# The Failed Guardianship and The Sunrise of Media-Reality: The Effect of the Media's Political Participation in Affecting the Voter's Identity during Brexit

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Previous Brexit analyses showed that major British media significantly influenced the public's opinion and substantially affected the vote outcome. However, this 'mediacractic' effect has not been studied in the comparative context between Leave and Remain media actors, dissecting their utilised approaches. Intrinsically, the preceding justifies the following research question: *Compared to* The Guardian*'s failure, how did* The Sun *successfully construct and maintain the Leave identity for its readers during the Brexit campaign?* The neutral-Remain *The Guardian* chose the role of an intermediary informer with limited commentary and expression of its position. In contrast, the pro-Leave *The Sun* became a vocal and highly persistent political actor, regularly declaring itself as an active political participant. My analysis shows that active participation in the political campaign in a referendum-type environment is more effective than the publication of restrainedly detached assessments. Specifically, *The Sun*'s three core approaches manifested in constructing a pro-Leave political media-reality. By creating and taking hold of the issue through priming and framing, *The Sun* established itself as a relevant and accessible issue entrepreneur. This created a foundation upon which the outlet constructed the bond of credibility while discrediting its ideological opposition via the stimulation of motivated scepticism. At last, given its nurtured 'reputation for honesty' and 'likeability', the tabloid consolidated its influence through a change to positive in-group messaging, leading to an imposition of a Eurosceptic media-reality. *The Sun*'s experience leads to a more general inference, the normative implications of which necessitate stringent regulation and future research on the viability of media-democracy.

## INTRODUCTION

The increased involvement of 21st-century citizens in the political process is facilitated by their ability to assess authorities' decisions and form Internet communities rapidly. The latter made it possible to effectively coordinate joint political action via the mutual hostage scenario between media and politics, creating a confluence of 'mediacracy'. Such a phenomenon uncovered a wide range of roles that the media plays in the political process. These cover a spectrum from the media's role as an intermediary between the government and society (McLeod & McDonald 1985) to the media becoming an influential and active participant in the political process (Page 1996). The latter role represents this research paper's focus, the empirical basis of which features the 2016–2020 Brexit campaign. Previous analyses showed that major British media significantly influenced the public's opinion and consequently affected the vote outcome (Gavin 2018; Gorodnichenko, Pham & Talavera 2021). However, this effect has not been studied in the comparative context between Leave and Remain media actors. Intrinsically, the preceding justifies the following research question: *compared to* The Guardian*'s failure, how did* The Sun *successfully construct and maintain the Leave identity for its readers during the Brexit campaign?*

During the outlined period, *The Sun*'s three core approaches manifested in constructing a pro-Leave political media-reality. I highlight each by situating the systematised cross-comparison between the chosen media's presence and content approval across three Brexit phases in political behaviour literature. The findings posit challenges regarding the plausibility of

media-democracy and necessitate stringent regulation. If the biased media can effectively claim ownership of a specific issue while asserting its special significance through agenda-building and consolidation mechanisms, then they are in a solid position to capture public favour. This means that the power of the unelected media to drive support for particular policy outcomes should be viewed as a critical threat to liberal democracy.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The recent evolution of media technologies led to the destruction of the unidirectional communication paradigm in which the media represented a mere political instrument (Newton 2006). Instead, the media has become an autonomous and essential player in the public space, with a vast potential for influencing voters' opinions and behaviours (Bennett & Iyengar 2008).

Notably, numerous studies have shown that the media can have a significant influence on the outcome of elections (Murphy & Devine 2018), both through direct coverage of candidates and issues (Iyengar 1990; 1994) and through indirect messaging (Shanahan, Jones & McBeth 2011). For example, a 2005 British general election study has shown the media coverage to be heavily biased towards the incumbent Labour government, substantially affecting voting behaviour (Deacon, Wring & Golding 2006). Further analyses highlighted the media's critical influence on the public's understanding of political issues and their attitudes towards political institutions (Foos & Bischof 2022). For instance, Anstead and O'Loughlin (2014) found that media coverage of the 2010 general election significantly
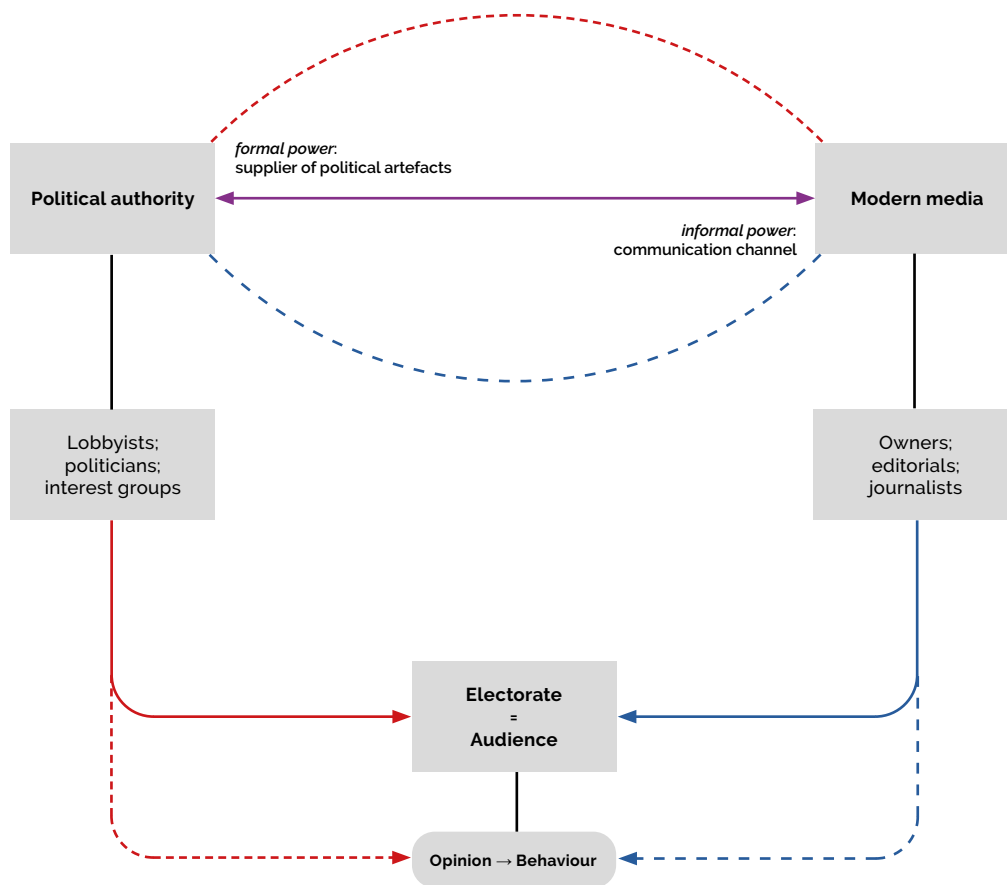
**Figure 1 | Mediacratic power configuration on the median voter.**

impacted the public's perceptions of the parties and the candidates by providing evaluation frameworks. At last, the media's inter-relationship with the political process has also been highlighted. Studies have found that the media can play an essential role in setting (McCombs & Shaw 1972) and even building (Zoch & Molleda 2006) the agenda of the mass public and political elites, influencing the discourse around particular issues (Bennett & Entman 2000). A study conducted by Boomgaarden et al. (2011) emphasised that the media's coverage of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis strongly influenced future economic development in a direction beneficial for the current administration.

Altogether, the media has become an active and highly influential political actor by bartering its communication channels for partial autonomy. Through its permitted monopoly over the immediate telling of political history, the media can influence what its audience considers and ignores, consequently shaping the opinion and behaviour according to the media's needs and political authority's wants. **Figure 1** visualises this mediacratic interplay.

Nonetheless, despite the media's growing role in shaping the political landscape, recent analyses of its participation in large-scale political campaigns featuring referendums have been limited (but see Jackson, Thorsen & Wring 2016). If mediacracy carries uncertainty and challenges to journalistic and democratic norms, it is critical to deconstruct the essential elements that constitute the media-political actor's success. The recent experience of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from

the EU and the interrelated roles of its core media outlets can fill this intellectual gap. I hypothesise that the modern media's success in affecting political identity depends on its ability to construct a well-defined media-reality. Through manipulative signalling and issue consolidation, the media can create a social bond with the core audience and immerse the readers into the political media-reality, affecting voters' opinions and behaviour.

## METHODS

To test my hypothesis, I use the methodological basis of systematisation. Both qualitative and discourse analysis of *The Sun*'s and *The Guardian*'s content and its readership's approval made it possible to clarify their roles and impacts during the Brexit campaign. Additionally, the comparative analysis made it possible to juxtapose *The Sun*'s successful pro-Leave and *The Guardian*'s failed neutral-Remain efforts.

The chosen chronological framework covers the period from then-Prime Minister (PM) James Cameron's formal introduction of Brexit on the 10th of November, 2015, to Britain's withdrawal from the EU on the 31st of January, 2020. This timeline was subdivided into three key phases: (1) the media's participation in the referendum's preparatory phase; (2) their involvement in Brexit discussions under then-PM Theresa May; and (3) their role in Brexit implementation under ex-PM Boris Johnson. Since the total number of Brexit articles during this period exceeded multiple thousands in both outlets, only publications with a thematic 'Brexit'

mark were analysed within the UK Web Archive (2022). The choice of relevant publications was inferred from the conditions of being published on the main page and a minimum number of 500 online comments. As such, the total number of analysed publications was 264 in *The Sun* and 257 in *The Guardian*.

### ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### PHASE 1: 10 NOVEMBER, 2015–13 JULY, 2016
94 Brexit articles in *The Sun* and 92 in *The Guardian* were analysed

A characteristic form of *The Sun*'s publications before the referendum was the editorial's political manifestos designed to create the issue within specific semantic boundaries. Three days before the referendum, *The Sun* (2016) published 'A vote for Brexit is all it takes to set Britain free', representing a compilation of theses from prominent Brexit supporters. It emphasised the potential for genuine independence from the 'elitist' EU. As such, *The Sun*'s biased but consistent coverage introduced the artificially constructed issue of Britain's lack of international independence. It further increased its perceived importance by priming the public to *The Sun*'s issue-ownership. The media outlet stimulated the accessibility of the 'top-of-the-head' opinions based on the induced cognitions and emotions when the specific attitude had to be expressed (Walgrave & Swert 2004). While employing these accessible short-cuts and incorporating what they think they know about that domain into the overall judgement, more than 90% of the manifesto's commentators actively spoke out in Brexit's support and noted *The Sun*'s role in providing 'unbiased and brave' commentary. Consequently, after announcing the preliminary results of the referendum on the 24th of June, the outlet released an article calling the victory the result of a massive popular uprising against the London elite (Tolhurst, Dunn & Hawkes 2016). Through a thematic framing of a class-based conflict, *The Sun* declared the underlying causes and likely consequences of the constructed issue while establishing criteria for evaluating potential remedies and successes for the problem. This storyline acted as an alternative formulation of a decision-making task, establishing a precise reference point for the audience, and outlining the outlet as a prominent issue-owner (Gamson et al. 1992). The readers thanked the editors for their support while celebrating cultural liberation— core issue components defined by *The Sun*. Through such a pre-package message and established evaluation boundaries, *The Sun* provided cues on how its readers should integrate their tailored beliefs into attitudes (Nelson, Clawson & Oxley 1997), by referring them back to the symbolic content designed to leave lasting impressions in an information-dense climate. As such, the large quantity of ideologically-consistent coverage paired with a Eurosceptic narrative made Brexit's Leave option not only accessible but also relevant in the readers' minds, simultaneously presenting *The Sun* as a critical issue entrepreneur during the first phase.

Conversely, *The Guardian* maintained a neutral position by publishing balanced and mainly economic argumentative pieces (e.g., Inman & Monaghan 2016). The adherence to journalistic norms dampened the ideological basis within the media outlet, bounding its influence to subtlety. Moreover, closer to the vote, *The Guardian* lost faith in victory, despite a slight advantage in the polls. The newspaper proclaimed that on the 23rd of June, disillusioned Britons would use Brexit to demonstrate dissatisfaction with the current political and economic situation, irrespective of EU membership (White 2016). In comments to such publications, more than 80% of readers agreed with the editors' position, emphasising the inevitability of the withdrawal. Hence, *The Guardian*'s initial approach, consisting of publishing expert assessments and forecasts about the consequences of Brexit were insufficient to sway a large audience to vote Remain.

### PHASE 2: 14 JULY, 2016–23 JULY, 2019
108 Brexit articles in *The Sun* and 102 in *The Guardian* were analysed

During the second phase, *The Sun* (2017) continued to play a pro-Leave political actor, with its central slogan: 'Theresa May must not betray the 17.4 million people who voted for Brexit'. By stressing its quasi-representation of the Leave supporters' views via a hyperbolic rhetorical apparatus (Kaniss 1997), *The Sun* strengthened the bond with its readership, thereby adding weight to its political influence. Around 85% of readers shared the editors' opinion, who believed that May should refuse the additional payments to the EU during the transition period. Consequently, *The Sun* (2018) published another manifesto directed at May and all British ministers and MPs, demanding further respect for the decision of British citizens. *The Sun*'s manifesto garnered several hundred positive comments accentuating the needlessness of a second referendum, the steadily declining support for May's negotiation efforts, and the apparent criticism of the Remain supporters. The latter became the subject of *The Sun*'s further effort to strengthen the bond of credibility with its readership. Accordingly, two main thematic currents can be distinguished in its political campaign for the next six months: the publication of polls confirming the desire to leave the EU (e.g., Wooding 2019) and criticism of May (e.g., Hannan 2018). The emphasis on the hostile rhetoric made it possible to establish a meta-contrast with the Remain supporters, thus stimulating 'motivated scepticism' (Taber & Lodge 2006). By effectively emphasising the pitfalls of its counterpart concerning the established issue and corresponding values, *The Sun* nurtured the principled dislike of ideologically incongruent information while enhancing the seeking of confirmatory evidence. According to *The Sun*'s Sunday poll results, 48% of the respondents believed that the political elites were deliberately delaying the agreement on a deal with the EU in the hope that it would make the public change its mind (Wooding 2018). For its readers, *The Sun*'s reference to Phase 1 priors and established contrast discredited the Remain supporters and calibrated them against any Brexit-deal propositions regardless of their consequences. Accordingly, Gye, Clark and Dathan (2019) report featuring the debunking of May's deal generated 90% approval in the comments. Consequently, the stimulated attitude polarisation and public backlash led to May's resignation and opened the doors to Number 10 for Boris Johnson. Therefore, throughout the second phase, *The Sun* constructed a bond of credibility with its audience and antagonised the pro-Remain camp.

In contrast, *The Guardian* continued its course of journalistic neutrality. Although the outlet did not stop

scrutinising Brexit, some journalists highlighted its potential advantages. Elliott (2016; 2018) and Herbert (2017) emphasised that Brexit forced the government to look closely at the British economy, while Hinsliff (2017) and Toynbee (2018) criticised May's chaos with the EU deal. However, at the second phase's end, *The Guardian* (2019) published an anti-Leave manifesto emphasising a clear-cut position of the media's staff concerning Brexit negotiations. The uncharacteristically emotional piece noted that the nation is going through a period of national democratic failures marked by entrenched class divisions and political incompetence. *The Guardian*'s inconsistent narrative, accompanied by its sudden change from a neutral intermediary to a vocal actor that still lacked a defined issue-ownership, confused the readers and failed to convince them to push for the second referendum.

### Phase 3: 24 July, 2019–31 January 2020
62 Brexit articles in *The Sun* and 63 in *The Guardian* were analysed

During this stage, the tone of *The Sun*'s publications changed noticeably from targeted negative outbursts to positive digests about political events that were semantically congruent to the established issue. The outlet actively endorsed Johnson, signalling his strong character and unwillingness to give in to Brussels (Tahir 2019). Its constructed reputation as an issue entrepreneur allowed *The Sun* to interpose specific messages supporting the Brexit administration to a relatively uninformed but conditioned-for-trust audience based on the Phase 2 priors. The comments showed that the general mood of more than 95% of readers has notably changed, as the former dissatisfaction has changed to a positive expectation of a deal and confidence in the current administration. Building from the capture of the audience's attention, *The Sun* merged with Johnson's cabinet in their shared signalling aimed to cultivate further media support for Brexit's final push. Accordingly, on the 29th of November, 2019, the newspaper reported on Johnson's meetings with the 'veterans' of the Brexit campaign to stimulate support at the parliamentary elections (Clark 2019). At last, *The Sun* released another editorial manifesto five days before the official withdrawal day, stressing that the British would finally regain control of their borders, highlighting *The Sun*'s position as a leading voice of disillusioned voters (Kavanagh 2020). Hence, during the short third phase, *The Sun*'s efforts revolved around strategic communications models. The outlet's existence of nurtured 'likability' (Brady & Sniderman 1985) allowed its audience to condition the political behaviour on the content of a signal provided by the information supplier. The critical element for *The Sun*'s consolidation of influence was its ability to establish a reputation for consistent quality, such as its credibility in telling the 'truth'. This success made it possible to crystallise its signalling, given that the inadequately informed readers were induced to make more 'accurate' conclusions concerning the options accessible to them from the content of a signal to maintain their Leave identity. As such, *The Sun* finally imposed the Eurosceptic media-reality, wherein the political world acquired a specific ontological status, existing in the form of a semantic sphere that justified a pro-Leave political world.

Conversely, *The Guardian*'s position during this period became negative. After Johnson assumed office, *The Guardian* prepared a series of articles stressing: the lack of genuine popular support for Brexit (e.g., Mandelson 2019); the Conservative Party's elitist orientation (e.g., Lucas 2019); and the unfounded hope of Brexiteers that the EU will give up and continue trading with the UK (e.g., Edgerton 2019). The mistimed imposition of meta-contrast further confused the audience and signalled *The Guardian*'s inconsistent narrative. Correspondingly, the reader's comments were highly diverse. The majority continued to criticise Brexit. However, the second largest group highlighted the importance of the transition period, thus accepting the circumstances. The third expressed their willingness to dissociate from politics altogether. Ultimately, following the UK's final exit from the EU, *The Guardian* broadcasted a live report, 'Brexit day: end of an era as United Kingdom leaves the EU', negatively assessing the effects of Brexit and citing EU political leaders (Sparrow 2020). Given *The Guardian*'s apparent capitulation in light of its failed bond of credibility, about 82% of the comments embodied negative feedback from readers disappointed not only in the new political reality but in the media outlet itself.

### Media-Reality
The above analysis outlines idiosyncratic approaches used by respective outlets during three Brexit phases. These explain why, compared to *The Guardian*'s failure, *The Sun* successfully constructed and maintained the Leave identity for its readers during the Brexit campaign.

By creating and taking hold of the issue through priming and framing, *The Sun* established itself as a relevant and accessible issue entrepreneur. This created a foundation upon which the outlet constructed the bond of credibility while discrediting its ideological opposition via the stimulation of motivated scepticism. At last, given its nurtured 'reputation for honesty' and 'likeability,' *The Sun* consolidated its influence through a change to positive in-group messaging, leading to an imposition of a Eurosceptic media-reality. The discussed mechanisms are visualised in **Figure 2** (next page).

*The Sun*'s experience leads to a more general inference. By collecting and interpreting political artefacts, the media constructs an artificial reality of political phenomena, adding distinctive information elements that meet the interests of formal political centres of power, simultaneously ripping the benefits of informal influence over agenda-building. The audience becomes mentally immersed in political phenomena through the media's concentration on constructed political issues. Through propagating adequate knowledge about the political world via ready-made fact structures, formal authority unites the world of political institutions into a single semantic order of symbolic entities in unison with the media. This creates a mediatised culture of mobilised supporters whose responses to political events can be tweaked based on the above-outlined framework.

### Conclusion and Implications
The analysis shows that active participation in the political campaign in a referendum-type environment is more effective than the publication of restrainedly detached assessments. The neutral-Remain *The Guardian* chose the role of an intermediary informer
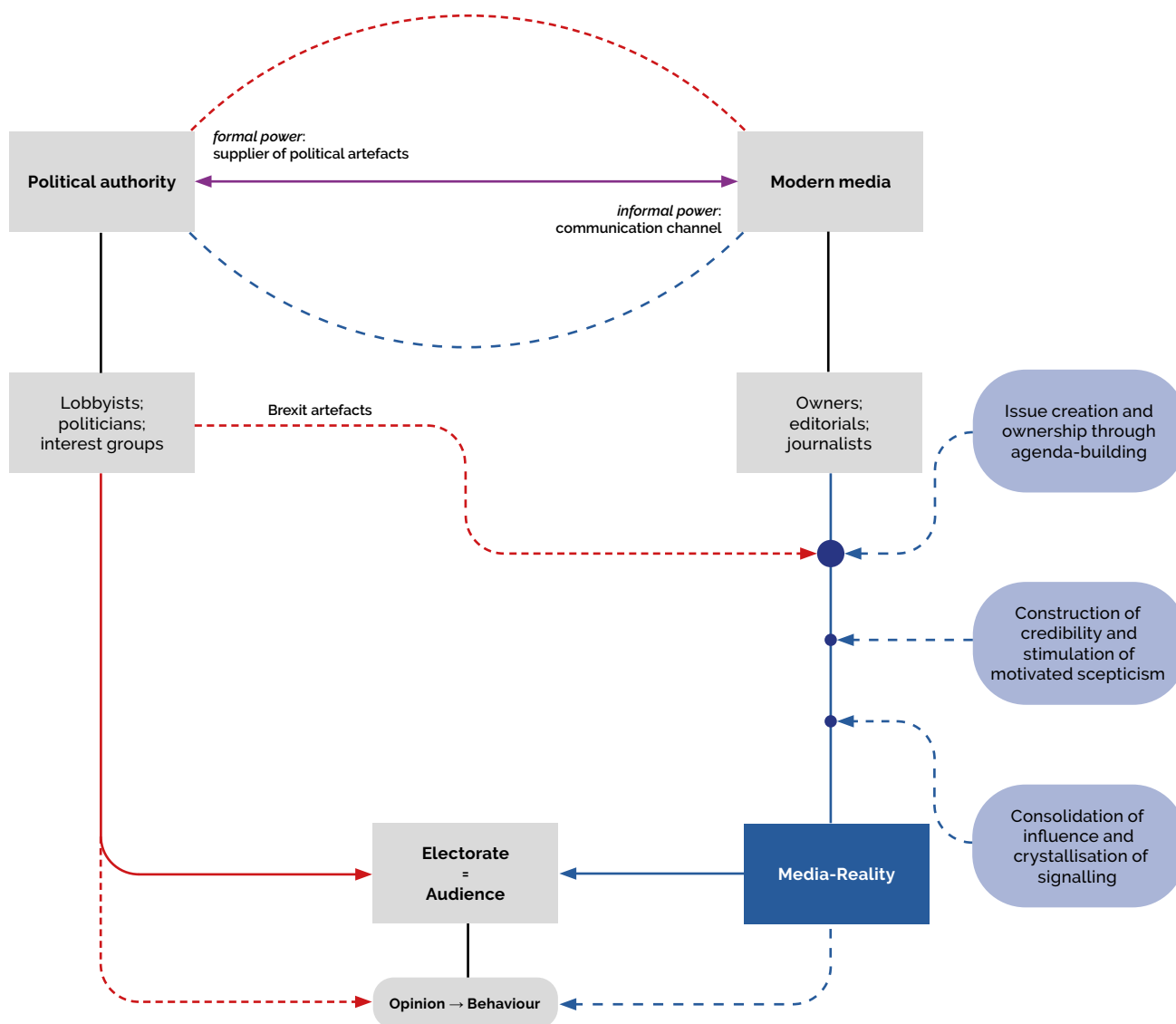
**Figure 2** | *The Sun*'s Eurosceptic media-reality.

with limited commentary and expression of its position. In contrast, the pro-Leave *The Sun* became a vocal and highly persistent political actor, regularly declaring itself an active political participant. The latter's approaches made constructing a Eurosceptic political media-reality possible by establishing a bridge of social cohesion with the audience. This helped the inadequately informed electorate make seemingly accurate inferences about available options from the content of signals dispersed in the media-reality. This superimposed navigation through the political world explains how *The Sun* successfully mobilised its readers during the Brexit campaign, partially affecting their voting behaviour. Although my research design suffers from the lack of control over confounders in the information field and the non-inclusion of other media actors, this paper's general inference outlines normative and positive challenges concerning media-democracy. The observed effective departure from traditional journalistic norms, paired with the unelected media's mobilisation power, must be researched further, albeit quantitatively. Moreover, the introduction of additional variables that shape the political environment could broaden the validity of that research, creating a more comprehensive picture of the political world. After all, mediacracy plays only one of the central roles in affecting voting behaviour. This inevitably entails engaging with other analyses of Brexit that are less focused on the media environment in favour of a more general psycho-sociological perspective, thus unpacking the complexity of the topic and its broader context. Ultimately, only after dissecting the mediacratic phenomenon layer by layer will it be possible to reach its core.

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