

# How the laughing, irreverent Briton trumped fact-checking: A textual analysis of fake news in British newspaper stories about the EU

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## Abstract

After the British people voted for Brexit in June 2016, the role the media played was intensely debated. However, the research has focussed so far on the issues of fake news and biased reporting. This paper will argue that a focus on the role story telling played in persuading voters needs to complement the existing research. The paper builds on insights from political psychology that showed under which conditions misrepresentations of the truth prevail even after they have been debunked. It further uses Roland Barthes' definition of myth as "depoliticised speech" and Jack Lule's analysis of archetypal mythologies in news stories to establish the effectiveness of the myth of the laughing, irreverent Briton in fake news stories on the EU in British newspapers, the so-called Euro-myths. This insight is highly relevant for the teaching of journalism: Journalism students need to learn both: Fact-checking and to understand why debunked lies prevail.

# Introduction

The political campaigns in the run-up to the British EU referendum in June 2016 were riddled with falsehoods, and the media coverage of this referendum was plagued by bias and distortion (Jackson, Thorson, and Wring 2016; Moore and Ramsay 2017; Levy, Billur, and Bironzo 2017).

Various fact checking initiatives attempted to counter the deceits. However, the lies didn't disappear after they were exposed. The claim that after leaving the EU the British government could spend £350m per week on the National Health Service is just the most prominent example. The Office for National Statistics twice rejected it as "misleading" (Office for National Statistics 2017), but still it remained influential on the vote for Brexit (Peat 2017; Cummings 2017).

Research in political psychology has shown that misperceptions indeed survive and remain politically influential even after they have been debunked (for an overview see Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017). The explanation can be found in inherent psychological needs.

People negotiate their directional preferences, that is their political persuasions, attitudes and beliefs, against their need for truth. Directional preferences may even reinforce the influence of misperceptions after their falsehood has been exposed (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017, p. 134).

The political adviser and campaigner Alex Evans in his recent book *The Myth Gap* (2017) describes the same phenomenon looking at the effectiveness of political campaigns.

Using the climate change campaign of the early noughties as an example, he shows that the truth of facts was by far less effective than false myths that told a coherent story (Evans 2017, pp. 57).

This paper builds on the research into political psychology and Evans' insights as a campaigner and aims to show that the British Eurosceptic media relied on a specific kind of storytelling as an instrument to create stories that resonate with the myth of British greatness.

Thereby the paper reflects the scholarly discussion of news stories as mythical tales. In this context the word 'myth' does not denote an invented, untruthful tale, but "a sacred, societal story that draws from archetypal figures and forms to offer exemplary models for human life" (Lule 2001, p. 15). Lule names archetypal figures like "the hero", "the trickster", or "the good mother", or story-archetypes like "the flood". I use the word "myth" in an analogue way to describe the narration of a societal identity.

Making this national identity myth resonate in news stories or comments, I will argue, led and still leads target audiences to discount facts and the exposure of lies.

I will analyse a sample of fake stories that go back about a quarter of a century and demonstrate how the manipulation and distortion of news stories on the EU has employed a specific kind of story telling since decades. It is the predominantly British media genre of misleading, distorting or outright false news stories about alleged EU regulation. The European Commission has dedicated its own blog to listing and debunking these stories which they call "Euromyths".<sup>1</sup> In this context the word "myths" is indeed used in the sense of "untrue story". For a clear distinction, I will speak of "myth" exclusively in the described sense of an archetypal story that taps into a socio-cultural identity. When I speak of the untrue British reports of EU regulation I will use the word "Euromyths".

The genre of the Euromyths – famous examples are the alleged bans of bent bananas<sup>2</sup> or curved cucumbers<sup>3</sup> by the EU – started in the early 1990s<sup>4</sup> and targeted at European legislation by ridiculing it as preposterous, absurd, and often pompous. The fake stories aspired to be witty, irreverent, and outrageous. For readers, I will argue, this style evoked the popular writing of P.G. Woodhouse, who represents a conservative British identity. The Euromyths thus resonated with their target audience because these readers recognised the national myth of a witty, irreverent people ready to resist a bully. As the myth echoed with the audience they were prepared to ignore the falsehood of the stories despite the many attempts to debunk the untrue claims. In fact, the British genre of the Euromyth proved so successful that the EU actively tried to counter them with often lengthy corrections on their dedicated website<sup>5</sup>. Tellingly, these attempts at putting the facts straight utterly failed, proving to be nothing but another exercise of fact-checking without much consequence.

I will suggest that when criticising "fake news" and the reporting of falsehoods it is not enough to respond with fact-checking. Instead, we need to analyse the tools of storytelling and myth-creating to expose a deeper-seated mendacity that is persuasive because it resonates with national myths. Falsehood in news reporting is not limited to the untrue representation of facts. The distortion of news becomes relevant through its impact which in turn is a function of how the story is told.

# Literature Review

News as a narrative has been discussed by media scholars since the 1970s (for an overview see Buozis and Creech 2017). Bird and Dardenne (1988) analysed news as mythological stories that provided comfort by creating a meaningful reality: “Myth reassures by telling tales that explain [...] phenomena and provide acceptable answers; myth does not necessarily reflect an objective reality, but builds a world of its own” (Bird and Dardenne 1988, p. 70). Nossek and Berkowitz (2006, p. 692) stressed that by choosing the “appropriate mythical narratives” which conform with societal conventions journalists “reify the dominant shaping of society”. Journalists, they argued, create news stories following as well as reaffirming cultural imprints: “As both a part of the culture and as storytellers for that culture, journalists construct stories based on narrative conventions that are culturally resonant for themselves and their audiences” (Nossek and Berkowitz 2006, pp. 692-693).

These views go back to the concepts of cultural theory that reflected on how language, texts, and specifically news texts “represent” historical, political, social, and economical conditions (Hall 1982; Hall, Evans, and Nixon 1997), and how news narratives construct ideology and power within societies (Carey 1989), because they “participate in the construction, maintenance, and dissemination of cultural myths” (Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2009, p. 956). Or, as Buozis and Creech (2017, p. 5) put it: “news texts and narratives, when viewed as cultural artifacts, reveal the relationship between truth and power, tied to specific historical and cultural contexts”.

Roland Barthes (1972) unveiled the ideological direction of myth within the “bourgeois society” by showing it to be “depoliticized speech”:

*“just as bourgeois ideology is defined by the abandonment of the name bourgeois, so myth is defined by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they were once made” (Barthes 1972, p. 255).*

Myth, according to Barthes, unfolds its ideological power because it pretends to tell stories that are natural rather than historical:

*“In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organises a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves” (Barthes 1972, p. 256).*

Barthes recognised a deep human need for the simplicity and clarity that myth offers, even comparing it to the Freudian pleasure principle as “the clarity principle of mythological humanity [...]: its clarity is euphoric” (ibid.).

Lule (2001) confirmed this need for simplicity and clarity from the journalists’ perspective. His book about archetypal myths in news reporting set off by describing Lule’s own difficulties as a young news reporter when writing an article about a citizens’ protest against a corner shop that sold drugs. Eventually he discovered what would transform the events into a story: The retelling of the myth of the archetypal victim-figure (Lule 2001, p. 13). Inspired by his own experience, Lule traced a number of mythical archetypes (hero, trickster, good mother, and flood among them) in news reports in the *New York Times*. Journalists, he concluded, “can be seen as powerful mythmakers, as State Scribes not unlike Homer and Pindar, who tell us, daily, stories at the very heart of human life” (Lule 2001, p. 187). Like Stuart Hall (1982) Lule suggested that mythical news tales fulfil a dialectical function within societies: “these stories shape, but are also shaped by, the times in which they are told” (Lule 2001, p. 187). Like Hall or similarly Roland Barthes Lule also analysed the ideological implication of myth (pp.191-193).

However, the literature on news stories as myth has not yet looked at the connection between mythical narratives and fake news. I will argue that news stories, by tapping into a myth that reaffirms political and cultural beliefs, immunise themselves against critical fact checking scrutiny. I will therefore suggest that the critique of fake news needs to go beyond fact checking and deconstruct the underlying myths that immunise a target audience against the debunking of the falsity.

## Methodology

This paper starts with the observation that fact checking alone is not a sufficient remedy against fake

news. Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler (2017) give an overview over research into misperceptions in politics and what makes them endure beyond their debunking. They quote research that suggest that the believe in the correctness of factual information about highly salient issues like health care, the Iraq War, or immigration depends on directional preferences (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017, p. 131). Research also suggests that the misperceptions remain politically influential after they have been debunked (ibid.).

Furthermore, Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler discuss research that investigates how directional preferences are negotiated against accuracy motivations. These studies show, they conclude, that “people’s interpretation of factual information depends on whether the information reinforces or contradicts directional preferences” (2017, p.133). In addition, the authors establish, “identity threat” motivates people to let their beliefs prevail over their need for accuracy:

*“Political facts often implicate long-standing, personally important identities such as partisanship [...]. If these facts are perceived as sufficiently threatening to one’s identity or worldview, people may seek to resist them” (ibid.).*

Along this line of research, I will ask which myth fake news stories transport. The concept of ‘myth’, as seen when discussing the scholarly literature, is adapted to capture beliefs that are fundamental for the personal or social identity of people and which therefore help to explain how fake news stories that draw on identity myth can prevail against the need for factual accuracy. Using textual analysis as a method of discourse theory I will establish the elements of Euromyth news stories that evoke the myth of the great, witty, and irreverent British nation. I will take P.G Wodehouse as a reference point for this myth, an author who is generally deemed to be “quintessentially English” ( e.g. McCrum 2002; Tharoor 2002; Rees 2013), and whose evocation of the Edwardian epoch has been seen as part of “a defining nineteenth-century narrative of modern Britishness” (Morra 2013, 23).

The body of texts I use has been collected by the Representation of the European Commission in the UK since 1992. They are currently held in boxes at the office of the representation in 32 Smith Square, London. The boxes contain newspaper cuttings, copies of newspaper articles, and copies and originals of, in some cases, lengthy communications between the EU Commission in Brussels, the London office, and various interested parties.

From October 1996 the UK Representation regularly issued a “Press Watch” newsletter that collected false and misleading articles<sup>6</sup>. The archive of newspaper cuttings and copies has not been collated systematically. Especially in the early boxes the publication date of the cutting or copy is often missing. In addition, the European Commission has collected an alphabetical list of the falsehoods on its own dedicated website (<http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/euromyths-a-z-index/>). However, this website does not include links to the articles it refers to, and usually does not even cite the original article that contained the error. Therefore the origin of the alleged Euromyth could not always be established. In some cases, when the original article was neither included in the archive boxes at the UK Representation in London nor detailed on the European Commission blog site, it could be traced at other libraries (as the British Library). In other cases efforts to establish the original source proved fruitless.

Consequently, the articles I will analyse in this paper represent a random sample.

From this sample, I will select seven different Euromyths from the early years after the UK Representation of the European Commission started to collect them. Although the number of analysed articles is limited, it will still allow the coherent picture of a British myth that proved to be influential over decades and might contribute to understanding the 2016 EU referendum campaign and its outcome.

## Analysis

### Bent cucumbers

The claim that Brussels demands cucumbers to be grown without a curve is among the earliest and most persistent Euromyths. Under the headline “Brussels sprouts the curve-free cucumber” Richard Pendlebury reports in the *Daily Mail* in May 1993: “We laughed when they tried to ban prawn-flavoured crisps and the green colouring in mushy peas. Now in a directive the late Frankie Howerd would have loved, Eurocrats want to iron out the kinks in British cucumbers.” (Daily Mail, 7 May, 1993).

The intro to the news story contains already many markers of the myth of the great, witty, and irreverent British nation. It starts with a laugh, it alludes to another absurdity (incidentally another Euro-myth, see below): the attempt to ban prawn-flavoured crisps, and it mentions the star comedian Frankie Howerd as comparison, who had died just about a year before the publication of this article, having experienced the height of his career during the 1950s and 60s. The article continues in this comical tone, claiming that “Eurocrats” want to “iron out” unwanted “kinks”, that under EU rule cucumbers will not be allowed to “droop”, and that “even a slight deviation” would be considered “vegetably incorrect”.

The European Commission blog rejected the claim unequivocally:

*“curved cucumbers are not banned: excessively curved cucumbers are in fact unusual and they simply have to be packed separately, and graded ‘Class III’. Consequently they are often cheaper than straight cucumbers: this is actually a standard procedure for other types of products which are not perfect but whose consumption quality is in no way questionable”* (<http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/quality-standards-for-apples/>).

It could be argued that the rest of the report is baseless before the background of this factual rebuke: The secretary of the Lea Valley Growers’ Association who is quoted to explain that one “can never get 100 per cent straight cumpers”, or the spokesman for the National Farmers’ Union who “was surprised that even more cucumber regulation was being considered” (Daily Mail, 7 May, 1993). Neither did an EU regulation require to grow 100 per cent straight cucumbers, nor did the Commission issue a new regulation to that effect. Still, the representatives of the British farming community, including a cucumber grower, who the article quotes with the question “Am I allowed to laugh?”, are cast in the role of irreverent objectors who unmask the alleged rule as equally impossible and absurd, and refuse to obey.

British irreverence is further displayed by a language with sexual overtones that playfully makes use of double meanings. “Go straight or else, EC warns growers”, is how the subhead rephrases the alleged regulation. The curves that a cucumber grows naturally are called “kinky”. Irreverent ridicule is also demonstrated in the image of the “Ministry of Agriculture inspectors, stalking New Covent Garden, tape measures at the ready”.

Finally, the article stresses British exceptionalism. The alleged regulation is intended, as the reporter claims, to ban “British cucumbers” – when obviously any EU regulation would apply to all member states. British cucumber growers, as the article lets the managing director of a wholesaler explain further on, are different from the Dutch because British growers’ “produce is wonkier than that of the Dutch”.

To sum it up: Pendlebury’s news report in the *Daily Mail* displays a spirit of ridicule and irreverence. It thus taps into a British identity myth showing the capacity to stand up to authority by unmasking its absurdity. Laughter and exceptionalism are the British traits that are pitched against a bureaucratic EU authority. It runs in the same mould as the “quintessentially English” farcical tone perfected by P. G. Wodehouse.

The cucumber-article, it needs to be emphasised, is not a comment or a column, but a news story. At the end of the news report it points to the accompanying comment.

The article certainly mixes fact and opinion and thus breaches the editor’s code.

Nevertheless it is framed as a news story and is intended to be read as one. As a news story it will be have been read as fact and will have spread its influence accordingly<sup>7</sup>. The alleged ban of curved cucumbers evidently survived its debunking and kept being repeated<sup>8</sup>.

## Seaside postcards

British laughter is also set against EU bureaucracy in a news story the *Daily Mirror* published in May 1993 with the heading “Sauce! EC set to ban seaside postcards” (Daily Mirror, 3 May, 1993). The story claims that: “The sex watchdogs of Brussels are bidding to stamp out a traditional bit of British seaside fun – the saucy postcard.” As in the cucumber story, the theme of sex and of humour pervade this article, if in a less subtle way. Whereas the “Eurocrats” don’t find it “funny at all” and “sniff” as a way of talking (“They [the postcards] are ‘sexist and offensive to women,’ sniff the Eurocrats”), on the British side “generations of holidaymakers laugh”, and resistance against the alleged ban comes from “that bastion of the British belly laugh – Blackpool” (Daily Mirror, 3 May, 1993).

Again, the story is pure fabrication. The Euro-myths blog states: “This is entirely untrue. To quote Bruno DeThomas, Spokesman, ‘this story is absurd and contains no truth whatsoever’. The European Commission has no competence in these fields, as all measures are non-binding. Thus it has not put forward any direc-

tives (and there is no EC legislation) in the fields of Sexual Harassment and Sexual Discrimination” (<http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/ec-to-ban-sexist-saucy-seaside-postcards/>). Still, resistance against the alleged threat comes in form of a quote from “tourism officer John Hall”: “They’re crazy – how can you set down standards for a sense of humour?”. Against the alleged ban “on the grounds of sexism” the same John “hit back” claiming that mostly women bought the cards. John is also quoted to state British exceptionalism: “What is funny in Blackpool, Scarborough and Brighton may not be funny in Belgium or France.” In addition, the story mentions “heritage” when pointing out that “generations of holidaymakers” laughed about the postcards, and again in a quote from John: “saucy postcards are as much part of our seaside heritage as our piers and promenades” (Daily Mirror, 3 May, 1993).

Laughter, irreverent resistance, British exceptionalism, and tradition are the elements of the British identity myth that the *Daily Mirror* news story evokes. As in the previously analysed *Daily Mail* news story a sexual theme is used to underline British irreverence.

## Condoms

The sexual theme comes to the fore in a news story the *Daily Star* published in October 1994 under the headline “Euro squeezed” with the sub head “Brits ‘too big’ for 5 inch EC condom”. The story is presented as an “exclusive”.

In fact, the story about the alleged dictate of inadequately sized condoms was widely reported at the time, not only in the British press. The archive at the UK Representation of the European Commission holds various papers that document the debate, including a written question by the Dutch MEP Nel van Dijk concerning the “European standard for condoms (EN 600)” that refers to a report by the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* of 18 October 1993 (“Written Question E-3379/93”, machine written script without date) and the answer given by Martin Bangemann “on behalf of the Commission” (machine typed script without date, headed by the reference number “QXW3379/93EN”). In his answer, Bangemann, at the time EU Commissioner for the internal market and industrial affairs, points out that the:

*“Commission is aware of the media interest in the standardisation activity on condoms within the European standards body CEN. The information provided in some articles is quite selective and does not focus upon the real subject of this standardisation activity.”*

Bangemann continues that “the standards [...] will not have a compulsory nature” (ibid.). On its Euro-myths blog the European Commission states:

*“Any standardisation work in the area of condoms concentrates on quality and not on length. In 1991 the European Commission did request CEN, the European standards body, to come up with European safety standards for condoms. However these were always intended to be voluntary, and as such derogations are really not necessary”* (<http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/eu-to-push-for-standard-condom.size/>).

The news story in the *Daily Express*, however, claims that “Eurocrats have been cut down to size – after under-estimating the British manhood” (Daily Star, 28 October, 1994).

The story is, unsurprisingly, brimmed with sexually loaded puns. It claims that the European Commission standardised the condom size “obviously to suit its smaller member countries”.

An “EC official” is quoted saying that “the issue will arouse a lot of passion”. The story ends on the name of the Dutch Prime Minister: “Wim Kok” – an obvious allusion to “cock”.

As before, the theme of laughter (“a crackpot scheme”) and British exceptionalism feature also in this news story. The latter in the form of boasting “the British manhood”, which to submit to standardized condoms “is an insult to thousands of Brits”, as the allegedly prescribed length were “not big enough for many” (Daily Star, 28 October, 1994).

## Prawn cocktail flavoured crisps

The Euro-myths that are reported as facts in false news stories often survived their debunking and kept being repeated as casual side remarks in comments, columns or sketches. Boris Johnson’s sketch for the *Daily Telegraph*, published on 15 January 1998, under the headline “Down went the thumbs, like a mob of Romans at a circus”. Johnson deplores that European parliamentarians in Strassbourg “fucked” a vote against the EU Commissioners Martin Bangemann and Edith Cresson. Johnson introduces Bangemann as “the 18-stone German who attempted to abolish the prawn cocktail crisp and promulgated the Euro-condom”

(Daily Telegraph, 15 January, 1999). The claim that Bangemann promoted the “Euro-condom” has been shown to be false in the previous analysis. That he allegedly tried to ban prawn cocktail flavoured crisps is listed among the Euromyths on the EC blog:

*“There has never been any intention of the sort. In the process of drafting a directive to reconcile different national rules on the amounts of sweeteners and flavourings in different foods, the respective national Governments were asked to provide the Commission with information about these areas. Unfortunately UK negotiators overlooked the effect on the production of specially flavoured crisps. When the trade pointed this out the list was later amended”* (<http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/ec-to-ban-prawn-cocktail-crisps/>).

Regrettably, the website does not link to the source of this claim (it only dates it on 16 January 1993), nor does the archive at the UK Representation contain a news story about the alleged end to prawn cocktail crisps. Johnsons aside remark in his sketch, however, demonstrates how a false story is kept alive and given the aura of a fact.

## Hunters required to carry a fridge.

A similar case of casually claiming as fact what is fiction provides Christopher Booker’s column in the *Sunday Telegraph* of 20 December 1992. Booker, a co-founder of and later regular contributor to the satirical magazine *Private Eye*, begins his column with a case of alleged bureaucracy by the then European Economic Community which, he says, he might have found “amusing” at the beginning of the year:

*“there was something called the EEC Wild Game Meat Directive, which proposes in draft form that every deer shot to be eaten should be inspected by a vet and refrigerated ‘at point of kill’. It would have seemed yet another wonderful example of Euro-lunacy that these Brussels officials could seriously insist on stalkers carrying a fridge up a 3,000ft Scottish mountain, and paying for a trained vet to accompany them”* (*Daily Telegraph*, 20 December, 1992).

The Euromyths blog clarifies that Booker misunderstood:

*“This directive (DIR 92/45/CEE, 16.6.92), which is due to take effect as from 1.1.1994, will not have any bearing on casual hunters. It is concerned with game meat hunted for commercial ends and establishes veterinary norms that apply equally to imported game meat from third countries. The claim that a fridge will need to be hauled up the mountainside along with a personal vet every time one goes hunting is absurd. Professional hunters will have twelve hours to deliver their game to a valid processing plant and it is only large scale hunting that will call for evisceration immediately after being put to death”* (<http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/hunters-to-be-required-to-carry-a-fridge-and-be-accompanied-by-a-vet/>).

Booker’s reading of the directive follows the model of farcical exaggeration that has been perfected by P. G. Wodehouse. Again ridicule is used as a means of irreverent objection against the “amusing” “lunacy” of the European institutions.

## Straight rhubarb

In June 1996, *The Sun* published a news story claiming that the EU required rhubarb to have straight stalks: “Farmers will have to throw away crooked stalks under barmy new rules” (*The Sun*, 24 June, 1996). The Euromyths blog flatly denies this to be true: “The European Union has never planned to set, or recommend, marketing rules for rhubarb” (<http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/british-rhubarb-to-be-straight/>).

The story shows again the by now familiar markers of irreverent laughter. The heading displays a funny wordplay (alluding to the character Roo of A. A. Milne’s classic “Winnie-the-Pooh”): “Rhu must be barmy”, and “Euro chiefs” are called “crackpot”. As before, the news story presents quotes against the non-existing directive that drum up resistance: “Last night the Asda supermarket chain slammed the plan and stormed: ‘Hands off our rhubarb.’”. The story also again sets British exceptionalism against the alleged measure by the EU. ASDA, it claims “will launch a campaign to save British rhubarb in its 207 stores, with Union Jacks flying next to displays” (*The Sun*, 24 June, 1996). Furthermore, the story repeats previous Euromyths, including the alleged ban of bent bananas<sup>9</sup> and cucumbers.

The rhubarb story is one of many food-based Euromyths. In these brief news stories, often a typical British food product or tradition is claimed to be in danger from EU regulation. Examples include the British brandy butter (“Britons have ladling it and lapping it up for 125 years. But now, under European Commission regulations, the sale of traditional brandy butter is to be banned.” [Daily Mail, 21 June, 1998])<sup>10</sup> and the Navy tradition of stirring up Christmas pudding with oars (“A Royal Navy tradition has been sunk by

Brussels bureaucrats.” [Daily Mail, 14 November, 1992)]<sup>11</sup>. The briefness of these news stories – barely more than nibs – is part of the myth creation. Similar to the casual remarks in Johnson’s sketch and Booker’s column, these short news stories are asides within the multitude of news stories. They are confirmations of a familiar type: The laughing, irreverent Briton holding up British tradition against a humourless authority. Laughter and defiance win as they unmask the absurdity behind the authority.

## Hitler’s oaks

In November 1994, the *Independent on Sunday* ran a two-column news piece by Richard D. North under the headline “Hitler law used against UK oaks” (Independent on Sunday, 20 November, 1994). The story claims that an EU “law” that “required nursery-men to breed only from perfect and pure-bred examples” originated in a law that was drawn up in Nazi Germany in 1934.

The story was widely covered in the British press. The archive at the UK Representation of the European Commission contains six further articles on the topic, only a few of them include date and publication. The *Sunday Express* has the most extreme take: “Oaks at risk from Hitler” it states in the headline and goes on to claim that the “directive has forced seed merchants to import tons of acorns from Eastern Europe while British acorns go uncollected” (Sunday Express, 20 November, 1994). The *Daily Mail* slightly more cautiously doesn’t claim coercion but just discriminatory classification: “Millions of acorns are now being imported from Eastern Europe because many of our own have been branded as inadequate by Brussels” (Daily Mail, 16 November, 1994).

The European Commission again refutes these claims. On its Euromyths blog it states:

*“The directive in question goes back to 1966, and was revised in 1971. Covering the marketing of certain seeds, including oak, and their external characteristics, the former sets up certain quality conditions but is not discriminatory against the UK or any other Member State (Directive 66/404/EEC, OJ L125 of 11/7/66). The latter (Directive 71/161/EEC, Official Journal L87 of 17/4/71) ... The Directive was made to be very flexible; its purpose being to enable someone who wants to grow straight trees for harvesting know that they are getting the product they want. However neither the EU nor the relevant UK legislation obliges anyone to get their acorns from a registered source”* (<http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/racially-pure-english-oaks/>).

It doesn’t clarify whether the directive of 1966 draws on a 1934 German law.

What is interesting in the context of myth creation is the absence of laughter in the articles on the threat to the English oak. Instead, all articles carry a pronounced - in the case of the Mail belligerent - nationalist theme. The *Daily Mail* doesn’t mention Hitler or the alleged origin of the directive from a Nazi law. However, it includes a side bar on how oak “has come to symbolise English stout heartedness”. The text mentions that the English ships which sailed against the Spanish Armada “were native oak to their core and held steadfast”. It quotes a National Maritime Museum spokesman who points out that oak “has been the building timber for English warships and led many to victory”. It ends on citing the anthem of the Royal Navy “Heart of Oak” by “patriot David Garrick”, and the first, best known, lines of Rudyard Kipling’s “Tree Song” (Daily Mail, 16 November, 1994).

The *Sunday Express* calls “Adolf Hitler [...] the culprit behind a controversial EU ruling” and quotes a “leading tree expert” claiming that “the British countryside is being shaped by a discredited law based on Nazi ideology intended to keep German forests ‘racially pure’” (Sunday Express, 20 November, 1994). Similarly, the *Independent on Sunday* expands on the Nazi theme when it alleges that the directive was “following the racial perfectionism of the original German law” and sets the German “perfectionism” against “Britain, where most stands [of trees] are a hybrid of at least two main species of oak [...] and where heavy use for timber has combined with wind, squirrels and rabbits to ensure that many of our remaining fine old oaks look more characterful than perfect” (Independent on Sunday, 20 November, 1994).

The nationalist theme creates an earnest version of the same myth that the previously analysed news stories produced: The mythical figure of the defiant Briton who is exceptional and refuses to bow to (absurd) authority.

## Conclusion and Discussion

The textual analysis looked at seven different Euromyths and how they are presented in news stories. The

analysis revealed that the Euromyths news stories display recurrent themes: ridicule and laughter, irreverence and defiance, British exceptionalism, and the capacity to unmask and stand up to non-sensical rules. In the last analysed case, the stories about the alleged danger to British oak trees, the laughter is replaced by a nationalistic theme.

The Euromyths news stories, it can be concluded, create the persisting myth of the (mostly) laughing, irreverent Briton holding up British exceptionalism against a humourless authority. Laughter and defiance win as they unmask the absurdity behind the authority.

## Where laughter fails British greatness takes its place.

The myth of the laughing, irreverent Briton is a myth in Lule's sense as it makes "the specific content of a news story [...] in large measure irrelevant" (Lule 2001, p. 195). The recurring themes confirm a myth of British identity that remains unaltered, independent of the actual political or historical situation. The myth of the laughing, irreverent Briton is therefore "depoliticised speech" as Barthes described it: "Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact" (Barthes 1972, pp. 255-256). Myth in this sense is not politically irrelevant. To the contrary. It is only removed from the political debate to render it unassailable. As Barthes explains: "Men do not have with myth a relationship based on truth but on use: they depoliticize according to their needs" (197, p. 257). The use of myth, however, is political. Consequently, as Barthes writes, the "unveiling" of myth is "a political act: founded on a responsible idea of language, mythology thereby postulates the freedom of the latter" (1972, p. 271).

At this point the circle closes with political psychology: myth formulates the directional preferences that overrides the need for factual accuracy. The myth of the laughing irreverent Briton reaffirms the belief in Britain's exceptional greatness and therefore overrides the attempts at fact-checking the Euromyths. I therefore argue that a textual analysis of mythical story telling needs to complement fact-checking. This is as relevant for the practice of journalism as it is to its teaching. When we teach fact-checking at journalism schools we also need to sensitize journalism students to the ways news stories are told and how they create myth.

There are, of course, limitations to the research this paper has presented. Most of all, the random selection of the analysed articles must remain unsatisfactory. A more comprehensive data base that tries to trace all sources of the Euromyths listed on the dedicated European commission website would be desirable. Beyond this, further research would need to establish how well the Euromyths list reflects the coverage of EU issues in the British media.

Furthermore, the textual analysis of news stories should be complemented with audience research that tries to establish how influential in fact the Euromyths news stories have been. *The Economist* used the list of the debunked Euromyths to visualise in a chart the time of high and low publication rate of Euromyths news stories. The chart seems to show that the frequency of Euromyths was higher around the time when the EU was particularly controversially debated within the Conservative party (The Economist Data Team 2016). It also shows that the number of Euromyths stories peaked in 2013, the year in which then prime minister David Cameron announced that his government would hold a referendum on the British EU membership. However, to establish the influence of fake EU news stories with any certainty more research is needed.

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(Endnotes)-----

1 <http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/euomyths-a-z-index/>

2 <http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/bananas-and-Brussels/>

3 <http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/quality-standards-for-apples/>

4 4 It was created, according to the witness of several contemporary Brussels based UK correspondents, by the then Brussels correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*, Boris Johnson. Newly sent to Brussels, Johnson quickly began to make his name by distorting and misrepresenting European legislation, regulation or just gossip (Helm, 1995; Gimson, 2007; pp. 98-99; Purnell, 2011, pp. 115-128; Fletcher, 2016).

5 <http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/euomyths-a-z-index/>

6 The first “Press Watch” newsletter was published on 2 October 1996. It started with a heading explaining its purpose: “After almost a quarter of a century of UK membership of the European Community, the media continues to pump out myths and inaccuracies. Some newspapers are reluctant to publish corrections, and when they do they never give them the prominence of the original offending story. In an effort to redress the balance we present here some recent examples. The aim is to make it a regular publication, which will be distributed to ministers, MPs, Whitehall departments, the Press Complaints Commission, other national organisations and newspapers themselves” (The European Commission 1996). The Press Watch newsletters were published initially in very irregular intervals with months, on one occasion even more than a year, between them, which later changed to a more regular about quarterly publication. Thus the second Press Watch newsletter appeared in February 1997, the third in April 1998, a fourth on in July 1998, a fifth in November 1998, a sixth in March 1999, and so on.

7 From my own experience covering the Brexit fall out as a reporter for the German website *Zeit online*, I have anecdotal evidence that the cucumber Euomyth is influential up to now. For example, in a recent interview (conducted in July 2017) an ardent Remainer told me the only reason for leaving the EU she could understand was sovereignty because she wanted an end to absurd EU rules such as banning curved cucumbers (Henkel, 2017).

8 For example in *The Sun* in March 1998: “Cucumbers have to be straight and must not arch more than 10mm for every 10mm of their length so people can tell how many are in a box” was listed under “some of the EU’s dafter food laws (*The Sun*, 4 March, 1998).

9 The Euomyths blog refutes this claim with a similar argument as in the case of the alleged ban of curved cucumbers: “Truth: Yes ... and no. Curved bananas have not been banned. In fact, as with the supposed banning of curved cucumbers, the Commission regulation classifies bananas according to quality and size for the sake of easing the trade of bananas internationally” (<http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/bananas-andbrussels/>)

10 The Euomyths blog clarifies that the regulation concerns a clear naming of butter products and that exemption have been made for British butter products with alcoholic content to allow for a lower amount of milk and fat (<http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/brandy-butter/>).

11 The Euomyths blog rejects the claim: “There is no truth at all in this accusation. The framework directive on materials in contact with foodstuffs (89/109/CEE – L40 of 1989) merely states that such materials should not “transfer their constituents to foodstuffs in quantities which could endanger human health or bring about an unacceptable change in the composition of the foodstuffs” (<http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/eu-banswooden-oars-for-stirring-the-christmas-pudding/>).