(Re)constructing a hostile environment: political claims making and the primary definers of a refugee “crisis”

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(Re)constructing a hostile environment: political claims making and the primary definers of a refugee ‘crisis’

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(Re)constructing a hostile environment: political claims making and the primary definers of a refugee ‘crisis’

1. Introduction

At the fundament of any contentious societal issue is the question of who is empowered to speak and have their voice heard. To forge a more complete understanding of how an issue comes to be defined in public discourses requires a nuanced analysis of interventions in debates. There are a myriad different ways to conduct such an analysis but this task first requires a clear definition of what it means to make a claim in a public debate. In the realm of the political, claims can involve both actions and words. Recognising that one may seek to influence the public debate either as an individual or as part of a collective, we define interventions into debates on contentious issues through the prism of ‘claims-making’ which connects both actions (e.g. events, decisions) and discourse (Koopmans and Statham, 1999). Using this approach, we develop an understanding of which actors prevail in defining a significantly contentious societal issue: namely the so-called refugee ‘crisis’ that began in 2015. Our study provides a paradigmatic case for those working across cognate research areas during a period in Europe where there is again a refugee emergency due to conflict. Our study sheds light on how such events can be constructed in the public sphere and the importance of context that leads to their framing.

Analysing claims should not be isolated from its political context. This study is situated in the lead up to the decision to leave the European Union in June 2016 (Dennison and Geddes, 2018) when much contentious debate encompassed issues of migration and asylum. While recognising that public debate can take place across different venues, the focus of our study is on one venue that has consistently been a critical site for actors to define issues of migration and asylum: newspaper titles. The impact of claims made in newspaper coverage on the public discourse around migration and asylum has been recognised by research in recent years analysing how the print media helped to frame the reporting of the refugee emergency across Europe (Georgiou and Zabrowski, 2017; Harteveld et al, 2018).
In the UK specifically, the role of the media in shaping discourses in the field of asylum has been revealed by existing research (Khosravi-Nik, 2010). Moreover, despite technological change and the importance of social media (Bennett, 2018); key titles in the ‘print media’ (in hard copy or online) continue to be influential venues for shaping perceptions of the issues around migration and asylum, including when these intersect with the UK’s relationship with the EU (Foos and Bischof, 2018). Greenslade (2005) has highlighted the variation in approaches by ‘quality’ newspapers on the one hand and ‘tabloid’ newspapers on the other hand (see also Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008; Threadgold, 2009). In that same analysis, titles such as The Express are identified as crucial for understanding how issues of asylum are mediated given that in the early 2000s that outlet ‘became fixated on the ‘crisis’ of asylum-seekers, often devoting its front page to alarmist stories’ (2005: 21) and research has highlighted that this has been a continuous trend (Share, 2018). Such efforts made to conceptualise the arrival of refugees as a ‘crisis’ speaks to a core finding of our study: namely how the tragedy experienced by those fleeing persecution and war is reconstructed by actors, particularly political elites (and specifically those on the right of the political spectrum), as an issue of border control and political management. Our findings are grounded in an understanding of the refugee ‘crisis’ as an event and an awareness of the specific context of debates surrounding asylum in the UK. As such, our research design and findings offer a novel contribution to the ongoing debates in this context. Moreover, although our analysis is developed through a theoretical lens which emerged from the same UK context (Hall et al, 1978), this lens animates our novel data in a manner that offers a potential framework for researchers in other contexts to draw upon for their own studies.

2. Research context and theoretical frame

The refugee ‘crisis’ that captured the public consciousness across Europe in 2015 revealed the Janus face from which European publics viewed the arrivals on their southern shorelines. The arrival of would-be refugees became a salient political and public issue in September 2015 following the journey of thousands of refugees predominantly from Syria and the middle east region across the Balkans, Central Europe and Germany. In response, the European Commission presented a plan to redistribute 160,000 refugees across EU member states, sparking opposition from many member states. This revealed a gap in the willingness of government actors to engage in sharing responsibility and, more broadly, the contestation
rather than cooperation between member states over the issue (Niemann and Zaun, 2018). Thus the events of the refugee emergency revealed two very different conceptualisations of what was taking place and the potential responses possible. In the early days of the ‘crisis’ (August-September 2015) we saw on the one hand the *willkommenskultur*¹ represented by images of volunteers expressing solidarity and embracing the arrival of refugees in Germany (Jurgens, 2021). On the other hand we later observed the public demonstrations of far-right movements expressing deeply anti-refugee and anti-migrant rhetoric from the Seine to the Danube (Bastow, 2018; Bocskor, 2018) which when fused with Euroscepticism can generate electoral implications (Pirro et al, 2018). Therefore, not all European governments responded to the emergent refugee situation in the same way (Rea et al, 2019). Moreover, the approach taken by some European governments altered as the situation unfolded (Vonberg, 2018) and extant research has revealed the importance of appreciating the temporal dimension of media coverage of the refugee situation across Europe (Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017), a dimension we shall explore within our analysis.

In this article we focus on a context where the response by political elites to the refugee crisis intensified rather than challenged the policy dispositions that have been in place for decades: the United Kingdom. Moreover, the contemporary UK political landscape is one that is continuously being reshaped following a contentious EU referendum where the movement of people across borders was at the forefront (Baglioni et al, 2019). Before exploring further, it is crucial to note that across UK civil society there have been consistent and coordinated efforts by some to welcome refugees (Squire, 2011; della Porta, 2018) and furthermore the asylum and immigration policies of the UK Government do not necessarily reflect the approach of devolved administrations within the UK (Mulvey, 2015; Guma et al, 2019). However, given that authority over issues such as migration and asylum resides in Westminster, it is from that central level of government that policies and large parts of discourses continue to be shaped.

A hostile policy environment in the UK for those seeking refuge has been evident throughout Labour and Conservative Governments (Squire, 2016) and imbued with discourses of deservingness (Sales, 2002) and border control (Walters, 2004) that have and continue to draw upon simplistic imaginaries such as the ‘economic pull factor’ (Mayblin, 2019). However, one of the objectives of this study is to aid our understanding of how an event located within a specific time period can be reconfigured into a device for (re)constructing certain discourses

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¹ A ‘culture of welcome’
and policies around asylum. Moreover, when we seek to understand the context of our study we need to also appreciate the history of social relations in Britain which has enabled a particular framing of those arriving in the country by political actors. Claims made by such actors can in fact foster popular consent for policies that emphasise border control (Hall, 1986).

Against this background, we sought to uncover which actors were most dominant in defining the diverse group of people who began arriving on European shores in 2015. The question of who defines an event is a well-established avenue of inquiry among those examining the influence of particular actors who use the media to set the agenda. Moreover, debate surrounding who has agenda setting power in the field of migration and asylum has been a source of contestation and political claims analysis by scholars in the UK in past decades (Statham and Geddes, 2006; Freeman, 2002). Our contemporary research offers a prism through which we can better understand political claims made during a critical juncture, both in terms of the refugee emergency itself and the political context of the UK.

To better understand the political claims analysed in this study we turned for inspiration to the seminal work of Hall et al (1978) and the distinction made between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ definers. ‘Secondary definers’ being comprised of the media which acts to interpret, and indeed often amplifies or exaggerates any potential crisis. However, our analysis in this study focuses upon the ‘primary definers’ and their capacity to set the agenda in the way explicated by Hall et al (1978):

‘Once in play the primary definition commands the field; there is now in existence an issue of public concern, whose dimensions have been clearly delineated, which now serves as a continuing point of reference for subsequent news reporting, action and campaigns’ (: 75-76).

Although we can say that primary definers are the generators of the claims being made, our analysis does not neglect the role that the media plays in selecting what qualifies as newsworthy. Instead we recognise how newspapers in the UK are reflective of the broader inequalities and asymmetries of power apparent across society (Gans, 1979). As such, news production processes can ‘reproduce the definitions of the powerful, without being, in a simple sense, in their pay’ (Hall et al., 1978: 57). Building on the logic of this approach, we sought to understand how refugees come to be defined in a media landscape that for some time has reflected the hostile policy environment discussed above. The conclusions drawn by Greenslade (2005) that the portrayal of those seeking asylum in the UK has been driven by racist misrepresentations corresponds with the problem identified by Philo et al. (2013) that
there is a complex interaction between policymakers, media representation and public attitudes and as such it is highly problematic that:

‘Media coverage can highlight and stimulate potential tensions and fears by stigmatising refugees and asylum seekers. This legitimises negative official and public responses’ (Philo et al. 2013: 169).

Although extensive research has been carried out on issues of migration and asylum in the UK, no study exists which marshals the empirical insights using the methodology of a political claims analysis and views them through a lens that utilises the concept of ‘primary definers’ (Hall, et al, 1978). By adopting this approach, we illuminate the way in which political elites in the UK, through their role in the news process act as ‘primary definers’ of the situation. In the following analysis we reveal the continued dominance of political elites in claims making in the UK and the negative disposition of these actors towards refugees. Furthermore, what our findings uncover is that rather than claims making being reflective of pragmatic or policy actions, claims making in the UK in the context of the refugee crisis was articulated predominantly through verbal statements. We elaborate how such verbal statements were used to externalise the refugee crisis as an event happening ‘outside’ of the UK. In other words, rather than conceptualising the refugee crisis through the prism of a humanitarian tragedy (McMahon and Sigona, 2020), those seeking refuge in Europe were constructed by many political elites, to be a threat (Triandafyllidou, 2018; Bennett, 2018). The idea of the refugee being conceptualised as a threat to the UK has been the subject of extant analysis, with Mulvey (2010) revealing that as far back as the early 2000s under the New Labour Government, the ‘framing of asylum as a numerical crisis and threat, aided by the media, not only contributed to that crisis but also implied the solution, a reduction in numbers’ (Ibidem: 445). We aim to explore this perspective further, building upon the work of Hall et al (1978) on the question of who defines a problem in a given situation. Considering the work of Statham and Geddes (2006) (contra Freeman, 2002) on the role of dominant policy actors, we seek to illuminate the ways in which political elites are able to utilise their authority to act as ‘primary definers’ and construct the event of the refugee emergency through the prism of a ‘crisis’ that must be ‘managed’. Guiding our analysis are three central research questions:

- RQ1: Who were the primary definers of the refugee ‘crisis’ in the UK print media?
- RQ2: What was the disposition of actors towards refugees when making political claims about the ‘crisis’?
• RQ3: What were the issues that actors invoked when making political claims about the ‘crisis’?

In the subsequent sections of this article we shall: i) elaborate upon our research methodology of political claims analysis; ii) present the findings of our political claims analysis, focusing upon key elements such as the actors involved, the positioning of their claims - either for or against refugees - and the issues that they focus upon; and iii) finally we shall conclude by drawing together our findings and reflecting on their implications for the future shape of discourses on asylum and migration in the UK.

3. Research design

To answer the questions set out above we adopted a research design germane to the topic of migration and asylum (Statham and Geddes, 2006; Cinalli and Giugni, 2013) which enables us to evidence the ways in which certain claims are more dominant than others in a particular field (Koopmans and Statham, 1999). The methodological approach we deployed is political claims making. Through a synthesis of quantitatively driven protest event analysis and the qualitatively driven political discourse analysis, political claims analysis provides a mixed-methods approach that captures the actions of a range of societal actors resulting in findings being drawn from a ‘multi-organisational field’ (Ibidem, 1999: 3).

The political claims which form the focus of this study were derived from a randomised representative sample of newspaper articles sourced from the online tool Lexis-Nexis using the keywords ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum’. Moreover, reflecting previous iterations of the political claims approach in the extant literature, we focused on three UK titles, two of which are quality newspapers (one centre-left, the other centre-right) and one tabloid; namely The Guardian, The Telegraph and The Express. The purpose here is to capture a breadth of readership and reporting styles: quality newspapers (the traditional ‘broadsheets’) predominantly target middle class audiences, whereas tabloid newspapers have sought mass market appeal. Moreover, in terms of the registers used, the former frequently adopting a more serious or sober tone and the latter opting for more sensationalist headlines (Greenslade, 2005; Philo et al., 2013). Our focus on ‘newspaper’ titles in this study also offers an insight into how editorial positions from the era of ‘print’ news are being reproduced online as these titles now use a
variety of digital channels to distribute their articles. One limitation of our approach is that it does not capture the nuances of devolution in the field of asylum (see Mulvey, 2018). Thus our ‘UK oriented’ approach presents an opportunity for future scholarship using this method to analyse any divergences within different policy arenas.

The timeframe of our analysis ran from August 2015 to April 2016, reflecting the peak period when claims from various actors were made in the debate. Moreover, our sample of claims are drawn exclusively from news articles, rather than from (for example) editorials or letters pages. Let us now turn to our unit of analysis: the individual political claim.

It is crucial to differentiate our understanding of a claim on the one hand and an article on the other hand. A newspaper article can contain numerous claims and a claim in itself can be constructed of different statements or actions. If these statements or actions stem from more than one actor then this must be considered to be part of the same claim if they meet three conditions: i) that the claim took place on the same day; ii) that the claim took place at the same location and; iii) that the actors involved in making the claim can reasonably considered to be acting in concert. Furthermore, our data collection is based upon a codebook which sets out the guidelines for the coding of each individual claim. Each of our claims are characterised by a certain structure, which can be distilled into key elements that form the key characteristics of a claim, such as the ‘actor’ (who makes the claim), the ‘position’ (whether the claim is favourable or unfavourable to refugees) and the ‘issue’ (which is the main concern of a claim). Thus, a claim is best understood as an intervention in the public discourse by a specific actor.

Our case focuses upon those claims where the ‘objects’ discussed are refugees either as individuals or as a group. An example of our approach is illustrated in Figure 1, which is drawn from an article in the Telegraph in January 2016 with the headline ‘ISIL using refugee crisis to target UK’. The article contained five claims in total, one of which stemmed from then Justice Secretary Michael Gove MP; the text below is a direct extract from that article. As we can observe, the claim is made by a UK Government Minister (whom we coded as a ‘state actor’), who identifies border control as the key issue (which we coded as ‘political management’) and who makes a claim that demonstrates a negative disposition to new arrivals (which we coded as ‘anti-object’). As was often the case, the issue of the refugee ‘crisis’ was conflated with the broader issue of freedom of movement in the European Union. In this instance by a senior politician who would later that same year become a key figure in the campaign for the UK to leave the European Union.
In our study, two researchers undertook the coding of claims from our sample of news articles. To ensure consistency in the coding, an exploratory pre-reliability test on the coding of claims was conducted with the aim of identifying coding errors and remaining problems in the codebook. The feedback for this test was used for one last thorough revision of the coding instructions and intra-coding reliability tests were run and reflected successful consistency in coding claims. We now turn to the outcomes of this coding process, elaborating upon three key elements of our political claims analysis: the actors who dominate the political discourse on the refugee ‘crisis’, the position these actors take on the ‘crisis’ (pro-refugee, anti-refugee or neutral) and finally, the issues around which their claims are focused.

4. Findings

In this section, we present the data generated by our coding process and our findings which are structured to correspond with the three research questions outlined earlier, namely: the distribution of actors involved in claims-making in the UK media, the disposition of these actors towards refugees and the issues these actors focus upon in their claims.

4.1 Findings I: Actors

The context we have outlined earlier in this article reflects the fact that for several decades issues surrounding migration and asylum have become strongly politicized in the UK. There was deep polarization occurring almost in parallel with the refugee crisis that forms that basis of our study, when the country was entering a referendum on whether to vote to leave or remain in the European Union and where the topic of immigration and asylum was a salient issue (Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017). Considering this contentious context, we began our analysis by focusing on the types of actors who have made claims across the three UK newspapers. As we can see from Table 1 (the figures in the last column), state actors, that is governmental or public administration representatives, played a pivotal role in shaping the public debate of the 2015 refugee crisis with almost one in every two claims (45.4%) made by them. This finding can be explained firstly by the decision-making capacities of state actors; on whether or not to accept refugees and to participate in resettlement programmes and whether (and indeed how) to contribute to calls for humanitarian assistance and integration strategies at multiple levels of governance. Secondly, this finding speaks to the resources that state actors possess and can
deploy to have their claims reported by the media and be treated as the ‘primary definers’ of topical issues (Hall et al, 1978). Alongside state actors, the second most frequently salient actors are political parties (16.4% of all claims): this once again relates to the resources and opportunities that political actors possess to primarily define topical issues such as the refugee ‘crisis’. Moreover, this finding also reflects that migration and refugee issues are highly contentious and politicized in the UK, therefore parties, particularly those which are right-wing and anti—immigrant consider these to be topics on which to mobilise popular support (Bale, 2018), and are consequently motivated to make political claims.

[Table 1]

However, the field of migration and asylum is one in which other actors, such as civil society organizations, charities, and non-profit groups play a crucial role as first responders in terms of humanitarian activism as well as awareness raising and fundraising. This is reflected by our claims making findings revealing that one in every ten claims are made by what we call ‘group-specific organisations and groups’ which, in our analysis are mainly formal and informal refugee-crisis oriented organisations (both pro- and anti-refugees) among other actors including self-organised groups of refugees/migrants and other groups such as the unemployed and disabled people. These findings should be understood in tandem with the percentages of other civil society and advocacy groups which together amount to more than 5% of claims. The presence of a range of civil society and interest groups who have street level knowledge and experience in our claims making sample highlights that although state and political actors occupy the privileged position of ‘primary definers’ in the field of migration and asylum they are by no means the only actors who can offer a prism through which the public can understand complex transnational events such as the refugee ‘crisis’. Nevertheless, our findings offer support to the thesis that it is political elites rather than (pro-refugee) actors in civil society which are dominant in the debate (Statham and Geddes, 2006). Another finding from our sample was the virtual absence of the labour movement in claims making relating to the refugee crisis. One may argue that this is to be expected given that the issue can be framed around political management and humanitarian issues or indeed point to the decline in the membership and consequently the influence of the trade union movement in the UK (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016). Nevertheless, the trade union movement have a track record on challenging racism and discrimination and as the situation unfolded in 2015 explicitly criticised the UK Government for not accepting more refugees (TUC, 2015). As such, this is
an important gap to identify, given the capacity of the labour movement to offer a progressive voice on contentious issues.

Another group of actors whose vocal capacities have found a platform in the media are supranational actors (11.7% of all actors’ claims), again a somewhat unsurprising finding given the transnational nature of the refugee ‘crisis’, in which supranational organizations such as the United Nations (UN) or the International Organization for Migration (IOM), along with the EU, have played a role. However, we shall explore later in this article the difference in disposition between these supranational actors compared to state actors and political parties towards refugees.

To understand the context of our findings even further, we analysed our data across the time period of the events surrounding the refugee emergency. We found that the total number of claims across the different months revealed that the number of claims spiked in September 2015 (26%) and reached its second highest peak in January 2016 (14.6%), reflecting a temporal salience of the events. Moreover, our data revealed some divergence in terms of the time periods where different actors made their claims. For example, we observed that the frequency of state actors claims making remained consistent across the timeline with the exception of December 2015 (9.7%) and tailed off somewhat in April 2016 (38.8%). Actors such as political parties maintained a similarly consistent trend which fell to single figures in December 2015 (6.5%). Interestingly however, we found that the claims made by non-state and non-political party actors actually appeared to spike somewhat during the same month of December 2015, this is true for Group-specific organisations and groups (19.4%), Advocacy and policy-oriented groups (12.9%) and other actors (22.6%), the latter of which encompasses local citizens, individual activists, celebrities and those framed as the elite by the newspapers. We can hypothesize that as the key players such as state actors and political parties wind down because of the parliamentary recess, less prominent voices are given more opportunities to voice their claims in these media platforms. Moreover at this time a number of actors launched fundraising campaigns to provide material support to the refugees. In terms of supranational actors we observed a spike in December 2015 (19.4%) and in February 2016 which trended towards a peak of 22.4% in April 2016. This could also suggest that as state actors and political parties vacated the stage in December these other voices were given more opportunities but it also speaks to the fact that as the political implications of the refugee crisis for the European Union and discord between the member states became manifest, these actors became more prominent (Niemann and Zaun, 2018).
Overall, although state actors and political parties perform the role of primary definers in the political claims making surrounding the refugee crisis, our findings reveal that they do not enjoy a monopoly over the public debate, with voices breaking through from a range of civil society organizations, some of which are rather weak in terms of material resources that are already under pressure from meeting the needs of those experiencing poverty, marginalisation and other forms of vulnerability (Stewart and Mulvey, 2014; Collins et al, 2015). Therefore, as we explored our data, we also considered the question of whether (and the extent to which) these more solidarity-oriented voices were given a platform across the three newspapers that form the basis of our sample.

A comparative analysis of actors’ claims across the three newspapers is also provided by Table 1. Overall, among the newspapers it is The Guardian that gives voice to a broader range of actors, in fact although state actors are also dominant in this newspaper (37.7% of claims), The Guardian reports more than twice as many claims made by societal actors (either group specific organizations or civil society-advocacy organizations) than the other two newspapers. Thus, from this first overview of claims making actors it appears that the public debate regarding the refugee ‘crisis’ is more pluralistic in the left leaning ‘quality’ newspaper than in the others. On the contrary, The Express provides a much stronger voice to political parties (almost a third of actors are political parties, more than double that of The Guardian, and three times that compared to The Telegraph). When digging deeper into an analysis of these actors we found that The Express frequently offered a platform to key figures in UKIP, including the one-time leader of the party and prominent advocate of the Leave campaign in the EU referendum, Nigel Farage. This outcome confirms the tabloid’s strong contribution to the politicization of the refugee and immigration issue by providing political leaders who are more vocal on this topic the opportunity to be primary definers in the refugee crisis, thus strongly contributing towards both the polarization of the debate and its framing around particular issues, as we shall discover later.

Another interesting finding which we elicited during our analysis was the distribution across newspapers of the supranational actors category: both The Guardian and The Telegraph were more willing to provide a platform to supranational actors and organisations (the EU and United Nations High Commission for Refugees), that are of course central to a topic such as refugee issues but sometimes are at odds with the viewpoint of the UK Government.
4.2 Findings II: Positioning

Earlier we outlined the polarised context in which our study takes place and thus our findings need to be understood against that background. Although the discourses of border control and deservingness have come to shape the UK context in recent decades (Squire, 2016), there has always been a constituency of support for migrants and refugees that has become manifest in both individual and collective forms (Montgomery et al, 2018; Darling, 2010). The polarisation between those who perceive refugees as a threat and those who offer solidarity is not an exclusively British phenomenon and neither is the intensification of this divide (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). The polarisation around the refugee crisis within British society is illustrated in Table 2 which shows the position towards refugees of actors involved in making claims; actors can adopt a pro-, anti- or neutral position towards refugees. Table 2 reveals that two types of actor occupy the polar opposite positions of the political arena. On the one hand, half of all claims made by state actors are against refugees, while a third of them have a neutral stance, and only one in five perceive refugees in a positive light. Similarly, nearly two thirds of claims made by political parties are anti-refugee, with again only one in five adopting a pro-refugee viewpoint. In stark contrast, almost all claims made by civil society and human rights organizations, and more than two thirds of those claims made by group specific organizations, are in support of refugees. Other actors such as professional organizations and a range of different other societal actors adopt a more neutral position, as they occupy that space between a positive business-oriented perception of migration and refugee issues, and more critical positions inspired by political entrepreneurs. The position of supranational actors reflects the heterogeneity of political views towards migration and asylum, with some supranational organizations articulating support for refugees, namely those that work to protect them such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Whereas a more diversified position can be found within the EU, with the European Commission and some member states defending the rights of refugees and the European Council and other member states adopting a more cautious or critical position.

[Table 2]

To give additional perspective into these findings we once again we analysed our data from a temporal perspective and scrutinising the data across the period from August 2015 until April 2016, the number of claims which were made against refugees spiked between January and
April 2016, a key period of campaigning in the run up to the Brexit referendum, while the pro-
refugee claims reached their highest peak in October and December 2015 following the death
of Alan Kurdi and coinciding with the welcoming approach by Angela Merkel and the German
government. Therefore we can detect from these findings that the events surrounding the
refugee emergency in Europe and their primary definition in the UK are best understood not
only as being formed of two interpretations (humanitarianism and solidarity on the one hand
and political management and border control on the other hand) but also two periods with the
momentum against refugees gathering pace after Christmas 2015.

When we look at Table 3 we also gain further insight into the uneven distribution of these
claims across the three UK newspapers which reflect different editorial narratives: with The
Express publishing the most anti-refugee claims (58.6%) compared to 42.9% of such claims
by The Telegraph and 29.9% by The Guardian. This hierarchy is reversed when we observe
the proportion of pro-refugee claims across the three titles, with most of these claims being
found in The Guardian (45.5%), which is then followed by The Telegraph (34.4%) and then
The Express (20.3%). Of course, the positions reflected here must be understood not only in
terms of the editorial position of each newspaper but also their readerships. However, a more
nuanced understanding of how discourses and policies that represent a negative position
towards refugees remain dominant can be developed by appreciating the extent to which media
platforms embrace heterogeneity in the types of actors who are able to primarily define a
situation. As we discovered in our study, perhaps a more pertinent observation is how the
absence of heterogeneity can enable certain actors to primarily define a situation around
particular issues that narrows the range of potential discourses and voices and shapes the debate
towards certain policy responses.

[Table 3]

4.3 Findings III: Issues

Thus far we have learned which actors have most (and least) frequently performed the role of
‘primary definers’ during the refugee crisis and we have also identified the positions these
different actors adopt in relation to refugees. However, the question of what is at stake in the
claims that are made can only be properly understood when appreciating the issues around
which such claims are shaped. The types of issues that formed the basis for the claims in our
sample are outlined in Table 4 which reveals the frequency of different issues that were mobilised in the construction of claims by different actors. Table 4 illustrates both the variegated ways in which the refugee crisis was conceptualised by actors and the uneven distribution of the issues that formed the focus of their claims. Table 4 also reveals that by far the most frequent way to define the refugee issue was as a matter of political management (68.1% of claims), meaning that actors made claims primarily defined around the modalities of crisis management (e.g. border control, asylum application processes and the sharing of responsibilities across EU member states). The next most frequent type of issue raised by actors concerned the background, situation and fate of refugees (15.9%) which often revolved around issues such as the perilous journey of refugees across the Mediterranean and the conditions in the camps that received and accommodated them if they were lucky enough to survive the crossing. Finally, almost one in every ten claims (8.6%) centred upon an issue focused on more general problems connected with the influx of refugees, and a residual portion of claims (4.2%) concentrated on public and civic initiatives or placed an emphasis on integration policies (3.2%).

[Table 4]

What our findings demonstrate is that despite the diverse ways in which the refugee crisis could be conceptualised by actors; in the UK the debate was dominated by claims that conceptualised it as a matter of crisis management. Again, if we give consideration to a temporal perspective of our data we found that only during the month of December 2015 the main issues were instead centred upon the perilous journey of refugees alongside the practical problems connected with the massive arrival of refugees. Although actors could have focused on the protection of refugees by referring to human rights norms that place an obligation on states to give refuge to those fleeing conflict and persecution, many frequently defined the situation as a problem of protecting borders. Of course, this conceptualisation did not reflect a consensus. Instead, the differences between actors we outlined earlier, is replicated in our findings in Table 5 that illustrates the uneven distribution of issues across actors in the UK. We found that it is state actors who predominantly made claims relating to the political management of the refugee crisis (77.9%), a figure mirrored, albeit with the caveat of much fewer claims being made overall, by political parties (74.4%). Moreover, when considering the dominant issues raised by supranational actors, we see a similar pattern with the primary type of issue again being that of political management (78.3%). It is only when we look more closely at non-state organisations do we begin to discern some divergence in the types of issues being highlighted
such as group specific organisations and groups which although also engaged in issues of political management (32.9%) are mainly focused upon issues relating to the background, situation and fate of the refugees (46.3%). Nevertheless, the latter lack those resources and the political saliency that state actors possess, and therefore their presence is much less visible.

[Table 5]

5. Conclusions

At the outset of this article we sought to explain the context in which our study took place: a context where the discourses and policies of asylum and migration have been restrictionist in nature for the best part of two decades. What our findings reveal is that in terms of the political claims made across three UK newspapers, there was clearly a dominance of political elites in claims-making relating to the challenges presented by the refugee ‘crisis’. These findings offer support to earlier studies that have revealed the role that resources play for actors to influence public discourses (Koopmans and Statham, 1999; Baglioni et al 2008; Giugni 2010). Therefore, it follows that those actors with greater economic, political and relational resources have more opportunities to have their voices heard. Moreover, these actors do so during a period of crisis, thus acting to stabilise rather than disturb the asylum policy architecture. Indeed, our analysis reveals that political elites utilised their position as ‘primary definers’ in the UK to frame refugees arriving in Europe as a threat or risk to the country (Triandafyllidou, 2018; Bennett, 2018), rather than through a frame of solidarity.

From a broader perspective, the negative position adopted by political elites in the UK aligned with other actors across the EU who were rejecting a Europeanization of the emergency. This calls upon researchers to give greater consideration to the type of temporal perspective embedded within our analysis which highlights how the momentum against refugees via claims making in the UK accelerated in the months preceding the June 2016 referendum.

In using their position to articulate claims that are predominantly negative towards refugees, political elites in the UK defined the situation in a way that also ‘crowded out’ other actors from the public discourse. This not only reduced opportunities for other actors but also created a terrain for them to articulate their own claims that had already been primarily defined as being in the realm of political management. Thus the potential for alternative claims to successfully
discursively generate solidarity (Wallaschek, 2020) was curtailed. As Hall et al (1978) reflect, ‘arguments against a primary interpretation are forced to insert themselves into its definition of ‘what is at issue’ - they must begin from this framework of interpretation as their starting-point’ (Ibidem: 58). As migration scholars have noted, the dramatization of the events which began to unfold in the Mediterranean in 2015 as one of ‘crisis’, served to produce the context where only certain actors had the agency to respond through governmental action (Bojadžijev and Mezzadra, 2015). We found that the approach of political elites in the UK is to take the wide range of complex issues surrounding the refugee ‘crisis’ and use simplistic imaginaries (Mayblin, 2019) to define the situation through the prism of political management and border control.

Although the disposition of political elites is predominantly negative towards refugees, when other actors are given a voice - such as civil society organisations - often the perception is more positive. It also speaks to a broader range of issues. Yet, frequently their message is already embedded in a discourse that has been shaped around issues of political management. While recognising the limitations of our study (i.e. it’s precise focus on a particular period of time and on three media outlets) we conclude that if there is to be a shift in discourse and policy in the UK, from a political management agenda to a humanitarian/human rights agenda on issues of asylum and refuge, then a first step would be to rebalance who occupies the crucial role of ‘primary definer’.

We view this research – through a worked example of using claims analysis - as a tool for others in this field to refine and apply across different media channels to build the detailed evidence base that can assist in this task. Our approach thus seeks to create the groundwork for future research that will analyse the claims made during refugee emergencies.

References


Whitehead T and Coughlin C (2016) ‘Isil using refugee crisis to target UK; Intelligence officials fear jihadists are trying to enter Europe by posing as migrants; Isil jihadists try to enter Europe using false passports’. *The Telegraph* [online] 27th January (accessed 19 August 2019).
Figure 1: Anatomy of a political claim

Michael Gove, the Justice Secretary claimed that immigration is "effectively uncontrolled" in the EU.
### Table 1: Actor by newspaper (percentages; frequencies between brackets)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>The Guardian</th>
<th>The Telegraph</th>
<th>The Express</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State actors</td>
<td>37.7 (101)</td>
<td>55.6 (144)</td>
<td>43.3 (113)</td>
<td>45.4 (358)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties</td>
<td>11.9 (32)</td>
<td>9.7 (25)</td>
<td>27.6 (72)</td>
<td>16.4 (129)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional organizations and groups</td>
<td>4.9 (13)</td>
<td>3.5 (9)</td>
<td>5.7 (15)</td>
<td>4.7 (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Group-specific organizations and groups</td>
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<td>8.5 (22)</td>
<td>6.1 (16)</td>
<td>10.4 (82)</td>
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<td>1.2 (3)</td>
<td>2.7 (7)</td>
<td>2.7 (21)</td>
</tr>
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<td>1.9 (5)</td>
<td>2.9 (23)</td>
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<td>Supranational actors</td>
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<td><strong>100</strong></td>
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N=788
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Anti-object</th>
<th>Neutral / Ambivalent</th>
<th>Pro-object</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>40.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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</table>

N=788
Table 3: Position towards refugees by newspaper (percentages; frequencies between brackets)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The Guardian</th>
<th>The Telegraph</th>
<th>The Express</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Anti-object</td>
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<td>42.9 (111)</td>
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<td>Neutral / Ambivalent</td>
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<td>22.8 (59)</td>
<td>21.1 (55)</td>
<td>22.8 (180)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pro-object</td>
<td>45.5 (122)</td>
<td>34.4 (89)</td>
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<td>33.5 (264)</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>100 (259)</td>
<td>100 (261)</td>
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N=788
Table 4: Frequency of issue

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<th>Percentages</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Political management</td>
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<td>15.9</td>
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<td>Problems associated to the refugee influx/crisis</td>
<td>8.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public and civic activities/initiatives beyond political governance</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration policies</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
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N=788
Table 5: *Issue by actor (percentages)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Integration policies</th>
<th>The background, the situation and the fate of refugees</th>
<th>Problems associated to the refugee influx/crisis</th>
<th>Public and civic activities/initiatives beyond Political Governance</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>State actors</td>
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<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other actors</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=788