**Manufacturing Dissent: How *The* *New York Times’* Covered the Brexit Vote**

by

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The Brexit vote has come and gone. After the initial shock, the world seems to have refocused on events elsewhere, and Brexit no longer dominates the headlines. Yet, the lessons and implications of Brexit must not be forgotten. We offer an informal empirical examination of how the mainstream media, specifically the prestigious New York Times, portrayed this important vote. *The New York Times* both reflects and shapes elite opinion. An examination of its coverage can give a sense of the lessons the American political and economic elites might have distilled from the Brexit vote in particular, and public support for economic and political integration in general.

But our commentary has implications beyond the coverage of the Brexit vote. We suggest thinking about Brexit media coverage in the context of the role of media in a democracy. Given the constant refrain about political polarization along the liberal-conservative dimension, we should ask if this dimension adequately captures the emerging polarization in contemporary politics. In the UK, Labour and Conservatives (and the Liberal party as well) opposed Brexit. In America, both the Democrats and Republications have supported free trade in the past. The 2016 presidential elections are a discontinuity in this regard although [Hillary Clinton](http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2015/oct/08/hillary-clinton/hillary-clinton-now-opposes-trans-pacific-partners/) and [Tim Kaine](http://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/kaine-comes-out-against-trans-pacific-partnership-deal-226064) have supported the Trans-Pacific Partnership previously, and Donald Trump’s businesses have benefitted enormously from economic globalization. We interpret the Brexit vote signaling the emergence of a new type of politics that pits the cosmopolitan elites (globalization beneficiaries) against the rest (globalization losers). Polarization of these sorts has been noted by scholars such as [Benjamin Barber](https://www.amazon.com/Jihad-vs-McWorld-Terrorisms-Challenge/dp/0345383044) but they suggest the opposition of conservative religions to globalization, partly reflecting the [Clash of Civilization](https://www.amazon.com/Clash-Civilizations-Remaking-World-Order/dp/1451628978/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1469903214&sr=1-1&keywords=clash+of+civilizations) thesis. We suggest Brexit vote signals the clash within the civilization, between globalization beneficiaries and globalization losers.

How should media cover such important events and debates? Freedom of the press is the cornerstone of democracy. [Thomas Jefferson](http://famguardian.org/Subjects/Politics/thomasjefferson/jeff1600.htm) had noted: “The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

But what if the media itself becomes biased and begins to favor one perspective and demonize others? Last month, *The New York Times* carried a front-page article: “[Fair Play in a Fact-Challenged Political Landscape](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/04/business/media/fair-play-in-a-fact-challenged-political-landscape.html?_r=1)” where it criticized CNN for hiring Corey Lewandowski, Donald Trump’s former campaign manager, as an on-air commentator. It asked, “What happens to the balance between truth and falsehood when an important portion of the national news media hands the political debate over to partisan operatives…?” The article chided some British newspapers for their partisan views favoring Brexit. Finally, it invoked Benjamin Franklin’s famous words, “It is a principle among printers that when truth has fair play, it will always prevail over falsehood

We agree with the standards espoused by T*he* *New York Times* but wonder if itself has lived up to Ben Franklin’s ideals in its coverage of Brexit? Using the Lexis-Nexis database, we coded all articles and Op-eds published in *the New York Times* between June 24 and July 7, 2016 (starting from the day after Brexit and ending when the Dallas shootings refocused public attention elsewhere). Of the 161 relevant articles, opinions, or news items, we find that 61% provided a “negative” coverage (highlight the negative consequences of Brexit for U.K., EU or the world; criticize politicians who campaigned for Brexit), 32% provided a “balanced” coverage (suggest that the world is back to normal, present both the positive and negative aspects of Brexit), and 7% provided a “positive coverage” (highlight the rationale for exit in positive light; make a positive case for policy reform at the level of EU or the world; report the perspective of common people on globalization, instead of dismissing them as misinformed, racist or xenophobic). The dataset is available here: <http://faculty.washington.edu/nives/replication_data.html>

There have been other instances of the alleged media bias of *The New York Times.* For example, its coverageof the Clinton-Sanders nomination contest has come under criticism. For many, this reflected the pro-establishment “bias” of *the New York Times*. But more than a mere bias, there was an allegation that this newspaper edited an article documenting Sanders’ legislative achievements. This compelled the Times’ Public Editor to address the issue of “[stealth editing](http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/03/17/new-york-times-bernie-sanders-coverage-public-editor/). In fact, a similar issue has arisen in the context of editing an already published Op-ed of Michael Eric Dyson, [What White America Fails to See](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CAseem%5CDocuments%5Cin%20progress%5CWhat%20White%20America%20Fails%20to%20See), in the aftermath of Dallas shooting.

In 1988, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky wrote a famous book, [*Manufacturing Consent*,](https://www.amazon.com/Manufacturing-Consent-Political-Economy-Media/dp/0375714499) in which they argued that, contrary to claims about a free press, the mass media in the United States had become a tool of the dominant institutions to carry out propaganda in support of the “system.” The Herman-Chomsky model might shed some light on how *The New York Times* has covered the Brexit vote. *The New York Times* has emerged as an important articulator of the “cosmopolitan” perspective on economic and political integration. Because Brexit seeks to turn the tide of regional integration, *the New York Times’* editorials are (not surprisingly) critical about it. But it is another matter when this bias is reflected in news stories and virtually all other coverage; in this case the newspaper itself becomes a political operative.

But the issue is more than a bias in newspaper coverage. It suggests that the “cosmopolitans,” the winners from political and economic integration, have not appreciated the broader message of the British voters. It is easy to dismiss it as racism, xenophobia, and misinformation, as *the New York Times* seems to suggest. May be it is worth exploring if British voters saw it differently. As recent scholarship on globalization and inequality suggests, the proverbial tide of economic and political integration is not lifting all boats; it is sinking most and lifting the luxury yachts of the elite only.

Brexit, of course, reflects the issues of immigration. But opposing immigration does not automatically make the pro-Brexit voters racist or xenophobic. For one, immigration has important economic implications for the local economy. These issues are exacerbated when local economies are in decline and income inequalities are increasing. Of course, racist and bigoted politicians will take advantage of such situations. But it is critical not to confuse the concerns of the voters with the strategies of politicians.

Democracy requires that those who control the levers of power, including mass media, should play fair. As an eminent newspaper, *The New York Times* ought to ask itself: has it played fair in covering the Brexit vote? Or has it become a partisan operative, as it accused CNN of turning into? The real threat to democracy may not come from government censorship but from the media outlets themselves that turn into partisan operatives instead of beacons of balanced discussion.