

Course on *The European Union and the Politics of Migration*

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## How British media portrayed migration from the EU in the context of Brexit

**Abstract:** In this paper, I explore how British media portray immigration from the EU and how that relates to the Brexit decision. I base my arguments from a range of empirical research that analyzed British media's portrayal of EU immigration prior to the Brexit vote. In the first part, I analyze how British media portrayed the facts of immigration. In the second half, I analyze how British media interpreted implications of EU immigration. I found that British media plays more than a passive role in presenting facts and viewpoints in the Brexit debate, but is active in shaping facts, selectively reporting on the immigration issue and imposing its own analytical frames in explaining the implications of immigration. British media highlighted the massive scale and negative consequences of EU immigration. It most often presents EU immigrants as abusing British welfare system and the EU as eroding British sovereignty. Understanding how the British media influenced public understanding and opinion about EU immigration in relation to British people's decision to leave the EU has can reveal how the media interacts with public opinion and political reality more generally and will be insightful for future political campaigns.

### **Introduction**

### **Background**

Britons voted in a referendum on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2016 to leave the EU (May, 2017). The decision came as a surprise as many polls prior to the referendum predicted a remain vote (May, 2017). Such result has prompted much research as to why and how this decision happened. One important factor that has been indicated is concern for immigration from the EU (Pencheva, 2019). Moreover, the media has been indicated to be one of the major sources that Britons obtain information about immigration (van Klingeren et al., 2015 cited in Allen, 2016). Therefore, media's portrayal of immigration is an important factor to investigate in understanding why Britons voted to leave the EU. Such investigation also reveals the role of media in directing public discourse and influencing real-life politics.

## **Literature Review**

This paper summarizes and presents findings from a range of empirical sources that researched on British media' portrayal of EU immigration leading up to the referendum. The below sources all analyzed contents from a large sample of media reports from across the political spectrum across different time periods. Balch & Balabanova (2017) investigated the link between the role of EU portrayed in the media and how that informed public's view on immigration. They found that the EU is predominantly portrayed in a legal framework that emphasizes its' power dominance over Britain rather than in an economic lens where costs and benefits are compared or as a political arena where negotiations take place (Balch & Balabanova, 2017). They also found that the media emphasized less on economic nationalism and more on welfare abuse when discussing immigration from the EU (Balch & Balabanova, 2017). Pencheva (2019) found that facts are often distorted, and hypothetical claims were made in the media' discussion of EU immigration. Allen (2016) researched media mentioning of "immigration" in the 10-year period before the Brexit referendum. He found that the frequency of mentioning immigration correlates to both actual immigration figures and public events like the 2010 Conservative election promise to reduce immigration (Allen, 2016). He also found that immigration is mostly mentioned in terms of scale and less so in legality (Allen, 2016). May (2017) reported on Boris' (2017) report. She points out that immigration was highly reported by the "leave" campaign and is presented in mostly negative terms (May, 2017). Watson (2018) focused on epistemic rights violation in British media in their discussion of EU immigration and raised instances of false-information, withholding information and agenda-setting in the media.

## **Research Question**

My research question is how British media portrayed immigration from the EU in the context of Brexit. I will analyze first how British media presented facts related to EU immigration and secondly, how they frame the consequences of EU immigration.

## **Research Findings**

### **Part1: How the media presented facts**

The following presents different findings on how the British media presented facts related to EU immigration. I first discuss media mentioning of “immigration” which has been on an increasing trend and increased dramatically prior to the referendum vote. Then I discuss the media’s emphasis on the large scale and negative consequences of EU immigration. After that I present some examples of falsehood and hypothetical claims perpetrated by the media. Lastly I discuss the media’s relatively few and incomplete mentioning of the EU and its’ deliberation process concerning immigration policies.

#### **1. Heightened media exposure**

The media has increasingly reported on EU immigration since 2012 and more dramatically so immediately prior to the Brexit referendum. Boris (2017 cited in May, 2017) found that mentioning of immigration in referendum-related articles increased from 25% in the first six weeks of the Brexit campaign to 40% in the last four weeks of the campaign. This finding shows that the media increasingly present EU immigration as a deterministic factor as to whether Britain should stay in the EU. Going back further from the referendum, mentioning of immigration in newspapers has already been on the rise since 2012 and has doubled by 2014 (Allen, 2016). This increase is found to correlate with the increase of immigration applications (Allen, 2016). As a result, immigration became a top issue in public

opinion in 2014 according to Ipsos MORI's poll that asks British people to "name the most important issue facing the country" (Allen, 2016.). Allen (2016) also showed that although immigrant application level in 2006 is as high as that in 2014, media mentioning of "immigration" is significantly higher in 2014, he reasoned that the immigration issue only gained public salience after the 2010 Conservative campaign that calls for reducing immigration. Although the referendum is a factor leading to higher exposure of immigration issues, showing that the immigration topic is portrayed by the media as highly relevant to the decision for Britain to stay or leave the EU, there are other factors like the increase in actual immigration rate and prior political campaigns that generated such media exposure.

## **2. Negative reports**

It is found that British media mostly reports on the negative consequences of EU immigration in the UK and such reports are mostly made by media that supports leaving the EU like the Daily Mail, the Daily Telegraph, and the Daily Express (Boris, 2017 cited in May, 2017). Although researchers have pointed out that EU migrants to the UK boosts salary for British workers, does not compromise job opportunities, have a lower unemployment rate and rely less on welfare than British workers (Springford, 2013; The Migration Observatory), migrants are still blamed for economic problems faced by the UK (Knosravinik, 2017; May, 2017). Moreover, media reports highlight negative social and cultural impacts of migrants (Allen, 2016). For example, an article in 2006 acknowledged that migration contributes to GDP growth, but argued that "there are too many downsides in a crowded island" (Allen, 2016). Another article in 2006 said the Home Office is not thinking through "wider implications of immigration on the labour market or society" (Allen, 2016). EU immigration is portrayed negatively in British media.

### **3. Emphasis on the scale of immigration**

The mentioning of EU immigration in the press is often described as being massive. Pencheva (2019) and May (2017) found an emphasis on the large quantity of immigration from the EU. Metaphors such as “floodgates”, “waves” and “swarming” are also used to describe the massiveness of immigration. More antagonistic military metaphors such as “battle”, “siege” and “war” are also used to describe immigration. Allen (2016) found that “mass” is the most frequent associated descriptor of “immigration” (both from inside and outside of the EU). “European” and “uncontrolled” are also frequent descriptors (Allen, 2016). For example, a news article described: “With net migration reaching 298,000 it is apparent that immigration from the EU is out of control” (Allen, 2016). Such emphasis on the massiveness of immigration may have skewed public perception to believe immigration in Britain to be a larger issue that warranted. Duffy & Frere-Smith (2014, cited in Balch & Balabanova, 2017) found that Britons’ guess of foreign-born population in Britain is twice (24%) the actual amount (13%).

### **4. False information**

In the discussion of EU immigration prior to Brexit, much false and misleading information were observed to be propagated by the media. Judging from the pro-leave stance of *the Daily Mail*, *the Daily Telegraph* and *Mail Online* (May, 2017) that propagated these falsehoods, this is also seen as a way that the media distorts facts to advance their own political agenda. Below describe four instances of such false or misleading reporting that exaggerated the negative impact of EU immigration on the UK.

#### **4.1. “£350 million sent to the EU”**

*The Daily mail* reported that “every week we [UK] send £350 million to the EU” (*Daily Mail*, 29 April 2016, cited in Watson, 2018). However, this number does not take into account rebates that the UK receive from the EU (Watson, 2018). *The Daily Mail* inflated the actual amount of money that the UK contributes to the EU by reporting on the “gross total” not the “net total”. Such claim has been discredited by UK government and academic authorities (Watson, 2018).

#### **4.2. “NHS breaking due to 1.5 extra patients”**

*Mail Online* reported that “Report shows the NHS is nearly at breaking point as massive influx of EU migrants forces doctors to take on 1.5 million extra patients in just three years” (*Mail Online*, 3 April 2016, cited in Watson, 2018). The figure of 1.5 million extra patients is described as solely comprised of immigrants while it is actually a figure taken from the *Health and Social Care Information Centre* that does not tally the nationality of patients. Such figure therefore includes British patients and also immigrants from outside the EU.

#### **4.3. “700 offences committed by EU migrants every week”**

The above headline is taken from the *Daily Telegraph* homepage on 17 February 2016 (cited in Watson, 2018). On the same day, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Mail Online*, *The Daily Express* all reported an increase of “criminal convictions” for EU immigrants amounting to 700 offences “found guilty” and “being committed” (Watson, 2018). However, the “700” figure are criminal notifications that includes appeals, updates to convictions, and broken court orders and does not equate criminal convictions (Watson, 2018).

#### **4.4. “2.4M people migrated to the U.K.”**

Reports from the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Express* on 13 May 2016 claimed to reveal the “real” number of immigrants (Allison Pearson, *Daily Telegraph*) and figures that the government is “hiding” (*Daily Express*, 13 May 2016) by claiming that 2.4M people migrated to the U.K between 2011 and 2015 instead of the 0.9M official figure (Watson, 2018). The additional 1.5M discovered in the report are short term visitors according to the *Office of National Statistics* that did not stay concurrently in Britain and are not anticipated to remain after 2015.

Such are four instances of misleading reporting that inflated the scale of EU immigration to the UK, crimes committed by EU immigrants, healthcare burden caused by EU immigrants and funds that Britain contribute to the EU. Readers of the above newspapers are misled to believe in a more massive scale and burden that EU immigrants inflict upon Britain than reality. Compounded with findings highlighted below that UK citizens know little about the EU and have conflated impression of immigration, such mis-reporting from the media likely skewed public opinion towards Brexit due to unsubstantiated fear.

## **5. Hypothetical rather than empirical claims**

The following are two unsubstantiated claims made by the British press that similarly heightened public fear of EU immigration.

### **5.1. Surge of migrants from Bulgaria and Romania abusing welfare**

Pencheva (2019) reported that the media makes hypothetical claims that great influx of immigrants from Bulgaria and Romania will come to Britain without restriction after the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2006. A commentary on the *Sun* on 22 September 2006 says: “any Bulgarian or Romanian will be free to come here as they please – and come they will, because their own countries are very poor and there is no work” (quoted in Pencheva,

2019). It is also reported that the media describes 29M of immigrants coming from these two countries where 29M is the population of Bulgaria and Romania combined (Pencheva, 2019). The press equated the possibility that Bulgarian and Romanian immigrants may now freely enter Britain to the certainty that large numbers will come. Under the assumption of mass immigration, some media also assumed welfare abuse by such immigrants without providing evidence. For example, the *Daily Mail* commented: “It is easy to imagine how a public fed up with abuses of the welfare state would react.” (March 2013, quoted in Pencheva, 2019). Its columnist Tony Parsons also asked: “At what point does mass immigration... push our social services to breaking point?” (Daily Mail, 2006 quoted in Pencheva, 2019).

## **5.2. Accession of Turkey and other countries**

Watson (2018) found that media report of Turkey accession had increased in the weeks prior to the Brexit referendum. Turkey and four other European countries have been negotiating to join the EU since 2006. Much conditions laid out by the EU has not yet been met and Turkey’s accession is not foreseen in the near future (Watson, 2018). However, the press treated this future prospect as an imminent threat. For example, The *Mail Online* reported with the headline: “EU expansion will open our borders to 88 million from Europe’s poorest countries” on 29 April 2016, with 88 million referring to the combined population of the five countries applying to join the EU (Watson, 2018). The *Mail Online* further said that “We [the UK] are actually paying to give the people of Albania and Montenegro unfettered access to the UK’s public services” (Mail Online, 29 April 2016 quoted in Watson, 2018). Such claims build on unsubstantiated assumption that applying countries will join the EU in the near future and immigrants from these new EU countries will exploit the British welfare system. Such discussion and presented possibility of Turkey accession has been influential as a

survey by Ipsos MORI found that 45% of British people thinks that “Turkey will be fast-tracked into the EU and their population of 75 million people will have the right to free movement to the UK” (Watson, 2018).

## **6. Lack information on the EU**

The role of the EU in mediating policies and how the British participation in negotiations with the EU is rarely mentioned in the media. Such lack of visibility of the EU can explain findings that the British public have low awareness of the EU. Only 13% and 17% of Britons can recognize pictures of the European Council President and European Commission President respectively in a survey done in 2012 (Survation, 2012 cited in Balch & Balabanova, 2017).

Balch & Balabanova (2017) found that 67% of British articles in 2006 and 60% of articles in 2013 which mentioned free-movement within European states either did not mention the EU or did not assign a role to the EU in explaining the policy decisions on free-movement. This means that less than half on media report on European immigration failed to mention the role of the EU in coordinating this policy. Moreover, on the topic of Turkish accession that incited fear of Turkish immigrants coming to Britain, much pro-leave press portrayed the UK as having no control over such decision. They did not mention UK’s participation in negotiations in the EU on Turkey accession and UK’ veto power over any expansion of EU membership (Watson, 2018). The lack of information on how decision-making happens in the EU, how laws and regulations are negotiated and made and how they may be amended, and how the UK participates in these processes may contributes to the fact that most newspapers portray the EU as an imposing authority that the UK has no negotiation power against (Balch & Balabanova, 2017). The lack of media education about

the functioning of the EU also contribute to a lack of belonging of British citizens towards the EU (Dennison & Carl, 2016). Both factors prompted British resistance to the EU.

## **7. Summary**

Overall, the British media has played an active role in framing EU immigration negatively in relation to the Brexit decision. Some presses made use of empirically supported claim more, such as the Guardian (Pencheva, 2019). But many presses from the pro-Leave campaign has made bogus claims and reported selectively on more negative perceptions of immigration and left out the broader picture of how the UK participates in EU policy making.

### **Part 2: How media interprets immigration**

Other than selective reporting on the facts, the British media also offers analysis to the immigration phenomenon. In general, Allen (2016) found that journalists used their own voice to communicate the main message in their articles related to immigration. This may be framing immigration as problematic or successful, but journalists spoke from their own perspective to bring out the central message in their article rather than citing other authorities (Allen, 2016). 41% of the articles on EU immigration also lack references to additional sources (Allen, 2016). Thus, reporters created ample space to perpetrate their own opinion rather than presenting a balanced and neutral view of different perspectives (Allen, 2016). Framing by the media concerning the implications of EU immigration is explored in this session. The most popular frames are found to be describing EU as eroding British sovereignty and EU immigrants as abusing welfare. There is also a convergence to frames used by right-leaning presses in the reporting of EU immigration.

#### **1. EU as an imposing legal authority eroding British sovereignty**

It is found that the media depicts the EU as a higher legal authority that is imposed upon Britain (Balch & Balabanova, 2017). The media often describes the UK as being antagonistic and restricted by the EU (Balch & Balabanova, 2017). This impression is aggravated by the lack of description of the EU as a political space for contestation where Britain can participate in negotiations and agreements (Balch & Balabanova, 2017).

Balch & Balabanova (2017) compared the use of three frames in the portrayal of the EU in relation to immigration in 2006 and 2013. They found that EU is most often framed in a legal sense, as a higher “state-like” entity that imposes itself upon Britain as opposed to a political that presents the EU as a platform for political discussion and negotiations or an economic frame that presents the EU as an economic partnership built on mutual benefits. The legal frame is used in 43% and 65% of all articles mentioning the EU and immigration in 2006 and 2013 respectively. Examples of the press describing the EU in this way includes: “Britain simply will not be allowed to prevent their [Romanian and Bulgarian] nationals from entering the country” (Rennie, 2006, p. 14, cited in Balch & Balabanova, 2017); “We [Britain] are obliged under EU law” (Craven & Arbuthnott, 2013, cited in Balch & Balabanova, 2017); “The legal advice is clear that we [Britain] could not do that” (Forsyth, 2013 cited in Balch & Balabanova, 2017). These descriptions take control out of the British governments’ hands and portrays the EU as an invincible legal authority. In reality, the UK can negotiate with the EU on border control policies as in the case of a temporary restriction on immigration rights imposed on Romania and Bulgaria citizens after their accession in 2006. Moreover, the EU is portrayed as being antagonistic to the British sovereignty. Sporting and war metaphors were used to describe the competition for “authority” between the UK and the EU. For example, the UK is described to be “in a major row with the European Commission” (Boffey & Helm,

2013, p. 6, quoted in Balch & Balabanova, 2017). And it has been commented that “this is what happens when you “surrender control of your borders” (Parsons, 2013, p. 13, quoted in Balch & Balabanova 2017). Such language portrays the EU as compromising British sovereignty.

The media also seldomly describes the justification provided by the EU and the EU policy making processes. The political frame is used 22% and 27% in 2006 and 2013. This is a far lower usage than 43% and 65% for the legal frame. The media lacks representation of the EU as an arena for political negotiations. The participation of the UK in signing intergovernmental arrangements in which it agrees with the EU policies were also not mentioned. The media propagates a rigid view of the EU as imposing legal authority. The depiction of UK as lacking negotiation power in communicating or consenting to such policies prompted voters to believe that immigration policies within the EU cannot be changed and it must be an “all or nothing” decision, thus prompting voters to choose to quit the EU as they see no alternative solutions. Such belief that there is a need to take back British sovereignty is seen in this quote in an article: ‘if we want to decide our immigration policy, we must first re-establish our right to do so’ (Heathcote-Amory, 2005, p. 25 quoted in Balch & Balabanova, 2017). If the decision-making process and rationales of the EU are not reported and what was emphasized was only the power hierarchy that the EU lords over Britain, it is understandable why the British people would want to be freed from this black box that restricts their own nation’ sovereignty in border-controls.

## **2. Domestic prosperity and welfare abuse**

Secondly, immigration from the EU are associated with strong “welfare chauvinist” arguments in the media (Balch & Balabanova, 2017). Arguments for domestic prosperity is

dominant and immigrants are seen as compromising the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of Britons (Balch & Balabanova, 2017).

Balch & Balabanova (2017) found an increased use of the “welfare chauvinist” argument in the media from 2006 to 2013 when mentioning EU immigration. The “economic nationalist” argument has declined in usage correspondingly. “Public security” was a new frame that emerged in 2013. Arguments for “cultural diversity” in 2006 has been replaced by “cultural protectionist” arguments in 2013. The most significant finding is that immigrants are increasingly described as exploiting the welfare system in Britain. Britons are increasingly concerned about domestic social justice rather than economic benefits or cultural diversity brought about by the freedom of movement. Pencheva (2019) also reported that EU migrants’ abuse of the British welfare system is the second most popular frame used in describing EU immigration even though EU immigrants rely less on welfare than British nationals. Balabanova & Balch (2010, cited in Allen, 2016) found that authors in 48% of all articles mentioning EU immigration used the argument of “domestic prosperity” which argues that “immigration should be controlled to deliver the best possible economic, social and welfare conditions for local citizens”. The use of these arguments showed the media’s framing of immigrants as exploiting British welfare and its’ call for an inward turn to protect Britain’s own interests.

### **3. Right wing influence**

May (2017) observed that the press reports on EU immigration issues according to their partisan position on the decision of Brexit. Moreover, right-leaning newspapers reports on EU immigration more often than does left-leaning newspapers and left-leaning newspapers

converged to the frames that right-leaning newspapers used to report on EU immigration (Balch & Balabanova, 2017).

Balch & Balabanova (2017) found that EU immigration is reported evenly between left and right leaning newspapers in 2006. But in 2013, as the issue of immigration is reported more as a whole, right-leaning newspapers also gave it a stronger emphasis than does left-leaning newspapers. Moreover, left-leaning newspapers used a larger range of frames to portray immigration in 2006. The Guardian and Observer used the political frame most often and the Independent uses the economic frame most often. However, in 2013, all newspapers surveyed used predominantly the “legal” frame although right-leaning newspapers portrays EU as more imposing and left-leaning newspapers portray it as promoting universal values. There is a general trend of debates surrounding immigration narrowing in perspectives (Balch & Balabanova, 2016, cited in Balch & Balabanova, 2017). Balch & Balabanova (2017) reasoned that such a shift is due to leftist parties such as the Labour party adopting stricter stance on immigration to attract voters from right-leaning parties. Therefore, the media in reporting party campaigns, also quotes more of the rightist arguments. Overall, a right-wing narrative prevails over the media discussion on immigration and influenced the public to see immigration more negatively.

#### **4. Summary**

In this section, I presented three frames that the British media used to conceptualize the issue of EU immigration. The most predominantly view is that the UK’s control over its own borders is being conceded to the EU, a rigid and imposing legal authority. The second most emphasized view is the need to protect British welfare system and socio-cultural status

quo against exploitation of EU immigrants. Lastly, viewpoints presented by the media has narrowed in the course of the Brexit debate and had been increasingly dominated by right-wing arguments.

## **Conclusion**

In the above analysis, I have presented ways that the British media influenced public opinion mostly towards negative perceptions of EU immigration. Some aspects of media influence, such as propagation of falsehood and unsubstantiated claims are termed “epistemic rights violations” that violated readers’ rights to truthful information (Watson, 2018). But other aspects such as negative descriptions, emphasis on the scale of information, lack of reports on EU functioning may be an unintentional choice. These may even be products of the media responding to public concern. Lastly, there are analytical frames such as erosion of sovereignty, welfare abuse, or conservative narratives imposed by the media in guiding readers to understand the immigration issue. These are by nature subjective frames and it is hard to find a completely neutral ground. One way or the other, the media is powerful in swaying audiences towards one opinion or the other. We have seen evidences of the public’s inflated estimation of immigration figures and poor knowledge of the EU correlating with the media’s selective reporting. This paper provided strong evidences that the media has been crucial in shaping public perception towards EU immigration and has indirectly influenced the British people’s decision to leave the EU.

Nonetheless, in a democratic society, we expect the media to be a truthful and impartial disseminator of facts (Watson, 2018) and the British media seem to have fallen short of that. Much has been said about right-leaning media shaping public opinion, but the lack of

counter-influence in the form of educating the audience on the accurate facts of immigration and deliberation process of the EU is to be attributed to newspapers on both sides of the political spectrum. The media does not single-handedly orchestrate public opinion but is itself situated within the society and reflects some of the society's concerns. There is a sense that the media reacts to the political reality and pre-existing public opinion (in the case of the 2010 Conservative campaign). It is an ongoing debate (Balch & Balabanova, 2017) on whether the media should shape public discourse. But we can acknowledge from the above analysis that the media inevitably does so through intentional presentation of facts or unintentional emphasis on some aspects of the issue more than others. Such analysis is important as once the concrete influence of the media is identified, government agencies and citizens can disseminate information to supplement and counter-balance the dominant narrative in the media. Such a healthy feed-back cycle between a transparent government, active citizens and a responsible media is the goal of a democratic society.

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