POPULIST RHETORIC AND MEDIA MISINFORMATION IN THE 2016 UK BREXIT REFERENDUM

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On 23 June 2016, the United Kingdom voted narrowly to leave the European Union. The result was a shock for many onlookers after a succession of polls which had predicted a small victory for Remain – those who backed keeping the status quo (What UK Thinks 2016). Even the primary figures involved in the Leave campaign – Nigel Farage, the leader of the right-wing populist UK Independence Party (UKIP) and Boris Johnson, the Conservative politician who, as prime minister, would eventually go on to facilitate Britain’s exit – seemed surprised.

However, the Leave victory, narrow as it was, was not as surprising as politicians and pundits imagined. The debate over Europe followed decades of anti-European rhetoric from politicians on all sides, as well media organisations. The Leave campaign itself built on this and harnessed a message which incorporated classic populist tropes of appealing to ordinary people, criticising elites and ‘othering’ groups, most notably immigrants.

This chapter will look at the 2016 referendum through a populist and misinformation lens. While scholars agree that news media play a vital role in referendum campaigns, referendums are relatively underexamined compared to elections (Ridge-Newman 2018, 4). Yet referendums campaigns are often more important than election campaigns in determining outcome because of the short-term perceptions of the referendum question, the groups and individuals involved, and the public reaction to the campaign discourse (LeDuc 2002, 145). Populist approaches can therefore be very effective as the referendums are often outside traditional party issues. Research has commonly focused on whether the coverage of referendums is fair and balanced: for example, in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum (Robertson 2014; Tolson 2016). This chapter, however, argues that if news media follow the populist narrative, even while challenging and debunking misinformation, this can end up shaping public reaction.

Another problem is that if news media approach coverage of referendums and elections in the same way, the serious impact of the outcome can be lost. While elections have to be held at least every five years in the UK, for example, the 2016 Brexit referendum could not be similarly rerun. Yet many news media at least began by covering the referendum in the same way as they would an election – concentrating on inter-party strife and potential jockeying for power, particularly amongst the ruling Conservative party (so-called ‘blue-on-blue’ warfare) and treating many claims about the EU as they would promises made in party political manifestos.
The 2016 referendum was particularly unusual in that the result went contrary to the position that the three main parties (Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat) officially backed. While David Cameron had called the referendum to allow ‘the British people to have their say’ (BBC 2013), the Remain campaign led by the government did not manage to convince the public. Unlike the Leave campaign, Remain failed to coalesce around a clear, populist slogan or persuade key swing voters. This was reflected in the news coverage, which found the soundbites of the Leave campaign easier to turn into a story or a broadcast package. Even when challenging the Leave campaign narrative, this still gave publicity to the assertions.

Finally, this chapter focuses mainly on news media coverage of the Leave campaign. The role that social media played in the Brexit referendum, particularly the questions around bots and trolls, has been widely debated elsewhere and was undoubtedly influential (Fuchs 2018; Hall et al. 2018; Gorodnichenko 2018; Hanska and Bauchowitz 2017). This chapter, however, seeks to examine the lessons of news coverage in referendums, examining misinformation and populism.

The background to Brexit

The UK’s relationship with the EU, and Europe generally, had long been fractious. Anti-European discourse had been relatively unchallenged by the media and both main political parties for decades (Hensmans and van Bommel 2020), often as a balancing act to keep together the union of the four countries which make up the UK (Jones 1998). This led to a cultural anti-Europeanism – whether interpreted through nostalgia for the British Empire, the succession of wars dating back centuries against different European countries, or the idea of English exceptionalism (the narrative of Britain standing alone in the Second World War, for example). As the British empire crumbled and a globalised world advanced, an English populism hardened into Euroscepticism (Hensmans and van Bommel 2020).

The UK was not a founding member of the EU, or the European Communities as it was then called, but joined following a referendum held in 1975 in which 67.2 percent of the electorate voted in favour. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, there were conflict and uncertainty about the UK’s place in Europe. This encompassed both sides of the political divide – with Labour Party policy in 1983 being to leave the community, while rifts in the Conservative party deepened following the decision to join the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) in October 1990 and Margaret Thatcher’s resignation as prime minister the following month. The ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, which furthered European integration in 1993 without a referendum, led to increasing Euroscepticism in the Conservative party and the formation of the right-wing UK Independence Party in 1993.

This conflict over the UK’s place in Europe was reflected in the media coverage. By the early 1990s, media coverage of the European Union was increasingly hostile in some quarters – for example, headlines such as The Sun’s 1990 ‘Up Yours, Delors’, a blast against Jacques Delors, then president of the European Commission. A specific type of mythic storytelling also grew which relied on manipulation and distortion of tales about alleged EU regulation (Henkel 2018), a genre of reporting primarily created by The Telegraph’s Brussels correspondent at the time, Boris Johnson (Gimson 2012; Purnell 2011). While supposed bans on prawn cocktail crisps, bent bananas, and crooked cucumbers made for amusing reading, the EU was sufficiently concerned to set up a website to try to counter these ‘Euromyths’ which were perpetuated.

In the aftermath of the Maastricht Treaty and the BSE crisis, which saw Europe ban imports of British beef, Eurosceptic views on both left and right in the UK hardened and grew from 38 percent in 1993 to 63 percent in 2014 (Curtice and Evans 2015). Meanwhile, UKIP saw
increasing success in European elections, moving from third place in the 2004 elections to first place in the 2014 elections with 27.5 percent of the vote (Deacon and Wring 2016) and then winning two national by-elections in 2014.

Faced with increased pressure within his own party and fears about the rise in UKIP’s vote share, the Conservative prime minister David Cameron offered an in-out referendum on a renegotiated package with the EU if the party won the 2015 election. At the time, the Conservatives were in coalition with the pro-European Liberal Democrats. Cameron’s surprise election victory in 2015 made the referendum inevitable, and he announced on 22 February 2016 that a referendum would be held on 23 June 2016.

Senior Conservative figures, in particular Boris Johnson, the MP and mayor of London, and Michael Gove, the justice secretary, chose to campaign aggressively for Leave, to Cameron’s shock and dismay (Rayner 2019). On 24 June 2016, the electorate voted in favour of leaving in England and Wales; Scotland and Northern Ireland’s populations had voted to Remain. But overall, the populist cry of ‘take back control’ had chimed with enough of the electorate for a Leave victory.

Linked to that slogan were three recurring messages, which were at best misleading and at worst disinformation and propaganda. But all three proved particularly potent in the run-up to the referendum and received widespread coverage via both legacy and social media. First was a battle bus slogan that linked £350 million sent to Brussels to funding for the UK’s National Health Service (NHS), which was created by the official Vote Leave campaign. Second was the ‘Breaking Point’ poster, showing a long queue of migrants, which was created by the unofficial Leave.eu campaign. Third was messaging from both campaigns around the alleged imminent accession of Turkey to the EU. The success of all these tropes was embedded deeply in the history of UK populism, which had manifested itself as English exceptionalism and anti-European feeling for decades (Hensman and van Bommel 2020).

The power of this messaging was particularly important because of the volatility of referendum campaigns. Unlike election campaigns, in which party identification and ideological orientations characteristically play a large part, in referendums, some voters may be driven by strongly held beliefs while others may be more susceptible to change (LeDuc 2002). As Zaller (1992) puts it, opinion formation in elections is a combination of information and predisposition. With Brexit there had clearly been both media and political agendas going back decades which were anti-Europe, but polls suggested that this was not a clear-cut outcome. This situation becomes even more acute during referendums, as LeDuc puts it:

When parties are internally divided, ideological alignments are unclear or an issue is new and unfamiliar to the mass public, voters might be expected to draw more of their information from the campaign discourse. Under these circumstances, the outcome of the contest becomes highly unpredictable.

(LeDuc 2002, 713)

Dekavalla (2018), in her analysis of the 2014 Scottish referendum, refers to two common frames in which elections and referendums are constructed: the strategic game frame (politics as a competition focusing on opponents and win/lose metaphors) and the issue frame (policy issues). While in the Brexit referendum, there was clearly a strategic game frame, encouraged by Leave campaigners (who sought to portray the Conservative politicians Johnson and Gove as an alternative government), the issue frame was also a vital part because of the policies Leave chose to focus on: the economy, the NHS, and immigration, which were also the three most referenced in the media coverage (Moore and Ramsay 2017).
The information that was most successfully both communicated by politicians and replicated in the media appeared to be the Leave campaign’s populist appeals. Jagers and Walgrave’s 2007 typology of populism suggests that populist parties make appeals across three broad areas. While the Leave/Remain campaigners were not a political party (Vote Leave, for example, included Boris Johnson and Michael Gove from the right-wing Conservatives and Gisela Stuart from the left-wing Labour party, while the Remain coalition had David Cameron and George Osborne from the Conservative government and Alan Johnson from Labour), as populist movements, their appeals can be seen in this light.

The first trope Jagers and Walgrave suggest is appeals made to ordinary people – using language such as ‘working people’ and ‘common sense’. The second is anti-elite appeals – most notoriously characterised in the Brexit campaign by Michael Gove’s pronouncement on Sky News that the British public ‘had had enough of experts’ but also by the way that Leave campaigners characterised the EU as unelected and unaccountable bureaucrats. The third is ‘othering’ – language which divides people into in-groups and out-groups – to illustrate the difference between the ‘British’ and the ‘other’. In the case of Brexit, the appeal of the £350 million pledge was characterised as the first trope – an appeal to working families and common sense – but was also explicitly linked in Vote Leave messaging to fears of ‘others’ filling up NHS waiting rooms. The second two not only used ‘othering’ as a concept but suggested that the metropolitan elite had no idea of the problems caused by immigration.

Both official and unofficial Leave campaigns’ use of such populist messages have been characterised as ‘post-truth’ (Marshall and Drieschova 2019). Dominic Cummings, the architect of Vote Leave and later chief advisor to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, wrote a 19,800-word account of the Leave campaign, in which he talked of creating a succession of ‘simple and psychologically compelling stories’ (Cummings 2017). The consumption of such narratives was not concerned with fact but with emotion. As Cummings himself pointed out, this approach was not only aimed at Leave voters but also Remainers:

Almost none of these [graduates] know more about what a Customs Unions is than a bricky in Darlington. They did not vote on the basis of thinking hard about the dynamics of EMU or about how Brussels will cope with issues like gene drives. Millions thought – there’s two gangs and I know which one I’m in.

(Cummings 2017)

The emotional appeals by Leave, however, were helped by the particular idiosyncrasies of the British media system. According to Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) definition of media systems, the UK falls into the North Atlantic/liberal model, categorised in particular by a professional model of broadcast governance and external pluralism: in the UK’s case, in the press. This resulted in public service broadcasting adhering to an objectivity norm, in which broadcast news, particularly the BBC, presented contentious claims, particularly by Vote Leave, as one side of an argument rather than analysing them (Gaber 2018, 1020).

At the same time, the majority of the press coverage was firmly Eurosceptic. Startin (2015) divided portrayals of the EU in the British press into Europositive, Euroambivalent, and Eurosceptic. He concluded that tabloids and midmarkets were mainly Eurosceptic, with The Mirror being the only one categorised as Euroambivalent. As for the quality press, the majority were both Europositive and Euroambivalent, apart from The Telegraph, which was labelled Eurosceptic. The result was highly polarised coverage, with pro-Remain papers emphasising pro-Remain campaigners and arguments, and pro-Leave papers emphasising the pro-Leave equivalents. While the break between quality and tabloid might seem to establish a balanced
amount of coverage, researchers at Loughborough University found that by the time of the referendum, in aggregate terms, this produced a ‘coverage gap’ of 59 percent – 41 percent in favour of Leave campaigners. However, when these differences were weighted by circulation, the difference extended to 82 percent versus 18 percent (Deacon et al. 2016).

The NHS, £350 million, and the battle bus

The UK’s National Health Service (NHS) was created in 1948, and the country was the first place in the world where a free health service based on citizenship rather than payment of fees and insurance was implemented. It quickly became part of public life; it is a cliché to say is the closest thing the UK has to a national religion – although that has not stopped politicians or columnists reciting this very mantra (Spence 2017; Toynbee 2018). It has been praised as the ‘most civilised achievement of modern government’ (Webster 2002, 1). Certainly, the NHS is commonly framed as part of English ‘exceptionalism’, seen as the envy of the world, even if there are problems domestically as to how it operates. (As a side note, it is worth remembering that while much of English populism looks back to the events of the Second World War and the achievements of its wartime leader Winston Churchill, the creation of the NHS was the act of the post-war Labour government which unseated Churchill in 1945.)

So one of the most controversial claims that went straight to the heart of UK populism was Vote Leave’s link between the money that the UK contributed to the EU budget and the suggestion that this could be funding the NHS instead. It was most plainly displayed on the bright red Vote Leave battle bus with the slogan ‘We send the EU £350m each week. Let’s fund the NHS instead’ – a claim that, Vote Leave would later say, was a suggestion rather than a hard promise. The blogger Jon Worth, however, pointed out that early social media posts from Vote Leave’s official Twitter account were more specific: ‘Let’s give the NHS the £350m the EU takes each week’ (Worth 2017).

The level of NHS funding has been a constant political debate, and so the linking of the NHS to unaccountable Brussels budgets was a powerful populist trope – one of Cumming’s ‘compelling psychological stories’ – which was articulated by Boris Johnson and Michael Gove in particular. And yet from the very beginning, there were problems with this claim. The £350 million was a gross figure that did not take into account the rebate that the UK received from the EU, as well as the money the UK itself received from the EU (Full Fact 2017). The UK Statistics Authority went on to call the £350 million figure ‘misleading’ (Dilnot 2016), and the UK fact-checking charity FullFact called it a ‘clear misuse of official statistics’ (FullFact 2017). Despite numerous complaints to the regulator, the Advertising Standards Authority, no action could be taken because political adverts are exempt from the advertising code (Sweney and Plunkett 2016). And many senior Leave campaigners, such as Iain Duncan Smith, David Davis, and Nigel Farage, went on to distance themselves from the claim in the aftermath of the election (Perraudin 2016; Riley-Smith 2016; Stone 2016).

It may be that the £350 million claim did sway fewer minds than thought. A YouGov poll just before the referendum found that 35 percent felt that leaving the EU would be good for the National Health Service (NHS), compared to 24 percent who thought it would be bad (What UK Thinks 2016b). The respective figures on 23 February (just after the referendum was announced) was 30 percent versus 11 percent, suggesting that there had been a far more rapid rise in those who thought it would be bad. But, as Reid (2019) points out, the main problem for Remainers was that the £350 million figure, even if incorrect, focused the overall debate beyond the NHS on the costs, not the benefits, of EU membership and ‘problematis[ed] the epistemic authority of some bodies and figures, and in doing so erod[ed] the set of common
factual reference points in the debate’. Without agreed ‘facts’ – or at least a common agreement on how to define such figures – the mutual justification necessary for democratic norms begins to fall apart.

Phillips, when talking about troll culture, notes that journalists are put in an invidious position, guided by the basic tenet to publish newsworthy information – the information imperative. However, while she is clear that this can serve a critical democratic function, this can also be ‘harnessed as a tool of manipulation, a point exacerbated by the ubiquity of social media’ (2018, 8). Between 20 February 2016, just before the referendum was announced, and 25 June 2016, after the referendum was held, there were 396 stories in the UK media which mentioned £350 million and the NHS within close proximity. For example, The Independent, a left-leaning quality paper characterised as a Europositive/Euroambivalent newspaper (Startin 2015), carried fifty-five stories which referred to the £350 million and the NHS. Of these only six did not explicitly challenge the £350 million figure. Two of these were commentary on a referendum debate, two were election results pieces, and two were reviews of television coverage including the cancellation of the popular entertainment programme, Loose Women, on the day after the election. This meant, however, that the story, even if challenged, was part of the wider narrative Leave had set up.

The same was true of many of the other headlines about the £350 million claim which reported on the criticism, by people such as Sir Andrew Dilnot, chair of the UK Statistics Authority, and the MP Sarah Wollaston, a trained doctor herself, who left the Leave campaign over this figure; the sheer amplification of the story meant that it was a success for Leave.

The message was complicated further because of complications around public service broadcasters’ need for ‘due impartiality’, particularly during electoral periods. The broadcasting regulator Ofcom defines the concept as follows:

‘Due’ is an important qualification to the concept of impartiality. Impartiality itself means not favouring one side over another. ‘Due’ means adequate or appropriate to the subject and nature of the programme. So ‘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.

The BBC had previously been criticised for false equivalence over its coverage of climate change (Jones 2011), and there were concerns that it and other broadcasters failed to interrogate fully the claims made on both sides in the Brexit referendum (Suiter 2016), something that the BBC’s director of news challenged in the aftermath (Harding 2016). But Gaber (2018) reported that BBC journalists said that they were being required to give great prominence to Leave because they had not reported unsubstantiated Leave assertions earlier in the campaign. As one BBC journalist put it:

I was going back to ‘Leave’ to say that your press releases are rubbish. I would ask them to harden up the stories. I remember whilst working on a Sunday night package being told that I had to have more Leave clips than Remain. I was delivering unbalanced packages possibly to compensate for some earlier imbalance.

(BBC Anonymous cited in Gaber 2018, 1022)

The continued debate around the bus with its £350 million slogan meant it became one of the most enduring images of Brexit – to the extent that when Boris Johnson, during his bid to become the Conservative party leader in 2019, said that he made model buses out of wine boxes
to relax, there was immediate speculation that he was trying to game the Google algorithm to push references to the £350 million pledge further down the search page (Stokel-Walker 2019). The particular power of the bus pledge, however, was because of the close association that it created between the NHS and immigration, another of Cumming’s ‘compelling stories’.

A British Social Attitudes survey the year before revealed that 63 percent of respondents thought the NHS was being stretched by immigration (British Social Attitudes 2016). The Leave campaign repeatedly argued that migration from the EU put pressure on public services, resulting in longer queues for doctors’ appointments and for surgery, rather than it being the responsibility of domestic government spending decisions. One of Vote Leave’s most striking messages was their referendum broadcast, which contrasted the fate of a frail older woman and her health care both within and outside the EU. After a graphic suggesting how many migrants might come to the UK if Turkey were to join the EU, the screen split, showing (staying in the EU) a surly foreign man elbowing a tearful elderly white woman out of the queue in A&E while (leaving the EU) the woman is contentedly treated without having to wait.

(Shaw 2019)

Shaw sees the imagery in this broadcast as a clear homage to the Conservative politician Enoch Powell’s 1968 ‘rivers of blood’ speech, which described an elderly white woman living in a street taken over by immigrants. The broadcast also employed another nostalgic trope included in the broadcast – the ‘Dad’s Army style arrows swooping across the continent towards Britain’ (Wheeler 2016), indicating the possible numbers of Albanians, Turks, and others who could head to the UK if they were permitted to join the EU. As Cummings himself put it:

Immigration was a baseball bat that just needed picking up at the right time and in the right way. . . . The right way was via the NHS (unifying) – not ‘we want our country back’ of Farage (divisive).

(Cummings 2017)

This narrative was again picked up by the mainstream media whether it backed the Leave argument or not. A Nexis search of stories with immigration/immigrant in close proximity to the NHS retrieved 2,793 stories between 20 February 2016 and 25 June 2016. Again, looking at The Independent – a Europositive/Euroambivalent publication, in which immigration was presented positively – there were still 100 stories in a 17.5-week period – on average more than 5 a week that linked these two things. For more Eurosceptic publications, such as The Telegraph, its online site had 214 stories, and The Mail online had 196 – 12 stories and 11 stories, respectively, a week. While the sheer weight of story numbers reflects that the limitless space online has, as opposed to print media, previous research has shown that online media tends to portray immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers more often as threats than print media does (Blumell et al. 2020).

**Breaking point and Turkey**

Immigration generally was integral to both the official Vote Leave campaign and the unofficial Leave.eu campaign. It had been a salient issue for several years and covered widely in the media. After the accession of Central and East European states to the EU in 2004, many UK voters had become increasingly concerned about migration (Heath and Tilley 2005; McLaren
and Johnson 2007). The 2015 refugee crisis, which had seen those fleeing Syria end up in different European countries, had seen an intensified anti-immigration narrative in the British press (Berry et al. 2016; Choul iaraki et al. 2017) and amongst political figures. This was seen even amongst Remainers in the referendum debate, complicating things for those who then tried to argue in favour of the EU. For example, Cameron had repeatedly pledged to bring down immigration figures and had referred to a ‘a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life, wanting to come to Britain’, phraseology he was condemned for (Taylor et al. 2015).

By the time of the 2016 referendum, immigration was ranked as the most important issue in the country – the highest level since 1999 and rising ten percentage points between May 2016 and June 2016 (Ipsos Mori 2016). Goodwin and Milazzo (2017) found that public support for leaving the EU was significantly stronger in areas where there had been high rates of ethnic demographic change before the referendum. The researchers also found that Remainers were also more likely to switch to Leave if they experienced rising levels of immigration. As a result, the decision of the Leave campaigns to focus on immigration issues, particularly towards the end of the campaign, was effective.

The oft-repeated mantra ‘take back control’ by Leavers was a deliberately ambiguous phrase (Gietel-Basten 2016, 673) and thus often a thinly veiled way of referencing immigration (Browning 2019). The number of articles referencing immigration reflected this, rising fourfold per week from mid-April until the referendum day (Moore and Ramsay 2017, 29). But this was a message that resonated. During the election campaign, the most unsubtle visualisation of this was UKIP’s ‘Breaking Point’ poster.

The poster, unveiled by UKIP’s leader Nigel Farage the week before the referendum, was widely condemned. It portrayed a long queue of (mostly) non-white men and the headline ‘Breaking Point: The EU has failed us all’. It emerged that the picture was of Syrian migrants at the Croatian/Slovenian border – although Britain’s refusal to sign the Schengen Agreement meant that such migrants would find it nearly impossible to enter the UK. But while the picture might have been factually inaccurate, the framing was clear. As Morrison (2016) suggests:

This was UKIP’s crystallisation of the fabled Cameron ‘swarm’. Its malice lay in the fact that it simultaneously suggested a threefold untruth: that the inward migration encouraged by our EU membership is a non-white phenomenon; that it principally involves young, able-bodied males who can only be coming to steal our jobs and livelihoods; and that it is a Trojan horse for importing Islamist (ergo ‘Middle Eastern-looking’) terrorists.

(Morrison 2016, 66)

The architects of Vote Leave distanced themselves from the poster – with Michael Gove saying that he ‘shuddered’ when he saw it (Simons 2016). It was compared to the aesthetics of 1930s propaganda (Wright 2016) and reported to the police for racial hatred (Stewart and Mason 2016). On the same day as the poster was launched, a man with far-right views fatally stabbed and shot Labour MP Jo Cox, shouting ‘Britain first’ as he attacked her and, when asked to give his name for the record in court, responded ‘death to traitors, freedom for Britain’ (Booth et al. 2016). Farage withdrew the poster after the death of Cox, although he said that it was only unfortunate timing and that it was wrong to link the MP’s assassination to any arguments he or Gove might have made (ITV News 2016).
While the official Vote Leave campaign separated itself from such Leave.eu outputs, their focus also remained on immigration. The main Vote Leave communications via the website were clear: on the page titled Why Vote Leave? it stated that Turkey was joining the EU, along with Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. The populations of each were given, with another big red arrow pointing from the region to the UK (Vote Leave 2016). This was followed by a poster stating that ‘Turkey (population 76 million) is joining the EU’ (Boffey and Helm 2016). But, although Turkey had begun accession talks in 2005, the pace of progress had been slow and stormy, and Turkey’s record on human rights and the increasing authoritarianism of Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s government had effectively put paid to any prospect of Turkey joining (Reuters 2019).

Yet in their study of UK media coverage of the referendum, Moore and Ramsay (2017) found that Turkey was most likely to be associated with immigration in the national press. Out of 461 articles that mentioned Turkey, 109 had a negative portrayal of Turkey or its citizens, in terms of criminality or the pressure that would be put on UK public services if Turkey joined the EU. Just 2 articles were positive – about statements Boris Johnson had made about his pride in his Turkish ancestry (2017, 107).

This was not surprising, given the common approach to immigration coverage and not just in the UK. Studies show that news media frequently portray those seeking asylum as an economic and security risk, for example (Caviedes 2015; Esses et al. 2013; KhosraviNik 2010; Parker 2015; Philo et al. 2013). In the UK news media, refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants, and migrants were often framed as ‘dangerous criminals’ and articles suggested ‘that Britain is under attack from migrants, particularly asylum seekers and refugees’ (International Policy Institute 2004, 42). This was aided by a long-standing approach by politicians on both sides of the political spectrum to sound tough on immigration and raise issues of pressure on public services, rather than utilise other reports (e.g. Dustman and Frattini 2014, which found a positive contribution from immigrants).

Turkey became a useful conduit to combine EU migration and the refugee crisis in voters’ minds, which allowed Vote Leave ‘to play on the idea of the existential future of Europe . . . ageing, declining and weakening on the global stage . . . surrounded by hotbeds of population growth, poverty and fanaticism’ (Gietel-Basten 2016, 676)

Conclusion

Pundits and MPs kept saying ‘why isn’t Leave arguing about the economy and living standards’. They did not realise that for millions of people, £350m/NHS was about the economy and living standards – that’s why it was so effective. It was clearly the most effective argument not only with the crucial swing fifth, but with almost every demographic. Even with UKIP voters it was level-pegging with immigration. Would we have won without immigration? No. Would we have won without £350m/NHS? All our research and the close result strongly suggests No. Would we have won by spending our time talking about trade and the Single Market? No way. (Cummings 2017)

In his influential work on populism, Mudde (2004) talked about the ‘populist zeitgeist’, which is facilitated by ‘the media’s preference for and receptivity to populist actors’ (Aalberg and de Vreese 2017, 3). The success of the Leave campaigns in channelling populist messaging that had been utilised by politicians and media before the referendum meant that they managed to frame much of the debate.
Esser et al. (2017) distinguish between populism by and through the media. The first is the phenomenon by which media actively performs populism themselves – aligning themselves with or actively celebrating ‘the people’ (Moffit 2018). This was seen particularly strongly on referendum day, when front pages aligned themselves with their readers – whether The Sun’s ‘Independence Day’ or The Guardian’s ‘Who do we want to be?’ (Brady 2016) and The Daily Mail’s headline the day after: ‘Take a Bow Britain!’ (Daily Mail 2016). The editorial – the voice of the paper, which is usually confined to inside pages – congratulated voters on withstanding ‘hysterical threats and terrifying scares . . . insults and abuse’ from ‘self-serving elites’. Throughout the editorial, the pronoun we was used, the paper directly eliding itself with its readers.

As regards populism through the media, Moffit (2018, 242) defines this as the way media ‘cover, promote and “set the stage”’ for political populism. This may not necessarily be endorsing populist messages themselves, but by continually reporting on such actors, they inadvertently amplify them and their claims, resulting in the media becoming ‘powerful mobilisation tools for populist causes’ (Mazzoleni 2008, 50). This was the case with Brexit. Even though many of the arguments made by the Leave campaigns were often debated by journalists who reported on challenges to the £350 million figure, for example, or fact-checked claims themselves, the amplification of such arguments meant that the narrative was shaped by Leave.

Leave also benefited from an anti-European populist rhetoric articulated by both right-wing politicians and the right-wing media that had not been challenged for decades. This meant that it was complicated for those on the Remain side, now trying to make a positive case for staying in the EU. David Cameron himself had made a series of (unfulfilled) pledges on immigration, and the previous Labour government had employed a sustained discourse that constructed asylum seekers as threats and potential criminals (Innes 2010). It was therefore unsurprising that it proved difficult to overcome the arguments that Leave employed around criminality and border controls, when they were similar to ones that politicians had deployed earlier themselves.

Added to that, public service broadcasters who found themselves trying to negotiate a sense of balance combined with a mainly Eurosceptic press meant that misleading statements were either seen as one side of an argument or, even when they were rigourously pursued, sustained the narrative of cost rather than benefit of membership of the European Union in the public discourse. As LeDuc (2002) points out, the outcomes of referendums are often unpredictable, and short-term strategies and tactics can make a substantial difference, despite partisanship and ideology. The Leave campaigns’ use of populist rhetoric combined with misinformation managed to overcome the supposed advantage of Remain, which had the main three parties backing it, along with business leaders, but which failed to encapsulate its message in a way that connected to the electorate.

Notes
1 An abbreviation for British exit from the EU.
2 The 2016 referendum was not binding legally as Parliament is sovereign in the UK but was seen as politically binding. For more discussion on this, see https://fullfact.org/europe/was-eu-referendum-advisory/.
3 The original EC website has now been archived post Brexit, but Euromyths can be found at www.europarl.europa.eu/ueditedkingdom/en/media/euromyths.html.
4 BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy), otherwise known as mad cow disease, has mainly affected cattle in the UK, where millions of animals had to be destroyed in the 1990s. The ban on British exports was put in place after BSE was linked to Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD), a disease that causes paralysis and death in humans.
5 Cameron resigned and was replaced by Theresa May. For the next three years, May struggled to facilitate an acceptable withdrawal from the EU; she resigned as prime minister on 24 July 2016 and was succeeded by Johnson, who finally succeeded in achieving withdrawal from the EU on 31 January 2020.
6 The UK would eventually leave the EU on 31 January 2020, under the premiership of Boris Johnson.
7 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGgiGjK7MA.
8 Search was done on Lexis Nexis looking at £350m near/25 NHS (i.e. between 25 words, within the same paragraph) between 20 February 2016 and 25 June 2016. Search results included newspapers, web-based publications, video, news transcripts, audio, news, magazines, and journals based in the UK and Northern Ireland.
10 This has now been removed from the internet, although a description of it can be found at www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36367247.
11 The speech strongly criticising mass immigration was made in Birmingham on 20 April 1968, just before the second reading of the government’s race relations bill. It caused an uproar, and Powell was dismissed from his role in the Shadow Cabinet by the Conservative leader Edward Heath.
12 Dad’s Army was a popular BBC sitcom which ran from 1968 to 1977 and is still regularly repeated. It was based on the activities of the Home Guard in the Second World War. The Home Guard were local volunteers for a citizen militia comprising those too young, too old, or in reserved occupations, who would mobilise to delay any Nazi invasion. The opening graphics portrayed Nazi arrows advancing on Britain, only to be pushed back by union flag arrows representing the Home Guard.
13 A Lexis-Nexis search was done comprising ‘immigra* near/25 NHS’ between 20 February 2016 and 25 June 2016. Search results included newspapers, web-based publications, video, news transcripts, audio, news, magazines, and journals based in the UK and Northern Ireland.
14 For example, Labour prime minister Gordon Brown’s ‘British jobs for British workers’, which caused controversy and was taken up by strikers.

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