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**Between the Lines: Subtle Media Discourse and the
Normalisation of Anti-Migrant Sentiment in the Run Up to
the United Kingdom 2024 Riots**

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By Hebe Bourne

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how anti-migrant narratives are constructed, disseminated and normalised within British media discourse. Focusing on the interplay between language, society and power, it investigates the discursive strategies that frame migrants as deviant threats and examines how such representations shape public attitudes and policy responses. Drawing on moral panic theory, Critical Discourse Analysis and *mythopoetic legitimation* it illustrates how recurring myths are perpetuated. The study traces a shift from overt hate speech to more subtle, coded hostility, an area that remains comparatively underexplored in existing research. The 2024 UK riots are used as a case study to demonstrate how a culture of permissibility surrounding anti-migrant sentiment is cultivated through sustained narratives of ‘othering,’ analysed through a close reading of selected tabloids and broadsheets. This thesis critiques the limitations of UK law and press regulation in addressing such insidious forms of hate and evaluates the tension between freedom of expression and the need to protect against hate. Finally, it considers civil society initiatives, journalistic ethics and corporate responsibility as alternative approaches to mitigate discursive harm. By analysing the feedback loop between media, politics and far-right mobilisation, this thesis underscores the societal consequences of normalised hostility and calls for greater accountability and ethical responsibility in migration discourse.

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*“you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land”*

Warsan Shire

*“Language is not only an instrument of communication or even of
knowledge, but also an instrument of power”*

Pierre Bourdieu

TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
UN	United Nations
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
ECRI	European Commission against Racism and Intolerance
EU	European Union
CPS	Crown Prosecution Service
IPSO	Independent Press Standards Organisation
IMPRESS	Independent Monitor for the Press
OHCHR	Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
SFH	Stop Funding Hate
UK	United Kingdom

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INTRODUCTION

On the morning of 29th July 2024, seventeen-year-old Axel Rudakubana, armed with a 20cm kitchen knife ordered a taxi, and made his way to a dance studio in Southport, Lancashire. On the first floor, twenty-six girls aged between six and thirteen were taking part in a two-hour Taylor Swift-themed dance class when Rudakubana attacked at random. He stabbed eleven children and two adults, resulting in the deaths of three girls, aged six, seven and nine. Arrested at the scene, Rudakubana was immediately taken into custody on suspicion of murder.

As news of the murders spread, horror gripped the United Kingdom (UK) and speculation about the killer's identity quickly followed. Social media became a breeding ground for sensationalist conspiracies and Rudakubana was falsely identified as a Muslim immigrant. Misinformation circulated rapidly; he was deliberately misnamed 'Ali Al-Shakati' and wrongly alleged to be on an MI6 watchlist and to have arrived by small boat the year prior.¹ With little verified information released by the police, due to his young age, and inflammatory claims spread by websites known for fuelling anti-immigrant sentiment, a perfect storm for fear to give way to fury was fostered.

Within 36 hours following the attack, hundreds of protesters descended on the seaside town marred by grief, gathering outside the Southport Mosque.² It wasn't long before protesters morphed into rioters as bricks, bottles and rocks were launched at the mosque, police vans set

¹ E. Kivi, "How Dubious Website Channel3NOW Fueled Misinformation about Southport Suspect in the U.K.," *Logically Facts*, August 6, 2024, <https://www.logicallyfacts.com/en/analysis/how-dubious-website-channel3now-fueled-misinformation-about-southport-suspect-in-the-u.k.>

² Josh Halliday, "The Areas in England Where Riots Have Broken Out since Southport Attack," *The Guardian*, August 1, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/aug/01/the-areas-in-england-where-riots-have-broken-out-since-southport-attack>.

alight and police officers assaulted by masked individuals.³ Despite the release of Rudakubana's real name and background, a British citizen born in Wales to a Christian family, the disorder quickly infected other cities including London, Manchester, Leeds, Nottingham and Belfast. Politicians and the media dubbed the riots the worst public disorder, and "the most concerted effort at organised racist violence" the UK had witnessed in over a decade.⁴

What began as a reaction to a horrifying crime quickly evolved into a broader outpouring of anti-immigration sentiment, which resulted in targeted violence towards minorities. Chants began to reverberate across London: "We want our country back" and "Oh Tommy Robinson", in support of right-wing former leader of the English Defence League.⁵ Placards reading "No apartments for illegals" and "Deport them, don't support them" were brandished in Aldershot.⁶ In Hull, banners emblazoned with "Stop the boats" a direct quote from the Conservative party's slogan during Rishi Sunak's election campaign, took centre stage.⁷ Mosques were attacked, and migrant-owned businesses had their windows smashed.⁸

The most extreme episode occurred in Rotherham, where a Holiday Inn Express, housing asylum seekers, was targeted. Rioters set bins alight and attempted to burn the hotel down with people still inside, as the atmosphere turned increasingly febrile. The violence subsided within a week, by 5th August 2024. The Government responded swiftly, arresting perpetrators and promising they would face the full force of the law.

The outbreak of the riots raised pressing questions about the conditions under which extreme public reactions emerge, especially when triggered by incidents seemingly disconnected from the immediate grievances of those involved. The scale and intensity of the response appeared symptomatic of deeper societal tensions, reflecting an atmosphere of hostility that had been

³ Al Jazeera, "Far-Right Protesters Target Southport Mosque, Clash with UK Police," *Al Jazeera*, July 31, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/31/far-right-protesters-target-southport-mosque-clash-with-uk-police>.

⁴ The Economic Times, "UK Riots 2024: Why Are Riots Happening in Britain, Worst in 13 Years," *The Economic Times*, August 5, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/uk-riots-2024-why-are-riots-happening-in-britain-worst-ever-in-13-years/articleshow/112279141.cms?from=mdr>.

⁵ BBC News, "Dozens Arrested after Protest Disorder Spreads," *BBC News*, July 31, 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0jqjx13dyo>.

⁶ Halliday, "The Areas in England Where Riots Have Broken Out."

⁷ Michael Savage, "Top Tories Fuelled Riots with 'Divisive Language' on Immigration, Say Party Grandees," *The Guardian*, August 10, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/aug/10/top-tories-fuelled-riots-divisive-language-immigration>.

⁸ Michael Holden, "Explainer: Why Are There Riots in the UK and Who Is behind Them?" *Reuters*, August 7, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/why-are-there-riots-uk-who-is-behind-them-2024-08-07/>.

developing over time. Notably, the language used by rioters bore striking resemblance to prevailing political and media discourse, suggesting a discursive environment in which particular narratives had been repeatedly reinforced. HOPE Not Hate, a charity that builds alternative narratives to oppose far-right extremism wrote in response to the riots: “Both the rioters and online supporters have been emboldened by the existing climate of prejudice that has been fostered for years by elements of our media and supposedly mainstream politicians.”⁹ This observation served as the impetus for the present study, which seeks to explore how language operates within structures of power to frame social issues, legitimise exclusionary attitudes, and potentially contribute to episodes of unrest.

While riots are by nature unpredictable, there are glaring patterns that cannot be ignored. Far-right extremism in the UK does not exist in a vacuum and the rhetoric broadcasted by the rioters is not an isolated incident. The 2024 riots, however, marked a critical turning point, exposing a culture of permissibility that had allowed anti-migrant hostility to intensify beneath the surface. It is within this environment of emboldened xenophobia that this thesis situates its focus. This is not to dismiss the socio-economic grievances felt by many of the rioters, the majority of whom came from deprived neighbourhoods,¹⁰ including underfunded public services and a worsening cost-of-living crisis. The emphasis, instead, is on how these frustrations are routinely misdirected towards scapegoated migrant communities, framed as threats to British national identity, security and resources. Although not all the targets of the riots were people of colour, ethnic minorities, as well as Muslims in particular, were disproportionately affected.¹¹ Given that patterns of racism often intersect with xenophobia,¹² this thesis will also critically engage with how anti-migrant hate and the depiction of threat is enhanced by racialised dynamics. While social media undoubtedly played a role in spreading misinformation and coordinating unrest, this thesis focuses specifically on the UK’s mainstream press, both tabloids and broadsheets. Journalistic content carries particular ethical

⁹ HOPE not Hate, *Deflecting, Minimising and Justifying: Three Months on from the Race Riots* (London: HOPE not Hate, 2024), <https://hopenothate.org.uk/2024/11/14/deflecting-minimising-and-justifying-three-months-on-from-the-race-riots/>.

¹⁰ Zeke Hunter-Green, “Local. Left Behind. Prey to Populist Politics? What the Data Tells Us about the 2024 UK Rioters,” *The Guardian*, September 25, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/sep/25/local-left-behind-prey-to-populist-politics-data-2024-uk-rioters>.

¹¹ Maka Julios-Costa and Camila Montiel-McCann, *A Hostile Environment: Language, Race, Politics and the Media* (London: Runnymede Trust, 2023), 9, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/6798ec9f5e429b786277f9db_A%20hostile%20environment_report_v4.pdf.

¹² Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, *A Hostile Environment*, 9.

and legal responsibilities, and its influence on public discourse is both powerful and under-examined in this context.

Overt expressions of racism and xenophobia in printed discourse are no longer tolerated in contemporary democratic societies. Modern racism, however, has evolved into more subtle and insidious forms. While the direct impact of explicit hate speech has been widely studied, less attention has been paid to the covert, implicit mechanisms through which prejudice is communicated, and normalised. These mechanisms, while less visible, can be equally, if not more, damaging to public perception. In order to understand and analyse the breadth of the phenomenon, a multitude of tools and multidisciplinary approach have been necessary, including legal understanding, sociological analysis and linguistic analysis.

This thesis examines how subtle, yet hostile language in mainstream British media, particularly tabloids and broadsheets, has helped to legitimise anti-migrant sentiment in the run up to the 2024 UK riots. It argues that routine discursive strategies frame migrants as dangerous, undeserving or burdensome, thereby reinforcing public prejudices and misconceptions and normalising xenophobia.

Rooted in the study of language as a form of social practice, the purpose of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is to analyse “hidden, opaque, and visible structures of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language.”¹³ This thesis will adopt this approach to uncover and decode the concealed, nuanced linguistic techniques employed by the British media to construct an unfavourable portrayal of migrants, whether deliberately or not. In doing so, it interrogates the ideological foundations of these media narratives and explores how they help to sustain a social climate in which anti-migrant hostility can be justified or excused. The objective is to promote awareness and to provide tools to develop a critical eye when reading media portrayals of migrants and minorities. It emphasises the importance of questioning the power dynamics that underpin seemingly ‘factual’ narratives.

¹³ Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, “Critical Discourse Studies: History, Agenda, Theory and Methodology,” in *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, 3rd ed., ed. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (London: SAGE, 2016), 12.

In order to deal sensitively and accurately with the subject, it is important to clarify the terms used. While often used interchangeably, *refugee*, *asylum seeker*, *immigrant* and *migrant* are distinct terms with important legal and human rights implications.

1. *Refugees* are defined by The Geneva Convention of 1951 as people fleeing wars and persecutions. Their status is legally recognised under international law, granting them specific rights, and legal and material protections.¹⁴
2. *Asylum seekers* also flee danger but have not yet had their refugee status legally determined. They must apply for asylum upon arrival in a host country, where their claims are assessed through a legal process.¹⁵
3. *Immigrants* leave their home and settle in a new country with the intention of living there permanently. There is no single definition in international law.¹⁶
4. *Migrants* is a broader, non-legal term referring to people, including all of the above, who move across borders for various reasons, voluntarily or not.¹⁷

This thesis will use the term migrants as an umbrella category to refer to all individuals who move to the UK, regardless of their reasons for migration. While the terms *immigrants* and *migrants* are often used interchangeably, these terms are frequently deployed by the media to distinguish between those deemed deserving of protection and those who are not. In doing so, media narratives effectively delegitimize the claims to protection of asylum seekers and refugees, by implying that personal choice and economic gain are the basis for mobility, rather than as a response to danger.¹⁸

Chapter 1 traces the historical development of exclusionary immigration policy in the UK, examining its roots in race and national belonging and outlines the shift from overt racism to more covert forms of hostility in public discourse. Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical and

¹⁴ United Nations, *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, adopted July 28, 1951, United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 189, p. 137, entered into force April 22, 1954.

¹⁵ Amnesty International, *Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants*, n.d., Accessed June 29, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/#:~:text=The%20terms%20%E2%80%9Crefugee%E2%80%9D%2C%20%E2%80%9C,there%20is%20a%20legal%20difference.>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ewa Połomska-Kimunguyi, “Echoes of Empire: Racism and Historical Amnesia in the British Media Coverage of Migration,” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 9, no. 3 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-01020-4>, 5.

methodological framework of CDA and *mythopoetic legitimation*, focusing on the subtle role of discourse in sustaining anti-migrant myths. Chapter 3 examines three dominant and recurrent framings in the press: migrants as criminals, as resource drain and as an invading mass. Selected newspaper articles from the four months leading up to the riots will be critically analysed, exposing examples of common trends that negatively depict migrants, and their impact on public perception. Chapter 4 investigates the interplay between political and media discourse and the influence of mainstream rhetoric on far-right mobilisation and violence. Chapter 5 reviews the legal and regulatory limits of combatting subtle hate speech and evaluates the potential for civil, or corporate interventions to reduce harm without infringing on freedom of expression.

1.

HISTORICAL AND POLICY CONTEXT

This chapter outlines the historical development of UK immigration policy, demonstrating how laws have repeatedly constructed migrants as racialised outsiders, discerning between ‘desirable’ and ‘undesirable’ migrants. It then explores the evolution of hate speech in the British media, focusing on the shift from overt hostility to more implicit, coded forms of discrimination. Together, these sections establish the socio-political context in which exclusionary narratives are produced and legitimised.

i) UK Immigration Policy: A History of Exclusion

Since the early 20th century, UK Immigration policies in the UK have functioned not just to regulate borders, but to construct racialised hierarchies of desirability, often determining who belongs on the basis of ethnicity, perceived threat and political gain. These policies have, consequently, shaped and limited the full integration of migrants. British laws have long since delineated the parameters of belonging informed by the ‘desirability’ of the immigrant.¹⁹ 1905 marked a new era of legal frameworks to address immigration, with the passing of the 1905 Aliens Act,²⁰ restricting foreign entry to Britain for the first time. The Act was introduced primarily in response to the forced migration of Eastern European Jews fleeing religious and political persecution under the Russian Empire, offering them asylum. By virtue of preventing others from entering, the notion of the ‘undesirable migrant’ was born.²¹ Fears of criminals and

¹⁹ Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, *A Hostile Environment*, 13.

²⁰ Aliens Act 1905, 5 Edw. 7 c. 13 (UK).

²¹ Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, *A Hostile Environment*, 13.

disease, encouraged by politicians and the media alike, catalysed the bringing of the Act into force. For example, in 1905, an editorial in the Manchester Evening Chronicle wrote "the dirty, destitute, diseased, verminous and criminal foreigner who dumps himself on our soil [...], shall be forbidden to land."²² This Act laid the foundations for significant legislative decisions to restrict entry and regulate borders implicitly based on racial grounds in the century to follow.²³

In 1914, the Aliens Restriction Act²⁴ was enforced in response to the First World War, later strengthened by the Aliens Orders of 1920²⁵ and 1925.²⁶ The legislation enabled deportation of any foreign national deemed a threat in periods of national danger and great emergency, as well as placing limits on German and Austrian movement in the UK.

The British Nationality Act 1948,²⁷ established that individuals born in the colonies were Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies (CUKC) thereby granting them the right to live and work in the UK. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the British Government actively encouraged migration from Commonwealth nations as part of a broader effort to facilitate post-war reconstruction and stimulate economic growth. Exercising their newly granted citizenship, 800 West Indian passengers, eager to work and confident that they would be welcomed to bolster the workforce, set sail on the now-infamous Empire Windrush, landing on British shores in 1948.²⁸ In direct contrast to the promised warm welcome, arrivals were met with hostility and racism. Denied housing, rejected from the workforce, and refused entry to pubs, social integration became virtually impossible. With the growing numbers of Caribbean and South Asian migrants arriving in Britain, resentment grew and racial tensions reached boiling point with the Notting Hill Race Riots, 1948, dubbed the "worst racial violence Britain had ever seen."²⁹ A group of 200 white working class youths, including a large number of far-right

²² Museum of Family History, *20th Century Immigration: William Evans-Gordon and the Aliens Act of 1905*, n.d., Accessed June 9, 2025, <https://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/20c-evans-gordon.htm>.

²³ Alison Bashford and Jane McAdam, "The Right to Asylum: Britain's 1905 Aliens Act and the Evolution of Refugee Law," *Law and History Review* 32, no. 2 (2014): 309–350, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0738248014000029>.

²⁴ Aliens Restriction Act 1914, 4 & 5 Geo. 5 c. 12 (UK).

²⁵ Aliens Order 1920, issued under the Aliens Restriction Act 1919 (UK).

²⁶ Aliens Order 1925, issued under the Aliens Restriction (Amendment) Act 1919 (UK).

²⁷ British Nationality Act 1948, 11 & 12 Geo. 6 c. 56 (UK).

²⁸ English Heritage, *The Story of Windrush*, n.d., Accessed June 9, 2025, <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/inspire-me/the-story-of-windrush/>.

²⁹ The Independent, "White Riot: The Week Notting Hill Exploded," *The Independent*, August 29, 2002, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/white-riot-the-week-notting-hill-exploded-912105.html>.

groups, attacked homes occupied by Black families, throwing bottles, petrol bombs, and shouting racist slogans.

The following year, in 1949, the Royal Commission deemed the increase in immigrants as “unsuitable” claiming they were not of “good stock,” a euphemism reflecting the desirability of white European compared to non-White Commonwealth immigrants.³⁰ According to Shankley and Byrne, restrictive immigration policies introduced between 1948 and 1981 were frequently based on racialised grounds.³¹ This was exemplified by the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962,³² which largely revoked the previously granted right of entry to citizens from colonies and Commonwealth nations. The Act introduced new requirements, including parental lineage, effectively constructing figurative barriers against many who had once been welcomed. As with earlier legislation, the driving force for this act lay in a renewed surge in anti-immigrant sentiment.

In 1968, British-passport-holding Kenyan Asians, fleeing the ‘Africanisation’ policies of newly independent Kenya, were blocked by the subsequent amendment to the Commonwealth Immigrants Act.³³ By requiring a ‘substantial connection’ to the UK defined as being born in the UK or having a parent who was, the Act effectively barred the majority of this group and was widely condemned at the time as racially discriminatory. Despite repudiations by the Home Secretary James Callaghan that the Act was “racialist in origin or conception”, Cabinet papers revealed later that the legislation was undeniably targeted at “coloured immigrants” despite the absence of any evidence to support its justification.³⁴

Successive acts continued the trend of non-inclusion of undesirable migrants. The British Nationality Act 1981,³⁵ introduced in line with Margaret Thatcher’s 1979 pledge to tighten immigration controls, restricted automatic citizenship to those born in the UK or with a British

³⁰ Rajeev Syal, “The truth is out: Britain’s immigration system is racist, and always has been,” *The Guardian*, May 30, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/30/britain-immigration-system-racist-laws>.

³¹ Wesley Shankley and Bridget Byrne, “Citizen Rights and Immigration,” in *Ethnicity and Race in the UK: State of the Nation*, ed. Wendy Shankley, Kasia Sveinsson, Nissa Finney, and Laia Béatrice Meer, 1st ed. (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020), 35–50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv14t47tm.8>.

³² Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962, 10 & 11 Eliz. 2 c. 21 (UK).

³³ Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968, c. 9 (UK).

³⁴ Mark Lattimer, “When Labour Played the Racist Card,” *New Statesman*, January 22, 1999, <https://www.newstatesman.com/long-reads/1999/01/when-labour-played-racist-card>.

³⁵ British Nationality Act 1981, c. 61 (UK).

parent. These changes have been widely viewed as racially motivated, privileging white migrants from the Old Commonwealth (Canada, Australia, New Zealand) over predominantly non-white individuals from countries with deep colonial ties to Britain (Caribbean, Africa, India).³⁶ Since then, immigration law has increasingly focused on deterring asylum seekers, through measures such as restricting access to housing (1993 and 1996 Immigration Acts),³⁷ removing entitlement to benefits (1999), and curtailing the right to work (1999 and 2002).^{38,39}

Immigration policy in the UK has long been weaponised as a means of controlling entry of undesirable ‘outsiders.’ The more ethnically different, the less welcome they have historically been. Scholars view these laws are not neutral, but part of a broader colonial legacy, systems of racial ordering that criminalises and controls migrants.⁴⁰ In the early 21st century, these policies grew increasingly exclusionary and punitive, both shaping and being shaped by heightened public and media anxiety about immigration.⁴¹

In 2012, Theresa May, then-Home Secretary, stated her overt intentions to continue in this vein: “The aim is to create here in Britain a really hostile environment for illegal migration.”⁴² These subsequent policies, extended to an ever-growing range of actors,⁴³ triggered a “range of administrative and legal measures” that were “mobilised to limit access to employment, healthcare, housing, banking services and more.”⁴⁴ A defining feature of this constructed hostility is the ‘deputisation of border enforcement’ outsourcing immigration checks to landlords, teachers, healthcare professionals, employers and social workers.⁴⁵

³⁶ Shankley and Byrne, “Citizen Rights and Immigration.”

³⁷ Immigration and Asylum Appeals Act 1993, c. 23 (UK); Asylum and Immigration Act 1996, c. 49 (UK).

³⁸ Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, c. 33 (UK); Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, c. 41 (UK).

³⁹ Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, *A Hostile Environment*.

⁴⁰ Jessica L. Potter and Isabel Meier, “Distanciation as a Technology of Control in the UK Hostile Environment,” *Critical Social Policy* 44, no. 2 (2024): 263–284.

⁴¹ Melanie Griffiths and Charlotte Yeo, “The UK’s Hostile Environment: Deputising Immigration Control,” *Critical Social Policy* 41, no. 4 (2021): 521–544, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018320980653>.

⁴² James Kirkup and Robert Winnett, “Theresa May Interview: ‘We’re Going to Give Illegal Migrants a Really Hostile Reception,’” *The Telegraph*, May 25, 2012, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/9291483/Theresa-May-interview-Were-going-to-give-illegal-migrants-a-really-hostile-reception.html>.

⁴³ Aliverti, Ana. “Enlisting the Public in the Policing of Immigration.” *British Journal of Criminology* 55, no. 2 (2015): 215–230.

⁴⁴ Griffiths, Charlotte, and Jon Trebilcock. “Continued and Intensified Hostility: The Problematisation of Immigration in the UK Government’s 2021 New Plan for Immigration.” *Critical Social Policy* 43, no. 3 (2023): 401–422. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02610183221109133>.

⁴⁵ Griffiths and Yeo, “Deputising Immigration Control.”

The Runnymede Trust has criticised this framework as “ambiguous” and “constantly shifting” pointing to over 5,700 immigration rule changes since 2010.⁴⁶ This opacity fosters confusion and facilitates racial profiling, particularly under schemes like the Right to Rent.⁴⁷ Although official language has shifted from a ‘hostile’ to a ‘compliant’ environment,⁴⁸ the underlying structure remains intact. By delegating enforcement responsibilities, the state effectively shifts the burden of discriminatory practices onto ordinary citizens, avoiding accountability. According to The Runnymede Trust, the hostile environment is “a form of modern racism” intentionally structured to exclude “as many ethnically minoritised people as possible [...] without appearing to be racist.”⁴⁹ This façade of bureaucratic legitimacy and necessity often conceals underlying ideological motives. A striking example is the Windrush scandal, where long-settled British residents were wrongly targeted and stripped of rights under these hostile policies. As a result, 140,000 people were told that they had no right to remain in the country they called home.⁵⁰

Recent developments have reinforced this trajectory. These include the end of the Brexit transition period (2020), the New Plan for Immigration (said to increase exclusion experienced by those seeking asylum)⁵¹ and the Points-Based system in 2021, (to attract desirable ‘skilled’ workers to grow the economy).⁵² The launch of the Rwanda Asylum Plan in 2022 and the enactment of both the Nationality and Borders Act 2022⁵³ and the Illegal Migration Act 2023,⁵⁴ had further ramifications for asylum seekers. The Migrants Rights Network found that these Acts have “relied heavily on demonisation and division in order to be framed as palatable.”⁵⁵

These shifts reveal a consistent pattern in which immigration policy serves not just administrative ends, but broader agendas of exclusion and control. Masked by the language of security or economic need, such measures have routinely constructed certain migrants as undesirable. UK immigration policy cannot be disentangled from broader questions of race,

⁴⁶ Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, *A Hostile Environment*, 61.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁸ Griffiths and Trebilcock, “Continued and Intensified Hostility.”

⁴⁹ Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, *A Hostile Environment*, 4.

⁵⁰ Połońska-Kimunguyi, “Echoes of Empire,” 5.

⁵¹ Griffiths and Trebilcock, “Continued and Intensified Hostility.”

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Nationality and Borders Act 2022, c. 36 (UK).

⁵⁴ *Illegal Migration Act 2023*, c. 60 (UK).

⁵⁵ Migrants' Rights Network, *Words Matter*, n.d., <https://migrantsrights.org.uk/projects/wordsmatter/> (accessed May 4, 2025).

power and belonging, nor from the discourses that continue to shape public and political narratives around migration today.

ii) The Evolution of Hate Speech in UK Media

This section explores the distinction between overt and implicit hate speech in UK media discourse and the general trend toward the latter. Overt hate speech is more easily identifiable and often subject to legal sanction. In contrast, this thesis focuses on the more insidious rise of ‘soft’ hate speech, subtle, coded language, that while not always legally actionable, plays a significant role in fuelling anti-migrant sentiment and social harm. Although there is substantial literature on hate speech targeting marginalised groups,⁵⁶ far less attention has been paid to its more covert forms in the press.

There is currently no international legal definition of hate speech, which is predominantly due to the complexity of the characterisation of what is ‘hateful’, and depends on linguistic, contextual and social factors.⁵⁷ To attempt to standardise the understanding, the United Nations (UN) defined hate speech as “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are.”⁵⁸ Efforts have been made to distinguish between different forms and degrees of hate speech, particularly by identifying linguistic strategies that, while not overtly intentional, embed subtle discriminatory meanings that influence public perception of targeted groups.

⁵⁶ Michael Herz and Peter Molnar, eds., *The Content and Context of Hate Speech: Rethinking Regulation and Responses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁵⁷ Darina Benikova, Michael Wojatzki, and Torsten Zesch, “What Does This Imply? Examining the Impact of Implicitness on the Perception of Hate Speech,” in *Language Technologies for the Challenges of the Digital Age*, ed. Georg Rehm and Thierry Declerck, *Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, vol. 10713 (Cham: Springer, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73706-5_14.

⁵⁸ United Nations, *United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech: Synopsis* (New York: United Nations, 2019), <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/UN%20Strategy%20and%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20Hate%20Speech%2018%20June%20SYNOPSIS.pdf>.

Soft hate speech

Serafis and Assimakopoulos, for example, introduce the term *soft hate speech* to describe the coded, implicit and indirect expressions of hate speech, that, though lawful, “raises serious concerns in terms of intolerance and discrimination”.⁵⁹ The distinction between soft and overt hate speech lies not only in legal thresholds but also in the presence (or absence) of explicit intent to incite discriminatory hatred against a group with legally protected characteristics.⁶⁰ They argue that within the domain of hate speech research, the overemphasis on ‘explicitness’ neglects the power of statements which may initially appear “rational or normal.”⁶¹ Even if statements do not meet the legal criteria for incitement, language can still collectively reinforce discriminatory attitudes, rendering a distinction necessary. Serafis and Assimakopoulos call for a shift away from purely legalistic definitions and toward a broader understanding of *how* subtle forms of hate are communicated in everyday discourse.⁶²

While soft hate speech may not incite a direct call to violence, it retains the power to normalise hatred and legitimise aggression through nuanced discursive framing.⁶³ To illustrate the continuum between explicit and soft hate speech, Serafis and Assimakopoulos contrast overt incitement with softer expressions through the example: “Wipe out [minority group]! We need to stop [minority group] from invading our country” compared to “[Minority group] is scrounging off the state. There is scientific evidence that [minority group] is inferior to us.”⁶⁴ They argue that the latter, while less confrontational, remains ideologically potent and permits discriminatory hatred to flourish.

The potential for harm caused by this subsection of hate speech should not be underestimated. Ocampo et al. note that although “the sneaky and tricky nature of subtle messages might be

⁵⁹ Damianos Serafis and Stylianos Assimakopoulos, “Zooming in on the Study of Soft Hate Speech: An Introduction to This Special Issue,” *Critical Discourse Studies*, 2024, 2.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2024.2440863>.

⁶⁰ Stelios Assimakopoulos and Damianos Serafis, “Why Soft Hate Speech Matters: Argumentativity and the Dispersion of Hatred Towards Minorities,” *Critical Discourse Studies*, 1–20,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2024.2440869>.

⁶¹ Serafis and Assimakopoulos, “Zooming in on the Study of Soft Hate Speech,” 2.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Michał Krzyżanowski, “Discursive Shifts and the Normalisation of Racism: Imaginaries of Immigration, Moral Panics and the Discourse of Contemporary Right-Wing Populism,” *Social Semiotics* 30, no. 4 (2020): 503–527, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2020.1766199>.

⁶⁴ Serafis and Assimakopoulos, “Zooming in on the Study of Soft Hate Speech,” 3.

perceived as less hurtful”, they are “at least as harmful as overt abuse.”⁶⁵ Sorial similarly critiques the prevailing “focus on vitriolic or hyperbolic manifestations of hate speech” warning that this emphasis can “obscure the fact that reasonable or civil expressions of hate speech can also incite or stir up hatred and discrimination against minority groups, although perhaps in less obvious ways.”⁶⁶ When soft anti-migrant rhetoric is repeatedly disseminated by the media, it cultivates an environment in which prejudice is rationalised and hostility can grow. Mohammed describes the “perilous” nature of soft hate speech, as “discursively responsible for inciting hatred, discrimination, and violence against the already disprivileged minority group,” highlighting how even covert language can reinforce existing social hierarchies.⁶⁷

The Evolving Language of Hate

In recent years, overt hate speech has become less common in mainstream UK media and political discourse, not necessarily due to a decline in prejudice, but because social norms and legal boundaries have made explicit bigotry less publicly palatable. Rather than vanishing, however, narratives have evolved and been repackaged through subtle linguistic strategies, coded metaphors and dog-whistles (political messages that convey one meaning to the public and another coded meaning to a specific group), that perpetuate xenophobic sentiment under a veneer of acceptability. Mendelberg explains this shift, in terms of racist hate speech, to be a result of the now widely accepted ‘norm of racial equality,’ in post-civil rights societies.⁶⁸ She argues this norm acts as a deterrent and clarifies why politicians and media figures rarely express explicit racism; doing so would provoke public backlash and would be condemned. Clarke aligns with this opinion, stating, “the generally prohibited nature of overt racism and openly prejudiced behaviour” prompts politicians and media outlets to adopt a more nuanced

⁶⁵ Nicolás Benjamín Ocampo, Ekaterina Sviridova, Elena Cabrio, and Serena Villata, “An In-Depth Analysis of Implicit and Subtle Hate Speech Messages,” in *Proceedings of the 17th Conference of the European Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics*, ed. Andreas Vlachos and Isabelle Augenstein (Dubrovnik, Croatia: Association for Computational Linguistics, 2023), 1997–2013, <https://aclanthology.org/2023.eacl-main.147/>.

⁶⁶ Sarah Sorial, “Hate Speech and Distorted Communication: Rethinking the Limits of Incitement,” *Law and Philosophy* 34, no. 3 (2015): 299–324.

⁶⁷ Dina Mohammed, “Where the Hate Lies in Soft Hate Speech: The Argumentative Potential in Hostile Public Spheres,” *Critical Discourse Studies* (2025): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2024.2446938>.

⁶⁸ Tali Mendelberg, *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

and indirect form of discourse, “that nevertheless still reproduces negative stereotypes about immigrants.”⁶⁹

Despite migrants receiving unwarranted stigmatisation from the press all over Europe, the UK press stands out as particularly culpable. A 2015 UNHCR report examining coverage of the refugee crisis in Spain, Italy, Germany, the UK and Sweden, concluded that “Britain’s right-wing media was uniquely aggressive in its campaigns against refugees and migrants [...] seen in the preponderance of negative frames.”⁷⁰ A subsequent report by Stop Funding Hate and Ethical Consumer, drawing on insights from academics and expert practitioners, has put the spotlight on the rise and impact of more subtle forms of anti-migrant hate in UK media.⁷¹ Pia Oberoi, UN Senior Advisor on Migration and Human Rights for the Asia Pacific Region, has described the treatment of undocumented migrants as a “blind spot” and the “last frontier” for tackling hate in our societies.⁷²

To illustrate this general trend away from explicitness, it is important to consider historical precedents in British media and political discourse. Foreign populations were once actively shunned through offensive media language, for instance, in 1893, *Truth* magazine described immigrants and foreigners as “deceitful, effeminate, irreligious, immoral, unclean and unwholesome. Any one Englishman is a match for any seven of them.”⁷³ Even by the 1960s, the public tone had shifted and there was widespread condemnation of Enoch Powell’s infamously racist *Rivers of Blood* speech in 1968.⁷⁴ This saw him dismissed from the Shadow cabinet due to incitement to hatred, as his words were deemed racist in tone. In arguing against anti-discrimination legislation, he included egregiously offensive anecdotes and alluded to a ‘threatening’ future where the “Black man will have the whip hand over the White man.”⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Amy L. Clarke, “‘Lost Voices’: The Targeted Hostility Experienced by New Arrivals” (PhD diss., University of Leicester, 2020).

⁷⁰ Mike Berry, Iñaki García-Blanco, and Kerry Moore, *Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries* (UNHCR, 2015), <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/87078/1/UNHCR-%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>.

⁷¹ Clare Carlile and Rob Harrison, *Addressing Subtle Forms of Hate in UK Media Coverage of Migration* (Ethical Consumer & Stop Funding Hate, 2022), <https://research.ethicalconsumer.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/Addressing-subtle-hate-UK-media-coverage-migration-Full-Report-Oct2022.pdf>.

⁷² Carlile and Harrison, *Addressing Subtle Forms of Hate*, 5.

⁷³ Połońska-Kimunguyi, “Echoes of Empire,” 5.

⁷⁴ Powell, Enoch. “Rivers of Blood Speech.” April 20, 1968. In *Post-War British Political Speeches*, edited by Andrew Roberts, London: Penguin, 2007.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Today, overt expressions of xenophobia are increasingly met with backlash and societal discomfort. This shift is evident in response to a 2015 article written by tabloid columnist Katie Hopkins, who referred to migrants as “cockroaches” and a “plague of feral humans.”⁷⁶ She opened her article with “show me pictures of coffins... I still don’t care” before invoking violent imagery, calling for holes to be punctured in migrant boats, likening migrants to a “norovirus”, and describing towns as “festering sores plagued by swarms” of benefit-claiming asylum seekers. The UN Human Rights High Commissioner, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, condemned her words as clear incitement to hatred and urged the UK authorities to take steps to curb it.⁷⁷ He further highlighted the alarming parallels with both Nazi and Rwandan media, which, in the lead-up to the Holocaust and the 1994 genocide respectively, referred to their targeted groups as “cockroaches.”⁷⁸ Despite hundreds of complaints, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) dismissed claims of discrimination against the Hopkins article concluding it did not refer to a specific individual.⁷⁹ This decision raises concerns about the limits of regulatory frameworks, which will be explored later in this thesis.

Such explicit expressions remain rare, and a general societal consensus now condemns blatant hate speech. For instance, in 2019, Gary Jones, editor of tabloid *The Daily Express*, publicly committed to changing the paper’s anti-migrant rhetoric admitting discomfort with front-page headlines that were “downright offensive,” and “cumulatively” have “created an Islamophobic sentiment”.⁸⁰ This was in response to 70 anti-migrant front pages in 2016 alone.⁸¹ Despite this shift, the *Daily Express* continues to rely on negative framing strategies, suggesting that surface-level changes do not always equate to deeper reform.

⁷⁶ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR), “UN Human Rights Chief Urges UK to Tackle Tabloid Hate Speech after Migrants Likened to ‘Cockroaches’,” *OHCHR*, April 24, 2015, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2015/04/un-human-rights-chief-urges-uk-tackle-tabloid-hate-speech-after-migrants>.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Mark Sweney, “NUJ Condemns Regulator’s Decision on Katie Hopkins ‘Cockroaches’ Column,” *The Guardian*, May 5, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/may/05/nuj-condemns-regulator-decision-katie-hopkins-cockroaches-column>.

⁸⁰ Tom Embury-Dennis, “Daily Express Helped Create ‘Islamophobic Sentiment’, Admits Newspaper’s Editor,” *The Independent*, April 25, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/daily-express-islamophobic-sentiment-editor-gary-jones-home-affairs-select-committee-a8321026.html>.

⁸¹ Carlile and Harrison, *Addressing Subtle Forms of Hate*.

Nevertheless, many examples of xenophobic discourse fall into a grey area between explicit and implicit hate. In October 2022, then-Home Secretary Suella Braverman, came under fire for her incendiary language as she warned of “an invasion on our southern coast.”⁸² Though she avoided overt slurs, the choice of a militaristic metaphor evoked a siege narrative, tapping into fears of hostile forces and nationalist sentiment. She was widely reprimanded by opposition lawmakers, members of her own party and human rights organisations, calling her dehumanising and demonising language “heinous.”⁸³

Despite inevitable outliers in the political and media sphere, the UK has experienced a gradual shift from direct abuse to a more socially acceptable anti-migrant framing. These discursive strategies that have become “normalised and embedded” in media rhetoric, are far subtler and thus harder to spot and challenge.⁸⁴ This is the ‘soft’ hate speech that falls under the radar; it appears to be innocuous on the surface, but over time “sanctions hate in wider society” that can lead to “serious acts of violence.”⁸⁵ It is through the ubiquitous and cumulative existence of less obvious forms of hate that discriminatory attitudes are legitimised and sustained.

As this Chapter has shown, the decline of overt hate speech in the UK has not eliminated xenophobic discourse. Instead, such narratives have adapted, under a veneer of civility, into coded and culturally acceptable forms that still perpetuate hostility. These discursive shifts operate alongside a long history of exclusion embedded in UK immigration policy, reinforcing a broader environment of rejection towards the ‘undesirable’ migrant.

⁸² Jessica Murray, “Suella Braverman Sparks Furious Backlash over 'Invasion' Comments about Migrants,” *The Mirror*, November 1, 2022, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/suella-braverman-sparks-furious-backlash-28374323>.

⁸³ Al Jazeera, “UK Home Secretary Slammed for Asylum Seeker ‘Invasion’ Remarks,” *Al Jazeera*, November 1, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/1/uk-home-secretary-slammed-for-asylum-seeker-invasion-remarks>.

⁸⁴ Carlile and Harrison, *Addressing Subtle Forms of Hate*, 32.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

2.

MORAL PANIC, MEDIA AND MIGRANTS

This chapter seeks to explore how mainstream British media constructs mythical narratives of threat around migration, fuelling disproportionate public anxiety and contributing to a sustained climate of moral panic. It will introduce a framework of Critical Discourse Analysis and *mythopoetic legitimation* to examine media discourse to highlight the ways in which discourse can foment mistrust and normalise exclusionary ideologies.

i) Moral Panic

The etymological root of the word ‘panic’ comes from the Greek *panikon*, meaning ‘pertaining to Pan,’ the god of woods and fields. In Ancient Greek mythology, the faun-like deity was believed to watch over shepherds and incite sudden groundless fear among herds and crowds.⁸⁶ This irrational, paranoid fear, and the resultant ‘panic’, was thought to reduce humans to their most animalistic instincts. Pan’s dual nature, that encompassed the divine and the beastly, was said to embody the delicate balance between disorder and order, civilisation and savagery.⁸⁷ In human societies, maintaining this fragile balance is what prevents irrational fear and concern from spilling into collective disorder. Yet, under certain social or political conditions, this equilibrium can fracture, creating fertile ground for unrest. It is through the analysis of these conditions that sociologist Stanley Cohen coined the term ‘moral panic’.

⁸⁶ *Online Etymology Dictionary*, “Panic,” Accessed May 7, 2025, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/panic>.

⁸⁷ *New World Encyclopedia*, “Pan (Mythology),” Accessed May 7, 2025, [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Pan_\(mythology\)](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Pan_(mythology)).

Cohen introduced this social theory in his 1972 book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* where he described moral panics as a socially constructed phenomenon of overreaction, beginning when: “a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests”.⁸⁸ His focus was on the ‘disproportionate’ response, of the media and the public, to a series of seaside altercations in the 1960s between rival English youth subcultures, the ‘Mods’ and the ‘Rockers.’ According to Cohen, moral panic arises when the media amplifies a perceived threat through sensationalist rhetoric, portraying ordinary incidents as disproportionately alarming. These exaggerated portrayals tap into public fears and prejudices, casting certain groups as *folk devils*, villains that represent social disorder and deviant behaviour, while positioning the public as the *moral majority* under threat. This intense media attention generates widespread social anxiety and a surge in public concern. Cohen identified several key actors in the development of moral panics: *moral entrepreneurs*, who define and target deviance, *institutions of control* such as police and politicians, who escalate responses, the *public*, who must interpret events and decide whom to trust, and crucially, the *media*, which frames and amplifies the panic.

Building on Cohen’s foundational definition, Goode and Ben-Yahuda developed a more analytical framework that identifies recurring stages in the development of moral panics across different social contexts:

- a) Concern – Heightened anxiety about the potential or imagined threat.
- b) Hostility – The emergence of moral outrage towards the deviant actors (folk devils) seen as harmful or threatening to societal values.
- c) Consensus – A widespread agreement (not necessarily total) that the threat exists, is serious and must be addressed. This belief is typically reinforced by elite or influential groups, particularly the mass media.
- d) Disproportionality – A response that greatly exaggerates the scale, severity or frequency of the threat, often inflating public concern beyond what is supported by objective evidence or actual harm.

⁸⁸ Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

- e) Volatility – The panic erupts and dissipates suddenly. As Cohen notes, “Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folk-lore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself.”⁸⁹

The most important actors involved in the moral panic are the deviant, scapegoated *folk devil*, “visible reminders of what we should not be”,⁹⁰ and “onto whom public fears and fantasies are projected.”⁹¹ They are constructed as the root-cause of wider social problems and as Hunt claims, “the folk devil would not be perceived as a problem – might not even exist at all – without the moral panic.”⁹²

Moral panics are not a new phenomenon and have long shaped public responses to perceived deviance. In 15th century Europe, for example, women judged to have consorted with the devil were burnt alive as a fever of panic swept the land fearing the evils of witchcraft.⁹³ Such panics have recurred globally, from the ‘Satanic Panic’ of 1980s America⁹⁴ to the post 9/11 anti-Muslim rhetoric prevalent in the British press.⁹⁵

One of the most influential analyses of moral panic and race in modern Britain comes from Stuart Hall. He argued that the moral panic surrounding mugging in 1970s Britain was deliberately engineered by the Government to maintain its hegemony at a time when the Capitalist system was facing significant instability.⁹⁶ Young black men were cast as the designated folk devil and through excessive media reporting and distortion of statistics, public anxiety was redirected toward the figure of the Black mugger. This manufactured threat became the embodiment of societal breakdown. The mechanisms Hall identified, namely, media

⁸⁹ Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, xxvi–xxvii.

⁹⁰ Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 2.

⁹¹ Alan Hunt, “Moral Panic and Moral Language in the Media,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 48, no. 4 (1997): 631, <https://doi.org/10.2307/591600>.

⁹² Hunt, “Moral Panic and Moral Language,” 631.

⁹³ Goode and Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics*, 150.

⁹⁴ Sarah Hughes, “American Monsters: Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970–2000,” *Journal of American Studies* 51, no. 3 (2017): 695, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875816001298>.

⁹⁵ Julian Petley, “‘Ta-Ta Qatada’: Islamophobic Moral Panic and the British Tabloid Press,” in *Media, Crime and Racism*, ed. Chris Greer, Mark Rohloff, and Emily Monk (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 139–160, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71776-0_8.

⁹⁶ Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

exaggeration, racial scapegoating and political opportunism, remain central to the construction of today's panics surrounding immigration.

Expanding on this, Cohen explains how moral panic relating to migrants, asylum seekers and refugees is uniquely persistent and unrelenting. He calls “the overall narrative [...] a single, virtually uninterrupted message of hostility and rejection.”⁹⁷ This consistency is echoed by Rivkah Brown who characterizes “Britain’s immigration panic” as, “the product of a decades-in-the-making national hysteria about immigrants.”⁹⁸ These responses are not only disproportionate but actively constructed, sustained and propagated through language, particularly through the rhetoric used by mainstream media. This is most evident in the continuous framing of immigration as a ‘crisis’, since 2015, “effectively turning it into a calamity without beginning or end.”⁹⁹ Połośńska-Kimunguyi warns the crisis narrative “opens up space for ‘crisis governance,’” paving the way for “exceptional measures, the use of force, and derisions of established practices and the rule of law.”¹⁰⁰

According to Critcher, serial moral panics are particularly likely to recur in contexts of migration, particularly if their skin is a different colour to the indigenous population.¹⁰¹ He points to the common “accusations against these newcomers” which include the claims that “they make excessive demands on welfare, education, and housing systems; and that they are excessively involved in crime.”¹⁰² The emphasis on *excess* provokes a disproportionate response, as media coverage reinforces public hostility and amplifies fears that the native population is being displaced or disadvantaged. Building on this, Cohen calls the reactions more overtly political than others notably because “successive British governments have not only led and legitimated public hostility, but spoken with a voice indistinguishable from the tabloid press.”¹⁰³ In doing so, he highlights the symbiotic relationship between state and media, where both institutions collaborate in sustaining and reproducing the “dominant ideology.”¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷ Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, xxiii.

⁹⁸ Rivkah Brown, “We Don’t Need to ‘Talk About Immigration,’” *Novara Media*, August 14, 2024, <https://novaramedia.com/2024/08/14/we-dont-need-to-talk-about-immigration/>.

⁹⁹ Połośńska-Kimunguyi, “Echoes of Empire,” 5.

¹⁰⁰ Połośńska-Kimunguyi, “Echoes of Empire,” 5.

¹⁰¹ Chas Critcher, “Moral Panics,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology*, March 29, 2017, <https://oxfordre.com/criminology/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264079-e-155>.

¹⁰² Critcher, “Moral Panics.”

¹⁰³ Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, xxiii.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, xxxvi.

The media, Cohen argues, often serve as a mouthpiece to justify hard-line policies: “even the most fleeting moral panic refracts the interests of political and media elites: legitimizing and vindicating enduring patterns of law-and-order politics, racism and policies such as mass imprisonment.”¹⁰⁵

These overlapping state-media dynamics are made visible through the linguistic and symbolic techniques used to legitimise dominant ideologies. Cohen outlines a recurring media process: exaggeration, where actions or statements are overstated or misrepresented; prediction, involving warnings of serious consequences if no action is taken; and symbolization, through which labels such as ‘mod/rocker’ or ‘illegal immigrant’ become shorthand for perceived social threats.¹⁰⁶ Media coverage actively selects which stories are deemed newsworthy, often amplifying drama, emergency and crisis. These portrayals frequently rely on “processed or coded images” that frame individuals as inherently deviant.¹⁰⁷ Cohen called the media appeals to the public “a sleight of hand, magic without the magician”, an allusion to the subtle and strategic ways in which folk devils are constructed.¹⁰⁸

Together, these frameworks of panic, deviance and ideological legitimation provide a foundation for understanding how contemporary media continue to frame migrants in subtle but predictable and exclusionary ways. The consistent reproduction of panic through language, symbolism and selective media framing reveals not only how fear is manufactured but also how it functions to uphold broader structures of exclusion and control.

ii) Critical Discourse Analysis

To expose the potentially damaging role of media discourse, this section introduces the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and explores how it can be used to examine the ideological underpinnings of media narratives. Given the established patterns outlined in the previous section, particularly the construction of folk devils and exaggerated media responses they provoke, CDA offers a valuable lens for examining how migrants are framed in the British press.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., xxxvii.

CDA Framework and Origins

CDA emerged in the late 1980s within European discourse studies, as an approach to examining the complex relationship between language, power and society. Spearheaded by scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, Teun van Dijk, CDA is a problem-oriented framework that investigates how language is used in its socio-cultural context. Its core objective is to critically analyse how discursive structures construct, reproduce, and legitimise social power inequalities in various social fields such as politics, education, law and media.¹⁰⁹ As a method, CDA investigates the ways in which rhetorical devices, syntactical choices, and narrative strategies reinforce dominant ideologies and can reveal “underlying rationale in support of purported discriminatory hatred.”¹¹⁰ It insists that discourse is never neutral, but shaped by specific interests, consciously or unconsciously and is thus inherently political.¹¹¹ CDA, therefore, provides a framework of understanding for how we are cognitively affected by the language we consume every day, particularly when the harm is achieved through covert discursive techniques.

Rather than prescribing a single theoretical route, approaches in CDA are multifarious.¹¹² What binds these together is the shared problem-oriented focus on effecting social change through critical understanding, and exposing and challenging power relationships embedded in language.¹¹³ Equipped with theoretical tools to identify subtle manipulation, the objective is to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, reveal how ‘common-sense’ discourses serve hegemonic purposes and to inform strategies to reduce discrimination in society.¹¹⁴ As Van Dijk elaborates, it is discourse study *with an attitude*, and CDA analysts take on an explicitly critical stance against inequality.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ Teun A. van Dijk, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, 2nd ed., ed. Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, and Deborah Schiffrin (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 466–485.

¹¹⁰ Dimitris Serafis, “Unveiling the Rationale of Soft Hate Speech in Multimodal Artifacts: A Critical Framework,” *Journal of Language and Discrimination* 6, no. 2 (2022): 323.

¹¹¹ Dianna R. Mullet, “A General Critical Discourse Analysis Framework for Educational Research,” *Journal of Advanced Academics* 29, no. 2 (2018): 118, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1932202X18758260>.

¹¹² Ruth Wodak, “Critical Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis,” in *Discursive Pragmatics*, ed. Jan Zienkowski, Jan-Ola Östman, and Jef Verschueren (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2011), 50–70, <https://doi.org/10.1075/hoph.8.04wod>.

¹¹³ Teun A. van Dijk, “Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis,” *Discourse & Society* 4, no. 2 (1993): 249–283.

¹¹⁴ Christopher Hart, *Critical Discourse Analysis and Cognitive Science: New Perspectives on Immigration Discourse* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

¹¹⁵ van Dijk, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” 466–485.

Foucault's concept of *discourse* underpins much of CDA's theoretical foundation. He defines it as a set of statements that provide both the language for talking about, and a way of representing the knowledge about, a particular topic at a specific historical moment.¹¹⁶ In short, it is a system of representation.¹¹⁷ The meanings we attach to objects, people and events depend not only on conceptual understanding but also on how we organise and classify relationships between them. What we perceive as 'truth' is contingent on the dominant discourses of a particular era.¹¹⁸ Building on this, Wodak emphasises discourse's function as a form of "social practice".¹¹⁹ Texts do not merely reflect reality, she claims, but actively construct the way we see it by establishing what is considered normal or acceptable. Fairclough and Wodak further describe the *dialectical relationship* between language and society, calling it mutually constitutive.¹²⁰ They argue that discourses both shape and are shaped by social structures and institutional contexts and language not only sustains the social status quo but has the power to transform it.¹²¹ For this reason, context is a central concern for CDA analysts. Discursive practises, therefore, play a crucial role in power relations, particularly between cultural majorities and minorities, by shaping how people and issues are represented and positioned in society.¹²²

CDA in Practice

Van Dijk's extensive work on racism and the media provides a key application of CDA principles in the analysis of minority representation. In *Racism and the Press*, he demonstrates how news discourse plays a central role in the reproduction of 'top-down' ethnic prejudice, particularly when it serves the interests of social elites, namely the political, educational, scholarly and media elites.¹²³ He argues that media outlets are not neutral transmitters of

¹¹⁶ Stuart Hall, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power," in *Formations of Modernity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben (Cambridge: Polity Press in association with The Open University, 1992), 291.

¹¹⁷ Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE Publications, in association with The Open University, 1997), 17.

¹¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980).

¹¹⁹ Wodak, "Critical Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis," 51.

¹²⁰ Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis," in *Introduction to Discourse Studies*, ed. T. A. van Dijk (London: Sage, 1997), 258.

¹²¹ Fairclough and Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis," 258.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Teun A. van Dijk, *Racism and the Press* (London: Routledge, 1991).

information but active participants in the construction and “discursive reproduction” of ideologies.¹²⁴ Through selective framing, the media preserves the status quo in a way that “legitimizes the ethnic and racial dominance of the white group” and “strongly suggest[s] *how* the readers should think and talk about ethnic affairs.”¹²⁵ According to van Dijk, discourse is central to reproducing social inequality because it operates at the intersection of the social and cognitive dimensions of racism, with the media serving as a key component in the shaping of public knowledge, attitudes and ideologies.¹²⁶ Although van Dijk focuses on the role the media plays in reproducing the political elites’ ideology, he stresses it also plays a ‘semi-autonomous’ role in the manufacturing of public consensus.¹²⁷ Journalists may claim impartiality, but their editorial choices, such as what to include, what to omit, how to headline, which images to select, inevitably include value-laden decisions.

A central insight from van Dijk’s work is that racism in media discourse is often implicit and coded with “increased subtlety and indirectness.”¹²⁸ The strategies chosen to represent minorities, often tied to subtle stereotypes of threat, and deviance, feed into shared social beliefs and fears, which in turn justify exclusionary practices, policies, and hostility. It is through the nuanced but biased ways of reporting about minorities that he claims racism is powerfully reproduced and highlights the insidious nature of subtle hate which he argues is “just as effective to marginalize and exclude minorities.”¹²⁹ He warns that such language appears “so normal, so natural, and so commonsensical” that it makes it especially difficult to challenge or even recognise as discriminatory.¹³⁰ Understanding this covert reproduction of prejudice, particularly in migrant media coverage, allows CDA scholars to disclose how discourse functions as a tool of exclusion, and contributes to the normalisation of xenophobia in both thought and practice.

While CDA encompasses varied approaches, this study does not adhere rigidly to a single framework. As van Dijk notes, analysing racism in media ideally requires a multidisciplinary lens, incorporating discourse structures, socio-political context, cognitive processes and

¹²⁴ van Dijk, *Racism and the Press*, X.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Teun A. van Dijk, “News Racism: A Discourse Analytical Approach,” in *Ethnic Minorities and the Media*, ed. Simon Cottle (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), 36.

¹²⁷ Teun A. van Dijk, “Mediating Racism: The Role of the Media in the Reproduction of Racism,” in *Language, Power and Ideology: Studies in Political Discourse*, ed. Ruth Wodak (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1989), 203.

¹²⁸ Ibid., X.

¹²⁹ van Dijk, “News Racism,” 34.

¹³⁰ van Dijk, “News Racism,” 34.

broader ideological dynamics.¹³¹ This thesis draws on core CDA principles: that language is both socially constructed and socially constructing;¹³² that discourse reflects, reinforces and legitimises social inequality;¹³³ and that media texts are imbued with ideology and power.¹³⁴ In particular, the focus will be on legitimation through language, a central concern for van Leeuwen, explored in the next section.

Mythopoetic Legitimation

Van Leeuwen explores how discourses legitimise social practices through everyday communication by appealing to shared moral values, institutional authority, or narrative structures, what he classifies as *moral evaluation*, *authorisation* and *mythopoetic legitimation*. This thesis focuses on the latter, as developed by van Leeuwen and expanded by Bennett, which involves the use of storytelling or cultural myths to justify social actions and norms.¹³⁵ Bennett defines legitimation as “a process, involving discourse and practice, through which actions and actors are bestowed with legitimacy or marked by their illegitimacy” rooted in socially constructed values and norms.”¹³⁶ Mythopoetic legitimation is the “telling of one story to tell another”¹³⁷ and operates through narratives that reward conformity to these values and punish transgression, often presenting such moral frameworks as universal or self-evident.¹³⁸

Wodak and van Leeuwen emphasise storytelling’s role in racist and antisemitic discourse, especially in non-official contexts, where isolated incidents are retold as evidence of broader social patterns.¹³⁹ Bennett elaborates that myths are not simply stories but are a form of intentional interaction that shape communal identity and moral consensus.¹⁴⁰ The “myth-

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Fairclough and Wodak, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” 258.

¹³³ van Dijk, *Racism and the Press*.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Theo van Leeuwen, “Legitimation in Discourse and Communication,” *Discourse & Communication* 1, no. 1 (2007): 91–112, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481307071986>.

¹³⁶ Sam Bennett, “Mythopoetic Legitimation and the Recontextualisation of Europe’s Foundational Myth,” *Journal of Language and Politics* 21, no. 1 (2022): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.21070.ben>.

¹³⁷ Bennett, “Mythopoetic Legitimation,” 5.

¹³⁸ van Leeuwen, “Legitimation in Discourse,” 91.

¹³⁹ Theodoor van Leeuwen and Ruth Wodak, “Legitimizing Immigration Control: A Discourse-Historical Analysis,” *Discourse Studies* 1, no. 1 (1999): 83–118, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445699001001005>.

¹⁴⁰ Bennett, “Mythopoetic Legitimation,” 5.

maker” crafts a narrative aligned with dominant values, selectively including or excluding details to support a particular ideological stance, and make them appear ‘natural’.¹⁴¹

This aligns with Roland Barthes’ concept of mythology where myths appear as naturalised truths rather than ideological constructs.¹⁴² For Barthes, myths disguise their political intent by presenting themselves as common sense or cultural inevitabilities. What seems like a neutral explanation is, in fact, an ideologically loaded narrative, stripped of its origins in human decision and power. In the context of media discourse on migrants, such myth-making transforms social prejudice into naturalised belief, reinforcing exclusionary ideologies while concealing their constructed nature. The specific myths that reappear in British media, which will be explored, relate to the manufactured threat that deviant folk devils allegedly pose.

Deviance, Folk Devils and Manufactured Threat

The concept of *mythopoetic legitimation* becomes especially relevant in understanding how migrants are cast as deviant others. Cohen’s notion of the ‘deviant’ *folk devil* in moral panics is central to understanding how media discourse labels certain groups as ‘threats,’ a recurring myth in the British media. The term ‘deviant’ originates from the Latin ‘*deviare*’ meaning to ‘turn aside’ or ‘to stray’, suggesting that deviance denotes a departure from what is perceived as the correct path.¹⁴³ This reflects the sociological meaning of deviance as behaviours, beliefs, or appearances that diverge from societal norms or expectations and threaten social order. As a result, society is prompted to label and respond to these individuals with various forms of social control, such as public shaming or legal penalties.¹⁴⁴ According to Goode and Ben-Yehuda, “the most crucial feature of deviance” is not the act, the belief, or the individual characteristic in question; “it’s the audience, the people observing, hearing about, and evaluating it.”¹⁴⁵

In this context, *mythopoetic legitimation* offers a useful lens for understanding how media discourse constructs and justifies hostility toward migrants. This process frames exclusionary narratives as natural or necessary through the repetition of familiar story structures, positioning

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957; London: Paladin, 1972).

¹⁴³ Online Etymology Dictionary, “Deviant,” n.d., <https://www.etymonline.com/word/deviant>.

¹⁴⁴ EBSCO Research Starters, *Deviance (Sociology)* (2017), <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/sociology/deviance-sociology>.

¹⁴⁵ Goode and Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics*, 150.

migrants as villains who threaten moral order. The production of these narratives often serves to reinforce the notion of a cohesive national identity under siege. Stuart Hall observed that immigrants are frequently used as “one of the easily available 'scapegoats' for the recurring economic and social ills of a system in crisis” rendered “highly visible and highly vulnerable” through much “‘mythical' media presence.”¹⁴⁶ He claims these scapegoats “do not just 'happen', they are produced from specific conditions, by specific agencies.”¹⁴⁷

Examples of Threat

Across the UK and European media, migrants are regularly portrayed as threats, ranging from moral, cultural, demographic, to economic, through an array of symbolic associations and rhetorical strategies. Demster and Hargrave observe that British press are more likely than any other country in Europe to frame refugees as potential threats to culture, welfare, security and the health system.”¹⁴⁸ These depictions are not based on substantive evidence but operate as myths, narratives that gain legitimacy through repetition and emotive framing.

As van Dijk argues media discourse consistently positions minorities in deviant roles, “they are disruptive, they (actively) take our houses and jobs, they cheat on welfare, they violate the norms and the rules, they do not (want to) adapt, [...] they are a threat to our personal safety, because many of them are assumed to be criminals.”¹⁴⁹ These portrayals serve to establish a moral boundary between the ‘in-group’ and the ‘out-group,’ supporting what scholars identify as group-threat theory,¹⁵⁰ the perception that migrants endanger the cultural or material well-being of the native population. Studies indicate that perceived threat is a key factor influencing public attitudes toward migrants and refugees.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁶ Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 50.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Helen Dempster and Karen Hargrave, *Understanding Public Attitudes Towards Refugees and Migrants* (London: Overseas Development Institute & Chatham House, 2017).

¹⁴⁹ van Dijk, “Mediating Racism,” 37.

¹⁵⁰ Elmar Schlueter and Peer Scheepers, “The Relationship between Outgroup Size and Anti-Outgroup Attitudes: A Theoretical Synthesis and Empirical Test of Group Threat and Intergroup Contact Theory,” *Social Science Research* 39, no. 2 (2010): 286–295.

¹⁵¹ Helena Landmann, Robert Gaschler, and Anett Rohmann, “What Is Threatening about Refugees? Identifying Different Types of Threat and Their Association with Emotional Responses and Attitudes towards Refugee Migration,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 49, no. 7 (2019): 1401–1420.

These threats typically fall into two categories, ‘realistic’ denoting economic and security threats, and ‘symbolic’ threats which concern perceived challenges to cultural norms, identity and values.¹⁵² For example, as a security threat: migrants, especially those from North Africa or Muslim majority countries, are frequently linked to terrorism or political instability.¹⁵³ Migrants are commonly depicted as posing a cultural threat, undermining alleged national identity, cohesion or ‘cultural purity.’¹⁵⁴ Economic threat is another common frame, accused of exploiting welfare systems or undercutting native workers, particularly in media coverage of Eastern European migrants.¹⁵⁵ Migrants are frequently associated with illegal behaviour, casting migrants as fundamentally incompatible with British values. In terms of a demographic threat, migrant populations are portrayed as overwhelming or unsustainable as in the former Prime Minister Theresa May’s warning of “unprecedented mass movements of people” through “unmanaged channels” as one of the “new threats.”¹⁵⁶

iii) Method: Framework of Analysis

While these representations of migrants in UK media vary, they share a common function: portraying migrants as incompatible with, or harmful to, the host society. Given the breadth of these framings, this thesis will focus on three dominant mythic framings frequently deployed in British media coverage, chosen for their regularity, resonance, and role in justifying exclusionary attitudes and normalising public hostility towards migrants.

The three myths identified are:

1. Migrants as Criminals – rooted in tropes of illegality and moral transgression.
2. Migrants as Burden – constructed through an ‘Us vs. Them’ dichotomy in relation to resources and services.
3. Migrants as Mass Threat – amplified through scale, urgency and ‘crisis’ rhetoric.

¹⁵² Eyes on Europe, “Explaining the Main Driver of Anti-Migrant Attitudes in Europe,” *Eyes on Europe*, November 30, 2020, <https://www.eyes-on-europe.eu/explaining-the-main-drivers-of-anti-immigrationattitudes-in-europe/>.

¹⁵³ Kate McCann, Maciek Sienkiewicz, and M. Zard, *The Role of Media Narratives in Shaping Public Opinion toward Refugees: A Comparative Analysis*, Migration Research Series No. 72 (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2023), <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/MRS-72.pdf>.

¹⁵⁴ Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, *A Hostile Environment*, 18.

¹⁵⁵ Alex Balch and Ekaterina Balabanova, “Ethics, Politics and Migration: Public Debates on the Free Movement of Romanians and Bulgarians in the UK, 2006–2013,” *Politics* 36, no. 1 (2016): 19–35.

¹⁵⁶ Theresa May, *Theresa May’s Speech to the UN General Assembly*, transcript, published September 20, 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/theresa-mays-speech-to-the-un-general-assembly>.

Each myth operates as a form of mythopoetic legitimation, whereby migrants are cast in villainous roles as the ‘folk devils’ of a moral panic, host populations as victims and institutions or politicians as either heroic protectors or failing guardians. These narratives naturalise exclusionary or punitive responses, by framing them as morally necessary or common-sense solutions.

Drawing on the principles of CDA and following Bennett’s model, the analysis will involve both a short, summary macro-level examination, “to ascertain how these narratives have been mobilised, by whom, in which contexts, for which legitimacy purposes” and a more in-depth micro-level analysis focusing on lexical, syntactical and rhetorical choices.¹⁵⁷

The next section will apply this approach to a sample of British newspaper articles, selected to illustrate how these strategies function in practice. The sample spans the four months leading up to the 2024 riots, a period marked by heightened public debate on immigration. This temporal focus allows for an exploration of how recurring discursive patterns may have contributed to a broader climate of hostility that escalated into violence.

The corpus includes articles from major UK newspapers including both tabloids – The Daily Mail, The Sun, The Daily Express and broadsheets – The Telegraph and The Times. These newspapers are broadly recognised for their right-leaning editorial stance. All articles are available online.

These publications were chosen for three key reasons.

1. Reach and influence: These outlets command wide readerships and wield considerable influence in shaping public opinion.
2. Track record: Media-monitoring organisations such as *HOPE Not Hate* and *Ethical Consumer*, have consistently identified these outlets as key amplifiers of anti-migrant narratives.
3. Comparative scope: Including both tabloid and broadsheet formats allows for a broader analysis of how similar discursive techniques operate across different journalistic

¹⁵⁷ Bennett, “Mythopoetic Legitimation,” 16.

registers. Left-leaning outlets were excluded to maintain thematic coherence, and future research might contrast ideological framings across the spectrum.

Although the sample is necessarily limited in scope, the framing techniques they illustrate are not isolated or unique to this sample. Indeed, they are representative of recurring discursive patterns that appear consistently across a broad spectrum of UK media coverage on migration. The repetition of these discursive forms especially in relation to the three myths, suggests a process of ideological normalisation, whereby public prejudice becomes embedded in apparently neutral or factual reportage.

Headlines of Selected Articles

Tabloids

1. *The Sun*

- a. “'MIGRANT' HOUSING CRISIS Migrants coming to UK to blame for almost 90 per cent of Britain’s housing problems, shock report warns.,” May 8, 2024.
- b. “'MIGRANT BABY SWINDLE' Albanian gangs target UK mums-to-be in plot to register illegal migrants as the dad,” April 1, 2024.

2. *Daily Mail*

- a. “Nigel Farage Warns of ‘Invasion’ of Young Men across Channel before Election,” June 24, 2024.
- b. “SUE REID: The Criminal Asylum Seekers Who Have Abused Britain’s Hospitality with Appalling Crimes – Including Paedophilia, Rape and Murder,” May 24, 2024.

3. *Daily Express*

- a. “One Chart Exposes UK's 'Enormous' Immigration Problem with Influx 'like Never Before',” April 29, 2024.
- b. “Thousands More Small Boat Migrants Set to Cross Channel as France Steps up Security,” July 20, 2024.

Broadsheets

4. *The Telegraph*
 - a. “Britain Has Reached Its Immigration Breaking Point,” July 16, 2024
 - b. “Europe’s Migrant Crime Wave Is Coming to Britain,” May 16, 2024
5. *The Times*
 - a. “The Times View on Immigration: Quality over Quantity,” May 28, 2024.

This chapter has demonstrated how media discourse constructs and sustains moral panics around migration through exaggerated symbolic framings and subtle linguistic choices. By casting migrants as folk devils in mythic narratives of threat and deviance, the media actively produces and legitimises public anxieties. The frameworks of moral panic, CDA and mythopoetic legitimation serve to reveal how language embeds xenophobia in everyday reporting and the next chapter will examine and decode examples.

3.

ANALYSIS OF SELECTED NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

This section examines strategies that perpetuate the constructed myths of criminality, resource drain and mass threat. Through techniques such as lexical choice, polarisation, presupposition, metaphors, hyperbole and exaggeration, the means through which migrants are systematically framed as a problem in UK media discourse, will be demonstrated.

The Cumulative Power of Repetition

Before analysing the specific discursive strategies and semantic patterns in selected news articles, it is important to recognise that the impact of subtle, harmful language in the media stems primarily from repetition. It is not any single instance, but rather the cumulative effect of repeated framings that gives such language its power. As Fairclough, observed,

“the hidden power of media discourse and the capacity of . . . power-holders to exercise this power depend on systematic tendencies. [...] A single text on its own is quite insignificant: the effects of media power are cumulative, working through the repetition of particular ways of handling causality and agency, particular ways of positioning the reader.”¹⁵⁸

Unlike overt hate speech, which is often identifiable by its aggressive tone and vitriolic content, subtle hate operates more insidiously. It manifests through patterns: “repetition, sheer volume,

¹⁵⁸ Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (London: Longman, 1989), 54.

or disproportionality of focus on an issue.”¹⁵⁹ Over time, these patterns reveal underlying biases, not necessarily what is said, but how often, and in what context. Połńska Kimunguyi refers to this selective reporting, “throughout 2016, 84% of stories in *The Times* made a clear connection between migration and social benefits-seeking.”¹⁶⁰ This overwhelming proportion signals a shift from neutral reportage to ideologically skewed framing. Similarly, research from *Stop Funding Hate* found that subtle hate is often defined by the “disproportionality of focus on certain topics, the sheer quantity of certain reports or the repetition of tropes or ideas.”¹⁶¹ Recognising these overarching patterns is crucial to exposing how seemingly factual discourse becomes a vehicle for prejudice. These patterns shape public perception over time, gradually embedding discriminatory assumptions into what may otherwise appear to be neutral reporting.

While a comprehensive analysis of these patterns would require a large-scale dataset, this thesis, instead, draws on existing quantitative studies and a focused selection of media texts to illustrate key trends. Given the constraints of this thesis, references will be made to existing quantitative research, alongside the focused selection of media texts to illustrate key patterns. The aim is not to present an exhaustive media study, but to expose and critically interrogate the rhetorical techniques and framing strategies that enable noxious, xenophobic narratives to persist under the guise of normalcy.

i) Myth 1: Migrants as Criminals

Macro-level analysis

The first myth examined in this chapter is the pervasive association of migrants with criminality in the British press. At the macro level, which as previously mentioned is “to ascertain how these narratives have been mobilised, by whom, in which contexts, for which legitimacy purposes,”¹⁶² this framing casts migrants as inherent threats to law, order and the moral fabric of society. Sustained by political rhetoric and reinforced by mainstream media that often cite

¹⁵⁹ Carlile and Harrison, *Addressing Subtle Forms of Hate*, 6.

¹⁶⁰ Połńska-Kimunguyi, “Echoes of Empire,” 7.

¹⁶¹ Carlile and Harrison, *Addressing Subtle Forms of Hate*, 55.

¹⁶² Bennett, “Mythopoetic Legitimation,” 6.

politicians to imply legitimacy, this narrative positions migrants as deviant outsiders whose presence justifies heightened social control.

The crime myth emerges within broader contexts of contested asylum claims, anxieties over violent crime, and sensationalist focus on issues such as fraud, trafficking and so-called, ‘grooming gangs.’ Despite consistent evidence disproving a positive correlation between immigration and violent crime,¹⁶³ the myth is woven into the everyday reporting.

The legitimatory function of this myth is clear: by demonising the ‘out-group’ as criminal, the media encourages the ‘in-group’ to reject them, thereby rationalising exclusionary discourse, hostile policies and widespread public suspicion. Arcimaviciene et al. note “migrants are further delegitimized through the scenarios of Crime and Terrorism” invoking “the myth of moral authority” that claims to know what is best for the ‘Other’ and how they should be punished.¹⁶⁴ This framing, they argue, heightens negative emotions and fear, producing a perception of constant threat.¹⁶⁵ Research also indicates that “prejudice is especially high for minority groups associated with problems and criminal threat frames in the news.”¹⁶⁶

Such framings often serve broader political agendas, allowing both media and political actors to channel public frustration away from structural issues and towards scapegoated groups. In doing so, migrants become convenient targets through which complex problems like crime or economic insecurity are simplified and moral panic is manufactured. This criminal framing also aligns with the media’s commercial logic, where sensationalism boosts engagement. Crime stories about immigration attract attention, generate outrage and sustain audience interest, reinforcing editorial choices that prioritise drama.

¹⁶³ Michael T. Light and Isabel Anadon, “Immigration and Violent Crime: Triangulating Findings across Diverse Studies,” *Iowa Law Review* 103, no. 3 (2020): Article 11, <https://ilr.law.uiowa.edu/assets/Uploads/ILR-103-3-Light-Anadon.pdf>.

¹⁶⁴ Liudvika Arcimaviciene and Serkan H. Baglama, “Migration, Metaphor and Myth in Media Representations: The Ideological Dichotomy of ‘Them’ and ‘Us,’” *SAGE Open* 8, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244018768657>.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Cecil Meeusen and Laura Jacobs, “Television News Content as a Contextual Predictor of Differences Between Attitudes Toward Minority Groups,” *Mass Communication & Society* 20, no. 2 (2017): 227.

Micro-level analysis

Having introduced the broader myth of migrant criminality, this section conducts a micro-level analysis of selected headlines and news stories. Drawing on CDA, it explores how lexical choices, syntactic framing and rhetorical strategies subtly criminalise migrants and legitimise hostility.

Even the ubiquitous term ‘illegal immigrant’ functions nominally to conflate refugees, asylum seekers and migrants with criminality, embedding a direct association between arrival and wrongdoing in public discourse. Despite its widespread use, the term has been condemned by both the UN and the EU as dehumanising, as it “normalises the use of punitive measures, enforcement, and procedures to punish and deter irregular migrants”.¹⁶⁷ A complex legal definition is instead reduced to a pejorative identity marker, and the media discursively renders migrants outside of the law, and by implication, outside social legitimacy, making harsher treatment appear justified.

There is a wealth of corpus evidence to illustrate the prevalence of the term. For example, HOPE Not Hate’s study on the role of the media in promoting far-right and anti-migrant hate found that a significant proportion (950 out of 3468 articles (27%)) of articles in the dataset use the term ‘illegal’ to refer to both people who are migrants and their journeys.¹⁶⁸ A separate corpus analysis of 175,000 articles from 15 UK (1996-2005), traced collocates, meaning words that exist next to other words i.e. ‘co-locate,’ of refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants and migrants. Collocational analysis is useful in assessing how a group is presented in discourse because “they can convey messages implicitly and even be at odds with an overt statement”.¹⁶⁹ The study found consistent use of negative semantic prosodies (how a word’s meaning is modified based on the words it’s commonly associated with) such as ‘illegal’, ‘suspected asylum seeker’ or ‘sneak across the perilous state’, which subtly but powerfully construct refugees as deceitful and unlawful. The reader is encouraged to infer illegality even without overt accusations. The report concluded that all collocates found in this corpus indexed the

¹⁶⁷ Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), *Words Matter: Terminology Leaflets on People Who Migrate* (UNHCR, 2018), https://www.unhcr.org/cy/wp-content/uploads/sites/41/2018/09/TerminologyLeaflet_EN_PICUM.pdf.

¹⁶⁸ HOPE not Hate, *Stoking the Flames*, 20.

¹⁶⁹ Susan Hunston, *Corpora in Applied Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

treatment of these groups as social problems.¹⁷⁰ A more recent quantitative report (2019 to 2023) looking into ‘The narrative construction of migrant irregularity’ in the UK, corroborates this trend finding “the discourse surrounding legal status is dominated by the concept of ‘illegality’.”¹⁷¹

The number of subsections of crime with which migrants are affiliated is vast, ranging from rape to paedophilia to associations with female genital mutilation. An ICLAIM report based on 5,987 articles from four widely-read UK newspapers with diverse readerships, between 2019 and 2023, found other consistent collocates for immigrants to be words which indicate concerns around security or legality such as ‘terrorist’, ‘suspected’ and ‘sham’.¹⁷² The report concluded “the linguistic choices made by media outlets, political entities, [...] when describing identical phenomena can substantially influence the perceptions and understanding of readers and voters.”¹⁷³

By way of example of direct framing, this headline in The Sun: “*MIGRANT BABY SWINDLE: Albanian gangs target UK mums-to-be in plot to register illegal migrants as the dad*” is a means for the news outlet to grab attention.¹⁷⁴ By placing, in capital letters, the words “MIGRANT BABY SWINDLE” together, the innocence of a baby is immediately contrasted with the villainous migrant through the criminal act of ‘swindling.’ The negative tone of the article is immediately set. The article explains how Albanian migrants had come up with a “ruse” to “dodge deportation by claiming he has a UK family”. The verbs “ruse”, “dodge” and “claim” imply deliberate attempts by migrants to break the law and pose a risk to the law-abiding citizens of the UK. Albanian men are depicted as active agents in their crime through transitivity structures, i.e. who does what to whom. In this case, the migrants are portrayed as actively targeting the passive British women. These rhetorical devices construct a binary framing of mythic villain (foreign gangs) and mythic victims (innocent pregnant women) legitimising hostile attitudes towards the ‘enemy’.

¹⁷⁰Costas Gabrielatos, “Collocational Analysis as a Gateway to Critical Discourse Analysis: The Case of the Construction of Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Immigrants in the UK Press,” presentation, March 2008, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237771187>.

¹⁷¹ I-CLAIM Project, *The Narrative Construction of Migrant Irregularity in the United Kingdom*, WP4 (I-CLAIM, 2025), https://i-claim.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/The-narrative-construction-of-migrant-irregularity-in-the-United-Kingdom-I-CLAIM_WP4.pdf.

¹⁷² I-CLAIM Project, *The Narrative Construction of Migrant Irregularity*, 2025, 28.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁷⁴ The Sun, “Albanian Gangs Target Pregnant Mums in Swindle,” *The Sun*, April 1, 2024, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/27059962/albanian-gangs-target-pregnant-mums-swindle/>.

The author also uses techniques of recontextualisation, hyperbole and exaggeration. Similarly, a Telegraph article, the headline “Europe’s migrant crime wave is coming to Britain” evokes an indeterminate amount of “crime” that will descend on the borders.¹⁷⁵ The author uses the discursive strategy of recontextualisation by using a Danish study that found Non-Western migrants to be overrepresented in violent crime and alleges that the same will happen in the UK. This selective reference recontextualises the study to support the criminality myth, despite a lack of causal explanation. In doing so, it subtly biases the reader’s understanding by importing credibility from an unrelated context. Bennett calls recontextualisation “*the* discursive strategy underpinning legitimisation,”¹⁷⁶ and especially mythopoetic legitimisation. Additionally, the findings of the original study do not in reality warrant the hyperbolic use of “wave.” Hyperbole is a rhetorical device “that creates heightened effect through deliberate exaggeration,” and a useful tool to stoke fear regarding the scale of incoming criminality.¹⁷⁷

The Telegraph headline is, therefore, misleading. Van Dijk refers to the “ideological implications” of headlines that bias the understanding process of the rest of the article: “they summarize what, according to the journalist, is the most important aspect, and such a summary necessarily implies an opinion or a specific perspective on the events.”¹⁷⁸ He deems headlines to be a subjective definition of the situation, thereby influencing the interpretation made by the readers.¹⁷⁹ According to a report on British Media’s Coverage of Muslims and Islam (2018–2020), “60 per cent of readers will share an article without reading beyond the headline.”¹⁸⁰ It is consequently likely that subjective representations of migrant issues are frequently shared across the UK, without critical awareness of the biased viewpoint.

Later on in the article, the author uses techniques of generalisation, presupposition, delegitimising language and selective quantification to build on the myth presented and thus justify an anti-migrant stance. Generalisation language such as “Europeans have been told

¹⁷⁵ The Telegraph, “Europe’s Migrant Crime Wave Is Coming to Britain,” *The Telegraph*, May 16, 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/05/16/europes-migrant-crime-wave-is-coming-to-britain/>.

¹⁷⁶ Bennett, “Mythopoetic Legitimation,” 4.

¹⁷⁷ Literary Devices, “Hyperbole,” *Literary Devices*, accessed 28 June 2025, <https://literarydevices.net/hyperbole/>.

¹⁷⁸ van Dijk, *Racism and the Press*, 51.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Muslim Council of Britain, *Media’s Coverage of Muslims and Islam (2018–2020)* (London: Centre for Media Monitoring, 2021), 158, <https://cfmm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CfMM-Annual-Report-2018-2020-digital.pdf>.

many untruths”, “vast people transfers”, “virtually every Western European country” serve to amplify the scale of the threat.¹⁸¹ Presupposition refers to implicit assumptions embedded within a statement that are taken for granted as true, regardless of whether factually established. This technique, van Dijk explains, is a way for the Press to “indirectly and sometimes rather subtly state things that are not ‘known’ by the readers at all, but which are simply suggested to be common knowledge.”¹⁸² It is an “often-used strategic means to conceal controversial claims and are less easy to challenge by an uncritical reader than a straightforward assertion.”¹⁸³ For example, the author of the article claims, “[w]hen it became apparent at various points that the picture was somewhat less rosy...”, they assume that the reader is in agreement with this viewpoint. Take the following passage: “There may be a perverse selection mechanism at play where, among the people most willing to lie to gain entry to Europe, there’s a subsection without scruples in other areas that are significant causal factors in crime.”¹⁸⁴ The phrase “among the people most willing to lie...” contains the unproved presupposition that migrants routinely use deception to cross borders. By embedding such claims with speculative language “there may be...”, the author avoids direct assertion but continues to steer the reader toward a moral judgment about migrants abiding by the rules. This strategy subtly but indiscriminately delegitimises migrants, as the reader is not to know who the ‘lying’ migrants might be. Furthermore, the author constantly frames the alternative narrative of pro-migration discourse as a “lie”, (“untruths”, “we were assured”, “whoppers”) to reinforce the veracity of his own narrative. The cherry-picked use of unsourced statistics lends a false sense of numerical legitimacy to the constructed myth. Covertly, but methodically, an anti-migrant stance is promoted.

In the Daily Mail article¹⁸⁵ headlined “*The criminal asylum seekers who've made a mockery of Britain's hospitality by carrying out appalling crimes including paedophilia, rape and murder...*”, the content largely comprises a list of seventy-five migrants convicted of serious offences, each accompanied by details of their crime and sentences. The author states: “The behaviour of this man — and the others named here — should send shockwaves through our

¹⁸¹ The Telegraph, “Europe’s Migrant Crime Wave Is Coming to Britain.”

¹⁸² van Dijk, *Racism and the Press*, 183.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ The Telegraph, “Europe’s Migrant Crime Wave Is Coming to Britain.”

¹⁸⁵ Sue Reid, “SUE REID: The Criminal Asylum Seekers Who Have Abused Britain’s Hospitality with Appalling Crimes – Including Paedophilia, Rape and Murder,” *Daily Mail*, May 24, 2024, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13276809/SUE-REID-criminal-asylum-seekers-Britains-hospitality-appalling-crimes-paedophilia-rape-murder.html>.

beleaguered asylum system.” The “should” functions as a deontic modality of expectation, expressing a judgment and evaluative stance on *how* the system should react. This removes any sense of neutrality in what is presented as a factual account. Similarly, the term “beleaguered” lexically reinforces a narrative of institutional strain and attack, in this case, by the villainous, deviant criminals that need to be stopped. The consistent association with asylum seekers and broad criminal threat illustrates how even supposedly factual reporting can subtly support exclusionary narratives.

ii) Myth 2: Migrants as Resource Strain

Macro-level analysis

The second myth explored in this chapter constructs migrants as a burden on national resources, allegedly undermining communal wellbeing and placing strain on national infrastructure. At the macro-level, this narrative is mobilised by politicians and media figures to frame migrants as villainous freeloaders, draining welfare systems, overloading healthcare and outcompeting ‘innocent’ citizens for housing and benefits. This framing arises in contexts of austerity, economic anxiety, and public service pressures serving a clear legitimatory function: to scapegoat migrants, deflect from systemic failures, justify restrictive policies, and reinforce boundaries between ‘deserving’ citizens and the undeserving ‘other.’

This myth, however, has been repeatedly challenged. The Migrants Rights Network dismissed it as “a state-peddled myth” arguing that the root causes of deprivation lie in capitalism and Government austerity.¹⁸⁶ They note that migrants are often poor for the same reason non-migrants are: structural inequality and underinvestment.¹⁸⁷ Empirical evidence further undermines the resource-drain framing. For instance, 2024 data from the Migration Observatory reveals that the fiscal impact of migration is minimal - less than 1% of GDP and that higher net migration correlates with lower deficits and debt.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Migrants' Rights Network, *Words Matter*, n.d., <https://migrantsrights.org.uk/projects/wordsmatter/> (accessed May 4, 2025).

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ The Migration Observatory, *The Fiscal Impact of Immigration in the UK* (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2024), <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/the-fiscal-impact-of-immigration-in-the-uk/>.

Similarly, mythical claims that migrants overload public services lack evidential support. Research shows there is little data available on migrants' use of public services such as healthcare, which undermines the basis for such assertions.¹⁸⁹ Regarding housing, figures from the Chartered Institute of Housing indicate that migrants occupy less than 2% of housing stock, pointing to underbuilding and poor policy planning as the key causes of shortages.¹⁹⁰

This broader mythical narrative of migrants as a burden on resources is reinforced and sustained through lexical and rhetorical patterns within media discourse, unpacked in the following section.

Micro-level analysis

A recurring discursive strategy in British media coverage in relation to migrants is the combined strategy that van Dijk calls 'positive-self representation' versus 'negative-other representation.'¹⁹¹ Language is used to construct boundaries between native 'Us', often implicitly white and British, and 'Them', typically racialised non-white outsiders.¹⁹² Migrants are framed as "a permanent threat", fuelling the perception of a "conflict between those who want to get in and do not belong here, and those of 'Us' who belong."¹⁹³ Cohen highlights this division as central to the construction of moral panic, where the public is positioned against a vilified out-group.

This dichotomy often manifests as a hierarchy between "active and capable on the one side and those linked to crime, danger, inability, resource drain and exploitation, on the other."¹⁹⁴ The reader is discursively included as part of the innocent 'in-group', intensifying polarisation through mythopoetic legitimation. Połńska-Kimunguyi argues that the media actively construct this "bifurcated world" using binary oppositions that "juxtapose categories of the wealthy, orderly, benevolent, and developed Britain", against the "poor, underdeveloped, and dangerous 'others,' who are dependent on Britain's goodwill."¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Chartered Institute of Housing, *Dispelling Myths About Migrants and Housing*, 2024, <https://www.cih.org/blogs/dispelling-myths-about-migrants-and-housing/>.

¹⁹¹ van Dijk, "News Racism," 39.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ van Dijk, "Mediating Racism," 37.

¹⁹⁴ Połńska-Kimunguyi, "Echoes of Empire," 7.

¹⁹⁵ Połńska-Kimunguyi, "Echoes of Empire," 9.

A study in the representation of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants from 1996-2006 concluded that the tabloids in particular construct a very sharp ‘Us’ vs. ‘Them’ categorisation.¹⁹⁶ Wodak states that this process constructs a ‘panic’ state of affairs among its readership, legitimising and urging them to take on a more active role within this (constructed) ‘stand-off.’¹⁹⁷

The Telegraph article headlined “*Britain has reached its immigration breaking point*,”¹⁹⁸ exemplifies the resource-strain narrative by directly attributing national pressures to immigration: “In addition, all of these people have placed greater stress on our infrastructure” and “too many immigrants are a major reason for our sky-high property prices.”¹⁹⁹ The vague and dehumanising phrase, “these people” constructs migrants as an undifferentiated faceless mass, while the possessive “our” reinforces a binary distinction between a native ‘Us’ and an intrusive ‘Them.’ The use of the active verb “placed,” positions migrants as responsible agents acting upon a passive blameless public infrastructure, thus presenting them as a deviant threat to national resources. This framing is offered without empirical evidence, echoing findings from Stop Funding Hate UK that “unevidenced links between migration and overwhelmed public services” as a common feature of subtle hate.²⁰⁰ Such vagueness strategies continue in the sweeping, unsubstantiated assertion: “[t]he same is true across roads, railways, hospitals, dental clinics and much more.”²⁰¹

The Sun article headlined, “*‘MIGRANT’ HOUSING CRISIS: Migrants coming to UK to blame for almost 90 per cent of Britain’s housing problems, shock report warns*”, exemplifies hyperbole and scapegoating, reinforcing the resource-strain narrative.²⁰² The exaggerated numerical framing of “90%” is presented without context or source, lending a false sense of statistical legitimacy to the assigned blame. This act of assigning blame reflects a broader scapegoating strategy, where seemingly credible data is used to create a tenuous causal link

¹⁹⁶ Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: The Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2021), 110.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ The Telegraph, “Britain Has Reached Its Immigration Breaking Point,” *The Telegraph*, July 16, 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/07/16/migration-britains-population-explosion-demographics/>.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Carlile and Harrison, *Addressing Subtle Forms of Hate*, 55.

²⁰¹ The Telegraph, “Britain Has Reached Its Immigration Breaking Point,”

²⁰² The Sun, “Migrants Blame Britain for Their Housing Problems,” *The Sun*, May 20, 2024, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/27786722/migrants-blame-britain-housing-problems/>.

between migrant arrivals and systemic failures such as inadequate housing. Through such blame attribution, the article positions migrants as a direct threat, polarising the reader against a demonised “influx” deserving of hostility.

Another prominent feature of the ‘Us vs. Them’ strategy is the frequent use of the conjunction ‘*but*’ to pre-empt accusations of discrimination.²⁰³ This rhetorical structure allows writers to combine a seemingly positive self-presentation (e.g. “I’m not racist”) with a negative portrayal of migrants, thereby maintaining plausible deniability.²⁰⁴ This discursive polarisation serves to separate the two groups. Van Dijk terms this rhetorical strategy ‘Apparent Concession,’ whereby speakers “avoid a bad impression with the recipients” by issuing disclaimers that do little to offset the larger discriminatory narrative. The Telegraph article typifies this: “We know that some migrants really do add to our society – *but*²⁰⁵ they make up only a few tens of thousands of the millions coming here.”²⁰⁶ The ‘*but*’ cancels the initial concession, reasserting the dominant message of burden and overwhelm.

The same strategy appears in the Telegraph article (“*Europe’s Migrant Crime Wave Is Coming to Britain*”):

“It is to Europe’s credit that it welcomed people fleeing war zones and persecution in recent decades. And many of those arriving have repaid the gesture of good faith, making an invaluable contribution to our society. *But*²⁰⁷ it is also no secret that many of the predominantly young male asylum seekers arriving in Europe in recent years are in fact economic migrants.”²⁰⁸

Likewise, in The Times article “*The Times View on Immigration: Quality over Quantity*,”: “Immigration can be a huge plus for Britain, maintaining its economic vibrancy as other powers decline. But it needs to be carefully directed to that end, and not become a chaotic free-for-all.”²⁰⁹ The presuppositions embedded in such claims, for example Britain’s unique “economic

²⁰³ van Dijk, “News Racism,” 41.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ (Own emphasis added).

²⁰⁶ *The Telegraph*, “Britain Has Reached Its Immigration Breaking Point.”

²⁰⁷ (Own emphasis added).

²⁰⁸ *The Telegraph*, “Europe’s Migrant Crime Wave Is Coming to Britain.”

²⁰⁹ *The Times*, “The Times View on Immigration: Quality over Quantity,” *The Times*, May 28, 2024, <https://www.thetimes.com/article/the-times-view-on-immigration-quality-over-quantity-bzds3hqds5>.

vibrancy” or Europe’s benevolence, are taken for granted and used as baselines to frame migrants as undermining these virtues. The message is clear: although a small subset may be ‘deserving’, the majority are threats to order and prosperity. This rhetorical structure casts migrants as mythical ‘villainous’ folk devils, exploiting the generosity of their benevolent hosts.

Within this binary, a further internal division is made between ‘desirable’ and ‘undesirable’ migrants. Repeated references to “low-skilled,” “illegal” or “dependent” immigrants position them in contrast to high-skilled, self-sufficient migrants. The Telegraph article “*Britain Has Reached Its Immigration Breaking Point*” states:

“The issue is that not all workers are alike. There is now academic literature showing that workers from Western countries, like Japan or America, are a net fiscal benefit but that non-Western workers are a net fiscal negative. Unfortunately, the latter make up the vast majority of those coming here to work.”²¹⁰

Here, the term “non-Western” serves as a racially charged euphemism, under the guise of cultural or geographical categorisation. As Goodfellow states “racism doesn’t only and always announce itself loudly in the debate [...] some people are constructed as a cost, or as low skilled, [...] intertwined with how they are racialised.”²¹¹ The absence of a verifiable source for the referenced “academic literature” weakens the credibility of the claim, yet it remains ideologically potent. Similarly, The Times article draws a sharp dichotomy between “unskilled” migrants and “high-skilled generators of future wealth” stating, “[w]hat it does not need are millions more unskilled migrants and their dependants, placing an ever greater strain on housing, education and health services.”²¹² The author continues: “[p]olicing of the system must be stepped up and arrivals subject to a rigorous cost-benefit analysis.”²¹³ The use of high-modality language with the word “must” intensifies the call for restrictive immigration controls. By narrowing the scope of blame to a particular subset of migrants, the discourse amplifies hostility and legitimises targeted exclusion.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Maya Goodfellow, “Dismantling the Myths of Migrants as Threats or Tourists,” *Discover Society*, April 7, 2021, <https://discoversociety.org/2021/04/07/dismantling-the-myths-of-migrants-as-threats-or-tourists/>.

²¹² The Times, “Quality over Quantity.”

²¹³ Ibid.

iii) Myth 3: Migrants as Mass Threat

Macro-level analysis

The third constructed myth in this chapter frames migrants as a deviant and overwhelming collective force, a mass threat, necessitating urgent intervention. At the macro level, this myth is disseminated through alarmist and sensationalist reporting, primarily driven by segments of the media and political actors aiming to legitimise securitised immigration policies. Such narratives gain particular traction during periods of economic hardship, political instability, or cultural anxiety, moments in which migrants are readily scapegoated as symbols of disorder and decline.

A key feature of this myth is the construction of migration as an imminent and catastrophic crisis, particularly visible in the discourse surrounding small boat arrivals. These crossings have become the symbolic epicentre of the so-called immigration emergency, repeatedly framed as evidence of the loss of border control. This focus is strategically magnified by the press' fearmongering tactic, thereby allowing government policies, such as those disproportionately targeting small boat crossings, to appear necessary and proportionate. In reality, however, the scale of this issue is significantly misrepresented: according to Amnesty International, in the year ending June 2023, 44,460 people arrived by small boats, which is only 3.7% of the total 1.2 million people who immigrated to the UK during that time.²¹⁴

Such exaggerations align with what Goode and Ben-Yahuda identify as key elements of moral panic, where a “sober assessment” of the evidence often reveals that the scale of threat and the resultant fear, “were, in all likelihood, exaggerated or misplaced”.²¹⁵ Within media discourse, exaggeration is a central discursive strategy to elevate the perceived urgency of the uncontrolled ‘folk devil.’ Lexical choices, metaphorical framings and numerical overstatements work together to construct migrants not as individuals but as a faceless,

²¹⁴ UK Home Office, *Irregular Migration to the UK: Year Ending June 2023* (GOV.UK, November 23, 2023), <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/irregular-migration-to-the-uk-year-ending-june-2023/irregular-migration-to-the-uk-year-ending-june-2023>.

²¹⁵ Goode and Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics*, 150.

encroaching mass. Van Dijk highlights this tactic noting that, “dramatization, exaggeration, and hyperbole are the main rhetorical tricks of the popular press to make the news more exciting.”²¹⁶ When combined with crisis language, these techniques foster a sense of national emergency that intensifies public anxiety and helps justify exclusionary policies. Ultimately, by constructing migration as an existential threat, these narratives cultivate a cultural climate in which extreme responses become not only acceptable, but seemingly necessary.

Micro-level analysis

Metaphorical Devices

News stories frequently rely on visual and conceptual metaphors to construct and reinforce the subjective narratives they aim to promote. These metaphorical framings are not incidental but are strategically employed to shape public understanding in emotionally charged and polarising ways. As Demata observes “[t]he distribution of positive and negative metaphors dovetails with the allegiances of the right-wing Press”, underscoring the ideological dimension of such rhetorical choices.²¹⁷ Scholars widely agree that metaphors used to describe migration are frequently degrading and dehumanising. Arcimaviciene, for example, emphasises that these metaphors not only reflect but also shape dominant perceptions of the Other.²¹⁸

Metaphors offer the media a powerful rhetorical device for implying negative attributes about migrants, without making substantiated claims. As Musolff explains, depicting migrants as “disease-engendering organisms,” allows writers to sidestep evidentiary scrutiny by tapping into the audience’s pre-existing associations with illness and contamination.²¹⁹ He calls this tactic effective due to its “argumentative advantage,” whereby metaphor serves as a proxy for evidence, legitimising discriminatory attitudes under the guise of familiar imagery. In this way, metaphor becomes a subtle yet powerful tool for normalising exclusionary beliefs.

²¹⁶ van Dijk, *Racism and the Press*, 219.

²¹⁷ Massimiliano Demata, “A Great and Beautiful Wall,” 278.

²¹⁸ Arcimaviciene and Baglama, “Migration, Metaphor and Myth.”

²¹⁹ Andreas Musolff, “The Study of Metaphor as Part of Critical Discourse Analysis,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 9, no. 3 (2012): 301–310, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2012.688300>.

Common metaphorical domains used to describe migrants include war, natural disasters (particularly water-based), parasites,²²⁰ diseases,²²¹ pollutants²²² and other scenarios evoking chaos or loss of control. These metaphors regularly appear in both the tabloid and the broadsheet press, to dehumanise migrants and to suggest an unsustainable scale to the ‘problem.’²²³ Recurring lexical choices such as ‘flow,’ ‘wave,’ ‘surge,’ ‘catastrophe,’ and ‘disaster’ imply panic, unpredictability and stress.²²⁴ Empirical research by the Migration Observatory (2006-2015) confirms that terms ‘influx’ and ‘flood’ were among the most frequent collocates used in UK press coverage of migration.²²⁵

Such metaphorical expressions contribute to negative evaluations of the unpredictability of the situation, creating feelings of insecurity and panic that people generally experience in the face of natural disasters.²²⁶ This contributes directly to anti-migrant sentiment by sustaining the myth that Britain is at capacity and under siege. In doing so, it obscures the structural causes of migration and disregards the often-limited choices available to asylum seekers and refugees, ultimately legitimising restrictive and hostile policy responses.

The Daily Express article, headlined, “*One chart exposes UK's 'enormous' immigration problem with influx 'like never before'*”²²⁷ employs hyperbolic language and temporal intensification to create a sense of urgency. The use of size-based descriptors such as “enormous”, “influx” paired with the time market “like never before”, allude to an extraordinary crisis, priming the reader for alarm. The author continues in the same linguistic register: “unprecedented surge” which starkly contrasts the Government’s “decade-long efforts to curb migration.” The juxtaposition of rapid escalation and prolonged, and allegedly ineffective, control efforts, implicitly suggests the need for more extreme measures, reinforcing the myth of a runaway crisis demanding urgent attention.

²²⁰ Andreas Musolff, “Dehumanizing Metaphors in UK Immigrant Debates in Press and Online Media,” *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* 3 (2015): 41–56.

²²¹ Massimiliano Demata, “A Great and Beautiful Wall,” *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* 5, no. 2 (2017): 274–294.

²²² Theresa Catalano and George E. Fielder, “European Spaces and the Roma: Denaturalizing the Naturalized in Online Reader Comments,” *Discourse & Communication* 12, no. 3 (2018): 240–257.

²²³ Arcimaviciene and Baglama, “Migration, Metaphor and Myth.”

²²⁴ Połńska-Kimunguyi, “Echoes of Empire,” 9.

²²⁵ Migration Observatory, *Migration in the News: Portrayals of Immigrants, Migrants, Asylum Seekers and Refugees in National British Newspapers, 2010–2012* (Oxford: University of Oxford, August 8, 2013), https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Report-Migration_News.pdf.

²²⁶ Arcimaviciene and Baglama, “Migration, Metaphor and Myth.”

²²⁷ Aurora Bosotti, “One Chart Exposes UK's 'Enormous' Immigration Problem with Influx 'like Never Before',” *Daily Express*, April 29, 2024, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1907498/chart-uk-immigration-rate>.

Metaphors of ‘rupture’ and ‘breaking’ are another popular strategy in both the British tabloid and broadsheet press. The Telegraph headline, “*Britain has reached its immigration breaking point,*”²²⁸ presupposes that such a threshold exists, and has now been reached, framing the issue as a national emergency. This metaphor contributes to panic-inducing discourse by portraying the nation as structurally incapable of withstanding further immigration. This is reinforced through the statements such as “Labour have no plan to address the pressure our open border has placed on public services, housing and infrastructure,” where the pairing of “no plan” and the verb “pressure” amplifies a sense of helplessness. The article ultimately directs blame toward migrants as the perceived source of systemic strain.

Echoing the inflammatory words of Suella Braverman, this Daily Mail headline reads “*Nigel Farage warns of ‘invasion’ of young men from countries ‘with terrorism, gang culture and war zones’ as he blasts Tory control of UK’s borders in election speech.*”²²⁹ The use of “invasion” functions as a war metaphor, invoking imminent threat and legitimising urgency. Such language positions the UK as besieged, invoking what Forkert et al. describe as the myth of a Europe “under siege.”²³⁰ Połńska-Kimunguyi reinforces this, claiming it prohibits “solidarity with the ‘enemies,’ as they might bring violence to the carefully constructed zone of stability, and hard-earned prosperity.”²³¹ Migrants, in this construction, are stripped of individuality and depicted as a faceless, encroaching mass. As a mythical villainous enemy, they directly threaten the innocent British citizens, while in this instance Nigel Farage posits himself as a ‘hero’ to combat this problem.

The threat is further compounded by unsubstantiated claims linking immigration to economic decline, deepening the perception of incoming danger. This implicit but repeated negative framing normalises distrust towards the ‘out-group’. Cohen notes that the repetition of fixed metaphors, such as ‘floods’ and ‘invasions’, “shows them as the ‘natural’ way of describing the situation. The ‘naturalization’ of particular metaphors can blur the boundaries between the literal and the non-literal,” ultimately serving to sustain the climate of moral panic.²³²

²²⁸ *The Telegraph*, “Britain Has Reached Its Immigration Breaking Point.”

²²⁹ David Wilcock, “Nigel Farage Warns of ‘Invasion’ of Young Men across Channel before Election,” *Daily Mail*, June 24, 2024, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13563073/Nigel-Farage-warns-invasion-young-men-channel-election.html>.

²³⁰ Kirsten Forkert, Federico Oliveri, Gargi Bhattacharyya, and Jonathan Graham, *How Media and Conflicts Make Migrants* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

²³¹ Połńska-Kimunguyi, “Echoes of Empire,” 9.

²³² Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, xxiv.

Numerical Strategies

Numerical rhetoric is another key discursive strategy through which migrants are constructed as mass threat. Rather than aiming to inform, statistics are often used to overwhelm and alarm. By omitting the names and lived experiences of migrants, and instead presenting inflated or decontextualised statistics, migrants are framed not as individuals with rights but as unmanageable quantities. Common collocates such as “millions” and “thousands” frequently accompany reductionist verbs like “cut”, “reduce” to reinforce the urgent need to curtail the “influx”.²³³ In this way, immigration becomes semantically linked with unrelenting numerical growth, an association reinforced by the constant repetition of such narratives in the media. As van Dijk argues, the semantic objective in this case is to “associate immigration with problems and threats if only by quantity.”²³⁴

The Runnymede Trust has highlighted that this tendency to inflate the migrant numbers directly impacts public perception, fuels anxiety and increases support for restrictive policies. Repeated claims that migrants numbers are excessive, ultimately legitimises exclusionary policy responses by presenting them as rational solutions to an ‘out-of-control’ crisis.²³⁵ Zappettini reinforces this point, emphasising that discursive framing has a powerful capacity not only to shape public opinion but also to provide the “justification upon which political decision-making processes are legitimised, triggering thus a further setting of political agendas and policy deliberations.”²³⁶

Statistics are frequently presented without context or verifiable sources, making them difficult to challenge. As such, they often circulate uncritically, treated as factual and authoritative. This numerical framing is typically bolstered by emotionally charged language. For example, The Telegraph article “*Britain Has Reached Its Immigration Breaking Point*” opens with: “between 2022 and 2023 the population of England and Wales increased by over 600,000 – the biggest increase since 1949, when records began,” setting an alarmist tone for the rest of the article.²³⁷

²³³ Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, *A Hostile Environment*.

²³⁴ van Dijk, “News Racism,” 45.

²³⁵ Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, *A Hostile Environment*.

²³⁶ Federico Zappettini, “Europhobia as a Trajectory to Hate Speech Normalisation? A Diachronic Analysis of Brexit Media Propaganda,” *Critical Discourse Studies*, 2025, 1–17.

²³⁷ *The Telegraph*, “Britain Has Reached Its Immigration Breaking Point.”

The author suggests Labour “threw the gates wide open” and continues with charged language that amplifies this numerical and social pressure, “population explosion”, “bonanza”, “madness”, “huge influx”, “strain” and “scale”. This is a clear example of hyperbolic rhetoric, employed to construct a sense of crisis and urgency, implicitly positioning immigration as a threat requiring immediate restriction.

The Sun article headlined “*Albanian Gangs Target Pregnant Mums in Swindle*” declares:

“The flood of migrants continues, however, with 3,180 arriving from all countries just last month. Some 5,435 in 114 boats have been intercepted so far this year, the Border Force transporting 442 of them to the Dover on Easter Sunday. The soaring numbers have piled more pressure on Rishi Sunak who has pledged to stop the boats.”²³⁸

The reference to “all countries”, is both vague and inaccurate, exaggerating the breadth of the issue. Lexical choices such as “flood”, “soaring” and “piled more pressure” evoke images of an uncontrollable deluge, while verbs like “intercepted” and “stop the boats” cast the UK as a besieged nation taking defensive action. Migrants are linguistically constructed as forces to be contained rather than as human beings seeking refuge.

The article from The Daily Express titled “*Migration chaos warning as thousands set to cross Channel during French Olympics*”²³⁹ is just one example of the constant stream of reporting regarding the Channel crossings. An ICLAIM report reveals UK media coverage overwhelmingly favours maritime-related terminology: ‘boats’, ‘crossings’, and ‘arrivals,’ skewing public understanding of irregular migration pathways.²⁴⁰ The article frames Channel crossings as a looming national emergency, with language centred on the need for “protection” of the UK, justifying the need for defensive measures. Phrases like “migration chaos”, “unguarded coasts” and “braced for a nightmare” allude to militaristic imagery and reinforce a sense of vulnerability and invasion.²⁴¹ The repetition of “migration chaos”, also featured

²³⁸ *The Sun*, “Albanian Gangs Target Pregnant Mums in Swindle.”

²³⁹ Jonathan Walker, “Thousands More Small Boat Migrants Set to Cross Channel as France Steps up Security,” *Daily Express*, July 20, 2024, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1925828/thousands-more-small-boat-migrants-set>.

²⁴⁰ I-CLAIM Project, *The Narrative Construction of Migrant Irregularity*, 2025, 28.

²⁴¹ Jonathan Walker, “Thousands More Small Boat Migrants Set to Cross Channel.”

prominently in the headline, functions as a rhetorical strategy to amplify a sense of disorder and crisis.

Underlying all three constructed myths is a persistent binary logic. Simplified contrasts such as innocent and lawful vs villainous and unlawful, plenty vs scarcity and order vs chaos obscure complex realities and place migrants as the destabilising force that bridges these binaries. These linguistic simplifications are strategically employed to legitimise exclusion, punishment and restriction, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and normalising an environment of intolerance towards migrants.

iv) Mental Models

Van Dijk's theory of 'mental models' explains how individuals process and store information by constructing internal, and often socially shared, representations of events, people and situations. These mental models form the "underlying *cognitions* of language users" and are shaped by prior knowledge, beliefs and experiences.²⁴² They guide how readers interpret discourse, functioning as subjective frameworks through which meaning is made.²⁴³ When media discourse repeatedly links migrants with crime, strain or threat, it activates and reinforces negative mental models that may already exist in readers' minds. As a result, audiences are more likely to process new information in ways that confirm pre-existing biases, even in the absence of overtly prejudiced language.²⁴⁴ Van Dijk argues that dominant ideologies are reproduced and communicated through discourse, because they are embedded in the mental models that readers use to receive and interpret texts.²⁴⁵ In this way, the media does not merely reflect prevailing ideologies but actively shapes and sustains them in the public consciousness.

It should be acknowledged, however, that readers are not merely passive recipients of discourse and Chilton reiterates that "readers are not of course totally predictable [...] not absolutely

²⁴² Teun A. van Dijk, *Elite Discourse and Racism* (London: SAGE Publications, 1993), 13, <https://discourses.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Teun-A.-van-Dijk-1993-Elite-Discourse-And-Racism.pdf>.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

manipulable.”²⁴⁶ While texts guide interpretation, the meanings they trigger are shaped by the reader’s own cognitive frameworks. These mental structures aren’t contained in the text itself but are activated and adapted in the mind, influenced by individual social and psychological contexts. Readers are also capable of critical thinking. Assimakopoulos and Serafis argue, however, that scrutiny often only takes place after initial, automatic interpretation has already taken place.²⁴⁷ Subtle hate speech can be absorbed subconsciously, shaping perceptions before conscious evaluation occurs. Detecting and rejecting these messages requires non-automatic processing, which is something not all readers are equipped or willing to undertake especially considering the discursive reproductions of discriminatory hatred are often “below the threshold of notice for anyone who accepts the[m ...] as ‘natural’”.²⁴⁸

The CDA in this chapter reveals how ideological messages are embedded in familiar, seemingly factual reporting. When these framings are repeated across multiple platforms and over time, they entrench a worldview in which exclusionary attitudes appear rational and necessary. In this way, the media actively moulds public opinion, rendering xenophobia increasingly naturalised and perceived as ‘common sense.’

²⁴⁶ Paul Chilton, “Manipulation, Memes and Metaphors: The Case of *Mein Kampf*,” in *Manipulation and Ideologies in the Twentieth Century: Discourse, Language, Mind*, ed. Louis de Saussure and Peter Schulz (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2005), 39-40.

²⁴⁷ Assimakopoulos and Serafis, “Why Soft Hate Speech Matters,” 13.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

4.

THE INTERPLAY OF MEDIA AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN
ANTI-MIGRANT NARRATIVES

This chapter examines the symbiotic relationship between media and political discourse in the construction of anti-migrant narratives. It argues that through a process of mutual reinforcement, these actors disseminate alarmist framings which serve to normalise public hostility. The chapter demonstrates how this discursive loop can produce tangible social and political consequences and reveals the mechanisms by which constructed notions of ‘threat’ become embedded within mainstream discourse.

i) Mutual Reinforcement Between Media and Political Discourse

To fully understand how anti-migrant discourses gain traction, it is essential to examine the interplay between media and political rhetoric. These two domains do not operate in isolation, but co-construct narratives that shape public opinion and policy.

Studies have identified the bidirectional causal relationships between framing in media discourse and in parliamentary discourse revealing how the two agendas influence and shape each other.²⁴⁹ British newspapers, widely regarded as overtly partisan and ideological in

²⁴⁹ Rens Vliegthart and Conny Roggeband, “Framing Immigration and Integration: Relationships between Press and Parliament in the Netherlands,” *International Communication Gazette* 69, no. 3 (2007): 295–319, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048507076582>.

outlook, play a significant role in shaping political debate.²⁵⁰ Zappettini notes that “tabloid journalism relies on distinctive ideological and stylistic features aligned with populist discourses” and the political elites, in turn, rely on the tabloid press to “(dis)inform audiences” and influence political attitudes.²⁵¹ The tabloid press reaches 85% of British readership, and so is an appealing means of disseminating political beliefs.²⁵² It should be acknowledged that individuals tend to select media outlets that conform to their pre-existing political views, making the relationship mutually reinforcing.²⁵³

Politicians can leverage the media to their advantage to both promote and legitimise policy choices and present them to the public in a palatable and selective manner. In the lead-up to the introduction of the Nationality and Borders Bill in March 2021,²⁵⁴ then-Home Secretary Priti Patel reportedly held restricted press briefings to help secure favourable media coverage.²⁵⁵ Her office held meetings with journalists from selected outlets including The Sunday Telegraph, The Sun, The Daily Mail, The Daily Telegraph, The Times and The Sunday Times, all known for their right-leaning readership.²⁵⁶ These outlets largely endorsed the Bill, framing it through the positive lens of the briefing. Any criticism was buried at the end, with most coverage dominated by Patel’s quotes and unchallenged tropes linking migration to crime, invasion, and fraud.²⁵⁷ Similarly, Patel’s press delegation to Rwanda *excluded* critical outlets like The Guardian, The Independent, Financial Times and the BBC, outlets more likely to challenge the official lines.²⁵⁸

Media discourse frequently mirrors political rhetoric. For example, in 2021, the New Plan for Immigration focused heavily on ‘illegal’ migration, framing those who arrive via irregular routes as immoral and undeserving of humanitarian protection.²⁵⁹ Policy statements warned of

²⁵⁰ Scott Blinder and Anne-Marie Jeannet, “The ‘Illegal’ and the Skilled: Effects of Media Portrayals on Perceptions of Immigrants in Britain,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 9 (2018): 1627–1646, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1412253>.

²⁵¹ Zappettini, “Europhobia as a Trajectory,” 5.

²⁵² Zappettini, “Europhobia as a Trajectory,” 5.

²⁵³ Natalie Jomini Stroud, “Polarization and Partisan Selective Exposure,” *Journal of Communication* 60, no. 3 (2010): 556–576, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2010.01497.x>.

²⁵⁴ Nationality and Borders Act 2022, c. 36 (UK).

²⁵⁵ HOPE not hate, *Stoking the Flames: How the Media and Government Promote Hostility Towards Migrants* (London: HOPE not hate, 2023), <https://hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Stoking-the-Flames.pdf>.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Griffiths and Trebilcock, “Continued and Intensified Hostility,” 407.

“dangerous and unnecessary journeys” and asserted asylum access should be “based on need, not on the ability to pay people smugglers.”²⁶⁰ This language served to demonise those arriving by small boats and fed into the polarising media discourse that presents migrants as deviant criminals, reinforcing the separation between deserving and undeserving.

Wodak identifies a major shift whereby extreme nationalistic rhetoric found in far-right populist discourse has gradually entered into the mainstream.²⁶¹ Centrist political parties, motivated by electoral concerns, have adopted increasingly exclusionary stances, contributing to what she constitutes a normalisation in the political landscape, almost imperceptible at first.²⁶² This includes fear-mongering about national security and the protection of social welfare.²⁶³ Once considered extreme anti-migrant positions, formerly confined to parties such as Reform UK, these have now been mainstreamed, adopted by both Labour and the Conservatives. The media do not simply report these developments but co-produce them, working in step with political parties to “actively (re-)construct them.”²⁶⁴

Powerful elites have preferential access to what is presented to the public, and significant influence over timing and framing. Most readers, assuming objectivity, will consequently absorb this construction of news discourse, without a critical lens.²⁶⁵ This facilitates manipulation of public opinion into viewing exclusionary policy measures as not just acceptable but necessary.

Due to the perception that the media presents factual and objective accounts, negative framings are absorbed as ‘commonsense’. Crucially this interplay between political and media discourse reinforces a feedback loop of legitimisation: politicians rely on the media to disseminate exclusionary narratives, while the media draw authority from political rhetoric to justify alarmist tones. Together, they construct and sustain ideological environments that cement scapegoating, normalise public hostility towards migrants and maintain moral panics.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ van Dijk, “Mediating Racism,” 37.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

ii) How Media Narratives Escalate Public Aggression

Establishing a direct causal relationship between media coverage and the actions of hate crime perpetrators in real-world contexts presents a significant challenge especially “in situ i.e. outside of a carefully controlled experiment”.²⁶⁶ Growing evidence, however, reveals a strong correlation between mainstream media narratives and legitimised public hostility, a dynamic that creates fertile ground for real-world violence against migrants.

Studies have identified the impact of media discourse on dangerously negative perceptions. The summary of a 2010 report on hate crimes against Muslims fuelled by media and political commentaries, is unequivocal stating that empirical evidence shows perpetrators “are invariably motivated by a negative view of Muslims they have acquired from either mainstream or extremist nationalist reports or commentaries in the media.”²⁶⁷ A key driver, the report concludes, is the “negative and false belief that Muslims pose a security or terrorist threat.”²⁶⁸ Once again, threat plays a crucial role in triggering actions of those with already-existing prejudices against a certain group. Furthermore, danger, criminality and threat discourse reinforce hierarchical distinctions in human worth, consolidating a menacing ‘other’ that generates fear.²⁶⁹ The media’s role in shaping public attitudes toward minority groups has been widely acknowledged both in academic literature and the UN. For example, a Migration Research Series report examining media narratives around refugees identified different media portrayals of two ‘out-groups’, Ukrainian and Syrian refugees, fostered greater public sympathy for one while fuelling intolerance and division against the other.²⁷⁰

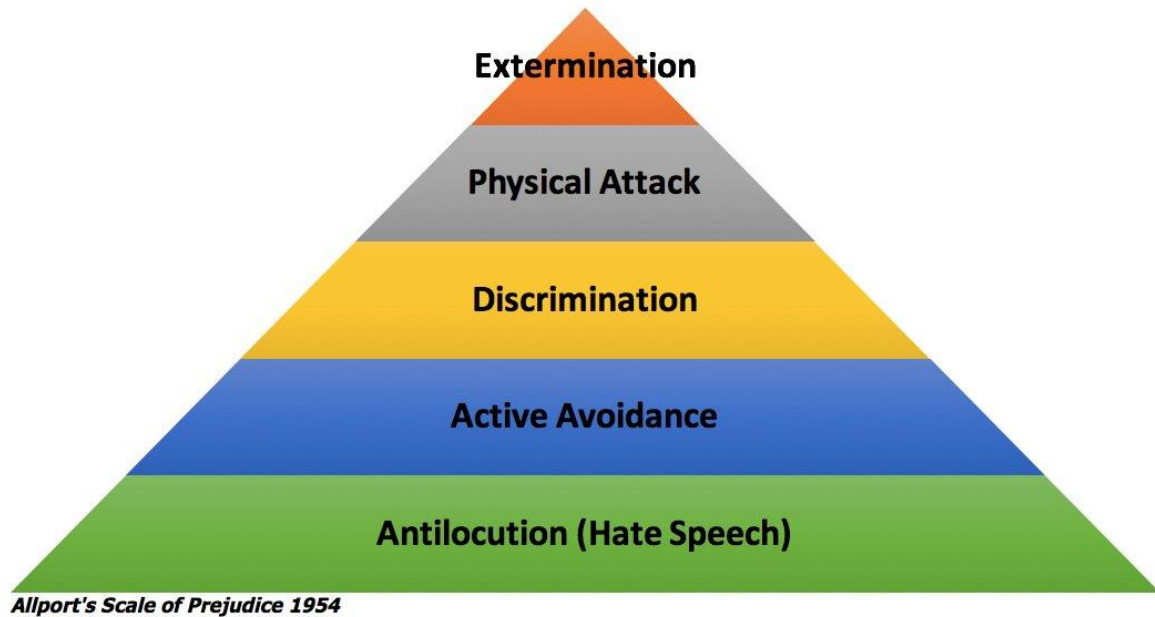
²⁶⁶ Blinder and Jeannet, “The ‘Illegal’ and the Skilled,” 1632.

²⁶⁷ Jonathan Githens Mazer and Robert Lambert, *Islamophobia and Anti Muslim Hate Crime: A London Case Study* (European Muslim Research Centre, University of Exeter, 2010), 11, <https://tandis.odihr.pl/bitstream/20.500.12389/20715/1/06056.pdf>.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Połńska-Kimunguyi, “Echoes of Empire,” 8

²⁷⁰ Kate McCann, Maciej Sienkiewicz, and Michael Zard, *The Role of Media Narratives in Shaping Public Opinion toward Refugees: A Comparative Analysis*, Migration Research Series No. 72 (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2023), <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/MRS-72.pdf>.



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In extreme cases, a perceived threat can trigger more than just hostility, it can catalyse violence. Studies have identified linked far-right attacks to heightened media coverage of immigration while empirical research shows that negative portrayals can trigger physiological and emotional responses associated with social aggression, such as elevated testosterone-cortisol ratios.²⁷² ²⁷³ Hostile language, even when not overtly inflammatory, gradually reshapes perceptions. Allport's Scale of Prejudice (1954) charts this progression from antilocution (Hate Speech), avoidance, discrimination, physical attack and extermination, highlighting how prejudice can escalate into violence through cumulative social and psychological influences, due to an erosion of moral or rational boundaries.²⁷⁴ The UN similarly warns that atrocity crimes rarely “happen suddenly or spontaneously” but are often preceded by: “messages in public discourse and the media [...] which spread hostility and encourage people to commit violence against specific communities, often based on their identity”.²⁷⁵

²⁷¹ Carlile and Harrison, *Addressing Subtle Forms of Hate*, 5.

²⁷² Ruud Koopmans, “Explaining the Rise of Racist and Extreme Right Violence in Western Europe: Grievances or Opportunities?” *European Journal of Political Research* 30, no. 2 (1996): 185–216, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.1996.tb00674.x>.

²⁷³ Pierluigi Conzo, Giovanni Fuochi, Luca Anfossi, et al., “Negative Media Portrayals of Immigrants Increase Ingroup Favoritism and Hostile Physiological and Emotional Reactions,” *Scientific Reports* 11 (2021): 16407, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-95800-2>.

²⁷⁴ Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1954).

²⁷⁵ United Nations, *The Plan of Action for Media Stakeholders in Addressing Hate Speech and Preventing Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Genocide (Advanced Copy)* (New York: United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, 2024), <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Plan%20of%20Action%20Advanced%20Copy.pdf>.

Subtle hate speech may have even more of a gradual effect than explicit hate speech, but nonetheless, can lay the foundations for more extreme violence. The insidious power of soft hate lies in its cumulative normalisation of hostility, which over time lowers the threshold for discriminatory action and primes the public for more extreme responses.

iii) Media, Brexit and the Normalisation of Hostility

The UK 2024 riots did not erupt in isolation. In reality, they were the culmination of years of anti-migrant sentiment embedded in political rhetoric, press coverage and online discourse. The positive correlation between negative media coverage and hate crime is well-established. Following the 2016 Brexit referendum, Britain witnessed a fivefold increase in racist hate crime.²⁷⁶ In the run up to the public vote, anti-immigrant rhetoric tripled during the 10-week campaign, rising faster than any other political issue and appearing on 99 front pages, (79 of which were pro-leave newspapers), compared with 82 about the economy.²⁷⁷ The Daily *Express*, the Daily Mail, and The Sun dominated this hostile framing, repeatedly portraying migrants as a burden on the economy and public services.²⁷⁸

The ramifications of such rhetoric involved lived experience of fear. For example, studies of Eastern European migrants' experience of hate crime before and after the Brexit vote, in rural areas, found a consensus: the media had exacerbated hostility and increased their sense of insecurity.²⁷⁹ The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination expressed "serious concerns" regarding the post-referendum hate-crime spike, explicitly linking it to divisive anti-migrant British media narratives.²⁸⁰ Albornoz et al. found that hate crime rose

²⁷⁶ Jennifer Saul, "Immigration in the Brexit Campaign: Protean Dogwhistles and Political Manipulation," in *Media Ethics, Free Speech, and the Requirements of Democracy*, ed. Carl Fox and Joe Saunders (London: Routledge, 2018), 19, <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/161840/3/ImmigrationBrexitCleanDraft.pdf>.

²⁷⁷ Jane Martinson, "Media Painted Bleak Picture of Immigration before Brexit Vote, Study Finds," *The Guardian*, May 10, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/10/brexit-eu-referendum-campaign-media-coverage-immigration>.

²⁷⁸ Martin Moore and Gordon Ramsay, *UK Media Coverage of the 2016 EU Referendum Campaign* (London: The Policy Institute at King's College London, 2017), <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/cmcp/uk-media-coverage-of-the-2016-eu-referendum-campaign.pdf>.

²⁷⁹ Karen Lumsden, Jackie Goode, and Alex Black, "'I Will Not Be Thrown Out of the Country Because I'm an Immigrant': Eastern European Migrants' Responses to Hate Crime in a Semi-Rural Context in the Wake of Brexit," *Sociological Research Online* 24, no. 2 (2019): 167–184.

²⁸⁰ BBC News, "UN Blames UK Politicians for Brexit Hate Crime Spike," *BBC News*, August 26, 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-37193140>.

most sharply in ‘Remain’ areas where anti-migrant sentiment had previously been stigmatised, attributing this to shifting social norms: the referendum result “legitimized previously sanctioned views towards immigrants to be expressed publicly.”²⁸¹ Saul similarly argued that the timing of the surge indicates “a legitimation effect [...] which made people more willing to act,” due to political outcomes emboldening them to act on latent prejudice.²⁸² These findings suggest a close connection between shifts in public attitude and outlook towards migrants, and the degree of ‘permission’ perceived to express those views openly.

Overt displays of hostility, in the form of anti-migrant demonstrations, have been on the rise since 2022, spearheaded by the far-right, with a rise of 102% recorded in general anti-migrant far-right activity.²⁸³ Over 50 anti-migrant demonstrations took place in the UK in just the first three months of 2023.²⁸⁴ In February 2023, rioters started violent clashes outside a hotel housing asylum seekers in Kirkby, Liverpool.²⁸⁵ Mimicking the inflammatory language of war and water metaphors adopted by the media and politicians, one far-right protester posted online a map of hotels housing asylum seekers declaring: “This is the reality of the invasion. Soon the entire UK and the Republic of Ireland will be sunk.”²⁸⁶ Between 2021 and 2024, far-right groups made 24 visits to Hull, gathering outside asylum-seeker accommodation and delivering speeches including explicitly dehumanising rhetoric, referring to migrants as “vermin coming over on boats.”²⁸⁷ These examples demonstrate how legitimised hostile tropes can move from headlines and policy into public spaces.

The linguistic link between policy announcement, media coverage and far-right discourse was analysed by the NGO *HOPE Not Hate*, using a corpus of 3,500 articles. Their study identified statistically significant correlations between press coverage on migration, by *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Express* and *The Sun*, with far-right engagement around the issue of migration on

²⁸¹ Facundo Albornoz, Jonathan Bradley, and Silvia Sonderegger, *The Brexit Referendum and the Rise in Hate Crime: Conforming to the New Norm*, CeDEx Discussion Paper Series, No. 2020-12 (University of Nottingham, 2020).

²⁸² Jennifer Saul, “Immigration in the Brexit Campaign,” 19.

²⁸³ HOPE not Hate, *Stoking the Flames*, 4.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Amelia Gentleman, “The Attack on Migrants in Knowsley Didn’t Come from Nowhere – Ministers Are Fuelling the Violence,” *The Guardian*, February 13, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/feb/13/attack-migrants-knowsley-ministers-violence-asylum-seekers>.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ HOPE not Hate, *Laying the Groundwork: How Years of Anti-Migrant Activism Fed into This Summer’s Race Riots*, October 8, 2024, <https://hopenothate.org.uk/2024/10/08/laying-the-groundwork-how-years-of-anti-migrant-activism-fed-into-this-summer-race-riots/>.

the messaging platform Telegram.²⁸⁸ Articles linking migrants to criminality were especially likely to be circulated in these spaces.²⁸⁹ The study highlighted that far-right discussion spiked around the same topics dominating government and media agendas: the Rwanda plan, asylum hotels and small boats crossings.. In parallel to the Government’s ‘Stop the boats’ campaign, migration-related messages in far-right Telegram groups rose from an average of 761 per day in 2021 to 1136 in early 2023.²⁹⁰ This suggests a cascading effect: government rhetoric feeds into media framing, which in turn reinforces far-right narratives and encourages mobilisation.

iv) Misinformation and disinformation

Rather than issuing direct calls to violence, the insidious nature of subtle hate and discursive framing creates fertile ground for a moral panic to escalate into physical aggression. In the case of the 2024 UK riots, the immediate catalyst was not a call to arms but in fact a piece of misinformation or perhaps more appropriately, *disinformation*. This story was carefully constructed: a false narrative about the perpetrator’s ethnicity, deliberately to inflame tensions. Without the relentless reinforcement of the ‘deviant migrant’ myth across media and political discourse, this story may not have provoked such a visceral reaction. Instead, it functioned as a confirmation of a socially constructed fear, primed and internalised by those ready to act. As Katwala observes, misinformation played a role in the targeting of both asylum seekers and Muslims, but “the reason that misinformation is shared and believed is primarily due to threat perceptions – driven by fears and prejudices towards the groups being targeted, as well as efforts by extreme actors to stoke those prejudices.”²⁹¹

This was not the first time misinformation catalysed far-right mobilisation. In March 2023, protests erupted in Newquay, Cornwall after it was falsely implied that a rape suspect was housed in an asylum seeker.²⁹² In reality, his address just happened to be on the same road. The similarities between this event and the 2024 riots are striking: both events were preceded by dehumanising narratives that cast migrants as criminals and threats, creating a context in which

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ HOPE not Hate, *Stoking the Flames*, 19.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Sunder Katwala, *Understanding “Legitimate Concerns” – and How to Differentiate Them from Those with No Legitimacy*, British Future, 2024, Accessed June 3, 2025, <https://www.britishfuture.org/understanding-legitimate-concerns-and-how-to-differentiate-them-from-those-with-no-legitimacy/>

²⁹² Hope not Hate, *Stoking the flames*, 12.

even false allegations could spark collective outrage. Notably, similar crimes by native British men rarely provoke such reactions, implying the moral outrage at the crime serves more as a façade masking the true motivation: hostility towards migrants.

The gap between reality and perception is often where constructed threats take root. Research across Europe finds that *perceived* group threat, rather than *actual* threat, is a dominant driver of negative attitudes towards migrants.²⁹³ This is typically assessed by measurable factors such as the size of the immigrant population.²⁹⁴ In the case of the 2024 riots, although 85% of Britons opposed the unrest, a YouGov poll found that 62% of its supporters believed their views were widely shared.²⁹⁵ Only 12% of respondents believed the rioters reflected the views of most Britons.²⁹⁶ This stark misperception illustrates the core of a moral panic. As Cohen writes, its hallmark reaction “is disproportionate to the actual seriousness (risk, damage, threat) of the event. The reaction is always more severe (hence exaggerated, irrational, unjustified) than the condition (event, threat, behaviour, risk) warrants.”²⁹⁷ Yet for those involved in the riots, such responses may have felt entirely rational. Within the discourse that surrounded them, many rioters likely felt they were defending a threatened moral order, acting on behalf of a supposedly silenced majority.

These developments illustrate how political rhetoric, media narratives, and public perception form a mutually reinforcing cycle. When threat is constructed as ‘common sense’ and continuously reinforced across platforms, the line between opinion and action begins to blur. The 2024 riots were not an isolated event, but the predictable outcome of years of moral boundaries being gradually but subtly redrawn by the media, political actors, and the ideological narratives they legitimised. This underscores the urgent need to interrogate the language of ‘threat’ and to recognise its power in shaping both public attitudes and tangible social consequences.

²⁹³ Blinder and Jeannet, “The ‘Illegal’ and the Skilled,” 1632.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ YouGov, “The Public Reaction to the 2024 Riots,” *YouGov*, June 10, 2024, <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/50257-the-public-reaction-to-the-2024-riots>.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 12.

5.

NAVIGATING HATE SPEECH AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

This chapter examines the complex legal, ethical and societal tensions surrounding hate speech and freedom of expression in the UK. It begins by outlining relevant international and domestic legal obligations related to both issues, before evaluating the limitations of legal and regulatory approaches. Given the subtlety of the negative framings, hate speech laws have proven ineffective in addressing harmful rhetoric that falls below the legal threshold. It concludes by exploring alternative strategies for sustainably addressing anti-migrant hostility in media discourse.

i) The Debate

Hate speech has seen a marked increase across the UK and Europe in recent decades, driven by a confluence of political, societal and media dynamics.²⁹⁸ While the causes are multifaceted, a comparative 2018 study of six EU countries found that “[t]he rise in prejudice and intolerance can [...] be directly linked to the respective governments’ own policies and communications strategies” as well as traditional media scapegoating migrants for various problems.²⁹⁹ Simultaneously, democracies are experiencing a “freedom of speech recession”, a backsliding, with open democracies implementing restrictive measures and eroding journalistic

²⁹⁸ ARTICLE 19, *Responding to 'Hate Speech': Comparative Overview of Six EU Countries* (ARTICLE 19, 2018), Accessed June 3, 2025, https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ECA-hate-speech-compilation-report_March-2018.pdf.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

freedoms.³⁰⁰ Balancing the right to be free from discrimination with the right to speak freely presents a significant and nuanced challenge.

As mentioned, there is currently no international legal definition of hate speech, which is predominantly due to the complexity of the characterisation of what is ‘hateful’, and depends on linguistic, contextual and social factors.³⁰¹ In reaction to the contested nature of the definition, a wealth of academic literature has been dedicated towards hate speech and its conceptual limits.³⁰² To provide a unified framework for the United Nations to address the issue globally, the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech defines hate speech as...

“any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.”³⁰³

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) builds on this, defining hate speech as expression that “advocates, incite, promote or justifies hatred, violence and discrimination.”³⁰⁴ ECRI stresses that if left unaddressed, it can lead to “acts of violence and conflict on a wider scale”. In this sense hate speech is an extreme form of intolerance which contributes to hate crime.”³⁰⁵ They do reiterate the need to balance restrictions with protections for free expression.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁰ The Future of Free Speech, *The Free Speech Recession Hits Home: Mapping Laws and Regulations Affecting Free Speech in 22 Open Democracies* (2023), Accessed June 3, 2025, https://futurefreespeech.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Report_The-Free-Speech-Recession-Hits-Home_30112023.pdf.

³⁰¹ Darina Benikova, Michael Wojatzki, and Torsten Zesch, "What Does This Imply? Examining the Impact of Implicitness on the Perception of Hate Speech," in *Language Technologies for the Challenges of the Digital Age*, ed. Georg Rehm and Thierry Declerck, vol. 10713 (Cham: Springer, 2018), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73706-5_14].

³⁰² Soojin Lee and Anne Gilliland, "Evolving Definitions of Hate Speech: The Impact of a Lack of Standardized Definitions," in *Wisdom, Well-Being, Win-Win: Proceedings of the 19th International iConference 2024*, ed. Isaac Sserwanga et al. (Cham: Springer, 2024), 141–156, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-57860-1_11.

³⁰³ United Nations, *Understanding Hate Speech: What is Hate Speech?*, n.d., <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech> (accessed June 3, 2025).

³⁰⁴ Council of Europe - European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), *Hate Speech and Violence*, n.d., Accessed May 30, 2025. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance/hate-speech-and-violence>.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

In 2008, the Council of the European Union Framework Decision mandated that member states criminalise incitement to violence or hatred against protected groups. Implementation remains fragmented across EU member states, however, with national legal interpretations often shaped more by politics than consistent human rights standards, a situation further complicated in post-Brexit Britain.³⁰⁷

Globally, reconciling the right to freedom of expression with other rights is the source of much debate, and is heightened in the realm of journalism and media. The UN regards freedom of opinion as the cornerstones of democracy, but it is not absolute, asserting that restrictions must be exceptional and proportionate, intended to prevent harm and protect equality.³⁰⁸

Academic perspectives on the tension differ sharply. Waldron argues for targeted hate speech restrictions, not to police thoughts but to curtail more tangible, permanent and harmful expressions of hate.³⁰⁹ He argues that the central problem lies in the public spread of messages that distort the social landscape by sending a clear and permanent message to minorities that they are not seen as worthy of equal citizenship by the majority.³¹⁰ He maintains that a well-ordered society should not tolerate such messages, and that democracy is defined not solely by majority rule, but by the safeguarding of minority dignity.³¹¹

Conversely, many scholars caution against the imposition of hate speech laws on the press, warning of a slippery slope toward censorship that could undermine the essential role of a free press in a democratic society. Heinze argues that freedom of speech is one of the foundational conditions of democratic legitimacy, and that restricting it through bans, even well-intentioned ones, is logically inconsistent with democratic principles.³¹² He contests ‘viewpoint-selective’ legislation warning that it risks enabling governments to determine which perspectives are acceptable, an approach fundamentally incompatible with pluralistic debate. Instead, Heinze

³⁰⁷ Beatrix Immenkamp, *Criminalisation of Hate Speech and Hate Crime in Selected EU Member States* (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2024), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)766226](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2024)766226), Accessed June 3, 2025.

³⁰⁸ United Nations, *Hate Speech versus Freedom of Speech*, n.d., <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/hate-speech-versus-freedom-of-speech>, Accessed June 3, 2025.

³⁰⁹ Jeremy Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jbrjd>.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Eric Heinze, *Hate Speech and Democratic Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

advocates for counter-speech rebuttal, factual correction, and public condemnation as more appropriate responses to prejudice.³¹³

Rauch supports this stance questioning “where to draw a stable and consistent line between hate speech and vigorous criticism” and, critically, “who exactly can be trusted to draw it.”³¹⁴ For him, the absence of such a clear line exposes the danger of overreach.³¹⁵ The issue is particularly acute in journalism, due to the overlap between political and press discourse, making it difficult to distinguish between reporting and endorsement. Many argue that media coverage of incendiary speech, especially when quoting public figures, should not be mistaken for alignment. Indeed, journalists have a duty to report on political discourse, even when it is controversial, as part of their broader obligation to inform the public.

ii) International Law Obligations

As a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) since 1976, the UK is bound to respect, protect and fulfil Article 20(2): “Any advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.”³¹⁶ The rights to equality and non-discrimination are provided in Articles 1, 2 and 7 of the UDHR,³¹⁷ and legally reinforced through Articles 2(1) and 26 of the ICCPR.³¹⁸ These must be balanced with Article 19, which protects freedom of expression, including the right “to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds,” subject to restrictions necessary to protect others’ rights and reputations.³¹⁹

Recognising the harm caused by hate speech, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression issued guidelines on Article 19(3) of the ICCPR in 2001, acknowledging its

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Jonathan Rauch, “A New Argument for Hate Speech Laws? Um, No,” *The Washington Post*, February 4, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2014/02/04/a-new-argument-for-hate-speech-laws-um-no/>, Accessed June 23, 2025).

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, art. 20(2), G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), U.N. Doc. A/6316 (Dec. 16, 1966).

³¹⁷ G.A. Res. 217 (III) A, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, arts. 1, 2, and 7 (Dec. 10, 1948).

³¹⁸ *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, art. 21(2) and 26, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), U.N. Doc. A/6316 (Dec. 16, 1966).

³¹⁹ *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, art. 19, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), U.N. Doc. A/6316 (Dec. 16, 1966).

capacity to incite violence and entrench division while also cautioning that hate speech laws can be abused, particularly in regimes that silence dissent under the guise of social harmony.³²⁰ This places minority groups in a dual position of vulnerability: both as targets and as potential victims of overreach.

The 2013 Rabat Plan of Action, advises that restrictions on speech focus narrowly on incitement to hatred. The non-legally binding plan clarifies that these can be measured through six factors: context, speaker identity and intent, content, extent and likelihood of harm.³²¹ The UK also ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (1969) and Article 4 requires a commitment to criminalise the spread of ideas rooted in racial superiority and incitement to racial violence or discrimination.³²²

Under the European Convention on Human Rights, Article 10 guarantees freedom of expression, limited by duties outlined in Article 10(2), which stipulates that it “carries with it duties and responsibilities.”³²³ It is further limited by Article 17 which prevents the abuse of rights to undermine others. *Handyside v United Kingdom* affirmed that freedom of speech “is applicable not only to “information” or “ideas” that are favourably received [...] but also to those that shock, offend or disturb the State or any sector of the population.”³²⁴ Journalists are afforded special protection as “public watchdogs” as they foster robust public debate and the public has a right to receive ideas from journalists.³²⁵

iii) Domestic Law Obligations

While the UK lacks a dedicated ‘hate speech’ law, a range of legal provisions address incitement to hatred and discriminatory expression. Hate crime legislation applies when a

³²⁰ United Nations General Assembly, *Contribution of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression*, A/CONF.189/PC.2/24 (March 22, 2001).

³²¹ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Rabat Plan of Action on the Prohibition of Advocacy of National, Racial or Religious Hatred that Constitutes Incitement to Discrimination, Hostility or Violence* (Geneva: United Nations, 2013).

³²² *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*, G.A. Res. 2106 (XX), U.N. Doc. A/6014 (December 21, 1965).

³²³ Council of Europe. *European Convention on Human Rights*, art. 10. Rome, November 4, 1950.

³²⁴ *Handyside v. United Kingdom*, no. 5493/72, Series A no. 24 (European Court of Human Rights, 7 December 1976).

³²⁵ *Chauvy and Others v. France*, no. 64915/01, ECHR 2004-VI, § 67 (European Court of Human Rights, 29 June 2004).

criminal offence is motivated by hostility toward someone based on protected characteristics, such as race, religion, sexual orientation, transgender status, and disability.³²⁶ As ‘hostility’ lacks a legal definition, the accepted view from the Crown Prosecution Service interprets it in everyday terms covering “ill-will, spite, contempt, prejudice, unfriendliness, antagonism, resentment and dislike.”³²⁷ When such hostility is proven, prosecutors may seek an enhanced sentence due to the aggravating nature of the offence.³²⁸

The Race Relations Act 1965 was the UK’s first legislative attempt to address hate speech, focusing on incitement to racial hatred. Its enforcement was weak, however, and was limited to public spaces. Though intended to curb hostility toward Caribbean and Indian subcontinent, prosecutions under the Act disproportionately targeted Black individuals, raising concerns that trials were inadvertently platforming racist views.³²⁹

More comprehensive provisions were later introduced via the Public Order Act 1986.³³⁰ Sections 17-19 criminalise threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour that intends to ‘stir up racial hatred’, including written publications and broadcasts. A conviction under this Act requires proof of intent or that, in context, the content was likely to incite hatred.

One illustrative case is that of a 28-year-old British man Jordan Parlour, convicted under Section 19 of the Public Order Act 1986, after inciting violence online encouraging attacks on a Leeds hotel housing more than 200 migrants.³³¹ He pleaded guilty and received a 20-month sentence.³³² He had posted on Facebook claiming migrants were given "the Life of Riley off the tax us hard-working people earn when it could be put to better use", echoing dehumanising narratives common in sections of the media.³³³

The Equality Act 2010 further broadens protections, prohibiting discrimination on grounds of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief,

³²⁶ Crown Prosecution Service, *Hate Crime*, last modified 2024, <https://www.cps.gov.uk/crime-info/hate-crime>.

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ ARTICLE 19, *Striking a Balance*.

³³⁰ *Public Order Act 1986*, c. 64 (London: The Stationery Office, 1986)

³³¹ BBC News. *Man jailed for Facebook posts encouraging violence*. BBC News, Accessed 21 May, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czjy7mykdwno>.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Ibid.

sex, or sexual orientation.³³⁴ While not a criminal statute, it empowers individuals to bring civil claims against both public bodies and private entities for discriminatory treatment.

iv) Media Regulations

Following the Leveson Inquiry,³³⁵ a judicial public investigation into the culture and ethics of the British press, which recommended replacing the Press Complaints Commission and ending self-regulation, two press regulators are now in place. The principal regulator is the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), a non-governmental body responsible for maintaining standards and handling complaints across UK newspapers, TV and radio. Media outlets that voluntarily join IPSO commit to the Editor's Code of Practice, which includes provisions on, accuracy, privacy, harassment, discrimination and intrusion. IPSO can order corrections, apologies, or retractions where breaches occur. The second, the Independent Monitor of the Press (IMPRESS), is also an approved regulator, though no major national newspapers are members. Some outlets, such as the Guardian, have appointed their own internal readers' ombudsmen.³³⁶ Despite government encouragement to join independent regulators, scepticism persists about true independence, with campaign groups like Hacked Off argue that IPSO is insufficiently impartial.³³⁷ ³³⁸ Criticisms include the claim that regulators are funded and effectively governed by the press industry, who have a clear conflict of interest, resulting in structural bias towards editors.³³⁹

IPSO asserts that its code balances individual rights with the public's right to know.³⁴⁰ Its 'Accuracy' clause reads: "The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text,"³⁴¹ but the Code

³³⁴ United Kingdom, *Equality Act 2010*, c. 15 (London: The Stationery Office, 2010).

³³⁵ Brian Leveson, *An Inquiry into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press: Executive Summary and Recommendations* (London: The Stationery Office, 2012).

³³⁶ House of Commons Library, *Newspapers and Press Regulation*, Research Briefing CBP-7576 (London: UK Parliament, November 29, 2021), <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7576/>.

³³⁷ Hacked Off, *About Hacked Off*, n.d., <https://www.hackedoff.org/about-hacked-off>.

³³⁸ ARTICLE 19, *Responding to "hate speech": Comparative overview of six EU countries* (London: ARTICLE 19, 2018), https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ECA-hate-speech-compilation-report_March-2018.pdf.

³³⁹ Hacked Off, *About Hacked Off*.

³⁴⁰ Independent Press Standards Organisation, *Editors' Code of Practice*, Accessed July 1, 2025,

<https://www.ipso.co.uk/editors-code-of-practice/>

³⁴¹ Ibid.

does not refer directly to ‘hate speech.’ The ‘Discrimination’ clause limits prejudicial references to protected characteristics, such as race or religion, or including details of them if irrelevant to the story. *Stop Funding Hate* highlight a flaw in the code: “both clauses refer to discrimination against an individual rather than a group, meaning that pieces on migration as a whole do not come under regulation.”³⁴² The case of Katie Hopkins who described migrants as “cockroaches” and called for holes to be drilled in their boats, highlights this gap. Though arrested by police she was not charged, and IPSO found no breach. Her defence rested on “the importance of free speech,”³⁴³ illustrating the unwillingness of authorities to intervene when it comes to restricting freedom of expression.

Despite IPSO’s stated commitment to champion an accountable press, they have faced criticism for its inaction in high-profile cases involving major newspapers, regarding Islamophobia, Brexit misinformation, transphobia and anti-vaccine content.³⁴⁴ A recent report revealed its shortcomings and failure to act on complaints: in 2023 despite receiving thousands of complaints, only 52 were upheld, just 0.7%, with an average processing time of over five months and no investigations launched.³⁴⁵ An *ARTICLE 19* report similarly found limited evidence that regulatory bodies are successful in generating necessary improvements to media practices, and deemed the complaints processes difficult to access.³⁴⁶ It concluded, “IPSO has been widely criticised by various stakeholders, including the National Union of Journalists and groups representing victims of some illegal press practices, for being ineffective in addressing victims’ concerns.”³⁴⁷

Ultimately, while the UK’s regulatory framework allows a degree of oversight, its limited enforcement record and structural limitations, particularly its focus on individual, rather than group-based discrimination, undermine its ability to effectively regulate harmful discourse. A significant volume of potentially harmful media content can persist, protected by ‘press

³⁴² Carlile and Harrison, *Addressing Subtle Forms of Hate*, 39.

³⁴³ Steve Doughty, “Katie Hopkins Will Not Face Charges over Allegations She Incited Racial Hatred in Article Comparing Migrants to ‘Cockroaches,’” *Daily Mail*, October 18, 2015, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3279257/Katie-Hopkins-not-face-charges-allegations-incited-racial-hatred-article-comparing-migrants-cockroaches.html>.

³⁴⁴ Brian Cathcart, “The Toughest Regulator in the World? IPSO Stares Failure in the Face,” *Inform’s Blog*, November 20, 2021, <https://inform.org/2021/11/20/the-toughest-regulator-in-the-world-ipso-stares-failure-in-the-face-brian-cathcart/>.

³⁴⁵ Hacked Off, *IPSO Brief 2023* (2023), https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6641da6192d9eb6b354d4181/67813257826388f30a31d140_IPSO%20BRIEF%202023.pdf.

³⁴⁶ ARTICLE 19, *Responding to "hate speech."*

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

freedom' with minimal recourse for affected communities. The conclusions of *ARTICLE 19* report sum it up: "There is no mechanism by which the very powerful British print media may be held to account for the disparagement of a group of persons on the basis of a protected characteristic."³⁴⁸ While the legal instruments in place provide a foundation for addressing incitement, they fail to address rhetoric that, while not explicitly inciting hatred, nevertheless contributes to an environment of hostility. These gaps contribute to a permissive media environment where harmful narratives continue to legitimise public hostility and normalise exclusionary views. The next section explores non-legal alternatives to challenge and reduce such harmful narratives.

iv) Alternatives to Legal and Regulatory Mechanisms

As demonstrated, the line is fine and contested between criminalising hateful language in the interest of safeguarding human dignity and preserving the fundamental right to freedom of expression. This thesis has sought to demonstrate that contemporary anti-migrant hostility rarely manifests in overtly vitriolic or explicit statements that fit neatly within legal definitions. Instead, nuanced techniques and discursive strategies serve to negatively frame and associate migrants with socially deviant activities. There is, in general, a lack of perception of the potential impact of such language, whether written or spoken.³⁴⁹ These expressions, therefore, frequently evade legal scrutiny. Coupled with the protective boundaries afforded to journalistic expressions, the law becomes a blunt instrument for addressing these harms. The same applies to media regulation, which rarely captures more covert forms of discriminatory speech. To effectively expose and challenge the embedded narratives within the press, that contribute to a hostile environment, alternative strategies must be pursued. Given that the perpetuation of anti-migrant sentiment stems from a complex interplay of social, political and media forces, the response must be similarly multifaceted.

Where law and regulation fall short, other tools and interventions become crucial. The Rabat Plan of Action, developed by the United Nations of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, calls on the collective responsibility of states, media and society "to ensure that acts of

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁴⁹ Kim McGuire, "Engaging with the Media in a Pre and Post Brexit World: Racism, Xenophobia and Regulation: A United Kingdom Perspective," *Journal of Hate Studies* 15, no. 1 (2019): 255–273.

incitement to hatred are spoken out against and acted upon with the appropriate measures... [and] all media should, as a moral and social responsibility and through self-regulation, play a role in combating discrimination and promoting intercultural understanding.”³⁵⁰ The plan highlights a combined approach, that goes beyond legal restrictions, placing the onus on all factions of society to act to prevent the dissemination of hateful language.

In response, several NGOs and International institutions have developed guidance and campaigns aimed at exposing harmful patterns in language and reframing media narratives. For example, the Migrants’ Rights Network, a UK charity, produced the Words Matter campaign with an aim to encourage the rejection of dehumanising narratives in reporting.³⁵¹ The campaign challenges the use of the term “illegal immigrant,” a term also condemned by the UN for being misleading, oppressive and socially divisive, and instead advocates for either “undocumented” or “irregular”.³⁵² The campaign also critiques hostile metaphoric language, such as “swam”, “influx” and “invasion” arguing it echoes White supremacist conspiracies like the Great Replacement Theory. They warn against this “dangerous” language, that “fuels the kind of violence we saw during the fascist riots of August 2024.”³⁵³ This view is reinforced by the National Union of Journalists, which in its ‘Race Reporting Guidelines’ urges journalists to avoid emotive, dehumanising metaphors.

Complementing these efforts, the Ethical Journalism Network has developed a five-point test to help journalists evaluate the ethical implications of speech in reporting. Meanwhile, the International Labour Organization, the International Organization for Migration, and advocacy groups like *Human Rights Watch* have issued language guidelines and conducted training to promote rights-based reporting on migration issues.³⁵⁴

³⁵⁰ OHCHR, *Rabat Plan of Action on the Prohibition of Advocacy of National, Racial, or Religious Hatred That Constitutes Incitement to Discrimination, Hostility or Violence* (Geneva: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, October 2012), Principle 9, A/HRC/22/17/Add.4.

³⁵¹ Migrants’ Rights Network, *Words Matter: Explaners Compilation* (London: Migrants’ Rights Network, 2024), Accessed May 21, 2025, <https://migrantsrights.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/WM-compilation-final.pdf>.

³⁵² UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018* (Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019), <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/5df9f0417.pdf>.

³⁵³ Migrants’ Rights Network, *Words Matter: Explaners Compilation*.

³⁵⁴ International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Glossary on Migration*, 34th ed., International Migration Law Series (Geneva: IOM, 2019), https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml_34_glossary.pdf.

The Role of Civil society

Civil society organisations also play a critical role in addressing subtle hate speech. The Centre for Media Monitoring, for example, systematically track how British media report on Islam or Muslims.³⁵⁵ Through the provision of empirical evidence of patterns in language, including concerning collocates and frequent stereotypes, they can expose subtle framing. Similarly, Stop Funding Hate and Ethical Consumer have focused on the necessity of categorising subtle forms and drivers of hate which is crucial for building public understanding. In their report they list a 62-page Appendix with examples and referencing of subtle hate linguistic examples.³⁵⁶ As part of this, they list ten key approaches gathered from interviews with experts on hate and migration as important steps to take to spread awareness about subtle hate.³⁵⁷

1. Focus on trends, patterns and volume of subtle hate and drivers of hate
2. Demonstrate the impact of subtle hate – focus on harms
3. Include personal stories and migrant voices
4. Draw on understandings of other forms of prejudice
5. Ensure that you do not demonise those holding prejudicial views
6. Use and compare examples to explain what does and doesn't constitute hate
7. Explain the origins and history of tropes
8. Support the public to anticipate tropes likely to appear in the media
9. Build wider media literacy
10. Focus on national and international standards, and demonstrate that these have not been met by media outlets in the UK

Corporate Accountability

Corporate responsibility also offers an effective route for change. Campaigns such as Stop Funding Hate (SFH) have harnessed public pressure to encourage advertisers to withdraw financial support from outlets that persistently spread hateful or misleading stories about

³⁵⁵ Faisal Hanif, *British Media's Coverage of Muslims and Islam (2018–2020)* (Centre for Media Monitoring, November 2021), Accessed March 8, 2022, <https://cfmm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CfMM-Annual-Report-2018-2020-digital.pdf>.

³⁵⁶ Ethical Consumer Research Association, *Addressing Migrant Hate in the UK Media: Appendix of Examples* (2022), Accessed June 23, 2025, <https://research.ethicalconsumer.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/Addressing-migrant-hate-Appendix-examples-2022.pdf>.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

migrants.³⁵⁸ Rather than relying on legal mechanisms, this approach influences media behaviour through market-based initiatives. SFH provides guides for the public on how to spot hate and contact advertisers, emphasizing respectful but firm communication. Since 2016, SFH has succeeded in persuading hundreds of advertisers to move their advertising budgets away from hateful media.³⁵⁹ Brands such as Lego have, as a result, ceased advertising with the Daily Mail following public outcry.³⁶⁰ The Conscious Advertising Network furthers this approach. They are a coalition of advertising and media agencies in the UK committed to removing ads from harmful or deceitful content, through which many brands have made ethical commitments to advertising.³⁶¹

Ethical Alternatives and Media Literacy

A further key strategy lies in the development of alternative media and the promotion of media literacy, ensuring media consumers have the tools to critically evaluate news and identify insidious bias. If a reader can recognise when a headline or narrative is prejudiced, the manipulative effect of hostile reporting can be mitigated. Initiatives such as the *Media Storm* podcast exemplify ethical journalism by platforming migrant voices core principle is to provide ‘right of reply’ to marginalised groups that are denied due representation in everyday news coverage.³⁶² The amplification of migrant voices is essential to promoting awareness about the plight of those who are being demonised as a faceless threat. By centring migrant voices, stereotypes can be challenged and refuted. Contextualisation is, therefore, needed to guide the public in understanding why certain events occur, such as migrants attempting the Channel crossing and how the Government’s policies have a role to play.

In summary, while legal and regulatory tools offer a limited response to the challenges of subtle hate speech, a broader coalition of civil society, media actors, and corporate entities can collectively foster a more accountable and inclusive public discourse. Recognising the complexity of the problem demands equally nuanced, context-sensitive solutions.

³⁵⁸ Stop Funding Hate, “What’s the Long-Term Goal of Stop Funding Hate?” *Stop Funding Hate*, March 13, 2018, accessed June 25, 2025, <https://stopfundinghate.info/2018/03/13/thelongterm/>

³⁵⁹ Carlile and Harrison, *Addressing Subtle Forms of Hate*.

³⁶⁰ R. Wilson, “Stop Funding Hate – How a Movement for Ethical Advertising Is Making Hate Unprofitable,” *Impakter*, December 11, 2018, Accessed June 25, 2025, <https://impakter.com/stop-funding-hate/>.

³⁶¹ Carlile and Harrison, *Addressing Subtle Forms of Hate*, 5.

³⁶² Media Storm, “Our Mission,” *Media Storm Podcast*, Accessed June 25, 2025, <https://mediastormpodcast.com/mission/>.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has argued that language which may initially appear innocuous, can exert a profound influence on readers' perception and can provide the rationale to justify pre-existing beliefs. In the context of xenophobia and anti-migrant sentiment, media discourse has been shown to play a central and legitimising role in emboldening the far-right. Even as overt hate speech declines, a modern, insidious form, 'soft hate speech,' is prevalent throughout the British press. This form of discursive intolerance is harder to identify, and consequently, harder to challenge.

Through subtle framing and rhetorical strategies, such as an 'Us vs. Them' binary, metaphorical devices, numerical framing, selective reporting, presuppositions, apparent concessions, vagueness techniques and more, migrants are repeatedly constructed as a threatening 'Other.' Drawing on three dominant, recurring myths in the media, co-constructed with Government rhetoric, this thesis has illustrated how both tabloids and broadsheets perpetuate harmful portrayals of migrants. Myths of criminality, resource drain and mass invasion are used to scapegoat 'deviant' migrants for wider societal issues. These narratives, naturalised through what van Leeuwen terms *mythopoetic legitimation*, trigger fear and enhance hostility. Consistently portrayed through stories of the villainous migrant vs the innocent British citizen victim, these framings become embedded in the *mental models* of the reader, helping to sustain a climate of moral panic.

The issue is not simply the intent of the media, but the consequences of normalising exclusionary attitudes and justifying restrictive policies. Political and media discourse operate in a mutually reinforcing feedback loop, rooted in a historical legacy of exclusionary immigration and ideological boundary drawing between 'desirable' and 'undesirable' populations. This filters down from political language into media discourse and ultimately into the public lexicon, especially among audiences primed to believe migrants are to blame.

Hegemonic ideologies are thus reproduced and elite interests advanced, with media discourse actively reinforcing social hierarchies. For the media, crime and drama sells, for the Government, inflating the problem and stoking fear enables a legitimisation, and even a perceived necessity, of hard-line responses to alleged mass threat.

The UK 2024 riots, though catalysed by disinformation, occurred in a discursive environment saturated with hostility, as demonstrated through the selected articles. These repeated negative framings laid the psychological groundwork for violence. As Allport's scale reminds us, hate often begins with language. Sanitised by the veneer of respectability, although the press did not directly incite violence, the seeds were sown for its eventual eruption.

This thesis also questioned how such subtle hate might be addressed. It explored the legal boundaries of hate speech and freedom of expression, finding that much of the language used does not meet the legal threshold for incitement. The limitations of UK regulatory mechanisms, including issues of independence and inadequate sanctioning, were also examined. Ultimately, due to the nuance and complexity of the problem, a holistic response is required, one with ethical journalism, effective oversight and the cultivation of critical media literacy at its centre. Future work might address how regulatory oversight could encompass subtler, repeated negative framings.

The aim of this thesis has been to promote the analytical tools necessary to identify and challenge the hidden ideological messages embedded in media discourse and, by doing so, resist and dismantle anti-migrant hate that persists between the lines.

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