Brexit, Agenda Setting and Framing of Immigration in the Media: The Case of the *Daily Mail*

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1. Introduction

On June 23rd 2016, members of the United Kingdom voted in a referendum to determine whether their nation will continue to be a member state of the European Union. The movement termed Brexit - a portmanteau of British and Exit - was decided upon by a state-wide referendum that drew over 40 million voters (Wheeler 2017) and was divided into two camps: 'Leave' and 'Remain'. The majority's decision to leave not only offered new insights on the voter motivations, but it also highlighted the power of media to set political agendas and shape the public perception of relevant issues. Communication scholars have argued that the national newspapers in the UK played a large part in shaping public opinion and in some ways distorting the truth (Deacon et al. 2016; Levy et al. 2016). This paper seeks to determine the veracity of these claims by analysing portrayals of both the economy and immigration in the *Daily Mail* before and after the referendum. While this paper speculates that journalistic measures may have affected the outcome of the referendum, further data and investigation would be required to warrant such a conclusion.

In the United Kingdom, the public's major concern during the campaign initially concerned the issue of the economy however, mid-way through the campaign immigration issues became the most concerning to the public. I argue that this change in opinion is due to newspapers on the 'Leave' side of the campaign placing emphasis on the issue of immigration by devoting more newspaper space to the issue and employing negative frames in the portrayal of current and prospective immigration levels. The frames utilised were created with the use of exaggeration and the rhetorical 'othering' of immigrants. This paper attempts to understand how the *Daily Mail* framed the issue of immigration during the Brexit referendum to advance the 'Leave' agenda.

Liberal theorists from Milton and Madison to John Stuart Mill have argued that the democratic right of freedom of expression requires the existence of an unfettered and independent press within each nation (Mueller 2014). These theories have been built upon by modern day theorists who emphasise the role of an informed citizenry as

a key necessity in the maintenance of democratic processes, as is evident in the works of Weber, Schumpeter, Dahl, and Amartya Sen. Amartya Sen suggests that a free media is essential to democracy because it acts as a guarantee of government transparency in making them accountable to the people (Sen 2001). This refers to the obligation of elected representatives to be answerable to the people and to comment on and give reasons for the results of their political decision making (Mueller 2014). The underlying idea amongst these theorists is that media aids in the creation of an informed public and an informed public is one of the most important factors in a democracy. In the case of a newspaper such as the *Daily Mail*, on the 'Leave' side of the campaign, political bias influenced how the agenda was set to focus on the issue of immigration and it also affected the framing of issues, to the effect of misinforming citizens.

2. The British Media and Agenda Setting

Agenda setting is not inherently bad. It acts as a system of prioritising one thing over another and such prioritisation is necessary in a functional society (Dearing & Roger 1996). Agenda setting can fall into three categories: the 'media agenda', the 'public agenda' and the 'policy agenda'. For each agenda type, salience is key. With regards to media agenda setting, the focus is not only on the positive or negative aspects of an issue, but on the emphasis placed on one issue over another. The extent to which people regard issues as being important as a result of the emphasis on these issues in the media is the central focus of media agenda setting theory (Dearing & Roger 1996; McCombs 2014).

Strictly speaking, the Brexit campaign pertained to the UK's exit from the EU. The main arguments for or against leaving the EU quickly became about three key areas of concern: immigration, sovereignty, and the economy (Wheeler 2014). In May 2016, respondents to an Ipsos poll cited the economy as being an important topic in their decision to vote 'Remain' or 'Leave'. During the last two months of the campaign, however, immigration became the most important issue for voters. In another poll conducted by Ipsos on June 16th 2016, 33% of respondents mentioned immigration as one of their most important issues, up from 28% in May. In comparison, only 28% of respondents mentioned the economy as their most important

issue in June, down from the initial 33% (Skinner et al. 2016).

This shift did not occur randomly, but instead because of media agenda setting. Media exposure, such as reading the newspaper, results in a mediated view of the world, which means that the priorities of the media strongly influence the priorities of the public (McCombs 2014). Media priorities can be deduced based on the emphasis that is placed on a particular issue. To identify the amount of emphasis placed on the respective issues, it's important to look at the number of articles written on the topic between the time the first and second poll were conducted, as well as the length of the titles and articles.

3. Agenda Setting Analysis

The top three newspapers in the UK affirmed their stance as being on the 'Leave' side of the campaign, these newspapers include the *Daily Mail, The Sun*, and *The Daily Telegraph*. This suggests that readers in the United Kingdom were more exposed to the 'Leave' campaign rhetoric. The *Daily Mail* newspaper is chosen as the focus of this analysis on agenda setting because out of the five highest ranked newspapers, it is ranked number one in the UK in terms of readership, with over 29 million readers (Newswork 2017).

The official campaign period lasted ten weeks, starting on April 15th 2016 and ending on the day of the vote on June 23rd 2016, therefore all news articles analysed in this paper fall within this time frame. The key political figures were divided into two camps: the more popular 'Leave' camp spearheaded by Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, and the 'Remain' campaign spearheaded by David Cameron and Theresa May. The election had a turnout of around 46 million voters, a 72% turnout, per the BBC. Overall, 53.4% of citizens voted 'Leave' and 46.6% voted 'Remain' (Wheeler 2017).

The articles examined will be in the 2-month period from mid-April to early June, from when the first audience poll was taken, up until June 14th, when the second audience poll was taken. This allows for the determination of changes in media focus and the correlated change in public opinion based on the amount of emphasis on a given topic.

Half way through the election period from June 11th to June 14th, a poll by Ispos showed that public opinion had shifted from the economy to immigration, with

many considering it to be the most important issue. This may indicate that the public agenda was inspired by a media agenda that placed emphasis on the issue of immigration over other topics. To substantiate this claim, this paper takes the approach suggested by McCombs in studying the agenda setting theory. McCombs' approach suggests that to analyse this theory one must look at the headlines, lead stories, frequency of words, phrase citations, and so on (McCombs 2014).

To analyse the agenda setting of the *Daily Mail* over a particular period of time, this analysis was conducted by examining articles written before the campaign from April 5th to April 10th 2016, and articles from three periods leading up to the June 14th poll (see appendix A). The three periods analysed were April 15th to 20th, May 10th to 15th and June 10th to 15th. The weeks were chosen to be representative of the months in the campaign period leading up to the polls.

After determining the time frames to be examined, the second aspect of the analysis consisted of going through the archives of the *Daily Mail* for each period and focusing on using two search terms 'Brexit, immigration' and 'Brexit, economy'. This served to illustrate the salience the *Daily Mail* gave to the topic based on the increase or lack thereof in the number of articles written on the given topic. These search terms also tried to take into account variations of each word used and tried to account for these variations with searches of such synonymous terms as 'immigrant', 'migrant' and 'economics'.

The analysis of the number of articles written on each topic is displayed in appendix B. In the period before the campaign B1, there were a total of 7 articles written about immigration and 22 written on economy, this did not include the total number of articles on immigration written without the context of Brexit, as that total would be 16. For the purpose of this paper, only immigration articles written in the context of Brexit are examined.

In the C1 period there is a slight increase in both the number of articles on immigration and economy. The total number of immigration related articles during this period is 28 and the total number of articles on the economy are 36. In period C2, there is a decrease for both articles on immigration and economy. That said, there is an almost comparable number of articles written between the two topics, with 26 articles on the economy and 21 on immigration. In period C3, there was a spike in articles

regarding both topics with a total of 86 articles on the economy and 84 articles on immigration within the 5-day span. Although articles on the economy are consistently more frequent than articles on immigration, from period B1 to period C3, there is a significant increase in the overall number of articles written on immigration. From period B1 to C3 there is an 88.5% increase in immigration-centric articles compared to the 77.4% increase in economy-centric articles.

The increase in the number of articles on immigration related topics is not the only factor to take into consideration in determining the *Daily Mail*'s influence on increasing the salience of immigration related topics. The number of words that comprise an article also indicates another dimension of the salience afforded to a given topic (McCombs 2014). The analysis on word count is conducted on articles written only in period C3 as it has the highest number of articles written on both topics. The word count analysis looked not only into the average word count in each article but the average word count in the titles of the articles as well and this was conducted with a random selection of 10 articles in this time frame. With regards to the length of the articles on each topic, articles on immigration averaged about 807.8 words, which was 19% more words on average than articles on the economy, which had an average of 699.3 words per article. Immigration articles therefore had more content and therefore can be safely assumed to take up more space in the print version of the newspaper, thus attracting more attention.

Newspaper titles also play a part in agenda setting as well. Given that agenda setting is used to shape what the public views to be important, media can use a variety of tools to relay that emphasis. For cable news, emphasis can be conveyed by utilising breaking news banners and using selective repetition (McCombs 2014). Print newspapers also employ similar tactics, such as the use of bold fonts and capitalisation, as well as the use of selected quotes in the title and the length of the titles themselves (McCombs 2014).

The articles utilised for this analysis were the same as those used to determine the average words per article. The analysis showed that, on average, the titles of articles about the economy averaged about 16.6 words while the titles of articles on immigration averaged 23.8 words. The amount of emphasis placed on an issue can also be determined by the amount of words that are put in bold and the amount of quotations

used.

Still using articles in the C3 period, 50 articles were analysed for this section, mostly because the archive shows 50 articles at a time. The analysis took into account and eliminated bolded abbreviations such as EU or PM because these words are popular abbreviations, but instead focused on seemingly random words that the paper chose to emphasise. For immigration related articles, 17 out of 50 articles used bolded words in the titles. Other articles falling under the topic of immigration used capitalised words like "exclusive", "kill", "another", "help", "out", "turks". This is in contrast with the 8 out of 50 words that are capitalised in article titles under the topic of the economy.

To relay emphasis or draw the reader's attention to a subject, the newspapers made use of quotations as well; the quotes used were often extractions from key political figures in either the 'Leave' or 'Remain' camp. The quotes often served as shock factors or attention grabbers in the titles. From the analysis of articles on immigration related articles, 19 of 50 made use of quotes in the title, a sharp contrast to 3 of 50 articles under the topic of economy which made use of quotes.

A limitation to this analysis is that with the use of a digital archive, it is difficult to determine which articles were on the front page of the newspaper, a factor that could contribute to ensuring that one topic is perceived as more important than others. However, based on the analysis of the word lengths of articles on each topic, the measures taken to create emphasis, and the overall amount of space in the newspaper ascribed to immigration issues, the media evidently began to place more emphasis on immigration and this in turn could explain the change in public opinion from viewing economics as an important issue.

By providing more coverage on the issue and placing emphasis on the topic, it can be assumed that the *Daily Mail* contributed to the change in people's opinion on the issue that was most important. While it has been established that the *Daily Mail* participated in agenda setting by shifting the focus to immigration issues and thus inspiring changes in public opinion on the salience of immigration issues, they contributed in shaping how people perceived the issue as well. Although framing is often described as second level agenda setting, these two concepts are different (Weaver 2007). Agenda setting acts as a way to make people think that an issue is

important, while framing is how news media shapes our view of the issue (Entman 2007). So, while newspapers like the *Daily Mail* help set the agenda in emphasising immigration issues, they can make people think about immigration in a negative or positive light depending on the frames employed.

4. Framing Analysis

To understand how the issue is framed in the media, it is important to look at the word choice and tone of the articles to determine how immigration issues are intended to be perceived by the audience (Boydstun et al 2014). To study the frames created around immigration, an analysis of 10 randomly selected articles in the period C3 was conducted. This period was chosen because it contains the highest number of articles written about immigration in a 5-day span in comparison to other campaign periods and because it is closer to the time of the second poll conducted on June 16th 2016. The analysis was conducted by first extracting key terms from the speeches of popular 'Leave' campaigners. Speeches from key figures in key campaigns tended to frame immigration in a negative way and because the *Daily Mail* took a stance as being on the 'Leave' side of the campaign, it was important to examine if the media employed a similar frame.

An analysis of four randomly selected speeches made by Boris Johnson, spanning the entire campaign period, several key words proved to be recurring in the speeches with regards to immigration which can be construed as signals of 'Leave' rhetoric. The key words were determined to be 'control', which appeared 65 times, whereas 'borders' appeared 9 times and 'crisis' appeared 13 times (Johnson, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d). The articles written by the *Daily Mail* in period C3 were then analysed for their use of these 'Leave' rhetoric. The framing analysis revealed that articles on immigration were framed in a way that engenders a negative public opinion of increased immigration. The rhetoric utilised by the newspaper employed terminology implicitly supportive of the 'Leave' campaign such as 'control' in the context of borders and immigration, which appeared 44 times in the 10 articles analysed, The word 'control' appeared either directly before or directly after words like 'EU immigration', 'immigration', 'borders', and 'Britain's borders'. Instances where the word control did not come directly before or directly after these words but where

mentioned in the same sentence were included in the analysis. Further analysis for 'Leave' rhetoric showed that 'borders' was mentioned 33 times and 'crisis' 11 times in the 10 articles.

An analysis of these articles in terms of their content and headlines revealed five framing themes. These themes were 'us vs. them' rhetoric, immigrants having negative impacts on the economy, border invasion, islamophobia, and exposing corruption.

5. The Other

The *Daily Mail* referred to non-Britons in a way that homogenised and dehumanised them, thus creating the spectre of 'the other'. While the newspaper explicitly identified Britons as 'citizens of the UK', immigrants were usually referred to by the nationality they are perceived to been identified with initially, such as 'Turks' and 'Syrians', irrespective of naturalisation. Given that the paper could have framed these people in neutral terms such as 'British immigrants', the use of foreign classifications serves to create a divide between those who are 'true' Britons and those who they perceive to be a threat to 'true' British society. These choice of words contributes to the 'us vs. them' narrative by creating the perception that the other does not have the same moral values and are - in a simplistic sense - bad people. For example, an article published on April 17th 2016 by the *Daily Mail* read: '72 per cent of struck off doctors are from overseas: Cases include an Indian GP who ran an immigration scam and a Malaysian medic who secretly filmed female patients'(Adams 2016) The article makes sure to refer to the struck off doctors not as fellow Britons, but by their initial nationality, so as to amalgamate them into the ominous spectre of the 'other'.

6. Islamophobia

Most articles on the issue of immigration also contain a subtle thread of islamophobia. According to a survey, the British public think that one in five British people are Muslim when in reality it is one in twenty and that 24% of the population are immigrants when the official figure is 13% (Fenton 2016). The *Daily Mail* utilised existing islamophobia to add further salience to the issue. This is especially evident in the emphasis they place on the Middle East and immigration from majority Muslim

countries in comparison to that which they place on immigration of other EU and Anglosphere countries. While immigration from anywhere is seen in a negative way, immigrants from majority Muslim countries are referred to by mononyms of their nationality only, for example 'Turks' and 'Syrians', whereas those from European countries are referred to as 'foreign workers' or 'Polish workers'. For example, an article published on April 21st 2016 read 'Britain will take 3,000 MORE refugees from the Middle East as ministers admit previous promises did not go far enough' (Sculthorpe 2016). The word 'more' is capitalised by the newspaper, suggesting outrage at the precedent immigration, let alone further immigration. This anti-immigration sentiment is further evidenced by the use of 'already' in the sub-heading 'New group is on top of the 20,000 refugees promised new homes already' (Sculthorpe 2016).

7. Immigrants and the Economy

Another propagandistic manoeuvre by the *Daily Mail* consisted of stories that implied that immigration was bad for the economy because it took resources away from deserving citizens and gave them to 'jobless' migrants. For example, an article published by the *Daily Mail* ran with the headline: ''It's a sham': IDS says the chances of kicking out jobless migrants after six months were 'close to zero' – and claims Cameron KNOWS it.'(Slack 2016) The newspaper strengthened this frame with stories that gave credence to the idea of resource scarcity was becoming a problem due to immigration, although they never actually provided proof that such scarcity exists. For example, use of words like 'handout' and 'poverty' when referring to immigrants as opposed to a neutral word like 'benefits', which was often used when referring to poor Britons (Seaton 2016). Similarly, when discussing Britons, words such as 'entitled' and 'hardworking' were used to establish ownership of hard earned resources, while the outsiders are asking for handouts or wanting to take their resources from them. The theme often focused on the pressure immigrants place on the system, be it on job opportunities, access to health care or access to public education. An article published by the *Daily Mail* on April 19th 2016 ran with the headline stating: 'Thousands of children miss out on a place at all their chosen primary schools: Up to a tenth in some areas did not receive a spot…Councils are struggling to provide enough places after

years of migration' (Harding 2016).

8. Border Invasion

In the speeches of 'Leave' campaign leaders and in newspaper articles, the issue of control with regards to the UK's borders was given increased salience through repetition. As mentioned earlier in an analysis of 10 articles, 'control' with regards to borders was mentioned 44 times. The articles implied that millions of migrants will be coming to Britain illegally because of the UK's membership in the EU. This is evident in their use of words like 'sneak', and phrases like 'migrants will push', or 'open the floodgates to more refugees'. An article published on June 10th 2016 states: 'Revealed: migrants sneak into Britain at a rate of one every six minutes – official figures show' (Dathan 2016). Similarly, another article published on April 5th 2016 stated ''Staggering' number of European jihadis: EU's own border agency admits terrorists are exploiting refugee crisis and lax controls - but has no idea how many illegal immigrants there are.' (Slack 2016) However, it is important to note that although the paper claims to have received the information from officials, they never mention what official figures or reports are used. The newspaper tended to use startling figures to represent the number of people supposedly coming into the country and then attributing these figures to supposed experts but never revealing the source of the data. By utilising these methods, the *Daily Mail* presents the idea that the only way to curb this invasion is to 'control' Britain's borders and keep immigrants out.

9. Liberation from Corruption

The *Daily Mail* conveyed the impression that immigration is a bigger issue than people think and that the current leaders of the 'Remain' camp were all in a conspiracy with other EU leaders to open up the UK's borders for profit. The framing of immigration issues by the *Daily Mail* also suggested that those supporting the 'Remain' camp was part of a conspiracy to bring in more immigrants. It perpetuated the idea that voting to leave the EU would be the only way to liberate people from this corruption. This is evident with the use of dramatic words like 'revealed' and phrases like 'lifted the lid' in articles about the policies being put forward by 'Remain' campaigners. For example, two articles published on June 10th 2016 stated: 'We DO meddle too much, says EU

boss: Juncker finally tells the truth on bloated Brussels and admits many laws should have been left to national governments.' (Stevens 2016) The use of the word 'finally' implies that they had been telling lies or half-truths up to that point and now the people will finally know what is really happening. The second article read: 'Greediest snouts in the EU trough: Not sure how to vote? Read about the stinking wealth and hypocrisy of those Brussels fat cats the Kinnocks and it may help you decide' (Pendlebury 2016).

10. Conclusion

Through the content analysis of the *Daily Mail*, the most popular newspaper in the UK in terms of readership, it is evident that articles aimed to inspire readers to vote 'Leave' focused on immigration. Over the periods examined, there was an 88% increase in the amount of articles written on immigration, in comparison to the 77% increase of articles on the economy. While both topics increased in coverage, by writing increasingly about immigration and dedicating more newspaper coverage to the issue through longer articles and headings, the *Daily Mail* contributed to the shift in public opinion from viewing issues of the economy as being the most important to viewing issues of immigration as being most important during the Brexit campaign.

According to Lippmann, the media is in charge of creating the pictures in our heads when it comes to public opinion (Lippmann 2014). Thus, not only did the *Daily Mail* raise the salience of immigration, they also shaped how people viewed the topic. The issue of immigration was framed by the Daily Mail in a negative manner focusing on five themes, namely the 'us vs. them' narrative, liberation from corruption, islamophobia, border invasion and the negative impacts of immigrants on the economy. All five themes suggested that immigration was bad for the UK and was robbing hard working citizens of benefits that were rightfully theirs. By setting the agenda and framing the news coverage on immigration, the *Daily Mail* can be said to have acted in a manner that does not align with objective journalistic standards. Instead, using negative rhetoric with reference to immigration, the *Daily Mail* created frames that engendered negative associations with immigration.

The frames were effective because it fed into established stereotypes and created a sense of urgency. Their choice of words served to alienate immigrants, which resulted in presuppositions when it came to the Brexit referendum (Rowinski 2016). By

such means, they exaggerated an immigration crisis that could not be substantiated but seemingly required immediate attention. The solution presented was voting 'Leave'. By doing so, Britons would be regaining control of their borders. However, it is important to note that the newspaper rarely mentioned how the process of regaining control would work beyond voting 'Leave'. This false sense of urgency could have mobilised readers to vote on the ideological stance the newspaper had taken without having any other knowledge on the issue.

While agenda setting is not necessarily a bad thing (McCombs 2014), in the case of the Brexit referendum, the act of agenda setting by the newspaper failed to inform people in an objective manner. The *Daily Mail* was arguably biased in favour of its political stance and its rhetoric reflected this. A few hours after the vote and result of the referendum 'what is the EU?' became a trending google search in the UK and similarly, searches on 'what happens if we leave the EU?' had tripled (Fung, 2016). This implies that a sizeable portion of the United Kingdom's demographic - which might also include readers of the *Daily Mail* - were not duly informed on key matters that underscored the referendum. So, even though 53.4% of people voted to leave the EU many didn't really know what the EU represented (Fung 2016).

The role of the *Daily Mail* in not only setting the agenda for the referendum but also framing the key issues such as immigration detracted from the capacity of its readers to act in an informed manner. With all the emphasis on immigration and taking back control, it is important to note that most of the articles never explained how voting 'Leave' would curb the perceived immigration problem or impact the future of Britain economically and socially. Instead, newspapers like the *Daily Mail* focused on sensationalism and poorly substantiated claims. A potential area of further study would be to examine the extent to which all other newspapers acted in a similar manner.

This paper has sought to determine the role of news media in shaping public opinion on matters central to the Brexit referendum. While it has concluded that the *Daily Mail* failed to serve the public in an objective manner, it is also pertinent to consider other reasons for why public opinion took shape as it did. Perhaps it was the case that papers like the *Daily Mail* were simply reporting on sensationalist campaigners and relayed their misinformation with journalistic accuracy, rather than engendering it themselves. A further limitation of this paper is its exclusion of other

issues from the analysis, aside from Brexit and the economy, which may be of salience. For instance, the average Brexit article may well be longer than the average article on the economy, but how long are articles on other relevant political subjects? Moreover, while it was useful to examine the similarity of language employed by Boris Johnson and the *Daily Mail*, this comparison would be all the more informing if we had the context of contrasting language employed by 'Remain' campaigners and their media allies.

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