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Impartiality, statistical tit-for-tats and the construction of balance: UK television news reporting of the 2016 EU referendum campaign

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Abstract

There has been greater news industry recognition in recent years that impartiality should not be translated into simply balancing the competing sides of a debate or issue. The binary nature of a referendum campaign represents a unique moment to consider whether broadcasters have put this into practice beyond routine political reporting. This study examines how impartiality was editorially interpreted in television news coverage during the United Kingdom's 2016 European Union referendum. We carried out a systematic content analysis of the United Kingdom's main evening bulletins over the 10-week campaign, examining the issues and sources shaping coverage, as well as all the statistical claims made by campaign actors. Our aim was to critically examine how notions of impartiality were constructed and interpreted, exploring any operational limits and political consequences. Overall, we found that news bulletins maintained a fairly strict adherence to a central binary balance between issues and actors during the campaign. But this binary was politically inflected, with a significant imbalance in party political perspectives, presenting us with a right-wing rather than a left-wing case for European Union membership. We also found that independent expert analysis and testimony was sucked into the partisan binary between leave and remain campaigners, while journalists were reluctant to challenge or contextualise claims and counter-claims. Journalists were, in this sense, constrained by the operational definition of impartiality adopted by broadcasters. We argue for a more evidence-driven approach to impartiality, where journalists independently explore the veracity of campaign claims and have the editorial freedom to challenge them. We also suggest that the reliance on claims and counter-claims by leading Conservative politicians did little to advance public understanding of the European Union, and helped perpetuate a series of long-standing negative associations the British media have been reporting for many decades.

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Keywords

Content analysis, impartiality, journalism, news/information, political communication, public service broadcasting

This article discusses the findings of a detailed content-based case study about the impartiality of television news coverage during the United Kingdom's 2016 European Union (EU) referendum. We explore the successes and failures in the broadcaster's attempts to provide news coverage that was both fair and informative, and, in so doing, suggest the need for a serious reappraisal of the way in which impartiality is interpreted by broadcasters.

UK broadcasters have to abide by 'due impartiality' guidelines in news and current affairs programming. During the 2016 EU referendum campaign, the BBC Trust oversaw BBC content, while the Office of Communications (Ofcom) regulated commercial broadcasters (since April 2017, Ofcom is also responsible for the regulation of BBC content). According to the (recently revised) BBC editorial guidelines, 'Due impartiality is often more than a simple matter of "balance" between opposing viewpoints. Equally, it does not require absolute neutrality on every issue or detachment from fundamental democratic principles'. Similarly, Ofcom's code states, "'due impartiality" does not mean an equal division of time has to be given to every view, or that every argument and every facet of every argument has to be represented'.¹ The BBC also issued specific EU editorial guidelines, which asked editors to pursue a 'broad balance' approach to reporting the campaign. According to the guidelines,

Due impartiality is not necessarily achieved by the application of a simple mathematical formula or a stopwatch, but the objective – in a referendum with two alternatives – must be to achieve a proper balance between the two sides ... However, referendums are seldom fought purely on the basis of just two opposing standpoints – on each side, where there is a range of views or perspectives, that should be reflected appropriately during the campaign.

In other words, balance should not just be achieved by allowing the two camps to argue between each other, but must also consider debates *within* the Leave or Remain campaigns. At the same time, the guidelines also stress the freedom editors have to exercise 'news judgement' when reporting the EU referendum. The aim of this study is to assess how this news judgement was applied when interpreting 'due impartiality' and 'broad balance' over the course of the 10-week campaign.

Broadcasters faced an interesting challenge in balancing the perspectives of both sides of the campaign. In one sense, like most referenda, it presented voters with a simple binary choice, with two opposing Remain and Leave campaign groups – *Britain Stronger in Europe* and *Vote Leave*. Yet behind these two campaigns was a divergent set of ideas reflecting the complexity of EU membership. Beneath the central binary – in or out – lay a series of cross-cutting debates: between international cooperation and national sovereignty, unfettered free trade versus regulated trade (to protect employment rights and the environment), or the free movement of labour versus controls on immigration. So, for example, someone on the left might oppose membership because they would prefer the United Kingdom to be able to support and protect its own industries, while someone on the right might want unfettered free trade, with *fewer* regulatory limits on capital flows.

Behind these cross-cutting debates lay a series of substantive claims about, for example, the impact of the EU on employment, wages, public services and economic growth. While some of these claims were speculative and difficult to evaluate, others could be measured against expert evidence and testimony. Broadcasters could not assume high levels of public understanding about these issues: a Eurobarometer survey conducted in May 2016 found that only 27% of people in the United Kingdom could answer three basic questions about the EU – lower than in any of the other 28 member states except Latvia (Hix, 2015). There was, in this sense, a need to educate as well as inform.

Of course, broadcasters had a role to play in allowing both sides of the campaign an equal platform to articulate their message to voters. But the ‘due impartiality’ guidelines also encourage editorial judgements to allow journalists to rigorously test the claims and counter-claims of each campaign group. Our study offers a systematic assessment of how balanced the coverage was of both campaigns as well as how far journalists exercised their editorial judgement to verify the arguments put forward.

Interpreting impartiality: Constructing balance

There is an extensive academic literature focussed on examining ‘bias’ in news reporting (Groeling, 2013) – widely seen as a critical issue in maintaining a healthy and democratic public sphere. Most Western governments regulate their media systems, particularly in broadcasting (which remains a dominant source of information for most people – Ofcom, 2016), applying the notions of impartiality and objectivity to the regulation of news. While they intersect, both concepts reflect different empirical goals. Objectivity foregrounds the investigation of truth, whereas cruder notions of impartiality assume that truth is always contested. Editorial judgement allows journalists to plot their ways through this philosophical conundrum, searching for the most truthful version of a story against a backdrop of competing claims.

During elections, these editorial decisions are brought into sharp relief: broadcasters must give the key players the opportunity to put their case, while retaining the licence to examine those cases critically. The first of these is, of course, easier to measure. So, for example, Loughborough University’s studies of past UK general elections have included ‘stop-watch balance’ as a key criterion for assessing whether one party or leader receives more attention than their opponents (Deacon et al., 2005). This represents an important measure of representation, as well as revealing which parties and policies are marginalised. Regulators have previously allocated airtime to parties based on the level of past electoral success (Semetko, 2000) or other benchmarks (Hopmann et al., 2012), rather than rely on news values to determine coverage. Recent work on the 2015 General election (Cushion and Thomas, 2017) suggests that broadcasters exercise a degree of freedom to interpret impartiality according to their editorial judgements about news selection.

Viewed in this context, impartiality is not simply a measure of who is able to speak, but which side is allowed to set the agenda. For our purposes, this is complicated further by the nuances of the EU referendum debate: while both campaigns tended to focus on particular issues, there were clearly different agendas *within* the Leave/Remain camps. Our study will also assess the *tone* – another key measure of impartiality (Hopmann et al., 2012) – of each source contribution (Remain, Leave or unclear) as well as

examining the role of journalists in challenging the claims made by both advocates and expert sources. Whereas source and issue balance are largely descriptive ways of interpreting impartiality, exploring the tone of reporting or the positions of sources is a more analytical way of characterising the nature of coverage.

Our findings should also be considered against the wider backdrop of how UK news media have reported the EU over several decades. The EU has long been the *bête noir* of a significant section of the UK press. While far less vituperative, research has shown that broadcast news has *not* been impartial, viewing the EU through a negative lens (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2013; Gavin, 2000). In an impartiality review for the BBC Trust, Wahl-Jorgensen et al. (2013) found that coverage of debates about the EU tended to reflect divisions within the Conservative Party, in which both sides characterised the EU as bureaucratic, undemocratic and generally in opposition to British interests.

Method

We examined UK evening television news bulletins, including BBC News at Ten, ITV News at Ten, Sky News at Ten, Channel 4 at 7 pm and Channel 5 at 6.30 pm. Each channel, of course, broadcast a wider range of programming over the campaign in formats that allowed greater analytical detail or longer interviews than a daily bulletin can reasonably supply. But many of these programmes are watched by small audiences, whereas the evening bulletins are the most watched format of television news and taken to be programmes of record. Since millions of people in the United Kingdom are regularly exposed to nightly bulletins, it makes them one of the most important sources of information about the EU referendum campaign. Our long experience of analysing broadcast news output also suggests that while there are undoubtedly variations between different news programmes in style and tone, the main evening flagship bulletins reflect the channel's considered editorial position.

We monitored these news bulletins over the 10-week campaign (from 15 April to 22 June 2016). The unit of analysis was the 'news item', categorised by the type of convention (a live two way, say, or an edited package) rather than by story topic (this allowed us to isolate each distinct reference to the EU). We examined both on-screen contributions (when they are seen and speak on camera) as well as indirect sources (when a journalist refers to them, such as 'the Leave campaign said today ...').

Our content analysis began by quantifying the range of issues addressed by broadcasters and the types of sources informing coverage. We then considered the role and treatment of every statistical claim made during the campaign (instances where a source or journalist referred to any data or figures in the context of the EU referendum). Our aim here was to both quantify the presence of statistics in coverage, and assess *how* they were handled – whether they were examined, challenged or put into some context. When statistics were referenced by rival campaign groups but not challenged or contextualised, we labelled this a 'statistical tit-for-tat' and we consider the wider context of this exchange.

Overall, we examined 571 news items, 1582 sources and 517 statistical claims.² Approximately 10% of the sample was recoded to check the reliability of the variables. The level of agreement between two coders for all variables was above .92 and, according to Krippendorff's alpha, achieved high levels of reliability (with each variable scoring .88 or above).

Table 1. Story subject of news items about the EU referendum.

	BBC	ITV	Channel 4	Channel 5	Sky News	Total
Referendum process	37.8%	44.2%	33.3%	35.8%	43.9%	39.1% (223)
Economy	10.1%	8.5%	14.7%	10.4%	9.2%	10.7% (61)
Immigration	13.5%	7.0%	14.7%	10.4%	5.1%	10.5% (60)
International relations	6.8%	10.1%	10.9%	7.5%	11.2%	9.3% (53)
Economic forecast	5.4%	8.5%	4.7%	10.4%	8.2%	7.0% (40)
Public opinion	5.4%	5.4%	9.3%	7.5%	2.0%	6.0% (34)
Party infighting	3.4%	4.7%	0.8%	10.4%	7.1%	4.6% (26)
Security	5.4%	2.3%	1.6%	3.0%	5.1%	3.5% (20)
Trade agreements	3.4%	3.1%	0.8%	1.5%	3.1%	2.5% (14)
Other	1.4%	0.8%	2.4%	1.5%	3.0%	1.7% (10)
Business	2.7%	0.8%	1.6%	0.0%	1.0%	1.4% (8)
Cost of EU membership	0.7%	1.6%	2.3%	1.5%	0.0%	1.2% (7)
NHS	0.7%	0.8%	2.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.9% (5)
Agriculture	2.0%	0.0%	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.7% (4)
Sovereignty	0.0%	1.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4% (2)
Employment/jobs	0.7%	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4% (2)
Public services	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	0.4% (2)
Total	100.0% (148)	100.0% (129)	100.0% (129)	100.0% (67)	100.0% (98)	100.0% (571)

EU: European Union; NHS: National Health Service.

Interpreting the impartiality of issue and source balance

We began by considering the balance of issues in news items about the EU referendum. As we have suggested, debates about leaving or remaining in the EU were potentially wide-ranging. Of the 571 items we identified in television news coverage of the EU referendum, around four in ten were about the *process* of the referendum – including campaign walkabouts, the strategies of both camps or infighting between parties, along with public attitudes towards the EU and how people might cast their vote (see Table 1). In other words, despite the clear policy differences between the Leave and Remain camps – as well as surveys revealing significant gaps in public understanding about the EU (Hix, 2015) – the coverage was primarily about the campaigns, the personalities involved and public opinion towards the EU.

If we include economic forecasts and trade agreements, the dominant topics on all bulletins related to the economy (around 20%). This covered a wide range of economic indicators, and sometimes intersected with other issues, such as the free movement of people being contingent on access to the EU's single market. If we exclude these sub-topics, the economy and immigration received roughly the same level of attention in television news coverage (about 11%) – far more than other topics. There were some minor differences between bulletins, the BBC being the most immigration-oriented, while Sky News and ITV carried more items principally about the economy. But perhaps more striking was how similar broadcasters were in balancing items about the economy and immigration, particularly Channels 4 and 5 which were proportionally identical on these two issues (14.7% and 10.4%, respectively). Loughborough's study of EU coverage found a similar dual focus – at the expense of most other issues, 'including the environment, taxation, employment, agricultural policy and social welfare', as well as the

potential consequences of a Leave vote, not least on the possible departure of Scotland from the United Kingdom (Deacon et al., 2016).

In short, the United Kingdom's evening television news bulletins gave roughly equal attention to those issues – the economy and immigration – that both sides of the official campaigns chose to emphasise. This suggests that broadcasters allowed the main campaigns to set the agenda – and our analysis below will explore how often bulletins challenged them on these issues.

The next part of our analysis examined the sources informing television news coverage, including the balance of voices between advocates for Leave and Remain. By this measure, the broadcasters were fairly evenly balanced, with the total average difference of only 3.7% between Leave and Remain. Most – apart from ITV – gave marginally more time to Remain sources (see Table 2). We see a similar pattern with indirect sources (Table 3) proportionally balanced between opposing camps (with a difference of just 3.2% in television news coverage generally, in this case tilted in favour of Leave). There were greater disparities between channels, but these were not dramatically different or uniform (roughly between 4% and 12%). Overall, our findings indicate that actors representing the Leave and Remain campaigns were fairly well balanced on UK television news over the 10-week campaign. It also shows that *coverage was generally adversarial* (with arguments pitched between Leave and Remain camps) *rather than explanatory* – especially on the BBC and Channel 5, where less than 15% of indirect sources did not clearly favour one side of the argument.

The dominance of supportive or oppositional voices towards EU membership indicates that, once again, the broadcasters (especially the BBC and Channel 5) chose to cover the referendum by focussing on the two official campaigns, rather than using more independent sources that were less adversarial. While journalists might argue no source is truly independent, they could (and did) draw on competing expert voices to help form a judgement about the veracity of claims made by both sides of the campaign. Moreover, where possible, they could interpret the weight of expert knowledge about particular issues. This is, after all, common practice in news reporting, where economic expertise is widely used, and coverage is often based on assumptions held by a majority of economists (Lewis and Thomas, 2015). However, Table 4 shows that knowledge-based professions, such as think tanks, economists and academics, made up a small share of contributions, whereas the clear majority (62.2% of sources) were politicians representing the Leave or Remain campaigns.

If we examine the party affiliation of politicians appearing across all television news bulletins, a significant imbalance emerges: an overwhelming majority – 71.2% – was from the ruling UK Conservative party, compared to Labour's (the Official Party of opposition) 18.4%. UK Independence Party (UKIP) – a right-wing Euro-sceptic party – represented 7.6% of sources, with just 2.8% left for other parties to contribute (particularly notable here is the absence of the Scottish National Party (SNP), whose pro-EU stance combined with a suggestion that a Leave vote might trigger another independence referendum). The distribution of party political sources was broadly similar between bulletins, with Conservative party sources most dominant on Sky News and Channel 5 (79.2% and 78.2%, respectively; or 86.7% and 84.6% including UKIP). Loughborough's study across press and broadcast sources found a similar imbalance (Deacon et al., 2016).

Table 2. On-screen sources supporting, opposing or unclear perspectives towards continued EU membership.

	BBC	ITV	Channel 4	Channel 5	Sky News	Total
Leave	40.8% (108)	42.7% (100)	44.4% (119)	43.5% (57)	38.4% (76)	42.0% (460)
Remain	48.7% (129)	38.0% (89)	48.1% (129)	48.9% (64)	45.5% (90)	45.7% (501)
Unclear	10.6% (28)	19.2% (45)	7.5% (20)	7.6% (10)	16.2% (32)	12.3% (135)
Total	100% (265)	100% (234)	100% (268)	100% (131)	100% (198)	100% (1096)

EU: European Union.

Table 3. Indirect sources supporting, opposing or being neutral towards continued EU membership.

	BBC	ITV	Channel 4	Channel 5	Sky News	Total
Leave	40.1% (51)	42.5% (40)	43.0% (34)	39.6% (21)	40.9% (54)	41.3% (200)
Remain	45.6% (58)	36.1% (34)	31.6% (25)	47.1% (25)	32.5% (43)	38.1% (185)
Unclear	14.7% (18)	21.2% (20)	25.3% (20)	13.2% (7)	26.5% (35)	20.6% (100)
Total	100.0% (127)	100.0% (94)	100.0% (79)	100.0% (53)	100.0% (132)	100.0% (485)

EU: European Union.

Table 4. Type of on-screen sources in television news coverage of the EU referendum.

	BBC	ITV	Channel 4	Channel 5	Sky News	Total
	%					
Politicians (primarily from Leave/Remain campaigns)	60.8	61.5	57.8	64.1	69.7	62.2
Public	14.0	15.4	19.0	25.9	6.1	15.5
Foreign leader or diplomat or institution	3.8	7.3	6.7	3.1	4.0	5.2
Business	5.3	3.0	4.5		4.0	3.7
Financial institution	2.6	3.0	1.5	3.8	3.0	2.6
Economist	1.5	2.6	1.1		4.0	1.9
Academic	4.2	0.4	1.5		1.0	1.6
Celebrity		0.4	2.6	1.5	1.5	1.2
Thank tank	1.9	0.9	0.4		2.0	1.1
Official or unofficial campaigns	1.1	0.4	2.6		0.5	1.0
Security services	1.5	1.3	0.4		1.5	1.0
Trade union	1.5	0.9			0.5	0.7
Journalist/media		1.3		1.5	0.5	0.6
Pollster	0.8		0.7			0.4
UK political institution	0.4	0.4	0.4		0.5	0.4
Religious leader	0.4		0.4			0.2
Other	0.4	1.3	0.4		1.0	0.6
Total	100 (265)	100 (234)	100 (268)	100 (131)	100 (198)	100 (1096)

EU: European Union.

So while the balance between Remain and Leave contributions was relatively even across evening bulletins (see Tables 2 and 3), party political voices were *heavily* skewed

in the favour of more right-wing and Conservative party perspectives. The reliance on Conservative voices also influenced the *narrative* of television news coverage, since many items were about the party's infighting and a future leadership contest. Although both Remain and Leave campaigns were headed by Labour politicians, neither was especially visible, and more left-wing, Labour policy issues – such as employment rights, the role of public services or the environment – were pushed off the agenda (see Table 1). This suggests, once again, that broadcasters chose to adopt a narrow interpretation of impartiality that took little account of the range of issues or political positions in the debate about EU membership. Broadcasters may have judged that balancing the official Remain and Leave campaigns was an editorially appropriate way of interpreting 'due impartiality' because it granted each campaign the democratic right to choose which arguments to place in front of the public. However, in doing so, debates between left and right political perspectives were marginalised, which ran counter to the BBC's EU guidelines that encouraged journalists to find a "broad balance" of *arguments* and not necessarily between the designated Campaign Groups' (BBC News, 2016: 5; *original emphasis*).

'I think people in this country have had enough of experts' (Michael Gove, Leave campaign) – Accepting or challenging statistical claims

During the campaign, journalists and commentators often complained about exaggerated or dubious claims made by rival camps, with statistics often misused to support or counter opposing arguments. The parliamentary Treasury Committee, for example, criticised some of the claims made by both campaigns, while the chair of the UK Statistics Authority singled out the Leave campaign for its misuse of statistics (BBC News, 2016). For both, the most glaring example was the Leave campaign's oft-repeated claim (painted on the side of their campaign bus) that the UK government sends £350 million to the EU every week – a figure that took no account of the United Kingdom's rebate or the various grants and subsidies flowing from the EU to the United Kingdom. Despite independent sources challenging the Leave's claim about the UK government spending £350m per week on EU membership, an Ipsos MORI (2016) survey found that almost half of respondents believed this was true just days before the election.

In order to explore whether bulletins accepted or challenged statistical claims made by sources over the 10-week campaign, we examined every reference to a statistic either by a (on-screen or indirect) source or by a journalist that attributed the source. By statistical claim, we refer to instances where a source or journalist referenced a statistic (or statements related to figures), such as the Leave campaign's claim about the cost of EU membership.

Overall, we identified 517 statistical claims, with a high proportion of all EU related news items – 42.4% – featuring a statistic. Our research on the broader use of statistics in broadcast news established that this is around twice the average proportion of statistical references in news items (Cushion et al., 2016). The use (or misuse) of statistics, in other words, was very much a feature of this campaign. Table 5 shows there was some variation between bulletins, with Channel 4 featuring the highest proportion of statistics and Channel 5 the lowest.

Table 5. Reference to a statistic within a television news item about the EU referendum.

	BBC	ITV	Channel 4	Channel 5	Sky News	Total
Percentage of at least one statistical claim in a news item	38.5% (57)	38.8% (50)	52.7% (68)	29.9% (20)	48.0% (47)	42.4% (242)
Percentage of at least one statistical claim in a news item (excluding journalists)	32.4% (48)	32.6% (42)	45.0% (58)	26.9% (18)	44.9% (44)	36.8% (210)

EU: European Union.

Table 6. Statistical references made by sources or journalists in television news coverage of the EU referendum.

	BBC	ITV	Channel 4	Channel 5	Sky News	Total
Politician	28.7%	31.1%	36.0%	37.2%	31.1%	32.5% (168)
Leave – official (and unofficial) campaign	8.7%	8.5%	8.0%	7.0%	10.7%	8.7% (45)
Remain – official (and unofficial) campaign	4.3%	0.0%	1.3%	11.6%	1.0%	2.5% (13)
UK political institution	8.7%	17.9%	6.0%	18.6%	10.7%	11.0% (57)
Journalist/media	14.8%	16.0%	21.3%	11.6%	7.8%	15.3% (79)
Financial institution	11.3%	7.5%	6.0%	2.3%	7.8%	7.5% (39)
Pollster	3.5%	4.7%	4.0%	0.0%	9.7%	4.8% (25)
ONS	7.0%	3.8%	2.0%	11.6%	3.9%	4.6% (24)
Business	2.6%	0.0%	6.0%	0.0%	2.9%	2.9% (15)
Foreign leader or diplomat or institution	0.0%	2.8%	2.0%	0.0%	1.9%	1.5% (8)
Think tank	2.6%	1.9%	2.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.5% (8)
Economist	0.9%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%	3.9%	1.2% (6)
Academic	0.0%	3.8%	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0% (5)
Celebrity	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2% (1)
Other	5.2%	1.9%	3.3%	0.0%	8.7%	4.3% (22)
Total	100% (115)	100% (106)	100% (150)	100% (43)	100% (103)	100% (517)

EU: European Union; ONS: Office for National Statistics.

Table 6 shows that 43.7% of statistical references were made by politicians on the Leave or Remain side, or the official (and unofficial) campaigns. If we include UK political institutions (which was overwhelmingly made up of UK government treasury department sources, which appeared to favour the Remain campaign) then over half – 54.7% – of all statistical references were made by politicians or political bodies. If we exclude journalists, this figure rises to 69.0% of all statistical claims.

To make sense of these figures, it is useful to compare them with statistical claims made during routine news coverage (outside the referendum period). Our research on the broader use of statistics in broadcast news shows that the overwhelming majority of statistical references – 81% – are made by journalists (Cushion et al., 2016). During EU referendum coverage, this proportion dropped dramatically to 15.3%. In other words, *the role of reporters filtering and deciphering statistical information was far less evident during the EU campaign than in routine reporting.*

Table 7. Statistical references supporting, opposing or unclear perspectives towards continued EU membership.

	BBC	ITV	Channel 4	Channel 5	Sky News	Total
Leave	32.7% (32)	32.6% (29)	37.3% (44)	31.6% (12)	22.1% (21)	31.5% (138)
Remain	33.7% (33)	34.8% (31)	38.1% (45)	39.5% (15)	34.7% (33)	35.8% (157)
Unclear	33.7% (33)	32.6% (29)	24.6% (29)	28.9% (11)	43.2% (41)	32.6% (143)
Total	100% (98)	100% (89)	100% (118)	100% (38)	100% (95)	100% (438)

EU: European Union.

When journalists did use statistics, they were usually unattributed and, again, typically involved attempts to ‘balance’ one statistic against another. So, for example, a report on BBC News at Ten on 14 June stated that

In the middle of the campaign we got those figures showing that last year 270,000 EU citizens came to live in Britain and that’s pushed immigration to the number one concern, above the economy [...] that’s a boost for Leave because many people think voting out of the EU will stop the foreigners coming in. But is that true? In theory EU citizens would be subject to the same controls imposed on immigrants from outside the EU. But that wouldn’t necessarily mean big reductions, after all non-EU migration still exceeds EU migration from the European Union. Why? Well because lots of immigrants benefit Britain – we welcome 10,000’s every year.

This statement asserts more than it explains, particularly about the benefits of immigration (something that, surveys demonstrate, is poorly understood, with many people assuming that immigration has a negative impact on the economy). But it is fairly typical of attempts by reporters to use statistics to balance competing perspectives about immigration.

If journalists are excluded, Table 7 shows, once again, most broadcasters (notably on BBC, ITV and Channel 4 bulletins) were doggedly even-handed in balancing the statistical claims supporting Leave and Remain. This, does, however, conceal a notable difference between the breadth of the make-up of those making claims. Our findings indicate that a significant proportion (42%) of the reported claims favouring Remain came from business, the academy, trade unions, financial institutions or other professions. Anti-EU sources, by contrast, were composed overwhelmingly of politicians or Leave campaigners (97.8%). In other words, the Remain side had a range of actors expressing viewpoints using data or figures, while any statistical claims favouring the Leave camp came almost entirely from political figures. In this sense, the ‘imbalance’ favouring Remain on Sky News actually *reflects the wider range of statistical information used by advocates for Remain in a way that other broadcasters did not.*

This finding, we would argue, demonstrates another problem with the narrow definition of impartiality broadcasters chose to adopt. In most sections of civil society – economists, business people, trade unions, academic experts and so on – there were clear majorities (in some cases, such as among economists, overwhelmingly so) in favour of remaining in the EU. So, for example, 88% of economists (based on a survey of more than 600 respondents from academia, the city, industry, small businesses and the public sector) believed leaving the EU would harm the British economy – Sodha et al., 2016). And yet this consensus got caught up in the broadcaster’s balancing act, and the weight

of this support was squeezed into one side of the ledger, giving them equal weight with (less well supported) counter-claims.

The decision to represent independent expertise as, in effect, *part* of the Remain campaign was a significant victory for the Leave camp. This was implied by a prominent Leave politician, Michael Gove, during a live interview when he claimed that ‘people in this country have had enough of experts’. The Leave campaign could thus portray independent sources as a partisan, pro-EU elite – *part* of a Remain campaign rather than reflecting the weight of expert testimony on this issue. While not every issue of the campaign could be explained by a weight of evidence approach, journalists could have drawn on a wider range of non-partisan sources to explore differences of opinion *between* experts.

The preponderance of statistical points made by politicians rather than independent sources – especially on the Leave side, which depended almost exclusively on political sources – raises the question of journalistic scrutiny: to what extent were their competing facts and figures challenged or contextualised in news coverage? There were undoubtedly occasions when statistics when journalists did question or contextualise claims, as this example indicates,

In streets up and down the country, people are trying to work out if that figure of 350 million is accurate. Well, in 2015 we received about £85 million pounds a week thanks to a rebate negotiated in the 1980s. We also received £88 million in payments to sectors like agriculture, and on top of that it was about 27 million pounds paid to the private sector. Add those together and take them away from that 350 million figure and you end up with a net contribution to the EU of more like 150 million pound a week. (9 June 2016, Channel 5)

This, however, was not the norm. Table 8 shows just under one in five statistical claims were put into some context (with Sky News being the least likely to do so, although, as Table 3 shows, Sky were also most likely to use independent sources). Most of the context was supplied by journalists or by politicians/campaign groups – 57.6% and 17.9%, respectively – with few instances of reporters using independent expertise used to explain or analyse competing claims.

Around the same proportion of statistical claims – just over one in five – was challenged in some way by a journalist, political or independent source. However, in keeping with the overall flavour of coverage, most of these challenges – 65.2% – came from politicians or campaign groups themselves, with few instances of the use of independent sources to verify claims. When less partisan sources *were* used to inform coverage, they often explicitly challenged the sometimes dubious claims made by campaign groups, as this example illustrates,

Institute of Fiscal Studies spokesperson: We’ve already looked at the numbers and our conclusion is that the most realistic numbers to look at in terms of direct contribution we make, net of how much is spent here is a 150 million pound per week, about £8 billion per year. (9 June, 2016, Sky News)

As we have seen in the narrow rubric used by broadcasters, however, such independent scrutiny would have been notched up as a contribution favouring the Remain campaign – thus requiring a counter-claim from the other side.

Table 8. The proportion of statistical claims challenged or contextualised in television news coverage of the EU referendum.

	BBC	ITV	Channel 4	Channel 5	Sky News	Total
Percentage of statistical claims challenged	20.4% (20)	27.0% (24)	18.6% (22)	13.2% (5)	13.7% (13)	21.0% (92)
Percentage of statistical claims contextualised	25.5% (25)	23.6% (21)	18.6% (21)	23.7% (9)	9.4% (9)	19.4% (85)

EU: European Union.

Journalistic challenges to statistical references were not routine – made in 17.6% of claims – with very few occasions when a number or figure was *comprehensively* interrogated by a reporter, as in this example on Channel 4:

We've done our own bit of research to find out if membership really does cost each of us £252 a year, as claimed by many Brexit campaigners. Are we giving Brussels £350 million a week, whilst receiving nothing in return? Here's our latest fact check.

[statistics appear on screen without voice over]

Does the EU cost every person in the UK £250 a year? Leave Campaigners say the membership fee is £350 m a week – Leave campaign. That would be 0.6% of national income. Or one seventh of UK health spending (13.9%). That's £252 a year per person in the UK, They estimate this because last year the UK gave £18.8bn to the EU. But what they leave out is that we get quite a lot of money back, there is a rebate every year, negotiated by Margaret Thatcher. Billions are given to the UK to spend on things like farming (£9.8 bn). Even more comes back in grants for universities and business (£5.7bn) – IFS. Bringing the cost down from £252 to £89 a year. (19 April 2016)

However, this more detailed statistical breakdown was very much the exception rather than the rule.

The campaign was thereby dominated by *statistical tit-for-tat* reporting, in which the two campaigns traded statistical claims. Table 9 shows that over one-third of news items involving a statistic about the EU during this period – 37.1% – included a statistical tit-for-tat between the two sides of the campaign, with even higher proportions on the BBC and Sky.

Over half of these statistical tit-for-tats involved rival camps either challenging or contextualising their opponent's claim – 53.8% – without any reporter mediation (a proportion broadly similar across broadcasters). Approximately half of these exchanges were not centred on a specific figure or data set, but on distinct or generalised statistical claims, as this example on Channel 4 illustrates,

Presenter: The campaign itself has been dominated by a claim from the Leave side that VAT could be cut or even scrapped on energy and other bills if the UK voted out. The Remain campaign have branded this as fantasy economics.

Table 9. The proportion of news items with a statistical claim including a tit-for-tat in television news coverage of the EU referendum.

	BBC	ITV	Channel 4	Channel 5	Sky News	Total
Percentage tit-for-tats within news items involving a statistical claim	41.7%	33.3%	32.8%	20%	44.7%	37.1%

EU: European Union.

Gary Gibbon (Reporter): Brits will save £2 billion a year off their energy bills, the Sun says. Inside the paper has an article written by Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, plus Labour's Gisela Stuart, saying fuel bills will be lower for everyone if we leave.

Chris Grayling (Conservative, Leave campaign): Give the British people a bonus for voting to leave by cutting their fuel bills. *That is only a small part of the money we would save from our contribution;* money that should also be spent on other priorities like our national health service.

Amber Rudd (Conservative, Remain campaign): Well this is *fantasy economics from the Leave campaign. The fact is that 9 out of 10 economists have told us that our economy would shrink if we left the EU* and if our economy shrinks there is going to be less money, there is going to be cuts [...] Once again the Leave campaign spending money they don't have. (31 May 2016; *emphasis added*)

Without additional analysis or journalistic interpretation, it would be hard to see how this kind of statistical tit-for-tat would enhance viewers' understanding of EU membership or the consequences of leaving. The dominant message conveyed by this particular form of impartiality was that the weight of evidence on both sides was broadly comparable – something that many independent observers (notably economists) would dispute. The decision by broadcasters to push most independent voices onto one side of this simple binary may have amplified viewers' confusion about the relative merits of EU membership.

Statistical tit-for-tats, constructing balance and (re)interpreting impartiality

In recent years, there has been greater recognition among broadcasters that impartiality should not be translated into simply balancing the competing sides of a debate or issue. It is now widely acknowledged that a binary notion of balance can distort coverage when the weight of evidence clearly falls on one side (Lewis and Speers, 2003) – most famously in the coverage of climate change or the reporting of the Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) vaccine.

And yet, our study of television coverage of the EU referendum campaign found that while broadcasters understandably balanced the airtime granted to official Leave and Remain actors, they did not consider or scrutinise the veracity or weight of opposing arguments. In applying this editorial judgement to 'due impartiality' and 'broad balance',

we also found broadcasters did not reflect the full range of party political opinions and left little space for analysis beyond politicians and campaigners. In particular, the UK Conservative Party – who were split on leaving or remaining in the EU – made up by far the largest share of party political sources. Labour – or, indeed, any left of centre party voices, who represented a more left-wing perspective on EU membership - were marginalised as the electoral contest was often interpreted through the prism of Conservative party infighting or a future leadership contest. In short, while the Conservative case for Remain was featured prominently, a more left-wing case for EU membership – despite intense campaigning by many senior Labour, Liberal Democrat, SNP, Plaid Cymru and trade union figures – was side-lined. The striking failure of the Remain campaign in many traditional Labour heartlands raises the plausible possibility that the lack of political balance in broadcast coverage – notably the absence of a left-wing case for Remain – may have been significant. While broadcasters might claim Labour’s marginal coverage was due to its leader being a reluctant participant in the referendum campaign, there were nonetheless many other senior figures in the party (and other parties) that could have been used to counter-balance Conservative perspectives.

Our analysis of statistical claims made during the coverage also shows how the narrow balancing act between the (generally Conservative) advocates for Leave and Remain *constrained expert analysis and journalistic scrutiny*. Research has shown this lack of explanation and analysis has characterised reporting of the EU for many years – allowing the British electorate to become one of least informed in the EU (Hix, 2015). Rather than respond to this lack of knowledge, campaign coverage (by continuing in the same vein) helped perpetuate it.

While the preponderance of expert testimony and statistical evidence favoured the Remain campaign, the proportions of statistical claims made on television news were finely balanced between Leave and Remain campaign actors. In practice, this meant that evidence from a number of highly respected economists, for example, were given equal rate with a simple rebuttal from a campaigner on the Leave side.

Similarly, most statistical claims were not subject to challenge or put in context. Instead, we found coverage was dominated by *statistical tit-for-tats*, with rival camps trading numerical claims with little journalistic arbitration or attempt to consult or interpret expert opinion about particular issues. For a general public with low levels of trust in politicians, this provided heat but little light. It also distorted the weight of evidence in key areas, suggesting competing arguments held equivalent value *regardless of the weight of evidence*. Strikingly absent from this binary was coverage that explained how the EU worked, the nature of international trade, or the economic role of EU immigration and its impact on public services. The broadcasters’ mission to inform was muted in the echo chamber of claim and counter-claim.

In the aftermath of the referendum, several journalists questioned the way impartiality had been interpreted. Justin Webb, presenter of the BBC’s Radio 4 Today show, argued that ‘One of the clearest messages during the referendum campaign was that audiences were hungry for real knowledge. People wanted to go beyond claim and counter-claim so that they could work out what was true’ (cited in Plunkett, 2016b). Yet, the operational definition of impartiality the broadcasters chose to adopt ruled this kind of journalistic scrutiny out of bounds. If, for example, reporters had repeatedly made clear that the

Leave campaign's central statistical claim was widely discredited, they would have fallen outside the narrow confines of their own, self-imposed rubric. Getting to the truth, in this sense, was trumped by a narrow version of impartiality.

As a consequence, our study indicated that journalists often appeared reluctant to make judgements about the veracity of some of the campaigns' claims or turn to alternative sources of knowledge for analysis and verification. Despite the fact that, as Radio 4 presenter Eddie Mair pointed out, voters were asking 'basic questions' about the EU membership that politicians *or the media* were not answering (cited in Plunkett, 2016a), they stuck closely to the agendas of the Leave and Remain campaigners.

Although the United Kingdom's referendum campaign lasted 10 weeks, days before the vote, one survey showed that less than one-third – 31% – of people 'felt well or very well informed about their EU vote'.³ This was revealed by an Ipsos MORI (2016) poll that found close to half of respondents believed that the UK government spent £350m per week on EU membership, despite independent experts repeatedly challenging this statistic. Adopting a more evidence-driven approach to impartiality, where journalists independently seek the most truthful version of events – as well as taking their mission to inform more seriously – may have gone some way in better informing people before they cast their vote.

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Notes

1. The quotes are from the BBC Trust's and Office of Communications' (Ofcom) editorial guidelines about impartiality: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines/impartiality>; https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/24534/section5.pdf.
2. We are grateful to Natasha Egan-Sjodin for coding all the material.
3. This representative poll is quoted from the Electoral Reform Society's website: <http://electoral-reform.org.uk/press-release/under-third-voters-feel-well-informed-about-eu-referendum> (accessed 9 August 2016).

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