

The Sun

(12 June 2018)



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Component 1: Exploring the Media

Focus areas:
Media Language
Representation
Media Industries
Audiences
Media Contexts

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

The Sun is a British tabloid daily newspaper owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.

It was originally published six days a week until News Corp. also started producing *The Sun on Sunday* in February 2012 to replace the *News of the World*.

With an average daily circulation of roughly 1.6 million copies of their print edition in the UK and a daily readership of around 4.1 million (<http://www.newsworks.org.uk/The-Sun>), *The Sun* has the largest circulation of any daily print newspaper in the United Kingdom. In addition, *The Sun on Sunday* is the UK's biggest selling Sunday newspaper.

On 23rd June 2016, citizens of the UK voted to leave the European Union. This was nicknamed 'Brexit'. The vote was very close with 51.9% voting leave and 48.1% voting remain. This reflects the divisive nature of the referendum and the sometimes ugly nature of the campaigns where the Leave camp was accused of fuelling racism and xenophobia (fear of strangers), and the Remain camp was accused of 'betraying Britain' (nationalism).

Almost two years later (on the date this edition of *The Sun* was published) different factions were still arguing. The Prime Minister, Theresa May was trying to put a bill through Parliament to approve her plan for Brexit, but many MPs (from both sides) were critical.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media language

Historical and Cultural Contexts:

The Sun started life as a broadsheet in 1964, becoming a tabloid in 1969 after being purchased by its current owners. Sex was an important feature of the paper's marketing strategy and the first topless page 3 model appeared in November 1970. This soon became a regular feature of the paper and has been an area of contention for some people.

The Sun has always been considered controversial in terms of its output, partly due to its over-reliance on sensational news and partly due to complete fabrication for the sake of a story ('Freddie Starr Ate My Hamster', 1986). It has also maintained an 'anti-elitist' agenda where it regularly exposes the sex or drug scandals of celebrities or authority figures.

In the past five years there has been a surge in 'populist nationalism'. This is a political ideology that distrusts 'experts', statistics and mainstream politicians in favour of returning control to 'the common people' (populist). In many countries across the world, there has been a rise in nationalism; the belief that your country and customs are superior to all others. Positively, nationalism could be seen as pride in your country's culture, traditions and achievements. Negatively, the dismissal or fear of other cultures could be viewed as xenophobia or racism.

The Sun is unashamedly right wing, and part of its brand is to support a nationalist ideology - especially in sporting events and stories about the royal family, but also extending into politics. These have been controversial: during the 1980s Falkland War they featured a photo of a sinking Argentine battleship with the headline 'Gotcha!'. They often employ outspoken columnists like Katie Hopkins whose descriptions of migrants as "cockroaches" were condemned by the UN Commission for Human Rights.

During the Brexit campaign and aftermath, The Sun enthusiastically supported the leave party and published a number of exaggerated or plainly untrue stories that linked into

nationalist beliefs: that migrants from the EU are stealing British jobs, overwhelming the welfare services, planning terrorist attacks etc. They even reported the Queen supported Brexit, a claim that Buckingham Palace denied.

Consider codes and conventions and how media language communicates meanings:

- The **dominant image** is a **photo-montage** of **iconic** British landmarks or traditions. There are key historical sites like Stonehenge and the Shard; popular British brands like Minis and red buses and spitfires; and even the Houses of Parliament to show a respect for our political system. These are set on backdrops of rolling fields, forests and coastline. It creates the image of Britain as a ‘green and pleasant land’ (a common term from William Blake’s poem ‘Jerusalem’, itself a song with a nationalist message). This is a very **positive representation** but also quite a stereotypical one.
- This montage is **anchored** by the **headline**, ‘Great Britain or Great Betrayal’. The headline’s use of the emotive term ‘betrayal’ make it clear that the cultural icons featured on the cover are at risk from politicians.
- There is also a **strapline** that reads ‘For A Greater Britain’ that suggests *The Sun* has a clearer idea than MPs what is good for the country.
- The start of the headline addresses MPs directly, and has a threatening tone. The huge letters for the ‘choice’ is phrased more like an **ultimatum**. This reduces what is obviously an extremely complex piece of legislation to something very simple and emotive. ‘Cutting through bureaucracy’ is something right wing populists favour, and this kind of ‘straight talking’ is what *The Sun* is renowned for.
- The **opening to the article** can be seen on the left third of the cover beginning, ‘The Sun says...’ suggesting the newspaper has real influence when it comes to the decisions MPs make.
- The **masthead** is in block, capitalised text and uses the colours red and white. Other newspapers in the UK also use this design (such as *The Mirror*, *The Daily Star* and the *Daily Sport*) and these are termed “red tops” as they specialise in tabloid journalism – journalism that often relies on sensationalism, celebrities and gossip. Tabloids are also renowned for simplifying complex political issues.

- The masthead also has a puff box to show the price and how much cheaper it is than *The Mirror* who are *The Sun*’s main competitor.

Possible areas for further investigation are:

- **Code and conventions of newspaper covers:** layout, use of cover photographs/ images, house style, mastheads.
- **Emotive vs Formal language** to engage different audience responses.
- Roland Barthes **enigma codes** - headlines used to tease people to want to read certain stories

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Representation

Historical and Political Contexts:

In its early years, *The Sun* nominally supported the Labour party but has moved back and forth between Labour and the Conservatives, depending on party leadership. The paper has always been very vocal in telling its readers how they should vote (“Why it must be Labour” 1970; “Vote Tory this time” 1979; “Do you really want this old fool to run Britain?” 1983).

Today, *The Sun* is described as having **political allegiance** to the **Conservative party** and does not support the EU, so it is not surprising they are backing offering a **pro-Brexit** viewpoint that links to nationalist values. The paper does have an **ambivalent** representation of politicians. They often flatter and endorse specific MPs and policies, but also regularly feature articles that expose government policies they consider too left wing (especially concerning immigration or multiculturalism). This links to the populist belief that politics is run by an ‘elite’ who have ‘lost touch with the people’.

Consider the representation of immigration as an issue:

- The cover is a montage of different British cultural traditions that we should be proud about (including fish’n’chips and the Loch Ness monster!) These are also quite **stereotypical** elements of British identity, what foreign tourists may expect from a visit to the UK. *The Sun* isn’t just reinforcing these stereotypes; it is saying that if we don’t celebrate and protect them then we will be ‘betraying’ Britain. The only way to ‘protect’ British identity is for MPs to vote in favour of the Brexit bill.
- The landmarks and traditions are closely associated with England and particularly the South of England where there was strong support for Brexit. There is only one Northern landmark

(the Angel of the North) and no representations of Scotland and Northern Ireland except for Loch Ness. This may be because Scotland and Northern Ireland both voted to remain, so are not part of *The Sun's* target audience. *The Sun* does have specific Irish and Scottish editions, so this may also explain the focus on England.

- The strapline 'For A Greater Britain' implies, along with 'The Sun Says...' suggests *The Sun* has a clearer definition of what makes Britain great than others, and implies the reader should trust its vision.

PART 3: STARTING POINTS

- Media Industries

Consider the importance of funding

- Increasingly newspapers earn revenue from their advertisements and so, in this sense, journalism is being seen more and more as a commodity whose purpose is predominantly for profit. £1 in every £7 spent on groceries is spent by a *Sun* reader making it a very attractive advertising vehicle.
- As **readership figures of print news continue to drop** and advertisers choosing to leave if figures drop too low, newspapers are under **increasing pressure to capture audiences**, so the populist nationalist ideology and emotive ultimatum that dominate the cover is a clear bid to attract those readers who voted leave. The range of British cultural institutions, from royalty to the Red Arrows is trying to appeal to the largest range of audience interests.

Consider the impact of technologies, and convergence:

- In August 2013, *The Sun* launched Sun+, a **subscription service digital entertainment package**. Subscribers paid £2 per week but were able to access all of *The Sun's* regular content as well as have exclusive access to Premier League clips, a variety of digital rewards and a lottery. Despite the cost of this, Sun+ had 117,000 **subscribers** who they could **engage** with on a more personal level due to the **brand loyalty** created from the subscription. This was just one of the ways *The Sun* adapted to people's reading

habits, with people now having little time to spare and increasingly 'reading on the go'.

- However, in November 2015, the paper had to remove the paywall and offer most of its web content for free in order to compete with major rivals such as *The Mail Online*. Since removal of the paywall, it now has around 1 million browsers per day.
- Despite the move of most news services to online platforms, the print edition continues to be extremely popular with approximately 3 million daily readers, compared to 4 million who consume it on their mobile devices.

PART 4: STARTING POINTS – Audiences

Consider target audiences:

- *The Sun* targets the **lower middle social classes**, most of whom haven't attended higher education. Two thirds of its readers are over 35 years old, 54% are male and its biggest audience share comes from the C2DE demographic.
- According to www.see-a-voice.org, the average reading age of the UK population is 9 years old. *The Sun* has a reading age of 8 years. Using of words in bold, lots of visuals and smaller chunks of text means they are purposefully making their product **accessible to everyone** and especially appealing to members of our society who have **weaker literacy skills**.
- In addition, this way of formatting makes it easier to read at speed – on the daily commute for example - and to skim and scan the paper to find specific articles that interest you. This could help explain why *The Sun* is "**Britain's most popular paper**" as stated by its tagline, as it is an easy read.

Consider theoretical perspectives:

- **Active/Passive audience**. Historically, readers of print newspapers were considered to be passive (i.e. they read what was in front of them and believed it), especially as there is an expectation that what is shared in the news genre is true. However, today's audiences are much more active and understand how tabloids often don't report full facts. This potentially changes the way they interpret the information they are given.