Received: 22 March 2021 | Revised: 14 January 2022 | Accepted: 20 January 2022

DOI: 10.1111/geoj.12433

THE GJ Royal Geographical Society with IBG

WILEY

THEMED SECTION

Media coverage of the blue economy in British newspapers: Sea blindness and sustainable development

Celine Germond-Duret[1] | **Basil Germond**[2]

[1]School of Biological and Environmental Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

[2]Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

Correspondence
Celine Germond-Duret, School of Biological and Environmental Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University , Liverpool, UK.
Email: C.V.GermondDuret@ljmu.ac.uk

Funding information
There are no funders to report for this submission.

Abstract

The wide acceptance and endorsement of the blue economy by public and private actors can be considered as a positive step towards the sustainable transition of coastal and marine environments. While particular attention needs to be paid to the potential risks posed by the perspective of economic gains resulting from marine exploitation, a large public support is also required to build a sustainable society. The mass media plays a critical role in communicating scientific advances and risks, shaping opinions, and fostering behavioural change. The article discusses the media coverage of the blue economy in British newspapers through a frame analysis. The analysis reveals that the blue economy is largely framed in terms of economic opportunities and weak sustainability, and treated in a very factual, non-critical way. Sea blindness enables us to understand the lack of in-depth discussion about the blue economy and its framing as an overtly positive economic opportunity. The findings also suggest that the way the blue economy is represented proceeds from the dominant development discourse that has spread onto the marine space.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The blue economy can be defined as the sustainable pursuit of economic activities resulting from the exploitation of coastal and marine resources. While its wide acceptance and endorsement by public and private actors could potentially be considered as a positive step towards the sustainable transition of coastal and marine environments, concerns have been raised as to the very sustainable dimension of the blue economy. This raises the question of how the marine space is being considered and what level of social and environmental disruption is deemed acceptable on behalf of economic gains. This is of particular concern for the marine environment because the sea has traditionally been regarded as placeless and thus prone to economic exploitation (Germond & Germond-Duret, 2016). Critical engagement with activities conducted at sea is thus of crucial importance, as is people's understanding of the nature and potential consequences of developments taking place in the marine environment.

The type of information (including the lack of information), and the worldviews people are exposed to, frame their understanding, concerns and engagement with environmental matters. The ways news, facts and information are reported is important as they can result in a wide range of reactions among the general public, from support to criticism. The mass media plays a critical role in communicating scientific advances and risks, shaping opinions, and fostering

behavioural change. It is recognised as the main source of information for the general public that has the potential to frame public perception of different topics, especially when first-hand information is not readily available (de Vreese, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972, cited in Govaerts, 2021). For example, the role played by the media in the context of climate change mitigation and adaptation has been widely studied (Boykoff, 2008; Murali et al., 2021). A recent survey on citizens' perception of the sea by DEFRA (UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) showed that the written press is the third source of information about the marine environment after television/radio and films (DEFRA, 2021, p. 23). But mass media coverage of ocean matters is often limited to what people can relate to. Recent engagements with ocean sustainability by the general public and the mass media have mostly been centred on plastic pollution (Keller & Wyles, 2021; Stafford & Jones, 2019) and to some extent deep sea mining and marine resources depletion.

This article explores the media coverage of the blue economy in British newspapers. Conducting a frame analysis, we answer the following questions: How is the blue economy represented in British newspapers? Are there overarching discourses framing its coverage? Given the growing focus placed on the blue economy by public actors and coastal and marine stakeholders, as well as the potential implications of an increase in maritime activities, it is important to understand the way media present the blue economy to the general public and how it is framed.

First, there has been a lack of attention paid to the sea by all actors and at all levels—politicians, media, and even social scientists—at least until the "scholarly turn to the oceans" noticed by Connery (2006, p. 496). This phenomenon has sometimes been accounted for by the concept of sea blindness. The very expression "sea blindness" has so far mostly been used in the context of maritime security and naval affairs. For example, Young (2019, p. 18), discussing 'NATO's selective sea blindnessa talks about the "all-but-universal continental focus, in which armies predominate". Sea blindness here refers to governments' indifference to the sea and to the resulting challenges faced by navies. Mugridge (2009) attributes the first use of the expression "sea blindness" to Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Fieldhouse in the early 1980s, "to reflect the apparent lack of awareness within the British population of the importance of the sea and the contribution of the Royal Navy to their prosperity" (pp. 310–311). Mugridge still connects sea blindness to the military domain and the freedom to use oceans for the physical and economic security of nations, while recognising that it is nowadays a broader phenomenon, "a socio-political failure to acknowledge or recognise the importance of the maritime domain to both society and economy" (p. 306). We define sea blindness as a general lack of interest for the marine space, and the failure to recognise how it connects and matters to societies, cultures and people's identity. It does not result from ignorance and lack of knowledge about the marine environment itself, but rather from a limited awareness of the multidimensionality of the sea and its importance for societies. As a result, the social and cultural dimension of important developments occurring at sea (like the blue economy) can be neglected or misunderstood. The term "blind" is not used here in a derogatory way, but etymologically refers to the longstanding practice of only seeing certain aspects of the sea: the sea as a placeless void whose importance is only recognised as an enabler of the movement of ships, goods and people (Steinberg, 2001).

Sea blindness, the perception of the sea as placeless, and any other dominant narrative about the sea have impacts on developments happening at sea. It has been shown that overarching discourses have shaped the emergence and the understanding of the blue economy (see Silver et al., 2015 and Voyer et al., 2018, respectively). A discourse is "an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices" (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p. 175). Germond-Duret (2022) argues that the wide endorsement for the blue economy results from three discourses: placelessness of the sea, development and sustainability. The placelessness of the sea has resulted in the sea being seen as no more than an exploitable space open to economic development (facilitating the blue economy). The development discourse extended the idea of development into the ocean space. The sustainability discourse justified the need to implement the blue economy at sea in similar terms as sustainable development on land. The spread of these discourses into the maritime domain through the blue economy has resulted in further control and interventions (e.g., resource exploitation and territorialisation). Unravelling which broader structures of ideas shape and influence the way the blue economy is understood by the written press and presented to the public is thus essential because different sets of representations justify different sets of practices.

Finally, it is important to consider what the sustainable dimension mentioned above truly means. What differentiates the *blue* economy from the *maritime* economy is its sustainability component. However, the ambiguity over its sustainable element is evident, both at the conceptual and practical level. Conceptually, the expression "blue economy" is sometimes preceded by "sustainable", as if it was not that evident. For example, the expression "sustainable blue economy" is used by the United Nations Sustainable Blue Economy Finance Initiative (UNEPFI, n.d.), by the World Wide Fund for Nature ("promoting a sustainable blue economy") (WWF, n.d.), by the Commonwealth (action group on blue sustainable economy) (The Commonwealth Blue Charter, n.d.) and by some academics too (e.g., "equitable and sustainable blue economy" used by Phelan et al., 2020 in their title). It mimics the confusion over the concept of sustainable development

itself, which is subject to much debate and interpretation, and whose understanding varies between "weak" and "strong" sustainability (depending on the weight given to the need to preserve natural resources compared with economic needs) (Brekke, 1997). If the blue economy is overtly understood in positive terms and is presented to the general public as such, then it is unlikely to be challenged. Without counter-narratives, the risk of harmful practices is likely to persist.

It is thus crucial to understand how the blue economy is being represented. We explain below the rationale for conducting a frame analysis of the media coverage of the blue economy and the coding used to analyse our dataset. The findings are structured around the principal frames resulting from the analysis, and reveal that the blue economy is represented as an economic opportunity within a weak sustainability framework and that the potential risks that the blue economy can pose are not considered. We relate these findings to sea blindness and the dominant discourse of development.

2 | METHOD: FRAMING THE BLUE ECONOMY

The aim of the paper is to analyse British newspaper coverage of the blue economy and relate it to existing discourses influencing its representation. We conducted a frame analysis, which is a proven method for the analysis of newspaper content, since it focuses on the communication and articulation of ideas on a given topic. It has been used in social sciences, including Geography (for example, see Porter & Hulme, 2013).

Frame analysis is a method of discourse analysis that puts the emphasis on what elements are communicated and made prominent in the representation of policy issues. It aims to identify which aspects of an issue are given attention or omitted (Entman, 1993) and determines what elements are presented (and then accepted) as meaningful or meaningless. Frames are like storylines. They are the key messages that result from the communication of certain social phenomena and they induce a specific understanding by the target audience. As a consequence, they impact on people's perception of a given issue, who are exposed to recurring stories and ideas over time. Indeed, frames do not constitute a single representation of a problem at a single moment in time; there is an element of continuity because frames are socially shared and persistent over time (Reese et al., 2001, p. 11).

Frame analysis is often used to analyse agenda setting and how it influences people's opinion, with the underlying idea that this process would be intentional. However, the message conveyed by the mass media is not necessarily intentional and can instead proceed from dominant discourses imposing themselves onto the wider society, and the media then only reflect and reinforce existing discourses. Of course, there are political agendas and editorial choices, but there are also, on some issues, dominant ideas that are not challenged and act in a normative way. Frames on a given issue should indeed be linked together and interpreted in their broader context, for they are often embedded in wider discourses. Frame analysis is useful to highlight when dominant discursive practices determine agendas and result in the maintaining of existing ideas and opinions by showing recurring and interrelated storylines. This method is thus particularly relevant for our study that aims at identifying which dominant discourses frame the representation of the blue economy.

In this study, the frames were determined through the content analysis of the written press mentioning the blue economy. The corpus of data we analysed was composed of newspapers' articles collected from the LexisNexis database. We searched for the expressions "blue economy" or "blue growth" or "blue degrowth" or "blue wealth", anywhere in the title, heading or text of British (national and regional) newspaper articles, published between 1 January 1990 and 31 December 2020. After collecting the articles and removing the duplicates, the corpus consisted of 274 articles. The articles included 130 "BBC Monitoring: International Reports" that we decided to exclude from the analysis. Indeed, these articles report news by other media sources. They do not target the wider public and the wider public does not (or not directly) have access to them (it is rather subscribed by other news organisations). Then, after manually removing false positive[1] and further duplicates, our corpus consisted of a total of 101 articles for coding. We conducted an additional manual search on the websites of some national newspapers to see if that would return some further articles and to validate the accuracy of our dataset. No further articles were returned. Coverage of the blue economy can thus seem limited. However, the search focused on specific expressions (e.g., "blue economy") because our intention was to identify how the actual idea of a blue economy was explicitly communicated, which puts our corpus within the expected boundaries for a search of specific, technical terms.[2] The list of articles analysed is available in the Appendix S1. They include broadsheets and tabloids, and national, regional and local newspapers.

A content analysis was performed through the coding of segments of texts. A coding scheme can be developed either inductively (emerging from the analysis) or deductively (based on pre-existing theory or findings). We used a mixed approach. First, as Porter and Evans (2020), we analysed a random sample of articles to develop the coding scheme (Table 1), which was then applied to the whole dataset. We came up with five codes and added a sixth one on risks and

TABLE 1 Coding scheme

Codes	Indicators
Energy	Energy security; energy efficiency; renewable energy; blue energy; etc
Sustainability	Sustainable development (including social and environmental dimensions); circular economy; etc
Economic opportunities	Economic growth; job creation; etc
Social opportunities	Food security; empowerment; gender equality; etc
Oceans as assets	Economic value of marine resources; oceans as resources; etc
Risks	Environmental degradation; livelihood impacts; dispossession; ocean grabbing; etc
Security	In order to implement the blue economy the maritime domain must be secured, policed; prevention of maritime criminality; etc

a seventh one related to maritime security. Although this did not emerge from our random sample analysis, it is important to highlight the potential risks linked to the blue economy. Similarly, we thought it was also important to look for any reference to maritime security because the need to securitise the maritime domain to make it profitable has been highlighted by practitioners and academics alike. Thus, these two additional codes were included to enable the analysis to show the extent to which these themes are of interest to the media; what is not said is indeed as important as what is said. The texts were coded manually, which the size of the corpus enabled, attributing a code to each segment of text containing relevant indicators and references linked to the code (Table 1).

In addition, for each article, we checked (coded Y/N) if (1) the article gave a definition of the concept of blue economy, and (2) the blue economy was just mentioned "in passing" in the article without further elaboration.

Based on this coding scheme, we then qualitatively analysed the data for overall patterns, trends and themes to highlight and discuss overarching frames.

3 | FINDINGS: THE BLUE ECONOMY AS A SAFE OPPORTUNITY

The first occurrence of the expression "blue economy" in the dataset dates back to 2010 (article 1), but it was made in reference to water scarcity rather than aspects of maritime economy. The first mention of "blue economy" as understood in this article is in an editorial of the *Sunday Times* published in October 2011 in the context of the preparation for the Rio+20 Conference (article 2). The author refers to the blue economy as a way to do "something about the destruction of life in our oceans". The first meaningful reference is thus placing the emphasis on the protection of the marine environment. 2012 marks a turning point with articles published in the context of (and making references to) the Rio+20 Conference. But this does not constitute a proper quantitative breakthrough as we have to wait until 2017 to see a noticeable increase in the number of articles referring to the blue economy (Figure 1). We cannot identify any specific prompting event that could *directly* explain this increase of references to the blue economy, but this can be explained *indirectly* by the increasing interest in marine environmental protection; and the academic literature follows the same trend (Figure 2). This also coincides with an increase in coverage by local/regional newspapers (notably from Scotland) of local events and developments related to the maritime economy.

Among the 101 articles analysed, 91 mention the blue economy in passing (i.e., without discussing it much), and 10 articles talk about the blue economy in greater length. Thirty-two featured in the "news" section and 26 in the "business" section (the other sections were not significant). As shown in Figure 3, the newspapers that mention the blue economy the most are national broadsheets (*The Times* and *The Sunday Times* and *The Guardian*) or Scottish newspapers (*Aberdeen Press and Journal*, *The Herald* and *The Sunday Herald*). Scottish newspapers' interest in the blue economy is mostly linked to the importance of the offshore sector for the region, then both oil exploitation and alternative uses of the sea for energy generation (windfarms) are covered. It is also interesting to note that this local interest in the opportunities offered by the blue economy is expressed in several articles from regional newspapers based in coastal areas (e.g., *Western Mail*, *The Plymouth Herald*). This shows that a media interest in the blue economy is associated with a high dependence of local communities on the marine or maritime economy. However, this regional/local interest is limited to certain coastal areas and the absence of articles in Northern Irish and Northern England's newspapers is noticeable. Although the blue economy is a global concept, the articles mostly refer to British and European stories (EU's Blue Growth strategy for instance).

A thematic analysis of the articles, based on the coding explained in the method section, revealed the three following principal frames that we detail below: economic opportunity; weak sustainability; absence of risk. In addition, it is

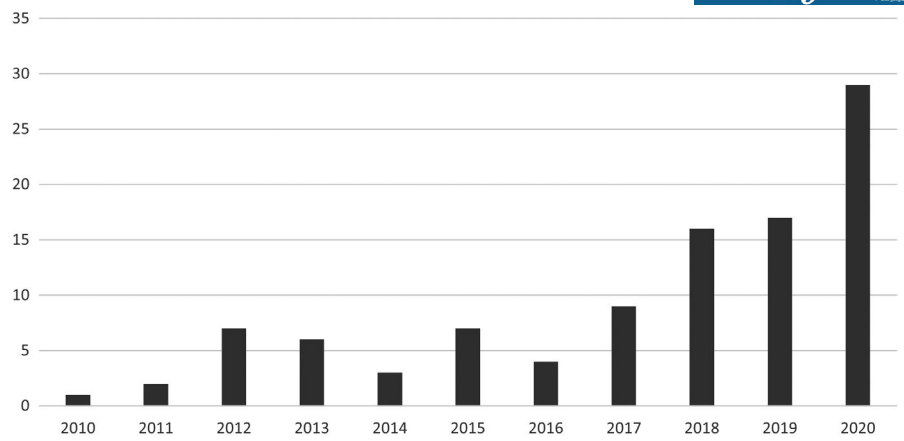

FIGURE 1 Media coverage of the blue economy by year (British newspapers)

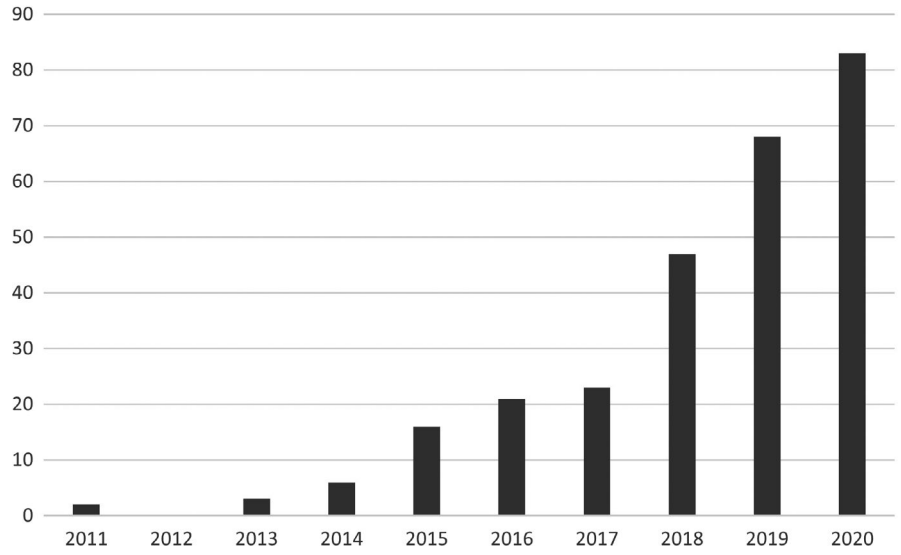

FIGURE 2 Blue economy coverage in academic articles (using SCOPUS, with "blue economy" or "blue growth" in the title or keywords)

worth noting that the data show a lack of references to maritime security considerations (1/101 article). We expected to encounter arguments about the need to secure the maritime domain in order to attract investors in the blue economy. Indeed, this is an argument that was prominently put forward by academics and practitioners alike (cf. Damanaki, 2014; Germond, 2015). In other words, the blue economy is not presented as being related to maritime security issues in the dataset. Also, although the ideological standpoint of a newspaper often determines what they cover and how (Carvalho, 2005; Carvalho & Burgess, 2005), there does not appear to be significant divergence in the coverage of the blue economy based on newspapers' political orientation (left/right) or type (broadsheet/tabloid).

3.1 | The blue economy as an economic opportunity

The blue economy is framed as an economic opportunity. As mentioned above, the second largest section the articles featured in is the "business" section. In about a third of the articles, the blue economy is explicitly presented as an opportunity for economic growth and/or for profit maximisation, with the term "opportunity" being regularly employed to qualify the blue economy. For example, the blue economy is presented as a contribution to "making the ocean profitable" (article 6), a way to "create more value" (article 7); it is an "opportunity for new jobs and economic growth" (article 8), has the "potential to generate huge economic growth and much-needed jobs" (articles 17, 18), to "provide a potential new economic frontier" (article 27), to 'maximise opportunities (article 98), and to increase "prosperity and stability" (article 31) as well as to "regenerate local economy" (article 95); it is related to "greater exploration and exploitation" (article 45). There are many

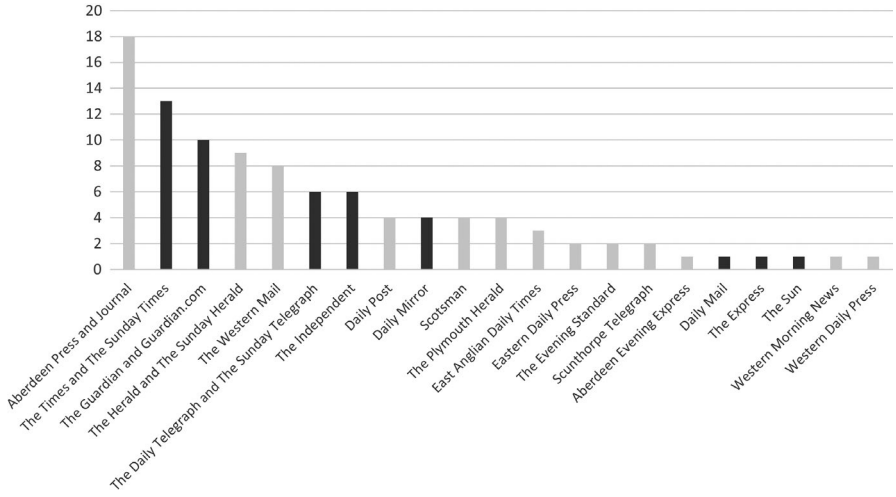

FIGURE 3 Media coverage of the blue economy in the UK, by newspaper. National newspapers in dark grey; regional and local newspapers in light grey; 2010–2020

references to the exploitation of offshore petroleum resources (by Scottish newspapers), which are presented as opportunities for economic growth and job creation under the label of the blue economy. Terms such as "value", "profit", "growth", "prosperity", "jobs", "exploitation" are all related to the notion of economic opportunities, the blue economy equating to "the business of the sea" (article 99). Marine and maritime resources are represented as economic opportunities. To make the most of them (economically speaking) is thus presented as something logical, rational, normal.

Only a handful of articles talk about the blue economy in relation to Brexit (e.g., the blue economy as an opportunity to benefit from other funding streams outside the EU; and Brexit as an opportunity to build on the UK's seafaring heritage and forge new maritime industries, articles 34, 45). Since the research was made on the very expressions "blue economy" or "blue growth", the dataset does not encompass articles that would talk about Brexit and the sea more generally (for example, fishing quotas or movement of goods through the Irish Sea) if there is no mention of the blue economy or blue growth. However, since the second half of 2020, investing in the blue economy is also presented as being part of the plans for post-COVID economic recovery: "a transformational plan [towards] post-covid economic recovery" (article 101). That said, the blue economy is presented as a contribution to the proposed "green recovery" (articles 92, 94, 97, 98), which emphasises the importance of sustainability in the post-pandemic era (HM Government, 2020).

3.2 | The blue economy as weak sustainability

In close to half of the articles analysed, the blue economy is framed within the traditional, technical acceptation of sustainable development; that is, the sea is a source of riches and the blue economy can contribute to economic growth, but the marine environment must also be protected. The blue economy is described as "the sustainable use of ocean resources" (articles 46, 54, 58, 70), but sustainable development is recurrently conceptualised in a technical way, that is, biased towards the economic side: "preserving and investing in the value of ocean ecosystems" (article 6); "Blue growth is something of a balancing act" [between opportunities for economic growth, environmental protection and] "social sustainability" (article 8); it is admitted that "the 'blue' economy, can only meet our increasing demand if we restore the ocean and manage it better for the goods and services it provides" (article 22). It is claimed that "the broad approach to fisheries and oceans conservation of SDG14 ties in with FAO's Blue Growth Initiative, which balances the sustainable and socio-economic management of natural aquatic resources" (article 26); Similarly, "if Britain is to increase its economic reliance on the sea, it will need to be sustainably managed" (article 45). In that respect, the need to create marine protected areas (MPAs) was mentioned only a few times, as part of practical measures to apply blue economy principles (e.g., "one that sustains the ocean's natural capital while providing long term social and economic benefits", article 30). There is barely any mention of "biodiversity"; one of the few references indicates that "the value to the UK of marine biodiversity is estimated to be in the trillions of pounds" (article 47). The need for conservation did not stand out either, apart from the recognition that the blue economy "depends on the conservation of ocean resources to help sustain livelihoods from the sea" (article 91) and the mention of Seychelles' debt-for-nature swap to invest in conservation and "help

build a sustainable blue economy" (article 41). But it was not further related or discussed in relation to the blue economy. The sustainable development dimension of the blue economy is often framed within an economic growth and profit maximisation narrative. In sum, framing the blue economy within sustainable development is represented as the rational way to preserve the value of the ocean towards generating economic growth.

There are very few references to the social dimension of sustainable development beyond references to job creation. One article is devoted to the blue economy and women in Africa, but in a way that links women empowerment with accessing jobs via opportunities provided by the blue economy; that is, "a great chance to achieve the continent's post-2015 development goals on women's involvement in employment and leadership" (article 20). The expression "coastal community" is only used in one article, in reference to the development of a new deep water terminal in Stornoway, "a great example of the blue economy in action, as it is creating infrastructure in our islands which can benefit a range of marine industries and coastal communities" (article 100).

Seven articles have reported on Prince Charles' speeches, in which he often uses the blue economy label in the context of his initiatives to protect the marine environment and especially the issue of plastic pollution (articles 37, 38, 40, 54, 58, 59, 60); for example, "finding an approach to protect and conserve the ocean and develop a truly sustainable approach to the blue economy is a really urgent priority" (article 54). Prince Charles' mentions of the blue economy are interesting in that the purpose is to alert public opinion to the importance of addressing plastic pollution in particular and marine environment protection in general. They constitute some rare occurrences of a primary emphasis put on the environmental dimension of sustainable development. That said, it is interesting to note that the recent (since 2020) narrative around "green recovery" (mentioned above) tends to put more emphasis on the environmental dimension of the blue economy and our environmental responsibility (e.g., articles 94, 96, 97).

3.3 | Absence of risk: Lack of critical analysis of the blue economy

It is increasingly recognised that the blue economy can pose risks to socio-cultural and environmental systems (see e.g., Bennett et al., 2021), so it is interesting to note that the articles analysed were not critical of the blue economy as a concept or policy. What is not said about the blue economy (risks) is as important as what is being said (opportunities). Two articles were critical of deep-sea mining and thus advocated a "truly" sustainable blue economy: "Deepsea mining presents something of a double-edged sword. Just as it presents promise of a future "blue economy", it also creates tension between growth and conservation of the sea" (article 27); "seabed mining [is] potentially lucrative ... but one that could threaten marine life while providing little benefit to local communities. [Thus the prudent approach would be to] apply the principles of a blue economy – one that sustain the ocean's natural capital while providing long term social and economic benefits" (article 30). However, what is actually criticised here are exploitative practices that prevent future growth of the blue economy, reproducing the technical sustainable development discourse. It was highlighted in one article that "the need for marine conservation and economic development of marine industries can ... be in conflict", hence questioning the sustainability objective of the blue economy (article 84). Blue economy is considered as a ready-made solution to make sure that resource exploitation is conducted in a sustainable way. Whereas there is a need for "Green Recovery and the Blue Economy [to] be made real" (article 97), there is no further coverage in the data of the potential negative impacts that the blue economy can have on local communities, for example, on their identity and traditions and via infringement on their rights and means of livelihood.

4 | DISCUSSION: SEA BLINDNESS AND THE NORMAL STATE OF AFFAIRS

Sea blindness enables us to understand the lack of in-depth discussion about the blue economy and its framing as an overtly positive economic opportunity, as shown by the data we analysed in Section 3. The focus on its economic dimension, and the absence of consideration for its multidimensionality and the possible impacts on social and cultural systems, can be explained by the enduring vision of the sea as placeless: full of natural resources, but with no further connection to societies. Indeed, sea blindness goes hand in hand with the vision of the sea as a non-place. The sea is represented and constructed in collective imaginaries as a "placeless void" (Steinberg, 2001). Ocean space epitomises emptiness, danger and "otherness" (Germond & Germond-Duret, 2016); "it is a fluid world rather than a solid one" (Anderson & Peters, 2014, p. 5); it is uninhabitable in a traditional land-based sense. Such representations

contribute to making the sea "invisible" or at least irrelevant to most land users, except when it relates to topics of particular relevance, such as job creation. When newspapers talk about the sea, it is mostly through utilitarian lenses (e.g., providing jobs), as illustrated by the most significant coverage by coastal newspapers (especially Scottish). The rest comes second, resulting in not only a disregard for socio-cultural impacts, but also a weak sustainability vision (and an overall absence of consideration for potential risks). Potts et al.'s (2016) survey of 7000 individuals across seven European countries about their concerns for global environmental issues revealed that oceans' health was near or at the bottom of the list they were presented with. Interestingly, their study revealed that there was little difference between coastal populations and inland populations as to their concerns for oceans' health. Our findings rather show that newspapers with a coastal readership are more likely to cover the topic of the blue economy. This can be explained by the fact that the sea is less "off the radar" but it does not mean that regional newspapers are necessarily more concerned about marine environment protection compared with economic opportunities.

This fits with a business-as-usual approach to sustainability, or what Hopwood et al. (2005) call the status quo approach (i.e., no fundamental changes to society is needed to become sustainable), which is the vision dominating policy (Hopwood et al., 2005, p. 48). Media framing can be constrained by broad, dominant discourses that represent policy issues according to pre-existing ideas. The three frames identified are interrelated, and put together; they reveal the influence of a wider discourse. We argue that the way the blue economy is framed by British newspapers (opportunity, sustainable) and the lack of critical appraisal result from a broader narrative that shapes the understanding of development and sustainability in relation to the marine environment and our relation to the sea. Our findings suggest that the blue economy is part of the continuous dynamics reproducing and maintaining the development discourse by adding labels (e.g., human, participatory, sustainable, etc.) and spreading to other spaces (i.e., the marine space), while remaining an economic concept above all. What appears to be the most important is to grow the economy and create jobs, and to do that we must protect the environment so as it remains a "sustainable" (understand long-term) source of growth and profit. This is illustrated by references in the newspaper articles to the need to preserve marine resources so as to be able to keep exploiting them for economic growth. The narrative also claims that by promoting a "blue" economy we can better protect the marine environment. In the same way that sustainable development results from a reflection on the dynamics between the economy and the environment, the blue economy results from inherent conflicts between the representation of oceans as areas of economic growth on the one hand and a vulnerable space needing protection on the other hand (Voyer et al., 2018, p. 596). As often with sustainable development, the social dimension is forgotten (Germond-Duret, 2012), as exemplified by the lack of references to coastal communities in newspaper articles.

The dominant discourse of development goes hand in hand with the enduring sea blindness, which prevents us from seeing beyond the detached and utilitarian vision of the marine environment; it contributes to the selectivity of what we "see". This naturally reflects on the way media talks about the blue economy; as we have seen here, the blue economy is covered in a very factual, technical and rational way, reflecting the prevailing vision of development. It has been shown that one of the reasons why the blue economy has benefited from a wide endorsement from many different actors is precisely because it does not challenge existing dominant discourses (Germond-Duret, 2022). Its coverage does not challenge them either; it is constrained by them. This can explain that there is no divergence in coverage according to the political stance of the newspapers; the blue economy is reported, not discussed; it is not seen as a political issue; it is the continuity of the normal state of affairs.

The dominant technical vision of sustainable development (weak sustainability) impacts on the representation (and lack of representation) of the blue economy, resulting in the naturalisations of ideas that are simply reproduced by media outlets. This is a clear difference compared with the media coverage on climate change. Indeed, media coverage on climate change is notably influenced by the political perspective and the "quality" of the newspapers (see, for example, Boykoff, 2008 on UK tabloids), resulting in different representations of climate change (including denial). In the case of the blue economy, media are not "partisan", in the sense that they are not trying to promote certain ideas or ideologies in relation to the concept. Stories are presented as they have been heard or received, reproducing the one and only dominant discourse. This is also because, in contrast to climate change, support for the blue economy does not seem to imply as many social and behavioural changes. The framing of the blue economy as an overarching positive economic opportunity is not necessarily an editorial choice or the result of a deliberate decision. Instead, the ideas presented may well have been naturalised, as if they were evident, creating "background knowledge that is taken to be true" (Doty, 1996, p. 10); for example, the blue economy is the (only) logical solution for future growth of the maritime economy. The blue economy is not challenging existing practices. Instead, it represents an extension of existing discourses produced on land onto a different space — the sea.

There has been a growing effort at challenging blue economy initiatives and prevailing narratives, and at critically assessing impacts on local populations. The blue economy has been associated with social and economic costs, including the dispossession of vulnerable coastal populations through conservation and development projects, the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, and more generally, the extension of neoliberalism onto new territories via ocean privatisation and ocean grabbing (Barbesgaard, 2018; Bennett et al., 2015; Farmery et al., 2021; Hadjimichael, 2018; Satizábal et al., 2020; Song et al., 2021). The lack of critical appraisal, the ignorance of potential risks, and the emphasis put on the economic dimension are not without consequences in terms of interventions at sea or in coastal areas. Bennett et al. (2021) identify 10 risks that result from the framing of the blue economy as "beneficial for the economy, developing nations, and coastal communities". Of particular interest are the risks of dispossession, cultural impacts, marginalisation of women, as well as human and indigenous rights abuses. In other words, there is a risk that the socio-cultural dimension of the blue economy is forgotten in practice, as it is the case in narrative. These risks are not currently understood and communicated by the UK press.

5 | CONCLUSION

The analysis reveals that the blue economy, as presented to the general public via newspapers, is largely framed in terms of economic opportunities and weak sustainability, and treated in a very factual, non-critical way. Our findings refer to the British context, but we can extrapolate some degree of universality because the development discourse influences policy agendas and contributes to maintaining existing ideas on development and the environment globally. That said, we have also highlighted regional specificities in the media coverage, with further interest in the sea and in the economic opportunities the blue economy can bring to coastal regions where close connections exist between the sea and communities' livelihood.

Despite a growing interest in marine social sciences, efforts made to highlight the placeful dimension of the sea and to denounce the lack of consideration for the socio-cultural connections to the sea are still limited. The literature has also remained quite complacent towards the blue economy so far, although we can notice a steep increase in studies critically engaging with the blue economy (in particular coming from political ecology). The article has contributed to filling these gaps by critically assessing the framing of the blue economy in the British press and highlighting how its coverage is constrained by dominant discourses (i.e., the development discourse). It showed how economic considerations prevail over socio-cultural aspects, and how sustainability is envisaged in its weakest sense, thus contributing to the continuity of existing practices and constraining the boundaries of what is possible to achieve in terms of strong sustainability.

The findings also stress that sea blindness is an important framework for understanding the lack of awareness for the potential risks posed by the blue economy. Beyond the blue economy, it is also an important lens to understand the lack of appreciation for the socio-cultural importance of the sea. Traditional disinterest by social sciences, exclusion of local communities from decisions regarding MPAs, lack of consideration for the specificities of coastal settlements, disregard for traditional marine tenure and non-Western views of the ocean, and so forth can all be explained by an enduring sea blindness. Studying the sea from a social and political perspective requires researchers to engage with narratives and with the way the sea is represented beyond its materialities. Indeed, social and political interactions at, within and from the sea are constrained by dominant discourses that reinforce the utilitarian conception of the sea as a space for economic growth. Representations of the marine space have practical implications, and unravelling how knowledge on the sea is created has the potential to not only advance further understanding of societies' relation with the sea but also to address challenges facing oceans. Materialist analyses can also benefit from the consideration of the broader influences constraining the practices scrutinised. While the development discourse is unlikely to dramatically change, making oceans visible (not just to political actors but to anyone), reflecting on sense of place, and highlighting knowledge structures about the sea are important starting points. There is an ever-increasing social science literature on the oceans, but the articulation between people and the sea, and the understanding of discursive representations, need further research.

There are sites for change and the dominant representation of the sea as a space for economic growth is not immutable. Highlighting the multidimensionality of oceans and their placeful nature is necessary to move away from the sea blindness that has so far prevented ocean space from benefiting from enough attention and understanding, both academically and politically. In sum, sea blindness is a key element of the social and political construction of the sea, which can only be accounted for via further research on the representation of the sea and how it is discursively framed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to acknowledge the contribution of the anonymous reviewers as well as the journal editor, whose insightful comments greatly enhanced the quality of this paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from LexisNexis. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data. Additional supporting information is available in the Appendix S1.

ORCID

Celine Germond-Duret https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1059-8846

ENDNOTES

[1] For example, an article about an airline and its "dark blue economy seats".

[2] For comparison purposes, Porter and Hulme (2013) reported 70 articles within UK national newspapers mentioning the term geo-engineering.

REFERENCES

Anderson, J. & Peters, K. (2014) (Eds). *Water worlds: The human geography of the oceans*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate.

Barbesgaard, M. (2018) Blue growth: Savior or ocean grabbing? *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45(1), 130–149. Availabe from: https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1377186

Bennett, N.J., Blythe, J., White, C.S. & Campero, C. (2021) Blue growth and blue justice: Ten risks and solutions for the ocean economy. *Marine Policy*, 125, 104387. Availabe from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2020.104387

Bennett, N.J., Govan, H. & Satterfield, T. (2015) Ocean grabbing. *Marine Policy*, 57, 61–68. Availabe from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2015.03.026

Boykoff, M.T. (2008) The cultural politics of climate change discourse in UK tabloids. *Political Geography*, 27(5), 549–569. Availabe from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2008.05.002

Brekke, K.A. (1997) *Economic growth and the environment: On the measurement of income and welfare*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

Carvalho, A. (2005) Representing the politics of the greenhouse effect. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 2(1), 1–29. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/17405900500052143

Carvalho, A. & Burgess, J. (2005) Cultural circuits of climate change in UK broadsheet newspapers, 1985–2003. *Risk Analysis*, 25, 1457–1469. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1539-6924.2005.00692.x

Connery, C. (2006) There was No More Sea: The supersession of the ocean, from the bible to cyberspace. *Journal of Historical Geography*, 32(3), 494–511. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2005.10.005

Damanaki, M. (2014, May 23) European Maritime Security Strategy: Moving Forward [Paper presentation]. CHENS (CHiefs of European NavieS), Portsmouth, UK. Available from: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-14-408_en.htm

DEFRA (2021) Ocean literacy in England & Wales: headline findings report. Available from: https://oceanconservationtrust.org/app/uploads/15131_ME5239OceanLiteracyHeadlineReport_FINAL.pdf

de Vreese, C.D. (2005) News framing: Theory and typology. *Information Design Journal*, 13, 51–62. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1075/idjdd.13.1.06vre

Doty, R. (1996) *Imperial encounters: The politics of representation in north-south relations (Volume 5) (Barrows Lectures) (First edition)*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Entman, R.M. (1993) Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58.

Farmery, A.K., Allison, E.H., Andrew, N.L., Troell, M., Voyer, M., Campbell, B. et al. (2021) Blind spots in visions of a 'blue economy' could undermine the ocean's contribution to eliminating hunger and malnutrition. *One Earth*, 4(1), 28–38. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40152-020-00168-0

Fletcher, S. & Potts, J. (2007) Ocean citizenship: An emergent geographical concept. *Coastal Management*, 35(4), 511–524. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/08920750701525818

Germond, B. (2015) The geopolitical dimension of maritime security. *Marine Policy*, 54, 137–142. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2014.12.013

Germond, B. & Germond-Duret, C. (2016) Ocean governance and maritime security in a placeful environment: The case of the European Union. *Marine Policy*, 66, 124–131. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2016.01.010

Germond-Duret, C. (2012) Extractive industries and the social dimension of sustainable development: Reflection on the chad-cameroon pipeline. *Sustainable Development*, 22(4), 231–242. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.1527

Germond-Duret, C. (2022) Framing the blue economy: Placelessness, development and sustainability. Development and Change. First published: 07 February 2022. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12703

Govaerts, F. (2021) Media representation of salmon aquaculture in France. *Aquaculture*, 540, 736679. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aquaculture.2021.736679

Hadjimichael, M. (2018) A call for a blue degrowth: Unravelling the European Union's fisheries and maritime policies. *Marine Policy*, 94, 158–164. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2018.05.007

Hajer, M. & Versteeg, W. (2005) A decade of discourse analysis of environmental politics: Achievements, challenges, perspectives. *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning*, 7(3), 175–184. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/15239080500339646

HM Government (2020, November) *The Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution: Building back better*. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/936567/10_POINT_PLAN_BOOKLET.pdf

Hopwood, B., Mellor, M. & O'Brien, G. (2005) Sustainable development: Mapping different approaches. *Sustainable Development*, 13(1), 38–52. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.244

Keller, A. & Wyles, K.J. (2021) Straws, seals, and supermarkets: Topics in the newspaper coverage of marine plastic pollution. *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, 166, 112211. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpolbul.2021.112211

McCombs, M.E. & Shaw, D.L. (2018) The agenda–setting function of mass media. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176–187. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1086/267990

Mugridge, D. (2009) Malaise or farce - the international failure of maritime security. *Defense and Security Analysis*, 25(3), 305–311. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/14751790903201448

Murali, R., Kuwar, A. & Nagendra, H. (2021) Who's responsible for climate change? Untangling threads of media discussions in India, Nigeria, Australia, and the USA. *Climatic Change*, 164(3-4), 3–4. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-021-03031-1

Phelan, A.A., Ruhanen, L. & Mair, J. (2020) Ecosystem services approach for community-based ecotourism: Towards an equitable and sustainable blue economy. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 28(10), 1665–1685. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1747475

Porter, J.J. & Evans, G. (2020) Unreported world: A critical analysis of UK newspaper coverage of post-disaster events. *The Geographical Journal*, 186(3), 327–338. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12353

Porter, K.E. & Hulme, M. (2013) The emergence of the geoengineering debate in the UK print media: A frame analysis. *The Geographical Journal*, 179(4), 342–355. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12003

Potts, T., Pita, C., O'Higgins, T. & Mee, L. (2016) Who cares? European attitudes towards marine and coastal environments. *Marine Policy*, 72, 59–66. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2016.06.012

Reese, S.D., Gandy, O.H. & Grant, A.E. (2001) *Framing public life: Perspectives on media and our understanding of the social world*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Satizábal, P., Dressler, W.H., Fabinyi, M. & Pido, M.D. (2020) Blue economy discourses and practices: Reconfiguring ocean spaces in the Philippines. *Maritime Studies*, 19, 207–221. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1007/s40152-020-00168-0

Silver, J.J., Gray, N.J., Campbell, L.M., Fairbanks, L.W. & Gruby, R.L. (2015) Blue economy and competing discourses in international oceans governance. *The Journal of Environment and Development*, 24(2), 135–160.

Song, A.M., Dressler, W.H., Satizábal, P. & Fabinyi, M. (2021) From conversion to conservation to carbon: The changing policy discourse on mangrove governance and use in the Philippines. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 82, 184–195. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.01.008

Stafford, R. & Jones, P.J.S. (2019) Viewpoint – Ocean plastic pollution: A convenient but distracting truth? *Marine Policy*, 103, 187–191. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2019.02.003

Steinberg, P.E. (2001) *The social construction of the ocean*. Cambridge Studies in International Relations, Series Number 78, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

The Commonwealth Blue Charter (n.d.) Action Group on Sustainable Blue Economy. Available from: https://bluecharter.thecommonwealth.org/action-groups/blue-economy/

UNEPFI (n.d.) *Sustainable blue finance*. United Nations Environment Finance Initiative. Available from: https://www.unepfi.org/blue-finance/

Voyer, M., Quirk, G., McIlgorm, A. & Azmi, K. (2018) Shades of blue: What do competing interpretations of the Blue Economy mean for oceans governance?. *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning*, 20(5), 595–616. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908x.2018.1473153

WWF (n.d.) *Promoting a sustainable blue economy*. Available from: https://www.wwf.eu/what_we_do/oceans/promoting_a_sustainable_blue_economy/

Young, T.-D. (2019) NATO's selective sea blindness. *Naval War College Review*, 72(3), 12–39.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of the article at the publisher's website.

Appendix S1. List of the articles included in the data set.

How to cite this article: Germond-Duret, C. & Germond, B. (2022) Media coverage of the blue economy in British newspapers: Sea blindness and sustainable development. *The Geographical Journal*, 00, 1–11. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12433