

# Deliberation, distortion and dystopia: the news media and the referendum

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2016/07/04/brexit-was-a-failure-of-deliberative-democracy-we-are-all-to-blame/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2016/07/04/brexit-was-a-failure-of-deliberative-democracy-we-are-all-to-blame/)

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The EU referendum was a classic test of the concept of media framing of deliberation. Yet, it perhaps ended up demonstrating that it is politicians and the public who set the agenda and that the news media has short-term, shallow but significant effects.

No one can say that the media has not given us enough debate or information to help voters make up their minds. Broadcasters, newspapers, social media, universities, political parties, think-tanks and corporations created vast amounts of data and debate.

The side that lost complained loudly about the news media. They accused it of bias and of failing to explain the issues and the risks clearly enough. While the wider public say they were not given the facts. Some even now wish they had voted differently. They are both mistaken.



Politicians (and to a degree the voters) get the coverage they deserve. At times it appeared that both Leave and Remain campaign teams abandoned any coherent idea of deliberative, policy-based argument in favour of exaggerated scenarios, self-serving statistics and appeals to emotions and fantasies. This is part of a longer-term trend in political communications where the strategy is to destabilise the discourse while controlling your own message based on emotional appeals to voters. The damage being done to democratic deliberation will be long lasting and will get worse after the vote as the two main parties continue to implode.

This critique is not just that of an academic or a journalist. The Commons Treasury Committee also condemned both sides for the low standard of campaigning. The Remainers wildly exaggerated the risks involved in leaving, while the Brexiteers brazenly misrepresented the cost and impact of EU membership and its relationship to other issues such as immigration.

Not surprisingly, the Prime Minister found it difficult to convince the public that the organisation that he's been slating for years is now a wonderful thing. At the same time, the various 'charismatic' Leave leaders failed to give a coherent

explanation of what will happen after June 23rd if we cut off the continent. Instead they flag waved and dog whistled about foreign hordes.

So what can the journalists do to shine light into this shade? At this point we must accept the limits of media effects. Politicians as well as journalists tend to exaggerate the impact of journalism on the public. Long term it is significant but there is a range of other influences on people's thinking including non-mediated factors that swamp the power of journalists to swing votes.

When the campaign started [I wrote about how the newspapers will have less influence on the final outcome than some people might think](#) because of their diminished status. In this campaign, however, they were more important than I expected in helping shift the frame of the debate towards issues such as immigration and generally encouraging the febrile mood of lashing out at the status quo and risk-taking.

If you wish to consider how this media campaign has gone then don't start with the journalist or politician, ask the citizen. [New LSE research](#) suggested that many only made up their minds in the last days of the campaign. So with such a close and unstable campaign the small influence of the press might be significant at the margins.

The public have plenty of sources for campaign news if they had the will, time and (sometimes) money. Overall, too many newsrooms have been distracted by the latest lines peddled by the campaigns, but there has been plenty of good political information and debate out there.

But did people bother to consume any of this? The evidence is that people were interested and sought out information. Relatively large audiences tuned into the TV set-piece programmes.

But as voter reaction after the poll suggested – including people Googling 'EU referendum' after the result – they may have ended up feeling confused because of the contradictory claims and uncertain about the purpose of the vote ("buyer's Remorse"). That is the nature of this issue and the crudeness of a referendum process. It is also the reality of post-factual politics with the government and opposition parties riven ideologically and tactically. It is messy and the media coverage reflected that. It is politicians that lead debates, not the media, and on this issue and in this campaign their previous parochial failure to take responsibility for our place in Europe is coming back to haunt them.

[This is the original version of an article that appeared in [EU Referendum Analysis 2016](#) an edited volume with dozens of interesting rapid response articles by academics]

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