

## **An Analysis of British Media's Framing of Immigration During Brexit Campaign's Final Days**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Did conservative media frame immigration during the run-up to the Brexit Referendum differently than liberal media? Through the coding of articles in both *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*, we will determine that these publications framed immigration in terms of national security rather than human rights or economic integration issues during the final few days of the Brexit campaign in 2016. Additionally, this framing was due to two newsworthy events that formed the narrative during these waning days: a great debate and a controversial advertisement which not only dominated the headlines but also caused the campaigns to act and react around a security narrative.

Keywords: Brexit, United Kingdom, Immigration, Media Analysis, Framing

### **Introduction**

In June 2016, the United Kingdom shocked the world and voted to leave the European Union. In the three years since, both those who voted to remain in the European Union (Remainers) and those who voted to leave (Brexiters) have become entrenched in their own sides of the debate. Those in the Leave camp deride people who favor EU membership as “Remoaners”: sore losers who want to subvert the will of the 17.4 million people who voted to leave (Freedland 2019, Farage 2016). Likewise, Remainers often belittle those who voted to leave as xenophobic at best and racist at worst (Shaw, 2019; Stone, 2018). Thanks in part to the drawn-out negotiations between the UK and the EU and ongoing political battles, these accusations and stereotypes have calcified, resulting in an increasingly divided country not only politically but also culturally.

While the formal campaign on the EU Referendum began in February 2016, the Leave side had been campaigning on this singular topic since the UK joined the European Union in 1972. The British National Party (BNP) was the first to oppose the United Kingdom's entry to the EU, and subsequently, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) led the charge (Edwards). The reasons these organizations gave for a withdrawal often had xenophobic or protectionist overtones, with UKIP being strongly opposed to any immigration from areas that were considered “culturally dissimilar” to the UK (Dennison and Godwin 2015). The messaging was sometimes so polarizing that even the proponents and leaders of the Leave campaign objected to the tactics used by these groups (“Gove ‘Shuddered’ At UKIP Migrants Poster” 2016). However, despite these objections, the BNP and their political successors in UKIP ultimately became part of the Brexit movement, with UKIP's leader Nigel Farage at the helm.

Through coding of articles in both *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*, I will show how immigration was framed in terms of national security over other options during the final few days of the Brexit campaign in 2016. Additionally, I will show that this framing was due to two newsworthy events that formed the narrative during these waning days: a great debate and a controversial advertisement that dominated the headlines and caused the campaigns to act and react around a security narrative.

## Hypotheses

In examining *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*, I look at how the media framed immigration in the final days leading up to the referendum, in both their news and opinion sections. While thousands of newspaper articles, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor have been published since the Brexit campaign was launched, this data will look at how immigration was framed in two newspapers immediately preceding the vote in June 2016. Specifically, I will analyze the center-right *The Daily Telegraph*, which endorsed the Leave campaign (Telegraph View 2016), and the center-left-leaning *The Guardian*, which endorsed remaining in the European Union (“*The Guardian View On The EU Debate: David Cameron Makes A Serious Case | Editorial*” 2016). By coding how each of these two publications addressed immigration during this period, we can gain insight into the talking points and policy debates that drove both sides during the Brexit campaign.

The first hypothesis is that the media depicted immigration as inextricably linked to national security. Given the manifestos of the pro-Brexit “Vote Leave” and “Leave.eu” campaigns, it is likely that newspapers supporting or voicing the beliefs of the anti-European factions made the explicit connection of immigration and national security (“Why Vote Leave” About Leave.eu). While security was not the primary focus of the lead campaign, Vote Leave, it was still a highly visible topic. According to the campaign’s website, being “in charge of our own borders” and being able to “control immigration” were items two and three on the list supporting Brexit (“Why Vote Leave”). The campaign’s message was accompanied by imagery showing migrants crossing a border secured with razor wire as well as a graphic stating that Turkey, along with its 76 million inhabitants, was one of the five new countries joining the EU (“Why Vote Leave”). While the campaign’s purpose for including this imagery was not explicit, the implication of the imagery was that the demographic shift of Turkey’s 76 million Muslim citizens suddenly becoming EU citizens was against the national interests of the UK and the European Union. The inclusion of Turkey at this point in the debate is curious given the stalled accession talks between the EU and Turkey in 2015. At best, many more years of negotiation laid ahead between the two governments, so there was no imminent “threat” of Turkey joining the EU. Just six months after the Brexit referendum, the European Parliament overwhelmingly voted to suspend accession talks with Turkey altogether due to human rights and other concerns. If there are any subsequent referenda on the matter, it will be interesting to see if a similar xenophobic dog whistle is used by a new Vote Leave campaign.

Even though the Leave campaign utilized imagery involving immigration, Vote Leave’s primary argument in support of Brexit invoked economic freedom. Therefore, another hypothesis I will examine is that the media in the UK looked at immigration through a lens of economic integration or prosperity (“Why Vote Leave”). This hypothesis speaks to the heart of one of the arguments used by the Remain campaign: that leaving the EU would wreak economic havoc on the United Kingdom due to the fact it could not participate in the EU’s common market. Additionally, free movement of goods, services, and capital are other aspects of the EU’s *acquis communautaire*. Researchers Jonathan Portes and Giuseppe Forte at London’s King College note that immigration and the economy were the two central issues of Brexit (2017). If this hypothesis is supported, then it would speak to not only the media’s ability to tie the two issues together but also the politicians who merged the two topics into one grand theme—even if none of the

projections released by the UK Government before the election analyzed Brexit-related immigration changes on the UK economy (Portes & Forte). While Freedom of Movement only applies to EU citizens, it is closely related to the migrant crisis faced by Europe over the past decade, with millions of refugees fleeing their home countries due to war, famine, or other humanitarian issues (Citizens’ Rights Directive). I will also code to see if a related humanitarian framing exists in any of the articles examined.

Finally, I will examine how *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* differed in how they framed immigration. Given *The Guardian*’s pro-Remain and *The Daily Telegraph*’s pro-Leave endorsements, their overall political leanings will differ. The first sub-hypothesis is that *The Guardian*’s content will frame immigration along the lines of a humanitarian or human rights issue, given the publication’s history of endorsing left-wing causes or Labour candidates. Furthermore, the second sub-hypothesis is that *The Daily Telegraph*’s editorial board is looking at the issue through the lens of national security, and therefore its writers and published letters to the editor will support that position. This is a hypothesis that has its genesis in and is similar to the research of Deborah Sogelola at the University of Ottawa. In 2018, Sogelola wrote about the immigration framing of the *Daily Mail*, a British newspaper that has a right-wing editorial point of view. She wrote that the *Mail* “homogenized and dehumanized” non-UK residents and aliens (Sogelola, 135). This analysis expands on Sogelola’s research and compares two generally respected newspapers that hold opposing editorial endorsements and histories of political bias to determine whether a connection can be made between the publications’ editorial positions and their news articles’ framing.

## Research Design / Data

In this research, I chose to focus on two English-language newspapers published in the United Kingdom. This provides a local lens through which foreign observers can interpret how media in the United Kingdom discussed immigration as a local issue. The two newspapers in this study were selected given their history of partisan endorsement. I selected two generally and historically well-respected newspapers with a wide readership. Additionally, the two selected newspapers each endorsed a different side of the Brexit referendum. Representing the “Remain” option, *The Guardian* historically endorses Labour, Liberal, or Liberal Democratic causes and is generally seen as a left-of-center publication (Copeland and Copsey 2017). Since World War II, the paper has only endorsed Labour or Liberal/Liberal Democrats in any general election (Nelsson 2015). This speaks to the publication’s *bona fides* and a good representative of the center-left of British politics.

Endorsing “Leave,” *The Daily Telegraph* does not mince its words. In its endorsement of Theresa May’s Conservative Party in the 2017 snap election, the *Telegraph*’s editorial board left no doubts regarding their choice:

But they have to ask themselves whether they are prepared to see [Labour Party leader] Jeremy Corbyn in office for that to happen. While Labour is in no position to win an election outright it could conceivably end up in a coalition with the Lib Dems and the SNP if the Tories are not returned to power. Mr Corbyn anywhere near the levers of power would be a disaster for the country. (Telegraph View 2017)

Regardless of how the political winds are blowing, *The Daily Telegraph* endorses the Conservative Party, having awarded them their endorsement in each of the five pre-Brexit elections between

1997 and 2015. Since their late endorsement of “Leave” (just three days before the referendum was held), they made the above endorsement of the Conservative Party, and in the summer of 2019, they backed Brexit hardliner and former *Telegraph* journalist Boris Johnson to replace the outgoing Prime Minister later stating that Johnson grew “frustrated” and “exasperated” with a “bureaucracy hell bent on wrapping Britain” (Telegraph View 2019). This glowing endorsement of Brexit, as well as subsequent endorsements against the opposition, establishes *The Daily Telegraph* as a staunch advocate in favor of the UK leaving the European Union outside the single editorial proclaiming as much in 2016.

This establishes the use of both papers as good indicators as to the European supporting “remain” campaign and the Eurosceptic Leave campaign outside the realm of their official endorsements.

According to a search on Nexis Uni®, *The Guardian* alone published 1,546 articles involving immigration and migration between the start of the campaign on February 22, 2016, and the referendum date on June 23, 2016. This is more than any other newspaper in the world and over four times as many mentions as the next highest UK publication, *The Times of London*, with 374 entries. *The Daily Telegraph* mentioned these search terms a relative handful of times, with 259 results during the campaign period.

To find fifty articles for this research, the time frame was restricted to an extremely limited period: only a few days for each paper. For *The Daily Telegraph*, this window was from Monday, 21 June, 2016, the day after their official endorsement, to Thursday, 23 June, 2016, the day of the referendum. For the remain-endorsing *The Guardian*, the window was for the final two days, 22 and 23 June 2016. Restricting a search to such a small area or time frame does create a risk that the sample size is too small to draw any general conclusions about the two papers. Any bias that may be present could be missed as a publication could simply be reporting on a factual matter. However, given the consistency of the two papers’ positions during the entire Brexit debate, I believe this risk to be small. If anything, the most strongly held beliefs would be those most published in the days leading up to the election.

After I established the search dates for each paper, I eliminated duplicates and articles that contained only a fleeting mention of immigration. For example, an article in *The Daily Telegraph* covering the 19 June death of actor Anton Yelchin, who was an immigrant to the United States, was eliminated. Though the article did address immigration, it was not directly tied to the Brexit debate. Also eliminated were a handful of reports from Germany and anything regarding the presidential campaign of Donald Trump, which was occurring at the same time as these stories, as they lacked any useful framing on immigration in the United Kingdom. After these eliminations, 25 articles remained for this publication. For *The Guardian*, 31 articles were found for the two days of the campaign, 22 and 23 June 2016. Of these, a single article regarding Barack Obama, immigration in Burma (Myanmar), Spain, and an article summarizing the Trump campaign were eliminated. This resulted in the required 25 articles.

## Coding

To determine how immigration was framed, I reviewed each article’s content and coded each paragraph. While the 50 articles provided hundreds of paragraphs of content, only those paragraphs that mentioned immigration, migration, or words with a similar stem were tagged for this research. Each mention was then coded as to how immigration was presented, using one of the following categories: national security, humanitarian or human rights, economic integration,

or a combination thereof. For example, if the article mentioned “taking back control,” it was coded as national security. If the paragraph mentioned “welcoming” an immigrant or migrant, or if an article generally treated immigration as a positive net effect for the United Kingdom or something the UK “should” otherwise be involved in, it was coded as a humanitarian framing. Alternatively, if the opposing view was taken, it was coded as national security. Finally, if a paragraph was indirectly critical of framing immigration as a security issue, then it was coded as humanitarian and vice versa. In all, 95 paragraphs from *The Guardian* and 84 paragraphs from *The Daily Telegraph* were coded.

## Results

**Figure 1: Paragraph Coding of British Newspaper Articles (total mentions)**

	SECURITY	HUMAN RIGHTS	ECON	SEC/HUM *	SEC/ECON †	HUM/ECON ‡	ALL	OTHER §
<i>The Guardian</i>	27	23	23	1	4	1	1	16
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	35	11	17	3	7	1	2	7
Total	63	34	40	4	11	2	3	23
<p><b>Notes:</b> Total mentions include the combined percentages from both publications. Coding included the mention of immigration through a combination of the following:</p> <p>* National Security as well as Humanitarian</p> <p>† National Security as well as Economic Integration</p> <p>‡ Humanitarian as well as Economic Integration</p> <p>§ The mention of immigration was unique and did not include any of the framing previously mentioned.</p>								

*Media framed immigration in terms of security.*

This hypothesis was supported. While *The Guardian* only slightly favored framing immigration in terms of security, *The Daily Telegraph* presented immigration as a security issue more than twice as often as the next closest narrative, economics. If you include the paragraphs where security framing was coded with either humanitarian or economic ones, over 43% of the paragraphs included a security narrative of some type. Many of the paragraphs coded as security came from the “taking back control” talking point, which dominated the Leave campaign’s final days.

**Figure 2: Paragraph Coding of Articles (as a percentage of paper’s mentions)**

	SECURITY	HUMAN RIGHTS	ECON	SEC/HUM *	SEC/ECON †	HUM/ECON ‡	ALL	OTHER §
<i>The Guardian</i>	28	24	24	1	4	1	1	17
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	42	13	20	4	8	1	2	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>13</b>
<p><b>Notes:</b> Total mentions include the combined percentages from both publications. Coding included the mention of immigration through a combination of the following:</p> <p>* National Security as well as Humanitarian</p> <p>† National Security as well as Economic Integration</p> <p>‡ Humanitarian as well as Economic Integration</p> <p>§ The mention of immigration was unique and did not include any of the framing previously mentioned.</p>								

*Media framed immigration in terms of human rights.*

This hypothesis was not supported. *The Guardian*’s coverage was evenly split between the three primary narrative hypotheses, but *The Daily Telegraph* emphasized the security narrative more than the other characterizations. As a result, this specific coding was found in the fewest number of paragraphs.

*Media framed immigration in terms of economic integration.*

This hypothesis was also not supported. Twenty-three of *The Guardian*’s 95 paragraphs were coded economic integration, but just as many as were coded as humanitarian. Again, *The Daily Telegraph*’s coding shows that a vast majority of their coverage involved security. Only 17 of 84 *Telegraph* paragraphs tied immigration to economic integration, so the overall number of paragraphs regarding economic integration was lower than expected, less than half the number of the paragraphs coded for security.

*Media framing varied by the editorial endorsement of the newspaper; specifically, The Guardian framed immigration in terms of human rights.*

This hypothesis was not supported when looking at articles for the given period. In the final two days of the referendum’s campaign, *The Guardian* instead framed 27 of 95 paragraphs through a security lens, which was a plurality of the overall coding for the paper at the time.

*Media framing varied by the editorial endorsement of the newspaper; specifically, The Daily Telegraph framed immigration in terms of security.*

This hypothesis was supported. For the final few days of the Brexit campaign, 42% of *The Daily Telegraph*’s paragraphs containing the search terms were framed solely as a matter of security. While this is not a majority, it is an overwhelming plurality, as the next closest topic was covered only 20 times, less than half of security’s frequency. If I were to include the paragraphs where security was combined with either human rights, the economy, or a combination of all three, that number rises to 56%.

## **Discussion / Conclusion**

The data show that British media characterized immigration primarily in terms of security during the final few days of the Brexit campaign, regardless of the endorsement of their editorial board in the matter. This outcome highlights a risk that I did not anticipate: that a newsworthy event would occur that steered the dialogue toward one of the framings, which in turn led that framing to dominate the news cycle.

During the last two days of the campaign that this data cover, there were two dominant stories shaping the media narrative as a whole. The first was a debate moderated by the BBC in London. Taking place two days before the polls were to open, “The Great Debate” featured then Member of Parliament and future Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Labour MP Gisela Stuart, and Conservative minister Andrea Leadsom. This pro-Brexit team debated Remain leaders Ruth Davidson, who was then leader of the Scottish Conservative Party, Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, and trade union leader Francis O’Grady (UK Election 2015). While multiple issues were discussed, security and immigration were heavily featured. “Take back control” was said 24 times, while immigration or migrants were referenced 81 times (Debate).

I downloaded the transcript from this debate and analyzed the text via a web-based text utility. Over the course of the two-hour debate, 17,128 words were captured. The six-word phrase “vote leave and take back control” was said seven times, more than twice as often as any other six-word phrase. The three-word phrase “take back control” was found 24 times, with the only three-word phrase being quoted more often was the unavoidable “the European Union” (Text Analyzer).

The second event that dominated news coverage and affected the results of my study occurred the week before the election but continued to stir debate at the time of the data sampling. A controversial billboard was posted by UKIP and promoted by their leader Nigel Farage on 16 June, 2016.

**Figure 3: Breaking Point billboard**

(Source: @UKIP)

The focus of the billboard, and the subsequent condemnation by leaders of both sides in the Brexit debate, was the implication that the European Union had failed the United Kingdom by allowing large groups of non-European refugees into the country. The phrase “take back control” appears on the billboard, which ties the imagery to the official Leave campaign and reinforces immigration as a national security talking point. The referendum occurred at the peak of the Syrian migrant crisis, with 335,160 Syrian refugees applying for asylum within the EU during 2016 (Eurostat, Asylum applicants in the EU 2016). This represented over a quarter of all those who applied for refugee status that year. According to Eurostat, however, the Syrian refugee crisis did not have a direct effect on the United Kingdom. The UK only accepted 38,290 refugees in 2016, with the largest nationalities being Iranian (4,780 applicants or 12%), Pakistani (3,700 applicants or 10%), and Iraqi (3,645 applications or 10%). While the Syrian crisis was a heavily covered event at the time, Germany, Greece, and Austria were the EU nations where over 90% of Syrian refugees applied for asylum.

Another implied message in the poster was that similar influxes of refugees were imminent. In actuality, the photo used on the billboard was taken near Rigonce, Slovenia—over 770 miles from London.

The billboard was promoted by Nigel Farage’s UKIP Party’s social media, which tweeted, “The EU has failed us all. We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders” (@UKIP). Within minutes, others on Twitter quickly compared the imagery to that used in Nazi propaganda, which called interwar European migrants “parasites undermining their host countries” (@brendanjharkin).



**Figure 5: Screenshot from BBC’s *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the Final Solution***

(Dan Bloom, *The Daily Mirror*)

The outcry in the final week of the campaign forced Leave leaders, namely Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, to distance themselves from Farage. During the Great Debate, Johnson said the UK should “celebrate immigrants and everything they do for our country.” *Daily Telegraph* writer Michael Deacon suggested this embrace of immigration was a sign that the Leave campaign was worried about the optics of racist or xenophobic comparisons and was eager to distance themselves from the provocative imagery (Deacon). Gove was quoted as saying, “When I saw that poster, I shuddered. I thought it was the wrong thing to do” (“Gove ‘Shuddered’ At UKIP Migrants Poster” 2016).

While the reaction of the media to the provocative billboard and the pre-election BBC debate, and the resulting focus on a security-heavy framing of immigration, could be explained as a simple reporting of the events of the times, does the emphasis on security also reach into the editorial column or letters to the editor? Or did the editorial sections stay true to their “roots” of humanitarian/economic prosperity framing on one side and security/economic danger on the other? To determine if this was the case, I separated the purely journalistic or “news” pieces and the opinion pieces in both *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* to see if there was a trend.

In the Leave-endorsing *Telegraph*, ten of the 25 articles containing the search terms were classified as an opinion piece. While the five articles listed under “opinion” or “letters” were obvious to classify, there were also two items classified as “news,” two defined as “feature,” and one more included in the business section according to Lexis Nexis that seemed like more than simple news pieces. Even though these articles were not explicitly categorized as opinion, each was written with a clear bias and included terms or endorsements that chose a side of the debate. One such feature by Allison Pearson leaves no ambiguity by stating, “I detest the arrogant obliviousness of the Brussels oligarchy, am convinced that the accursed eurozone will collapse, and I’d like our country to be well away from the falling debris” (“The referendum campaign? Ah yes, I remember it well” 2016). Obviously supporting Leave, Pearson’s view of immigration is framed as a security issue, and she addresses the potential economic impact of the UK accepting 250,000 migrants per year.

**Figure 6: Paragraph Coding of The Daily Telegraph opinion articles**

	SECURITY	HUMAN RIGHTS	ECON	SEC/HUM	SEC/ECON	HUM/ECON	ALL	OTHER
Total	5	1	11	0	1	1	1	5

Further analysis of the 25 *Telegraph* opinion paragraphs showed less emphasis on a security framing than an economic framing. In fact, only a single letter from Juliet Samuel was coded as primarily security focused. Four of the ten articles took an economic angle, with another three framing immigration in a variety of other ways.

**Figure 7: Article Coding of The Daily Telegraph opinion articles**

	SECURITY	HUMAN RIGHTS	ECON	SEC/HUMAN	SEC/ECON	HUM/ECON	ALL	OTHER
Total	1	0	4	0	0	1	1	3

However, when you look at only the opinion articles in *The Guardian* (both by contributors as well as letters to the editor) written during this time frame, the framing of immigration through a humanitarian or human rights lens increased to a slight plurality. Of the 44 opinion-based articles, 15 (34 percent) were coded with a human rights framing. This is slightly more than the paragraphs coded as security-related, which occurred in 12 paragraphs, or 27 percent of the time.

**Figure 8: Paragraph Coding of The Guardian opinion articles**

	SECURITY	HUMAN RIGHTS	ECON	SEC/HUM	SEC/ECON	HUM/ECON	ALL	OTHER
Total	12	15	8	1	4	1	0	3

Of the 1,834 immigration-related articles published by *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* during the four-month campaign, the 50 articles analyzed in this research account for only 2.7% of these newspapers' output on the topic during the formal Brexit campaign. To get a better representative sample of articles, one could either expand the time frame outside these final few days, analyze a random sampling of articles from these two newspapers over a greater time frame, or analyze a greater selection of publications in the same time frame. Simply put, there is a mountain of data available, and this research only scratches the surface.

While the hypothesis that the media as a whole, and *The Daily Telegraph* in particular, primarily framed immigration through the lens of national security, more research is needed to support this conclusion further. Additionally, there is abundant data available to examine whether (and to what extent) the media shaped the Brexit debate or whether it simply reflected and reported events and opinions of the time. As noted above, the breadth and depth of data force those who have a serious interest in the topic to look at more than a fraction of articles written over just a few days by two papers. To reach a true understanding of how British media depicted, discussed, and framed immigration during the run-up to the Brexit referendum, further researchers will need the resources to comb through more data.

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## Appendix

### Articles from *The Daily Telegraph*

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2. Friday can be ‘independence day’, says Boris as the insults fly, Steven Swinford; Kate McCann; Ben Riley-Smith, *The Daily Telegraph* (London), NEWS; Pg. 2,3, (June 22, 2016 Wednesday)
3. Davidson says Leave ‘flunked’ last chance to set out case; Scottish vote may decide overall result with contest on knife edge across UK as whole, Simon Johnson, *The Daily Telegraph* (London), NEWS; Pg. 11, (June 23, 2016 Thursday)
4. Risks of Remain are unacceptable to the British psyche, JOHN NAPIER, *The Daily Telegraph* (London), BUSINESS; Pg. 2, (June 22, 2016 Wednesday)
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