvony, 1998).

Then Prime Minister David Cameron, followed by arch-leaver and future prime minister Boris Johnson, were the most quoted politicians in UK papers during the entire referendum campaign (Levy, Aslan, Bironzo, 2016, 2016, p. 28). Senior government figures including Chancellor George Osborne, Michael Gove, who held the positions of Justice Secretary and Chief Whip, were among the most quoted politicians, followed by leading Leave figures Nigel Farage, Priti Patel and Iain Duncan Smith. Opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn was the

eighth most quoted politician in UK papers in the lead up to the referendum. Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown was the most prominent pro-Remain politician quoted, in sixteenth position on the list. Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, also a prominent pro-Remain campaigner was placed nineteenth. The high volume of Leave campaigners quoted would seem to suggest that readers derived their gratification from the coverage and thus fuelled further coverage and the campaign as a whole.

2.5.2 Hypodermic Needle Model

Instances of the hypodermic needle theory are well documented in the British press, primarily tabloid publications. The hypodermic needle theory was developed by Harold Lasswell in the 1920s and describes the injection of information straight into users' consciousness. It is a linear, one-way method of communication with no opportunity for the recipient to respond directly.

During the Brexit referendum campaign several UK papers used hyperbolic, hypodermic needle-orientated headlines to get their one-way message across with no room for ambiguity, doubt or indeed, rebuttal. Referendum-related examples include 'Queen Backs Brexit' (*The Sun*, 2016, p. 1); 'BeLeave in Britain', (*The Sun*, 2016, p. 1) and 'The audacity! Bercow claims Leave-backing MPs are to blame for Brexit delay and not him' (*Daily Express*, 2019, online). The phenomenon is less pronounced in Ireland, though tends to be associated with the Irish variations of UK titles.

Remain proponents also used their influence to provide messages to their electorate which suit their agenda. *The Guardian* described leader of the Brexit Party Nigel Farage as 'TV's default resident troll'. The BBC – which as a state broadcaster is obligated to remain neutral – was criticised for interviewing a scientist who backed Leave (Zeiler, 2018, p. 148).

Two of the top three newspapers in the UK which ran Brexit headlines during the election – in order, *The Daily Telegraph*, the *Financial Times* and the *Daily Express*, declared as Leave publications (Levy, Aslan, Bironzo, 2016, 2016, p. 13).

2.5.3 Media framing

Media framing refers to the way in which media products or news are presented or ‘framed’ to the public. Through this communication model, media providers can present information in a way which reflects their perspective.

Although we’re aware that news framing exists, and that news media actively engage packaging their news products to be viewed and perceived through their unique viewpoint, there are gaps in research and theory pertaining to journalists’ contributions to actually framing the news. Framing theory is primarily researched after the information recipient has received and processed the content, as opposed to the process undertaken by the journalist to frame the content in the first instance.

‘Framing has grown into a thriving approach to analyse media content and effects. Research of frame building is less developed. Particularly journalists’ contributions to shaping the frames deserves further analysis’ (Bruggemann, p.1, 2014).

This viewpoint is also held by Claes H de Vreese, who in 2012 argued that one of the most pressing issues in media framing is the process through which journalists conceptualise their frames.

Bruggemann points out that journalism is a powerful tool, used to interpret the world. We have seen this tool in full effect in the Brexit campaign. As discussed throughout the literature cited in ‘Nationalism/Patriotism in the UK Media’ of this review, Brexit news stories released prior to the referendum polarised some elements of the electorate. Walter’s research into the treatment of EU nationals in UK media is a prime example of framing.

Some researchers argue that other factors have more influence over opinion than framing. Studies have shown that the influence of ideology and socio-economic status is more

important to media users than the frames they are presented with (Wettstein, 2012, p. 320). In a modern twist to the impact of popular opinion on media framing, Yuqiong Zhou and Patricia Moy argue that online discourse exerts a significant influence on media framing (Zhou and Moy, 2007). This suggests that framing is not a one-way process.

Analysis and opinion, as discussed in the sections about prior referenda coverage, are also an example of media framing. After the referendum, BBC political editor Laura Kuenssberg called Brexit the biggest challenge Britain has faced since the Second World War; similarly, former UK Brexit secretary David Davis called it the biggest challenge in a generation. Statements from influential persons can provide a frame for coverage and help order issues in the public's consciousness in terms of relevance and importance. This is also true of the order of stories as they appear on television news or their prominence on websites.

In contrast to the nationalistic, freedom-orientated slogans and campaigning by the Leave side in the lead up to the referendum, media outlets in mainland Europe have framed Britain's decision to exit the European Union entirely differently. German media have framed Britain's departure as a loss of the 'Cool Britannia' image cultivated in the 1990s (Adler-Nissen, Gaplin and Rosamond, 2017 p. 576). German media also alluded to the 'myth of British exceptionalism' as a driver for the Leave vote (p. 577).

Both Japanese and Indian leaders have expressed desire that the UK will remain as their countries' 'gateway to Europe' (p.581), providing an insight into how their countries view the UK and have framed their relationship. Turkey similarly has expressed concern that many promises and initiatives it had undertaken with the UK in the context of furthering EU-Turkish relations may not come to fruition given the importance of bi-lateral ties to its relationship with the wider continent.

Media framing also encompasses the types of bias found in the media. In 'Framing Bias: Media in the Distribution of Power' the author argues that strategic framing and agenda setting are at the heart of the political process (Entman, 2007, p. 165). A comprehensive overview (Levy, Aslan, Bironzo, 2016, p. 16) of the editorial positions held by each UK newspaper found that the *Daily Express* published the largest amount of pro-Leave articles, followed by *The Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Daily Star*. *The Daily*

Mirror, The Guardian, The Financial Times and *The Times* led the way with most pro-Remain articles. The study found that 'Although our findings showed that of the articles taking a position the majority were heavily skewed in favour of Brexit the media are not a homogenous block.'

Previous references to the same study in this literature review, combined with the research into the application of audience theories partly illustrate how print media coverage as a whole and its biases influenced the referendum campaigns and ultimately led to a Leave victory.

2.6 Conclusion

By discussing the above talking points it allows us to identify and evaluate the salient points in this study. To critically analyse empirical evidence it is vital to ask 'What does the data say?', 'What is the story?' and 'How do the facts fit together?' (Machi, McEvoy, 2006, p.96).

Touching upon the background of the UK-EU relationship, and the attitudes of peoples in the UK, and the trends and sentiment in their media throughout the last few decades, enable us to illustrate the environment of conflict the media were operating within.

Following on from this backdrop we can see how nationalism and patriotism in the UK media, the news values they operate and the apathetic approach of the Labour party led to the Leave result.

Applying audience theory to examine media and political behaviour paints a cohesive, coherent narrative of the Brexit process and the media landscape that existed throughout the campaign. Accepted and established theories like Uses and Gratifications, the Hypodermic Needle Theory and Media Framing can be observed in the practice during the campaign and provide insights into how campaigns – particularly the Leave campaign – were successful in conveying their message through the media and subsequently wooing voters. Media and politicians alike used messages conveyed through headlines, interviews and campaign coverage to provide and convey their message to voters effectively and to make voters, who may have been otherwise apathetic, take notice. Just 42.2% (Electoral Commission, 2011) of voters turned out to vote in the 2011 Alternative Vote referendum –

the first test of David Cameron's tenure as Prime Minister, having agreed to hold the vote as part of a coalition deal with Nick Clegg's Liberal Democrat party – compared to a 72.2% (Electoral Commission, 2016) turnout for the UK European Union membership referendum, which effectively marked the end of his time as Prime Minister.

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

A methodology shows how research questions are articulated – its effect is a claim about the significance of the study (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012, p. 25). This methodology section explains the practices and means through which the study was undertaken and discusses the rationale behind the use of these methods and their application. The decisions behind research methods used need to be fully interrogated in order to fully justify and explain their application (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012, p. 25).

The method of research used for this dissertation is primarily quantitative. Quantitative analysis can be defined as investigating phenomena which involve the collection and analysis of numerical data (Oxford Dictionary). Quantitative research searches for facts and can be organised as a series of ‘what?’ questions (Barnham, 2014, p.1). Qualitative, in contrast, can be defined as asking a series of ‘why?’ questions.

This study takes the form of a content analysis. Content analyses can add an extra layer of analysis to otherwise qualitative material, i.e., newspaper articles, and can be useful when researchers have large quantities of data to analyse (Fisher, 2004, p. 157).

Sources that are utilised in this study include Google Scholar and Sage Journals, *The Irish Times* online archive, *The Times* archive, *The Belfast Telegraph* Digital Edition, Lexis Nexis and The Irish Newspaper Archive. In order to ensure the research is complete and accurate it was necessary to purchase annual subscriptions to *The Irish Times* and *The Times*.

It was decided to utilise exclusively digital methods of research due to the efficiency of online libraries and resources and the practical restraints relating to taking on a large-scale study with more traditional methods, in this case paper-based research.

‘Online spaces are now central to, and have fundamentally transformed, the ways people around the world go about their daily business. Within these spaces, digital research is growing in importance because it facilitates the researcher’s access to primary data,’ (Gray, 2018, p. 530).

As the research involves a content analysis it was essential that quantitative research accounted for a large majority of the research. Four primary types of quantitative research exist – descriptive, correlational, quasi-experimental and experimental (study.com). This dissertation falls into the descriptive category, whereby an observational, comparative study takes place with no uncontrolled variables.

There are a great number of research methods available to researchers undertaking a Master's dissertation – one way of helping readers grasp the range of possibilities is to marry more open methods of research with more constructive types (Fisher, 2004, p. 132). Though strictly speaking, this study is utilising just one method of research, it intends to marry its descriptive elements with later correlational findings – the descriptive elements being the research itself and the correlational findings being the accompanying illustrative charts and graphs showcasing the links of the analysis.

3.2 Early Workings – Title Choices

It was initially intended to review *The Guardian* rather than *The Times* and the initial proposal was written to this effect. It was decided to study *The Times* rather than *The Guardian* for two reasons. The articles and resources in *The Times* of better quality (despite having to pay a subscription for the privilege), and it was felt that the centre right-leaning readership is more demographically comparable with that of *The Belfast Telegraph* and *The Irish Times* than *The Guardian* which it was felt would add a layer of consistency to the study.

The choice in Northern Ireland was limited – *News Letter*, *The Irish News* or *Belfast Telegraph*. After reviewing the readership figures and factoring the papers' political leanings, it was evident that *The Belfast Telegraph* was the most suitable choice for this study as it has the highest readership and effective monopoly on moderate-leaning readers in Northern Ireland. It is also known for quality journalism – though some less objective Republican-leaning minds may disagree.

In Ireland, *The Irish Times* was chosen for two reasons – firstly, *The Irish Times'* resources (akin to *The Times* in the UK) are superior to any of its competitors and while the *Irish*

Independent has a higher readership it and *The Belfast Telegraph* are both owned by the same parent company, Independent News and Media. It was felt reviewing both could bias the study towards one media entity. It's not possible to prove this without digging deeper – it would be an interesting subject for a future study, but it was felt the prospect of data contamination or bias was not worth the risk.

Tabloids were discounted entirely for this exercise as it was felt the emotive, hyperbolic language used in red-tops wasn't compatible with the more matter-of-fact, straight-forward broadsheet style in any of the chosen three titles. Additionally, tabloid articles are generally shorter than their broadsheet equivalents, meaning that the quotational element of the study (Q.4) may have been unfairly biased. (Fisher, 2004, p.102) states that 'In a conceptual framework, you put the concepts together as in a jigsaw puzzle. You work out how all of the concepts fit together and relate to one another'.

There was also a consideration regarding which time period to research and how long a period was sufficient. Content analysis studies must wrestle with the question of how much data to collect and how much time it should represent (Lacy, Riffe, Stoddard, Martin and Chang, 2001, p. 836). A time period of just a few days seemed appropriate given that it would be necessary to ask several questions and examine data through multiple methods to formulate answers.

3.3 Secondary Question Reasoning

Human interest and opinion pieces were chosen to be examined as after several hours of research – categorising *The Irish Times* articles – it was found that partisanship existed more in these areas rather than others categories, e.g., financial or political reporting. This will be touched upon later in the results section and can be viewed first-hand via the Google Sheets research link referenced in the results section. Initially, it was hoped to discover a trend in partisanship relating to the Northern Irish border question too, though there was not enough data to conduct a full study – not enough articles were published about the subject in the time period studied.

3.4 Comparative Content Analysis – Primary Question

The primary question asked in this dissertation is whether there is a quantifiable level of partisanship in Brexit coverage in the lead up to the 2016 Brexit referendum in three papers of record. It is intended to compare content from June 20 to June 24 – the day just after the Brexit referendum.

Quantitative studies should utilise tables with descriptive information to provide readers with a clear and straightforward understanding of the samples characteristics, before any inferences or results are introduced (Bell, DiStefano and Morgan, 2010, p.374).

Google Sheets was used to collate the data. The data is represented in a number of ways:

- By total volume. In addition to a chronological display the data will also be displayed by volume. These figures will provide an overall illustration of newspaper activity during this time.
- Chronologically from start date to end date in graph/bar chart form.
- A combination of volume and chronology

The publication of these results will be followed by accompanying discussion, narrative and conclusion.

3.5 Comparative Content Analysis – Secondary Questions

The secondary questions asked in this dissertation aim to expand on the primary question by providing a more detailed construction of the coverage.

- Is Brexit portrayed as an opportunity or risk for Britain?
- Is there a notable bias in opinion-based/human interest stories?
- Which side received more exposure in the three titles studied?

These questions are intended to provide supporting, alternative and layered data for analysis.

‘All researchers need to develop the capacity to see their topic with new and different lenses in order to look beyond and transform their own current knowledge. Topics present themselves in different ways and for all sorts of different reasons. What distinguishes research from everyday interest or curiosity, however, is the opening up of familiar things to alternative ways of seeing.’ Clough and Nutbrown, 2012, p. 53.

This data will be represented in the same manner as the primary question, with graphing and charts illustrating results. A combination of the data from the primary question and four secondary questions will provide a complete illustration of the publications’ leanings on Brexit and their sentiment toward the issue – whether it was important enough to be the focal point of the article, if Brexit is seen as an opportunity or risk and which side saw their representatives quoted most.

Utilising chronological charts and the question results it will be possible to plot x, y, axis graphs; this study will be able to illustrate multiple sources of data at once. Example: How prevalent are human interest articles in *The Irish Times* over the course of the examination period? Time would be represented on the x axis, with the number of articles to that effect on the y axis. This method provides specific illustrative data which can be discussed afterwards. This information will be presented both in this analysis and results section and online.

3.6 Consideration for Qualitative Research

As the study is geared toward data analysis and review, it was not initially envisioned that qualitative analysis would be necessary. Qualitative research is a type of research that aims to find out people’s opinions and feelings rather than information that can be easily shown in numbers (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019).

Consideration had been given to a keyword analysis, which would initially have been the only form of qualitative research in the study. This idea was discounted after research

begun due to the absence of now commonplace Brexit vocabulary, e.g., ‘backstop’, ‘Canada plus’, ‘withdrawal agreement’, ‘people’s vote’, ‘no deal’. None of these terms were used in any of the titles studied in the lead-up to the referendum.

Additionally, it is possible that as a relatively new type of research, a keyword analysis may have been viewed as not as valid as traditional methods. If the methods through which a research undertakes their work have no legitimacy, their work has no merit (Newman, Benz and Ridenour, 1998, p. 27).

Interviews and/or focus groups or case studies could not add to the research being undertaken, nor could they be properly represented or interpreted and compared with the results of the content analysis.

It was decided that to add depth to the existing statistical data, it would be prudent to examine between three and five talking points the data had thrown up. It was felt that discussing this material would add an extra layer of insight into the already exhaustive data analysis piece.

3.7 Possible Problems

Pushback had been received early on from *The Belfast Telegraph* regarding obtaining some of the information needed, though their customer service was very quick to respond and provided an alternative source – the Newspaper Library at Belfast Central Library. From research conducted into the library it was envisioned that physical travel to Belfast may be needed to conduct the research. Fortunately, the Lexis Nexis archives held a complete record of *The Belfast Telegraph*’s online back catalogue for the period studied. The advent of the Covid-19 pandemic also made potential travel tricky.

The Irish Times was slow to respond to queries. Fortunately, their online resources are extensive. It was not envisioned that obtaining past issues of *The Irish Times* would be problematic though if at any point it had been required to contact the paper, this may have delayed progress. There had not been direct contact with *The Times*. Their online resources are paywall-protected though considerable.

The vast majority of research was undertaken through the Lexis Nexis media portal. Articles from all three titles could be found online through this resource. The portal was not without its limitations however, as the print version of *The Belfast Telegraph* could not be accessed. As touched on above, the research regarding *The Belfast Telegraph* was conducted using the publication's online edition.

3.8 Research Limitations

Research questions require researchers to define the limits of their study (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012, p. 41).

This research is limited by the researcher's ability to collect and analyse data from a smaller time period than would have been possible with a larger team. The researcher had considered the idea of a comparative content analysis looking at the time period studied and the week just prior to the UK's official exit from the European Union in January 2020. Time and manpower constraints prevented this from being possible.

The study itself is limited in so much that five days may not be considered a large enough time period to provide a large enough sample of data to interrogate to answer the questions being asked. The same is true of the amount of publications being analysed – a greater number would have been preferable. It is for this reason that the researcher chose to narrow the scope of the study to the week containing the referendum itself and the three newspapers of record of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

The study is also partially limited by the unavailability of *The Belfast Telegraph* print editions from the week of Brexit. As confirmed by the newspaper's office, it does not keep back editions from this era. The newspaper's online edition has been utilised as an alternative.

Although the majority of this study was undertaken over a five-month period during which Covid-19 restrictions were in place, it was not seriously impacted by the outbreak, bar a lack of library access and a cancelled research journey to the Newspaper Library in Belfast Central Library.

3.9 Ethical Issues

Research questions require researchers to identify and plan responses to ethical issues that may arise during their study (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012, p. 41).

No person-to-person ethical issues were foreseen during the research process. No first-hand contact, i.e., interviews or focus groups took place and no footage or content which requires personal consent was used.

For many in academic fields, plagiarism is an ethical concern (Johnson-Eiola and Selber, 2007, pp. 399, 400). Most definitions of plagiarism evaluate it as an 'issue of academic honesty'. Special care was taken to ensure no instances of plagiarism took place in this study.

4. Results and Analysis

This section of the study is broken down into three sections –

- Introduction
- Results and Analysis
- Talking Points (including applicable audience theory)

The Introduction will cover –

- 1.1.1 The method of research employed in the study
- 1.1.2 An explanation of the segmentation and drill down of the results
- 1.1.3 The volume of content analysed
- 1.1.4 The rules applied to permissible content and filters
- 1.1.5 Criteria considered
- 1.1.6 Methods of data visualisation

The Results section will cover –

- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Top-level data
- 4.3 Content breakdown
- 4.4 Political coverage analysis
- 4.5 Coverage type
- 4.6 Risk, opportunity or neutral
- 4.7 Share of overage – Remain v Leave
- 4.8 Most quoted politician
- 4.9 Quotes and order of quotes
- 4.10 Most front-page coverage
- 4.11 Positioning of stories within publication
- 4.12 Analysis

The Discussion of Results and Analysis section will cover –

4.12.1 Evidence of Bias and Contextual Divergence

4.12.2 Contrasts in National Narrative

4.12.3 Lack of Corbyn Coverage

4.12.4 Applicable Audience Theory

4.1. Method of Research Employed in the Study

As discussed in the Methodology section, this study employs a predominantly quantitative approach, with some qualitative discussion points discussed directly after and resulting from the presentation of empirical evidence.

A quantitative approach is a broad term that includes many different approaches. It is a representation of reality, simplified with only relevant details included (Waters, 2008, p. 7).

The Results and Analysis section illustrates the results of the study as chart data. It includes all of the required collated numerical data relevant to expressing the results of the study. It will use this data to provide a foundation for discussion of critical points, which will be discussed in the final part of the Results and Analysis section.

4.2 Explanation of the Segmentation and Drill Down of Results

This section will lay out and discuss the results obtained from the study. The results are accompanied by analytical data, charts and graphs and corresponding keys, illustrating the results of the content analysis. Most graphs pertaining to top-level results are expressed as both raw figures and as percentages.

1. The results are separated into three basic blocks, beginning with top-level data which breaks down the articles covered into categories depending on their content.
2. Further to this, the data is then broken down by applying filters ascertaining how many of the articles – and in which categories – Brexit is determined to be a Risk/Opportunity or Neutral prospect for the UK or were written from a Remain/Leave or Neutral perspective.
3. The results will then focus on which politician or interested party was quoted in the stories run by the chosen titles, and into which bracket – Leave or Remain – they fit.
4. Finally, this portion of the study will discuss the results and the topical points contained within.

The results of this study, in live Google sheet format, [can be found here](#).

4.3 Volume of Content Analysed

A total of 357 articles were read and analysed - 78 from *The Irish Times*, 100 from *The Times* and 179 from *The Belfast Telegraph*. It is worth reiterating that two sources – *The Irish Times* and *The Times* – were print-based, while *The Belfast Telegraph's* online edition was used. These articles were published between June 20, 2016 and June 24, 2016. The Lexis Nexis online news database was utilised to find and filter articles. The keyword 'Brexit' was used to filter the correct articles.

4.4 Permissible and Filtered Content

The vast majority of the content presented by Lexis Nexis was deemed to be acceptable for use in the study. There were some exceptions. Content which fell under these criteria was manually filtered out -

- Video content where no accompanying article existed
- Imagery where no accompanying article existed
- Letters to the Editor

- Celebrity news
- Sports news
- Articles which mentioned Brexit in passing
- Daily news round-ups
- Listicles
- Duplicate articles e.g., articles with similar content updated with a more recent headline. In these cases, the original articles were used.

Similarly, some quoted individuals are omitted. It was decided to only include individuals speaking on behalf of either themselves, their political party, union, think tank or academic/research institute. Individuals speaking on behalf of private financial entities – be it a private company, bank or investment firm – are not included.

A relevant example which can be observed in the study is the inclusion of quotes from Richard Branson who is speaking on behalf of himself and not his company, Virgin Group, when asked about the impact of Brexit on the British economy. He is labelled a ‘Prominent Remainer’. The same is true of Wetherspoons’ founder, Tim Martin, who is speaking on behalf of himself and not his pub chain in an article studied. He was labelled as a ‘Prominent Leaver’. Conversely, quotes relating to profit warnings issued by the Head of Dixons Carphone Sebastian James, are not included, though the article, as relevant financial content, is included.

4.5 Criteria Considered

The research criteria are divided and sub-divided into different categories, depending on what questions needed to be asked and answered to fulfil the primary and secondary question criteria as outlined in this study’s introduction.

To reiterate, this study asks –

Primary - Is there a quantifiable level of partisanship in 2016 Brexit referendum coverage when comparing British, Irish and Northern Irish newspapers of record?

Secondary Q1 – Is Brexit portrayed as an opportunity, risk or neutral for Britain?

Secondary Q2 – Is there a bias in opinion-based and/or human-interest reporting in each title?

Secondary Q3 – Which side received more exposure in the three titles studied?

In order to fulfil the study criteria, the following top-level data was extracted from each article in each publication:

- Which publication ran the most Brexit-orientated stories
- Which stories were politically orientated
- Which stories were financially orientated
- Which stories were human-interest orientated
- Which fit the 'Other' category
- The corresponding percentages of each criteria above
- How many Brexit-orientated stories were run per publication per day

Separately to the immediately above, each article was read and scrutinised to determine whether Brexit is viewed as a Risk, Opportunity or Neutral.

Articles were also scrutinised to ascertain whether the article was written from a perceived Remain, Leave or Neutral stance.

The two criteria immediately above were also charted without financial stories included. The reasons for this deviation are noted in the relevant Research sections.

In the next section, the study collates and examines data relating to the prominence of one-sided – or stories told from a predominantly one-sided approach – and asks the following questions:

- How many front-page stories were devoted to Brexit?
- How many Remain stories made the front pages in *The Irish Times*, *The Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph*?
- How many Leave stories made the front pages in these newspapers?

- On average, which page number was Brexit covered from a Remain perspective in *The Irish Times* and *The Times*, and pertinently, how close to the front page were these stories?
- On average, on which page number was Brexit covered from a Leave perspective in *The Irish Times* and *The Times*, and pertinently, how close to the front page were these stories?

In the next section, the study examines the amount of coverage afforded to each politician/prominent Remainers/Leavers:

- Which politician was most quoted overall?
- Which politician was most quoted per publication?
- Which politician was most quoted per day?
- How many Remain v Leave were quoted per newspaper?*
- Were more Remainers or Leavers the first, second or third quoted source in studied articles?*

*Quotes from Jeremy Corbyn are excluded from this count. The reason for this is clarified in the later Analysis segment discussing Corbyn's Brexit stance, its coverage and its impact on the referendum campaigns.

*Paraphrasing or secondary mentions are not counted as quotes. Only direct quotes are included in results.

4.6 Methods of Data Visualisation

Much of the data represented in the following three sections will be bar charts save for the political quotation results towards the end of this section and where a chronological timeline is required to be mapped on the X axis and the graph in the section immediately following this one.

‘Bar charts show the number of observations in different categories. Here each category by its own line or bar and the length of this bar is proportional to the number of observations’ (Waters, 2008, p. 104).

4.7 Top-Level data – Stories Per Day

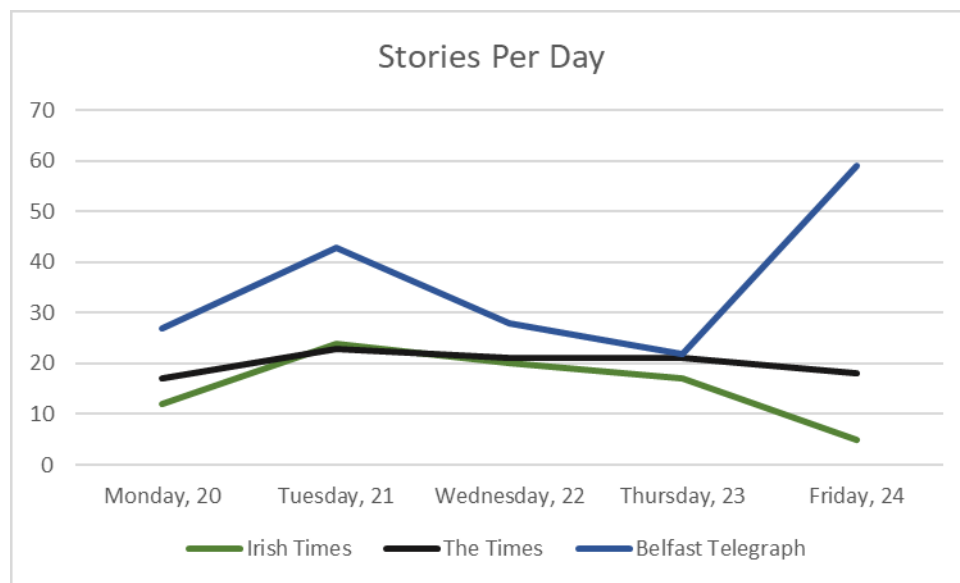


Fig 1

As mentioned in the Analysed Content section, *The Belfast Telegraph* churned out the most content over the week of the Brexit referendum with 179 articles (online). *The Times* and *The Irish Times* print editions published 100 and 78 respectively.

The Belfast Telegraph's raw number of articles covered is much greater than the two other publications as this is largely as this study looked at the online version of the paper, rather than the print editions of *The Times* and *The Irish Times*. This is particularly evident on Friday – the day of the referendum result count. *The Belfast Telegraph's* site listings allowed it to track developments as they occurred and produce a much greater volume of content than is possible in print and as such does not indicate that the paper covered Brexit more thoroughly than *The Times* or *The Irish Times*.

This disparity is considered when reflecting on results throughout this section, in particular by reflecting data as percentages rather than – or in addition to – whole numbers.

4.7.1 Top-Level Data – Initial Impressions

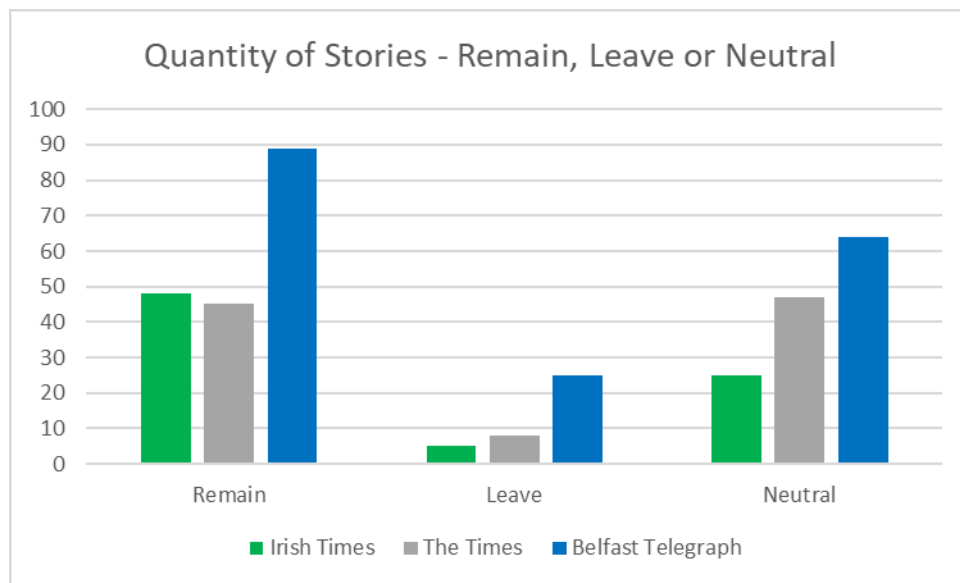


Fig 2

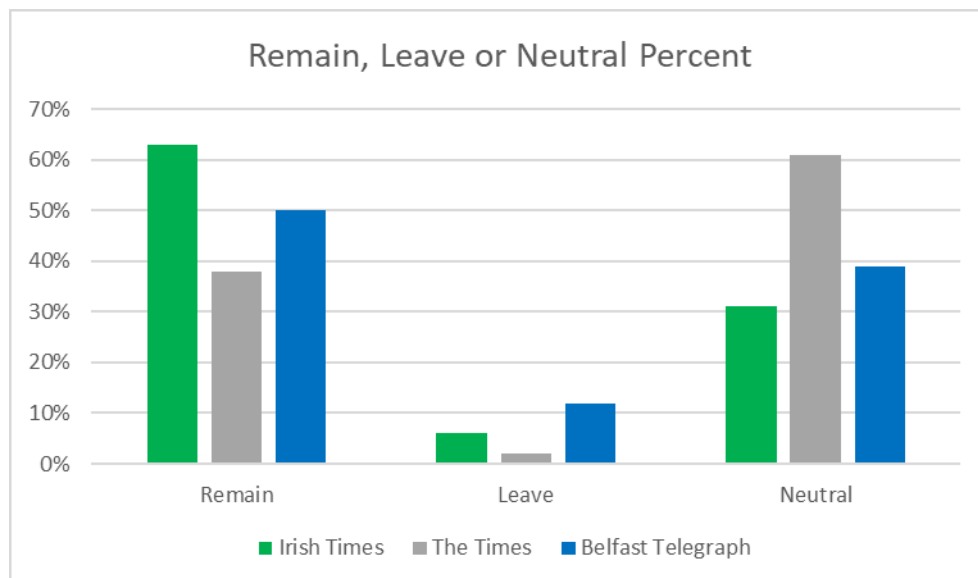


Fig 2.1

On initial inspection it is evident that *The Irish Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph* published more Remain leaning pieces than any other type of content. *The Times*, in contrast, published more Neutral articles than Remain or Leave pieces.

Sixty-two percent of stories published in *The Irish Times* were written from a Remain perspective; 6% from a Leave perspective and 32% from a Neutral point of view.

Thirty-eight percent of stories in *The Times* were written from a Remain perspective; 2% were written from a Leave perspective and 61% were written from a Neutral point of view.

Fifty percent of stories published in *The Belfast Telegraph* were written from a Remain perspective; 13% were written from a Leave perspective and 36% were written from a Neutral point of view.

4.7.2 Top-Level Data - *The Times* v *The Irish Times*

While coverage volumes in *The Irish Times* and *The Times* follow roughly the same volume Tuesday to Thursday, there is a stark difference in coverage on Friday – in print, the day covering the vote (non-live coverage).

This may be for one of two reasons, both or neither. In Ireland a moratorium is observed from 2pm the day before polling opens (bai.ie, 2016) whereas in the UK, a moratorium is observed only when polls are open (bbc.co.uk, 2017). It is unclear whether as a paper based in Dublin, *The Irish Times* would observe a UK vote moratorium, though as it also covers Northern Irish issues, this may have been a factor.

‘The moratorium remains an important measure for ensuring that fairness is achieved by the broadcast media prior to, and during, the period when citizens cast their ballot. The prohibition of electioneering and references to election issues will allow voters a period for reflection in the final stages of the election campaign,’ advises the Broadcast Authority of Ireland (bai.ie, 2016). The quote was issued prior to the February 2016 General Election.

‘On polling day specifically, the BBC (like other broadcasters) doesn't report on any of the election campaigns from 00:30 BST until polls close at 22:00 BST on TV, radio or bbc.co.uk or

on social media and other channels’, explains the BBC, speaking specifically about 2017 local elections (BBC, 2017).

Notably, on Friday *The Irish Times* published no stories considered in the ‘Political’ bracket compared to 10 in *The Times*.

Elsewhere, the Ireland v France Euro 2016 fixture to be held two days later on the 26th received coverage (six articles on June 24 in *The Irish Times*). Other notable Irish-specific topics on the day include a meeting between Taoiseach Enda Kenny and Joe Biden and a charity scandal whereby Console head Paul Kelly amassed more than €500,000 in credit card debt. It is also notable as the last Friday of the second quarter of the year, with a noticeable dilution of normal column inches with financial news – ‘Public Finances Getting Better, Says Noonan’ and ‘Half of All First-Time Buyer Mortgages Approved in May’ being some sample headlines.

4.8 Coverage Type – Political, Financial, Human Interest/Opinion or Other

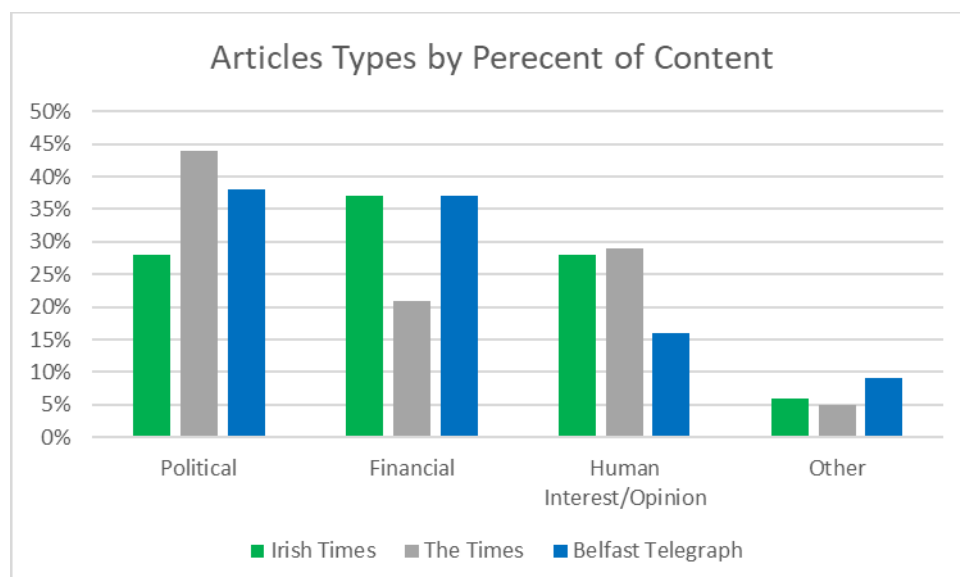


Fig 3

As mentioned earlier, comparing articles by percentage of coverage rather than expressing simple numerical data removes any skewing received by the online results produced by the large sampling in *The Belfast Telegraph's* online edition.

In the above chart it is possible to view the percentage of article types in each publication across the week of the Brexit vote (June 20 - June 24, 2016).

4.8.1 Political Coverage

This study has found a greater percentage of politically orientated articles in the UK-based newspapers. Although there is no empirical evidence gathered to support this theory, it would appear common sense that the level of political coverage in voting regions would be higher than in a non-British region. MPs and interest groups naturally target their own constituents/voters. There is also the coverage of local issues and parliamentary questions, which in Ireland would be Dáil focused.

4.8.2 Financial Coverage

Financial news story coverage accounted for between 30% and 40% of all coverage in both *The Irish Times* and *Belfast Telegraph*. Financial news story coverage in *The Times* accounted for just over 20% of all stories.

The Times was the only newspaper of the three in which human-interest and opinion-based content outstripped financial coverage. This could be due to the presence of competition from the *Financial Times* in *The Times's* key demographic. *The Times* and *Financial Times* share key demographics – both are traditionally read more by Conservative than Labour voters, are read by 25-34 year olds more so than any other age bracket, have majority male readerships, are picked up by members of the AB social class than any other. Both are read by London-based readers more than readers in any other region in the UK (Ipsos Mori, 2004,

ps. 18, 20, 21). The headquarters of both papers are located just six kilometres from each other in the centre of London.

4.8.3 Human-Interest Coverage

All three papers ran insightful and thought-provoking columns dedicated to a range of issues – the establishment of a new EU-NI border, immigration in the UK and the impact of Irish business in the Republic among others. *The Irish Times* and *The Times* in particular, as evident by the percentage of their coverage dedicated to this material, ran many long-form human-interest and opinion columns.

4.9 Coverage Per Day

Throughout the next section this study will discuss the quantity of coverage afforded to different types of coverage per day – political coverage, financial coverage and human-interest and opinion-based coverage.

Each section is accompanied by two charts – one showing the actual amount of articles in each publication per day published on the category and another showing the percentage of the overall coverage that topic accounted for per paper per day.

4.9.1 Political Coverage – Per Day

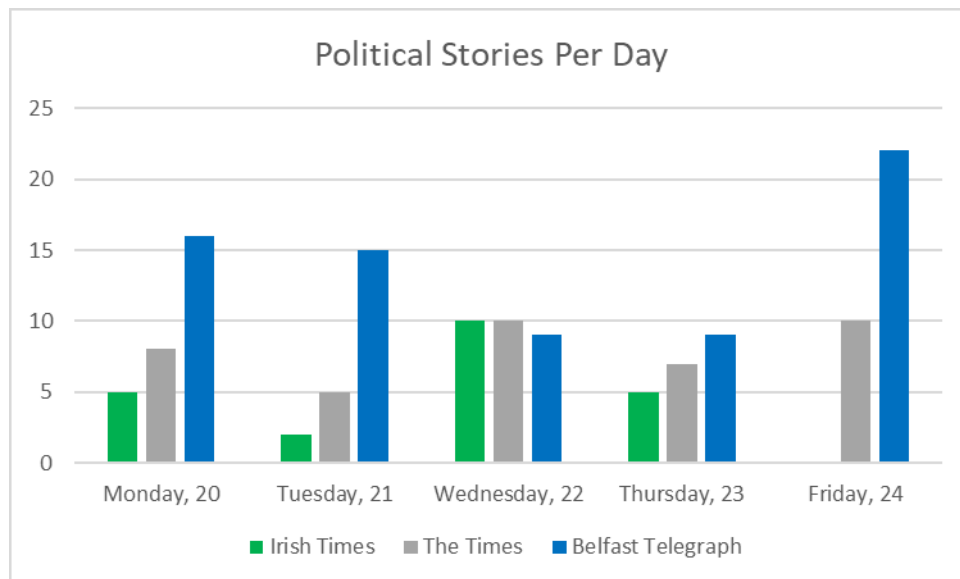


Fig 4

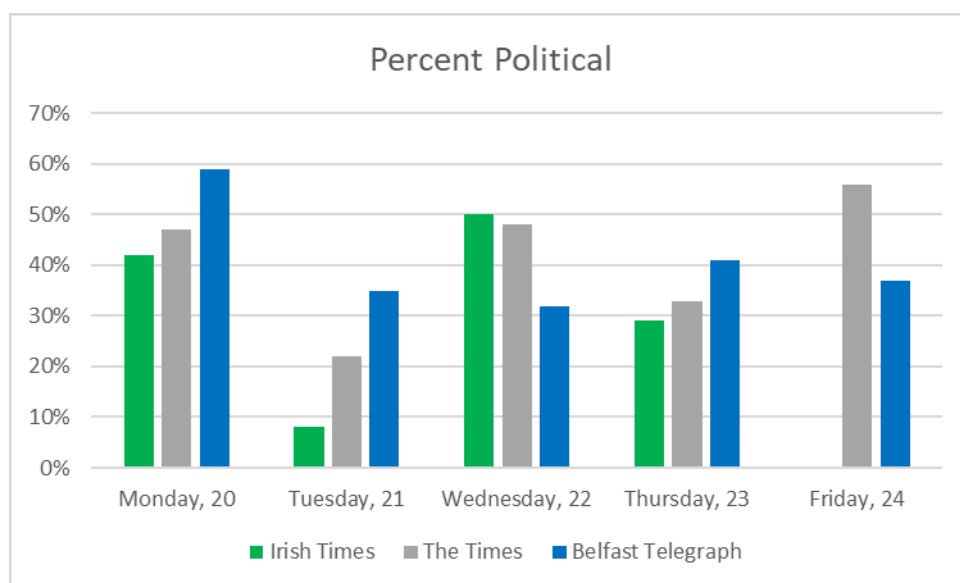


Fig 4.1

As mentioned in a prior section, the most notable detail in political coverage across the three titles is the absence of political stories on Friday in the *Irish Times*. This, as mentioned beforehand, is likely due to a moratorium on broadcasting.

Elsewhere, this study sees a surge in political coverage on Friday in *The Belfast Telegraph*. It is important to note as *The Belfast Telegraph*'s figures are online – and more current – Friday coverage at *The Belfast Telegraph* saw articles published after the result was announced. Neither *The Irish Times* nor *The Times* published articles to the end of Friday commenting on the result as they went to print prior to the result being announced. Another publication (*Financial Times*, 2016) reported that the referendum results it would become clear around 3:30am – perhaps not enough time for *The Times* or *The Irish Times* to go to print with results.

Conversely, through the percentage figures in the chart above, it is possible to see that as percentage of its coverage for Friday, *The Belfast Telegraph*'s political coverage is smaller than *The Times*'. Why this is the case is unclear though it could be that this is due to *The Times* is based in London and is thus in a better position to commit resources to the debate. It also has the advantage as an England-based publication, of being able to cover more politicians and polling centres and campaign points of interest than *The Belfast Telegraph*. Additionally, as a News Corp-owned publication, would have greater resources and a larger pool of connections than *The Belfast Telegraph*, which as a publication with obligations to a smaller Northern Irish-based readership and being owned by Dublin-based Independent News and Media, would be at an inherent disadvantage in covering a large event where most voters are in another jurisdiction.

To put the above statement in context, *The Irish Times* ran just 22 political stories throughout the week of Brexit, significantly fewer than *The Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph*, which each ran more than 40 stories. Although a seemingly obvious statement, these figures add to the evidence that the further the publication is from the epicentre of the story – in this case, London – the less likely it will receive coverage. This appears to be true even in a

highly localised area like Great Britain and Ireland, which share many social, cultural and political similarities and interests.

Content Analysis

As expected, the political coverage in *The Irish Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph* are combinations of commentary from home-based politicians, interest groups and powerful individuals, mixed with reports of developments in London and on the Brexit campaign trail. *The Belfast Telegraph* also focuses on Scottish affairs, which did not appear to be a priority for *The Irish Times*. In *The Times* an almost exclusive focus on England and Scotland, is evident. Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland is mentioned in no headline in *The Irish Times* during Brexit week, but is mentioned in eight headlines in *The Times* and nine headlines in *The Belfast Telegraph*. Northern Ireland appeared once in a headline in *The Times* throughout the week, and Wales did not appear at all. The Northern Irish headline was a feature article entitled 'Ulster Fears a Return to the Bad Old Days: Remainers Are Swayed by Worries that Brexit Would Mean Border Controls'. There were no politically classified articles about either Northern Ireland or Wales in *The Times* during the week of the vote.

Both *The Belfast Telegraph* and *The Times* ran a story about royal opinion during the referendum. Both stories centred on a request from Queen Elizabeth to dinner guests to give her three reasons for the UK to remain in Europe. Both papers debated whether the Queen had used the request to indicate her support for Brexit. *The Sun*, which had already declared its support for Brexit, ran this story on their front page framing it as a signal of royal approval for the UK to leave the EU. *The Times* ran the story on page 8. There is no data to suggest what on which page *The Belfast Telegraph* ran the story. Both stories are classified as being reported from a Neutral stance in this study. *The Irish Times* did not cover this story.

4.9.2 Financial Coverage – Per Day

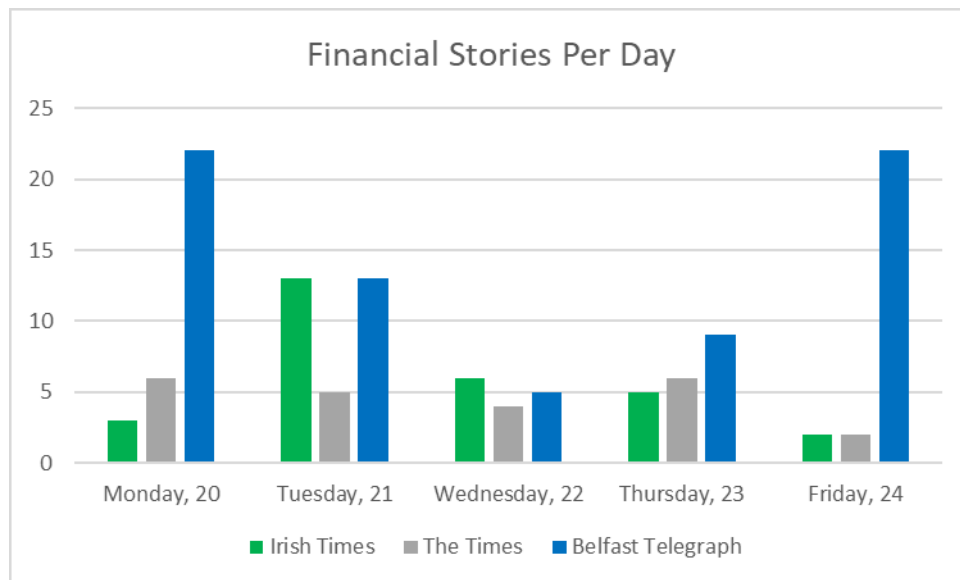


Fig 5

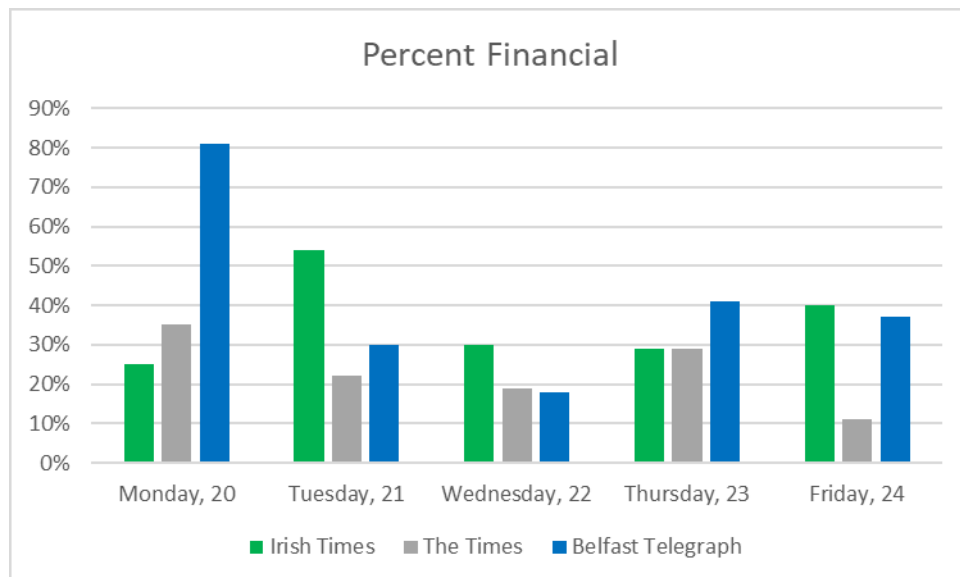


Fig 5.1

Statistical Analysis

Financial coverage in all titles during Brexit week was overwhelmingly anti-Brexit. It is to this end that in later sections, pertinent results are displayed with both financial news included and excluded from results. This is not to say that there was an underlying bias in Brexit financial reporting, just that on balance many stories highlight the underlying risks associated with the UK leaving the single market rather than any predicted benefits of leaving.

In terms of the breadth of coverage, this study observes a noticeable spike in coverage in *The Belfast Telegraph* on Friday. This is due to live articles published after the result was announced. Again, this coverage was overwhelmingly anti-Brexit. Tuesday also saw a significant amount of activity in *The Belfast Telegraph* and *The Irish Times* with reports that the FTSE and ISEQ saw gains on the back of confidence from Europe of a Remain result.

It is worth speculating that the vote was held towards the end of the week to prevent such headlines in printed dailies being carried in seriatim through consecutive trading days. Trading ends at 4:30pm on Friday in London and re-opens at 8am on Monday. While there is no concrete data to support this theory, it became apparent while cataloguing the data for the results that market-dependent entities and financial reports became more skittish towards the end of the week – closer to the referendum. The tactics behind the scheduling of this referendum on a Friday, just a few days from the end of a traditional financial quarter, would make an interesting study.

Content Analysis

Some sample headlines relating to anti-Brexit sentiment published in *The Belfast Telegraph* include - 'Northern Ireland's listed companies suffer share price plummet following Brexit'; 'Stocks tumble after UK votes for Brexit'; 'Brexit could put back Lloyds and RBS share sales for years'. *The Times* reported 'Long queues as panic buyers stock up on foreign currency'

and ‘Companies will lose out under Brexit’. Some headlines from *The Irish Times* reported ‘Big name investors turn bearish’ and ‘Brexit could reduce growth, says [then finance minister Michael] Noonan’.

As mentioned in the Statistical Analysis section, market reports and entities became more nervous as the week progressed. On Monday, *The Belfast Telegraph* reported that the ‘FTSE 100 index rises sharply as Brexit concerns ease’. *The Times* reported on Tuesday ‘Global markets soar’. *The Irish Times* reported a surge in the strength of sterling on the same day and *The Belfast Telegraph* reported that ‘Confidence over EU vote sees FTSE 100 push ahead’. On Wednesday, *The Irish Times* reported that ‘More US investors pull out over fears of EU exit’ and that ‘British tech firms worry over Brexit’. Thursday and Friday saw *The Times* report that ‘City banks tell clients to prepare for Brexit chaos’ and *The Irish Times* to speculate that ‘Brexit would see dramatic fall in sterling’. Although a fall in sterling may not necessarily be negative given that it could make a historically strong currency more competitive, the article was written in a negative context, referencing Y2K and potential market chaos – ‘The fallout, in the event of a Leave vote, does not bear thinking about, certainly initially’, the author wrote. The author points out that ‘Economists and market analysts are united in forecasting market chaos if there is a Leave vote’.

The Irish Times had predicted a nervy end to the week on Monday, predicting ‘Markets expecting extreme volatility before Brexit vote; Anxiety about referendum outcome wiped \$1 trillion off stocks last week’.

4.9.3 Human Interest/Opinion Coverage Per Day

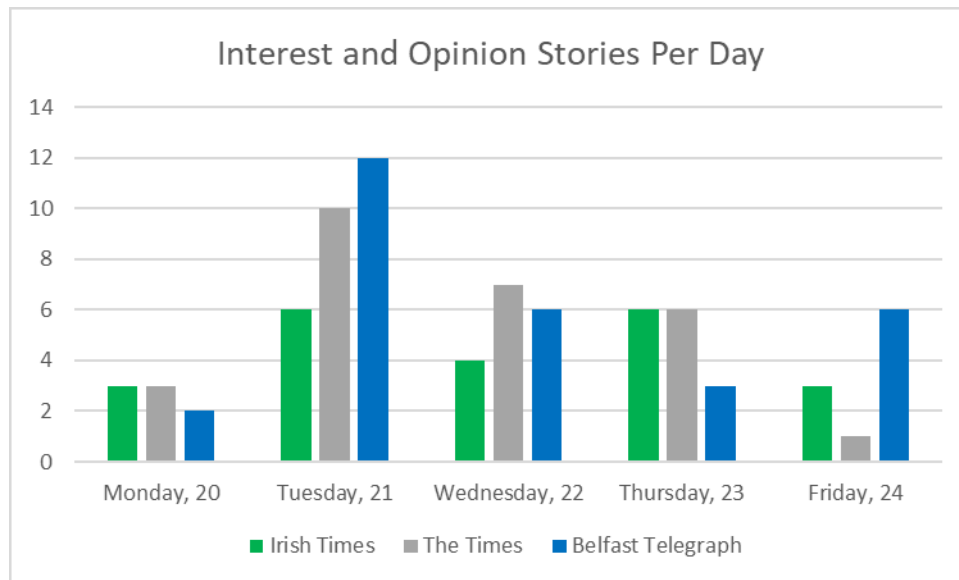


Fig 6

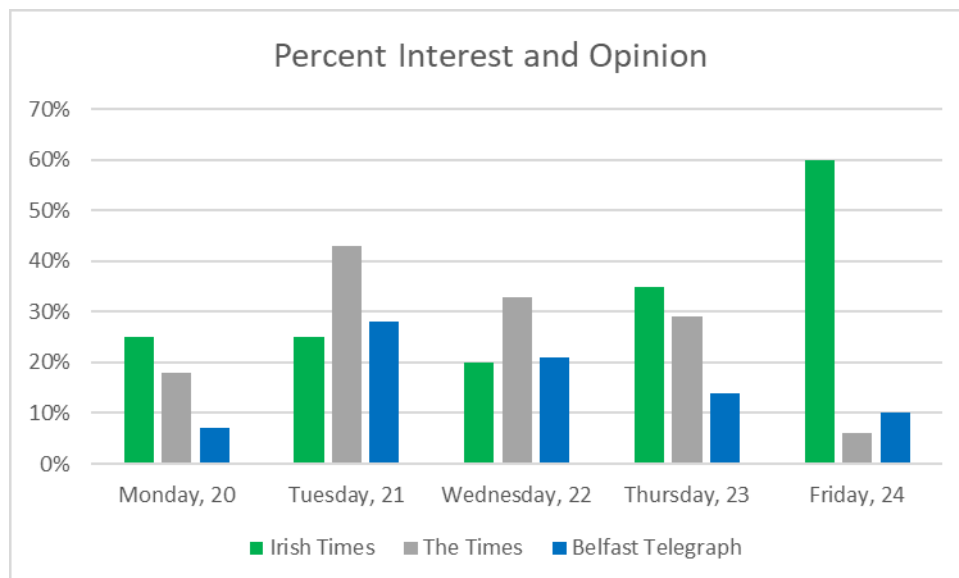


Fig 6.1

Statistical Analysis

Despite a much lower quantity of overall coverage, human-interest and opinion stories are vital to determining whether bias existed in the three titles being studied. While political and financial news generally reflect popular events as they happen, human-interest and opinion stories are often written from an editorial point of view and can contain long-form content mirroring the political stance of the publication.

It is worth noting that – with the exception of Tuesday in *The Belfast Telegraph* – all three publications ran similar numbers of editorial pieces per day – between two and seven, significantly lower quantities than their financial or political coverage. The study also shows the percentage of human-interest and opinion stories dropping consistently in both UK papers, from Tuesday onwards, confirming – backed up by political and financial figures – that both moved towards a strategy of reporting live or nearly live events, rather than focusing on the publication's editorial lines.

In *The Irish Times* this study sees a much greater percentage of human-interest and opinion stories on Friday, though for context it is worth remembering that the paper published no political news stories relating to Brexit that day.

A significantly lower percentages of human-interest and opinion stories in *The Belfast Telegraph* compared to *The Times* and *The Irish Times* is observed. This is likely down to the high volume of near live financial and political reporting on *The Belfast Telegraph's* site pushing these percentages down. It should not be taken as an indication that *The Belfast Telegraph* publishes fewer human-interest and opinion-based content in their standard print edition.

Content Analysis

All three publications published a rich variety of human-interest content. *The Irish Times* published articles from the perspective of young British Muslims, a view from Shakespeare's

hometown, The Falls Road, Reading, Birmingham and Scotland's 'Little Ireland' – the town of Coatbridge, 10 miles east of Glasgow. All but one of the stories were written from a Remain (seven stories) or Neutral (two stories) perspective. The outlier was an article about a factory and market in Nottinghamshire, where the author Patrick Freyne, who also wrote the two Remain stories about happenings in Reading and Stratford-Upon-Avon – Shakespeare's hometown – interviewed locals, who presented predominantly Leave viewpoints. Despite being the only article to interview a predominantly Leave-orientated field, the article touches upon 'straight racism' the author encountered when interviewing local Leave supporters. It is classified as being Leave-orientated as it presents many more coherent, articulate Leave points of view than of any other persuasion.

Opinion content in *The Irish Times* offers a wide spectrum of opinion and analysis, with hyperbolic headlines and colourful reflections and predictions abounding. 'Hateful public discourse has real and horrifying consequences', writes Una Mullally. 'Brexit offers a jagged razor of incoherent nationalism', writes Fintan O'Toole and 'A campaign of lies and lethargy has divided societies and parties. Whatever the result, the referendum has left a legacy of division and mistrust', writes Denis Staunton. Ex-Taoiseach John Bruton and former Deputy Northern Irish First Minister and IRA man Martin McGuinness penned Remain leaning pieces. Perhaps the most strongly written piece is by Fintan O'Toole, who describes the perceived abandonment of the British working classes by the European Union. O'Toole, the newspaper's assistant editor, ends his piece by speculating that if Brexit happens it will be 'exhilarating and empowering'. He caveats this by stating that while 'it will make English hearts beat faster and the blood flow more quickly', the English will 'eventually notice that it is their own blood that is flowing'. Despite being a very emotive, vivid and powerful piece, it is ultimately classed as being written from a neutral standpoint.

4.9.4 Other coverage

Coverage labelled 'Other' is a jumble of news stories which did not fit into any of the categories assignable. Surprisingly, these stories were few and far between – there were 15 'Other' stories in *The Belfast Telegraph* through the week, and five apiece in *The Times* and

The Irish Times. To illustrate the type of stories boxed into the 'Other' category, here are some of the headlines encountered:

The Times

'Humid weather threatens to keep both sides sweating'

'Three steps for businesses to thrive'

'The unlikely stars who went viral'

The Irish Times

'Record number of UK solicitors admitted to practise in the Republic'

'Most Twitter users want UK to stay in EU, Irish researchers find'

'A vote that really matters; UK/European Union'

The Belfast Telegraph

'Lord Sugar attacked as he questions Gisela Stuart's place on the Brexit panel'

'Widower leads tribute to Cox on her birthday'

'UK emissions drop not as steep without UK'

4.10 Brexit Portrayed as a Risk or Opportunity; Remain or Leave

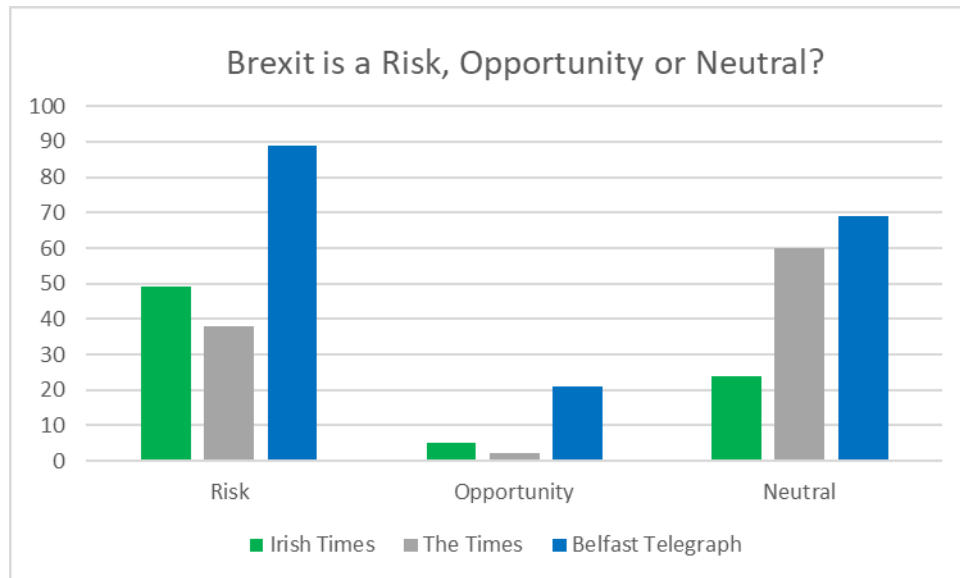


Fig 7

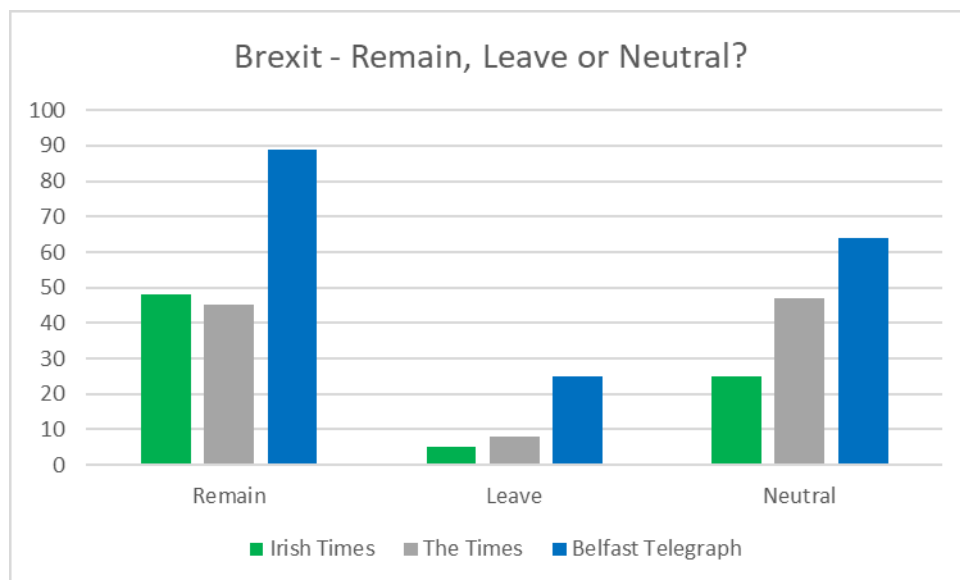


Fig 8

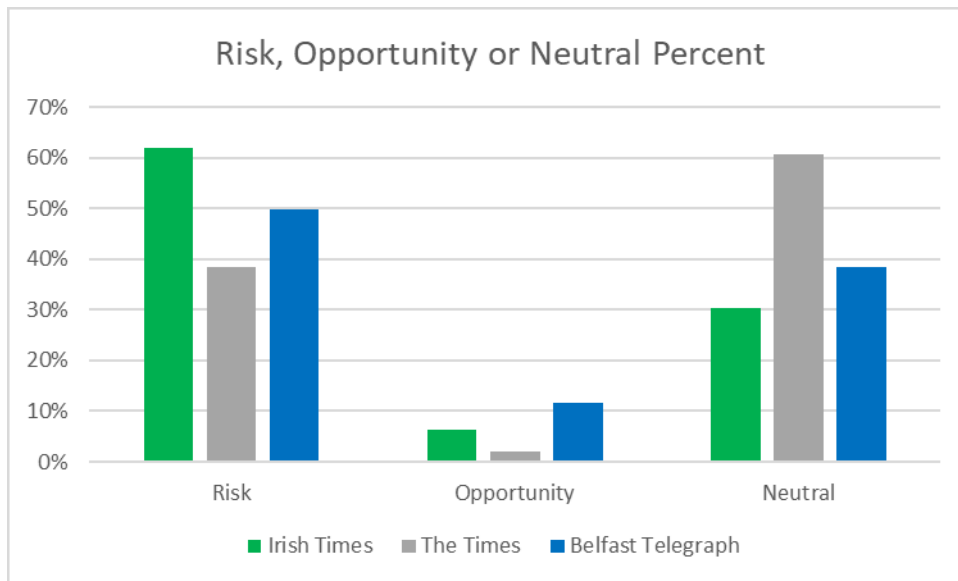


Fig 7.1

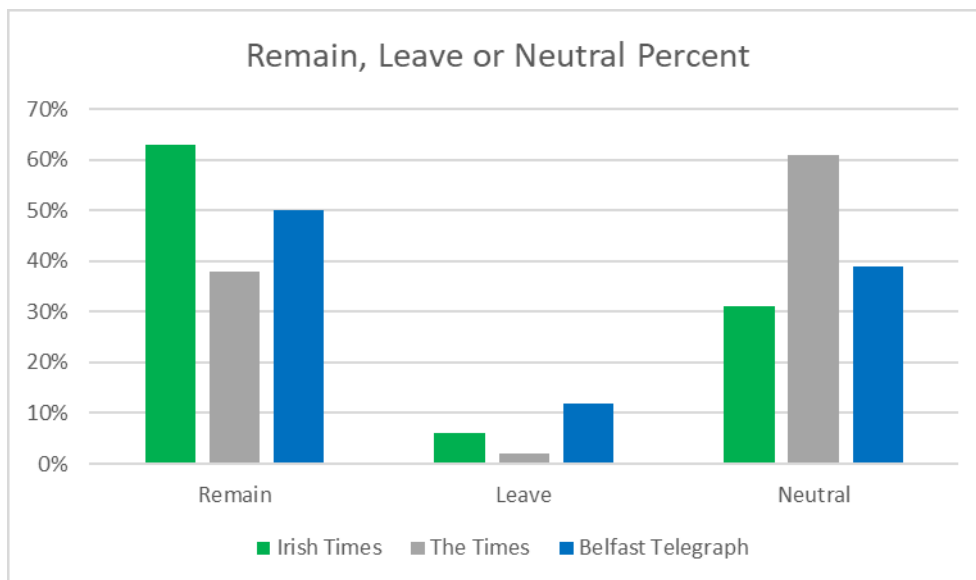


Fig 8.1

4.10.1 Introduction

This section discusses the results of the tabulation of articles relative to their leanings on Brexit – whether the end results present a risk opportunity for the UK, and whether particular articles were geared viewed as being written from a Remain, Leave or Neutral point of view. It combines all ‘Political, Financial, Interest and Opinion and Other stories.

The charts above express these finding both whole numbers of articles and as percentages.

Inclusion of Financial Results

It is worth noting that the charts above include financial-orientated stories. Excluding financial stories –

- 22 *The Irish Times* stories view Brexit as a risk, as opposed to 49
- 20 *The Times* stories view Brexit as a risk, as opposed to 38
- 39 *Belfast Telegraph* stories view Brexit as a risk, as opposed to 89

- 23 *The Irish Times* stories focus on Remain issues, as opposed to 48
- 26 *The Times* stories focus on Remain issues, as opposed to 38
- 39 *Belfast Telegraph* stories focus on Remain issues, as opposed to 89

Please note that ‘Neutral’ is also a category marked in this segment.

As mentioned in an earlier section, financial stories were almost exclusively Remain leaning. This was largely due to reporting on happenings on financial markets approaching Brexit with trepidation and cannot be used to infer bias.

4.11 Risk, Opportunity or Neutral?

4.11.1 Statistical Analysis

All three newspapers published more articles with content presenting Brexit as a risk than an opportunity for the United Kingdom. *The Belfast Telegraph* posted most articles presenting Brexit as an opportunity at 89, *The Times* published eight and *The Irish Times* ran five.

Removing financially orientated stories, the gap between Opportunity and Risk is smallest in *The Belfast Telegraph* – 39 stories are categorised as presenting Brexit as a risk and 21 as an opportunity. In *The Times* and *The Irish Times* the gap is much wider – as mentioned above, *The Times* ran eight stories portraying Brexit as a risk, it also ran 26 portraying it as an opportunity; *The Irish Times* ran 23 stories portraying Brexit as a risk and as mentioned above, it ran five presenting it as an opportunity.

Removing financially orientated stories from the study alters the Remain figures significantly. Forty-eight percent of Remain stories in *The Irish Times* were financial; this figure rises to 58% in *The Times* and 62% in *The Belfast Telegraph*. It is possible that the figure is higher in *The Belfast Telegraph* due to the presence of live market reporting, though this would not explain the 10-point differential between *The Irish Times* and *The Times*, for which this study examined their traditional daily print editions.

A greater percentage of *The Times* stories are classed as being Neutral than any other – 45%. This compares to 35% in *The Belfast Telegraph* and 32% in *The Irish Times*.

4.11.2 Content Analysis

The Times, *The Irish Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph* all ran both Remain and Leave orientated content in their political, financial and opinion and interest content. Although not a category assessed in this study, it is clear from cataloguing empirical evidence on a multitude of other criteria that many articles pointed at one camp or the other, focus on the

potential for negative repercussions of the opposing side winning, rather than the benefits of their side coming out on top. Some examples include 'London could lose right to euro trading after Brexit' (*The Times*, June 22); 'Killer flaw at the heart of Brexit campaign, The voters that Leave needs to deliver victory in tomorrow's referendum would be the ones hit hardest if we left the EU' (*The Times*, June 22); and 'Michael Gove compares economic experts warning against Brexit to Nazis' (*The Belfast Telegraph*, June 22).

Articles portraying Brexit as a risk usually feature quotes from a leading Remainer on a hot-button topic associated with the Leave campaign - racism, financial uncertainty or isolationism for example. "'Brexit campaigners peddling hate over immigration'", Mayor of London Sadiq Khan said' (*The Belfast Telegraph*, June 21). "'Voters should turn anger on Tory austerity, not immigration'", says Jeremy Corbyn' (*The Belfast Telegraph*, June 23); and 'EU referendum: "'An exit would be very serious for NI farmers"; 'Co Down dairy farmer and ice cream producer Will Taylor thinks Brexit would put farming into a crisis,' (*The Belfast Telegraph*, June 21).

Conversely, articles portraying Brexit as an opportunity usually attack the EU or aim to prove that the UK would be better outside it. Examples include - 'EU referendum: Meet the Brexit businessman whose life has taken him from a farm in Antrim to Chequers; Irwin Armstrong, whose Ballymena company exports medical test kits, says his own dealings with Europe have helped convince him that Brexit is best for Northern Ireland', (*The Belfast Telegraph*, June 21); 'Donald Trump hails Brexit vote as "great thing" for UK' (*The Belfast Telegraph*, June 24); and "'We need to shut the border. There's too many people coming in"; This depressed northern city is like ground zero for the Brexit movement,' (*The Irish Times*, June 22).

'Leading, Not Leaving' (*The Times*, June 21) is among the most boisterous of these. In the piece the author – unnamed – claims that more citizens in countries across the EU, in France, Spain and The Netherlands for example, have more negative perceptions of the EU than in Britain and that should the UK vote to leave it will trigger similar ballots in other countries. It claims that EU institutions will counter speeding up projects aimed at enhancing European integration.

4.11.3 Crossover

As evident from the charts above, Brexit portrayed as a risk or opportunity and written from a Remain or Leave standpoint are closely aligned. Most articles categorised written from a Remain point of view will also view the UK's exit from the EU as a risk; conversely, most articles written from an opportunity point of view, will pivot towards Leave.

Some categories are more closely aligned than others. Financial news, as mentioned already, is overwhelmingly tilted towards a Remain viewpoint.

A rare example of a financially driven leave story appeared in *The Irish Times* on Tuesday, June 22 – 'Unionist farmers not sold on this union; Access to markets and subsidies will not be enough for some'. The day before, *The Irish Times* ran a similar industry-based Remain piece exploring the impact Brexit could have on the UK whiskey market – 'Scotch whisky distillers worried that Brexit will have them over a barrel; Producers believe the EU helps sales of scotch go smoothly abroad'. Another financially driven Leave story is 'Unskilled EU migrants cost £6.6bn a year, Brexit "rough estimate" claims,' (*The Belfast Telegraph*, June 21).

In *The Times*, four human-interest and opinion pieces were classified as 'Leave' but just three saw Brexit as an opportunity. 'We're choosing between freedom and serfdom; Brexit may cost us in the short term but I'd rather be poor than give up our right to govern ourselves,' (*The Times*, June 21) was classified as being written from a neutral standpoint due to its balanced content.

4.12 Remain v Leave – Share of Coverage

4.12.1 Introduction

This section will explore the volume of coverage received by each side in the lead up to the referendum. It will begin by revisiting top-level numerical data from the ‘Top Level Data’ sections and discuss how they pertain to the next round of results discussed below.

The next section will explore the following topics -

- Revisit number of articles published by each paper from a Remain, Leave or Neutral standpoint
- Most quoted politician per publication
- Most quoted politician per day
- Most front-page coverage
- Position of stories within publications

It will be followed by an in-depth analysis and discussion of some key points observed in the Results section.

4.12.2 Top-Level Data - Review

As discussed above *The Irish Times*, *The Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph* ran 78, 100 and 179 (online) stories pertaining to Brexit in the week up to the referendum.

Sixty-three percent of stories published in *The Irish Times* were written from a Remain perspective; 6% from a Leave perspective and 31% from a Neutral point of view.

Thirty-eight percent of stories in *The Times* were written from a Remain perspective; 2% were written from a neutral perspective and 61% were written from a Neutral point of view.

Fifty percent of stories published in *The Belfast Telegraph* were written from a Remain perspective; 12% were written from a Leave perspective and 29% were written from a Neutral point of view.

At first glance, this data appears to suggest that both *The Irish Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph* supported Brexit and that *The Times* took a neutral stance.

In reality *The Times* is the only newspaper of the three to have declared its support for one side – Remain. This placed, as mentioned previously it, at odds with its sister publication, *The Sunday Times*, which declared for Leave. It also placed it at odds with *The Sun*, another popular News Corp publication. It also declared against the views of its owner, billionaire Australian media tycoon Rupert Murdoch. In the aftermath of the Brexit result Murdoch was quoted comparing the referendum and its result to a ‘prison break’ (Martinson, *The Guardian*, 2016).

The Belfast Telegraph did not follow the lead of many mainland UK publications and take a position on Brexit and *The Irish Times* did not take up any position, though it would not have been expected to have declared for a side as it is not based in the UK.

4.13 Most Quoted Politician

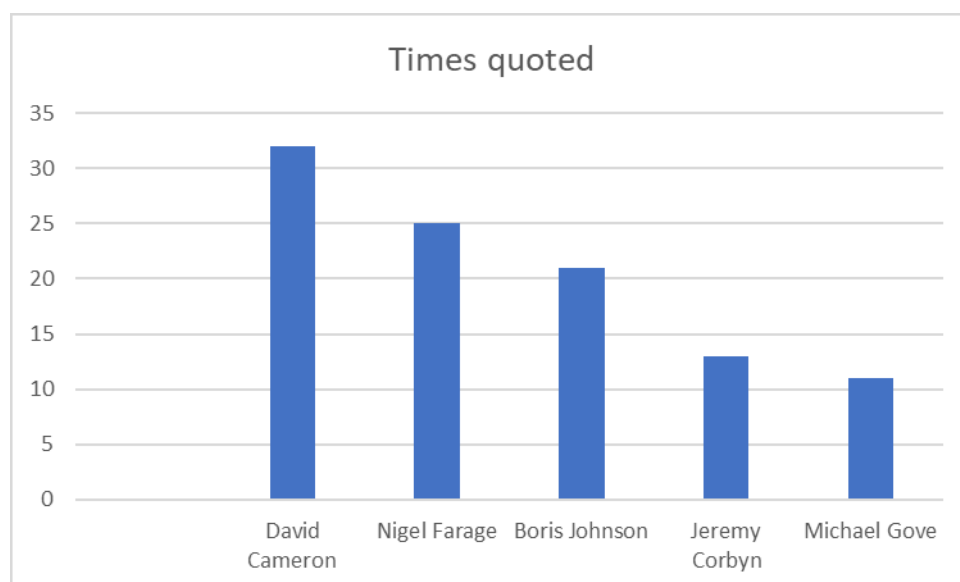


Fig 9

Prime Minister David Cameron was the most quoted politician across the three titles studied in the week of Brexit. Brexit campaigner Boris Johnson, who was between posts as Mayor of London and Secretary of State in Theresa May's government, was the second most quoted politician. Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage was third, followed by Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn in fourth and Justice Minister and Chief Whip Michael Gove in fifth.

Thirty-one percent of the coverage of the five most prominent figures in the Brexit debate went to a Remainer, 56% went to the eventually victorious Leave camp and 13% went to a neutral figure.

These findings contrast the narrative in much of the overlying leanings of publications and articles discussed in prior sections and hint that once the content is scrutinised more closely, juxtapositions can emerge.

Chancellor George Osborne (*The Irish Times*), Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon (*The Times*) and Secretary of State Phillip Hammond (*The Belfast Telegraph*) were the only senior politicians other than the five mentioned above to be the first quoted source in an article. The publication in which they were the first quoted source is in brackets next to their name.

4.13.1 Most Quoted Politician Per Publication

Before discussing which politicians were most widely covered during Brexit it is worth remembering that both sides of the debate attempted to get their message across to the public and generate publicity, though some publicity was also unwelcome.

In the lead up to the result Prime Minister David Cameron and chief Brexit campaigner Boris Johnson, among others, offered soundbites to try to bring the public onside. 'There is no problem we are facing in our world today – facing our country today – that isn't helped by working together', Cameron declared. 'Vote Leave, take back control of our country and our democracy and stick up for hundreds of millions of people around Europe who agree with us, who agree that the EU is going in the wrong direction', Johnson offered, just prior to the vote (both quotes – *The Times*, June 23).

Michael Gove, who was still a minister in David Cameron's cabinet but campaigned for Leave, took the brunt of some attacks launched at Leave campaigners in the Conservative Party. He was forced, as reported in *The Belfast Telegraph* on June 21, to deny that a pledge made by the government on immigration in 2015 was a lie. On June 22 in the same paper and in *The Irish Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph* he is reported as having compared economists to Nazis for their predictions for the UK economy should Leave succeed. Baroness Warsi, a senior Tory politician and former communities minister who defected to the Remain campaign in the week of the vote, accused Gove and Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage of 'complete lies' and spreading 'hate and xenophobia' (*The Times*, June 20). There is no evidence in any of the papers studied to show he directly responded to her comments.

There were also instances where both were quoted together in a neutral setting, outside the mainstream Brexit debate – a pertinent example being in the aftermath of the murder of Labour MP Jo Cox, who was killed by Thomas Mair, a far-right activist, in her home constituency in West Yorkshire on June 16. "‘Passionate’ Cox receives praise across the political spectrum; Ukip's Farage attacks Cameron and Remain side for politicising MP's murder' (*The Irish Times*, June 21).

None of the most quoted politicians in the lead up to Brexit wrote opinion pieces in any of the three newspapers studied.

In *The Irish Times* David Cameron was quoted seven times during the week of Brexit, while Nigel Farage was quoted seven times and Boris Johnson, twice.

High-profile Brexiteer, Secretary of State for Justice and Chief Whip Michael Gove was the most quoted politician in *The Times*. He was quoted seven times over the week leading up to Brexit. Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage and David Cameron were quoted five times each.

The Belfast Telegraph quoted David Cameron 19 times, Boris Johnson 12 times and Nigel Farage seven times.

It is worth noting that perhaps the least senior figure – though still very prominent government figure Michael Gove – was the first person quoted in six of the seven stories in which his quotes featured in *The Times*. Michael Gove is a former news editor at *The Times*. *The Times* was the only paper of the three in which a report about Gove comparing remain

economists to Nazis did not feature a rebuke of his position. *The Irish Times* was the only paper to run a story that he apologised for his remarks.

4.13.2 Most Quoted Politician Per Day

The Irish Times

The Irish Times quoted David Cameron three of the five days covered – Monday, Wednesday and Thursday. Nigel Farage was quoted the most on Tuesday. He was quoted twice – once in story about the murder of MP Jo Cox and in another about a jump in the price of sterling as the Remain camp were perceived to be in control. Farage is a former commodities trader.

The Irish Times quoted no-one on Friday.

The Irish Times is the only newspaper studied in which a Remainer is the sole most quoted person per day.

The Times

The most quoted politicians per day in *The Times* were exclusively Leave campaigners – Michael Gove was the most quoted politician on Monday and Tuesday (tied with Boris Johnson). Johnson was also the most quoted politician on Wednesday and Thursday while Nigel Farage received most attention on Friday.

The Belfast Telegraph

The most quoted politicians in *The Belfast Telegraph* were also Leave campaigners, bar one tie with a Remainer and another with a Neutral. Boris Johnson was the most quoted politician three days per week – Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday (tied with David Cameron) while Nigel Farage received most attention on Thursday and Friday (tied with Jeremy Corbyn).

Nigel Farage received a lot of publicity in the last few days before the vote. 'I now dare to dream that the dawn is coming up on an independent United Kingdom' (*The Belfast Telegraph*, June 24). 'I've waited for this vote all my life. It has been a massive exercise in democracy, in which I'd like to think I've played a little bit of a part in making it

come to pass,' Farage told reporters after submitting his ballot near his home in Kent, England (*The Times*, June 24).

4.14 Quotes and Order of Quotes– Remain v Leave

The Times is the only newspaper studied to have quoted Leave campaigners more than Remain campaigners. In addition to counting the number of times each of the main players was quoted in the three papers studied, the study also collated quotes from other Remain and Leave sources – as discussed in the Methodology section. These persons were segmented as 'Prominent Remainer', 'Remain MP', 'Prominent Leaver' and 'Leave MP'.

These figures are included in the below collation of Remain and Leave-orientated quotes.

The Irish Times quoted Remain campaigners 15 times in the lead up to Brexit; the paper quoted Leave campaigners 10 times.

The Times quoted Remain campaigners 27 times in the lead up to Brexit; the paper quoted Leave campaigners 29 times.

The Belfast Telegraph quoted Remain campaigners 88 times in the lead up to Brexit; the paper quoted Leave campaigners 63 times.

Digging further into the data it becomes apparent that this trend continues throughout the text of the articles.

In *The Irish Times*, the disparity between Remain and Leave in the paper becomes greater – 11 of the first quoted sources in articles come from a Remain source, three come from a Leave source. *The Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph* are more even handed - *The Times* quoted 17 Remainers before Leavers, 16. *The Belfast Telegraph* led with quotes from 38 Remainers; 34 Leavers.

The Irish Times quoted three Remain sources as their second quote; four were Leave-orientated. One third-placed quote was Remain-orientated; three were Leave supporters.

The Times used six Remainers as their second source; they used 10 Leavers.

In *The Belfast Telegraph* Remainers are consistently quoted more prominently than Leavers – 32 of the second-quoted sources are Remainers, 20 were Leavers; 18 of the third quoted sources were Remainers, nine were Leavers. Four of the third placed quotes were from Remainers; three were given by Leavers.

4.14.1 Notable Others

At the outset of this study it was intended to document and quote a broader spectrum of individuals, though some louder voices inevitably rose to prominence. Some high-profile politicians who were quoted but did not receive the same volume of attention that the lead players received included the following –

- Conservative politician and Leader of the House of Commons Chris Grayling was quoted three times – once in *The Times*, twice in *The Belfast Telegraph*.
- Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Phillip Hammond was quoted three times in *The Belfast Telegraph*.

Interestingly Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Jeremy Hunt – who served in this post from 2012 to 2018 with three different prime ministers – a notable duration in British politics, and in particular a Conservative government, was not quoted at all in any of the three publications studied. The same is true of Minister of State for Employment Priti Patel. Future Prime Minister Theresa May was quoted, though due to the low volume of coverage she received as a quiet Remainer, was moved into the ‘Remain MP’ category rather than occupying a named slot of her own.

4.15 Most Front-Page Coverage – *The Times* and *The Irish Times*

Front-page covers in *The Belfast Telegraph* cannot be discussed in this section as the online version of the newspaper was used to tabulate results. The results from the paper were processed without page numbers.

Both *The Times* and *The Irish Times* printed the same amount of front-page Brexit-orientated stories between June 20 and June 24, 2016 – seven.

Brexit had at least one story dedicated to the subject on the front of both papers for each of the five days of Brexit week. On one day, June 22, *The Irish Times* ran three Brexit stories on their front page. Poll results and reaction make up three of the seven stories in *The Irish Times*, while another is related to the primary vote, whose headline uses the word ‘poll’. Just two of *The Times*’ front-page stories relate to polls, though one also references the final vote.

While much of the front-page content covered in each paper was similar – both papers referenced the same YouGov poll on June 24 and they both documented a bump in the strength of sterling on June 21 – both took different angles on their coverage, with predictable themes present throughout. *The Irish Times*’ stories followed an EU-centric narrative, mentioning the bloc three times and publishing an opinion piece by Martin Wolfe titled ‘Why I believe Britain belongs in Europe’.

This is contrasted by *The Times*’ coverage, which displays a more insular, UK-oriented agenda containing more references to Westminster politicians and going on at the national political level. *The Irish Times* named only one UK politician in their front-page stories – Prime Minister David Cameron, though they named ‘Prime Minister’ once more without direct reference to his name. *The Times* mentions four politicians in seven headlines – UKIP leader Nigel Farage three times, Justice Secretary Michael Gove once, former Mayor of London and future Secretary of State Boris Johnson once and Prime Minister David Cameron once.

Brexit-related front-page headlines in *The Irish Times* and *The Times* between June 20 and June 24, 2016:

The Irish Times

Britain's decision on EU final, warns Cameron; Prime minister tells BBC audience euro and Schengen unavoidable if UK rejoined (*The Irish Times*, June 20, p.1)

Sterling rises as poll shows surge in support for Remain; 53% support staying in EU compared to 46% for Brexit, says ORB survey (*The Irish Times*, June 21, p.1)

Polls show Brexit vote remains too close to call; Both sides issue last-minute pleas to voters in debate at Wembley Arena (*The Irish Times*, June 22, p.1)

Cameron predicts investment surge if Remain vote wins (*The Irish Times*, June 22, p.1)

Why I believe Britain belongs in Europe – editorial by Martin Wolfe (*The Irish Times*, June 22, p.1)

UK voters go to the polls as EU membership hangs in the balance; Rival campaign leaders make final appeals to public as result remains too close to call (*The Irish Times*, June 23, p.1)

Takeaways and tension as traders wait through night; Sterling rises to highest level this year as YouGov poll results revealed (*The Irish Times*, June 24, p.1)

The Times

Brexit camp divided as senior Tory walks out; Gove and Farage accused of spreading hatred EU referendum (*The Times*, June 20, p.1)

Pound soars as markets bet on a Remain victory; City warns of further shocks in 48-hour countdown to referendum; Boost for markets as City bets on a Remain victory (*The Times*, June 21, p.1)

FTSE chiefs join forces in huge vote for Remain; Don't risk jobs, warn 1,300 business leaders; No 10 putting pressure on business chiefs, says Boris (*The Times*, June 22, p.1)

Britain's Brexit revolt;? Huge gains for Leave campaign in referendum? Nail-biting finish as Farage warns genie 'out of bottle'; Early results point to a nail-biting finish (*The Times*, June 23, p.1)

Final polls leave Britain's future on a knife edge; Leaders make their final pleas (*The Times*, June 23, p.1)

Tory MPs launch bid to save Cameron; Tories unite for Operation Save Dave (*The Times*, June 24, p.1)

Closest call for Britain; Farage concedes it 'looks like Remain will edge it'; Four-point lead over Leave in final YouGov poll; Brexit Tory MPs pledge loyalty to prime minister (*The Times*, June 24, p.1)

None of the front-page stories printed by either paper is judged to be written from a Leave perspective. All but one *Irish Times* story – 'UK voters go to the polls as EU membership hangs in the balance; Rival campaign leaders make final appeals to public as result remains too close to call' (*The Irish Times*, June 23, p.1) – had at least a slight tilt to Europe albeit some from a financially-driven, and thus, for the purposes of this study, an unreliable perspective. Martin Wolfe's editorial on June 22 and David Cameron's prominent warnings point to a decidedly pro-Remain bias.

While most of the headlines in *The Times* were also judged to be written from a neutral perspective, two were viewed as being written from a Remain point of view. 'Pound soars as markets bet on a Remain victory; City warns of further shocks in 48-hour countdown to referendum; Boost for markets as City bets on a Remain victory' (*The Times*, June 21, p.1) and 'FTSE chiefs join forces in huge vote for Remain; Don't risk jobs, warn 1,300 business leaders; No 10 putting pressure on business chiefs, says Boris' (*The Times*, June 22, p.1). As with the headlines in *The Irish Times*, both were categorised as being financial news.

4.16 Positioning of Stories Within Publication

Both *The Times* and *The Irish Times*, on average, positioned Leave stories closer to the front of the paper than Remain. The mean – as opposed to median – position of Leave stories in *The Irish Times* is on page 8, whereas the mean of Remain stories appeared on page 10. In *The Times*, the mean page number on which Leave stories appeared was page 21; for Remain stories, page 25.

4.17 Talking Points

This sub-section will discuss a number of key talking points extracted from the data already discussed in the Results section. The points discussed will form a narrative drawn from the facts and figures stated and will form the basis for the conclusion, which in turn will apply established media theory, comparisons from the wider media landscape and past papers on similar topics.

The section will discuss –

- Evidence of bias and contextual divergence
- Contrasts in national narrative
- The limited coverage provided to leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn
- Applicable Audience Theory

4.17.1 Evidence of Bias and Contextual Divergence

National news media tend to carry similar stories day-to-day depending on the news cycle. Stories can be accompanied by a narrative or be purely fact-based depending on the event and often, particularly with issues of national importance or emotive subject matter, carry accompanying opinion – the bias of the writer, editor or publication emerging from their perception of the events.

Vast amounts of media were published in the lead up to Brexit. A study by King's College London (Moore, Ramsey, 2017, p.4) found that 14,779 Brexit articles were published across 20 UK publications in the 10 weeks prior to Brexit; 195 of 550 front pages during this time were dedicated to Brexit news (p.8).

A study by the Reuters Institute, referenced in the Literature Review section, found that 41% of all articles across British media leading up to Brexit displayed a pro-Leave bias (Levy, Aslan and Bironzo, 2016, p.5). Just 27% showed a Pro-Remain bias despite many polls showing leads for Remain up until the day of the vote. YouGov, ComRes, ORB and Ipsos Mori all published polls in the lead up to Brexit showing slender Remain leads (BBC, 2016). A

BBC compilation of polls over the 30 days prior to Brexit showed a lead of one percentage point to Remain, with YouGov being the only outlier, publishing two-point leads to Leave on 19 June, 2016.

This study found that 63% of stories in *The Irish Times*, 35% of stories in *The Times* and 50% of stories in *The Belfast Telegraph* were Remain-orientated (an average of 49%), and that 6% of *Irish Times* stories, 2% of stories in *The Times* and 13% of stories in *The Belfast Telegraph* were Leave-orientated (an average of 7%).

This study has found that while this is broadly true patterns in partisanship can emerge. The disparity between the results of the much larger Reuters study, which also looked at *The Times*, though in not as much detail or as concise a time period as this study, also provides evidence to this effect.

The Reuters study found that tabloids tended to be among the most one-sided print media, citing the *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* as the three most biased Leave papers. *The Guardian* – an initial candidate for this study, though removed from consideration due to its strong left-leaning stance and strong editorial biases – *The Financial Times* and *The Daily Mirror* were cited as being the most prominent Remain-leaning papers (Levy, Aslan and Bironzo, 2016 ,p.5). This finding appears to reinforce this study's decision to omit tabloid titles for their overtly emotive use of language and confirms its findings that financial news was broadly pro-Remain.

This study shows some examples of narrative divergence – where a newspaper has chosen to report its own version of events, contrary to the framing used in other titles, or not report at all.

One of the most telling instances of this is when Secretary of State for Justice and prominent Brexiteer Michael Gove compared pro-Remain scientists to Nazis. This story appeared in a negative context in both *The Irish Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph* but not in *The Times*, where Gove had formerly acted as news editor. *The Times* stated that that 'despite facing criticism over the claim, Mr Gove persisted yesterday' before continuing to quote Mr Gove's remarks and stating that rumours held that he may quit cabinet if Remain won.

Both *The Belfast Telegraph* and *The Times* mention Donald Trump in a headline apiece – in the former an article stating that David Cameron has no plans to meet the American presidential candidate, and in *The Times* an article about Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan among others, attempting to gag media. There is no mention of Trump in *Irish Times* Brexit coverage, apparently displaying that the Irish paper has no – or less – interest in the foreign relations of the UK, a third-party state in this context.

The Irish Times and *The Belfast Telegraph* carried stories about the resignation of Baroness Sayeeda Warsi from the Conservative Party, whereas *The Times*, while mentioning the event did not name the Baroness in their headline, labelling her as a senior Tory and instead choosing to name Michael Gove and Nigel Farage, more prominent politicians, and focusing their story on their exploits.

Interestingly, though not surprisingly, all three papers carried stories about Northern Ireland and the questions around the border, despite two of the papers not being among the most popular titles in the region. All three also carried regular updates in fluctuations in the price of sterling.

4.17.2 Contrasts in National Narrative

The readership of the three titles studied cover a specific geographical area – *The Times* is generally read by UK readers, primarily in England, *The Irish Times* is predominantly read by readers in the Irish Republic and *The Belfast Telegraph* is aimed at readers in Northern Ireland. There is territorial crossover, with *The Times* in particular, crossing boundaries, being widely available in all three jurisdictions despite also having an Irish edition, and *The Irish Times* being stocked on many newsagents' shelves in Northern Ireland.

There is a divergence in national narrative along these lines in the content produced in each publication. While it is self-evident, and supported by the findings in this study, that regional affairs will take precedence among papers aimed at a specific geographic area, which is true of all three titles studied here, though there were some interesting and unexpected anomalies.

While a story about the Queen of England apparently declaring for Leave at a dinner party made the papers in *The Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph*, it didn't appear in *The Irish Times*, despite being relevant to the overall campaign narrative and a staple in the news cycle across the UK on the day it was reported.

Similarly, a story about former Manchester United and England footballer David Beckham backing Remain appeared in *The Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph*, but not in *The Irish Times*.

Both newspapers based on the island of Ireland quoted British Prime Minister David Cameron more than any other politician. This may show that these parties are leading with the voice of government of another territory, similar to for example, how an Irish newspaper is more likely to lead with a narrative or opinion espoused by Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron or Pedro Sanchez rather than their opposition. Framing events from one side or another add value and psychological weight to an argument (Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p.27).

Johnson-Cartee discusses the impressions of the American media on foreigners – its perceived arrogance and tendency to pontificate – and the disconnects between US leaders such as Woodrow Wilson and Ronald Regan and other world leaders, notably post First World War leaders and Ayatollah Khomeini. These comparisons, though of another time, can be used to accurately represent the disconnect between conflicting and unmarriageable ideologies and the tendency of news outlets to report from their own viewpoint or the view which is most accessible. Such divergences in the Brexit debate can be observed.

A cultural divergence between both Ireland-based papers and *The Times* is especially noticeable. Articles on perceptions on Brexit in France, Spain and Germany appear in *The Times*, though none are mentioned in headlines in either *The Irish Times* or *The Belfast Telegraph*. Again, this appears to be evidence of Irish readers showing no – or less – interest in British third-party foreign affairs.

An opinion piece by former Northern Irish Deputy First Minister and IRA man Martin McGuinness in *The Irish Times* is unlikely to appear in the same setting across the water.

Focus on Scotland seems to follow a pattern of interest relative to cultural proximity with three stories dedicated to affairs there in *The Belfast Telegraph*, two in *The Times* and one in *The Irish Times*, though the sample size is not large enough to confirm this as a trend.

4.17.3 Limited Corbyn Coverage

Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn is the fourth most quoted politician in this study behind Conservative Party leader David Cameron, prominent Brexiteer and Conservative Party politician Boris Johnson and UKIP Leader Nigel Farage. The fifth most quoted politician was Secretary of State for Justice Michael Gove.

Corbyn was criticised by media for taking a neutral stance to Brexit, a stance which may explain why he received so little coverage compared to other campaign leaders. This position angered some frontbenchers and left the Remain campaign without a major political backer.

A coherent Labour Remain campaign never captured the public imagination, or as evident in this study, headlines or column inches. This is despite ex-Prime Minister and Chancellor Gordon Brown rallying for a Remain vote. Brown, who served as UK Prime Minister until May 2010, when his Labour Party was defeated by David Cameron's Conservative Party, had largely remained on the political sidelines during the tenure of his successors as party leader Ed Miliband and Jeremy Corbyn. Brown's campaign compared the Leave campaign to Donald Trump's bid for the US presidency (*The Belfast Telegraph*, 2016). He served as a popular Remain figure among Labour supporters inspiring the following headline –

‘Gordon Brown to the rescue: Former PM makes extraordinary return to take over Labour's EU campaign by promising extra support for communities facing the strain of immigration as Corbyn takes back seat’ (Dathean, *Mail Online*, 2016)

Despite his effort, Brown failed to gain enough traction to secure a Remain victory or to be counted among the most quoted politicians in this study. Mentions of Brown's campaign were so few he is labelled as a ‘Remain MP’, and were not comparable to more prominent figures, including Corbyn.

In late 2019, Corbyn defended his party's neutral stance during Brexit (BBC, 2019) and declared that if there were to be a second referendum he would mandate that his party approach it with the same stance (Stewart and Walker, *The Guardian*, 2019).

Brown and Corbyn clashed two years later, this time directly, when they disagreed on Labour's approach to EU-UK Brexit talks. In 2018, during protracted deal talks with the EU, in which Prime Minister Theresa May was struggling to hammer out a deal and subsequently have an agreement ratified by parliament, Brown rebuked Corbyn's assertion that Brexit could not be stopped, instead siding with future Labour leader and then Shadow Brexit Secretary Keir Starmer, and insisting that Corbyn 'Respect the Labour Party,' and its anti-Brexit voices (Yedroudi, *The Express*, 2018).

Corbyn's failure to engage the British public did not take long to manifest itself. Not long after the vote on Sunday, June 26 veteran MP and sitting cabinet member Hillary Benn was sacked by Corbyn following rumours of a plot to remove the party leader from his position (Wilkinson, Henderson and Millward, *The Telegraph*, 2016).

His lukewarm attitude to the EU meant that he was at a disadvantage when he tried to compete with more passionate characters on each side. 'I won't take the blame, says Labour Leader' read a headline in *The Times* on June 21. In the piece, Corbyn asserts that he would not take the responsibility for a Leave vote should it transpire and that he is not a lover of the bloc. It is possible to infer from this headline that the Labour leader was aware that he would draw criticism from his party for not campaigning on a platform more representative of the party's values than his own. As per *The Belfast Telegraph*, Corbyn was quoted during Brexit week declaring that the European Union must change if the UK electorate reject Brexit, a declaration again not towing the line of either Remain or Leave campaigns.

In the lead up to his resounding Labour Party leadership bid in 2015 Corbyn admitted that he had voted 'No' to remaining in the EU in the 1975 UK European Union (then the European Economic Community) (*Reuters*, 2015).

Launching the Labour Party's Remain campaign 'In for Britain' in 2015 was delegated to former Home Secretary and then author and backbench MP Alan Johnson, who had stood down from frontbench politics to concentrate on family life in 2011.

Reflections on content both part of this study and external, through events prior to the referendum and afterwards, paint a coherent picture of Corbyn's apathy to the Brexit campaign and provide valid reason for the low amount of coverage he received compared to his peers. Corbyn was the only prominent politician among five most quoted in this study from a liberal background, which may suggest that the Remain campaign – which relied on mostly liberal backers – may have been more successful if Corbyn had not been Labour Party leader at the time of the referendum, though this is a largely speculative conclusion.

4.17.4 Application of Audience Theory

Key elements of audience theory can be documented throughout the week of Brexit. This study's Literature Review outlined some examples of the Brexit-related content on the media spectrum. With the benefit of a complete study, it is possible to highlight specific examples of theory in the newspapers studied.

News Framing

Examples of news framing in Brexit debate are plentiful. The debate centres around two ideologies and a battle over the electorate's perception of each side's message.

Framing is most evident in the financial news and opinion-based stories across the three titles. As mentioned already financial news was almost exclusively pro-Remain and although this is largely due to the narrative being drawn from the City of London, it enabled Remainers to seize upon this and use comment from industry professionals to shape their message.

'Pound Soars as Market Bets on Remain Victory,' (*The Times*, June 21) is a prime example of pro-Remain framing in financial media. The story being carried on the first page, with Prime Minister and Remainer David Cameron was the only prominent Brexit figure quoted, warning that Brexit is 'irreversible' and 'not just for five years or ten years, for our lifetimes'.

Billionaire financier George Soros was also quoted in the same article, warning of the impact of a potential UK exit on the public's personal finances.

David Cameron claimed (*The Belfast Telegraph*, June 21) that the UK would be 'more insular and inward-looking post-Brexit'. The following day the same paper ran an article quoting David Cameron as saying that the UK enjoys 'the best of both worlds' in the EU and as a single power. Cameron mentioned the term 'United Europe' twice in his interview.

The Leave campaign's framing effort appeared to centre on immigration policy, though by the week of the referendum the Leave camp were on the defensive on this issue. *The Irish Times* reported on June 20 that the 'Pro-Brexit side seeks to tone down anti-immigration rhetoric'. 'Don't fall for Leave's promises on immigration; Brexit leaders won't have the will to deliver the huge reduction that supporters are expecting,' David Cameron, (*The Times*, June 20) and 'Michael Gove denies Tories' 2015 immigration pledge was a lie' (*The Belfast Telegraph*, June 21) serve as examples.

Hypodermic Needle

The hypodermic needle theory was used by both sides in the debate providing messages of warning and of optimism, but much of the straight-talking comment across the papers studied came from parties not directly involved in Brexit.

On June 21 *The Belfast Telegraph* reported that 'Brexit would be "detrimental to the UK"', the comment being attributed to billionaire Hong Kong businessman Li Ka-Shing.

Minister for Finance Michael Noonan asserted in *The Irish Times* on July 22 that Brexit 'could reduce economic growth', and the same paper carried a headline 'British Tech Firms Worry Over Brexit' on the same day.

Both of the UK papers spelled out unambiguous economic warnings. 'Almost all economists are sitting on one side of the Brexit seesaw' (*The Times*, June 20) and 'Instant growth downgrade and recession threat as economy hit by Brexit' (*The Belfast Telegraph*, June 24) serve as examples. 'Don't fall for Leave's promises on immigration; Brexit leaders won't have

the will to deliver the huge reduction that supporters are expecting' (*The Times*, June 20) is another.

Uses and Gratifications

Just over 72% of voters turned out for the Brexit referendum, compared to 67.3% (BBC, 2016) for the 2019 general election and 68.8% in the 2017 general election according to the Commons Library (McInnes, Commons Library, 2019). The 2016 Brexit referendum drew a higher turnout than any UK vote since the 1992 general election. This is in no small part due to the emotive subject matter delivered by both sides through the media.

Providing gratification through messaging is essential in any campaign, arguably none more so than when the apparent fate of a country is at stake. The use of Brexit media by the electorate is not just to be kept informed but to be gratified, and from studying the wording of Brexit headlines in the chosen titles, it is clear that the media in the two UK-based papers oblige.

The word 'anger' appeared in two headlines in *The Times* during Brexit week, once in *The Belfast Telegraph* and did not appear in any headlines in *The Irish Times*. The word 'warn' appears 18 times in headlines in *The Belfast Telegraph*, four times in *The Times* and twice in *The Irish Times*. The word 'independence' appears five times each in headlines in *The Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph* and in none in *The Irish Times*.

We can surmise from this evidence – particularly as there is a foreign paper in the mix to act as a control – that the two UK publications studied were keen to draw readers using attempts at gratification, satiating their desire for emotive content.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine whether a quantifiable difference existed between three newspapers of record in Ireland and the UK, when reporting on Brexit in the week leading up to the referendum. The aim of the study was to answer one primary question and three sub questions.

Primary – Is there a quantifiable level of partisanship in 2016 Brexit referendum coverage when comparing British, Irish and Northern Irish newspapers of record?

Secondary Q1 – Is Brexit broadly portrayed as an opportunity, risk or neutral for Britain?

Secondary Q2 – Is there a bias in opinion-based and/or human-interest reporting in each title?

Secondary Q3 – Which side received more exposure in the three titles studied?

5.1 Is there quantifiable partisanship in 2016 Brexit referendum coverage when comparing British, Irish and Northern Irish newspapers of record?

Two large studies cited in the Results and Analysis section – by Reuters and King’s College London – both found that UK-based print media displayed a pro-Leave bias. These studies covered all mainstream UK newspapers, both broadsheet and tabloid.

The Reuters study states that “There is no doubt that Britain has a highly partisan press. Successive studies have shown a strong correlation between press readership and voting patterns but establishing the direction of any causal link is much harder” (Levy, Aslan, Bironzo, 2016, p.11).

The Reuters study found that *The Daily Express*, *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* were the most biased Leave orientated newspapers, and that *The Guardian*, *The Financial Times* and *The Mirror* were most in favour of Remain. This seems to suggest that broadsheet newspapers were more inclined towards Remain than tabloids. *The Daily Star*, another prominent tabloid, ran with more Leave stories.

This study found that, broadly speaking, *The Times*, the only British paper included in both this study and in the Reuters study, published more Remain-leaning pieces – in line with its declaration of support – than Leave, which the Reuters study asserted was the case, though both covered different lengths of time.

This study covered just five days, whereas the Reuters study scrutinised samplings two days a week for four months prior to the referendum. This study found that *The Irish Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph*, which as non-mainstream UK papers were not included in the Reuters study, also published more pro-Remain pieces than pro-Leave. Thirty-eight percent of stories published in *The Times* during Brexit week were Remain-orientated, with 62% stories in *The Irish Times* and 50% in *The Belfast Telegraph* also tilting in this direction. Two percent of stories in *The Times*, 6% in *The Irish Times* and 13% in *The Belfast Telegraph* were considered Leave orientated. This evidence suggests that a pro-Remain bias existed in the newspapers of record in Irish, Northern Irish and British newspapers when reporting on Brexit in the week before the referendum.

Other aspects of this study suggest that Leave received more coverage than apparent from initial inspection –

- Three of the five most quoted politicians across the publications studied were Leave campaigners
- *The Times* and *The Irish Times* positioned Leave stories closer to the front of their editions than Remain stories

Results and Analysis discussion alluded to a cohesive, centralised and pointed Vote Leave campaign. This was complemented by what we can see in hindsight was a savvy and astute management team, which was better prepared than its fractured pro-Remain alternative. Although it managed to capture fewer column inches in the newspapers of record, it succeeded in conveying its message through popular tabloids and its official website voteleavetakecontrol.org. Throughout the campaign, the site carried – and still carries, as of June 2020 – messages that claim leaving the EU will save the UK £350m per week; it espouses the merit of trading as an individual trader rather than part of the EU bloc, and urges the electorate to vote “Leave” to avoid the expansion of the EU and Turkey’s

accession. David Cameron was later accused of lying over Turkey's accession bid, which with the benefit of four years hindsight observers will note was never a likely reality.

5.2 Is Brexit portrayed as an opportunity, risk or neutral for Britain?

Brexit was broadly portrayed as a risk for the UK in *The Irish Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph*, with more neutral stories in *The Times*, though here too, the number of stories which portrayed Brexit as a risk than an opportunity.

Six percent of *Irish Times* stories portrayed Brexit as an opportunity for the UK, compared to 8% in *The Times* and 21% in *The Belfast Telegraph*. Just over 44% of voters in Northern Ireland voted to leave the EU, giving an impression of the influence the media may have had on voters. Conversely, 53% of English voters cast their ballot to leave the EU, *The Times'* primary market, though the media landscape is more crowded in this market.

Financial stories in particular portrayed Brexit in a negative light, with four stories in *The Belfast Telegraph*, one story in *The Irish Times* and none in *The Times* portraying Brexit as an opportunity. This is particularly pertinent given the fact-based nature of financial reporting as opposed to the sometimes speculative and abstract nature of political and human-interest and opinion pieces.

Some key headlines, which punctuate this point, include '£45bn wiped off FTSE 100 in day of chaos on global markets after Brexit vote' (*The Belfast Telegraph*, June 24), 'Long queues as panic-buyers stock up on foreign currency' (*The Times*, June 23) and 'Iseq soars most since 2010 on hopes Britain will stay in the EU' (*The Irish Times*, June 21).

As mentioned in the last section, credit should go to the Leave campaign and its ability to target and mobilise its voter base. The same team, led by campaign director Dominic Cummings, current Prime Minister Boris Johnson and current Chancellor for the Duchy of Lancaster Michael Gove later played central roles in capturing the largest Conservative parliamentary majority since 1987 in the 2019 UK General Election. The coverage provided by tabloids and a minority of broadsheets – including *The Sunday Times* and *The Telegraph* – helped the Leave campaign to a win, without, as this study suggests, needing the coverage of more esteemed titles.

5.3 Is There a Bias in Opinion-Based and/or Human-Interest Reporting in Each Title?

Human-interest and opinion pieces can act as a mirror on a publication, providing readers with a sense of a publication's place on the political spectrum and the ideas and thoughts of those responsible for its release.

As mentioned in the Results and Analysis section, all three papers ran similar numbers of human-interest and opinion pieces in the week before the Brexit referendum. Three such articles in *The Irish Times* were judged to be from a Leave perspective - 'There's a lot of talk about taking back our country. Take it back from where? Remainers thin on are the ground while Leavers fret about jobs and security' (June 21) being an example. Remain-leaning pieces published in the same title that week include 'Hateful public discourse has real and horrifying consequences' (June 20) and 'Shakespeare's view of the world was a European view. He was not isolationist'; 'In the Bard's home town it can be hard to tell the tourists from migrants' (June 22) offered counter points.

The Times offered four Leave-orientated articles but 13 neutral pieces – more than either *The Irish Times* or *The Belfast Telegraph*. This is surprising given that it is closer to the action than the other titles, and its pages more coveted by interest groups. "EU will never be the same again after Britain's day of reckoning" (June 23), "Civilised' campaign descends into bitter exchange of insults" (June 23) and "MPs need to drain the swamp they created; The referendum battle has degenerated into xenophobia. As MPs mourn Jo Cox, they must all look at their own behaviour" (June 21) offered thought-provoking insights into life in Westminster and campaigners' actions on the trail.

The Belfast Telegraph published five leave-orientated human-interest pieces – more than *The Irish Times* or *The Times*, 'EU referendum: Global outlook needed for expansion' (June 21) and 'May talking nonsense on border, claims Kilclooney' (June 22) acting as illustrative pieces towing the Leave agenda line.

Despite the prevalence of neutral and Leave-orientated pieces in two of the three papers, all three leaned towards Remain, *The Irish Times* most so, followed by *The Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph*. In addition to this statement being factual empirically, it is noticeable in

the headings and content of the articles too, as evident by the two *Belfast Telegraph* headings quoted in the previous paragraph which serve effectively as soapboxes for Leave campaigners. As is the case in the paper's daily content, its mix of cross-community views and opinions, expertly balanced in the region's only mass-produced dual-community publication, flanked by *News Letter* and *The Irish News* on either side, is a testament to its impartiality and ability to remain as a market leader in a media segment heavily polarised along community lines.

Hard-nosed, no-nonsense Remain pieces from Fintan O'Toole, Una Mullally – who occasionally writes for the left-leaning *Guardian* in the UK – and op-eds from heavy-hitting politicians like John Bruton and Martin McGuinness leave *Irish Times* readers in no doubt of the paper's editorial stance on Brexit.

The Times' human-interest and opinion coverage was less polarising than the Irish-based papers, with articles – as mentioned above – heavily neutral and in many cases, difficult to assign to one category or another. This could be chalked up to internal divisions within the paper – with its Sunday edition opting to back Leave – or a conscious effort to tow the line.

5.4 Which side received more exposure in the three titles studied?

In the Results and Analysis section the data gathered to answer this study's primary content was broken down and re-purposed in a number of ways. It was segmented to produce graphics illustrating the most quoted politician, which side received most quotes, the most quoted politician per day, which side had most front-page stories covered and the average number of each page story in *The Times* and *The Irish Times*.

The data was used primarily to illustrate how despite most stories in all papers being Remain leaning, the Leave side received, on balance, a greater scope of coverage in individual articles. Most politicians quoted across the three papers came from Leave backgrounds – three of the top five, with Leave stories also positioned closer to the front of each publication. In a measure of editorial strength, six Remain stories were published on *The Irish Times'* front page in the five days in the run up to the Brexit referendum, while no

Leave stories were published. Two Remain-orientated stories were published on *The Times*' front page, with none advocating for Leave.

Boris Johnson, Michael Gove and other prominent leavers were heavily quoted, with only David Cameron appearing in the top five quoted sources. High-profile Remainers like former prime ministers Gordon Brown, Tony Blair and John Major, as well as future prime minister Theresa May, received very little attention and largely failed to attract the considerable coverage their names would typically command in the titles covered. Each day across the week studied, at least two of the three top-quoted sources from each publication were prominent Leavers.

Much of the campaign narrative was controlled by the Leave campaign with references to special trade deals, farming subsidies in Northern Ireland, border control – with reference to French demands on border changes post-Brexit and a run on the Irish passport office – cropping up in the papers studied prior to the vote. Despite this and the considerable coverage afforded to worried business leaders and city workers concerned about the impact on their businesses and the wider economy, the Leave campaign continued to capture the British public's imagination through patriotic soundbites and hearty calls to action. 'If we don't break free we never will', wrote prominent Conservative activist Tim Montgomerie in *The Times* (June 23). According to *The Belfast Telegraph*, Leading Brexiteer Nigel Farage declared that 'Win or lose the battle, we will win the war' (June 24) the day of the referendum. The Leave side's dominant framing of the referendum as a battle mobilised support from disenchanted voters and despite polling showing a Remain lead up to the referendum, managed to carry the vote across the line.

Perhaps the only notable exception was in Scotland, where First Minister Nicola Sturgeon was closely followed by media: she was quoted nine times in *The Belfast Telegraph* and eight in *The Times* during the period studied. Sturgeon used nationalist messages and like 'Vote Remain for Independence' to capture the public's imagination, a similar tactic to the Leave campaign but for the opposite camp. Sturgeon's message also got through as Remain won every constituency in Scotland.

5.5 Future research opportunities

Brexit-related media content will continue to be poured over and scrutinised in the coming years and decades. This study aims to fulfil a small part of a much larger picture, providing a comprehensive comparative contextual analysis of three major newspapers of record. Other future studies will undoubtedly focus on other segments – tabloid publications, internet news sites, news broadcasts and comparative studies of different platforms to name a but a few possibilities. This study has cited two much larger predecessors undertaken by Reuters and King’s College London. It is hoped that this study will be similarly useful to future research on this topic.

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