

Seminar: The Road to Brexit: British Discourses of Europe
Lecturer: Prof. Dr. Ina Habermann
Podcast Contribution, Author: Duco Hordijk
Topic: The European issue in the British press

Rethinking Britain and the European Union: The Importance of the Press

Speaker:

Negative coverage of the European Union in British newspapers nearly doubled over the last 40 years.

Author:

These are the core findings of a 2017 joint study from Queen Mary University in London and Aston University in Birmingham. In the study, the investigators describe and analyse how the 'European issue' has been reported in the British print media over the 40 years from the mid-1970s to the mid-2010s.

Researchers looked at more than 16.000 newspaper articles from the Daily Mirror, the Daily Mail, the Guardian, the Times, and the Financial Times, thus including centre-left and centre-right tabloids and broadsheets. UK tabloid newspapers are perceived to be more populist, relative to the broadsheets, that target the middle classes and are read by the political elite.

Although the Murdoch-owned News UK plays a crucial role, based on circulation figures, only one of the top five national newspapers, The Sun, is owned by Murdoch's News Corporation. The remainder – Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Daily Telegraph and Express – are owned by a variety of publishers, all of which have their own political agendas. Even though the prime motivation of entrepreneurs like Murdoch is to sell newspapers, which they do by giving the public the kinds of stories they like, this agenda is important, since it introduces a bias into the selection of news and the reporting that the papers offer. For their research project, the scientists first looked at the main topic of the article, such as the Single Market, the Common Agricultural Policy, Economic and Monetary Union. Then they assessed how the EU was portrayed: positive, negative, mixed or factual.

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Finally, each article was weighted, based on the average daily circulation of the respective newspaper. These are their main findings:

Speaker:

First:

Author:

The total volume of stories on the European issue did not vary hugely between the mid-1970s and the mid-2010s. And factual articles constantly average 42 per cent of the total over the last 40 years.

Speaker:

Second:

Author:

However, negative reporting has significantly increased from 24 per cent in 1975 to 45 per cent in 2013, and this has come at the expense of positive and neutral reporting. Crucially, when centre-right tabloid newspapers began to take a significantly increased interest in the dealings of the European Union, their coverage became steadily more negative.

Speaker:

Third:

Author:

The data suggest that the structural bias within the UK media cannot be traced to a particular issue or event where reporting suddenly becomes more euro-skeptic. It appears to be more a question of a general climate of opinion.

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Conclusion:

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Significantly, the increasing dominance of euro-skepticism in the UK is not so much due to one particular event, such as the Maastricht treaty, or an individual, such as Murdoch, but to the absence of positive coverage in the remaining newspapers to counter negative articles. Due to centre-right wing tabloids supporting the rise of nationalistic, populist parties like the UK Independence Party, the European Union's negative publicity has increased. This goes some way towards explaining the growing euro-skepticism within the British population over the last 40 years, which eventually led to Brexit. It must be said, however, that this is part of a wider development in the European Union as a whole and that we are facing an increasing symbiosis of populist parties and right-wing media all over Europe.

Speaker:

In short:

Author:

The European Union needs more voices that speak up for its cause. And this is not only true in the United Kingdom.