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To cite this article: Mike Berry, Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, Inaki Garcia-Blanco, Lucy Bennett & Joe Cable (2021) British Public Service Broadcasting, the EU and Brexit, *Journalism Studies*, 22:15, 2082-2102, DOI: [10.1080/1461670X.2021.1981154](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1981154)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1981154>



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Published online: 15 Oct 2021.



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British Public Service Broadcasting, the EU and Brexit

Mike Berry, Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, Inaki Garcia-Blanco, Lucy Bennett and Joe Cable

Department of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the historic role of Britain's major public service broadcaster, the BBC, in reporting the European Union. To do this it combines a content analysis of two datasets of BBC broadcast and online coverage from 2007 and 2012 with a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with former and current senior BBC editors and journalists. The research finds that BBC coverage in the pre-referendum period was closely tied to major events – such as summits – and elite party conflict. These patterns in coverage were primarily a consequence of the lack of traditional news values inherent in most EU stories and the impact of the wider political and media landscape. The consequence of these patterns in coverage was to present audiences with a restricted, negative and largely conflictual picture of Britain's relationship with the EU which is likely to have fuelled rather than inhibited the growth of Euroscepticism.

KEYWORDS

BBC; Journalism; EU; Brexit; referendum; Euroscepticism

“When I did some reports during the referendum, I did think this is a referendum not just on what has happened recently but it's a referendum on the image that's been developed in relation to the reporting of the EU over a period of 10, 15, 20 years” (Gavin Hewitt, BBC Europe Editor 2009–2014)

Introduction

Much of the research on why Britain voted to leave the European Union has concentrated on either cultural or economic explanations (Norris and Ingehardt 2018). In contrast, relatively little attention has focused on the role of the mass media – and in particular the long-term cumulative impact of coverage. This lack of interest in media influence is striking because readership of the British Eurosceptic press closely correlates with Eurosceptic attitudes (Swales 2016). Furthermore, voters' explanations for favouring leave – such as immigration, the cost of welfare paid to EU citizens or threats to national sovereignty – also mirror dominant themes in much press reporting (Startin 2015).

CONTACT Mike Berry  berry1@cardiff.ac.uk

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In understanding long-term influence it is important to recognise that the media provide models, templates and ways of understanding that help us structure social reality (Philo 1990; Kitzinger 2000). How stories are contextualised and framed, the information that is present (and absent) impacts on how the public understands issues, assigns responsibility and perceives policy choices (Philo 1990; Lewis 2001; Kitzinger 2000; Philo and Berry 2011; Berry 2018, 2019; Gavin 2018). The media, as McQuail notes, are therefore a crucial site in the formation of public knowledge and key agents of political socialisation:

The media work most directly on consciousness by providing the constructed images of the world and of social life and the definitions of social reality. In effect, the audience member learns about his or her social world and about himself from the media presentation of society (given that most of the time this is not directly accessible). The media provide the materials for responding to experience and these accumulate over time in a long-term process of socialisation. The effects of the media on the individual are not only indirect, they have happened long ago, certainly in the past (1977, 76).

This is not to say that public attitudes towards Europe are a simple function of media narratives. Whether those narratives resonate and take root depends on historical, cultural, political and economic contexts. In Britain, these have included the country's "island mentality", its legacy of Empire and exceptionalism, and a tendency to tell its national story through the lens of Britain "standing alone" in World War II – rather than its broader historical relationship with Europe (Grant 2007; Daddow 2012; Wellings and Baxendale 2014). Public attitudes have also been shaped by key events and processes – such as the Maastricht debates in the 1990s, European enlargement in 2004 and 2007, and the post-2008 Eurozone crisis (Startin 2015). So the formation of public beliefs and attitudes is a complex, dynamic process involving collective memory, identity and significant events – as well as the information that people are exposed to through the media and other key sites of socialisation.

This lack of interest in how the media may have contributed to the Euroscepticism which underpinned Brexit is particularly pronounced in relation to UK public service broadcasting, whose historic role in reporting the EU has not been researched in great depth. This paper will address that gap by examining how the BBC's online and broadcast coverage reported on the European Union in the pre-referendum period. The paper will also explore the factors that influenced the reporting of EU news so as to understand how various routines, pressures and constraints structured coverage. Finally, the paper will build on these findings to discuss the long-term contribution of the BBC's reporting in shaping attitudes towards the EU.

To address these questions this paper will combine content analysis of two datasets of BBC coverage from 2007 and 2012 with the results of interviews with leading BBC journalists and editors. However, before presenting this data, the paper will first ground the analysis in a review of the literature on (a) how the EU has been reported, and (b) the production factors that structure news reporting.

Reporting the European Union

A major strand of the pre-referendum literature has involved cross-national studies which have examined the factors that increase the likelihood of EU stories being reported (e.g., Peter, Semetko, and De Vreese 2003; Peter, Lauf, and Semetko 2004;

Brüggemann and Kleinen-von Königslöw 2009; Schuck et al. 2011; De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2012). These have identified three interlinked factors: the domestic political context, the media themselves and the activities of political elites. Negativity, the presence of Eurosceptic political parties, elite conflict and situations where party manifestos show different attitudes to Europe, all correlate with increased EU coverage (De Vreese, Lauf, and Peter 2007; Schuck et al. 2011; De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2012). EU news, except around major events, tends to be marginal and focused on domestic political actors (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000; Norris 2000; Swales 2016). EU coverage in broadcast journalism is more event driven and less visible than in newspapers, and more prominent in public service broadcasting than commercial television (Peter, Lauf, and Semetko 2004). TV news tends to report the EU in a negative light (Peter, Semetko, and De Vreese 2003; De Vreese et al. 2006), and compared to other EU countries, British television coverage tends to be less frequent, more focused on economic issues and less policy orientated (DeVreese 2002; Peter, Semetko, and De Vreese 2003).

There have also been two comparative pre-referendum online studies (De Wilde, Michailidou, and Trenz 2013; Michailidou, De Wilde, and Trenz 2014). However, both studies were primarily focused on the content of public comment threads rather than media reporting. The studies also had little to say specifically about British public service broadcasting – one only provided an aggregate level analysis covering multiple countries whilst the other analysed a BBC sample of only ten stories.

In depth research focused solely on British reporting has tended to be more qualitative and focused on how the EU has been constructed in press accounts (e.g., Morgan 1995; Anderson and Weymouth 1999; Anderson 2004; Daddow 2012; Startin 2015; Copeland and Copsey 2017). This research has found the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, the *Daily Mirror* and the specialist financial press (*Financial Times* and *Economist*), to be broadly supportive of EU membership. However, even here, the positive arguments for membership in areas like security, stability and economic prosperity have been consistently understated (Startin 2015; Copeland and Copsey 2017). In contrast, the remainder of the press has since the 1980s taken an increasingly hard Eurosceptic position – which has been particularly pronounced in the *Daily Mail*, *Sun* and *Express* (Startin 2015; Copeland and Copsey 2017). Key themes have included the EU as a meddling foreign power which undermines British sovereignty and security, the EU as a wasteful, bureaucratic drain on national resources, and the European project as a conspiracy against British interests (Anderson and Weymouth 1999; Daddow 2012; Startin 2015).

There have only been two pre-referendum papers looking specifically at how British broadcasting reported the EU and both of these were case studies. Gavin's (2000) analysis of how BBC and ITV news reported on Britain's EU membership produced three key findings. First, television news provided little coverage of the civic entitlements available to British workers under the Social Chapter. Second, reporting tended to focus more on the economic losses associated with EU membership than the benefits. Third, coverage concentrated on how issues undermined rather than promoted pan-European solidarity. A similarly negative picture of EU membership was also reported by Gavin (2001) who found that EU tax harmonisation plans were predominantly framed as an attack on British sovereignty.

Since this brief review of the literature has highlighted the dearth of in-depth research on the content of British public service broadcasting this paper will address the following research questions:

RQ1: What types of EU stories were present in BBC broadcast and online coverage prior to the referendum?

RQ2: Who were the main sources in BBC broadcast and online coverage?

RQ3: What was the range of debate on key stories in coverage?

What Structures the Production of EU News?

Research on what structures EU reporting has found that the most important factors relate to editorial and proprietorial perspectives, the characteristics of EU news, the social organisation of the newsbeat and the wider political context. Within the British press, a key factor has been the Eurosceptic attitudes of newspaper owners such as Rupert Murdoch and the Barclay brothers, which have decisively impacted the line taken by their publications (Daddow 2012). At other newspapers – such as the *Daily Mail* and *Express* – editors have also enforced a Eurosceptic line (Anderson and Weymouth 1999; Daddow 2012; Copeland and Copesey 2017).

Another issue raised in the literature is that little has been invested in developing the EU news beat in most European newspapers (Statham 2008). As Lorenz's (2017) study of news agency reporting of the EU shows, this underinvestment has led to staff shortages and an inability to produce in-depth investigative reporting, with the consequence that journalists, heavily dependent on promotional material provided by EU institutions, may be vulnerable to "churnalism".

A key problem is that EU stories are rarely highly newsworthy. Reflecting on their interview transcripts with journalists from across the continent, Raeymaeckers et al. (2007) found the same themes reappearing. European issues were "complex", "difficult", "boring", "abstract" or "too institutional"/"too bureaucratic" (2007, 112). Similar findings were reported by Statham:

Europe may be difficult to fit within existing news values and formats, as a complex, technical issue, as an event with a remote or transnational scope, or because it lacks charismatic spokespersons or clear political cues. For example, journalists' news values may demand exciting conflicts between personalities, whereas Europe may deliver technocratic debates between faceless bureaucrats. (Statham 2008, 410)

Such problems are compounded by the complexity of the beat. Part of this involves difficulties in accessing information on EU decision making, which Martins, Lecheler, and De Vreese (2012) note is "voluminous", "scattered" and "complex". Another challenge involves understanding how different EU institutions coordinate, make decisions and disseminate information (Morgan 1995).

Reporting the EU is also coloured by the role conceptions held by journalists (Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2013). Whilst Brussels-based journalists tend to see themselves as neutral providers of information, UK-based correspondents conceptualise their role more as "watchdog or active interpreter" (Price 2010, 232). The importance of role conceptions also comes across in Firmstone's (2008) study of how transnational news

organisations cover the EU. At one level this reflects different national journalistic cultures. For instance, in comparison to the *Financial Times*, coverage at the *Wall Street Journal* tends to be more feature based and maintain a harder barrier between news and comment. At another level, Firmstone (2008) demonstrates how journalists at these newspapers develop a transnational role conception that allows them to provide “a bird’s eye view of events and issues that is not anchored in the concerns of nation states” (Firmstone 2008, 347).

Where journalists are located also influences the kinds of stories and perspectives that are reported. Brussels-based correspondents are likely to report on what is happening at the EU level and feature the “EU perspective”, whilst UK-based correspondents tend “to get their story leads from political speeches, official briefings, lunches with ministers or informal chats with governments or opposition politics” (Price 2010, 229). As Statham (2008, 419) notes, this means the “media tend to follow the political system over Europe; they represent much more than lead political debate, and this is how the journalists perceive their role”. It also means that EU news is heavily domesticated, with stories being reported through a national lens and not making it on to the news agenda unless they have a strong home angle (Clausen 2004).

Finally, researchers have pointed to shortcomings in the EU’s public relations. The EU, it is argued, makes insufficient effort to meet the informational needs of national journalists with its press officers being more concerned with the transnational press – particularly the *Financial Times* (Raeymaeckers, Cosijn, and Dprez 2007; Statham 2008).

As this review shows whilst there have been a number of studies – particularly comparative studies – which have examined the various factors that influence the EU news beat, there has been relatively little detailed research focused specifically on the BBC and how it operates within a particular set of social, organisational and political constraints. With this in mind, the fourth research question this study will address is:

RQ4: What production factors structured BBC reporting of the EU?

Since at its core this study is interested in the question of how BBC coverage might, over many years, have influenced public attitudes towards the EU the final research question is:

RQ5: What was the long-term impact of BBC reporting on public attitudes towards the EU?

Methodology

Content Analysis

This paper is based on a quantitative content analysis of a month’s BBC broadcast and online news reporting in 2007 and 2012.¹ The BBC has been selected because it is both Britain’s most trusted news source and a broadcaster that is highly regarded by other public broadcasters across the world (Ipsos-Mori 2017).

Content analysis was selected as it is a commonly used method to examine the type of stories and sources that appear in large samples of news content (e.g., Berry 2018). To generate a sample that reflected BBC output, we drew from both flagship news programmes and “softer” bulletins like BBC Breakfast. On television we examined BBC News at Ten (BBC One), BBC Breakfast 7–8am (BBC One), and Newsnight (BBC Two). On

radio, we coded the Today programme from 7–8.30am (Radio 4), Newsbeat at 12.45pm (Radio 1), 5 Live Breakfast, and Your Call 9–10am (Radio 5 Live). All broadcasts during the sample period were reviewed by our coding team and only those items that involved Britain's relationship with the European Union were included in the sample. Online content was retrieved in early 2013 from the BBC website using the keyword searches "EU" or "European Union" and results were then manually sifted to filter out stories not relevant to our analysis. Broadcast material was selected by viewing and listening to all bulletins during the sample period. These broadcasts were retrieved from the BBC's internal Redux platform.

The sample period selected for analysis was all weekday coverage between 15 October and 15 November in 2007 and 2012, respectively. Since this research is interested in the long-term cumulative impacts of coverage it was thought appropriate to focus on the decade preceding the referendum and select time periods when both of the major parties had been in power. This was also a period when Eurosceptic parties began to gain support and greater visibility following the election of Nigel Farage as UKIP leader in 2006. These specific months were chosen to deliberately avoid major news events (e.g., elections, disasters and scandals) which might have skewed the sample.

The unit of analysis was the story (news segment or online story) which was host to all the textual elements we categorised. The coding process involved three classes of data – sources, story types and views. Sources were coded if they appeared in headlines, direct speech, reported speech, references, documents or social media. We reported up to 16 separate sources per story. Sources were initially coded into more than 100 granular categories but to provide a broad and manageable overview of the data, we have collapsed these down into a small number of categories (e.g., political, media, etc.). Overall, we coded 966 source appearances so that on average each story included 4.6 sources. Story types were categorised on the subject of the story. This could involve an issue such as the Lisbon Treaty, a policy area or event. The third class of coded data examined the perspectives around the dominant story in each sample period – the Lisbon Treaty in 2007 and the EU budget negotiations in 2012. Here coders identified and quantified the various arguments being made – such as the claim that the Lisbon Treaty would be good for the British economy or that it would involve a loss of sovereignty to Brussels.

The coding was carried out by a team of ten experienced coders and was piloted extensively before the start of the content analysis. Whilst many of the measures were adapted from previous studies carried out by Cardiff's Journalism School, the source variable types were refined through the piloting process. Since we were using an experienced coding team and variables which had been used extensively in previous content analyses carried out for the BBC Trust, we carried out intercoder reliability tests using two members of the coding team on 5% of the sample. On all variables reported, intercoder agreement was above 80%.

During the review process for this paper, one referee requested that we should also report the individual intercoder agreement statistics and Krippendorff's Alpha for all four variables reported in the study. Unfortunately, due to the fact that the study was conducted a number of years before the paper was submitted, it proved impossible to locate the original intercoder reliability data. We were left with only one option – to recode a portion of the dataset and run fresh intercoder reliability tests. Two of the original

Table 1. Intercooder reliability data.

Variable	Intercooder Agreement	Krippendorff's Alpha
Story Topic	100%	1
Source Type	91.6%	0.642
Source Political Affiliation	79.1%	0.707
Views	78.2%	0.768

coders on the research were contacted and agreed to recode 5% of the original sample. The new intercooder reliability statistics are presented in [Table 1](#).

As can be seen, two of reliability statistics were well above 80% and the final two were marginally below 80%. It is worth pointing out at this stage how much of a challenge the recode presented. In the original study, coders spent weeks practicing coding and familiarising themselves with the coding schedule – particularly the complexities and nuances of what constituted reported speech and how to code it. Coding decisions were also discussed collectively, and individual coders could always check ambiguous coding decisions with the research team. In contrast, the two coders involved in the recode approached the coding process “cold” with no training or practice. They had to refamiliarize themselves with the coding process purely by rereading the coding manual and the appendices of the BBC Trust report. Considering the substantial obstacles faced in the recode- achieving intercooder agreement of around 80% or above for all four variables illustrates the robustness of the coding instrument. We would just like to make a final point about one of the Krippendorff's Alpha scores which looks anomalous. Although the intercooder agreement for the “source type” variable was 91.6%, its Krippendorff's Alpha was only 0.642. The reason for this disparity is that Krippendorff's Alpha is best suited to estimating the reliability of normally distributed data. However, the “source type” data is not normally distributed. In the full study, 73% of this data was coded under one category – “political”, and in the reliability sample the proportion was even higher with 70 out of 83 (84%) instances of this variable being classified as “political” by both coders. In a situation with a high intercooder agreement and skewed data distribution, methodologists recommend using Gwet's AC coefficient (Neuendorf 2017). We then re-analysed the data for this variable using, the Real Statistics extension for Excel, which produced a Gwet's AC coefficient score of 0.914.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with six current or former senior BBC journalists and editors. Although this is a small sample in comparison to previous research in this area, this study focuses on a single national institution as opposed to a range of institutions across many EU states. Furthermore, those interviewed were amongst the most senior and/or experienced journalists and editors who have worked at the Corporation.

- Richard Sambrook had a thirty-year career at the BBC as a journalist and news executive. He was appointed Director of News in 2001 and in 2004 was made Director of the World Service and Global News. Between 2012 and 2021, he was a Professor at Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Culture.

- Craig Oliver worked as an Editor for the BBC's flagship Six O'Clock News and Ten O'Clock News bulletins before being appointed Controller of BBC Global News in 2010. In 2011, he became David Cameron's Director of Communication and during the EU Referendum campaign he was the chief strategic planner for "Britain Stronger In Europe", the official Remain campaign.
- Mark Mardell has worked for the BBC for more than thirty years after spending the early part of his career in commercial broadcasting. He worked initially as a political journalist before becoming political editor of BBC Two's Newsnight and then a Chief political correspondent for the Ten O'Clock News. Between 2005 and 2009 he was the BBC's first Europe editor.
- Gavin Hewitt joined the BBC as a presenter on its flagship documentary series Panorama in 1984. He is currently the News Editor of BBC News. Between 2009 and 2014, he was the BBC's second Europe Editor.
- Steve Herrmann began his BBC career in 1985. In 1997, he joined BBC Online becoming its World Editor for five years from 2001. In 2006, he was appointed Editor of BBC News Online, a post he held until 2016.
- Nick Jones worked for the BBC for 27 years as both a political and industrial correspondent after beginning his career as a print journalist. Since leaving the Corporation in 2002, he has written a number of books on New Labour, spin, political communication and the decline of the industrial newsbeat.

Two of the six interviews were conducted face to face and the other four were conducted over the telephone. The average length of interviews was 39 min and 59 seconds. During the interviews, participants were asked to explain the pattern of results in the content analysis as well as comment on the factors identified in the research literature. So for instance, questions included "Did EU stories need a strong domestic angle in order to be reported in broadcast or online news?" and "Did press coverage of the EU influence the agenda of BBC reporting?". Following the interviews the researcher analysed the interview recordings using a process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). This involved identifying themes and patterns through listening, transcribing and re-listening to the interview recordings.

Content Analysis Findings

Across the two sample periods we identified 138 online and 70 broadcast (38 radio, 32 television) stories for analysis. The average length of online articles was 498 words. The mean length of television stories was four minutes and 28 seconds. News at Ten had the shortest stories at an average of two minutes and 40 seconds, followed by Breakfast News at three minutes and 18 seconds and Newsnight at eight minutes and 41 seconds. The mean length of radio stories was six minutes and 58 seconds. The shortest stories appeared on Newsbeat with an average length of 49 seconds, followed by Live Breakfast/Your Call at two minutes and 16 seconds and the Today programme at eight minutes and eight seconds.

We will begin by reviewing sourcing patterns, noting the dominance of political sources, who were subject to a secondary analysis to identify key actors. The paper will then examine which stories were covered and the range of opinion that was present.

Sourcing Patterns

As can be seen in [Table 2](#), political actors accounted for more than six in 10 source appearances in 2007, and almost eight in 10 in 2012. Political sources also tended to appear early in news items giving them the ability to shape the initial angles taken on stories (Hall et al. 1978). In contrast, other groups, such as citizens, usually appeared later, largely in reaction to the terms set by political elites. The second most prominent source category was other media or journalists which primarily involved BBC journalists discussing how EU stories were being reported in the press. Since most of the press is Eurosceptic, this magnified such views. For instance:

[Journalist quoting from *Daily Mail* newspaper] The new treaty is 96% identical to the defeated constitution don't let Britain down by signing up (Today programme, October 18, 2007)

The *Sun* says that Gordon Brown has rolled over in an abject surrender on the EU Constitution (Today programme, October 23, 2007)

Members of the public were the next most prominent source category, followed by business representatives and NGOs/charities. The presence of just two trade union sources in 2007, and none in 2012, is striking given the EU plays a significant role in workplace legislation. Since political sources were so dominant, most stories were reported through institutional framing and opinion.

A secondary analysis of political sources found a clear hierarchy of access, with senior politicians the most prominent. The most frequently quoted individual was the Prime Minister (108 appearances) followed by the Leader of the Opposition (32 appearances). The most cited collectives were cabinet ministers (131 appearances) and MPs (107 appearances). Thus coverage had a strong domestic focus, though EU Commissioners were featured or quoted on 55 occasions, foreign governments on 45 occasions and foreign politicians on 37 occasions. [Table 3](#) shows the political affiliation of the domestic sources which confirms the dominance of the two main parties which account for approximately four in five domestic political source appearances.

Both the Liberal Democrats (8.7% of political source appearances) and the Scottish National Party (6.4%) achieved access, but the Green party was completely absent despite the party having elected MEPs, councillors, and an MP after 2010. The dominance of the two main parties is particularly pronounced in broadcast news, where they accounted for more than nine in ten political source appearances.

Table 2. Source types, by year.

Source type	2007 N (%)	2012 N (%)
Political sources	273 (65.0%)	431 (79.2%)
Media/journalists	36 (8.6%)	40 (7.4%)
Member of the public	18 (4.3%)	11 (2.0%)
Business/private company/economy	12 (2.9%)	10 (1.8%)
NGOs/charities/activists/pressure groups	10 (2.4%)	7 (1.3%)
Academics/expert/science/tech/medical	10 (2.4%)	1 (0.2%)
Think tank	7 (1.7%)	10 (1.8%)
Public sector	7 (1.7%)	5 (0.9%)
Judiciary/legal	6 (1.4%)	5 (0.9%)
Trade union	2 (0.5%)	0 (0%)
Other	39 (9.3%)	24 (4.4%)
Total	420 (100%)	544 (100%)

Table 3. Political party affiliation of source, by year.

Political party affiliation of source	2007 N (%)	2012 N (%)	Broadcast N (%)	Online N (%)	Total N (%)
Conservative	50 (38.8%)	107 (46.9%)	78 (50.6%)	79 (38.9%)	157 (44.0%)
Labour	56 (43.4%)	69 (30.3%)	60 (39.0%)	65 (32.0%)	125 (35.0%)
Liberal Democrat	16 (12.4%)	14 (6.1%)	10 (6.5%)	20 (9.9%)	30 (8.4%)
SNP	0 (0%)	24 (10.5%)	0 (0%)	24 (11.8%)	24 (6.7%)
UKIP	4 (3.1%)	4 (1.8%)	3 (1.9%)	5 (2.5%)	8 (2.2%)
Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition	0 (0%)	5 (2.2%)	3 (1.9%)	2 (2.5%)	5 (1.4%)
Plaid Cymru	0 (0%)	2 (0.9%)	0 (0%)	2 (1.0%)	2 (0.6%)
Independent	2 (1.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (1.0%)	2 (0.6%)
DUP	0 (0%)	1 (0.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.3%)
Ulster Unionist	1 (0.8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.3%)
Alliance	0 (0%)	1 (0.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.3%)
Sinn Fein	0 (0%)	1 (0.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.3%)

Range of Stories and Views in 2007

The most reported story in 2007 was the Lisbon Treaty which amended the Treaties of Rome and Maastricht in light of the arrival of new accession countries. Online news focused on a greater range of stories and so provided a more rounded account of how EU membership affected the United Kingdom.

Table 4 provides a breakdown of the range of stories on BBC Online News ranked by word count. The Lisbon Treaty was by far the most reported story followed by discussion of various aspects of EU regulation. There were two articles on attempts by the EU to liberalise the telecommunications sector. There were also two articles looking at an export ban on British livestock to the EU following the foot and mouth epidemic, two articles on carbon emissions, and single articles on EU fisheries policies, share dealing and wine classification. EU crime and anti-terrorism legislation was also reported.

The pattern of coverage for broadcast news (Table 5) is significantly different. First, there is a more restricted range of stories. Second, certain items – such as a piece on subsidies to wealthy landowners – appeared in broadcast news but not in online news. Third, within broadcast news, story selection appears to be guided by what is likely to be

Table 4. Online news stories in 2007.

Story topic	Proportion of total coverage	Raw word count
Lisbon Treaty	43.2%	10,950
Regulation & consumer/environmental protection	16.2%	4110
Crime and anti-terror legislation	13.0%	3298
EU aid to UK	4.3%	1099
British Bill of Rights/Constitution as counterpoint to EU legislation	4.3%	1098
EU immigration policy	4.1%	1047
EU's trade and diplomatic links to the developing world	2.8%	704
Gordon Brown's speech on The UK's relationships to EU & US	2.8%	701
Debate on whether Tony Blair will become President of EU Council	2.6%	660
Incorrect EU budget accounts	2.4%	597
EU support for Galileo sat-nav system	1.7%	436
EU economic forecast	1.2%	313
Trade dispute over French support to national air carrier	0.8%	203
BBC website shortlisted for EU award	0.6%	145
Total	100%	25,361

Table 5. Broadcast stories in 2007, by programme.

	Lisbon Treaty	Crime/ anti-terrorism	Regulation/ environment	Immigration	Subsidies to wealthy landowners	EU Citizens' Summit	Incorrect EU budget accounts	Total secs
News at Ten	66.3%	–	–	16%	–	–	17.7%	1063
Newsnight	72.6%	–	10.0%	–	–	16.6%	0.8%	2494
Breakfast	41.7%	–	27.2%	29.9%	1.2%	–	–	1189
News (TV)								
Today	74.9%	1.3%	21.7%	1.4%	0.7%	–	–	5551
Breakfast (Radio)	84.9%	15.1%	–	–	–	–	–	79
Newsbeat	100%	–	–	–	–	–	–	84
Total secs	7322	83	1776	601	56	415	207	10,460

attractive to particular audiences. So EU immigration is extensively covered on BBC Breakfast News and News at Ten, both of which have a mainstream audience. However, the most significant difference between online and broadcast reporting is the dominance of the Lisbon Treaty across broadcast news. We will now examine in detail how coverage on this story was structured.

Table 6 presents the incidence of arguments on the Lisbon Treaty across broadcast and online news. As can be seen, the most prominent arguments correspond to the key arguments of the two main parties. Labour's position was that Britain would sign the Lisbon Treaty because (a) the government had secured its stated exclusions, (b) the agreement was a different document to the EU constitution and so didn't involve a fundamental shift of power to Brussels, so that (c) there was no need for a referendum. The Conservatives argued (a) the treaty was substantively similar to the EU constitution on which the Labour Party had offered a referendum in their manifesto, (b) the treaty would lead to a major transfer of power to the EU, and (c) Labour's exclusions could

Table 6. The range and frequency of arguments on the Lisbon Treaty.

Argument	Frequency
Referendum needed on ratification of Lisbon Treaty	41
Treaty is the same as rejected EU constitution	31
Referendum not needed on ratification of Lisbon Treaty	30
Red lines/national interest secured in Treaty	29
Labour betrayal/will forfeit trust because promised referendum on further EU integration	25
Treaty different from previously rejected EU constitution	20
Treaty means further loss of sovereignty/democratic deficit/EU superstate	16
Red lines not secure/not sustainable	13
No extra powers are being ceded to EU	10
Treaty will be 'step forward'/allow EU to act	7
Conservatives split over EU	6
There should be a referendum on EU membership	6
Britain shouldn't sign Lisbon Treaty	5
Treaty complex/difficult to explain to public	5
Lisbon Treaty/EU membership good for UK economy	5
Not supporting Treaty will isolate UK in Europe	3
Public opinion is against Treaty	2
Labour promised referendum on constitution not Lisbon Treaty	1

be challenged by EU courts in the future. This meant that (d) Labour should offer a referendum on the treaty.

The other key finding from this analysis is that the debate around Britain's relationship to the EU was highly negative. The justification for supporting the Lisbon Treaty was primarily defensive – in that it wouldn't further infringe sovereignty. The only positive case for the Treaty – that it will benefit the United Kingdom economically – was made in less than two percent (5/255) of arguments.

Range of Stories and View in 2012

In our second sample, the BBC website published 87 stories – a substantial increase over the 51 in 2007 – and a breakdown of those stories can be seen in [Table 7](#). The distinctive character of online output can be seen in how one story – the position of a future independent Scotland within the EU – featured in 21 online reports but didn't appear in our broadcast sample.

However, the most covered story on BBC online was EU budget negotiations which accounted for 42% of coverage. News reports focused on the progress of negotiations, along with the Westminster debate over the budget. Linked to this debate were a series of stories on dissent within the Conservative party over EU membership and demands for a referendum. Another set of stories focused on whether the Labour party was reconsidering its pro-EU position. There were also stories about EU regulation and regional development aid to the United Kingdom.

As in 2007, there was a more limited selection of stories in broadcast news ([Table 8](#)) and a single story – the EU budget negotiation – was more dominant in broadcast than online coverage. Reporting of the EU budget featured relatively little information about how the budget was spent or the pros and cons of EU investment policy. Instead, as can be seen in [Table 9](#), most debate focused on arguments over whether the government should support a real term freeze in EU spending.

Labour Party and Eurosceptic Conservative backbenchers argued that the EU budget should be cut with some Tories claiming much of the EU budget was wasted. The Conservative government argued that the real terms freeze was the best deal possible and Labour were being opportunistic. Once again, most coverage was structured around the positions of the two main parties and the impact on Conservative unity. As in the earlier sample coverage was also predominately negative. Calls to exit the European Union – or hold a referendum on leaving the EU – had risen since 2007 and criticism of

Table 7. Online stories in 2012.

Story Area	Proportion of total coverage	Raw word count
EU budget negotiations	42.0%	18,226
Future of an independent Scotland in EU	24.1%	10,501
Debate over the future of Britain in the EU	11.4%	4926
Regulation & consumer/environmental protection	5.9%	2543
Labour's changing stance on EU	5.1%	2203
EU banking reform	4.5%	1956
EU plans for female quotas on company boards	3.7%	1593
EU aid to UK	1.9%	811
Calls for elected President of EU	1.4%	616
Total	100%	43,375

Table 8. Broadcast stories in 2012.

	EU Budget	EU Criminal Justice	EU Banking reform	Labour's changing stance on EU	EU plans for female quotas on company boards	Total Secs
News at Ten	74.4%	23.7%	1.9%	–	–	1179
Newsnight	100%	–	–	–	–	1681
Breakfast News (TV)	44.7%	14.4%	–	–	40.9%	792
Today	67.9%	8.4%	16.1%	0.6%	7.0%	9588
Breakfast (Radio)	100%	–	–	–	–	602
Newsbeat	100%	–	–	–	–	14
Total secs	10,036	1202	1566	54	998	13,856

Table 9. The range and frequency of arguments on the EU budget negotiation.

Argument	Frequency
Britain pushing hard for best deal which is real terms freeze/cut not possible/will use veto if necessary	69
EU budget should have a real terms cut	55
Europe is a problem for Conservatives/Conservatives are split	41
Labour is being hypocritical/cynical/opportunistic in opposing real term freeze	24
Britain should get a referendum on EU membership	18
Britain becoming isolated/unpopular in EU because of budget wrangles/Euroscepticism	14
Public opinion has moved against EU/in favour of renegotiating relationship with Europe	12
EU states pushing for budget cut/freeze	11
Britain should leave EU	10
Britain needs to repatriate powers from EU	9
EU spending needs reform/different priorities – less CAP more R&D infrastructure	8
Britain should remain in Europe because we can't extract ourselves from negotiations	7
Britain should remain in Europe because it is good for business, influence and security	7
Budget should get real terms increase	5
Conservatives united on Europe	5
Cutting budget would damage spending on infrastructure/R&D/education	4
Referendum on EU membership not necessary	4
Britain benefits from EU structural aid	3
EU budgets need more transparency	2
More of EU budget should go to smaller nations	1
Public opinion is badly misinformed – exaggerates costs and doesn't appreciate benefits – of EU membership	1

the UK's membership of the EU outweighed statements arguing that the relationship provided economic benefits (Table 9).

Interview Findings

The interview data showed the production factors identified in the cross-national literature were also relevant to UK public service broadcasting. So the dryness of most EU news was frequently highlighted by interviewees: "many of the editors thought it was a dull story ... and one that they worry would bore audiences" (Mark Mardell). Furthermore, the complexity of the Brussels story was seen as challenging for the constrained space of broadcast news which, Mardell argued, meant that "explanatory" material on how the EU operated tended to be "banged online". However, Steve Herrmann framed this process more positively, arguing that the BBC news website provided a "reference resource" which complimented broadcasting:

We recognised early on that online was fantastic as a medium for depth and for explanatory material. We realised you could do a great deal to explain the background to complicated issues, display different viewpoints, sort of set out the history of something or maps, or explain visually with information graphics – for example how the budget was spent – for all these kinds of things online felt like a very good means of doing this

Another factor that was cited to explain the differences in online and broadcast news agenda was the “logistics and the economies of online news” in that – as opposed to broadcasting – it wasn’t always necessary to send out a crew to gather and edit pictures which “freed us up to do more stories, probably a wider range of stories” (Steve Herrmann). Herrmann also pointed to how different audiences shaped the broadcast and online news agendas. Whilst broadcast news with its exclusively home audience was strongly domesticated, BBC Online’s “remit was to also serve a global audience” opening up the space to report on a wider selection of issues.

In explaining the restricted range of EU stories in broadcast news, interviewees spoke of the challenges in reporting EU process stories: “the day to day process wasn’t very well reported and television is very good at reporting events ... but long term process it is not very good at reporting because there isn’t a measurable day to day change going on” (Richard Sambrook). Event stories, Mark Mardell argued, could also be managed via the news diary which facilitated forward planning and gave journalists an opportunity to sell EU stories to editors. In line with previous research, interviewees highlighted how EU news was domesticated through the focus on conflict between national political elites:

Parties agree is not a story. Parties disagree: that is a story and parties’ internal disagreement is an even bigger story and that’s just a fact of Westminster life and a fact of journalism. We are, rightly or wrongly and I would sometimes argue we overdo it – but we – and I mean more broader than the BBC- I’d include the newspapers in this, are driven by Westminster politics, driven by top heavy politics from Westminster and what goes on there will inform and colour everything else (Mark Mardell)

However, there were also factors particular to British public service broadcasting, such as the role conception held by BBC editors and journalists. Donnelly and Dykes (2012) argue that broadcast news fails to act as a counterpoint to Eurosceptic newspapers and Richard Sambrook stressed the BBC didn’t see its role as being to compensate for imbalances in other parts of the media:

To what extent is it the BBC’s responsibility to correct what the tabloid press do? And the answer is it is not really their responsibility. I remember a discussion in the 1990s about that, saying the press is so Eurosceptic shouldn’t the BBC be the counterbalance to it? But the answer is no, that’s not its role, otherwise it gets dragged off course. It can’t just be there to respond to what other people chose to do. So it’s got to take its own sense of impartiality.

Interviewees also argued that the resources and attention devoted to covering the EU was affected by the shifting priorities of successive Director-Generals: “before John Birt [Director-General 1992–2000], BBC television didn’t have a single correspondent on mainland Europe- radio did but television didn’t ... and one of the things that Birt did was to put tens of millions into open TV bureaus and establish a network of correspondents” (Richard Sambrook). However, Birt’s successor Greg Dyke was “less patrician” and more interested in building audience share. The end of Dyke’s tenure in 2004 saw the BBC’s

approach to Europe change again. The following year, the BBC commissioned an impartiality review of its EU coverage which pointed to a “structural problem in that the main Europe correspondent was also expected to deal with fires, earthquakes and disasters” as well as report on the Iraq war (Mark Mardell). This meant that there “wasn’t the heft” of “someone looking at it from a political point of view.” Following the review, the BBC created the post of Europe editor, with Mardell being the first appointee.

Another issue highlighted was the power and attitudes of political editors – who Craig Oliver argued – didn’t grasp the importance of covering Europe:

I think it’s a huge problem. The power of what’s called Millbank – which is basically where the broadcasters are based in Westminster – is incredible to this day in BBC journalism. It has a huge impact and the news editor and the political editor there has a huge sway over what’s covered and how things operate and there’s a feeling among a lot of editors who make programmes that unless Laura Kuensberg is on then somehow they haven’t done it properly.

This brings us to the issue described by one interviewee as the rise of the “culture of the presenter”. As Cushion (2015) has noted, since the 1990s there has been a rise in live “two-way” coverage and a subsequent decline in the use of pre-edited packages. One interviewee felt this development had “done much to reduce the significance of the analytical reporting that the BBC used to do” (Nick Jones).

Another factor identified as shaping coverage was pressure from Eurosceptic lobby groups. As Richard Sambrook noted, the Corporation had been under political pressure from such groups from the late 1990s:

There was definitely pressure, quite a lot of pressure in the late 90s, early 2000s from the Peter Bones, Bill Cash [Eurosceptic Conservative politicians] and all the rest of it. But it was sort of seen as alongside the Israeli pressure and the other lobby groups as something that had to be managed at arms’ length really. So I don’t think it would be fair to say that it had an undue influence on the coverage at all but there was definitely a constant campaign. It wasn’t huge, it was constant letters, little reports coming in all the time, the sort of Newswatchy type stuff, there was a constant drip.

The reference to Newswatch and Israeli lobbyists highlights the significance of media monitoring groups. Another interviewee suggested, such groups “came to the fore” during Tony Blair’s premiership when “the Today programme were getting letters saying you’ve had so many pro-Europe people on the BBC and you’re not having anti-, you’re not having any people from the sceptic wing” (Nick Jones). One consequence of this, Nick Jones argued, was the BBC became cautious about commissioning controversial analytical pieces and tended to fall back on “stopwatch” journalism:

Some stories are too difficult for the BBC to do because the culture very much became “this is a very, very touchy subject. Are you sure of your facts? We don’t want any trouble over this.” It’ll be much easier to get in two of the well known voices. Today of course it would be Jacob Rees-Mogg and Anna Soubry [Eurosceptic and pro- EU Conservative politicians] ... and have a little ding dong with them.

However, both Europe editors argued that the success of Eurosceptic parties in successive European and General Elections meant that the BBC – because of its public service remit – had a responsibility to feature those perspectives. Gavin Hewitt also argued

that media-savvy Eurosceptic politicians such as Nigel Farage had become adept at attracting media attention:

I knew that if for instance in Strasbourg if Nigel Farage got up and spoke I knew that my phone would ring “there’s an interesting clip today with Nigel Farage” and I think it gives you an interesting idea of the dynamic. I think editors find it very difficult to turn away from an exciting, interesting clip in favour of some analysis.

A number of interviewees also argued that pressure was also coming from the public. Gavin Hewitt said that EU reporting had been seen as “problematic and hugely sensitive” and that when he had started in Brussels he felt he was “treading on eggshells, it wasn’t that our journalism wasn’t robust – it was robust – but you were looking over your shoulder with a sense that if you go too far in one direction your postbag is going to be full”. However, interviewees stressed that this was more of a problem for broadcast than online news – which may to some extent explain why online coverage was more expansive and analytical.

Interviewees also cited pressure from Britain’s Eurosceptic press. As Gavin Hewitt put it: “if you did a story that some British journalists regarded as being soft on the EU they would have a go at you in their papers”. Another way newspaper agendas were seen to influence the BBC was through the way broadcasters featured reviews of newspaper coverage: “every news bulletin in the morning is followed up by here’s what all the newspapers are saying, here’s what the columnists are saying, which in one way is perfectly legitimate but it is often worldviews that are quite particular and specific and lead you down a path of well the EU is just a bunch of Eurocrats who want to do crazy things like cancel prawn cocktail crisps” (Craig Oliver). The press was also seen to influence how broadcast news framed stories:

This continual hostility of the press agenda does feed through to the BBC in ways which people don’t understand ... If there has been some EU summit – and of course all the papers start coming out at 8, 9, 10 o’clock and have all got some line about it – that is going to have an influence. First on the newsroom which is writing the pieces and commissioning the pieces for the morning bulletin. And the sort of the pressure you get is: “well all the papers are saying this is a complete disaster, this has gone wrong, we’ve got to reflect what they’re all saying, we’ve got to reflect it ... you’ve got to understand this is what people are reading”. So I’m now having to explain the story in the agenda that’s been set by the *Daily Mail* (Nick Jones).

In explaining a key finding in the content analysis – that elite politicians seemed unwilling to make a positive case for EU membership – interviewees pointed to a more indirect mechanism where those dominant broadcast agenda setters were constrained by the climate created by the Eurosceptic press. Daddow (2012) has argued that Rupert Murdoch threatened successive British prime ministers with a press backlash should they adopt a pro-EU approach and Nick Jones argued that part of the reason Gordon Brown adopted defensive rhetoric on Europe was because he was following the “*Daily Mail* agenda”. Jones claimed that although Labour usually signed up to most new EU legislation “they wanted it to be known in the “sceptic press” that they were standing up for Britain and against the EU bullies ... because this is the narrative that has been going on for so long”. Mark Mardell also argued that a press climate “suspicious” of Europe inhibited politicians for making the case for the EU:

It was the background of the Tory opposition that was profoundly Eurosceptic during the Blair and Brown years, it was the background of years and years of Eurosceptic press conditioning people to think that anything that came from the EU was bound to be bad. We would do the occasional item on, say, roaming charges or whatever but you wouldn't necessarily get Tony Blair - even Tony Blair - saying this is why the EU works this is why it's great for Britain (Mark Mardell).

The interviewee then contrasted the British approach with that of other European leaders:

I think this is fundamentally important point about how European opinion is covered. You'll regularly get Merkel - or when I was there it would have been Sarkozy but obviously now Macron - talking about the glories of the European Union ... It's very, very, very rare that you get a British Prime Minister stand up and say what a great thing it is because it didn't play domestically - even if they thought it. And they didn't think they'd be a place where they needed to win that argument so why piss off their voters who didn't agree? Why piss off the parts of their party that didn't agree? There was no mileage in it whatsoever' (Mark Mardell)

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper set out to address three issues. First, it sought to fill the gap in the literature in relation to systematic research on how the BBC has reported the EU. Second, it endeavoured to unpack the factors that structured reporting in this area. Third, it set out to consider the role that the Corporation's historic reporting played in influencing the growth of Euroscepticism. We will now examine these three issues by focusing on the paper's five research questions.

The results of the content analysis indicated that there were major differences between broadcast and online news (RQ1). Broadcast reporting featured a more restricted range of stories and was more focused on a single story in both samples. This meant the broadcast audience were provided with little information on the routine activities of the EU and the many ways it impacted life in Britain. This finding is in line with previous cross-national research, which has found EU news tends to be marginal unless it involves a major event or domestic political conflict (Peter, Semetko, and De Vreese 2003). Online reporting provides a broader picture of the EU - but this has to be set against the fact the online audience is smaller and self-selecting (Ofcom 2018).

The findings on sourcing patterns (RQ2) and range of views (RQ3) showed that reporting drew from a narrow range of perspectives - primarily from the main two political parties. Since Eurosceptic voices amongst leading politicians were far louder than those of pro-EU sources, coverage tended to reflect that imbalance. Furthermore, the focus on the "Westminster soap opera" involving plots, splits and inter or intra-party conflict meant that the "game frame" displaced substantive discussion of policy. This was evident in broadcast coverage of the EU budget debate. Whilst there was substantial discussion of the two parties' position on the budget there was much less information on how the budget was spent and the consequences of a cut. For instance, one perspective reported by the BBC website (1 November 2012) but absent from broadcast news was that cutting the budget would reduce structural aid to some of the poorest regions of the United Kingdom.

The interview data (RQ4) showed – in line with previous research – that journalists struggled with reporting a story that was widely seen as dry, complex and likely to bore audiences (Raeymaeckers, Cosijn, and Dprez 2007; Statham 2008). This led broadcast journalists to fall back on elite political conflict as a key news value structuring coverage – a trend reinforced by the dominant role of political editors at Westminster. The impact of this was to strongly domesticate broadcast coverage and limit the ability of the BBC to present a rounded account of the EU. Also in line with previous research, interviewees pointed to the significance of the political context in driving coverage (Price 2010; De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2012). In the United Kingdom, this was strongly shaped by a climate of Euroscepticism. Part of this involved the rise of Eurosceptic lobby groups whose views had to be featured because they represented a significant strand of public opinion. Even more important was the long-term Euroscepticism of much of the British press. This was seen to operate through direct attacks on the Corporation for its allegedly pro-Europe stance and via inter-media agenda setting. It was also seen to function more indirectly by establishing a dominant negative narrative about Britain’s relationship to Brussels which the key agenda setters for BBC news – political elites – felt constrained to work within.

BBC news with its commitment to balance and impartiality was potentially a key site where a rounded picture of the EU could have been constructed. Instead, as this research has demonstrated, broadcast coverage was sparse, dominated by major events or elite party conflict and embodied a narrative in which Britain’s relationship to the EU was “suspicious”. How might such historic coverage have affected the growth of Euroscepticism which underpinned the referendum result (RQ5)? One way to approach the question is to consider the literature on the factors that drive Euroscepticism. These have been categorised as utilitarian, political or identity based (Goodwin and Milazzo 2015). Utilitarian explanations involve economic cost–benefit analyses of EU integration, political explanations highlight the role of elite political cues, and identity-based explanations focus on how the EU relates to concerns over issues such as immigration or sovereignty. The lack of a positive narrative about EU membership is likely to impact on all three mechanisms. First, it will skew cost–benefit analyses towards seeing membership in a negative light because the public have encountered few arguments for the advantages of EU membership (Startin 2015). Second, citizens reliant on elite political cues for decision making will have encountered few pro-EU arguments from politicians or parties they identify with. Third, on issues such as sovereignty and immigration citizens will have largely encountered one-sided arguments that stress the negative impacts of EU membership. For instance, few are likely to be familiar with arguments around “pooled sovereignty” or to realise that Britain has historically played an influential role in establishing important aspects of the European project. These could have been powerful counter-arguments to misleading claims that Britain is “ruled by unelected bureaucrats in Brussels” (Lustig 2016).

The lack of a historic positive narrative is also likely to have been an important factor in the EU referendum campaign. The Leave side could draw on a range of negative tropes about the EU which had been established deep in the national consciousness. As the chief strategist of Vote Leave, Dominic Cummings (2017), revealed, these were mined through focus group research which allowed the campaign to hone its message around themes – such as sovereignty, waste, security and immigration – which have been key staples of

Eurosceptic reporting. In contrast, the Remain side could draw on few positive arguments about Britain's relationship with Europe that would be familiar to audiences. Such positive connotations – especially when the predominant narrative had been negative for so long – would be difficult to create from nothing in the confines of a brief campaign. This point was made by Craig Oliver when asked what he would have done differently during the referendum: “I’d invent a time machine and go back forty years and force political leaders to make the case for the EU”. Lacking a positive narrative about EU membership, the Remain campaign fell back on a series of negative arguments which failed to sufficiently resonate amongst an electorate who felt that the status quo had not delivered (Ipsos-Mori 2016).

To conclude, this paper finds that BBC coverage was sporadic, strongly tied to elite party conflict and indexed to the views of leading politicians. This meant audiences were presented with a highly restricted, negative and largely conflictual picture of Britain's relationship with the EU. The BBC could have been a site where a more rounded picture of the EU was cultivated. However, due to a number of factors rooted in the sociology of news production, the behaviour of leading politicians and the wider media and political context, this did not take place.

Note

1. The content analysis data in this paper came from an Impartiality Review commissioned and funded by the BBC Trust (Wahl-Jorgensen et al. 2013). The Review examined the range of news sources and opinion in three areas of BBC coverage: religion, immigration and Britain's relationship with the European Union.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by BBC Trust.

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