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Framing Brexit in leave and remain endorsing letters to the editor

Bachelor Thesis

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Abstract

On the 23rd of June 2016 the people of Britain voted to leave the European Union (EU). This decision had a big impact on the daily lives of British people, and on the news cycle all across Europe. In this study I ask the following research question: How did leave and remain endorsing letters to the editor frame Brexit in British newspapers during the Brexit campaign period? The following frames were selected for this research: responsibility, human-interest, conflict, economic, morality and powerlessness. A corpus of 60 letters to the editor from three large British newspapers was analyzed to determine which frames were used in leave and remain letters. Furthermore an in-depth qualitative analysis was performed on one leave and one remain letter to examine *how* the frames were employed in the letters. The results of the quantitative study show that leave endorsing letters used the responsibility and powerlessness frame more frequently than remain endorsing letters. Further analysis showed that overall, the human-interest frame and the conflict frame were most salient in the letters. These results are in line with expectations. In the qualitative analysis it became clear that the responsibility frame was often used by the leave letters to attribute responsibility for a bad current social or economic situation to the EU. The powerlessness frame was also used frequently by the leave endorsing letters, perhaps because “we want our country back” was a phrase used by Brexit endorsing politicians. The results of this study may shed light on how members of the public, rather than news media, employed framing in the Brexit debate.

Introduction

On the 23rd of June 2016 the people of Britain voted to leave the European Union (EU) in a referendum commonly referred to as Brexit. The word ‘Brexit’ is a portmanteau of ‘Britain’ and ‘exit’ and refers to both the referendum and the overall political process of the departure of the United Kingdom (UK) from the EU. In the referendum the question was asked “*Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union*” and 51% of voters voted to leave the EU (“What is Brexit?,” 2019). Since the vote the UK has been negotiating a divorce deal with the EU. They need to reach a deal that determines the terms of their departure. The date of departure has been postponed twice, but is currently set for 31 October 2019. Brexit has been a ubiquitous topic of debate since the referendum was announced and has had a large impact on daily life in Britain. I visited London in April I talked to several scholars who personally apologized to me for the outcome of the referendum.

Regardless of the final outcome of the negotiations, Brexit has already had consequences for the UK and the other countries of the EU. Estimates say that so far Brexit costs the UK economy £40bn per year (Giles, 2018). Moreover, in the period after the referendum the pound devalued by 11% and UK exports have grown slower than they would have if the people of the UK had voted to remain in the EU (Tetlow & Stojanovic, 2018).

The representation of Brexit in the news has been an area of abundant research. One research analyzed 3,403 newspaper articles relating to Brexit. They found that the referendum first gained media attention around 2010, but the vast majority of media coverage occurred in the campaign period before the referendum: 20 February to 22 June 2016. The campaign period was the official time for politicians to make their case for leave or remain and to sway voters to their side. They toured through the country with their campaigns and debates were held on television. In this period an average of 66 articles about Brexit were published daily by the nine largest newspapers in the UK. The study found that generally, the articles from the remain endorsing newspapers used defensive language and focused on the possible negative outcomes of a Brexit, while the articles from the leave endorsing newspapers focused on the bad state of the current economic and social situation in the UK, and argued a more positive future in case they would leave the EU (Levy, Aslan & Bironzo, 2016).

By the end of this campaign all large UK newspapers had explicitly declared a position toward Brexit, with many not declaring a side until the last few days. Four of the biggest newspapers backed leave (*Daily Express, Daily Mail, The Sun, Sunday Times*) while

the other five biggest papers backed remain (*Mail on Sunday, The Times, The Guardian, Daily Mirror, Financial Times*) (Levy et al., 2016). However, the papers that supported leave had a total combined circulation of approximately 1.5 million more readers than the papers that supported remain (Mayhew, 2018). In a content analysis of Brexit related news articles from the abovementioned newspapers, researchers found that of all articles analyzed, 27% showed support of remain, while 41% showed support for leave. The remainder of the articles published were either mixed or undecided (Levy et al., 2016).

In this study I aim to study Brexit related letters to the editor. Specifically, I will be examining the way in which these letters used frames. This research will be performed by doing a quantitative analysis of frames in letters, and a qualitative analysis of how those frames appear in letters.

Agenda setting theory

In general, news media are often expected to report on events as objectively as possible and tell all sides of a story (Neuman et al., 1992). Besides this, they can do much more. Media can help shape public opinion by setting the public agenda. Agenda setting is a theory that states that mass media have an influence on audiences' perception of the importance of an issue. If the media extensively cover an issue, the general audience will see it as a more significant issue (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). For example, research found a strong correlation between what issues news media emphasized during the 1968 US presidential campaign and what voters considered to be the major issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Another study proposed that "media coverage interacts with the audience's pre-existing sensitivities to produce changes in issue concerns." (Erbring, Goldenberg, & Miller, 1980, p. 45). This view of agenda setting regards the audience as an active participant.

This agenda setting can be driven by the use of frames (Valkenburg et al., 1999). For example, an experimental study found that when an article about a Ku Klux Klan rally was presented with a 'free speech' frame, participants expressed greater tolerance toward the rally than participants who had read an article written using a 'public order' frame (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997). In another experiment, participants who watched a television news broadcast manipulated to show a protest with a 'deviant' frame, were more critical of the protesters than participants who saw a more balanced news broadcast (McLeod, 1995).

Frames

The definition of a frame differs across fields of research. Entman (1993) defines framing as: “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication context” (p.52). When we talk or write or speak it is inevitable to select some aspects of reality, because we cannot communicate all of reality. In a communication context, we choose which aspects to select and by making these choices we frame our message. A receiver uses these frames to process the incoming information, and place it in a context in their own reality (Entman, 1993; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992).

News frames involve frames used by news media. It is important to note that this can be a conscious choice by journalists and media, or an unconscious consequence of selecting information (Khabaz, 2018; Valkenburg, Semetko, & De Vreese, 1999). Frames are used because they make information easier to process “Both the media and the public employ simplifying cognitive frames as hooks to capture a piece of the abundant flow of confusing and conflicting information.” (Neuman et al., 1992, p.60). A distinction is made between audience frames and news frames. News frames are employed by media to aid the sending of the message, while audience frames are used by audiences to make sense of the incoming information. (Neuman et al., 1992) This implies that audience are not passive receivers.

For the purpose of this study we will define news frames as: networks of consciously or unconsciously selected information that can steer, guide and aid audiences in processing news and placing information into their own pre-existing networks.

Several frames have been identified and studied in the field of frame analysis. This research will focus on six frames. Previous research introduced the *Economic Consequences*, *Conflict*, *Powerlessness*, *Human-Interest* and *Morality* frames (Neuman et al., 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Furthermore, the *Attribution of Responsibility* frame based on Valkenburg et al. (1999) will be studied.

The conflict frame refers to the tendency of the media to emphasize conflict and polarization. Journalists want to tell “both sides of the story” (Neuman et al., 1992, p.64) which emphasizes conflict between two parties. Furthermore, the media has the power to determine which groups are opposite each other. For example, during the South African press boycott of 1985 journalists used “blacks vs. whites”, “blacks vs. Police” and “the South African government vs. journalists” to frame the same issue (Neuman et al., 1992, p.65). Research found that media are much more likely to use a conflict frame when discussing an issue than the general public is in their own discussion of the same issue (Neuman et al., 1992).

Another frame commonly used in news frame analysis is the human-interest frame (Neuman et al., 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). A human-interest frame focuses on personal experience and describes the people that could be affected by the issue. Media outlets can use this frame to capture the audience's attention, while refraining from imposing their own opinion. On top of that the human-interest frame can incite feelings of empathy in the public, whether they identify with the people in the story or not (Neuman et al., 1992).

In addition, the responsibility frame is used in this study. It is defined as a way of attributing responsibility to a person, group or form of government (Valkenburg et al., 1999). With the responsibility frame media can attribute responsibility for causes or solutions. Research has shown that news media and framing can have an effect on people's causal attribution (An & Gower, 2009; Iyengar, 1987). It was found that in crisis reporting, news media were more likely to stress the organizational level of responsibility as opposed to individual responsibility level (An & Gower, 2009)

Next is the economic consequences frame. It is defined as being concerned with the outcome of an issue, the costs and profits. The same research argues that the media use technical language while discussing economic consequences, while the public superimposes this frame with a moral frame. It was also found that people often use the economic consequences frame in combination with human impact or moral evaluation, for example by comparing the monetary costs to general helpfulness to humanity while discussing the potential expensive Strategic Defense Initiative, thus adding a human-interest frame to the economic frame (Neuman et al., 1992).

Media can also communicate moral values. This can be done through the use of the morality frame. However, media are more indirect in their use of moral values than individuals by for example using quotes of others who are expressing values (Neuman et al., 1992). For example research found that a morality frame was often used to report on preventable company crises which perhaps influences people's moral judgement of an organization (An and Gower, 2009).

The use of the powerlessness frame can put individuals in position of powerlessness against powerful entities such as the government. However, it was also found that media describe powerful organizations or individuals such as the government or a politician as being powerless against greater powers Neuman et al. (1992). For example, the UK government can be seen as powerless against the bigger EU Government. A slogan often used by the leave campaign was "We want our country back" (Khabaz, 2018) implying powerlessness. Therefore this research will also include an analysis of the powerlessness frame.

Some research combining Brexit and frames had been done. In one study, frames in Brexit news articles published in France, Germany and the Netherlands were analyzed. These countries were selected because they have close economic relations with the UK and they all have a Eurosceptic movement. The frames they examined were integration, democracy and sovereignty, identity and values, history, and utilitarianism. During the Brexit campaign period, articles from a French quality newspaper mostly used the utilitarian and integration frame and focused on economic risks of Brexit for the UK. A German quality newspaper used a combination of all frames, with a focus on the risks a Brexit would pose to integration and the EU and UK economies. A Dutch quality newspaper also used all frames, and focused on the political and economic risks of Brexit (Bijsmans, Galpin & Leruth, 2017).

Another research studied news articles published by UK newspapers that explicitly backed the leave campaign. The research identified several frames that were used to build the referendum articles. The most salient frames were “getting our country back”, “undemocratic Europe” and “take control” (Khabaz, 2018, p. 506). However so far there is a lack of research regarding frames in letters to the editor in the Brexit debate.

Letters to the editor

Letters to the editor provide a unique place in which members of the public can get their opinions or thoughts published in a newspaper. These letters are often short due to space limits and offer opinions about a wide variety of topics. The letters-to-the-editor section of a newspaper is one of the few spaces where public opinion is mediated, compared to other modern mass media (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001). There is however, a strong bias in letters-to-the-editor sections. Publishers get sent many letters and they have to choose which ones to publish. Some can only publish 5% of submissions. Because of this, editors have the power to put things on the agenda by selecting certain letters and by not publishing others. They also control public debate by choosing when to publish the letters and whose opinion to publish (Wahl-Jorgenson, 2001). So even though the letters-to-the-editor section is seen as a place of public opinion it might also indirectly reflect the publisher’s opinion.

Editors often follow four rules when selecting letters for publishing. The rules of relevance, brevity, entertainment and authority (Wahl Jorgensen, 2002). While these general rules take out some of the bias it is not entirely eliminated. The rule of authority for example, makes that not everyone has an equal chance of being published, but figures with authority in a certain field have a greater chance. Regardless of this bias, the letters to the editor section still offers a unique glimpse into public debate.

Previous research about letters to the editor examined the way in which letters to the editor in a local newspaper framed a referendum about spending a large amount of money on a new sports stadium. They compared this to the way newspaper articles and editorials framed the same issue. They found that letters were much more likely to present an opinion on the topic than letters which were neutral (Buist and Mason, 2010).

Research Question

This study aims to combine frame analysis with letters-to-the-editor sections to determine how frames are used in leave and remain supporting letters to the editor.

In this study I ask the following research question: How did leave and remain endorsing letters to the editor frame Brexit in British newspapers during the Brexit campaign period? This research question will be answered by performing a quantitative and a qualitative analysis. In the first part, I will compare how often leave and remain letters used the frames; responsibility, human-interest, conflict, economic, morality and powerlessness. For the qualitative analysis I will analyze one typical leave letter and one typical remain letter, to determine how they used the frames from the quantitative analysis.

Method

Materials

The corpus consisted of 60 letters to the editor published in three UK newspapers with published letters available on Nexis Uni. All letters were published between February 20th and June 22nd 2016, the campaign period leading up to the referendum. This period was selected because it contained the most Brexit related letters published before the vote was held. The full letters were analyzed including titles and headers but without the names and possible job titles of the authors.

The letters to the editor were all taken from the Nexis Uni database with the following search and selection criteria. The search terms were ‘Brexit’, ‘leave’, ‘remain’ and ‘referendum’. The words could appear anywhere in the text but only letters that were related to Brexit were selected. Next the results were filtered on time period (20/02/2016 - 22/06/2016), language (English), the type of article (letters to the editor), and publication (*The Sun*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times*). These three newspapers were selected because of the availability of their published letters in the database, other newspapers had either too few letters or didn’t have letter available in the database at all. For each search, the first letters that met the criteria were selected. Among all articles, only 24 letters endorsing remain were available. To equally represent both leave and remain, yet have a large enough database, 36 leave endorsing letters were selected to make an even 60. The letters had an average length of 106 words.

The three newspapers had different stances regarding Brexit. Most newspapers declared a position near the end of the campaign (Ridley, 2016). *The Sun* announced their support for leave mid-June 2016. Of all the letters from *The Sun* published in the campaign period, none supported remain, 19 were selected for this research. *The Daily Telegraph* voiced their support of remain near the end of June. A total of 20 letters from *The Daily Telegraph* were included and 11 supported leave. *The Times* also declared to be in support of remain, and this was the newspaper with the biggest availability of remain letters. A total of 21 letters from *The Times* were selected, with 15 being in favor of remain, while 6 supported leave.

Model of Analysis

For the quantitative analyses 24 questions were used to measure the dependent variable ‘frames’. The questions measured the six frames; responsibility, human-interest, conflict, economic, morality and powerlessness. The first 21 questions were adjusted from Semetko & Valkenburg (2000). Their questions refer to ‘the issue’ or ‘the problem’, which for the purposes of this research was replaced with ‘the current economic and political situation’ in all questions. For this study, I added another frame that seemed relevant to Brexit. This frame will be called the ‘powerlessness frame’. It is defined as a frame that relates to feelings of powerlessness, having less power than another specific person, group of people or institution. The questions for this frame were developed specifically for this study. Three questions were developed to measure the powerlessness frame. “Does the story refer to a lack of power compared to another group/government/individual?”, “Does the story refer to a future regaining of power?” and “Does the story refer to a past power that is now lost?”. Table 2 in appendix A gives an overview of the questions used to measure each frame.

Procedure

The independent variable of this study is ‘opinion’ which has two values (leave, remain, nominal measurement level). To determine whether the letters were in support of leave or remain, I looked for phrases that clearly promoted one side, such as “Vote Leave!” and phrases that were clearly opposed of the other side such as “A vote to leave is a vote to needlessly destroy our legal system”. The intercoder reliability of the variable ‘opinion regarding vote’ was good: $\kappa = .97, p < .001$. There was disagreement about one letter, which was replaced by a letter both coders agreed on.

For all 60 articles, the 24 questions (see appendix A, table 2) were answered with a ‘yes’ (1) or a ‘no’ (0). Next, a mean score for each frame was calculated per letter, resulting in six scores per letter. All letters were coded by a trained coder, and 20 letters were re-coded by a second coder who also received training. The inter-coder reliability was low for some questions, but the average percentage of agreement between coder one and coder two for the questions was 85% with the percentages ranging from 40% to 100% (see appendix A, table 3). For some questions an inter-coder reliability score could not be calculated. This is because SPSS can’t calculate Cohen’s Kappa, when one of the data sets is a constant. So, if for example the second coder coded question 1 with a 0 for all 20 articles, SPSS cannot calculate a Cohen’s Kappa. The inter-coder reliability for the questions of the responsibility frame ranged from $\kappa = -.01$ to $\kappa = .64$. For the questions of the human-interest frame the inter-coder

reliability ranged from $\kappa = -.07$ to $\kappa = .77$. For the question of the conflict frame the inter-coder reliability ranged from $\kappa = -.05$ to $\kappa = .57$. The questions of the economic frame had an inter-coder reliability ranging from $\kappa = .52$ to $\kappa = .62$. For the morality the frame, the inter-coder reliability of one of the questions was $\kappa = 1$, $p < .001$. For the other two questions of the morality frame, no kappa could be calculated. For the powerlessness frame questions, the inter-coder reliability ranged from $\kappa = .05$ to $\kappa = .83$. See appendix A table 3 for all scores of inter-coder reliability and the percentages of agreement.

Statistical analysis

For the quantitative part of this research, independent-samples T-tests were performed for each frame to determine if any frames were more salient in leave or remain letters.

Qualitative analysis

For the qualitative part of this study, two ‘typical’ letters were analyzed. One was a leave supporting letter, while the other was a remain supporting letter. The letters were selected based on their ‘averageness’. Both letters followed the results found in the study, and had a content that was characteristic for the whole set of letters. In this analysis, I examined how the six frames were used in letters.

Results

A series of independent samples t-tests showed a significant difference between Remain and Leave on the use of the responsibility frame ($t(58) = 2.10, p = .040$). Leave letters ($M = .19, SD = .17$) scored higher on the responsibility frame than Remain letters ($M = .11, SD = .12$). Further significant differences were found between Remain and Leave on the use of the powerlessness frame ($t(55.85) = 2.91, p = .005$). Leave letters ($M = .20, SD = .28$) scored higher on the powerlessness frame than Remain letters ($M = .04, SD = .15$). Table 4 shows all means and standard deviations for the leave and remain letters.

Besides that, another independent samples t-test showed no significant difference between Remain and Leave on the use of the human-interest frame ($t(58) = .617, p = .540$), the conflict frame ($t(58) = .00, p = 1.000$), the economic frame ($t(58) = .514, p = .609$) and the morality frame ($t(57.54) = 1.83, p = .073$), equal variances not assumed).

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of each frame for leave and remain

	Leave	Remain	Total
	n = 36	n = 24	n = 60
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Responsibility frame	.19 (.17)	.11 (.12)	.16 (.15)
Human-interest frame	.49 (.24)	.46 (.18)	.48 (.21)
Conflict frame	.46 (.28)	.46 (.23)	.46 (.26)
Economic frame	.31 (.40)	.26 (.34)	.29 (.37)
Morality frame	.19 (.26)	.10 (.15)	.15 (.23)
Powerlessness frame	.20 (.28)	.04 (.15)	.14 (.25)

Qualitative results

To illustrate some of the findings of this study, two letters were analyzed in depth, in their use of the six previously examined frames.

Letter 1. *The Sun*, 20-4-2016

“THE chancellor's claim that by 2030, the UK economy will shrink by six per cent is no better than plucking figures out of the air. It is impossible for anyone to predict world financial events, even five years hence. It is highly likely that the first two years of a Brexit will see a fluctuation of markets until economies settle down. However by 2030, I can only envisage the UK in a much stronger position, as by that time we will have consolidated our own world markets and no longer be shackled to Brussels.”

Letter 2. *The Times*, 5-3-2016

“Sir, Leaving the EU is too great a risk for UK farmers. The European single market accounts for 73 per cent of Britain's agri-food exports and gives us access to a market more than twice the size of the US. Outside the EU we could keep all or some of this market, but we would have to abide by EU regulations without a say in their formation and pay into the EU budget without receiving EU payments in return. We'd pay, but have no say. The Leave campaigns talk about trying to negotiate a free trade deal similar to the Swiss model. But that would not cover all products and would not give the same unrestricted access as provided by the single market. Where we did get duty-free access we would still be required to meet EU standards and regulations. In other words, the regulatory bonfire we've been promised by the Leave campaigns just wouldn't happen. In any case, some of the worst regulations, as well as the "goldplating" of EU directives, happen in the UK, not Brussels. On direct payments, Leave campaigners have said it is inconceivable that any UK government would drastically cut support. But it is government policy, set by Labour and endorsed by the coalition government in 2011, to abolish direct payments in 2020. Leaving the EU would mean reducing our access to our most important market, little or no reduction in regulation, no influence on future rules, the speedy abolition of direct support and an uncertain future for UK agriculture.”

Letter 1 was coded as ‘leave’ due the negative statements about potential unfavorable consequences of leaving the EU and positive mentions of possible favorable consequences ‘by 2030, I can only envisage the UK in a much stronger position’. Letter 2 on the other hand, was coded as ‘remain’ because of the statement “Leaving the EU is too great a risk for UK farmers” and the many mentions of possible negative outcomes of leaving the EU.

When looking at the responsibility frame, we see that letter 1 doesn’t attribute responsibility to any form of government, however it does suggest a solution to the issue, therefore this letter scored on the responsibility frame. The letter proposes that “I can only envisage the UK in a much stronger position”, referring to a period after the UK has left the EU. Letter 2 does not attribute responsibility to a specific person or institution for the political and economic situation that led to Brexit. Furthermore, the letter does not offer any solutions to the issue, therefore scoring 0 on the responsibility frame. In line with the results of the quantitative study the responsibility frame is not highly salient in these letters.

Next is the human-interest frame. It is expected that this frame is salient in the letters because of our quantitative study. Letter 1 and 2 both use use adjectives that could generate strong feelings such as “shackled to Brussels” and “plucking figures out of the air” (letter 1) and “goldplating” (letter 2). Furthermore letter 1 emphasizes how the Brexit would affect the UK. Letter 2 is also focused on describing how Brexit would affect one specific group, namely farmers. Therefore the human-interest frame is present in both letters.

Furthermore, the conflict frame is also present in both letters. In letter 1, one party directly reproaches another “The chancellor’s claim (...) is no better than plucking figures out of the air”. Letter 2 also contains the conflict frame, as it reflects disagreement between two parties, and the author reproaches the UK “some of the worst regulations, as well as the “goldplating” of EU directives, happen in the UK, not Brussels”. This was also expected from the results of the quantitative analysis.

Both letters also reference economic consequences in some form. Letter 1 states potential economic consequences of pursuing a course of action “It is highly likely that the first two years of a Brexit will see a fluctuation of markets until economies settle down”. Letter 2 does something similar “Leaving the EU would mean reducing our access to our most important market”. The trend among most letters was that they either mentioned a lot of economic consequences, or none at all.

In letter 2, the economic frame is superimposed with a human-interest frame. The potential economic consequences are combined with what that would mean for the people

“We’d pay, but have no say”. This combination of frames was also found by Neuman et al. (1992).

The morality frame is not present in these letters. This was expected from the results of the quantitative analysis. This was a bigger trend among the letters, with only a few that scored 1 on one of the morality questions. This was usually because of the question “Does the story offer specific social prescriptions on how to behave?”, which was answered as ‘yes’ when people directly stated how others should vote in the referendum. Other cases also occurred, but rarely. When a clear statement about voting was made, it was usually done so by leave endorsing letters.

Finally, the powerlessness frame is only mentioned in letter 1. The sentence “no longer be shackled to Brussels” implies a lack of power and a future regaining of power. This was an important theme during the period prior to the referendum and was often used by the leave campaigners (Khabaz, 2018). As with the quantitative analysis, the powerlessness frame was much more salient in leave letter than in remain letters.

This analysis of two Brexit related letters to the editor illustrates how the frames were present in the letters and provides examples of the quantitative results.

Conclusion and discussion

The aim of this study was to analyze the frames used in Brexit letters to the editor. Previous research had found frames used in Brexit articles, but there was a lack of research on Brexit opinion pieces. The opinion pieces are important because they reflect an underlying ongoing public debate that may have affected people's voting choice. The findings of this study can illuminate how frames are employed by the public in letters to the editor, showing that frames are not exclusive to news media.

The findings of the quantitative analysis were as follows. When comparing the leave and remain letters, leave letters had a higher average score on the responsibility and powerlessness frames. Both leave and remain letters used the conflict, human-interest, economic and morality frames in a similar frequency. The qualitative analysis illustrated these findings. One possible explanation for these findings is that the leave campaign mostly highlighted the negative current economic and political situation in the UK, and they attributed responsibility to the EU (Levy et al., 2016). The remain campaign however, focused on potential negative outcomes of leaving the EU making it harder to attribute responsibility. Similarly, the powerlessness frame was expected to be used more frequently by leave letters, as a phrase used frequently by leave endorsing politicians was "We want our country back" (Khabaz, 2018). The promise of more autonomy was a big reason for voters to choose to leave. The remain campaign didn't focus on power relations as intently.

Further findings showed trends in the salience of frames in the letters as one group. Overall, the human-interest and conflict frame were most salient in the letters. The economic frame was relatively common while the responsibility, morality and powerlessness frames were much less common. Research found that when selecting letters to publish, editors "prefer the emotionally charged, personal stories of individuals" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, p.304). This tendency may explain why the human-interest frame was largely present in the letters. Furthermore the nature of the Brexit referendum could be a possible explanation for the frequency of the conflict frame in the letters. The referendum only posed two options, leave or remain in the EU. This had a polarizing effect on the debate and this was reflected in the letters. Many letters referred to both sides of the Brexit debate, or reproached the views of others'. The economic frame was mostly present in the discussion about the potential economic consequences of Brexit. Both sides referred to these consequences or responded to a politician's claim about economic consequences. In line with Neuman et al. (1992) people often combined the economic consequences frame with a human-interest frame. So rather

than simply mentioning the financial costs of Brexit letter writers also listed the effects this might have on them.

More research is necessary to compare frames used in letters to the editor and regular news articles. Perhaps news articles reflect the opinion expressed in letters to the editor or vice versa. Future research could also examine whether the framing of Brexit affected the outcome of the referendum. Furthermore, research may examine if similar frames were employed during the Brexit campaign period in other forums of public debate, such as social media or in face-to-face conversations.

A limitation of the present study was the relatively low level of agreement between coders. For some questions the level of agreement was unacceptable. This may have been caused by questions that were not specific enough. For example the question “Does the story employ adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, empathy-caring, sympathy or compassion?” had a very low level of agreement. The question leaves much room for interpretation, so that may have contributed. Another limitation was the use of pre-determined frames. Because the frames were based on other studies, perhaps not all frames that actually existed in the letters were discovered. I studied the letters with these frames in the back of my mind, which may have led me to miss other frames that had not been defined yet. A strength of the current study is the combination of a quantitative and qualitative analysis. This may make it easier to understand the results of the study, and it may help people to spot frames in letters more easily in the future.

As it seems there is no end in sight for the Brexit debate and the consequences of the referendum, there are plenty of opportunities for more research. Brexit is still a widely covered news subject in both the UK and the countries the divorce might affect. However, no conclusions about the effects or the wisdom of the choice to leave can be drawn until the deal is done.

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Appendix A. Tables

Table 2. Questions from the model of analysis

Frame	Question Number	Questions
Attribution of responsibility	Q1	Does the story suggest that some level of the UK government has the ability to alleviate the current or future economic and political situation?
	Q2	Does the story suggest that some level of the UK government is responsible for the current or future economic and political situation?
	Q3	Does the story suggest that some level of the EU government has the ability to alleviate the current or future economic and political situation?
	Q4	Does the story suggest that some level of the EU government is responsible for the current or future economic and political situation?
	Q5	Does the story suggest solutions to the current or future economic and political situation?
	Q6	Does the story suggest that an individual or group is responsible for the current or future economic and political situation?
	Q7	Does the story suggest the current economic and political situation requires urgent action?
Human-Interest Frame	Q8	Does the story provide a human example or “human face” on the current or future economic and political situation?
	Q9	Does the story employ adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, empathy-caring, sympathy or compassion?
	Q10	Does the story emphasize how individuals and groups are affected by the current or future economic and political situation?
Conflict Frame	Q11	Does the story go into the private or personal lives of the actors?
	Q12	Does the story reflect disagreement between parties, individuals, groups or countries?
	Q13	Does one party, individual, group, country reproach another?

	Q14	Does the story refer to two sides or to more than two sides of the current or future economic and political situation?
	Q15	Does the story refer to winners and losers?
Economic	Q16	Is there a mention of financial losses or gains now or in the future?
Frame	Q17	Is there a mention of costs/degree of expense involved?
	Q18	Is there a reference to economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action?
Morality	Q19	Does the story contain any moral message?
Frame	Q20	Does the story make reference to morality, God, and other religious tenets?
	Q21	Does the story offer specific social prescriptions about how to behave?
Powerlessness	Q22	Does the story refer to a lack of power compared to another group/government/individual?
Frame	Q23	Does the story refer to a future regaining of power?
	Q24	Does the story refer to a past power that is now lost?

Table 3. Inter-coder reliability and percentages of agreement

Question	κ	p	Percentage of agreement
1	-.07	.732	85%
2	.64	.002	95%
3	-.05	.814	90%
4	.57	.010	85%
5	.01	.948	40%
6	-	-	100%
7	-	-	100%
8	.60	.006	80%
9	-	-	100%
10	.07	.402	45%
11	.77	.000	95%
12	.40	.025	70%
13	.57	.010	80%
14	.05	.795	50%
15	-.07	.732	85%
16	.62	.003	90%
17	-	-	100%
18	.52	.008	75%
19	-	-	100%
20	-	-	100%
21	-	-	100%
22	-.05	.814	90%
23	.83	.000	95%
24	-	-	100%

Appendix B. Statement of own work

Student name: Anna raaijmakers

Student number: 4438981

PLAGIARISM is the presentation by a student of an assignment or piece of work which has in fact been copied in whole or in part from another student's work, or from any other source (e.g. published books or periodicals or material from Internet sites), without due acknowledgement in the text.

DECLARATION:

- a. I hereby declare that I am familiar with the faculty manual (<http://www.ru.nl/stip/english/rules-regulations/fraud-plagiarism/>) and with Article 16 "Fraud and plagiarism" in the Education and Examination Regulations for the Bachelor's programme of Communication and Information Studies.
- b. I also declare that I have only submitted text written in my own words
- c. I certify that this thesis is my own work and that I have acknowledged all material and sources used in its preparation, whether they be books, articles, reports, lecture notes, and any other kind of document, electronic or personal communication.

Signature:

Place and date: Nijmegen, 6 June 2019