

The Representations of Protesters in the UK National Daily Press: Pro- And Anti- Brexit Demonstrations 2016-2019

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Abstract : In a political climate divided by Brexit, it is crucial to be critical of the press, as it is the apparatus which political authorities use to impose their laws and shape public opinion. Although large protests have the power to shake and disrupt policy-making by making it difficult for governments to ignore their goals, the British press historically constructs protesters as delegitimate, deviant, and criminal, which could limit protests' credibility and democratic power. This paper explores how the remain supporting daily UK press (The Mirror, Financial Times, The Independent, The Guardian) and the leave supporting daily UK press (The Daily Mail, The Daily Star, The Sun, The Express, The Telegraph) discursively constructed every pro- and anti-Brexit demonstration from 2016 to 2019. 702 instances of the terms 'protester', 'protesters', 'protestor' and 'protestors' were analyzed through both transitivity analysis and critical discourse analysis. This mixed-methods approach allowed for the analysis of how the UK press perpetuated and upheld social ideologies about protests through their specific grammatical and language choices. The results of this analysis found that both remain and leave supporting press utilized the same discourses to report on protests they oppose and protests they support. For example, the remain backing The Mirror used water metaphors regularly associated with influxes of refugees and asylum seekers to support the protesters on the remain protest 'Final Say', and oppose the protesters on the leave protest 'March to Leave'. Discourses of war, violence, and victimhood are also taken on by both sides of the press Brexit debate and are again used to support and oppose the same arguments. Finally, the paper concludes that these analogous discourses do nothing to help the already marginalized social positions of protesters in the UK and could potentially lead to reduced public support for demonstrations. This could, in turn, facilitate the government in introducing increasingly restrictive legislation in relation to freedom of assembly rights, which could be detrimental to British democracy.

Keywords : Brexit, critical discourse analysis, protests, transitivity analysis, UK press

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