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Legitimation in government social media communication: the case of the Brexit department

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ABSTRACT

When governments introduce controversial policies or face a risk of policy failure, officeholders try to avoid blame and justify their decisions by using various legitimation strategies. This paper focuses on the ways in which legitimations are expressed in government social media communication, using the Twitter posts of the British government's Brexit department as an example. We show how governments may seek legitimacy by appealing to (1) the personal authority of individual policymakers, (2) the collective authority of (political) organisations, (3) the impersonal authority of rules or documents, (4) the goals or effects of government policy, (5) 'the will of the people', and (6) time pressure. The results suggest that official legitimations in social media posts tend to rely more on references to authority and shared values rather than presentation of evidence and sound arguments.

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1. Introduction

When governments introduce controversial policies or face a risk of policy failure, officeholders tend to engage in blame avoidance behaviour to dodge public blame attacks and hold on to power (Hinterleitner, 2020; Hood, 2011; Weaver, 1986). Blame avoidance in government may involve the strategic use of language, often aimed at minimising the citizens' perception of harm, or shifting or diffusing the blame (Hansson, 2015, 2018a, 2018b, 2019). While public-facing government communication increasingly takes place on social media, the defensive discursive strategies used by officeholders in these online environments have yet to be studied. In this article, we contribute to filling this research gap by exploring the uses of legitimation strategies – a type of rhetorical blame avoidance focused on justifying problematic social action – in the Twitter communication of the British government's Brexit department.

The Brexit department's communication on Twitter deserves particular attention because the Department dealt with a complex and controversial policy that engendered numerous public blame firestorms and triggered several ministerial resignations. The Department for Exiting the European Union (informally known as the Brexit department

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and abbreviated as DExEU) was established by Prime Minister Theresa May to oversee the UK's exit from the EU, following a UK-wide referendum on 23 June 2016, in which 51.9 per cent of voters voted in favour of exiting the EU. In August 2016, as a part of its public communication efforts, the Department created a profile on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/DExEUgov>) where it posted content over the course of three and a half years until the Department was dissolved on 31 January 2020 when Brexit took effect. For our study, we collected a dataset of all the 1,869 tweets and retweets that the Department published during its lifespan, and analysed these qualitatively to identify the ways in which the Department used language for the purpose of self-legitimation during the highly controversial Brexit process.

Our analysis draws upon the existing discourse-analytic literature on legitimations (e.g. van Leeuwen, 2007), but sheds new light on the uses of defensive discursive strategies specifically in the context of government social media communication about controversial policies. As we will demonstrate below, in their social media communication, government departments may try to legitimise their actions by appealing to (1) the personal authority of individual policymakers, (2) the collective authority of (political) organisations, (3) the impersonal authority of rules or documents, (4) the goals or effects of government policy, (5) 'the will of the people', and (6) time pressure.

While our aim in this study is to improve our understanding specifically of the legitimisation strategies used in official social media messages, we should note that relatively little is known of the linguistic aspects of social media communication of government departments in general. Both in communication and discourse studies, much of the research on the political uses of Twitter, for example, have focused on electoral campaigns (Bennett, 2019; Gruber, 2019; Hoffmann, 2018; Jungherr, 2016; Kreiss et al., 2018; Mueller & Saeltzer, 2020; Stier et al., 2018), presidential and prime ministerial communication (Boukala, 2018; Kreis, 2017; Waisbord & Amado, 2017; Wignell et al., 2020), and networking among citizens (Bouvier & Rosenbaum, 2020). Scholars of public administration, information systems and e-government have mainly been interested in managerial, institutional, legal, and political aspects of social media use in government (Medaglia & Zheng, 2017). A rare example of linguistically informed research into the Twitter use of government organisations is Krzyżanowski's (2018) detailed analysis of 519 tweets posted by the European Commission's spokesperson service in 2014 and 2015. It is also worth noting that existing studies usually do not cover the entirety of the social media posts of a particular government department throughout its lifespan. Our corpus provides a complete overview of how a department communicated over time.

Our study also makes an empirical contribution to the growing literature on Brexit as a political and linguistic phenomenon, which has so far largely focused on the pre-referendum campaigning era and has rarely addressed social media content (Bennett, 2019; Buckledee, 2018; Charteris-Black, 2019; Koller et al., 2019; Zappettini & Krzyżanowski, 2019). An exception to this is Bouko and Garcia's (2019) multimodal analysis of a random sample of 2,196 tweets mentioning Brexit posted in the weeks following the EU membership referendum in the UK, showing that citizens' reactions to Brexit on Twitter often conveyed negative sentiments.

In what follows, we will first briefly introduce literature on legitimisation strategies and then provide background about the Brexit department and its social media communication. In the analysis section, we will describe and exemplify the types of legitimising appeals we identified in our dataset. We conclude by discussing the implications of our

study and suggesting that similar legitimations may be exploited by governments in other contexts where they face blame risks.

2. Framework: blame avoidance and legitimation in political discourse

Since the 1980s, political scientists have explored how policy choices, institutional design, and communication of governments may be shaped by officeholders' motivation to avoid receiving blame and losing their office (Hood, 2011; Weaver, 1986). The self-defensive communicative behaviour of officeholders may be either aimed at avoiding public debates over blame issues (e.g. by providing no comments to the press, or by shifting public attention to something else) or trying to win an argument against blame makers by using denials, justifications, excuses, or counterattacks (Hansson, 2015; Hood, 2011). Blame avoidance behaviour may be either reactive, when officeholders respond to public accusations, or anticipative, when officeholders try to communicate in a way that would lower the risk of becoming a target of accusations (Hansson, 2017a).

Among the most important discursive strategies of blame avoidance are *legitimations*: answers to the spoken or unspoken 'why' question to justify some social action (Hansson, 2015; van Leeuwen, 2007). Discourse analysts have noted that people who wish to defend their behaviour or (political) standpoint tend to use, among other things, appeals to personal authority, rules, role models, experts, tradition, moral values, fear, goals and effects, a hypothetical future, or altruism (Reyes, 2011; van Leeuwen, 2007; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). The uses of legitimation strategies have been explored in various domains, including political campaigning (e.g. Mackay, 2015; Zappettini, 2019), public administration and public diplomacy (e.g. Björkvall & Höög, 2019; Simonsen, 2019), business organisations (e.g. Holmgreen, 2021), and news and social media texts (e.g. Lee, 2020; Pérez-Arredondo & Cárdenas-Neira, 2019; Vaara, 2014). These studies demonstrate how powerful groups or institutions have sought approval for their problematic behaviour or harmful policies by using persuasive and sometimes manipulative discourse where their 'institutional actions and policies are typically described as beneficial for the group or society as a whole, whereas morally reprehensive or otherwise controversial actions are ignored, obfuscated or reinterpreted as being acceptable' (Rojo & Van Dijk, 1997, p. 528).

Following van Leeuwen (2007), a basic distinction can be made between legitimation via authorisation and rationalisation. The former means imposing some kind of authority without further justification: the answer to the 'why' question is either 'because [authority figure] says so' (personal authority legitimation), or 'because [rule, policy, law, etc.] says so' (impersonal authority legitimation). Rationalisation, however, involves referring to the utility of the practice that is being justified: the answer to the 'why' question is 'in order to do/be/have [something desirable]'. Besides these, van Leeuwen's (2007) framework includes two forms of legitimation focused on morality: moral evaluation and mythopoesis. Moral evaluation legitimation involves referring to some system of moral value, so the answer to the 'why' question is 'because it is [good/associated with positive values]'. Mythopoesis means telling of moral or cautionary tales where legitimate social practices are rewarded and deviant behaviour is punished.

These legitimations may be regarded as typical appeals used in political argumentation (Hart, 2013; van Leeuwen, 2018) and their reasonableness may be evaluated from an

argumentation-analytical perspective. Defensive appeals may rely on quasi-argumentative shortcuts, content-related conclusion rules ('if x, then y' or 'y, because x') which may seem plausible because they refer to values, biases, or prejudices that the audience presumably shares with the speaker/writer. Normatively, certain uses of such appeals could be classified as argumentative fallacies, for instance if their formulations are confusingly ambiguous or the claims cannot be supported by relevant evidence (see Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, pp. 74–80; Reisigl, 2014, pp. 77–79).

The use of legitimations is topic-specific and context-specific. For example, Reyes (2011) showed how in their speeches, US Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama tried to legitimise the US military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan during the 'War on Terror' via appeals to fear, hypothetical futures, rationality, expertise, and altruism. Vaara (2014) found that in Finnish news media, the struggles over legitimacy concerning the 2009 Eurozone crisis involved position-based authorisations using institutionalised authorities and 'voices of the common man', knowledge-based authorisations using economists, rationalisations via economic arguments, moral evaluations based on (un)fairness, mythopoeisis involving alternative future projections, and cosmological claims of inevitability. In a similar vein, in this study we aim to unveil a distinctive set of legitimations the UK government used in their social media communication in the run-up to Brexit.

Blame avoidance and legitimation are complex social phenomena that can only be understood fully by studying particular historical, institutional, and interactional settings in which certain actors experience specific blame risks. We will outline these in the following sections.

3. Context: blame risks of the Brexit department

Throughout its existence, the Brexit department of the British government was vulnerable to blame attacks mainly from two perspectives:

1. Many UK citizens opposed Brexit, seeing it a harmful policy that would negatively affect their wealth and freedoms. Throughout the 2016–2020 Brexit process, opinion polls in the UK consistently indicated, although in slightly lesser proportions than in the Brexit referendum, still more than 40 per cent support to remaining in the European Union (whatukthinks.org, 2020). The share of Brits who thought that the economy would be worse as a result of Brexit rose above 50 per cent while fewer than a quarter believed it would be better (Curtice, 2020). Surveys also suggested that more than half of the UK population wanted the 'freedom of movement' – the right to live and work in EU countries – to continue after Brexit (YouGov, 2019).
2. The government faced constant criticism for poor planning and execution of the Brexit process (Smith, 2018; YouGov, 2021). The UK's negotiations with the EU were characterised by 'a lack of consultation with domestic constituents, a political system engulfed by internal splits and resignations, an insistence on sticking to pre-determined positions, and lower levels of transparency' (Frennhoff Larsén & Khorana, 2020, p. 859).

These vectors of blame reflect the important new divide that developed and persisted in British society in the wake of the Brexit referendum: that between 'Remainers' and 'Leavers' (Hobolt et al., 2021).

That the UK government could not deliver a Brexit deal by their own deadline of 29 March 2019 has been regarded as a policy fiasco at least partially ascribable to poor leadership of Prime Minister Theresa May (McConnell & Tormey, 2020). Shortly before the negotiations were to begin, May called a surprise general election to increase the majority of her party in the Parliament and strengthen the negotiating mandate of the government – but the elections resulted in a minority government and weakened Prime Minister's position (Hobolt, 2018). Between January and March 2019, May's proposal for the UK's Withdrawal Agreement was defeated at three consecutive votes in the House of Commons. May announced her resignation soon after that.

May's government adopted a hard, confrontational bargaining style that complicated negotiations with the EU and harmed its reputation abroad (Martill & Staiger, 2020). May's approach to the Brexit process was characterised by secrecy and information leaks that further eroded public confidence in her government and its policies (Heide & Worthy, 2019). In their public rhetoric, cabinet members repeatedly misled the public by (1) making claims about overwhelming popular support for their policy, (2) misrepresenting the power relations between the EU and the national government, and (3) seriously downplaying the complexity of negotiations involved in leaving the EU and reaching trade deals thereafter (Hansson & Kröger, 2021).

Due to government-internal strife, the Brexit department saw several changes in its political leadership in the middle of the negotiation process. The first Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (known informally as Brexit secretary), David Davis, was appointed in June 2016, but resigned on 8 July 2018 over the cabinet's agreement on a plan for the future relationship between the UK and the EU ('the Chequers plan'). The second Brexit Secretary, Dominic Raab, who was appointed on 9 July 2018, resigned on 15 November 2018 over the draft withdrawal agreement. Finally, Stephen Barclay was appointed on 16 November 2018 and served until the dissolution of the Department on 31 January 2020 when Brexit took effect. There were also several personnel changes to the Minister of State for Exiting the EU who deputised for the Brexit secretaries, Chief Negotiators for Exiting the EU, and Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State for Exiting the EU who served as the lowest-tier ministers at the Brexit department.

4. Data: Twitter communication of the Brexit department

When government officeholders communicate with the public, they mainly do it for two broad purposes: (1) to exert their executive power by influencing people's behaviour via commands, requests, and other persuasive techniques, and (2) to hold on to power by presenting themselves in a positive light and warding off blame via various defensive and self-legitimising communicative moves such as justifying, boasting, and flattering (Hansson, 2017b). Government agencies' use of social media channels, such as Twitter, may also serve multiple functions, including information provision about policies and operations of the agency, input/feedback seeking from citizens, and favourable symbolic presentation of the government (DePaula et al., 2018). As our study deals with legitimisation strategies used in the service of blame avoidance, we focus on the latter.

Twitter is a social media networking service that has become increasingly popular since its launch in 2006. As of August 2016, when the Brexit department started posting on Twitter, about 17 per cent of adults in the United Kingdom used Twitter daily, and this

figure reached 43 per cent by 2020 when the Department was dissolved (Tankovska, 2021a, 2021b). Twitter is used strategically by people interested in politics and can be seen as a tool that various elites exploit for the purpose of agenda setting (see, e.g. Adi et al., 2014; Bennett, 2019). In the UK, Twitter profiles have been set up both by hundreds of individual politicians who may use these for party-political campaigning purposes, as well as official collective entities, government departments/agencies, that are overseen by the ministers but according to the Civil Service Code may not participate in party-political battles (Social media guidance for civil servants, 2014).

Twitter as a communication platform has particular affordances. Users can publish short posts ('tweets') online containing various types of content (text, links, images, video), share ('retweet') messages published by other users, and 'follow' other users to keep track of their published/shared messages. They can also add 'hashtags' (words preceded by the symbol #) to cross-reference messages on certain topics, classify the content, as well as construe interpersonal relationships and evaluations (see Zappavigna, 2015). In this article, we focus on textual content published by the UK Brexit department; the uses of links, images, and videos can be analysed in future research. For this study, we scraped all the tweets and retweets from <https://twitter.com/DExEUgov> using the rtweet R software package.

By the end of its term in 2020, the Brexit department's Twitter profile had attracted 55,600 followers.¹ Throughout its existence, the Brexit department posted 968 original messages and shared ('retweeted') 901 messages that originated from a total of 145 accounts. The Brexit department mainly shared tweets posted by the UK Prime Minister's office (@10DowningStreet), 14 senior and junior ministers who oversaw the Brexit department during different periods, and other UK government departments and agencies. Out of the 901 retweets, 186 came from the UK Prime Minister's profile, 94 from the Brexit Secretary Steve Barclay, 44 from the Brexit Secretary David Davis, 35 from the Department for International Trade, and 31 from the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. All the other sources were retweeted less than 30 times. These figures indicate that a significant part of the Brexit department's Twitter communication was geared towards amplifying and spreading Brexit-related messages from the most senior political leaders (particularly the Prime Minister) and relevant government departments. We included all the retweets in our analysis as these constitute an inherent part of the Brexit department's communication stream on Twitter and represent the Brexit-related government communication strategies that we are interested in in this study. Our dataset contains a total of 1,869 twitter posts (42,618 words).

5. Analysis: legitimising appeals in government social media communication

As explained above, legitimising means answering the spoken or unspoken 'why' question to justify some social action (van Leeuwen, 2007). In the context of the blame risks affecting the Brexit department, legitimising primarily revolves around the following two interrelated 'why' questions: (1) Why should Brexit be implemented – and why should it be done in the way the UK government and its Brexit department do it? (2) Why might the UK government and its Brexit department deserve praise (and not deserve blame) for what they do? As is common within qualitative critical discourse

studies, our analytical process was abductive, that is, recursively moving between deductive and inductive inquiry (see KhosraviNik & Unger, 2016; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). The categories used in the analysis were identified partly by consulting the existing literature on legitimations reviewed above, and through scrutiny of the data. The two authors of the paper read the entire dataset independently, identifying all the possible strategies of legitimation present in the data. We first noted various references to the authority of individual and collective actors, rules, documents, and time. We also found mentions of goals or anticipated effects of government policy. However, we did not observe instances that could be strictly categorised as moral evaluation legitimations or mythopoesis. Based on this initial scrutiny of the data, we compiled an annotation manual to set out the criteria for each category present, with illustrative examples. The two authors analysed the entire dataset in three consecutive rounds, using inter-coder agreement procedures to identify ambiguous cases and correct errors in analysis. In the first round of analysis, we reached above 80 per cent agreement, and in the second round, 98 per cent agreement for each of the categories. All disagreements were resolved at the third round of analysis.² Below, we discuss the six kinds of legitimising appeals present in our data, and their features with illustrative examples, starting with appeals to authority.

5.1. Appealing to the personal authority of individual policymakers

The largest share of legitimations in the tweets of the Brexit department rely on the assumption that people will be persuaded by claims if these are made by a powerful policy maker, such as Prime Minister or a cabinet minister. In these cases, the answer to the ‘why’ question is simply ‘because [authority figure] says so’. Most commonly, this is discursively realised in tweets in the form of quotations or paraphrases of ministers’ statements that function as legitimations. These acts of speech representation imply: ‘Brexit should be implemented in this way (and the government/Brexit department deserve praise, not blame, for this) because the minister says so.’ For example:

- (1) ‘We are ready to work with our friends and partners to get a deal. But if you want a good deal for the UK, you must simultaneously get ready to come out without one.’ – PM @BorisJohnson <https://t.co/njkoKb9lLI>

In (1), the suggestion that the UK might leave the EU without negotiating a withdrawal agreement (‘deal’) with the EU is authorised by Prime Minister Boris Johnson whose words are quoted. By presenting the name of the authority figure as his Twitter username (i.e. a ‘handle’ beginning with @, a hyperlink to the personal Twitter profile of the Prime Minister), the personal aspect of the legitimation is further highlighted. In many instances, tweets paraphrase statements by ministers who cast the Brexit-related policies and actions of the government as deserving praise.

- (2) As DExEU Secretary @SteveBarclay told MPs this morning – we’re not just leading on vital work to prepare Britain for #Brexit at home – we are also focused on delivering the unprecedented future trading relationship with the EU that our #Brexit deal has secured. #BackTheBrexitDeal <https://t.co/L0whZV708A>

In (2), the tweet justifies the work of the Brexit Department by referring to the speech by Brexit Secretary Steve Barclay who boasted about it ('leading on vital work', 'delivering the unprecedented future trading relationship'). Besides explicitly quoting or paraphrasing a politician, appeals to their authority are sometimes realised as calls to read their statements. For example:

- (3) 31 January is a moment to heal divisions, re-unite communities and look forward to a bright future. Read @SteveBarclay's article in today's #SundayExpress <https://t.co/aXp9ygHHyf>

In (3), the first sentence is a claim about the date of the UK's formal exit from the EU (31 January 2020) that suggests that Brexit will have positive implications. It is not explicitly presented as a paraphrase (it does not read 'Steve Barclay said ...'), but it appears to paraphrase an article by the Brexit Secretary Steve Barclay, as the second sentence calls the audience to read Barclay's article in a newspaper and includes a hyperlink to that article.

The overwhelming reliance on appeals to authority in government social media communication may be seen as problematic for two reasons. First, the discourse structures that 'emphasise the position, power, authority or moral superiority of the speaker(s) or their sources' (van Dijk, 2006, p. 376) could make the recipients potentially more vulnerable and less resistant to manipulation. Second, appeals to authority (also known as appeals to 'awe', *argumentum ad vercundiam*) could be regarded as argumentative fallacies if these are used to avoid rational debate (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016).

5.2. Appealing to the collective authority of institutions or groups

Appeals to collective authority are similar to personal authority legitimations but refer to the authority of collective entities, such as organisations, institutions, or countries. The basic form of collective authority legitimation is 'because [authoritative organisation/institution] says so'. Notably, previous literature on legitimation in discourse (e.g. van Leeuwen, 2007) does not differentiate between personal and collective authority legitimations, but in the context of government communication and political blame games, this distinction becomes highly relevant. References to collectivised actors, such as countries, parliaments, or governments as sources of authority may give the impression that the justification is more widely accepted and has more power behind it (as it does not come from one person only) and at the same time mask or background the agency of individual actors and diffuses accountability between many people (when a parliament 'says' something, it is not attributable to a particular person). For example:

- (4) Parliament has backed the Government as it aims to leave the EU and build a new Global Britain

In this example, the answer to the 'why' question is: 'Brexit should be done according to the Government's plan because the Parliament says so.' In democracies, governments are meant to seek approval to their policies from legislators, so it is unsurprising that a government department appeals to the authority of the parliament when the latter

makes a favourable decision. However, some of the legitimising appeals refer to the authority of other powerful collectivised actors, as in the following example:

- (5) British businesses back our #Brexit deal. Firms don't want the uncertainty of crashing out of the EU without a deal, or of a second referendum.

In (5), the Brexit department refers to 'British businesses' as a collectivised actor whose support legitimises the proposed withdrawal agreement ('deal') the UK government had negotiated with the EU. Both sentences may leave a potentially misleading impression that the government's proposal was supported by all British firms, thereby disregarding the many businesses that actually saw leaving the EU as a morally wrong and economically harmful course of action.

5.3. Appealing to the authority of rules or documents

Some authority appeals do not refer to any individual or collective actors. Appeals to the impersonal authority of rules or documents occurs when the answer to the above 'why' questions is 'because [agreement, act, bill, paper, deal, scheme, treaty, plan] says so'. In many instances, written documents are represented as social actors, for example:

- (6) The Brexit deal on the table will allow trade to continue to flow smoothly.
 (7) The Repeal Bill provides confidence that there will be no unexpected changes on the day we leave the EU.

In (6), the positive outcome of government policy (trade 'flowing smoothly') seems to be guaranteed by 'the Brexit deal' as a powerful actor. In (7), a legislative document (Repeal Bill) is depicted as providing reassurance that no negative changes will happen as a result of Brexit. This kind of constructions mask human agency and appeal to the presumable 'objectivity' of official documents in the eyes of law-abiding and less-informed citizens.³ Legitimations via documents may sometimes be combined with other types of authority appeals, for instance:

- (8) We're leaving on 31 October. Reports say almost all of the UK's largest tech companies say they're ready.

In (8), the choice of a particular Brexit date is legitimised, on the one hand, through a reference to the collective authority of 'the UK's largest tech companies', and on the other hand, through a reference to written documents ('reports') that appear to funnel and amplify that authority.

5.4. Appealing to goals or effects of government policy

Instead of using authority appeals, a course of action may be defended by referring to its purposefulness. This type of legitimising – rationalisation – may take many forms, such as: 'I do x in order to do (or be, or have) y', 'I achieve doing (or being, or having) y by x-ing', 'X-ing serves to achieve being (or doing, or having) y', 'X [allows, helps, facilitates] doing y' (van Leeuwen, 2007). The Brexit department's tweets frequently appeal to future positive

outcomes (supposedly) arising from the activities of the government, so the answers to the ‘why’ questions would be ‘because [Brexit, policy] leads to [a desired effect]’ or ‘because [Brexit, policy] helps to achieve [a desired goal]’. For instance:

(9) Outside the EU we’ll be able to give farmers the support they need – helping them farm more productively and sustainably.

In (9), the Brexit department suggests that leaving the EU would make it possible for the UK government to support the British farmers. Increased government support and more productive and sustainable farming are depicted as the desirable goals and foreseeable positive outcomes of Brexit. In some instances, however, the advantageous effect that the tweets appeal to is ‘no unwanted change’, typically taking the form of claims that no harm will happen as a result of Brexit. For example:

(10) Britain will remain secure in any Brexit scenario. We’ll continue to co-operate with our European partners to ensure our country remains safe.

(11) For businesses, workers and consumers across the UK, the Repeal Bill will mean no unexpected changes on the day we leave the EU.

Examples (10) and (11) refer to possible risks (loss of security, unexpected changes) that people in the UK may perceive in relation to Brexit, and justify Brexit by claiming that these risks will not materialise. Some rationalisations are notably vague, appealing to ‘brighter future’, ‘new role’, and ‘opportunities’, for instance:

(12) Now is the time to come together to build a brighter future.

(13) International Trade Sec @LiamFoxMP: Free trade will transform the world for the better & the UK has a golden opportunity to forge a new role

In the same vein, some rationalisations are hyperbolic:

(14) The #Brexit deal paves the way for us to negotiate the broadest and most ambitious Free Trade Agreement with the EU the world has seen.

5.5. Appealing to the ‘will of the people’

In the Brexit department’s tweets, justifications of Brexit policies sometimes boil down to ‘because the people want it’. This includes appeals to the result of the 2016 referendum, essentially claiming that ‘Brexit must be done (this way) because the people voted for this’.⁴ Appealing to ‘the will of the people’ may be regarded as a sub-type of appeals to collective authority as well as goals: in these legitimations, ‘the people’ may be seen as a collective actor who authorises government’s actions, while ‘honouring the will of the people’ presumably voiced at the referendum is also presented as a primary goal of government’s Brexit policies. For example:

(15) We have a great deal. Now it’s time for MPs to deliver Brexit and honour the will of the people.

In (15), Members of Parliament are cast as having an obligation to support a particular proposal ('deal') negotiated by the government because not doing so would constitute acting against what the British people want. Similar appeals may be realised without mentioning 'the people' and referring to the referendum result that is taken to stand for people's will:

(16) We must honour the referendum result, and continue to grow our economy.

The use of appeals like (15) and (16) is problematic for two reasons. First, the idea of a single will of the people is unreasonable as there are always different views in politics that need to be respected (Weale, 2018). As populist politicians typically claim that they and only they represent the 'real people' (Wodak, 2017), their references to the will of the people in the context of Brexit suggest that those who voted 'Remain' should be excluded from the notion of 'the people' and their views completely disregarded. Second, at the 2016 referendum, citizens did not vote over a specific policy proposal detailing the conditions of leaving the EU, so it is misleading to claim that a particular government policy outlining a specific version of Brexit should be seen as corresponding to the wishes expressed by voters.

5.6. Appealing to time pressure

Appealing to time pressure means claiming that something must be done 'before it is too late', or simply because 'it is time'. van Leeuwen (2008) has used the term 'disembodied time summons' to refer to representations where time is used as a source of authority, 'as a kind of inescapable fate, or as a form of timing ordained by time itself' (p. 77).

In the case of the Brexit department, this primarily includes tweets that suggest that Brexit should 'get done' quickly, certain deadlines should be adhered to, immediate action is required, and time should not be wasted. There are mentions of important future dates, countdowns to deadlines, and calls to 'get ready' for Brexit.⁵ For example:

(17) Now is the time to get a #Brexit deal done.

(18) We want a deal but are leaving the EU on October 31 with or without one.

(19) Only 16 days remain until Brexit. If you sell goods in the UK, you may need to start using a new UK product marking after #Brexit.

(20) Get ready to import from the EU after #Brexit. You need to act now to make sure you're able to receive goods from the EU.

In (17) and (18), appeals to time pressure are used to push for completing the exit negotiations according to the terms proposed by the UK government. In (19) and (20), time pressure is construed as a basis for exhorting British businesses to adhere to the changes to exporting and importing regulations that come with leaving the European common market. The use of appeals to time pressure suggest that timing is a crucial aspect of the Brexit process, and an important signifier of political power of the UK government. Moreover, in the context of blame risk, these appeals help to background the agency of government in demanding (potentially inconvenient) behavioural changes and give the impression that the demands are simply appearing due to the passing of time and approaching of deadlines.

6. Conclusions

We have identified six types of legitimations that were used in the Twitter communication of the Brexit department to justify the policies of the UK government. We suggest that these could occur in social media messages of other government departments in other contexts where policymakers face public blame risks in relations to their contentious proposals or actions.

Appeals to the authority of individual officeholders are particularly prevalent in our dataset of government social media messages. This indicates that the departmental social media profiles are often used to amplify the statements of political leaders by rebroadcasting, quoting or paraphrasing them, and directing the users to read their speeches or opinion pieces on other websites. Appealing to the impersonal authority of institutions and rules/documents may seem as an obvious choice in government contexts as officeholders are in the business of producing policy proposals and other documents and seeking approval to these from legislators and various groups in society. However, as noted above, authority appeals may be used to avoid rational debate and exploit people's vulnerability to manipulation by emphasising the power and superiority of the speaker/source.

While justifying policies by referring to their goals or effects may seem normatively more desirable than merely appealing to someone's authority, legitimation via rationalisation is often based not on factual evidence but on vague ('brighter future') and hyperbolic ('most ambitious') positive depictions. Admittedly, social media environments tend to favour sharing of rather short texts⁶ and, therefore, users may prefer using concise slogans that appeal to emotions instead of presenting extended rational arguments and having substantial conversations. More generally, it has been argued that Twitter usage is more about connections than engagement (Bouvier & Rosenbaum, 2020), and as social media platforms have affordances that make these attractive for political campaigners who want to disseminate short-form content (Bossetta, 2018), governments may be similarly inclined to use social media largely for the purpose of favourable self-presentation (DePaula et al., 2018).

It seems reasonable to assume that some legitimations, such as appeals to the 'will of the people' and time pressure, are more likely used in specific circumstances: the former when there are referendum results or opinion poll figures available that could be cast as embodying the 'will of the people', and the latter when some (arbitrary) deadline has been set that could be represented as a motivation for urgent action.

Our analysis suggests that the post-referendum Brexit communication of the UK government was focused on implementing a version of Brexit suitable to the Conservative government by pushing for a quick conclusion to the exit negotiations with the EU and getting the related bills approved in the UK Parliament.⁷ The messages on Twitter primarily suggested that Brexit should 'get done' because it was required by the Prime Minister, other ministers, 'the people', or impending deadlines, and because certain individuals, organisations, or written documents said that the government's proposals regarding Brexit should be seen as desirable. There was little discussion of the content of the negotiations and policy proposals, and the concerns many people (including Remainers) may have had regarding the Brexit process and its possible negative outcomes were largely ignored.

As noted earlier, the list of appeals we have presented is context-specific and hence not exhaustive. It is likely that other kinds of legitimations that appeal, for example, to role models, experts, tradition, moral values, or fear, may be used in other government social media communication contexts. Legitimation on social media often relies on visual cues, images, videos, hashtags, or hyperlinks. Therefore, multimodal discourse analysis could help to identify and understand the persuasive elements beyond verbal language (e.g. Hansson, 2018c; Mackay, 2015; Ross & Rivers, 2017). Corpus-assisted methods of discourse analysis could be used to identify patterns in social media communication that may play part in legitimising government policy (Hansson & Page, forthcoming). A challenge for a more quantitative analysis of legitimation is that the general semantic formulations of legitimising appeals (e.g. 'X should be done because [authority figure] says so') do not necessarily map on to the actual syntactic patterns that occur in real-life data as indicated by the examples presented in this article. Future studies could compare the uses of various legitimation strategies in social media communication by other governments and organisations in other national contexts, in relation to other kinds of blame risks, and explore more closely their reception and effects (e.g. who will be perceived by particular audiences as deserving blame and to what extent).

As noted at the outset, the social media communication of government departments deserves much more critical linguistic analysis. A deeper understanding of the various defensive and justificatory discursive moves used by powerful institutions in the context of public blame games is a necessary step towards increasing policymakers' accountability and improving the quality of public debates over contentious policies.

Notes

1. The Brexit Department also had a Facebook profile (<https://www.facebook.com/dexeugov/>) where it posted content similar to their Twitter account, but which had much fewer followers (~4,000) and not as much engagement (likes, comments, shares) as on Twitter. The Facebook profile was set up only in June 2017, ten months later than their Twitter account, so Twitter should be regarded as the Department's primary social media channel.
2. The value of inter-coder assessment in this project, like other forms of collaborative qualitative research (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020) is two-fold. First, it enabled reflexive discussion between the research team about the linguistic realisations of particular categories (e.g. what kind of actions could be regarded as forms of personal authority legitimation), allowing to refine the annotation manual and provide a fuller set of illustrative examples that facilitated consistency in interpretation. Second, as a quality measure it increases the confidence with which the categories of legitimation as found in our data might be recognisable by other researchers, and in other datasets beyond our own. Further work could combine the kinds of qualitative discussion provided in this paper with other, quantitative approaches (see Hansson & Page, forthcoming) that scale up the study of legitimation in larger datasets and about other forms of legitimation and blame avoidance.
3. For a detailed discourse-analytic take on the nature and language of official documents in policy making, see Scollon (2008).
4. Notably, already before the Brexit referendum, the British tabloid newspapers 'contributed to legitimise Brexit along populist and nationalist logics as the "will of the (British) people"' (Zappettini, 2021). After the referendum, this populist appeal has been frequently exploited by Brexit-supporting politicians and pro-Brexit press (Freedon, 2017; Zappettini & Krzyżanowski, 2019).

5. 'Get Ready for Brexit' was the slogan of the advertising campaign run by Boris Johnson's government in September and October 2019 to encourage UK people and businesses to visit the government website and receive advice on preparing for leaving the EU on 31 October 2019. The £46 m campaign was criticised as a waste of money because the 31 October deadline was not met and there was little evidence the public became better prepared (Syal, 2020).
6. Posts on Twitter ('tweets') were originally limited to 140 characters and expanded to 280 characters in November 2017.
7. It is worth reminding that before the referendum, the UK government departments did not propose nor legitimise any Brexit policies, but on the contrary, carried out a campaign in support of remaining in the European Union. Therefore, the UK government communication before and after the referendum does not lend itself to a meaningful comparison in terms of how their legitimisation of Brexit changed.

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