"Stop Giving Us the Negatives of the Other Side's Aims": The EU referendum through letters to the editor

Iñaki Garcia-Blanco (garcia-blancoi@cardiff.ac.uk)
School of Journalism, Media and Culture - Cardiff University (United Kingdom)

Lucy Bennett (bennettl@cardiff.ac.uk)
School of Journalism, Media and Culture - Cardiff University (United Kingdom)

Abstract:
The referendum on Britain's membership of the EU gave citizens the final say on one of the most controversial political issues in modern Britain, crossing social classes, traditional political cleavages, and political parties. In an attempt to examine how the public made sense of Brexit and its potential consequences, we analyse <u>all</u> letters to the editor discussing Brexit or the campaign published in British daily national newspapers in the two months before the referendum. Through a content analysis of 1,419 letters, we examine the main themes, capturing the key concerns, criticisms, and political aspirations expressed by citizens. Leave messages largely dominated in Leave newspapers, whereas a wider range of voices were represented in Remain titles. Leave voices, therefore, resonated more strongly throughout the letters. Our analysis points to changing forms of public debate: in a debate dominated by negativity, readers mainly argued <u>against</u> leaving or remaining in the EU, as opposed to arguing in favour of these options, to the extent that some readers expressed frustration with the negativity of the campaigns, and of media coverage. Ultimately, this study tentatively explores whether these fora constituted arenas for debate, or off-line echo-chambers.

The United Kingdom's membership of the European Union (EU) has been one of the most divisive issues in British contemporary politics (Geddes 2013; Oliver 2015a), transcending party divisions, and class lines (Smith 2012). A late joiner to the European project, the UK was famously labelled as "an awkward partner" (George 1998). British membership of the European Community was controversial since the outset. In 1975, the first nationwide referendum in the history of the UK was called to decide whether the country should stay in the ECC. Early analyses of that referendum expected the vote would have finally settled the question (Butler and Kitzinger 1976). The anti-European discourse of the so-called Eurosceptics, however, never disappeared from British politics (Gifford 2008). This sentiment was fuelled–at least partially–by a ferocious press, constructing the EU as a "not just undemocratic, but increasingly totalitarian" (Kavanagh 2007) organisation where "seventy-five per cent of our laws are made by unelected Eurocrats in Brussels" (Hamilton 2009), riddled with "appalling waste, greed and corruption aboard the world's biggest gravy train" (Hughes 2004), and which constituted the embryo of "a federal superstate" (Glover 2001:13). The veracity of many anti-EU claims in the British press has been frequently questioned (Dougal 2003), constituting a textbook example of post-truth avant la lettre. The European question became such a divisive issue that at different points in the past the three main political parties advocated to hold a referendum to settle the issue (Oliver 2015a, 2015b).

Fulfilling an electoral manifesto pledge to hold an in/out EU referendum, David Cameron renegotiated the terms of Britain's membership–subsequently characterised as "pathetic" (Daily Mail 2016) and "thin gruel" (The Times 2016). Following a vote in the House of Commons, an overwhelming majority agreed for a referendum to be

held on 23rd June 2016. David Cameron and George Osborne–then prime minister and chancellor of the exchequer–were the most senior government figures supporting the Remain campaign, which eminently focused on stability, and the risks to economic prosperity entailed by leaving Britain's main trading market. Labelled as 'project fear' by the Brexit camp, Remain campaigners highlighted Britain's high dependency on EU workers; the benefits of a borderless area for goods, services and citizens, and the uncertainty that voting to leave would bring to Britain. The Leave camp–whose most prominent supporters were Michael Gove (then Secretary of State for Justice), Boris Johnson (former Mayor of London), and Nigel Farage (then leader of UKIP, originally a single-issue anti-EU party)–campaigned to take back control of British borders, free the UK from EU regulations and red tape, and open new trading opportunities with markets outside Europe.

The campaign, described in the Guardian (2016) as "nasty, brutish and seemingly endless" and in The Economist (2016a:24) as "bad-tempered and unenlightening", fuelled unprecedented levels of anger (Wahl-Jorgensen 2016), particularly towards immigrants and members of the political elite. Whilst anti-immigration and anti-elitism constitute defining tropes of tabloid discourse (Conboy 2006), these narratives were also embraced by Leave prominent campaigners and by broadsheets supporting Leave during the EU referendum campaign.

Presented as a triumph of populism after the results (Blair 2016; The Economist 2016b), the victory of the Leave camp was interpreted as a message that went beyond the binary choice of remaining or leaving the EU. An editorial in the New York Times (2016) characterised the vote as:

a cry of anger and frustration from more than half the country against those

who wield power, wealth and privilege, both in their own government and in

Brussels, and against global forces in a world that they felt was squeezing

them out.

The convulsive, fractious political period after the referendum underlined the multiple

understandings of what Brexit meant for politicians and the public. Despite the

constant references to the 'will of the people', evidence on what the public expected

from Brexit is far from illuminating. This is the case in media content–e.g. Stewart

and Asthana's (2016) in the Guardian, or BBC News' "The Brexit Panel" (2018),

both based on focus groups–and in academic works (e.g. Curtice 2016). Academic

research on citizens' views around the EU referendum has prominently focused on

social media posts. Little attention has been paid to newspaper letters, which offer two

distinctive features. First, letters have been selected for publication, and therefore

deemed to contain views worth considering. Second, they also appear in print, and

can arguably capture views of a wider section of the population, potentially having a

greater reach than social media posts or news comments. Thus, by focusing on

newspaper letters, this study delivers a vital and new contribution to EU referendum

scholarship.

Through a content analysis of all the letters to the editor published in British national

newspapers two months before the vote, this research explores how citizens discussed

the issues at stake during the referendum campaign in letter pages. This project also

illustrates how British national newspapers helped to construct citizens' political

motivations during this consequential political event. Our interest in letters to the editor is justified precisely because of their role in the mediated construction of citizens' political views, since letters are presented to readers as unsolicited, non-mediated content expressing the views of fellow citizens in their own words. Whilst we do not know the content, breadth of opinion, and tenor of <u>all</u> letters each newspaper received–and which letters were potentially discarded–, all published letters underwent a selection process deeming them worthy of publication. Through publishing some letters–and discarding others–newspapers legitimise views they contain, indicating these views are worth considering (Richardson and Franklin 2003).

Our analysis shows that public debate on Brexit in letters to the editor was dominated by negativity. Letters contained few arguments supporting leaving or remaining in the EU: readers, instead, mainly argued <u>against</u> these possibilities. Pro-Leave messages largely dominated in Leave newspapers, whereas Remain titles published a more diverse range of voices. Consequently, Leave voices resonated more strongly in the letters.

Letters to the editor as a means for political expression
The journalistic institution of letters to the editor has traditionally constituted a prominent platform for citizens' voices to find their way through media content. In a context of essentially one-directional media, letters stand out for their singularity, since they enable citizens to intervene in public debate using their own voices (Wahl-Jorgensen 2007; Nielsen 2010). It could be expected that letters to the editor would be declining in the internet and social media age: news is mainly accessed online and the

use of social media for information continues to grow (Newman et al. 2021), offering readers countless opportunities to comment on news via sites and social media platforms. In this vein, work has explored use of social media during the EU referendum, analysing areas such as influence and stance of Twitter users (Grčar et al 2017), prevalence of echo-chambers (Hänska-Ahy and Bauchowitz 2017) and computational propaganda (Howard and Kollanyi 2016). However, we are exploring letters, rather than social media, due to the differing nature of these forms of expression. Sensu stricto, the letters section does not amount to an open, public forum for citizens (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002a). Letters are subject to a "dual process of mediation" (Coleman and Ross 2010:54) because writers self-select themselves and published letters are filtered, edited, and often abridged. A closer scholarly examination (Wahl-Jorgensen 1999, 2002a, 2002b) shows even further reservations about the potential of letters to embody the Habermasian ideal (Habermas 1989), because of common selection practices, unequal access (possibly leading to some voices being systematically over/under/unrepresented), or the economic–instead of public interest–motivations behind publication. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding its limitations, letters to the editor still constitute a distinctive forum for public debate (Wahl-Jorgensen 2007; Nielsen 2010), enabling citizens to self-represent themselves in the public sphere; providing a public arena for citizens to debate among themselves, and serving as channels of communication between the public and political representatives (McNair 2000).

It could be expected that citizens' participation would be heightened through all available channels–including letters to the editor–during campaigns for elections or referenda, due to the significance of these events in the political cycle. Research

published during electoral campaigns, however, has underlined how the letters page is colonised by political parties through orchestrated "letter writing campaigns to highlight key policies and themes in party platforms" (Richardson and Franklin 2004:476). An analysis of local press coverage of the 2005 UK General Election, found that almost two in ten letters had been written by members of the political elite (Cushion et al. 2006). Following a series of interviews with newspaper professionals, Tunstall (1977) reported that some papers tried to publish a balanced number of letters supporting each party.

Through our analysis of letters to the editor published during the 2016 EU referendum campaign, we tentatively explore whether letters constituted an arena for debate (i.e., a platform for deliberative discussion and exchange of ideas), or an echo chamber/filter bubble (loosely defined as platforms where individuals are fundamentally exposed to like-minded views). Scholars (e.g. Sunstein 2018) have shown concerns with the pernicious effects echo chambers may have upon democracy, particularly in online contexts where contents are determined by algorithms. These views assume that exposure to like-minded views may contribute to uncritical reinforcement of pre-existing beliefs and could eventually lead to further political polarisation and the rise of extremisms. Other scholars, however, question the technological determinism of such suggestion (Bruns 2019), underline that most social media users are embedded in heterogeneous networks (Barberá 2015), and indicate that citizens who consume news online use a variety of news providers (Dubois and Blank 2018).

We also examine whether the general tone of the campaign–which Moore and Ramsay (2017:164) defined as "the UK's most divisive, hostile, negative and fear-provoking of the 21st century", and characterised as "quite negative" by Levy et al. (2016)–permeated readers' letters. Galpin and Trenz (2017: 51) suggest a series of structural and operational factors (from media ownership to journalistic practices such as news selection) contribute to a 'spiral of Euroescepticism', which "can account for the salience of Euroesceptic statements and opinions in the public sphere that then push political parties to contest the EU in predominantly negative terms and limit citizens' options for constructive engagement in the EU democracy". Scholars have long debated the implications of negativity in media and public discourse in general, and during electoral campaigns in particular (Norris 2000). Negativity has been recognised as one of the key news values, and its prevalence in journalistic discourse may well be a consequence of some fundamental tenets of journalistic practice in contemporary western societies, subsumed under the notions of the watchdog role of the press, or the understanding of journalism as the fourth estate (McNair 2000). Some academics, however, have shown concern with (allegedly growing) negativity in news coverage, fearing it could affect citizens' trust in–and engagement with–politics (Moy and Pfau 2000), whilst, conversely, others suggest it could contribute to mobilising the electorate (Schuck et al. 2014).

Previous research has signalled negativity as one of the most prominent features of letters to the editor (Cooper et al. 2009; Hayek et al. 2020), either because they act as a 'social safety valve'–i.e. offering a platform for citizens to vent about matters of public interest (Lander 1972)–, or as a means to offer a counterbalance to the news (Nielsen 2010), or to 'spice up the news' (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002b). Negativity has

also featured prominently in letters to the editor published during British electoral campaigns (Richardson and Franklin 2003).

Our examination of letters to the editor offers vital new insights surrounding mediated citizen views on the EU referendum within a wider landscape where political polarisation is increasing alongside the international populist movement (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008). Examining disillusionment and polarisation, Maher, Igou, and van Tilburg (2018: 205) conclude that "clearly, it is important to explore factors that lead people to adopt more extreme political views". Analysing how citizens expressed themselves through the tones, views and arguments made visible in the letter pages will allow us to further new insight into polarisation and the role letters played during the EU referendum in the British media.

Methodology

We conducted a Nexis UK search using the terms "brexit OR referendum AND letters" across daily national newspapers (excluding Sunday titles) between 22 April and 23 June 2016. The search returned 1,830 documents, manually sifted to discard not relevant material (e.g., those which were not letters, or did not address the referendum). Letters published in the Express are stored in Nexis as independent documents, whereas documents from other newspapers contain all letters published by each newspaper in a day. All relevant letters–regardless if they contained the search terms or not–were included. In the case of the Sun and The Times–which have different editions for Northern Ireland and Scotland–we only analysed the letters published in the National Edition. The Daily Mirror publishes letters under "The Big Issue" heading. An additional search including those words was undertaken. Since

Nexis did not return any letters for the Daily Mail, we manually collected all relevant letters from the physical newspaper. Newspapers invite readers to participate in their letters' pages through a variety of channels (post, email, text, tweets), and we coded each contribution as a letter–regardless if it was a regular letter, email or SMS. We analysed a total of 1,419 letters.

Table 1: Number of letters by newspaper (including political allegiance and stance on referendum)

Newspaper*	Number of letters	Type	Allegiance	Leave/Remain
The Sun	260	Popular	Right	Leave
Daily Mail	276	Midmarket	Right	Leave
Daily Mirror	29	Popular	Centre-Left	Remain
Daily Telegraph	283	Quality	Centre-Right	Leave
The Times	109	Quality	Centre-Right	Remain
Daily Express	88	Midmarket	Right	Leave
I	56	Quality	Liberal Centre	None**
The Guardian	207	Quality	Centre-Left	Remain
The Independent	111	Online	Liberal Centre	Remain

*Newspapers listed by circulation in June 2016 (higher first)
**The I did not declare a position, although their coverage overall supported Remain (Loughborough University 2016)

Our coding sheet explored different elements within letters: allegiance towards voting, letter author(s), themes, among others. The corpus of themes was developed alongside our piloting, to achieve a more comprehensive range. The coding frame was designed, tested, and refined by both authors. The second author coded all letters. The first author coded 10 percent of letters for the intercoder reliability test. An average agreement of 91.9 percent was achieved in all relevant variables. The lowest Cohen's Kappa score was achieved in the allegiance variable (0.815), whereas the highest score was obtained in the style variable (0.917).

The Brexit debate in the letters page

There was a remarkable numerical difference in the overall number of letters published in Leave newspapers (907), almost doubling letters published in Remain papers (456). This difference is only partially explained by the Mail and Sun publishing short contributions under the 'Straight to the point' and the 'TXT to us' headings, respectively: the Telegraph does not publish such one-liners, and is the Leave newspaper publishing the highest number of letters. The number of letters in the Mirror (29)–the most widely read (popular) newspaper in the Remain camp–is negligible. One in twenty letters was authored by an expert, whereas politicians/spokespersons wrote 48 letters in total (3.4 percent overall). Close to nine in ten letters were written by what appeared to be rank-and-file citizens. Anecdotally, we identified some instances where the same letter had been published in different newspapers, and instances where different letters had been signed by the same individual. Still, and unlike in Richardson and Franklin's (2004) study, we could not identify any strong indication of orchestrated letter writing campaigns.

Previous research (e.g. Wahl-Jorgensen 2007) has highlighted that newspapers aim to attain 'balance' in the letters page. Tunstall (1977) indicated that the expectation of this balance would be more meticulously observed during electoral campaigns. Contrary to these aims, and leaving aside the Mirror and the Independent, newspapers mainly published letters supporting their editorial stance. Leave papers did not only publish many more letters than their Remain counterparts: their letters were also less diverse, and overwhelmingly supported to leave the EU.

Table 2: Letters endorsing Leave or Remain by newspaper (frequency and percentage)

Newspaper	Remain	Leave	Unclear	Undecided	Neither
Daily Telegraph	39 (13.8%)	140 (49.5%)	99 (35%)	5 (1.8%)	0
Daily Mail	39 (14.1%)	173 (62.7%)	59 (21.4%)	5 (1.8%)	0
The Sun	1 (0.4%)	220 (84.6%)	34 (13.1%)	4 (1.5%)	1 (0.4%)
Daily Express	0	78 (88.6%)	9 (10.2%)	1 (1.1%)	0
The Guardian	107 (51.7%)	36 (17.4%)	62 (3%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)
Independent	35 (31.5%)	35 (31.5%)	40 (36%)	1 (0.9%)	0
The Times	53 (48.6%)	21 (19.3%)	34 (31.2%)	1 (0.9%)	0
Daily Mirror	12 (41.4%)	12 (41.4%)	5 (17.2%)	0	0
I	18 (32.1%)	11 (19.6%)	25 (44.6%)	2 (3.6%)	0

*The I did not declare a position

Remain voices hardly featured among letters in Leave newspapers. Few in favour of Remain were published in the Telegraph and the Daily Mail–figures dropped to one in the Sun and none in the Express. Readers of papers supporting to remain in the EU, however, were significantly more exposed to letters favouring to leave the EU than readers of Leave newspapers were exposed to letters in favour to remain in the EU. There was one letter supporting leaving the EU for every two letters supporting remaining in Remain newspapers, whereas the ratio dropped to one letter supporting Remain for every eight letters supporting to leave in Leave newspapers. These proportions may accurately reflect allegiances displayed in letters received by each newspaper. They may also be the consequence of newspapers following different criteria when selecting which letters to publish. The wider range of voices in letters in Remain newspapers may have contributed to balance the editorial line of these titles, offering a richer, more diverse representation of citizens' opinions on UK's relation with the EU. Such selection also provided readers with significant exposure to legitimate citizen voices supporting a vote against the editorial positions of these newspapers.

In addition to coding for letters endorsing a position, we coded for arguments supporting the case to leave or remain in the EU. With different degrees of intensity

depending on the newspaper, most published letters did not contain any arguments in favour of leaving or remaining–ranging from one in two letters in <u>The Times</u> or the <u>Mirror</u> to almost nine in every ten letters in the <u>I</u>. This could indicate that many letters argued <u>against</u> remaining or leaving, as opposed to making a positive case supporting one of these options. This negativity would be in line with the general tone of the campaign and its coverage (Levy et al. 2016; Moore and Ramsay 2017), which generated frustration amongst some readers. As summarised in a letter in the <u>Sun</u>: "Both sides of the EU referendum debate need to stop giving us the negatives of the other side's aims and give us the positives of their own objectives" (Beeden 2016:38).

Whilst half of letters advocating to remain contained arguments in favour of remaining (48 percent), only one in three letters advocating to leave listed any benefits of leaving (35.8 percent). This would support the suggestion that voting to leave was indeed a protest vote–at least for some citizens. In addition to the negativity of the discourses, the limited use of arguments in favour of leaving or remaining could also suggest that citizens related to the EU and explained their positions in this referendum in emotional terms–e.g., as an expression of frustration or anger. In this vein, a reader in the <u>Mail</u> wrote: "I can't wait to cast my vote to leave the EU. I am part of a groundswell of anger that is running through this country at the way this and previous governments have allowed our sovereignty to be eroded" (King 2016:66). This could be interpreted as a consequence of letters editors' documented preference for emotional, personal accounts instead of more argument-based letters when selecting which letters to publish (Wahl-Jorgensen 2007, 2019).

Table 3: Letters containing arguments in favour of leaving or remaining in the EU by newspaper (frequency and percentage)

	Arguments for Remain	Arguments for Leave	Not applicable
Daily Telegraph	15 (5.3%)	51 (18%)	217 (76.7%)
Daily Mail	19 (6.9%)	74 (26.8%)	183 (66.3%)
The Sun	1 (0.4%)	49 (18.8%)	210 (80.8%)
Daily Express	0	33 (37.5%)	55 (62.5%)
The Guardian	55 (26.6%)	18 (8.7%)	134 (64.7%)
Independent	11 (9.9%)	18 (16.2%)	82 (73.9%)
The Times	36 (33%)	13 (11.9%)	60 (55%)
Daily Mirror	7 (24.1%)	7 (24.1%)	15 (51.7%)
I	3 (5.4%)	4 (7.1%)	49 (87.5%)

Arguments, however, were more common in letters in Remain newspapers: one in three letters (36.2 percent) contained at least one argument supporting to leave or remain in the EU, as opposed to one in four in Leave papers (26.7 percent). This could indicate Remain newspapers were slightly more inclined to publish letters containing evidence-based arguments, rather than unsubstantiated opinions (that is, without any supporting evidence). It could also support the perception that the emotional case for remaining in the EU was either difficult to make, or was lost–an idea that was held by prominent Remain figures such as Nick Clegg (Elgot 2017).

Although newspapers tended to publish letters supporting their editorial stance, letters in Remain newspapers occasionally included arguments in favour of leaving the EU. Arguments supporting remaining in the EU, however, featured sparsely in letters in Leave newspapers, to the extent that no arguments in favour of remaining in the EU could be found in letters published in the Express (just one letter in the Sun).

With the exception of the Telegraph and to a lesser degree, the Mail, Leave newspapers also published fewer letters displaying unclear or undecided positions than Remain papers. Overall, letters in Leave newspapers constructed a reductionistic

spectrum of legitimised citizens' positions, essentially ranging from citizens supporting Leave to citizens whose position towards the EU was not clear, whilst letters in favour of remaining in the EU were almost non-existent. As opposed to the selection of letters in Remain newspapers, letters in Leave titles largely constructed the vote to leave the EU as the main legitimate option in the referendum, only marginally countered by letters displaying unclear or undecided positions.

What were the letters about?

In the build-up to the referendum, official campaigns and politicians advocating to leave or remain in the EU pushed two different sets of arguments. The letters we analysed echo the main themes in the campaigns, and signal readers' dependence on campaign/media messages and their presentation of these issues. Some of the most prevalent themes in the letters, however, were not issue-oriented, and engaged with politicking or the campaigns, rather than with key issues around EU membership.

In principle, referenda should revolve around issues, not individual politicians nor political parties. Research, however, shows they can easily be turned into partisan contests (e.g., de Vreese and Semetko 2004), or become "somewhat like 'second order' elections" (Leduc 2005:146). During the campaign, party politics featured sporadically in letters published in the Guardian and the Independent. It had a more limited presence in the Mirror, the Express, and the Telegraph, and was negligible in the rest. This was probably a consequence of the campaigns not being organised along partisan lines and including Labour and Conservative politicians alike. Still, the most prominent theme in letters in all newspapers–except The Times–was 'actions of

British politicians.' The prevalence of this theme ranged from one in every five letters in The Times to half of the letters in the Express.

A sizeable proportion of letters in Leave newspapers criticised the Remain campaign–not its arguments. The negative characterisation of the Remain campaign, together with the criticism of 'scare tactics' deployed, constitutes further evidence of the negativity that permeated the letters. Some of these criticisms pointed at the negativity that dominated the campaign. A letter in the Express read: "I am disappointed by the tactics adopted by the Remain campaign. We have had Project Fear and now we have personal attacks on the likes of Boris Johnson which have no place in a rational debate" (Purse 2016).

'Taking the country back,' an abstract, emotional notion which was incidentally similar to the Leave campaign slogan also featured prominently in letters published in Leave newspapers. A reader in the Mail wrote: "I can't hardly wait to see us regain control of this wonderful country and for common sense to be restored" (King 2016:66).

Letters often appealed to the importance of democracy as a political system and for it to be 'restored' in the UK. These were not contributions discussing the democratic-ness of the EU: presented as an incontrovertible truth, the unsubstantiated idea that the EU is intrinsically undemocratic repeatedly punctuated letters in Leave newspapers. It was implicitly assumed that a fully democratic country could only exist outside the EU. A reader in the Telegraph wrote: "if we remain in the EU, the strictures upon this country will become ever more demanding and undemocratic"

(Coaker 2016). In the <u>Mail</u>, a reader claimed "the EU is the worst example of dictatorship, one which is faceless and over which the rank-and-file have not the faintest control" (Watts 2016:46), whereas in the <u>Sun</u>, a letter read: "I hope enough Brits have the courage to vote to leave the EU so we have a free and fully democratic UK for our children" (Butterworth 2016:36).

The public being given the final decision featured significantly among letters in Leave newspapers. A reader in the <u>Mail</u> celebrated that "finally the man (sic) in the street would have a say in the future of the United Kingdom" (Woolley 2016). The perception that the EU was 'failing' had some traction too, featuring in at least one in every twenty letters in Leave newspapers. A reader in the <u>Sun</u> wrote: "we can survive and grow without the stifling shackles of EU membership. It is a failing organisation whose days are numbered" (David 2016:42).

In summary: more than half of the ten most prominent themes in letters in Leave newspapers did not engage with the issues at stake, nor with the pros and cons of remaining in–or leaving–the EU. The most prevalent themes in these letters engaged with politicians and the campaign–particularly to criticise the Remain side–, but not necessarily with what being inside or outside the EU meant for the UK.

Table 4: Ten* most prominent themes in letters in Leave newspapers (frequency and percentage)**

	Daily Telegraph	Daily Mail	The Sun	Daily Express
UK politician's actions	95 (33.6%)	97 (35.1%)	108 (41.5%)	46 (52.3%)
Remain campaign (negative)	65 (23%)	42 (15.2%)	60 (23.1%)	38 (43.2%)
Immigration/free movement	53 (18.7%)	57 (20.7%)	66 (25.4%)	16 (18.2%)
Scare tactics	31 (11%)	29 (10.5%)	29 (11.2%)	17 (19.3%)
Impact on economy	42 (14.8%)	31 (11.2%)	24 (9.2%)	6 (6.8%)
Terrorism/war/security/peace	38 (13.4%)	28 (10.1%)	27 (10.4%)	6 (6.8%)
EU laws/restrictions on the UK	22 (7.8%)	27 (9.8%)	17 (6.5%)	17 (19.3%)
Taking the country back	8 (2.8%)	17 (6.2%)	21 (8.1%)	22 (25%)
Importance of democracy	21 (7.4%)	16 (5.8%)	16 (6.2%)	10 (11.4%)
Public making decision	21 (7.4%)	27 (9.8%)	8 (3.1%)	1 (1.1%)
EU failure	15 (5.3%)	23 (8.3%)	13 (5%)	6 (6.8%)

* Eleven themes are listed because 'Public making decision' and 'EU failure' featured on an equal number of letters (57).
** Non-substantive issues are shown in grey.

More than half of the top themes in letters published in Remain titles did not engage with issues, and engaged with campaign matters, rather than with key debates. In addition to actions of politicians and UK party politics, letters in Remain newspapers contained criticism for both campaigns, albeit with different degrees of intensity. One reader in the <u>Mirror</u> said:

> The EU referendum campaign seems to have taken away people's ability to think beyond the headlines. Boris and his red bus have been allowed to perpetrate myths about our contribution to the EU…Have they not thought through the Brexit lies? (Jeffery 2016)

Significantly, and in contrast with letters in Leave newspapers, readers also showed concerns with the Remain campaign, which received criticism in almost two in five letters in the <u>Independent</u>, and in one in ten letters in the <u>Mirror</u> and the <u>Guardian</u>. A letter in the <u>Independent</u> read: "the Remain campaign has been all about trying to worry people and has rightly earned the title, Project Fear" (Warner 2016). The

negativity of letters did not stop with the campaigns: citizens also expressed concerns

with media coverage of the referendum, particularly in the <u>Independent</u> and the

<u>Guardian</u>. A letter in the <u>Guardian</u> stated: "While I appreciate that I am out of step

with the <u>Guardian</u> position on the EU…the number of anti-Brexit articles has reached

such overwhelming proportions that I find it difficult to continue to read the paper"

(Tunningley 2016).

The importance of unity, and the importance of democracy as a political system were

also among top themes in Remain newspapers. In this vein, a reader in the <u>Guardian</u>

denounced "the appalling lack of democracy evident throughout the EU at present",

while acknowledging that "the EU has evolved into a deeply interlinked body of

nations, confronting all manner of crises, which need to be tackled with as much unity

as we can muster" (Knott 2016).

Table 5: Ten* most prominent themes in letters in Remain newspapers (frequency and percentage)**

	The Guardian	**Independent**	**The Times**	**Daily Mirror**
UK politician's actions	56 (27.1%)	37 (33.3%)	21 (19.3%)	13 (44.8%)
Immigration/free movement	55 (26.6%)	31 (27.9%)	12 (11%)	11 (37.9%)
Terrorism/war/security/peace	25 (12.1%)	8 (7.2%)	23 (21.1%)	4 (13.8%)
Leave campaign (negative)	22 (10.6%)	22 (19.8%)	9 (8.3%)	5 (17.2%)
Impact on economy	24 (11.6%)	18 (16.2%)	13 (11.9%)	2 (6.9%)
UK party politics	32 (15.5%)	12 (10.8%)	1 (0.9%)	2 (6.9%)
Importance of unity	27 (13%)	6 (5.4%)	9 (8.3%)	0 (0)
Remain campaign (negative)	17 (8.2%)	18 (16.2%)	3 (2.8%)	3 (10.3%)
Media coverage	16 (7.7%)	13 (11.7%)	3 (2.7%)	2 (6.8%)
Importance of democracy	18 (8.7%)	9 (8.1%)	5 (4.6%)	1 (3.4%)
NHS	15 (7.2%)	9 (8.1%)	4 (3.6%)	5 (17.2%)

* Eleven themes are listed because 'Importance of democracy' and 'NHS' featured on an equal number of letters (33).
** Non-substantive issues are shown in grey.

While letters contained a wide range of themes, the key issues driving the official

campaigns had a particular prominence: immigration/free movement, impact on the

(British) economy, and terrorism/war/security. The most prominent substantive theme in the letters was immigration/free movement, perhaps the key topic for the Leave campaign. Citizens expressed concerns with immigration for the pressure immigrants allegedly place on public services, infrastructures, job and housing markets, or simply because EU membership implicitly entailed free movement, and that limited the UK's control over immigration. A letter in the Express read:

> Uncontrolled immigration puts an intolerable burden on our schools, the National Health Service, jobs, housing and wages. Enough is enough. Britain needs to have total control over our own borders and our own dwellings. The only way to do that is by leaving the EU. (Brooking 2016)

Although not as prevalent, there were letters with an essentialist message too. A reader in the Sun claimed "Plumstead in SE London has been turned into little Romania, these people do not integrate. Our so-called MPs should try living among them, and now they want the Turks in as well" (Sue 2016:38).

Immigration also featured prominently in letters supporting remaining in the EU, mainly to indicate how Britain's services and economy could be jeopardised if European immigration was reduced: "we need to encourage immigration…If we leave the EU, family members are going to have to look after their next of kin at home because we will not be able to staff our hospitals, nursing and care homes" (Collins 2016). Anecdotally, some letters celebrated how free movement in the EU also enabled UK citizens to move across European borders too. Immigration and free movement featured in one in every four letters supporting Leave (23.14 percent) and

Remain (25.3 percent), constituting–by a significant margin–the most prominent

substantive theme in the letters we analysed. This confirms the centrality of this issue

for citizens and newspapers, as well as the efficacy of the Leave campaign–which

identified the importance of this issue and fuelled it through the campaign.

The economic impact of leaving the EU was the main argument of the Remain

campaign and featured on at least one in ten letters in all newspapers except the

Mirror and the Express–where it was mentioned in one in every twenty letters. This

theme appeared more often in letters published in the Guardian, the Independent and

the Telegraph. Letters in support of remaining referred to experts and economic

organisations, who warned about negative consequences a vote to leave would have

for the British economy. A letter in the Guardian stated: "independent experts have

repeatedly shown that leaving will seriously damage our economy with some

suggesting Britain would enter recession" (Milburn 2016). Letters in support of Leave

argued against these forecasts (identified as 'project fear'), by appealing to the

strength of the British economy, or to the conviction that Britain would continue to

trade with the EU on equal terms if the UK voted to leave. An example from the Sun:

"do the Remain camp really think Europe's businesses and banks would rush to leave

behind 60 million customers in the world's fifth-biggest economy? Grow up, do"

(Beresford 2016:42). Others pointed to the slowing down of European economies and

the impact of this on British trade, to the possibilities of trading with countries outside

the EU, and to the negative impact that complying with EU regulations allegedly had

over the UK's economy. A group of business leaders claimed in the Telegraph:

Year-on-year the EU buys less from Britain because its economies are stagnant and millions of people are unemployed…Brussels' red tape stifles every one of Britain's 5.4 million businesses, even though only a small minority actually trade with the EU…Outside the EU, British business will be free to grow faster, expand into new markets and create more jobs. (Goldstein 2016)

A minority of Leave readers accepted leaving the EU would have a negative economic impact, but considered it a price worth paying, such as this reader in the Sun: "let us take an economic hit for maybe two years. Short-term pain for long-term gain far outweighs EU bureaucracy" (Emamboccus 2016:44).

The role the EU played in maintaining peace in Europe, and cooperation in matters of security and counter-terrorism was the third most prevalent substantive theme. Readers held opposing views on whether European integration had led to peace and stability enjoyed in Europe since World War II. A reader in the Mail stated "the EU has played a vital role in building a Europe of peace and prosperity. Brexit will undermine all that and endanger our nation and our continent" (Whittock 2016:56). Leave readers argued that the EU had not played a role in Europe's peace. In this vein, a group of former servicemen claimed in the Sun:

It is NATO that has kept the peace in Europe and further afield for more than 65 years. Outside the EU, the UK and its Armed Forces would be freer, more effective, more democratic and more able to retain their distinctive capabilities and ethos. (Cowie et al. 2016:36)

Two opposing sides emerged with regards to terrorism. Remain supporters claimed EU membership enabled key cooperation to fight terrorism. A reader in <u>The Times</u> stated: "Brexit would lead to an inevitable dilution of information sharing, with clear adverse consequences…We are safer in the EU, with EU structures…in the fight against terrorism" (Lord Carlile of Berriew 2016). Leave readers, instead, suggested that freedom of movement in the EU made the UK more vulnerable to terrorism, such as this letter in the <u>Sun</u>: "we are told we are safer in the EU–but the story of 'Jihadi Junior'…shows how unsafe we really are and how many terrorists have made it into Europe because of open borders" (Sean 2016:38). Another common argument among Leave readers suggested EU membership prevented the UK from deporting criminals to their countries of origin. A reader in the <u>Sun</u> claimed: "a vote to stay in the EU must accept that the UK will not be able to deport villains from abroad" (Spencer 2016:40).

Conclusion

In strict numerical terms, there were significant differences in letters to the editor published in British national newspapers during the EU referendum campaign. Leave newspapers were more mobilised than Remain titles: they published a significantly higher number of letters, and these letters were more homogeneous in their support of the Leave campaign. This followed their overall coverage of the referendum (Levy et al. 2016), and underlines the importance of European integration for Leave newspapers, presenting it as a crucial, pressing issue that tops–or should top–British citizens' political priorities.

Newspapers privileged the publication of letters endorsing their editorial positions–the Independent and the Mirror constituting an exception. With different degrees of intensity, all newspapers–but the Express and practically the Sun–also published letters opposing their editorial stance. As a consequence of these numerical imbalances, Leave newspapers provided limited exposure to legitimised narratives and arguments where citizens justified a vote to remain in the EU, effectively constructing the vote to leave as the main legitimate option in the referendum. Letters in Remain newspapers, instead, contained a more diverse range of arguments and a wider spectrum of opinions. As a result, they contributed to legitimise the idea that citizens' arguments in favour to remain or leave the EU were all worthy contributions to the debate, and could be equally reasonable and legitimate.

Whilst Leave supporters may have been more mobilised and vociferous than Remain voters in their letter-writing and Remain supporters may have sent their letters to newspapers more receptive to publishing them, it is plausible these numeric differences may be explained as consequence of different editorial criteria, or more structural reasons. The EU referendum campaign combined different factors (nationalism, a community under threat, fear of outsiders, World War II, bureaucracy, populism, anti-elitism, anti-EU sentiment…) that have traditionally defined British tabloid journalism (Conboy 2006) and may have been prominent in Leave broadsheets' coverage of the referendum campaign too. The overlap between these recurrent themes for Leave newspapers–which are probably of vital importance for their readers–and the defining issues of the EU referendum may explain the homogeneity of themes and positions we identified in letters published in Leave titles.

Most letters in all newspapers did not contain arguments in favour of leaving or remaining in the EU. This may indicate the complex nature of British citizens' relation to European integration. It may also suggest the options to leave and remain in the EU were constructed largely in negative terms, whereby a vote to leave was a vote against EU membership (and for some citizens, a vote against EU immigration or political elites), and a vote to remain was a vote against the negative impact that leaving the EU could have upon the UK's economic and political stability.

Negativity featured prominently in many letters. Whilst negativity has traditionally been a typical attribute of letters to the editor, it is plausible that this negativity got reflected–even amplified–in the letters we analysed given the aggressive, negative nature characterising the campaign and its coverage. The views and opinions on European integration and Brexit in letters may have contributed to deepen polarisation of this debate. Nielsen (2010) suggested letters are a privileged platform for readers to express disagreement with the media coverage of an issue, or with the nature of the debate itself. In this vein, some readers expressed frustration with the campaigns, their negativity, and also with media coverage. Rather than merely constituting criticism, this disagreement may constitute an indication of good, constructive, salutary debate.

The letters we analysed also underlined readers' dependence on campaign/media messages. While party politics did not feature prominently in letters, actions of politicians constituted the most prominent theme. In addition to signalling the enduring importance of the personalisation of politics–even in the context of referenda–, the prevalence of actions of politicians, combined with the dominance of campaign-/media-related issues (such as 'project fear' or 'criticism of the campaign'),

and the prominence of key campaign topics (i.e. immigration, terrorism/security/war, economic impact) among the most prevalent themes in the letters constitute further confirmation of this dependence.

Rather than constituting an arena for debate, where different positions were shared and confronted, the letters page largely constituted yet another platform for newspapers to advance the legitimation of their declared position, potentially contributing to furthering the polarisation of this debate. This may be a consequence of the positions expressed in the letters received by each newspaper, a product of letter selection, or a consequence of more structural reasons that fuel anti-EU discourses and contribute to limiting citizens' constructive engagement with European issues (Galpin and Trenz 2017). Especially in the case of Leave newspapers, the homogeneity of voices in the letters, and the reproduction of newspaper and campaign lines and discourses in these letters would indicate that, on this occasion, the letters page effectively worked as an off-line echo-chamber, an occurrence that may underline the role and function of tabloid newspapers in a polarised media landscape (Schulz 2012), and may also lead to question whether tabloids and broadsheets effectively played different roles when representing the views of citizens in this debate. The widespread use of epithets such as 'undemocratic,' 'corrupt' or 'failing' to characterise the EU as if they were indisputable facts without attempting to substantiate them reveals the extent to which these conceptions of the EU had been naturalised among Leave supporters–and some Remain supporters too. The negativity dominating the debate, as well as the negative perceptions about European integration, is probably the result of years of anti-EU messages fuelled by the so-called Eurosceptic press and anti-EU politicians (Berry 2016) and constitutes a

hegemonic, taken-for-granted shared understanding/common ground for Leave supporters, ultimately acting as a binding agent for them as a community.

It is revealing that a debate where the notion of democracy played such a central role took place in contexts largely dominated by like-minded individuals, rather than in a marketplace of ideas. This points to a tension between two different normative conceptions of the role journalism should play in a democratic society: the tension between journalism understood as a platform for deliberative conversation, and journalism understood as a tool to foster community (Ryfe 2017). Broadly speaking, Remain newspapers were seemingly guided by editorial principles/business models that privileged deliberation, whilst Leave newspapers privileged building–or restoring–a community.

This article has demonstrated that the public debate on Brexit in letters to the editor was distinguished by the negativity and personalisation of arguments, reflecting the polarisation of the debate about the UK's membership of the EU, both in British society and journalism. Our analysis also offered further evidence showing readers' dependence on media/campaign themes, which effectively turned letters into a sounding board for discourses already in circulation, instead of contributing to expanding the debate. This article has also revealed the frustration that the negativity and polarisation that largely dominated the campaign and its media coverage generated amongst a minority of citizens.

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