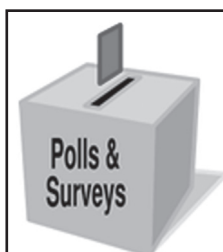# News Construction in View of Both Brexit and Donald Trump

Introduction

Politics over the last two to three years has taken many twists and turns in the UK, Europe and the US. It is quite hard to think in terms of an expected order of things anymore. Polls have been proven wrong on many occasions recently. This would be an interesting topic in itself, but when it is looked at through the media, and particularly through the reporting of these events via the news, it becomes even more interesting and more complicated. This Factsheet will look at news construction and using the examples of Brexit and Donald Trump as examples. This Factsheet can be used when answering questions on:

- Media and news construction – how the media constructs and presents news.

- Stratification and differentiation – how powerful groups influence the presentation of the news.

- Globalisation – how news is influenced by global developments.

> **Activity:** What has been the most interesting thing for you that has occurred within political systems over the last two years? How was it predominantly represented in the news? You could focus on print or broadcast or both, and/or social media.

Two of the most interesting political events during recent times are the Referendum to leave the EU, or Brexit, and the Presidential election in the US which culminated in the business tycoon Donald Trump becoming the 45th President of the United States. Both of these events confounded the Polls, and both were (and still are) covered voraciously by the news media.

Construction of news

Before looking at the above two events, how is news constructed? Ownership of the media is possibly the most important factor, in terms of the construction of news, because there is no removing the ideological aspect that owners bring to their particular institutions. The news media is concentrated in very few hands, and all of our national press is owned by conglomerates, as are the commercial news broadcasting companies. Every one of the conglomerates is headed by an extremely powerful person (e.g. News International (the UK arm of News Corporation) owned by Rupert Murdoch, who also owns *The Sun, The Times, Sunday Times,* a large percentage of *BSkyB-Sky television,* etc.) This pattern of ownership means that news is therefore ideological. Our British press certainly is, and each of our daily newspapers has an ideological underpinning. Owners control media content either directly or indirectly through imposing their views on their editors.

So, how does all of this work – the whole concept of selection and presentation of news is ideological, and there are various concepts that need to be considered.

Most of the news that the audience receive about the world comes via the media, however, the media is selective in what is chosen to be aired as daily news, as quite clearly, not every single item that could be considered news can be reported. It is argued that the news provides a window on the world, a true reflection of what is going on.

> **Activity:** Is this how you perceive the news? To what extent do you think of it as a true reflection of what is going on in the world? Write a paragraph on your thoughts on this.

According to the Glasgow Media Group the selection and presentation of news is not a neutral process, the news is a series of socially manufactured messages and these are produced within the context of the dominant ideology.

News values

A key determining factor in the selection of news is newsworthiness. News values are applied to any potential story, if a story scores highly in news values, then it is more likely to be included. A starting point is Galtung & Ruge's 1965 academic study of news selection and structure, in which they set out twelve factors or news values which govern the news, here are six of the most relevant:

Threshold: This refers to the size an event to be considered newsworthy – the bigger the better.

Unambiguity: News needs to be clear, even if it addresses a complex situation.

Continuity: If an event is big enough it will be covered for some time.

Cultural proximity: Western nations such as the UK, USA and Europe are more likely to be covered by British news media than developing countries.

Elite persons: Events which contain references to stars (entertainment or sport), politicians, or royalty are more likely to become news (this goes for elite nations too).

Meaningfulness: News is generally circulated by national broadcasting organisations, so it largely consists of items relating to the nation concerned. It takes many more deaths to occur in a developing country to be considered newsworthy than it does in the UK, USA and Europe.

Since Galtung & Ruge compiled these aforementioned news values in 1965, it is important to include a further two:

Narrativisation: News items are called stories for good reason, as they become long-running sagas, individuals in the spotlight often become characters in a drama.

Visual imperative: This is the drive towards stories that have strong pictures.

Another important concept in news construction is *agenda-setting.* As members of an audience we can only really discuss and form opinions about things we think we know about, and in the main, it is the media that provides us with this information. What is put on the news 'agenda' for us to think and talk about is therefore very important. McCombs (2004) argues that the news media increasingly tell us both 'what' to think, and 'how' to think about it.

The media has the power to cover some stories and not others, a journalist, editor or owner can decide to run a story or not, this is known as *gatekeeping,* they decide what gets through the gate and what doesn't. They therefore, influence what knowledge the audience gains access to, and it is another important concept within news construction.

Activity: Look at a newspaper front page, it doesn't matter which newspaper, and apply the concepts discussed so far – news values, agenda-setting and gatekeeping, in view of whatever stories are on the front page of your newspaper.

Of course, we are living in an increasingly globalised world, where new technology has become all-pervasive within all of our lives, but also in the world of news gathering, construction and presentation. News providers have to compete to survive, so they have to be up-to-date to keep audiences attracted and retained. Mainstream news can no longer rely on audiences as they once did, with major evening news bulletins and daily newspapers both losing audiences. We are all or can be prosumers and citizen journalists now, and this has had an impact on the news media.

Activity: Research the terms "prosumer" and "citizen journalist", to ensure that you understand them, as they are increasingly important concepts, with regard to new media technology and web 2.0.

Exam Hint: Knowing the above information is important for showing an understanding of the sociological concepts involved in news construction. However, it is also important to use examples in your answers and Brexit and Trump are both good examples to use to illustrate your understanding of news construction.

Brexit is the term for the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. In a referendum on 23rd June 2016, the UK voted to leave the EU on a vote of 51.9%.

On 29th March 2017, the Government invoked Article 50 of the Treaty on the European Union. At present, the UK Government is negotiating the terms of this.

Once the announcement was made about a referendum (and even at the time of writing, to some extent), news stories on Brexit have pretty much dominated the news agenda – within print, broadcast and social media.

Activity: Look back over the list of news values and see if you can determine which of them apply to news stories on Brexit? Do this for the topic generally, as different news stories on Brexit would be determined by different news values.

In terms of *agenda-setting* it could be argued that the topic of Brexit has undoubtedly given a mass audience in the UK (and globally in fact) something to discuss and form opinions on. These opinions have clearly been divisive, with heated discussions taking place all over the country, depending on whether you were 'for' or 'against' Brexit. Interestingly, news stories that were covered during the 'for' and 'against' campaigning on Brexit, were very much constructed.

An article in *The Telegraph* 13th March 2017, by Ashley Kirk, entitled *EU Referendum: The claims that won it for Brexit fact checked* looks at the claims made in the run up to the Brexit vote on 23rd June 2016 and fact checks them:

Fact one: the amount of money the UK gives to the EU (Vote Leave campaign argued that The EU now costs the UK over £350 million every week – nearly £20 billion a year). *Verdict: Wrong* – EU membership comes at a cost, the UK pays more in than it gets back, certainly not £350 million a week. In 2015, Kirk argues we paid the EU an estimated £13 billion, or £250 million a week.

Fact two: on the UK's economy and the EU (George Osborne the then Chancellor and remain exponent argued that Brexit would make us worse off to the tune of £4,300 for every household in Britain by 2030). *Verdict: hard to say* – most economists agree that leaving the EU will cost the UK, but that the £4,300 figure is unhelpful. There is too much uncertainty in the figures.

Fact three: on the UK's sovereignty in the EU (Jacob Rees-Mogg, Conservative MP and vote leave exponent, argued that the UK consistently loses in the EU because other members favour a highly regulated and protectionist economy). *Verdict: wrong* – Since 1999, when decision records became available from the EU Council where governments meet to negotiate and adopt policies, the UK has been in the minority (voting "No") on 57 legislative acts. It has supported and been in the majority on 2474 acts and abstained on 70 occasions.

Fact four: on British jobs and their reliance on the EU (Alan Johnson, then Labour MP and remain exponent argued that two thirds of British jobs in manufacturing are dependent on demand from Europe). *Verdict: wrong* – roughly 15% of manufacturing jobs were directly linked to demand from other EU countries in 2014.

Fact five: On Britain's immigration levels and the EU (Nigel Farage, former leader of UKIP and Brexit champion argued that it is not good for our quality of life, it is not good for social cohesion in our society, and our population, inexorably headed towards 70 million or 75 million, will not make this a better, richer or happier place to be). *Verdict: hard to say.* The UK population is currently 65 million and expected to reach 70 million in 2027 and 75 million in 2042. They are uncertain estimates because they involve tentative predictions on future immigration levels. There is no single piece of research that fully answers questions about quality of life and social cohesion.

The five facts checked by The Telegraph appeared as news stories in the run up to the vote. This of course has implications because the UK voting public went to the Polls on June 23rd 2016 to vote in a Referendum on either remaining or leaving the EU, and the majority of the information they had taken on board to inform that vote was either hard to prove or false. In other words, agenda-setting had clearly told the audience what to think.

Activity: What can be argued here, is that owners of (some) news media opinions were very much the opinions that swayed the voting public, and given that the majority of newspapers were in favour of Brexit, a reasonably forceful argument can be made that they were, in the large part, responsible for the Leave vote winning. Do you agree with this, or do you have other opinions on this?

Exam Hint: Using contemporary research in your exam answers will show that you understand modern sociological debates. Research and evidence on Brexit does not appear in textbooks so make sure you use different sources to develop your sociological understanding.

The two largest circulated newspapers in the UK, the Sun and Daily Mail, are both ideologically conservative and both backed Brexit, so it is not surprising that a journalist for The Guardian, Jane Martinson (24/06/16) argues if the Mail and Sun swung the UK towards Brexit. She goes on to argue that they did, writing:

- The Sun came out last week with a union-jack draped front cover urging its readers to "BeLeave in Britain" and at 6am on Friday published "See EU later".

- 'British newspapers were overwhelmingly in favour of Brexit, with the Mail, Telegraph, Express and Star accounting for four times as many readers and anti-EU stories as their pro-remain rivals.

- If you believe in Britain, vote leave" urged the Mail on Wednesday, lambasting the "lies" and "greedy elites" of a "broken, dying Europe" on its front page.'

She goes onto argue that such headlines were not just the hallmark of an increasingly bitter referendum campaign – with its relentless focus on anti-immigration stories – but came after years of anti-EU reporting in most of the British press.

Since the Brexit vote and democratic decision to leave Europe was reached, there has been a rocky path politically:

- On 24th June 2016, David Cameron (then Prime Minister) resigned as a consequence of the vote to leave the EU.

- A leadership contest began straight away, for a new leader of the Conservative party.

- July 2016 Theresa May becomes Prime Minister.

- On 18th April 2017 Theresa May calls a snap General Election to take place on Thursday 8th June 2017.

The result of this General Election is that Theresa May's Conservative party won, but with a reduced majority, and damage to Theresa May's credibility as a Prime Minister, especially in view of her being the Prime Minister who will oversee Brexit.

Activity: In view of what has happened as a consequence of Brexit, assess the situation by using news values, agenda-setting and gate-keeping. Remember that this is a major event in your lifetime, and so the decisions that the news media make, in terms of stories they run have consequences.

Trump

Barack Obama had served two terms as President of the United States, and as two terms is the maximum, a presidential race began. The two front-runners were Hillary Clinton, a Democrat, and Donald Trump, a Republican. Trump was very much the outsider, as a tycoon businessman and reality TV celebrity, with no experience of office. However, he triumphed, and in November 2016, he was elected president. Polls consistently showed Hillary Clinton leading. His victory was a large political upset. Trump frequently, throughout his campaign, stated that the media had intentionally misinterpreted his words and that the media was guilty of adverse media bias. However, he did receive a huge amount of free media coverage during his campaign, mostly due to his fame. Trump took office on 20th January 2017, and there has been an increasingly fractious relationship with the news media. Trump is generally disdainful of the news media, accusing it on many occasions of *fake news.* He prefers to relate to the public via his social media accounts.

Activity: Look back over the list of news values and see if you can determine which of them apply to news stories on Trump? Do this for the topic generally, as different news stories on Trump would be determined by different news values.

In an academic article by Stanford University academics Rakove, Glasser and Hamilton on President Trump and the media (30/01/2017), in answer to the question How does President Trump's communication style differ from that of previous U.S. Presidents? Glasser argues, "He's unpredictable and contradictory. He has no commitment to 'facts' or 'truth' or any other concept having to do with the reliability and validity of what he says." Hamilton states, "On his first full day in office, President Trump said at an appearance at the CIA 'I have a running war with the media. They are among the most dishonest human beings on earth."

On the legal website Verdict-Justica, under the heading 'Consequences of Donald Trump's Disastrous Press Relations' by John Dean (03/03/2017), he argues that Donald Trump has been dealing with the news media most of his adult life, which is much more than the average person who has become President of the United States. As 'The New York Times' recently explained, with time Trump learned how to control and manipulate the tabloid press of New York. Dean continues later, saying that the political press corps is much different from the tabloids, for they are interested in issues like a politician's character and policies, not merely gossip and antics of a celebrity. Trump has not adjusted well to dealing with the political press. Indeed, his rocky relationship during his presidential primary campaign, and then the general election, were openly hostile, where he placed the news media in a small pen at the back of his rallies and often encouraged his supporters to boo them. But this relationship has become even worse now that he is president.

In an article in the Financial Times by Lionel Barber, Demetri Sevastopulo & Gillian Tett (02/04/2017) under the headline 'Donald Trump: without Twitter, I would not be here', they explore the president's relationship with social media. 'The Trump presidency is like no other in the 230-year history of the American Republic. He is the first Commander-in-Chief never to have held government or military office; a property tycoon and reality TV host who has changed his party allegiance five times. Mr. Trump's social media campaign of 2016 was run by Dan Scarino, who informs the journalists that the president's combined following on social media is 101 million (across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). Mr Trump says proudly 'Over 100 million. I don't have to go to the fake media.'

There is a real paradox here – on the one hand we look at the power that the media wields in an ideological sense, and are mostly critical of this. Certainly, Marxists argue that the media is an instrument of the ruling class. We look at the way news is selected, and there is power, on the part of the news agencies because of agenda-setting and gatekeeping.

However, President Trump argues that the news media is fake, that the news which is published is fake news. He argues that he tells the truth in his tweets, and that he does not have to rely on the news media to disseminate his political messages, he does that for himself. This is a quite unprecedented situation.

It could certainly be argued that new media technology and particularly social media have influenced the contemporary political landscape.

Activity: Compare Trump with Brexit, and the ways that the UK press may of helped to win the Brexit vote? Are there any similarities? Or, are they completely different?

Activity: How far would you agree with this last point? What role do you see social media playing in contemporary politics? And, the impact this has had on the construction of news?

Activity: Find a news story on Brexit and a news story on President Donald Trump and then fill in the following table to test your understanding:

	Which of the news values apply and why?	Is there evidence of agenda setting?	Is there evidence of ideological bias (left or right?)
Brexit			
Trump			

Exam Hints:

- *You would not expect to see an exam question on either Brexit or Donald Trump, but a general question on news construction such as "Discuss the view that news is socially constructed" is quite likely.*

- *With a question such as this, you would be expected to write about concepts such as: News values, Gatekeepers & power elites, Ownership, Ideology, Moral panics etc., but you would also be expected to give good contemporary examples to illustrate and Brexit and Donald Trump are both good contemporary examples. This will show the examiner evidence of critical autonomy.*

- *For an exam question such as "Outline and explain what is meant by the term agenda-setting" you would be expected to define the term and apply theoretical perspectives, but relevant contemporary examples such as Brexit and Donald Trump would also be expected.*

- *An exam question such as "Outline and explain the concept of news values" would allow you to not only explore the concept of news values and the ideological nature of them, but examiners would also be looking for your ability to apply examples to illustrate specific news values, and again Brexit and Donald Trump would work very well.*