

Leap into Media!

Inspirational tasks for
Y11 and Y12



EMC
Publications

An English and Media Centre Student Resource

Written by Jenny Grahame, Andrew McCallum and Claire Pollard

Cover design: Rebecca Scambler

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Task 1

Deconstructing a Newspaper Front Page: Ownership and Bias

The article for this task is taken from *MediaMagazine 69*



'March 29th, 2019: The Day Brexit Didn't Happen'

Exploring the article

■ Read **March 29th, 2019: The Day Brexit Didn't Happen** (MM69), by Jonathan Nunns.

■ Answer the following questions, drawing on the article for information and ideas.

1. What are some of the insights that you can get about a particular news event by studying a front page? How does these apply specifically to Brexit?
2. The article talks about 'deconstructing' a front page. What do you understand by deconstructing? Use a dictionary to help you if need be. In what ways does deconstructing a text differ from analysing a text?
3. What are the different regulatory systems that govern broadcast and print news? What are the consequences of the different systems in terms of what newspapers are able to do and their influence? What are your own thoughts about the pros and cons of these different systems?
4. The article mentions four tabloid and mid-range newspapers: *The Sun*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Daily Express* and *The Daily Mail*. Based on what the article says, what do you understand to be the key differences and similarities between these publications. You should consider:
 - » Their ownership
 - » Their stance towards Brexit
 - » Their broader political affiliations
 - » Their readership
5. What are the agendas of the two broadsheet newspapers referred to: *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*. Are they different in any significant way to the tabloids and mid-range papers?
6. The article ends with a quotation from Umberto Eco: 'It's not the news that makes the newspaper, but the newspaper that makes the news.' To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? You might consider where you get your own news from, and how reliable, biased or politically motivated it might be.

Selecting two newspapers to study

The BBC publishes all of the UK's leading newspapers' front pages every day at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs/the_papers.

- Visit the web site and select two newspaper front pages that particularly interest you.
- Before you begin to deconstruct the front pages, you are going to research each publication. (Searching your newspaper on Wikipedia should give you a good overview of this information.) You need to make a factfile on each that includes the following:
 - » Is it a tabloid or a broadsheet, or somewhere in between (a mid-range newspaper)? Is the distinction to do with the size of the publication (the tabloid format is smaller than the broadsheet one), or is it to do with a typically tabloid or broadsheet approach to news?
 - » Political leanings – is the paper broadly left or right wing? Do they give support to a particular political party? Do they express strong views about particular issues? Do they campaign for any issues?
 - » Readership – what is the demographic of the newspaper's readership? You might think in terms of age, social class, gender, ethnicity and so on.
 - » Ownership – who and what can you find out about the company or individual who owns this publication? What else do they own? What other interests might they have?

Comparing coverage

- Now look at the front pages of your chosen newspapers on any given day.
 - » What do you notice about the stories they have decided to cover?
 - » How much space is given to different categories of stories e.g. political, UK, global, health, education, entertainment, celebrities etc.? What might this reveal about how the newspapers might be trying to affect public opinion?

Look more closely

- How does the language used in the headlines, standfirsts and captions differ across the front pages (this is especially interesting when the same lead story is covered across more than one paper)? What might this reveal about the attitude of the paper towards the subject being covered?
- Look at the images selected – does the headline or caption anchor the meaning; is the meaning possibly just an interpretation of the image? Has the image been deliberately constructed and if so in what ways and with what aims?
- Write a comparison of the two front pages you have studied or, if you're craving some production work, make a vlog sharing what you have learned from your research.



MARCH 29TH 2019

THE DAY BREXIT DIDN'T HAPPEN

In a world of fast-paced news cycles, events and positions can change before the ink on the page is dry. Jonathan Nunns takes a snapshot of a day's reporting and analyses what the papers made of the day Brexit didn't happen.



The coverage of Brexit day was as muddy and unclear as Brexit itself. However, one issue stood out. We may think disinformation is a modern, internet-age phenomenon but newspapers have always expressed strong bias and spun stories to their owners' advantage.

How to write about Brexit? Amidst the turmoil, anything written, even taking into account all the available facts, could be reversed by midnight, let alone by the time you read this. There have been some writers (and politicians) for whom truth has been dismissed in favour of career and agenda. However, it is more difficult when trying to catch the actual authenticity of something constantly changing. Writing about Brexit is like walking across a crusted lava field. What may appear firm is not, so tread carefully.

One way to circumvent this is to take a snapshot, deconstruct it and see what you learn. Where did things stand on March 29th? This was the day, as the then Prime Minister, Theresa May reminded the nation, Britain was due to leave the EU. How was the big (non) event covered by the newspapers? By this means, it may be possible to provide fruitful analysis that doesn't become outdated before the ink dries.

News in Context

UKTV and Radio news are different (in more than the obvious ways) from the coverage provided in print. Broadcast media are regulated by OFCOM, (The Office of

Communications) a quango responsible for regulating communications in the UK. They require that broadcasters provide impartial/balanced coverage. No such rules apply to newspapers, which are allowed, as far as libel law will permit, to spin the news as they see fit. They are regulated by IPSO (The Independent Press Standards Organisation), a self-regulatory body criticised by some as toothless since it was set up and is run by the industry it scrutinises. For these reasons, the press acts more as a mouthpiece for the views and agendas of their proprietors than TV news ever does. The CEOs of the UK's news networks may have agendas to push, but their regulator largely prevents them.

For this reason, despite financial losses and declining circulation, newspapers remain much sought after by the rich and powerful. To own a

newspaper is to amplify your voice to a nationwide audience, an example of both hegemony and two step flow. To own a paper is to be an influencer, and influence has value beyond money. Newspapers aim to shape events by influencing the actions of those in power. No democratic government can be oblivious to their representation in the press, so policy may be changed to deliver coverage conducive to the re-election of a politician or party.

Extra, Extra, Read All About It! The Redtops do Brexit

Rupert Murdoch's *The Sun* stoked the anti-EU campaign that fed Brexit, complaining endlessly about the alleged undermining of Britain by Europe. Unsurprising, since as a proponent of unchecked capitalism, Murdoch had been on a lifelong quest to remove regulations/rights that obstructed his companies gaining maximum influence and profit. This naturally put the bureaucratic EU directly in his way, so Murdoch applied *The Sun's* influence to secure a UK withdrawal. If you doubt this, take a look at the similar agendas of his Trump-supporting American network, Fox News.

The Sun's March 29th headline urges MP's to support May in what would become the third failed



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attempt to get her Brexit deal through parliament. With support hinging on the votes of the Northern Irish DUP, the writers created a characteristically pun-filled front page.

'Come on Arlene' ran the headline, intertextually referencing the 80's hit, Come on Eileen, by Dexy's Midnight Runners. The nod is one of the primary indicators of the readership. Few under forty-five would recognise a song seldom heard today but huge in the 80s. To emphasise the link, the pre-heading played on the band's name to add topicality, punning with 'Brexy's Midnight Runners'.

With an older C2 to E demographic, *The Sun's* pro-Brexit stance was culturally on message and consistent with the ideology of their earlier splashes such as 'EU dirty rats' and 'See EU Later!'.

Compared to the pro-Conservative *Sun*, the Labour-supporting, anti-Brexit *Daily Mirror* is a rarity in a UK press dominated by Brexit-supporting, right-of-centre titles. On Brexit day, the paper took a muted tone. The cover featured only brief reference to Brexit/May's stalled deal, running instead with a royal story and a splash on an old story, the unsolved murder years earlier of the presenter, Jill Dando. The writers may have anticipated Brexit-fatigue in their demographic and avoided leading on it. There are questions about *The*

Mirror's anti-Brexit stance. Their owners, the renamed Reach Group, purchased Richard Desmond's right-wing *Express* titles months before, leaving the group with both the pro-Labour/anti-Brexit *Mirror* titles and the enthusiastically Conservative/UKIP/pro-Brexit *Express* titles. Which begs the question as to what the political stance of the group actually is? Currently it is shouting at itself, supporting both sides of Brexit from within the same stable.

Shock Horror! How the Mid-market Tabloids Handled Brexit Disappointment

Reach's *Daily Express* ran with 'Darkest Hour For Democracy' superimposed across an image of Parliament overshadowed by storm clouds. Reversing the coverage by its *Mirror* stablemate, *The Express* ran with Brexit as the splash and the Dando story in support, reflecting the differing political orientations within a demographic otherwise similar to that of *The Mirror*.

The Daily Mail had been renowned for its contempt for Europe under the stewardship of veteran editor,

Conservative and Brexiteer, Paul Dacre. That positioning had been successful for the owner, the 4th Viscount Rothermere, whilst Brexit could be spun as a success. Once political deadlock set in, Dacre's position became untenable and Geordie Greig from the *Mail on Sunday* was rotated in as a more moderate voice to replace him. Hence the *Mail's* coverage was not what might have been expected. Instead of 'no deal' and 'hard-Brexit', the paper ran with 'One Last Chance', a reference to its newly-minted support for May and a slightly softer Brexit. The splash ran over a low-angle of Big Ben showing 11pm, the moment Brexit was meant to happen. The softened position reflected the proprietor and editor's thinking that a hard-Brexit stance was no longer as effective in retaining their readership of older C1s and C2s as awareness grew that Brexit was going badly wrong.

Press Ganged! The Broadsheets and the Non-event

The anti-Brexit, centre-left *The Guardian*, the only independently owned national UK title, ran with coverage that reflected a title that did not have to obey the demands of a proprietor. Brexit was indirectly mentioned in 'May Tries To Buy Time As Ministers Say: Go Now', a reflection of their view that the



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PM was weakened by the failure to deliver Brexit. The core demographic of educated, public sector, B and C1s might be expected to sympathise with the anti-Conservative/anti-Brexit position. The nuancing of the cover allowed the title to appear impartial in its coverage whilst speculating on the race for the PM's job.

It was left to the pro-Conservative/pro-Brexit *The Daily Telegraph* to headline with genuine disappointment and disillusionment with the Brexit non-event. Running with both a splash and op-ed on the cover, *The Telegraph* ran with the polysemic 'Day of Reckoning', over a shot of stereotypically older, white Brexiteers assembling for a pro-leave march.

Beneath, for the op-ed, ran a more sinister heading 'Champagne celebrations have been replaced by the bitter taste of betrayal': the first steps towards a narrative that blames not the concept of Brexit for the failure but politicians who can be made responsible for 'dropping the ball' on the 'otherwise

excellent' Brexit project? This outlook reflects the agenda of the proprietors, the billionaire Barclay brothers, who are arch deregulators, running their businesses from a helipad-equipped castle on their own private island.

Scoop?

The coverage of Brexit day was as muddy and unclear as Brexit itself. However, one issue stood out. We may think disinformation is a modern, internet age phenomenon but newspapers have always expressed strong bias and spun stories to their owners' advantage. As the Italian postmodernist Umberto Eco commented. 'It's not the news that makes the newspaper, but the newspaper that makes the news.'

Jonathan Nunns is Head of Media Studies at Collyer's College, Horsham.