

# HATE HOPE

# STOKING THE FLAMES

## THE INFLUENCE OF TABLOID PRESS AND GOVERNMENT RHETORIC ON FAR-RIGHT ANTI-MIGRANT ENGAGEMENT

The image displays a grid of 25 newspaper front pages, primarily from the Daily Express and Daily Mail, with one from The Sun. Each page features a prominent headline related to the migrant crisis, asylum seekers, and government policy. The headlines are as follows:

- SUNDAY EXPRESS:** FIRST RWANDA ASYLUM FLIGHTS 'THIS SUMMER'
- DAILY EXPRESS (top left):** RISHI'S £478M DEAL: I SAID WE WOULD STOP BOATS
- DAILY EXPRESS (top middle):** SUELLA: BACK LAW TO STOP BOATS...OR BETRAY BRITAIN
- DAILY MAIL (top middle):** WE WILL PUSH HUMAN RIGHTS LAW TO LIMIT
- DAILY EXPRESS (top right):** ENDING CHANNEL MIGRANT CRISIS CAN WIN ELECTION
- DAILY MAIL (middle left):** BOAT MIGRANTS TO GET LIFE BAN
- DAILY EXPRESS (middle left):** SUELLA VOWS TO CUT NET MIGRANT RECORD OF 504,000
- DAILY MAIL (middle middle):** SUELLA: CHANNEL MIGRANT CRISIS OUT OF CONTROL
- DAILY EXPRESS (middle middle):** JUDGE SLAMS HIS OWN COURT OVER SECRET RWANDA RULING
- DAILY EXPRESS (middle right):** FURIOUS PRITI ATTACKS SECRECY OF EURO COURTS
- DAILY EXPRESS (bottom left):** FURY AS RWANDA FLIGHT BLOCKED
- DAILY MAIL (bottom left):** PM: I WON'T LET THE LEFT WRECK RWANDA PLAN
- DAILY EXPRESS (bottom middle):** PM: BOLD PLAN TO SEND BOAT MIGRANTS TO RWANDA
- DAILY MAIL (bottom middle):** RWANDA PLAN TO SMASH THE CHANNEL GANGS
- DAILY EXPRESS (bottom right):** PRITI'S FURY AT EU OVER MIGRANT CRISIS
- DAILY EXPRESS (bottom far left):** MIGRANTS WILL BE TURNED BACK TO FRANCE
- DAILY EXPRESS (bottom far middle):** MIGRANT CRISIS: PATEL PAYS FRENCH £54M TO DO THEIR JOB
- The Mail (bottom far middle):** MIGRANTS: PRITI PINS BLAME ON FACEBOOK AND TIKTOK
- DAILY MAIL (bottom far right):** PRITI: ASYLUM SEEKERS TO BE SENT OVERSEAS
- THE SUN (bottom far right):** NO ENTRY



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# INTRODUCTION

Immigration has always been a key issue around which the far right have mobilised, though it has not always been the primary focus of far-right activism. But in recent years, we have seen this change. HOPE not hate research recorded a rise in anti-migrant far-right activity of 102% in the year 2022.<sup>1</sup> And we have seen a rapid rise in far-right protests outside of hotels accommodating asylum seekers, with over 50 demonstrations recorded in the first three months of 2023.

This development has not taken place in a vacuum. The far right's revived interest in immigration and asylum has piggybacked on mainstream anti-migrant rhetoric. This report looks at the interaction between media and government rhetoric as well as policy announcements on far-right engagement around migration.

We find that the three factors interact, contributing to the hardening rhetoric towards people who are migrants, with both government rhetoric and media coverage

influencing far-right engagement and rhetoric around the issue. This interaction between the media and government is complex, and in the context of 'culture wars', outrage from the progressive world at cruel and unworkable policy and harsh language also plays a role, where moral panic is whipped up against those who speak out.

Our analysis shows that far-right engagement online spikes around key government announcements, such as the Rwanda plan. And we find increased media coverage about migration in The Daily Mail, The Daily Express and The Sun correlates with far-right engagement, with clear overlaps in themes between media coverage of migration and far-right social media messages.

This report highlights the worrying impacts of hostile language and policy in feeding the far right. Politicians and the media need to take real responsibility and drop their line of inflammatory language that incubates the far right.



# KEY FINDINGS

## ■ Far-right engagement on migration increases in parallel with media coverage on the subject

- Our analysis of 3,500 articles since 2021 indicates that press coverage by The Daily Mail, The Daily Express and The Sun on the issue of migration correlates with far-right engagement around the issue of migration on Telegram to a statistically significant degree.
- We also find a meaningful overlap in topics discussed in these outlets and in far-right messages. Key topics discussed among the far-right on Telegram in relation to migration are: the Rwanda plan, hotel accommodation used to house asylum seekers, small boats and cross channel migration, violence against women and girls, criminality and threats to children. These are also the focus of Government statements and press coverage.
- The Daily Mail is the most read publisher in anti-migrant discussions on Telegram, and we find that messages sent alongside links to its articles often contain extreme racist language.
- Local news outlets are also disproportionately shared on far-right Telegram messages compared with their overall readership. This highlights the importance of responsible local journalism for community relations.

## ■ Far right activity online spikes around key Government announcements

- Our analysis indicates that government statements on migration as well as policy announcements also have a measurable influence on far-right engagement. We show that a time series of government statements and policy announcements on the topic of migration is predictive of the number of messages about migration in a large dataset of far-right groups on Telegram.



- While other factors likely also influence engagement, the large number of reactions to specific government statements, such as the Rwanda plan announced in April 2022 and the Illegal Migration Bill in 2023, suggest that far-right users on Telegram are highly responsive to government statements on the issue.
- Messages about migration on far-right platform Telegram rose by 72% above average the day after Prime Minister Johnson declared that 50 asylum seekers had been told they will be sent to Rwanda in the next fortnight in May 2022. The policy continued to be an intense focus at regular intervals in the coming year.
- Far-right engagement on migration is increasing as the Government's 'Stop the boats' campaign ramps up
  - The number of messages about migration in our dataset of far-right Telegram groups has increased from an average of 761 messages per day in 2021 to 1136 per day during the first months of 2023.

# THE MAKING OF A CRISIS

## ROSIE CARTER

Immigration has always been a focus for the far right, but in the past few years there has been a surge in activity by the organised far right in the UK. Rising numbers of small boats of people crossing the Channel alongside a backlog in processing asylum claims and the increased use of hotel and B&B accommodation for asylum seekers have become focal points for the movement.

HOPE not hate have recorded hundreds of incidents at asylum accommodation sites over the last three years, with far-right groups and anti-migrant activists actively breaking into accommodation sites to harass residents. We have also seen a number of activists filming small boat arrivals on the South coast. What started as a small group of so-called 'citizen journalists' or 'migrant hunters' creating content to share online has animated the wider far right and resulted in increased offline activity.

Our research recorded an increase of 102% in far-right anti-migrant activity in 2022<sup>2</sup>. Groups like fascist Patriotic Alternative have leapt on the issue in their attempt to grow their membership by leafletting in local communities, infiltrating town hall meetings about asylum accommodation plans and performing stunts and propaganda drives in the hope of provoking outrage and gaining coverage in the local and national press. Besides them, individual activists like Amanda Smith (aka Yorkshire Rose) have continued to provide a drip feed of online content, filming her visits to asylum accommodation sites 124 times in 2022. In the first three months of 2023, we have also seen a huge rise in anti-migrant demonstrations that have been organised, agitated and attended by the far right. We have recorded over 50 anti-migrant demonstrations in the first three months of 2023. While many of these are small, attended by a handful of known far-right figures, others have attracted a considerable number from local communities. In Kirkby where the far right had been agitating for weeks, crowds of around 400 local people took to the streets, with the event marred

by clashes between protestors and police, missiles were thrown and a police van was smashed up and set on fire.

It has been many years since the far right have been able to draw crowds of these numbers, and build their support from local communities. But this has not taken place in a vacuum. The far right's revived interest in immigration and asylum over recent years has piggybacked on a mainstream anti-migrant rhetoric. As our report will show, the explicit targeting of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and the organisations that support them by the political mainstream has opened up opportunities for the far right.

## THE MAKING OF A CRISIS

In the UK, immigration has long been a divisive political issue. But the public salience of immigration fluctuates based not only on what is happening nationally, but also locally, shaped by political and media narratives. There are endless factors that impact how important immigration and asylum are seen as political issues, with everything from individual experiences of the cost of living crisis to international conflict and natural disasters playing a role.

The 2016 referendum was a key moment for the 'immigration debate'. The Leave campaign, charged with racist dog whistle politics, fuelled concerns about EU migrant workers and created panic around the refugee 'crisis' taking place across Europe. But since the vote to leave the EU, in part as the result released frustration among those who felt this victory really had 'taken back control' and the value of migrant workers became clear, concern about immigration shrank dramatically.

Ipsos Mori's 'most important attitudes' tracker saw 56% name immigration and asylum as the 'most important issue' facing the country in September 2015<sup>3</sup>, but from 2020- 2022, this figure was hovering consistently under 10%<sup>4</sup>, in part as it was replaced by other issues, such as the pandemic and the housing crisis. Immigration gradually faded from newspaper front pages<sup>5</sup> and HOPE not hate's own





Patriotic Alternative protesting in Cannock in March 2023

research showed that attitudes to immigration have become far more open and positive over time<sup>6</sup>. But in the last few months, Ipsos Mori's tracker shows a dramatic bounce, with concern about immigration rising eight points within just a month to put it in line with concern about the NHS<sup>7</sup>.

This bounce in concern has happened in tandem with the announcement of the Government's new 'Illegal Migration Bill' which is being rushed through parliament, despite widespread criticism of its cruelty and unworkability. The bill is aimed at stopping people crossing the Channel in small boats by reforming the asylum system to create new powers to detain and deport people. But this has been accompanied by loud political noise, with the slogan 'Stop the boats' emblazoned across the Prime Minister's podium and debate on the bill filling TV debates and newspaper columns.

Since 2018, there has been a sharp rise in people crossing the Channel in small boats. But this 'crisis' is feeding on the back of years of failed asylum policy. Channel crossings have increased in large part because other routes for people seeking asylum in the UK have been shut down. Increased securitisation among other routes, such as travelling through the Channel Tunnel concealed in a lorry, as well as the UK's withdrawal from the Dublin Regulation have left those arriving through irregular routes with few alternatives<sup>8</sup>. The Refugee Council have highlighted that at least 60% of people crossing the Channel in small boats are granted refugee status by the Home Office, but that safe routes have been cut by 75% and 36% respectively<sup>9</sup>.

It is not just arrivals, but the impact of asylum policy failings once people arrive that has fed into this frenzy. The UK's asylum backlog –

that is, the number of asylum cases awaiting a Home Office decision – has grown substantially in recent years. As the backlog has grown, the cost of the UK's asylum system increases as the Government have an obligation to support people left waiting for their cases to be processed who are not permitted to work, while integration for people seeking sanctuary is hampered because they are left in limbo<sup>10</sup>.

Moreover, this has led to a crisis over asylum accommodation. Accommodation is provided by the Home Office through private contractors for people seeking asylum who have nowhere to live or cannot meet basic living costs. The long backlog in processing asylum cases has meant that for many, accommodation intended to be temporary has become far more permanent, with many trapped in unsuitable and unsafe accommodation, with hotels and B&Bs becoming used as standard by contractors. This means there is little direct Government oversight, and the accommodation is incredibly expensive with these companies making enormous profits.

These have become points of local tension in many cases, as people are left on hotel sites with little support put in place, in a system that has effectively been outsourced to the hospitality industry. Narratives about 'illegal immigrants' being given '5 star treatment' have quickly set in, while the cancellation of weddings or holidays in hotels being used for asylum accommodation feed community resentments – often stoked by the far right.

## DANGEROUS WORDS

Tensions have been fuelled by government rhetoric, which rather than acknowledging policy failings, has pursued a line of

inflammatory anti-migrant rhetoric about an ‘invasion’ of ‘illegal immigrants’.

Suella Braverman has claimed her ‘dream’ is to deport people to Rwanda, and trotted out proposals to instead house people on isolated military bases or on cruise ships. Robert Jenrick, the Minister for Immigration has continuously framed the issue of hotel accommodation as a ‘draw’ for asylum seekers, saying that ‘hotel Britain’ has become a soft touch for undocumented migrants. Dominic Raab has said that hotel accommodation was attracting the ‘wrong kind’ of immigrants and made suggestions that foreign national criminals are attracted by hotel accommodation.

Robert Jenrick’s most recent comments drive the conversation from controls to culture, saying that the values of those crossing the Channel are at odds with the country and spuriously claiming that there are “heightened levels of criminality when related to the people who’ve come on boats related to drug dealing, exploitation, prostitution.”

And understandably, with each policy proposal or inflammatory comment comes outrage from the progressive world. While it is absolutely essential that people speak out against these cruel, inhumane and unworkable suggestions, in the ‘war on woke’, moral panic is whipped up against those who speak out as being ‘out of touch’, or actively working against the interest of British people. This dominates headlines, creating ‘culture war’ focal points for the national debate.

The furore around football pundit Gary Lineker’s tweets against the Illegal Migration Bill is a case in point. Lineker tweeted that the bill was “an immeasurably cruel policy directed at the most vulnerable people in language that is not dissimilar to that used by Germany in the 30s”, which saw him suspended by the BBC, bringing into question the public broadcaster’s political impartiality. Suella Braverman told the BBC that his comment “diminishes the unspeakable tragedy” of the Holocaust.

This incident highlights how government announcements become more than policy, as commentary around the debate turns up the volume on divisive debate. But this is not a debate with two clear opposing sides.

The Government have failed to condemn and take action on the far right, who have been using momentum whipped up in their culture wars. Jenrick’s comments in a recent interview that protests in Knowsley, stoked by the far right, were simply ‘public concern’ being vocalised and “a warning to be heeded, not a phenomenon to be managed” show how the

Government’s culture wars have created space to legitimise the far right.

## A FEEDING FRENZY FOR THE FAR RIGHT

It is not just policy failings that have created a chaotic situation, but the language used by the Government around migration that has served to fuel anti-migrant hate. At every occasion the Government have doubled down on hard talk and tough control measures on immigration, moments have been created for the far right. While the far right have no real interest at all on policy issues, harsh measures spun out with hostile language and pushed through the tabloid press are an open invitation for them to fuel reactionary anti-politics anger and immigration fears at the same time.

Hostile rhetoric is not just restricted to online chat forums either. Beyond the growing number of anti-migrant demonstrations and ‘citizen journalists’ visits to asylum accommodation sites, we have witnessed a number of terror attacks fuelled by anti-migrant hatred. On 30 October 2022, a man named Andrew Leak drove to Dover and threw petrol bombs at the migrant-processing centre. HOPE not hate’s archive of Andrew Leak’s now deleted Twitter account revealed a man who extensively consumed far-right material and was obsessed with a desire for violence against Muslims and migrants.

The very provocative images of small boats carrying asylum seekers beneath the white cliffs of Dover and controversy around the use of hotel accommodation for asylum seekers have inevitably been picked up by the far right. But the increasing activity from anti-migrant activists we have monitored over the last few years is inseparable from how migration is being weaponized by more mainstream political actors and the press. We need to assess how far-right activity is being enabled by mainstream politics.

This report seeks to do just that, by looking at far-right engagement on Telegram on the subject of immigration and the relationship this has to Government announcements and policy as well as coverage of migration in three major tabloid newspapers.

In a hostile climate, where people who are migrants and refugees have faced daily harassment from organised far-right political groups, we need to see far greater safeguarding and action to address the backlogs trapping people in unsuitable accommodation where they become targets for hate. Politicians and the media need to take real responsibility and drop their line of inflammatory language that incubates the far right.



## KEY MOMENTS IN THE 'IMMIGRATION DEBATE'

In the last years the Government have made a number of big announcements, brought in new policy to reform the asylum system and punitive measures to crack down on cross-channel migration which has kept the issue of migration high on the media agenda.

This timeline details key statements and policy statements made by the UK government on migration alongside media coverage over the period covered by this report, January 2021 to March 2023.

5/2/21

Gearing up to the Nationality and Borders Bill, Priti Patel vows to combat the 'plague' of Channel people traffickers.

Priti Patel vows to combat 'plague' of Channel people traffickers



Priti Patel has said that illegal migrant crossings had "stripped" governments for decades and announced plans for a crackdown on people smugglers.

The Times, 5/2/21

Priti Patel plans to introduce two-tier system to tackle illegal immigration



EU countries have a "moral duty to help" Britain tackle illegal immigration by taking back failed asylum seekers, Priti Patel has said.

The Times, 24/3/21

24/3/21

As the new asylum plans are announced, the Home Secretary claims the overhaul is "firm but fair" and that other EU countries have a "moral duty" to help.

5/8/21

The Mail publishes record figures of channel crossings.

Migrants ALL claim they're children so they will get better rooms and education after crossing the channel and being put up in a seaside hotel in Kent

- Each of the migrants housed at Stade Court Hotel in Hythe, Kent, claim to be children
- Reports last week revealed all 43 rooms were booked by Home Office until September
- Mail on Sunday told by migrants claiming to be under-18 they were sharing rooms

By JAKE PHILL, MOLLY CLAPTON AND TIM FINNIN IN CALAIS FOR THE MAIL ON SUNDAY | PUBLISHED: 00:35, 25 July 2021 | UPDATED: 09:05, 25 July 2021

Daily Mail, 5/8/21

Migrants 'are staying in four-star hotel rooms at £125-a-night on the taxpayer' as Britons struggle to afford spiralling energy bills amid cost of living chaos

- Migrants are staying in £125-a-night hotel rooms paid for by the British taxpayer
- More than 28k migrants came to the UK (legally in 2021 and 18k are in UK hotels)
- Tory MP Tom Hunt said housing migrants like this would lead to a 'sleep resort'
- He said illegal migrants should be in detention centres rather than fancy hotels

By CHRIS MATTHEWS FOR MAILONLINE | PUBLISHED: 02:56, 8 January 2022 | UPDATED: 08:41, 8 January 2022

7.5k shares

2.8k likes

Illegal migrants are staying in four-star hotel rooms at £125-a-night paid for by British taxpayers as the country braces for spiralling energy bills amid a cost of living crisis.

More than 18,000 migrants are staying in hotels across Britain.

Conservative MP Tom Hunt said putting up illegal migrants in such pricey rooms would inevitably lead to Brits forming a 'sleep resort' for them.

Mail Online, 8/1/22

8/1/22

As the cost of living crisis dominates headlines over the Christmas and new year period, coverage of the cost of contingency asylum accommodation ramps up.

JANUARY 2021

APRIL 2021

JULY 2021

OCTOBER 2021

JANUARY 2022



19/3/21

Priti Patel tells The Sun that "Our generous safeguards for victims are being rampantly abused by child rapists, people who pose a threat to national security and failed asylum seekers with no right to be here"



Child rapists and terrorists will be stopped from using exploiting modern slavery loophole to stay in Britain

CHILD rapists, terrorists and serious criminals as well as failed asylum seekers will be stopped from exploiting modern slavery safeguards to stay in Britain. And lefty lawyers who help them face a major clampdown and punishing costs for wasting court time.

The Sun, 19/3/21

Britons have simply had enough of illegal migration, says PRITI PATEL

The British people have simply had enough of illegal migration and the abuse of our asylum system.

By PHEEN PATEL | 02:56, 4 April 2021 | UPDATED: 02:56, 4 April 2021

The Express, 4/6/21

4/7/21

The day before the publication of the Nationality and Borders Bill, the Home Secretary writes for the Express, claiming the measures are wanted by the British public.

09/09/21

Border Force staff are being trained to employ "turn-around" tactics at sea under plans developed for two years, a statement from the Home Office said.



Daily Express, 9/9/21

'Unchecked criminality' as six times as many migrants cross the Channel compared with last January

Warning that French need to stop smuggling gangs as £1.7m made the crossing, putting £10m on cost for 40,000 arrivals this year

By Charles Doherty, front section writer | Published: 31/1/22

The Telegraph, 31/1/22

31/1/22

Numbers of channel crossings continue to increase

KEY MOMENTS IN THE 'IMMIGRATION DEBATE (CONTINUED)

**Euro court GROUNDS Rwanda flight: Meddling Human Rights judge rules NO migrants can be flown to Africa just minutes before Government's 767 was due to take off - but 'disappointed' Priti Patel vows 'we will NOT be deterred'**

- Protesters gathered outside Heathrow Immigration Detention Centre in bid to stop Rwanda flight taking off
- Boeing 767 - operated by Spanish charter firm Privilege Style - seen landing at Ministry of Defence test site
- Church leaders including Archbishops of Canterbury and York have said the Rwanda plan 'shames Britain'
- Six people were expected to be removed in tonight's flight, four of whom failed in High Court appeals today
- Several deportations were blocked tonight after an injunction from European Court of Human Rights
- Baroness Chakrabarti says a 'substantive judicial review' of the Rwanda scheme will be considered in July

By BORY FINKE, HOME AFFAIRS CORRESPONDENT FOR MAIL ONLINE and ADAM SLOMONE and DAVID BARRETT FOR THE DAILY MAIL AND NEIL BEARS FOR THE DAILY MAIL AND STEWART CLARK AND JACOB THORBURN FOR MAIL ONLINE  
PUBLISHED: 19:23, 14 June 2022 | UPDATED: 19:21, 15 June 2022

MAIL ONLINE, 14/6/22

21/3/22

Priti Patel pushes forward with the Nationality and Borders Bill.

**PRITI TOUGH** Supporters of Priti Patel say MPs who block her plans to crack down on Channel crossings are 'on the side of criminals'

Jonathan Bebb  
Published: 21:03, 21 Mar 2022 | Updated: 21:03, 21 Mar 2022

The Sun, 21/3/22

14/6/22

The first deportation flight of asylum seekers to Rwanda is abandoned after a last minute intervention from the ECHR. This comes just days after the flight was ruled permissible by a high court judge.

21/6/22

Following the ECHR decision to ground the first Rwanda flight, Justice Secretary Dominic Raab pushes forward with his new Bill of Rights. This Bill would remove the requirement on courts to "take into account" the judgments of the ECHR in cases where human rights are at stake.

**LEGAL 'ABUSES' CRACKDOWN** Britain will tear up 'perverse' Euro laws in new Bill of Rights, says Dominic Raab

Jonathan Bebb  
Published: 23:41, 21 Jun 2022 | Updated: 23:41, 21 Jun 2022

BRITAIN will tear up "perverse" Euro laws that have been entrenched into UK courts in a new Bill of Rights, Dominic Raab says today.

The Deputy PM will "curb abuses" by making sure judges apply common sense in their rulings – and so the Supreme Court can overrule the European Court of Human Rights.

The Sun, 21/6/22

**Albanian migrants crossing the Channel to face criminal records checks at Dover**

Police from the Italian state returned to the UK to check fingerprints and biometric data against criminal databases

By Charles Wilson, 29/08/2022

Albanian migrants crossing the Channel face criminal records checks by police officers from their own nation as Britain's at sea emergency.

Home Office officials are due to meet senior Albanian police officers on Tuesday to agree the plans for officers from the Balkan state to cross-reference migrants' fingerprints and biometric data with Albanian criminal databases.

Government sources said it would enable Dover, France and immigration enforcement officers to identify and fast-track anyone deemed a "threat to the public good" because of their criminal background to be arrested and taken back to Albania.

Telegraph, 29/8/22

29/8/22

As part of new plans to "fast track" deportations of Albanian nationals, the Home Office is rumoured to be introducing criminal record checks – including fingerprint and biometric data collection – for people arriving by small boats in Dover.

APRIL 2022

MAY 2022

JUNE 2022

JULY 2022

AUGUST 2022

SEPTEMBER 2022

OCTOBER 2022



Daily Mail, 14/2/22

18/6/22

Media attention turns to a critique of the ECHR following the grounding of Rwanda flight.

**The Rwanda verdict from the European Court of Human Rights was utterly predictable: How it has been a friend to criminals and terror suspects with perverse judgments against Britain, writes ROSS CLARK**

By ROSS CLARK FOR THE DAILY MAIL  
PUBLISHED: 22:21, 13 June 2022 | UPDATED: 18:44, 18 June 2022

Daily Mail, 18/6/22

**The TikTok 'summer sale' for migrants: Smuggler gangs launch 'closing down sale' and slash price of Channel crossings by £1,500 per person as traffickers target Albanians on social media**

- Figures show Albanians now make up 70% of last arrivals from southern France 120% of 3,000 since July 10
- More multiple crossings have been found on TikTok selling Channel crossings at inflated prices this summer
- The accident came with advice on using the railway system to then stay in UK, with the help of those lawyers
- How gangs believed to be running the illegal route from France to UK, claiming 'The French won't stop you'

By Ross Clark, 09/08/2022  
Published: 09:00, 09 August 2022 | Updated: 09:00, 09 August 2022

Daily Mail, 9/8/22

9/8/22

Following a leaked report by the Royal Navy Surveillance revealing that 4 in 10 people crossing the Channel are from Albania, the media begins to single them out.

5/10/22

In her first Party Conference as Home Secretary, Suella Braverman promises to "stop the boats". Claiming there is "no quick fix" to this "chronic" problem, she lays out her plans to materialise the Rwanda scheme, end the use of hotel accommodation for asylum seekers, and "take back control" from foreign courts undermining sovereignty.

**Suella Braverman says it is her 'dream' and 'obsession' to see a flight take asylum seekers to Rwanda**

Home secretary says flights are unlikely to start before Christmas because of expected appeals to High Court ruling

The Independent, 5/10/22

1/11/22

Suella Braverman comes under fire for massive overcrowding at the Manston migrant processing centre in Dover. She admits that “illegal immigration is out of control” but fires back at criticism that the Conservative party are unserious about stopping what she referred to as “the invasion on our southern coast”.

**Tories warn of ‘fireworks’ if Suella Braverman is axed and insist she was ‘speaking the truth’ as she faces backlash over claim Channel migrants are ‘invading’ south coast - with her own minister voicing alarm about ‘demonising’ arrivals**

- Suella Braverman facing backlash over claim of migrant ‘invasion’ on south coast
- The comment came as she made a Commons statement defending her handling
- Tories voiced alarm while immigration minister distanced himself from remark

By JAMES TAPPFIELD, POLITICAL EDITOR FOR MAILONLINE  
PUBLISHED: 01:02, 1 November 2022 | UPDATED: 11:14, 2 November 2022

Mail online, 1/11/22

**‘Hotel Britain must end’: Immigration minister says the UK must disincentivise ‘asylum shopping’ by housing migrants in ‘simple, functional spaces’ as opposed to ‘luxury’ rooms**

- Immigration Minister says luxury ‘Hotel Britain’ must come to a swift end
- Robert Jenrick says simple accommodation will disincentivise migrants
- The comments come after Suella Braverman sparked outrage for divisive claims
- Some 40,000 migrants have likely crossed the Channel so far in 2022
- Mr Jenrick said, moving forward, Britain will be ‘compassionate but not naive’

By BRITANNY CHAIN FOR MAILONLINE  
PUBLISHED: 01:30, 13 November 2022 | UPDATED: 14:48, 14 November 2022

Mail Online, 13/11/22

**STARMER SLAMMED** Rishi Sunak slams ‘lefty lawyer’ Keir Starmer for opposing migration plan & says Labour leader is on ‘side of smugglers’

Nia Holfman  
Published: 02:26, 8 Mar 2023 | Updated: 20:38, 8 Mar 2023

The Sun, 8/3/23

4/2/23

Rishi Sunak’s top line briefed to the Mail on Sunday: “Make no mistake, if you come here illegally, you will not be able to stay.”

**Rishi Sunak warns he WILL send back illegal Channel migrants: PM to announce new hard-hitting laws that will stop human rights legislation being used to resist deportation**

- Rishi Sunak has vowed to change the law to strip rights from asylum seekers
- He wants to prevent asylum seekers using rights legislation to remain in Britain

By GLEN OREN FOR THE MAIL ON SUNDAY  
PUBLISHED: 03:02, 4 March 2023 | UPDATED: 16:36, 5 March 2023

Mail on Sunday, 4/2/23

13/11/22

Minister for Immigration Robert Jenrick claims that ‘Hotel Britain’ is incentivising migrants to take advantage of the asylum system.

8/3/23

At Prime Minister’s Questions, Rishi Sunak hits back at opposition to the new Bill.

NOVEMBER 2022

NOVEMBER 2022

DECEMBER 2022

JANUARY 2023

FEBRUARY 2023

MARCH 2023

APRIL 2023

NEWS > POLITICS

**Sunak: Fresh laws ‘most important’ part of plan to tackle Channel crossings**

The Prime Minister repeated promises that his Government would ‘stop the boats’.

Evening Standard, 4/1/23

2/11/22

Media coverage on asylum accommodation centres on the cost of supposed ‘luxury hotels’

4/1/23

The Prime Minister reiterates plans to “Stop the boats”, making it one of the five promises in his “Building a better future” speech at the start of the year.

7/3/23

The ‘Illegal Migration Bill’ enters Parliament.



Daily Express, 7/3/23

19/3/23

The Home Secretary visits Rwanda to firm up plans for the offshoring process. The press list is small and targeted, including The Telegraph, GB News, The Sun, The Express and The Daily Mail. Notably missing are media outlets with traditionally more critical coverage such as the Guardian, the Independent, the Financial Times and the BBC.



The Sun, 19/3/23

News > UK News

**FIVE-STAR MIGRANTS** Thousands of migrants living at luxury hotels with Brits forking out £6.8m a day to house them

Harry Cole | Rob Pattinson | Natasha Clark | Ryan Sabey  
Published: 22:00, 2 Nov 2022 | Updated: 7:59, 3 Nov 2022

The Sun, 2/11/22



# CASE STUDY: NEWQUAY PROTESTS SPARKED BY ONLINE MISINFORMATION ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT

## ANKI DEO

Two anti-migrant protests have been held so far in 2023 outside the Beresford Hotel in Newquay, which as of March housed around 200 asylum seekers. The second protest was prompted in part by the discovery that a man had been charged with rape. The address of the accused was given only as a road name, which was the road that the Beresford Hotel is also on. Rumours flooded the community about the identity of the accused until it emerged clearly that he was neither staying in the Beresford Hotel, nor an asylum seeker.

Incidentally, the organiser of the protests, Mylo Gregory, has been mired in controversy since it emerged that he had previously been arrested for minor fraud and an assault on a woman in Newcastle. In other words, there was an added layer to the selective media coverage about violence against women and framing the anti-migrant protests.

The local newspaper Cornwall Live has published 12 articles mentioning the Beresford hotel since the allegations of rape were first linked to asylum seekers on March 21st 2023. The alleged link between the rape allegation and the asylum seekers staying in the Beresford hotel was included in seven articles, but in all cases there was clear and consistent messaging that the accused was not an asylum seeker in the hotel. The other five articles focus exclusively on the demonstrations without reference to the rape allegations. The first article to acknowledge the existence of the rumour quickly dismissed it with the clear headline “Alleged Newquay rapist not a resident of Cornwall asylum seeker hotel”. It was helpful that Cornwall Live addressed the allegation in the local media, as there was a simple explanation for the spread of misinformation which meant the news site could have the final word on the matter.

Compared to a sample of other articles within the same month, articles shared on Facebook by Cornwall Live about the Newquay protest did not receive a higher average number of likes or shares than articles on other topics, however they did receive a higher than average number of comments (an average of 259 for Beresford Hotel articles compared to 151



Photo: Cornwall Resists  
<https://www.instagram.com/cornwallresists/>

for other articles). This suggests that whilst articles about asylum seekers do not receive more attention online overall, they appear to be generating more discussions amongst the community. This is in line with our findings later in this report.

Cornwall Live’s coverage of asylum seekers in the 12 articles sampled was mostly neutral and occasionally positive, emphasising the difficulty that asylum seekers experience and interviewing them to share their perspective. However, there was one article in which asylum seekers were presented by one interviewee in a stereotypical and negative light.

Interviewees made reference to multiple negative and unfair tropes around asylum seekers, which Cornwall Live did not question or critique.<sup>11</sup> They compared asylum seekers’ treatment to that of the homeless, referred to asylum seekers as “illegal”, cast doubt on their age, argued that they should remain in any safe country they first arrive in, argued that asylum seekers posed a threat to the safety of children, and presented them as a threat to local housing and jobs. Whilst these harmful tropes might represent the views of some members of the community, presenting them unchallenged contributes to negative stereotypes about asylum seekers. The seemingly objective style of article which reports that one side says A whilst the other side says B can be very damaging as stereotypes about asylum seekers, a group with very little voice, can easily become entrenched.

# THE ROLE OF MEDIA AND GOVERNMENT RHETORIC IN FUELLING FAR-RIGHT ANTI-MIGRANT HATE

**MUSTAFA AHMAD and  
PATRIK HERMANSSON**

Social media has been central to the recent increase in far-right activity against migration. Lists of hotels being used to house asylum seekers are frequently shared on Telegram chats and in Facebook groups, where protests and activity are organised. Each news article on immigration shared in these channels supports a narrative that immigration is an ever larger and more threatening problem.

However, the far right's focus on migration has occurred alongside an increased focus on immigration in the political mainstream. This article examines the role of how press coverage and government rhetoric are shaping the discourse and helping encourage engagement of the far right around migration.

Many have previously highlighted the hostility of the tabloid press in the UK on migration focusing on its harsh, often dehumanising and racist rhetoric.<sup>12</sup> In this case we examine the effect of media coverage on far-right engagement. The analysis is based on three time series datasets: government statements on migration, British far-right Telegram messages, and articles from three major newspapers: The Daily Mail, The Daily Express and The Sun. Analysing relationships between these three data sets allows us to examine the relationship between government, media, and far-right engagement on migration.

We find that the three interact in complex ways, all contributing to the hardening rhetoric towards people who are migrants, with both government rhetoric and media coverage influencing far-right engagement and rhetoric around the issue. We find that instances of government rhetoric, in which we include statements by government officials such as by the Home Secretary or the Minister for Immigration as well as policy changes, helps

predict an increase in far-right chat messages about migration. We also find that our data set of tabloid articles correlate with far right engagement on Telegram to the same measure. This leads to the conclusion that both media and government rhetoric as well as policy announcements are likely to have an influence over far-right engagement on the issue of migration. We also find clear overlaps in rhetoric between media coverage of migration and the far-right messages.

## FAR-RIGHT ENGAGEMENT AROUND GOVERNMENT STATEMENTS AND POLICY ANNOUNCEMENTS

The last few years has seen a steady stream of hostile policy proposals and inflammatory statements from the Government on migration. From an anti-immigration and anti-EU sentiment that played out through the 2016 referendum to the Windrush scandal and more recently, an active demonising of Albanian 'criminals', punitive suggestions of gunboats in the Channel and threats of deporting asylum seekers to Rwanda or offshoring vulnerable people on barges.

In order to assess the impact of Government statements and policy announcements on far-right anti-migrant engagement in the UK, we analysed two datasets over the period January 2021 to March 2023: one time series data set consisting of government statements and policy announcements made each week, and one time series data set of anti-migrant telegram messages per week.

Using the Granger causality test, we find a statistically significant relationship between the Government policy statement time series and far-right activity on Telegram, with a time-lag of one week, with an F-statistic of 3.9295 ( $p < 0.05$ ). This suggests that the number of government statements and policy announcements is predictive of the amount of

# DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The analysis builds on three primary data sets which all cover the period from January 2021 to March 2023.

The primary data is 660,000 Telegram messages from far-right chat groups on the topic of migration. The dataset was collected using a snowball sampling technique. We scraped chats starting with a selection of large far-right English language chats from different parts of the far right reflecting different ideological directions and types of communities. These were selected based on their importance according to HOPE not hate's monitoring of the area. Following forwarded messages (a common way of introducing users to new chats on Telegram) we expanded our list of relevant chats. The number of messages per day about migration has a rising trend with an average of 761 messages per day in 2021 and 1136 per day during the first months of 2023.

The dataset was then reduced to only posts discussing migration using a Random Forest machine learning model trained on a manually labelled dataset of 3600 posts. In our tests, the model reached an accuracy of 91%. Considering the relatively large size of the data set we deem this to be sufficient for the purpose of the analysis which is to measure the level of far-right engagement around the issues of migration over time.

The second data set is a manually built timeline of government announcements and public statements made by politicians and government officials in the UK around the issue of migration. This is based on comments made in the press and official government press releases. It contains 164 policy announcements and Government statements made during the time period. It is important to note that this dataset does not differentiate between types of announcements or policy changes or their relative importance. While it is reasonable to assume that certain statements have more impact than others, this is not captured.

The third data set is a collection of articles on migration in three right-wing tabloids, The Daily Mail, The Daily Express and The Sun. We downloaded the articles using a publicly available archive using the keywords: *immigra\**, *migra\**, *asylum* or *refugee*. The dataset contains 3468 articles in total.

We use two statistical tests to assess the relationship between these three time series datasets: the Granger causality test and Spearman's rank correlation. The Granger causality test is used to determine if past values of one time series can help predict the future values of another time series, beyond the information contained in the past values of the second time series itself. We then use Spearman's rank correlation to increase the confidence in our results, by measuring the strength and direction of the relationship between two variables. It is more robust to outliers and non-linear relationships compared to the Pearson correlation coefficient which makes it suitable in this case, where one dataset has a much higher cardinality than the others (thousands of messages in a day or week versus a handful of events) and we cannot capture the importance of individual government statements.

Additionally, we use topic modelling to find frequent topics within our datasets. We use BertTopic<sup>18</sup> which clusters documents based on their embeddings (a numerical representation of a text's meaning) derived from deep learning models. It then takes advantage of c-TF-IDF, a modified version of the conventional TF-IDF metric adjusted to identify significant words within large corpuses of text to generate coherent topic representation.



far-right activity on Telegram around migration the following week. The correlation we find is of a moderate degree. The results of a Spearman rank correlation analysis give us a correlation coefficient of ( $\rho$ ) of 0.2107 ( $p < 0.05$ ).

While the correlation is not perfect, the results show a meaningful relationship between the two datasets. Therefore, we can say that we have a strong indication that the more Government have made public statements about migration, the more the far right have engaged on the topic on Telegram.

There is, of course, a complex web of factors that also plays into this interaction. This can include media coverage from both mainstream and ‘in-movement’ sources, content being shared on other social media platforms, the experiences of people who are migrants as well as in receiving communities and much more. We will look closer at the role of mainstream press later in this report.

Moreover, as we will detail later on in this report, immigration is a constant topic of discussion within far-right contexts as it is considered a foundational threat by most far-right groups. This will lower the influence of any external variable. We also do not assess the importance of different government statements or policy announcements here. It is reasonable

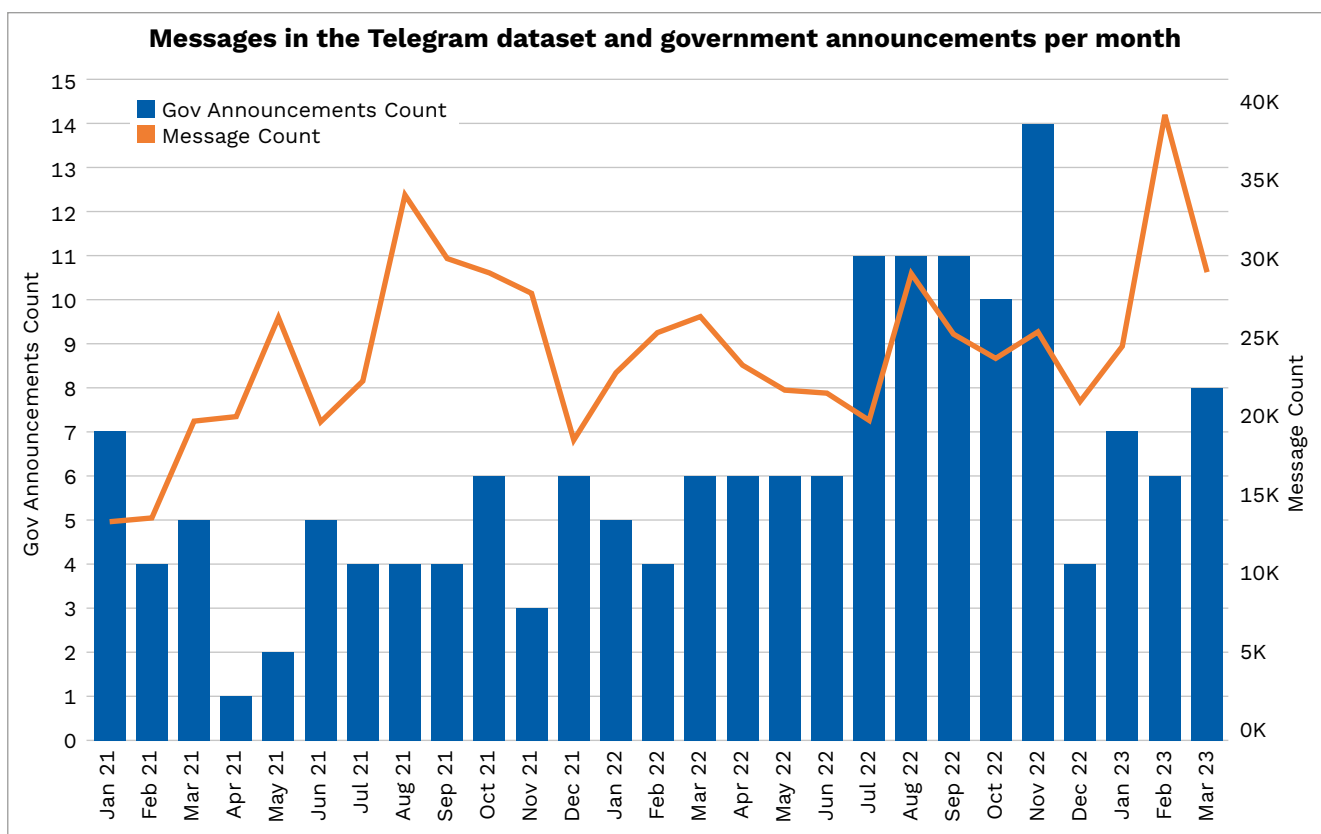
to believe that larger and more controversial policy announcements or statements have more influence than smaller comments have different impacts.

It is also reasonable to expect some delay in the interaction between Government announcements and far-right engagement, given that information does not spread instantly. Further delay could come from other processes such as far-right actors taking time to produce and disseminate their responses and delays from statements percolating through the press.

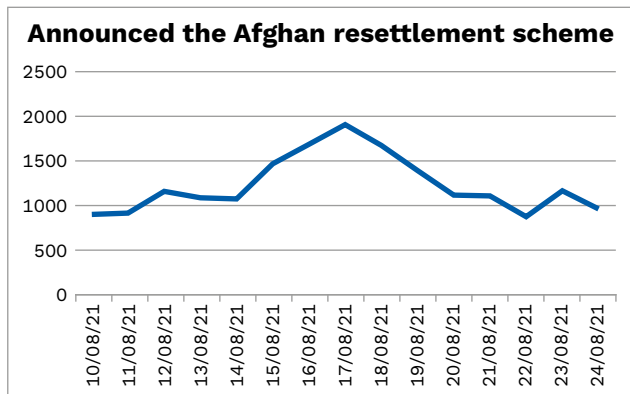
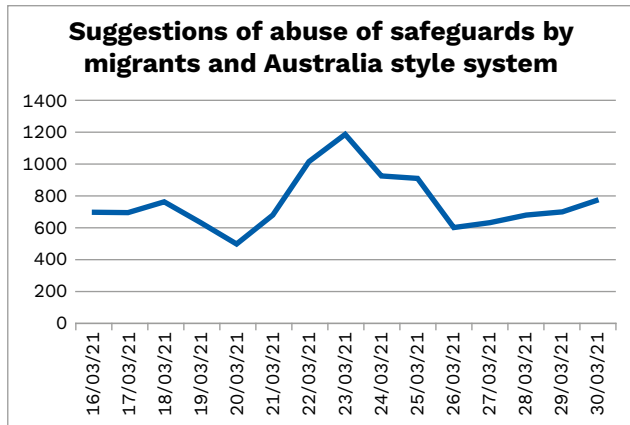
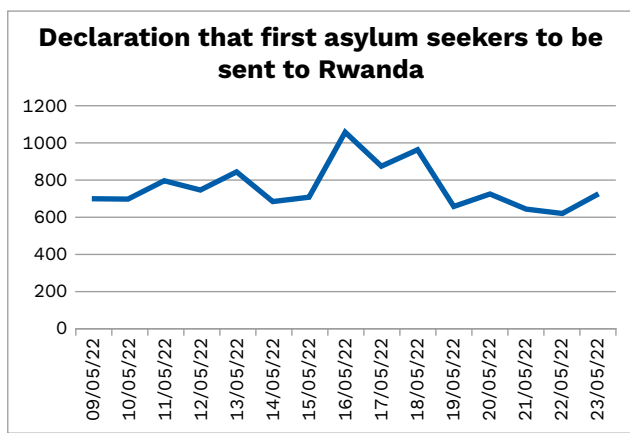
There are a number of easily observable rapid increases in activity in the Telegram dataset that can be attributed to government statements or policy changes. This strengthens the indication that government statements have an impact on far-right engagement.

One such example is 22 March 2021, where we see a spike in far-right messages on Telegram about migration, with many mentioning ‘Australia’, linked to reports that the Home Office was looking to bring in legislation to mimic Australia’s “offshore processing” regime for asylum seekers in the preceding days<sup>13</sup>.

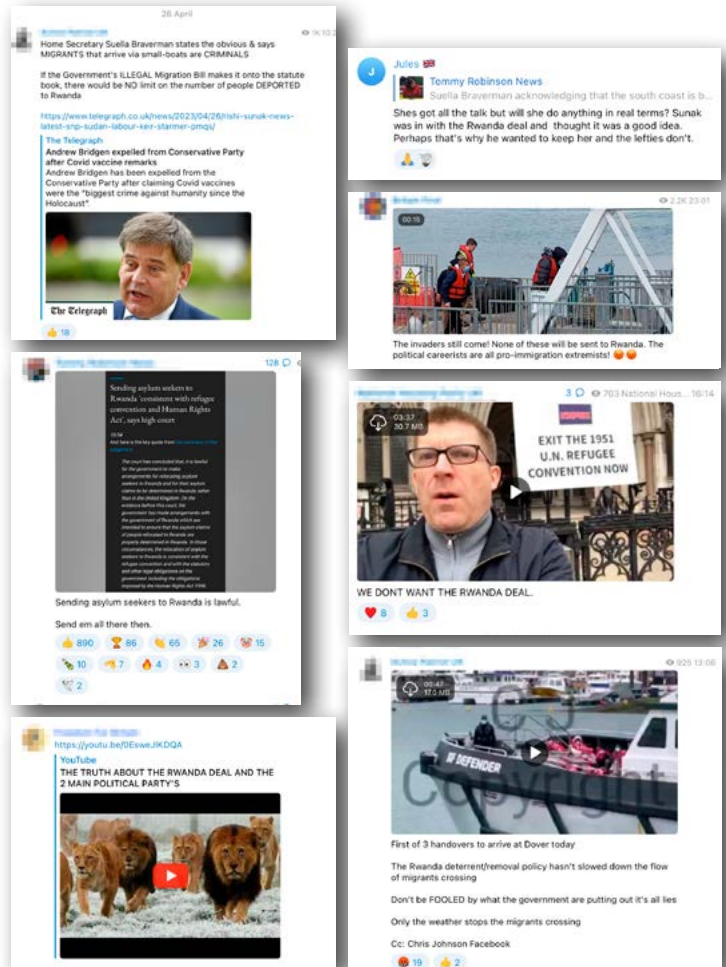
This spike had followed a drip-feed of media coverage on the Government’s plans to ‘control’ immigration by small boats crossing



the Channel, highlighting how Government statements and policy announcements rarely sit in isolation. On 19<sup>th</sup> March 2021 then Home Secretary Patel was quoted in The Sun saying “Our generous safeguards for victims are being rampantly abused by child rapists, people who pose a threat to national security and failed asylum seekers with no right to be here”<sup>14</sup>. Framing asylum seekers as a sexual threat to children and criminals connects to one of the key ideas about immigrants within the far right and responses, as well as quotes from Patel, were shared extensively in our dataset the following days.



These charts show mentions of themes spiking on Telegram chats around key Government announcements



In April 2022, Boris Johnson announced that the UK had signed an agreement with Rwanda, introducing a scheme to send people seeking asylum in the UK to Rwanda to have their claims processed there. The Rwanda plan has been the subject of much debate and so has frequently returned as a topic of comment in mainstream politics and media coverage. Our data shows that political discussion of the Rwanda plan appears to be the cause of multiple spikes in far-right anti-migrant engagement.

A significant peak with a raise of 75% over average took place on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2022, the day after Prime Minister Johnson declared that 50 asylum seekers had been told they will be sent to Rwanda in the next fortnight<sup>15</sup>. The announcement also mentioned “leftie lawyers”, a phrase that refers to those challenging the Government’s plans for refugees. This is of note, because Government announcements are often accompanied by pushback from progressive media and activists as well as the legal sector. The pushback to Government announcements is also frequently picked up on by the far-right. Most messages on the topic of migration in





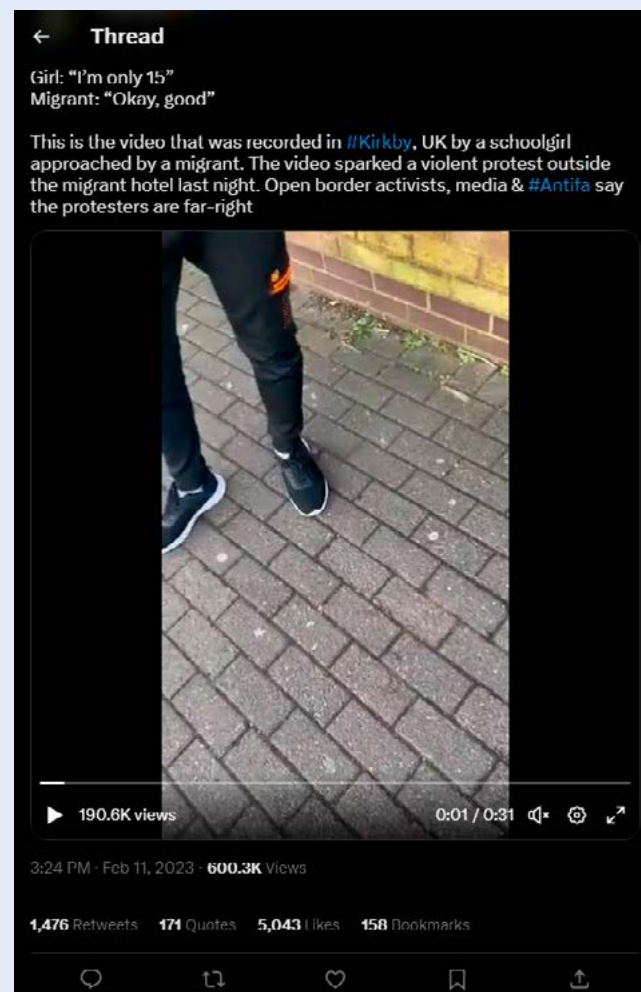
# CASE STUDY: VIRAL VIDEO PLAYS INTO KEY FAR-RIGHT TROPE IN KIRKBY

## ANKI DEO

The violent demonstration outside the Suites Hotel in Kirkby on February 10th was partially prompted by a viral video and image in which a man is seen speaking to a girl who identifies herself as fifteen years old and says “we don’t do that in this country”. Allegations and rumours that the man was an asylum seeker staying at the Suites Hotel quickly circulated online. Police made an arrest whilst investigating the claims of the video and subsequent discussion on social media but later released the man with no further action. The video and image have been viewed on Twitter alone at least 1.75 million times, with at least 18 different accounts sharing and reposting them. This demonstrates how powerful media content can be in helping shape toxic narratives around asylum seekers and how quickly assumptions and misinformation can spread far beyond the local community. The image and stills from the video were also published in the Daily Mail.

Search topics on TikTok also provide information on how many times videos linked to a specific topic have been viewed in total. The topic “asylum seekers Liverpool girl video” has 92.2 million views, which is comparable to the topic “Suella Braverman” with 90.9 million views or “asylum seekers complaining uk” with 91.7m views. Although views of videos on TikTok are not as indicative of the viewers opinion as retweets, likes or shares, the sheer number of viewers demonstrates the potential for this content to go viral and start to shape the narrative around asylum seekers. Perhaps more concerningly, the topic “grooming in Liverpool” has 3.7 billion views, with the more specific “immigrant grooming Liverpool” having 117.4 million views. Although the term grooming can be used in contexts beyond child sexual exploitation, and a small proportion of videos were about dog grooming, the shockingly high number suggests that this content is effective at keeping people glued to the TikTok app. This makes videos like the one from Kirkby ripe

for exploitation by far-right actors who want to draw a clear correlation between presence of asylum seekers and sexual violence and/or child sexual exploitation. The idea of saving schoolgirls from dangerous “others” is a much more appealing cause for many. By reposting existing videos or creating new content that relates concerns around child safety to concerns around asylum seekers, far-right and racist actors are able to reach a new audience who might have been deterred by other elements of their message.



## PRESS COVERAGE AND FAR-RIGHT ENGAGEMENT

Hostile press coverage on the topic of migration has been a long standing topic of discussion in the UK. An UNHCR report from 2015 found that the UK was “the most negative, and the most polarised” among the countries surveyed.<sup>19</sup> The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford has highlighted that UK press tend to frame migration in terms of numbers and scale, using words such as “flood” and “mass migration” which dehumanises migrants. They have also shown how language centred on criminality negatively portrays people who are migrants and refugees as undeserving.<sup>20</sup>

This section applies the same statistical tests we used to assess the role of government statements and policy announcements on far-right engagement on Telegram but we instead use a dataset on articles about migration from three major newspapers, The Daily Mail, The Daily Express and The Sun.

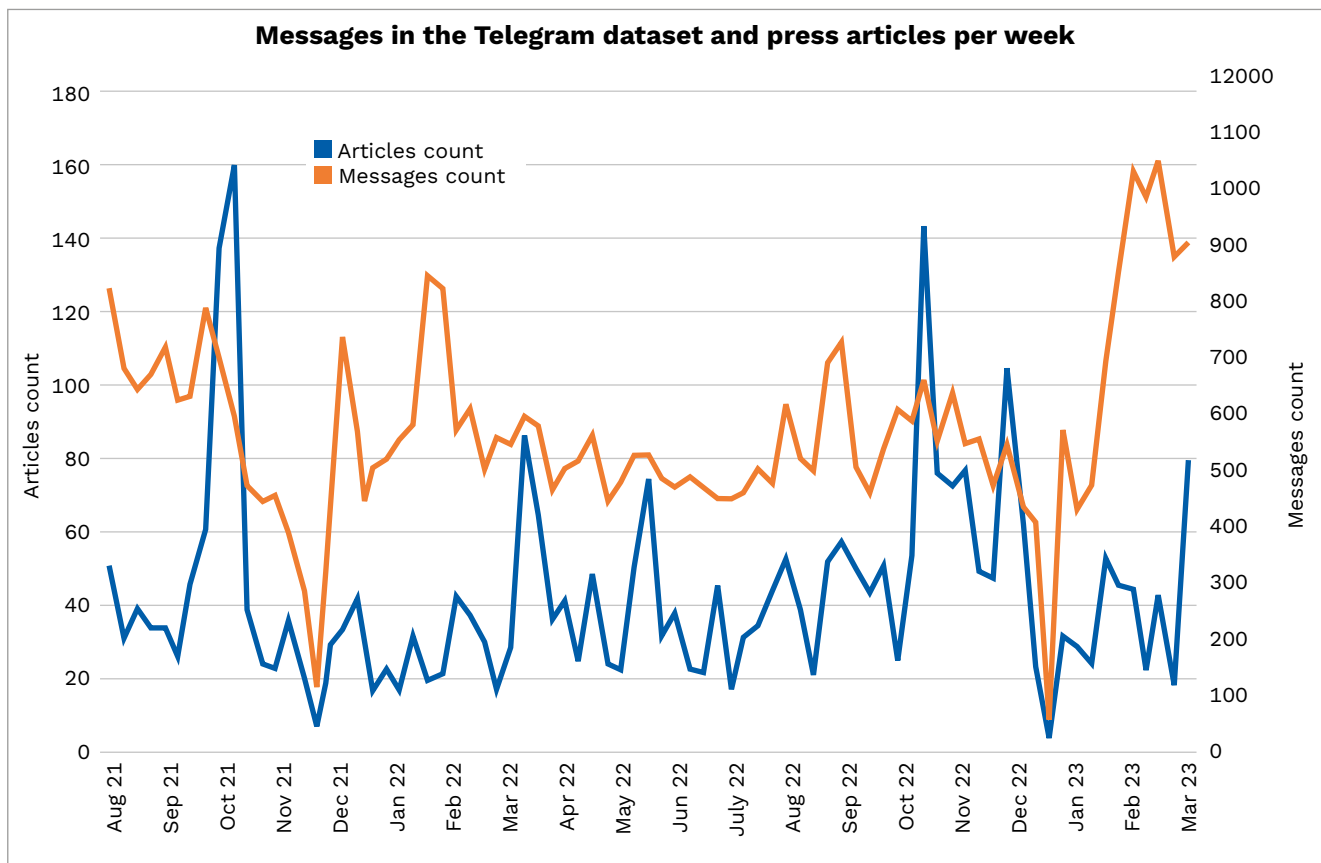
We find a statistically significant correlation between our press dataset and our Telegram dataset in the same week. The results of a Spearman rank correlation analysis show a statistically significant correlation between the two variables, with a correlation coefficient ( $\rho$ ) of 0.3513 ( $p < 0.05$ ). The correlation is not perfect and can never prove causation,

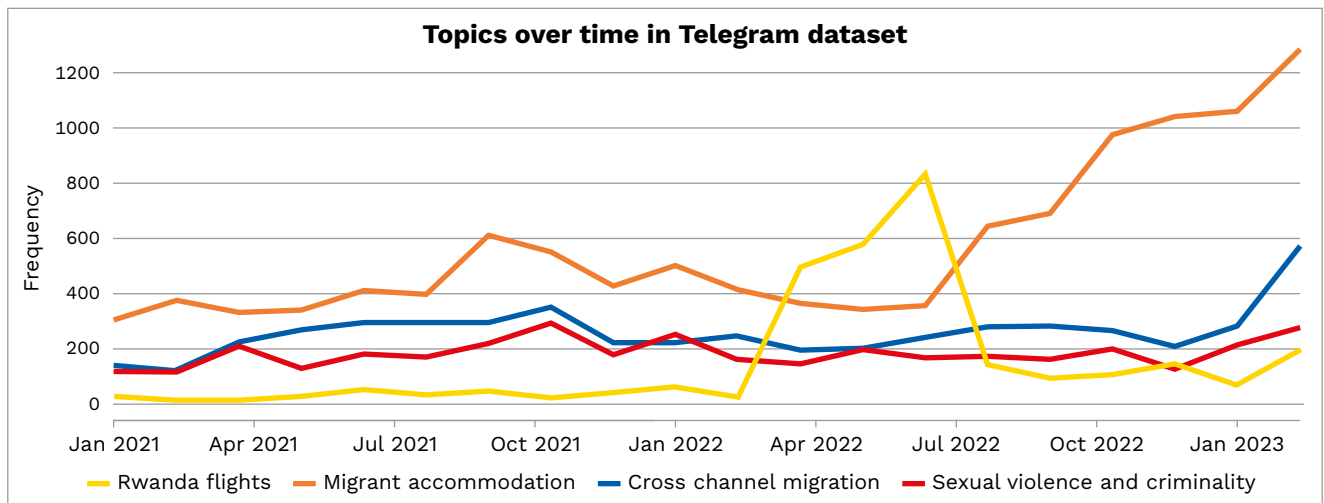
however the increased number of press articles tend to show an increase in the amount of Telegram messages. The fact that the correlation is not stronger is expected as many factors likely drive far-right engagement, including government statements and policy announcements, as explored in the previous section.

It is difficult to separate the influence of media from government statements and policy announcements, as these naturally reach people in most cases through media and themselves influence media coverage of migration. The lack of time-lag in this correlation compared to the correlation on our government statement dataset is an indication of this.

On a broader level, the connection between press and government policy is also relevant. When migration is a focus at the political level, press coverage will increase. For example, there was a sharp rise in news stories related to migration after the introduction of measures to reduce net migration in 2011 and 2012 by the Conservative-led coalition government.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, it is not just the frequency, but also content of media coverage that has an influence on how the far-right speak about migration. We identify a clear overlap in language used in the two datasets.





The articles on our press dataset frequently use the term ‘illegal’ to refer to both people who are migrants and the journeys they have taken. 950 out of 3468 articles (27%) mention either ‘illegal migrant’ or ‘illegal immigrant’. More direct references of criminal activity are also common. These are the articles that are often quickest to be picked up and shared in far-right groups on Telegram. Examples include allegations of sexual advances towards minors as was the case in the widely reported Kirkby case where a man was arrested but later released, after videos were spread alongside the claim that he was making advances towards a 15-year-old girl. Another is an article from June 2021 which was shared alongside claims that a knife was found alongside life jackets used by cross channel migrants.

The framing of people who are migrants as ‘illegal’, or directly linked to criminality fuels a central far-right narrative of immigration as a threat to safety. Using the term “illegal” to describe people seeking asylum creates a direct link to ideas of criminality or illicit activity and serves to dehumanise people who have taken arduous routes to get to the UK. The term ‘illegal’ to define people moving across borders, even when they hold irregular status, has been condemned by both the United Nations and the European Union.

As the use of hotel accommodation for asylum seekers has increased, so has coverage in news publications, and in engagement by the far right. 815 (24%) of the articles cover the topic of accommodation for asylum seekers, 619 of which were published in 2022.

Analysing our dataset of Telegram messages, we find a significant overlap in themes with our press dataset. We use topic modelling<sup>22</sup> to

find frequent topics discussed in the far-right telegram dataset and find that some topics have changed over time while others have stayed fairly constant.

The theme of sexual violence and in particular the supposed threat that migrants pose to young girls has remained fairly constant in far-right messages during the period of the analysis, with only a slight increase for shorter periods. Messages on this topic are often shared alongside links to press articles that refer to migrants and criminality. That the topic has remained relatively stable in frequency is expected, as a theme that has long dominated far-right anti-immigrant rhetoric in the UK. Small variations over time and a slight increasing trend is possibly due to the specific stories relating to this topic gaining periodic prevalence after widely shared stories, such as the case of Kirkby earlier this year.

The topic of cross channel migration increased in early 2021 remaining fairly stable before a significant increase in early 2023. If we looked at a longer period of time, it is likely that this was not frequently talked about but it appears that it has now become a stable discourse within anti-migrant contexts in the UK. This is in part simply a result of growing numbers of people crossing the Channel in small boats over this time period, though it is of note that channel crossings have increased in part as there have been greater controls put in place on other routes of spontaneous arrival, such as by lorry. These routes received far less coverage by press, and far less engagement by the far right.

Mentions of asylum accommodation have also been on a steadily increasing trajectory in far right messaging over the last year, which mirrors its increasing focus in our press



dataset in 2022 and the increasing salience of the topic overall.

Mentions of the Rwanda plan show the most dramatic change over the time period. Our data shows a dramatic increase in mentions in April 2022, when the plan was first announced by the Government. This remained the most salient topic within anti-migrant contexts on Telegram for several months. The dramatic rise of this very specific topic is notable and is a clear indication of the role that government policy plays in directing the focus of the anti-migrant far right. Topics rise over a longer period of time and are likely amplified by complex interactions between far-right activity, media and perceived discontent among other factors. The rise of the Rwanda policy as the most salient topic in our dataset for a short period following its announcement is difficult to attribute to anything but government rhetoric.

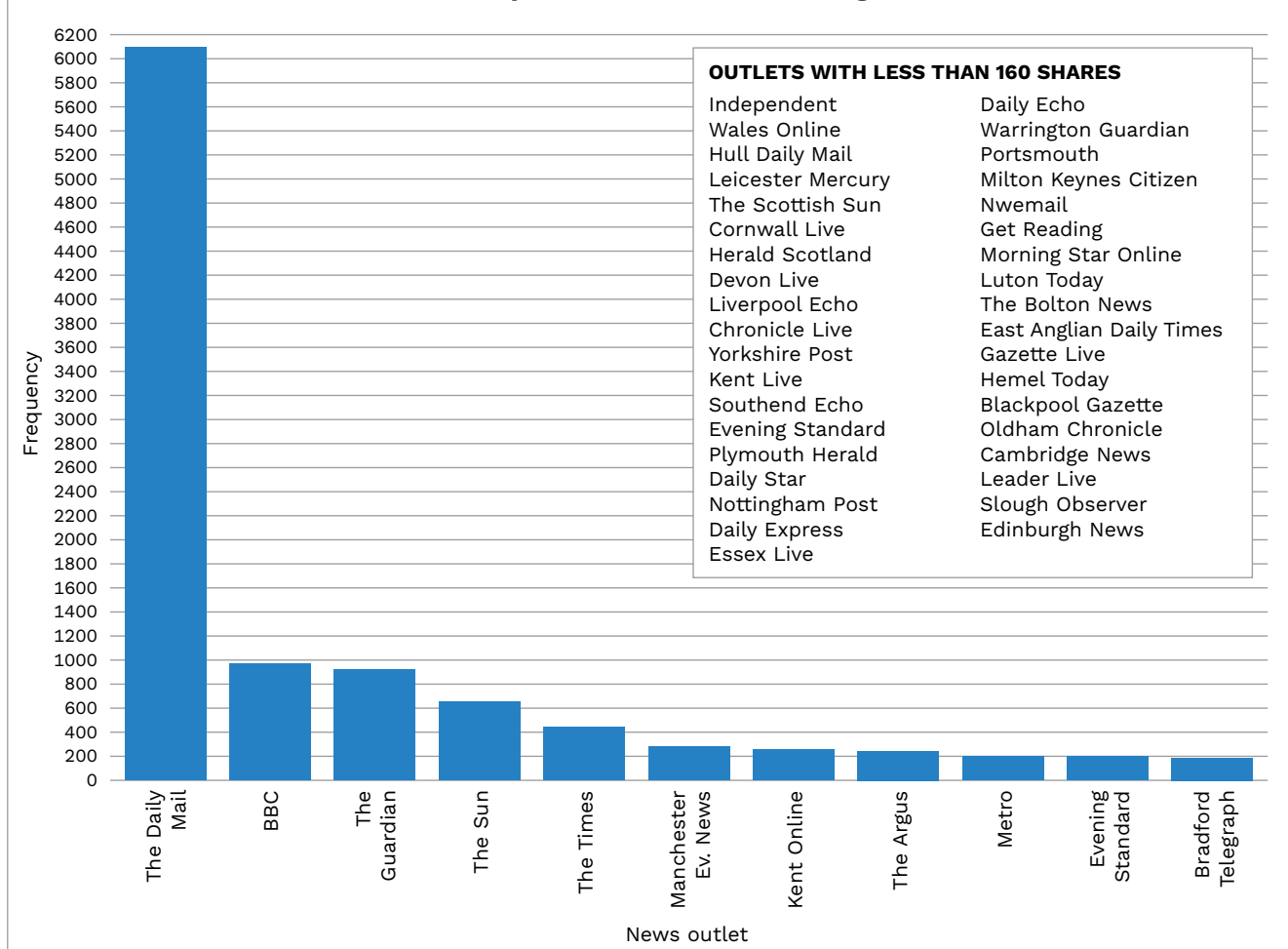
Our analysis suggests that media coverage of migration has a significant influence on both the quantity and content of far-right anti-migrant engagement on Telegram.

## NEWS HABITS OF ANTI-MIGRANT TELEGRAM

News articles are frequently shared in anti-migrant messages on far-right Telegram channels and these news stories are often the central focus of discussion, and often generating strong reactions. We extracted messages with links to British news outlets, including both national newspapers as well as local newspapers, from our Telegram dataset in order to analyse the frequency importance of different publications and the responses to their articles.

We find that Daily Mail is the most frequently shared news outlet with approximately six times more shares than the second most shared news outlet, The BBC. An Ofcom survey from 2022 found that while the Daily Mail is the most widely read print newspaper, “the BBC remains the news organisation with the highest cross-platform audience reach”, indicating that the Daily Mail is overrepresented as a news source among anti-migrant users on Telegram.<sup>23</sup>

Number of shares per news outlet in the Telegram dataset



Notably, we find that messages shared alongside links to articles in The Daily Mail are more extreme than the Telegram dataset overall and more explicitly hateful than the articles themselves. Articles about migration are frequently shared with messages using the words “sexual exploitation”, “rape”, “child predator”, “gangs” and “native population”.

The analysis also reveals that local news plays an important role in shaping far-right discussion on the issue of migration. Manchester Evening News and Kent Online are the sixth and seventh most shared publications respectively. Both outlets have covered the issue of migration extensively. Kent Online covers the area of Dover which has been the focal point of cross channel migration and is the location of a processing centre for people who arrive by small boats.

We find that local news often publishes articles covering specific stories related to migrants which on occasion causes significant outrage. One example is a story that appeared on Kent Live in August 2021, about a migrant who was awarded compensation for wrongful imprisonment and lack of access to HIV-medication.<sup>24</sup> This story fuelled anger among far-right Telegram users, claiming that the Government is overspending on migrant healthcare.

Local news is also likely to be picked up by far-right users where stories relate to specific hotels being used for asylum accommodation. These are frequently shared as sources of information and discussion in relation to planning of anti-migrant activism.

Our analysis shows that coverage of migration in the mainstream media can have a direct impact on far-right discussion, and stresses the importance of responsible press coverage by both national and local press.

## CONCLUSION

Our findings indicate that both government rhetoric and policy and media coverage play a role in driving far-right engagement around migration. This is most likely a complex relationship where government policy and statements influence the press, while the media also play a role in driving the public salience of migration to which the Government respond.

The issue of migration as a focal point of both Government and press should be taken seriously as our analysis of anti-migrant activity online shows how both influence the frequency and content of far-right engagement.

# ANTI-MIGRANT RHETORIC IN THE MAINSTREAM

## MISBAH MALIK

The data analysis for this report looked specifically at how far-right activity is linked to media coverage of migration and Government announcements separately, but the interplay between these two factors cannot be understated. Media coverage of immigration has provided the mood music behind a surge in the far right's explicit targeting of people who are migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

## CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH RIGHT-WING MEDIA

A notable practice of the Conservative Government over recent years is the restrictions placed on briefings and press trips to trusted journalists or publications. The Home Office has been seen to do this with right-wing news outlets where they have been more able to sow a narrative that is more hostile to immigration and asylum and more receptive to punitive immigration policies.

Prior to the release of the Nationality and Borders Bill in March 2021, then Home Secretary Priti Patel used restricted press briefings in a way that likely helped ensure positive coverage of the bill. Her office held meetings with journalists from The Sunday Telegraph, The Sun, The Daily Mail, The Daily Telegraph, The Times and The Sunday Times<sup>25</sup>.

The next day, these outlets reported on the announced Bill in the context of the meeting and therefore unsurprisingly overwhelmingly in favour of the proposal. Whilst some did engage with criticism, these comments were relegated to the last few paragraphs, with the majority filled with verbatim quotes from Patel and tropes about migration linked to criminality, invasions, and fraudulent asylum claims, with little to no analysis of their validity.

The Sun reported that the reforms will prevent the Modern Slavery Act from being abused by criminals to avoid being deported, without mentioning that they will also leave survivors of trafficking without the support

they need.<sup>26</sup> It also reported that the changes will stop fraudulent claims from “clogging up the system”, without any acknowledgement of the fact that such claims play a minute role in the asylum backlog; the refusal rate has been falling since 2004, to its lowest in 2022 at only 24%<sup>27</sup>.

There are many indications this relationship between the Home Office and the media is one that has been proactively pursued. In October 2022, Suella Braverman held a round of introductory meetings with journalists in her new capacity as Home Secretary. However, these meetings only included The Times and Sunday Times, The Express and Sunday Express, The Telegraph, Politico, The Sun and Mail on Sunday<sup>28</sup>.

Perhaps unsurprising therefore, was the exclusive press list for Braverman's most recent trip to Rwanda, which included The Telegraph, GB News, The Sun, The Express, Sky News and The Daily Mail. Notably missing were media outlets who had published more critical coverage of the Rwanda policy, such as the Guardian, the Independent, the Financial Times and the BBC<sup>29</sup>.

A Home Office spokesperson assured that a “range of outlets are covering the trip”, however the outputs suggest otherwise. Coverage of the trip, and the conclusions subsequently drawn about the Rwanda arrangement, were overwhelmingly positive, framed as a retaliation to mounting critique, as ‘evidence’ of objections being misinformed.

The Sun ran a quote from Suella in its headline – “It would be a blessing for migrants to go to Rwanda”<sup>30</sup> – before attempting to redirect narratives that question the logistics of the scheme. Addressing the question of cost, the article reported the housing developments in Kigali as a more economical, long-term alternative to the £6 million a day being spent housing asylum seekers in contingency hotels in the UK. However, the article fails to mention that, whilst the UK's asylum system currently costs £1.7bn a year<sup>31</sup>,



Anti-migrant activist Alan Legget at the Holiday Inn in Rotherham in February 2023



it is estimated that the Rwanda plan will cost £9bn in the first three years.<sup>32</sup>

There is also an uncritical use of quotes as ‘evidence’ to discredit criticism, with no verification of their validity or robust facts to go alongside. Concerns about human rights violations are supposedly squashed by testimonies from refugees grateful for the “sanctuary” they have received in Rwanda, with Sky News directly quoting a refugee who has “never felt [they] have been considered as a foreigner”<sup>33</sup>. There is no mention of the particular concern for LGBTQ+ refugees, arguably the most worrying and hardest to disprove.

## NARRATIVE OF CRISIS

The right-wing media produces a consistent drip of coverage about immigration that ebbs and flows, and sets the backdrop for asylum policies. Various events can understandably incite increased reporting, for example channel crossings often make headlines in the summer months as more journeys are made in the warmer weather. However, the pace and tone of coverage creates a narrative of crisis that is often used to frame key announcements in a way that ramps up the salience of the issue.

The announcement of the Illegal Migration Bill in March 2023 was trailed over months, alongside relentless setting the scene for a ‘crisis’. Regular reportage of channel crossings across most media outlets has understandably increased as the number of people making the journey has increased, however coverage in the right-wing media is often unjustifiably alarmist. The day before the announcement, the Daily Mail reported “what could be one of the busiest days of 2021 so far for small boat Channel crossings”. Readers are flooded with numbers that whip up panic about asylum seekers flooding to the UK, with little context of the shutting down of alternative routes as a cause of this. Multiple photos of the same group of people but from different angles works to further inflame mass hysteria about large numbers of arrivals ahead of Priti Patel’s plans to curb them.

Similarly, dominant narratives, linking asylum to criminality and showing up ‘soft touch’ Britain, have been thread through a number of stories primarily published in The Times and The Daily Mail. As the Government prepared to issue the consultation on the Nationality and Borders Bill in 2021, major outlets reported on the ‘failure’ of the Dublin Regulations.

Days before the announcement of Government proposals for an offshore asylum processing system, The Times repeated a story that had appeared in Breitbart just days before stating that 10,000 foreign criminals eligible for deportation were ‘roaming the streets of Britain’. The Sun accompanied coverage of the announcement with Patel’s statement “Our generous safeguards for victims are being rampantly abused by child rapists, people who pose a threat to national security and failed asylum seekers with no right to be here”. By framing the problem as criminality going undetected, this coverage is likely to justify a solution which maximises surveillance and clamps down on harsh punishments for those who are caught.

As this report has shown, this symbiotic relationship between the Government and the media is feeding the far right. Sensationalist phrases such as ‘Stop the boats’, ‘Hotel Britain’, and references to an ‘invasion’ of asylum seekers ‘storming the white cliffs of Dover’ have been seized upon by these groups. Their own rhetoric is largely similar to this framing, allowing them to easily repurpose Government and media content. As has been illustrated through this research, we know that a slow drip of media coverage has influenced how the far-right are talking about the migration issue.

The overlap between Government, media and far-right rhetoric has allowed the latter to become normalised. It becomes more difficult to recognise and call out the extremity of Patriotic Alternative’s ‘End the invasion’ banners when the Home Secretary herself has referred to an out of control ‘invasion of our southern coast’. In recent protests against housing of asylum seekers in hotels, protestors have carried placards using the Government’s own slogan, ‘Stop the boats’.

The importance of responsible coverage of complex and nuanced issues like immigration cannot be understated. Government rhetoric around immigration is moving more and more in line with the extreme anti-migrant views of the far right, clearing the way for them to creep into mainstream spaces. This is supported by the media, who we have shown to be pivotal in reproducing and sanitising these narratives for mainstream consumption. This has established an ecosystem of hostility towards migrants, from the Home Office, through to mainstream media. Each reinforces the other. This sets the country in a dangerous direction.



## Endnotes

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