Press release

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UK press coverage of EU Referendum campaign dominated by pro-Leave

A new report from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism reveals that UK press coverage in the weeks leading up to the EU Referendum was dominated by pro-Leave articles. The report, *UK press coverage of the EU Referendum*, examines how the UK press covered the EU Referendum story, and looks at what the key arguments, spokespeople, tone of articles and areas of focus were in the weeks leading up to the nationwide vote.

Produced in partnership with media insight specialists PRIME Research, the report includes analysis of two days of press coverage each week for the London editions of nine national newspapers over the four months of the campaign.

Dr David Levy, Director of the Reuters Institute and one of the report's authors says: *"The research reveals a picture of highly polarised press coverage, reliant on a narrow range of voices, and where coverage was relatively more focused on the contest itself and personalities than any of the complex issues at stake. In that sense, in spite of some notable exceptions, the press was generally better at reinforcing the views of decided voters than in giving undecided voters, seeking broad facts and high-quality information, the evidence to make up their own minds."*

Key findings from the report include:

A dominant pro-Leave bias

- Of the articles focused on the referendum, 41% were pro-Leave, while 27% were pro-Remain, creating a dominant pro-Leave presence. (See Fig 4.1) After factoring in the reach of different newspapers, the pro-Brexit dominance is further accentuated, with 48% of all referendum-focused articles pro-Leave and just 22% pro-Remain.
- Six out of the nine newspapers followed this pro-Leave dominance, with the strongest positions in the *Daily Express*, followed by the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun*. The *Daily Mirror* had the highest share of pro-Remain articles, followed by the *Guardian* and the *Financial Times*

A focus on the economy – from both sides

- The economy was the most cited referendum issue covered in articles, followed by sovereignty and migration. (See Fig. 5.3) The economy was cited in both pro-Leave and Remain articles, but sovereignty and migration skewed heavily to pro-Leave articles.

Enough of experts?

- Almost half of spokespeople cited in articles were either UK politicians or campaign representatives, while analysts/experts made up 11% of spokespeople cited, and academics just 2%. Foreign politicians made up 5% of spokespeople cited. (See Fig. 6.1)
- Of the small number of academics quoted, one, Professor Patrick Minford, heavily associated with the Leave campaign, accounted for a fifth of all quotes on our sample days.

Blue on blue

- 64% of UK politicians cited in articles were Conservative, and 17% Labour. (See Fig 6.3)
- The most quoted politicians during the campaign period were former PM David Cameron (quoted in approximately 14% of articles) and Boris Johnson (10%).
- Current PM Theresa May kept a relatively low profile as the eleventh most cited politician.
- Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was the eighth most cited politician, quoted in just 3% of articles. This trend was true even in the left-leaning press; he was quoted in 3-4% of articles in The *Guardian* and *Mirror*, about a third as many times as David Cameron or Boris Johnson.

The report finds marked differences in tone between the Leave and Remain arguments in the press. While the pro-Remain articles focused largely on the single issue of the economy, they adopted a generally very negative tone, apparently reluctant to use positive language, and gave pessimistic forecasts of a pro-Brexit future. In contrast, pro-Leave articles adopted a more positive tone, balancing criticism of the status quo with hopeful messages for a pro-Brexit future. Pro-Leave articles did play to fears, notably around migration and sovereignty, but their future-oriented messages were more optimistic.

Diego Bironzo, Account Director at PRIME Research and one of the report's authors says: *"The granular topic analysis performed for this study shows that the winning campaign adopted a broader range of topics and tones. The Leave camp's more varied and often emotive messaging not only proved effective in gaining media traction: ultimately, by approaching different issues (such as controlling migration, regaining sovereignty, using EU budget contributions for the UK) at different times, it resonated with different news audiences."*

Selected images for press use

Editors' notes

About The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

The Thomson Reuters Foundation is the core funder of the RISJ, based in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford. The RISJ was launched in November 2006 and developed from the Reuters Fellowship Programme, established at Oxford 32 years ago. An international research centre in the comparative study of journalism, the RISJ aims to be global in its perspective and provides a leading forum for scholars from a wide range of disciplines to engage with journalists from around the world. See http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/

About PRIME Research

Established as an academic research institute in Germany in 1987, PRIME Research has expanded internationally to become one of the world's largest public relations research consultancies. PRIME applies robust metrics, innovative tools and a focused approach to provide, via a complete portfolio of services, meaningful and actionable insights from the analysis of all forms of media (print, broadcast, digital; traditional, social).

About the authors

Dr David A. L. Levy is Director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and an expert in media policy and regulation. He previously worked at the BBC both as a news and current affairs producer, reporter and editor and later as Controller, Public Policy. He is the author of *Europe's Digital Revolution: Broadcasting Regulation, the EU and the Nation State* (Routledge,1999/2001) and joint author or editor of several RISJ publications.

Billur Aslan has recently received her PhD from Royal Holloway, University of London (RHUL). She currently works as a research assistant on different research projects of the New Political Communication Unit of RHUL, Open University and the Reuters Institute. Billur's research interests are in the fields of media and politics with a particular focus on social media, social movements and the Middle East. Billur's research has been published in the *International Journal of Communication and Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*.

Diego Bironzo is an account director at PRIME Research UK, where he runs international media analysis and communications measurement programmes on behalf of corporate clients and institutions. He has a degree in media studies and communication, and a masters in corporate communication from the Universities of Turin and Lumière Lyon II. Diego has extensive experience in the fields of data mining and strategic analysis, with a particular focus on public affairs, monetary policymaking and the banking industry.

Methodology

Data were provided by PRIME Research, who collected them from nine newspapers on two days of press coverage (Tuesdays and Saturdays) each week over the four months of the campaign, from February 20-June 21, 2016. The sample included the London editions of the five largest tabloids and mid-market papers, namely the *Sun*, *Daily Mail, Daily Star, Daily Express* and *Daily Mirror*, as well as the four broadsheets; the *Times, Guardian, Financial Times* and *Daily Telegraph*. PRIME Research used various keywords to identify EU referendum related news stories, such as: EU referendum, EU membership, Brexit, Vote Leave, Vote Remain, Leave campaign, Remain campaign, Project fear, Project fact, Euro, Euro scepticism, Euro sceptic/s, Cameron's deal, Cameron's negotiation, Exit terms. Once an automated search gathered all articles with at least one relevant mention of such keywords, a researcher assessed whether the articles were relevant before submitting them to a team of five analysts who performed the detailed coding in PRIME's proprietary content analysis system.

Researchers constructed a total sample of 3,403 articles discussing the EU Referendum, of which 2,378 articles were explicitly focused on the EU Referendum and which were used for the bulk of the analysis in this report. Our articles included news items, opinion pieces and editorials. Most of the analysis is based on article-level analysis of those articles focused on the referendum. However, in a few cases we rely on message-level analysis.

The concentration on the printed press was dictated in part by resources, and the role of the press in helping set the agenda for other media, and in addition because newspapers still account for the largest share of investment in original journalism.

For more information on this report, contact **Monique Ricketts**, Events Officer, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism: monique.ricketts@politics.ox.ac.uk / + 44 (0)1865 611073/07802 551057