by political journalists – were all put under the microscope during the campaign, with some organisations facing major questions over their practice and conduct.

The EU Referendum, the 2016 US Presidential Election and the 2017 UK General Election also saw the highest ever participation, involvement and influence by social media of any electoral contest. But these contests also saw the greatest disconnect between media/political establishment and ‘the people’ that had ever been seen. The fact the political-media establishment predicted clear wins for Remain, Hillary Clinton and the Conservative Party in those three contests respectively, demonstrates it was out of touch on three occasions out of three. How did the mainstream media fail so badly to report the reality of what real people were saying about politics in three electoral contests on two continents?

**Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017**

Evidence that trust in UK media took a significant knock in the wake of a bruising and polarising Brexit campaign is confirmed in the highly respected 2017 Reuters Institute Digital News Report’s UK analysis by Nic Newman (Reuters/Newman, 2017).

It suggested the BBC was under scrutiny… Remainers accused the BBC of pursuing ‘unthinking balance’, failing to expose exaggerations and distortions of Leave. Right-wing press and websites played a key role as cheerleaders of Leave campaign, attacking the BBC for perceived pro-EU bias. None of this enhanced the reputation of mainstream journalism… the growth of social media exposed people to alternative perspectives and a more emotive form of news. Politicians were concerned about the implications of rapidly changing media ecosystem. (Reuters/Newman, 2017).

**Newspapers**

Before Brexit, it was widely thought the direct influence on elections by UK newspapers had dramatically waned. Brexit forced us to revisit that analysis, if only briefly and in that specific instance because the margin of victory was so narrow. To be fair, the result of the 2017 General Election confirmed the decline of the direct influence of the press on voting, as far as general elections were concerned. But in a tight political contest, such as Brexit, it was possible the press tipped the balance (Clark, 2017).

*Daily Express* editor Hugh Whittow noted how his paper had been the first to overtly call for the UK to leave the EU and had explicitly campaigned for it.

In Brexit, Trump and the Media, he wrote:

“It was the Daily Express which had been, all along, the architect of an editorial campaign which brought about a dramatic political victory.

“We had delivered to the people who matter the most – our readers – the result they wanted, a result which went totally against the expectations of the Prime Minister, the City, the CBI and much of the media, such as the BBC.

“It’s fair to say the press on both sides of the argument did an effective job of stimulating public interest and action.” (Whittow, 2017)

**Criticism of the press**

But the EU Referendum, its aftermath and the subsequent 2017 General Election coverage, raised a host of issues for the press. The issue of the accuracy of a partisan press, was not new, but seemed to be brought into sharper focus by the ultra-partisan nature of the support for Leave by the right-wing press.

Hugo Dixon of InFacts, found plenty of inaccuracies in press coverage to highlight both during the Referendum campaign and afterwards. In terms of possible remedies, he concluded: “If papers had to make big front-page corrections every time they printed misleading front-page splashes, the psychology around getting the facts right would change dramatically.” (Dixon, 2017).

Former Fleet Street journalist Liz Gerard, now of the SubScribe journalism analysis platform, scrutinised the coverage of the aftermath of the UK vote to Leave the EU in the right-wing, Brexit-supporting mid-market tabloids and detected vengeful triumphalism. She noted: “Having secured their dream result in the vote...
to leave the EU, the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* were not happy to sit back and celebrate... both seemed determined to continue the fight until any resistance movement had been pulverised.” (Gerard, 2017).

This kind of approach to securing Brexit with no quarter offered to Remainers was later emphasised in now infamous headlines such as ‘Enemies of the people’ [the Supreme Court judges who ruled Parliament should have a vote on Brexit] and the most famous headline on the day after Mrs May called the snap election in April 2017 ‘Crush the saboteurs’.

**Criticism of broadcasting**

But while bias, extreme partisanship and a degree of exaggeration and inaccuracy could have been reasonable expected of the partisan press, broadcast media had to be scrupulous in its coverage of the Referendum and the general election because of the terms of its regulation. But that conduct was criticised and defended, especially in the case of the Referendum.

Hugo Dixon of InFacts urged more interrogation: “What the BBC could and should have done was grill its guests more vigorously – and make more space for coverage that didn’t fit into the tired Punch and Judy-style battle between spokespeople put up by the two official campaigns.” (Dixon, 2017)

Systematic academic analysis by Professors David Deacon and Dominic Wring of Loughborough University led them to the conclusion: “The clear political skew of television news coverage of the EU Referendum campaign... raises serious questions about the way in which impartiality is interpreted and delivered.” (Deacon and Wring, 2017).

Brutally honest self-reflection by one of TV journalism’s most important participants, Channel 4 News political editor Gary Gibbon, suggested the issues might have been side-tracked by the spectacle. He wrote: “We lent on high impact gladiatorial contests and ghettoised fact checking when it should have coursed through all we did. We slipped into our comfort zone of big Tory beast fights.” (Gibbon, 2017).

Professor Richard Tait of Cardiff University, former editor-in-chief, ITN, added insight and possible solutions for broadcasters: “They should themselves have a fresh look at how they report politics: the balance between the Westminster ‘bubble’ and the nations and regions; the balance between reporting the arguments and analysing them; and the balance between interviewing political figures and talking to non-politicians who may have different perspectives and relevant expertise.” (Tait, 2017a).

Ivor Gaber, Professor of Journalism at Sussex University, was a stern critic of broadcast political journalism. He said: “The result of this phoney balance was the BBC produced coverage that was boring and confusing and drove the debate away from a meaningful discussion into a sterile chorus of he said/she said.” (Gaber, 2017).

**In defence of due impartiality and balance**

But broadcasters bound by law to be balanced will always face criticism and in a detailed and finely argued discussion of the corporation’s position and approach (worth quoting at length), David Jordan, BBC’s Director of Editorial Policy and Standards and Ric Bailey, BBC Chief Political Adviser, noted the unique nature of the Referendum as an electoral contest and defended the corporation’s handling of the most contentious aspects.

They wrote:

“*With a binary question, such as the EU Referendum, each part of the output had to achieve ‘broad balance’ – a disarmingly bland phrase which gives editors the freedom to make judgements rather than be ruled by maths, recognising there had to be an overall similarity and consistency in the levels of coverage for Remain and Leave.*

“*Whilst it is the journalistic duty of the broadcasters to scrutinise their claims, it is also appropriate we provide a platform so the electorate knows what they are saying. Imagine [if] broadcasters refused to allow an officially designated campaign group to use certain figures or statistics...; the BBC was clear... the overwhelming weight of expert economic and business opinion was advising people to vote Remain. Nonetheless, the BBC should be open to those who may challenge a consensus – not all conventional opinions stand the test of time, as... economists who banged the drum for the Euro or who failed to anticipate the financial crash might now attest. Different voices must be heard from time to time, though not necessarily given the same weight or exposure.*

“*The BBC’s job is to enable debate; to interrogate, to challenge, to contextualise and to analyse the claims...*
made on each side. Being a platform for democratic argument, allowing two sides to engage directly, is a fundamental purpose of our political coverage, offering the opportunity to cross-examine each other’s claims. The notion these claims were not scrutinised is simply untrue. Where claims were misleading or wrong, the BBC called it.

“Suggestions the notion of impartiality itself needs to be re-thought in the so-called ‘post-truth’ world, in the wake of the EU Referendum may need reconsideration. The BBC’s contribution followed the Referendum Guidelines about how to achieve due impartiality and a broad balance between the Referendum arguments; the evidence suggests, by and large, it succeeded, with no substantive complaints from either campaign.” (Jordan and Bailey, 2017).

This issue of the ‘impartiality’ or ‘balance’ or even ‘objectivity’ of broadcast journalism during the EU Referendum was perhaps the most interesting and important issue to emerge for discussion in its aftermath and one which has an impact on the whole arena of political reporting. Was broadcasting, especially the BBC, balanced enough, or even too balanced? Did broadcast journalists challenge and check the facts well enough? Does what happened during the Brexit campaign change any of our assumptions of the practice of political journalism and therefore help to create a ‘new world order’ for journalism?

Social media

Of course with every political contest the impact and influence of social media grows. In the EU Referendum its role was judged significant by some analysts, including researchers Max Hanska and Stefan Bauchowitz. They wrote: “As social media changes the ways news and information is distributed, accessed and engaged with, we are forced to consider its implications for both journalism’s role in shaping public discourse, but also for the way media conveys information back-and-forth between citizens and the political system.

“As the linear and hierarchical gatekeeping structures which define the broadcast age have ever-less purchase on our evolving news and information ecosystems, the messy, multi-directional, bottom-up practices of diffusing and absorbing information will play an ever-greater role in processes of public opinion formation.” (Hanska and Bauchowitz, 2017)

And in the subsequent 2017 General Election, the sophistication, and arguably impact, of social media was ramped up another notch. Social media expert Alex Connock, then MD Endemol Shine North, wrote: “Like Trump, Labour used alternative news channels. Enders pointed out that pro-Labour online publications with no direct print equivalents (The Canary and Evolve Politics) were reaching larger Facebook audiences for their content than most national news brands. Overall coverage weighted by distribution was much more left on social media than in print or on major news websites.” (Connock, 2017).

The Impact of Donald J Trump

The EU Referendum in the UK might have stood alone as an example of the upsurge of populism and its impact on politics had it not been for an even more globally significant event during 2016 – the election of Donald Trump as president of the USA, in a result, buoyed as it was by the candidate’s own admission, by the UK’s June Brexit vote.

The triumph of Trump’s campaign was significant in many ways. Ironically, the news media made Donald Trump, because he made news. Trump’s use of Twitter completely bypassed news media and communicated a core, unchallenged, unbalanced, unmediated message direct to the people. His demonisation of the entire ‘dishonest’ news media – ie the liberal, establishment media which questioned his policies – created a divide between the presidency and the media greater than anything that had existed since the downfall of Richard Nixon more than 40 years earlier.

The actions of the communications professionals around him deepened this divide. Normalisation of lies, fake news and ‘alternative facts’ in the news process created a new and disturbing climate in the US political reporting process.

This was certainly a new world order for journalism and we do not yet know what its longer-term impact on the US political process might be, but respected journalist and media commentator Raymond Snoddy saw an opportunity as well as a threat in the changed US political media climate, writing: “Faced with barefaced lies, the noisy repetition of what is demonstrably false could create a new age of opportunity for the mainstream media where valid information will be increasingly valued. It could even help us ease the current serious pressures on the funding of that professional journalism.” (Snoddy, 2017).
The impact of knowledge on decision-making

Knowledge makes easy choices difficult, said James Mates, Europe Editor of ITV News in his chapter ‘In love with America, indifferent to Europe: UK journalism’s westward squint’ in Brexit, Trump and the Media.

“Evidence… suggests our strength of feeling about an issue stands in inverse proportion to our understanding of it - the less we know, the more robust our opinions. The more we discover about the complexity of an issue, the more we moderate our views on how it could or should be tackled. And when you understand that, you understand why those who try to sell us simple solutions to difficult and often intractable problems urge us not to listen to ‘experts’.” (Mates, 2017).

This in the end could be the simplest answer to the very complex question of the victories of populism in 2016.

Problems in broadcast election coverage

Dr Stephen Cushion and Professor Justin Lewis of Cardiff University analysed both the EU Referendum coverage and the 2017 UK General Election coverage for Brexit, Trump and the Media. Their findings made fascinating reading. On the election, they wrote:

“Neither of the two leaders underwent transformations in their leadership styles during the campaign, but, on television at least, they appeared to do so.

“There is a more general question raised by the heavy reliance of broadcasters on vox pops and two-ways, both of which are informed by journalistic and/or editorial judgement rather than a more scientific evidentiary base, and neither of which tend to explain or examine the stalls set out by the political parties.

“In rethinking election coverage, perhaps more time could be spent explaining the issues which most concern people, rather than – inaccurately – speculating about how the public think or the consequences of party strategy.” (Cushion and Lewis, 2017)

Problems

So which particular problems did coverage of the Referendum, Trump and the UK election raise for UK journalism? In discussion with his fellow editors, Professor Richard Tait of Cardiff University, argued both events showed journalism had lost touch with ordinary people.

He said:

“In all three electoral contests the conventional wisdom was wrong: Leave won, Trump won, May lost her majority. And we got the 2015 general election wrong. Journalists seem more out of touch with popular mood than ever; not enough reporting and too much opining, perhaps? Didn’t anyone spot students organising to get the vote out for Corbyn?

“Cardiff research shows broadcaster vox-pops, intended to gauge popular mood, simply had people repeating the conventional wisdom. Did journalists go along for the ride rather than analyse issues? Research by Loughborough and Cardiff shows how narrow broadcasters’ agenda was in Referendum, dominated by Cameron and Boris. Many current issues – Ireland, Article 50, rights of expatriates – were hardly covered in the campaign.

“Ironically, one of the reasons Corbyn did so well is broadcasters were less interested in the two horse race (they thought it was a foregone conclusion) and did cover policy issues he raised such as health and social care.

“Did the decline in resources of local media mean signs of rebellion at local level were just not picked up and communicated more widely, especially during EU Referendum?” (Tait, 2017b).

Solutions

A lot of detailed analysis and commentary of these three phenomena then produced many criticisms of journalistic practice, but identifying fault is only half the story. What did contributors to Brexit Trump and the Media think possible solutions to the issues raised might look like?

Veteran media and communications academic, Professor Jay Blumler, said:

“In addition to presenting campaigners’ arguments about their pet issues, public service journalists should
strive to ensure that responsible attention is also being paid to other issues a) of concern to many voters and/or b) that will evidently have to be addressed by governments once in power.

“Public service broadcasters should adopt and implement a new norm. In addition to those of impartiality, objectivity and holding power to account... to hold political advocates to account for the factual accuracy of their claims.” (Blumler, 2017).

Looking at issues raised in the US, especially during the Trump campaign, Bill Wheatley of Columbia University, wrote: “In the face of fake news and alternative facts, journalists have to major anew on accuracy, relevance, clarity, the avoidance of hype, and promoting balance while Reporting vigorously the affairs of their communities.” (Wheatley 2017).

Looking at the UK, Phil Harding, ex-editor BBC R4 Today programme and Controller of Editorial Policy at the BBC, said: “The British media needs to be bolder and blunter in pointing out official falsehoods and lies. It needs to take a leaf out of the American media’s book, which after the failures of the early campaign coverage really seems to have got the bit between its teeth.

“Journalists on both sides of the Atlantic need to spend less time talking to themselves and more time getting out and listening to the public. The media missed a lot of the anger voters were feeling because it didn’t spend enough time on the ground.

“The media can and must play a vital role in providing the facts and calling out the lies. But it needs to do a far better job than it has managed to so far.” (Harding, 2017).

In his Introduction to Brexit, Trump and the Media, long-serving and respected Channel 4 News anchor Jon Snow said: “We, who report, pontificate, and comment, need to render our industry more reflective of the people we serve.” (Snow, 2017).

In the postscript, BBC Radio 4 Today programme presenter and former BBC political editor Nick Robinson, who was involved in much of the corporation’s most contentious coverage as a presenter on its leading political radio programme, concluded:

“The lesson of Trump. Brexit and the 2017 General Election is that we can and must fight to convince a new generation that all you read, watch and listen to is not the same.

“Yes, we get things wrong. Yes, we can do better. Yes, we have lots to learn, but we do not come to work to make the case for a party, a leader or a cause. Our job is to report and investigate, question, analyse and explain.” (Robinson, 2017).

Summary

Brexit, Trump and 2017 General Election raise fundamental questions about present and future role of journalism in society. Despite the EU Referendum result, generally the elections show there is a definite decline in newspapers’ influence but a huge climb in social media influence.

Equally evident in the events of 2016 and 2017 is a loss of total control of the political agenda by journalists, and an attempt to seize that control and drive the political agenda by bloggers and politicians. At the same time, journalism has been seen to be out of touch with ordinary people.

Changes may well be needed in journalistic practice, especially around the areas of balance and verification. But did 2016 show there was a new world order in political journalism? Is it too late for journalism to re-establish its integrity and authority?

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