

Balanced Reporting, the BBC, and Brexit*

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Abstract

Media organizations can “shape” news via their choice of coverage and slant. We measure the “aggregate slant” of the BBC from 2014-18, benchmark it against UK newspaper of known political leaning, and show that it took a sharp “turn to the right” in the runup to the Brexit vote. We disaggregate this shift across topics and show that roughly three-quarters of the measured change was due to stories related to the European Union, that 90% of that change was due to increased coverage relative to topic-specific slant, and that the change was driven by crowding out of “left-leaning” topics. We show even stronger results on a Leave/Remain rather than Labour/Conservative scale. We measure the causal effect of this shift using two different datasets and empirical approaches and both show causal increases of exposure to BBC news on Brexit vote intentions/vote shares, with effects sufficiently large that the absence of a change in the BBC’s slant would have made the Brexit vote too close to call.

Keywords: Public Service Broadcasting, BBC, Brexit, Media Bias, Slant, Coverage, Balanced Reporting, Text Analysis

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