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**Abstract**

*This corpus-assisted critical discourse analytical study examines representations of real and imagined Brexit-related demonstrations in five British pro-Brexit newspapers in March and September 2019. These two months correspond to the United Kingdom's original withdrawal date from the European Union (March) and the attempted prorogation (suspension) of the UK Parliament (September). Examining social actor and action representation (KhosraviNik, 2010; van Leeuwen, 1995) in concordance lines from two semantic domains (Rayson, 2008), the paper illustrates that the newspapers represent the democratic actions of Remain-backing MPs as illegitimate coups and rebellions. In contrast, real and imagined Leave-backing protests are framed as legitimate expressions of justified despair, even if they are violent. Alongside these conflicting representations, the newspapers depict politicians' metaphors of unrest as harmful to individuals and the imagined community of the nation (Anderson, 2006). The study argues that the newspapers' discourses of unrest delegitimise calls for political action that could have, at the time of the articles' publications, prolonged Brexit. It concludes that by blaming politicians, citizens, and activists for unrest in the UK, the newspapers avoid acknowledging the role their coverage might play in reproducing and reifying social and political divisions.*

**Key words:** *Brexit, protest, mediated anger, socio-political unrest, democracy*

## **1. Introduction**

Brexit has been a form of contentious politics since a small majority of the UK public voted to leave the European Union in June 2016 (Brändle et al., 2021; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Social actors, whether politicians, activists, or citizens, have made Brexit-related demands on the UK government, often through collective action. These demands have tended to be oppositional. Remain voters have called on the government to hold a second referendum, while Leave voters have insisted that the government deliver Brexit as quickly as possible. Both sides have organised demonstrations to draw attention to their causes; Remain voters participated in 'People's Vote' protests, while Leave voters marched to the Houses of Parliament on 29 March and 31 October 2019, both dates on which the UK was supposed to, but did not, leave the EU. Far beyond mere political and ideological disagreements, the identity

labels 'Remainer' and 'Leaver' have developed into a new political cleavage in the UK (Kelley, 2019).

Although there have been many studies of Brexit-related discourses (e.g., Buckledee, 2018; Koller et al., 2019; Parnell, 2021), little attention has been paid to how newspapers reported on, manufactured, and repressed anti- and pro-Brexit dissent during the withdrawal process. This paper fills the gap by taking up Cottle's (2008) call to examine how sections of the media actively champion some demonstrations while demonising others. It does so by analysing how pro-Brexit newspapers legitimise pro-Brexit anger while vilifying anti-Brexit sentiments (Cottle, 2008). The study contends that by representing legitimate political actions as illegitimate coups and revolutions, the newspapers repress anti-Brexit dissent in parliament and try to convince readers that complex parliamentary processes are being illegitimately flouted. The article interprets these journalistic practices as a 'quieter method of repression' (Boykoff, 2007, p. 284) and argues that they have concerning implications for British democracy. The paper concludes that by blaming Remain-voting MPs and activists for socio-political divides in the UK, the newspapers obfuscate the role their coverage plays in (re)producing divisions.

## ***2. Brexit: The Socio-political Context***

The criticisms levelled at the European Union during the Vote Leave referendum campaign of 2016 were not new. British discontent with the idea of European union was voiced as early as 1973, when the UK joined the Common Market, and persisted through to June 1975, when Labour leader Harold Wilson held the first referendum on whether the UK should stay in the European Community. Although the Yes campaign prevailed in 1975 and the UK remained a part of the Community, some British politicians continued to be sceptical of European integration. For example, in 1988 prime minister Margaret Thatcher delivered her famous Bruges speech, in which she warned of a 'super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels' (Daddow et al., 2019, p. 11). Echoes of this fear of European domination could be heard from the mouths of Leave-backing politicians almost thirty years later, when they warned that 'the EU is already planning its next power grab' (Vote Leave, 2016, n.p.).

As the European project established its goal of ever closer union in 1993 by introducing EU citizenship with the Maastricht Treaty, the UK negotiated opt-outs for joining the euro and adhering to a 'social chapter' of integration. Although this established a precedence for the UK's role as the EU's 'awkward partner' (George, 1990), it did little to quell the Eurosceptic sentiment burgeoning on the backbenches of the House of Commons. A similar inability to silence the Eurosceptic faction of his party afflicted prime minister David Cameron in 2013. Growing public support for the Eurosceptic United Kingdom Independence Party was affecting the polls, and Cameron could no longer ignore the concerns about the EU that were dividing his party, the Conservatives. In his so-called Bloomberg speech in January 2013, Cameron announced his intention to hold a second referendum on the UK's EU membership if the Conservatives won the 2015 general election. His party was elected, and he fulfilled his promise.

On 24 June 2016, the day after the EU membership referendum, the public in Britain awoke to the news that by a slight margin, the nation had voted to leave the EU. In the years that followed, the UK went through three prime ministers and two withdrawal agreements. 2019, in particular, was a year of political contestation: British MPs refused to approve Theresa May's withdrawal agreement and then blocked a no-deal Brexit, while new prime minister Boris Johnson unlawfully prorogued (suspended) parliament. At the same time as this political disarray, civilians demonstrated for and against Brexit in the streets. It is the representation of these political and civil disagreements in five pro-Brexit British newspapers that this study explores.

### ***3. Mediated Anger, Populist Styles, and Unrest***

In British parliamentary discourses, parliamentary democracy is typically constructed as a feature of national identity that has long distinguished Britain from its European counterparts (Marcussen et al., 1999; Wodak, 2018). Within the context of Brexit, democracy is framed as threatened by the EU through an Invaded Nation frame (Charteris-Black, 2019). Given that democracy is constructed as a national value, a threat to democracy is inevitably a threat to the nation – an imagined political community (Anderson, 2006) that is 'real only insofar as people identify with it' (Wenzl, 2020, p. 73). The discursive construction of a national threat prompts an intertwining of political fear (Robin, 2004) and what Wahl-Jorgensen (2018) terms mediated anger: a performative form of collective emotion that is culturally constructed (Katriel, 2015) and has ideological consequences. Mediated anger acts as an emotional and moral compass that citizens can use to orient themselves towards events (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018).

The representation of public emotion, particularly anxiety and fear, is a key element of populist communication (Freedon, 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Populism is a political style that is 'performed, embodied and enacted across a variety of political and cultural contexts' (Moffitt, 2017, p. 3). Populist styles of communication promote a dichotomy between an elite and the people, and perpetuate a narrative of crisis (Farrand & Carrapico, 2021; Moffitt, 2017). Populism is increasingly mediated, such that media outlets become active participants in populist performances, 'presenting themselves as proxies for the people' (Moffitt, 2017, p. 9). As Mazzoleni (2007, pp. 54-55) states, there is a convergence of goals between populist actors and the media, in which the latter pursues 'corporate ends by striking emotional chords'. News media is particularly dependent for the success of its narratives on expressing the emotions of social actors and eliciting emotions from audiences (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

Socio-political unrest is one factor that contributes to a populist narrative of crisis and induces a collective sense of fear and anger (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Unrest is a symptom of 'social instability' that could take various forms, including 'protests', 'riots', 'demonstrations', and 'attempted revolutions' (Ponticelli & Voth, 2020, pp. 2-3). According to Hart and Kelsey (2019, p. 18), 'mainstream media, for reasons of political economy, tend to marginalise, delegitimise and undermine riots, strikes and protests, presenting them as illegitimate acts of non-conformity or criminality that constitute a "threat" to civil society'. This discursive framing has previously been called the 'protest

paradigm' (Chan and Lee, 1984). Researchers such as Cottle (2008) have questioned the significance of the protest paradigm, arguing that public protest has been mainstreamed and demonstrations have become normalised. As a result, media coverage of protests has become more progressive in some contexts. The present paper highlights the context dependency of representations of demonstrations by examining how sections of the media represent some protests as acceptable and others as illegitimate in the context of Brexit. It goes beyond representations of real protests, to consider how imagined demonstrations are legitimised or delegitimised to counter a threat to the imagined community of the nation (Anderson, 2006).

## **4. Data and Methods**

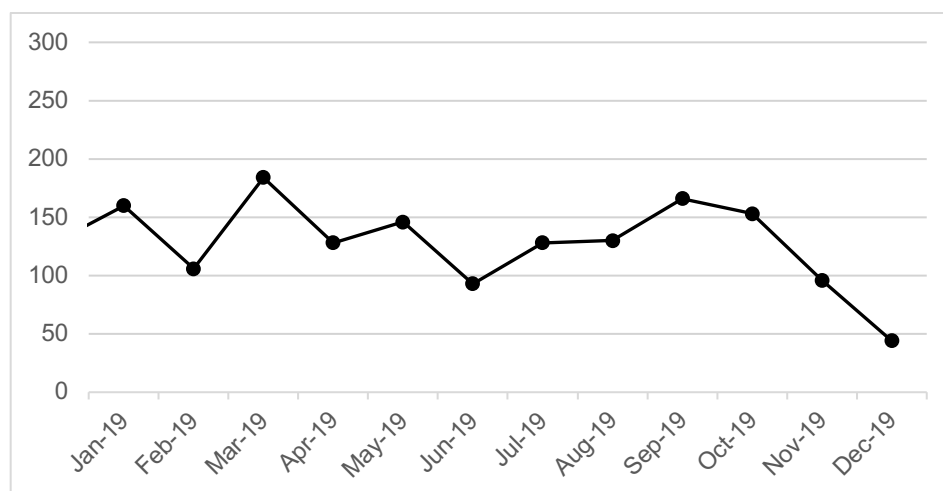
### **4.1 Data Collection**

This study analyses newspaper data rather than the multitude of other Brexit-related discourses because 'the mass media play a crucial role' at the repression—dissent interface (Koopmans, 2005, p. 159). I elected to look at representations in five pro-Brexit newspapers (*The Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Star*), rather than anti-Brexit newspapers like *The Guardian*, because pro-Leave stances dominated two thirds of national newspaper articles leading up to the EU referendum and most newspapers with the highest readership levels explicitly supported a Leave vote (Levy et al., 2016). As a result, then, this study considers the most dominant and widely accessed constructions of Brexit-related dissent. That said, it would make for an interesting follow-up study to examine the depiction of Brexit-related protests – both real and imagined – in anti-Brexit newspapers, too.

The data used in this project were collected from the online news repository Nexis. The criteria for the initial corpus compilation were that each article included "Britain" or "British", "Europe" or "European", "Brexit", "nation", and "people". All the articles available were collected, including news and comment pieces and letters to the editor. Although letters are written by readers and submitted to the newspaper, they are subjected to the editorial processes of selection, shortening, and having headlines attached to them. Letters thus become part of the editorial product of the newspapers and are unlikely to represent opinions that diverge from the publication's broader socio-political stances. The only articles excluded were live blogs from the newspapers' websites; each time a live blog was updated, it appeared as a separate article in Nexis, and collecting each iteration of a live blog would skew any type of linguistic analysis focused on frequencies.

The decision to exclude live blogs slightly affected the representativeness of the data because the *Telegraph Online* and the *MailOnline* frequently used live blogs in their Brexit-related reporting. Excluding live blogs meant that the contribution these two publications made to the corpus was smaller than their output during the data collection period. Although excluding live blogs somewhat affects the representativeness of the data, it is less detrimental to the analysis than skewing the statistical results by including terms that only achieve keyness because of duplication in the corpus compilation.

When I had collected the data, I downsampled it to focus on the months in which the highest number of articles were published. This enabled me to confidently map representations of socio-political unrest onto political events. As Figure 1 indicates, the two months in which the most articles about Brexit were published were March and September. This is not surprising; March 29 was the UK's original withdrawal date from the EU, while September saw both the introduction of Labour MP Hilary Benn's Bill, which required the prime minister to request an extension to Article 50, and the unlawful prorogation of Parliament (Walker, 2021). Once the data were downsampled, the corpus included 350 articles and totalled 316,571 tokens.



**Figure 1.** Number of articles published per month

## 4.2 Analytical Framework

This paper takes a corpus-assisted critical discourse analytical approach to the representation of Brexit-related demonstrations. A corpus is defined as ‘a large collection of authentic text’, with corpus linguistics referring to ‘any form of linguistic inquiry based on data derived from such a corpus’ (Stefanowitsch, 2020, p. 1). As Hart and Kelsey (2019, p. 44) note, ‘corpus linguistics enables researchers to show that patterns of representation identified in qualitative analysis occur frequently enough across large numbers of text to be significant’. The corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS) position adopted in the paper interprets corpus linguistics as a methodology. In other words, it views corpus techniques as a way into the data that extends the scope of discourse analysis beyond a small group of texts (Partington et al., 2013). As in Mulderigg’s (2011, p. 564, original emphasis) study, this article combines corpus linguistics with *critical* discourse analysis to produce ‘a systematic and thus *replicable* form of critical discourse analysis’. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a form of language-based social analysis that investigates how, through discourse, social inequality is constructed and legitimised (van Dijk, 2015; Wodak, 2001). It addresses the interplay between relationships of power, control, and discrimination as they are constructed in discourse (Wodak, 2001). CDA, according to Fairclough (2013, pp. 10-11), is a systematic, normative, transdisciplinary analysis of ‘relations between discourse and other elements of the social process’. That is, it ‘combines critique of discourse and explanation of how it figures within and contributes

to the existing social reality, as a basis for action to change that existing reality' (Fairclough, 2015, p. 6). In this paper, discourse, which is a highly loaded term that differs in meanings depending on scholar, refers to 'a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements [...] that in some way together produce a particular version of events' (Burr, 1995, p. 48).

CADS research takes an eclectic approach that allows researchers to draw on as many corpus tools as necessary to provide complete results (Partington et al., 2013). The aim of CADS is to uncover non-obvious meaning which is unlikely to be perceptible in manual analyses of texts (ibid.). Although Partington et al. (2013) argue that CADS is not tied to CDA because it has no overarching political agenda, CADS and CDA share the goal of illuminating implicit meanings in discourse. Existing corpus-assisted CDA research has illustrated how corpus linguistic methods can be usefully combined with critical discourse analysis to identify such meanings (e.g., Baker et al., 2008; Islentyeva, 2020).

### 4.3 Data Analysis

I use key semantic domain analysis to examine how pro- and anti-Brexit demonstrations are constructed in the pro-Brexit press. Key semantic domain analysis establishes statistically significant, i.e., key, semantic fields by comparing the relative frequencies of words automatically tagged as belonging to a semantic domain in the target corpus with those in a reference corpus (Rayson, 2008). The key semantic domain analysis tool is available through the web-based programme suite Wmatrix4 (Rayson, 2008). As words are grouped into semantic fields, the tool reveals instances where several words with similar semantic meanings are used frequently.

The Wmatrix4 approach to keyness in semantic domain analysis is two-pronged. It allows researchers to set a cut-off for the log-likelihood value, which is a measure of the confidence that a difference in relative frequencies is not due to error or chance (Gabrielatos, 2018). It also allows users to select an effect size measure, which examines the size of the difference in relative frequency between the target and reference corpora (Gabrielatos, 2018). Using both measures means that the results show a significant difference between realisations of the semantic domains in each corpus – a difference which is highly unlikely to be due to error or chance (Pojanapunya & Watson Todd, 2018).

Using the UCREL Semantic Analysis System in Wmatrix4, I compared the relative frequencies of words associated with the semantic domains in the Brexit corpus with their relative frequencies in the British National Corpus (BNC) Informative Sampler, which consists of 779,027 words. I chose the BNC Informative Sampler over the BE06, which is also available in Wmatrix4, because it consists solely of informative writing and so highlights instances of more rhetorical or evaluative language use in the newspapers. I organised the semantic domain analysis results by effect size and selected as potential candidates for analysis those semantic domains which had a log-ratio value above 1.0 and a log-likelihood value above 6.63 ( $p < 0.01$ ). A log-ratio value above 1.0 signals that there are at least twice as many instances of a domain in the target corpus as in the reference corpus, while a log-likelihood value above 6.63 means the observed difference in instances is highly unlikely to be due to error or chance (Pojanapunya & Watson Todd, 2016).

This initial process generated 36 key semantic domains, not all of which were involved in representing political demonstrations. I manually examined the concordance lines for words in each key semantic domain and removed those which did not include any mention of political discontent. After this process, only two semantic categories remained: *Violent/Angry* and *Unethical*. I then re-examined all the concordance lines for each semantic domain to distinguish the social actors and actions. To illustrate using the *Violent/Angry* domain as an example, I analysed who was perpetuating violence against whom. After I had established these broader categories of social actor representation, I determined which verbs or nouns were used to construct political unrest, such as ‘clashed’ or ‘bloodbath’. I then performed a manual analysis of the concordance lines, drawing on van Leeuwen’s (1995) framework for social actor representation and, where relevant, Halliday’s (1985) transitivity analysis. I analyse the most frequent representations of political unrest from each semantic domain in the analysis section below.

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1 The Violent/Angry Semantic Domain

The *Violent/Angry* semantic domain has a log-ratio value of 1.08 and a log-likelihood value of 274.98. There are 290.9 instances of the words in the domain per 100,000 words in the target corpus, compared to a relative frequency of 150.2 per 100,000 words in the reference corpus. As these two values indicate, there are almost twice as many instances of the semantic domain in the target corpus as in the reference corpus, and it is highly unlikely that this observed difference is due to error or chance ( $p < 0.0001$ ).

The key semantic domain of *Violent/Angry* is realised through a range of nouns and verbs, including anger\* (39 instances), threat\* (35), rebel\* (21), fury (16), clash\* (12), and seize (6). (Wildcards, which are indicated by the asterisks, stand for lemmas). There are two principal representations of unrest: a depiction of protests led by Leave voters as a form of legitimate civil engagement, and a largely metaphorical recontextualisation of political disagreements between Remain- and Leave-backing MPs in Parliament as illegitimate dissent on the part of the Remainers. Below, I take each portrayal in turn, considering the socio-political consequences of these ideological representations.

#### 5.1.1 ‘Dignified fury’: legitimising pro-Brexit demonstrations

Concordance lines from the *Violent/Angry* semantic domain repeatedly legitimise pro-Brexit demonstrations through the mediated constructions of anger and disappointment, as Examples (1) and (2) illustrate below:

- (1) MANY thousands of people filled Parliament Square this week. They wanted to be there to celebrate Britain's freedom from the EU but instead they had to express their **anger** at the failure of this country's political class to enact their wishes. While there were an estimated 20,000 protesters outside Parliament, their dignified **fury** was shared by the 17.4 million people who voted to Leave (*Express Online*, March 2019).

- (2) Friday was supposed to have been a day of celebration; it became a day of protest. They had dreamed of March 29th for two years, the day that Britain would finally leave the European Union. Instead, they marched in their thousands on Parliament Square to voice their **anger** and their despair (*Telegraph Online*, March 2019).

In both examples above, the journalists perform emotional alignment with the Leave-supporting protesters through the repetition of the mental desiderative processes (Halliday, 1985) ‘wanted to’ and ‘dreamed of’ and the abstract emotion nouns ‘anger’, ‘despair’ and ‘fury’. This emotion-based lexis frames the act of protest as a justified and peaceful (‘dignified’) act of collective psychological expression. The blame for the act of emotional expression is ascribed to a homogenous, collectivised (van Leeuwen, 1995) ‘political class’ through the deontic modality of ‘had to’. This auxiliary verb phrase removes the agency and responsibility from the protesters; dissent is framed as an obligation forced upon a Leave-backing public by a ‘failure’ of politicians to be responsive to public opinion. The argument underpinning both examples is that the delay to Brexit constitutes a contravention of popular sovereignty because the ‘hopes’, ‘wishes’ and ‘dreams’ of the protesters have not been fulfilled by politicians. Within this argument, an underlying populist style dichotomises an incompetent ‘political class’ and ‘the people’, who are amplified through aggregation (van Leeuwen, 1995) to include not just the ‘many thousands’ or ‘20,000’ protesters, but the entire Leave-voting population. In sum, then, pro-Brexit dissent is legitimised through its representation as an acceptable and blameless response to an unacceptable political situation in which representatives fail to honour the public’s wishes – a reflection of a responsive understanding of democracy (Bardi et al., 2014).

In addition to real pro-Brexit protests, the media outlets represent *imagined* expressions of pro-Brexit demonstrations. Images of violent behaviour pervade these representations, but violence is neither criminalised nor delegitimised, so the protest paradigm is subverted (Chan & Lee, 1984). Pro-Brexit violence is justified through a mediated representation of legitimate anger at the behaviour of (Remain-backing) political elites, as Examples (3) and (4) illustrate:

- (3) On Thursday night a senior cabinet minister told *The Times* that Britain will face a "violent popular **uprising**" like the yellow vest protests in France if MPs thwarted Brexit (*Telegraph Online*, September 2019).
- (4) It is no exaggeration to say that if last week was actually an exercise to derail Brexit or make the nation do it all over again, the **backlash** will be swift and **brutal** (*The Sun*, March 2019).

In Example (3), the *Telegraph Online* journalist and the anonymous cabinet minister they cite legitimise a hypothetical pro-Leave protest through the noun phrase ‘violent popular uprising’. The adjective ‘popular’ positions the anger fuelling the protest as shared among ‘the people’ of Britain. The noun ‘uprising’ draws on the populist imagery of a revolution through an UP-DOWN spatial metaphor (Koller & Ryan, 2019); in this metaphorical representation, the collective action of the people is framed as overpowering the politicians and protecting the interests of popular sovereignty. By association, then, the adjective ‘violent’ is ameliorated and the potential



violence is legitimised as a means of people regaining their rightful power. The hypothetical demonstration is further legitimised through the conditional clause ‘if MPs thwarted Brexit’, which represents the potential violence as contingent upon the decisions of Members of Parliament (MPs). In other words, any violence that occurs is framed as the fault of politicians’ actions rather than the protesters’ behaviours.

The demonisation of MPs is accompanied by an elicitation of fear through the allusion to the ‘yellow vest protests’ in France (3). These civil demonstrations against the French establishment ended in the deaths of eleven people. By evoking those protests, the journalist and the unnamed source warn that if MPs delay or prevent Brexit, a similar level of violence could be seen in the UK. Example (4) works similarly through the presupposition that a ‘swift and brutal’ ‘backlash’ is inevitable if MPs ‘de-rail Brexit’ (by blocking a no-deal Brexit) or ‘make the nation do it all over again’ (through a second referendum). These examples reveal that reporting on imagined Leave-backing protests fits the protest paradigm of violence and theatrics (Chan & Lee, 1984). However, although the journalists link citizens to a somewhat demonised group in France, the framing is not deprecatory. On the contrary, it is normalised through the representation of violence as inevitable.

To recapitulate, Leave-backing protests are legitimised in the pro-Brexit press, even if they are violent, because of delays to Brexit. The legitimisation of dissent is construed by recourse to anger, disappointment, and fear; dissent is framed as an expression of legitimate despair at political incompetence and the failures of representative democracy.

### **5.1.2 Seizing power and galvanising rebellions: repressing anti-Brexit opinions**

In contrast to and complementing the ideological alignment with Leave voters, the newspapers represent citizens and activists protesting Brexit as illegitimate and dangerous. In the corpus, support for remaining in the EU is evaluated as ‘militant’ (Brady, 2019), People’s Vote Marches are personified as violently ‘hit[ting] London’ (Express Online, 2019), and calls for Scottish independence in the wake of the 2016 referendum are labelled as ‘threatening a new Jacobite rebellion’ (Baldwin, 2019). Through these discursive representations, Remain voters’ expressions of dissenting opinion are recontextualised as violent acts that threaten domestic peace and democracy. Arguably, this discursive representation constitutes an act of quiet repression (Boykoff, 2007) as it seeks to, at best, undermine and, at worst, silence the expression of anti-Brexit sentiment.

Remain-voting citizens are not the only social actors whose actions are represented as a threat to the imagined community of the nation (Anderson, 2006). More frequently, debate in Parliament – represented in political discourse as a longstanding cornerstone of British democracy (Marcussen et al., 1999; Wodak, 2018) – is recontextualised as an illegitimate seizure of power from an elected government. In some cases, civil forms of dissent towards Brexit are discursively associated with the actions of Remain-backing MPs, allowing pro-Brexit newspapers to undermine both citizen and political expressions of dissenting opinion simultaneously. Example (5) represents this pattern in a column from *The Express* in September 2019:

- (5) These demonstrations were accompanied by frenzied language from a host of Left-wing politicians and anti-Brexit campaigners. Typical was the hysterical outburst from the Liberal Democrat MP Tom Brake, who proclaimed that Johnson's "declaration of war will be met with an iron fist". Beyond such tinpot revolutionary **agitation**, the anti-Brexiters are stepping up their plots at Westminster. They have drawn up a plan to call an emergency debate tomorrow, then **seize control** of the order of business in the Commons (*The Express*, September 2019).

In Extract (5), the journalist associates civil 'demonstrations' with the language of politicians and activists through the verb phrase 'were accompanied by'. The discursive expressions of dissenting opinion are delegitimised through lexis associated with mental illness ('frenzied language' and 'hysterical outburst'). This semantic link between dissenting opinion and frenzy and hysteria delegitimises anti-Brexit sentiment, while the noun phrase 'tinpot revolutionary agitation' undermines the power of language to effect political change. That is, the ironic undertones of the adjective 'tinpot' imply poor coordination and inefficacy. The noun 'agitation' also suggests that dissatisfaction is incited by members of the political elite, such as 'Liberal Democrat MP Tom Brake', and is not reflective of public opinion. In short, then, verbal expressions of dissent from citizens, activists, and politicians are framed as disruptive but ineffective. Although dissenting *opinion* is framed as relatively unarmful, the preposition 'beyond' discursively associates the linguistic performance of dissent with more powerful alleged 'plots at Westminster' to 'seize control of the order of business in the Commons'. As a result, dissenting citizens and activists are tarnished with the brush of rebellion for merely expressing a political stance. At the same time, the democratic political action of tabling an emergency debate is framed as a threat to the imagined community of the nation (Anderson, 2006) in a populist narrative of national crisis (Moffitt, 2017).

The representation of the emergency debate as akin to a coup ('seize control') has worrying implications for democracy. The article suggests MPs behave illegitimately by expressing dissent. However, parliamentary procedures state that 'any MP can apply to the Speaker for an emergency debate in the Chamber', if the matter for debate is 'urgent', 'important', and 'specific' (UK Parliament, 2021, n.p.). That is, the request must require an 'urgent response', be of 'evident national importance', and be 'focused' on a matter (UK Parliament, 2021, n.p.). Arguably, this is the case for the parliamentary debate to which the journalist refers – the prorogation of Parliament called by Boris Johnson was due to take place within a week, limiting the amount of time MPs had to debate the government's Brexit plans. This time pressure rendered the emergency debate sufficiently 'urgent', while the ramifications of a no-deal Brexit on the UK economy made it nationally significant. As the emergency debate met the requirements for consideration, it was democratically valid according to Parliament's procedures. It is striking, then, that the *Express* column discursively delegitimises the right to democratic debate; the noun 'plots' frames the last-minute tabling of the debate – required by the upcoming prorogation of Parliament – as a conspiracy to undermine Brexit. The framing of Remain-backing MPs as conspiring is extended through the material process (Halliday, 1985) 'drawn up' which frames the tabling of the debate as a deliberated action rather than

an emergency response to the prorogation. As an institution with the power to interpret political procedures for laypeople, the *Express* has a responsibility to report accurately on the emergency debate. However, the article frames the legitimate, democratic action of debate as undemocratic.

In addition to representations of real and imagined protests, the news outlets draw on the conceptual metaphor of ARGUMENT IS WAR (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) to represent ideological disagreements between Remain- and Leave-backing social actors as unrest. Extract 6, in which the *Telegraph Online* positions an argument between Leave and Remain-supporting politicians as a physical fight through the metaphorical relational process ‘clashed’ (Halliday, 1985), elucidates this discursive pattern:

- (6) This explains some of the twists and turns of recent weeks as Johnson and others committed to honouring the real "People's Vote" (the Brexit referendum), have **clashed** with the **reactionary forces** of the Remainers (*Telegraph Online*, September 2019).

In this example, the *Telegraph Online* recontextualises the Remain-backing ‘People’s Vote’ slogan as a motto for Brexit. Through the adjective ‘real’, the writer contends that the only legitimate expression of political opinion is that which supports leaving the EU. In other words, the journalist argues that because a small majority of people voted Leave, any support for a second referendum is illegitimate, even if the protest reflects the political opinion of a substantial part of the electorate. In short, he implies that any anti-Brexit sentiment must be silenced as the referendum vote revealed the singular and final will of the people. Once again, then, pro-Brexit reporting on anti-Brexit dissent constitutes a ‘quieter’ form of repression (Boykoff, 2007) that seeks to erase any political stance that diverges from the newspapers’ own.

A moral juxtaposition between the prime minister, who is individualised as ‘Johnson’, and Remain-backing MPs who are collectivised (van Leeuwen, 1995) as ‘reactionary forces’ also underpins Extract (6). Evoking the semantic field of commitment through the verbs ‘committed’ and ‘honouring’, the journalist positions Johnson as a champion of the will of the British people. In contrast, the metaphorical noun phrase ‘reactionary forces’ equates Remain-backing individuals with a mob that the prime minister ‘and others’ are fending off (‘clashed’). What is notable about this example is the inversion of the populist rhetoric that characterises many of the concordance lines in the corpus: the most senior politician in the country is framed as the spokesperson of the people, while the Remain-backing MPs are depicted as a paramilitary group. Undoubtedly, this example constitutes ideological alignment between the newspaper and the pro-Brexit prime minister.

Remain-backing politicians are also individualised (van Leeuwen, 1995) in the corpus, although, as Example (7) indicates, this is typically to demonise key political figures in the opposition:

- (7) Voters see Corbyn and McDonnell for what they are - a potent **threat** to this country's stability and prosperity (*The Sun*, September 2019).

In Example (7), then Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and Labour MP John McDonnell are represented as a ‘potent threat’ to the nation’s ‘stability and prosperity’ in a narrative of national crisis (Moffitt, 2017). This example represents Labour MPs as an internal enemy that threatens the political

stability of the imagined community of the nation (Anderson, 2006). By representing Corbyn and McDonnell in these terms, *The Sun* implies to Leave voters that they must stand against the individuals to protect their country. In this example, as above, there is an underlying discourse of honour associated with the Leave-backing social actors which is pitted against the representation of Remain (and left-leaning) politicians as violent Others. Notably, this attitude is presupposed to belong to Leave voters as well as the journalist, which indicates a common-sense agreement that opposition politicians pose a threat to the UK.

Left-leaning politicians and activists are not the only social groups demonised in the corpus. Conservative MPs who chose to defy the party whip and vote against a no-deal Brexit, or force May to request a further extension to Article 50, are negatively framed as rebels. Examples (8) and (9) illustrate this discursive depiction:

- (8) This led pro-European Tories such as Michael Heseltine and Geoffrey Howe to galvanise a **rebellion** against her, and within little more than a year she was out of No 10 (*Daily Mail*, September 2019).
- (9) Brexiteers fear defeat in a snap election will allow a Remainer **alliance** of Labour, Lib Dem, SNP, Independent and Tory **refusenik** MPs to **seize power and force** Britain to stay in the EU (*The Sun*, September 2019).

In Example (8), a collectivised (van Leeuwen, 1995) group of ‘pro-European Tories’ is framed as disrespecting the will of the British people and engaging in a targeted smear campaign against Theresa May. This extract evokes a historical parallel between May and former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, who similarly resigned after a so-called rebellion. Disagreement with May’s politics is discursively framed through the metaphorical material process (Halliday, 1985) ‘galvanise [a rebellion]’, the connotations of which invoke a sense of traitorship and betrayal of both the party and the country. Newspapers in the corpus also regularly criticised Theresa May’s Withdrawal Agreement and discursively framed her as humiliating the nation due to her political ineptitude (Parnell, 2021). However, by focusing on the actions of individual political actors, the newspapers obscure their own role in inciting dissatisfaction towards the Prime Minister and her Brexit plans.

Excerpt 9, like Extracts 7 and 8, demonstrates that the representation of political actors as traitors is not tied to a specific political party. On the contrary, the so-called ‘Remainer alliance’ consists of Labour, Liberal Democrat, Scottish Nationalist Party, Independent, and Conservative MPs. The noun ‘alliance’ frames these disparate, anti-Brexit voices yet again as part of a military group, while the adjective ‘refusenik’ disparages Remain-backing MPs as unwilling to obey the will of the people. Given that the role of MPs is to represent their constituents, this accusation suggests the MPs are not fulfilling their responsibilities as representatives of the people. The verb phrase ‘seize power’ and the material process (Halliday, 1985) ‘force’, as above, frame the political action of voting as an illegitimate attempt to grab power as part of a broader endeavour by Remain voters to undermine the legal and political processes involved in Britain’s withdrawal from the EU.

In almost all examples above, the depiction of political unrest is metaphorical. The attempts by Remain-voting social actors to engage in debate about Brexit are represented as underhand plots, paramilitary coups,

and ill-prepared attempts at agitation. These discourses delegitimise democratic political action and silence political opposition. They also legitimise negative reactions towards individual Remain-voting politicians and groups in the name of defending the imagined community of the nation (Anderson, 2006).

## 5.2 The 'Unethical' Semantic Domain

The log-ratio value of the *Unethical* semantic domain is 1.25, and the log-likelihood value is 121.18. There are 101.4 instances of the words in this domain per 100,000 words in the target corpus, compared to 47.8 instances in the reference corpus. Once again, these values indicate that the *Unethical* semantic domain is more characteristic of the discourses in the pro-Brexit press than in the BNC Written Informative Sampler. The likelihood that the observed frequency differences are due to error or chance is very small ( $p < 0.0001$ ).

The *Unethical* key semantic domain consists of nouns and verbs such as 'betray\*' (79), shame\* (40), 'traitor\*' (12), and anarch\* (5). In the examples from this domain, Remain-backing MPs and citizens are depicted as anarchists attempting to induce a state of crisis within the nation. For instance, in Example 10, taken from *Express Online*, 'the Brexit chaos' is framed as 'an existential crisis so great' that its effect on the national psyche is equivalent to the Second World War ('Messerschmitts', 'Heinkels'). This comparison is representative of a more consistent discourse of Brexit as a crisis in British media and political discourses (Zappettini and Krzyżanowski, 2019):

- (10) NOT since Messerschmitts and Heinkels darkened the skies of Britain has the nation faced an existential crisis so great. The way out of Brexit chaos, many might think, is a moment for calm heads, sober reflection, intelligent politics and teamwork. The national interest, as far as the British public is concerned, is the ONLY interest. Yet once again the nation's so-called leaders shamed themselves in parliament on Wednesday shouting, screaming, barracking and point-scoring with all the intellectual panache of 1970s football terrace **yobs** (*Express Online*, March 2019).

In Example (10) above, there is a populist juxtaposition between the British public, which cares only about the 'national interest', and the 'nation's so-called leaders'. While the public privileges reason in its expectation that delivering Brexit requires 'calm heads, sober reflection, intelligent politics and teamwork', the politicians' behaviour is rooted in emotion. Through the verbal processes (Halliday, 1985) 'shouting' and 'screaming' and the metaphorical verbs 'barracking and point-scoring', the journalist indexes political ineptitude and a lack of professionalism among MPs. The classist simile of MPs as akin to '1970s football terrace yobs' subverts the professionalisation of politics and represents British MPs as incapable of reason. This, in turn, is framed in populist terms as a national 'crisis' (Moffitt, 2017). In short, British politicians are placed in the role of domestic Others who threaten the stability of the nation.

While in Extract (10) the MPs are not linked to a particular party (or indeed, a stance towards Brexit), Example (11) once again individualises former Labour leader Jeremy 'Corbyn' (van Leeuwen, 1995):

- (11) Mr Corbyn's only Brexit strategy is generating **anarchy** in a bid to topple the Government and force a General Election. Contemptuously disregarding the wishes of 17.4 million who voted to quit the EU, 234 Labour MPs - many representing overwhelmingly Leave seats - **trooped** through the 'No' lobby (*Daily Mail*, March 2019).

In this excerpt, Corbyn is framed as an instigator who incites discontent ('generating anarchy') within the nation for the purpose of 'toppl[ing] the Government' and 'forc[ing] a General Election'. The connotations of violence in the material processes (Halliday, 1985) 'topple' and 'force' once again delegitimise Corbyn's actions while failing to note that it is the role of the opposition to disagree with the Government's policies. The *Daily Mail* journalist goes on to accuse Corbyn of trying to wreak havoc in the professional political sphere and among the people by contravening the popular 'wishes' of Leave voters. The millions who voted to Remain are conspicuously absent from this representation, which depicts 'the people' as only those who voted to Leave. The juxtaposition between '17.4 million' and '234' reinforces the populist dichotomisation of citizens against a minority elite, suggesting that the dissent expressed by the 'Labour MPs' is unsubstantiated. These MPs are accused of not respecting the wishes of their constituents through the aside that 'many represent[ed] overwhelmingly Leave seats' and are framed as insurgents through the military material process 'trooped' (Halliday, 1985).

In examples from the *Unethical* semantic domain, the emphasis is on the discursive construction of political ineptitude, which co-exists with the representation of dissenting opinion as a conspiracy perpetrated by politicians and the leader of the opposition. The newspapers evoke fear of a national crisis through the framing of politicians as anarchists with varying levels of ability to disturb the national peace.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper has revealed that real and imagined Leave-backing demonstrations are legitimised as justified emotional responses to alleged political incompetence. Popular sovereignty is foregrounded through a populist rhetoric that pits an entirely Leave-voting imagined British public against Remain-backing MPs whose democratic actions are framed as illegitimate. In some worrying cases, actions that are in line with parliamentary procedures are recontextualised as a threat to the nation. Through this discursive frame, pro-Brexit newspapers suggest to readers that there is a need to defend the nation from Remain-backing MPs. In contrast to the mediated construction of legitimate anger (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018), Remain-supporting social actors who express dissenting opinions are framed as immoral, unethical, and undemocratic. Politicians such as then Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn are demonised as threatening the stability of the imagined community of the nation (Anderson, 2006).

Through the dichotomous representation of honourable Leave politicians and unethical Remain MPs, pro-Brexit newspapers manufacture dissent against legitimate democratic actions, such as the tabling of an emergency debate about Brexit prior to the unlawful prorogation of Parliament (Cottle,

2008). The newspapers engage in a quiet form of repression (Boykoff, 2007) that seeks to silence any anti-Brexit sentiment expressed by citizens, activists, or MPs, while legitimising hypothetical violence in support of the UK leaving the EU. Representing citizens and politicians as a threat to the nation and as supporting violent action against individuals, even when their behaviour is democratic, constitutes a discourse of blame which obfuscates the role that the newspaper coverage plays in (re)producing socio-political disunity within the UK.

The aftermath of Brexit has not brought 'evidence of conciliation or convergence in public attitudes' or shown that 'underlying issues of distrust, disconnection and division' have been addressed (Wincott, 2019, p. 16). It is not far-fetched to suggest that the discourses I have identified in this paper have contributed to the sustained sense of division in the UK post-Brexit. It is also unlikely that the representations of pro-Remain politicians as traitors or anarchists will have helped to ameliorate the current low levels of trust in politicians among the British public (Curtice et al., 2020). Of course, this study, in its focus only on pro-Brexit newspapers, is somewhat limited in its conclusions; future research could compare how anti-Brexit newspapers frame Brexit-related protests to provide a more balanced view. This would enable a panoptic vision of media representations of pro- and anti-Brexit demonstrations and their role in perpetuating socio-political division in Britain and could make more confident claims about the reach of these discourses among members of the British public.

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