The Stories we tell about Human Trafficking

How have the words associated with people/human trafficking changed between 2000 and 2019?

We've all been there. You're at a family gathering and after a couple of glasses of wine everyone is feeling proud of themselves for not yet partaking in a shouting match. Then someone, maybe your outspoken uncle, reaches breaking point and just has to mention the one topic that no one can seem to agree on: Human trafficking.

He commences a long spiel about trafficking being absolutely harmless. "These anti-slavery warriors are too sensitive and there's just not enough forced migratory labour these days. If it wasn't for people traffickers, how would we get people to do the jobs we don't want to do?". Carnage unfolds.

Of course, no one has ever had to endure this conversation. People trafficking does seem like something we can all in fact agree on.

Defined as:

> *the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or ... coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation*
>
> *-the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, 2000)*

It seems hard to come down on the side of "the traffickers". This makes it more understandable that efforts against it attract people from across the political spectrum. The sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein has described the peculiarity of attending a conference on sex trafficking only to see both Republican congressmen and Feminists sharing a platform, two groups who agree on little else. You would be forgiven for even feeling a sense of optimism at the prospect of political opponents putting their differences aside and getting behind a mutual cause.

With that said, how we talk about trafficking has come under scrutiny from critical academics for reasons I shall discuss at the end of this article. There are certain terms commonly associated with trafficking that can be relevant to this criticism, and my intention for this project was to see how they have been used through time in the media, which I eventually narrowed to British print media.

Each grouping of these terms I refer to as either associations, rubrics or co-occurrences, all of which mean a grouping of words that are often found alongside “human trafficking” or “people trafficking” (hereon referred to simply as “trafficking”). These are:

- The Sex rubric - “sex” and/or “prositution”
- The Labour Rubric - “Labour” and/or “labourer”
- The Migration Rubric - “Migration” and/or “migrant”
- The Slavery Rubric - “modern slavery” and/or contemporary slavery”
- The Smuggling Rubric - “Smuggler” and/or “smuggling”

Method and teething problems

I used a programme called Lexisnexis, which allows you to search for all instances of a particular word, or combination of words, being used in the media in a given year. It doesn’t matter how many times it’s mentioned in one article - whether two uses or ten, it counts as one result.

Before looking at associations, I wanted to see how trafficking on its own had grown. I first searched for all instances of the word “trafficking” within British news. The majority of results were unrelated to my research topic, often pertaining to road traffic, which I remedied by preceding “trafficking” with either “human” or “people”.

The program shows a graph of the search term’s use through history; there was a significant increase in results from 2012/13 onwards and when I paired it with other associations it delivered similar results.

It occurred to me this might not necessarily be due to a growth in the coverage of trafficking specifically. It might be that LexisNexis increased its number of data sources around this time. I needed a control variable, something that represents the overall growth in data sources in order to compare trafficking against it. “The”, as the most common word in the English language, seemed an apt contender. Sure enough, “the” showed the same increase around 2012/13.

I contacted Lexisnexis, and while they couldn’t confirm a specific increase, they said the amount of sources they use is constantly expanding. To document trafficking mentions overtime, it made more sense to look at mentions as a proportion of this, rather than looking at the absolute number of mentions. I began collecting data for mentions of “the” between 2000 and 2019, assuming:

$$no.\ data\ points\ in\ a\ year\ \approx\ no.\ data\ points\ that\ mention\ "the"\ in\ a\ year$$

The timeline graph only gave the curve’s shape, not numerical values. For these, I looked at the number of results for each year specifically.

This was easier for the early years as it displayed this figure at the top of the page. Once results surpassed 10,000 it no longer gave exact figures, meaning I had to navigate to the last result and note down its number manually. By 2017 the dataset was so large that I couldn't even view the last page. The problem remained when using a different PC and operating system. I contacted a software engineer at Lexisnexis to no avail, and instead decreased the size of the dataset. The results were successful when limited to British newspapers, leading me to settle on the research question:

How have the words associated with people/human trafficking changed between 2000 and 2019?

I repeated this process for all of the different rubrics.

Results

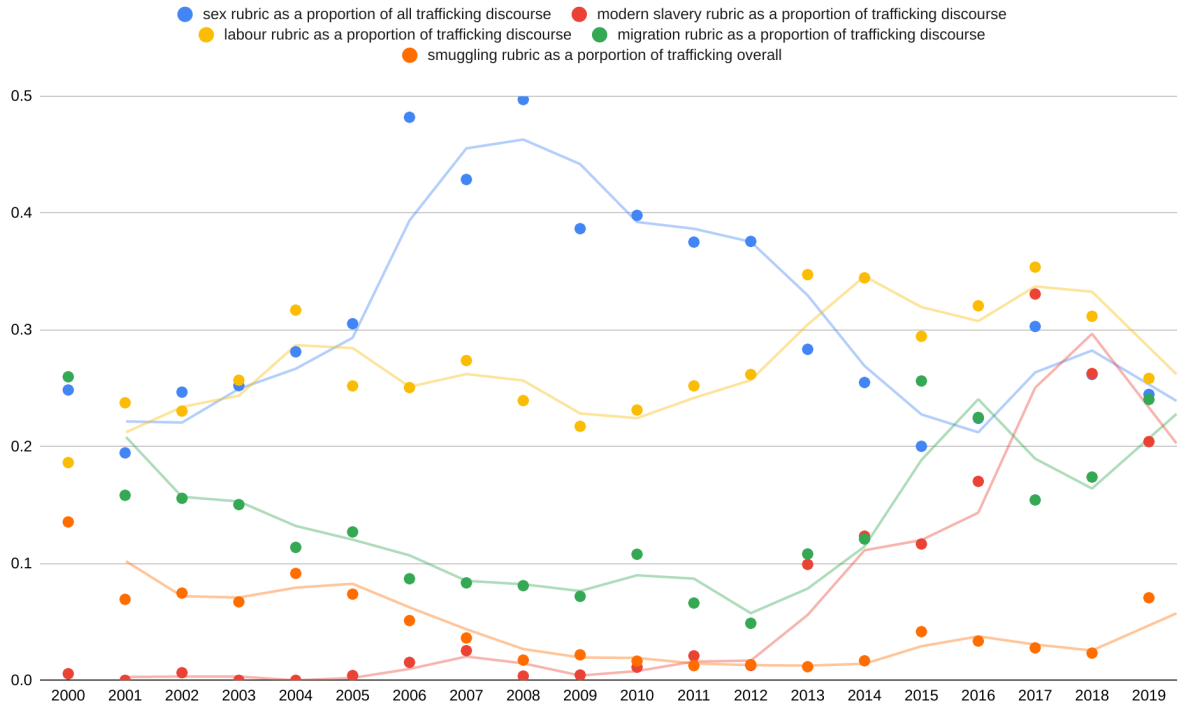
Figure 1 - Y axis units are in mathematical notation, where 1.00E-03=0.001

As seen in the graph above, mentions of people or human trafficking in the media have significantly increased since 2000, most markedly from 2012 onwards. Using "the" as a control means we can be certain that this rise is specific to trafficking itself, not caused by an overall increase in data.

The control also meant that the spikes I initially saw in the years of the world cup and Olympics can no longer be seen. Social scientists have described a supposed "moral panic" that presents itself around major sporting events, where the demand for cheap labour in building new infrastructure supposedly increases instances of trafficking. Whether trafficking does actually increase around sporting events is disputed, however this data suggests that these moral panics have little influence on the overall mentions of trafficking.

The largest spike for a single year was between 2018 and 2019, a rise of 57%. The figures for 2019 were 7x that of 2000, strong evidence that trafficking has cemented itself as a prominent topic within the British press.

While trafficking overall has steadily increased, the words associated without have varied considerably over time:



Articles that mentioned either sex or prostitution reached a peak around 2009, where they made up almost half of all trafficking articles. This association returns in 2017 and the approach up to it, possibly as a result of the Harvey Weinstein allegations and the ascendency of the #metoo movement. Note that 2006, the year that Tarana Burke originally coined the term, also sees a spike, though this is likely a coincidence.

The proportion of articles containing "migrant" or "migration" increased from 2012, similar to the increase in trafficking mentions overall. This may have arisen because of the European "migrant crisis" caused by the Syrian civil war and Europe's border responses to it; occasionally, the press use trafficking as a synonym for people smuggling, and we can see that co-occurrences of the two also increase during this period.

As people smuggling was a big issue during the crisis (with many using smugglers to cross the Mediteranean or reach the Turkish Border), it would make sense that the crisis would increase mentions of trafficking, mentions of smuggling alongside trafficking, and mentions of migration alongside trafficking, all of which can be seen on the graph.

However, the rise in smuggling within trafficking discourse is comparatively low next to its use earlier in the 20th century, and it may not be the direct cause of the increase in the other rubrics. Instead, the migrant crisis may have increased stigma around migration, which made trafficking a more emotive issue alongside it, and sharpened focus towards its migratory elements. Note a spike in migration results for 2016, the year of the Brexit referendum, where immigration was seen as a core issue.

Mentions of "labour" or "labourer" alongside trafficking is a little more difficult to put into a political context. It seemed to dip proportionally as the sex rubric peaked, however recently the prominence of both has converged. Some academics interested in trafficking may find this encouraging, while the increase of co-occurrences of trafficking with "modern or contemporary slavery" could be cause for concern, for reasons I discuss below.

Why how we talk about Trafficking matters

Sex trafficking, perhaps more than any other type, has been heavily criticised as a concept. To start, it receives a disproportionate amount of attention compared to other forms of trafficking when considering the rates at which they take place. There is also heavy disagreement over how it should be defined, which produces surprising coalitions of people.

One side believes it should include voluntary prostitution, a position held by both evangelical christians and radical feminists alike, and the other does not. The whole debate is shaped in part by a split amongst feminists known as the "sex wars" that arose in the 1970s but still remain today.

Anti-prostitution feminists see sex work, along with pornography and sadomasachism, as an inherently exploitative process which objectifies the female body and expresses and supports patriarchy. Sex-positive feminists however see sex work as non-exploitative provided it is consensual, or even as actively empowering. Allied with sex-positive feminists in wanting to decriminalise prostitution are

others who may have grievances with sex work but see its decriminalisation as a pragmatic step towards ensuring sex worker's rights.

The definition used in the introduction was originally formulated at a UN conference in 2000. It was left deliberately vague so as to not take a side. However, when used in practice INGOs such as CATW, Evangelical Christians and state initiatives have tended to take an anti-prostitution approach, much to the dismay of Sex Worker's rights activists.

Where you stand on prostitution is a political stance, yet the presenting of anti-trafficking work as being "politically neutral" means that anti-prostitution policies slip under the radar of criticism. In an interview, the founder of the Feminist organisation "equality now!" freely admitted that neutralising sex trafficking had helped in their fight against commercial sex work (chapter 2, p47).

Critics of sex trafficking are often in favour of seeing sex trafficking not as a category on its own, but as a sub-category of labour trafficking. Perhaps then they may be encouraged to see that sex trafficking has dropped in prevelance since the early 2010s (although has risen slightly in recent years) while labour trafficking remains most prevalent. The growth of trafficking-as-modern slavery however, would concern some.

You would be hard pressed to find someone who is pro-slavery, and the forced labour that trafficking victims incur certainly appears to be slavery, so it seems surprising that many academics take issue with this framing. The reason is framing trafficking as slavery functions as another layer of neutralisation, and critics hold that by being presented in this way trafficking appears to be something without a political cause.

A big criticism is that *freedom* and *slavery* are black and white categories being applied to a spectrum of experiences. It is assumed that there is a hard, meaningful distinction between freedom and enslavement, and that trafficking falls under the latter. This assumes that the people who are trafficked have got there through overbearing force, a force that "free" people aren't subjected to.

But Steinfeld points out that in reality this force isn't always physical overpowerment; people often become trafficked by having to choose between two very unpleasant options, such as "forced labour or death". It could be argued that the practical difference between working through fear of execution or starvation is not an important one. The resulting scenario is that you have to submit to exploitative work in order to survive. The distinction boils down to what we view as acceptable and unacceptable forms of exploitation.

To conclude, human trafficking has grown considerably in the British press since 2000, somewhat independently of the growth in trafficking itself. Being presented as a neutral topic has been criticised

heavily by academics, and by looking at how different associated words have changed overtime we can see that trafficking and how it is defined certainly isn't static, nor apolitical.