VTU Review: Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences

Volume 2 Issue 1 2018 **"St. Cyril and St. Methodius" University of Veliko Tarnovo**

The Role of "Letters to the Editor" in Shaping Mass Media Representations of Brexit

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Brexit has commanded an enormous amount of attention in the UK media, both before and since the In-Out referendum on 23 June 2016. Though various studies have already considered the overall role of newspapers in affecting attitudes towards the EU in the UK, this article focuses on an area in which there has so far been no research: the role of "Letters to the Editor" in newspaper contributions to the Brexit debate and their parts in equipping voters to make an informed choice. It looks at six UK national newspapers, all with varied stances on the EU and with different tones and styles of getting messages across to readers. All letters published in each paper during the month leading up to the referendum will be scrutinized with a view to throwing some light on the following initial questions. To what extent did readers' letters tend to support and reinforce each newspaper's stance on "Leave" or "Remain"? To what extent did readers' letters contribute to a real debate in each newspaper, i.e., disputing the content of articles or editorials published by the newspapers or disputing other readers' letters? How, if at all, did the role of readers' letters vary between the six newspapers? Finally, were there any differences of note in the style and format of the different newspapers' letters pages?
Keywords: Brexit, UK EU Referendum, UK and Europe, UK-EU relations, UK media and EU, Letters to the Editor.

Introduction

Brexit has commanded an enormous amount of attention in the UK media, both before and since the In-Out referendum on 23 June 2016. The attention the EU issue received and the attempts to generate understanding – or peddle misunderstanding – of the EU across its many dimensions were unprecedented. This article focuses on UK newspapers, which undoubtedly played a significant part in determining the referendum result by shaping voters' views or re-affirming pre-existing ones. Though various studies have already considered the overall role of newspapers in affecting attitudes towards the EU in the UK (Leruth et al 2017, Copsey and Copeland 2017), this article will focus on an area in which there has so far been no research: the role of "Letters to the Editor" in newspaper contributions to the Brexit debate and their parts in equipping voters to make an informed choice. It will look at six UK national newspapers, all with varied stances on the EU and with different tones and styles of getting messages across to readers. All letters published in each paper during the month leading up to the referendum will be scrutinized with a view to throwing some light on the following questions: To what extent did readers' letters tend to support and reinforce each newspaper's stance on Brexit? To what extent did readers' letters contribute to a real debate in each newspaper, for example, by disputing the content of articles or editorials published by the newspapers or disputing other letters that had been published? How, if at all, did the role of readers' letters vary between the six newspapers?

*An earlier version of this article was presented at the International and Interdisciplinary Conference *Letters*, organized by the Bulgarian Society for British Studies, the Bulgarian American Studies Association and "St. Cyril and St. Methodius" University of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria (Varna, Bulgaria, 27-29 2017).

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The article begins with a short discussion of the role of "Letters to the Editor," or at least of what this role should be in theory. This serves also as an explanation of why Letters pages are an important dimension of the overall role of the printed media in shaping and/or reinforcing voter preferences and therefore a worthy topic of study. The next section has two parts. First, it introduces the newspapers which were scrutinized and over which period, including some standard information about each newspaper's usual political affiliations, its readership, circulation and, most importantly, its stance on Brexit (whether it recommended its readers to vote "Leave" or "Remain"). Second, it provides some key quantitative data about letters on the EU Referendum during the period covered. How many letters? What proportion of overall letters published were on the referendum theme? What proportion of letters were in favour of "Remain" and what proportion in favour of "Leave"? How did the letters published align with the particular newspapers' stance on the Referendum? The final section develops the analysis of the letters published in a more qualitative and in-depth way and considers the following questions: How did the style and content of letters published vary between the newspapers? Which newspapers, if any, had a serious/informed and balanced debate? Which newspapers followed a pattern of supporting the stance of the newspaper itself and reflecting readership preferences and what they wanted to hear? What other notable variations in readers' letters were revealed?

Letters to the Editor in Newspapers

There can be no doubt that in the past couple of years or so social media have been transforming the way politics works, in particular including how political debates are conducted and how political ideas, viewpoints and opinions are transmitted. As well as transforming channels of communication of political messages, the issue of regulation and verification of political news is of course a major worry. The election of current US President Donald Trump is as a seminal event in terms of politics in the digital age and the persuasiveness of online media. In the June 2017 general election in the UK, it is widely accepted that the Labour Party campaign was surprisingly successful because of the medium as much as the message, as it sidestepped most of the traditional media outlets and focused on a wide range of digital platforms, particularly those used by younger voters. In contrast, "a campaign by traditional right-wing newspapers seems to have fallen flat with voters" (*The Financial Times*, 2017). Yet those same newspapers had "looked so powerful after last year's EU vote" (*The Financial Times,* 2017). Indeed, shortly before the referendum a former editor of *The Sunday Telegraph* said that "the views expressed by papers were 'important' in the vote's outcome: 'Remember this could be really close…very serious politicians have been ringing up editors and asking them to back their side'" (Ridley). To emphasize this further, after the referendum, "a member of Cameron's team said "if the *Mail, Sun* and the *Telegraph* had been for 'In' we would have romped home" (Shipman 131).

The bulk of newspapers' content is the work of its journalists, columnists, guest contributors and editors. Most newspapers also set aside at least one page per issue for contributions from readers, mainly in the form of "Letters to the Editor." A letter to the editor is "a written way of talking to a newspaper, magazine or other written publication…[;][t]hey can take a position for or against an issue, or simply inform, or both…[;][l]etters to the editor are among the most widely read features in any newspaper or magazine[;] [t]hey allow you to reach a wide audience" (Community Tool Box 2-3). Walbert (2008) notes a number of reasons why newspapers embrace reader submissions, including the following: to diversify the viewpoints expressed within the newspaper; allow readers to respond to events from a local/regional/national perspective; as a device to develop amongst readers a sense of identity or "belonging" around the newspaper; to gauge readers' interests and sentiments in order to tailor coverage and retain/increase readership; develop an impression that the readers contribute to the agenda of the newspaper and the issues it focuses on. Though it is not the primary purpose of this article to delve deeply into attitudes about the role and purpose of letters to the editor in the various newspapers covered, the focus on the EU referendum may throw some light upon it.

UK Newspapers and the EU Referendum Debate

Tables 1 to 4 provide a range of data about the six newspapers included in the study and analysis of the letters received about the EU referendum issue from 1 June to 22 June 2016. The study focused on print versions only. The six newspapers are equally divided between "quality"/broadsheet and tabloid/middle market press. The print circulation (as of December 2016) of these newspapers has some quite strong disparity, ranging

from 1,491,264 in the case of the *Daily Mail* down to 193,271 for *The Financial Times*. The circulation data for the other four varied less, ranging from 391,626 for the *Daily Express* to 716,923. In terms of the editorial stance on the EU Referendum there was an equal split with the three right/centre-right wing, and traditionally Conservative Party-favouring, newspapers supporting "Leave" and the left leaning *Daily Mirror* supporting "Remain" along with the politically (in terms of party loyalty) unaffiliated *Times* and *Financial Times*. *The Times* made a strong point of the caveat that came with its recommendation that readers vote to stay in the EU, which was that the EU was in need of major reform. This reflected the newspaper's longstanding opposition to deeper integration in the EU, or at least to the UK's participation in it.[1]

Table 1: The Newspapers

Newspaper	**Type**	**Price**	**Circulation (Daily Print Sales, December 2016)**	**Editorial Stance on the EU Referendum**
The Financial Times	Broadsheet/ "Quality"	£2.70	193,271	Remain
The Times	Broadsheet/ "Quality"	£1.20	446,164	Remain but Reform
The Telegraph	Broadsheet/ "Quality"	£1.60	460,054	Leave
Mirror	Middle Market/Tabloid	£0.70	716,923	Remain
Mail	Middle Market/Tabloid	£0.65	1,491,264	Leave
Express	Middle Market/Tabloid	£0.50	391,626	Leave

Turning now to readers' contributions to these newspapers during the EU Referendum debate, Tables 2 and 3 provide the basic data on letters published between 1 and 22 June across the six newspapers. A total of 484 letters appeared, falling into three categories: those that supported the "Leave" position; those that supported the "Remain" position; and *comments* which discussed some aspect of the "Leave"/"Remain" debate or about the nature or conduct of the referendum itself without falling into the "Leave" or "Remain" bracket. *The Daily Telegraph* had the highest number of letters on the EU Referendum issue at 160, around 5 times as many as the *Daily Mirror* which had the least number of letters at 37. There were a total of 285 letters supporting "Leave," 112 supporting "Remain" and 87 comments. The greatest number of letters supporting "Leave" was in *The Telegraph* (110/69%) and for "Remain" in *The Times* (45/60%). The *Express* and the *Mail* had the least number of letters supporting "Remain," at 0 and 4 respectively. The *Mirror* readers' contributions were exactly balanced: 17/46% letters for "Remain" and 17/46% in support of "Leave." *The Financial Times* had the highest proportion of comment-type letters, at 45% of letters received, by some margin. This was over twice as many as *The Telegraph* and *The Times*.

[1] In 2009, in the context of a serious slump in the value of the £ during the financial crisis, a debate about UK possible membership of the Eurozone surfaced briefly. *The Times* editorial position was unequivocal, arguing that the Euro was primarily a political project and did not advise that the UK become part of it. See Dangerfield (2009).

Table 2: Letters Published on the EU Referendum Issue

Newspaper	Number of letters on Brexit	Number of letters for "Leave"	Number of letters for "Remain"	Number of Comments
Daily Mirror	37	17	17	3
The Telegraph	160	110	16	34
The Times	75	15	45	15
The Financial Times	71	9	30	32
Daily Express	69	68	0	1
Daily Mail	72	66	4	2
Total	484	285	112	87

Table 3: Letters Published on the EU Referendum Issue Between 1 June and 23 June – % Data

Newspaper	Number of Letters on Brexit	Proportion of Letters for "Leave"	Proportion of Letters for "Remain"	Proportion of Comments
Daily Mirror	37	46%	46%	8%
The Telegraph	160	69%	10%	21%
The Times	75	20%	60%	20%
The Financial Times	71	13%	42%	45%
Daily Express	69	99%	0%	1%
Daily Mail	72	92%	6%	2%

Further analysis of these quantitative data reveals some clear connections between the positions taken in letters and the editorial stances of the newspapers. Table 4 ranks the newspapers according to the proportion of letters received that corresponded with the respective editorial stances. The data reveal that the newspapers in support of "Leave" had the highest proportion of published letters that corresponded with each newspaper's own position. The most overwhelming support for the newspaper's position was found to be in the cases of the *Express* and the *Mail*, with 99% and 92% respectively, which demonstrated almost exclusive support on the

part of those readers/contributors. Readers of *The Telegraph* were not very inclined to contest the newspaper's editorial stance, with 69% in support of its "Leave" recommendation and only 10% of letters representing the "Remain" case. Conversely, the newspapers in support of "Remain" had the lowest proportion of published Brexit letters that corresponded with their editorial stances. *The Times* had the most, having published 60% of letters that supported "Remain," followed by the *Mirror* with 46% and *The Financial Times* the least at 42%. It is notable that less than half of the letters published in the two of the "Remain"-supporting newspapers were in line with the editorial stance. All this suggests that the pro-Remain newspapers letters pages were more of a forum for debate than the corresponding pages in pro-Leave newspapers. The latter were either more biased in what they published or were perhaps restricted by a lack of letters acceptable for publication that argued for "Remain" (or both). Finally, the results for *The Telegraph* – much less even in the balance of letters published – and the *Mirror* – much more even in the balance of letters published – show that it was not true that just the tabloids could potentially have used letters pages to restrict debate and promote their position.

Table 4: Ranking of Newspapers According to Proportion of Readers' Letters That Support the Editorial Stance on "Leave" or "Remain"

Newspaper	***Proportion of Letters in Line with Editorial Stance***	***Proportion of Letters not in Line with Editorial Stance***	***Circulation***
Daily Express	99%	0%	*391,626*
Daily Mail	92%	6%	*1,491,264*
The Daily Telegraph	69%	10%	*460,054*
The Times	60%	20%	*446,164*
Mirror	46%	46%	*716,923*
The Financial Times	42%	13%	*193,271*

As far as the overall impact of letters to the editor in the national press is concerned, insofar as they were influential, the data indicate that they further stacked the odds in favour of the "Leave" campaign. As noted above, the pro-Leave newspapers were either more biased and manipulative in their use of letters or only attracted letters that the proprietor and other readers wanted to see. Either way, the effect could only have helped the "Leave" campaign. On the other, hand the pro-Remain newspapers had a more balanced set of contributions and therefore acted also as a channel for the "Leave" message. Added to this, these effects were amplified by the fact that the pro-Leave newspapers were the ones with the biggest circulation. At 2.43 million collectively, this was some 1.7 times greater than the 1.36 million commanded by pro-Remain group newspapers. Moreover, pro-Remain support was more locked into broadsheet/"quality" press and therefore both less likely to reach undecided/fickle voters and where it did, more likely to give them both sides of the debate. As Shipman wrote with respect to two other "Remain" supporting newspapers, the "Remain" cause "could expect good shows in *The Guardian* and *Independent*, but both were newspapers with dwindling circulation which did not speak to the kind of voters the 'In' campaign would need to convert" (131). Finally, the past form of the pro-Leave newspapers, especially the tabloids, suggests that they were much less likely to practise "censorship" of letters and would continue to allow unalloyed myths and untruths about the EU to appear on their pages. This had been most clearly verified just one year before the referendum with the publication of the Leveson Report on UK press standards. This stated that "[a]rticles relating to the European Union, and Britain's role within it, accounted for a further category of story where parts of the press appeared

to prioritize the title's agenda over factual accuracy" (206). Evidence presented to the Leveson Report stated that the *Express*, the *Mail* and *The Telegraph*

> are broadly anti-European. At various times, readers of these and other newspapers may have read that 'Europe' or 'Brussels' or the 'EU superstate' has banned, or is intending to ban kilts, curries, mushy peas, paper rounds, Caerphilly cheese, charity shops, bulldogs, bent sausages and cucumbers, the British Army, lollipop ladies, British loaves, British made lavatories, the passport crest, lorry drivers who wear glasses, and many more. In addition, if the Eurosceptic press is to be believed, Britain is going to be forced to unite as a single country with France, Church schools are going to be forced and hire atheist teachers (and) British soldiers must take orders in French (Leveson, 2015, 2017).

In other words, Europe/EU has been a topic that tabloid/middle-market press regards as "okay" to lie about, thus further bolstering the letters/press role in favouring the "Leave" campaign.

Letters to the Editor and the EU Referendum Debate: Comparison of Style, Tone and Content

Given the complexity of the issue of whether to stay in the EU coupled with the widespread lack of knowledge about European integration across all citizens and therefore across all readerships of all newspapers in the UK, the expectation would have been that a sophisticated debate on EU membership would not be found in the bulk of the UK press no matter what the quality of the newspaper. That is, both the broadsheets and tabloids faced a higher test of the standard of their content when compared with most other parts of the political journalism agenda. Notwithstanding this challenge there were, as would be expected, still major differences between the styles, tone and content of the broadsheet/"quality" newspapers on the one hand and the tabloid/middle market ones, on the other. The standard way of understanding of these two forms of print journalism is as follows. Broadsheets are "associated with a high-minded approach to the dissemination of news, and with an upscale readership…[;] [they] tend to employ a traditional approach to newsgathering that emphasizes in-depth coverage and a sober tone in articles and editorials; [b]roadsheet readers often tend to be fairly affluent and educated" (Rogers 1). Tabloids, considered to be "popular" press and aimed at less educated, less discerning readers from lower social groupings, tend to have shorter pieces with less in-depth coverage of issues. They "tend to be more irreverent and slangy in their writing styles than their more serious broadsheets brothers…[i]n Britain tabloid papers – also known as the red tops for their front-page banners – tend to be much more racy and sensationalistic than their American counterparts" (Rogers 3). The reputation of British tabloids as more extreme and less scrupulous in their reporting than elsewhere is perfectly illustrated by their tendency not to treat the EU seriously, as found by the Leveson Report contents already noted in this article. The rest of this section highlights some of the more notable features of the way that the referendum debate was reflected in the readers' letters sections of the newspapers that were scrutinized. This includes not only tone and content, but also some specific features of letters sections that were to do with format.

As would be predicted, the reader contributions published in the broadsheets' letters pages were much more concerned with attempts to tackle issues in an in-depth way and less of the more simplistic, rhetorical/banal contributions that were more common in the tabloids. As well as being more balanced in their pro-Leave/pro-Remain coverage, the broadsheets included many more contributions from often well-known or distinguished figures and from representatives of the world of finance, politics, science and technology, academia, economic/business sectors particularly affected by the implications of leaving and remaining and so on. *The Financial Times* was undoubtedly the forum for the most heavyweight debate within its letters pages. This was not only around the economic consequences of potential Brexit but also delving into the political dimension, too, reflecting on questions of sovereignty, democracy, the UK's place in the world, the nexus between UK party politics and the referendum and so on. *The Financial Times* was also an exception by virtue of the fact that it easily had the greatest number of comments which at 32/55%, comfortably exceeded the number of letters it had in support of the paper's own "Remain" preference. The comments covered a range of issues, including the quality of the overall debate surrounding and feeding into the referendum debate, the question of whether the UK Civil Service had a duty to be silent or at least impartial about the wisdom of the UK staying in the EU or not, the nature of democracy, both in terms of how the democratic credentials (or not) of the EU might be judged and whether referenda are genuine instruments of "popular" will; the historical influence of

Continental Europe on the UK and so on. It is clear therefore, and this is something that was always quite predictable given the high level of coverage of European integration in its pages before the referendum, that the most comprehensive and informed debate was in *The Financial Times*.

Different approaches to letters pages may also have affected the role that letters played in the newspapers' referendum debate contributions. One factor of course was the normal length of letters, with the assumption that the shorter the letter the less in-depth it would be. In line with the general style of the newspapers, the broadsheets on balance tended to include lengthier letters than was the case for the tabloids but the tabloids were by no means publishing only short missives. The different formats for letters pages that some newspapers employed were however notable and potentially significant for the referendum message that was projected. The *Daily Mirror* was distinct in the way that it gathered and organized its own readers' contributions. Instead of an open forum, readers' letters were steered towards its particular "Big Issue" of the day, which collected together all letters on a single topic. This meant that whereas all the other newspapers tended to be publishing at least some letters on the referendum on all or most of the days of the period studied, the *Mirror* was not. The "Big Issues" during this period included questions such as whether Russia should host the 2018 soccer World Cup, views about the new series of *Top Gear*, the British Home Stores (BHS) collapse, ISIS threats, to name a few. There were, however, six days where the referendum was the issue of the day, but for half of the period there were either no letters about Brexit or sometimes just letters in which it was linked somehow to the particular "Big Issue" of the day, for example, the Jo Cox murder, but was not itself the main focus. The *Daily Mail* also has an additional feature to its standard collection of readers' letters published in the normal format each day. Its "Straight to the Point" section, usually in an eye-catching, prominent position on the Letters page, includes a number of one-liners attributed to readers. There were plenty of "Straight to the Point" offerings on the referendum, almost exclusively pro-Leave. They often contained banal, trivial or clichéd comments on the EU issue, and also occasional anti-French, anti-German and even anti-Scottish sentiments were expressed. This jingoistic approach, often with wartime allusions, was visible in letters contained in the pro-Leave press, with obvious potential for editorial exploitation. It certainly tapped into the emotional and abstract, i.e., "we want our country back," dimensions of the referendum debate.

Finally, in the tabloids in particular it was noticeable that a good number of letters "personalized" the referendum issue: this was by linking the choice of how to vote to support for those politicians at the centre of the debate. Some of the letters that appeared in the *Daily Mirror*, including ones supporting both the "Remain" and the "Leave" side, used the Brexit issue for party politics purposes. Some contributions emphasized the mistakes being made by the Cameron government and the disingenuous nature of leading Conservative politicians' contributions to the debate. Also, there were criticisms of the Conservative government for calling the referendum and accusations of potentially sacrificing the UK's economic and political future for the interests of their party. So some letters in the only pro-Remain tabloid under scrutiny and the one with the biggest circulation of the pro-Remain group of newspapers were relatively small in number and featured comments that seemed to mainly prioritize use of the referendum issue to paint the Conservative party in a bad light. At the same time, the pro-Leave newspapers also featured plenty of letters that were highly critical of the Conservative party leadership. There were some particularly vitriolic letters towards Cameron in the middle market/tabloids. Thus, it was interesting to see letters in traditionally Conservative-supporting newspapers reflecting the split in the party over Europe. All of the pro-Leave newspapers under consideration came down on the side of the Eurosceptic element of the Conservative party. This strand of the debate was clearly another reason to conclude that the impact of Letters to the Editor was less favourable to the "Remain" cause. For the *Daily Mirror*, there was a contradiction in that the attacks on the Conservative leadership worked against its preference for the UK to stay in the EU. There was no senior pro-Remain Labour politician to champion that cause, bar possibly the "toxic" Tony Blair. The Labour leader at the time, Jeremy Corbyn, was at best ambiguous on the issue and offered only a very lukewarm opposition to "Leave." On the other hand, the pro-Leave tabloids dissected their traditional support for the Conservative Party by siding with the Eurosceptic wing (alongside support for UKIP) and vilified Cameron, Osborne and other prominent "Remainers." This was consistent with and an important part of their pro-Leave message.

Conclusion

The results of this study, based on a representative sample of the UK press, suggest that insofar as there was an impact of readers' "Letters to the Editor" in national newspapers upon the June 2016 EU Referendum result, it could only have worked for the "Leave" campaign. In quantitative terms, the total number of letters published supporting "Leave" exceeded those supporting "Remain" by 2.5 to 1. The extent to which there was a debate was greater in the pro-Remain newspapers with the proportion of letters corresponding with the editorial stance of the newspapers ranging from 42% to 60% in the pro-Remain newspapers and from 69% to 99% in the pro-Leave ones. Circulation data and some other qualitative observations reinforce the impression that the impact of "Letters to the Editor" was negative for the chances of a vote to remain within the EU.

The precise impact of newspapers on the June 2016 EU Referendum result cannot be quantified and the role of "Letters to the Editor" within the overall press is also very difficult to ascertain so these conclusions, albeit convincing, must remain tentative.[2] What can be said with far more certainty, however, is that the scrutiny of "Letters to the Editor" on the EU referendum issue confirms that in their contributions an ample number of readers mirrored the standard and style of the UK press's reportage of the EU and the UK relationship with it and that two broader and longer held viewpoints about UK print journalism's contributions to citizens' attitudes towards the EU continue to hold. First, as Allen wrote, "[u]ndoubtedly, the British popular press has done little to inform the public debate about the EU" (129), which means that, second, as Gowland et al. lamented, "[s]uch limited knowledge has often meant that distortions, simplistic and demonizing narratives, deeply ingrained prejudices and stereotypes easily creep into British media representations of the EU and acquire status as immutable truths" (6).

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[2] At the time of writing news was emerging of possible misuse of social media to actually subvert the referendum result via the harvesting of users' data for the purpose of targeted political messaging. Whether that turns out to be true or not doesn't alter the conclusions of this research which is about demonstrating that "Letters to the Editor" were a reinforcement of, rather than a corrective to, media hostility towards the EU.

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