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# Neoliberal Narrative in Times of Economic Crisis: A Political Claims Analysis of the UK Press, 2007-2014

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Using political claims analysis on 1,000 articles from five national newspapers (Daily Mail, The Sun, The Times, The Guardian and Daily Mirror), this article demonstrates that press coverage of the financial crisis, recession, and austerity in the UK between 2007-2014 drew heavily on a neoliberal discourse. Political, market, and civil society actors discussed the impact of hard times on people using a reductionist neoliberal narrative, framing people as “economic actors” and consistently underplaying any social or political traits. By examining communicative, rather than coordinative, discourse this research expands the focus of previous studies which have examined the embeddedness of ideology in society, and highlights potential links to studies of citizen participation and mobilization.

**Keywords:** Political Claims Analysis, Financial Crisis, Neoliberalism, Newspaper Coverage, Media, Hard Times, Neoliberal Narrative, Communicative Discourse, Great Britain, UK, United Kingdom, Press Coverage, UK Press, Recession, Austerity Policies, Ideology and Society, Citizen Participation, Mobilization, Great Recession, Economic Crisis, Neo-Liberalism, Economic Actors.

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LSE British Politics and Policy Blog 2016 "Words matter: deconstructing 'welfare dependency' in the UK – Paul Michael Garrett. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/%EF%BB%BFwords-matter-deconstructing-welfare-dependency-in-the-uk/>

Usando un análisis de discurso político sobre 1,000 artículos de cinco periódicos nacionales (Daily Mail, The Sun, The Times, The Guardian, y Daily Mirror), este artículo demuestra que la cobertura de la prensa sobre la crisis financiera, recesión y medidas de austeridad en el Reino Unido entre 2007-2014 se basan significativamente en un discurso neoliberal. Actores políticos, del mercado y la sociedad civil, han discutido el impacto de tiempos difíciles en la población general usando una narrativa neoliberal reduccionista, concibiendo a las personas como "*actores económicos*" y subestimando de manera consistente cualquier característica social o política. Al examinar el discurso comunicativo, en lugar de coordinativo, este estudio expande el enfoque de literatura previa que ha analizado los fundamentos ideológicos en la sociedad, y destaca relaciones potenciales con estudios sobre participación y movilización ciudadana.

By analyzing media coverage of the hard economic times affecting the UK from 2007-14, this article examines how neoliberal ideology is embedded in the way we make sense of the crisis. This timeframe covers the financial crisis, recession, and the subsequent introduction of austerity measures and throughout this time quotations in the press principally utilized a neoliberal discourse, presenting these events as happening not to “people” but to “economic actors” who were understood primarily in relation to markets.

This article demonstrates that this neoliberal outlook permeated the discussion and presentation of economic crisis in the UK media, and can be attributed to actors across the political, economic, and civil society spheres. As human beings are not understood in terms of their human qualities as “people” but rather solely in relation to their role in the market—whether as consumers or producers—this discourse, we argue, dehumanized the crisis and constructed it as an external problem that could not be solved politically. Individuals were portrayed as economic agents of the market, stripped of any political or social traits. This diminished any relatable human element from the narrative, leaving the discussion dry and technical, and narrowing any suggested solutions to the crisis to the field of macroeconomics.

This analysis extends the focus of previous studies that have tended to concentrate on the discourse used between policy elites (Cahill 2011, 486). Here, we examine the discourse used between policy elites and the public. This moves the analysis beyond a narrow focus on elite speeches and policy documentation, to the more resonant day-to-day narratives built up by the media.

In 2010 and 2011, Mervyn King, then-Governor of the Bank of England, made very similar comments to the Trade Union Congress and the Treasury Select Committee asking, in essence, why Brits were not angrier given the dire and worsening economic situation? (see Ellis 2010; The Sun 2011). Here we argue that part of the answer lies in the neoliberal narrative widespread in society and reflected in media coverage. If economic crisis is reified as a problem outside of human control—almost as a natural disaster—and human beings the victims of this calamity as dehumanized consumers, it is harder for us to relate to abstracted problems, and therefore for emotions such as anger to emerge through solidarity and compassion.

Therefore, this discursive dominance of neoliberalism is important for at least two reasons. Firstly, it is so prevailing that it arguably skews the “information environment” (Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006) available to citizens and crowds out alternative narratives and understandings of the events that have impacted upon the UK in recent times. Secondly, this environment limits the emotional and empathetic resonance of news coverage during this time. Brown (2015, 208) calls these ideas of solidarity and empathy the “register of democracy,” and argues that when this is lost and crowded out by markets values, as we suggest in this analysis, what disappears is this “capacity to limit, this platform of critique, and this source of radical democratic inspiration and aspiration.”

The present study analyses data from a random sample of 1,000 political claims reported across five UK newspapers from the start of 2007 through to September 2014. The articles were a random sample from a mix of broadsheets and tabloids: Daily Mail (n=202), The Sun (n=203), The Times (n=201), The Guardian (n=202) and Daily Mirror (n=204).

The article is structured as follows. The literature review discusses the theory behind the building and transmitting of discourse in the media by political actors before outlining what the literature has defined as the tenets of neoliberal ideology. The following methods and data section outlines our use of political claims analysis and introduces the unique dataset utilized by this study, and the coding of a neoliberal claim. The following results and findings section is then split into two. The initial part maps out the claims landscape between 2007-14 and examines the actors and issues being reported. The second part then focuses specifically on claims concerning “people,” noting how a neoliberal framing dominate such news coverage. We conclude with a discussion of the wider implications of the results of our study.

### **Ideology and Discourse in the Media**

In his analysis on the embeddedness of neoliberal ideology, Cahill (2011, 486) argues that neoliberalism has become the “dominant framework through which social and economic policies are made across the capitalist world.” In the UK, the pervasive effects of the ideology have been identified in many policy developments, including labor market management (Whitworth and Carter 2014), social security provision (Kiess et al. 2015) and health (Ferlie, Mcgovern, and FitzGerald 2012). Indeed, an important feature of the world post-financial crisis has been the resilience, and indeed resurgence, of the neoliberal paradigm (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009; Cahill 2011; Mirowski 2013; Cerny 2014).

There are numerous ways in which these neoliberal developments are theorized to have come about, including regulatory experimentation, inter-jurisdictional policy transfer and the formation of transnational rule-regimes (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010a). Such ideas focus in particular on developments in political economy, and are

less likely to examine just how it might be that neoliberal paradigms become embedded in wider society. Cahill (2011, 486–7) makes strides to address this issue by suggesting that neoliberalism has become normalized and embedded societally in (at least) three ways: through institutions, through class relations, and discursively. The first point is that, contrary to many interpretations, neoliberalism does not circumnavigate the state but instead operates through it, particularly in terms of economic regulation. The second point is that the transformation of class occurs through the boosting of the power of capital, to the detriment of labor and the working class. However it is the third point, the discursive mechanism, which we wish to focus on in this article.

Cahill (2011, 486) argues that, discursively, neoliberalism is the “political common sense” amongst elite policy makers, and so, to varying degrees, there has been “ideological and policy convergence around a neoliberal core among both conservative and social democratic parties.” This is an uneven process, and so there are differences in strategy and elements of discourse between the types of party; however, there is ultimately a shared frame of reference.

In general, this suggestion from Cahill has a focus on “coordinative discourse,” that is, the narrative utilized amongst elite policy actors. In this research we expand this idea to look at “communicative discourse”; that is, the narrative between political actors and the public (see Schmidt 2008). Such a focus is key to understanding in more detail the societal embeddedness of neoliberalism.

When it comes to this communication between political elite and the public, the crucial conduit for information is provided by the mass media. For the majority of citizens, the main source of information regarding what is going on in the wider world comes via this source. Studies on the effect of mass media have demonstrated its ability

to inform and influence the attitudes of citizens regarding, for instance, their opinions toward politicians (Bartels 1993; Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998; Stevens and Karp 2012) or attitudes towards immigrants (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2009). Indeed, when it comes to immigration, the media has been shown to have an effect above and beyond real-world developments, for instance by boosting the visibility of minority groups, leading to much higher estimates of rates of immigration compared to reality (Sides and Citrin 2007; van Klingeren et al. 2015).

Furthermore, Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart (2009, 518) point out the general importance of the information environment, which suggests that people can be affected by the news through interpersonal communication without necessarily being directly exposed to it. Citizens do not need to directly read or watch the news to be influenced by it. We should therefore take seriously messages from political actors as reported in the media. As Moss and O'Loughlin (2008, 709) note:

Political representatives frequently engage in practices of representing issues or problems requiring collective action; of representing 'the public' and other identity groups; and indeed of representing the political system within which they work.

These claims in the media thus tell us an important story, a particular representation of what is going on. It is these claims that form the unit of analysis in our study. Of further importance when examining the communicative discourse of mass media, is that those actors making claims to be read by the public are not always "political representatives" in the narrow understanding of the term, i.e., MPs. For instance, the Governor of the Bank of England made frequent claims in the media concerning these issues; these claims played a part in building up a narrative of the unfolding events. The same can be said for Trade Union leaders, bosses of financial institutions, directors of



charities, and so on. In this context, to only examine claims made by politicians overlooks a large swathe of the narrative that was presented to the British public.

Accordingly, these claims are not presented in isolation, but can be understood as the building blocks of a much larger discourse. And as van Dijk (2006, 1995) argues, discourse plays a prominent role in the way that ideological propositions are acquired, confirmed, changed, and perpetuated. The media then can easily be understood to play an important role in informing people when it comes to their ideology. It can then be seen as a valid area to examine for the embeddedness of neoliberal ideals across society more widely.

Furthermore, “ideologies, just like other social representations, may have a standard schematic organization, consisting of a limited number of fixed categories” (van Dijk 1995, 139). These schemas need not necessarily be detailed or complex systems. Indeed, regardless of whether the schema itself is complex, in terms of the level of detail provided by everyday newspaper articles, any ideology is unlikely to be presented in any great detail. Instead, actors are expected to draw on an existing framework of often highly simplified “tropes” to make their claims.

An example of this can be seen in the UK media’s popularization of the moniker “Red Ed” for the previous Labour Party leader Ed Miliband from 2010 onward. In this one phrase the papers were trying to encapsulate Ed Miliband’s supposed desire for interventionist and redistributive policies (particularly in the housing and energy markets), a reference to the “red scare” during the time of the Soviet Union, as well as serving as a reminder that his late father was a Marxist scholar (Gaber 2014).

Taken together, the ideas in the previous discussion demonstrate that we can examine the UK media for signs of a neoliberal discourse, to assess whether there is

evidence of societal embeddedness of a neoliberal ideology as detailed in Cahill (2011). Before we undertake this analysis, we first need to outline an expectation of what a neoliberal framing of events will look like.

### **Tenets of Neoliberal Discourse**

Neoliberalism has been termed a rascal concept: “promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently contested” (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010b, 182). Peck, Theodore, and Brenner (2009, 96–7) briefly outline the history of neoliberalism: as a term distinct from classic liberalism it can be traced back to the 1920s; as a guiding ideology to implementing government policy it gained traction in the 1970s; in public discourse it had a boost during Reagan and Thatcher’s time in office but properly took off after 2000; and, in academic discourse “explicit deployment of neoliberalism is a strikingly recent phenomenon.”

Accordingly, while neoliberalism is not a monolithic, singular idea, it is an Anglo-American-centric ideology and regardless of what particular flavor of neoliberalism might be up for discussion, there is arguably a common principle across them: “the superiority of individualized, market-based competition over other modes of organization” (Mudge 2008, 706).

In a similar manner, Schram and others (2010, 742) suggest that “neoliberal ideology emphasizes the constructive and intentional application of market principles to diverse social relations that extend beyond economic markets.” This leads to a shift away from the notion of democratic citizens towards one of market actors who occupy “individualistic market roles of consumer, worker, and paying customer,” a space which is “synonymous with ‘taxpayers’ who have a contractual right to expect efficient and

effective institutional actions that produce a good return on their investment” (Schram et al. 2010, 742).

Wendy Brown (2006, 694) argues that “neoliberalism casts the political and social spheres both as appropriately dominated by market concerns and as themselves organized by market rationality,” meaning that the state must “promulgate a political culture that figures citizens exhaustively as rational economic actors in every sphere of life.” Elsewhere, Brown (2015, 35) sees neoliberalism as eroding democratic principles, in particular when the principles of political life are transformed into an “economic idiom.” When it comes to the power of narrative, Brown (2015, 208) makes a strong point about the importance of language:

The point is simply that as long as it operated in a different lexical and semiotic register from capital, liberal democratic principles and expectations could be mobilized to limit capitalist productions of value and market distributions; they could be a platform for critiques of those values and distributions, and they could gestate more radical democratic aspirations. When this other register is lost, when market values become the only values, when liberal democracy is fully transformed into market democracy, what disappears is this capacity to limit, this platform of critique, and this source of radical democratic inspiration and aspiration.

What a neoliberal narrative does then is cast people predominantly as agents of the market, with a focus on their productivity in the economy, stripping away their social or political needs (unless these needs can be reconceptualized to align with the economy). The following section discusses how this research examines this narrative in the UK media using political claims analysis on 1,000 articles across five national newspapers.

### **Data and Methods**

In this study political claims analysis is used to outline the extent to which the information environment is informed by a neoliberal narrative. Political claims analysis

integrates the quantitative rigor of protest event analysis with the constructivist framing perspective of political discourse analysis (see Koopmans and Statham 1999). It draws from sociolinguistics to examines elements of political actors' speech and statements, including but not limited to their setting, access to the platform from where they are speaking, communicative acts and their social meanings, and the "microsemantics" of what is said (see van Dijk 1993). The analysis looks not only at the statements made, but also the substantive impact they might have "in the real world," making it a method particularly well-suited to examining claims in the media (see for instance Giugni and Passy 2004; Koopmans 2004; Giugni et al. 2005; Lodge and Wegrich 2011).

An important precursor to this study is by Lodge and Wegrich (2011), who carried out political claims analysis of UK, U.S. and German financial newspapers, focusing on financial regulation. They demonstrate that the period from 2006 to 2011 was dominated by a "hierarchical" frame of reference which drew on ideas of promoting stronger regulations as a response to crisis. However, this dominating frame decreases in popularity toward the end of 2011. In the UK, specifically, they argue that regulation did not form part of the 2010 general election campaign, and priorities shifted to overall state of public finances, the future of public services, and social and labor policies (Lodge and Wegrich 2011). Straight after the election, the second-most utilized frame of reference was that of "individualism," which draws on discourse such as "regulation is bad for investment/recovery," "markets are superior to rules," and "consumer protection is bad" (Lodge and Wegrich 2011, 278). In their short research symposium, the authors do not draw out the implications of this. However, it is arguable that this pattern is very much expected with the formation in May 2010 of a governing coalition between the right-wing Conservative Party and Liberal Democratic party

taking over from the ousted (traditionally center-left) Labour Party. Indeed, this hints at policy development drawing heavily on neoliberal discourse.

In our analysis the data comes from a systematic content analysis of newspapers in the UK press between 2007 and 2014.<sup>1</sup> Both quality newspapers and more tabloid-oriented newspapers are included, chosen to represent the political spectrum of reporting in the UK: The Daily Mail, The Sun, The Times, The Guardian, and The Daily Mirror. While it is well-known that print media is in decline in the UK, it remains an important transmitter of political claims. Taking the last month of study, September 2014, the five newspapers had a combined daily circulation of 5.2 million copies (Guardian Media October 2014). These articles are in the most part also replicated online. As they are behind an internet paywall, figures are not available for The Sun and The Times, but in August 2014 the remaining three papers had over 19 million unique daily browsers between them (driven in a large part by the popularity of the MailOnline). Taking the idea of an “information environment” we can argue that newspapers form an important source of political information in the UK, and an important place to examine for evidence of the discursive embeddedness of neoliberalism.

Articles containing any of the three words “crisis,” “recession,” or “austerity” (in reference to the current economic crisis) were searched for and then randomly selected and analyzed until 200 claims were coded from each newspaper. Editorials and opinion pieces were excluded, and therefore the focus is purposely restricted to the narrative presented in the news itself.

After initially mapping out the media claims landscape, a second round of coding was undertaken on all the claims which had “people” (broadly defined) as the

object of the claim, to examine if the claim utilized neoliberal framing. This might include “families,” “the public,” “workers,” and “Brits,” but would not include companies, sectors of the economy, banks, or political parties, for instance (the reason for this is discussed in further detail later).

To identify a neoliberal claim we draw on the literature review to argue that to be considered part of this discourse the claim must principally or explicitly refer to the object (in this case, “people”) in terms of its value to the economy or market. This casts the people under discussion firmly as economic actors, rather than social or political actors, and forms the basis of the “standard schematic organization” that neoliberal claims will utilize. If that is the case, the claim is coded as 1, if otherwise, it is coded as 0.

A couple of examples here demonstrate the coding process in more detail. A political claim which was coded as neoliberal in nature (1) is provided in this extract from an article (Chapman 2014) which discussed the impact of the crisis and recession on middle class families:

Emran Mian, director of the Social Market Foundation, said: “Families in the middle have adapted to evade the squeeze. The super-consumers among them have beaten the market, managing their costs so that they rise by less than inflation.”

Here, it is clear that what matters are the individual choices and responsibility (made by “super-consumers”) regarding financial and economic decisions. The suggestion is that for a middle-class family to fall foul of economic hardship, is to not be acting correctly—the market can be “beaten.”

In comparison, an example of a non-neoliberal (0) political claim comes from an article (Butler, Taylor, and Ball 2013), which discussed the impact of multiple welfare cuts caused by austerity policies:

Claudia Wood, deputy director of Demos, said households hit by multiple welfare cuts were more likely to get into debt, become reliant on charities for crisis help and face social isolation and mental illness.

Here, the claim provides a far more rounded picture on the multiple possible outcomes of being effected by hard economic times, which draws on related social and health issues, rather than primarily focusing on just economic ones.

### **Findings**

Table 1 outlines which actors were most commonly reported as making claims about the financial crisis, austerity, or recession. The government of the day accounted for 16.4 percent of claims in the sample, making them the most commonly cited actor, followed closely by politicians and political parties (15.2 percent). Taken together, the four political actors—the two mentioned, plus parliament and state agencies—accounted for 43 percent of claims. The next largest group of actors consists of market-based actors such as banks and financial institutions (9.9 percent), private companies (12.9 percent), and professional organizations (10.1 percent), and they account for a third of claims in total. Finally, civil society actors account for the remaining quarter of claims overall. In this group, think-tanks lead the way (8.4 percent), closely followed by unions (7.8 percent). Third-sector civil society groups such as charities, voluntary support networks, and housing associations account for only 4.7 percent of all claims.

### **TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

These results demonstrate a clear hierarchy here in terms of media coverage, with political actors leading the way, market actors following, and then civil society actors lagging behind. In particular, these civil society actors have quite limited

coverage, considering the scale of the crisis and subsequent impact of austerity measures across society.

Much of the following discussion draws on these three broad groupings of actors—political, market, and civil society—categories used in varying configurations across other studies using political claims analysis (Koopmans and Pfetsch 2006; Hutter 2014) as well as network governance (Klijn and Skelcher 2007, 587). However, first the results from the political establishment are examined in more depth. The claims break down in an expected pattern when it comes to looking at political parties: 43 percent came from the Labour Party, 42 percent from the Conservative Party (the two largest parties who governed for an almost equal time during the time period), and 12 percent from the Liberal Democrats (at the time the third-largest party, and part of the governing coalition from 2010). This leaves only 3 percent of claims from all other parties. This may initially seem inaccurate considering the increasing media coverage of smaller parties over this period, in particular the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the Scottish National Party (SNP). However, the UKIP narrative is one focused very specifically on immigration and the EU and for the SNP it is possible that they were simply not focused on in the national newspapers. They gained much more exposure in the run up to the Scottish independence referendum in September 2014 and the May 2015 general election, both events just falling outside of the dates covered by this analysis.

Figure 1 shows claims made by political parties during each the Labour government and the coalition government.

**FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE**



There is a clear shift in focus determined by which party is in government. Actors from the Labour Party accounted for 58 percent of claims by political actors during their time in government, dropping to 35 percent in opposition. For the Conservative Party the pattern is reversed but of roughly the same magnitude: 31 percent of claims were accounted to them during opposition, compared to 52 percent in government. Interestingly, the Liberal Democratic percentage did not change when they became a minority party in the coalition. This suggests they were either doing quite well originally in getting their views reported while in opposition, or they did badly while in government. Either way, it suggests a problem for the party during their time in power.

Widening the focus from only the political establishment, we can examine what topics political, market and civil society actors were discussing, with the results presented in Table 2.

**TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE**

By far the most popular issue concerned macroeconomics, such as deficit reduction, interest rate cuts, inflation or taxation. These topics covered 65.5 percent of all issues raised. The second most popular issue concerned the banking and financial systems. Together, topics within these two issue groups made up 82 percent of what actors were discussing. The strongest difference between actor types can be found with the civil society actors, who were generally more likely to emphasize employment and other subjects, and less likely to focus on macroeconomics and banking.

In one sense, of course, this is not a surprising result as the events under discussion were caused by a credit crunch. However, during the following recession and austerity drive it is surprising just how absent social policy issues were in relation to this

topic; issues of health, particularly mental health, community cohesion, social well-being, and the like do not feature.

After the macroeconomic categories, the frequency of issue coverage falls away considerably. In the UK, at least, large-scale unemployment was warned about, but did not materialize at the levels expected, and it was not until later in the cycle that zero-hours contracts made it onto the agenda. Considering the crisis stemmed from a sub-prime mortgage market, there is a gap here in the narrative when it comes to housing issues.

The “other” category is a very mixed one containing lots of different topics that get only scant mention in regards to the financial crisis, recession and austerity. For instance, as an issue, racial discrimination only comes up twice (0.21 percent of claims) as does protecting animal and plant life, renewable energy, or financing the health service. Some topics with slightly more prevalence included gender and sexual discrimination and riots and crime, but these still accounted for less than 1 percent each.

Finally for this section, Table 3 presents a breakdown of the objects of the political claim; this is the group affected by whatever it is the actor is discussing in relation to the hard times in the UK.

### **TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE**

The main object of the claims was “economic markets.” This may seem to overlap with companies or organizations, but in fact it generally did not. The habit of actors was to talk very broadly about “the economy”—or discuss certain sectors within it, such as construction, retail, or finance—as being an “object” that would be affected by changes in circumstances. Such an approach effectively depopulates these “places”

of their human components and presents them as something “out there” that is stalling, struggling, growing, or recovering.

It is for this reason that only claims which specifically have “people” as the object—often families, but sometimes individuals or specific groups or simply the general population—were coded for signs of neoliberal discourse. This was to get a better sense of how the information environment presented the impact of hard times on the UK public themselves in the claims most relatable to them. Indeed, it is clear that even though the dominate issues are macroeconomic, the reporting still relates to people 29 percent of the time. The following section focuses on this subset of claims.

### **The Neoliberal Narrative**

The sample contained 276 claims which identified “people” as the primary object being discussed in relation to the financial crisis, recession, and austerity. When these claims are coded for the use of neoliberal discourse, a clear pattern emerges: 78 percent of claims utilized the neoliberal narrative in some way. Figure 2 shows the percentages by type of actor.

### **FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE**

It is clear that, in comparison to civil society actors, political and market actors are considerably more likely to utilize neoliberal framing in their political claims.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, these actors use such a narrative between 80 percent and 90 percent of the time. Civil society actors are using such a framing around 57 percent of the time. While this is

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<sup>1</sup> Results from a simple logistic regression model demonstrate that the odds of a civil society actor using neoliberal framing are significantly lower compared to a political actor (OR=0.3,  $p<0.001$ ) and considerably higher for a market actor, again compared to a political actor (OR=2.8,  $p=0.039$ ).

a large difference, it still shows that a majority of the time when civil society actors are making political claims in the media, they are still using the same ideological reference points as the political and market actors, in these political claims: the point being made by the actor describes people primarily in terms of their economic value, such as their spending power, unemployment, earnings, debt, or productivity.

That the impact of such issues may have social or political effects such as stress, family breakdown, corrosion of wellbeing, disenfranchisement, disengagement, apathy (or indeed heightened political mobilization), is hinted at occasionally, or sometimes appears to be assumed, but it is very rarely mentioned explicitly. Such impacts are not the core concern much of the time.

We can examine in more detail how the framing of neoliberal events played out across claims from the major political parties. It is exceedingly difficult to disentangle the impact of the election result from the changing patterns of narrative regarding the impact of crisis and even more so the governance of the recession and introduction of austerity measures. Accordingly, this analysis uses the natural split provided in the data in the May 2010 general election, producing two time periods; one under a Labour Government, the other under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. Due to small numbers of Liberal Democrat claims, we focus here only on the two largest parties. Even when focusing on the larger parties, it is still important to consider this is a small sample and the results are predominantly illustrative. However, the results are intuitive.

Figure 3 graphs the predictive probabilities of framing a political claim in a neoliberal way, using results from a simple logistic regression model with the two parties as independent variables, interacted with the two time periods (Labour

government and Coalition government). Full model specification and results are available in the Appendix (see Table A1).

### **FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE**

The results show a clear shift in claim framing by the Conservative Party. Between 2007 and 2010, when they were in opposition, less than six out of ten claims were neoliberal. During their time in power, in the coalition between 2010 and 2014, this increased considerably to nine out of ten claims. The model results show that, when talking about people and hard times, the Conservative Party in power were significantly more likely to draw on a neoliberal discourse compared to when they were in opposition (OR=26.7,  $p<0.05$ ). It is arguable that while in opposition the party drew strategically on more emotive language (such as Cameron’s “Broken Britain” and then his “Big Society”) as a way of heightening their criticism of government. However, this changed when they were in power; once in office and pursuing their austerity agenda, the language utilized became almost constantly neoliberal and market-orientated in nature.

In terms of strategies of political rhetoric, we might expect this shift to occur in reverse for the Labour party over this time period as they went from being in government (up until 2010) to being in opposition. However the data shows this was not the case. Instead, from 2010 onwards the Labour Party was just as likely to utilize a neoliberal narrative in their political claims making as were the Conservative Party (OR=.47,  $p=0.540$ ).<sup>2</sup> This description of events fits critiques from some commentators that—despite having a leader nicknamed “Red Ed”—the Labour Party was unable to

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<sup>2</sup> This odds-ratio is calculated from the same model as run in Table A1, but with the reference categories switched for comparison.

project an alternative message in opposition and found itself tagged as “Tory-Lite” (Corbett 2015).

Figure 4 combines all the claims from political actors and examines their predictive probabilities alongside the market actors and the civil society actors, again employing a simple logistic regression using the actor type as an independent variable, interacted with the two time periods (full results are in the Appendix, see Table A2). Again, we should be cautious about a small sample, however, the pattern is once more intuitive.

### **FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE**

The results show how during Labour’s term in office, when the financial crisis first broke and was followed by the recession, market actors were significantly more likely to frame the impact these events would have on people in a market-focused way, with almost every claim in the media using such framing. This is not an unexpected result. At this time political actors and civil society actors were less likely to use such a framing (around 70 percent of the time), but as likely as each other. During the coalition however, the picture shifts. Political actors increase their usage of such claims (OR=3.7,  $p<0.05$ ) however civil society diverge, having much lower odds in comparison (OR=0.4,  $p<0.05$ ).

The implications of this are important. During the Coalition and the implementation of austerity measures, if a claim was made in the press discussing the impact such difficult times were having on people in the UK, these results suggest that, if the claim was taken out of context, it could be difficult to determine if it came from an economist in an auditing company or from a politician. Such results suggest that both actor types have the same likelihood of using a market-based, reductionist language to

refer to people, positioning them in the first instance as economic units, who need to be spending more, consuming more, who need better access to credit, or who need to be employed (or work harder and more productively if they are). Not only did market actors and political actors have the same likelihood of using such framing, but they also used it the vast majority of the time.

Finally, of those claims made by political or market actors which utilized a neoliberal framing, none were being used to criticize a neoliberal approach in any way. Interestingly, out of the entire sample (not just those claims focusing on “people”) only one article reported a claim by an actor specifically using the term “neoliberalism” and this was in order to provide a direct critique; the term was used by a Trade Union leader during the Labour party conference in October 2012, as reported on by The Guardian (Mulholland 2012). Indeed, the Trade Union leader used the term to critique the governing coalition, but also the previous New Labour government.

In other words, direct use of the term “neoliberalism” is not at all a frequent part of political parlance when it comes to the UK information environment; however, media reports are dominated by issue framing that is neoliberal in nature.<sup>3</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The analysis presented in this article mapped out the political claims landscape in the UK from 2007-14, showing that the neoliberal concerns of macroeconomic and financial issues were the main topics of discussion by a considerable margin and that the prominent actors discussing these issues were political and market actors. Civil

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<sup>3</sup> Anecdotally, analysts at Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute noted this absence in their social media coverage of the 2015 general election. As part of a list of eight election “unmentionables” a tweet listed neoliberalism at 7) noting that; “Some broadcasters are sick of hearing about it. Odd, because they never mention the word.”

society actors struggled to be heard in the debate, and social policy issues barely featured. Yet more than one in four claims had as their object not neoliberal actors in the sense of policy makers, banks, or companies, but instead were discussing the much broader object of “people” in some way.

In these discussions of people, neoliberal ideals dominated, and provided the main “go-to” framework to present and discuss the impact of hard times. Any detailed human cost of the crisis and subsequent austerity was given little room in the news coverage. When the discussion was focused on people, it remained framed by macroeconomic and neoliberal parlance, giving rise to something of a dehumanizing narrative that reduced the human story to its economic constituent, at the expense of any social or political traits.

Accordingly, our results show a strong overlap in language utilized by market actors and political actors, and by actors from the opposing two main parties, particularly from 2010 onward (see also English et al. (2016) in this special issue). In comparison, civil society actors were more likely to break away from this neoliberal mould, but accordingly the stories they told were from many reference points, and there was no evidence of a coherent counter-narrative.

The results presented in our analysis have contributed to the literature on the discursive embeddedness of ideology in society, as outlined by Cahill (2011). Importantly, it has done so by expanding the narrative beyond a narrow focus on coordinative discourse to include communicative discourse. It moves forward this literature by demonstrating that political claims analysis of media coverage, as conducted in this study, provides a fruitful area to for further research. By examining not just coordinative discourse between elite level policy makers and in grey policy



documentation, but by focusing on the communicative discourse between political actors and the public, we have provided a detailed quantitative analysis of the narratives that build up, and in this case dominate, the primary information environment available to citizens.

This article has mapped out and outlined the extent of this discourse, and its change in usage by different actors over time. Further research could examine the suggestion made here, regarding the prevalence of this neoliberal narrative discourse and lack ideas of empathy, collaboration, and understanding. This is what Wendy Brown (2006) calls the loss of a “democratic register,” which, she theorizes undermines collective action. This theory is convincing, but to test it, this article opens the door to ways in which the narratives available to citizens can be studied, and rigorously empirically assessed for establishing their impact on political behavior.

In doing so, we can try to sketch a more convincing answer to the Governor of the Bank of England’s question about the lack of citizens’ anger over the years in which the UK has been under economic pressure and hardship. Since media coverage has been shown to skew people’s perceptions on levels of immigration and to influence their vote, then perhaps it would not be too surprising if an information environment dominated by a dehumanizing neoliberal discourse also affected how citizens view one another, as well as the available opportunities for social and political change. After all, the belief in the absence of political alternatives would lead citizens to shy away from an angry response to the current crisis. If citizens do not blame the government or other actors for the crisis, but rather see it as a normal part of life in neoliberal societies, then anger would make little sense.

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**Table 1: Claims in the UK media 2007-2014, by Actor (%)**

Actor Making Claim	% of total claims
Government	16.4
Parliament	2.0
Politicians and Political Parties	15.2
State Agencies	8.9
Banks and Financial Institutions	9.9
Private Companies	12.9
Professional Organisations	10.1
Unions	7.8
Civil Society Groups	4.7
Think-Tanks	8.4
Other	3.7
Total number of claims	989

**Table 2: Issue Topic by Actor Type (%)**

	Political	Market	Civil Society	Overall
Macroeconomics	69.1	65.0	59.2	65.6

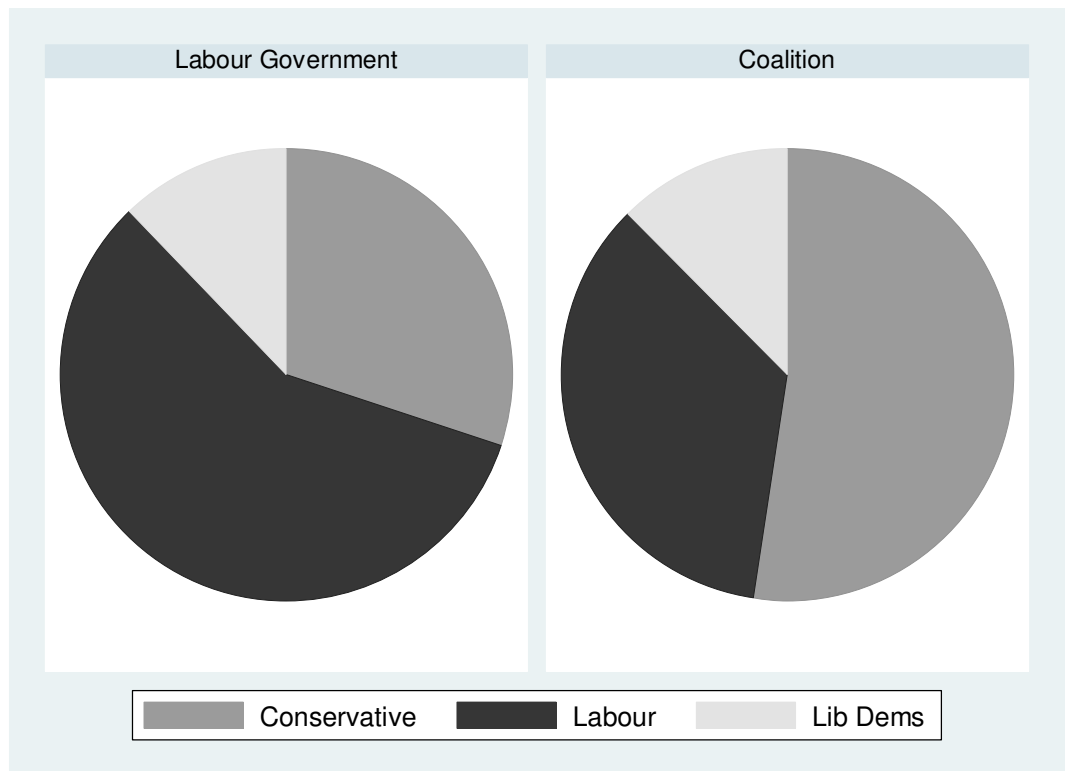
Banking/Finance	15.2	21.5	9.7	16.2
Employment	2.1	2.2	6.8	3.2
Government	1.9	.	2.4	1.4
Educational	.	0.6	1.9	0.6
Other	11.7	10.7	19.9	13.1
Total number of claims	420	326	206	952

**Table 3: Object of Claim (%)**

Object of Claim	% of total claims
Political Players	9.6
State Agencies	2.1
Banks and Financial Institutions	9.5
Private Companies	4.6
Professional Organisations	3.4
Unions	0.5
Civil Society Groups	0.5
'People'	29.1
Economic Markets	38.7
Other	2.0
Total number of claims	952



**Figure 1: Political Party Claims by Incumbent Government (%)**



n=332

**Figure 2: Neoliberal claims by Actor**

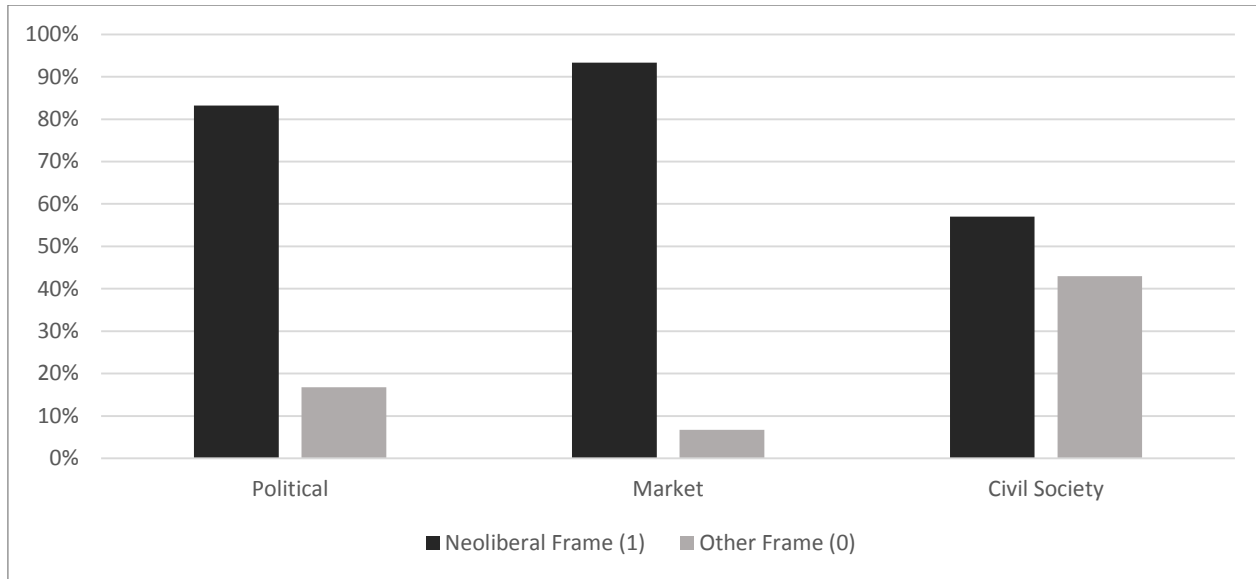
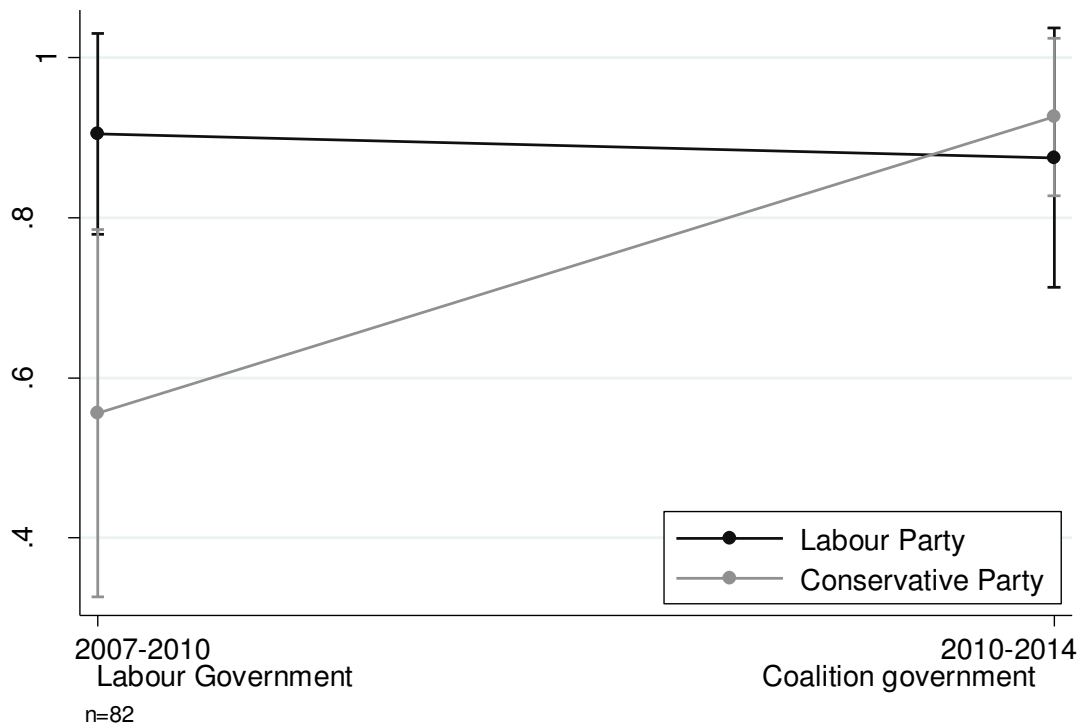
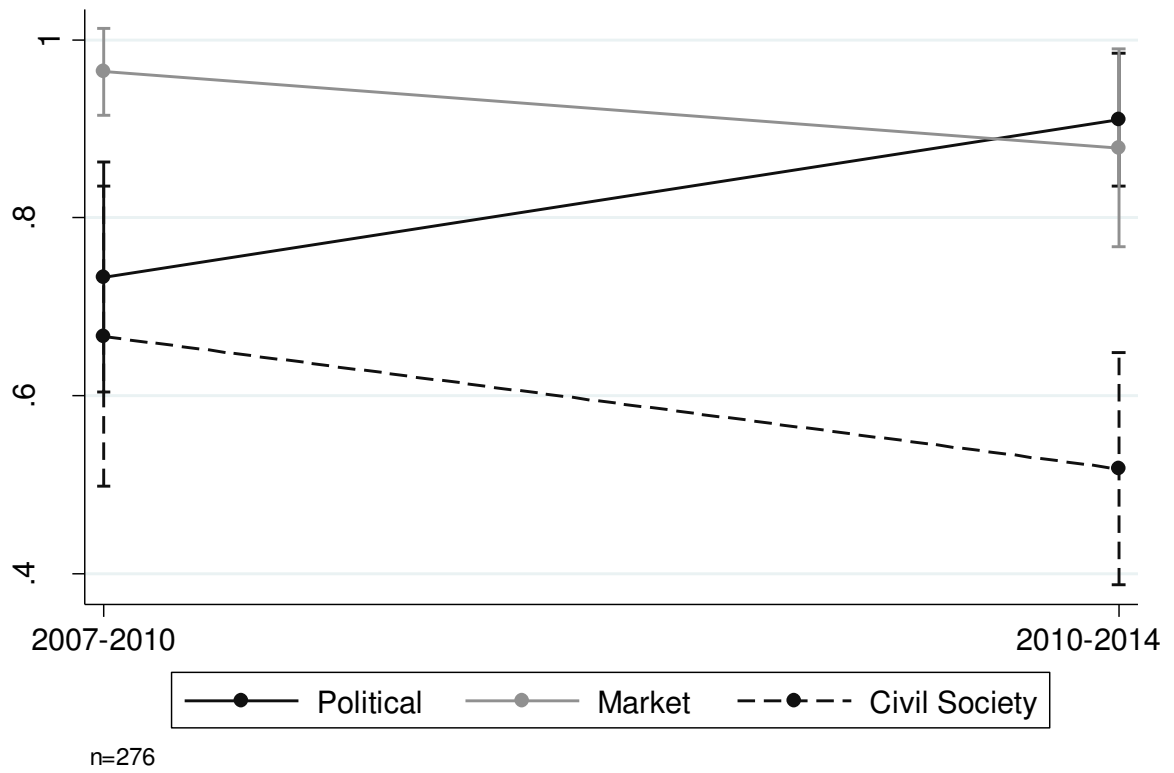


Figure 3: Probability of Neoliberal Framing by Political Party





**Figure 4: Probability of Neoliberal Framing by Actor Type**

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**Appendix**
**Table A1: Logit Regression Results Political Parties and Neoliberal Framing**

	<b>OR</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>Political Party * Government in Power</b>		
(ref: Conservative Party * Labour in power)		
Conservative#1	26.67	0.009
Labour #0	8.67	0.014
Labour#1	12.78	0.008
<b>N</b>	82	
<b>Pseudo- R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.14	

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Note: #0 refers to the time period of labour in power (2007-2010) and #1 refers to the Coalition period in power (2010-2014)

**Table A2: Logit Regression Results Political, Economic and Civil Society Actors  
Neoliberal Framing**

	<b>OR</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>Actor Type * Government in Power</b>		
(ref: Political Actor * Labour in power)		
Political#1	3.71	0.023
Market #0	9.81	0.004
Market#1	2.64	0.124
Civil Society#0	0.73	0.535
Civil Society#1	0.39	0.029
<b>N</b>	276	
<b>Pseudo- R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.16	

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Note: #0 refers to the time period of labour in power (2007-2010) and #1 refers to the Coalition period in power (2010-2014)