

Get Covid Done: Discourses on the National Health Service (NHS) during Brexit and the Coronavirus Pandemic

Silvia Antosa, Massimiliano Demata

Abstract

This article analyses the representation of the British National Health Service (NHS) in Government communication and news media in Britain as a crucial discursive figure of British national identity both during the months preceding the Brexit referendum of June 2016 and in the early months of the diffusion of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. We focus on a number of issues regarding the ways in which the NHS has been portrayed in the public arena. Both during the Brexit campaign and at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, the NHS was adopted as a powerful unifying national symbol to be protected, thanks to a populist language based on the adoption of quasi-religious tropes and mythical themes, war metaphors, and praise for heroism. This populist language was charged with rhetorical messages and slogans which turned the NHS into an image of Britishness, as emerges especially from an analysis of the leading front-page articles from the right-wing newspaper *Daily Mail* in the early phases of the pandemic.

Keywords: NHS, Brexit, Britishness, Covid-19, nationalism, pandemic, *Daily Mail*.

1. Introduction

This article examines the ways in which the British National Health Service (NHS) has often been represented in Government communication and news media in Britain as an iconic symbol and discursive *topos* of national identity in the last few years. In particular, as we discuss in this article, both during the Brexit campaign and

* This paper was conceived and written jointly by the two authors. The individual contributions are identified as follows: Silvia Antosa wrote Sections 2 and 3; Massimiliano Demata wrote Section 4; Sections 1 (Introduction) and 5 (Conclusions) are co-authored.

at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, the NHS was adopted as a powerful unifying national symbol to be protected, thanks to a populist language based on the adoption of quasi-religious tropes and mythical themes, war metaphors, and praise for heroism. On the one hand, a key focus of the Brexit campaign was ‘saving’ the NHS. According to the campaign rhetoric, the shortage of money that the NHS suffered from because of the supposedly heavy European taxation was impacting negatively on the quality of British healthcare, and the system risked being overwhelmed by demand from foreign nationals. As a consequence, the separation of Britain from Europe was represented as the salvation of an entire nation from the ‘unhealthy’ Europeans and other foreigners. On the other hand, the NHS has been at the core of the communication campaign of the British Government during the coronavirus pandemic: “Stay at home. Protect the NHS. Save Lives”¹. The focus on the NHS in the two periods differs slightly: while for Brexiteers the NHS had to be protected from foreigners and money-grabbing Europeans, now it has to be protected from unhealthy citizens affected by Covid-19. Notwithstanding these differences, the rhetorical and communicative strategies do not differ from the Brexit language: the dualism of the (healthy) British *vs* (unhealthy) other is echoed in the healthy *vs* unhealthy opposition during the pandemic, whilst the nationalistic language of heroism and the war against the virus coming from abroad continues to pervade the institutional and media communication.

This article analyses the evolution of nationalist discourses on the NHS during both Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic in British media and politics. We first provide some critical context on the construction of British nationalism, Euroscepticism and populism in the last few decades leading to Brexit. Then, we focus on a critical analysis of Government communication strategies in the representation of the NHS both during the Brexit campaign and the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in March and April 2020. Lastly, we analyse a number of leading front-page articles from the right-wing newspaper *Daily Mail*, whose influence on the most

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-information-leaflet/coronavirus-stay-at-home-protect-the-nhs-save-lives-web-version>, last accessed 28 October 2020.

conservative sectors of British society has always been pervasive. During March and April 2020, the *Daily Mail* devoted five leading articles on the front page to the NHS and the challenges it faced in dealing with Covid-19. In all these articles, the NHS is consistently presented as a key British institution as well as a symbol of national unity which needed the support of the whole country in order to manage the serious situation that was happening because of the pandemic.

The *Daily Mail*'s support of the NHS during the pandemic crisis appealed to the same nationalistic ethos at the basis of the support for Leave. Indeed, the NHS was one of the big issues peddled during the Brexit campaign, and defending the NHS was one of the defining elements of the Leave supporters (Meredith and Richardson 2019). The methodology adopted to analyse the articles follows Critical Discourse Analysis, and in particular the Discourse-Historical Approach of Ruth Wodak and her school, which looks at Discourse as a socially constituted as well as constitutive semiotic practice steeped in history (Wodak 2001). By paying attention to the linguistic strategies as well as to the interdiscursive and intertextual relations established by (and in) the texts on the NHS, this article will show how discourse on the NHS is part of a hegemonic construct which aims at building a certain vision of national identity. The emphasis on the need for the NHS to be 'protected' from foreigners (whether EU citizens or those non-British staff working in it) is conveyed through the frequent use of discursive and rhetorical strategies, including the war/invasion metaphor, which are often used in nationalist discourse to perpetuate a national identity based on difference and 'othering' (Anderson 1985; Hobsbawm 1990).

2. British nationalism and Euroscepticism

On 23 June 2016 Britain held a referendum to decide whether to leave or remain in the European Union. The vote was preceded by a heated public debate and a powerful electoral campaign leading to the victory of those who supported Leave, even though the margin of their victory was not huge (52% *vs* 48% of those who voted Remain) (Gietel-Basten 2016). Prime Minister David Cameron set up the Referendum on the EU mainly in order to strengthen his leadership within the Conservative Party. His vocal support for remaining in

Europe, however, went unheard, especially as another right-wing, populist party, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), gathered increasing consensus. UKIP successfully tackled and exploited pressing issues such as the national economic depression, European immigration, and the difficult economic situation of the NHS (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017: 4). Populist political discourses adopted by parties like UKIP had a massive impact on the debate over Brexit (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017: 111-45) and, more generally, on British attitudes and feelings about a number of social and cultural issues that still pervade and animate disputes and controversies today.

While populism has been widely investigated by scholars, who have pointed out its impact both in the development of strong nationalisms in Western Europe (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Gusterton 2017) and in the creation of support for the Leave campaign in Britain (Freedden 2017), its coexistence with several other discursive factors still needs to be properly assessed. These include, for example, the long-standing political and cultural ambivalence of the United Kingdom towards Europe, which, at various stages since 1945, “has meshed both with the rhetoric of the political left and the political right [...] [U]ltimately, the UK’s position vis à vis Europe has been negotiated in the context of massive sociocultural transformations such as the dissolution of the British Empire and the European post-war economic boom” (Mair 2019: 1). As a consequence, the pro-European feelings demonstrated in the 1975 referendum showed a peak in consensus towards Europe and an apparent redefinition of Britain’s role in the Old Continent. This generated one of the key-metaphors which pervaded public political discourses until recently, i.e. the slogan *Britain at the heart of Europe* (Musolff 2017).

The following decades witnessed alternating positions that speak volumes of the ambivalent ways in which the UK has been seeking to redefine its sovereignty and its role in global politics as a world power. For this reason, key notions and slogans such as “get back control”, “take/want (one’s) country back” and “(a truly) global Britain” reveal a collective sociocultural need to regain a worldwide leadership. More generally, they disclose a perceived loss of a central role occupied by Britain in the global political and economic scenario (Gamble 2018). Britain’s need for reaffirmation is

made manifest, in Musolff's words, in "[t]he discourse career of this metaphor [*Britain at the heart of Europe*] [which] shows a decline in its affirmative, optimistic use, and a converse increase of deriding uses to the point of declaring the *heart of Europe* irredeemably *diseased, dead, non-existent* or *rotten*" (Musolff 2017: 641; emphasis original). The underlying idea conveyed by such slogans and metaphors is the construction and reinforcement of a notion of Britishness – and especially Englishness – as a collective, exceptional identity which needs to take back its 'imperial' and 'civilising' role after it had lost its status and importance at a global level. The notion of British exceptionalism is reinforced by the fact that it is an island which is set geopolitically apart from the rest of Europe. Thus, Europe is a choice for Britain, not a 'necessity' (Daddow 2018).

As the slogan *Britain at the heart of Europe* and its negative derivatives made clear, Europe increasingly became the adverse party, the diseased body from which 'healthy' Britons needed to separate in order to re-assert their collective identity and national history. British politicians from political parties major – Tories, Labour and UKIP – exploited this dichotomy by claiming that leaving Europe was the pathway for a return to Britain's mythicised former status. In addition, they pointed out that the EU referendum was the means through which the 'sacred' will of the people would be conveyed (Kerr and Kettel, 2021). According to Manuel Hensmans and Koen van Bommel,

[...] the folk myth of England as the heart of the elected nation Great Britain – superior to continental Europe in its creative abilities, economic soundness and democratic instincts – remains at the heart of English Ressentiment [...] Instead of facing up to its neo-imperial demons in a constructive, agonistic fashion, the English populist movement made reference to Britain's imperial past to portray 'Europe' as the ultimate institutional expression of contemporary British and English decline. (Hensmans and van Bommel 2020: 375, 376; see also Wellings 2012)

This description highlights a number of pivotal oppositions that are crucial for understanding the complexity of the Brexit phenomenon. These include the polar opposites past *vs* present; imperial glory *vs* global decline; myth of England as the elected nation *vs* reality of Europe as symbol of political and economic failure which ultimately leads to a symbolic death.

These dichotomies are portrayed through the rhetorical adoption of quasi-religious tropes and mythical themes, such as the recurring use of threats about an apocalyptic future if things do not change; the idea that British people have a unique role to play in (their own) history; the notion that migrants coming from Europe and emerging countries can seriously threaten the British ‘preternatural’ mission as a global leader. A clear example of the way in which these discursive strategies have been used can be found in one of the most influential official websites of the Leave Campaign: *Vote Leave Take Control*². The site lists several reasons why voters needed to vote leave, by prefiguring a devastating, end-of-the-world scenario that would come to pass if the UK remained part of the European Union. It shows a simple scheme in which every image is accompanied by a short explanatory paragraph and an arrow leading to the next, more devastating image/caption/accompanying text. The sequence goes as follows: “The EU is expanding – The EU will cost us more and more – The EU already costs us £350 million a week – Immigration will continue to be out of control – We’ll have to keep bailing out the € – The European Court will still be in charge of our laws – Vote Leave, Take Back Control”. The apocalyptic scenario envisaged by this list of threats can be avoided only by the salvific intervention of the referendum vote, which is the only way out of this tragic cause-effect situation.

This view is confirmed by a recent study by Steven Kettell and Peter Kerr, who have pointed out at least three main factors at the core of Brexit discourses: “First is the idea that the British ‘people’ has a unique political, cultural and historical role to play in global affairs. The second is that the sanctity of Britain’s special status is under threat from European elites and an influx of foreign migrants. The third is that the EU referendum gave voice to the sacred ‘will of the people’” (2021: 284). These discourses aimed to present Brexit as an inevitable road to a sort of “national salvation and historic destiny for the UK” (p. 287) and made them virtually incontestable. These debates converged in the representation of the NHS both during the Brexit campaign and the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in March and April 2020 as the inner core and symbol of the British

² http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/why_vote_leave.html, last accessed 27 January 2021.

nation, whose mythical, exceptional status had to be saved and protected from the foreign ‘enemy’.

3. Protect the National Health Service

Former Chancellor of the Exchequer Nigel Lawson famously asserted that “the NHS is the closest thing the English people have to a religion, with those who practise it regarding themselves as a priesthood” (Murray 2018)³, while more recent commentators have defined it as “an institution infused with almost sacred popular emotionality” (Hensmans and van Bommel 2020: 375) and the “‘Holy Grail’ of British politics” (Kerr and Kettel, 2021: 284). The institution was born out of the ideal that health care should be available to all, regardless of their social standing. As Ben Webster has extensively discussed in his work on the history of the NHS, the British care system has been widely recognised as an outstanding model of “socialised medicine” and praised as “the most civilised achievement of modern Government” by British leaders (Webster 2002: 1).

During the Brexit campaign, the discursive representations of the NHS foregrounded its sacrality for all British citizens, regardless of their social class or status. It was presented as a supreme national symbol that needed to be protected at all costs, especially from European bureaucrats and immigrants. Politicians from across different parties (Tories, Labour and UKIP alike) claimed that austerity caused massive cuts in the NHS budget, which in turn could no longer sustain the increasing number of European immigrants (Shahvisi 2019). In addition, both the Government and the opposition argued extensively that the unsustainable costs of EU membership could be saved and reinvested in the NHS (Gietel-Basten 2016). A clear representation of this discursive network is the so-called Brexit Bus, which stated that £350 million could be

³ He was actually criticising the public attachment to the NHS as it impeded Conservative reform. Significantly, Lawson’s “wryly sophisticated joke” (Starkey 2020) clearly reveals that the NHS has historically been seen as a left-wing project, and there has been a long-standing commitment from the right to privatisation up to today. The co-opting of protecting the NHS in the Brexit debate was a very successful piece of populism because it cut across these political lines.

spent to fund the NHS each week if Britain were to leave the EU⁴. As a consequence, while recognising that the underfunded British care system was undergoing a crisis, politicians exploited anti-immigration discourses to pursue their aims (Shahvisi 2019). Heavy European taxation was thus deemed unjustified and culminated in depriving the Britons of their health. In this way, the dichotomy between the ‘diseased’ body of Europe *vs* the ‘healthy’ state of Britain reached its climax, and paved the way for more aggressive discursive tropes based on images of war and invasion.

In the early months of 2020, while post-Brexit debates and heated negotiations with the EU were still dominating political and public discourses, the global coronavirus pandemic spread across the globe. The British Government led by the Tory Prime Minister Boris Johnson worked on a communication campaign based on one slogan: “Stay at home. *Protect the NHS*. Save Lives”⁵. This slogan accompanied the Government’s decision to put the country in lockdown after witnessing thousands of deaths across the country as well as a general overwhelming of the health care facilities, A&E and hospitals⁶. The coronavirus pandemic had a powerful impact on the NHS, and particularly the Intensive Care Units (ICUs) (Propper, Stoye and Zaranco 2020). Within weeks, a massive effort to improve existing facilities and increase medical staff was carried out. As highlighted by several commentators, the negative effects of the pandemic on the healthcare system as a whole will be paid especially by older individuals and by those living in more deprived areas, thus exacerbating existing social, class and gender inequalities (Propper, Stoye and Zaranco 2020).

⁴ It was later found that the numbers were made up and the campaign was based on a number of lies; see the fact-checking website: <https://brexitlies.com>, last accessed 25 October 2020.

⁵ This slogan was then replaced by another refrain, which marked the easing of the strict measures of the lockdown: *Stay Alert. Control the Virus. Save Lives*. The new slogan no longer explicitly focuses on the NHS but still maintains an indication of having “control” of the virus, which is reminiscent of “take back control” from the Brexit campaign.

⁶ At the time of writing this article, the same slogan has been reissued to prepare the population for a second lockdown, due to start on 5 November 2020, following a second wave of the coronavirus pandemic across Europe (<https://www.conservatives.com/news/stay-at-home-protect-the-nhs-save-lives>, last accessed 3 November 2020).

Once again, the NHS has been at the core of the Government communication strategy. However, the focus on the NHS in the two periods here examined differs slightly. The nationalistic rhetoric praising British institutions fighting against the virus coming from abroad still pervades the institutional and media communication. Slogans, metaphors and institutional discursive strategies reveal problematic racist practices, including the requirement that foreign nationals who work for the NHS pay to access its services⁷. During the Brexit campaign, the NHS had to be protected from foreigners and money-grabbing Europeans. The British Health Care system had to be safeguarded from those who wanted to take advantage of its money and its world-renowned virtues. During the coronavirus pandemic, the NHS still needs protection, but this time it has to be safeguarded *also* from ‘unhealthy’ citizens affected by Covid-19. As mentioned above, the most vulnerable categories during the pandemic are older citizens and marginalised, disenfranchised people. Thus, the equation healthy Britons *vs* unhealthy Europeans during the Brexit campaign has been semantically resignified and reinforced along class, gender and racial lines.

4. The *Daily Mail*, nationalism and metaphors of war

The representation of the NHS by the Government along the dichotomic construction of healthy *vs* unhealthy citizens and the necessity to ‘defend’ it from the threat of Covid-19 and its spread among the British population were mirrored by the narratives of the pandemic constructed by most British media. In particular, tabloids employed a lexical repertoire referring to the war, a repertoire which became a fixture of the representations and public perception of Covid-19. The militarised language used by British politicians and media has routinely represented the struggle against Covid-19 as an example of British strength, resilience and bravery. This is particularly evident in the metaphors of war and invasion which were used to describe the threat of Covid-19 to Britain. The pervasiveness of this metaphor is by no means unique to Britain,

⁷ The debate about the health surcharge planned by the Conservative Government for non-EU migrant workers in the NHS has been going on for a while and has resurged during the coronavirus pandemic. See Campbell and O’Carroll (2019).

as similar figurative language was used in many other countries to describe the spread of the pandemic (McCormick 2020: 329-30).

Among the British news outlets, the *Daily Mail* distinguished itself for its passionately patriotic and nationalistic tone, a tone which had characterised its support for Leave four years before. The *Daily Mail* has a pervasive influence on large sectors of the British public, and particularly on the older generations: among the British dailies, it has the second highest median age for its readership (58) and the second highest share of over 65s among its readers (Taylor 2014). In 2015 it was judged Britain's most influential newspaper (Thelwell 2015), and in 2020 it was the third best-selling newspaper in the United Kingdom (Mayhew 2020). While it is a middle-market paper in a tabloid format, the *Daily Mail* employs the typical "emotionally charged" language of tabloids or popular papers (Kitis and Milapedes 1997: 562). It is indeed considered a "popular" paper" (Conboy 2007: 10) with a strong focus on entertainment, as opposed to the "elite" approach of the more serious press, such as the *Times*, the *Guardian* or the *Independent*. The *Daily Mail* has always been in favour of anti-Liberal policies, famously campaigning against immigration and abortion laws and often expressing xenophobic, homophobic and even anti-Semitic points of view (Stoegner and Wodak 2016). It also supported Leave in the name of nationalism and nativism, while it attacked the EU and rejected multiculturalism and globalisation (Breeze 2018). Not surprisingly, then, at the time of the pandemic, the *Daily Mail* displayed staunchly nationalistic and highly emotional views in its representation of Britain's response to the pandemic.

In its articles on Covid-19, the *Daily Mail* defended the importance of the NHS as a quintessentially British institution, praising it and the "heroism" of its doctors and nurses, who faced an invisible "enemy" or "army". In the metaphor *scenario* (Musolff 2016) constructed by the *Daily Mail*, the source domain of invasion is articulated along a series of lexical elements evolving around the NHS, with the virus seen as a dangerous army invading the United Kingdom, laying siege to the NHS and putting doctors and nurses in grave danger. Of the five front pages dedicated by the *Daily Mail* to the NHS in March and April 2020, only one (Borland, Groves and Spencer 2020) did not associate the NHS with a metaphor of war. In the other four front pages, the NHS is represented in its attempts to

fight against the virus which is threatening the United Kingdom, with the latter providing the help of *volunteers*, that is, British men and women, to the former. This can also be seen in the use of nouns such as *army* and *heroes*, which are needed to fight a *battle* and a *war* against the pandemic. All of these lexical elements constitute a metaphor scenario which communicates a sense of militarisation in the struggle against the virus. The headlines of the four front pages, together with some extracts from the four articles, are as follows:

**‘BILLION-POUND’ UK BATTLE PLAN (headline of online edition)
VOLUNTEER NHS ARMY TO TACKLE ‘MASS EPIDEMIC’
(headline of print edition)**

Helpers could be asked to feed patients, ferry them around wards or deliver medicines, in virus battle plan. An army of NHS volunteers is being called up to help tackle the coronavirus menace.

The move is expected to be in a dramatic battle plan to be unveiled this morning.

And a ‘war room’ in the Cabinet Office and in every Whitehall ministry will have a lead official to coordinate their responses. (Borland and Groves 2020)

NOW HERE’S HOW YOU CAN HELP, BRITAIN

An army of 250,000 NHS volunteers is being recruited to help vulnerable patients kept indoors by the pandemic. An army of volunteers is needed to assist the most vulnerable in our society. (Borland 2020)

A NATION OF HEROES

An incredible half a million volunteers have enlisted in an NHS army to fight coronavirus. The aim was to recruit 250,000 in a week but double that number signed up in the first day – a rate of five a second. Boris Johnson said he wanted to ‘offer a special thank you to everyone who has now volunteered to help the NHS. (...) They will be absolutely crucial in the fight against the virus.’

Chief executive Sir Simon Stevens said: ‘We are blown away by this response and the kindness of our country’. (Borland, Hayward and Allen 2020)

MAIL’S £1M AIRLIFT FOR NHS HEROES

A new weapon in the war on coronavirus touched down at a deserted Heathrow last night: an airliner crammed with PPE. Inside, filling every seat and the cargo hold, were more than 20 tons of vital coveralls and

masks – worth over £1 million – fresh from China and destined straight for the Covid-19 frontline tomorrow. On the day Britain paused for a minute’s silence as the Covid-related death toll of NHS staff reached triple figures, the vital reinforcements could hardly be more welcome. (Hardman 2020)

The extracts above show the pervasiveness of the war metaphor in the description of how the NHS is trying to counteract the spread of the virus. The whole metaphorical scenario resonates with the notion of heroism, as those who work for the NHS are *heroes*, and the United Kingdom itself is “A NATION OF HEROES”. The militarisation of the way the virus is counteracted in the United Kingdom is reinforced by the fact that medical supplies, or “vital reinforcements”, are brought from China to “the Covid-19 frontline”; all medical efforts are coordinated by “a ‘war room’ in the Cabinet Office and in every Whitehall ministry” which is working on “a dramatic battle plan.”

As is typical in many metaphors, the representation of Covid-19 as an enemy threatening to invade the nation communicates a sense of concreteness and personal involvement in the dangers coming from the pandemic, seen as an outside enemy, and is meant to strike a chord among those readers who feel a degree of emotional attachment to their own nation. This idea is reinforced by the map showing the contagion in the United Kingdom published in DM1, at a time when the very first few cases in the UK became known. This map, titled “How the bug is spreading”, shows the island in red on a blue background, with yellow pointers indicating the local outbreaks of Covid-19. The information given in the pointers includes the number of cases for each of the 19 towns or counties (e.g. Kent: 1, London: 4, York: 2) and, significantly, for all but three of them, the locations where the single infected patients supposedly caught the virus. All these locations are foreign nations, for example “LEEDS: 2 Infected in Iran,” “SWANSEA: 1 Had been in northern Italy,” “DERBYSHIRE: 1 Had been on holiday in Tenerife.” The information about the spread of the virus carried in the DM therefore highlights the foreign origin of the virus, as most people got infected when they were outside the United Kingdom, implicitly communicating the notion that Covid-19 is an outside enemy coming in from abroad.

In reporting the brave efforts of the NHS in tackling Covid-19, the *Daily Mail* projects a sense of national identity and pride constructed in opposition to an outside enemy. The language used by the *Daily Mail*, especially the metaphor of the pandemic as an invasion, is part of a broader figurative frame of war. This frame communicates a sense of danger to the homeland and aims at building up consensus by projecting the image of a nation united in solidarity against a common enemy. The use of metaphors of war by the *Daily Mail* in representing the pandemic is not a merely rhetorical artifice. Metaphors are ways of representing social reality which are deliberately chosen in order to communicate certain interpretations of that reality. In political and media discourse, metaphors play a key role in evaluating social actors and events and, as a consequence, contribute to shaping the public's response to them: as argued by Charteris-Black, "in political rhetoric the primary purpose of metaphors is to frame how we view or understand political issues by eliminating alternative points of view" (2011: 32). Metaphors also have the power to stimulate certain emotional responses to the actors, objects or events described among the addressees of the discourse which they are part of. For this reason, the choice of which metaphors to use in discourse may have serious implications on our social life: the cumulative use of metaphors may become a conventional way to frame certain aspects of reality which in turn elicit specific evaluations and emotional responses among the population. In the context of the public debates about Covid-19, metaphors of war are very pervasive and have a strong emotional impact on people's response to the pandemic: they alert people quickly and communicate a need for solidarity, unity and cooperation (Hartmann-Mahmud 2002), prompting a sense of urgency and action against a threatening entity, in this case a virus, but they also promote fear and anxiety against the "enemy". The aggressive and violent essence of the conceptual domain of war has provided a rather convenient way to represent very dangerous threats to society, such as climate change, cancer or AIDS (Semino 2020), or to drum up consensus against the arrival or presence of "outsiders", such as migrants (indeed, along with the flood and virus/epidemic metaphors, the invasion/war metaphor is one of the most frequently used in addressing migration in public discourse in both the UK and the USA (Santa Ana 2002: 68-71; Semino 2008: 118-

23; Musolff 2012). Thus, somehow not surprisingly, war and invasion metaphors have become popular ways of framing Covid-19 as an external threat among media and politicians as well as the public at large, as demonstrated by Wicke and Bolognesi's (2020) analysis of the conceptualisation of the pandemic on Twitter.

The use of the hero framing of NHS workers and the metaphor of war/invasion may have become extremely popular tropes in the conceptualisation and representation of the pandemic in discourse, but they have not gone unchallenged. Several scholars have warned about the negative effects of such representations of Covid. The #ReframeCovid project (Koller and Semino 2020) avowedly aims at recording and promoting the use of non-war metaphors related to Covid-19. Indeed, a war metaphor might communicate the impression that the "defeat" of the virus may depend on the strength of the national leaders who oppose it – a case in point, if we think of populist leaders such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and Boris Johnson, whose public approach to the virus projected an image of personal strength and defiance, with little regard to what prevention and medical treatment could achieve. This "hero framing" of the NHS has also created problems among NHS workers themselves: the hero narrative fails to acknowledge the intrinsic limitations of the workers' "duty to care" as well as the reciprocal duties of workers and the NHS as their employer, for example in terms of providing NHS employees with acceptable standards of safety (Cox 2020). It can also be used to obscure the fact that the NHS has been chronically underfunded for years, something that NHS workers themselves have complained about publicly (Moscrop 2020). Furthermore, the use of the metaphors of war may help introduce coercive legislative measures restricting civil liberties for citizens in response to the pandemic and may make such measures more acceptable or even desirable (Gillis 2020). Finally, by evoking a war against Covid-19, what really happens is a form of "ideological appropriation" (Christoyannopoulos 2020): as a pandemic would in theory require global, and not just local, mobilisation, the militarisation of language within each single nation leads to a response to the virus which, since war is traditionally a national endeavour which tests the prerogatives of the nation, reinforces the strength of the state in a health emergency well beyond its remit.

5. Conclusions

This article has examined the representation of the NHS both in Government official communication and in one of the most widely read British tabloids, the *Daily Mail*. The timespan here examined includes both the years immediately preceding the 2016 Brexit vote and the onset of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. As we have discussed, in both historical periods, British institutional communication has emphasised the crucial role of the NHS in British society by focusing on the dichotomy healthy *vs* unhealthy in different ways. While during the Brexit campaign the nationalistic slogans praised British institutions and society against the ‘unhealthy’ Europeans, who deprived the almost ‘sacred’ NHS of its funds, during the coronavirus pandemic the enemy threatening British society was the foreign virus itself.

The *Daily Mail* addressed the virus as an enemy who needed to be fought for the very survival of the NHS as well as the country itself. The war rhetoric and the metaphors of war play a key role in communicating a sense of patriotism, national cohesion and common effort. However, the militarisation of language frames the pandemic in terms which are unnecessarily bellicose and potentially prone to be used to manipulate public opinion and somehow legitimise violent emotions. War/invasion metaphors are indeed extremely effective in that they create “emotionally charged” (Musolff 2012: 16) frames, causing fear and anxiety (and even terror) and prompting aggression and hostility among the public. These metaphors are often constructed as part of a discursive space in which the social, political and cultural values of a nation are seen (or *need* to be seen and represented, as part of a nationalist or nativist agenda) as under threat from an outside enemy. As a consequence, they are also highly instrumental in fuelling a divisive discursive space which is based on the need for security and which creates a binary logic, founded on a dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’, or the ‘other’. This “dichotomist perspective” (Wodak 2015: 5) invests the ideological and cultural processes of inclusion and exclusion within the nation and can legitimise draconian measures against migrants. In the case of the virus and the NHS, the ‘call to arms’ of the Johnson government and the appeal to rally around the NHS by the *Daily Mail* determines a divisive rhetoric which blames the

‘other’ for the virus, celebrating at the same time an authentically British institution. Crucially, as a side effect, behind the celebration of the ‘heroes’ of the NHS, the invasion/war metaphor scenario has been used to hide the serious responsibilities of the Johnson government for the spread of the virus in the United Kingdom.

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