

# ‘How much can she (and the rest of us) take?’: A Critical Analysis of the Role of the Print Media in Narrative Creation during the Truss Premiership

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This article critically analyses the role of print media in the narrative surrounding the premiership of Liz Truss, focusing primarily on *The Daily Mail*. This article argues that newspapers were essential forces in the establishment of the general narrative of incompetence, instability, and failure surrounding Truss' premiership. Ultimately, this would lead to her growing unpopularity and, eventually, her resignation. The article also furthers that tabloid and broadsheet corpora contributed to a general narrative of female politicians as unable to work effectively in leadership roles. Firstly, this article charts the narrative of Truss' leadership through the newspaper's headlines and cover stories. It argues that this demonstrates the media's power to influence the trajectory of political events and the attitude of its readers. Further, it explains how tabloid newspapers utilise right-wing ideology and language techniques to construct a narrative with gravitas and broad appeal to the public. Finally, this article examines how the gendered language in and coverage by *The Mail* and other newspapers emphasised Truss' incompetence and thereby contributed to negative perceptions of female politicians in leadership positions in politics. Utilising techniques of critical discourse analysis, as well as examining pre-existing empirical studies on gendered media coverage, this article concludes that the print media played a significant role in establishing a negative narrative of Truss' premiership. Overall, this article hopes to contribute to the growing body of work relating to the perceptions of female politicians in the media. It will also demonstrate the continuing role played by the media in the political sphere despite decreasing newspaper circulation in the United Kingdom.

## INTRODUCTION

On the 20th October 2022, Liz Truss resigned as Prime Minister, making her the shortest serving Prime Minister in British History after only 45 days in office (Nevvet and Whannel 2022).

The speed of her downfall, as well as the almost universal portrayal of her premiership as a failure, are now defining features of her premiership (Kutllovci 2022). Although it is acknowledged that Truss' resignation resulted from poor economic decision-making (BBC News 2022), British newspapers, in particular *The Daily Mail* (*The Mail*) and other tabloid corpora, were vital actors in establishing the negative narrative surrounding Truss, which consisted of incompetence, failure and disastrous leadership. After contextualising the Truss premiership by outlining the varying headlines and front pages of tabloid and broadsheet corpora from her election as Conservative Party leader to her resignation, this article will seek to illustrate how the print media were able to establish such a narrative. Using techniques of critical discourse analysis, in particular, the use of tabloid newspaper ideology and language techniques including 'seductive persuasion' (Kitis and Milapedes 1997), a highly negative narrative of Truss and her leadership was brought to the political fore. By examining the presence of gendered techniques in these headlines, this article will also further that the print media established a gendered narrative surrounding Truss during her premiership, advancing a pre-existing narrative of women as 'non-leaders' (Mavin et al 2010). This article will highlight that through a multiplicity of language techniques, pre-existing audience-newspaper

relationships and the ‘tabloidization’ (Conboy 2010, 130) of the ‘political reality’ (Shenhav 2006, 246-247), a highly negative narrative of Truss was embedded in public opinion. As a result, this acted as a factor in Truss’ decision to resign. Thus, this article will argue that the media’s role in the narrative surrounding the Truss premiership was significant. Narrative, in this article, will be defined as the general perceptions which are attributed to the ‘political reality’ (Shenhav 2006, 246-247).

This article constitutes an original contribution to the field of Political Media Discourse Analysis. The print media’s role in establishing the narrative surrounding Truss, particularly the role of tabloid corpora, has not been researched in the United Kingdom before. However, the brevity of Truss’ tenure as Prime Minister and the rapidity of her decline in public opinion raise important questions about the factors that contributed to her negative public perception (Kuttlovki 2023; Raven 2022). The power of the media in shaping opinion around the ‘political reality’ (Shenhav 2006, 246-247), also known as its ‘agenda-setting’ capability (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 176) is widely documented. This can also be described as a so-called ‘soft-power’ of the media (Wright et al 2020), in which the media acts as a government ‘lapdog’ or ‘watchdog’ (Whitten-Woodring 2009). This entails a publication either supporting the government agenda with minimal criticism, (government ‘lapdog’) or acting as a source of criticism for the government agenda (government ‘watchdog’) (Whitten-Woodring 2009).

The use of Critical Discourse Analysis methodologies and literature review of language concepts in this essay, have been chosen to critically analyse how the media had the power to foster such negative perceptions of Truss. This analysis is warranted as Critical Discourse Analysis’ central thesis posits that ‘language and representation are bound up with power’ (Higgins and McKay 2016, 285). In order to examine the power that the print media had in shaping the negative public opinion and thus contributing to the downfall of Truss, it is essential to examine print media’s use of language. More specifically, it must be considered how the media chooses to represent itself through ideological means and how language distorts the ‘political reality’ (Shenhav 2006, 246-247) from its source (Hall 1973, 2-3).

### **AN OUTLINE OF THE PRINT MEDIA’S NARRATIVE OF TRUSS’ PREMIERSHIP**

The overall narrative of the Truss premiership provides an important picture of the distinctions between the tabloid and broadsheet press. Particularly at the beginning of the Truss premiership, two different narratives or perceptions of the ‘political reality’ could be observed (Shenhav 2006, 246-247); one positive and sensationalised, and another that was less positive and more tentative regarding Truss’ prospects of political success. Towards the end of her premiership, positive news coverage from all print corpora had faded. Tabloid newspapers, who were once supportive, began to contradict their earlier coverage as it became increasingly clear that Truss’ position was untenable. It is crucial to examine the contradictions projected and the extent of the negative coverage to understand the influence of the media narrative on the electorate.

The tabloid newspaper *The Mail* began its coverage of Truss’ premiership in a positive light. After Truss won the Conservative Party’s leadership contest on the 6th September 2022, *The Mail* printed ‘Cometh the hour, cometh the woman’ as its main headline (Groves 2022b). This tone was replicated almost exclusively by newspapers which are largely perceived to have a right-wing ideology (Smith 2017), including the tabloids *The Daily Express*, with the headline ‘Put faith in Truss to deliver for Britain’ (Lister 2022b), and *The Sun*, which read ‘Liz puts her foot on the gas’ (Cole 2022). The following day, *The Mail*’s splash read ‘Together we can ride out the storm’ in reference to Truss’ speech before she entered Downing Street to begin her premiership. The headline also describes how ‘the skies cleared’ before Truss started speaking in ‘a moment loaded with cheering symbolism’ (Moir 2022). These headlines contrasted other newspaper’s front pages acknowledging the issues facing Truss’ initial weeks as Prime Minister. This included *The I*, whose standfirst read ‘Economists warn that taxpayers or consumers will need to pay for bailout’ (The I 2022d) referring to Truss’ proposed energy bill cap, and the *Financial Times*’ headline, ‘Truss assumes office with vow to steer Britain out of energy storm’ (Financial Times 2022), which addressed the political issues facing Truss

during her first days in office.

From this array of headlines, an initial positive leaning in the tone of the tabloid print media can be observed, especially in comparison to 'broad sheet' media. *The Mail*, *The Daily Express* and *The Sun* are all considered to possess a majority 'right-wing' stance by the public (Smith 2017), and all portray the entrance of Truss into Downing Street as a positive event. Therefore, ideology arguably determines the tone of newspapers' coverage of Truss and will be significant in shaping the opinions of a right-wing readership.

On the 23rd September 2022, Kwasi Kwarteng, Truss' Chancellor of the Exchequer, delivered her government's 'mini-budget' containing '£45 billion of unfunded tax cuts' (BBC News 2022). *The Mail* celebrated the 'mini-budget' on the 24th September with the headline 'At Last! A True Tory Budget' (Groves 2022a). However, other newspapers focused on the falling value of the pound. This included the tabloid *The I* with the headline 'Pound plunges after Kwarteng bets UK economy on tax cuts' (The I 2022c), and the broadsheet newspaper *The Telegraph*'s headline 'Kwarteng gambles on biggest tax cuts in half a century' (Chan et al 2022).

The economic consequences of the 'mini budget' were significant. On the 26th September, the value of the pound 'fell to record lows against the dollar' (BBC News 2022). The economic impact was so significant that the Bank of England intervened by buying £65 billion in government bonds to prevent a collapse of the pension system (Partington 2022). Moreover, the International Monetary Fund criticised the budget as "likely to increase inequality" (Taaffe-Maguire 2022). *The Mail* continued its support of the financial plan by seeking to blame 'speculators profiting from the plunging pound' in its lead on the 27th September; this was accompanied by the headline 'Fury at elite city slickers betting against UK PLC' (Ford, Rojas and Witherow 2022), directing discontent towards them rather than Truss or Kwarteng who had enacted the budget. In stark contrast to this, other major tabloid newspapers were deeply critical of the economic strategy. For example, *Metro*'s headline read 'The pound Kwartanks' (Binns 2022). *The Daily Star*'s headline quipped 'Honey, I shrunk the quids' (Stone 2022a), referring to the falling value of the pound.

A clear disparity in coverage of the 'mini-budget' and its consequences can be observed between *The Mail* and other corpora. Additionally, *The Mail* is also wilfully ignorant of the budget's real-world political consequences.

After the severe economic consequences of the 'mini budget', the news coverage of Truss became universally negative. On the 18th October, *The Mail* published the headline 'In office, but not in power' (Groves 2022c). When Suella Braverman resigned as Home Secretary on the 19th October, she referred to 'concerns about the direction of this government' in her resignation letter (Braverman 2022). In its standfirst, *The Daily Express* remarked 'Truss premiership in meltdown after "disgraceful" Commons scenes' (Lister 2022a). Five newspapers referred to Truss' government and leadership as 'chaos', this included the tabloids *The Daily Mirror* (Stevens 2022) and *The I* (The I 2022a), the online newspaper *The Independent* (Woodcock 2022), and notable broadsheets including *The Daily Telegraph* (Riley-Smith 2022a) and the *Financial Times* (Parker et al 2022a).

On the 20th October, Liz Truss resigned as Prime Minister. *The Mail* presented a teaser of an article on its front-page reading 'Truss was a disastrous dalliance who served only to remind us what a real leader looks like' (Vine 2022). *Metro*'s headline read 'The worst PM we've ever had' (Yeatman 2022). In a final negative attack on Truss, newspapers presented the Truss premiership as an overall failure.

*The Mail* had adopted a contrasting narrative to their coverage only three weeks earlier; changing their stance from support of Truss and her economic policy to disapproval of her premiership. This was also adopted by *The Daily Express*. This narrative turnaround was therefore particularly significant as both tabloids are perceived as two of Britain's most right-wing newspapers (Smith 2017), largely aligning themselves with the conservative ideology.

It may be argued that Truss' downfall could be attributed more to the consequences of the economic downturn than the narrative constructed by newspapers. For example, an empirical study by Sanders et al (1993) found that during the period 1979 to 1987, newspaper

coverage of the economy had a negligible impact on the public's support for the government (1993, 176). However, the media was significant in setting the agenda for Truss' leadership. The 'agenda-setting' power of the media refers to its ability to determine the 'important issues' within politics and shape the 'political reality' (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 176). The impact of the 'agenda-setting' can be evidenced by opinion polls. At the beginning of Truss' premiership, the slightly optimistic tone adopted by the press was reflected in a 9% approval rating increase from Truss' predecessor, Boris Johnson, to herself (Raven 2022). However, by the end of her premiership, with broadly negative newspaper coverage, Truss' net favourability was -70% (Raven 2022). This demonstrates the significance of the newspapers in creating the general narrative around Truss' leadership, as the net favourability of Truss largely reflected the narrative projected by newspapers.

The impact of this narrative on the national perception of Truss' leadership can also be critically analysed with reference to the ideology of the tabloids, in particular *The Mail*, and the use of tabloid language techniques. This includes 'tabloidization' (Conboy, 2010, 130) and the use of 'seductive persuasion' (Kitis and Milapedes 1997, 560-561). These techniques enabled the media to significantly shape the narrative around Truss' leadership as a failure by making it more widely accepted by both audiences that support the Conservative party and readers who are apathetic to political news.

### **THE INFLUENCE OF NEWSPAPER IDEOLOGY**

Ideology, 'the structuring of beliefs from a particular perspective' (Conboy 2010, 105), was influential in establishing the positive narrative around Truss' entry into Downing Street. Conboy (2010) outlines how the media must present a consistent set of values and interpretations to maintain its audience, creating a 'pact of solidarity' (2010, 108), which is a reinforcement of 'the sense of shared values between the reader and news medium' (2007, 108). The media projects the news through an ideological lens to 'invite solidarity' or to 'reflect shifts within dominant ways of thinking' (2007, 108). *The Mail* is perceived as Britain's most right-wing newspaper (Smith 2017) and is seen by 31% of people as being 'generally much more favourable' to the Conservative party or right-wing (YouGov 2023).

The depiction of Truss by the right-wing tabloids was highly positive initially. *The Mail* portrayed Truss using sensationalised language. In its depiction of 'the sky clearing' over Truss, *The Mail* expands the truth to make it 'seem more exciting or dramatic' (Frye 2005, 2) in order to engage its audience. This stands in contrast to the general background of economic instability and hardship in the UK that Truss had inherited (Dunleavy 2022) as well as the challenges to her tenure, which were acknowledged in other newspapers. The positive aspects of Truss' leadership, and the sensationalism of her entry into Downing Street, were deliberately selected to establish the narrative of her leadership in a way that evoked positivity and optimism towards the Conservative party. The positive perception of Truss' beginnings as Prime Minister, that were adopted collectively by right-wing corpora, assisted in 'inviting solidarity' among a conservative readership. Thus, the ideology of the print media significantly influenced the creation of an initial, positive narrative around Truss despite the reality of the hardships she faced (Dunleavy 2022).

The shift in net favourability among Conservative voters coincided with *The Mail's* initial highly positive, sensationalised headline and its marked alteration in its opinion of Truss afterwards. In a poll conducted by Redfield and Wilton Strategies (2022) on the 7th September 2022, 13% of 2019 Conservative voters 'Strongly Approve[d]' of Truss' overall job performance, and 33% of Conservative voters 'Approve[d]'. In comparison, national opinion was significantly lower, with only 21% of overall poll participants who 'Approved'.

This provides a marked contrast to the net favourability of Truss after her resignation, in which 62% of 2019 Conservative voters now 'Strongly Disapprove[d]' of Truss' overall job performance. Conservative voters' opinion now coincided with the overall national opinion, in which 66% of participants 'Strongly Disapprove[d]' (Redfield and Wilton Strategies 2023). This negative downturn in Truss' net approval was accompanied by *The Mail's* tease on the 20th October describing Truss as a 'Disastrous Dalliance' (Vine 2022), as well as previous coverage

describing Truss' powerlessness; 'In office but not in power' (Groves 2022c). A correlation can be identified between the timings of the negative coverage by *The Mail* and a sharp downturn in the net favourability of Truss. Although *The Mail* was not the only tabloid nor print media to adopt a negative stance towards Truss during her last weeks in Downing Street, the high proportion of Conservative voters amongst *The Mail's* readership (Curtis 2017) signifies that *The Mail's* ideological position may have had some impact on its readership.

Such low favourability as Prime Minister in opinion polls would not normally be a decisive factor in the decision for a Prime Minister to resign, as evidenced by Truss' predecessor Boris Johnson. According to a poll by YouGov (2021), 73% said that Boris Johnson was doing 'badly' as Prime Minister on the 17th January 2022. However, Johnson did not resign until 7th July 2022 when the significant number of resignations of cabinet ministers and junior ministers in his government, making his viability in government untenable (Coffee House 2022). It is important to note that Truss' election as Prime Minister was determined by a vote among the Conservative party membership between the final two candidates for party leader, rather than at a general election (Durrant and Barr 2022; Johnston 2022). Much like the accession of Theresa May after the resignation of David Cameron, Truss' appointment came during a period of 'heightened instability' following Johnson's resignation (Williams 2021, 400). Truss had not necessarily 'proved herself' as, in comparison, Margaret Thatcher did in 1979, when she secured her premiership in a general election after leading the Conservatives in opposition (Williams 2021, 400). Truss may thus have been more reliant or, at least, more sensitive to public favourability, particularly that of the Conservative 'base' or 'backbone membership' (Tryl 2022).

The position taken by *The Mail* after the consequences of the 'mini-budget' was, therefore, an extremely significant force in shifting the narrative regarding Truss due to *The Mail's* ideology. *The Mail's* initial support for Truss continued from its favourable coverage during the leadership contest, with 88% of articles written about Truss during the leadership contest period described as positive (Tobitt 2022). However, *The Mail* then transformed from being one of Truss' biggest supporters during the Conservative leadership contest (Waterson 2022). They quickly grew from being described as one of the 'doomed mini-budget's biggest cheerleaders' (Hall 2022) to a voice in the myriad of criticism facing Truss' final week as Prime Minister. As a result of its marked shift in its stance on the 'mini-budget', *The Mail* switched from being a government 'lapdog' to a government 'watchdog' regarding Truss and her government's agenda (Whitten-Woodring 2009). As a right-wing, Conservative-supporting tabloid (Smith 2017; YouGov 2023), this transformation contributed significantly to the perception of Truss' failure to govern, as the main source of her support had turned against her.

Truss not only risked general dislike by this continuing decline in net favourability among Conservative voters, but also a significant challenge to her legitimacy as Conservative party leader. This was the section of the electorate that underpinned her legitimacy to accede to Downing Street and thus, had the ability to not only cause legitimacy questions amongst Conservative MPs, of which a majority of 137 backed her rival at the time, Rishi Sunak, in comparison to her 114 votes in the fifth ballot (Morris and Scott 2022), but also to hold her to account regarding her chances of success in the next general election (Murr and Fisher 2022).

It is difficult to identify the print media as the sole determiner of the downturn in Truss' favourability among Conservative voters. However, it is important to consider that 'political homophily', the concept that individuals form their habits based upon their ideological similarity to others or, in this instance, newspaper titles (Huber and Malhotra 2017), has been evidenced previously. According to a poll by YouGov of over 50,000 British Voters, 74% of voters who read *The Mail* as their most regular newspaper in the 2017 election voted for the Conservative party (Curtis 2017). With the assumption that *The Mail* readership is thus predominantly Conservative-leaning (Curtis 2017), it is likely that *The Mail's* marked change in stance was influential on the Conservative voter base.

Thus, it is argued that the ideology of newspapers was impactful on the growing dissatisfaction with Truss' leadership amongst Conservative voters. This, ultimately, contributed to a more prolific downturn in her popularity with the public at large, as well as with Conservative

voters. With this significant loss of approval among the Conservative voter base (Redfield and Wilson Strategies 2022), this was presumably a decisive factor in Truss' decision to resign. Therefore, the print media had a significant impact on the narrative created around Truss.

### **THE INFLUENCE OF LANGUAGE IN TABLOID CORPORA**

In furthering an ideological agenda or appealing to a certain audience based on ideology, language acts as an important textual mechanism through which newspapers can maintain their readership and impart their views. With the rise of tabloid and 'popular' newspapers, language became an essential mechanism for newspapers to expand beyond a homogeneous, middle-class audience to become appealing to 'proletarian Britain' (Conboy 2010, 3). When analysing the language newspapers utilised during Truss' tenure as Prime Minister, it becomes evident that the use of language was an essential component in the crafting of her negative image. Through the techniques of 'seductive persuasion' (Kitis and Milapides 1997) and 'tabloidization' (Conboy 2010), newspapers were able to circumvent reporting of complex politic.

#### **'SEDUCTIVE PERSUASION'**

Kitis and Milapides (1997, 560-561) identify two ways in which a newspaper or news reports can persuade their readership. Firstly, news reports can seek to convince their readership by presenting 'a series of argumentative steps' (Kitis and Milapides 1997, 560-561) and relying on the reader to accept those steps. Alternatively, they can use 'seductive persuasion', meaning that they attempt to 'seduce' their readership. This can be achieved by pre-empting the ideological leaning of the reader, establishing the newspaper's truthfulness in the 'trustworthiness' of its writers and its reputation as a newspaper instead of seeking to present a logical argument (Kitis and Milapides 1997, 560-561). To summarise, employing this concept seeks to engage the 'emotional rather than the cognitive involvement' (Kitis and Milapides, 1997, 561) of the readership by reaffirming the readers' views, or by implicitly forcing them to change or modify their thoughts entirely. This is particularly evident in the writing of *The Mail*, where their ideological leanings play a key role in drawing in their readership. In the context of Truss, 'seductive persuasion' was particularly successful in reaffirming positive narratives to a Conservative audience at the beginning of her premiership, and in later adding significant weight to negative perceptions of her leadership due to *The Mail's* right-wing reputation (YouGov 2017).

*The Mail's* employment of 'seductive persuasion' (Kitis and Milapides 1997) was a clear feature of its creation of the narrative around Truss. This was displayed in the emotive and 'sensationalist' language of Truss' entry into Downing Street, with the headline describing 'The skies clearing' above Truss (Moir 2022). *The Mail* portrays Truss' presence as powerful enough to control the weather, portraying her as a saviour-like figure to the readership. This triggers the emotions of the reader and reaffirms *The Mail's* ideal audience's Conservative views by portraying her extremely positively and as an almost 'omnipotent presence' (Dunleavy 2022). This is contrary to accounts in other corpora including *The Financial Times*, which highlighted her political challenges, including inflation and energy prices (Financial Times, 2022). This emotive language is employed again when *The Mail's* perspective had changed, with the use of the rhetorical question 'How much can she, and the rest of us, take?' (Groves et al 2022b). The use of the pronoun 'us' reaffirms an ideological 'pact of solidarity' (Conbo 2010, 108) between the paper and its Conservative readership by referring to them as a collective. This directs an adversarial tone towards Truss herself rather than her government in its entirety; an anti-establishment, populist perspective of 'us' versus 'her'. This also implicitly encourages its readers to change their views along with the newspaper by reinforcing the sense of an ideological community and by presenting negative views that appear 'attitudinally-congruent' with the rest of the population (Hameleers, Bos and de Vrees 2017).

As a result of 'seductive persuasion' (Kitis and Milapides 1997), *The Mail's* use of language intersects with its ideological stance by encouraging its predominantly Conservative readership (Curtis 2017) to change their opinions of Truss' competency as Prime Minister. By

doing so, *The Mail* actively contributes to the delegitimisation of Truss' premiership as the tabloid explicitly encourages her primary voter base, who once supported her and who also read *The Mail*, to turn against her. It can therefore be argued that *The Mail's* use of 'seductive persuasion' (Kitis and Milapides 1997) was significant in the pervading negative narrative surrounding Truss.

### 'TABLOIDIZATION'

According to Conboy (2010, 130), 'tabloidization' is a convergence of elements of entertainment and popular culture with news and politics. The tabloid newspaper creates a 'textual bridge' of readers' own experiences of their culture with their beliefs by using language that resembles what the reader would use to discuss their own views in a conversation (Conboy 2010). This concept is referred to by Fairclough (1994) as 'conversationalization'. The 'tabloidization' of the Truss premiership was particularly noteworthy due to its extent and, also, due to its popularity. The tabloid newspapers were successful in simplifying the Truss premiership and its shortcomings into easily digestible material. The extent of this is visible in its potential to become an online meme (Alvelos 2022). Overall, the techniques of 'tabloidization' were highly successful in projecting a publicly accepted narrative of Truss' as politically incompetent.

A prominent example of the 'tabloidization' (Conboy 2010, 130) of the narrative around Truss was *The Daily Star's* recurring comparison of Truss to a lettuce in a competition to see if the lettuce would expire before the end of Truss' premiership (Stone 2022b). The comparison of Truss to the colloquialism 'wet lettuce' (Stone 2022b) made a significant contribution to the narrative concerning Truss' incompetence and weakness as a leader; it had the ability to transcend 'its tabloid-sponsored milieu...becoming the source of innumerable memes, jokes, puns, and mutations' (Alvelos 2022). The comparison spilled over from print media into other forms of widely read and interacted with social media channels, including a livestream on YouTube, which was watched by nearly 20,000 people (Victor 2022).

The comparison between Truss and the lettuce, which was originally featured in the magazine *The Economist*, outlined how the ten days Truss had had as Prime Minister before the 'mini-budget' compared roughly to 'the shelf-life of a lettuce' (Alvelos 2022; *The Economist* 2022). The transfer of this comparison from a more 'elite' publication (Demata and Conscenti 2020, 55), with a closed audience limited to those interested in politics, to a metaphor used in a 'popular' tabloid (Demata and Conscenti 2020, 55) 'conversationalized' (Fairclough 1994) the derision of Truss. It thus appealed to a broader audience due to its popularity and transposition to an online meme.

A neologism, which is 'a recently created (or coined) word, or an existing word or phrase that has been assigned a new meaning' (Richardson 2007), is often utilised in tabloid milieu and is a feature of the 'tabloidization' of press coverage. Aiming to relate politics to popular culture references and providing a 'textual bridge' (Conboy 2010) of understanding for their readership, neologisms were used to make criticism of Truss' premiership the subject of satirised ridicule understandable to a wider readership.

Both tabloid publications *The Metro* and *Daily Star* utilise a neologism in their reporting of the crash of the pound. *The Metro's* headline 'The pound Kwartanks' (Binns 2022) satirises the surname of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Kwasi Kwarteng. By turning the bleak economic picture into a comedic, satirical headline, *The Metro* dilutes the serious economic nature of the crash of the pound. This makes the news more comprehensible for its everyday readership and also draws greater attention to the economic incident. Its humorous, 'eye-catching headline' makes it more accessible and appealing to readers (Schaffer 1995, 28). Similarly, *The Daily Star's* headline 'Honey, I Shrunk the Quids' (Stone 2022a) refers to the film 'Honey, I Shrunk the Kids'. References to popular culture by these newspapers signify a 'tabloidization' (Conboy 2010, 130) of the 'mini-budget' and general reporting on the economy.

Because tabloid newspapers are focused primarily on issues of gossip, celebrity, and sex (Schaffer 1995, 29; Williams 2009, 201), their content does not typically emphasise the reporting of 'hard news', such as politics, compared to their broadsheet counterparts (Schaffer 1995, 28). Thus, to gain the attention of their regular readership and to further reach new audiences,

political issues are contextualised by tabloids through ‘conversationalization’ (Fairclough, 1994), the use of colloquial phrases and references to popular culture in order to appeal to the mass-market (Williams 2009, 200). By making Truss’ political failures increasingly digestible for a mass-market audience, these were no longer confined to the politically active readership, but were now widely known among members of the public.

In this instance, the utilisation of neologisms and ‘tabloidization’ (Conboy 2010, 130) was essential in making the negative narrative of Truss accessible and easily understandable to a wider audience. In other words, Truss’ failings fell victim to ‘democratisation’ by the tabloid press, in which they were no longer solely subject to scrutiny by the politically involved, but also to that of the public at large. As a result, the negative narrative surrounding Truss was widely received and interpreted through the negative tabloid coverage. Therefore, this had an impact on her approval ratings among the general public, and not solely those within the confines of her own party or voter base.

The popularity of the Truss and lettuce comparison, as well as the negative coverage by other tabloid corpora, was crucial in projecting the perception of Truss’ incompetence to a larger, less politically active audience. It also extended the projection beyond the confines of the print media to social media, which 87% of people aged 16 to 24 now use as their primary source for news consumption (Ofcom 2022, 3). This ultimately contributed to a ‘swift erosion of public opinion’ (Avelos 2022) by furthering a negative narrative of Truss through multiple media channels. At the beginning of her premiership, this also reaffirmed and sensationalised the political views of the Conservative readership. By implicitly encouraging the Conservative readership to change their views, it aided Truss’ delegitimisation within her own political party. Whilst it was her policy, not her own image, that was responsible for her downfall in the ‘political reality’ (Shenhav 2006, 246-247), the print media was essential in popularising and reaffirming the narrative around Truss’ leadership as one of failure and humiliation.

### **THE TABLOID NEWSPAPER AND ‘GENDERED MEDIATION’**

“Gendered mediation” (Gidengil and Everitt 2003, 210) refers to news coverage that treats the masculine as the norm. As a result, when women find themselves stepping into the political sphere, they are subject to increased scrutiny because their behaviour and presence is viewed as a deviation from the norm, or as an anomaly. This coverage by the media is not only more extensive and has greater emphasis on the female or feminine but is deliberately gendered due to the desire to present women as a ‘novelty’ in the masculine order (Gidengil and Everitt 2003, 210). In politics, this is not a concept confined to the coverage of Truss alone, instead it is a wider historical trend. It also clearly extended to Truss’ predecessors Theresa May and Margaret Thatcher (Williams 2021). However, it is also true that, due to the consequences of ‘tabloidization’ and tabloid focus on audience enhancement and ‘personalisation’ (Langer 2007), Truss was subjected to “gendered mediation” by the emphasis on her personally as the focus of negative political coverage. This contributed to subtly pervading narratives around female politicians as ‘outsiders’ and ‘non-leaders’ (Mavin et al 2010, 560).

Furthering this, newspapers also established a highly gendered narrative around Truss’ leadership competency. Newspaper headlines sought to portray Truss’ ‘humiliation’ by emphasising the control held by the new Chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, over the economy and even the leadership of the Conservative party itself when reversing the measures established in the ‘mini-budget’. In contrast, Truss herself was portrayed as powerless. A headline from *The Mail* that stated Truss was ‘In office, but not in power’ (Groves 2022c) on the 18th of October 2022, along with *The I’s* headline that read ‘Hunt takes charge as PM fears the exit’ (The I 2022b). *The Financial Times* also wrote in their subheading that ‘investors’ were now ‘reassured’ by Hunt (Parker et al 2022b). These headlines play into a gendered mortification of Truss’ leadership, implying that she requires ‘the back-up of a man to give her message credibility’ (Mavin et al 2010, 651). This posits that male leadership and political domination are required to stabilise the failures of a female leader. This overall message represents female politicians as ‘non-leaders’ (Mavin et al 2010, 560) by contrasting Truss’ lack of power, as suggested by *The Mail*, with Hunt’s ability to ‘reassure’ investors and to ‘take control’.



This example corroborates an empirical study by Aaldering and Van der Paas (2018). When analysing media coverage, they found evidence of 'gender-differentiated coverage' between male and female political leaders. Male leaders received greater coverage based on leadership traits of 'political craftsmanship' (2018, 926), which involves their knowledge of issues, general political competence and 'vigorousness' (2018, 926), describing their 'strength' in the political arena, decisiveness and ability to dominate. The roles in the above example can be attributed to Hunt; he is praised for his 'political craftsmanship' (Aaldering and Van de Pas, 2018, p. 926) in 'reassuring' the markets by *The Financial Times* and for his 'vigorousness' (Aaldering and Van de Pas 2018, 926) by 'taking charge' as outlined by *The I* (The I 2022b). In comparison, Truss is described as powerless by *The Mail*. Such a stark supposed contrast in leadership ability implicitly encourages the readership to view Hunt as more 'competent' and better suited to leadership than Truss. As a result, subtly pervading narratives surrounding women in political leadership are reinforced as the male politician is presented as more proficient in politics.

Corroborating this, the 'personalisation' (Langer 2007) of the narrative surrounding Liz Truss was also central to the gendered portrayal of her incompetence. 'Personalisation' is the increasing 'focus on leaders and their personalities' rather than concentrating on 'abstract institutions or policies' as a means of delivering political news (Langer 2007, 372). Truss was at the forefront of criticism for the failures of her government. For example, on the 18th October 2022, the front page of *The Mail* featured a picture of Truss leaving Parliament with the caption 'Haunted PM leaves Westminster last night' (Groves et al 2022b). The lettuce comparison used by *The Daily Star* placed Truss' 'iconicity as a core source of her derision' (Alvelos 2022). Finally, Truss was also referred to by the personal pronoun 'She' in *The Mail*'s headline 'How much can she, and the rest of us, take?' (Groves et al 2022b); in this context, the pronoun 'she' ensures that her gender becomes the 'primary descriptor'. This can also be considered a 'demoting' description as the individual being discussed 'has to be inferred' and the person is given subtly 'a more background role' (Langer 2007, 374). Additionally, *The Mail* begins their lead with 'Her first 38 days in office.' The pronoun of 'her' used immediately after the headline is particularly poignant as Truss is not mentioned once by name in the headline, nor lead; as two of the most eye-catching pieces of the newspaper's front cover, this omission is significant. Truss is, again, 'demoted' (Langer 2007, 374) as an anomalous female figure, a figure unworthy of mention by name.

With this presentation of Truss' female leadership by the print media, as well as the personal focus on Truss for her Chancellor's mistakes, Truss is presented to the newspaper readership as an object of ridicule. As a female leader, she is shown to the readers with large images of herself as the focus of the negative coverage, despite Kwarteng also being to blame for the economic policy. She is subjected to a greater 'mediation' that is deliberately gendered as it highlights her as the source of the political problem. She is 'the novelty' (Gidengil and Everitt 2003, 210) in the political process and is offered up to their readership as the source of the blame, particularly by *The Mail*.

Gendered coverage was continued throughout the reporting of the 'mini-budget' and its economic consequences. After the dismissal of Kwarteng, no major broadsheet or tabloid placed a picture of Kwarteng on its front page. Despite this, all had images of Truss. Although some headlines did focus on Kwarteng's dismissal, such as the headline in the broadsheet newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* 'Truss clings to power after axing Kwarteng' (Riley-Smith 2022b), all of the major tabloids present Truss as the lead of the story. *The Sun*, albeit not as a headline, utilised a spoiler reading 'Lame duck Liz on the brink' (Atherley 2022). Meanwhile, *The Daily Star* continued their lettuce neologism with the headline 'How long can wet lettuce Liz Romaine?' (Stone 2022c). With these headlines, the competency of Kwarteng as Chancellor of the Exchequer is not scrutinised, despite him serving as one of the so-called 'Great Offices of State' In this instance, Truss is bearing an increased load for the actions of Kwarteng. This is not to suggest that Truss was not equally responsible for her governments 'mini-budget' policy, but rather that she is the victim of increased media scrutiny and derision that did not equally focus on the failures of Kwarteng. She is the subject of 'gendered mediation'

(Gidengil and Everitt 2003, 210) and increased scrutiny because of her position as a woman in a leadership role.

This is not unique to Truss: Williams identified that increased coverage generally centres on 'gender, femininity [or] appearance' by 'conservative media' compared to 'progressive' corpora (2021, 407). To illustrate this point, compared to one-third of articles in more left-leaning corpora, all more right-wing newspapers relied on emphasis of Theresa May's femininity in 'more than half' of all articles (2021, 408). Additionally, since Thatcher, a change in 'journalist norms and standards' has occurred, which has 'sensationalised' and 'personalised' the politician (2021, 415). This has had an impact on gendered coverage as greater inspection is given to their private lives and as 'subversive gender choices' are brought to the fore (Williams 2021, 415). This begins to explain why gendered coverage is particularly prominent in the tabloid press and why, despite Truss' tenure as Prime Minister being so short, she was subject to gender-differentiated coverage.

Indeed, tabloids often act to 'exploit the climate of permissiveness' by combining politics with celebrity gossip (Buckledee 2020, 12). *The Mail* changed its format in the 1970's and 1980's to the tabloid format in order to appeal to a new audience and to increase circulation, replicating the success of its competitor, *The Sun* (Buckledee 2020, 14). With tabloid media, 'hard news' such as politics is adapted to evoke a 'sensationalised' tone (Williams 2021, 415) as a means of appealing to the readership. However, the desire of the tabloid to 'celebritise' (Williams 2021, 411) a political actor to appeal to a broader audience results in the political actors themselves being presented by the tabloid as a 'nexus point' via which political issues can be discussed (Weidhase, 2021). This can also be described as 'Infotainment', a term used to describe the combination of information and entertainment in tabloid newspapers and, often, the inability to tell the difference between the two. This leads to increased focus on the political actor generally as the centre of coverage. However, female politicians suffer negative consequences disproportionately from this coverage (Gidengil and Everitt 2003). By serving as a forum of discussion for political issues, the coverage they receive emphasises their presence as a deviation from the norm of the male-dominated political arena, subtly reinforcing the perspective that 'women do not really belong in politics' (Gidengil and Everitt 2003, 210).

Women are often regarded as the 'inherently different, deviant presence' in society, whereas the male presence is perceived as the 'genderless norm' opposing women as the 'gendered other' (Williams 2021, 406-407). Consequently, a woman's position, particularly within the traditionally male-dominated political sphere, is seen as a deviation from the norm. Thus, their gender is used as a 'primary descriptor' (Williams 2021, 407) which differentiates them from men. This 'gendered othering' (Southern and Harmer 2021), in which a woman's place in the political order is presented as anomalous by the media, is not exclusive to Truss. Both Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May were found to have been impacted by increased media 'personalisation' (Langer 2007; Williams 2021).

Furthermore, in William's study analysing articles from the first three weeks of Thatcher's and May's premierships and using critical discourse analysis, it was found that in 45.7% of May's articles, her gender was mentioned. This compared to 40.8% for Thatcher (2021, 407). There was also disparity between the two female leaders regarding mentions of their femininity and appearance. Thatcher's femininity was highlighted in 53.4% of articles, while May's was emphasised in 66.1% (2021, 408.) With regards to appearance, May's appearance was subjected to coverage 'almost twice as often' as Thatcher (2021, 411). Although gendered commentary adopted a 'neutral or even positive tone' (2021, 410), the commentary on May had a particularly negative impact because of the emphasis it placed on 'her sex over her professional role', which, in turn, places her position as a 'serious political actor' into question (2021, 410). This study draws parallels to the coverage of Truss. Her gender was also placed 'over her professional role' (Williams 2021, 410), for example by *The Mail's* use of the pronouns 'she' and 'her' before mentioning her by name (Groves et al 2022b). This contributes further to the question of her credibility as a politician, as her female characteristics are emphasised as atypical in the male dominated political sphere (Williams 2021, 401).

By participating in 'gendered mediation' (Gidengil and Everitt 2003, 210), print media

thus portrayed Truss as the 'outlier' in the political system. Her competency as a leader was compared to that of her male counterpart Jeremy Hunt, who was portrayed as more capable by 'taking charge' (The I 2022b), while she was also placed as the 'source of derision' (Alvelos 2022) for her government's failures. Simultaneously, her male chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, was subjected to less coverage for his own 'mini-budget' failure. This gendered portrayal of Truss contributed to the narrative of incapability and incompetency that pervaded coverage of Truss in the print media, leading to the extremely low net-approval she received among her supporter base and the public (Redfield and Wilton Strategies 2022b).

Placing Truss at the forefront of political derision contributed to a narrative of women as 'non-leaders' (Mavin et al 2010, 560), as Truss herself, rather than her decisions, are placed at the forefront of the narrative of failure and ridicule. Truss is 'not necessarily depicted as unsuitable for leadership; rather, she is constructed as a monstrous version of what a leader is expected to be' (Baxter 2018, 48) through a continual emphasis on her as a leader as the principal factor in her downfall. This is visible in the reference to her by *The Mail's* article by Vine (2022) as a 'disastrous dalliance'. Thus, the media was significant in its contribution to a gendered narrative around Truss' leadership and its failure.

Combining imagery and language techniques with 'gendered mediation', tabloid corpora are able to reinforce gendered stereotypes of female politicians as 'non-leaders' (Mavin et al 2010, 60) as a subtly pervading, 'normalised' perspective. The 'tabloidization' of major political issues, most prominently demonstrated by the 'Lettuce' campaign run by the *Daily Star* and its subsequent popularity introduced the comparison of Truss to a lettuce into the lexicon of vocabulary used daily to portray Truss' political failures. What is noteworthy is the ease with which this comparison gained traction on social media (Alvelos 2022) and this was transposed from the covers of the *Daily Star* tabloid, a unique demonstration of the British 'tabloid culture' that fails to be replicated elsewhere (Buckledee 2020, 1-19). However, most importantly, it serves as a demonstration of how easily a female political leader can become the source of popular derision whilst her fellow male political actors and collaborators escape this gendered criticism. This was also visible with Theresa May, whose nickname of 'Maybot' by *The Guardian's* John Crace (2016) was widely adopted and was 'the year in a word' in 2017 according to *The Financial Times* (Mance 2017). 'Maybot' was adopted to ridicule May's monotonous answers to questions, such as her campaign slogan 'Strong and Stable'. However, it quickly became a descriptor for every political 'faux-pas' that she committed, including her dancing and a coughing fit she had during a speech at the Conservative party conference in 2017 (Mance 2017). Derision was no longer consigned to her political actions; it now applied to everything she did, from her speech to her human bodily functions. What was once a technique reserved for the tabloid press, *The Guardian*, considered a 'quality paper' with a 'neutral language' focus (Demata and Conoscenti 2020, 14) adopted a narrative marred by features of 'tabloidization' (Conboy 2010, 130).

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the chronology of the narrative constructed of Truss' leadership by newspapers was initially one of optimism, low taxes, and assistance with the rising cost of energy bills. This then descended rapidly, into one of humiliation, powerlessness, and failure. Assisted by ideological influence, the 'tabloidization' of her leadership, the 'conversationalist' register adopted and the use of 'seductive persuasion', newspapers were significantly influential in 'agenda-setting' around Truss' leadership. This combination was responsible for establishing it as a failure. Additionally, the print media was able to contribute to the continued depiction of women as 'non-leaders' inter alia through its portrayal of Jeremy Hunt as a more competent alternative and its 'personalisation' of Truss as the cause of her downfall (Langer 2007). The use of these techniques to create a highly negative narrative, in combination with extremely low public opinion, significantly challenged and undermined Truss' credibility as Prime Minister. This article, therefore, concludes that the role of newspapers was significant in establishing the narrative surrounding Truss and her premiership and hence may well have been a factor in her decision to resign.

This article hopes to further contribute to the understanding of the impact that the print media has on political agenda-setting. Although it is increasingly challenging to determine the impact of the media in its entirety on voter behaviour due to its increased 'fragmentation' into different forms, such as social media, online transpositions of the traditional newspapers and broadcast media (Wring and Ward 2020, 283), print media still has influence and is still emulated by radio and television (Wring and Ward 2020, 283). This article hopes to demonstrate further how the print media's 'soft-power' of narrative creation, particularly that of the tabloid press, is still prevalent in influencing the behaviour of the electorate. It therefore could also impact the behaviour of the political actors that are answerable to, and are legitimised by the electorate themselves (Gidengil and Everitt 2003).

Notably, this article does not present original statistical evidence. However, it establishes the basis and prominent themes that can be utilised to further investigate the frequency of gendered or sensationalised terms in the coverage of Truss' premiership. It is hoped that such an analysis will support the conclusions of this article.

This article also hopes to contribute to a greater understanding of how gender differentiated coverage or 'gendered mediation' can impact the narrative portrayed of female political actors, largely to their disadvantage. It is hoped that the evidence outlined results in heightened awareness of the negative impact of gendered coverage. This has the potential to encourage increased critical introspection by all media outlets into the impact of their coverage and the impact of increased gendered 'personalisation' (Langer 2007, 372) of female politicians, as well as increased critical awareness of the readership. With this, further progress will be made towards the goal of 'normalising' (Williams 2021, 399) the female politician as a permanent, valuable feature of the political order.

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