

# **An analysis of the representation of immigration in British broadsheet and tabloid news**

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## **Abstract**

Immigration is a high-profile topic in politics, the media and society and has been since public concern for the issue increased significantly in 1990 (Page, 2009). The question that this essay will explore is how immigration is represented in newspaper media today and what are the common themes. I have explored some of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and post Brexit legislation that deals with immigration, before analysing viewpoints presented in a sample of headlines. It is important to analyse these, particularly whilst the patterns of immigration and legislation change post Brexit, to ensure that we see immigration from a range of perspectives. I argue that immigration has been presented as mostly one-sided; it is a major issue yet the problems that it brings have been generalised and exaggerated. I conclude that clear distinctions between the type of immigrant and a wider range of perspectives are needed to ensure our view of immigration is well-informed and objective.

## **1. Introduction**

Immigration has been a prominent issue in Britain, and more recently in the media, for many centuries. From northern Irish Diaspora as a result of the potato famine in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and immigrants from Eastern Europe in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Voicu, 2009) to the Windrush Generation, immigration in recent history has made a considerable contribution to the UK population.

At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, public concern about immigration topped all issues facing the UK (Page, 2009) and this level of concern is still reflected in the media- with headlines such as ‘Ludicrous! Latest figures show absurd amount of money spent to STOP illegal immigrants’<sup>1</sup>. Despite the overwhelming negativity, the benefits of immigration are vast such as ‘new faces, new languages, new ideas, new rhythms’ (Hargrave, 2018). These advantages are recognised yet negativity appears to dominate the media. Is this the reality or has our view become distorted?

The dominance of negativity towards immigration has been an underlying theme in previous pieces of research into the representation of immigration in the media, and is something that I noticed in my sample of headlines. An

Anglia Ruskin University study looking at local media found that headlines showed a 'stark preference for the use of themes with negative denotations and connotations with regard to how migrants are presented' (Rasinger, 2016). Moreover, the idea that immigration is generalised in the media, as discussed by Duygu Onay-Coker (2019) in their article about how Syrian migrants were represented in Turkey, was something I considered when looking at the headlines I had collected.

## **2. A history of British policies**

Though immigration in its broadest sense has arguably been happening since the beginning of human civilisation, in this essay I will focus on the recent history (that being from mid-20<sup>th</sup> century). The sudden rise in foreign born residents in the UK began with the Windrush generation. With upwards of 70,000 civilians having died across the two World Wars<sup>2</sup> there was a large labour shortage- which was widely advertised across the Caribbean islands. Consequently, commonwealth citizens came over to the UK to help fill jobs and rebuild the economy (Hargrave, 2018).

Between the 1951 and 1961 censuses, the size of the foreign-born population of the UK grew by about 225,000<sup>3</sup>. This rise prompted a series of Immigration Acts in an attempt to control immigration, with the Immigration Act of 1962 ending unrestricted entry (Dean, 1992). Over the next few decades, control of immigration increased to the point that, during the Ugandan Asian diaspora in the 1970s, a 'woman from overseas visiting her husband needed to wait a year for a visa to enter the country' (Hargrave, 2018). Throughout history it may be argued that Britain has adapted its policy for its own benefit, with the 2000 NHS expansion causing the Government to campaign for foreign workers (similar to what happened during the Windrush) as it suited them and their need for labour.

## **3. Post-Brexit immigration**

Immigration has been dominant in election campaigns since the 2010s (Consterdine, 2016) and it was a significant talking point of the Brexit campaign. This was partially due to the sheer volume of media attention for example, the Daily Mail increased the number of articles about immigration by 88% during the campaign (Sogelola, 2018). Not only was immigration important to the Brexit decision, it has also been greatly impacted since.

The new system, as a result of Brexit, for determining who is allowed to migrate is points-based system focused on talents and skill of prospective immigrants<sup>4,5</sup>. Immigrants are grouped into tiers with tier 1 including exceptional talent migrants and tier 5 being temporary migrants. A similar

system in Canada saw a shift in immigration from family class to economic class immigrants being dominant (Beach et al., 2006) and this would have a positive impact on the UK economy.

#### 4. Methods

To analyse how immigration is currently presented in the media, I collected online headlines concerning immigration. I used Figure 1 to select the website as these sources were reaching the most people and therefore having the most impact. To collect the headlines, I worked through the list of past stories on the website of each of the news sources, as that is how the headlines would reach members of the public. I used quota sampling to collect a total of 20 relevant headlines (starting with the BBC and working my way down the list of sources). To ensure a range of events were covered, the sample consisted of headlines between December 2020 and July 2021.

### Top 10 Most Popular News Websites UK 2021

1. BBC. It's the most popular news website in the UK in 2021.
2. The Guardian.
3. Daily Mail.
4. The Telegraph.
5. The Independent.
6. Daily Mirror.
7. The Sun.
8. Daily Express.
9. Metro. And finally,
10. Channel 4 News.

**Figure 1.** Most popular news websites in 2021 in the UK (Source: UGWIRE<sup>7</sup>)

Headline	Source	Date	Author(s)
Concern over wait for Windrush compensation	BBC News <sup>8</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup> May 2021	E.Harrison
Channel Crossings: Border Force intercepts more than 200 migrants	BBC News <sup>9</sup>	31 <sup>st</sup> March 2021	—
'No deportation risk' for illegal migrants getting jobs	BBC News <sup>10</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup> February 2021	—
'Intrusive and cruel': struggles in applying for UK settled status	The Guardian <sup>11</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup> July 2021	A.Gentleman and L.O'Carroll
Under the UK's two-tiered asylum plan, I could never become a doctor	The Guardian <sup>12</sup>	18 <sup>th</sup> June 2021	W.Arian
How asylum seekers are dehumanised by the government	The Guardian <sup>13</sup>	19 <sup>th</sup> March 2021	—

Home Office: new deportation law may discriminate against ethnic minorities	The Guardian <sup>14</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup> April 2021	A.Walawalkar and M.Townsend
Britain's borders: wide open for covid, slammed shut for people in need	The Guardian <sup>15</sup>	19 <sup>th</sup> May 2021	G.Monbiot
Immigrant children twice as likely to graduate than white peers- but they still struggle for a job	The Telegraph <sup>16</sup>	29 <sup>th</sup> June 2021	L.Roberts
EU immigration to the UK underestimated by 1.6 million	The Telegraph <sup>17</sup>	24 <sup>th</sup> June 2021	H.de Quetteville
England needs to build 300 homes a day to cope with migrant surge, studies find	The Telegraph <sup>18</sup>	30 <sup>th</sup> December 2020	C.Hymas
Number of visa overstayers almost doubles in five years	The Telegraph <sup>19</sup>	23 <sup>rd</sup> February 2021	C.Hymas
Pandemic means UK can no longer track how many migrants are entering or leaving country	The Telegraph <sup>20</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup> February 2021	C.Hymas
Workers live like 'slaves' in caravans after coming to UK under promise of jobs	Daily Mirror <sup>21</sup>	19 <sup>th</sup> March 2021	R.W.Jones
Foreign Lag Tags: Foreign criminals to be tagged to stop them fleeing under new Govt plans	The Sun <sup>22</sup>	29 <sup>th</sup> May 2021	D.Wooding
Boris Johnson says dumping illegal immigrants abroad is a 'humane' way to stem numbers crossing channel	The Sun <sup>23</sup>	18 <sup>th</sup> March 2021	J.Reilly
Immigration laws to cut down on 'asylum shopping'	Daily Express <sup>24</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup> July 2021	D.Maddox
For too long it has been 'racist' even to mention immigration says Priti Patel	Daily Express <sup>25</sup>	27 <sup>th</sup> May 2021	P.Patel
Home Office's detention policies found to be a breach of human rights	Metro <sup>26</sup>	15 <sup>th</sup> April 2021	J.King
'I was run over by a car and racially abused for being an immigrant'	Metro <sup>27</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup> April 2021	F.B.Romero

Figure 2. Immigration headlines

## 5.1 Negativity

The underlying tone of the headlines sampled is negative- though the sample is not large enough to assume this is the case for all headlines concerning immigration between December 2020 and July 2021. Having said this, research suggests that negativity often acts as a framework for Immigration news reports (Smith and Deacon, 2018).

The negativity shown in the sample is not always directed towards migrants but rather towards the situation that they are now in. For example, Headline

13 is concerned about the ability to 'track how many migrants are entering and leaving the country' rather than the problems increased migration brings. This suggests that a wider range of approaches to immigration is beginning to be represented in the media, which is encouraging as previous research found that between 2013 and 2014 two-thirds of articles only presented one viewpoint (Masini et al., 2018).

## **5.2 Type of migrant**

From examining these headlines, I noticed that they lack specific details about the nature, motivation and impact of the type of immigration the article is reporting. This is important, as without these clear distinctions, it could be believed that every issue is caused by and linked to every migrant. For example, headline 2 mentions border force intercepting migrants. There are no details (in the headline) about whether the migrants are asylum seekers, illegally entering or are another type of migrant. A study in Poland discovered that the media representation was based on 'repetitive generalisations' and 'stereotypes' (Domalewska, 2016). It is therefore reasonable to believe that the same could be occurring in the UK media- but a larger sample would be needed to make this argument significant.

## **5.3 Resources**

The increasing population of the UK- partially due to immigration- is putting greater pressure on resources such as housing (as mentioned in headline 11 'needs to build 300 homes a day'). The idea of resources vs. population has been explored greatly since Thomas Malthus first brought attention to his theory that resources such as food and housing could not keep up with the exponential population growth during the industrial revolution (Malthus, 1798). This is still relevant today with academics relating it to the issue of fossil fuels and demand for energy (Burger, 2020). This argument is significant to the immigration debate, as restricting immigration is arguably one of the easiest ways to reduce stress on resources by slowing the population growth. This could explain why so much negativity has been directed towards immigration, as eliminating it could be seen as a political quick fix for other issues such as unemployment.

## **5.4 Economic**

Headline 9 caught my attention as I considered the economic benefits of migration for the UK. Further investigation into this claim found that '58% of people aged 25-44 with foreign-born parents<sup>28</sup> go into higher education, compared to 46% of those with British-born parents'<sup>29</sup>. The larger rate of progression to further education suggests that children of foreign-born

parents may go on to have higher order jobs. This, in theory, would increase taxes and create a multiplier effect for the economy. However, the claim that immigrant children ‘still struggle for a job’ to me suggests that there is still an issue of social integration and acceptance of immigrant populations (as backed up by headlines 18 and 20).

Despite the difficulty in seeking employment, immigration has had a positive and substantial contribution to the national economy. A UCL study published in 2013 showed that between 2001 and 2011 immigrants provided 34% more in taxes than they received in benefits<sup>30</sup> and it is reasonable to believe that the contribution is still similar today. Moreover, the UK attracts ‘highly educated and skilled immigrants’ (Dustmann & Frattini, 2014) meaning the prospect of further economic growth is promising. Considering these points, the argument for the positive impacts of immigration on the economy is a compelling one.

## **5.5 Historical**

It is worth noting that the historical policies briefly discussed in section 2 are still significant today. Headline 1 mentions the Windrush Compensation which is a scheme to compensate those who came to the UK as part of the Windrush generation, whose immigration status was confused or not acknowledged<sup>31</sup>. The ‘hostile environment’ created by 2010 immigration policies led to wrongful deportation and refusal of citizenship due to immigrants having to prove their immigration status with records that were not available (Wardle & Obermuller, 2019). This is significant as it indicates the long term impacts past policies can have on the immigrant population.

## **5.6 Social**

Immigration brings social challenges such as racism and discrimination (headlines 7 and 18). However, it also boasts social benefits including the spreading of cultures and diversity. Figure 3 shows part of the new shopping complex in Bracknell, Berkshire that was built in 2017. The presence of Japanese clothing store Superdry, Mediterranean inspired eatery Fuego and Charcoal Grill Takeaway, serving halal meat, all within walking distance of the town centre are evidence that new cultures are spreading. Scenes like this are common amongst British highstreets and indicate the successes of social integration.



Figure 3. The Lexington, Bracknell

## 5. Conclusion

From examining the historical legislation as well as looking at immigration in the media, it is clear that it is an important topic that needs to be addressed properly. Clear distinctions need to be made to understand the type of immigration that is being discussed as this has a large impact on the focus of the conversation. I also believe that the significance of online media in shaping perceptions of immigration will only grow with time. Between 2018 and 2019 the use of social media for news has risen from 44% to 49%<sup>32</sup>. If this trend continues then online media will soon become the dominant source. Whilst this in itself is not problematic, the nature of social media news is that only one or two stories are highlighted. This means the breadth and depth of stories we are exposed to could become limited (Möller et al., 2019).

Furthermore, there are two different perspectives, in contrast to the focus on the impact for the UK, that I believe are equally important in drawing conclusions- the first being the impact on the country of origin. Immigration is a two-sided process; 'Migration does not just affect the society to which people migrate- it also affects the country they leave' (Portes, 2019). Migration can benefit the country of origin by contributing to the economy through remittances or through the repatriation of technology and expertise. However, it can also cause issues- especially if most of the immigrants are highly skilled workers- as it can lead to a brain drain. By looking at the topic of



immigration from the perspective of the original country the balance shifts slightly.

The second perspective stems from the idea ‘the biggest challenge facing the contemporary world is not migration but ruthless, relentless and rising inequality’ (Crawley, 2020). It is argued that we need to look beyond immigration to the reasons fuelling it. If we focus on the push and pull factors of immigration rather than the act of migration itself I believe the balance of arguments would be very different.

Overall, I challenge us to look at immigration from multiple viewpoints to keep our opinions as objective as possible in order to understand the different types of immigration and its significance in the wider world.

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