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# UK press is the most aggressive in reporting on Europe's 'migrant' crisis

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Different voices.

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Just as Ronald Reagan said that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter, for the UK press, one newspaper's "asylum seeker" is another paper's "migrant". And, as you'd expect, the sometimes aggressive way in which the media is covering this issue is polarising debate in Britain.

Last year, researchers at Cardiff University’s Journalism School conducted a study to examine how the refugee and migrant crisis was being reported in the press in different European countries.



We examined the different types of source used by the press as well as the use of terminology – “migrant”, “refugee” or “illegal immigrant”. It was also important to analyse the different themes highlighted in the coverage, whether it be policy debates, humanitarian suffering or potential threats to national security, as well as the range of explanations offered for population flows and discussions of how the crisis could be resolved.

Our research pointed to some very clear findings in relation to the controversial issue of terminology. Last year, Al Jazeera publicly declared that it would no longer use the term “migrant”. In an editor’s blog, Al Jazeera declared:

The Guardian typically takes a humanitarian view on refugees. The Guardian

*The umbrella term migrant is no longer fit for purpose when it comes to describing the horror unfolding in the Mediterranean. It has evolved from its dictionary definitions into a tool that dehumanises and distances, a blunt pejorative.*

While Germany (91.0%) and Sweden (75.3%) overwhelmingly used the terms “refugee” or “asylum seeker”, in Spain the most widely (67.1%) used term was “immigrant” and in Britain (54.2%) and Italy (35.8%) the word was “migrant”.

We also found that when it came to political sourcing, government spokespeople tended to dominate – from 51.3% of political source appearances in Sweden to 79.6% in Germany. Meanwhile, the main opposition voices in Sweden, Italy and the UK came from right wing anti-immigrant parties.

Interestingly, the lack of far-right parties with representation in national parliaments in both Spain and Germany meant that the voice of the anti-immigrant right struggled to be heard in their media.

### Hard line

But the most striking finding in our research is how polarised and aggressive British press reporting was compared to that of other countries.

In most countries, newspapers, whether left or right wing, tended to report using the same sources. They also featured the same kinds of



themes and provided similar explanations and solutions to the crisis.

But the British press was different. While The Guardian and – to a lesser extent, the Daily Mirror – featured a range of humanitarian themes and sources sympathetic to the plight of refugees, the right-wing press consistently endorsed a hardline anti-refugee and migrant, Fortress Europe approach.



Daily Mail takes a typically hard line on 'migrants'. Daily Mail

## Percentage of articles featuring selected themes in news coverage

X.1 ▼	Guardian	Telegraph	Daily Mail	Sun	Daily Mirror	EU Average (excluding UK)
Health risk for country of destination	1.9	0	4.8	9.5	4.2	3.4
Humanitarian (elements)	41.3	29.8	16.1	7.1	29.2	24.7
Humanitarian (key theme)	16.3	8.8	4.8	0.0	4.2	13.6
Migrant criminality	7.7	7	14.5	7.1	4.2	3.7
Migration figures/levels	69.2	71.9	75.8	54.8	50.0	49.8
Political response/policy	41.3	29.8	33.9	38.1	33.3	45.4
Search and rescue/aid supplies	47.1	42.1	32.3	31.0	54.2	44.6
Threat to communities/cultural threat	12.5	14	22.6	9.5	12.5	8.4
Threat to national security	11.5	7	16.1	11.9	0.0	9.3
Threat to welfare/benefits /resources	8.7	15.8	41.9	26.2	4.2	8.9

This can be seen, for instance, in the low proportion of articles which featured humanitarian themes (Daily Mail 20.9%, The Sun 7.1%, EU average 38.3%) as well as the high percentage of articles which emphasised the threat that refugees and migrants pose to Britain's welfare and benefits system (Daily

Telegraph 15.8%, Daily Mail 41.9%, The Sun 26.2%, EU average 8.9%).

## Angling for prejudice

But this raw data only tells half the story. In the EU press, the negative commentary on refugees and migrants usually only consists of a reported sentence or two from a citizen or far-right politician – which is often then challenged within the article by a journalist or another source. In the British right-wing press, however, anti-refugee and migrant themes are continuously reinforced through the angles taken in stories, editorials and comment pieces.

### EU ARE KIDDING Brussels: UK's 600,000 benefit tourists is no problem



The Sun later apologised for factual errors in this story, blaming a 'subbing error'. The Sun

It is this consistent, hard campaigning edge which marked out the British right-wing press, something graphically illustrated in the week following the deaths of 1,000 refugees and migrants in the Mediterranean in April 2015. In The Guardian, the EU response – to focus primarily on using military power to attack people smugglers – was criticised. In reported stories and opinion pieces, journalists, NGOs, and lawyers condemned this policy while arguing for more

settlement places and legal migration routes.

## Percentage of articles featuring selected explanations for refugee and migration flows

X.1 ▼	Guardian	Telegraph	Daily Mail	Sun	Daily Mirror	EU Average (excluding UK)
Absence of border control	7.7	1.8	9.7	0.0	4.2	1.3
Economic pull factors	21.2	21.1	40.3	14.3	8.3	10.4
Enforced conscription	2.9	0.0	1.6	0.0	0.0	0.1
Isis/terrorism	2.9	3.5	4.8	2.4	0.0	3.7
No reason in article	34.6	42.1	35.5	64.3	54.1	57.8
Repressive regimes	16.3	8.8	8.1	2.4	8.3	5.0
War/Conflict /Atrocities	58.7	43.9	35.5	26.2	45.8	33.5

In the more right-wing Daily Telegraph, Daily Mail and The Sun, however, plans for EU quotas were condemned, as was the United Nations for failing to acknowledge “the social impact of what many Europeans see as uncontrolled and illegal immigration”. In the Daily Telegraph and Daily Mail, these views were primarily expressed in editorials and comment pieces while in The Sun the key forum was

the letters page. Here's a typical example:

*Well done, Katie Hopkins, for saying it how it is. Immigrants do not have a gun to their heads when they board these boats and are aware of the risks. They have only one thing in mind. Get to England and then screw the taxpayers for every penny they can get. (ALAN CARRINGTON Wickford, Essex, The Sun April 22 2015)*

Overall, very little reporting – especially outside the German and Swedish press – focused on the positive economic, social or cultural contributions that refugees and migrants could make to EU states. And most discussion of responses – such as improving search-and-rescue operations, more aid, or attacking people smugglers – focused on the symptoms of the crisis, rather than on the push factors driving refugee and migrant flows. Out of nearly 2,000 articles in our sample, only a handful focused on the need to resolve the conflict in Syria or address human rights abuses in states such as Afghanistan, Eritrea, Sudan or Iraq.

In recent research on EU attitudes, Italians (57%), Greeks (56%) and Britons (48%) were found to be most in favour of more restrictive asylum policies, while Germans, Spaniards and Swedes tended to say that their asylum policies were either about right – or should actually be less restrictive. While these patterns cannot be attributed exclusively to media reporting, research has demonstrated that the kind of media messages that we found in our British press sample – repetitive, negative, narrow and derogatory – can be highly influential.

As Roy Greenslade noted recently, newspapers influence their audiences through “repetition” so that “in a drip-drip-drip process over months, if not years, newspapers have an impact on readers who never think about, let alone question, the propaganda they consume”.



Europe UK press Migrant crisis