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The Slant Social "Diagnoses": Media Influence on Public Opinions in BrexLit *Middle England*

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ABSTRACT

In Jonathan Coe's highly-received BrexLit Middle England (2018), deep-rooted social divisions are revealed through the conflicts between individual characters who try to navigate opposing viewpoints in the face of the Brexit referendum. Previous critics have approached these divisions from diverse angles, with some touching upon the effect of media. However, they often oversimplify the influence of media on public opinions, neglecting the complex, heterogeneous nature of the contemporary media landscape and failing to examine how characters' conscious media choices within a pluralist media environment contribute to their divergent perceptions of British society and Brexit attitudes. Applying Michel Foucault's medical institution model as an analogy for media systems, this study aims to develop a comprehensive analysis of media influence on three social groups within the novel. The analysis reveals that different social groups in Middle England have distinct media choices, which construct their respective knowledge systems, leading to their slanted "diagnoses" of societal issues. These biased "diagnoses" ultimately lead to different Brexit referendum choices. Meanwhile, the media's polarized portrayal and adversarial presentation of the "Leave" and "Remain" options intensify the sense of opposition, obstructing meaningful public discussion and dialogue, thereby exacerbating the divisions in the public. This paper reveals the media's latent power in controlling social perceptions on Brexit issues and calls for critical reflection on the role of media in political discussions in the public sphere.

KEYWORDS: *Jonathan Coe, Middle England, Brexit, BrexLit, Media Influence.*

INTRODUCTION

As one of the most polarizing political events in contemporary British history, the Brexit referendum has deepened societal divisions and intensified social antagonism. As particularly evidenced in the Brexit-related discussions across mass media channels, conversations grounded in political and social reality are eclipsed by the polemical contestations driven by "personal and emotional beliefs" concerning immigration, national sovereignty, and political identities (Hauthal, 2021, p. 297). The possibility of a reasoned consensus is overshadowed by the hardening oppositional identities of "Leavers" and "Remainers," with each side treating the other as the corruptive forces against which the British society must be defended.

Against this backdrop, Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018) emerges as a seminal work in the BrexLit subgenre (Shaw, 2018, p. 18), garnering substantial media and scholarly attention for its portrayal of the multilayered psychological and sociocultural tensions underlying the referendum divide. Previous scholars have examined *Middle England* through various lenses, focusing primarily on the question of national identity (Clément, 2021; Shaw, 2023; Bartulović, 2024) and socioeconomic factors underlying character motivations (Flodqvist, 2020; Mengel, 2022; Schuhmaier, 2023).

Although some scholars acknowledge media's influence on characters' perceptions (Zrari, 2020; Clément, 2021; Shaw, 2023), these analyses often oversimplify media's impact by focusing either on an isolated outlet or Leave-

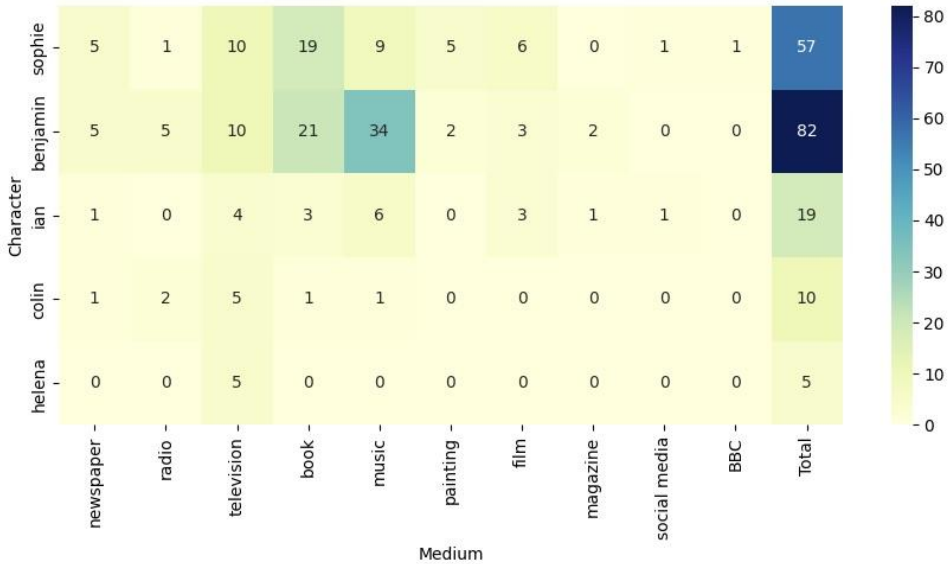
supporting media. Moreover, these studies have tended to treat media audiences as passive receivers rather than active agents in their selection and reception of content. Consequently, these studies, downplaying the complex, heterogeneous nature of the contemporary media landscape, fail to examine how characters' conscious media choices within a pluralist media environment contribute to their divergent perceptions of British society and Brexit attitudes.

As Lindell (2020) expounds, differences in the quantity and nature of **media consumption** can contribute to disparities in knowledge and participation across social groups (p. 482, emphasis mine). In *Middle England*, the three social groups—university-educated intellectuals represented by Sophie, middle-class male residents in Middle England represented by Ian, and elderly inhabitants of the same region represented by Colin—exhibit distinct media consumption choices, which correspond to their varied perceptions of British society and different motives for the referendum voting choices. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theories, this paper creatively applies his model of medical institutions as an analogy for media systems. Just as medical institutions establish a knowledge system that conditions and disciplines medical perception, media institutions similarly configure and shape collective social perceptions. In this context, British citizens assume the role of "doctors," attempting to diagnose British social issues and prescribe their votes as treatments. This paper will explore how three groups of characters reflect different modes of Brexit decision-making, shaped by the distinct media systems they engage with.

THE MEDIA-FILTERED SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE: MANIPULATED SYSTEMS OF KNOWING

In *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), Michel Foucault illustrates how medical knowledge, essentially a formalized system of discursive practices in medical institutions, conditions and disciplines the doctors' perception of the disease. Similarly, in media institutions, the circulated knowledge configures and regulates their audience's understanding of societal reality. Due to the increasingly diversified mass media products, media fragmentation and audience segmentation have become a pronounced phenomenon today (Mancini, 2013, p. 43). This is also reflected in the novel *Middle England*, where characters from different social strata, exemplified by Sophie Potter, Ian Coleman, and Colin Trotter, exhibit distinct patterns of media choices.

Table 1. *Media References Mapped by Characters in Middle England*



As shown in the heatmap (Table 1) generated using the spaCy NLP library with the Coreferee plugin, media references in the novel display noticeable variation across characters, revealing disparities in media engagement along social lines. Associations between characters and media terms are established through three analytical methods within a three-sentence contextual window surrounding each media mention: identifying direct name mentions, linking pronouns to their referents, and analyzing syntactic dependencies to determine grammatical involvement (whether a character appears as a subject, passive subject, possessive modifier, passive agents, or prepositional objects in relation to the media term). This layered approach ensures a contextually grounded and functionally meaningful identification. Among the five main characters, Sophie and Benjamin exhibit the highest engagement, with 57 and 82 references respectively, spanning books, newspapers, television, and art media such as music and painting. By contrast, Helena and Colin appear at the margins, each with no more than 10 references, mainly to television and newspapers. Ian occupies a middle position, with 19 scattered references that require closer qualitative examination.

Overall, the data suggests a hierarchical media landscape, where characters' differing levels of media engagement reflect broader distinctions. In Foucauldian terms, these differentiated media engagements situate characters within divergent regimes of knowledge that shape their social perceptions. In light of the patterns exhibited in the heatmap, this section aims to provide a qualitative overview of their relative media choices.

Sophie's Intellectual-Engaged Media Choices

As illustrated in the heatmap, Sophie and Benjamin stand out for their intensive and diverse media engagement, forming a distinctive social group within the novel's media landscape. Their media choices consistently favor "quality" journalism and reflect a sustained philosophical and aesthetic investment in European high-cultural media. Their selection of these media resources constructs a knowledge space that shapes their understanding of the world.

Sophie Potter is a left-leaning intellectual teaching art history at one of London's universities. In journalist media, she exhibits a clear preference for left-liberal and "quality" newspapers such as *the Observer* and a heightened sensitivity to serious journalism regarding social inequality and injustice, as seen from her quick absorption of such information when reading a fictional tabloid entitled *The World Today*. By contrast, local gossip stories are items she normally "would not even have bothered to read" (p. 57). Such a pattern of news choices is also observed in Benjamin Trotter, another "bookish" character in the novel. As a graduate of Oxford living in a secluded house in Middle England, Benjamin is not as metropolitan and left-leaning as Sophie. Nevertheless, he shares with her a preference for "quality" news content, as can be inferred from his news-consuming behaviors. In the novel, he usually gets news from the BBC News Channel, a national broadcast covering serious domestic and global news. By contrast, he is annoyed by the sensationalist personal attacks in political debate programs and frowns at the meaningless puns used in a local tabloid, which reflects his disdain for what might often be referred to as tabloid-style language (Lefkowitz, 2016, p.2). Both characters' selective consumptions of news media construct a knowledge system that filters information through hierarchies of social importance and language styles, privileging certain forms and topics while dismissing others as "politically unimportant and epistemologically vulgar" (Foucault, 1980, p. 110).

In terms of other media products, this social group exhibits a sustained philosophical and aesthetic engagement with literature, arts, music, etc. Sophie confesses to a "neurotic obsession with literature" and its "moral benefits" (p. 153), reflecting her liberal humanist belief in literature as a tool for ethical development and empathy. She also shows artistic interests in various media forms, including paintings and cinematic arts. In particular, she has an academically specialized study in the "portraits of black European writers in the nineteenth century" (p. 75) concerning their racial prejudices. Similarly, Benjamin displays a long-standing investment in music and literature. In the novel, he listens to classical music by a wide range of Western artists, and habitually tunes into Radio Three, a music podcast featuring classical music, opera, etc. He himself admits that "the questions of cultural and literary value" have preoccupied him for "all his life" (p. 402), expressing his deep concern for the moral reflection of these media forms. Together, these consumptions cultivate a media environment that is marked by not only "quality" information but also moral and ethical reflections. These media choices constitute a knowledge regime that forms the basis for their subsequent diagnosis of British society.

Ian's Laddism-Influenced Media Choices

The social group exemplified by Ian Coleman presents a kind of media choices divergent from those of Sophie. As shown in the heatmap, his media engagement is moderate and scattered across television, books, music, films, etc. As further analysis reveals, Ian's media choices emblematic of the distinctly British cultural phenomenon of "new lad" (Zrari, 2021), a male-targeted cultural trend that emerged in the 1990s driven by men's magazines like *Loaded* and could be observed in diverse forms of popular media, such as television, films, and music, and literature. It promotes "a spirit of popular, masculine, working-class hedonism…in contradistinction to middle-class, politically correct values of self-control and moderation" (Growse, 2012, p. 4). Similar to the previous social group, this laddism-influenced media choices constitute a knowledge field that conditions how this social group learn about social reality.

Ian Coleman is a driving instructor living in the Midlands city of Birmingham. As observed in Ian's flat, there are only fourteen books on his bookshelf, including some popular novels, sports readings, and, notably, a copy of *Stuff* magazine with a female dressed in a revealing mini-dress on the cover. The gadget magazine Stuff is one of the "lad" publications that emerged after and was inspired by *Loaded* (Crewe, 2003, p. 96). Its cover image also suggests its laddish imprint of an unabashed pursuit of "hypersexualized" women's bodies (Tippett, 2023, p. 146). Besides the limited readings, Ian has "about the same number of DVDs, mainly James Bond and Jason Bourne films" (p. 56). According to Hines and Jones (2020), the Bond girls in the James Bond series, especially in the Brosnan era, have been a salient topic for lad magazines, since their imageries align with the heterosexual masculinity promoted by laddish culture. As Coe satirically depicts in the novel, Ian has internalized the images propagated by the consumption of lad media. He not only sees the image of Sophie in a towel as "every

Stuff reader's masturbation fantasy made flesh" (p.55) but also imagines himself as James Bond making love with Sophie. A similar preference for lad media can also be observed in the minor character named Geoffrey Wilcox, a businessman in the forklift truck industry who also comes from Middle England. Although his media choices are not explicitly listed in the novel, it can be inferred from several behavioral details that he shares a similar taste in lad media. Firstly, his penchant for transgressive humor, evidenced by his frequent inappropriate jokes, suggests a likely preference for offensive comedy shows that often deliver "laddish cruelty" (Tracey, 2012, p. 185). Adding to the evidence is Geoffrey's apparent discontentment with the BBC's institutional reforms following the Ross-Brand scandal, a case where two radio presenters made a "lewd" and "misogynist" joke on Live, thereby receiving heavy criticism for its inappropriateness. Geoffrey's critical attitude suggests he sides with those who justify such "politically incorrect humor," typical of the discourse popular in lad media (Growse, 2012, p. 13).

Contrast with their active engagement with lad media is their limited consumption of serious news content and highbrow art. Ian's bookshelf suggests his relative disinterest in these materials. Besides, he confesses to Sophine that he is "not a great reader" (p. 53). Even after getting married to Sophie, he exhibits no interest in exposing himself to Sophie's media tastes. Similarly, Geoffrey Wilcox, a minor character, also shows an apparent disinterest in the arts, literature, and serious journalism. Though not represented in the heatmap (Table 1) due to his limited presence in the novel, Geoffrey's media choice pattern nonetheless suggests a similar laddish media preference. He not only openly derides his art-appreciative wife as a "culture vulture" (p. 156) but also brings an irrelevant book to a literary reading lecture, showing a full resistance to what he perceives as highbrow literature. When reading a news outlet, he naturally bypasses serious news such as the Scottish referendum and food bank emergency, focusing instead on a more sensationalist one containing celebrity misconduct and BBC controversy. The laddism-influenced media choices of this social group constitute a knowledge regime that forms the basis for their subsequent diagnosis of British society.

Colin's Nostalgia-Driven Media Choices

The social group exemplified by Colin Trotter presents a media choice pattern that differs remarkably from the above two social groups, which is marked by a limited engagement with news and an obsession with nostalgic media products. Their media choices reflect how the older generation living in Middle England navigates the contemporary media landscape and Britain's changing society. Colin Trotter is a lower-middle-class retiree from the manufacturing industry that flourished during the 1970s. He has been living alone in Middle England after his wife died. Unlike Sophie or Ian, Colin confines himself to political media content, showing no interest in "any of the new stuff" or entertaining comedy and music. His news source is *The Telegraph*, a conservative newspaper known for its traditional perspective and somewhat backward-looking editorial stance (Curtis, 2006). Generally speaking, his engagement with news media appears significantly less extensive than that of the other social groups. A similar pattern, though more antagonistic in nature, can be observed in the minor character Helena Coleman, an elderly resident of a small Middle England village. She largely excludes herself from the contemporary news media, lamenting that the present outlets systematically reject the views of the elder generation and what she believes to be traditional British values, showing her profound distrust. *The Telegraph* appears to be the only newspaper she engages with, which might be her "lesser evil" of choice, as evidenced by her attempt to submit a 500-word opinion letter to the outlet in the hope of publication.

Besides news outlet choices, both characters are obsessed with nostalgic media products. In terms of Colin, the Woodlands Garden Centre serves as a symbolic space of his engagement with these media products. Unlike Benjamin, who views going to the Garden Centre as "an act of desperation" (p. 179), Colin often exhibits a passion for visiting there, implying his psychological association with this place. The Garden Centre is a shopping center encompassing a furniture department, a pet shop, a clothes shop, and "a huge section devoted to crafts and hobbies" (p. 60), among which several shops selling media products stand out with their nostalgic collections, such as DVDs of British war films and Ealing comedies, jigsaw puzzles depicting "scenes of traditional English village life," and books devoted to local history. These products constitute a mediated world where the English stories of wartime unity, idyllic traditional life, and post-war industrial prosperity are overwhelmingly being retold. Colin, who enjoys his time in this place, indicates his preference for media that portrays a nostalgic version of the world. This media mediates Coe's own memory of the past, constituting a special knowledge system through which he interprets contemporary Britain.

Helena also has connections with these nostalgic media products. For example, in one of the places she frequents, a wall picture of traditional foxhunting receives a noticeable length of depiction in the text. Fox hunting is a traditional British pastime that was practiced in the countryside until its 2005 ban. It is often treated as "an essential component to country life, a traditional part of English national culture" (Eliason, p. 124). The picture of this hunting scene signifies Helena's relishing of media

representing British pastoral traditions that have been rejected in contemporary society. Therefore, both characters show a deep psychological attachment to these nostalgic media products that provide images of traditional Britain. The nostalgia-driven media choices of this social group constitute a knowledge regime that forms the basis for the subsequent diagnostic practices.

THE MEDIA-FRAMED SOCIAL DIAGNOSIS: SLANT PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL ISSUES

As illustrated in the last sections, the media choices of each social group constitute complex knowledge systems analogous to the knowledge system sustained by medical institutions. Directly conditioned and disciplined by such knowledge is the practice defined by Foucault as "the medical gaze" (*le regard médical*), through which doctors observe and interpret patients' conditions in biomedical language to formulate diagnoses (Misselbrook, 2013, p. 1). It is a penetrating gaze that actively distinguishes the normal from the deviant, detects pathological symptoms, recognizes diagnostic signs, and, in the end, produces the "truth" of the diseases according to an established nosology. Similarly, the characters in *Middle England* employ different "media gazes" to form their own diagnoses of British society, producing their own "truths" about social issues. Constrained by the domain and structure of the knowledge system, it illuminates certain societal phenomena while obscuring others, prioritizing certain pathological interpretations while fending off alternative perceptions.

Sophie's Diagnosis: Entrenched Prejudices and Antagonist Forces

Sophie's intellectual-engaged media choices, and Benjamin's likewise, constitute a distinct knowledge system that not only informs their worldview but also contributes to the formation of an intellectual gaze through which they categorize and interpret social phenomena. This gaze operates primarily through an ethical framework, reflecting the discursive patterns predominant in their chosen media sources. According to Rozado (2024), there has been "a marked surge in the number of references to different prejudice types regarding ethnicity, gender, sexual or religious orientation" in British and American news outlets since 2010 (p. 1966). The same phenomenon could be observed in academic literature, which demonstrates an explosive "increasing frequency in the usage of prejudice denouncing terms and social justice associated terminology" in the post-2010 period (p. 1966). As Sophie and Benjamin regularly engage with these intellectual media publications, they inevitably internalize the discursive patterns predominant in these sources.

The pattern of such a diagnostic gaze is evident in both characters' moral assessment of others' behaviors. For example, when observing Derek's contempt towards Naheed, an Asian female instructor, Sophie automatically attributes their conflict to racial- and gender-related prejudices, diagnosing Derek's attitude as "resentment felt by…men at being lectured…by an Asian woman" (p. 40). As cautioned by Liang (2024), these prejudice-denouncing notions such as racism could be employed to "obfuscate the underlying class dynamics" in society (p. 311), thereby recasting systemic struggles as mere moral failings of individuals. This theoretical insight can find validation in the text itself, where Naheed contradicts Sophie's reductive assessment by suggesting that Derek's behavior "is not always to do with race" (p. 44) but might stem from a more generalized frustration with their lives. From the textual description of Derek's appearance—a "ruddy-faced, middle-aged man in a business suit with tousled white hair" (p. 41)—it can also be inferred that he might suffer from economic difficulties, adding to the validity of Naheed's interpretation. Sophie's self-asserted interpretation of Derek's behavior reflects a gaze that prioritizes moral diagnosis. Dereck's anger, which is expressed in offensive, emotional, and vulgar language, is readily dismissed by Sophie as insignificant and undeserving of empathy. A similar diagnostic gaze shapes Sophie's relationship with her husband, Ian, in which moral accusation overrides the possibility of mutual understanding. Unlike Sophie, whose academic privilege allows her to move between cities, Ian, who works and lives in Middle England, is tied to a local job and a provincial economy. His "anxiety" and "uneasiness" over Sophie "drifting back towards a city, a way of life and a set of friends that had nothing to do with him, that pre-dated him" (p. 150), fuels his obsession with a job promotion, which he hopes could offer the financial support for them to live in one city. However, Sophie's gaze systematically elides these socioeconomic factors. When Ian expresses frustration over the missed promotion in irrational terms, Sophie interprets his emotional responses as "gleeful, infantile triumphalism" (p. 330), measuring him against her principles of openness and rationality. Her assertion that "as a person, he's not as open as I thought… his basic model for relationships comes down to antagonism and competition" (p. 331) further affirms such a privileged diagnosis of Ian's anxieties.

While this diagnosis may partially arise from Sophie's intellectual disposition, it more significantly reflects a broader discursive formation shaped by media narratives. As Marsden (2020) notes, the dominant media discourse on class in the UK is often underpinned by a moral framework that delegitimizes certain experiences of economic distress by repositioning them as ethical deficiencies rather than structural consequences (p. 205). Such framing reinforces the moral agenda at play, solidifying Sophie's interpretation and encouraging what Foucault describes as "arrogant imaginings and

affirmations of other people's struggles" (Bove, 1983, p. 51). Similarly, such a slant gaze can be found in the character Benjamin. When discussing with a Palestinian immigrant, Aneeqa, about her mother's dating attitudes, Benjamin comments that "there's much more to life than money" (p. 282), presenting a moral judgment on her mother's preference for rich boyfriends. However, Aneeqa's retort— "Says the man who's never had to use a food bank" (p. 282)—reveals Benjamin's systematic ignorance of materialist factors, such as the austerity policies, behind her mother's wealth-based prejudices.

As Foucault (1963/1976) delineates, a gaze "is not supposed to 'translate' without concealing" (p. xvi). It illuminates and, at the same time, produces its own epistemological limitations and perceptual distortions. Both characters' observations reflect the influence of a prevalent prejudice-denouncing logic shaped by their selected media content, which foregrounds individual morality while marginalizing the structural conditions underpinning human behaviors. Their interpretive framework effectively guards against alternative explanations by dismissing them as irrational or morally deficient. In this process, entrenched prejudices and antagonisms are essentialized as social pathologies, thereby obscuring the socioeconomic conditions that underlie the perceived "prejudice" and "antagonism."

Ian's Diagnosis: Out-of-Control Immigration and out-of-Touch Elites

Ian's laddism-influenced media choices, and Geoffrey's likewise, construct a particular form of knowledge system which not only delimits what has been known but also configures a gaze that determines how new social phenomena are categorized and interpreted. One of its noteworthy traits of lad media is that it popularizes "a 'natural' and 'honest' form of masculinity" (Tippett, 2023, p. 146). As the editorial stance of the lad magazine *Loaded* shows, they condemn "[r]eflection, deliberation and living life according to the terms of others" as "'inauthentic' and 'dishonest,'" and elevate the idea that "liberation was found in acting instinctively" (Crewe, 2003, p. 100). It shapes a gaze that normalizes subjective or even stereotyped judgment and intuitive responses. For example, when reading a news article about a murder suspect, Ian immediately concludes the man is guilty, not on the basis of evidence, but because the suspect's profile— "an English teacher with a fondness for romantic poetry, known occasionally to dye his hair a subtle shade of blue"—appears to Ian as a "weirdo" (p. 57). Through Ian's gaze, deviation from normative masculinity is not only perceived as "abnormal" but is also rapidly conflated with criminality. This process is similar to a doctor diagnosing patients not through careful examination of pathology, but through a normative framework that privileges instinct over analysis, and normalcy over health. Such a gaze reflects the internalized logic of lad media, which encourages arbitrary stereotyping and intuitive judgments. Similarly, when Geoffrey observes "two vegetarian women sharing a cabin," he self-assertedly claims them to be lesbians. His comment, "I know one when I see one, that's all," expresses his laddish judgmental attitude.

Aligned with such a reliance on intuitive judgment is a latent anti-intellectualist attitude. Notably, the editors of *Loaded* were hostile to the so-called "left-wing politics of the middle-class intelligentsia" (Crewe, 2003, p. 102). In the novel, Geoffrey serves as a representative of such a cultural attitude. When discussing the content quality of BBC with Sophie, he argues that people of her kind—namely, the liberal "elite" —live in a world which is "elitist, arrogant, metropolitan and out of touch," disconnected from the "real world" where people like him reside (p. 159). The "real world" in Geoffrey's argument, from a laddism perspective, most likely represents the male working-class population. Although Geoffrey is a businessman who can afford a luxurious ten-day cruise trip and is certainly not working-class, he readily adopts a "working-class" sentiment, empathizing with or even internalizing working-class identity to strengthen his opposition to so-called elitism. This logic also appears to be shaped by lad media discourse, as reflected in the *Loaded* editor's exclamation that "whether you're working class or middle class, [if] you work all day, you're all working class aren't you?" (Crewe, 2003, p. 98). Through such a gaze, the society is structured in an opposition between the liberal elite and the working-class white male, who are often the "victims" of "unfair" elitist values. Such a framing is further manifested in Geoffrey's poignant comment on Ian's failed promotion: "This country. We all know the score. How it works. People like Ian don't get a fair crack of the whip any more" (p. 164). As implied from the preceding dialogue, where he tries to confirm Ian's competitor is "an Asian lady," Geoffrey implicitly attributes the failure to "reverse prejudice" against the working-class white male. In this way, the promotion of an immigrant over a white male becomes the pathological symptom of such an elite disease.

Compared with Geoffrey, Ian's opinions about intellectual and immigration issues are hardly evident at the beginning. He seems to maintain a neutral stance in his promotion failure, accepting his incompetence to the Asian colleague by acknowledging that "She's great" (p. 56). However, Geoffrey's comments later elicit the latent anti-intellectualist thoughts already installed by the lad culture in Ian's knowledge system, making him adopt the same problematizing narrative. According to the mass communication scholar Paul F. Lazarsfeld (1948), the effect of mass media is not always straightforward but often through a "two-step flow of communication" where the message travels through the opinion leaders first and

then to the other people in a social group (p. 13). In this social group, the vague feelings of the group members can be "reinforced" and "crystalized" into definite opinions (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948, p.14). This effect is evident in Ian's increasingly self-asserted judgment on social issues regarding the elite and immigration. For example, in one of the arguments with Sophie, Ian is accused of frequent usage of the term "PC" (political correctness) to rebut Sophie's ideas (p. 288), showing his internalized rejection of left-liberal values and contempt toward "elitist" discourse. In terms of the immigration agenda, Ian appears increasingly obsessed with the idea of an immigration "crisis." After seeing the immigration figure, he repeats: "We're full up. The country's full up. Something's got to be done about it now," disregarding Sophie's more sophisticated explanation that "it was fewer people leaving, rather than more people arriving" (p. 303). Later, as Ian reflects on the failed job promotion, he exclamation—"If you like being patronized and talked down to by someone who used to be your colleague, who's sitting behind the desk you should be sitting behind, it was just great" (p. 56)—shows a total internalization of the belief that the job was unjustly given to an Asian immigrant, backed by the politically correct elite. Guided by such a gaze disciplined by the media, the social group exemplified by Ian essentializes the "out-of-control" immigration and "out-of-touch" elite as social diseases.

Colin's Diagnosis: National Decline and Cultural Displacement

Colin's nostalgic media choices, and Helena's likewise, form a particular form of knowledge system that not only shapes their memory about the English past but also structures a nostalgic gaze that determines how to categorize and interpret social phenomena. It results in a perspective that normalizes a romantic imagination of the community spirits and social culture in the past while pathologizing contemporary changes as the erosion of the past national character. To begin with, their limited engagement with contemporary news has rendered the present-day British social developments largely unnoticed and unintelligible. For example, Colin has difficulty understanding and accepting the transformation of the British economic structure. When visiting the Longbridge factory, as initially anticipated, Colin is shocked by the total demolition of the factory site and the replacement of shops. Such changes reflect the process of deindustrialization in Britain, during which many jobs in heavy industries were destroyed while new types of employment in service-based sectors emerged (Clarke & Newman, 2017, p. 105). Colin's ignorance of such change and his question—"How can you replace a factory with shops? If there's no factory, how are people supposed to make the money to spend in the shops?" (p. 266)—reveals his confusion and rejection of such societal shift. Helena expresses a similar sentiment. Her complaints about the disappearance of family-run shops and their replacement by migrant-operated new businesses demonstrate how her constricted knowledge system fails to accommodate the socioeconomic shifts brought about by globalization, such as the declining competency of traditional family-run businesses. From a Foucauldian perspective, this limited understanding of the present establishes specific "conditions of possibility," rendering certain contemporary social conditions unintelligible and, therefore, abnormal under their diagnostic gaze.

In contrast to their limited consumption of contemporary news, the two characters' obsession with nostalgic media products constructs a past-oriented gaze that glorifies the past way of life over other possibilities as the standard of a healthy British society. As previously analyzed, the collections in the Woodland Garden Centre symbolize Colin's nostalgic media choices, which keep retelling the national spirits of "splendid isolation," the post-war optimism, the industrial community values, the traditional idyllic English way of living, etc. Similarly, the picture of fox hunting, which Helena regularly is exposed to, constantly narrates "the artistic and cultural history of this country" (Egan, 2014, p. 76). However, these media collections, while upholding a contingent image of British culture, silence the alternative narratives of repression, struggles, and multicultural voices. For example, while Colin can vividly recall his life as embodying a "war spirit" at Longbridge, he demonstrates evident amnesia regarding the failed protest rally against the factory's privatization in 2001 (p. 264). According to Stuart Hall (1999), these artefacts equal to a discursive practice that "foreshortens, silences, disavows, forgets and elides" difference, dissent, and change" in pursuit of a collective "national story" as the embodiment of the English spirits and virtues (pp. 4-5). Moreover, as Sophie observed in the novel, the real countryside scenery she observed is "not quite the picture-postcard village" and "probably not have passed muster as the model for one of those jigsaws that enjoyed such healthy sales in the toyshop at Woodlands Garden Centre" (p. 71), implying the elevated aesthetic qualities in these nostalgic media. The knowledge field constituted by these media constructs a gaze that regards these contingent aesthetic configurations of Britain's past as the essential expressions of authentic Britishness. The transformed economic structure and the community culture become symptomatic of the pathology of present-day national character, which relatively responds to a national decline and cultural replacement.

Such sentiment is even amplified and exploited by *The Telegraph* newspaper they consume, which employs these nostalgic narratives to advance its own stance on matters of international issues, immigration, government policies, etc. As a conservative newspaper, it frequently

adopts a traditionalist rationale to reinforce its editorial stance, aligning specific political attitudes with its readership's understanding of British national identity. For instance, in its coverage of EU immigration, it characterizes illegal immigrants as "culturally weird and morally wrong 'folk devils'" (Tong & Zuo, 2018, pp. 2-15), thereby constructing an image of British culture as inherently exclusive of such newcomers. On the issue of fox hunting, the paper places "particular emphasis on the importance of hunting as a British tradition" (Parry, p. 11) and offers "the most sympathetic coverage of the pro-hunting alliance" (Anderson, 2006, p. 2). As Shaw (2023) delineates, "inaccurate representations of national past and heritage can be manipulated and mobilized to respond to the contemporary political situation, operating in relation to racialized discourses and responding to fears surrounding Britain's decline on the world stage" (p. 166). These news contents not only solidify both characters' nostalgic slant but also mobilize them to problematize the societal changes based on standards that contemporary society no longer applies. When observing the changes in Longbridge, Colin utters: "We've gone soft, that's the problem. No wonder the rest of the world's laughing at us" (p. 267). Colin's fear of being laughed at by "the rest of the world" implies post-imperial anxiety that the UK no longer commands respect through its productivity, toughness, or leadership. He sees the fall of the nation's world dominance as essentially its disease instead of the consequence of a natural process of balance of powers. Helena openly opposes the prohibitions on "hunting foxes", arguing that it is tyranny on "people who once kept a great British tradition alive" (p. 218), treating hunting as a universal British tradition instead of some class privilege. Guided by such a gaze disciplined by the media, this social group perceives national decline and cultural replacement as the contemporary social diseases that need to be treated.

THE MEDIA-SHAPED SOCIAL TREATMENT: POLARIZED PUBLIC OPINIONS

In the discursive regime established by medical knowledge, medical institutions emerge, claiming the necessity and the authority to treat the patient's body, anchoring the power of knowledge to the practice of medical intervention in clinical organizations. Similarly, the Brexit referendum emerges as an institutional practice that requires and legitimizes the citizen's intervention in the health of the national body. However, one notable characteristic of the Brexit referendum voting is the flexible interpretation of the two voting choices by the media (Zappettini & Krzyżanowski, 2019, p. 2), with each interpretation feeding the different social pathologies recognized by the different social groups. In this process, the different social diagnoses are repositioned to be associated with two oppositional voting treatments, on which two adversarial political identities of "Leavers" and "Remainers" are formed. Such antagonism is particularly presented in the tension between Sophie and Ian, who align with the Remain and Leave camps, respectively. It functions homologously to the medical institution of asylum, in which all the socially undesirable and morally irreconcilable subjects are amalgamated under the pathology of "the mad," thereby enclosing an empathetic and meaningful engagement with their different experiences. In this way, the voting treatment further entrenches the existing social divisions and disrupts meaningful dialogues for a possible political census.

Sophie's Treatment: Remain as a Restraint on the Populist Force

As aforementioned, the social group represented by Sophie has diagnosed social illness as various forms of prejudices and antagonism, as opposed to the ideal of a rational and harmonious society. During the EU referendum, such symptomatic phenomena intensified as "anti-elitist and exclusionary populist rhetoric" was repeatedly mobilized by the Leave-supporting media at the mid-point of the campaign, pushing such populist discourse into the mainstream (Smith et al., 2021, p. 21). Such phenomena are also reflected in the novel. For example, on BBC News Channel, Nigel Farage shows the notorious "BREAKING POINT" poster, depicting lines of refugees waiting to enter Europe (p. 311). In *The Sunday Telegraph*, Boris Johnson is "drawing an analogy between the European Union and Nazi Germany" (p. 311). Despite Benjamin's clear aversion to such discourse, these media messages all appear in his news diet.

The strong exposure of these populist messages from the Leave campaign forced the Remain-supporting media to be occupied with defense, rather than having room to produce a clear and effective message about "the benefits of staying in the EU" (Zečić-Durmišević, 2020, p. 191). The result was to "reinforce the main Brexit arguments", increase adversarial attitudes, and amplify the perceived consequence of populist forces while "marginalizing social, cultural, and civic issues" that should have received public attention (Maccaferri, 2019, p. 6). In this way, the signifier of "Brexit" becomes a crystallization of populist forces, making Remain-voting a necessary resistance against this disease of these prejudiced and divisive ideologies. In the novel, Philip's explanation acutely grasps this feeling: "Do you want to be on the same side as Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson?" (p. 307). A similar reaction could be observed in Sophie. Initially undecisive about the referendum choice, she solidifies her Remain stance after being triggered by Ian's anti-intellectual attitudes. She feels that her "modern, layered, multiple identity" (p. 331) was threatened by "Leavers" like Ian. "Remain" becomes a way to separate themselves from the other side, which they deem incomprehensible and irreconcilable.

Such division is similar to the practice of segregating the madmen in the asylum, where the psychological

experiences of these people are denied under the gaze of the doctors. Essentially speaking, this conflict results from the clashing of two knowledge systems, where two groups of subjects are disciplined under specific discursive formations. The binary voting choices function as the dividing power technology of "great confinement," which "[establishes] presences and absences" and "[breaks] up collective dispositions" in the population. In this way, it "[renders] social relations less symmetrical and reciprocal" by "disrupting the communicative relations that nourish social and political agency" (Johnson et al., p. 572). In the context of Brexit, the identity of Remainers emerges under such division as both a resistance to the populist forces and a subjectification of self that entrenches individuals in their own knowledge regime, blocking the possibility for dialogues and reconciliation.

Ian's Treatment: Leave as a Protest against Arrogant Elites

In light of the previous discussion, the social group represented by Ian has diagnosed the social illness as essentially the "out-of-control" immigration and the "out-of-touch" elite. During the EU referendum, such a narrative was popularized by the Leave campaign in the media to appeal for votes. Although the novel does not detail what Ian reads during the referendum, it is highly possible he is exposed to the message of Martin Daubney, a TV pundit and the former editor of the lad mag *Loaded*, who became a Brexit Party MEP for the West Midlands—the region where Ian lives. On social media, this lad media figure has been consistently fueling the anti-immigration and anti-elite sentiment through the narrative that the living of the white-working class was endangered by immigration (2016b) and betrayed by the "intellectual elite" (2016c). Such narratives not only fed into Ian's laddism-influenced perception, reinforcing his slant diagnosis, but also potently associated such perception with the motive to vote Leave, framing it as the solution to such social diseases. Furthermore, by accusing the Remain supporters as "well-off, metropolitans who will never compete with 4m extra immigrants for work" (2016a), these discourses position Remain voters under the signifier of the "other" in opposition to the "ordinary" "us" (Koller et al., 2019), analogous to how medical discourses situate the mad people in the realm of abnormality, which needs to be defended against for the health of the public. Such discursive formation is evident in Ian's reaction to Sophie's Remain inclination, where he refers to Sophie as part of "you lot" against "us" (p. 289). It parallels the binary construction of a pathological "other" and the normal "us." At the same time, Ian's refusal to engage with Sophie's direct question—"Who's 'us'? Who's 'you lot'?"—exemplifies what Foucault (1961/1988) describes as the "monologue of reason about madness" (p. 10), a unidirectional discourse wherein the "rational" subject refuses meaningful dialogue with the "irrational" other. In their narrative, "Remainers" become the signifier of these pathological forces against which the society and the rights of the "ordinary people" must be defended, and Brexit is framed as the remedy for those elite-induced diseases. If the conflicts between Sophie and Ian, as exemplified on the topic of immigration and "political correctness," only reveal the fissures in their different knowledge systems, the formation of Remain and Leave distinctions as popularized by Martin Daubney figures undoubtedly intensifies such conflicts, leading to further divisions. In the novel, there is a sudden increase in tension after Ian and Sophie decide on their divergent voting choices. From Ian's perspective, Sophie's Remain choice proves that "she's very naïve" and "she lives in a bubble" (p. 331). In other words, he considers her to be fundamentally incapable of understanding "real" social conditions, similar to how mad men are incapable of "authentic" reasoning. Such formation acts in the same structure as the asylum institution, wherein a particular social group is not only pathologized on an insular form of reason, but also subjected to a form of treatment which is fundamentally built on an exclusive mechanism that obstructs meaningful dialogue and resists reconciliation.

Colin's Treatment: Leave as a Resistance to Europe's "Encroachment"

As previously discussed, the social group represented by Colin identifies the social disease as essentially being the national decline and the cultural replacement. During the EU referendum, such nationalism- and nostalgia-based perception was strategically adopted by the Leave campaign to invoke a Eurosceptic discourse and gain votes. As Maccaferri (2019) notes, Euroscepticism is a discourse "built upon history, 'depend on' history," but "problematize a … past" (p. 4). By associating the older generation's sentiment about the national decline and cultural replacement with the narrative of EU threats, such discourse mobilizes the nostalgic sentiment to act against European harmonization.

In the novel, Colin is clearly persuaded by a *Sunday Telegraph* article where Boris Johnson made an inflammatory comparison between the EU and Nazi Germany, with a "half-page picture" of him "looking serious and statesmanlike", reminiscent of a "Churchillian" figure (p. 297). This presentation not only casts Britain as in a WW2 situation facing the threats of an aggressive EU, but also himself, the advocate of the Leave campaign, as Churchill, who will lead Britain to victory against European forces. By implying Britain is in a state of sovereign crisis, it validates Colin's diagnosis of national decline and his grievances about what he perceived as the weakened British power caused by deindustrialization. By picturing Boris Johnson as a

Churchill figure, it activates a romanticized WW2 narrative as often seen in nostalgic media, where a national leader will lead the country out of the crisis. Colin's exclamation that "He talks sense. He's about the only one who does" (p. 298) exhibits his complete alignment with such discourses. The newspaper here serves not only as a channel for the politician's voice, but an intentional amplifier for such discourses. Besides this report, the WW2 narrative has been repeatedly implemented by the newspaper to present a Leave-voting appeal. For example, the front page of the Telegraph on 20 June features another half-page Boris picture and the headline "Vote Leave, Change History," consistently comparing the EU to Hitler. Such a framing builds upon the historical trauma of the British Empire's declining global power, a sense of loss and humiliation still felt by the population, especially among the older generation, such as Colin. Notably, Boris Johnson was a Brussels correspondent of *The Telegraph* in the 1990s, whose comments about the EU have been scandalously malicious (Hinde, 2017, p. 81). His prominence in the Brexit debate not only reflects the popularity of right-wing politicians' voices but also shows the powerful effect of the right-wing newspapers' discourses. As Hinde (2017) delineates, newspapers and tabloids such as "the Mail, Express, Telegraph and the Sun" were "participants in the campaign rather than reporters of it" (p. 82). In their narratives, the floating signifier of "Brexit" suggests not only a retreat from the EU but also a return to a "glorious" national past of "splendid isolation" that is perceived as the exact treatment the contemporary Britain needs. Influenced by such a framing, the old Middle Englanders, such as Colin, are successfully mobilized to vote Leave.

Conclusion

By making an analogy between Michel Foucault's model of medical institution and contemporary media systems, this study explores how three divergent patterns of media choices characteristic of three social groups construct three distinct knowledge systems, and how they condition and discipline each social group's perceptions of social diseases, leading to different referendum voting choices. In medical practices, the power is exercised on the patient's body through both the production of pathological truth (diagnosis) and the imposition of physical intervention (treatment), conditioned and disciplined by medical knowledge. During the Brexit referendum, the power is operated in a similar manner through the public's formation of opinions about the social body and the subsequent referendum voting, configured and shaped by various forms of media that facilitate and cultivate people's perception of the world.

The study identifies three distinct patterns of media choices and modes of opinion formation in the novel, revealing the underlying power relations between media and public discourse. Their arguments for different "truths" about British society are pushed into direct conflict by the referendum voting. Polemic opinions are expressed and contested through both interpersonal communication and mass media channels. It encourages the pathologization of different experiences and opinions, contributing to a polarized public sentiment. Just as the medical system has historically labelled certain behaviors as "madness" based on societal intolerance of specific behaviors, the Brexit discourse similarly problematizes the opposition, reducing them to objects that require treatment, education, and regulation rather than being respected and listened to. Despite the media's pervasive influence on public discourse, its role is frequently naturalized and left critically unexamined. BrexLit *Middle England* illuminates how media systems operate as a Foucauldian medical institution that shapes citizens' perceptions of social reality, shedding light on a crucial yet underexplored dimension of Brexit division.

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Conflict of Interest

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