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What the referendum tells us about journalism

Referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union	
Vote only once by putting a cross <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> in the box next to your choice	
Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?	
Remain a member of the European Union	<input type="checkbox"/>
Leave the European Union	<input type="checkbox"/>

June 27, 2016

I suspect Friday passed in a volley of swearing for many of us. And maybe on both sides of the EU debate, for different reasons.

I love the description of Sunday Times personal finance columnist Ian Cowie, who said his home was like the expletive-laden start of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* on the morning after the referendum night before.

A young reporter who like me is fascinated by politics spent most of the day in a similar frame of mind, if his posts on Facebook and Twitter were to be believed.

But then, after many hours of reporting on the extraordinary scenes of June 23 and 24, he posted this on Facebook, which gladdened my heart: *"What a historic day to be reporting on, as a self-confessed political junkie, this was a day I'll never forget."*

And it was. And still it goes on, day after incredible day.

I made the point a few times while talking to would-be students and their parents at our uni open day on Saturday: what a great time to be reporting on politics in this country.

It is an opportunity and a privilege to be covering such a once-in-a-lifetime political earthquake.

But there's something else that it is. It's also a responsibility.

Last week, Western Mail chief reporter Martin Shipton warned that political coverage was in danger of [getting lost amid lifestyle journalism with more than half an eye on demanding web audience targets](#).

To slightly paraphrase him, it came down to burgers vs burghers (that's councillors to anyone not born in the 18th century).

I think the difficult truth is that journalists are having to do both. And that means they're not necessarily able to do either particularly well.

Certainly, there is precious little time for proactive, off-diary story-hunting and standing-up, let alone analysis.

We are back to a problem that was at the centre of most of the heart-to-hearts I have had with reporters over the last two to three years: the need to get out more.

As I have suggested above, I have played a full part in the social media echo chamber in recent weeks, railing against the world to people of a similar mindset, educational background and age.

But an agonised comment from one of that young reporter's colleagues struck a real – and in its own way, aching – chord with me.

“I don't know anyone who voted Leave,” she said. And she won't be alone in experiencing that bewilderment in Medialand.

I take my hat off to a couple of my Facebook friends – both journalists – who, despite voting Remain, have sent wise warning shots across the bows of their colleagues.

They had real stories from the Brexit front line of thoughtful contacts with personal experience of employment unfairness firmly linked to immigration from Europe.

They were tales from a world that too few journalists inhabit.

So part of that responsibility I highlighted earlier is that editors, digital editors, executive editors, heads of web, news editors – all of them – need to find ways of reporters meeting more real people, more different people, more new people.

Otherwise, as I have commented before, we're [producing news with the windows shut, the central heating on full blast, and the curtains drawn](#).

One of the things becoming increasingly clear is that the Remain case wasn't made in any way that resonated with those who feel completely bypassed by prosperity.

Many Leavers felt that they had literally nothing to lose. And many others who may have approached their decision with more thought reacted to the contempt and criticism of their views by digging their heels in still further.

The fact that so many people voted for a scenario which will punish the most vulnerable members of our society more than ever before highlights other aspects of the responsibility borne by journalists.

I'm not just talking about the way in which the post-truth politics of lies over NHS investment and fudging over immigration was allowed to hold sway.

Let's also consider how the most far-reaching decision about our country in two generations was taken on the basis of vacuous catchphrases rather than well-informed analysis and judgement.

As Observer columnist Peter Preston said yesterday, [only 22 per cent of people admitted to really understanding what they were voting on.](#)

A friend of mine challenged her mum as to why she had voted Leave, to be told: "I was looking for new saucepans the other day, and I couldn't see any made in Britain."

In Ebbw Vale, [in an area of Wales with virtually zero immigration and drowning in EU investment, they voted out.](#)

One Remain supporter there told the Observer: "There was only one word people had on their mind: immigration. They didn't look at the facts at all."

Although there are clear correlations in places such as Corby and Boston, [the facts don't always support a link between levels of immigration and Brexit backing.](#) In some places, dark xenophobia lurks not far from the surface.

We had an avalanche of information.

But too much writing was partisan, and too many of the TV debates were too antagonistic.

In the end too much of all of it simply intensified the effect of the echo chamber, rather than being really useful or engaging. What was lacking was some storytelling.

And then there's the final and most disheartening aspect of all.

A family friend in his early 20s, one with whom I have had many an interesting and grown-up conversation, didn't vote. Neither did the rest of his family.

He said he didn't see that the result would affect him. And also – that heartbreaking refrain – why would his single vote make any difference? I could have wept.

Another young friend failed to organise a postal vote in time.

For a few milliseconds I had some sympathy with whichever old Tory it was who wanted to stop the registration deadline being extended when last-minute applications crashed the gov.uk site.

He had said that if the vote was that unimportant to people, they shouldn't be rewarded for their administrative fecklessness – or words to that effect.

My fear is that, for all the anguished Facebook posts about privileged baby boomers destroying the futures of teenagers and 20somethings, not enough of that age group actually bothered to vote.

As Ben Page of Ipsos Mori said yesterday: “If under-34s had voted in the same volume as the over-65s, the result would have been different.”

That overall 72 per cent turnout was relatively high – higher than any national poll since 1992. But there had been real hopes we could have achieved an 80 per cent-plus figure.

The girlfriend of the guy who hadn't voted told me she thought voting in this one should have been compulsory. I'm not sure I want to see people locked up or fined for not voting, but it's an interesting thought.

For now, I'm left with a nagging suspicion that if more young people had overcome their lack of engagement, laziness or lack of organisation, we might be in a very different place today.

The laziness and lack of organisation may be an endemic problem too tricky for any of us to solve.

But that lack of engagement.....

This referendum was effectively determined by the decisions of older people getting their news and insights from The Sun and Express, but also by the indifference of too many younger people whose world view is shaped by Snapchat and Instagram.

Getting a new generation to feel they can really make a difference in a political system dominated by men in suits is one of the biggest challenges of our time.

It's one that multimedia news organisations and their journalists ought to relish.