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Media Manipulation: Divisions of Groups in BrexLit *Middle England*

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Abstract: ***In the widely acclaimed BrexLit Middle England (2018), Jonathan Coe foregrounds the role of media in both unifying and dividing a nation on the brink of political rupture. While many existing studies of BrexLit have focused on race, class, and generational divides, this paper highlights media as a critical but under-examined force in shaping political subjectivities and group dynamics among British people. Through a close analysis of three social groups in the novel, represented respectively by Sophie Potter, Ian Coleman, and Colin Trotter, the paper presents how divergent media preferences position them within distinct media ecologies by shaping their cognitive framework and affective dispositions. It also shows how such differences were further exploited by the campaign media during the referendum, which deepened group divisions and intensified ideological contestations. Therefore, Middle England reveals how contemporary media landscapes contribute to the divisions of social groups, inviting BrexLit criticism to move beyond cataloguing divisions toward analyzing the mediatized processes by the media that make the Brexit divisions become inevitable.***

Keywords: *Middle England*; Brexit; BrexLit; Media; Group Division.

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies of BrexLit have been substantially preoccupied with the idea that "Brexit did not divide the nation, it merely revealed the inherent divisions within society" (Shaw, 2021, p.16). In the most prominent BrexLit *Autumn*, scholars have interrogated these societal fissures through various critical frameworks, with race, class, and generational divides receiving predominant attention. Jonathan Coe's *Middle England*, positioned alongside Ali Smith's *Autumn* as a seminal text within the BrexLit subgenre, has likewise been examined through these lenses. However, the novel also suggests the potential for a new perspective—media, which is one of the essential factors behind the Brexit division, yet remains under-examined.

As a state-of-nation novel, *Middle England* spans the years leading up to and following the 2016 Brexit referendum, and stages two emblematic media spectacles: the 2012 Olympic opening ceremony and the referendum campaign. These events function antithetically in the novel, as the former momentarily unifies the population, while the latter catalyzes societal fracture. Crucially, both events not only reveal the media's capacity to mobilize collective feelings, but also show that different audiences are activated by different media narratives. Shaw (2023) has demonstrated how the Olympic opening ceremony juxtaposed a vision of cosmopolitan nationalism, which appealed to liberals, with an invocation of conservative nationalism that resonated with their ideological counterparts, synchronizing different dispositions into one shared emotional rhythm. Brexit's media campaign, however, exploited the heterogeneity of the population, deepening group divisions and intensifying ideological contestations.

As Hansen (2021) notes, the atmospheric and dispersed qualities of the contemporary media landscape have resulted in "independent processes of subjectification" that operate at subperceptual, micropolitical levels of lived experience. Therefore, while the novel's two central media events highlight the mobilizing power of media, the processes of subject formation they instigate extend far beyond the two moments. Throughout the text, different social groups exhibit distinctive media preferences that situate them within disparate media ecologies—media "environments" that "[surround] the individual and [model] their perception and cognition" (Scolari, 2012, p.209). These ecologies cultivate subjects in particular ways, predisposing them to interpret events through specific ideological frameworks. Therefore, this study intends to examine how three different social groups in the novel, as represented by Sophie Potter, Ian Coleman, and Colin Trotter respectively, demonstrate distinct patterns of media engagement that ultimately position the people involved to perceive British society in fundamentally incompatible ways during the referendum, resulting in deepened group divisions.

2. THE PREFERENCES FOR INTELLECTUAL MEDIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF "REMAINER" IDENTITY

The university-educated intellectuals depicted in *Middle England* exhibit a distinctive pattern of media engagement, exemplified by that of Sophie Potter. Sophie's daily media diet is anchored in "quality" newspapers such as *The Observer* and augmented by a steady intake of academic literature on cultural studies. As an academic on art history, Sophie focuses her research on nineteenth-century paintings of Black European authors, with particular attention to their underlying racial ideologies. Outside of scholarly readings, Sophie shows a heightened interest in a broad range of creative media, including literature, films, and music, created by European artists. She engages with this media content not merely for entertainment, but more frequently as a means of cultural inquiry and critical reflection, as evidenced by her admission of a "neurotic obsession with literature" and its perceived "moral benefits" (p.153). By contrast, for entertaining local stories, she "would not even have bothered to read" (p.57). Such media preferences can also be observed in Benjamin Trotter, another intellectual character in the novel, who regularly enjoys European classical music and confesses his preoccupation with "the questions of cultural and literary value" (p.402). Their preference for "quality" content, engagement with European "high culture" media, and investment in cultural critique exemplify both what Bourdieu (1979/1984) terms the "aesthetic disposition" (p.3) and what Holm (2020) identifies, in the contemporary cultural context, as the "critical disposition" (p.2). The aesthetic disposition is evident in their appreciation of "legitimate works of art," such as highbrow literature and classical music, which operates as a performative marker of cultivated taste (Bourdieu, 1979/1984, p.3). Sophie and Benjamin's affinity for European art and classical music resonates with the legacy of post-war European cultural policies that sought to promote transnational contact through the allegedly neutral dissemination of "high art" as a means of "promoting contact between European countries" in the 1940s (Delanty et al., 2013, p.28). As such, their media ecology fosters a cosmopolitan intellectual cognition, equipped with the requisite interpretive vocabularies and patterns of engagement. The "critical disposition," on the other hand, is expressed through their sustained engagement in philosophical and ethical readings of culture and society. As Holm (2020) argues, the critical disposition is a mode of interpretation that foregrounds the politics of representation, ideology, and structural inequality rather than aesthetic form (pp.9-10). This orientation enables Sophie and Benjamin to interpret cultural artefacts and public discourse through the lens of moral evaluation, often emphasizing themes such as racial injustice, gender inequality, and institutional exclusion. Their critical disposition thus foregrounds a prominent moral agenda, positioning them as self-assigned guardians of progressive values and arbiters of social justice.

Such preferences situate Sophie, and Benjamin likewise, within a media ecology oriented toward moral reflection and cosmopolitan values. This environment fosters ethical awareness and cultural openness, yet tends to marginalize material concerns. As recent research indicates, British and American journalism has experienced a substantial increase in references to various forms of prejudice related to race, gender, sexuality, and religion since 2010 (Rozado, 2024). A parallel trend can be observed in academic writing, where terminology associated with social justice and the denunciation of bias has proliferated markedly in the same period. It shapes a worldview in which ethical awareness and identity-based injustice take center stage. However, as Liang (2024) warns, this tendency to frame injustice through the language of prejudice can obscure deeper structural forces. The influence of such a media ecology on their cognition is evident in Sophie's relationship with her husband Ian. Their occasional arguments, though personal, are saturated with ideological terms characteristic of contestations between "liberal intellectuals" and "middle-class, straight males." Sophie's moral consciousness and social justice terminologies, as shaped by the discursive structure of her media diet, have greatly contributed to the escalation of their conflicts. When Sophie's position is suspended following an ungrounded accusation of transphobia, Ian's suggestion that she consider a career change due to the "toxic" environment at her university triggers a negative response from Sophie. She perceives Ian's words not as a genuine concern for her career but as a challenge to her liberal values, which enjoy a prominence in her media diet and moral reflections. This oppositional stance is further amplified when Sophie raises a provocative question to Ian about his interaction with Naheed, an Asian woman who competed with Ian for a job promotion. Despite Ian's evident emotional vulnerability after a "dreadful day," Sophie redirects the conversation into a broader moral confrontation, triggering Ian's resentment for "political correctness" and interpreting his irrational response as evidence of "male ego." Despite the antagonist tension, the novel implies that Ian's suggestion is not inherently driven by a desire to undermine Sophie's career and personal beliefs. Rather, it stems from his frustration that "there were no practical steps he could take to help her" (p.303) in the face of unjust treatment. Ian's arbitrary accusation of "political correctness" is undoubtedly irrational, yet Sophie's confrontational response reveals a deeper impasse. The two are unable to establish a shared discursive ground. Rather than facilitating mutual understanding, their interactions, disciplined by the distinct cognitive frameworks of their media diets, reinforce division and preclude meaningful dialogue.

The influence of the media is also manifested in Sophie's ignorance of Ian's anxiety. Her cosmopolitan disposition, cultivated by engagement with European arts as normative cultural ideals, creates a "field of visibility" that simultaneously illuminates certain realities while obscuring others. Sophie's cosmopolitan ideal is predicated on her academic privilege to move freely between different countries. By contrast, other characters, such as Sophie's husband Ian, who works and lives in Middle England, are rooted in a more locally based job and a provincial economy that does not provide such mobility. Sophie's unawareness of such reality alienates her from Ian's "anxiety" and "uneasiness" about Sophie "drifting back towards a city, a way of life and a set of friends that had nothing to do with him, that pre-dated him" (p.150) manifests in his strong desire for a job promotion in hope of that it might provide the financial support for them to live in one city. Upon such silent conflict, the discursive dissonance between this couple further deepens the misunderstanding. Ian's frustration is ultimately summarized in moral deficiencies of "gleeful, infantile triumphalism" (p.330) against the open, cooperative, and inclusive cosmopolitan qualities as believed by Sophie to be one's basic qualities. Her assertion that "as a person, he's not as open as I thought… his basic model for relationships comes down to antagonism and competition" (p.331) further affirms such a privileged interpretation of Ian's anxieties. In this framing, emotional frustration and local attachments are pathologized through a cosmopolitan disposition that fails to reckon with the anxieties of those excluded from its promises. Beyond the personal relationship with Ian, her structured feelings about Middle England that "she did not understand this place, that she had no sense of the life it contained" (p.375) serves as a further evidence of her general ignorance of the local conditions in her cosmopolitan eyes that sees only prejudices rather than local vulnerabilities.

Despite the existing differences between Sophie and Ian, a shared vision could be established through certain media narratives, as seen in the broadcast of the Olympic opening. Initially, Sophie approaches this event with visible detachment and quiet disdain. Her aversion is reflective of her broader media-shaped disposition that positions her to be skeptical of mass spectacle and patriotic propaganda. Her decision to keep a copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* open in her lap is a performative act of disinterest. However, Sophie's initial detachment gives way to unexpected curiosity and excitement as the event unfolds. As Shaw (2023) observes, the Olympic opening ceremony functions as a media spectacle that not only stages British youth culture, but also weaves in literary-inflected cultural narratives, most notably through intertextual references such as the allusion to *Pandemonium* by Humphrey Jennings. It aligns with Sophie's cultural and literary interests, inviting her to read the event not as a straightforward display of national pride but as an intricately constructed cultural text. Sophie is drawn into the spectacle through a mode of engagement familiar to her preoccupation with cultural analysis, allowing her to participate in a national narrative without compromising her cosmopolitan position. Although Ian was moved by a more masculine and popular image of Britishness in the ceremony, the reactions of both characters are *compatible* within this media narrative. The Olympic ceremony functions as a rare, multivalent media narrative, which is capable of activating different subjectivities without immediately positioning them in opposition. Although Ian is stirred by a more masculine and populist vision of Britishness in the ceremony, his response remains compatible with Sophie's more critically distanced engagement. The Olympic opening functions as a media event capable of accommodating their respective dispositions, creating a temporary convergence of affective engagement. This is echoed in the reaction of Coriander, another character in the novel, who excitedly types "THIS IS FOR EVERYONE" (p.141, emphasis in original) as a comment on the Olympic opening.

However, the Brexit referendum operates in direct contrast to the Olympic ceremony. Rather than offering a shared national spirit, the referendum campaign mobilized antagonistic affect through polarized messages tailored to distinct social groups. Throughout the Brexit referendum campaign, populist rhetoric that framed elites as corrupt and immigrants as threats gained wide traction, particularly through media outlets supportive of the Leave movement. This anti-establishment discourse became a dominant mode of public communication, appropriated by both prominent politicians and everyday citizens alike (Smith et al., 2021; Brändle et al., 2021). In the novel, this shift is presented in the portrayal of real-world media episodes. Nigel Farage's unveiling of the inflammatory "BREAKING POINT" poster on BBC News, which visually depicted refugees as an impending threat, and Boris Johnson's comparison of the EU to Nazi Germany in *The Sunday Telegraph*, exemplify the prevalence of such narratives within the media landscape. Such messages permeate Benjamin's media diet, which he passively consumes despite his explicit aversion to their ideological framing. For Remain-identifying intellectuals like Sophie and Benjamin, the media's emphasis on immigration, nationalism, and historical distortion not only alienated them from the content of the Leave position but also produced a reflexive moral repulsion toward its supporters.

Caught in this antagonistic media atmosphere, the liberal press found itself reacting defensively rather than articulating an affirmative vision of continued EU membership. As Zečić-Durmišević (2020) argues, the Remain

media response was largely absorbed in countering populist provocations, thereby forfeiting space for civic, cultural, and ethical discourse. Maccaferri (2019, p.6) similarly observes that this defensive posture served to entrench the adversarial structure of the debate, marginalizing the social and cultural stakes that might otherwise have resonated with figures like Sophie and Benjamin. Consequently, their Remain stance becomes less about EU policy and more about epistemological and moral self-preservation—a defense of identity against a perceived collapse into xenophobia, anti-intellectualism, and cultural regression. This logic is powerfully encapsulated in Philip's appeal to Sophie: "Do you want to be on the same side as Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson?" (p.307). The referendum becomes not a site of deliberation, but a test of moral alignment. Sophie, initially ambivalent, solidifies her position following her confrontation with Ian's dismissive and anti-intellectual posture. In this way, the referendum's media discourse exploits and exacerbates existing media ecologies, drawing clear boundaries between moral universes and precluding possibilities of negotiation. Within the Brexit context, the Remainer identity emerges through this division as both resistance to populist forces and a subjectification process that entrenches individuals within their epistemological domains, obstructing potential dialogue and reconciliation.

3. THE PREFERENCES FOR LAD MEDIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MIDDLE-AGED-MALE "LEAVER" IDENTITY

Ian Coleman inhabits a markedly different media ecology from Sophie Potter, one shaped by the affective economies and discursive logics of "lad" culture (Zrari, 2021). As a driving instructor based in Birmingham, Ian demonstrates little engagement with highbrow cultural material or serious journalism. He confesses to Sophie that he is "not a great reader" (p.53) and exhibits no interest in exposing himself to Sophie's media tastes even after getting married to Sophie. Lack of "quality" news information and "high culture" media, Ian's media ecology is dominated by pragmatic and entertainment-focused content, as seen in his modest personal library: a mere fourteen books comprising mostly sporting autobiographies, road-safety manuals, popular fiction, and a single copy of *Stuff* magazine, whose cover features a woman in a provocative mini-dress. This magazine, as a successor to *Loaded*, embodies the lad culture's embrace of "hypersexualized" femininity and celebration of heterosexual masculinity (Tippett, 2023, p.146). Complementing his reading material is a DVD collection consisting of James Bond and Jason Bourne films, which further aligns with the heterosexual male fantasies valorized in lad media. Moreover, the text suggests that Ian is far more engaged with social media discussions than Sophie. When Sophie becomes the target of online attacks, Ian is the first to notice. This detail reveals Ian's habitual immersion in social media information flows. Such a media preference is shared by Geoffrey Wilcox, a forklift-truck businessman, who also exhibits a resistance to high culture content and a preference for entertaining readings and media with the laddism imprint. His mockery of his wife as a "culture vulture" (p.156) and his deliberate uncooperation in a literary reading by bringing an unrelated book (p.170) signal a rejection of "high cultural" content. His enjoyment of "politically incorrect" humor, as seen from his frequent making of transgressive jokes and his disagreement with the BBC's institutional reform after the Ross-Brand scandal, suggests a preference aligned with what Tracey (2012) identifies as "laddish cruelty" (p.185).

Such preferences situate Ian, and Geoffrey likewise, within a media ecology that prioritizes instinctive responses, affirms heterosexual masculinity, and fosters a latent anti-intellectual sentiment. This environment exemplifies the distinctly British cultural trend of "new lad," a male-oriented media phenomenon that arose in the 1990s and extended across magazines, television, cinema, music, and popular literature. As shown in *Loaded's* editorial stance, values such as "reflection, deliberation, and living life according to the terms of others" are dismissed as "inauthentic," while the embrace of gut instinct is exalted as a form of personal liberation (Crewe, 2003, p.100). This framework authorizes expressions of judgment and desire that bypass the moral scrutiny valorized in liberal discourse. It thus fosters a reactive subjectivity that is particularly receptive to reductive, affect-driven interpretations of social phenomena. This epistemological tendency is starkly shown in Geoffrey's remark upon observing "two vegetarian women sharing a cabin" (p.165). He immediately labels them lesbians, using the slur "lezzers" and asserting, "I know one when I see one, that's all." This statement epitomizes the uncritical and self-assured style of judgment promoted by laddish media, where surface-level cues and stereotypes are deemed sufficient for social categorization.

Integral to this cultural configuration is the idealization of a "natural" and "honest" masculinity (Tippett, 2023, p.146) in the lad media ecology. In the novel, Ian's cognition is deeply shaped by this configuration. When Sophie appears wrapped in a towel, Ian perceives her as "every *Stuff* reader's masturbation fantasy made flesh" (p.55), seeing her through a laddish visual economy which naturalizes the sexualized women's bodies. During the 2012 Olympic opening ceremony, Ian remains indifferent to the cultural and historical dimensions of the performance. Instead, his emotional peak arrives when James Bond appears escorting the Queen, a moment that provokes "an

almost orgasmic surge of patriotic excitement" (p.136). His later fantasy of embodying James Bond while making love to Sophie reveals the internalization of laddish masculinity as an idealized template through which English national identity is both imagined and enacted. These masculinist ideals, while subject to critique by liberal intellectuals, are vigorously defended within the lad media ecosystem, which constructs itself in deliberate opposition to the cultural authority of institutions like *The Guardian*. As Crewe (2003) observes, *Loaded*'s editors were explicitly antagonistic toward the "middle-class intelligentsia" that the newspaper represented, casting the liberal "new man" as emasculated by "miserable liberal guilt" and positioning themselves instead as authentic spokesmen for the working-class male public (pp.98-100). This oppositional identity is thus not only gendered but also deeply class-related, rooted in a rejection of the liberal metropolitan elites. In the novel, Geoffrey exemplifies the political resonance of this laddish ideology. In a heated exchange with Sophie, he criticizes the BBC as "elitist, arrogant, metropolitan and out of touch" (p.159), implying that it caters to the intellectual class she represents rather than to "ordinary people" like himself. This antagonistic framing does not merely articulate a class resentment; it reveals a media-shaped subjectivity predisposed to interpret institutional authority through a lens of cultural betrayal. In this ecology, complex social institutions are reduced to caricatures of condescension, and political critique is channeled into emotionally charged oppositions between ingroup and outgroup identities. Contributing to this media ecology is their low information media and obsession with social media controversies. It thus cultivates a subjectivity primed to react rather than reflect, creating fertile ground for stereotypical and sensationalist narratives to take hold.

Despite the ideological dispositions shaped by the lad media ecology, the relationship between Ian and Sophie is not entirely antagonistic. Both sides, at times, attempt to reduce conflict and maintain communicative equilibrium. For instance, when Ian casually refers to a media figure as a "weirdo" (p.57), prompted by his laddish impression that the person deviates from the heterosexual masculine appearance, Sophie visibly disagrees. Sensing this, Ian promptly changes the subject, and both tacitly agree to move on without confrontation. This moment not only reveals Ian's media-conditioned instinct for intuitive judgments, which is likely to cause conflicts with Sophie's liberal dispositions, but it also suggests a degree of mutual accommodation between the two that suspends ideological contestation in the interest of a harmonious relationship. The Olympic opening ceremony further illustrates how divergent media dispositions can be momentarily synchronized by a shared national media spectacle. Both Ian and Sophie are emotionally captivated by the event's performance of English character, though the sources of their affective engagement diverge. While Sophie is moved by the ceremony's literary references, Ian, on the other hand, reaches his emotional peak when James Bond escorts the Queen into the stadium (p.136). This scene exemplifies how a singular media event can activate different ideological frameworks across distinct audience groups, producing a temporary convergence of emotional rhythms despite the existence of epistemological divides.

In contrast to the Olympic opening ceremony, which momentarily synchronized divergent dispositions through a polyvalent performance of national identity, the media coverage of the EU referendum produced the opposite effect. It accentuates societal fracture by mobilizing audiences through highly polarized and emotionally charged narratives. During the campaign period, the Leave side actively popularized an anti-elite rhetoric across media platforms to appeal to public sentiment. While the real implications of Brexit encompassed complex and ambiguous legal, economic, and social consequences, such intricacies were sidelined in favor of more accessible and emotionally resonant narratives. As shown in the Reuters Institute study, media coverage disproportionately highlighted campaign strategies and the performances of political figures, while sidelining the contributions of scholars, foreign experts, or citizens with lived experience (Levy et al., 2016). For individuals like Ian, whose worldview is already shaped by the affective logics of lad media, such a media landscape was not only familiar but structurally accommodating. This media-cultivated cognition predisposes him to narratives that bypass complexity in favor of moral simplification and emotional resonance. Media figures like Martin Daubney, a former *Loaded* editor and later a Brexit Party MEP for the West Midlands, strategically targeted such dispositions. During the Brexit referendum, Martin Daubney utilized Twitter (now X) as a key platform to disseminate pro-Leave messages, strategically leveraging its visibility among people like Ian to amplify narratives of cultural grievance and anti-elite sentiment. Daubney cast immigration as a material threat to working-class livelihoods, frames liberal elites as condescending agents of cultural betrayal, and positions Brexit as a reassertion of dignity on behalf of "ordinary blokes." What makes Daubney's media narrative especially effective is his calibration to an audience already attuned to this mode of reception. His references to the "sneering contempt" of the elites (2016c), their "[o]bsession with minority interests" (2016d), and the claim that "white boys" are "bottom of the heap" (2016b) are designed to resonate with the epistemological habits and emotional sensitivities formed within the lad media ecology. In other words, the media does not so much persuade as it activates Ian's pre-existing interpretive schema, cultivated through years of exposure to narratives that cast complexity as elitism, critical reflection as

emasculation, and authority as betrayal.

This discursive formation culminates in a clearly demarcated binary: "us" versus "them," where "us" stands for the white, working-class male and "them" encompasses Remain voters, liberal academics, and metropolitan institutions. The rhetorical construction of the Remain camp as "well-off, metropolitans who will never compete with 4m extra immigrants for work" (Daubney, 2016a) casts that difference as evidence of betrayal and illegitimacy, thereby foreclosing the possibility of dialogue towards mutual understanding. Ian's reaction to Sophie during the referendum is a telling expression of this media-structured logic:

Ian gave a satisfied smile and shook his head. "Wrong," he said. "Leave is going to win. Do you know why?"
Sophie shook her head.
"People like you," he said, with a note of quiet triumph. And then he repeated, with a jab of his finger: "People like you." (p.289, emphasis in original)

His comment echoes the binary logic propagated by figures like Martin Daubney, which constructs Remain voters as culturally alien, a metropolitan elite detached from the realities of "ordinary people." Through repeated exposure to such narratives, Ian's lad-informed media disposition is activated and weaponized. This is precisely how group divisions are deepened by media manipulation. It is not achieved through overt coercion, but through the strategic mobilization of pre-existing subjectivities. By fusing political preference with identity positioning and by structuring perception through affective binaries, the media during the Brexit referendum recast group differences as political opposition, leading to the emergence of Leaver identity as a protest against the perceived intellectual arrogance.

4. THE PREFERENCES FOR NOSTALGIC MEDIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ELDER "LEAVER" IDENTITY

The elder generation, like Colin Trotter, lives in a media ecology that differs remarkably from the above two social groups, which is marked by minimal engagement with diverse or current informational flows and an obsession with nostalgic media content. Colin Trotter is a lower-middle-class retiree from the manufacturing industry that flourished during the 1970s. Unlike Sophie or Ian, Colin confines himself to political media content, showing no interest in "any of the new stuff" (p.49) or entertaining comedy and music. His news source is *The Telegraph*, a conservative newspaper known for its traditional perspective and somewhat backward-looking editorial stance (Curtis, 2006). For instance, it portrays EU immigrants as "culturally weird and morally wrong 'folk devils'" (Tong & Zuo, 2018, pp.2-15), constructing British identity as exclusionary and culturally bounded. In its criticism of the European Union, *The Telegraph* frequently frames EU policy as "a serious threat to the traditional freedoms of the United Kingdom" (Anderson, 2004, p.163). Economically, the paper's editorial leanings often express a sense of mourning for lost imperial influence, as demonstrated in works such as *The Daily Telegraph Book of Imperial and Commonwealth Obituaries* (Murphy, 2010, p.1). A similar pattern can be observed in the minor character Helena Coleman. Living in a rural Midlands village, Helena disengages from most contemporary media, voicing distrust toward mainstream outlets for marginalizing what she views as enduring British values. The *Telegraph* appears to be the only publication she trusts, evidenced by her effort to contribute a 500-word opinion piece to its editorial section despite her general distaste for contemporary news outlets.

Besides news outlet choices, both characters gravitate toward nostalgic media content. For Colin, the Woodlands Garden Centre serves as a symbolic space of his engagement with these media products, where one can find nostalgic media collections, such as DVDs of British war films and Ealing comedies, jigsaw puzzles depicting "scenes of traditional English village life," and books devoted to local history (p.60). These media artifacts reconstruct a vision of Britain grounded in wartime unity, stable community life, and postwar prosperity. Unlike Benjamin, who regards the center as "an act of desperation" (p.60), Colin embraces it as a comforting space, which signals his preferences for these contents. Helena's relationship to nostalgic media operates similarly. This is evident in her attachment to a place where a wall displays an elaborate painting of a foxhunt. This image recalls a long-standing rural practice that was banned in 2005 but continues to serve in cultural memory as a symbol of English pastoral heritage. As Eliason (2004) notes, fox hunting is frequently imagined as "an essential component to country life, a traditional part of English national culture" (p.124). In this sense, the painting implicates Helena's relishing of media representing British pastoral traditions.

Such preferences situate Colin, and Helena likewise, within a media ecology characterized by selective exposure, affective nostalgia, and epistemological withdrawal from the present. It not only limits the discursive range

available for sense-making, but also reinforces a temporally displaced worldview in which national identity is imagined through a romanticized past, rendering contemporary realities emotionally unintelligible or ideologically illegible. In line with such a cognitive framework, Colin's engagement with the present is filtered through a nostalgic lens that struggles to accommodate societal change. This is evident in his reaction to seemingly mundane developments, such as the installation of speed traps at the village entrance: "The buggers are out to get money from you every step of the way" (p.21). His comment signals a deep-seated distrust of public institutions, grounded in the belief that contemporary governance no longer serves the common Englishman. This skepticism is further exemplified when he visits the site of the former Longbridge factory, only to find it replaced by a shopping complex. Confronted with this transformation, he exclaims: "How can you replace a factory with shops? If there's no factory, how are people supposed to make the money to spend in the shops?" (p.266). The moment reveals his inherited understanding of economic value, rooted in production and manufacturing, is fundamentally at odds with the realities of post-industrial Britain. He further laments, "We've gone soft, that's the problem. No wonder the rest of the world's laughing at us" (p.267), framing the shift not simply as economic mismanagement, but as the evidence of national decline. This response illustrates how his media-structured worldview sustains an image of the past in which British strength, productivity, and international respect were unchallenged. His perception of contemporary Britain as "soft" and laughable reflects an internalized narrative of imperial decline.

Helena's cognition is similarly shaped by such a nostalgic media ecology, which privileges an idealized vision of traditional English life. She voices frustration at the disappearance of traditional family-run shops and their replacement by migrant-operated businesses, interpreting this shift not as part of broader economic restructuring, but as a loss of cultural integrity. Her discontent reflects a cognitive orientation cultivated by a media ecology that offers few interpretive tools for engaging with globalization's effects. Instead, it predisposes her to read local economic changes as symptoms of national decline and moral erosion. The entrepreneurial success of migrant communities is not understood on its own terms but rendered intelligible only as an encroachment upon an idealized English past. This ideological framework is also reflected in her comments on the fox-hunting ban, where she declares: "The people who once kept a great British tradition alive by riding to hounds are not free to do so any more… Of course I voted for Mr. Cameron, but not with any enthusiasm. His values are not our values. He actually knows as little of our way of life as his political opponents do" (p.218). Her conflation of the fox hunting ban with a betrayal of traditional English life reflects the affective logic of her media ecology, which mythologizes rural customs as symbols of national character. In this way, the decline of countryside traditions, the fading visibility of "people like her" in national media, and the proliferation of unfamiliar social actors are experienced as cultural displacements.

Despite their entrenched nostalgic dispositions and ideological alienation from contemporary Britain, Colin and Helena are momentarily drawn into the English collective image offered by the broadcast of the 2012 Olympic opening ceremony. For example, Colin responds positively to the ceremony's celebration of British history, particularly "the poem that Kenneth Branagh recited" (p.135). The recited lines were drawn from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Through references to "isle" and "dream," it conjures an emotionally resonant image of Britain as a timeless, enchanted land (Quiteirregular, 2012). This kind of literary invocation aligns perfectly with Colin's nostalgic imaginary, shaped by a media ecology that relishes Britain's cultural past. Similarly, Helena experiences a marked emotional shift when the performance turns to more traditional imagery. The appearance of choirs from "all four countries in the United Kingdom," and "the scenes of rural life" performed in the stadium elicit a sense of comfort and recognition (p.134). These moments align precisely with Helena's pastoral imaginary, cultivated by a media ecology that privileges images of a unified nation with the traditional idyllic appeal. While their media ecologies usually predispose them to interpret public life through the lens of decline and dispossession, the ceremony momentarily realigns their affective orientation through symbolic gestures that reaffirm their vision of national identity. Their responses reveal how national media spectacles can strategically mobilize sentiment by activating deeply embedded emotional associations, even among those typically resistant to mainstream cultural narratives.

However, this nostalgic cognitive framework can also be exploited by the media to reproduce societal division. Rooted in a romanticized memory of the British past, this framework becomes a fertile ground for the instrumentalization of grievance and historical sentiment. As Maccaferri (2019) observes, Euroscepticism operates as a discourse "built upon history" and dependent on selective historical memory, yet one that also actively "problematizes" the past (p.4). In the Brexit context, the Leave campaign strategically employed nostalgia-laden imagery and rhetoric to frame the European Union as a threat to British sovereignty and identity. This narrative resonated deeply with older voters like Colin and Helena, whose affective attachments to a national past had already been cultivated by their media ecology. In the novel, Colin's alignment with this discourse is catalyzed by

a Sunday *Telegraph* article in which Boris Johnson draws a provocative parallel between the EU and Nazi Germany. The article features a half-page picture of Johnson, "looking serious and statesmanlike" (p.297), invoking the memory of Churchill and the imagery of wartime resistance. For Colin, whose emotional framework is deeply shaped by narratives of imperial greatness and wartime unity, this presentation functions as an affective trigger. The implied analogy between contemporary Brussels and wartime Berlin allows him to interpret the EU as yet another external force threatening Britain's autonomy, while Johnson's Churchillian posture activates a familiar cultural script of national salvation. This alignment is made explicit in Colin's comment: "He talks sense. He's about the only one who does" (p.298), which not only affirms his faith in Johnson but also reinforces the nostalgic logic that tends to problematize the general condition of the contemporary society. Notably, Boris Johnson was a Brussels correspondent for The Telegraph in the 1990s, whose comments about the EU were scandalously malicious (Hinde, 2017, p.81). His prominence in the Brexit debate not only reflects the popularity of right-wing politicians' voices but also shows the powerful effect of the right-wing newspapers' discourses. Colin's subsequent dismissal of Sophie's Remain inclination— "She's a nice girl but she's very naive" (p.312)— reveals how his media-shaped worldview not only structures his political attitudes but actively reconfigures his sense of group identity. In this comment, Colin casts himself, an older Englishman, as a bearer of historical insight and political realism. By contrast, Sophie, the younger Remain voter, is reduced to a figure of naivety. Consequently, Colin unconsciously reproduces a media-influenced cognition that glorifies historical narrative and experiences while dismissing alternative perspectives as innocent and uninformed. In this way, it forecloses intergenerational dialogue. By aligning himself with the former, Colin reinforces a binary logic in which the older generation becomes the guardian of "real" Britishness, and the younger generation is cast as alienated from its roots. Colin's Leave stance exemplifies how media discourses manipulate the population by reinforcing ideological fault lines along existing cognitive divides. This manipulation entrenches group boundaries and forecloses intergenerational dialogue, replacing mutual understanding with identity-based dismissal. Within the Brexit context, the elder Leaver identity thus emerges as a safeguard for British tradition and national character.

5. CONCLUSION

By examining the discrete media ecologies inhabited by Sophie Potter, Ian Coleman, and Colin Trotter respectively, this study demonstrates that the group divisions in *Middle England* are not merely a mirror of pre-existing social cleavages. Instead, they are to a great extent the product of heterogeneous media regimes that manipulate distinctive subjectivities. Sophie's intellectual media ecology inculcates a cosmopolitan moral disposition and consolidates a Remainer identity defined against populist prejudice. Ian's lad-media ecology nurtures anti-elite affect, rendering the Leaver stance an act of cultural self-defense. Colin's nostalgic media ecology sustains a romanticized narrative of British past glory, remedied by Brexit's promise of restored sovereignty.

Across these ecologies, different media ecologies supply the conceptual vocabularies, affective cues, and narrative templates through which characters interpret the social world and position themselves within it. Exploited by divisive narratives, such a media landscape leads to deepened group divisions and intensified social antagonism. Coe's novel thus invites BrexLit criticism to move beyond cataloguing divisions toward analyzing the mediatized processes by the media that make the Brexit divisions appear inevitable. Recognizing the media's manipulative power in shaping perception, affect, and group identity is essential to a thorough analysis of BrexLit and the Brexit phenomenon.

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