



Grassroots for Europe Round Table #15 – 25 May 2021

Summary Report

Topic: Taking Back Control of the Media – The Challenges and Pressures

The discussion covered the question of anti-EU bias in the media - both print and broadcast, but excluding social media. How anti-EU is it and how do government and anti-EU politicians influence it?

1. Broadcast media

- The BBC: There are three formal levers of influence that enable control over the BBC and its content - the Unitary Board that can be influenced through the 5 government appointees out of 14; Ofcom, the regulator; inchoate, informal levers of influence, with a general awareness amongst all journalists that a powerful government is pushing a narrative of “metropolitan liberal elite” (code for pro Remain).
- The appointment of Paul Dacre at Ofcom would make the challenge of changing the default narrative greater still, with his well-publicised views on both the BBC and Brexit.
- All of the media outlets must show “due impartiality”, not just the BBC. It is to be expected that GB News and Andrew Neil will try to push the boundaries of the impartiality. They will attempt to court controversy to increase ratings. GB News is funded for three years. It is a political, rather than commercial, venture.
- The BBC’s editorial decision-making is largely devolved to individual programme editors, who have control over programme content.
- British broadcast journalism is of a high standard and well respected, including by the vast majority of the public, according to Ofcom research, especially through the Covid-19 Pandemic.
- Pro-EU Groups need to adopt a more comprehensive, co-ordinated approach to the media to ensure their voices are heard in a way that they were not during the EU Referendum campaign.
- It is time to create a new media strategy and narrative in favour of the EU, which penetrates the media platforms. It is suggested that it comprise four components: Rebut, Instigate, Lobby and Engage (“RILE”).
- Within any campaign, the negative consequences of Brexit should not be the sole priority – it should go hand in hand with the other elements of an overarching communications campaign.

2. Print media

- It takes many years for a narrative to become embedded in the media. The origin of the press antipathy to the EU is the early 1990’s, and one Brussels Daily Telegraph correspondent in particular – Boris Johnson. He was the origin of the “straight banana” genre of journalism in the British print media. This could be characterised as the “Dads’ Army-fication” of content, which stereotypically depicted Brussels as overrun by plots, traps and foreign scoundrels. It sets the UK against old foes.
- All of the pieces from Brussels were written with a consistent narrative. i.e. the EU is over-bureaucratic, over-centralised, over-controlling and financed with vast sums of UK taxpayers’ money. The EU’s aim was always to dilute British sovereignty.

- These narratives became central to the centre-right and right-wing press over the next twenty-five years. Thatcher and Murdoch forced a change in the 1980's to the pro-EU consensus press narrative that had prevailed before and since the 1975 Referendum. Johnson created the narrative that was pushed through the frames of the Sun, Mail, Express, Telegraph and, to a certain extent, the Times and Sunday Times.
- These stories were so prolific that the EU established the "Euromyths" website in the early 1990's and, by the time it stopped updating the service in 2018, over 600 misleading, false or untrue stories had been featured. Craig Oliver's account of the 2016 Referendum campaign was illustrative of the widespread naïve absence of belief, on the Remain side, that twenty-five years of Johnsonian, anti-EU press narrative could be overcome in just ten weeks.
- The anti-EU press narrative over 25 years meant that when it came to the EU Referendum, the fact that the £350m extra a week to the NHS was untrue mattered not, as it fitted with long-established, public thinking that vast sums of money are sent to the EU. Likewise, a front-page story in the Daily Telegraph that EU freedom of movement was leading to Islamic terrorism was believable to its readers as it was consistent with stories they had been told for over twenty years.
- The media breakdown is 80% in favour of Eurosceptic outlets, with only 20% being ambivalent or pro-EU. The Sun, Daily Mail, Daily Telegraph, Express, Sunday Express, Sunday Telegraph and Sunday Times were all anti-EU papers before the EU Referendum and became even more explicitly so during the campaign.

The pro-EU case has been set back further through its presentation in the media since the Referendum, principally by two factors: Johnson and Covid19. There is now a need for clear narratives, but it still needs to be determined what they should be at this stage. Arguing for another Referendum now or to rejoin the EU in the current Parliament will not resonate. Some possible narratives could be around the new internationalism advocated by Best for Britain, or it being cold and lonely outside the EU or highlighting the costs of Brexit, as above. The narratives will need to be clear, consistent, and compelling. They will need to be repeated often and over a long period of time to percolate through to the public.