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## **COMMENT: Calais - the views of a hawkish elite are warping public perception of migrants**

Dr Gabriel Moreno Esparza from the Department of Media and Communication Design discusses the media representation of migrants in regards to the recent events occurring in Calais.

There's a mindset which holds that in the 21st century, we have all become public communicators and opinion-makers. With no fixed attachments to the few gatekeepers the public relied on in the past for information, so the argument goes, we are all able to propagate our own views and come to our

own conclusions.

The truth, sadly, is less liberating. The response to the crisis facing immigrants from Africa and the Middle East in the French port of Calais has turned that thesis on its head.

As the debate over the crisis rages, the supposedly independent space of social media has become not a thrilling space for dissent, but an echo chamber for views one would normally expect to find in the mainstream media.

## Listen up

The saga of the 3,000 individuals who live in the Calais “[New Jungle](#)” is closely entwined with the [humanitarian crisis](#) caused by a dramatic rise in the number of people travelling across the Mediterranean from Africa.

The volume of coverage has only grown, especially since French ferry workers from MyFerryLink [staged a strike](#) on June 23, [seriously disrupting transport services](#). The threat of further strikes spells more trouble ahead.

Google Trends data show that “Calais” has reached a new high on the [scale of search interest](#), hitting 74 points in June 2015 – a level it has not touched since July 2011. Focusing on the UK alone, the same index touched a maximum of 100 points in July, well above the 82 peak of April 2004.

Google’s scale of British search interest for the word Calais points to an unprecedented high. [Google Trends](#)

This was all before Calais came roaring back to prominence with reports of hundreds of people trying to enter the Channel tunnel, attempts which continued for several days and allegedly led to [the death of a young Sudanese man](#).

## Immigrant crawlers

The July 26 edition of the Sunday Times was a good example of the tone that, with [a few exceptions](#), has dominated the coverage. Under the headline

[“Migrants spark holiday chaos”](#), the story began: “Motorists heading to Europe were trapped in their vehicles for hours yesterday ... because of disruption caused by illegal immigrants in France.” The Mirror’s reports weren’t far behind: [“Migrants cause misery as thousands storm Eurotunnel’s French terminal in Calais”](#), it screamed, while a video invited viewers to [“Watch motorists’ shock as immigrants spotted crawling out of moving tanker”](#).

[EPA/Yoan Valat](#)

The “invasion” theme has been accompanied by worries about the crisis’s “aftermath”: [“What is the cost of Calais chaos to the UK?”](#) asked the BBC. Other headlines included [“Welsh firm ends overseas haulage after Calais attacks”](#) and the [all-encompassing](#) “Calais migrant crisis leads to chaos in UK”.

## **Following, not leading**

The events in Calais are undoubtedly relevant, and must be reported. What’s objectionable is that they are being so overwhelmingly reported from the privileged point of view of the people who dominate the public and private sectors.

It’s no great surprise that the media is more likely to follow stories that matter to elites and take views that suit their interests. But narratives coming from the powerful rather than the powerless generally perpetuate the order of things, diverting attention from the causes of problems and potential solutions.

Worse still, those who are not especially powerful but who enjoy some of the benefits of the status quo soon start to view and report events using language and discourses from “above”.

To see if this is happening now, I conducted a small-scale analysis of my own to see whether there was a correlation between the media’s treatment of recent events in Calais and people’s opinions about migrants.

I collected 5,071 tweets that used the #Calais hashtag on Thursday July 30 using [COSMOS software](#). I found that a vast proportion of the tweets collected were posted by people in the UK, and less so from France and Belgium.

I also used COSMOS to “mine” the sentiment of the tweets and found that subjective, opinion-loaded commentary was clearly dominant – suggesting much of the social media conversation about Calais was attuned to the blame-the-migrants bias expressed by the mainstream media.

This very preliminary analysis can’t establish the exact balance of pro- or anti-immigrant sentiments; one would need to conduct extensive further analysis for conclusive argument. But we don’t have to look far for anecdotal evidence supporting the hypothesis.

A quick look at comments below the line on “[The Guardian’s view on the Calais migrants](#)” supports speculation suggesting that its pro-immigrant stance would be insufficient to counter the anti-immigrant influence of the rest of the British media.

As Guardian reader Psychotropedia [wrote](#) in response to the newspaper’s editorial: “It’s physically impossible to fit a pint into a half-pint glass and, similarly, it’s impossible for our already over-congested little island of very finite resources to be the world’s lifeboat.”

On Twitter, meanwhile, many users similarly bought into the invasion thesis.

While I don’t presume a pure causal relationship between media coverage and the views expressed on social media, the Calais saga sadly confirms that social media narratives generally stem from the views of national elites, not groundswells of popular opinion.

To be sure, some grassroots organisations and independently minded citizens are forming their own views counter to the strong anti-migrant narrative – but their voices are nonetheless being muffled by the clamour of those who see strangers at the gates.



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