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Essay

**The Brexit and its presentation in the media – viewed from the
perspective of Stuart Hall's theory of the media**

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1 Introduction

On June 23, 2016, the majority of the British people voted for leaving the European Union. This result had neither been expected in Great Britain, nor in continental Europe.¹ The exit of Great Britain from the European Union is expected to have substantial effects on the economy and the political situation in Europe. The discussion in the British media has been, and still is, vivid and controversial.

- On the one hand, there are the voices that praise the Brexit as the relief from the cross of Europe, or even as an outbreak from the European jail.² This view is based on the still wide-spread belief that Great Britain is a Great Power country that should not be dependent on anyone else, like the European Union. This belief might have been an important driving force for the Brexit vote.
- On the other hand, there are the critical voices pointing out economic and political stress that might result, especially if Great Britain will take the “no deal” option. They see the Brexit primarily from a critical or negative point of view, even as a result of irrationality and illusions.

Both voices are strong and influential, and this reflects the tightness of the Brexit vote. An important research question is how the media influenced, and continue to influence, the political views and atmosphere in Great Britain, thereby contributing to the very different views prevailing. This question will be analyzed with respect to an example, i.e., how two mass media representing the two controversial views just outlined report and present the issue of immigration which has been an important driving force for the “leave” campaign.

This analysis will be based on the theoretical background of the media theory of encoding and decoding by Stuart Hall.³ This theory sets out to explain how media frame and present information, and how the recipients receive this information.

¹ Otte (2017), p. 2.

² Krätke (2016), p. 17.

³ Krotz (2009), p. 211f.

2 Stuart Hall's Media Theory

It is only room for a brief introduction of Stuart Hall's theory of creation of media messages and their reception.

Stuart Hall's media theory sets out with a critique of linear and deterministic communication models like the Laswell formula.⁴ His model is called the "coding/decoding model".⁵ According to this model, the "encoding" process encompasses the presentation of reality within a context that comprises a knowledge frame, a technical infrastructure, and rules of discourse and language. The knowledge frame consists of culturally given knowledge about and views of the world that develops within that culture. Together with the technical infrastructure (as for example, newspaper, TV, Internet, Social Media,...), and rules of discourse, the knowledge frame influences how reality is presented to the audience, i.e., how "sense" is given to reality. This is a political function.⁶

Thus encoding happens within a culturally mediated interpretation framework. Decoding, on the other hand, is the process of reception by the audience. This can consist in the adoption of the connotation of the information, or in questioning that connotation; that is, using a different frame of interpretation. This means that the information as such may not been questioned, but its interpretation is. Another variety of (mis)understanding might be that the connotation is refused.

⁴ Abazari/ Brojeni (2017), p. 88f.

⁵ During (1992), p. 90f.

⁶ Kneuer (2017), p. 44.

3 The presentation of immigration in two media

The issue of immigration was presented differently in various British media. This will be exemplified by the Guardian and The Daily Express, two daily newspapers. The Guardian has a position that might be called leftist-liberal, as it is directed primarily towards liberal, progressive, and intellectual inhabitants of the big cities and academics.⁷ Its circulation is about 0.8 million. In contrast, the Daily Express is a national conservative newspaper with a circulation of about 0.4 million.

The total number of articles mentioning the EU referendum in the time period from April 15 to June 23 (the day of the referendum) was nearly equal in both newspapers; about 1,600.⁸ But the Express published the topic on the front page 33 times, whereas the Guardian did this 24 times.⁹ Often, the front-page of the Express directly mentions immigration. (An example is the headline “Migrants pay just L100 to invade Britain”).¹⁰

There were 99 front-page leads on immigration with relation to the referendum; 78 of them appeared in Leave-supporting papers. Here again, the difference between the Express and the Guardian is not that big, though. The difference is more obvious when looking at the content of the articles. For example, the Express claimed: “British port staff faces migrants on a daily basis, many armed with knives” and “Government has failed to protect its citizens from foreign rapists and murderers.”¹¹ In contrast, the guardian reported on risks for children in the Calais refugee camps.

These results pertain to the “knowledge frame” of the Stuart Hall encoding/ decoding model. As the results show, depending on this frame different information can be selected (like armed migrants versus children in need of protection), and different amounts of information about some topic might be presented.

⁷ Jungclausen (2013).

⁸ Moore/ Ramsay (2017), p. 13.

⁹ Moore/ Ramsay (2017), p. 21. This difference is not that big, but in general newspapers backing “leave” had the topic far more often on the front page than newspapers backing “remain”.

¹⁰ Moore/ Ramsay (2017), p. 22.

¹¹ Moore/ Ramsay (2017), p. 77.

The topic of immigration was not always presented by itself, but often in conjunction with other topics. For example, with respect to economy, 44% of publications in the Express mention immigration too. I.e., the extra cost caused by immigration is pointed out. In the last four weeks before the referendum, this share rose up to 52%. The share of economy articles mentioning immigration is not much lower in the Guardian, but positive economic aspects of immigration are more often pointed out. This difference becomes obvious when comparing the Express and the Guardian with respect to the negative economic impact that migration would cause pressure on public services. 64 articles in the Express mentioned that, but only 22% in the Guardian.¹² The Express also claimed that “the average family of unskilled migrants costs the UK L30,000 a year” without balancing this with economic benefits.

With respect to the Stuart Hall model, this shows that even if the same (or similar) information is selected for presentation, it might be “encoded” differently: In this case, the emphasis may be laid on negative versus positive economic impacts.

Another point to mention is the language used. This refers to Stuart Hall’s “rules of discourse and language” which are another precondition of encoding, as stated earlier. Words used by the Express on its front pages in the context of immigration were: “invading”, “influx”, “stampeding”, “over-running”, “besieging”. The impression of an ongoing chaos and disaster was created.¹³ The wording “take back control” was used in 170 Express articles and in 93 Guardian articles.

With respect to images,¹⁴ one photograph used by the Express shows long lines of what appear to be foreign people, and this is combined with the picture of a classroom, thereby constructing the connotation that an invasion of foreigners will usurp the schools. The relation to the Brexit/ Leave campaign is given here

¹² Moore/ Ramsay (2017), p. 61.

¹³ Moore/ Ramsay (2017), p. 78.

¹⁴ Moore/ Ramsay (2017), p. 79.

by the headline “We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders.”¹⁵

So the Express tends to provoke negative connotations with respect to immigration by using the wordings and “picture language” described. This is also visible in the fact that the Express published the most “negative-only” articles with respect to immigration, and only one positive article.¹⁶ In contrast, in the Guardian, this relation was 17 to 4.¹⁷ With respect to negative pictures of people from different nationalities, this relation was 88 (Express) to 24 (Guardian).

4 Conclusions

One and the same reality can be described in very different guises, as the comparison of examples from two newspapers on the issue of immigration in the Brexit context has shown. With respect to the encoding/ decoding theory of Stuart Hall, these different guises can be described by different knowledge frames and rules of discourse and language. As the two newspapers address different target groups, they implement these different knowledge frames and discourse rules in their encodings.

The “decoding side” has not been analyzed here; this would require the analysis of the reception and matching it to the three reception patterns.

¹⁵ Moore/ Ramsay (2017), p. 80.

¹⁶ As before, this refers to the time span April 15 to June 23, 2016.

¹⁷ Moore/ Ramsay (2017), p. 97.

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