**Moving Beyond the Single Mediated Arena Model: Media Uses and Influences Across Three Arena’s**

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**Introduction**

This chapter draws on multiple interview-based studies of UK political actors at Westminster (see Davis, 2002, 2007, 2010, 2015). These have been conducted over nearly two decades, involving 180 interviews with political actors (politicians, civil servants, officials and political journalists), usually in sets of semi-structured interviews. The theoretical frameworks applied come more from media sociology and cultural theory than political communication and some adaption is necessary here. The studies applied an actor-centred interpretive framework to investigate the ‘mediation’ (Thompson, 1995, Livingstone, 1999) or ‘mediatization’ of the UK’s political arena. Such work simply asked: how do such political actors and institutions use media and communications and, conversely, how do media and communications then shape those same actors and institutions? More specifically, it inquired as to how media engagement altered the way political actors co-create agendas, debate frames, policy choices, promote individuals and ideas, pick leaders, develop political alliances and so on?

While this piece supports much outlined in Van Aelst and Walgrave’s (this volume) information and arenas model, it also seeks to complicate their account by arguing for a move away from the single arena concept. Traditionally, the common analytical framework used by political communication scholars (myself included) has a tendency towards thinking in terms of one, singular shared, mediated public arena or public sphere (Habermas, 1989). But, this has become increasingly problematic. Instead, I set out a model of media influence and use that operates across three communicative spaces: the *policy arena*, the *political arena*, and the larger *public arena*. The ways political actors use and are influenced by media and journalists varies across these three arenas. Thus, for politicians, the traditional *public arena* (or public sphere) is more about the presentation of individuals, parties and policy ideas in a populist way, akin to general product branding. At the opposite scale, the *policy arena* is technical and mostly operates outside of public/media view (although individual journalists may gain some personal access). In between, lies the increasingly mediatized *political arena* in which journalists, politicians and other ‘political actors’ work at close quarters. Each arena operates with a certain autonomy from the others. But, at the same time, there are clear overlaps, with successful media use and influence in one arena having an impact on other arenas. The *political arena*, located between the others, has two functions: first as an arena in which elite policy and individuals are promoted across sectors and elite factions, and consensus in achieved; and second, as a means to mediate and translate between the three arenas.

After setting out the arenas and findings the model will be further illustrated with two short case studies: the election of David Cameron as head of the Conservative Party, and the issue of European Union membership and the recent Brexit vote. Both of these cases reveal the gaps and shifts between the UK *policy arena*, *political arena*, and general *public arena*.

**Moving Beyond the Single Mediated Public Arena/Sphere Model: Media Uses and Influences Across Three Arenas**

In much research on political communication and media sociology, political and other elites sit on one side, citizens and interest groups on the other, and an expansive media space is located between them. Such a framework made sense in earlier centuries, with far more limited states, civil societies and media. But, in large, complex, fragmented and mediatized democracies, or ‘actually existing democracies’ as Nancy Fraser (1997) calls them, the framework is full of holes. That is not to say it is entirely redundant. Rather, parts of the framework need to be adapted to the greater variation, fragmentation and mediatization of Twenty-first Century polities and communication ecologies.

To quickly summarize, much political writing on the establishment of democracy, old and new, (see Held, 2006) holds very securely to an ‘ideal type’ of democracy that links elite decision-making to the mass of consumer citizenry via mass public communications and ‘public opinion’. Drawing on historical treaties and declarations on ‘the press’, a set of ‘ideal’ public communication functions in democracies have emerged (see Keane, 1991, Curran, 2002, for discussions). Habermas’s account of the ‘public sphere’ (1989 [1962]) is most commonly deployed. Here, the public sphere is conceived of as the public, deliberative space between the state and private citizens. It has been applied in the assessment of public communication spaces at the national, transnational and virtual levels. It seems equally appropriate when thinking about the mediatized political arena of a modern-day parliamentary space (see Davis, 2010).

However, arguably, such a model of democracy and communication does not fit modern Twenty-first Century, large, complex and fragmented polities. This issue has been highlighted by several of Habermas’s critics (see, for example, Behabib, 1992, Fraser, 1997) and was, indeed, acknowledged in his more recent work (1996). Since then, media too has become far more diverse and fragmented, operating on multiple planes, and often within specialized networks or separated, digital echo chambers (Chadwick, 2013, Viner, 2016).

In addition, there is a sense that politicians perform and behave differently when moving between public, mediated and more private political arenas (Corner and Pels, 2003). The appeal of a senior politician to their party, based on policy proposals, may be distinct from their appeal to ordinary party members or the larger electorate. As Corner explains (2003: 72-4), politicians can be seen to ‘perform’ in two different arenas (or spheres): ‘the sphere of political institutions and processes’ and ‘that of the public and popular’. Indeed, studies of German and U.S. politics have revealed that individual election victories may be as much based on ‘character traits’ as on policy differences (Lees, 2005, Kenski, et al., 2010). Watching the rise of Geert Wilders, Boris Johnson, Marine Le Pen and Donald Trump, it is clear that the projection of big personalities rather than policies can both appeal to electorates while also disrupting established parties and policy networks.

These issues suggest that any notion of a single, mediatized political arena, is likely to offer a partial picture. If politicians and journalists now operate across different networks and spaces, each with varied audiences and forms of communicative exchange, so there may be considerable differences in the way political actors use and are influenced by media.

Through multiple research projects (Davis, 2002, 2007, 2010) that looked at UK politics at Westminster, it became clear that political actors and their communications do shift considerably as they move from private to public and back again. News media uses and influences change accordingly, shifting between the autonomous, insider pole of the private policy space to the more general mediated public sphere. At one end is a more private policy space, where there is minimal journalist access or media coverage of political deliberation. At the other extreme, politicians and debates are widely covered by multiple media with large public audiences. In between lies the political arena in which journalists, politicians and other political actors circulate, and media coverage is aimed at more elite audiences.

To conceptualise this, the chapter now sketches out some media-oriented features that distinguish the three arenas of political interaction. These are termed: the *policy arena*, the *political arena*, and the larger *public arena* (the original public sphere as Habermas envisioned it). This sense of three overlapping arenas (or spheres or networks) came out as interviewees discussed various aspects of their everyday mediatized activities. The differences between the three are now outlined here through a focus on four factors, which help to separate and define the boundaries of these mediatized arenas: 1) news consumption and use as an information source; 2) journalist access within the political arena; 3) shifting policy and personality priorities across the arenas; and 4) the alternative ways and means of developing media profiles across the arenas.

Policy Arena

(private parliamentary spaces)

Political Arena

(public parliamentary space)

Public Arena

(public mediated sphere)

**Diagram One: The Three Arenas**

**News Consumption and Use Across the Arenas**

To start, there are clear differences in news consumption patterns when comparing the wider *public arena with the mediated political* and *private policy arenas*. The main papers read by the public are the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror*. When asked (see Davis, 2007) about their news consumption, not a single MP mentioned the *Sun* or *Daily Mirror* and only three listed the *Daily Mail*. In a separate survey (Duffy and Rowden, 2005), most Labour (67%) and Liberal Democrat (77%) MPs read the *Guardian*. Most Conservatives MPs read the *Daily Telegraph* (82%). The *Times* is the second most read paper by MPs in all three parties. When consuming broadcast news, politicians choose longer, more depth news programmes, such as the *Today Programme*, BBC 2’s *Newsnight* or *Channel 4 News*. The general public is more inclined towards prime-time television news bulletins (Ofcom, 2007). Several politicians noted that a majority of their constituents were less inclined to consume the sort of elite media outputs that they did, something all too easily forgotten in daily work:

(Kevan Jones, Labour MP) ‘You can listen to *Radio 4* in the morning and think that that’s everything. But when I go home at weekends and talk [people] haven’t got a clue what the *Today Programme* is, never even listen to it … we read the papers avidly every day, but most people don’t read … most of them haven’t read the *Guardian* in their life.’

Talking to politicians, it was also clear that the ways news media is regarded and consumed shifts as one moves between the more elite *policy arena* and *political arena*. For MPs generally, those operating in the political arena, news media scored highly as an information source. Ordinary back-bench MPs regarded it as a priority input (the second most mentioned source), particularly in terms of either reflecting or potentially influencing voter concerns. However, as one begins asking about news and information in the more private policy arena of committees, private offices and government departments, news became less relevant. Although half the 16 government ministers asked, listed it as an information source, none regarded it as a priority input at all. In fact, the large bulk of policy discussions did not include journalists or media at all, as MPs looked to ‘experts’, officials, lobbyists and organisational representatives.

In effect, as one moves from public to private, the news media consumed and its use as an information source shifts. In general, it becomes less and less influential in terms of offering useful information.

**Journalist Access Within the Arenas**

The three arenas are also defined by levels of Journalist access. On the one hand, news reporters write predominantly for the larger public. They have wide access to many parts of the political arena, with its myriad of sources and institutions. They move between the political and public arenas, translating from one to the other. However, while ‘lobby journalists’ (those given exclusive passes and access to Parliament) write for the wider public arena, much of their working life is spent within the rather more exclusive and exclusionary political arena.

For many who have closely witnessed Parliament in different capacities, Westminster is a small, insular ‘network’, ‘club’ or ‘village’, to which select ‘lobby journalists’ are admitted; but only if they adhere to strict rules and regulations. In most respects, reporters, in their everyday working lives, are more part of this inner political world than they are a part of the public or even their own media organization. In Westminster, journalists have on-site offices, share social facilities with politicians, and have organized political access and regular information supply. Many tend to remain in post for long periods, often longer than the average legislator (see Tunstall, 1996, Barnett and Gaber, 2001). As one critical journalist explained:

(Peter Oborne, journalist, commentator) ‘Most of my colleagues are embedded journalists … I think that the way in which lobby journalists become manifestations of the political system is quite disturbing.’

At the same time, correspondents are also restricted in their physical access to many of the spaces and meeting forums of the policy arena. At any one point, a small number of correspondents may gain additional briefings as individual ministers talk to and leak information to trusted allies. But, most, most of the time, have limited and fleeting access to policy-making forums. Speaking to political public relations advisors and journalists in earlier research (Davis, 2002), there was a substantial amount of secrecy and control maintained on media information flows:

(Andrew Grice, political journalist) ‘Number 10 has a strong grip on the information coming out of departments. From their point of view, it’s very sensible but, from another point of view, they go to great lengths to limit debate and discussion and to stop journalists from finding out what’s going on.’

In effect, journalist access and media presence gets more restricted as reporters move between the three arenas.

**News Moves from Policy to Personality and Brand Across the Arenas**

Interviews also reveal distinct differences in how insiders (politicians and journalists) regard audiences inside and outside the political arena. This then determines what is considered relevant news content for political, policy and public arena audiences. For politicians and civil servants, there was a common view that larger publics are either uninterested or unable to follow the policy process itself:

(Greg Clark, Conservative MP) ‘I don’t think there’s a terribly strong interest in the media for policy debates you know. Newspapers are about news and policy isn’t really news. It’s events that are news.’

The news media side clearly has a parallel view. Since the 1980s news organisations have been less inclined to cover Parliament in mainstream news fearing lack of consumer interest (Negrine, 1998, see also Barnett and Gaber, 2001). Half the 20 political journalists asked about this stated that their editors pushed for personality rather than policy-oriented stories. In fact, they saw their role as being about reporting party politics and conflicts rather than policy. Policy was both dull and took more resources to investigate:

(Polly Toynbee, political journalist) ‘one of the reasons that ministers have such contempt for the press, quite rightly really, is that what they’re doing day after day is hard policy work … We report nothing of what really happens, what the stuff of government really is, and what they’re really doing and thinking about all the time.’

Instead, both politicians and journalists present personalities, personal conflicts, and the symbolic. For several observers of politics (Crouch, 2004, Hay, 2007), parties now compete for increasingly de-aligned and volatile electorates. They forsake ideological and detailed policy positions to increasingly adopt the promotional qualities of brands (Hall Jamieson, 1996, Franklin, 2004). The media, simultaneously, seeks celebrities and personal stories with which to engage their publics. They are therefore willing collaborators in the manufacture of political brands and celebrity politics (Corner and Pels, 2003). During election times, it is ‘horse-race coverage’, personalities, sound bites and negative attacks which dominate over policy discussions (see Hall-Jamieson, 1996, Franklin, 2004, Esser, 2008).

Lees (2005) demonstrated that Gerhardt Schroder’s SPD election victory over Edmund Stoiber’s CDU-CSU, in the 2002 German election, was secured, according to polls, on the strength of his stronger ‘character traits’, rather than greater public support for his policies. Something similar was observed in relation to Obama’s victory over McCain in 2008 (Kenski et al., 2010). This growing emphasis on leader personalities in the political arena as well as the public arena was already evident to many interviewees during the Blair and Bush years:

(Clare Short, former Labour cabinet minister) ‘Look at Bush, he’s very similar to Blair … politicians who can handle the media come to the fore. So, you get Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Blair, maybe it explains Bush … you get the charmer to be the leader, the presenter becomes the decision maker.’

Within the private policy sphere and the political arena how an individual or party will be portrayed to the wider public arena is clearly a consideration (see below). At the same time, there was also an awareness amongst reporters that personalities and conflict information, also had an impact on the rise and fall of policy proposals, temporary policy alliances and legislation. When politicians were asked about all the reasons why they consume media, one common response was to look for such details in news content. It is the same when they meet and exchange information with journalists in personal interactions:

(Danny Alexander, Liberal Democrat MP) ‘The media can reveal what’s going on in a policy debate, either before the Government would like it to be revealed or in a way that the Government prefers it not to be revealed ... and that can be important when you’re coming up to a knife edge vote, and the Government is frantically trying to mollify its rebellious back benchers.’

**Mediated Public Profiles Across Arenas**

A related study, based on Bourdieu’s work on fields and forms of (media) capital, explored how politicians built up their media profiles and judged others via media (see Davis, 2010, Davis and Seymour, 2010). Here, it became apparent that there were several strategies involved and that these varied across the arenas. First, politicians may build up knowledge of how media operates, either through prior journalist or public relations experience (media cultural capital). It also comes from specialist media training and ongoing experience as a politician dealing with media. Second, they can build up reporter contacts and networks through regular exchanges (media social capital). They can also increase media contacts and access by acting as a regular information source without actually appearing in news reports. Third, they can develop a public media profile through appearance in media texts (print, online, broadcast) (mediated symbolic capital). But, such mediated public profiles, depend very much on the media and audiences involved. Thus, how mediated political actors are presented across the three arenas can be quite different.

The importance of accumulating forms of journalist-based social capital and media cultural capital within the political arena came across in many interviews. Nine tenths of those interviewed either had professional media experience or media training. Two thirds of the politicians, when asked about the qualities needed for advancement, mentioned the need for good media skills and/or relations with journalists. Two thirds of the journalists made similar comments.

In terms of developing a public media profile, MPs were very aware that they had to perform in a variety of more or less mediated environments. They both see, and are seen by, their peers through the media lens as well as in person. The media-oriented performances, and media-filtered consumption and evaluation of those performances, takes place in a number of settings. These can be classified according to their position vis-à-vis the more private (policy arena) or more public (public arena) poles.

Starting with the more private, the first form of mediated judgment comes in personal exchanges between politicians and journalists, or performances observed by journalists on the edges of the policy arena (exclusive meetings, briefings, lunches). The second, which relates to the *political arena*, is during performances in public forums (debating chambers, public meeting spaces). Both politicians and journalists explained how important it was to be noticed in the House of Commons debating chamber:

(Philip Webster, political editor) ‘performance in the House is what we see ... Prime Minister’s Question Time, Chancellor’s Question Time … getting in with a good question in response to a prime ministerial statement, for example. That gets them noticed.’

Such appearances are recorded and analysed primarily in more elite-oriented newspapers, websites and broadcasts. In the UK, these include appearances in the broadsheet press, on the *Today Programme* on Radio Four, depth television news programmes such as *Newsnight* (BBC One) and *Channel Four News*, and debate forums such as *Question Time* (BBC One and Radio Four). For much of the time, journalists and politicians do not physically attend such media events but, instead, observe, or later review them if present, through these other media:

(Sion Simon MP) ‘I’m looking to do that kind of *Today Programme* evaluation thing that the political class does, where they form judgements about which colleagues and opponents are doing well, doing badly, who’s making sense’

Finally, moving further towards the general *public arena* comes political performance in non-political elite media programmes such as daily news bulletins and documentaries, down to popular comedy programmes and chat shows. In such media, performance, audience and the basis of evaluation change once again. Politicians must be generally appealing rather than being able to explain and defend detailed policies and decisions.

**Media Uses and Influences Across the Arenas: Two Cases**

**The Rise of David Cameron**

The conceptual discussion is now further illustrated by two case studies. The first details David Cameron’s sudden rise from relative obscurity to leader of the Conservative Party in 2005. The question is how did a young, barely known MP, with little public profile, come from obscurity to lead his Party? For many observers, Cameron was simply an instant media creation who won on the basis of one well-publicized party conference speech. However, as argued here, Cameron’s success was based on his long-term accumulation of forms of media cultural and social capital within the *political arena* itself. Cameron’s conference speech then confirmed what many insiders already suspected: that he was the candidate most capable of gaining support in the public arena and thus winning a future election (the full case is documented in Davis and Seymour, 2010).

Following the May 2005 general election loss, the Conservatives called a leadership election. Unofficial campaigning took place through the summer. At the end of September five candidates remained and gave their big speeches at the Conservative Party Conference: David Davis, the favourite, Ken Clarke, Liam Fox, Malcolm Rifkind and David Cameron. To win the contest candidates had to first gain the support of MPs, whose two ballots would decide the two final candidates. Party members would then cast the final vote. Accordingly, gaining internal support, within the political arena, and external media profile with voters in the public arena, would have been essential. Table two below shows the large differences in support (or mediated symbolic capital) that the three main candidates had or lost across the three key audiences. The extremes being the general voters (GV) of the public arena, and Members of Parliament (MPs), representing the political arena.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Date and Poll** | **D Cameron %**  **GV PM MPs** | **D Davis %**  **GV PM MPs** | **Ken Clarke %**  **GV PM MPs** |
| 29.5 Telg/YouGov | 15 | 35 | 10 |
| 27.7 Times/Populus | 4 | 12 | 29 |
| 4.9 S Times/YouGov | 9 | 28 | 8 |
| 6.9 Times/Populus | 2 | 10 | 41 |
| 6.9 Times/Populus | 3 | 16 | 55 |
| 7.9 MORI | 2 | 6 | 32 |
| 9.9 Newsnight/ICM | 4 | 10 | 40 |
| 10.9 Telg/YouGov | 17 | 27 | 33 |
| 11.9 S Time/YouGov | 6 | 16 | 42 |
| 30.9 YouGov | 16 | 30 | 30 |
| 7-9.10 S Times | 18 | 16 | 25 |
| 9.10 YouGov | 39 | 14 | 26 |
| 10.10 Decl MPs | 17 | 35 | 11 |
| 11.10 Times/Populus | 45 | 15 | 22 |
| 13.10 Decl MPs | 16 | 33 | 12 |
| 17.10 D Mail/Const Chairs | 51 | 21 | 22 |
| 17.10 D Mail/Decl MPs | 17 | 34 | 12 |
| 18.10 1st Ballot MPs (198) | (56)28 | (62)31 | (38) 19 |
| 19.10 YouGov | 59 | 15 | - |
| 20.10 2nd Ballot MPs (198) | (90)45 | (57)29 | - |
| 21.10 MORI | 33 | 13 | - |
| 6.12 Members Ballot | 68 | 32 | - |

**Table Two: Polls of Candidate Support 29th May to 21st October 2005, from General Voters (GV), Party Members (PM), and Conservative Members of Parliament (MP)**

The table shows that the main audiences differed considerably in their levels of support for the candidates. For most of the period, only David Davis had clear MP support although he never gained strong general voter support and his party member support dramatically fell away after the conference. In contrast, Ken Clarke, became a clear leader with those general voters and party members outside the political field but he lacked strong support from fellow MPs inside and went out at the first ballot. David Cameron struggled to make an impact on any of the audiences until the week of the conference but then leaped ahead of his rivals.

This dramatic transition makes little sense when looking at the public profiles and histories of the candidates. Cameron was relatively little known to MPs having only been elected in 2001. David Davis had held a number of senior party positions since 1994 and was widely known inside Westminster and to the voting public. In the three years before the election period, Davis had appeared in 1798 pieces and Cameron 191. Many journalists, politicians and other insiders at the time concluded that he was the most likely winner. However, everything changed dramatically during the few days of the September conference speeches. Following these, broadcast and print journalists all marked out Cameron as the new favourite. By the time of the second Ballot, on the 20th October, Cameron had gained a strong lead amongst Conservative MPs and was clearly ahead in polls of public and party member opinion. For the next six weeks little changed and, on the 6th December, Cameron won with more than two thirds of the final vote.

The interview material and news content analysis revealed that Cameron’s success was not as instant as portrayed. While he lacked a media profile in public arena, he had spent many years building up alternative, internal forms of media capital within the political arena. Although only elected to Parliament in 2001, Cameron had spent six years in Parliament previously working as a senior political advisor, building up journalist contacts. He also had spent seven years as Head of Communications at Carlton Communications (1994-2001), one of the dominant television companies of the 1990s. His core campaign team was full of politicians with journalist or PR backgrounds (including his future nemeses Boris Johnson and Michael Gove).

Through the summer period, Cameron and his team proved to be more active than any other campaign. They were the most prominent news sources, Cameron wrote more articles and/or was the subject of an interview piece, more than anyone else, and his allies, appeared more than any other candidate’s. In effect, Cameron’s media capital was building up significantly within the policy arena and political arena in advance of the party conference speeches, which would then move the competition into the realm of the mediated public arena.

Three particular events crystalized this trend and encouraged the relatively small lobby journalist community towards a Cameron endorsement. The first of these was Cameron’s official campaign launch to journalists on the 29th September, which took place in the private policy arena of Parliament, but was not widely reported. The launches were clearly remembered by several journalist interviewees, especially when compared to Davis’s. As one explained it, behind closed doors (Gary Gibbon, political broadcast editor): ‘everybody felt that difference … the lobby slightly talked within itself a bit, you could see that happening’.

The second, significant event took place in the realm of the *political arena*. It was a late-night BBC *Newsnight* piece, of the kind watched regularly by insiders but less so the general public. In the piece, broadcast the night before the speeches, a focus group study revealed Cameron to be the most appealing candidate. A DVD of this was then widely circulated to all Conservative MPs and political journalists, many of which noted Cameron’s potential:

(Daisy McAndrew, political broadcast journalist) ‘we all go to many, many, many events that don’t end up on the telly … But, of course, it informs our opinion … so a lot of journalists had been following his [Cameron’s] progress for quite a while, but hadn’t really talked about it much.’

The third event was the conference speeches where, once again, the mediated performance skills of the five candidates were going to be directly compared. By almost all accounts, Cameron’s speech made a strong impact but was not considered the best of the five. But by then journalists were already primed to come out in support of Cameron and against Davis. A clear tipping point within the journalist interpretive community had been reached. The media shift was stark, leading to a clear majority of insiders and ordinary party members to unite in support of Cameron.

**UK Membership of the European Union and the Brexit Vote**

At the time of writing, the UK has just triggered Article 50, some nine months after voting to leave the European Union. What is clear is that the country was and is polarized in many ways that cut across political parties, classes, occupations, ages and regions. However, a further look at polling data, past and recent, as well as earlier interviews with UK political actors on Europe (Davis, 2007, 2010), reveals the general disparity between Parliamentarians and the wider public. Within the policy arena of Westminster and Whitehall, support for staying in was high, much higher than amongst voters in the national public arena. In between came the mediated political arena, where public political actor opinion was clearly blurred and unstable as it became influenced by much of the news media promoting leave over remain.

The differences between the three arenas, in terms of views and attitudes towards the EU, were already observable in earlier decades. For political actors in the policy arena, there was a much greater knowledge of EU affairs as well as greater support. For senior bureaucrats and ministers, dealing with European legislation, budgets, trade negotiations, etc., European institutions had become a part of their daily activities. European affairs also figure frequently in discussions in the political arena of ordinary MPs and more junior officials. European legislation passes through Parliament on a regular basis, often supporting or hindering domestic policy agendas. Many interviewees had quite a bit of professional knowledge about the institutions of the EU and, generally, were positive about it; although Conservative MPs were more ambivalent as Europe has been a long-term divisive issue for the party. So, for example, in 2005 (Smith, 2006) 80.3% of civil servants, and 87.7% of Labour MPs, agreed that ‘For Britain the benefits of European integration outweigh the costs’. 74.2% of Conservative MPs disagreed. However, when it came to actually voting in June 2016, 75% of MPs who had declared their position, voted to remain. This included 57% of Conservatives (BBC, 2016 a) and three quarters of the 24 Conservative Government’s Cabinet ministers.

In contrast, in the public arena, dominated by the national press, European affairs has a long history of either being under-reported or reported negatively. In fact, when asked about gaps in political news coverage, the single issue most politician interviewees listed (Davis, 2007), was European affairs. One survey of MPs (Baker et al., 1999) found that they thought there was a ‘paucity of debate’ on Europe in the media (80% Labour, 76% Conservative, 84% Liberal Democrat). Journalists too admitted that it was a difficult topic to cover, requiring expertise and research time, but having little public appeal:

(Philip Webster, political editor) ‘the press gives far too little attention toEuropean directives that pass quietly through this place in distant committees. They are open to the press. But the press never attend because they’re very boring meetings which, nine times out of ten, wouldn’t produce a story.’

Not only was the media seen as ignoring EU institutions, it was also perceived by politicians as being hostile to the Union. A majority of the UK print media, including the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, the *Sun*, the *Times*, the *Telegraph*, and their Sunday equivalents, had been overtly critical for many years (see Norris, 2000, Semetko et al., 2001, Baisnee, 2007). As one interviewee stated:

(Angus Robertson, SNP MP, former journalist) ‘Very few journalists understand European affairs, and that pool of journalists is ever reducing … Why, when 60% to 70% of legislation emanates from Brussels, do we read next to nothing about anything beyond straight bananas, Peter Mandelson and an annual bust up in the EU fisheries negotiations?’

Understandably, for some time, the attitude toward Europe of many British voters in the public arena, has been either disinterest or negativity. In 2004, when a survey asked ‘How much do you think you know about the powers and responsibilities of the European Parliament?’, 71% answered ‘not much’ or ‘nothing at all’ (YouGov, May 2004). For the ten years prior to the 2016 referendum, most of the time, EU membership was not considered a top eight voting issue, and only registered as such as the referendum approached. At this point, a majority of UK voters were unaware they even had MEP representatives. When asked, the public guessed that 15% of the UK’s population was from Continental Europe (5% is the real figure), and that 27% of the EU budget was spent on administration (6% is the real figure) (Ipsos MORI, 2016).

In between the opposed policy and public arenas, the mediated political arena became an uncertain and clouded battle ground for political actors as they sought a way between these different positions and audience knowledges (see accounts in Oliver, 2016, Shipman, 2016). Conservatives had been used to avoiding public discussion of the topic as the question of EU membership had threatened to split the party in both the 1980s and 1990s, almost bringing down the Major government (1992-97). David Cameron only called the referendum to maintain broad party support for his government in the face of its very vocal, anti-EU minority of Conservative MPs. As the referendum approached, it was clear that a large majority of ordinary Conservative members and voters would vote leave. It was also clear that they, as well as Conservative-supporting tabloid media, were ready to back any Conservatives who were prepared to break from Cameron’s line, both during the campaign and in any possible future leadership election that might follow. Thus, Boris Johnson, who had previously been more pro than anti Europe, switched sides at the last moment to become the de facto leader of the leave campaign. Meanwhile, many formerly loyal Conservative Ministers, such as Theresa May, Philip Hammond, Michael Fallon and Jeremy Hunt, hedged their political bets and kept low profiles during the referendum. None of them registered on Loughborough University’s (2016) detailed content analysis of campaign coverage. For similar reasons, senior figures in the Labour Party were unsure of their campaign strategy. Although a clear majority of Labour MPs, members and voters wanted to stay, Labour had been losing a lot of its traditional support to UKIP in many regions outside London and the South East. There was a very real fear of further losses, if the party sounded too pro-EU, of their tabloid-reading, poorer and less educated voters, swayed by the nationalist and anti EU line of the media.

The ambivalences of the UK political classes, combined with a largely anti-EU media, meant that news coverage was far more in favour of leaving than staying. Leave politicians were rather more reported than remain ones. Most coverage contained biased reporting and the large majority of biased reporting supported Leave. If adjusted for circulation, 82% of that biased coverage came down in favor of Brexit (Loughborough University, 2016). Thus, despite a clear majority of political actors in the policy sphere being in favor of remain, mainly for economic and technical reasons, the public arena was more swayed by arguments about immigration and national sovereignty (Ipsos MORI, 2016).

**Conclusions**

These two cases show the very real differences in the way media and journalists both inform and are used by politicians in relation to the three arenas. They also show how changes in one arena can then be relayed to and infect the other arenas, via the mediated political arena. In the first case, Cameron used his media knowledge and contacts in the policy and political arenas to overcome his lack of media profile in the public arena. In the second case, a vague, populist, media-led campaign in the public arena, paralysed political actors in the political and policy arenas, eventually bringing a leave vote and dragging Cameron down.

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