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# Neoliberalism, austerity and the UK media.

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This Brief considers newspaper coverage of the financial crisis and economic downturn in the United Kingdom and demonstrates how the people affected by the crisis were presented not as rounded human beings with social and political characteristics, but primarily as consumers and producers. This presentation of people as ‘market citizens’ draws heavily from a neoliberal narrative and the Brief considers the dominance of this narrative across the UK media. It considers whether this ideological framing has become embedded discursively in society and seeks to contribute to debates about how these news stories may impact on people in the UK and how we empathise with those experiencing economic hardship.

## Background

- Neoliberal ideology centres on the market concerns of individuals and the extension of market rationality into other spheres of public life, such as education and health.
- After the financial crisis of 2007-8 some commentators expected a ‘retreat’ of neoliberalism, yet many now argue there has actually been a resurgence, making the post-crisis period an interesting and vital one on which to focus.
- Research on neoliberalism frequently highlights its prolificacy across issues of political economy and within the language of policy-makers. There has been less focus on how embedded the ideology is in society, understood more broadly.
- Examining media coverage provides an ideal opportunity to analyse which narratives are being presented to citizens when they seek to understand the impact of economic downturns in their society.
- The research reported here focuses on newspaper coverage of political economy in the UK by analysing 1,000 quotes from named individuals included in news articles concerning the financial crisis, recession or austerity between 2007 and 2014. Five national newspapers were used: *The Mirror*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail*.
- To limit the partisan bias of newspapers, only news articles were examined (in other words, not editorials or opinion pieces). The reported quotes are understood as ‘political claims’.
- The claims were analysed to examine the particular set of values on which the quote was drawing (if any). The analysis here focuses in particular on claims with a neoliberal framing.

## Evidence

The individuals quoted in the news articles were grouped within three different spheres: politics, market and civil society. Table 1 shows the most popular issues of discussion:

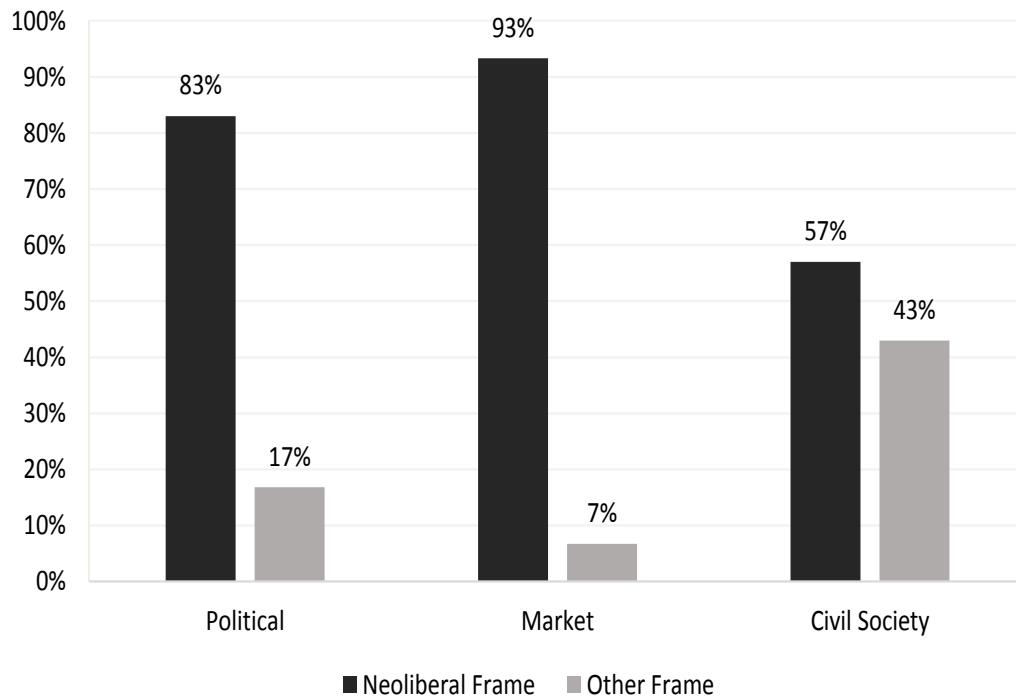
**Table 1: Topic of discussion by different types of commentators**

	Politics	Market	Civil Society	Total
<b>Macroeconomics</b>	69.1	65	59.2	65.6
<b>Banking/Finance</b>	15.2	21.5	9.7	16.2
<b>Employment</b>	2.1	2.2	6.8	3.2
<b>Government</b>	1.9	.	2.4	1.4
<b>Law and Order</b>	1.2	0.3	1.9	1.1
<b>Other</b>	10.5	11.4	19.9	12.7

- There was a clear predominance of macroeconomic issues (as would be expected when the issue is economic hard times). However, what was also revealed was the similarity between the commentators from the three spheres, with only a slightly different focus from those in civil society, who looked at employment and ‘other’ categories more often.
- The ‘other’ categories featured a large selection of topics, including environment, energy, transportation, education, immigration and social policy. They are grouped together as only very rarely did one sphere of commentary focus on these individual issues for more than 1% of claims.
- Out of 1,000 claims the actual term ‘neoliberalism’ was only present in one article when it was used twice by a trade union leader at the Labour Party Conference in 2012. As is shown below, the ideas underpinning the ideology might be ubiquitous, but direct use of the term is rare.
- We also analysed the quotes to examine ‘who’ or ‘what’ was the subject of the quote. Around 49% of the time the commentator was discussing the effect of these issues on economic markets or the financial sector. For 11% of the time the subject was government and state agencies. However, for 29% of the time (over 280 claims) the effect was being discussed in relation to people (for instance, on ‘families’ or ‘Brits’).
- If a claim discussed the impact directly on people, this research examined whether the claim was being framed in a neoliberal way. Two hypothetical examples (based on simplified real claims) help to outline the approach of the analysis:
  1. *An article reports that ‘More than half of UK families are burdened by debt’. An actor making a claim is reported as saying this will:*
    - ‘squeeze families’ purchasing power’ = Neoliberal frame*
    - ‘increase the risk of family breakdown’ = Other frame*
  2. *An article reports that ‘140,000 steel workers will lose their jobs’. An actor making a claim is reported as saying this will lead to:*
    - ‘a loss in economic output’ = Neoliberal frame*
    - ‘a strain on those families affected’ = Other frame*

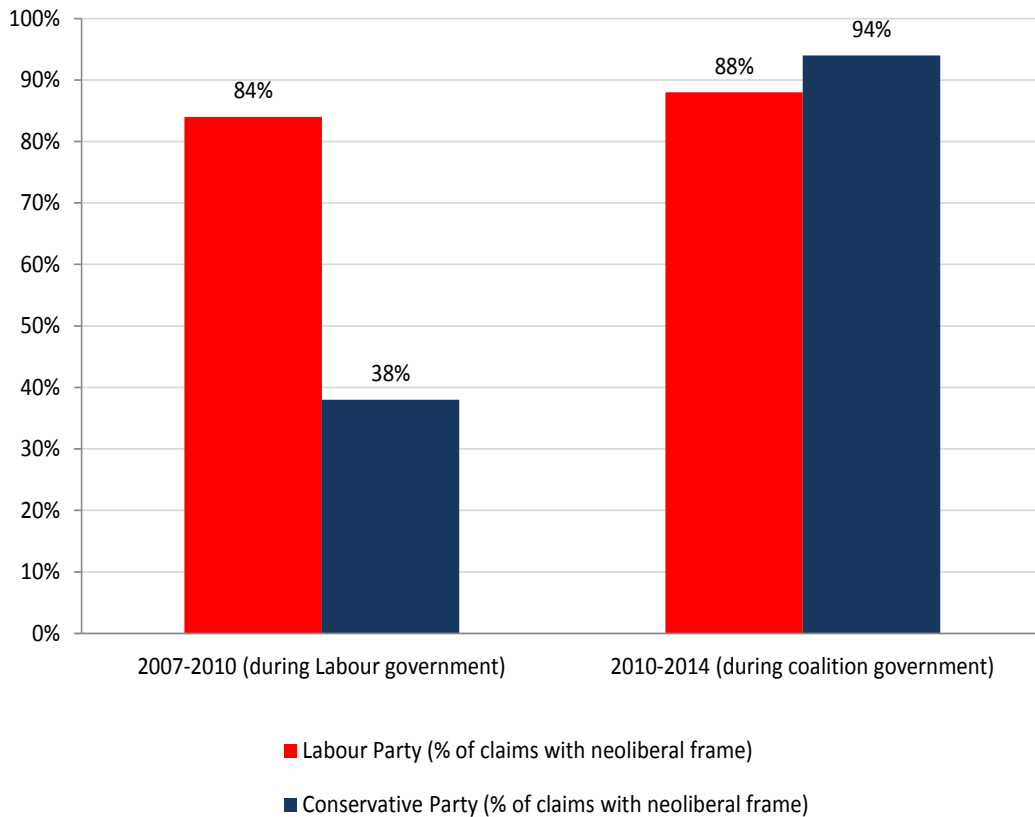
- Figure 1 shows how frequently a neoliberal frame was used when the object of the quote was people, broken down by the three spheres from which the individuals were drawn.

**Figure 1: Neoliberal framing by commentator's sphere of activity**



- The chart shows there was very little difference in how frequently politicians and market actors drew on neoliberal framing to discuss the impact of the economic downturn on people. By contrast, quotes from civil society were much less likely to use a neoliberal frame (although it was still present in a majority of these quotes)
- Although there were some slight differences in the coverage of claims from each sector (i.e. *The Sun* used more political commentators, whilst *The Guardian* used more civil society commentators), overall, there were no systematic differences between the newspapers in the reporting of quotes which were overwhelmingly neoliberal in nature.
- We looked at this in more detail by focusing on the two main political parties, Labour and Conservative (the Liberal Democrat sample size was not large enough) and how each acted in government and in opposition:

**Figure 2: Percentage of neoliberal claims by political party in 2007-10 and 2010-14**



- The results show a clear shift in how claims were framed by the Conservative Party. In opposition around 4 out of 10 claims were neoliberal in nature, compared to over 9 out of 10 ten claims when it was in power, albeit in a coalition. In comparison, there was no significant shift for the Labour Party.

## Analysis

- The evidence from this research suggests that a neoliberal narrative has permeated much of the newspaper coverage of hard economic times in the UK since 2007.
- The quotes and claims from political, market and civil society actors all draw from a similar framework of reference. By using a frame that tends to consider people primarily as 'market citizens' it is arguable that this strips people of their social and political traits.
- In opposition, the Conservative Party was willing to draw on language with a more human touch, sometimes using emotive terms to heighten its criticism of the Labour government (e.g. David Cameron's 'compassionate Conservatism' and his ideas of 'Broken Britain' and the 'Big Society').

- In contrast, the Labour Party did not make this shift. One possible reason for this is the party's effort to rebuild its image of economic competence. However, in not framing its comments differently, it is possible to see how the phrase 'Tory-lite' gained traction.
- Commentary from civil society groups was less likely to utilise a neoliberal framework. These individuals discussed the effect on mental health, childcare, social isolation and insecurity.
- Civil society groups drew on lots of different reference points to get their story across, which inevitably led to the emergence of a fragmented counter-narrative. We could not isolate or identify any single overarching counter-narrative to the neoliberal narrative.

## Conclusions

The research underpinning this Brief demonstrates the predominance of a neoliberal discourse in the UK media during the period since the financial crisis and economic downturn. This means that whenever the effect of the crisis, recession or austerity on people was discussed, it was generally framed in terms of their productivity or spending power. Issues like health or poverty were side-lined.

In 2010 and 2011, Mervyn King, then the Governor of the Bank of England, made comments to the Trade Union Congress and the Treasury Select Committee questioning why the British public were not angrier about the dire and worsening economic situation. Part of the answer should focus on limited resources and depoliticisation. However, the evidence provided here leads us to suggest that part of the answer also lies in the permeation of a neoliberal narrative across the news coverage of these events. If economic crisis is reified as a macro problem outside of human control – almost as a natural disaster – and if human beings are presented not as the victims of this calamity but rather as dehumanised consumers, it is harder for emotions such as anger to emerge through solidarity and compassion.



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