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Hebe Bourne

Between the Lines

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

European Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratisation

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Foreword

The European Master's Human Rights and Democratisation (EMA) is a one-year degree established in 1997 as a joint initiative of ten universities, and with support of the European Commission, has grown into a network of 43 universities found in all EU member states, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Based on an action- and policy-oriented approach to learning, it combines legal, political, historical, anthropological and philosophical perspectives on the study of human rights and democracy with targeted skills-building activities. The aim of the EMA programme is to prepare young professionals to respond to the requirements and challenges of work in international organisations, field operations, governmental and non-governmental bodies, and academia. As a measure of its success, EMA has served as a model of inspiration for the establishment of seven other EU-sponsored regional master's programmes in the area of human rights and democratisation all over the world. Today these programmes cooperate closely in the framework of the Global Campus of Human Rights, which has its headquarters in Venice, Italy.

Up to 90 students are admitted to the EMA programme each year. During the first semester in Venice, they learn from leading academics, experts and representatives of international and non-governmental organisations. During the second semester, they are hosted by one of the 43 EMA participating universities to follow additional courses in an area of specialisation of their own choice and to conduct research under the supervision of the university's EMA Director or their academic colleagues. On successful completion of the requirements of the degree, students are awarded the European Master's Degree in Human Rights and Democratisation, which is jointly conferred by seven EMA universities who accredit the programme.

Each year the EMA Council selects five theses, on the basis of:
1. Originality of the research topic, and its relevance and importance (including its contribution to the promotion and implementation of human rights and democratic values);
2. Innovation with respect to argument, methodology, and theoretical approach, including case studies;
3. Exceptional knowledge of the academic literature and excellent capacity for critical analysis;
4. Clarity of structure, language and argumentation of a publishable standard with minimum revisions

The EMA awarded theses of the academic year 2024/2025 are:

— Bourne, Hebe, *Between the Lines: Subtle Media Discourse and the Normalisation of Anti-Migrant Sentiment in the Run Up to the United Kingdom 2024 Riots*. Supervisor: Katarzyna Blay Grabarczyk, Université de Montpellier.

— Dulce Ramírez, María, *The Right to Own or the Right to Live? Re-examining the Human Right to Private Property in the Age of the Socio ecological Crisis through Indigenous and South Sámi Knowledge and Struggles*. Supervisors: Julien Pieret, Oona Le Meur, Université Libre de Bruxelles. This thesis will remain unpublished in accordance with the author's wishes.

— Lyons, Ben, *Lost for Words. The Silence of Peacebuilding on Minority Language Rights in the North of Ireland and Euskal Herria*. Supervisor: Faris Kočan, University of Ljubljana.

— Murillas García, Itziar, *The Security – Democracy Trade-Off? EU Policies and Civic Space in Morocco*. Supervisor: Harlan Koff, Université du Luxembourg.

— Nogueira de Sá Rosas de Castro, Clara, *To Be or Not to Be Neuroenhanced? Personal Identity under Siege in the Age of AI-powered Neurotechnology*. Supervisor: Thérèse Murphy, Queen's University Belfast.

The selected theses demonstrate the breadth, depth and reach of the EMA Programme and the passion and talent of its students. We are proud of the range of topics as well as the curiosity and research skills demonstrated by this year's cohort. On behalf of the Governing Bodies of the EMA programme, we applaud and congratulate these graduates for their work.

Prof. Manfred Nowak
Global Campus Secretary General

Prof. Thérèse Murphy
EMA Chairperson

Dr Orla Ní Cheallacháin
EMA Programme Director

Biography

Hebe Bourne studied French and Italian at Oxford University. She has a strong interest in criminal justice reform and has worked at the UK Ministry of Justice as well as with several charities supporting people with lived experience of the justice system. Following the EMA programme, she now works as a Human Rights consultant, focusing on forced labour in supply chains and ethical business practices in conflict-affected, high-risk areas.

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 United Kingdom (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.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Prof Katarzyna Blay Grabarczyk, for her invaluable guidance throughout the whole process.

Secondly, I would like to thank my parents for their patient proofreading and my sisters for being the best.

Finally, thank you to Elly and Fannie, the highlights of my year.

'you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land'[1]

Warsan Shire

'Language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power'[2]

Pierre Bourdieu

1 Warsan Shire, 'Home' in *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (flipped eye publishing 2011).

2 Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Economics of Linguistic Exchanges' (1977) 16(6) *Social Science Information* 645 < https://web.stanford.edu/~eckert/PDF/Bourdieu1977.pdf> accessed 23 February 2026.

Table of Abbreviations

CDA	Critical discourse analysis
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
UN	United Nations
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ECRI	European Commission against Racism and Intolerance
EU	European Union
IPSO	Independent Press Standards Organisation
UK	United Kingdom

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Introduction

On the morning of 29 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, 26 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 mor-

[1] E Kivi, 'How Dubious Website Channel3NOW Fueled Misinformation about Southport Suspect in the U.K.' (*Logically Facts*, 6 August 2024) <https://www.logicallyfacts.com/en/analysis/how-dubious-website-channel3now-fueled-misinformation-about-southport-suspect-in-the-u.k.>accessed 29 June 2025.

[2] Josh Halliday, 'The Areas in England Where Riots Have Broken Out Since Southport Attack' (*The Guardian*, 1 August 2024) <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/aug/01/the-areas-in-england-where-riots-have-broken-out-since-southport-attack> accessed 29 June 2025.

phed into rioters as bricks, bottles and rocks were launched at the mosque, police vans set 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 5 August 2024. The government responded swiftly, arresting perpetrators and promising they would face the full force of the law.

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3 Al Jazeera, 'Far-Right Protesters Target Southport Mosque, Clash with UK Police' (*Al Jazeera*, 31 July 2024) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/31/far-right-protesters-target-southport-mosque-clash-with-uk-police> accessed 29 June 2025.

4 The Economic Times, 'UK Riots 2024: Why Are Riots Happening in Britain, Worst in 13 Years' (*The Economic Times*, 5 August 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> accessed 29 June 2025.

5 BBC News, 'Dozens Arrested after Protest Disorder Spreads' (*BBC News*, 31 July 2024) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0jqjqxl3dyo> accessed 29 June 2025.

6 Halliday (n 4).

7 Michael Savage, 'Top Tories Fuelled Riots with "Divisive Language" on Immigration, Say Party Grandees' (*The Guardian*, 10 August 2024) <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/aug/10/top-tories-fuelled-riots-divisive-language-immigration> accessed 29 June 2025.

8 Michael Holden, 'Explainer: Why Are There Riots in the UK and Who is Behind Them?' (*Reuters*, 7 August 2024) <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/why-are-there-riots-uk-who-is-behind-them-2024-08-07/> accessed 29 June 2025.

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 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

[9] HOPE not hate, 'Deflecting, Minimising and Justifying: Three Months on from the Race Riots' (*HOPE not hate*, 2024) <https://hopenothate.org.uk/2024/11/14/deflecting-minimising-and-justifying-three-months-on-from-the-race-riots/> accessed 29 June 2025.

[10] Pamela Duncan and others, 'Local. Left Behind. Prey to Populist Politics? What the Data Tells Us about the 2024 UK Rioters' (*The Guardian*, 25 September 2024) <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/sep/25/local-left-behind-prey-to-populist-politics-data-2024-uk-rioters> accessed 29 June 2025.

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 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,

[11] Maka Julios-Costa and Camila Montiel-McCann, 'A Hostile Environment: Language, Race, Politics and the Media' (Runnymede Trust 2023) 9 <https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/6798ec9f5e429b786277f9db_A%20hostile%20environment_report_v4.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.

[12] Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann (n 13) 9.

[13] Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, 'Critical Discourse Studies: History, Agenda, Theory and Methodology' in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (eds), *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies* (3rd edn, SAGE 2016) 12.

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.

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.

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]

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]

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]

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 de-

[14] Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted 28 July 1951, entered into force 22 April 1954) 189 UNTS 137.

[15] Amnesty International, 'Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants: Definitions' (*Amnesty International*) <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> accessed 29 June 2025.

[16] ibid.

[17] ibid.

serving of protection and those who are not. In doing so, media narratives effectively delegitimise 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 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 a 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.

[18] Ewa Połońska-Kimunguyi, 'Echoes of Empire: Racism and Historical Amnesia in the British Media Coverage of Migration' (2022) 9 Humanities and Social Sciences Communications 3, 5 <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-01020-4>.

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.

1.1 UK immigration policy: a history of exclusion

Since the early 20th century, 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

[19] Maka Julios-Costa and Camila Montiel-McCann, 'A Hostile Environment: Language, Race, Politics and the Media' (Runnymede Trust 2023) 13 <https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/6798ec9f5e429b786277f9db_A%20hostile%20environment_report_v4.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.

[20] Aliens Act 1905 5 Edw 7 c 13.

entering, the notion of the 'undesirable migrant' was born.[21] Fears of criminals and 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 Act[24] was enforced in response to the First World War, later strengthened by the Aliens Orders of 1920[25] 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, 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

21 Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann (n 21) 13.
22 Museum of Family History, '20th Century Immigration: William Evans-Gordon and the Aliens Act of 1905' (*Museum of Family History*) <https://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/20c-evans-gordon.htm> accessed 9 June 2025.
23 Alison Bashford and Jane McAdam, 'The Right to Asylum: Britain's 1905 Aliens Act and the Evolution of Refugee Law' (2014) 32(2) Law and History Review 309 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0738248014000029>.
24 Aliens Restriction Act 1914 4 & 5 Geo 5 c 12.
25 Aliens Order 1920 (UK).
26 Aliens Order 1925 (UK).
27 British Nationality Act 1948 11 & 12 Geo 6 c 56.
28 Colin Grant, 'The Story of Windrush' (*English Heritage*) <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/inspire-me/the-story-of-windrush/> accessed 9 June 2025.

Hill Race Riots in 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 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 or-

[29] Mark Olden, 'White Riot: The Week Notting Hill Exploded' (*The Independent*, 29 August 2008) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/white-riot-the-week-notting-hill-exploded-912105.html> accessed 29 June 2025.

[30] Diane Abbott, 'The Truth is Out: Britain's Immigration System is Racist, and Always Has Been' (*The Guardian*, 30 May 2022) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/30/britain-immigration-system-racist-laws> accessed 29 June 2025.

[31] Wesley Shankley and Bridget Byrne, 'Citizen Rights and Immigration' in Wendy Shankley and others (eds), *Ethnicity and Race in the UK: State of the Nation* (1st edn, Bristol UP 2020) 35 <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv14t47tm.8>.

[32] Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962 10 & 11 Eliz 2 c 21.

[33] Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968 c 9.

igin 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 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]

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.[39] 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.[40]

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34 Mark Lattimer, 'When Labour Played the Racist Card' (*New Statesman*, 22 January 1999) <https://www.newstatesman.com/long-reads/1999/01/when-labour-played-racist-card> accessed 29 June 2025.

35 British Nationality Act 1981 c 61.

36 Shankley and Byrne (n 33).

37 Immigration and Asylum Appeals Act 1993 c 23; Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 c 49.

38 Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 c 33; Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 c 41; Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann (n 21).

39 Jessica L Potter and Isabel Meier, 'Distanciation as a Technology of Control in the UK Hostile Environment' (2024) 44(2) Critical Social Policy 263.

40 Melanie Griffiths and Charlotte Yeo, 'The UK's Hostile Environment: Deputising Immigration Control' (2021) 41(4) Critical Social Policy 521 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018320980653>.

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'.[41] These subsequent policies, extended to an ever-growing range of actors,[42] triggered a 'range of administrative and legal measures' that were 'mobilised to limit access to employment, healthcare, housing, banking services and more'.[43] 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.[44]

The Runnymede Trust has criticised this framework as 'ambiguous' and 'constantly shifting' pointing to over 5,700 immigration rule changes since 2010.[45] This opacity fosters confusion and facilitates racial profiling, particularly under schemes like the Right to Rent.[46] Although official language has shifted from a 'hostile' to a 'compliant' environment,[47] 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'.[48] 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

41 James Kirkup and Robert Winnett, 'Theresa May Interview: "We're Going to Give Illegal Migrants a Really Hostile Reception"' (*The Telegraph*, 25 May 2012) <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/9291483/Theresa-May-interview-Were-going-to-give-illegal-migrants-a-really-hostile-reception.html> accessed 29 June 2025.

42 Ana Aliverti, 'Enlisting the Public in the Policing of Immigration' (2015) 55(2) British Journal of Criminology 215.

43 Charlotte Griffiths and Jon Trebilcock, 'Continued and Intensified Hostility: The Problematisation of Immigration in the UK Government's 2021 New Plan for Immigration' (2023) 43(3) Critical Social Policy 401 <https://doi.org/10.1177/02610183221109133>.

44 Griffiths and Yeo (n 42).

45 Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann (n 21) 61.

46 ibid 61.

47 Griffiths and Trebilcock (n 45).

48 Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann (n 21) 4.

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.[49]

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)[50] and the Points-Based system in 2021 (to attract desirable 'skilled' workers to grow the economy).[51] The launch of the Rwanda Asylum Plan in 2022 and the enactment of both the Nationality and Borders Act 2022[52] and the Illegal Migration Act 2023[53] 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'.[54]

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

1.2 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

[49] Ewa Połońska-Kimunguyi, 'Echoes of Empire: Racism and Historical Amnesia in the British Media Coverage of Migration' (2022) 9 Humanities and Social Sciences Communications 3, 5 <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-01020-4>.
[50] Griffiths and Trebilcock (n 45).
[51] ibid.
[52] Nationality and Borders Act 2022 c 36.
[53] Illegal Migration Act 2023 c 60.
[54] Migrants' Rights Network, 'Words Matter'(*Migrants' Rights Network*) <https://migrantsrights.org.uk/projects/wordsmatter/> accessed 4 May 2025.

there is substantial literature on hate speech targeting marginalised groups,[55] 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.[56] 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'.[57] 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.

1.2.1 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'.[58] 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.[59] 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

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[55] Michael Herz and Peter Molnar (eds), *The Content and Context of Hate Speech: Rethinking Regulation and Responses* (CUP 2012).

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

[57] United Nations, 'United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech: Synopsis' (United Nations 2019) <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/UN%20Strategy%20and%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20Hate%20Speech%2018%20June%20SYNOPSIS.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.

[58] Damianos Serafis and Stylianos Assimakopoulos, 'Zooming in on the Study of Soft Hate Speech: An Introduction to This Special Issue' [2024] Critical Discourse Studies 2 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2024.2440863>.

[59] Stelios Assimakopoulos and Damianos Serafis, 'Why Soft Hate Speech Matters: Argumentativity and the Dispersion of Hatred Towards Minorities' [2024] Critical Discourse Studies 1 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2024.2440869>.

normal'.[60] 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.[61]

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.[62] 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'.[63] 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 and others note that although 'the sneaky and tricky nature of subtle messages might be perceived as less hurtful', they are 'at least as harmful as overt abuse'.[64] 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'.[65] 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

[60] Serafis and Assimakopoulos (n 60) 2.
[61] ibid.
[62] Michał Krzyżanowski, 'Discursive Shifts and the Normalisation of Racism: Imaginaries of Immigration, Moral Panics and the Discourse of Contemporary Right-Wing Populism' (2020) 30(4) Social Semiotics 503 <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2020.1766199>.
[63] Serafis and Assimakopoulos (n 60) 3.
[64] Nicolás Benjamín Ocampo and others, 'An In-Depth Analysis of Implicit and Subtle Hate Speech Messages' in Andreas Vlachos and Isabelle Augenstein (eds), *Proceedings of the 17th Conference of the European Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics* (Association for Computational Linguistics 2023) 1997 <https://aclanthology.org/2023.eacl-main.147/> accessed 29 June 2025.
[65] Sarah Sorial, 'Hate Speech and Distorted Communication: Rethinking the Limits of Incitement' (2015) 34(3) Law and Philosophy 299.

for inciting hatred, discrimination, and violence against the already disprivileged minority group', highlighting how even covert language can reinforce existing social hierarchies.[66]

1.2.2 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.[67] 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 and indirect form of discourse, 'that nevertheless still reproduces negative stereotypes about immigrants'.[68]

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'.[69] A subsequent report by Stop Funding Hate and Ethical Consumer, drawing on insights from academics

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66 Dina Mohammed, 'Where the Hate Lies in Soft Hate Speech: The Argumentative Potential in Hostile Public Spheres' [2025] Critical Discourse Studies 1 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2024.2446938>.

67 Tali Mendelberg, *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality* (Princeton UP 2001).

68 Amy L Clarke, '"Lost Voices": The Targeted Hostility Experienced by New Arrivals' (PhD thesis, University of Leicester 2020).

69 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> accessed 29 June 2025.

and expert practitioners, has put the spotlight on the rise and impact of more subtle forms of anti-migrant hate in UK media.[70] 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.[71]

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'.[72] 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.[73] This saw him dismissed from the Shadow cabinet due to incitement to hatred, as his words were deemed racialist 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'.[74]

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'.[75] 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

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70 Clare Carlile and Rob Harrison, 'Addressing Subtle Forms of Hate in UK Media Coverage of Migration' (Ethical Consumer and Stop Funding Hate 2022) <https://research.ethicalconsumer.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/Addressing-subtle-hate-UK-media-coverage-migration-Full-Report-Oct2022.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.

71 ibid 5.

72 Połońska-Kimunguyi (n 51) 5.

73 Enoch Powell, 'Rivers of Blood Speech' (20 April 1968) in Andrew Roberts (ed), *Post-War British Political Speeches* (Penguin 2007).

74 ibid.

75 United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 'UN Human Rights Chief Urges UK to Tackle Tabloid Hate Speech after Migrants Likened to "Cockroaches"' (Press release, 24 April 2015) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2015/04/un-human-rights-chief-urges-uk-tackle-tabloid-hate-speech-after-migrants> accessed 29 June 2025.

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.[76] 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'.[77] 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.[78] 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'.[79] This was in response to 70 anti-migrant front pages in 2016 alone.[80] 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.

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'.[81] 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

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76 United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (n 75).

77 ibid.

78 Mark Sweney, 'NUJ Condemns Regulator's Decision on Katie Hopkins "Cockroaches" Column' (*The Guardian*, 5 May 2015) <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/may/05/nuj-condemns-regulator-decision-katie-hopkins-cockroaches-column> accessed 29 June 2025.

79 Tom Embury-Dennis, 'Daily Express Helped Create "Islamophobic Sentiment", Admits Newspaper's Editor' (*The Independent*, 25 April 2018) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/daily-express-islamophobic-sentiment-editor-gary-jones-home-affairs-select-committee-a8321026.html> accessed 29 June 2025.

80 Carlile and Harrison (n 72).

81 Ashley Cowburn and Ben Glaze, 'Suella Braverman Sparks Furious Backlash over "Invasion" Comments about Migrants' (*The Mirror*, 1 November 2022) <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/suella-braverman-sparks-furious-backlash-28374323> accessed 29 June 2025.

by opposition lawmakers, members of her own party and human rights organisations, calling her dehumanising and demonising language 'heinous'.[82]

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.[83] 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'.[84] 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] Al Jazeera, 'UK Home Secretary Slammed for Asylum Seeker "Invasion" Remarks' (*Al Jazeera*, 1 November 2022) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/1/uk-home-secretary-slammed-for-asylum-seeker-invasion-remarks> accessed 29 June 2025.

[83] Clare Carlile and Rob Harrison, 'Addressing Subtle Forms of Hate in UK Media Coverage of Migration' (Ethical Consumer and Stop Funding Hate 2022) 32 <https://research.ethicalconsumer.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/Addressing-subtle-hate-UK-media-coverage-migration-Full-Report-Oct2022.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.

[84] 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 CDA and mythopoetic legitimation to examine media discourse to highlight the ways in which discourse can foment mistrust and normalise exclusionary ideologies.

2.1 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.[85] This irrational, paranoid fear, and the resultant 'panic', was thought to reduce humans to their most animalistic instincts. Pan's dual nature, which encompassed the divine and the beastly, was said to embody the delicate balance between disorder and order, civilisation and savagery.[86] 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'.

[85] Online Etymology Dictionary, 'Panic' (*etymonline*) <https://www.etymonline.com/word/panic> accessed 7 May 2025.

[86] New World Encyclopedia, 'Pan (Mythology)' (*New World Encyclopedia*) <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Pan_(mythology)> accessed 7 May 2025.

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'.[87] 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:

Concern – Heightened anxiety about the potential or imagined threat.

Hostility – The emergence of moral outrage towards the deviant actors (folk devils) seen as harmful or threatening to societal values.

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.

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.

[87] Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (3rd edn, Routledge 2002) 1.

Volatility – The panic erupts and dissipates suddenly. As Cohen notes:

> Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore 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.[88]

The most important actors involved in the moral panic are the deviant, scapegoated folk devil, 'visible reminders of what we should not be',[89] and 'onto whom public fears and fantasies are projected'.[90] 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'.[91]

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.[92] Such panics have recurred globally, from the 'Satanic Panic' of 1980s America[93] to the post 9/11 anti-Muslim rhetoric prevalent in the British press.[94]

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.[95] Young Black men were cast as the designated folk devil and

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88 Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (Blackwell 1994); ibid xxvi–xxvii.

89 Cohen (n 89) 2.

90 Alan Hunt, 'Moral Panic and Moral Language in the Media' (1997) 48(4) The British Journal of Sociology 629, 631 <https://doi.org/10.2307/591600>.

91 ibid 631.

92 Goode and Ben-Yehuda (n 90) 150.

93 Sarah Hughes, 'American Monsters: Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970–2000' (2017) 51(3) Journal of American Studies 691, 695 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875816001298>.

94 Julian Petley, '"Ta-Ta Qatada": Islamophobic Moral Panic and the British Tabloid Press' in Chris Greer, Mark Rohloff and Emily Monk (eds), *Media, Crime and Racism* (Palgrave Macmillan 2018) 139 <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71776-0_8>.

95 Stuart Hall and others, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (Macmillan 1978).

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 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'.[96] This consistency is echoed by Rivkah Brown who characterises 'Britain's immigration panic' as 'the product of a decades-in-the-making national hysteria about immigrants'.[97] 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'.[98] Połońska-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'.[99]

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.[100] 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'.[101] The emphasis on excess provokes a disproportionate response, as media coverage reinforces public hostility and amplifies fears that the native population is being

96 Cohen (n 89) xxiii.

97 Rivkah Brown, 'We Don't Need to "Talk About Immigration"' (*Novara Media*, 14 August 2024) <https://novaramedia.com/2024/08/14/we-dont-need-to-talk-about-immigration/> accessed 29 June 2025.

98 Ewa Połońska-Kimunguyi, 'Echoes of Empire: Racism and Historical Amnesia in the British Media Coverage of Migration' (2022) 9 Humanities and Social Sciences Communications 3, 5 <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-01020-4>.

99 ibid.

100 Chas Critcher, 'Moral Panics' (*Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology*, 29 March 2017) <https://oxfordre.com/criminology/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264079-e-155> accessed 29 June 2025.

101 ibid.

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'.[102] In doing so, he highlights the symbiotic relationship between state and media, where both institutions collaborate in sustaining and reproducing the 'dominant ideology'.[103] 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'.[104]

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 symbolisation, through which labels such as 'mod/rocker' or 'illegal immigrant' become shorthand for perceived social threats.[105] 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.[106] 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.[107]

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.

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[102] Cohen (n 89) xxiii.
[103] ibid xxxvi.
[104] ibid.
[105] ibid.
[106] ibid 24.
[107] ibid xxxvii.

2.2 Critical discourse analysis

To expose the potentially damaging role of media discourse, this section introduces the framework of 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.

2.2.1 Critical discourse analysis 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 and 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.[108] 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'.[109] It insists that discourse is never neutral, but shaped by specific interests, consciously or unconsciously, and is thus inherently political.[110] 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.[111] What binds these together is the shared problem-oriented focus on effecting social change through

[108] Teun A van Dijk, 'Critical Discourse Analysis' in Deborah Tannen, Heidi E Hamilton and Deborah Schiffrin (eds), *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (2nd edn, John Wiley & Sons 2015) 466.

[109] Dimitris Serafis, 'Unveiling the Rationale of Soft Hate Speech in Multimodal Artifacts: A Critical Framework' (2022) 6(2) Journal of Language and Discrimination 321, 323.

[110] Dianna R Mullet, 'A General Critical Discourse Analysis Framework for Educational Research' (2018) 29(2) Journal of Advanced Academics 116, 118 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1932202X18758260>.

[111] Ruth Wodak, 'Critical Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis' in Jan Zienkowski, Jan-Ola Östman and Jef Verschueren (eds), *Discursive Pragmatics* (John Benjamins 2011) 50 <https://doi.org/10.1075/hoph.8.04wod>.

critical understanding, and exposing and challenging power relationships embedded in language.[112] 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.[113] As Van Dijk elaborates, it is discourse study with an attitude, and CDA analysts take on an explicitly critical stance against inequality.[114]

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.[115] In short, it is a system of representation.[116] 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.[117] Building on this, Wodak emphasises discourse's function as a form of 'social practice'.[118] 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.[119] 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.[120] For this reason, context is a central concern for CDA analysts. Discursive prac-

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[112] Teun A van Dijk, 'Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis' (1993) 4(2) Discourse & Society 249.
[113] Christopher Hart, *Critical Discourse Analysis and Cognitive Science: New Perspectives on Immigration Discourse* (Palgrave Macmillan 2010).
[114] van Dijk, 'Critical Discourse Analysis' (n 110) 466.
[115] Stuart Hall, 'The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power' in Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben (eds), *Formations of Modernity* (Polity Press/The Open University 1992) 291.
[116] Stuart Hall (ed), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (SAGE Publications/The Open University 1997) 17.
[117] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (Colin Gordon ed, Harvester Press 1980).
[118] Wodak, 'Critical Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis' (n 113) 51.
[119] Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, 'Critical Discourse Analysis' in TA van Dijk (ed), *Introduction to Discourse Studies* (Sage 1997) 258.
[120] ibid.

tises, 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.[121]

2.2.2 Critical discourse analysis 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.[122] He argues that media outlets are not neutral transmitters of information but active participants in the construction and 'discursive reproduction' of ideologies.[123] Through selective framing, the media preserves the status quo in a way that 'legitimates the ethnic and racial dominance of the white group' and 'strongly suggest[s] *how* the readers should think and talk about ethnic affairs'.[124] 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.[125] 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.[126] 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'.[127] 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

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121 Fairclough and Wodak (n 119).
122 Teun A van Dijk, *Racism and the Press* (Routledge 1991).
123 ibid X.
124 ibid.
125 Teun A van Dijk, 'News Racism: A Discourse Analytical Approach' in Simon Cottle (ed), *Ethnic Minorities and the Media* (OUP 2000) 36.
126 Teun A van Dijk, 'Mediating Racism: The Role of the Media in the Reproduction of Racism' in Ruth Wodak (ed), *Language, Power and Ideology: Studies in Political Discourse* (John Benjamins 1989) 203.
127 ibid X.

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'.[128] 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.[129] 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 broader ideological dynamics.[130] This thesis draws on core CDA principles: that language is both socially constructed and socially constructing;[131] that discourse reflects, reinforces and legitimises social inequality;[132] and that media texts are imbued with ideology and power.[133] In particular, the focus will be on legitimation through language, a central concern for van Leeuwen, explored in the next section.

2.2.3 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.[134] 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 con-

[128] van Dijk, 'News Racism' (n 127) 34.
[129] ibid.
[130] ibid.
[131] Fairclough and Wodak (n 121) 258.
[132] van Dijk, *Racism and the Press* (n 124).
[133] ibid.
[134] Theo van Leeuwen, 'Legitimation in Discourse and Communication' (2007) 1(1) Discourse & Communication 91 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481307071986>.

structed values and norms."[135] Mythopoetic legitimation is the 'telling of one story to tell another'[136] and operates through narratives that reward conformity to these values and punish transgression, often presenting such moral frameworks as universal or self-evident.[137]

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.[138] Bennett elaborates that myths are not simply stories but are a form of intentional interaction that shape communal identity and moral consensus.[139] The 'myth-maker' crafts a narrative aligned with dominant values, selectively including or excluding details to support a particular ideological stance, and make them appear 'natural'.[140]

This aligns with Roland Barthes' concept of mythology where myths appear as naturalised truths rather than ideological constructs.[141] 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.

2.2.4 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 cen-

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[135] Sam Bennett, 'Mythopoetic Legitimation and the Recontextualisation of Europe's Foundational Myth' (2022) 21(1) Journal of Language and Politics 1 <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.21070.ben>.

[136] ibid 5.

[137] van Leeuwen, 'Legitimation in Discourse' (n 136) 91.

[138] Theodoor van Leeuwen and Ruth Wodak, 'Legitimizing Immigration Control: A Discourse-Historical Analysis' (1999) 1(1) Discourse Studies 83 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445699001001005>.

[139] Bennett, 'Mythopoetic Legitimation' (n 137) 5.

[140] ibid.

[141] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Éditions du Seuil 1957) (Annette Lavers tr, Paladin 1972).

tral 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.[142] 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.[143] 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'.[144]

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 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'.[145] He claims these scapegoats 'do not just "happen", they are produced from specific conditions, by specific agencies'.[146]

2.2.5 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 sys-

[142] Online Etymology Dictionary, 'Deviant' (*etymonline*) <https://www.etymonline.com/word/deviant> accessed 29 June 2025.
[143] EBSCO Research Starters, 'Deviance (Sociology)' (*EBSCO*, 2017) <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/sociology/deviance-sociology> accessed 29 June 2025.
[144] Goode and Ben-Yehuda (n 90) 150.
[145] Hall and others (n 97) 50.
[146] ibid.

tem.[147] 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'.[148] These portrayals serve to establish a moral boundary between the 'in-group' and the 'out-group', supporting what scholars identify as group-threat theory,[149] 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.[150]

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.[151] For example, as a security threat: migrants, especially those from North Africa or Muslim majority countries, are frequently linked to terrorism or political instability.[152] Migrants are commonly depicted as posing a cultural threat, undermining alleged national identity, cohesion or 'cultural purity'.[153] Economic threat is another common frame, accused of exploiting welfare systems or undercutting native workers, particularly in media cov-

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

148 van Dijk, 'Mediating Racism' (n 128) 37.

149 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' (2010) 39(2) Social Science Research 286.

150 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' (2019) 49(7) European Journal of Social Psychology 1401.

151 Eyes on Europe, 'Explaining the Main Driver of Anti-Migrant Attitudes in Europe' (*Eyes on Europe*, 30 November 2020) < https://www.eyes-on-europe.eu/explaining-the-main-drivers-of-anti-immigration-attitudes-in-europe/> accessed 29 June 2025.

152 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, International Organization for Migration 2023) <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/MRS-72.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.

153 Maka Julios-Costa and Camila Montiel-McCann, 'A Hostile Environment: Language, Race, Politics and the Media' (Runnymede Trust 2023) 18 <https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/6798ec9f5e429b786277f9db_A%20hostile%20environment_report_v4.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.

erage of Eastern European migrants.[154] 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'.[155]

2.3 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:

Migrants as criminals – rooted in tropes of illegality and moral transgression.

Migrants as burden – constructed through an 'us versus them' dichotomy in relation to resources and services.

Migrants as mass threat – amplified through scale, urgency and 'crisis' rhetoric.

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 mo-

[154] Alex Balch and Ekaterina Balabanova, 'Ethics, Politics and Migration: Public Debates on the Free Movement of Romanians and Bulgarians in the UK, 2006–2013' (2016) 36(1) Politics 19.

[155] Theresa May, 'Speech to the UN General Assembly' (20 September 2016) <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/theresa-mays-speech-to-the-un-general-assembly> accessed 29 June 2025.

bilised, by whom, in which contexts, for which legitimatory purposes' and a more in-depth micro-level analysis focusing on lexical, syntactical and rhetorical choices.[156]

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.

Reach and influence: These outlets command wide readerships and wield considerable influence in shaping public opinion.

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.

Comparative scope: Including both tabloid and broadsheet formats allows for a broader analysis of how similar discursive techniques operate across different journalistic 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.

[156] Bennett, 'Mythopoetic Legitimation' (n 137) 16.

2.3.1 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' 8 May 2024.
   B – 'MIGRANT BABY SWINDLE Albanian Gangs Target UK Mums-to-be in Plot to Register Illegal Migrants as the Dad' 1 April 2024.
2 – *Daily Mail*
   A – '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' 24 June 2024.
   B – 'SUE REID: The Criminal Asylum Seekers Who Have Abused Britain's Hospitality With Appalling Crimes – Including Paedophilia, Rape and Murder' 6 April 2024.
3 – *Daily Express*
   A – 'One Chart Exposes UK's "Enormous" Immigration Problem with Influx "Like Never Before"' 29 April 2024.
   B – 'Migration Chaos Warning as Thousands Set to Cross Channel During French Olympics' 20 July 2024.

Broadsheets

4 – *The Telegraph*
   A – 'Britain Has Reached Its Immigration Breaking Point' 16 July 2024.
   B – 'Europe's Migrant Crime Wave is Coming to Britain' 16 May 2024.
5 – *The Times*
   A – 'The Times View on Immigration: Quality over Quantity' 28 May 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.

3.1 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.[157]

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 vol-

[157] Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (Longman 1989) 54.

ume, or disproportionality of focus on an issue'.[158] Over time, these patterns reveal underlying biases, not necessarily what is said, but how often, and in what context. Połońska-Kimunguyi refers to this selective reporting, 'throughout 2016, 84% of stories in *The Times* made a clear connection between migration and social benefits-seeking'.[159] 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'.[160] 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.

3.1.1 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 con-

[158] Clare Carlile and Rob Harrison, 'Addressing Subtle Forms of Hate in UK Media Coverage of Migration' (Ethical Consumer and Stop Funding Hate 2022) 6 <https://research.ethicalconsumer.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/Addressing-subtle-hate-UK-media-coverage-migration-Full-Report-Oct2022.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.

[159] Ewa Połońska-Kimunguyi, 'Echoes of Empire: Racism and Historical Amnesia in the British Media Coverage of Migration' (2022) 9 Humanities and Social Sciences Communications 3, 7 <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-01020-4>.

[160] Carlile and Harrison (n 160) 55.

texts, for which legitimatory purposes',[161] 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 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,[162] 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 and Baglama 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.[163] This framing, they argue, heightens negative emotions and fear, producing a perception of constant threat.[164] Research also indicates that 'prejudice is especially high for minority groups associated with problems and criminal threat frames in the news'.[165]

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

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[161] Sam Bennett, 'Mythopoetic Legitimation and the Recontextualisation of Europe's Foundational Myth' (2022) 21(1) Journal of Language and Politics 1, 6 <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.21070.ben>.

[162] Michael T Light and Isabel Anadon, 'Immigration and Violent Crime: Triangulating Findings across Diverse Studies' (2020) 103(3) Iowa Law Review 939 < https://scholarship.law.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5446&context=mulr > accessed 29 June 2025.

[163] Liudvika Arcimaviciene and Serkan H Baglama, 'Migration, Metaphor and Myth in Media Representations: The Ideological Dichotomy of "Them" and "Us"' (2018) 8(2) SAGE Open 1 <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244018768657>.

[164] ibid.

[165] Cecil Meeusen and Laura Jacobs, 'Television News Content as a Contextual Predictor of Differences Between Attitudes Toward Minority Groups' (2017) 20(2) Mass Communication & Society 213, 227.

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.

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 European Union (EU) as dehumanising, as it 'normalises the use of punitive measures, enforcement, and procedures to punish and deter irregular migrants'.[166] 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.[167] A separate corpus analysis of 175,000 articles from 15 UK newspapers (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'.[168] The study found con-

[166] 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> accessed 29 June 2025

[167] HOPE not hate, 'Stoking the Flames: How the Media and Government Promote Hostility Towards Migrants' (HOPE not hate 2023) 20 <https://hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Stoking-the-Flames.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.

[168] Susan Hunston, *Corpora in Applied Linguistics* (CUP 2002).

sistent use of negative semantic prosodies (how a word's meaning is modified based on the words its 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 treatment of these groups as social problems.[169] 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"'.[170]

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 I-CLAIM 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'.[171] The report concluded 'the linguistic choices made by media outlets [and] political entities ... when describing identical phenomena can substantially influence the perceptions and understanding of readers and voters'.[172]

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.[173] 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

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169 Costas 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://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/id/eprint/31109/1/RASIM-Collocations-ELI-2008.pdf > accessed 29 June 2025.

170 Stefano Piemontese, 'The Narrative Construction of Migrant Irregularity in the United Kingdom' (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> accessed 29 June 2025.

171 ibid 28.

172 ibid 7.

173 Julia Atherley, 'MIGRANT BABY SWINDLE Albanian Gangs Target UK Mums-to-be in Plot to Register Illegal Migrants as the Dad' (*The Sun*, 1 April 2024) <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/27059962/albanian-gangs-target-pregnant-mums-swindle/> accessed 29 June 2025.

article is immediately set. The article explains how Albanian migrants had come up with a 'ruse' to 'dodge deportation by claiming [they have] 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, ie 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'.

The author also uses techniques of recontextualisation, hyperbole and exaggeration. Similarly, in 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.[174] 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 legitimation',[175] and especially mythopoetic legitimation. 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.[176]

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'.[177] He deems headlines to be a sub-

[174] Michael Murphy, 'Europe's Migrant Crime Wave is Coming to Britain' (*The Telegraph*, 16 May 2024) <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/05/16/europes-migrant-crime-wave-is-coming-to-britain/> accessed 29 June 2025.
[175] Bennett, 'Mythopoetic Legitimation' (n 163) 4.
[176] Literary Devices, 'Hyperbole' (*Literary Devices*) <https://literarydevices.net/hyperbole/> accessed 28 June 2025.
[177] Teun A van Dijk, *Racism and the Press* (Routledge 1991) 51.

jective definition of the situation, thereby influencing the interpretation made by the readers.[178] According to a report on British Media's Coverage of Muslims and Islam (2018–20), '60 per cent of readers will share an article without reading beyond the headline'.[179] 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 many untruths', 'vast people transfers' and 'virtually every Western European country' serve to amplify the scale of the threat.[180] 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'.[181] 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'.[182] 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'.[183] The phrase 'among the people most willing to lie' contains the unevidenced 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

[178] van Dijk, Racism and the Press (n 177).
[179] Faisal Hanif, 'British Media's Coverage of Muslims and Islam (2018–2020)' (Centre for Media Monitoring/Muslim Council of Britain 2021) 158 <https://cfmm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CfMM-Annual-Report-2018-2020-digital.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.
[180] Murphy (n 176).
[181] van Dijk, *Racism and the Press* (n 179) 183.
[182] ibid.
[183] Murphy (n 176).

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* article[184] headlined 'The Criminal Asylum Seekers Who Have Abused Britain's Hospitality With Appalling Crimes – Including Paedophilia, Rape and Murder', the content largely comprises a list of 75 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 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.

3.1.2 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

[184] Sue Reid, 'SUE REID: The Criminal Asylum Seekers Who Have Abused Britain's Hospitality With Appalling Crimes – Including Paedophilia, Rape and Murder' (*Daily Mail*, 6 April 2024) <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13276809/SUE-REID-criminal-asylum-seekers-Britains-hospitality-appalling-crimes-paedophilia-rape-murder.html> accessed 29 June 2025.

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.[185] They note that migrants are often poor for the same reason non-migrants are: structural inequality and underinvestment.[186] 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.[187]

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.[188] 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.[189]

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 representa-

[185] Migrants' Rights Network, 'Words Matter' (*Migrants' Rights Network*) <https://migrantsrights.org.uk/projects/wordsmatter/> accessed 4 May 2025.
[186] ibid.
[187] Carlos Vargas-Silva, Madeleine Sumption and Ben Brindle, 'The Fiscal Impact of Immigration in the UK' (The Migration Observatory, University of Oxford 2024) <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/the-fiscal-impact-of-immigration-in-the-uk/> accessed 29 June 2025.
[188] ibid.
[189] John Perry, 'Dispelling Myths About Migrants and Housing' (*Chartered Institute of Housing*, 7 August 2024) <https://www.cih.org/blogs/dispelling-myths-about-migrants-and-housing/> accessed 29 June 2025.

tion'.[190] Language is used to construct boundaries between native 'us', often implicitly white and British, and 'them', typically racialised non-white outsiders.[191] 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'.[192] 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'.[193] The reader is discursively included as part of the innocent 'in-group', intensifying polarisation through mythopoetic legitimation. Połońska-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'.[194]

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' versus 'them' categorisation.[195] 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'.[196]

The Telegraph article headlined 'Britain Has Reached Its Immigration Breaking Point'[197] 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'.[198] The vague and dehumanising

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190 van Dijk, 'News Racism' (n 127) 39.
191 ibid.
192 Teun A van Dijk, 'Mediating Racism: The Role of the Media in the Reproduction of Racism' in Ruth Wodak (ed), *Language, Power and Ideology: Studies in Political Discourse* (John Benjamins 1989) 37.
193 Połońska-Kimunguyi (n 161) 7.
194 ibid 9.
195 Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: The Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse* (2nd edn, SAGE 2021) 110.
196 ibid.
197 Guy Dampier, 'Britain Has Reached Its Immigration Breaking Point' (*The Telegraph*, 16 July 2024) <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/07/16/migration-britains-population-explosion-demographics/> accessed 29 June 2025.
198 ibid.

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.[199] Such vagueness strategies continue in the sweeping, unsubstantiated assertion: '[t]he same is true across roads, railways, hospitals, dental clinics and much more'.[200]

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.[201] 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 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 versus them' strategy is the frequent use of the conjunction 'but' to pre-empt accusations of discrimination.[202] This rhetorical structure allows writers to combine a seemingly positive self-presentation (eg 'I'm not racist') with a negative portrayal of migrants, thereby maintaining plausible deniability.[203] 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

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199 Carlile and Harrison (n 160) 55.

200 Dampier (n 199).

201 Jack Elsom, '"MIGRANT" HOUSING CRISIS Migrants Coming to UK to Blame for Almost 90 per cent of Britain's Housing Problems, Shock Report Warns ' (*The Sun*, 8 May 2024) <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/27786722/migrants-blame-britain-housing-problems/> accessed 29 June 2025.

202 Teun A van Dijk, 'News Racism: A Discourse Analytical Approach' in Simon Cottle (ed), *Ethnic Minorities and the Media* (Open UP 2000) 41.

203 ibid.

larger discriminatory narrative. *The Telegraph* article typifies this: 'We know that some migrants really do add to our society – *but* they make up only a few tens of thousands of the millions coming here'.[204] 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* 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.[205]

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'.[206] The presuppositions embedded in such claims, for example Britain's unique 'economic 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:

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[204] Dampier (n 199) (emphasis added).
[205] Murphy (n 176) (emphasis added).
[206] *The Times*, 'The Times View on Immigration: Quality over Quantity' (*The Times*, 28 May 2024) <https://www.thetimes.com/article/the-times-view-on-immigration-quality-over-quantity-bzds3hqd5> accessed 29 June 2025.

> 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.[207]

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'.[208] 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'.[209] The author continues: '[p]olicing of the system must be stepped up and arrivals subject to a rigorous cost-benefit analysis'.[210] 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.

3.1.3 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

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[207] The Times, 'The Times View on Immigration: Quality over Quantity' (n 206).

[208] Maya Goodfellow, 'Dismantling the Myths of Migrants as Threats or Tourists' (*Discover Society*, 7 April 2021) <https://discoversociety.org/2021/04/07/dismantling-the-myths-of-migrants-as-threats-or-tourists/> accessed 29 June 2025.

[209] *The Times* (n 208).

[210] ibid.

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.[211]

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'.[212] 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, 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'.[213] 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.

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[211] UK Home Office, 'Irregular Migration to the UK: Year Ending June 2023' (*Gov.UK*, 23 November 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> accessed 29 June 2025.

[212] Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (Blackwell 1994) 150.

[213] van Dijk, *Racism and the Press* (n 179) 219.

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.[214] Scholars widely agree that metaphors used to describe migration are frequently degrading and dehumanising. Arcimaviciene and Baglama, for example, emphasise that these metaphors not only reflect but also shape dominant perceptions of the other.[215]

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.[216] 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.

Common metaphorical domains used to describe migrants include war, natural disasters (particularly water-based), parasites,[217] diseases,[218] pollutants[219] 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'.[220] Recurring lexical choices such as 'flow', 'wave', 'surge', 'catastrophe' and 'disas-

[214] Massimiliano Demata, 'A Great and Beautiful Wall' (2017) 5(2) Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict 274, 278.
[215] Arcimaviciene and Baglama (n 165).
[216] Andreas Musolff, 'The Study of Metaphor as Part of Critical Discourse Analysis' (2012) 9(3) Critical Discourse Studies 301 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2012.688300>.
[217] ibid.
[218] Demata (n 216) 274.
[219] Theresa Catalano and George E Fielder, 'European Spaces and the Roma: Denaturalizing the Naturalized in Online Reader Comments' (2018) 12(3) Discourse & Communication 240.
[220] Arcimaviciene and Baglama (n 165).

ter' imply panic, unpredictability and stress.[221] Empirical research by the Migration Observatory (2006–15) confirms that terms 'influx' and 'flood' were among the most frequent collocates used in UK press coverage of migration.[222]

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.[223] 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'"[224] employs hyperbolic language and temporal intensification to create a sense of urgency. The use of size-based descriptors, such as 'enormous' and 'influx', paired with the time marker '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.

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'[225] 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

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221 Połońska-Kimunguyi (n 161) 9.

222 The Migration Observatory, 'Migration in the News: Portrayals of Immigrants, Migrants, Asylum Seekers and Refugees in National British Newspapers, 2010–2012' (The Migration Observatory, University of Oxford, 8 August 2013) <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Report-Migration_News.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.

223 Arcimaviciene and Baglama (n 165).

224 Aurora Bosotti, 'One Chart Exposes UK's "Enormous" Immigration Problem With Influx "Like Never Before"' (*Daily Express*, 29 April 2024) <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1907498/chart-uk-immigration-rate> accessed 29 June 2025.

225 Dampier (n 199).

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'.[226] 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 and others describe as the myth of a Europe 'under siege'.[227] Połońska-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'.[228] 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.[229]

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[226] David Wilcock, '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' (*Daily Mail*, 24 June 2024) <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13563073/Nigel-Farage-warns-invasion-young-men-channel-election.html> accessed 29 June 2025.

[227] Kirsten Forkert and others, *How Media and Conflicts Make Migrants* (Manchester UP 2020).

[228] Połońska-Kimunguyi (n 161) 9.

[229] Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (3rd edn, Routledge 2002) 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' and 'reduce' to reinforce the urgent need to curtail the 'influx'.[230] 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'.[231]

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.[232] 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'.[233]

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',

[230] Maka Julios-Costa and Camila Montiel-McCann, 'A Hostile Environment: Language, Race, Politics and the Media' (Runnymede Trust 2023) <https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/6798ec9f5e429b786277f9db_A%20hostile%20environment_report_v4.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.

[231] van Dijk, 'News Racism' (n 204) 45.

[232] Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann (n 232).

[233] Federico Zappettini, 'Europhobia as a Trajectory to Hate Speech Normalisation? A Diachronic Analysis of Brexit Media Propaganda' [2025] Critical Discourse Studies 1.

setting an alarmist tone for the rest of the article.[234] 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 'MIGRANT BABY SWINDLE Albanian Gangs Target UK Mums-To-Be in Plot to Register Illegal Migrants as The Dad' 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.[235]

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'[236] 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.[237] 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', 'un-

[234] Dampier (n 199).
[235] Atherley (n 175).
[236] Jonathan Walker, 'Migration Chaos Warning as Thousands Set to Cross Channel During French Olympics' (*Daily Express*, 20 July 2024) <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1925828/thousands-more-small-boat-migrants-set> accessed 29 June 2025.
[237] Piemontese (n 172) 28.

guarded coasts' and 'braced for a nightmare' allude to militaristic imagery and reinforce a sense of vulnerability and invasion.[238] The repetition of 'migration chaos', also featured 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 versus villainous and unlawful, plenty versus scarcity and order versus 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.

3.1.4 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.[239] They guide how readers interpret discourse, functioning as subjective frameworks through which meaning is made.[240] 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.[241] 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.[242] In this way, the media does not merely reflect prevailing ideologies but actively shapes and sustains them in the public consciousness.

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[238] Walker (n 238).

[239] Teun A van Dijk, *Elite Discourse and Racism* (SAGE Publications 1993) 13 <https://discourses.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Teun-A.-van-Dijk-1993-Elite-Discourse-And-Racism.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.

[240] ibid.

[241] ibid.

[242] ibid.

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 manipulable'.[243] 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.[244] 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'.[245]

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'.

[243] Paul Chilton, 'Manipulation, Memes and Metaphors: The Case of *Mein Kampf*' in Louis de Saussure and Peter Schulz (eds), *Manipulation and Ideologies in the Twentieth Century: Discourse, Language, Mind* (John Benjamins 2005) 39.

[244] Stelios Assimakopoulos and Damianos Serafis, 'Why Soft Hate Speech Matters: Argumentativity and the Dispersion of Hatred Towards Minorities' [2024] Critical Discourse Studies 1, 13 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2024.2440869>.

[245] 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.

4.1 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.[246] British newspapers, widely regarded as overtly partisan and ideological in outlook, play a significant role in shaping political debate.[247] Zappettini notes that 'tabloid journalism relies on distinctive ideological and stylistic features aligned with pop-

[246] Rens Vliegenthart and Conny Roggeband, 'Framing Immigration and Integration: Relationships between Press and Parliament in the Netherlands' (2007) 69(3) International Communication Gazette 295 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048507076582>.

[247] Scott Blinder and Anne-Marie Jeannet, 'The "Illegal" and the Skilled: Effects of Media Portrayals on Perceptions of Immigrants in Britain' (2018) 44(9) Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 1627 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1412253>.

ulist discourses' and the political elites, in turn, rely on the tabloid press to '(dis)inform audiences' and influence political attitudes.[248] The tabloid press reaches 85% of British readership, and so is an appealing means of disseminating political beliefs.[249] It should be acknowledged that individuals tend to select media outlets that conform to their pre-existing political views, making the relationship mutually reinforcing.[250]

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,[251] then-Home Secretary Priti Patel reportedly held restricted press briefings to help secure favourable media coverage.[252] 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.[253] 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.[254] Similarly, Patel's press delegation to Rwanda excluded critical outlets like *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, the *Financial Times* and the BBC, outlets more likely to challenge the official lines.[255]

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.[256] Policy

[248] Federico Zappettini, 'Europhobia as a Trajectory to Hate Speech Normalisation? A Diachronic Analysis of Brexit Media Propaganda' [2025] Critical Discourse Studies 1, 5.
[249] ibid.
[250] Natalie Jomini Stroud, 'Polarization and Partisan Selective Exposure' (2010) 60(3) Journal of Communication 556 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2010.01497.x>.
[251] Nationality and Borders Act 2022.
[252] HOPE not hate, 'Stoking the Flames: How the Media and Government Promote Hostility Towards Migrants' (HOPE not hate 2023) <https://hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Stoking-the-Flames.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.
[253] ibid.
[254] ibid.
[255] ibid.
[256] Charlotte Griffiths and Jon Trebilcock, 'Continued and Intensified Hostility: The Problematisation of Immigration in the UK Government's 2021 New Plan for Immigration' (2023) 43(3) Critical Social Policy 401, 407 <https://doi.org/10.1177/02610183221109133>.

statements warned of 'dangerous and unnecessary journeys' and asserted asylum access should be 'based on need, not on the ability to pay people smugglers'.[257] 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.

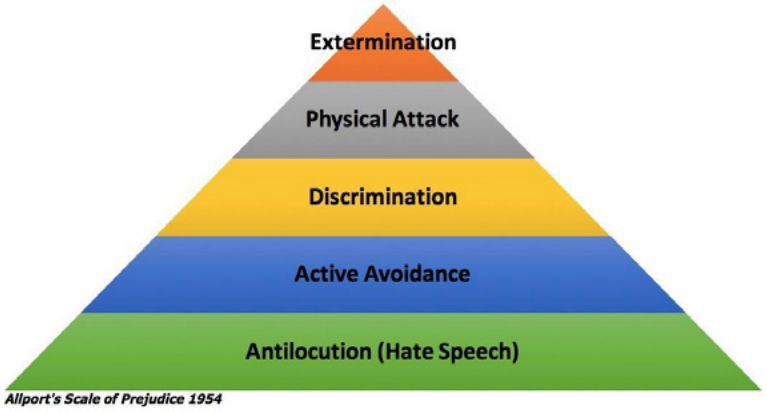
Wodak identifies a major shift whereby extreme nationalistic rhetoric found in far-right populist discourse has gradually entered into the mainstream.[258] Centrist political parties, motivated by electoral concerns, have adopted increasingly exclusionary stances, contributing to what she constitutes a normalisation in the political landscape, almost imperceptible at first.[259] This includes fear-mongering about national security and the protection of social welfare.[260] 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'.[261]

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.[262] 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 legitimation: politicians rely on the media to disseminate exclusionary narratives, while the media draw authority from political rhetoric to justify alarmist

[257] Griffiths and Trebilcock (n 256).
[258] Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: The Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse* (2nd edn, SAGE 2021).
[259] ibid.
[260] ibid.
[261] Teun A van Dijk, 'Mediating Racism: The Role of the Media in the Reproduction of Racism' in Ruth Wodak (ed), *Language, Power and Ideology: Studies in Political Discourse* (John Benjamins 1989) 37.
[262] ibid.

tones. Together, they construct and sustain ideological environments that cement scapegoating, normalise public hostility towards migrants and maintain moral panics.



4.2 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'.[263] 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'.[264] A key driver, the report concludes, is the 'negative and false belief that Mus-

[263] Scott Blinder and Anne-Marie Jeannet, 'The "Illegal" and the Skilled: Effects of Media Portrayals on Perceptions of Immigrants in Britain' (2018) 44(9) Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 1632 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1412253>.

[264] 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://studies.aljazeera.net/sites/default/files/events/documents/2019/20121892097317 34Islamiphobia%20and%20Anti%20Muslim%20Hate%20Crime_UK%20Case%20Studies.pdf > accessed 29 June 2025.

lims pose a security or terrorist threat'.[265] 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.[266] The media's role in shaping public attitudes toward minority groups has been widely acknowledged both in academic literature and by 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.[267]
[268]

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.[269] Hostile language, even when not overtly inflammatory, gradually reshapes perceptions. Allport's scale of prejudice 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

[265] ibid.

[266] Ewa Połońska-Kimunguyi, 'Echoes of Empire: Racism and Historical Amnesia in the British Media Coverage of Migration' (2022) 9 Humanities and Social Sciences Communications 3, 8 <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-01020-4>.

[267] 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, International Organization for Migration 2023) <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/MRS-72.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.

[268] Clare Carlile and Rob Harrison, 'Addressing Subtle Forms of Hate in UK Media Coverage of Migration' (Ethical Consumer and Stop Funding Hate 2022) 5 <https://research.ethicalconsumer.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/Addressing-subtle-hate-UK-media-coverage-migration-Full-Report-Oct2022.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.

[269] Ruud Koopmans, 'Explaining the Rise of Racist and Extreme Right Violence in Western Europe: Grievances or Opportunities?' (1996) 30(2) European Journal of Political Research 185 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.1996.tb00674.x>; Pierluigi Conzo and others, 'Negative Media Portrayals of Immigrants Increase Ingroup Favoritism and Hostile Physiological and Emotional Reactions' (2021) 11 Scientific Reports 16407 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-95800-2>.

boundaries.[270] 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'.[271]

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.

4.3 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.[272] In the run up to the public vote, anti-immigrant rhetoric tripled during the ten-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.[273] The *Daily*

[270] Gordon W Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Addison-Wesley 1954).

[271] United Nations, 'The Plan of Action for Media Stakeholders in Addressing Hate Speech and Preventing Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Genocide' (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> accessed 29 June 2025.

[272] Jennifer Saul, 'Immigration in the Brexit Campaign: Protean Dogwhistles and Political Manipulation' in Carl Fox and Joe Saunders (eds), *Media Ethics, Free Speech, and the Requirements of Democracy* (Routledge 2018) 19 <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/161840/3/ImmigrationBrexitCleanDraft.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.

[273] Jane Martinson, 'Media Painted Bleak Picture of Immigration Before Brexit Vote, Study Finds' (*The Guardian*, 10 May 2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/10/brexit-eu-referendum-campaign-media-coverage-immigration> accessed 29 June 2025.

Express, the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* dominated this hostile framing, repeatedly portraying migrants as a burden on the economy and public services.[274]

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.[275] 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.[276] Albornoz and others found that hate crime rose 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'.[277] 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.[278] 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.[279] Over 50 anti-migrant demonstrations took place in the UK in just the first three months of 2023.[280] In

[274] Martin Moore and Gordon Ramsay, 'UK Media Coverage of the 2016 EU Referendum Campaign' (Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power/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> accessed 29 June 2025.

[275] 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' (2019) 24(2) Sociological Research Online 167.

[276] Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Concluding observations on the combined twenty-first to twenty-third periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (3 October 2016) UN Doc CERD/C/GBR/CO/21-23 para 15.

[277] 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).

[278] Saul (n 274) 19.

[279] HOPE not hate (n 254) 4.

[280] ibid.

February 2023, rioters started violent clashes outside a hotel housing asylum seekers in Kirkby, Liverpool.[281] 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'.[282] 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'.[283] 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 non-governmental organisation (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 the messaging platform Telegram.[284] Articles linking migrants to criminality were especially likely to be circulated in these spaces.[285] 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 1,136 in early 2023.[286] This suggests a cascading effect: government rhetoric feeds into media framing, which in turn reinforces far-right narratives and encourages mobilisation.

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[281] Diane Taylor, 'After the cowardly attack on migrants in Knowsley, a warning to ministers: your words can start fires' *The Guardian* (London, 13 February 2023) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/feb/13/attack-migrants-knowsley-ministers-violence-asylum-seekers> accessed 23 February 2026.

[282] ibid.

[283] HOPE not hate, 'Laying the Groundwork: How Years of Anti-Migrant Activism Fed into This Summer's Race Riots' (*HOPE not hate*, 8 October 2024) <https://hopenothate.org.uk/2024/10/08/laying-the-groundwork-how-years-of-anti-migrant-activism-fed-into-this-summers-race-riots/> accessed 23 February 2026.

[284] ibid.

[285] HOPE not hate (n 254) 19.

[286] ibid.

4.4 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, *dis*information. 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'.[287]

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 hotel.[288] 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 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.[289] This is typically assessed by measurable factors such as the size of the immigrant popula-

[287] Sunder Katwala, 'Understanding "Legitimate Concerns" – and How to Differentiate Them from Those with No Legitimacy' (*British Future*, 2024) <https://www.britishfuture.org/understanding-legitimate-concerns-and-how-to-differentiate-them-from-those-with-no-legitimacy/> accessed 3 June 2025.

[288] HOPE not hate (n 254) 12.

[289] Blinder and Jeannet (n 265) 1632.

tion.[290] 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.[291] Only 12% of respondents believed the rioters reflected the views of most Britons.[292] 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'.[293] 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.

[290] Blinder and Jeannet (n 265) 1632.

[291] Dylan Difford and Matthew Smith, 'The Public Reaction to the 2024 Riots' (*YouGov*, 6 August 2024) <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/50257-the-public-reaction-to-the-2024-riots> accessed 29 June 2025.

[292] ibid.

[293] Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (3rd edn, Routledge 2002) 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.

5.1 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.[294] 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.[295] Simultaneously, democracies are experiencing a 'freedom of speech recession', a backsliding, with open democracies implementing restrictive measures and eroding journalis-

[294] ARTICLE 19, 'Responding to "Hate Speech": Comparative Overview of Six EU Countries' (ARTICLE 19 2018) <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ECA-hate-speech-compilation-report_March-2018.pdf> accessed 3 June 2025.

[295] ibid.

tic freedoms.[296] 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.[297] In reaction to the contested nature of the definition, a wealth of academic literature has been dedicated towards hate speech and its conceptual limits.[298] To provide a unified framework for the UN 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.[299]

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'.[300] The ECRI stresses that if left unaddressed, it can lead to 'acts of violence and conflict on a wider scale'. In this sense

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[296] The Future of Free Speech, 'The Free Speech Recession Hits Home: Mapping Laws and Regulations Affecting Free Speech in 22 Open Democracies' (Justitia, Vanderbilt University and Aarhus University Department of Political Science 2023) <https://futurefreespeech.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Report_The-Free-Speech-Recession-Hits-Home_30112023.pdf> accessed 3 June 2025.

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

[298] Soojin Lee and Anne Gilliland, 'Evolving Definitions of Hate Speech: The Impact of a Lack of Standardized Definitions' in Isaac Sserwanga and others (eds), *Wisdom, Well-Being, Win-Win: Proceedings of the 19th International iConference 2024* (Springer 2024) 141 <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-57860-1_11>.

[299] United Nations, 'Understanding Hate Speech: What Is Hate Speech?' (*United Nations*) <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech> accessed 3 June 2025.

[300] Council of Europe – European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), 'Hate Speech and Violence' (*ECRI*) <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance/hate-speech-and-violence> accessed 30 May 2025.

hate speech is an extreme form of intolerance which contributes to hate crime.[301] They do reiterate the need to balance restrictions with protections for free expression.[302]

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.[303]

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.[304]

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.[305] 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.[306] 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.[307]

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

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301 ECRI (n 300).

302 ibid.

303 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> accessed 3 June 2025.

304 United Nations, 'Hate Speech versus Freedom of Speech' (*United Nations*) <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/hate-speech-versus-freedom-of-speech> accessed 3 June 2025.

305 Jeremy Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech* (Harvard UP 2012) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jbrjd> accessed 29 June 2025.

306 ibid.

307 ibid.

that restricting it through bans, even well-intentioned ones, is logically inconsistent with democratic principles.[308] 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 advocates for counter-speech rebuttal, factual correction and public condemnation as more appropriate responses to prejudice.[309]

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'.[310] For him, the absence of such a clear line exposes the danger of overreach.[311] 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.

5.2 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'.[312] The rights to equality and non-discrimination are provided in articles 1, 2 and 7 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,[313] and legally reinforced through articles 2(1) and 26 of the ICCPR.[314] These must be bal-

[308] Eric Heinze, *Hate Speech and Democratic Citizenship* (OUP 2016).
[309] ibid.
[310] Jonathan Rauch, 'A New Argument for Hate Speech Laws? Um, No' (*The Washington Post*, 4 February 2014) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2014/02/04/a-new-argument-for-hate-speech-laws-um-no/> accessed 23 June 2025.
[311] ibid.
[312] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) (ICCPR) 999 UNTS 171, art 20(2).
[313] Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted 10 December 1948) UNGA Res 217 A(III) (UDHR), arts 1, 2 and 7.
[314] ICCPR, arts 21(2) and 26.

anced 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.[315]

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 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.[316] 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, intent, content, extent and likelihood of harm.[317] The UK also ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and article 4 requires a commitment to criminalise the spread of ideas rooted in racial superiority and incitement to racial violence or discrimination.[318]

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'.[319] 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

[315] ICCPR, art 19.

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

[317] United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Rabat Plan of Action on the Prohibition of Advocacy of National, Racial or Religious Hatred that Constitutes Incitement to Discrimination, Hostility or Violence' (United Nations 2013).

[318] International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (adopted 21 December 1965, entered into force 4 January 1969) 660 UNTS 195 (CERD).

[319] Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (European Convention on Human Rights, as amended) (ECHR) (adopted 4 November 1950, entered into force 3 September 1953), art 10.

population'.[320] 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.[321]

5.3 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 criminal offence is motivated by hostility toward someone based on protected characteristics, such as race, religion, sexual orientation, transgender status and disability.[322] 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'.[323] When such hostility is proven, prosecutors may seek an enhanced sentence due to the aggravating nature of the offence.[324]

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.[325]

More comprehensive provisions were later introduced via the Public Order Act 1986.[326] 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.

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320 *Handyside v United Kingdom* (1976) 1 EHRR 737 (ECtHR).
321 *Chauvy and Others v France* (2004) ECHR VI, para 67 (ECtHR).
322 Crown Prosecution Service, 'Hate Crime' (*Crown Prosecution Service*, 2024) <https://www.cps.gov.uk/crime-info/hate-crime> accessed 29 June 2025.
323 ibid.
324 ibid.
325 Sandra Coliver (ed), *Striking a Balance: Hate Speech, Freedom of Expression and Non-Discrimination* (Article 19/University of Essex 1992) <https://www.article19.org/data/files/pdfs/publications/striking-a-balance.pdf> accessed 23 February 2026.
326 Public Order Act 1986.

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.[327] He pleaded guilty and received a 20-month sentence.[328] 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.[329]

The Equality Act 2010 further broadens protections, prohibiting discrimination on grounds of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation.[330] While not a criminal statute, it empowers individuals to bring civil claims against both public bodies and private entities for discriminatory treatment.

5.4 Media regulations

Following the Leveson Inquiry,[331] 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 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, 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. Despite government encouragement to join independent regulators, scepticism persists about true independence, with campaign groups

[327] BBC News, 'Man Jailed for Facebook Posts Encouraging Violence' (*BBC News*, 9 August 2024) <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czjy7mykdwno> accessed 21 May 2025.
[328] ibid.
[329] ibid.
[330] Equality Act 2010.
[331] Brian Leveson, 'An Inquiry into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press: Executive Summary and Recommendations' (The Stationery Office 2012).

like Hacked Off argue that IPSO is insufficiently impartial.[332] 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.[333]

IPSO asserts that its code balances individual rights with the public's right to know.[334] 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',[335] but the Code 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'.[336] 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',[337] 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.[338] A recent report revealed its shortcomings and failure to act on complaints:

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[332] Hacked Off, 'About Hacked Off' (*Hacked Off*) <https://www.hackedoff.org/about-hacked-off> accessed 29 June 2025; ARTICLE 19, 'Responding to "Hate Speech"' (n 296).

[333] Hacked Off, 'About Hacked Off' (n 334).

[334] Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), 'Editors' Code of Practice' (*IPSO*) <https://www.ipso.co.uk/editors-code-of-practice/> accessed 1 July 2025.

[335] ibid.

[336] Clare Carlile and Rob Harrison, 'Addressing Subtle Forms of Hate in UK Media Coverage of Migration' (Ethical Consumer and Stop Funding Hate 2022) 39 <https://research.ethicalconsumer.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/Addressing-subtle-hate-UK-media-coverage-migration-Full-Report-Oct2022.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.

[337] Mark Duell, 'Cops get attack of common sense at last: Katie Hopkins will NOT face charges over allegations that she incited racial hatred in migrant article' (*Daily Mail Online*, 30 October 2015) <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3301963/Katie-Hopkins-not-face-charges-allegations-incited-racial-hatred-article-comparing-migrants-cockroaches.html> accessed 23 February 2026.

[338] Brian Cathcart, 'The Toughest Regulator in the World? IPSO Stares Failure in the Face' (*Inforrm's Blog*, 20 November 2021) <https://inforrm.org/2021/11/20/the-toughest-regulator-in-the-world-ipso-stares-failure-in-the-face-brian-cathcart/> accessed 29 June 2025.

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.[339] 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.[340] It concluded that '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'.[341]

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 freedom' with minimal recourse for affected communities. The conclusions of the 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'.[342] 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.

5.5 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

[339] Hacked Off, 'IPSO: The Watchdog That Won't Bite' (IPSO Brief 2023) <https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6641da6192d9eb6b354d4181/67813257826388f30a31d140_IPSO%20BRIEF%202023.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.
[340] ARTICLE 19, 'Responding to "Hate Speech"' (n 296).
[341] ibid 37.
[342] ibid 4.

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.[343] 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 UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, calls on the collective responsibility of states, media and society:

> to ensure that acts of 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.[344]

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

[343] Kim McGuire, 'Engaging with the Media in a Pre and Post Brexit World: Racism, Xenophobia and Regulation: A United Kingdom Perspective' (2019) 15(1) Journal of Hate Studies 255.

[344] United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (n 319) principle 9.

dehumanising narratives in reporting.[345] 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'.[346] 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'.[347] 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.[348]

5.5.1 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.[349] 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

[345] Migrants' Rights Network, 'Words Matter: Explainers Compilation' (Migrants' Rights Network 2024) <https://migrantsrights.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/WM-compilation-final.pdf> accessed 21 May 2025.

[346] UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018* (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2019) <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/5df9f0417.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.

[347] Migrants' Rights Network, 'Words Matter: Explainers Compilation' (n 347).

[348] International Organization for Migration, *Glossary on Migration* (34th edn, International Migration Law Series, IOM 2019) <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml_34_glossary.pdf> accessed 29 June 2025.

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

appendix with examples and referencing of subtle hate linguistic examples.[350] 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.[351]

01 — Focus on trends, patterns and volume of subtle hate and drivers of hate
02 — Demonstrate the impact of subtle hate – focus on harms
03 — Include personal stories and migrant voices
04 — Draw on understandings of other forms of prejudice
05 — Ensure that you do not demonise those holding prejudicial views
06 — Use and compare examples to explain what does and doesn't constitute hate
07 — Explain the origins and history of tropes
08 — Support the public to anticipate tropes likely to appear in the media
09 — 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

5.5.2 Corporate accountability

Corporate responsibility also offers an effective route for change. Campaigns such as Stop Funding Hate have harnessed public pressure to encourage advertisers to withdraw financial support from outlets that persistently spread hateful or misleading stories about migrants.[352] Rather than relying on legal mechanisms, this approach influences media behaviour through market-based initiatives. Stop Funding Hate provides guides for the public on how to spot hate and contact advertisers, emphasising respectful but firm communication. Since 2016, Stop Funding Hate has succeeded in persuading hundreds of advertisers

[350] Ethical Consumer Research Association, 'Addressing Migrant Hate in the UK Media: Appendix of Examples' (Ethical Consumer Research Association 2022) <https://research.ethicalconsumer.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/Addressing-migrant-hate-Appendix-examples-2022.pdf> accessed 23 June 2025.
[351] ibid.
[352] Stop Funding Hate, 'What's the Long-Term Goal of Stop Funding Hate?' (*Stop Funding Hate*, 13 March 2018) <https://stopfundinghate.info/2018/03/13/thelongterm/> accessed 25 June 2025.

to move their advertising budgets away from hateful media.[353] Brands such as Lego have, as a result, ceased advertising with the *Daily Mail* following public outcry.[354] 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.[355]

5.5.3 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. Their core principle is to provide a 'right of reply' to marginalised groups that are denied due representation in everyday news coverage.[356] 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.

[353] Carlile and Harrison (n 338).

[354] R Wilson, 'Stop Funding Hate – How a Movement for Ethical Advertising Is Making Hate Unprofitable' (*Impakter*, 11 December 2018) <https://impakter.com/stop-funding-hate/> accessed 25 June 2025.

[355] Carlile and Harrison (n 338) 5.

[356] Media Storm, 'Our Mission' (*Media Storm Podcast*) <https://mediastormpodcast.com/mission/> accessed 25 June 2025.

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 versus 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 versus 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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