

# **Unveiling Media Dynamics in BBC's Representation of Populist Discourse during the Brexit Campaign.**

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## **1. Introduction**

The United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union, known as Brexit, arose from public concerns in the United Kingdom over topics such as governance, immigration, and financial matters. People were doubtful whether the UK should remain in the EU and share all these things to other countries, so the process started which continued for years and started from a climate of uncertainty. On June 23, 2016, the first referendum on whether the UK should stay in the EU was held. The "Leave" campaign won by a small margin of 52% of the vote. Following that, David Cameron, who supported the concept, resigned, allowing Theresa May to take over as Prime Minister.

There was still discussion about it so, in March 2017, Prime Minister Theresa May invoked Article 50 to begin the process of exiting the EU. Individual rights and the Irish border issue were among the most important subjects discussed during this period. Despite reaching an agreement in 2018, it was faced with opposition in the UK Parliament, which caused the process to be postponed, however it was temporary.

When Boris Johnson became Prime Minister in July 2019, everything changed dramatically. Johnson reopened negotiations again, with the EU and decided to offer changes to improve the already planned plan. In October 2019, agreement on the new plan was reached. The Conservative Party's significant victory in the December 2019 election increased the speed of the process, because they had power and desire to finish this process at that time, it played a huge role in the decision which was soundly made by The United Kingdom formally, on January 31, 2020, "We're out!"

The decision to leave the EU marked a significant turning point for the United Kingdom, as it embarked on a new chapter of independence and sovereignty. However, the process of disconnecting from the EU and establishing new trade agreements, which cause other problems because the continuity of this process has become a bit complex and challenging.

## **1.1 Background**

This process was covered by all important media channels all over the world, but in this paper I want to focus on the BBC, because the majority of audiences in the UK rate the BBC highly for providing high-quality, accurate and trustworthy content and estimate the channel as the reliable source, which helps them understand what is going on in the world.

The depth and range of analysis and content provided by the BBC helps audiences engage with major issues and participate in the democratic process as well as informed citizens. (Norris and Ingehardt 2018). Also it should be noted that, media plays an important role in creating public opinion. The media does more than just change what people think it also shapes how we see what everyone else thinks. People in charge, like politicians, see the media as super important because it influences not only regular people, but also other powerful people. (Entman 1990). So public beliefs and attitudes formation is a complex and dynamic process. It also involves collective memory, identity and significant events. And the information that people are exposed to through the media and other key sites of socialization.

This paper will observe the events that happened in the UK during the Brexit referendum and analyze the populist rhetoric used by prominent political actors in their speeches, as reported by the BBC. In order to tackle these subjects, and narrow down my observation on the process, I choose certain politicians and periods of time for observation. There will be analyzing information based on interviews with Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson with a qualitative examination of BBC coverage from the beginning of 2019 and until February 1st, 2020. Nevertheless, the study will first base the research on a review of the literature on what populism is, how the media shapes public opinion, and objectivity when reporting the news before providing this data.

## **1.2 Research Motivation – Description of the Problem**

The motivation for this research comes from the significant role played by populist rhetoric in shaping public discourse during important political events such as the Brexit campaign. Also, based on BBC news we will observe the influence of the media, in framing these narratives. Particularly, populist sentiments (talking against the elite, focused on their own country, and talked a lot about having control), characterized by anti-elitism, nationalism, and appeals to sovereignty (People often spoke against those in power, emphasized their love for their country, and said it was important to have control over their own decisions), were integral to the debates surrounding the UK's withdrawal from the EU. This paper will observe how a prominent media outlet like the BBC represented these populist discourses is crucial for comprehending the broader dynamics of political communication and media influence during an important political event.

## **1.3 Research Question.**

***How did the BBC represent populist rhetoric and sentiments in its reporting on the Brexit campaign?***

### **Sub Questions:**

- How were prominent populists like Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage portrayed in BBC coverage and interviews from the start of 2019 to February 1st, 2020?
- What language devices and framing strategies did the BBC use to promote populist narratives in the speech that they covered featuring Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage?

## **1.4 Why is it Important to Research This Topic?**

Understanding the BBC's representation of populist discourse during the Brexit campaign is vital for several reasons:

First, it sheds light on the media's role in influencing public perceptions of political movements and figures, like Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage.

Second, it contributes to discussions on journalistic practices, objectivity, and the challenges of reporting on divisive issues, how the media tries to maintain the reputation while covering such important events, which will change the picture of the world's politics.

Third, it provides insights into the potential impact of media framing on the political landscape. It's clear that during such processes, the media has more power and influence than people can imagine. Informing future discussions on the relationship between media, populism, and public opinion indicates the topic's continuity and demonstrates its importance.

## **2. Major Research Findings**

The research highlights the BBC's selective framing of populist figures. How they are using emotive language and rhetorical devices, shifts in the challenges of maintaining impartiality in its coverage. It also highlights the dynamic relationship between media coverage and the evolving political landscape during Brexit. Populism tends to create a moral divide between the people and the elite, while nationalism emphasizes a sense of collective identity based on factors such as culture, history, and ethnicity. There is potential for overlap between nationalism and populism. Populist leaders may exploit nationalist themes to bolster their popularity by presenting themselves as upholders of national values. (Müller, 2016). Until we observe BBC coverage of our research topic, we are introducing a critical review of the literature related to the research question and this comprehensive examination of existing scholarly works gives us a brief review of following topics: media influence, journalistic practices, and the dynamics of political communication. It highlights key concepts and empirical findings that inform the theoretical framework and empirical research design of this study.

## **2.1 Influence of Media on Public Opinion**

According to Robert M. Entman, the media has a big role in making democracy work better. In his book "Democracy without Citizens" (1990), he points out that scholars usually focus on how the media changes what regular people think. As he mentions, they often forget to look at how the media affects the decisions of big events in politics. He also points out that sometimes the media makes things seem simpler than they really are. For example, he talks about how in the 1970s and 1980s, the media made it seem like everyone was getting more conservative, even though surveys showed that people were actually more liberal on many issues. With this example, Entman wants us to understand that the media not only just changes our personal opinions, it also affects how leaders make decisions by shaping their views of what the public wants, so it's a process where both sides make influences and are under influence too. Even though it's a bit complicated, he thinks in a democracy, we need the media to help us be part of politics, in this way we can be influential on governments and the political process in general. This goes against the idea that people don't really listen to the media and create their minds on their own.

## **2.2 Populism and Political Communication**

Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) explain populism as a simple set of ideas. They say it's not a big, complex ideology like fascism or liberalism. Instead, it's a basic way of thinking that sees society divided into two groups: the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite." Populism, according to them, involves criticizing those in power and praising regular people. They use an "ideational approach," which means they focus on the core ideas of populism, like this division between the people and the elite. The authors acknowledge that some people say this way of defining populism is too broad, but they think it's essential to distinguish between populism and non-populism and to show this difference, they compare populism to its opposites: elitism, which thinks regular people are not good enough, and pluralism, which believes in many different groups sharing power. They also talk about how populism can change its shape: populism often mixes with other ideas, creating different versions in different places.

In simpler terms, they see populism as a straightforward set of ideas that can look different depending on where you are and what other ideas it mixes with. The authors offer an example from UK, connected to our research topic, but in their case it's different media outlet:

“The media play an important part in the political failure and success of populist forces. For instance the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) has profited from the open support of the British tabloid Daily Express, which had earlier backed Labour and the Conservatives. “  
(Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 144)

Authors showed with this example that big media outlets such as Daily mail or BBC, can really affect the public perception. In this case, the media support from Daily Express is portrayed as a factor that contributed to the political success of UKIP.

### **2.3 Journalistic Practices and Impartiality**

If we talk about impartial media, for this we can use the example of Denis McQuail and Mark Deuze to discuss how communication, particularly in election campaigns, influences political opinions, with a specific focus on populism. It discusses the limited direct impact of media on voters' choices during election campaigns, highlighting factors such as economic crises and globalization as potential influencers in the realm of populist politics. The text also touches on the concept of "agenda-setting" and identifies three main focuses in populist communication: political actors, media, and citizens and represents it as a factor which should become a reason for people's participation in politics. According to them, ideas about populism and communication work on a global scale, in the UK as well as in the EU. (McQuail & Deuze, 2020, pp. 420–430)

In the case of the Brexit campaign, Cushion thinks that after the 2000s, conservative and far right media became more popular than left-wing media, and the reason for this according to the author is that wealthy individuals and companies provided a lot of money. As an example he offers the UK site Westminster case, which got private funding to support pro-Brexit and right-wing ideas and it has well known reasons all over the world: left-wing views, which often challenge profit-focused interests and promote collective solutions, don't get as much funding. (Cushion 2023)

***These studies which we looked at are a strong foundation for the research and help us to understand the theories of how media and populism works, also the ideas from these studies, like media framing, populism, and impartiality, are turned into specific things we can measure and study in the research plan.***

### **3. Theoretical Framework: Representing Populist Discourse in BBC's Brexit Reporting**

#### **3.1 Definition of Main Concepts**

**Populist Discourse:** For the purpose of this research, populist discourse is defined as political communication characterized by anti-elitism, appeals to national identity, and framing issues in terms of a dichotomy between "the people" and "the elite" (Mudde, 2004; Laclau, 2005).

**Media Framing:** Media framing refers to the way news outlets, in this case, the BBC, select, emphasize, and present information to shape the interpretation of events and construct a particular narrative (Entman, 2012; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

#### **3.2 Dimensions of Concepts and Indicators**

The research will use important ideas, breaking them down into specific parts and finding ways to measure them. This plan gives a clear method for analyzing the information in a detailed way. It makes sure that the way we collect information is connected to the main aim, which is to find patterns and small details in how the BBC talked about populist ideas, which were spread by famous politicians: Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage. There are different concepts and indicators for conducting the paper.

##### **Populist Discourse:**

**Anti-Elitism:** Analysis will focus on language expressing hostility or criticism towards established political or social elites.

**National Identity:** Examination of how narratives appeal to or construct notions of national identity.

**Simplification and Dichotomies:** Identifying instances where complex issues are simplified into dichotomies.

## **Media Framing:**

***Selection of Themes:*** Assessing which themes related to populist discourse are selected and emphasized.

***Tone and Emphasis:*** Analyzing the tone and emphasis given to different elements in the reporting.

***Visual Elements:*** Examining how visual elements, such as images and graphics, contribute to framing.

## **3.3 Variables/Factors**

### ***Independent Variables:***

Populist Discourse: Operationalized through indicators of anti-elitism, appeals to national identity, and simplification in communication.

Media Framing: Operationalized through the selection of themes, tone, and visual elements in BBC reporting.

### ***Dependent Variables:***

Representation: Operationalized through linguistic features, balance in coverage, and contextualization in the portrayal of populist figures.

## 4. Empirical Research Design:

The empirical research design is based on the theoretical framework by concepts such as populist discourse, media framing, and representation into specific indicators and variables. The case study approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how these concepts manifest in the BBC's coverage of the Brexit campaign, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the media's role in shaping public perceptions.

The research period spans from the **beginning of 2019 to February 1st 2020**, encompassing key moments in the Brexit campaign for an analysis.

### ***Qualitative Research Approach:***

This research employs a qualitative research approach due to the nature of the research question, which seeks to delve into the nuances of how the BBC represented populist discourse during the Brexit campaign. Given the focus on case studies, a qualitative method is deemed suitable for capturing the depth and complexity of media representations and also the news which will be analyzed during the research will not cover only articles, it will be a mix of interviews, tv shows and speeches. This approach will be helpful to understand the context and language better.

### ***Case Selection and Rationale:***

In general, the BBC's coverage of the Brexit campaign is the key case under review. This decision is prompted by the BBC's reputation as a prominent public service broadcaster in the UK and its enormous influence on public opinion as well as reputation, as discussed in the research's introduction. For example, the BBC's Victoria Derbyshire programme put ex-UKIP leader Nigel Farage and journalist Rachel Johnson - Boris Johnson's sister - on a political blind date. They are diametrically opposed to Brexit and observation on such cases will be the key for our research.

## **4.2 Data Collection**

The primary sources of data for this research will include a diverse range of media formats, such as news articles, transcripts of interviews, TV shows, and small political statements made during broadcasts on BBC News. This approach allows for a comprehensive examination of the BBC's representation of populist discourse, covering written as well as spoken forms of media. The selected period will be systematically analyzed, employing a systematic content analysis (SCA) methodology. SCA will enable a structured investigation into the language, framing, and overall representation of populist discourse within the chosen sources.

Given the vast amount of information available, the analysis in the paper will strategically focus on key cases, particularly on speeches and interviews of prominent figures such as Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson during specific periods. This targeted approach ensures a more in-depth exploration of significant instances and allows for a nuanced understanding of how populist discourse is constructed and conveyed through different media formats.

## **4.3 Data Analysis**

### **Thematic Analysis:**

Systematic thematic analysis will be conducted to identify themes within the collected data. This involves identifying patterns, topics, or issues that emerge consistently across various media formats, which was mentioned above. Themes may include, however are not limited to anti-elitism, nationalism, immigration, sovereignty, and economic concerns. There will also be the analysis that will pay close attention to linguistic features such as tone, rhetoric, and specific language choices. This examination will provide insights into how the BBC portrays and communicates populist discourse, contributing to a deeper understanding of the rhetorical strategies employed. It should be mentioned that during such research the thematic analysis will also play a crucial role, so observing on framing choices made by the BBC in presenting populist discourse is one of the best ways for showing thematic lines and structures. This includes assessing how issues are framed, what aspects are emphasized or de-emphasized, and the overall narrative structure. Understanding framing choices is crucial for comprehending the contextualization of populist messages within the media coverage.

## 5. Key Populist Elements in Boris Johnson's and Nigel Farage's Contexts

*The 17 articles, 4 tv shows and 5 small interviews during BBC News, that Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage appeared between the beginning of 2019 and February 1st, 2020, served as the basis for Research. Based on this source there is a systemization of information, which should represent the answers to our research questions.*

### 5.1 Farage's Populist Elements

Before starting the detailed analysis of sources, it should be mentioned that Nigel Farage, a key proponent of Brexit and founder of the Brexit Party, is recognized for making populist statements that tap into nationalist sentiments and skepticism toward the European Union (EU). His positions often revolve around anti-establishment rhetoric, emphasizing the need for the UK to reclaim national sovereignty. Farage discusses immigration, ties his critique to job competition and national identity, he uses these topics for manipulation and is a vocal critic of the EU's political and economic integration. He supports economic independence, asserting that leaving the EU would allow the UK to control its trade agreements and economic policies and tries to show the benefits of this decision on economic advancement for the country.

Nigel Farage talks in a way that regular people can relate to, the ways as populist leaders are trying to attract people and also he tries to connect with those who might feel ignored by the people in charge. Remember, politicians can change their views, and what they say can depend on the situation. Looking at specific events or quotes can help understand his communication style better which is used by Farage.

During his interviews with BBC, he tried to exacerbate the reality and compared the EU to slavery and criticized the idea of creating the EU as a bad British decision. It reflects his strong and provocative rhetoric against the European Union, and made sharp statements.

In BBC articles, there are elements that can be considered populist statements, particularly in the quotes attributed to Nigel Farage. Farage's call for a "non-aggression pact" and his assertion that a joint effort between the Brexit Party and the Conservatives would be "unstoppable" aligns with populist rhetoric. Populism often involves positioning oneself as the champion of the people against the perceived elite or establishment.

- **Against the Usual Leaders:** Farage doesn't like the usual political leaders. He wants a new way to handle Brexit. He tries to share ideas and connect with regular people during

speeches. Farage believes that teaming up with the Conservatives would be powerful because it brings together regular people's ideas. All these things create the view that he can control masses and influence them with the idea of being on the same level.

- ***Disliking Regular Politics:*** According to Farage, the Tories play small politics, and he doesn't like that. He thinks regular politics isn't good, so opposite to this approach, he tries to be a good friend for regular people. He says in interviews with BBC that he genuinely wants to be friendly. This is something politicians do to seem honest and connected to regular folks.

One of the tricks that Farage used during the years is the position when Nigel Farage's call for a "mass protest" against new alcohol guidelines in the UK aligns with his populist image, portraying it as government overreach into personal choices and as BBC covered it for years he was represented with such statements:

"Mr Farage has traded on his "man in the pub" reputation during his political career, frequently being pictured with a pint in his hand during campaigning or after election victories and describing every pub as a Parliament where political views are formed and exchanged."

(Nigel Farage Urges "mass Protest" at Alcohol Guidelines, 2016)

## **5.2 Johnson's Populist Elements**

In the case of Boris Johnson's speeches and interviews, he skillfully integrates populist elements into his communication, creating a distinct identity within the established order. He was on both sides, supporting Brexit as well as being part of Conservative Party. His resolute commitment to Brexit, boldly declared as "do or die," serves as a powerful symbol of anti-establishment defiance, challenging the norms of political behavior. In an effort to connect with the masses, Johnson tries to employ populist strategies. He appeals to the collective will of the people and emphasizes the collaborative potential of joining forces with The Brexit Party. He was eager to paint a powerful picture of an "unstoppable" movement.

Despite his role as a prominent figure in the Conservative Party, Johnson consistently directs criticism towards traditional political practices and his rhetoric, particularly aimed at opposition parties like Labour, portrays them as obstacles to achieving a meaningful Brexit. This dual role of being within the system while criticizing it adds intricate layers to his populist narrative, trying to be with regular people and represent a leading party at the same time was a really different form of populism in the case of Johnson.

- **Not Liking the Usual Leaders:** Boris Johnson doesn't act like a regular leader. He wants to shake things up and go against the usual way of doing politics, especially when it comes to Brexit, he is trying to do this by talking to people. Johnson says that if his government and The Brexit Party work together, they would be super strong, almost like nothing could stop them. With this style of politics he shows that they're doing what's right and listening to what folks want, especially about Brexit.
- **Disliking Regular Politics:** Even though he's in the Conservative Party, Johnson often talks like he's not a fan of how regular politics led to problems with Brexit. He points fingers at other parties, like Labour, and says they're making things harder. Like Farage, he also tries to represent himself as a good friend and tries to sound like a Farage\_ "good friend". He talks about a "clean-break Brexit" and wanting to work with The Brexit Party, showing he's serious about being friendly and working together. But, he also says no to teaming up for elections because he thinks Farage isn't the right fit, putting the country first.

Because of this both side positions Johnson was criticized many times by other politicians, for instance, the Wales' First Minister, Mark Drakeford, accuses Johnson's government of disregarding truth and losing its moral direction. The Welsh Assembly voted against a no-deal Brexit, revealing discontent even within Johnson's own party. (First Minister Says Boris Johnson Has Lost All Respect for the Truth, 2019)

The consequences of Johnson's populist-driven Brexit approach include internal party tensions, skepticism from regional leaders, and public protests against perceived undemocratic actions.

## 6. BBC's Framing Choices on Farage and Johnson

*In analyzing BBC's approach to framing key events, distinct populist dimensions emerge, shaping the narrative and influencing public perception.*

### **Anti-Elitism and National Identity:**

People like Nigel Farage are crucial to an exclusive narrative in the BBC's coverage, where the powerful are seen as unjust and self-serving. Farage's call for a "clean-break Brexit" incites a separate national identity and supports anti-elitist emotions. The narrative is filled with this populist theme, which highlights the average man's battle against the elite.

### **Simplification Strategies:**

The story intentionally simplifies difficult topics by presenting them as binary options between being lazy and making clear decisions. The BBC wants to improve public knowledge of issues by presenting them in an understandable manner. This strategy fits with populist tendencies to reduce complex issues to tales that are simple to understand for a wide range of people.

#### **Themes of Frustration and Blame:**

The BBC's coverage focuses on blame and frustration, emphasizing perceived injustices against Farage. The focus on unjust treatment and blaming influential people for wrongdoings supports the idea of systemic corruption. This populist framing paints established norms in an unfavorable light and builds on the dissatisfaction of the public.

#### **Scornful Tone and Negative Atmosphere:**

The BBC's use of language and tone adds emotional weight, showing dissatisfaction with the unfolding events. The intentional use of words that indicate disapproval generates a negative atmosphere, fueling the idea that something is wrong. This psychological connection is a significant instrument for influencing public opinion. By using such language and tone, the BBC successfully engages its audience on an emotional level, leading them to question and examine the events at hand. This strategic approach not only affects public opinion, but it also promotes a better understanding of the underlying issues.

#### **Visual Elements Shaping Perceptions:**

While the written narrative carried the plot, visual elements like carefully picked photographs and films were also important. The BBC used graphics to provoke emotions, showing politicians looking sad or angry, as well as ordinary people reacting emotionally to Brexit. The images used in the broadcast added slightly to the overall populist tone, influencing how the audience saw the events. Symbols such as flags and scenes from legislative sessions reinforced the narrative of divide and unity, adding to the populist framing of the Brexit debate.

#### **Contextualizing within Previous Texts:**

In the larger perspective of our analysis, the BBC's coverage of Brexit might be viewed as an example of populist rhetoric. This is consistent with the viewpoint offered by Norris and Ingehardt, who emphasize the powerful role of media, particularly influential organizations such as the BBC, in forming public perceptions. The connected use of anti-elitism, simplification, blame narratives, yelling tone, and carefully curated graphic elements results in a holistic and purposeful strategy to organize the narrative with specific populist characteristics. The media's ability to combine these aspects demonstrates the complexity and depth of the BBC's populist framing technique in its coverage of the Brexit process.

## 7. Conclusion

The research on how the BBC covered the Brexit campaign shows that Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage were portrayed in different ways from early 2019 to February 1st, 2020. Boris Johnson's representation was a mix of positive and negative, recognizing his efforts for Brexit while criticizing his handling of Parliament. Nigel Farage's portrayal covered various situations, including blind dates and non-aggression pacts, with criticism highlighting his populist statements.

When looking at the language and framing used by the BBC in covering speeches by Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, there's a careful approach. Positive language and framing were used to highlight Johnson's Brexit deal as a breakthrough, but negative framing was used to discuss chaos in Parliament. Farage's populist stances were reported critically, and coverage of collaboration reflected strategic framing choices, possibly aiming to shape perceptions of collaboration and unity.

In summary, the BBC's representation of populist rhetoric during the Brexit campaign was varied, using both positive and negative elements for figures like Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage. Language and framing played crucial roles in shaping how these leaders were portrayed. The analysis also identified independent variables like populist discourse and media framing, measured through anti-elitism, appeals to national identity, and simplification. Dependent variables included representation, assessed through linguistic features, balance in coverage, and contextualization.

For example, when examining two BBC articles about a potential election pact between Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, the research found themes of rejection and disappointment, with intense framing of contrasting positions. Nigel Farage used populist elements, positioning himself as an outsider and offering a "genuine hand of friendship." The BBC likely emphasized Farage's sincerity and potential unity in the Leave vote, highlighting anti-elitism.

Contextual factors, such as ongoing Brexit negotiations and public sentiment, influenced the narrative. While public influence wasn't explicitly explored, the articles suggested that public perception could shape the discourse. Responding to research questions, Boris Johnson's portrayal was mixed, acknowledging positive Brexit efforts but criticizing his parliamentary handling. Farage's portrayal covered various contexts, from blind dates to non-aggression pacts, with criticism of his populist statements.

Language devices and framing strategies by the BBC showed a nuanced approach, balancing positive and negative elements. Positive framing for Johnson's Brexit deal contrasted with negative framing on chaos. Farage's populist stances were reported critically, and collaboration coverage reflected strategic framing. In summary, the research delved into the political dynamics of Brexit, emphasizing language, framing, and context. The BBC's portrayal of Johnson and Farage navigated a nuanced path, presenting diverse facets of their actions and statements.

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