



The Increasing Prominence of Prejudice and Social Justice Rhetoric in UK News Media

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Executive Summary

- **Recent years have seen considerable debate about the rise of political polarisation in British society.** Specifically, over the last decade, various studies suggest that the UK is now rapidly following the United States into a more polarised politics in which intensifying ‘culture wars’ over issues such as racism, identity, diversity, history, the legacy of history, and ‘social justice’ or so-called ‘woke’ politics are becoming more prominent. This matters because it is, arguably, undermining the cohesion and stability of our society.
- **While this debate focuses on the role of party politics, much less attention has focused on the relationship between news media and rising polarisation.** Building on recent pioneering research which has tracked a sharp increase in the overall prominence of prejudice and social justice rhetoric in US and Spanish media, our purpose in this report is to explore whether similar trends are now also visible in the UK.
- **We use computational content analysis to explore the chronological prevalence in UK news media of words which denote prejudice (i.e., *sexism, racism, homophobia, etc.*) and ‘social justice’ or ‘woke’ rhetoric (i.e., *white privilege, whiteness, cultural appropriation, diversity, etc.*).** Our main interest in doing so is to explore how the media debate has changed over time.
- **Thus, we present analyses of UK media usage of these terms between the years 2000 and 2020 in 16 million news and opinion articles, published in a nationally representative sample of ten popular British media outlets: *The Guardian, The Independent, The Daily Mirror, BBC, The Times, Financial Times, Metro, The Telegraph, Daily Mail and The Sun.*** To our knowledge, this is the most comprehensive analysis of UK media coverage of these issues to date.
- **Consistent with recent studies in the U.S. and Spain, we find that references to prejudice and social justice rhetoric have increased sharply in UK media in recent years.** Between 2010 and 2020, terms such as *racism* and *white supremacy* in popular UK media outlets increased on average by 769% and 2,827% respectively, while terms such as *sexism, patriarchy* and *misogyny* increased by 169%, 336% and 237% each. Additional terms such as *transphobia, islamophobia* and *anti-semitism* increased by 2,578%, 289% and 469% respectively. Similarly, terms associated with social justice discourse have also markedly increased over the same temporal period: *diversity* (199%), *activism* (146%), *hate speech* (880%), *inequality* (218%), *gender-neutral* (1,019%) or *slavery* (413%).
- **These sharp increases are pervasive across media, regardless of their ideological leanings.** But overall prevalence tends to be larger in left-leaning outlets. Mentions of prejudice have also become far more prominent in the BBC, the UK’s leading public service outlet. From 2010 to 2020, mentions in BBC content of terms suggestive of racism have increased by over 802% while mentions of terms suggestive of sexism have increased by 610%. Mentions of homophobia and transphobia increased by 134% and 3,341% respectively. Terms signifying islamophobia and anti-Semitism increased by 585% and 2,431%.
- **By tracking the temporal prevalence of terms denoting prejudice and social justice in UK news media, we throw light on how the UK media debate is evolving and raise important questions about whether media institutions have got the balance right in how we talk about these issues.** In the final section, we consider possible explanations for the sharp increase in the prominence of prejudice and social justice rhetoric in UK news media, including the shifting profile of the UK media class which has increasingly become far more elite.



1. Introduction

Recent years have seen considerable debate about the rise of political polarisation and the so-called 'culture wars' in the United Kingdom. These debates have tracked the rise of national populist parties such as the UK Independence Party and the Brexit Party, the Brexit referendum in 2016, the rise of Boris Johnson, and intensifying debates about racism, immigration, gender, statues, and Britain's empire.

Against this backdrop, various studies have warned that the UK is now following the United States into a far more polarised or divisive politics, where people on different sides of the political divide become mutually hostile toward one another. Drawing on nationally representative surveys, researchers at King's College London, led by Professor Bobby Duffy, have pointed to "clear echoes" in the UK of the more polarised politics that has gripped the United States in recent years.¹

In 2021, five years after the Brexit debate, they found that people's views on cultural issues such as identity and diversity have become intimately tied up with the side of the Brexit debate with which they identify, while people's identities as Labour or Conservative voters, show similar alignments, providing 'conditions for more all-encompassing division'.²

Research by the Centre for Policy Studies has also pointed to the same conclusion. Drawing on surveys and focus groups with voters, they suggest the UK is on the same road as America, albeit a few miles behind, heading into a more polarised politics in which large numbers of people feel deeply disillusioned and divided, especially on identity and culture.³

These findings have also been reinforced by other academic studies. Drawing on surveys with British voters, scholars have warned about the rise of what is called 'affective polarization', namely, the way in which, since Brexit, many British people have embraced new political

identities as Leavers and Remainers which lead them to feel positively about members of their own political tribe but negatively toward members of the opposing political tribe.⁴

Much of this reflects earlier findings in the U.S. where, amid the rise of new cultural debates about things such as racism, immigration, diversity, the legacy of history, and 'social justice' or 'woke politics', Republicans and Democrats have developed very strong emotional attachments to people on their own side which have not only influenced the positions they take on specific issues but have also left them feeling more hostile toward people on the other side.⁵

The rise of this more polarised political environment is deeply concerning given that democracies require both people and leaders to engage respectfully with one another, especially on divisive issues.⁶ It undermines the cohesion of our societies, fuels division among different groups of voters, and emboldens foreign actors who look to exploit these internal tensions for geopolitical advantages.

But, at the same time, much of the existing research has only explored this issue through the narrow lens of party politics while largely ignoring one of the most powerful and influential institutions in society: the media. In Britain and other Western democracies, it is now well established that news media can have significant 'agenda-setting effects', shaping public perceptions and people's concerns about phenomena in the world around them. Recent studies have shown that increased media coverage of certain topics—such as immigration, crime, or terrorism—tends to precede increases in public concern about these issues, revealing how media can shape the national agenda in very powerful ways, influencing public opinion and politics.⁷

More recently, in the United States, research by one of the co-authors of this report, David Rozado, shows how the media debate has fundamentally changed in recent years. After analysing data from 47 media outlets, between 1970 and 2019, the research documented the so-called ‘Great Awakening’ of media, by tracking a sharp rise in references to terms that denote prejudice—such as *racism*, *sexism*, *homophobia*, *transphobia*, *anti-semitism* and *Islamophobia*.⁸

Previous research by the same author had already documented substantial increases in US news media discourse of terms such as *social justice*, *diversity* or *cultural appropriation*.⁹ Thus, paradoxically, despite the well-documented decline in overt expressions of prejudice that has taken place in many Western societies over the last five decades,¹⁰

the media has become far more focused on these contested ideas.

As shown in Figure 1, whether on the right or left, prejudice-denoting terms became far more prominent within the US media debate throughout the 2010s. While this sharp increase began before Donald Trump’s presidential bid in 2015, his election and the more polarised politics which followed might have contributed to the consolidation of this trend. In turn, this shift appears to have preceded increased public concerns about the prevalence of prejudice in society.¹¹ Similar trends have been uncovered in Spanish news media where the same method of analysis has documented a sharp increase in the frequency of terms which denote forms of prejudice related to gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion.¹²

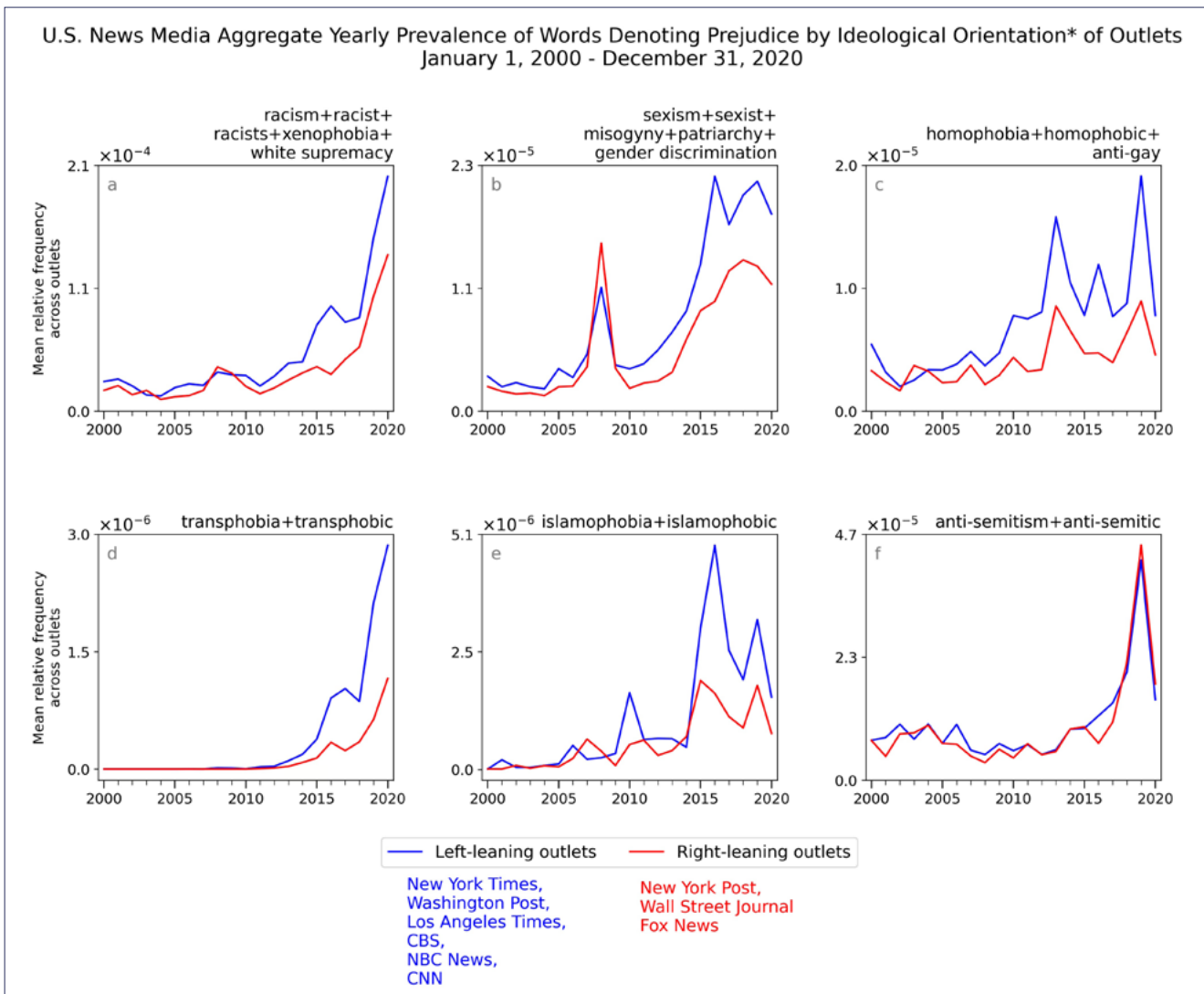


Figure 1

Average prevalence of prejudice-denoting terms across popular U.S. news media outlets sorted by ratings of outlets’ political bias from AllSides.¹³

The so-called ‘Great Awakening’ in media discourse is now attracting global attention, from journalists and analysts on both the left and right, including reputable mainstream magazines such as *The Economist*, *Vox*, and *The Guardian*.¹⁴ In this report, we ask the following question: to what extent is this ‘Great Awakening’ now also visible in UK media?

To answer this question, we explore UK media trends between the years 2000 and 2020, using the same techniques that were used to examine US and Spanish news media. To our knowledge, this is the first comprehensive attempt at exploring the prevalence of prejudice and social justice rhetoric across a large and representative sample of written articles in UK media.

While we are not making causal claims about the role of media in the polarisation of UK society, we are able to show, descriptively, and for the first time, key media trends over time, which contributes to the debate. We also hope this report will inspire future research on the relationship between news media, polarisation and the culture wars.

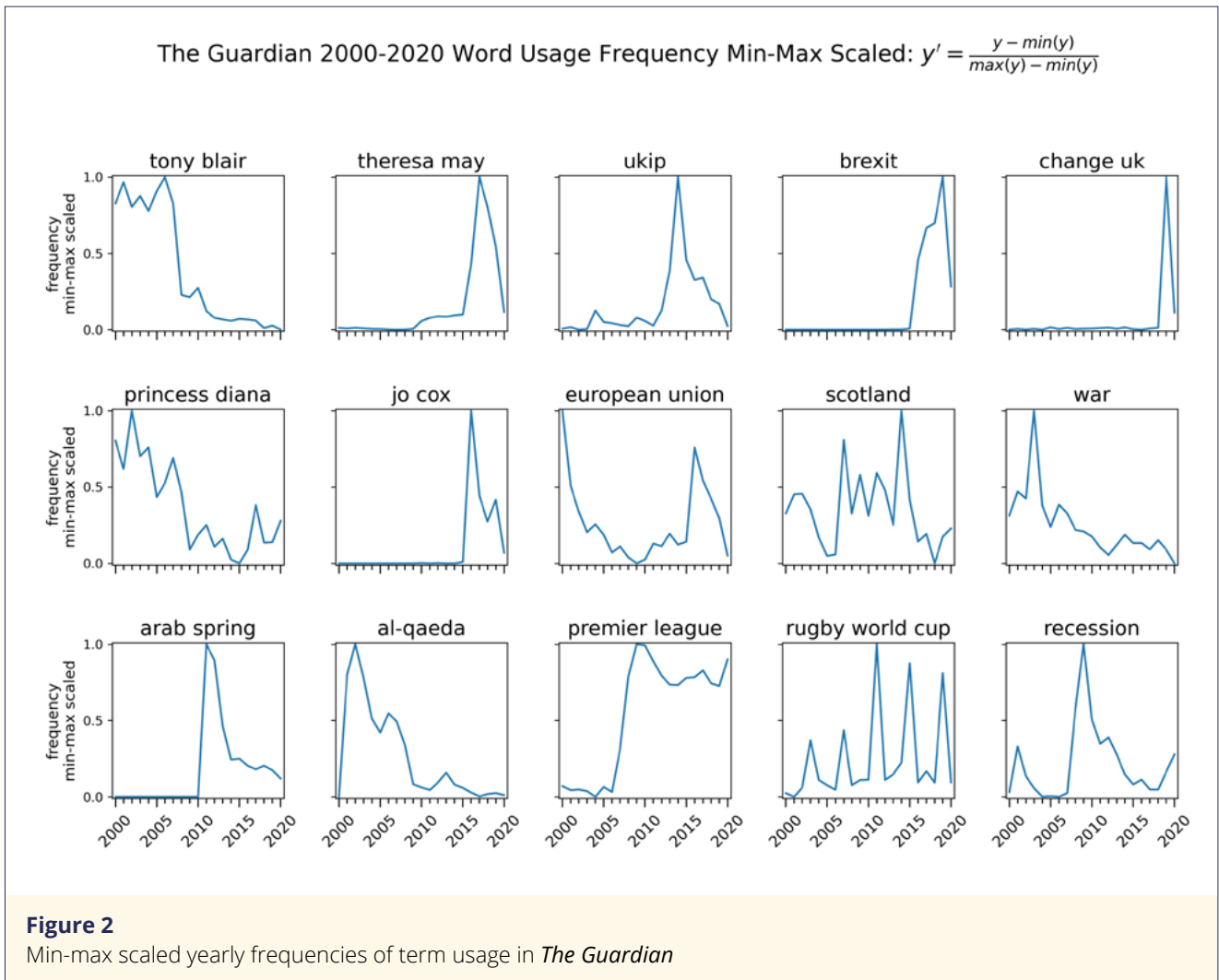
2. Data and Methods

The list of UK news outlets analysed for this report was derived from a YouGov ranking which lists the most popular newspapers in the UK.¹⁵ We added the BBC to this list since despite not being a newspaper, it is one of the most popular and influential news outlets in the UK. Ratings about the political leanings of UK news outlets were taken from three different sources that rank the political biases of news media, namely, Ad Fontes Media,¹⁶ AllSides¹⁷ and YouGov.¹⁸ All three sources mostly overlap in their political biases ratings of each news outlet analysed. To adjudicate occasional disagreements, we took a majority vote of the three sources to use as labels of news outlets political leanings.

Our method to analyse news media articles is described in supplementary material and has been shown previously to accurately capture historical events and social trends.¹⁹ Here, we briefly mention that yearly relative frequencies of a target term in an outlet were estimated by dividing the number of occurrences of the target term in all sample articles from the given year by the total number of all words in all

sample articles from that year. This method of estimating frequency takes into account the varying number of articles produced per year by each media outlet. Overall, we analysed over 16 million articles from 10 popular UK news media outlets.

Despite the potential for occasional noisy outliers in any big data analysis, overall, we are confident that our frequency metrics are representative of word prevalence in print news media content. For readers who are unfamiliar with this method, Figure 2 provides a visual demonstration, presenting the ‘min-max’ scaled yearly frequencies of some illustrative terms in *The Guardian* during the past twenty years.²⁰ The figure shows how our method accurately captures media coverage over time of key events, parties and political developments, with coverage of terms such as *UKIP*, *Brexit*, the *Arab Spring*, or the breakaway political party *Change UK* rising and falling at the expected points in time. The temporal sensitivity of the trends gives us confidence in our data, analysis, and findings.



3. Prominence of prejudice themes in UK news media content

We now turn to discuss our findings. Since the year 2000, the prevalence in UK news media of terms denoting different types of prejudice has increased sharply (see Figure 3). Across the 10 most popular news media outlets in the UK, mentions of ethnic prejudice have increased, on average, by 162%. The gender prejudice theme has increased by 174%. Prejudice themes relating to sexual orientation, gender identity and Islamic or Semitic religious orientation have also similarly increased, by 127%, 7,537%, 4,883% and 315% respectively.

While the individual trends vary, there is a common pattern across all six of them, namely, a marked increase in their prevalence in UK media post-2010. Crucially, as can be seen in Figure 3, this sharp increase preceded the Brexit referendum of 2016.

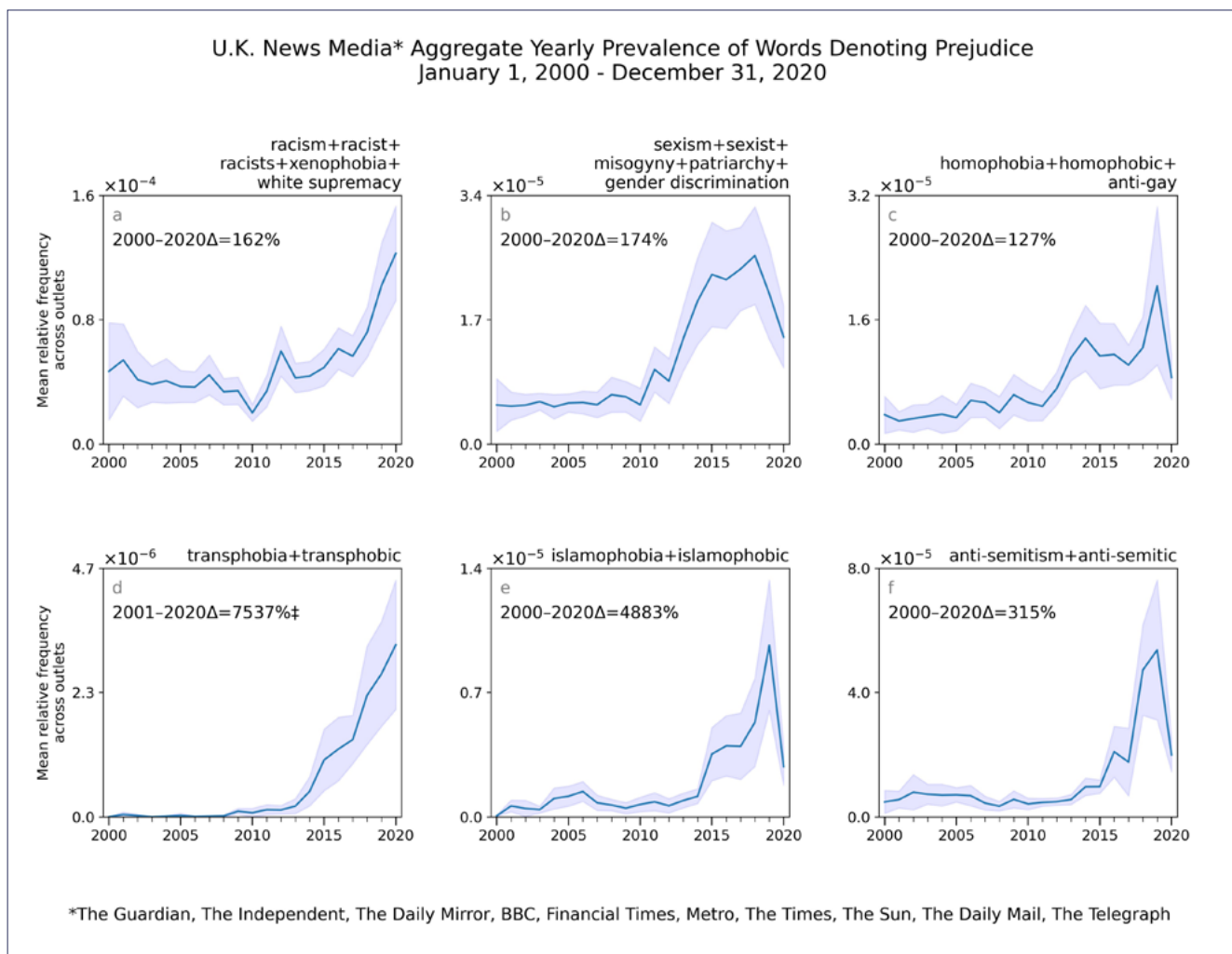


Figure 3

Average prevalence of prejudice-denoting terms in popular U.K. news media outlets. The shaded areas around the mean trends display the 95% confidence intervals. The 2000 to 2020 percentage change across outlets is shown on the upper left of each subplot. The symbol ‡ in subplot d denotes that no instances of the terms were found in the year 2000 so the year with the earliest appearance of either term is used instead.

The patterns in Figure 3 are highly reminiscent of the 'Great Awakening' trends in American and Spanish media.²¹ Indeed, the degree of coupling between US and UK news media outlets with respect to the prominence of themes denoting prejudice is substantial (see the large Pearson's correlation coefficients between UK and US news media mentions of prejudice in Figure 4). Overall, the prevalence of prejudice topics in UK media is larger than in their US counterparts, suggesting that Britain is experiencing similar, if not stronger, trends. An exception to this trend is the ethnic/racial prejudice theme where in the last couple of years its prevalence in US news media has surpassed its British counterparts.

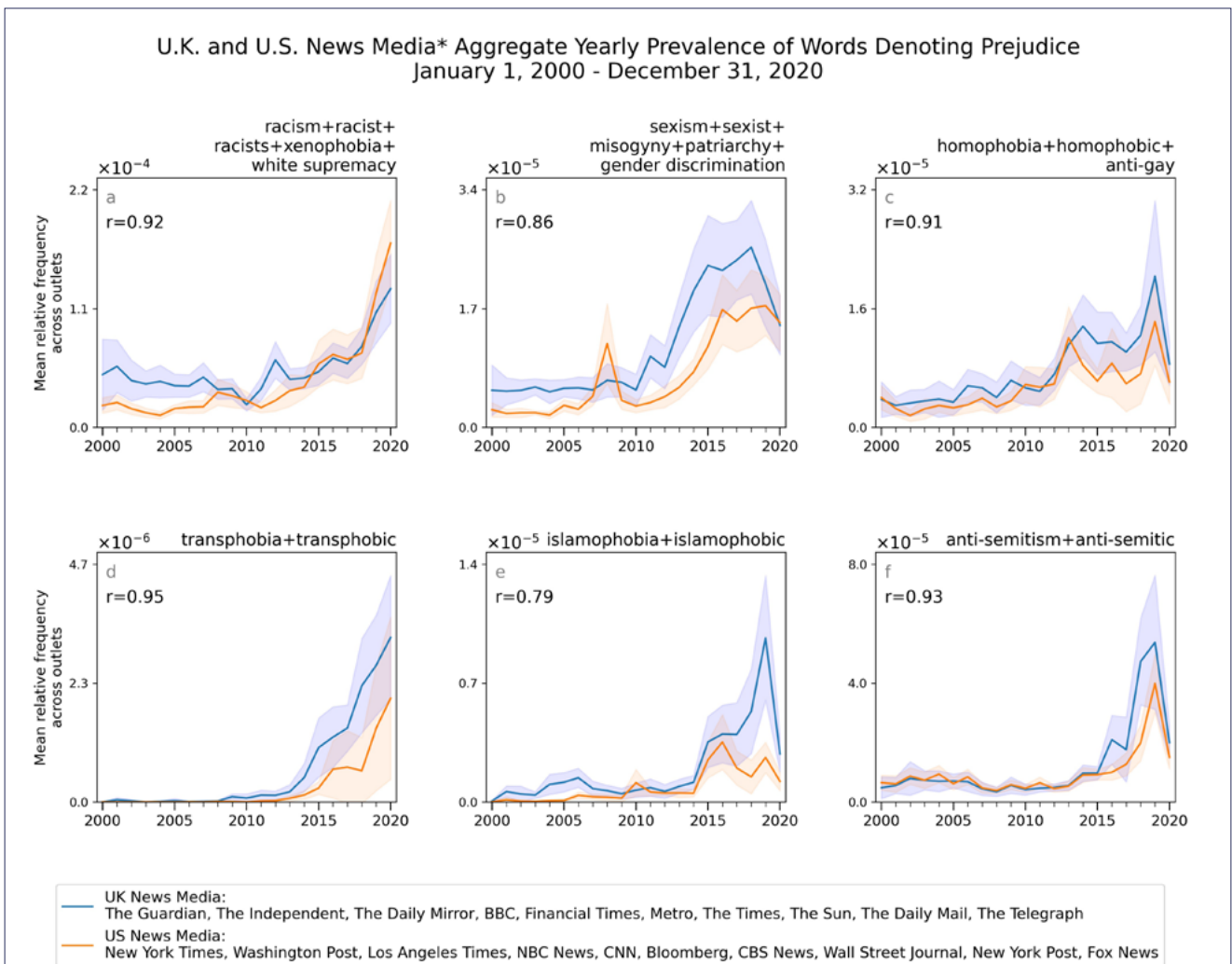


Figure 4

Average prevalence of prejudice-denoting words across U.K. (blue) and U.S. (orange) news media. The shaded areas display the 95% confidence intervals around the means. The Pearson correlation coefficients between both time series are shown in the upper-left of each subplot.

A visualization of the prominence of these prejudice themes in individual UK outlets is shown in Figure 5. Ethnic and gender prejudice-denoting terms are very prominent in *The Independent* and *The Guardian* but are much less apparent in the *Financial Times*.

Prejudice related to sexual orientation or gender identity is very prominent in *Metro* and not so much in tabloids such as *The Sun* or *The Daily Mirror*. In recent years, the prominence of the anti-Semitism prejudice type is largest in *The Telegraph*.

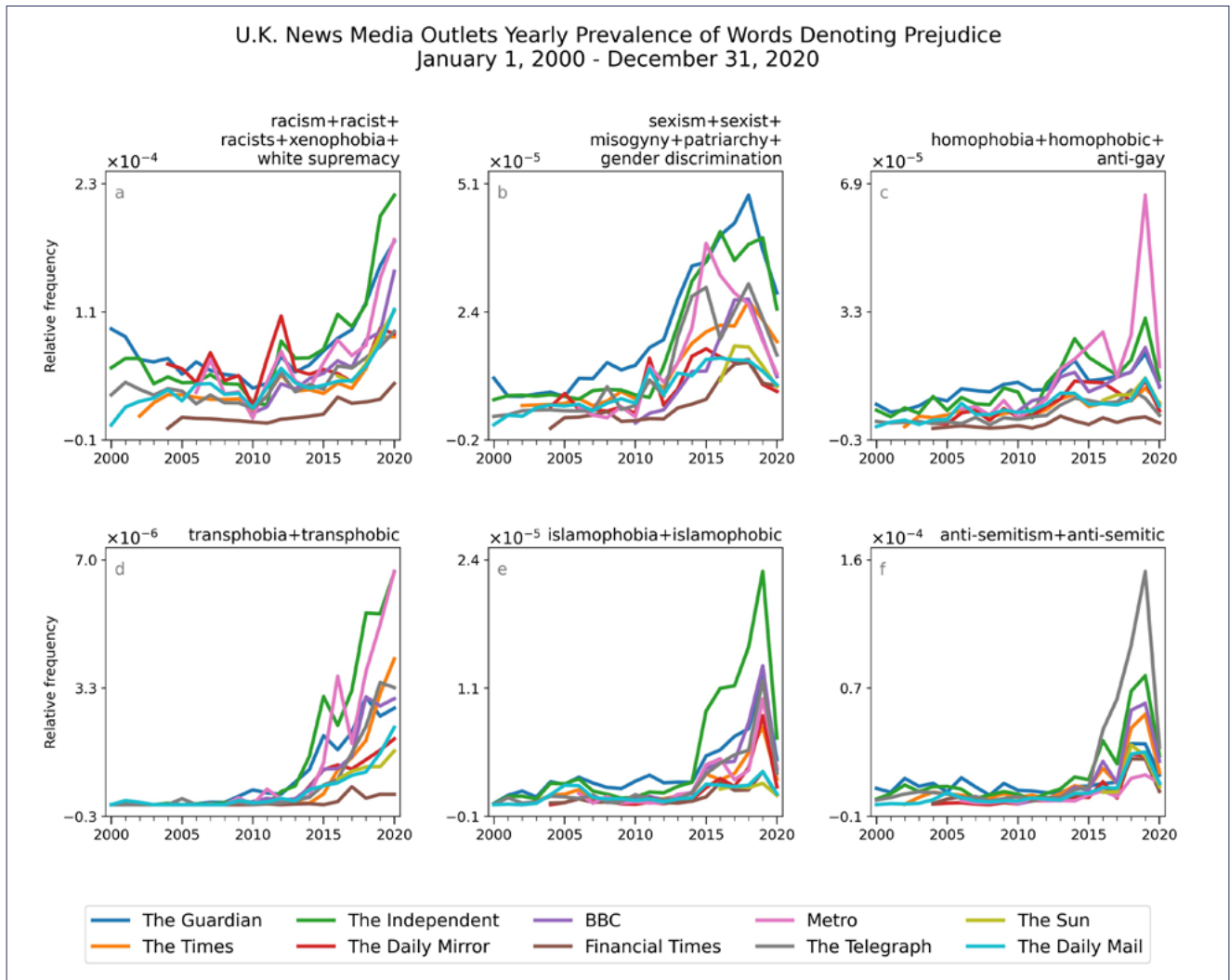
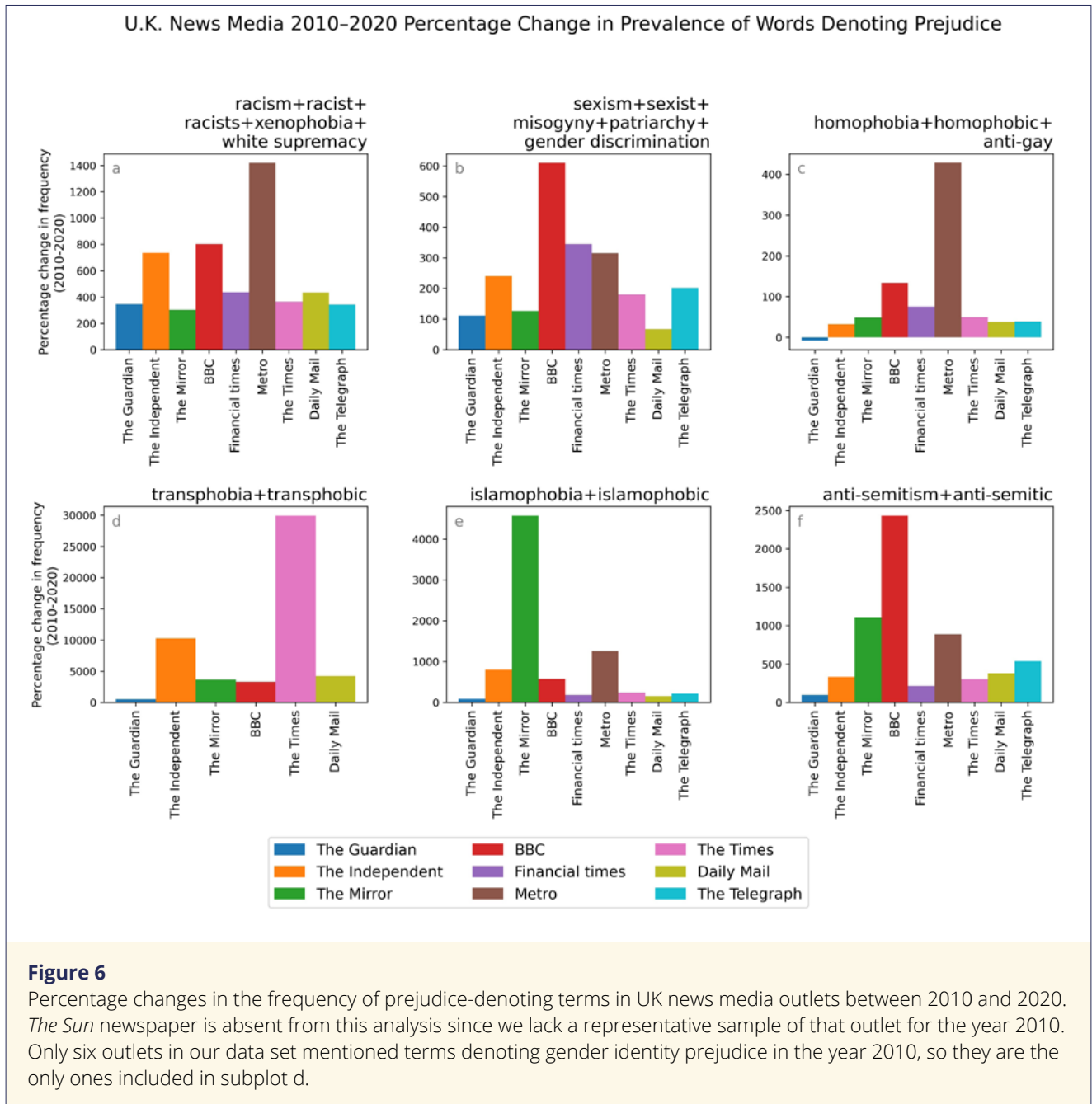


Figure 5
Prevalence of prejudice-denoting terms in popular U.K. news media outlets.

To precisely quantify recent changes in prominence within individual outlets, Figure 6 shows the percentage increases in mentions between 2010 and 2020 for the different prejudice themes studied. Overall, between 2010 and 2020, the prevalence of the racism theme increased by 802% in the BBC, 734% in *The Independent* and 345% in *The Guardian*.

The prevalence of sexism increased by 610% in the BBC, 315% in the *Metro*, 240% in *The Independent* and 180% in *The Times*. The prevalence of transphobia increased even more sharply, rising by 10,273% in *The Independent*, 3,637% in the *Daily Mirror* and 553% in *The Guardian*.



4. Prominence of social justice rhetoric in UK news media content

We next examine the prevalence in UK media of an additional set of terms that are associated with 'social justice' discourse, or what its opponents refer to as 'woke' politics. As academics have shown, so-called 'social justice', is especially focused on identity-related issues as well as historical phenomena with potentially lingering contemporary effects, such as the legacy of empire, colonialism or slavery.²² To explore the prominence of social justice rhetoric in UK media, we now examine the prevalence of terms usually associated with social justice discourse, such as *diversity*, *equality*, *unconscious bias*, *stereotypes*, *colonialism*, *white privilege*, *slavery*, or *gender pronouns*.

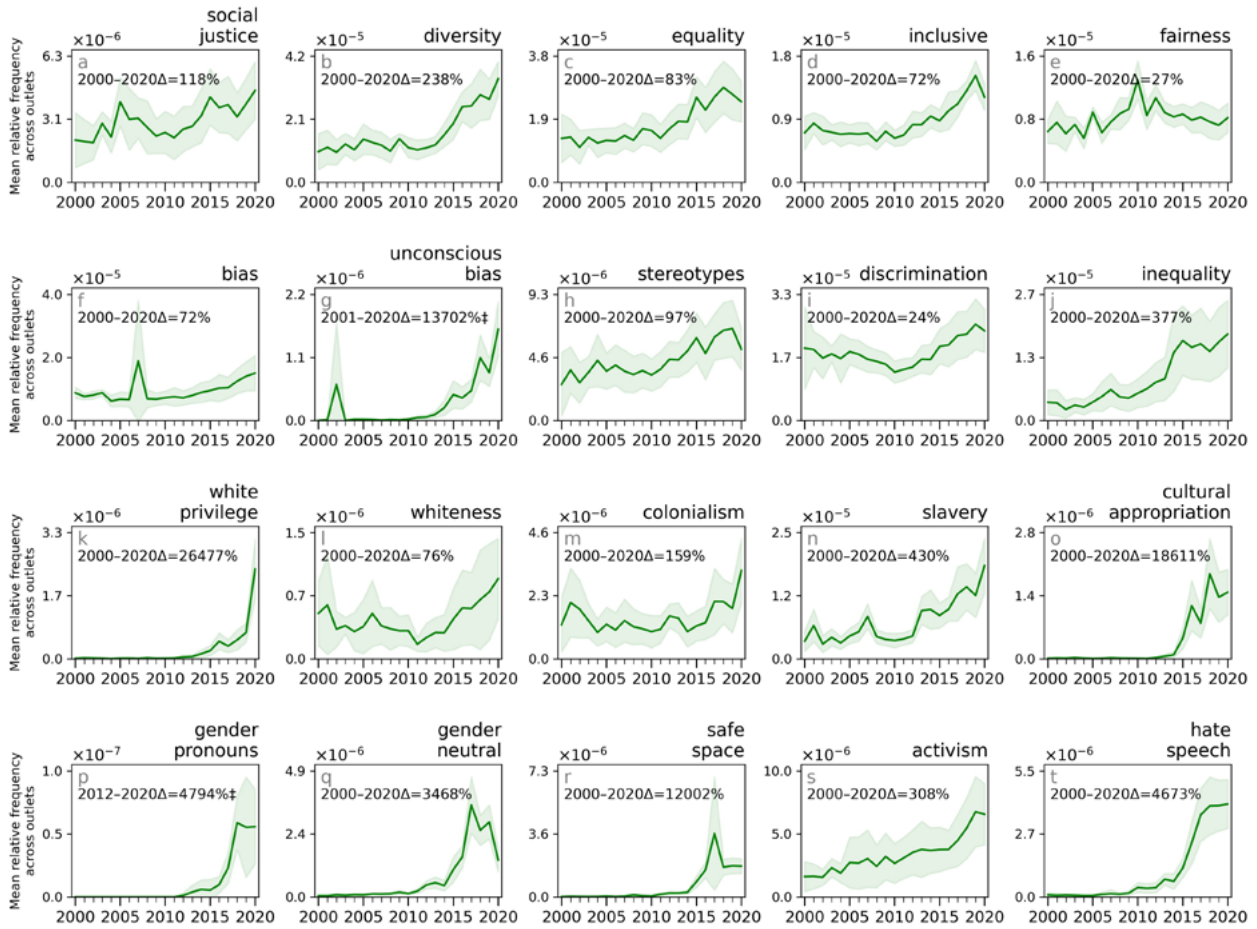
As shown in Figure 7, these terms, like the prejudice-denoting terminology documented in the previous section, have also become far more prominent in UK media over the last twenty years and their uptick also begins before the fractious debates over Brexit. Some increases since 2000 have been relatively

moderate, like those for *social justice* and *diversity* at 118% and 238% respectively. Others, however, have seen far more sharp growth, such as *unconscious bias* (13,702%), *cultural appropriation* (18,611%), *gender neutral* (3,468%), or *hate speech* (4,673%). These trends reflect the growth of social justice rhetoric within the UK media cycle and the extent to which it has been embraced by media.

For the terms in Figure 7, there is also a large degree of coupling between US and UK news media organizations, as shown in Figure 8. This provides further evidence that the 'Great Awakening' trend in the US is now also visible in the UK, where, increasingly, the most prominent media outlets are embracing the same social justice vocabulary as their American counterparts, despite also having a very different history with regard to issues such as race and slavery.



U.K. News Media* Yearly Prevalence of Words Associated with Social Justice Discourse
January 1, 2000 - December 31, 2020



*The Guardian, The Independent, The Daily Mirror, BBC, Financial Times, Metro, The Times, The Sun, The Daily Mail, The Telegraph

Figure 7

Average prevalence in U.K. news media of terms often associated with social justice discourse. The shaded areas display the 95% confidence interval around the means. The 2000 to 2020 percentage increase in prevalence of every term is shown on the upper left of each subplot. The † symbols next to some subplot percentage changes denote that no instances of the term were found in the year 2000 so the year with the earliest appearance of the term is used instead.

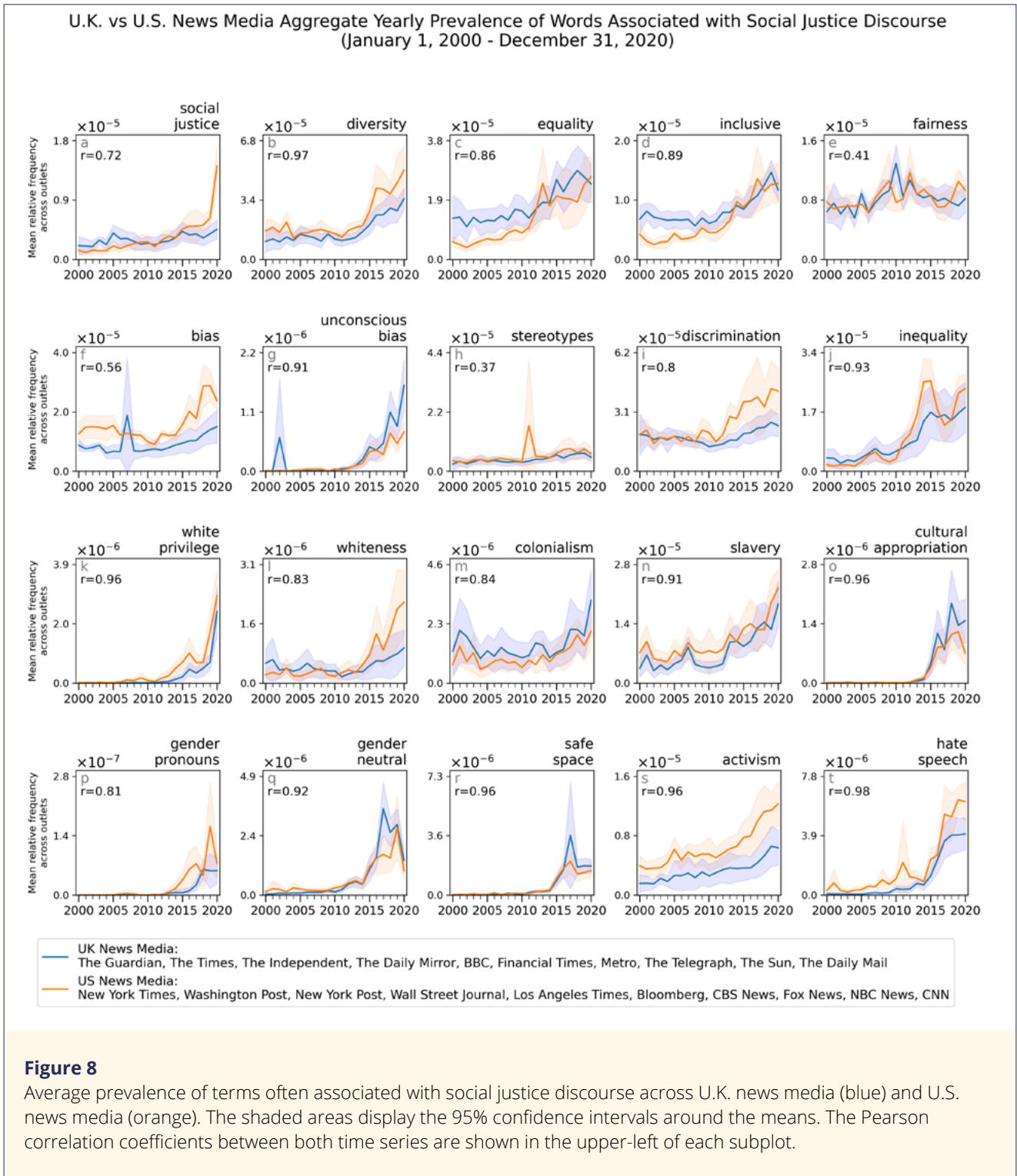


Figure 8

Average prevalence of terms often associated with social justice discourse across U.K. news media (blue) and U.S. news media (orange). The shaded areas display the 95% confidence intervals around the means. The Pearson correlation coefficients between both time series are shown in the upper-left of each subplot.

5. Differences between Left- and Right-leaning Media

To what extent are these trends more visible on the left or right of media? We next describe an analysis of these trends while controlling for the ideological leanings of UK media outlets. We use external ratings of news outlets political bias.²³ Our results, presented in Figure 9, indicate a large degree of correlation in the increasing usage of prejudice-denoting terms regardless of the ideological perspective of media. Whether left, right, or centre, all of UK media has witnessed a sharp increase in the prevalence of prejudice-denoting terms.

Yet, at the same time, the average prominence of most prejudice denoting themes is larger

in left-leaning media outlets than right-leaning ones. References to *racism*, for example, are 73% more prevalent in left-leaning media outlets such as *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mirror*, and *The Independent* than they are in right-leaning outlets, such as *The Telegraph*, *The Daily Mail*, and *The Sun*. It is a similar story for sexism (74% more prevalent on the left), homophobia (119% more prevalent on the left), transphobia (127% more prevalent on the left) and Islamophobia (197% more prevalent on the left). The one exception to this trend is for the period 2015 to 2020, when references to anti-Semitism were more prominent in right-leaning news media.

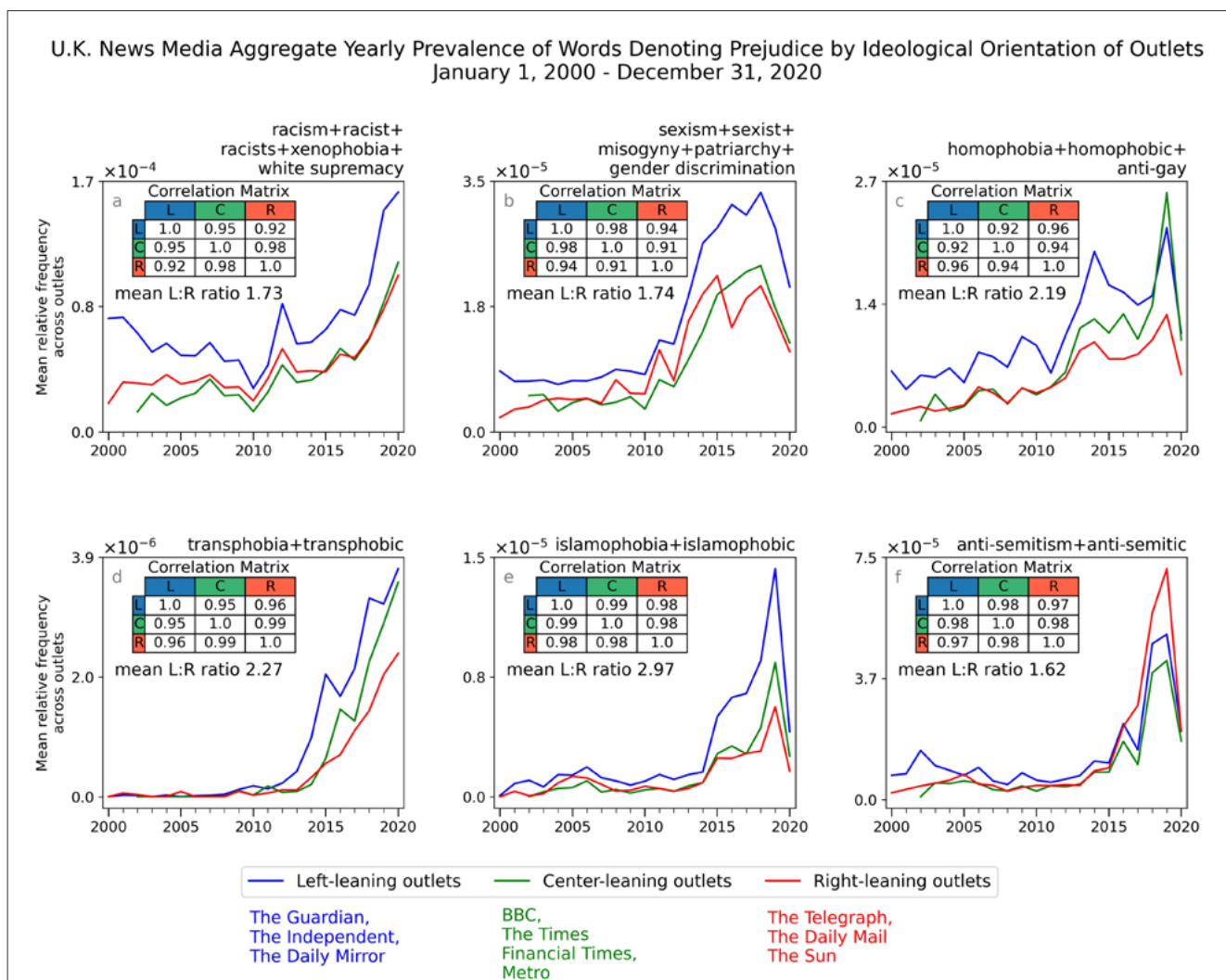


Figure 9 Average prevalence of prejudice-denoting terms in popular U.K. news media sorted according to external ratings of outlets' political bias. The correlation matrix between the three time series (left-leaning, center-leaning and right-leaning outlets) is shown in the upper left of each subplot. The mean left (L) to right (R) prevalence ratio is shown below the correlation matrix.

Similar to the patterns above, the prominence of terms denoting 'social justice' or 'woke' discourse has also been increasing across UK news outlets regardless of their ideological leanings, though once again the trend appears starker in left-leaning outlets, see Figure 10. This, too, confirms media trends previously reported in other Western democracies, such as the US and Spain, where media has also been shown to have adopted a very similar discourse.²⁴

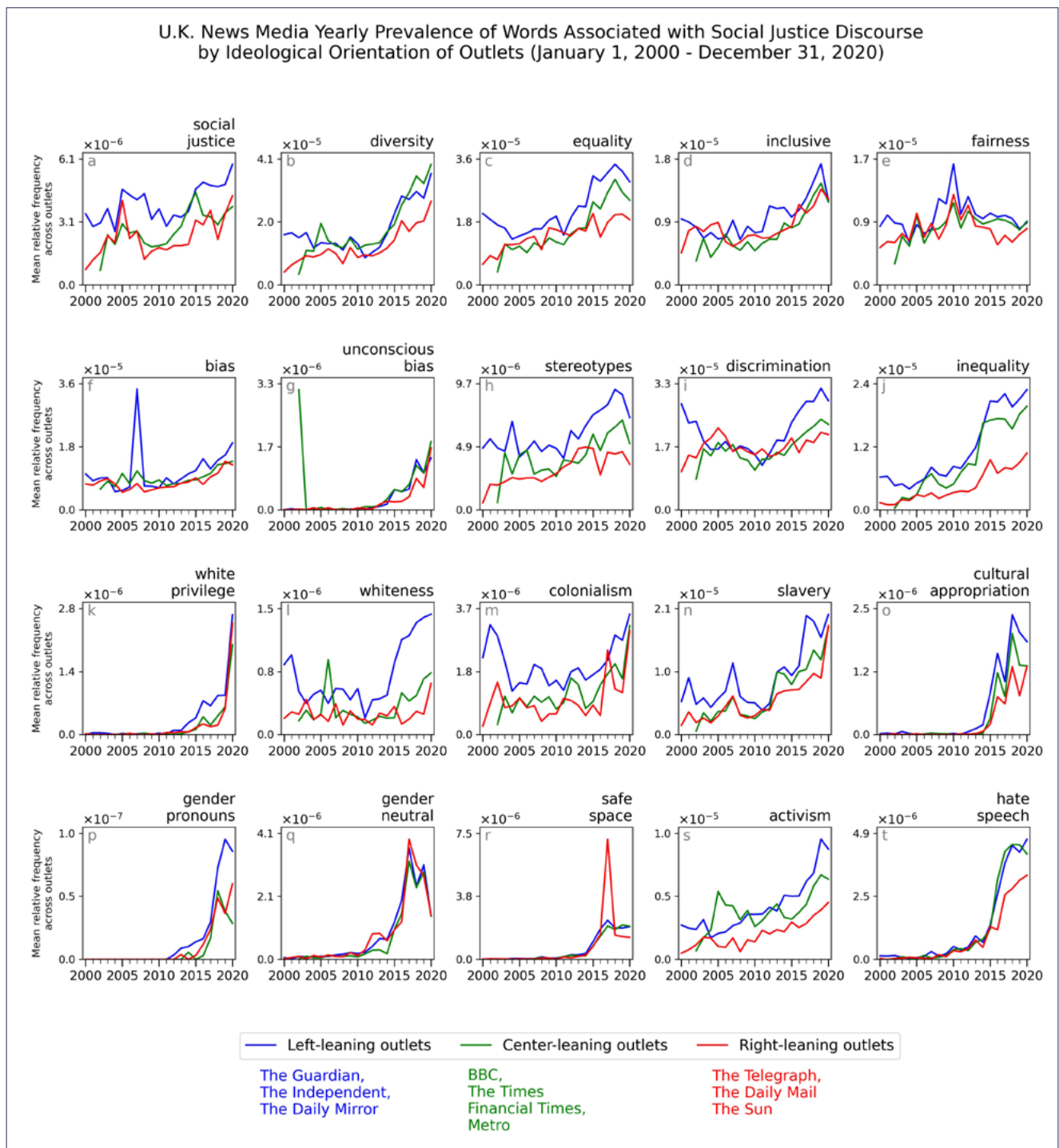


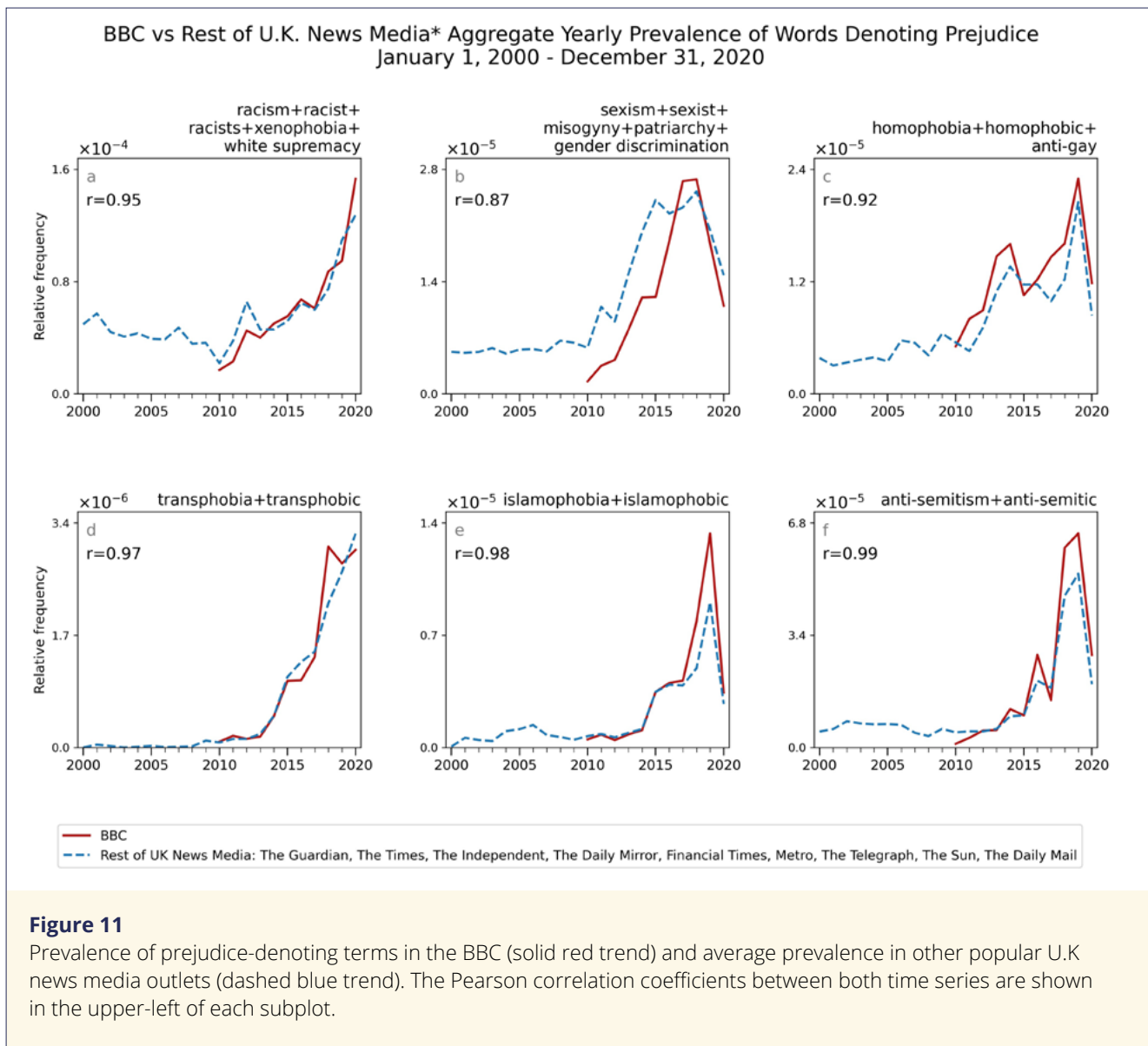
Figure 10

Average prevalence of terms associated with social justice discourse in popular U.K. news media outlets sorted according to external ratings of outlets' political bias.

6. The BBC and the rest of the media

Given the importance of the BBC as the premier UK public service news outlet, we conclude our results section by comparing the prevalence dynamics of the prejudice themes studied in this report between the BBC and other popular UK news media outlets, see Figure 11.

In general, the prevalence of prejudice themes in BBC content is very similar to the average prevalence of such topics in the rest of the UK news media landscape. The correlation between both time series is also extremely high confirming a high degree of coupling for these topics between the BBC and the rest of the UK news media.



7. Implications and Discussion

In this report, we have documented a sharp increase in the prominence of prejudice and social justice rhetoric in UK news media over a ten-year period, from 2010 to 2020. Using computational content analysis techniques, we have shown how similar trends in countries such as Spain and the United States, referred to as the so-called 'Great Awakening', are now just as visible, if not more so, in UK media.

We have also found that some prejudice themes have been decreasing in prevalence in 2020 with respect to previous years in U.K. and U.S. news media. This could be due to society or newsrooms having reached peak-concern with some types of prejudice around 2018-2019. Alternatively, the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 could have grabbed such a substantial amount of news media attention as to distort the broader trend, which may well resume when the global pandemic recedes.

How might we explain the overall picture regarding the increasing prominence of prejudice and social justice rhetoric in UK media? We suggest three possible explanations which, we hope, will attract further research and debate—especially among the media.

The first plausible explanation for the trends documented in this report is growing public sensitivity to potentially lingering prejudice in British society which, in turn, is reflected in the UK newsroom. Though research has shown a decline in overt expressions of prejudicial attitudes since the 1970s,²⁵ some writers have pointed to the rise of greater public sensitivity in Britain and other democracies over actual or perceived prejudice. A relaxation of the criteria used to define what counts as prejudice, in the form of *concept creep* and *prevalence-induced concept change*,²⁶ might also be playing a role in this process.

Civil society campaigner Sunder Katwala, for example, has talked about the 'higher expectations' that more recent generations of Britons have regarding the need to call out racism and discrimination, compared to older generations.²⁷ Seen through this lens,

while overt prejudice in British society has been falling, social intolerance of potential remaining prejudice has been rising, especially as young people embrace a more assertive 'anti-racism' agenda, which is promoted in schools, universities and other institutions, and encourages a strong focus on concepts such as *white privilege*, *white guilt*, *cultural appropriation*, and *institutional racism*. Consequently, the media might be simply echoing this growing societal sensitivity.

An alternative second explanation is that the center of ideological gravity in UK media newsrooms has shifted in recent years. In Britain and other Western democracies, surveys have shown that journalists lean more to the left than the general population.²⁸ Furthermore, the journalistic profession appears to be moving further leftwards, especially as prestige news media is increasingly organized and edited by university graduates from elite universities who also tend to hold more socially liberal beliefs and who have drifted to the left on cultural issues.²⁹

According to a 2022 report by the National Council for the Training of Journalists, almost 90% of Britain's journalists had at least a degree-level education, compared to less than half of Britain's workforce (while junior journalists were even more highly qualified and more likely to come from elite backgrounds).³⁰ According to the Reuters Institute at the University of Oxford, by the 2010s, journalism in Britain had become 'fully academised', with 98% of journalists who began work at this time having at least a bachelor's degree and 36% having a master's.³¹ When the same institute asked journalists to place themselves on the ideological spectrum, more than half, 53%, placed themselves on the left but only 23% placed themselves on the right (the rest were in the centre).³² This disparity was even more acute for younger rank-and-file journalists (56% left-leaning versus 18% right-leaning).

British journalists are also far more likely to come from upper middle class or higher socioeconomic status households, where at least one parent works in a higher professional or managerial role; while 80% of journalists

come from this background only 42% of British workers do. 'The educational backgrounds of people in the top jobs in UK media', notes the Sutton Trust, 'with a focus here on those working in news, politics and current affairs, look very different to the general population, with newspaper columnists the least like the audiences they write for'.³³

Given that university graduates tend to hold more socially liberal values, institutions that rely more heavily on graduates, such as media, might now also be shifting sharply leftwards on issues regarding identity, diversity, and social justice as new university graduates recruits replace older generations of journalists.

None of this is unique to Britain. As American writer Batya Ungar-Sargon points out in her book, *Bad News*, in many Western democracies' journalism has morphed into a profession of privilege, from a trade where people neither had much training nor a degree to one filled with the highly educated children of high socioeconomic status families who often hold more left-leaning views.³⁴

Therefore, one plausible explanation for the increasing mentions of prejudice themes and social justice terminology in media content could be due to the increasingly liberal ideological composition of newsrooms that might shape journalists' choices of topics to cover since people who identify more strongly on the left are far more focused on the topic of prejudice.³⁵

A third potential explanation for the rising incidence of prejudice and social justice rhetoric in news media content could be the recent emergence of financial incentives for media organizations to maximize diffusion of news articles through social media channels by triggering negative sentiment/emotions,³⁶ and/or political out-group animosity, both of which have been shown to drive engagement of social media-based news consumption.³⁷

By focusing on more moralistic and polarising language, designed to generate clicks on social media platforms, the new social-media driven incentives may be encouraging discursive shifts in news media, though we would welcome insights in this regard from media organizations themselves.

One important limitation of this work is that the relative frequency metric used to measure news media attention to prejudice and social justice themes misses critical contextual detail about the context in which the studied terms are being used. It is conceivable that at least some mentions of prejudice or social justice terms, for example in right-leaning outlets, might be due to content that is critical of the perceived excesses of so-called 'woke' politics (although this would not account for rising prominence of social justice rhetoric on left-leaning news media outlets). Future research could use more advanced quantitative and qualitative techniques such as computational sentiment classification or multi-rater content analysis to parse the affirmative and critical usage of the sets of terms targeted in this work.

To conclude, we have documented a substantial increase in British news media content between 2010 and 2020 of prejudice and social justice rhetoric. These trends are reminiscence of similar phenomena also happening in US and Spanish news media.³⁸ Previous research has noted a potential association between the prevalence of prejudice denoting terms in news media content and increasing public concern about the severity of prejudice in society.³⁹ Yet, a demonstrated causal link remains elusive and, as far as we can tell, missing from the existing literature. We hope that future research can examine the causal relationship between news media discourse and public perceptions of prejudice in society.

Endnotes

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