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## The tabloidization of the Brexit campaign: Power to the (British) people?

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# The tabloidization of the Brexit campaign: Power to the (British) people?

## Abstract

Consistent with a populist script, evoking the people has been a nodal point in the discursive unfolding of Brexit and its legitimisation. This paper focuses on the mediatisation of the Brexit referendum campaign in a corpus of online British tabloids to address the critical question of how the people in whose name Brexit was (de)legitimised were discursively constructed and mobilized. The argument put forward is that the legitimisation of Brexit was achieved through exclusionary definitions of the people and through strategies of fear, resentment and empowerment. This discursive framing points to the wider question of the instrumental role that a large section of the British tabloid press has had not simply in the contingency of referendum but also in the longer-term legitimisation chain of Brexit and in its institutionalisation and more generally in the historical priming of their readership with negative coverage of the UK/EU relationship.

*Keywords: Brexit, populism, tabloid journalism, Critical Discourse Analysis, Media Linguistics,*

## 1. Introduction

*"this will be a victory for real people, a victory for ordinary people, a victory for decent people" (N. Farage, quoted in The Sun, 24/6/2016)*

Reference to *the people* has always been at the core of populist discourses. As epitomised by the above statement pronounced by UKIP's leader Nigel Farage as the early Brexit referendum polls were announced on the morning of 24th June 2016, evoking *the people* has also been crucial to the discursive legitimisation of Brexit (see also Bennett, 2019). This legitimacy process has seen the British media, and in particular the tabloid press, playing a key role among a variety of institutional and other actors. Focusing on 'tabloid populism' (see below) as instrumental in the diffusion of populist discourses, this paper addresses the question of how *the people* in whose name Brexit was (de)legitimised were constructed and mobilized in/by the British tabloid press during the Brexit referendum campaign. More specifically, this aim has been operationalised around the following questions: i) which ideological framing of Brexit by the tabloid press contributed to (de)legitimise 'leave' and 'remain' arguments as choices of/for the people? ii) which people were mobilised

and antagonised in the discourses of tabloids and iii) how were the people linguistically characterised?

By addressing these questions the contribution of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it offers evidence of how tabloid populism was a driving force of the Brexit vote and how it contributed to the diffusion and legitimisation of populist discourses shoring up the ‘critical juncture’ of Brexit and its institutionalisation (Zappettini & Krzyzanowski, 2019; see also special issue on ‘Brexit as a Social & Political Crisis: Discourses in Media & Politics’ in *Critical Discourse Studies Journal* 2019, 16:4). Secondly, it contributes to the advancement of the literature on the relation between language and politics by approaching *the people* and (tabloid) populism at the critical intersection of increasingly mediated forms of political communication. In this sense, this article interprets journalism as ‘an argumentative discourse genre’ (Richardson, 2007:64) that combines evaluative and factual content to promote particular worldviews to the audience (Van Dijk, 2013). Crucially, journalists act as ‘frame gatekeepers’ (Bruggemann, 2014) in as much as they have the power to reproduce and reframe discourses from extra-media actors while fitting specific organizational/political agendas as well as local/national cultures. For example, in reporting Brexit as a crisis, journalists across Europe have framed the nature of such crisis through narratives that differ substantially from those used by their British counterpart (Krzyzanowski, 2019). Likewise, more than other European press cultures, the British press has framed the narration of immigration around discourses of ‘social burden’ and security (McNeil and Karstens, 2018). Similar considerations apply to the wider historical reporting of EU political news, with a large section of the tabloid press producing anti-EU propaganda based on spurious information and anti-foreign sentiment (Weymouth and Anderson 2014; Bingham and Conboy, 2015) which have gained the British written press the undesirable title of ‘the least trusted in Europe’ (European Broadcasting Unit, 2017). Thus, while the British press coverage of the referendum mainly reflected discourses produced by institutional actors in the campaign (Levy et al., 2016), the tabloids’ role in giving exposure to a selection of such discourses can hardly be overestimated when considering how the cumulative effect (Bell, 1996) on audiences reinforced existing pre-legitimising narratives (Krzyzanowski, 2014).

The argument put forward in this paper is that a large section of the tabloid press framed the choice over Brexit by providing the public with an imagined sense of empowerment over a perceived threat to the British nation and its popular sovereignty. Most tabloids (namely the Mail<sup>1</sup>-Sun-Express triad) associated this threat with immigration and EU policies which, in turn, were largely represented as adverse to the interests of the (British) people. Within this discursive logic, Brexit tended to be primarily legitimised by tabloids through strategies of fear, resentment and empowerment which relied on antagonistic representations of opposed groups of *people* (i.e. the British people and its enemies) and the exclusionary dichotomy of *us* and *them*. This discursive framing also points to the wider question of the aforementioned instrumental role that a large section of the British tabloid press has

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<sup>1</sup> By Mail I refer to The Daily Mail but not to its sister publication Mail of Sunday which on Brexit had a different stance (see Section 4).

had not simply in the contingency of referendum but also in the longer-term legitimisation chain of Brexit and in its institutionalisation. Crucially, in the tabloidization of the Brexit referendum campaign, not only was the Mail-Sun-Express triad able to reproduce and amplify the key Leave arguments, but these titles also reproduced their own ideological pro-Brexit agenda capitalising on historical anti-EU/populist discourses that had extensively primed the readership to a normalisation of Brexit long before the referendum became a reality.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: first a conceptualisation of populism at the intersection of interrelated political and communicative discursive dimensions is discussed in Section 2. Section 3 focuses on the historical role of the British tabloid press and on their role in the mediatization of the Brexit referendum. Section 4 discusses data and methodology used for the analysis which is subsequently presented in Section 5. Critical conclusions are drawn in Section 6.

## 2. Tabloid Populism: ‘the people’ and/in the media

Defining populism is notoriously problematic as the literature on the nature and the boundaries of the populist phenomenon fuzzily spans across overlapping ideological, political, social and communicative dimensions (see for example Wodak and Krzyżanowski, 2017). Taking up Stavrakakis (2017: 527) this article refers to populism as:

*“a specific type of discourse which claims to express popular interests and to represent associated identities and demands (the “will of the people”) against an “establishment” or elite, which is seen as undermining them and forestalling their satisfaction”.*

At its core, the populist ideology therefore revolves primarily around two basic elements: a dualistic conceptualisation of society as made up of antagonistic groups and a justification of actions in reference to *the people*, their interests, and their will (see also Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013). As Canovan (2005) notes, however, while *the people* is always a core element of populist narratives (and the often self-referential etymological and conceptual basis of how most scholars understand populism) the term is also highly problematic to circumscribe semantically and, in fact, derives its very rhetorical appeal from the way it can be synecdochally deployed<sup>2</sup>. The problematic definition of the people is also reflected in the interplay between populist discourses and democratic processes, in particular in the legitimacy

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<sup>2</sup> The indefiniteness of *(the) people* is even more acute in English, where the same term can denote both individuals in a general sense and more specific collective actors (citizens or subjects), two concepts which are otherwise lexically differentiated in other languages (see for example *popolo/gente/persone* in Italian and equivalent terms in cognate Romance languages or *Volk/Menschen/Personen* in German). In English, this semantic differentiation can partly be rendered by the pluralisation *people/peoples* and by the use of the definite article (*people/the people*).

of political decisions which, in the Rousseauian ideal of republican democracy, are supposedly exercised *in the name of the people* (popular sovereignty) and deemed the expression of a *volonté generale* (*people's will*). However, while the Rousseauian conception of *volonté generale* pluralistically supports a 'common good', in populist discourses *the people* is typically de-pluritized and its will instrumentally reified as one monolithic entity (Freedon, 2017). As Laclau (2005) pointed out, therefore, rather than existing *a priori* as a political subject, in all appeals to popular sovereignty *the people* is constituted discursively through the articulation and aggregation of specific social demands associated with different 'floating signifiers' (e.g. freedom, control, nation, etc.) and through the antagonisation between the people and its enemies i.e. those who forestall their demands. While reference to *the people* is thus virtually unavoidable (and according to Stavrakakis, 2014 indeed desirable for basic democratic debates) the boundaries between *people insiders/outside*rs are often arbitrarily manufactured and mobilised in discourse (Wodak, 2017). Trading on these premises, to understand the production and distribution of populist discourses one has to examine not only the linguistic act of naming *the people* but, crucially, also the actors involved in such process as well as the effects of such discourses. Such exercise carries specific significance in relation to the resurgence of populism of the last decade both at European and global level (Stavrakakis, 2014; Zienkowski and Breeze, 2019) in which the logics of 'we, the people' - articulated along ethnic and economic cleavages and narratives of threat, betrayal and resentment (Wodak, 2017) - has been highly mediated and politicised (Krzyzanowski et al., 2018).

As political discourses are produced and consumed in a public sphere increasingly reliant on mediated forms of communication (Esser and Strömbäck, 2014) it is crucial to consider the media not just as key communicative platforms but also as potentially influential actors in the social (re)production of populist logics. The media ability to shape social reality by naturalising certain selected views of the world and the way that specific discourses are framed and channelled by newspapers - thus contributing to construing the large cognitive models whereby public opinion understands political and social phenomena and upon which citizens exercise political agency - have been widely recognized (McCombs 2009; Van Dijk, 2013; Scheufele, 2000).

However, while this body of literature has clearly acknowledged the media's power to set the agenda by instigating and polarising public debates, the interplay between the (re)production of populist ideologies in the public opinion, editorial choices, journalistic practices and audience agency is complex. The role of the media in the diffusion of populist discourses has been differently described as of 'facilitator' or 'inhibitor' (Wettstein et al., 2018) with the audience differently seen as performing passive/active roles (Aalberg et al, 2016). It has been argued that media coverage of populism can give 'publicity oxygen' to certain discourses whether such coverage is positive or negative (Mazzoleni, 2008) but, equally, that the exclusion of populist demands from news agendas may fuel populist forms of anti-elite sentiment and the public delegitimization of the media as the latter are seen conspiring with 'the people's enemy' (Krämer, 2014).

Whilst the jury on establishing a direction of causality between a newspaper's political alignment, news coverage and the political attitudes of its readership is still out, this paper sides with Mazzoleni's view that the rise of most recent populist phenomena in Europe has fed on some sort of 'media complicity' through which the press has more or less intentionally given "increased visibility and significant reverberation of the populist message among a wide audience" (Mazzoleni, 2008:50). In this respect, the role of the European tabloid press has attracted particular interest and some scholars have referred to 'tabloid populism'<sup>3</sup> (Mazzoleni, 2008, Bos & Brants, 2014, Krämer, 2014) as a specific ideological worldview, as well as a discursive practice and a communicative genre, which is distinct from the quality press and which has been conspicuously complicit in the diffusion of populist discourses.

Firstly, the tabloid press differs from other forms of journalism in the ideological understanding of its own social role, namely that is to oppose the "excesses of political correctness and [...] liberal intellectualism" (Krämer, 2018) rather than foster an informed civic debate. Secondly, in terms of content, tabloid journalism aims at the creation of newsworthiness around 'soft' content and opinions rather than substantive and verified facts with a tendency to focus on personalities rather than issues and on the 'cultural compression' (Conboy, 2004) of complex arguments into simplistic and catchy lines. Thirdly, these ideological and discursive orientations are often accompanied by a 'demotic' and vernacular discursive style characterised by highly emotive, sensational and everyday language (Conboy, 2004) chiming with the communicative style increasingly adopted by politicians (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). These interrelated dimensions have contributed to make the tabloid press a prominent mediatising actor in the new 'politics of popular' by both nurturing populist tendencies within media institutions themselves and by representing a specific journalistic style through which world phenomena are popularized (Krämer, 2014). Hence, on the one hand, tabloids have actively taken up specific discourses contributing to the "legitimization of the issues, key-words and communication styles typical of populist leaders" (Mazzoleni, 2008:50). On the other hand, even if not explicitly aligned with populist movements, tabloids, like populist politicians, assert a rapport with the people/audience, an ability to think and speak as one of them and for them (Moffit and Tormey, 2013) that reifies *the people* as both the subject and the main audience of their discursive performance (Arditi, 2007).

The next section discusses the interplay between these ideological and stylistic elements focusing on the British tabloid press, their historical framing of the UK/EU relationship and the more specific production of populist discourses around the Brexit referendum campaign.

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<sup>3</sup> The term tabloid connotes the ideological stance associated with the format. Although recently some broadsheets such as the Guardian are published in a tabloid version, in my following discussion I refer to British tabloids meaning the 'red tops'.

### 3. The tabloidization of Euronews and the framing of the Brexit campaign in the British tabloid press

The British press has historically been instrumental in constructing public perceptions of the UK-EU relationship (Carey and Burton 2004; Bingham and Conboy, 2015). Since the emergence of the EU, most British newspapers have overtly aligned with one political view or ideology over European issues. Although with some caveats (including the fact that editorial stances on Europe have sometimes shifted), one could crudely say that while most broadsheets have portrayed the UK-EU relationship from Europositive to softly Eurosceptic positions, the majority of ‘red top’ tabloids (as well as some broadsheets such as *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*) have typically supported hard Eurosceptic to Europhobic views. In particular, titles such as *The Daily Mail*, *The Sun* and *The Daily Express* have been historically vocal about their anti-EU views, promoting various ‘crusades’ around different Euro-myths and through discursive strategies of simplification, ‘moral panic’ and blame (Daddow, 2012; Weymouth and Anderson 2014; Hameleers et al. 2016, 2017). In this sense, the overarching discourse of some British tabloids has been conspicuous for the trivialisation of EU politics (e.g. *The Sun*’s infamous headline ‘Stick it up yours Delors’) and for portraying the UK as a ‘victim’ of Brussels ‘conspiracy plot’ (Levy et al., 2016). As Berry (2016:14) puts it, the anti-EU stance of a portion of the British press meant that ‘before the [Brexit referendum] campaign even began large parts of the public had been primed by the media to be Euro-sceptic’.

In the run up to the vote the media partisan alignment polarised and the press messages echoing the official Leave/Remain campaigns intensified thus contributing to further frame the referendum debate along the agenda that had already been institutionalised through the appointment of official campaign actors (Zappettini, 2019a). Overall, the majority of press coverage of the referendum “was heavily skewed in favour of Brexit” (Levy et al., 2016, p.33) and “the right-wing tabloids tended to set the agenda, forcing more authoritative and impartial media – notably the BBC – to follow suit” (Buckledee, 2018:204; see also Seaton, 2016). Of all the bestselling British newspapers, the *Daily Mail* featured the highest number of articles on the EU referendum and the *Daily Express* the most front pages titles (Levy et al. 2016). The tabloid press bias towards the Leave message thus meant that the themes of the Leave camp got amplified and had more exposure with a larger readership than those of the Remain side which, on the other hand, relied on less emotionally appealing arguments based on ‘cold arguments’ and economic data (Zappettini, 2019a). Moreover, whilst in line with the official Leave and Remain campaigns the economy was the overall most discussed topic in the general press, British tabloids tended to recontextualise economic arguments within discursive frames of migration, security and sovereignty (Moore and Ramsay, 2017) which effectively echoed and amplified the official campaign’s dominant *topoi* of threat and risk (avoidance) (Zappettini, 2019a). Finally one must consider the increasing traction of online news. As information is shifting from printed to digital forms, not only have tabloids titles

been able to retain their audience shares but they have in fact increased their reach when one considers their presence on platforms such as Google and Facebook while some quality (and mostly Remain endorsing) papers are available only through paywall subscriptions. So for example the Leave supporting Mail Online and the Sun Online were the second and third most accessed news website after the BBC in 2016 reaching 68% and 64% of the UK digital audience respectively while the Remain endorsing Mirror Online was trailing behind in fifth place at 52% (Ofcom, 2017). Having provided a brief contextualisation of the mediatisation of the Brexit referendum campaign, the next sections present a detailed analysis of a sample of such discursive productions in the British tabloid press paying specific attention to the mobilisation of *the people*.

## 4. Methodology and data

The analysis was conducted abductively via a combination of computational linguistic analysis (Partington et al. 2013) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Krzyzanowski, 2010) methods. The computational analysis was used to survey a large amount of data and to focus on the different semantic boundaries which were constructed around *the people* in a corpus of tabloids articles on Brexit. For this purpose five corpora (N=4370 articles) were compiled deriving data from the Nexis database in relation to the national editions of the following five titles: The Daily Mail (MA); The Sun (SU); The Daily Express (EX); The Daily Mirror (MI); and The Daily Star (ST) (as detailed in Table 1). These five tabloids were chosen for their different political alignment/Brexit endorsement and because they represent the titles with the widest online audience<sup>4</sup> (OFCOM, 2017) as well as the highest average daily nationwide circulation in their printed version<sup>5</sup>.

Table 1. Details of corpora analysed.

Corpora	Title (including Sunday editions)	Political/Brexit Alignment	Articles analysed	Total words
1 -MA	Mail on line (dailymail.co.uk)	Conservative/Leave <sup>a</sup>	1570	2244168
2 - EX	Express on line (express.co.uk)	UKIP/Leave	1607	1144001
3 - MI	Mirror on line (mirror.co.uk)	Labour/Remain	660	454915
4 - SU	The Sun online (thesun.co.uk) <sup>b</sup>	Conservative/Leave	439	210567
5 - ST	Daily Star on line (dailystar.co.uk)	None/Leave <sup>c</sup>	149	79133

<sup>a</sup> *The Mail* endorsed Leave; *The Mail on Sunday* endorsed Remain  
<sup>b</sup> *The Daily Star* characterizes itself as non-political. At the beginning of the referendum campaign it took a non-partisan stance

<sup>4</sup> Excluding the BBC and quality newspapers. Although The London Evening Standard represents a tabloid publication with higher audience reach than EX and ST, it was not included because of its regional rather than national distribution.

<sup>5</sup> Excluding broadsheets and quality press. Source Statista <https://www.statista.com/statistics/529060/uk-newspaper-market-by-circulation/>



however towards the end it came out in support of Leave

<sup>c</sup> As the online version of The Sun is only available on the Nexis database for articles after 22/6/2016, the SU database was scraped manually from the tabloid website ([www.thesun.co.uk](http://www.thesun.co.uk)).

The database Nexis was specifically searched for any co-occurrence of the keywords *Brexit* AND *people* in the online version of these five publications (including Sunday editions) during the time between the official start of the referendum campaign and the referendum date (15/4-23/6/2016). Although highly similar articles were filtered out using such search option on the Nexis menu, the nature of online news means that in some cases results were returned in which certain paragraphs or sections were repeated verbatim or with minimal changes either as updated versions of the same article or sometimes under different headlines (this for example was particularly noticeable in the MA online database). These paragraphs and sections were annotated and taken into account to avoid skewing the qualitative analysis towards the higher representation of certain arguments (see below). Duplicate articles appearing under Scottish and (Northern) Irish versions were also discarded. Articles were further searched with AntConc (Anthony, 2018) to map distinct semantic fields associated with ‘the people’. This mapping was carried out by interpreting each occurrence of the people in the context of a sentence (via the KWIC function) and by identifying the main collocates occurring next to *(the) people*. Articles in which *(the) people* appeared to be used in one of the most typical semantic orientations (see figure 1 below) were then analysed at a discursive-pragmatic level with the aim to systematically identify: i) the framing of each article, that is the “central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning” to events and issues at stake (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143); ii) the typical argumentative structures used to (de)legitimise Brexit in relation to the signifier *the people*. The framing analysis was guided by Entman’s (1993) four salient dimensions of news narrative: problem definition, causal analysis, moral judgement and policy recommendation (this last dimension ultimately tallying with the Leave/Remain endorsement). The in-depth argumentative analysis relied on extant literature on legitimation in discourse (e.g. van Leuween, 2007) and in particular Reyes (2011) who suggests legitimation can be achieved through discursive strategies leveraging on: (1) emotions (particularly fear), (2) a hypothetical future, (3) rationality, (4) voices of expertise and (5) altruism. The above categories were treated as general strategic orientations and were identified via key *topoi* deployed in discourse (see Krzyzanowski, 2010).

An important premise must be made on the identification of arguments in relation to the actors involved in their (re)production. While a relatively small number of articles consisted of opinion columns explicitly aimed at evaluating the campaign arguments, the large majority of articles constructed news around the ‘soft’ content of ‘X said Y’. Narratives of most articles therefore were driven by a macrosyntax (van Dijk, 2013) ‘repackaging’ reported speech (e.g. large quotes from politicians, official lines from campaign representatives and, in some cases, endorsements from celebrities and *vox pops*). As the recontextualization of reported speech still relies on the journalists’ ‘intention work’ (Schreiber and Kampf, 2018) to construct newsworthiness around authority view from specific evaluative angles,

articles were treated as units of context in which editorial framing - aligning with the explicit political stance of a newspaper - would conceivably use commentary and reported speech intertextually to legitimise the macro argument for/against Brexit via the signifier ‘the people’.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Corpus Linguistics Analysis: Main collocates of (the) people

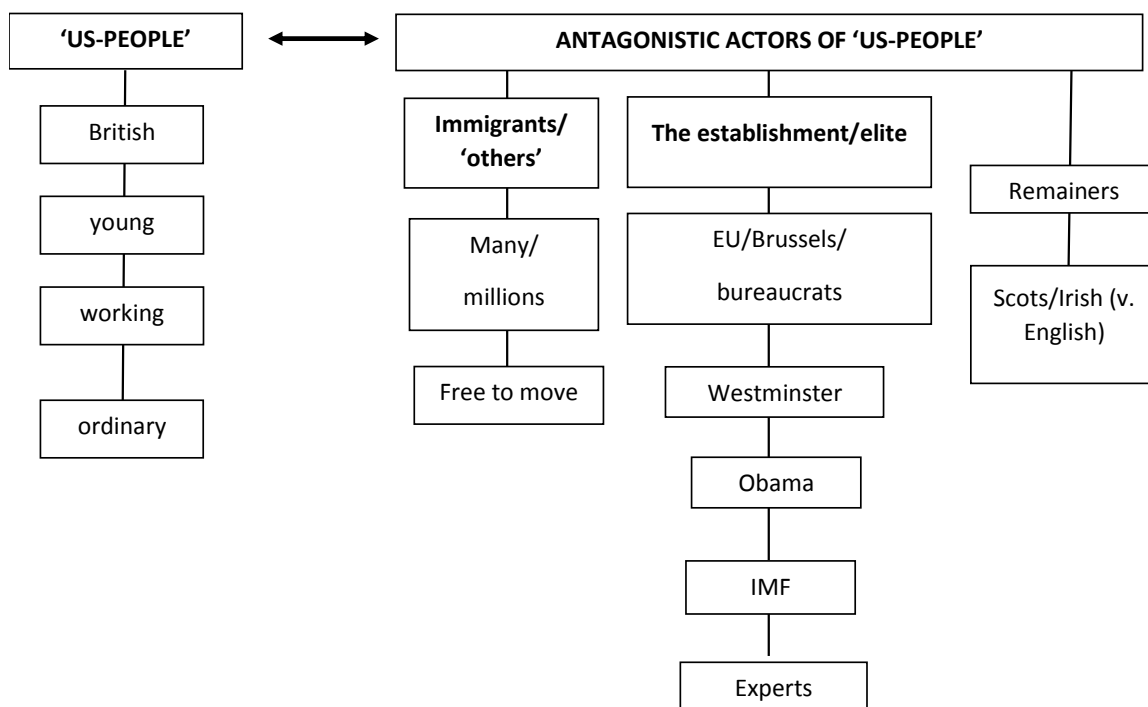
Results from the collocation analysis (summarised in Table 2) show that the most frequent co-occurrences of *Brexit* and *people* were found in the MA and the EX corpora which is consistent with the two titles featuring the highest number of general articles on Brexit among the press (Levy et al 2016) although here they clearly featured different words-per-article ratios. The analysis also showed that, overall, the qualifier *British* was the most frequent collocate of *people*, followed by *young*, *working*, *million*, *many*, *more*, and *ordinary*.

Table 2. The most frequent collocates/N-grams of *people* in the corpora

COLLOCATE TITLE	EX	MA	MI	SU	ST	total
British	272	232	102	75	19	700
young	130	116	89	21	6	362
many	84	69	33	21	13	220
working	49	32	60	12		153
more	50		28	24	6	108
most	31	27	11	16		85
ordinary	35	19		7		61
come/came/coming/are coming	19			36		55
movement of	7				7	14
people from	12					12
the number of people who	12					12
a lot of people	11					11
our	9					9
millions of people	6					6
The people of Britain	6					6
The people of this country	5					5

One very conspicuous pattern emerged from further analysis on the distribution of the most frequent collocates in the pro-Brexit press. The generic term people was used in discourse to characterise two distinct categories: the *us* group of people on one hand and their antagonists (the *them* group of people) on the other as illustrated in Figure 1. People belonging to the *us* group were linguistically characterised as *British, young<sup>6</sup>, working and ordinary* while their antagonists (the *them*-group) were differently nominalised and attributed different predicates. These different characterisations can be conveniently grouped into the following three main semantic clusters: i) (EU) migrants free to move; ii) the elites/establishments; and iii) a third less semantically homogenous group of antagonists comprising of ‘Remainers’, the ‘Scots’ and the ‘Irish’.

Figure 1. Linguistic characterizations of (the) people in the *us/them* group construction



<sup>6</sup> In some cases *young* was also used to characterise jobless immigrants moving to the UK (see next section).

This antagonistic discursive framing is discussed further in the discursive pragmatic analysis below with a specific focus on the most frequent argumentative and linguistic realisations that characterise the corpora. The discussion will highlight in particular *the discursive dynamics of fear, resentment and empowerment of the people* through which Brexit was legitimised.

## 5.2 Discursive Pragmatic Analysis

### 5.2.1 Antagonistic representations of ‘the British people’ vs. ‘immigrants’

This framing was typically realised via the juxtaposition of a group of actors (often qualified as *British people* and sometimes as *the people of Britain, the people of this country* or *our people*) with a group of opposed actors frequently nominalised as: *(EU) (im)migrants, EU citizens, or people from* (followed by a geopolitical noun e.g. Poland or Eastern Europe) and often qualified as *free to move*. This latter group was also frequently nominalised via the following lexical clusters: *the number of people who, many/more/ a lot of/millions of people* and such linguistic attributions were typically associated with the predicate *(have) come/came/(are) coming*. In essence, such linguistic characterisations and antagonistic representations sustained the overall framing of the *us-British* group as negatively impacted by immigration, a discourse which was primarily predicated on two main macro arguments. The first macro argument claimed that immigrants, enabled by Europe’s free movement rules, deplete ‘British’ resources (jobs, housing, welfare, health and education and other public services) resulting in the *us-British* group often losing out and being worse off/left behind. The second macro argument associated immigration with different public security risks to which the *us-British* group would be much more vulnerable if the UK remained in the EU (see below). In both arguments, the negative consequences of immigration were discursively traced back to a socio-political system ‘out of control’ (often represented as the result of the EU imposing rules on the UK but also as a complicit ‘elitist affair’ between Brussels and Westminster) and Brexit was thus legitimised along the Leave campaign macro argumentative scheme of ‘taking back control’ (see Zappettini, 2019a). For example, a Daily Mail article on 2/6/2016 quotes prominent Leave campaigner Liam Fox on the alleged negative impact of uncontrolled (*runaway*) immigration on the young British and on the housing system. The argument - realised via the conditional sentence ‘if, then’ - legitimised Brexit through strategies of fear and risk and via representations of a negative hypothetical future which were predicated on the *topos/fallacy of numbers and mass migration* (Zappettini, 2019a), i.e. on the implicit assumption that millions of Europeans citizens entitled to move to the UK (as well as Turkish nationals whom, it was implied, would be soon granted similar rights) would exercise their right of movement:

- (1) “*England will need to build a new home every SIX MINUTES to keep up with runaway immigration if voters reject Brexit*”  
[...] *If Britain did not vote to quit the EU, young people*

*[emphasis added – henceforth EA] would be stuck living with their parents for longer – unable to find or afford a home” (Daily Mail, 2/6/2016)*

The same argument of the ‘social housing crisis’ driven by immigration was also found in a Daily Express article authored by England cricketer Sir Ian Botham where his nostalgic vision of ‘green’ Britain at risk of being ‘concreted over’ to accommodate millions of migrants (cf. *topos of mass migration*) parallels the political discourse of lost sovereignty as British people are ‘told what to do by other people’ (thus reinforcing representations of the UK and the EU as two antagonistic groups of people). Legitimation is also achieved via reference to a hypothetical negative future (a ‘full’ and ‘overbuilt’ Britain) which is contrasted with the mythopoesis (van Leuween, 2007) of Britain’s ‘golden age’ (cf. Girardet, 1990 for such prototypical myth in populist discourses):

(2) *“I grew up with green fields around me that I could run around and play in. Britain was a country that could look after itself and it did not have to do what other people[EA] told it to do. [...] Even with migration continuing "just" at its current level we will have to build a new house every six minutes for the next 20 years. Our beautiful countryside is what makes Britain the place it is and this island was not designed for 100 million people [EA]. I don't want to see it concreted over just because we have no control over our borders” 21/6/2016 Daily Express*

Overall, most pro-Brexit articles framed immigration as a problem that the Government must but are unable to control since the UK is bound to European rules. A Daily Mail article ‘revealing’ how Prime Minister's ex-closest aide Steve Hilton had warned Mr. Cameron that achieving low immigration targets was incompatible with EU membership quotes Hilton’s view of the ‘immigration system as ‘broken’. Building on the victimisation of the UK, the discourse here also highlights the resentment of the ‘British people’ (once more juxtaposed to ‘other people’) to legitimise Brexit as an emotional response to the immigration ‘issue’.

(3) *“...the immigration system is a social disaster because the decency and tolerance of the British people [EA]... are mocked when they see their local communities and public services overwhelmed by sudden and unplanned-for arrivals of people [EA] in large numbers’. (Daily Mail, 21/6/16)*

Similarly, the legitimacy of Brexit in relation to the ‘question of uncontrolled immigration’ was frequently argued by the Daily Express. For example, reporting on the release of official immigration figures, one article stated that such figures could never be brought down while the UK was in the EU and, on that premise, it

legitimised a vote for Leave by invoking again the risky scenario of mass migration (through the rhetorical question ‘how long’):

(4) *“It is only a matter of time before the Eurozone crisis deepens and even more people [EA] flee to Britain in search of jobs. Meanwhile how long will it be until the migrants from Africa and the Middle East are granted citizenship by their new European homes? When that day comes they too will be free to come and live here. Getting out of the EU has never been more important.” (Daily Express, 27/5/2016)*

The Sun echoed the dominant Leave argument on immigration pressure. For example, an editorial piece (13/6/2016) invokes once again the *topos of a mass migration crisis* by referring to the numbers of people who have acquired British citizenship (mistakenly compounding EU with extra-EU immigration and British/EU citizenship) and by linguistically realising the gravity of such scenario via the ‘state as container’ metaphor in the title “Britain's creaking borders are under huge pressure with nearly 100 migrants getting a passport every hour”. Appealing to this framing, Brexit was legitimised as the only possible way to reduce/eliminate such pressure. In some cases the moral panic constructed around the ‘threats’ of immigration was reified with vivid and overtly xenophobic tones. For example, the Daily Express reported Farage’s comments on ‘Cologne-style sex attacks’<sup>7</sup> in which the politician associates immigration with security risk, a premise that underpinned the legitimisation of Brexit as the only way for ‘ordinary British people’ to protect themselves from such threat. Once more, this argument relies on the *fallacy of mass migration* and on misrepresentations of freedom of movement that were largely deployed by the Leave campaign (Zappettini, 2019a) leveraging on representation of a vulnerable UK inside the EU and appealing to strategies of fear and resentment as exemplified by extract (5) in which immigration is further associated with social ‘dumping’:

(5) *Asked whether mass sex attacks like those in Cologne could occur in the UK, he said: “It depends if they get EU passports. It depends if we vote for Brexit or not...EU open borders are not just a security risk but have led to a level of migration never seen before in our country that has been bad for social cohesion, damaged the quality of life for millions of ordinary British people [EA] who have seen their wages compressed and Britain's infrastructure placed under huge strain too.” (Daily Express, 6/6/2016)*

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<sup>7</sup> Mass sexual assaults were reported in the city of Cologne during the 2016 New Year's Eve celebrations, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-35250903>

In contrast to the above negative representations of (EU) immigration, the Daily Mirror's framing of freedom of movement was more balanced and overall positive (however see 5.2.3 for mixed representations of immigration in relation to the labour market). For example, a DM article (19/4) reports Labour MP Seema Malhotra's view that, rather being the victims of immigration (see extract 1 above), young people are benefitting from freedom of movement, a representation that supports Malhotra's appeal to older people to 'listen to the young' and vote Remain.

(6) *"[The young] cherish the freedom to travel, to learn, to experience all that Europe has to offer. When they think about migration, they can see it in terms of the opportunity for themselves. There are as many Britons living in mainland Europe as there are people from other European countries [EA] living here. Young people [EA] are convinced that their futures lie in a strong, prosperous Europe."*

## 5.2.2 Antagonistic representations of 'the British people' vs. the establishment/elites

Alongside the antagonization of immigrants, the pro-Brexit press also relied on frequent discursive frames which pitted the 'British people' against different elite/establishment enemies. Typical nominalisations in this sense included 'outside' enemies such as the EU bureaucrats (often metonymically referred to as Brussels), the IMF, Obama, as well as 'inside' enemies such as Westminster (a metonymical reference to the British government), the then Prime Minister David Cameron and Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne, experts and Remainers. Most articles typically represented the British people as vexed by one or more of the above 'enemies' either on a long-term basis (e.g. the EU) or within the contingencies of the Brexit campaign (e.g. President Obama). In both cases a vote for Brexit was legitimised as a form of (re)empowerment ('taking back control') over imagined oppressors of *the people* as well as a reaffirmation of the British (English) national character/pride. This framing thus relied primarily on emotive strategies tapping into both populist and nationalist dimensions. For example the Daily Express (13/5/2016) reported how the IMF was planning to release a report on the possible economic impact of Brexit under the headline 'Fury as IMF plan ANOTHER Brexit report to 'bully' voters a WEEK before EU referendum'. The article is constructed around the then Minister for Employment and prominent Leave advocate Preti Patel's response to the IMF forthcoming report:

(7) *"It appears the Chancellor is cashing in favours to Ms Lagarde in order to encourage the IMF to bully the British people [EA] [...] The EU-funded IMF should not interfere in our democratic debate a week before polling day."* (Daily Express, 13/5/16)

A similar framing leveraging on Brexit as reversing the elites' 'bullying' of *the people* was adopted by the Daily Mail in relation to PM Cameron's decision to knight a number of (mainly pro-Remain) individuals. The article frames such action as an abuse of power aimed at skewing the referendum debate in the Government's favour. The article reports senior Labour MP and chair of the Vote Leave campaign Gisela Stuart's comments as follows:

(8) *"David Cameron and George Osborne have used every single ounce of their power to try to bully and frighten the British people [EA] into backing their campaign to keep us in the EU" [...] I think the British people [EA] are sick and tired of it"*  
(Daily Mail, 10/6/16)

The same news was reported by the Daily Express under the usual 'fury' headline ('Fury as Cameron accused of handing gongs to pro EU candidates'). In this case, the EX extended Ms. Stuart's comments as reported in the Daily Mail (see above) to include the following line:

(9) *"The British people [EA] simply aren't going to tolerate being told what to do anymore by Brussels, by Cameron, or his newly-honoured accomplices."* (Daily Express, 11/6/2016)

The framing of Brexit as an enactment of British pride was prominent and often adopted by a number of articles in relation to strategies that typically appealed to emotions of national resistance, and standing up to the *people's* opponents/bullies. For example, the Daily Mail quoted Pro-Brexit Tory MP Andrew Bridgen who, commenting on a trivial 'smear attack' on Boris Johnson that "was 'undoubtedly' sanctioned by No10", praised the bravery of the British people against Remainers:

(10) *"The desperate Remain campaign are now resorting to personal attacks and smears because they have actually lost the argument. I'm very proud that the British people [EA] are not being cowed by Project Fear."* (Daily Mail, 10/6/16)

In some cases the contingency of Brexit arguments tapped into historical discourses to construct enemies outside Westminster and beyond Britain's borders. For example, a Daily Mail editorial by Toby Young titled 'Britain's proud voters don't take well to empty threats, Mr President: We will make up own minds when it comes to Brexit' (24/4/2016) discusses USA President Obama's statement that, in case Brexit occurred, Britain 'should go to the back to the queue' (i.e. it would receive no preferential commercial treatment). The article draws on the *topos of the special relationship* between the UK and the United States to suggest that the former has always stood by the latter, especially in times of war, and to disappointedly note that such support has not been reciprocal under the Obama office. Significantly, the article contrasts the current lack of



American support with President Roosevelt's backing in 1941 when 'Britain stood virtually alone against Hitler', this latter historical reference being traditionally part of tabloids' rhetoric on Blighty. Drawing on the war metaphor that likens UK's past enemies with current Brexit opponents (Germany/the EU) the articles appeals to the indomitable 'British spirit' to conclude:

- (11) *"...the British people [EA] don't respond well to threats. We will make up our own minds on June 23 and President Obama's intervention has probably made it just that little bit more likely that we'll vote to Leave."* (Daily Mail, 24/4/16)

The patriotic nature of Brexit was also a dominant theme in The Sun where Brexit was frequently advocated through the framing of freedom and independence and by urging readers to 'Beleave' in Britain and vote out. Freedom was typically interpreted in reference to the 'dominant' nature of EU political system with frequent interdiscursive reference to Britain's role in World War Two in a similar manner to other Leave endorsing titles (see above) which likened the EU to the Nazi invader/oppressor. For example, an article (The Sun, 20/6/2016) framing Brexit as a renewed battle Britain has been fighting with the 'continent' pleads with the readership to vote Leave with the same WW2 defiant 'Dunkirk spirit' and as 'not to give away what [older people/veterans] fought for':

- (12) *'We saved Europe once and now we can do it again by voting Leave,' say vets [...] Meeting the vets at a Berkshire airfield yesterday, Brexit backing Minister Priti Patel said she was "honoured". "These people [EA] fought for our country, and on Thursday we need to vote for our democracy," she said.* (The Sun, 20/6/2016)

Finally, national pride was also combined with the 'British exceptionalism' to project a positive future scenario of Brexit drawing conspicuously from the *topos of global Britain* (see Zappettini, 2019b). For example, in an article by David Wooding published in The Sun (15/06/2016) dedicated to prominent Leave campaigner Priti Patel touring the UK, the case for Brexit is made intertextually via the authors' stance on the Leave argument and Patel's reported speech. Along with reference to and support for the key arguments on immigration (see examples above), Brexit is framed and legitimised both through strategies aimed at representing freedom (from EU rules and Westminster elites) and control/empowerment as well as through representations of British citizens (collectively referred to via the possessive 'our people') being better off outside the EU (such positive scenario realised by reversing the '*leap in the dark*' metaphor to counter the argument of leaving as a risky decision).

- (13) *"Is there a risk Britain could founder without EU support? She replies: "We're the world's fifth largest economy. Our people [EA] are great innovators, highly creative, entrepreneurial. It's an insult that they are being patronised by the Government. I believe Britain would have a brighter, more*

*secure and prosperous future outside the EU because of our ability to do business in the world. Voting to leave wouldn't be a leap in the dark. It would be a leap into the light." (The Sun, 15/06/2016)*

### 5.2.3 Antagonistic representations of ordinary/working people's interests

The framing of Brexit in relation to the best interests of the 'ordinary/working people' was another frequent discursive realisation across the corpora. This framing typically represented certain social groups – identified as 'ordinary' (i.e. 'non-elite') and '(hard-)working' - as negatively/positively affected and/or dis/empowered by the referendum vote. Articles adopting this framing typically (de)legitimised Brexit around the argumentative scheme: 'working/ordinary people are better off in/out (of) the EU'. Notably, the argument against Brexit was advocated by the Daily Mirror (perhaps expectedly for a title that has always supported the Labour Party the MI was the publication that most frequently used 'working' as a collocate of *people*). At the same time, however, all the other publications supported Brexit<sup>8</sup> as an ideological and pragmatic choice that worked in the interest of 'ordinary/working' people by making use of *topoi* typically associated with right and left wing ideologies. Most tabloids supporting Brexit tended to reproduce the key Leave arguments on immigration and control and the supposed benefits of leaving the EU for ordinary/working people deriving from the UK 'freeing' itself from the EU rule (*topos of control*). While in some articles this was achieved by relying on strategies of fear and by representing negative scenarios (invoking the consequences of Britain having to accept unfavourable EU decisions), voting Brexit was often framed as a great opportunity for *the ordinary/working people* through a discursive mix of arguments premised on antagonistic representations of groups interests (the Brits vs. the European immigrants) and neoliberal economics (e.g. lower taxes). For example, The Sun (30/5/2016) published an article authored by Boris Johnson and Michael Gove in which it was claimed:

*(14)"... working people [EA] will be better off if we leave the EU. The NHS will be stronger, class sizes smaller and taxes lower. We'll have more money to spend on our priorities, wages will be higher and fuel bills will be lower. Leaving the EU is a great opportunity for us to take back control of our borders, our economy and our democracy." (The Sun, 30/5/2016)*

While this article frames Brexit as a necessary choice for the implementation of a right wing agenda, a number of Leave endorsing titles also appealed to more left wing ideologies. For example, Richard Littlejohn (in the Daily Mail 21/6/2016) frames the question of control and sovereignty by juxtaposing not only 'ordinary' and 'working' people to the EU political establishment (as discussed in section 5.2.2

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<sup>8</sup> Except the Mail on Sunday.

above) but also by appealing to the identities and interests of *working people* vis-à-vis powerful economic actors and by causally linking the suffering of the former to the EU ‘superstate’:

*(15) "We face a stark choice. Do we vote to become once more the ultimate masters of our own destiny, with the power to make our laws and control our own borders? Or do we conclude that we are incapable of running our own affairs and are better off as a meek dependency of an ever-expanding European superstate? That's the nub of the argument [...] On one side, the vested interests of Luvvie Land, big business, merchant banks and almost the entire political class. On the other, ordinary working people [EA] excluded from the system and the corridors of power and condemned to suffer from the worst excesses of the EU juggernaut." (Daily Mail 21/6/2016)*

In a similar manner, The Sun appealed to ‘working people’ from a left-wing perspective in an article (9/6/2016) authored by Labour MP for Bassetlaw John Mann (whom the Sun dubbed ‘Mann of the people’). As the MP represents his own stance as being in support of the ‘working class interests’, antagonistic representations of people are constructed to justify Brexit via different argumentative strategies. In line with previous examples, representations of rivalry between ‘ordinary people’ and ‘the elite’ as well as representations of the negative consequences of immigration/free labour of movement (causally linked to the EU) are prominent. Crucially, the anti-elite and anti-immigration sentiments are combined to construct antagonism not only between EU and British workers but also internally to the UK in relation to the uneven distribution of wealth. The ordinary/working people are thus mobilised in the politics of loss and resentment which constructs Brexit as a revolution restoring their lost power:

*(16) "people [EA] [in Westminster] have been terrified about talking about immigration. But on polling day they are going to get a big shock across the country [...] Because a people's revolution [EA] is under way. This is about returning power to the people [EA]. [...] the free movement of people [EA] [...] has, is, and will continue to undermine pay and conditions in working class communities. [...] It has created two kinds of people [EA] in this country: the people who gain from this and the people who lose out [EA]. [...] If you live in London and you want a cheap nanny, and a gardener and a cheaper plumber you can get really nice, really good people [EA] cheaper than you could before [...]. In the North of England, in the Midlands, in South Wales, people do not get those benefits. They get the problems [...] And that is not going to change unless we leave the EU. (The Sun, 9/6/2016)*

Another example of how The Sun framed the choice over Brexit by ‘interpellating’ and mobilising individuals who would recognise themselves as working class was found in an article titled “Power to the people” (11/5/2016) which reports Conservative MP Ian Duncan Smith’s view that the “EU helps rich and hurts workers”. Trading on the argument that the depression of wages is caused by ‘huge influxes’ of immigrant cheap labour - and warning it would get worse in future due to Turkey and Albania joining the EU - the article legitimizes Brexit along a seemingly altruistic strategy of social justice that yet restricts the boundaries of solidarity to the nation:

*(17) “THE EU's open-door migration policies are screwing British workers” while the richest benefit [...] My plea to better-off Britons who have done well in recent years is to consider using their vote in the referendum to vote for a better deal for people [EA] who haven't enjoyed the same benefits as them. [...] When you vote on 23rd June - even if you believe what you are being told by those who want to remain in the EU, that you may have done OK in the EU - think about the people [EA] who haven't.” (The Sun, 11/5/2016)*

While all pro-Brexit tabloids (implicitly or explicitly) tended to almost exclusively refer to ‘working/ordinary’ people as British nationals, the discourses of the anti-Brexit press (represented by the Daily Mirror and the Mail on Sunday) focused on framing the benefits of remaining in the Single Market around the safeguarding of workers’ rights (such as maternity leave, paid-holidays, pensions for part-time workers and a 48-hour week) that had been achieved within a European/transnational socio-political context of cooperation. In a few cases therefore articles appealed to strategies of transnational solidarity and altruism, however, by and large, the case for rejecting Brexit was primarily made by the pro-Remain press through domestic, rather than a pan-European framing. For example Brexit was seen as regressive for worker’s rights but also as favouring a Tory government (Daily Mirror, 28/4/16). Similarly, the Mirror’s final endorsement for Remain (21/6/2016) appeals to the ‘greatness’ of Britain and its history (as well as a rejection of UKIP’s divisive politics) suggesting a domestic or at least international rather than transnational framing:

*(18) it is the working people [EA] of this nation who made Britain Great. It is the working people [EA] who laboured in the mills and mines that powered the engines of Empire. It is the working people [EA] sent "over the top" who won us two world wars against unimaginable odds. ...And working people [EA] should not allow Farage and co to trade the Great Britain they built for a diminished "Little England" (Daily Mirror, 21/6/2016)*

## 6. Conclusions

This paper has suggested that the media have played a pivotal role in the Brexit campaign and its unfolding. Tabloids in particular have provided a crucial link to the legitimisation chain of Brexit by constructing discursive frames that, in synergy with the discourses of other institutional and public actors and through the cumulative effect of audience priming, contributed to legitimise Brexit along populist and nationalist logics as the ‘will of the (British) people’. Consistent with historical stances and specific Leave endorsements during the campaign, the analysis has identified The Daily Mail<sup>9</sup>, The Daily Express and The Sun as the most active and vociferous titles which legitimised Brexit by invoking specific antagonistic representations of *the people*. As the analysis has shown, the framing of most articles in the Mail-Express-Sun ‘triad’ hailed and mobilised *the people* through their linguistic characterisation as ‘British’, ‘working and ordinary’ in opposition to other groups of people, namely immigrants and the elites. This study has thus highlighted how the British tabloids voiced a British ‘imagined community’ and how they contributed to reify the nation’s ‘imagined enemies’ both externally (e.g. the EU as a dominant power) and internally (e.g. the ‘corrupt’ elites supporting the European project). This framing of the Brexit referendum debate tapped into, circulated and amplified existing discourses along a populist agenda of ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ (De Cleen and Stravakakis, 2017) divisiveness and through the typical tabloid language of ‘scandal’ and ‘fury’. The discursive analysis has also suggested that the tabloids’ antagonistic framing of the people relied on discursive strategies that primarily appealed to emotions of fear, resentment and empowerment. The overarching frame adopted by the Mail-Express-Sun ‘triad’ was thus to mobilise and legitimise Brexit as an ideological response to the above representations of threat and resentment. This response appealed to a populist rhetoric that was largely grounded in an exclusionary rather than an inclusionary form of populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013). So, rather than contributing positively towards an inclusive conceptualisation/articulation of *the people*, the data has suggested that the people’s empowerment constructed in the Brexit debate by the Mail-Express-Sun ‘triad’ was in fact fuelled by exclusionary discourses of rupture between Britain and the EU, whether it be ‘ordinary’ people restoring sovereignty, ‘getting rid’ of the Brussels (and Westminster) ‘elites’, or finally realising the full mercantile potential of ‘global Britain’ outside the constraints of the EU project. The data has also highlighted the manipulative use of ‘immigration issues’ with Brexit constructed by the three tabloids as a nationalist (in some cases xenophobic) reaction to the moral panic over immigration.

Compared to the Mail-Express-Sun ‘triad’, the other two titles in the corpora analysed presented very different stances. While the Daily Star’s overall reporting of Brexit was marginal and disengaged, The Daily Mirror (the only Remain supporting voice with the Mail on Sunday) mainly appealed to strategies of social cohesion and

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<sup>9</sup> For clarity, this analysis excludes The Daily Mail’s sister publication, The Mail on Sunday which endorsed Remain.

solidarity around the ‘working people’. However, while a limited number of MI’s pro-Remain arguments conceived of *the people* in a pan-European/transnational dimension, the delegitimation of Brexit was often framed within the logic of national interest/ the interest of British workers. Moreover, while the MI corpus was characterised by a higher reference to ‘working people’ than any other title, ‘working people’ was a rhetorical device conspicuously used by right-wing tabloids too, especially the Sun. In this respect the analysis has shown how Leave endorsing tabloids in fact mobilised rhetorically the term ‘working people’ giving continuity to the Conservatives’ ‘hard-working families’ discourses of the last decade but also appealing to ‘Lexit’ arguments - that is the case for Brexit made from the left ideology of class struggle - showing that the Brexit question cuts through party loyalties and readership and reflects how both Labour and Conservative Parties have been split within themselves on the Brexit referendum.

The analysis has also highlighted how strategies appealing to the voices of expertise (Reyes, 2010) were effectively only applied by the tabloid press insofar as the recontextualisation of reported speech of different political actors involved in the campaign (rather than ‘external’ experts) helped construct narratives that fitted the overarching tabloid’s pro Leave/Remain stance with the whole newsworthiness of most articles relying simply on ‘which Leave/Remain actor said what’ to support either camp. In this sense, however, tabloids did not simply act as communicative platforms in the Brexit referendum. As they amplified (or silenced) selected actors of the referendum campaign by staging newsworthiness around these personalities and their messages, they also effectively (de)legitimised Brexit along their own ideological populist/nationalist agenda.

A wider consideration relating to the points discussed so far in this section is the wider question of the instrumental role that a large section of the British tabloid press has had not simply in the contingency of the referendum but also in the longer-term ‘legitimacy chain’ of Brexit and in its institutionalisation (Zappettini & Krzyzanowski, 2019). Crucially, the amplification of the key Leave arguments capitalised on tabloids’ historical anti-EU/populist discourses that had extensively primed the readership with a normalisation of Brexit long before the referendum became a reality.

Consistent with such diachronic approach to the role of media, one must consider that, far from being over, the (de)legitimation of Brexit in the name of *the people* has been one of the key drivers of public and institutional discourses since the referendum result with the tabloids still being powerful actors in circulating specific discourses and (de)legitimizing specific logics/interpretations of Brexit. Tracing the encoding/decoding of such discourses would be a welcome continuation to this study.

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