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Re-framing free movement in the countdown to Brexit? Shifting UK press portrayals of EU migrants in the wake of the referendum.

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Re-framing free movement in the countdown to Brexit? Shifting UK press portrayals of EU migrants in the wake of the referendum

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Abstract

This article argues that long-standing press portrayals of economic migrants as threats to Britain's economic wellbeing underwent a marked turn immediately after the 2016 'Brexit' referendum. Following an intense campaign during which most national newspapers problematised European Union free movement, the month after the vote saw even 'Euro-sceptic' titles shift towards emphasising the economic costs of ending it. Within six months, however, discourses framing migrants as 'invaders' and/or 'exploiters' resurfaced. The article conceptualises the immediate post-referendum period as one of discursive aftershock, as key actors struggled to absorb the outcome and newspapers accustomed to years of spoon-feeding with simplistic pro- and anti-European Union rhetoric scrambled to find fresh sources of newsworthy conflict in a 'post-war' climate. In so doing, it contributes to our understanding of the multidirectional complexity of the agenda-setting process, by showing how shifts in the nature of public debate can help re-frame the narrative preoccupations of the media.

Keywords

Brexit, discourse, framing, free movement, migrants, newspapers

Introduction

On 16 June 2016 – one week to the day before the referendum on the United Kingdom's continued European Union (EU) membership – leading 'Leave' campaigner Nigel Farage unveiled a poster that crystallised the febrile anti-immigrant sentiment simmering beneath much of the mainstream newspaper coverage leading up to the vote. The now-notorious 'Breaking Point' poster depicted a stream of dark-skinned men heading towards the camera, above a strapline stating, 'The EU has failed us all' and an entreaty to voters to 'break free of the EU and take back control' (Stewart and Mason, 2016). For

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critics, the poster was invidious both because it resembled footage from a Nazi propaganda film and contained a visual lie with a potentially pernicious impact on an historic vote then just days away (Looney, 2017; Morrison, 2016; Stocker, 2017). Far from depicting EU nationals exercising their free movement rights to migrate between member states – a source of net inward migration that a decision to leave the Union would empower Britain to curtail – it showed asylum-seekers from *outside* Europe, displaced during the ongoing Mediterranean refugee crisis, crossing the Croatia-Slovenia border a year earlier (Stewart and Mason, 2016).

Though an outlier, in terms of how far it pushed anti-(im)migration discourse, in other respects the poster was merely the starkest manifestation yet of a strand of anti-EU debate presenting the United Kingdom's relationship with the Union as one of plundered and plunderer: with Britain cast as a vassal state whose financial over-generosity and porous borders had left it vulnerable to invasion and exploitation by opportunistic migrants from parasitical poorer countries (e.g. Balabanova and Balch, 2010; Balch and Balabanova, 2016; Philo et al., 2018). During the months leading up to then Prime Minister David Cameron's decision to call the referendum, in May 2015, free movement had been systematically toxified in political rhetoric as an issue with a supposedly negative real-world impact on UK communities, particularly those still suffering the long-term consequences of post-1980s deindustrialisation (Moir, 2017). To placate their core supporters, successive governments had used migrants as lightning rods to justify everything from pledges to create 'British jobs for British workers' (Brown, 2007) to crack-downs on 'welfare tourists' supposedly responsible for pressures on public services actually caused by years of fiscal austerity (Balch and Balabanova, 2016; Marangozov, 2016; Watson, 2016).

As several studies observe, this dominant discourse had been strengthened by the conflicted contributions to the debate of potential counter claims-makers, such as opposition parties (e.g. Balch and Balabanova, 2016; Smith, 2008). The Labour Party's failure to mount a sustained and unequivocal defence of positive *contributions* made by EU migrants to the United Kingdom's economy, public services and cultural life had emboldened anti-migrant forces in the 'growingly hostile and alienating' rhetoric they used to depict incoming migrants as a "bad" out-group' threatening the wellbeing of the "good" in-group' represented by British citizens (Ágopcsa, 2017). All the while, such discourses had been widely echoed, and stoked, by a popular press attuned to the commercial appeal of us-and-them narratives, including those happy to conflate intra-EU migration with immigration generally (Berry et al., 2016; Blinder and Allen, 2016) and/or extend concerns about its socioeconomic impact to securitised fears about terrorism (Huysmans, 2000). Moreover, such discourses proved so pervasive that they permeated beyond Britain's borders – including to countries that were targets of their opprobrium. A comparative analysis of press frames in the United Kingdom and Bulgaria by Balabanova and Balch (2010: 394) showed how Britain's 'dominant policy frame of "managed migration"' – a 'dehumanised' transactional view of 'migration control', based on the relative 'costs/benefits' to 'the economy or the welfare state' – was imported by Bulgarian papers, which directly echoed (and implicitly endorsed) its preoccupation with the impact of migrants on British workers, schools and housing.

This article revisits the issue of how EU migration has been framed in the UK press in the context of a succession of snapshots during the immediate life-cycle of the 23 June 2016 'Brexit' referendum: the week leading up to the vote, the period from 24 June to 23 July inclusive, and the equivalent month between 24 November and 23 December. In so

doing, it analyses how media-political discourses around free movement, as framed and contested in news stories, evolved over time, as the last days of campaigning gave way to, first, a post-referendum adjustment period then an end-of-year discursive transition during which public debate refocused around the practical politics of negotiating the United Kingdom's post-Brexit relations with the EU. In identifying these discursive shifts, the article raises questions about their causes and significance, and proposes provisional explanations for the key turns, rooted in the background political contexts of the times, while suggesting further lines of research which might illuminate them more fully. It ends by arguing that, in the immediate post-referendum period, the sharp turn away from conventional 'communitarian' anti-migrant narratives (Bader, 2005) emphasising 'welfare chauvinist' concerns about foreigners exploiting public services and social security (Balch and Balabanova, 2016), towards 'economic nationalist' frames highlighting the risk of losing skilled overseas workers (Balch and Balabanova, 2016), echoed a discursive aftershock simultaneously playing out in the wider public-political domain. This abrupt shift in discourse demonstrated how media agenda-setting can work 'in reverse', as the scramble among politicians and other key actors to make sense of the referendum result, and the implications of ending free movement, was *reflected* in how the press then re-framed the migration debate. Before detailing its methodology and findings, the article begins by reviewing key themes and issues to emerge from the existing literature.

The conflation of (im)migration

While this article's focus is the framing of *EU migrants* in the UK press, a much wider corpus of literature has examined media discourses around population movements generally, whether in the form of permanent resettlement (immigration), temporary flight from war/tyranny (asylum-seeking), or the pursuit of improved opportunities in new countries (economic migration). As numerous studies observe, a consistent feature shared by dominant discourse(s) around almost all these distinct phenomena is their metonymic and conceptual conflation (e.g. Blinder and Allen, 2016; Buchanan, Grillo and Threadgold, 2004). Kaye (1998: 168) demonstrates how the progressive 'narrowing' of 'definitions of refugee status' in public policy, and the conflation of refugees, immigrants and ethnic minorities, is reflected across the press. Casting the net wider, Buchanan and Grillo's (2004: 41) analysis of a representative sample of two UK broadsheets, two mid-market tabloids and two red-tops over a three-month period in 2002 identified 51 different labels for individuals seeking asylum in Britain and a 'consistent blurring of the distinctions between asylum seekers and economic migrants', with (often legally distinct) terms like "illegal immigrant," "asylum seeker," "refugee" and "migrant" used as 'synonyms'. Moreover, Alia (2005: 26) has noted how such confluations are extended to encompass specific problematised cultural groups, with 'distinctions between refugees, legal immigrants, illegal immigrants, terrorists and Muslims' obscured 'thanks to media representations'. She blames this simplifying discursive practice for promoting criminalisation 'at three mutually reinforcing levels': the 'symbolic', which frames asylum-seekers as intrinsically dangerous and deviant; the 'literal', which sees them prosecuted for 'crimes of arrival' (illegal entry) and 'crimes of survival', such as theft and prostitution; and the 'procedural' ways they are 'treated' as 'criminals', by being (for example) forcibly fingerprinted on arrival (Alia, 2005). While Alia's analysis draws comparisons between the discursive treatment of Iraqis in Britain, Indonesian 'boat people' in Australia and Mexican 'border jumpers' in the United States, British papers' tendency to blur

definitions marked them out as ‘an outlier’ in Berry et al.’s (2016: 252) analysis of press representations of the Mediterranean ‘refugee and migrant crisis’ across five EU member states. Philo et al. (2018: 2) also note common connotations in refugee coverage, including the growing prominence of the term ‘illegal immigrant’ in press and television news discourse, which has ‘imbued’ swathes of people ‘with the wholly negative connotations of “illegality”’ and conflated ‘refuge and asylum with economic immigration’. They add that the term ‘foreign criminals’ is frequently used in TV news to present refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants as ‘one homogeneous group’ (Philo et al., 2018: 73).

Taken together, this strand of literature shows how, by conflating disparate groups as one and the same, media-political claims-makers consistently deny difference where it exists: painting all incomers as part of an anonymous, swarming mass united by a shared determination to exploit the generosity of receiving countries. Such framing strips these distinct groups of their meaningful collective identities and their members of individual human agency. Conversely, this discourse of homogeneity – of *denied* difference – is often paired with another, similarly dominant, discursive imaginary. This is the equally false (and pernicious) binary *construction* of difference between foreigners and natives: the civilised, virtuous ‘in-group’ and the savage, vice-ridden ‘out-group’ (Ágopcsa, 2017).

Moral panics, othering and orientalism

Perhaps the most prominent pattern to emerge from the literature on discourses around mobile populations – whether they be legal or illegal; temporary or permanent – is the dehumanising language and imagery used by media, politicians and other key claims-makers to construct oppositions between the indigenous, threatened ‘us’ and the invasive, threatening ‘them’ (Van Dijk, 1997: 61–62). In *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978: 97) identified a long British discursive tradition – rooted in colonialism, and as common to academia as media – of problematising peoples of the Middle and Far East as an “object’ of study, stamped with an otherness’, while in the same year, Stuart Hall demonstrated how primary and secondary definers (state actors and news media) are prone to directing such othering discourses *inwards*, by framing moral panics around the deviancy of racially marked enemies within (Hall et al., 1978).

These twin concepts set the template for discourses of difference and distrust that continue to characterise today’s hegemonic media-political framing of foreigners, particularly in the context of large-scale inbound population movements. Though much of the literature focuses on representations of *immigration*, not migration, the range of imagined threats it identifies embraces a montage of fears, from classic moral concerns around crime, public disorder and terrorism (Poole and Richardson, 2006) to more prosaic but proximate panics about pressure on jobs, public services and the welfare state (Balch and Balabanova, 2016; Philo et al., 2018; Wood and King, 2013): preoccupations also identified in the few studies focusing on free movement frames (e.g. Balabanova and Balch, 2010; Balch and Balabanova, 2011, 2016). Similarly relevant here are the growing number of studies noting how racialising discourses are no longer reserved for non-white populations. As Fox et al. (2012: 682) argue, ‘nominally shared whiteness between migrant and majority’ has not ‘exempted’ EU migrants ‘from the sorts of racialisation found in other migrations’. Their comparative analysis of tabloid and immigration policy discourses distinguished between the former’s emphasis on the ‘cultural difference’ between native Britons and incoming Hungarians and Romanians (characterised as

‘racialised exclusion’) and ‘institutionalised racism’ promoted by successive governments’ construction of ‘shared whiteness’ as a basis for ‘racialised inclusion’ (Fox et al., 2012: 680).

Dehumanising framing devices also extend beyond the lexical composition of articles, to embrace photographs, footage and other semiotic cues that consolidate the construction of incoming peoples as threatening, exploitative others. In their analysis of newspaper discourse around the reporting of asylum in 2002, Buchanan and Grillo (2004: 41) noted an ‘almost complete absence’ of pictures of ‘refugee women’, in contrast to the frequent repetition of ‘stock images of male asylum seekers with their faces partially covered’, as if ““breaking into Britain””. Philo et al. (2018: 105–106) critique the imagery used to depict asylum-seekers as a marauding mass, from ‘numbers over a graphic of anonymous rows of computer-generated people, resembling an army’ in a 2011 *Channel 4 News* report to the routine juxtaposition of statistics relating to rejected asylum claims or ‘unresolved cases’ with ‘images of crowds’.

Moreover, research suggests that framing foreigners as threatening outsiders is as commonplace in other states with histories of high net inward migration. Colombo (2013: 164) notes a long tradition of ‘overt and covert forms of xenophobia and racist discourse’ directed towards immigrants from former Soviet countries by ‘Italian political elites and media’, popularised through dehumanising terms like ‘massive invasion’ and ‘plague’, and the increasing influence of right-wing political parties in shaping a discourse of ‘criminalisation and securitisation’ aimed at recent arrivals (Colombo, 2013: 157). The prominence of frames presenting migrants (especially asylum-seekers) as threatening in both Italian and UK papers, and the disproportionate discursive emphasis on those coming from regions relatively unrepresented in both countries’ actual populations, was also observed by Taylor (2014: 368), though she concluded this discourse did not amount to a fully ‘iterated moral panic’. By contrast, Greenberg and Hier (2001: 563) identified a panicky emphasis on ‘crisis’ and ‘threat’ in the ‘problematization’ of ““illegal” Chinese immigrants’ in Canadian news in 1999 and Bauder (2008: 289) observed ‘danger’ as the ‘most frequent and relatively consistent theme’ in reports about immigration to Canada between 1996 and 2004. Similarly, Pijpers (2006: 91) explicitly located the ‘fear of mass migration’ fomented by popular discourses in the Netherlands before the 2004 EU enlargement in the ‘literature on moral panics, risk society and the “othering” of economic migrants as strangers and folk devils’ and Lubbers et al. (1998) critiqued the wider-reaching ‘criminalisation’ of ‘ethnic minorities’ in Dutch newspapers, based on analysis of 8000 articles published between 1990 and 1995. Kamenova (2014: 170), meanwhile, has used the ‘severe othering’ evident in Bulgarian newspaper discourse around Syrian refugees and a ‘highly contested’ French magazine cover to argue for the emergence of a discrete discursive category: the ‘Other-migrant’.

Framing perceptions – and priming prejudice?

In addition to identifying key discursive themes underpinning press representations of (im) migrants, the literature offers growing evidence for the agenda-setting effects of media frames on public attitudes and support for illiberal policies. A longitudinal audience study by Vergeer et al. (2000) into the effects of Dutch newspapers’ focus on ‘ethnic crime’ – including (but not confined to) offences committed by non-native groups – suggested those exposed to these frames were more suspicious of minorities than those who were not. This notion reflected several other studies concerned with media influence on perceptions

of minority ethnic groups generally, rather than incoming populations *per se* (e.g. Armstrong and Neuendorf, 1992; Busselle and Crandall, 2002; Gilliam and Iyengar, 2000). More specifically, Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart's (2007: 404) agenda-setting study of Dutch newspapers identified an apparent sequential link between increased coverage of immigration issues and a higher 'aggregate share of vote intention for anti-immigrant parties'. Similarly, Krzyżanowski and Wodak (2009: 1–2) argue that the collapse of 'overt neo-fascist discourse' in many central and eastern European countries has had the paradoxical side-effect of enabling far-right parties to 'expand their electoral support' *insidiously*, by rebranding themselves as 'populist nationalist' movements and promoting 'more pervasive, diffuse' forms of 'racist discourse' that foster a 'normalisation of "othering"".

The embedding of 'stereotypic' public attitudes towards foreign incomers, partly through sustained media problematisation, has also been observed in audience studies in Switzerland (Schemer, 2012) and Canada (Esses et al., 2013). The latter's analysis suggested the Canadian public were highly susceptible to priming by media stories framing immigrants as disease-spreaders and refugees as frauds. Other studies place more emphasis on the primacy of real-world factors which, whether independently or combined with media framing, render fear of foreigners more salient. Considering the socio-economic backdrop against which many of these discourses tend to play out, Citrin et al. (1997: 876) propose 'the psychodynamic theory of scapegoating' as an explanatory framework – emphasising how 'economic adversity acts as a trigger for the displacement of anxiety and anger onto minority groups', based on 'rational fear' around the 'competition for scarce resources'.

In the United Kingdom's case, surveys and opinion polls have repeatedly demonstrated high levels of public sensitisation to migration and immigration as issues – and marked disconnects between perceptions of their scale and the reality. The 2011 Ipsos Mori index recorded 'an overestimation by the public of the number concerning migration', with respondents rating it the second most important issue facing the country, and nearly half judging it to have a 'negative effect' on British culture (cited in ICAR, 2012). By August 2016 – two months after the Brexit vote – another poll found that immigration generally was now considered the most important issue (cited in Blinder, 2015). Studies have also exposed widespread confusion about the *composition* of the United Kingdom's (im)migrant population which justify concerns that misleading media-political discourse can distort public perceptions (e.g. Blinder and Allen, 2016). A 2011 survey of a representative sample of 1002 UK residents found that, 'when thinking about immigrants', 6 out of 10 'were most likely' to visualise asylum-seekers and least likely to think of students, whereas official figures showed the latter to be 'the largest group' of immigrants and the former 'the smallest' (Blinder, 2011). The study's principal author has since argued that this 'imagined immigration' is influenced by both 'media coverage and elite rhetoric' (Blinder, 2015: 96). Though more qualitative studies have prioritised perceptions of asylum-seekers over economic migrants/immigrants, focus-groups conducted by Philo et al. (2018: 72) demonstrate how the 'intense focus' of TV news on a 'relatively small number of criminal cases' can significantly impact 'public understanding', with articles that 'bundle together a wide range of diverse groups and people' promoting 'an overwhelmingly negative perception'. A measure of the pervasiveness of such discourses was the same study's finding that they were increasingly accepted by asylum-seekers *themselves*. One refugee-worker interviewed by researchers recalled conversations with an Iraqi refugee and an elderly woman whose husband had fled Auschwitz who both questioned the genuineness of recent arrivals (Philo et al., 2018: 158–159).

There is, then, substantial literature testifying to the media's use of dehumanising frames to represent immigrants, migrants, refugees and foreigners/minorities generally – including those othering them as a homogeneous, marauding mass, devoid of either individuality or meaningful group identity. Perhaps more important, though, is the smaller evidence-base suggesting that such negative framing can have meaningful agenda-setting effects – fuelling public distrust and hostility towards such people. However, what is largely missing thus far from both content- and audience-based studies is any specific substantive focus on portrayals/perceptions of *economic migration*, let alone EU free movement. Given this issue's high visibility in the public sphere during the referendum campaign – and the salience attributed to it as a factor influencing the result (Vasilopoulou, 2016) – there is therefore a clear gap in the literature, particularly in the context of the immediate build-up to and short-term aftermath of the 2016 vote. Let us now turn, then, to the question of how intra-EU migration was represented in UK press discourse during this key period, the range and nature of discursive frames present, the extent to which these shifted over time, and what we should make of any such fluctuations.

Defining datasets: Before and after the vote

To track the discursive trajectory of press portrayals of EU free movement over the chosen time-frame, representative datasets of articles published during three distinct snapshot periods were constructed. The data were sourced using the Lexis Library database of British print and online newspapers and all UK national titles were sampled to generate as representative a picture as possible of the overall nature of press discourse(s) at each stage. Following a series of experimental searches to identify useful snapshot periods, the following were chosen: the week immediately before the referendum (17–23 June 2016 inclusive), during which numerous EU-related articles were published (many focusing on migration) as campaigning reached fever-pitch, the calendar month immediately after the vote (24 June–23 July inclusive), and the equivalent month-long period at the end of the year (24 November–23 December inclusive). Early experiments with keyword searches were used to fine-tune search terms, ensuring that a relevant corpus of articles was constructed. Initial searches tested the terms 'EU migrant', 'EU migration', 'EU economic migrant', 'EU economic migration', 'freedom of movement' and 'free movement'. Only the last was eventually used, as preliminary results for the first five returned numerous articles focusing not on *intra-EU* migration but EU policies towards 'migrants' entering Europe from *outside* (normally refugees). As well as proving the best fit for our final corpus, the term 'free movement' returned far more results than any other search, presenting three substantial datasets. Consideration was given to extending the first period to cover the full month between 24 May and 23 June, bringing its duration into line with the other two snapshots, but an initial search returned 2379 articles for this timeframe. Instead, the 7-day period leading up to the vote was felt to represent a cohesive but more manageable alternative snapshot which still generated more than enough initial results (670) to produce a substantial and informative dataset.

The analytical method used was framing analysis, applying Gitlin's (1980: 6) definition of this as the identification of 'principles of selection, emphasis and presentation' used to package and present a narrative and Entman's (1993: 53) conception of framing as the selection of 'some aspect of a perceived reality' to 'promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment for the item described'. Given the large number of search results,¹ the final corpus was narrowed down to focus

Table 1. Breakdown of main categories of frame for each snapshot period.

Snapshot period	Anti-migrant	Pro-migrant	Neutral	Incidental	Total
17–23 June	50 (41.3%)	8 (6.6%)	20 (16.5%)	43 (35.5%)	121
24 June–23 July	108 (20.7%)	62 (11.9%)	79 (15.1%)	273 (52.3%)	522
24 Nov–23 Dec	135 (26.4%)	16 (3.1%)	85 (16.6%)	275 (53.8%)	511

solely on news stories, rather than other articles, such as features or comment pieces. As news presents itself as factual and ‘objective’ (Tuchman, 1999 [1972]), the presence of bias in such articles tends to be implicit, making them more problematic than openly opinion-based articles – particularly given the high levels of public trust in the credibility of ‘straight news stories’ recent studies identify, compared to more ‘opinionated’ pieces and blogs (Meyer et al., 2010: 112–115).

Initial searches using the term ‘free movement’ returned numerous duplicates and non-news articles, necessitating that these be manually removed to ensure only news stories (and one copy of each) remained. The final tally for the period 16–23 June was 121, that for 24 June to 23 July was 522, and for 24 November to 23 December it was 511. In total, then, 1154 pieces were coded.

Defining discourses: Stable or shifting frames?

To identify the range of discursive positions adopted by articles, a process of ‘inductive category development’ was used, involving initial read-throughs of sampled articles (Mayring, 2000: 3). Four broad framing approaches were identified: an ‘anti-free movement’ or ‘anti-migrant’ position, a ‘pro-migrant’ stance, a ‘neutral’ frame in stories featuring competing (but more or less evenly balanced) claims by opponents and advocates of free movement, and a final category that included only ‘incidental’ references to EU migration, with no clear ‘pro-’ or ‘anti-migrant’ position discernible. These ‘incidental’ mentions typically took the form of fleeting references to the term ‘free movement’ in single sentences or short paragraphs within articles framed around different issues (e.g. predictions about the referendum result or pro-Leave claims that Brexit would restore the United Kingdom’s political sovereignty). To ensure initial results were replicable, 10% of the stories (115) were re-coded 9 months after coding was first carried out.² Re-coding produced a 95% match. Only six stories were re-categorised: two from ‘neutral’ to ‘incidental’ and four from ‘incidental’ to ‘anti-free movement’. The latter were all published in the week immediately before the referendum, focusing on an anti-EU narrative strand that largely vanished after the vote: the supposed likelihood of Turkey imminently joining the EU. On re-coding, it was concluded that this anti-Turkish framing was predicated largely on the specious concern that 70 million Turks could enter Britain under free movement rules if it stayed in the EU. Essentially, then, rather than alluding to free movement only ‘incidentally’, these pieces used anti-Turkish frames as *proxies* for anti-free movement ones. In adopting ‘Turkophobic’ approaches (Saz, 2011), then, they were distinct from all other ‘incidental’ articles coded, in that they took a distinct (anti-migrant) position. The recoding of this small number of stories was therefore preferred over the original coding, as it was felt to more accurately reflect their underlying frames: that is, ones that were implicitly *anti-free movement*, in that they problematised Turkey as a potential source of largescale inward migration. Table 1 gives headline totals for each category of frame.

As row 2 shows, the most common overall discursive position during the week preceding the referendum was ‘anti-migrant’ – numbering 50, or 41.3% of the total. These stories outstripped ‘pro-migrant’ ones nearly six to one, with only eight (6.6%) portraying free movement positively. Though articles in the ‘incidental’ category ran negative stories a reasonably close second (at 43, or 35.5% of the total), these adopted no clear discursive position and, since only 20 stories (16.5%) were coded ‘neutral’, the overwhelmingly dominant frame in the immediate run-up to the vote was therefore anti-migrant – numbering 50 out of the 78 that took a position (64%).

By contrast, the framing of free movement in the month following the vote underwent an intriguing discursive shift. While articles problematising EU migration still greatly outstripped positive ones, with one in five taking this stance compared to one in eight adopting pro-migrant frames, the latter nearly doubled in number, from 6.6% to 11.9%. Though the proportion of neutral articles remained fairly consistent (dropping marginally, from 16.5% to 15.1%), a surge in the percentage mentioning migration incidentally (from 36% to more than half) led to this category outnumbering all others combined. This suggested that, with the referendum decided and attention turning towards the practicalities of implementing Brexit, the free movement issue had become part of the ‘background noise’ of (impending) Leave talks.

Nonetheless, the emergence of pro-migrant narratives as a stronger force in the framing of free movement, together with the persistence of more impartial frames, saw the overall discursive balance shift away from negative portrayals – with ‘positive’ and ‘neutral’ articles combined now outweighing anti-migrant ones by 141 to 108 (or 57% to 43%). Moreover, the notion that negative framing remained in any way pervasive in this initial post-referendum phase becomes even more suspect when one considers that 70 anti-migrant articles published between 24 June and 23 July (65% of the total) appeared in either the *Daily Express* or *Sunday Express*. These newspapers – which published no ‘pro-migrant’ stories – had been long-standing outliers in the EU debate, in that they had campaigned for Brexit since before the referendum was announced and endorsed the United Kingdom Independence Party during the 2015 general election (*Daily Express*, 2015; *Sunday Express*, 2015). Stripping the *Express* stories out of this second dataset would have cut the number of anti-migrant pieces from 108 to 37: equivalent to just 8.2% of an adjusted total of 451, and fewer than two-thirds of the 62 pro-migrant pieces.

While the second snapshot period displayed a marked shift away from anti-migrant frames, during the third phase discourse was recalibrated towards more negative portrayals. Between 24 November and 23 December, eight times as many anti-migrant stories appeared as pro-migrant ones (135, or 26.4%, to 16, or 3.1%). Even adjusting for the distorting presence of *Express* stories – which numbered 70 (again, more than half the total) – ‘anti-migrant’ stories still outstripped ‘pro-migrant’ ones four to one (65 to 16). While 85 were neutrally framed, and 275 (more than half) mentioned EU migration incidentally, among stories *focusing* on free movement those adopting anti-migrant frames were again in a clear majority.

From exploiters to assets and back again? Unpacking the migrant frames

Headline figures, then, show that the broad trajectory of UK press discourse around free movement from the immediate pre-referendum period through its short-term aftermath moved from a strongly sceptical (even hostile) position to a more conflicted one – before

somewhat reverting to type, by re-adopting a broadly anti-migration discourse. But what of the finer details of these discursive shifts? *Exactly* how were EU migrants framed, and re-framed, during each phase, and how might we explain these turns in the context of unfolding real-world events? The following sections explore key patterns that emerged from qualitative analysis, before concluding with provisional pointers as to how the key discursive shifts might be interpreted as reflecting and responding to adjustments in the Brexit narrative(s) playing out contemporaneously in the political sphere.

The most common negative frames applied in ‘anti-migrant’ stories published in the week before the referendum were those casting EU migrants as ‘invaders’ and/or ‘exploiters’ (of benefits, public services and taxpayers): two discursive constructs reviving the long tradition of ‘villainising’ foreigners (Looney, 2017) and ‘welfare chauvinism’ (Balch and Balabanova, 2016). Invasion metaphors couched in hostile language framed migrants as a horde or swarm of incomers, much as Farage’s then newly unveiled ‘Breaking Point’ poster dehumanised them (Morrison, 2016). Common terms included ‘surge’, ‘influx’, ‘no limits’ and ‘uncontrolled’ and militaristic talk of the ‘red lines’ needed to curb it: a common allusion, during this and later stages, presenting the UK–EU relationship as a conflict. Individual examples of how Leave-supporting newspapers mobilised imagery of tidal-waves of invaders to support their case included a 20 June *Daily Telegraph* front-page headlined, ‘No limit on migrants from Europe if we stay, says Corbyn’ (Swinford, 2016) and the shouty declaration on www.express.co.uk a day later: ‘Tory guru told Cameron Four Years Ago “impossible” to meet immigration promise while in EU’ (Moore and Culbertson, 2016). This headline was one of several misleadingly conflating EU migration with other forms of population movement. These included a 23 June *Telegraph* story headed, ‘Refugee who walked the Tunnel “shows we can’t control borders”’ (Mendick, 2016), which, despite focusing on the conviction of ‘a Sudanese refugee’ for marching into Britain through the Channel Tunnel, was presented as evidence of “catastrophic” holes in European border controls that can only be plugged by quitting the EU’. Defying the inconvenient truth that EU withdrawal would have no direct bearing on the United Kingdom’s ability to control anything other than free movement, the story’s claims to the contrary rested on quotes from two prominent Eurosceptic Conservative MPs: then minister and ‘prominent Brexit campaigner’ Dominic Raab and backbencher Peter Bone. Though quotes were included (near the end) from a refugee case-worker, the culprit was framed as a classic ‘exploiter’ of UK generosity: having (according to Bone) ‘played the system’ by ensuring he was ‘entitled to full benefits’ and a ‘defence’ funded ‘through legal aid’ (Mendick, 2016).

A more commonplace approach in pre-referendum anti-migrant stories was to conflate not only disparate groups of (im)migrants but the ‘invader’/‘exploiter’ frames themselves, to focus on inward migration’s negative impact on ‘ordinary’ Britons – particularly people in low-waged jobs and those queuing for school places or affordable housing in areas subject to intense population pressures. Despite ostensibly adopting more of a human-interest angle on the referendum’s importance, these articles invariably depicted migrants as a marauding mass: sourcing quotes and truth-claims heavily reliant on sweeping official statistics and sensational claims by pro-Brexit political actors, rather than a more humanised picture recognising the plight of identifiable families and communities. A textbook example was an eve-of-poll *Express* story headlined, ‘Vote leave claims rising cost of education “ANOTHER reason to QUIT EU”’ (Little, 2016). This opened with the dramatic claim (from a leaked government report) that the cost of educating the 700,000 schoolchildren ‘with at least one parent from the EEA [European Economic Area]’ had

‘hit £3.2 billion a year’ – a bill that had ‘nearly doubled in 10 years thanks to free movement rules’ (Little, 2016). No fewer than three prominent anti-EU politicians were quoted in the 620-word piece, with minister Priti Patel branding pressure on schools ‘out of control’ and then UKIP MP Douglas Carswell claiming the number of EU migrants entering Britain between 2010 and 2015 had been ‘equivalent to 19 cities the size of Cambridge’. Not only were EU migrants once more conflated with a wider, qualitatively distinct, group – children with ‘at least one parent from the EEA’ – but the story offered an unbalanced breadth of opinion, with a reply from the Remain side confined to an unnamed ‘Government spokesman’ in the penultimate paragraph.

The shift away from the borderline moral panic framing of migrants as ‘invaders’/‘exploiters’ during the month after the referendum was characterised by two emerging new narrative strands. First came the abrupt rise to prominence of a counter-discourse presenting the end of free movement as a potential economic disaster, due to the loss of prospective future migrants with skills and qualifications Britain needed and/or the likely relocation of many existing migrants. The second counter-discursive strand strived to humanise migrants by approaching stories from *their* perspective: emphasising the insecurity they now faced amid speculation that they might be expelled from a country they regarded as home. Though such concerns had been raised before and during the referendum campaign, the initial after-shock of the vote appeared to encourage papers to finally give a hearing to previously under-represented claims-makers – ironically, at a point when it was too late for their warnings to affect the result. Moreover, space for countervailing voices was created not only in liberal papers but some with anti-migrant track records.

The significance of this discursive turn, which is considered more fully in the article’s closing sections, might partly be explained by the confluence of real-world and journalistic responses to the referendum result: those of prominent political (and economic) actors with stakes in its repercussions on one hand and normatively driven news organisations on the other. The sense of closure the vote offered, after months of intensely polarised political debate, arguably opened up space (however briefly) for more nuanced arguments to be aired, as the dust settled and actors on all sides dazedly absorbed the outcome. To reporters schooled in the key news value of ‘conflict’ (e.g. Graber, 1990), the referendum ostensibly ‘ended’ a years-long ideological and rhetorical war – forcing them to seek out fresh battles, and sources of tension, including issues identified by those about to be embroiled in the clean-up operation and fresh battles over withdrawal negotiations.

A typical example of a story framing migrants not as dangerous economic ‘exploiters’ but endangered ‘assets’ appeared in *The Independent* on 5 July, headlined, ‘UK industries facing severe hit if EU migrants are forced to leave over Brexit’ (Sheffield, 2016). This prominent page 7 report began with a list of sectors identified by respected think-tank the Resolution Foundation as those most exposed to the loss of specialist labour, namely ‘food production, agriculture and mining’. Though focusing on a household-name company, a similar approach was adopted by the Euro-sceptic *Mail Online* for a 29 June story headlined, ‘Vodafone warns over future of its global HQ in London if Brexit vote ends ability to freely move across the EU’ (Shapland, 2016). The story centred on an email sent to the press stating that, if Britain’s withdrawal ended free movement, 13,000 British-based jobs could be lost, as the firm’s ability to continue hiring EU nationals would force it to relocate elsewhere. The similarly Euro-sceptic *Telegraph’s* take on this issue extended the scope of the economic peril facing the City to encompass not just Vodafone but easyJet and the London Stock Exchange (Bury et al., 2016). The article included verbatim quotes

from authoritative sources, including Vittorio Caloa, Vodafone's 'boss', and Felix Hufeld, head of Germany's financial regulator, Bafin, who warned he 'could not see London hosting the headquarters of the "eurozone's most important" stock exchange after Britain's exit': a pronouncement casting 'fresh doubts' on the then mooted merger of the London Stock Exchange (LSE) and Deutsche Boerse (Bury et al., 2016). There were sub-genres of the 'economic asset' frame, too: for instance, warnings of 'a new form of Brexit – a brain exit or brain drain' hitting Britain's universities and scientific community (Johnston, 2016). Similarly, a *Telegraph* report opening with a positive reaction to the referendum from outgoing Football Association chairman Greg Dyke otherwise top-lined warnings from 'sports lawyers' that 'the Premier League's competitiveness could be damaged by the Leave vote', as European players were 'likely to require a form of work permit to play in English football' (Schofield, 2016). The *Express's* take on this story still managed to frame it as 'anti-migrant', however, by focusing solely on Dyke's description of Brexit as 'an opportunity to get more young English talent playing in the Premier League' (Dunne, 2016). While the concept of threat remained as integral to these 'pro-migrant' narratives as to earlier 'anti-migrant' ones, then, it had been refocused away from the guise of (de) humanised foreign folk-devils, towards the macro-level 'economic nationalist' (Balch and Balabanova, 2016) menace posed by potential post-Brexit damage to the *commercial* interests of UK-based capital and the British economy.

The second notable counter-discursive approach to emerge during this initial post-Brexit phase was a narrative strand inverting the widespread (if statistics-driven) focus on the human cost of large-scale migration on *Britons* – pressures on jobs, housing and school places – to highlight the human cost of the 'Leave' vote for *migrants*. While it might be unsurprising to encounter a 25 June story in the left-leaning *Daily Mirror* headlined, 'Britain's migrant families suffering 'sleepless nights' and fearing for their children's future over Brexit' (O'Leary, 2016), the previous day's *Mail Online* quoted several worried EU-based migrants in a report headlined, 'Will your nanny, cleaner or builder have to leave the United Kingdom? EU workers fear they may have to leave Britain after Brexit shock' (Wight, 2016a). Significantly, though, the site's swing towards a 'pro-migrant' perspective was more superficial than first appeared, as an accompanying piece by the same reporter twisted Brexit's implications for migrants back into a *threat* – with the warning (attributed to Jakub Krupa, 'head of Poles in (the) UK') that 'thousands of UK-based Poles' could 'end up applying for full British citizenship' to avoid being sent back to Poland (Wight, 2016b). As an intriguing aside, discourse on *migration* (if not migrants themselves) also underwent another, more tangential, shift immediately after the vote, including in some pro-Leave papers: not in the counter-discursive sense of defending the rights of *EU* nationals to remain in Britain but by highlighting concerns for the future status of *UK* expats living in other member states. Though many mentions of this issue occurred in 'neutral', 'incidental' or even 'anti-migrant' stories – typically in passing references to impending UK–EU talks over post-Brexit residency arrangements – they were, nonetheless, effectively making the argument *for* free movement.

By the time of our second post-referendum phase – the period commencing five months after the Brexit vote – a further discursive shift was occurring, with framing of EU migrants reverting to familiar 'invader'/'exploiter' tropes. One narrative giving renewed impetus to this discourse was the fear-promoting suggestion that, far from ending free movement overnight, the decision to quit the EU might (temporarily) *increase* migration as people rushed to enter the country before free movement ended. A variant on this panic frame was a parallel anti-migrant narrative suggesting EU nationals had *already*

mounted their 11th-hour invasion, anticipating a Leave vote – based on official statistics suggesting net inward migration had peaked the previous year. The significance of this discursive recalibration is considered in the closing sections, but one persuasive interpretation again rests on a confluence of real-world and journalistic factors. By the time this third period commenced, the United Kingdom had returned to a measure of political calm, under a self-styled ‘strong and stable’ (Wilkinson and Hughes, 2016) prime minister committed to ensuring ‘Brexit means Brexit’ (Cowburn, 2016). For newspapers hard-wired to seek out (and dramatise) conflict, Theresa May’s approach set out new battle-lines, as the diplomatic *realpolitik* of withdrawal negotiations began to unfold.

A typical example of a story sounding dire warnings about Britain being overrun by cynical last-minute arrivals spooked by the referendum appeared on www.telegraph.co.uk under the headline, ‘EU migrants who arrive after Article 50 should not stay permanently, says report’ (Dominiczak, 2016). The article was premised on ‘growing fears of a ‘surge’ of EU migrants travelling to the United Kingdom to take advantage of an expected amnesty’ ahead of the triggering of Article 50 of the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon (the mechanism allowing member states to withdraw), though the only source cited warning of such a ‘surge’ was a prominent Leave campaigner, then Labour MP Gisela Stewart. Another Leave-supporting outlet, *Mail Online*, varied the emphasis of the ‘surge’ by highlighting the number of EU citizens (including those already living in Britain) applying for *permanent* ‘British residency’ (Tapsfield, 2016). The release of new net migration figures by the Office for National Statistics on 1 December produced a further flurry of coverage, with papers of all persuasions stressing how it remained at record levels despite (or, reasoned the *Mail*, *because*) of the Leave vote. The Labour-supporting, Remain-backing *Mirror* used the data as an opportunity to criticise the Conservatives’ ongoing failure to bring inward migration down to the ‘tens of thousands’, as Cameron’s government had repeatedly promised (Prince, 2010). It did so by blithely conflating EU migrants with immigrants under the headline, ‘Total immigration to Britain from EU at its highest level ever, official figures reveal’ (Bloom, 2016). By contrast, *Mail Online* explicitly targeted migrants – its headline once again evoking the image of a ‘surge’ (this time of ‘EU workers coming to Britain’ before the ‘Brexit vote’), which had apparently sent ‘total immigration’ to its ‘highest EVER level of 650,000’ (Dathan, 2016). This theme was later picked up by the *Telegraph* in another statistics-driven story, derived from university admissions service Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). This highlighted a ‘surge’ in student applications from ‘poorer’ Eastern European countries, characterised by the director of the Higher Education Policy as a rush to ‘buy now while stocks last’ (Turner, 2016).

Discussion and conclusion

As this article shows, the negative framing of economic migrants (and foreign incomers generally) that dominated UK national press discourse on free movement immediately before the 2016 referendum was initially supplanted by a more conflicted set of frames after the vote, with EU nationals partially repositioned as economic assets, rather than invaders and/or exploiters (threats). But by the end of the year, with a new prime minister in place, preliminary ‘exit’ negotiations under way and the clock ticking to the point when Article 50 would be triggered, migrants were once more being framed as invaders/exploiters – in the context of a supposed last-minute ‘surge’ in pursuit of UK-based jobs, university places and/or citizenship. Why, though, did these discursive shifts happen and what

did they signify, in terms of their relationship to the evolving pre- and post-referendum political and economic landscape? There is only scope here to draw tentative conclusions about the significance of the various re-framings that occurred over this six-month period – and obvious potential for further research, to interrogate the motivations and narrative intentions of journalists and/or their sources through qualitative interviews with those concerned. However, drawing on existing literature in the field, and our knowledge of the background political context in which these articles were published, some provisional interpretations can be offered, based on textual analysis alone.

One feature of the discursive shift immediately after the referendum was a sense of collective disbelief, even among previously ardent Leave-supporters – with panicky stories about company relocations, job losses and academic brain-drains published even in pro-Brexit newspapers hinting (however fleetingly) at a ‘what have we done?’ recalibration of their positions. More prosaically, the fact the ‘war’ had now been ‘won’ by the Leave side meant that, to maintain the newsworthiness of Brexit, both normatively (as a continuum of ‘conflict’ and ‘bad news’ – Harcup and O’Neill, 2017) and commercially (as a source of off-the-shelf, sellable stories – Allern, 2002), the press had to reimagine it. This required it to re-focus its discourse(s), by identifying issues beyond the simpler pro- and anti-EU rhetorical arguments that had been endlessly recycled during the campaign.

But the re-framing of free movement on news pages (however temporary) arguably also reflected something deeper than this. A frantic battle for sense-making was under way in the wider public domain, involving both key actors and voters themselves, and it was this scramble for direction and meaning in the face of a fast-approaching new world of post-Brexit uncertainty that papers mirrored in resetting their agendas. As the post-referendum pro-Brexit message became increasingly confused, with the emergence of ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ Brexiteers, clarity-chasing journalists homed in on a range of elite (but previously side-lined) anti-Brexit actors. As in previous periods when dominant othering discourses had been disrupted (e.g. Critcher, 2006; McRobbie and Thornton, 1995), this allowed anti-migrant frames to be contested by a vocal and coordinated *pro*-migration backlash led by top Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE) 100 companies, universities and Premiership football clubs – all primed to provide quotable, page-ready copy on demand (Tuchman, 1999 [1972]). This abrupt discursive shift was important because it demonstrated (however briefly) the ability of previously side-lined counter-discursive voices to impact on both the tone and substance of public debate on issues with potentially serious human consequences. As Blinder and Allen (2016) recently showed, press depictions of (im)migration *matter* because the continual ‘recurrence’ of terms like ‘illegal immigrants’ in UK newspapers ‘supports the idea of a link between media portrayals and British citizens’ mental images of immigrants’, as reflected in repeated polls and surveys. In the context of the wider ongoing debates around Britain’s future relationship with the EU and post-Brexit immigration rules, then, these counter-arguments have the potential to regain traction, and influence public attitudes and political actions in relation to crucial policy issues, in the years ahead.

Belying this short-term discursive shift, however, by the end of the year familiar ‘welfare chauvinist’ (Balch and Balabanova, 2016) themes of exploitation and invasion had resurfaced in news coverage, following a major statistical announcement on the record scale of inward migration over the previous year – including during the early days in office of a premier who, as Home Secretary, had previously presided over (im)migration policy. The numerous reports generated by these figures across the spectrum of the press, and a ‘follow-up’ story (Harcup and O’Neill, 2017) focusing on a supposed ‘surge’ of

university applications by Eastern Europeans, easily slotted into a years-long narrative continuum stemming from the Conservatives' repeated pledges to cut net immigration to the 'tens of thousands' (Prince, 2010). In so doing, they rebooted the discourse – returning it to its previously dominant anti-migrant default-setting. However, with both Leave and Remain supporters by now preoccupied with the practical reality of negotiating the United Kingdom's EU withdrawal, there was an equally significant shift in free movement towards a more 'incidental' mention of migrants in stories otherwise concerned with different matters. This testified to a growing normalisation (and rationalisation) of discussion of free movement, as one of several complex and interconnected issues to be addressed during the withdrawal process, including the customs union and single market – rather than simply a lexical and conceptual trigger for the discursive othering of foreigners.

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Notes

1. Prior to filtering for non-news articles, the period 16–23 June initially generated 670 results; 24 June–23 July 2,486; and 24 November–23 December 1,127
2. Initial coding was conducted for a paper delivered to the 2017 International Conference of the Political Studies Association, and the data re-coded the following year to form the basis for this article.

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