BREXIT BRIEFING from NETWORKING NATIONS

We asked Eric Albert, UK Economics correspondent of Le Monde to take a look at the way the French media have covered Brexit before, during and after. This is his take.

Bewildered but Fascinated

Since the referendum, French media have covered Brexit extensively, scrutinising every detail of its political and economic consequences. But if much of the coverage emphasises the negative effects of the vote, many readers take a different view.

On June 25, 2016, Libération, well known for its punchy headlines, published a front page that summarised most of the French media’s take on the result of the referendum on exiting the European Union. The whole page was covered with the famous photo of Boris Johnson stuck on a zip wire, his blue helmet awkwardly put on his blond hair, looking slightly ridiculous, a Union Jack flag in both hands. At the bottom of the page, in huge black letters, two words: “Good Luck”.

The cover was both funny and pretty clear. Back then, Boris Johnson was expected to become the new British Prime minister. He was going to be in charge of withdrawing Britain from the EU. In essence, Liberation was saying: “here is the buffoon now in charge of one of the most difficult diplomatic and geopolitical challenge of modern time. It is going to be tough.”

There is no tradition of tabloids in France –indeed, there isn’t any- and newspapers tend to be a bit less opinionated than British ones. But the overwhelming reaction to the vote was “what have you done?”

French media were of course surprised. They had not seen the result coming, at least no more than British pollsters and commentators. But beyond the shock, their bewilderment came from
their approach of the EU. France is one of the founding members of the EU. In schools, pupils are taught that the European project was created as a force for peace, a way of turning the page of World War 2. Sure, like in many others countries, critics of the EU have risen steadily over the past decade. But the idea of withdrawing is still seen as completely absurd by a huge majority of journalists and politicians.

Every mainstream French newspaper can be described as pro-European. Le Monde, often referred to as the “reference” newspaper, is not officially endorsing any political party (though it is slightly left of centre) but it is officially claiming its European credentials. Le Figaro, the main right wing newspaper (equivalent to the Daily Telegraph), follows roughly the same line. If some of its commentators might be privately quite open to the “sovereignty first” argument, almost none have dared saying it publicly. Liberation, the main left wing newspaper, also is strikingly pro-European, with his influential and vocal Brussels correspondent Jean Quatremer often defending the EU (although he can be scathing against some decisions). As for the regional press (quite powerful in France, where the biggest selling newspaper is Ouest-France, distributed only in the North West of the country), it follows the same line.

On top of it, Brexit is not simply Britain’s problem. It has massive consequences for France, one of the founding members of the EU. It cannot simply be seen as a foreign affairs story. The survival of the European project is now at stake.

Last and certainly not least, the Brexit debate echoes deeply in France because of the rise of Marine Le Pen. The far-right leader, often polling around 30% for the May 2017 presidential election, wants France to withdraw from the Eurozone before organising a referendum on “Frexit”. For her, Brexit is a massive victory. On June 24, when the result was announced, she was one of the first to celebrate the “courage” of the British people.

All of that put together means that Brexit has been heavily scrutinised in France. Five months on, Florentin Collomp, Le Figaro London’s correspondent, says that he still spends close to 100% of his time on this topic. Tristan de Bourbon, a freelancer who works both for La Croix (a catholic newspaper, with a large readership) and L’Opinion (a newspaper promoting
economically liberal ideas—which means right wing in France), says he spends around 70% of his time on it. “La Croix did not ask for much coverage of British politics before Brexit. Now, we follow it all the time”, he adds. I, as City and British economy correspondent for Le Monde, still publish roughly one article out of two about Brexit. My colleague Philippe Bernard, Le Monde’s correspondent for politics and diplomatic affairs, writes three quarters of his stories on the subject.

Antoine Giniaux, Radio France’s recently appointed correspondent, who arrived in London in Septembre 2016, was surprised by the huge quantity of coverage his editors asked him to do about the Autumn Statement. Usually, this mid-year budget would probably justify a one-minute report for the news bulletin, with possibly a phone-in during one of the longer programme. This year, he was live on air several times and covered the event heavily for all the different outputs of Radio France (France Info, France Inter, France Culture and France Info television). “It was probably the most covered Autumn statement ever for Radio France”, he says.

The current coverage of Brexit is mostly factual. But its underlying tone tends to be negative. Stories so far have focused on the initial implosion of the British government, the battle for David Cameron’s succession, the internal fight in the Labour party, the complete lack of preparation of the British government, the risks for the economy… A lot has been written about the negative reactions of French and European people living in Britain, the rise of racist attacks, the trial of Jo Cox’s murderer… Much less has been written about the fact that people who casted their vote for Brexit seem pretty content with their vote five months on, and that the economy is holding up well so far.

“We live in London and we tend to meet relatively young people, says Loïc de la Mornais, France Televisions' correspondent in London. In our daily life, we therefore meet more people who supported Remain.” He emphasises the fact that he does travel extensively in Britain and does broadcast plenty of voices in favour of Brexit. But overall, French media have a gloomy tone about Brexit. Gloomy for Britain, but gloomy for Europe as well.

Arnaud Leparmentier, an influential columnist for Le Monde, with an extensive knowledge of European affairs—he used to be correspondent in Brussels and in Germany- recently wrote a piece with the headline “Brexit will be as costly as a divorce”. Without even going into the question of future trade agreements between the EU and Britain, he listed the many costs of the separation, i.e. who will pay British European civil servants’ pensions? How will the 27 EU members will share the bill of Britain’s contribution to the EU budget? What about
Britain’s funds invested in the European Investment Bank? Brexit “will be lose-lose”, he writes.

Vincent Coleen, London’s Les Echos (the main business newspaper) correspondent, also says that “everyone (in his paper) is against Brexit. “It a unanimous opinion. Everyone sees it as a bad news, both for Britain and France.”

Sometimes though, French media echo another perspective, describing Brexit as an opportunity for France to gain businesses. Paris’ offensive to “lay the red carpet” to companies based in Britain, especially big foreign banks, is a feature often written about. In part, it simply reflects the fact that French authorities have been very proactive about it. The different Paris local authorities have organised press conferences and launched marketing campaigns to lure investors, and the Prime Minister Manuel Valls has been vocal about it. Le Parisien recently covered it here, Les Echos here. This hope does not seem to be wildly shared by columnists, though.

If French media general tone has been negative, the readers and viewers have not necessarily agreed. Their comments and Twitter reactions have been really mixed. A large part has shared the gloom, believing that Britain made a historical mistake. But more and more, readers have been cheering Brexit. Often, it seems to be coming from people supporting the Front National, Marine Le Pen’s party. After all, they represent 30% of the voters.

As a correspondent in London, I have noticed a clear shift sometimes in late 2015. Before that, every story about the EU referendum was bringing two kind of comments. The first one was “if Britain wants to leave, let them go, we are fed up with them constantly trying to block the European project”. The second one was “they must be crazy”.

But a new strand of comments has now appeared, rising steadily during the last twelve months. In a nutshell, it is supporting the “courage” of Britain, who finally dares shutting the door on the EU. Every article warning of the economic dangers of Brexit invariably brings accusation of “propaganda”.

Loïc de la Mornais, from France Televisions, has had the same experience. “Recently, I said on air that over the long term, people who will suffer from Brexit might actually be the poorer ones, and not people working in the City of London. It provoked a lot of criticisms, from people accusing me of being a journalist disconnected from reality.” He adds that any story on Brexit invariably brings strong comments, be it on Twitter or by emails.

Finally, the election of Donald Trump might be a key turning point, although it is a bit too early to judge. Suddenly, Britain is not alone revolting against the establishment. French
media have drawn the same conclusion from both votes: the white working class, the losers of globalisation, needs to be listened to. The result of the EU referendum is less seen as Britain shooting itself in the foot, and more as a symptom of a deeper malaise. With the French presidential election campaign on the horizon, a victory by Marine Le Pen is now openly discussed as a real possibility. Not the likeliest one, but not to be discounted out of hand. This new perspective might change the coverage of Brexit in the future.

**Key reporters and columnists**

**Le Monde** (left of center, circulation 264,000 copies/day)

Arnaud Le Parmentier, columnist: he has been correspondent in Brussels and Germany and write regular columns, often dedicated to Brexit. Often appearing on TV and radio, he is influential. He is openly right-wing, which puts him in a minority at Le Monde.

Alain Frachon, columnist: he is a columnist specialised on world affairs and write more often about Syria and Donald Trump than Brexit, but he is influential as well.

Cécile Ducourtieux, Brussels correspondent.

Philippe Bernard, UK correspondent, politics

Eric Albert, UK correspondent, economics

**Le Figaro** (right wing, circulation 305,000)

Florentin Collomp, UK correspondent.

Jean-Jacques Mevelle, Brussels correspondent.

Nicolas Baverez, columnist: very focused on the economy, defending a Thatcherian shock for France, he has published very critical pieces on Theresa May and her lack of preparation regarding Brexit.

**Les Echos** (business newspaper, 127,000)

Vincent Coleen, UK correspondent

Gabriel Gresillon, Brussels correspondent (politics)
Derek Perrotte, Brussels correspondent (micro-economics)
Dominique Seux, deputy editor, columnist
Jean-Marc Vittori, columnist

Libération (left wing, circulation 77,000)
Sonia Stolper, UK correspondent
Jean Quatremer, Brussels correspondent. In Brussels, he is arguably the most influential French journalist. With a very large following on his blog and on Twitter, regularly intervening on French TV, he is more a columnist than a reporter. He has always considered Britain as a major obstacle to the European Union, and he now supports a hard line from the EU against Britain in the Brexit negotiations. He recently published a piece in English in the Guardian very critical of Boris Johnson.

La Croix (catholic, circulation 92,000)
Tristan de Bourbon, UK correspondent
Jean-Christophe Ploquin, columnist: world affairs columnist, he is very pro-European. Well connected in diplomatic and media circles.

L’Opinion
Tristan de Bourbon, UK correspondent
Luc de Barochez, columnist. He was one of the key figures in L’Opinion before leaving for Germany, where he now lives for personal reasons. He writes interesting columns about Brexit as seen from Germany, with a French twist.

France Télévisions
Loïc de la Mornais, UK correspondent
Valery Lerouge, Brussels correspondent

François Lenglet, columnist. Specialised in economics affairs, he is an influential thinker, and has predicted for many years the backlash against globalisation.

ENDS

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