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# Tabloid Tales: How the British Tabloid Press Shaped the Brexit Vote

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the role of the British tabloid press (BTP), and specifically the eurosceptic press, as a ‘supply-side’ influence on the 2016 EU referendum. First, we focus on the BTP and its role as an ‘agenda-setter’ in shaping eurosceptic discourse regarding the UK’s relationship with the EU. Second, we use content analysis of five tabloid newspapers – *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Daily Express* and *The Daily Star* to demonstrate the disproportionate pro-Brexit discourse prior to, and during, the EU referendum campaign. Third, drawing on opinion poll data, we show how this ‘bombardment’ approach influenced the electorate in the referendum campaign. Given the ‘knowledge deficit’ about the EU in the UK, we conclude that the BTP had a significant bearing on tipping the referendum vote towards Brexit.

**Keywords:** Brexit; euroscepticism; tabloid press; public opinion

## Introduction: Explanations for the Brexit Vote

In what was the most divisive and polarized campaign in the post-war period, 51.9 per cent of the UK public (based on a 72.2 per cent turnout) voted to leave the EU with polling data indicating clear lines of division in socio-demographic and geographical terms. Four and a half years later, after two changes of Prime Minister, two changes of Foreign Secretary, three changes of Secretary for Exiting the European Union, two general elections and two extensions to the Brexit timeline, the UK finally exited the EU on 31 January 2020 (with the transition period ending a year later), following a last-minute deal between the European Commission and the British government on Christmas Eve 2020.<sup>1</sup> Six years on from the referendum, there has been a wealth of academic research attempting to explain the 2016 Brexit vote with a complex mix of ‘supply’- and ‘demand’- side variables contributing to the outcome. Some authors have placed emphasis on the influence of the UK’s historical relationship with the EU and the impact of the British eurosceptic legacy (Evans & Menon, 2017; Shipman, 2016). Others have tried to explain the result by focusing on the failure of the EU to embrace the reform agenda both in constitutional and policy terms (Korski, 2016). Others have focused on the campaign itself, arguing that the Leave campaign’s pro-sovereignty ‘Take Back

<sup>1</sup>Theresa May became Prime Minister in July 2016 following David Cameron’s resignation after the referendum. She was succeeded by Boris Johnson in July 2019 after another leadership contest. Boris Johnson became Foreign Secretary in July 2016 before resigning in July 2018. Jeremy Hunt took over the role and was sacked in July 2019. Dominic Raab replaced him as Foreign Secretary. David Davis was the first Secretary of State for the European Union in the new Department for Exiting the European Union which was created in July 2016. He held the role until July 2018. Dominic Raab held the role between July and November 2018. Stephen Barclay took over the role in November 2018. General elections took place in June 2017 and December 2019.

Control' mantra was far more effective than the 'Britain Stronger in Europe' campaign, with its almost unique emphasis on the 'rational choice' economic argument for British membership (Atikcan et al., 2020; Startin, 2017; Vasilopoulou, 2016). Others have concentrated on the demand-side conditions prevalent at the time with a strong emphasis on the issue of immigration (Curtice, 2018; Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Hobolt, 2016). Researchers have also looked at the 'supply-side' role played by the British media historically and during the referendum campaign itself on the European question as a key variable in explaining the outcome (Deacon et al., 2016; Levy et al., 2016).

Brandenburg (2019) notes there has been little coverage of how the British press has influenced and shaped public opinion in relation to Brexit. It is to this body of literature this article contributes by focusing on the role of Britain's uniquely hostile British tabloid press<sup>2</sup> (BTP) as a major 'supply-side' variable in terms of influencing the outcome. We address the question raised by Foos & Bischof (2022) of whether powerful media outlets are able to shape public opinion. We argue that the 'bombardment approach' adopted by three of the five British tabloids (*The Daily Mail*, *The Sun* and *The Daily Express*) in the final stages of the campaign served as a key re-enforcer of the Vote Leave campaign. This 'bombardment approach' focused mainly on the issue of immigration, and, we argue, when considered with the mainstreaming of the British eurosceptic tradition among the BTP from the 1992 Maastricht Treaty period onwards, that it was a major supply-side variable which contributed to the Brexit vote. We agree with Goodwin & Milazzo (2016) that 'the decision taken by the Leave campaign to focus heavily on immigration, particularly during the latter part of the campaign, helped to drive public support for leaving the EU'. However, we argue that the 'bombardment approach' adopted by the BTP in England and Wales with its emphasis on anti-immigrant messaging in the final stages of the campaign was the crucial factor in securing the victory for Vote Leave. We suggest that the short-term cue of the 'bombardment approach' demonstrated by the BTP with its fixation on immigration was so pronounced in the final stages of a close fought campaign, that it tipped the balance in terms of influencing the outcome of the result. This argument is particularly resonant given that 30 per cent of the electorate stated that they would make up their mind on which way to vote in the week *before* the referendum (Helm, 2016). We believe our article is acutely relevant given the well-documented link between the 'knowledge gap' and negative attitudes towards the EU (McCormick, 2014). Like Foos & Bischof (2022), we believe that media actors and issue entrepreneurs can raise the salience of a political issue (in this case Brexit) while providing a strong frame that citizens rely on to interpret the issue. In this respect, we interpret the BTP as a political actor, which tries to change the beliefs and policy preferences of mass and/or elite audiences, thus affecting subsequent policy decisions.

We begin by contextualizing the result of the referendum before concentrating on the role of the BTP and its role historically as an 'agenda setter' in terms of shaping eurosceptic discourse. This includes analysis of the key, demand-side watershed moments in the evolution of the EU from the Maastricht Treaty onwards, which have helped to

<sup>2</sup>The British tabloid press (BTP) in this article refers to tabloid newspapers in England and Wales only. It is worth noting that Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU referendum and the tabloid newspapers in these regions will have had in some instances different front pages to those tabloid newspapers in England and Wales. However, a comprehensive analysis of the tabloid newspapers of Scotland and Northern Ireland is beyond the scope of this article and would merit further investigation.

embolden the BTP to adopt the hostile, anti-immigrant-driven portrayals of the EU, which became normalized in the latter stages of the referendum campaign. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological framing of the article which is based on a content analysis of the front pages of the Britain's five major daily tabloids – *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Daily Express* and *The Daily Star* – in the final month of the campaign. Our findings highlight the lack of a level playing field with regard to the BTP's portrayal of the EU during the referendum campaign as measured in terms of issue salience and coverage for and against British membership of the EU. We also demonstrate, how, in the final stages of the campaign, the 'bombardment approach' adopted by three tabloids focused increasingly on immigration as the primary galvanizer of opposition to Britain's membership of the EU. To demonstrate the impact of the 'bombardment approach' adopted by the BTP, we show that the percentage of tabloid readers who voted for Britain to leave the EU was significantly higher than non-tabloid readers, that immigration was a greater motivation in terms of their decision to vote Brexit and that more tabloid-reading voters decided which way to vote in the final stages of the campaign than non-tabloid voters. We conclude that this 'bombardment approach', in conjunction with the historical agenda-setting role played by the BTP on the EU, played a significant role in explaining the Brexit vote.

## I. The British Tabloid Press as a Eurosceptic Agenda Setter

Researchers have noted that anti-media discourse has contributed to the increasingly embedded nature of euroscepticism in certain EU Member States (Bijsmans, 2017; Caiani & Guerra, 2017; de Wilder et al., 2013). What distinguishes Britain from other EU Member States in terms of media discussion around the EU is the existence of the lopsided anti-EU stance of the BTP. In Britain, 'hard' euroscepticism stemming from the BTP has been pronounced and widespread while the case for EU membership has never been clearly communicated to the mass public (Usherwood & Startin, 2013). Since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, tabloid newspapers such as *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Express* have become renowned for portraying the EU in negative terms and against the national interest. Infamous headlines such as *The Sun's* 'Up Yours Delors' front-page have become iconic reference points for British eurosceptics while the BTP has served as the mechanism to link debate between British membership of the EU to the historical British eurosceptic legacy (Startin, 2015).

Daddow (2012) pinpoints the origins of this tabloid hostility to 1973 when Britain joined the EU, arguing that the British media have evolved from the principle of a 'permissive consensus' to 'destructive dissent'. This has resulted in a vigorously partisan, nationalist and at times xenophobic coverage of European affairs in the British context. Daddow (2012) attributes this to the 'Murdoch effect' arguing that News Corp's dominance and the negative stance of media coverage of the EU in Britain has been dramatic. Daddow (2012) maintains that since Britain joined the EU in 1973, Murdoch has altered the terms of the debate by convincing politicians on all sides of the political ideological spectrum that they should fear the backlash of the press should they try to advocate a more constructive position on European integration (Daddow, 2012; Startin, 2015).

While there is no doubting Murdoch and News Corp's influence in framing a narrative that has contributed to the mainstreaming of a eurosceptic discourse in British political

debate during the 1990s and 2000s (Foos & Bischof, 2022), the BTP's lopsided and anti-EU stance is not something that uniquely originated from the pages of News International publications. Researchers have speculated as to whether the BTP more generally has contributed to the rise of euroscepticism (Startin, 2015). Studies have suggested that there can be immediate effects of eurosceptic media frames on public attitudes such as De Vreese & Boomgaarden (2006) study on attitudes towards EU enlargement. It is clear that *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Express*, along with *The Sun*, have collectively developed into an influential, agenda-setting BTP eurosceptic triumvirate.

### *The Daily Mail*

*The Daily Mail*, with a print circulation of over 1.3 million (ABC, 2020) and a digital reach of up to 25 million (Newsworks, 2022), has a reputation as a 'deeply conservative and ultra-traditional' newspaper (Cotter, 2018). Infamously, its owner Lord Rothermere's sympathetic stance towards Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists, as epitomized by his article entitled "Hurrah for the Blackshirts" in 1934, has ensured that nationalism has long been associated with the newspaper and its discourse. *The Daily Mail* campaigned in favour of staying in the European Economic Community (EEC) in the 1975 referendum but the appointment of Paul Dacre as editor in 1992 saw a step-change for the newspaper in its framing of Britain's relationship with the EU. Dacre's appointment coincided with Britain's failed attempt to join the exchange rate mechanism (ERM) as well as the politicization of the EU through the 1992 Maastricht Treaty. This resulted in a notable shift to a eurosceptic framing. A decade into Dacre's editorship of *The Daily Mail*, Anderson & Weymouth's (1999) study on British euroscepticism and the press concluded:

The Daily Mail's discourse on the EU was ... characterised by a world full of Franco-German plots, threats to Britain's sovereignty and security by an advancing European superstate, allegedly untrustworthy European partners and a preference for the USA over the EU.

In 2003, the *Daily Mail* described the proposed draft EU constitution as a 'blueprint for tyranny' and in 2011 the paper warned that Germany was turning Europe into a 'Fourth Reich' (Harding, 2016). As Harding (2016) surmises 'Dacre's staunchly pro-Brexit message never failed to provoke; branding pro-European judges "enemies of the people" and threatening to 'crush the saboteurs'. After the EU referendum, and following his resignation from the newspaper in 2018, Dacre forewarned against a change of approach in the paper's editorial line on the EU stating that support for Brexit 'is in the DNA of both the *Daily Mail* and its readers'.

### *The Daily Express*

Despite its lower circulation of approximately 300,000 (ABC, 2020), the influence of the *Daily Express* over the British eurosceptic debate in recent years should not be underestimated. In 2010, the Richard Desmond-owned *Daily Express* launched a 'Britain out of Europe' crusade, which was epitomized by the English crusader logo deployed on the masthead of its front page being rebranded as 'a figurehead of the struggle to repatriate British sovereignty' (Startin, 2015). The paper spearheaded a 373,000-strong petition,



which led to a parliamentary vote in 2011 over whether Britain should have a referendum on EU membership. In short, the *Daily Express* conducted a billboard ‘bombardment approach’, which has kept the issue of British membership of the EU (pre- and post-2016 EU referendum) on its front pages over the past decade and has been a major contributor to the mainstreaming of euroscepticism in Britain. An overview of some of the major developments in the evolution of the newspaper in the years prior to the EU referendum reinforce this point. In 2013, the newspaper introduced a weekly column for former UKIP leader Nigel Farage; in 2014 the then political editor Patrick O’Flynn became a UKIP MEP, and in 2015 Richard Desmond donated £300,000 (and a subsequent £1 million) to UKIP’s 2015 general election campaign (Startin, 2015). It is evident that *The Daily Express*’s meshing of anti-EU and anti-immigration sentiment became increasingly influential in the wider debate about British membership of the EU in the build-up to the referendum campaign.

### *The Sun*

With a print circulation of 1.2 million (ABC, 2020), *The Sun* has a reputation as a eurosceptic tabloid newspaper. *The Sun* was bought by Murdoch in 1969 and turned into a ‘red top’ tabloid newspaper to directly compete with the *Daily Mirror*; a newspaper that dominated the British tabloid market in the 1960s and 1970s. By the end of 1970s, *The Sun* had overtaken the *Daily Mirror* as the most widely read tabloid in Britain (Johansson, 2007) and by 1992 it had a daily circulation of around 3.6 million (Rooney, 2000). During the 1990s and 2000s, *The Sun* took a strong negative editorial stance on the EU – between 1996 and 2016, 92 per cent of *The Sun*’s editorials displayed a negative tone towards European integration and 80 per cent were classified as eurosceptic (Vasilopoulou, 2013). *The Sun* is also infamous for inventing and disseminating euromyths such as the EU trying to ban ‘bendy bananas’ and regulate the shape of cucumbers. These euromyths were deemed crucial enough for the European Commission to dedicate a website to demystify them. *The Sun* was a major actor in the EU referendum campaign when it advocated for a leave vote. Emphasizing the contribution of *The Sun* to Brexit, the papers’ editor, Tony Gallagher, texted *The Guardian* newsroom on the morning after the referendum stating, ‘so much for the waning power of the print media’ (Martinson, 2016).

### *The British Tabloid Press and the Fusion of Eurosceptic and Anti-Immigrant Discourse: From the 1992 Maastricht Treaty to the 2016 EU Referendum*

The demand-side conditions with regard to the state of European integration post-Maastricht, gave the three aforementioned tabloids ammunition to enable them to manipulate the pros and cons of British membership of the EU. A series of watershed moments in the history of the European integration process enabled the Brexit-leaning BTP to develop a powerful eurosceptic narrative built around the theme of immigration and specifically the contestation of the freedom of movement and the Schengen Agreement. These watershed moments were the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, the 2004 ‘big bang’ enlargement (and subsequent 2007 enlargement when Bulgaria and Romania joined), the 2008 economic and financial crisis in the Eurozone (Startin, 2015), and the humanitarian and refugee crisis emanating from 2015. The key theme of immigration that became prominent in the EU

referendum campaign had gradually become more salient as part of a wider eurosceptic narrative not just in Britain, but across the EU. This sequence of events ensured that, in the latter stages of the EU referendum campaign when the eurosceptic BTP moved into overdrive in terms of its anti-immigrant ‘bombardment approach’, pro-EU voices looking to portray the benefits of freedom of movement were unable to gain any political traction.

We argue that the BTP’s hold on the debate, with its increased focus on an anti-migrant narrative in the final stages of the campaign undoubtedly influenced some tabloid readers in their decision on which way to vote in the referendum. We argue that the ‘agenda-setting’ role of the BTP combined with the EU ‘knowledge gap’ in Britain and the demographic profile of tabloid readers, left individuals undecided on which way to vote, susceptible to the cues of the BTP in the final stages of the campaign. In line with Foos & Bischof (2022), we argue that these effects can materialize when audiences are not self-selecting into receiving political messages and are not highly politically engaged or interested. We also concur with Arcenaux & Johnson (2013), who demonstrated that audiences that consume a medium for entertainment purposes are *more likely* to change their opinion if they receive political news via that medium than audiences that consume the medium because they intend to consume political news. As Foos & Bischof (2022) outline, the ‘framing literature suggests that one-sided framing is particularly effective’. Added to this, it is also worth underlining that the way daily newspapers are consumed in Britain, with the front-page headlines displayed in supermarkets, newsagents and petrol stations, only served to reinforce the effectiveness of the bombardment approach of the BTP, enabling it to shape attitudes beyond its immediate readership. With the absence of effective counter-frames, this ability to shape attitudes in relation to Brexit, we argue, acted as a ‘tipping-point’ in terms of influencing the outcome of the result.

## II. The Methodological Framing of the Article

Scholars (Deacon et al., 2016; Levy et al., 2016) have ascertained that British national newspapers have played a significant role in shaping public opinion and in some ways distorting the truth. These findings are in line with Ladd & Lenz’s (2009) study on the effects of *The Sun*’s endorsement switch from the Conservative Party to the Labour Party at the 1997 general election. Kim & Chung (2017) argue that a newspaper’s front page can be interpreted as something that seeks to extend the core values of its owners and editors to a wider audience. In conjunction with this, Foos & Bischof (2022) outline that the framing literature suggests one-sided framing is particularly effective. Therefore, combining these findings, we argue that in the absence of effective counter-frames, the BTP was able to shape strong attitudes in relation to Brexit via its front pages.

To examine the BTP’s influence on the campaign, we draw upon Harrison and Callan’s (2013, 25–6) research, which determines that ‘content analysis is appropriate for demonstrating how an issue gains traction in the media and to quantify bias in reporting in the press’. We conduct a content analysis of the front pages of the tabloid newspapers to determine the significance and salience of Brexit as an issue for each tabloid newspaper. We argue that in a closely fought race, the BTP’s preoccupation with immigration led to a bias in favour of a hard eurosceptic narrative reinforcing the ‘take-back control’ mantra of the Vote Leave campaign with no effective counter-frames or positive narrative on immigration.

We analyse the final stages of the EU referendum campaign by focusing on the front pages of the five British daily tabloids – *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Daily Express* and *The Daily Star* – looking at the 25 issues prior to the referendum. We include *The Daily Star* despite the fact it has traditionally not engaged with politics, concentrating its front pages on celebrity gossip.<sup>3</sup> Our analysis also uses a three-way categorization of the front-page headlines to examine the extent of the bombardment approach and the effectiveness of the one-sided framing, but also the validity of the front-page headlines utilized by the BTP. The three-way categorization defined the front-page headlines as follows:

- Reliable (R): A consistent, reliable headline based on a clear interpretation of evidence.
- Questionable (Q): A questionable headline in terms of the validity of its interpretation of evidence.
- Speculative (S): A speculative headline based largely on conjecture rather than knowledge.

We selected the last 25 days of the EU referendum campaign for two reasons: (1) it was the crucial ‘business end’ of the campaign, and (2) it coincided with the official ‘purdah’ period which started on 27 May 2016, thus preventing the government from releasing any further forecasting reports. We also selected this time frame as it coincided with Moore & Ramsey’s (2017) research which found that ‘coverage of immigration more than tripled over the course of the campaign, rising faster than any other political issue’ and that this was particularly noticeable in the final month of the campaign. It also coincides with findings from Foos & Bischof’s (2022) study, which observes that the boycott of *The Sun* newspaper after the Hillsborough disaster caused a decline in euroscepticism and a subsequent drop in the Leave vote in Liverpool and Merseyside in the EU referendum. Our study also demonstrates how the BTP, with its bombardment approach, progressively centred on the theme of immigration to shape its eurosceptic narrative and set the agenda in the final stages of the campaign.

### III. The British Tabloid Press and their Stance on Brexit

Research conducted by the Centre for Research in Communication and Culture (CRCC, 2016) at Loughborough University highlighted that national press coverage during the referendum campaign was highly polarized with a ‘coverage gap’ of 80 per cent to 20 per cent in favour of Leave. What is clear is the disparity in support for British membership of the EU or Brexit between what we would traditionally label ‘broadsheet’ and ‘tabloid’, although distinguishing the British daily press along the traditional lines of broadsheet and tabloid formats is not as straightforward as it once was. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, a tabloid is ‘typically popular in style and dominated by sensational stories’ and a broadsheet (irrespective of size) is ‘regarded as more serious and less sensationalist than tabloids.’ Based on this definition, we defined the *The Sun*, *The Daily*

<sup>3</sup>The Sunday editions of the tabloids were not included in the analysis though it should be noted that, unlike its sister paper, *The Mail on Sunday* supported the UK staying in the EU. We also excluded the Scottish editions of the tabloid papers – in some cases for example, *The Sun*, adopted a different stance. Similarly, free papers such as *The Metro* and the London-based *Evening Standard* were not incorporated in the analysis.



*Mail*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Daily Express* and *The Daily Star* as Britain's five, daily tabloids.

We begin with an examination of the editorial stance, for or against EU membership, of daily broadsheet newspapers. The findings show more support for remaining in than leaving the EU (see Table 1).

Only *The Daily Telegraph*, the highest circulation daily broadsheet, was in favour of Brexit, although *The Sunday Times*, with a circulation of 770,370 was, in contrast to its sister paper, also in favour of Brexit. *The Independent*, which transferred to an online format in March 2016 prior to the Referendum, is not included in the analysis but its compact print version *The I*, which adopted a neutral front-page stance, is. In terms of support for EU membership, if we combine the readership of *The Times*, *The Financial Times* and *The Guardian*, three broadsheets with a readership of 766,645 were in favour of Remain compared to one with a readership of 472,033 in favour of Brexit. We caveat these findings by stressing that *The Daily Telegraph's* support for Brexit was certainly more pronounced and partisan than the other broadsheets' more muted support in favour of staying in the EU, but this was outweighed by *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Financial Times'* support for the status quo.

We also examine the editorial stance, for or against EU membership, of the daily tabloid newspapers. As expected, the two biggest circulation tabloids *The Sun* and *Daily Mail* were vociferous supporters of Brexit as was the *Daily Express*. The Labour-leaning *Daily Mirror*, the third largest tabloid in terms of circulation, was the sole Remain-supporting tabloid. *The Daily Star* was classified as neutral – it sidestepped any detailed coverage of the referendum and it did not feature on its front pages in the time frame except with a neutral headline on the day of the plebiscite itself and indirectly in terms of coverage of Labour MP Jo Cox's death the week before the vote.

In terms of support for EU membership, if we add together the readership of *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Express*, three tabloids with a combined readership of 3,785,267 were in favour of Brexit compared to *The Daily Mirror* with a readership of 809,147 in favour of remaining in the EU. The readership of the 470,369 circulation *Daily Star* was largely oblivious to the campaign in terms of the newspaper's coverage (see Table 2). Given the agenda-setting role of the tabloids on the European question, the findings are unsurprising. However, they underline that support for Brexit was *significantly* more pronounced in readership of tabloid newspapers in Britain. In terms of readership, support towards Brexit among the tabloid press (excluding the neutrally classified *Daily Star*) was four to one in favour. With the tabloids enjoying a circulation of around 5

Table 1: Broadsheet Newspapers and Editorial Stance on UK EU Membership 2016

Newspaper	Circulation	Remain or Brexit
<i>The Telegraph</i>	472,033	Brexit
<i>The Times</i>	404,155	Remain
<i>The I</i>	271,859	Neutral
<i>The Financial Times</i>	198,237	Remain
<i>The Guardian</i>	164,163	Remain

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations 2016.

million in 2016, plus an ever-increasing online presence, this is a significant number given the tightness of opinion polls in the build-up to the referendum. Therefore, we concur with Foos & Bischof (2022) that sustained one-sided media campaigns on specific issues can have large, lasting and consequential effects on public opinion and policy.

Further scrutiny of the front pages of the five tabloids in the build-up to the referendum also illustrates the lopsided nature of the framing of Brexit in terms of issue salience. The content analysis of the front-page headlines of each paper in the 25 days prior to the referendum illustrates very clearly that the three tabloids supporting Brexit devoted their front pages to Brexit far more frequently than either the Remain-supporting *Daily Mirror* or the neutral *Daily Star*. What is evident is that the bombardment approach of the three Brexit-supporting tabloids keeps the salience of the referendum high throughout the latter stages of the campaign.

Two of the three pro-Brexit tabloids, *The Daily Express* and *The Daily Mail* devote over three quarters of their front pages to the referendum in their 25 editions prior to the vote. *The Sun* devotes less front-page coverage to the referendum but features headlines related to the referendum on almost half of the 25 of its front pages (see Table 3). The saturation of the pro-Brexit line from the three pro-Brexit tabloids contrasts greatly with the Remain supporting *Daily Mirror* and the neutral *Daily Star*, who, between them, only feature referendum-related stories on seven of their front pages, with four of these featuring in the last three days of the campaign. Overall, the 48 pro-Brexit front pages, compared to the seven Remain or neutral front pages in the 25 editions of the five tabloids, is a stark illustration of the lopsided nature of the tabloid coverage in the final stages of the referendum. Such a polarized framing in a referendum, where one third of voters made up their mind which way to vote in the final stages of the campaign, undoubtedly had an impact.

Table 2: Tabloid Newspapers and Editorial Stance on UK EU Membership 2016

Newspaper	Circulation	Remain or Brexit
<i>The Sun</i>	1,787,096	Brexit
<i>The Daily Mail</i>	1,589,471	Brexit
<i>The Daily Mirror</i>	809,147	Reman
<i>The Daily Star</i>	470,369	Neutral
<i>The Daily Express</i>	408,700	Brexit

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations 2016.

Table 3: Regularity of EU-related Front-page Headlines in the 25 Editions prior to the EU Referendum

<i>The Express</i>	<i>The Daily Mail</i>	<i>The Sun</i>	<i>The Daily Mirror</i>	<i>The Star</i>
19	17	12	5	2

#### IV. Immigration as a Driver for Brexit among the Tabloids

Moore & Ramsey's (2017) media survey of the EU referendum campaign concluded that 'coverage of immigration more than tripled over the course of the campaign, rising faster than any other political issue.' They concluded this was particularly noticeable in the final four weeks of the campaign – the timeline of our content analysis. They pinpointed that 'the majority of negative coverage of specific foreign nationals was published by three newspapers: *The Express*, *The Daily Mail*, and *The Sun*.' It is clear that the 'agenda-setting' role of the BTP combined with the EU 'knowledge gap' in Britain and the demographic profile of tabloid readers undoubtedly influenced individuals susceptible to the cues of the BTP in the final stages on the EU referendum.

##### *The British Tabloid Press and the Bombardment Approach*

###### *The Daily Express*

The *Daily Express*'s front pages are the most explicit with the word migrant or migrants featuring in nine of its 19 Brexit-related headlines. Of the six *Daily Express* front pages that do not feature the Brexit referendum, only one does not include some other reference to the referendum on the subheadings on the front page. Away from immigration, appealing to its core demographic, three of the paper's Brexit-related front pages focus on the issue of pensions and two on taxation. The other *Daily Express* headlines are less thematic but nevertheless keep the salience of the referendum very much at the forefront of its coverage: 'QUEEN ISSUES EU CHALLENGE', 'OUTRAGE AT BID TO "RIG" EU VOTE', 'HUGE BOOST TO EU EXIT HOPES', 'WE WILL THRIVE OUTSIDE THE EU'. On the day of the referendum itself, the paper's final say is the pro-sovereignty, rallying cry 'YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU: VOTE LEAVE TODAY'. It is evident from our analysis of *The Daily Express* front pages that the bombardment approach adopted by the newspaper's editors increasingly focused on the theme of immigration as the campaign intensified in the final stages.

###### *The Daily Mail*

*The Daily Mail*'s coverage in the 25 editions prior to the referendum vote follows a similar pattern to that of *The Daily Express*, with 18 headlines associated with the referendum. Again, immigration features as the underlying theme. Six of *The Daily Mail* headlines reference migration or immigration directly in the main headline. More subtly than *The Daily Express*, a further seven front pages are directly linked to the theme of immigration although not explicitly mentioning the words migration, migrant or immigration in the titles. These headlines clearly serve to undermine the positive case for the freedom of movement in the EU.

Of the four other Brexit-related headlines in the time frame associated with the referendum not associated with immigration, one focuses, like *The Daily Express*, on pensions – 'WHY STAYING IN EUROPE COULD HARM YOUR PENSION' and another on the story accusing David Cameron of giving out honours to pro-EU bosses in the Queen's Birthday Honours List: 'ARISE SIR REMAIN'. The other two front pages linked to the referendum were one the day before the referendum: 'IF YOU BELIEVE IN BRITAIN VOTE LEAVE' (which featured in tandem with the BBC's apology to singer Cliff Richard for alleged child-abuse allegations) and the one on polling day itself: 'NAILED:

FOUR BIG EU LIES'. The final headline focused on the following four perceived 'lies', three of which have a clear link to the immigration question and the perceived negativities of the Freedom of Movement: 'Talks with Turkey WILL start in days'; 'Brexit won't start trade war SAY Germans'; 'Brussels will NOT reform on open borders'; 'Deportation of EU jobless migrants a myth'. Similarly to *The Daily Express*, *The Daily Mail's* front-page headlines in the final stages of the campaign demonstrates a preoccupation with immigration in its attempts to convince readers to vote for Brexit.

### *The Sun*

*The Sun's* front-page coverage of the referendum is not as frequent as *The Daily Express* and *The Daily Mail*, but nevertheless, 12 of its front-page headlines are devoted to the issue. Interestingly, six of the Brexit-related headlines feature in the last nine days of the campaign (which also includes two headlines about the death of Jo Cox). The skewed nature of *The Sun's* coverage towards the last week of the campaign (the period when according to an opinion poll, a third of voters would be making up their mind which way to vote) also demonstrates that immigration features as a recurring theme. Of the seven other headlines associated with the referendum, one with the title 'FIEND'S EURO ARSENAL' makes a link to immigration in a security context. Another features the headline 'CAM BUSTER' which features Harry Boperal who confronted the Prime Minister on TV for 'allowing uncontrolled immigration to ruin his town'.

Away from immigration-related stories, the remaining pro-Brexit headlines are a random mix. One focuses on an alleged spoof pornographic film planned by an anti-Brexit group with the headline 'SEXTIT! Anti-Brexit gang fund grubby "are you in" porno to woo young voters'. The paper also leads with a spoof headline 'TIME TO MOTHBALL THE EU (VOTE LEAF TO PROTECT OUR COUNTRY ... AND OUR CABBAGES)' stating that the 'remain poll lead was collapsing', there was a 'Brexit rocket boost to shares' and that 'nasty Euro moths' had 'hit the UK'!

The remaining three headlines are, first, a rallying cry editorial headline, nine days before the poll, urging its readers to 'BeLEAVE in BRITAIN' and to vote to come out of the EU with the LEAVE part of the headline in red, white and blue. Second, the day before the referendum, the paper leads with the same story as *The Daily Express* with the headline 'WHAT QUEEN ASKED DINNER GUESTS: GIVE ME 3 GOOD REASONS TO STAY IN EUROPE – Sorry Ma'am we can't think of ONE.' Finally, on polling day *The Sun* concluded its Brexit campaign with a backdrop of the UK map in sunshine with the headline 'YOU CAN FREE UK FROM CLUTCHES OF EU TODAY – INDEPENDENCE DAY BRITAIN'S RESURGENCE'. Although *The Sun's* focus on immigration is not as pronounced as *The Daily Express* or *The Daily Mail*, it is, nevertheless, the dominant narrative, particularly in the final week of the campaign.

### *Uncovering the Headlines of the British Tabloid Press*

When examining the headlines of the three aforementioned pro-Brexit tabloid newspapers, there are only four headlines that are categorized as 'Reliable'. The majority of headlines are categorized as either 'Questionable' (34) or 'Speculative' (12) (see Tables 4, 5 and 6). These headlines push the boundaries in terms of validity and interpretation of evidence, for example 'PROOF WE CAN'T STOP MIGRANTS' (*Daily Express*), 'FURY

Table 4: *Daily Express* Front Pages in 25 Editions prior to the EU Referendum

Headline	Reliable	Questionable	Speculative
<b>Immigration-related headlines</b>			
Proof we can't stop migrants		X	
Migrant crisis will cost £20bn		X	
Migrant seized every 6 minutes			X
There will be bodies on our beaches: Farage predicts migrant mayhem in the channel		X	
The invaders – Sneaky migrants set up tents on French cliffs		X	
Migrants pay just £100 to invade Britain			X
Migrant crisis in the channel		X	
EU migrant numbers soar yet again		X	
<b>Euro-sceptic headlines</b>			
EU very bad for pensions		X	
Fury at PMs EU pension threat		X	
New EU threat to your pension		X	
New EU tax raid on Britain		X	
Outrage at plot to raise our taxes		X	
<b>Other EU-related headlines in text</b>			
Queen issues EU challenge		X	
Outrage at bid to rig EU vote		X	
Huge boost to EU Exit hopes	X		
We will thrive outside the EU			X
Your Country Needs you: vote leave			X

OVER PLOT TO LET 1.5 M TURKS INTO BRITAIN' (*Daily Mail*) and 'CALAIS MIGRANT RIOT LET US IN BEFORE YOU VOTE OUT: ILLEGAL STORMS FERRY PORT TO UK' (*The Sun*). Many are also highly speculative and are based on conjecture rather than knowledge, for example 'MIGRANT SEIZED EVERY 6 MINUTES' (*Daily Express*), and 'PM'S TV MAULING OVER MIGRATION' (*Daily Mail*).

What is clear from the analysis of the front pages of the three pro-Brexit tabloids is not only the prominence of the 'bombardment' campaign by all three, but also the shared focus on immigration in their framing of their support for leaving the EU. Of the 48 out of 75 front pages related to the referendum from the three pro-Brexit tabloids, 27 were directly (or indirectly) related to immigration. This underlines that by the time of purdah, immigration was clearly the dominant narrative in terms of the pro-Brexit tabloid agenda.

This contrasts greatly with the Remain supporting *Daily Mirror*, which only started to illustrate its support for British membership of the EU in terms of front-page headlines at the very end of the campaign in the final three days. Two days before the referendum it ran with 'SUPERMARKET BILLS "UP £580-A-YEAR IF WE LEAVE"'. The day before the vote its headline was the rather wordy 'Future for your jobs ... for your NHS ... for your income ... for your pensions ... for your safety ... for your children ... for your grandchildren ... for Britain's future ... vote remain tomorrow'. On the day of the referendum, in a similar vein, it continued with the headline 'Don't take a leap into the dark ... vote REMAIN today'. Apart from these three front pages, the only other referendum-related front-page headlines utilized by *The Daily Mirror* within the time frame were the headlines 'OSBOURNE'S BRUTAL BREXIT BUDGET' and the front-page lead



Table 5: *Daily Mail* Front Pages in 25 Editions prior to the EU Referendum

Headline	Reliable	Questionable	Speculative
<b>Immigration-related headlines</b>			
Cameron’s migration deception		X	
PM’s TV mauling over migration			X
Brexit poll as migration fears grow		X	
What a way to tackle migrant crisis			X
Immigration revolution	X		
Record number of jobless EU migrants in Britain	X		
Fury over plot to let 1.5 m Turks into Britain	X		
The Albanian double killer who’s lived freely in open borders UK for 18 years	X		
EU killers and rapists we’ve failed to deport	X		
UK’s open coastline shambles: 4 missed warnings			X
Britain’s wide open borders			X
England’s population to rise by 4 million in eight years	X		
Is this why the PMs dodging TV debates (with a picture of 2,600 migrants ... picked up en route to Europe)			X
<b>Euro-sceptic headlines</b>			
Why staying in Europe could raise your pension		X	
Arise Sir Remain	X		
If you believe in Britain vote leave		X	
Nailed: Four big lies:		X	
1. Talks with Turkey WILL start in days			
2. Brexit won’t start trade war SAY Germans	X		
3. Brussels will NOT reform open borders		X	
4. Deportation of jobless EU migrants a myth			X

‘FARAGE AIDE IS SEX CHILD PREDATOR’. In terms of intensity and salience, *The Daily Mirror*’s support for remaining in the EU was very measured when compared to the opposite take of the three pro-Brexit tabloids. In terms of issue framing, unlike the three pro-Brexit tabloids, there was no clear focus and there was certainly no attempt to counteract their anti-immigration framing, with any positive messaging about the pros of immigration and the freedom of movement.

The neutral *Daily Star* only directly featured the referendum on the day of the poll itself with the headline ‘YOUR country, YOUR vote, GRAB YOUR FUTURE BY THE BALLOTS’ with a picture of both David Cameron and Boris Johnson with a cross through them. The only other day within the time frame when it strayed into the debate in terms of front-page coverage was two days following Jo Cox’s murder, when it ran with the headline ‘MP DEAD AFTER ATTACK BY BREXIT GUNMAN’.

This ‘bombardment’ pro-Brexit approach from the three aforementioned tabloids, with its saturation of the issue of immigration as the campaign reached a climax, will have had an impact on their readerships. This conclusion is very much in sync with Foos & Bischof’s (2022) assertion that tabloid media outlets can be particularly influential if they decide to take a stance on politics because readers are likely to select into consumption for entertainment purposes.

Table 6: *The Sun* Front Pages in 25 Editions prior to the EU Referendum

Headline	Reliable	Questionable	Speculative
<b>Immigration-related headlines</b>			
Calais migrant riot: let us in before you vote out: illegal storms ferry port to UK		X	
Corbyn's migrant confession: we jez can't keep them out: EU cap impossible if remain wins		X	
New migrants bombshell: Checkpoint Charlies: Euro judges open floodgates to illegals		X	
Migrant boat crooks on CCTV brit smugglers £140 k per trip 100 s of illegals feared here: haul aboard		X	
As another 330,000 migrants prove we cannot control our own borders: Cameron responds: la-la-la		X	
<b>Euroceptic headlines</b>			
Fiend's euro arsenal		X	
Cam buster	X		
SEXTIT! Anti Brexit gang fund grubby 'are you in porno' to woo young voters?		X	
Time to mothball the EU (Vote leaf to protect our country ... and our cabbages		X	
BeLeave in Britain			X
What queen asked dinner guests: Give me 3 good reasons to stay in Europe – Sorry Ma'am we can't think of one		X	
You can free UK from clutches of EU today – Independence day Britain's resurgence			X

## V. The Influence of the Tabloid Anti-Immigration 'Bombardment Approach' on their Readership

Undeniably, immigration became the dominant theme as the referendum campaign progressed. Curtice (2018) maintains that it was a key issue in the referendum and that around 70 per cent of those that voted Leave believed that net immigration to Britain would fall if Britain left the EU. For Nundochan (2018) 'coverage reached fever pitch in the month leading to the referendum, with some outlets openly using language that racialized immigration and immigrants: language that created and established differences between the British "self" vs the European migrant "other"'. For Goodwin & Milazzo (2016), 'the decision taken by the Leave campaign to focus heavily on the immigration issue, particularly during the latter part of the referendum campaign, helped to drive public support for leaving the EU while also complicating the ability of Remain campaigners to "cut through" and galvanise support for continuing EU membership.' Goodwin & Milazzo (2016) acknowledge that 'recent academic research on the vote for Brexit points to the importance of immigration as a key driver' but 'they acknowledge that how immigration influenced the vote is unclear.'

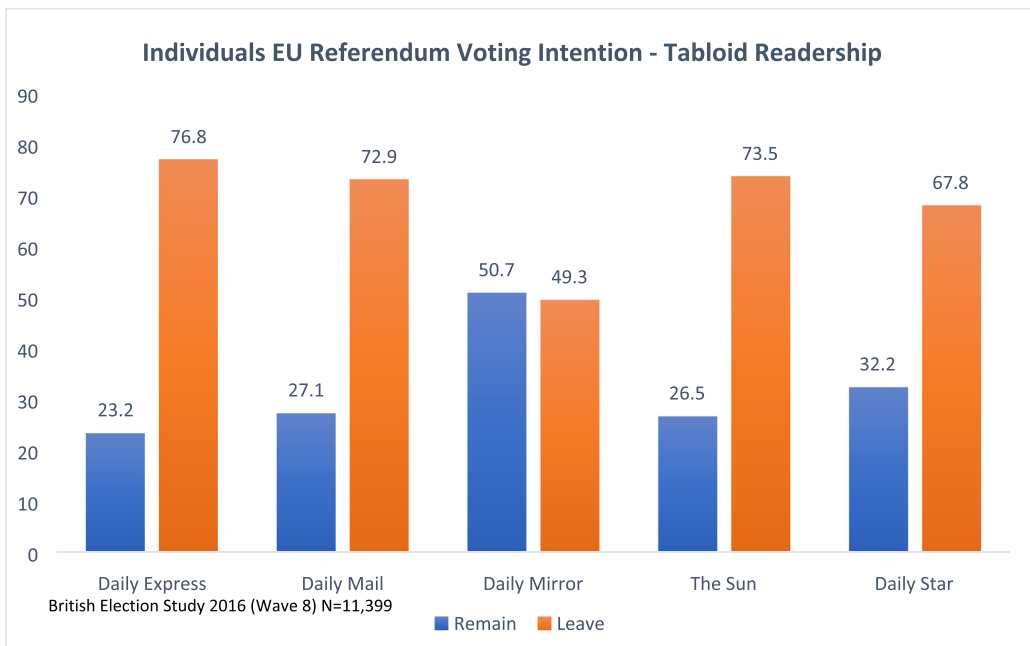
Analysis of wave 8 of the British election study (BES) illustrates that readers of the three Remain-supporting broadsheet newspapers – *The Times* (62 per cent), *The Guardian* (90 per cent) and *The Financial Times* (67 per cent) – intended to vote to remain in the EU. Unsurprisingly, given the euroceptic stance, 65 per cent of readers of *The Daily*

*Telegraph* stated their intention to vote to leave the EU. Perhaps the most surprising finding is that readership of *The I*, which was deemed as being neutral in the content analysis was overwhelmingly supportive of voting remain, with 83 per cent of people intending to do so. The findings illustrate that, overall, readers of broadsheet newspapers were *more likely* to vote remain in the EU referendum.

Analysis of the same data demonstrates a noticeable skew towards Brexit among tabloid readers. All three of the newspapers categorized as supporting Brexit in our content analysis demonstrated a significant majority *in favour* of Brexit. Over 70 per cent of readers of *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Express* – 74 per cent, 73 per cent and 77 per cent, respectively – intended to vote leave in the EU referendum. Bearing in mind *The Sun* and *the Daily Mail*'s combined circulation of over 3.3 million newspapers daily (not to mention their online presence), these are very significant percentages (see Figure 1).

Equally significant are the findings which emerge with regard to *The Daily Mirror* and *The Daily Star*. Readers of *The Daily Mirror*, the sole Remain-supporting tabloid, were evenly split with regard to their vote intention (50.7 per cent remain, 49.3 per cent leave). Given the lukewarm support for British membership of the EU in the final stages of the campaign in terms of issue salience, in comparison to the agenda-setting, anti-immigration ‘bombardment approach’ of the three Brexit supporting tabloids, this even split in support is no surprise. Neither was the data with regard to *The Daily Star*, which although classified as neutral in our analysis, indicated that 68 percent of readers intended to vote leave.

Figure 1: Individuals’ EU Referendum Voting Intention and Tabloid Readership [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



The BES data confirm that tabloid newspaper readers were more likely to vote to leave the EU than broadsheet readers. However, to what extent did the bombardment approach with its increasing focus on anti-immigration sentiment in the last month of the campaign play a significant part in shaping opinion towards Vote Leave for undecided tabloid readers in the final stages? In the IPSOS Mori Political Monitor poll (IPSOS Mori, 2016a) one week before the referendum ‘immigration ... surpassed the economy becoming the most important issue for voters’ with ‘one in three (33%) mention[ing] immigration as one of their most important issues (up from 28% in May) compared with 28% saying the economy’ in the June poll as opposed to 33% in the May survey. This reversal of percentages among the two most cited issues galvanizing voters intention becomes more compelling when we analyse the shift in percentages across the two polls when cross-tabulated with voting intention in terms of leave or remain. In the poll (IPSOS Mori, 2016a) ‘more than half (52%) of those likely to vote to leave in the referendum mention immigration as an issue compared with 14% of those likely to vote to remain.’ This contrasts with the May poll, where 49 per cent of those intending to vote leave in the EU referendum cite immigration as the key issue compared to 15 per cent of those intending to vote remain (IPSOS Mori, 2016c). Also, in the survey conducted a week before the referendum, 36 per cent of undecided voters cite immigration numbers as an important factor compared to 28 per cent the economy. The IPSOS Political Monitor surveys demonstrate a significant shift in momentum on the issue of immigration in terms of its salience among both leave and undecided voters in the time frame of the ‘bombardment approach’ identified among the three eurosceptic British tabloids.

Our argument about the influence of the ‘bombardment approach’ in the final stages of the campaign is further strengthened by an IPSOS Mori Issues index poll (IPSOS Mori, 2016b) published on the day of the referendum which shows that ‘concern with immigration has risen by ten percentage points [to 48%] since the comparable May Index, when concern stood at 38%.’ ‘Concern with immigration is particularly high’, the IPSOS report extrapolates, ‘for Conservative supporters (61%), those aged 65 and over and those from social grade C2 (both 60%).’ All three of these demographics are core in terms of the readership of the BTP and strengthen our argument about the impact of the agenda-setting, anti-immigration, ‘bombardment approach’ on influencing tabloid readers.

If we revert to the Ipsos Mori Political Monitor poll (IPSOS Mori, 2016a) conducted a week before the referendum and analyse the importance of individual issues in determining which way to vote in the referendum along lines of social class, what is striking is that nearly half (45 per cent) of C2s cite immigration. This concurs with the findings of Goodwin & Heath’s (2016) study of the referendum, which concludes that support for euroscepticism is not only more widespread across Britain, but it is also more socially distinctive along lines of class. This sharpening along lines of class we attribute significantly to the success of the ‘bombardment approach’ adopted by the three tabloids building on their eurosceptic legacy from the 1992 Maastricht Treaty onwards.

Delving deeper into the findings of the Ipsos Mori Political Monitor poll (IPSOS Mori, 2016a), it is clear that some of the agenda-setting myths perpetuated by the eurosceptic tabloids surrounding the perceived consequences of a vote to remain in the EU became more pronounced as the campaign drew to a close. Asked the question ‘If the UK votes to remain in the EU Turkey will be fast-tracked into the European Union and their population of 75 million people will have the right to free movement to the

UK', 45 per cent of respondents answered this in the affirmative even though the likelihood of Turkey joining the EU remains remote for a number of well-documented reasons. In response to the question 'there will be a higher risk of sex attacks on women by migrants', 28 per cent of respondents answered this in the affirmative if Britain was to stay in the EU.

The findings above concur with Goodwin & Milazzo's (2016) analysis that 'in the weeks prior to the 2016 referendum 75% of BES respondents indicated that they thought levels of migration were rising' with this being the case among nine out of ten leave voters, and with eight out of ten leave voters responding that they would lower the levels of immigration into the country. Goodwin & Milazzo (2016) conclude that it is 'perceptions regarding control over immigration' that emerges as the strongest predictor for Brexit. They also acknowledge, based on Startin's (2015) categorization of eurosceptic daily newspapers, which includes the three tabloids in our study, that eurosceptic news-readers were more likely to vote Brexit (with a 0.38 coefficient), one of the major indicators of support for Brexit in the BES.

Goodwin & Milazzo (2016) also identify that, compared to early 2014, 17 per cent of respondents switched to supporting leave compared to early 2014 and that even 30 per cent of Remainers were more cognizant of perceived rising immigration by 2016. We need to be mindful that none of the above evidence demonstrates causation with regard to motivating Brexit voters in the final stages of the campaign. Nevertheless, *taken collectively*, in consideration with our analysis of the front-page headline coverage, the evidence *does point* to a situation that was so lopsided in terms of the salience of anti-immigration responses that it should be identified as a key supply-side variable for delivering Brexit to the Vote Leave campaign. Hix's (2016) analysis of 2015 Eurobarometer data concluded that UK respondents were the least knowledgeable about the EU of all of the, then, 28 Member States. When we add our findings to the uncertainty caused by the 'knowledge gap' on EU issues, our analysis of the BTP front pages provides a compelling case.

## Conclusion

Brexit signified the most important constitutional shake-up Britain has known since it joined the European Economic Community in 1973. Over the past six years, Brexit and the Brexit settlement, have continued to dominate national press coverage in Britain with the BTP continuing to display a vigorously, hostile eurosceptic stance. The focus of this article was on the final stages of the 2016 EU referendum campaign, specifically on the front pages of the 25 issues of the five, national, British daily tabloid newspapers – *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Daily Express* and *The Daily Star*. We selected the last 25 days of the EU referendum campaign as a time frame as it was the crucial period at the 'business end' of the campaign. It also coincided with the official 'purdah' period. Our analysis found that the 'bombardment approach' deployed by the BTP in the latter stages of the 2016 EU Referendum campaign pointed to an unbalanced narrative, particularly in terms of Brexit coverage on the key issue of immigration. This was illustrated in terms of issue salience as measured by the number of headlines featured, and in terms of the intensity and hostility of those headlines. We argue that immigration, or rather *anti-immigration*, should be identified as a key variable for delivering Brexit by the BTP. When coupled with the 'knowledge gap' about the EU in Britain, we conclude



that the anti-immigration stance by the BTP created the perfect storm in tipping the EU referendum vote towards Brexit.

We recognize the limitations of our conclusions, given the long-standing debate about whether the press leads or responds to the public, and the extent to which individuals believe what they read in newspapers (Anderson, 2004). However, we robustly believe that the findings from our analysis make a significant contribution to the literature on the role and influence of the media, and more specifically the BTP, in terms of disentangling the explanations for the 2016 EU referendum vote. Britain is defined by its tabloid newspapers. It is the only country to have developed such a competitive, national, popular press and has created a nationwide tabloid culture. Newspaper owners, editors and journalists have played a vital role in the formation of British society. This is clearly portrayed in the evolution of Britain's relationship with the EU, both historically in terms of the tabloids' eurosceptic legacy, and in terms of its influence in the final stages of the 2016 EU referendum campaign. David Yelland (cited in Cotter, 2018), former editor of *The Sun* newspaper, summed up the situation succinctly, in an interview with Sky News:

If you go back and look at the front pages day after day of *The Sun* and the *Mail* and the *Express* during the referendum, they told lies on a daily basis about what would happen – how simple it would be to leave the EU, what the problem with the EU would be and so on .... If you talk to anyone in Europe about the tabloid press, they say that it is the fundamental thing which swept the vote.

The ability of the Vote Leave campaign to align with the BTP, to ally itself with long-standing eurosceptic narratives and to harness the public's knowledge deficit about the EU allowed the Vote Leave campaign to convey their message largely unopposed, especially on the key public concern of immigration. The 'Britain Stronger in Europe' campaign was unable to gain positive traction on the benefits of immigration and of the freedom of movement offered by EU membership. While the 'Britain Stronger in Europe' campaign found itself floundering to convince people of its core economic message, namely that the risks of Brexit and the benefits of staying would have a personal impact on their everyday lives, the Vote Leave campaign, buoyed by the messaging of the BTP, were able to portray the perceived threats posed by immigration as the major risk of Britain staying in the EU. This latter point was demonstrated by the fact that over one third of the front-page headlines in *The Express*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun* in the last week of the campaign were devoted to its perceived, negative consequences in relation to British membership of the EU.

As Harding (2016) surmises, 'The duty of journalists in this post-truth environment is the same as it has always been – to separate lies from facts, to inform readers as honestly as possible and to aim at the closest approximation of the truth.' The evidence from our analysis indicates otherwise. The exploitation of the 'knowledge gap' on EU issues, and the perceived fears about immigration, played a major role in delivering victory to the Vote Leave campaign. The fixation of the BTP with immigration in the final stages of the campaign reinforces Harding's (2016) assertion that 'inventing or doctoring stories ... as often happens with EU coverage' is 'an abdication of basic journalist ethics.' In a closely fought race, where the polls were neck and neck, and where a third of voters were undecided on which way to vote in the final week of the campaign, we argue that it was

the tabloids ‘that won it’ and got Vote Leave over the line via its portrayals of the perceived, negative consequences of immigration.

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