Hard Evidence: Analysis shows extent of press bias towards Brexit

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The Sun’s declaration of support for the Leave campaign in the EU referendum might seem entirely predictable. After all, the paper has been at the forefront of EU-bashing for decades, most memorably in its “Up Yours Delors” headline from 1990 when it stated its forthright views on proposals for a European Currency Unit. But there are three reasons why this development highlights the need for a detailed and nuanced analysis of press partisanship in the referendum campaign.

This is not an “either/or” matter, even though the referendum will ultimately be decided by a stark two-way choice. Endorsements for either option can range from strong advocacy to tepid. We need to consider where titles sit on the continuum of opinion between these polarities.
The Sun has always been quite clear as to where it stands on EU. Loughborough University Centre for Research in Communication and Culture

In making this assessment, there is also a need to examine what newspapers do in their routine coverage as well as say in their major leader editorials. There are times when these are not entirely in accordance. A famous example of this occurred in the 1997 UK general election, when The Sun made an early declaration that it “backed Blair”. This was followed by several weeks of decidedly lukewarm coverage towards New Labour.

And the political complexities of the EU referendum also mean that national newspapers cannot orient to their usual party political alliances. The 2015 general election saw the re-emergence of a highly partisan “Tory press” in the UK but participants in this group now have to decide which Conservative party they want to support – as the referendum has divided the party from top to bottom. They also need to consider whether they should temper or increase their criticisms of the leaders of other parties: Jeremy Corbyn, Nigel Farage, Nicola Sturgeon and others. It’s all very complicated.

**Crunching the numbers**

Loughborough University’s Centre for Research in Communication and Culture has been closely monitoring national press partisanship in the referendum as part of a wider “real time” news audit of the campaign.
Daily Mail makes its position clear.

Although many national newspapers have yet to formally declare their position, our findings – based on an analysis of 1,127 items published in the national daily press between May 6 and June 8 – provide some clear indications as to where support is likely to be eventually distributed.

Our latest findings show that referendum press coverage may be full of heated claim and counter-claim from different camps but there is less evidence that this is producing consistent and concerted patterning in the news angles adopted by many newspapers.

The graph below shows that a high proportion of items across many titles have reported the competing arguments rather than advanced arguments that favour one particular side. Furthermore, this distribution does not map neatly onto traditional means of differentiating the press sector as “popular” (Daily Mirror, Daily Star and The Sun), “mid-market” (Daily Express and Daily Mail) and “quality” (Daily Telegraph, Financial Times, Guardian and The Times) newspapers.

This suggests the differences cannot be explained entirely by differing conventions regarding the presentation of political news. The Sun may now have made up its mind on the decision but these results suggest it spent quite a bit of time thinking about it.
How does this coverage sit alongside other articles where it was possible to deduce the privileging of one or other camp? To assess this, we individually scored each item. Where an article was orientated to the Remain position, it was given a value of +1. If it privileged Leave, it scored as -1. Items where there was no clear evaluation, or coverage was balanced, were coded as zero.

This rudimentary scale allowed us to calculate two measures: first, the volume – the total number of pro-Remain items minus the number of pro-Leave items; and second, the average – the mean score for referendum items when they were published. Positive values for either measure indicate a pro-Remain orientation, negative values reveal a pro-Leave orientation. The further away either value is from zero, the stronger the partisanship of coverage on the continuum.

The graph below provides the volume comparison, organising titles in rank order.
And here we see the equivalent ranking for average which shows that, on balance, the Financial Times was the most pro-Remain, followed by the Guardian, while the Daily Express and Daily Mail have been the most consistently pro-Leave.
As these different measures provide slight variations in rank order, we have combined them to establish the current, overall positioning of papers on the continuum of opinion:

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<td>Strongest support for OUT</td>
<td>10. Daily Express</td>
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These results show we are a lifetime away from the 1975 EEC referendum, when all UK national daily newspapers, with the exception of the Morning Star, endorsed the case for staying in Europe. But they also suggest a degree of parity, with five titles on either side of the debate. Across the 1,127 items sampled there was only a balance of 64 articles in favour of Leave compared with Remain.

**Where the eyeballs are**

But these figures give no consideration to the different reach of newspapers. When you take newspaper circulation into account a significant gulf opens up between the two sides. A straightforward percentage comparison of the number of Remain to Leave items finds 41% were pro-Remain and 59% pro-Leave. But when weightings for circulation are factored in, the fact that the highest circulating newspapers have tended to support Brexit means that the gap between the two positions widens into a substantial difference of 18% pro-Remain and 82% pro-Leave.
This suggests that the real significance of The Sun’s decision to back withdrawal from the EU is not so much in opening up a “coverage gap” between Remain and Leave campaigns but in contributing to a very significant “circulation gap” between the two positions – put simply, more newspaper readers are exposed to the Brexit message. Most of the newspapers aligned with Leave also have a significant C2DE readership – that is, working class newspaper readers and those in casual or no employment. These may be crucial groups in determining the outcome of the referendum vote.