

## **The Impact of Social Media on Brexit**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the influence of social media on public opinion and voting behaviour during the Brexit campaign. It summarises the context of the campaign, poses a set of research questions based on involvement and activity on Facebook and Twitter, describes how the data collected from both platforms has been processed and finally, uses geographical and machine learning techniques to enrich and challenge news articles with different political perspectives. On 23rd June 2016, the UK held a referendum on its membership of the EU. The original vote took place in 1975, to legitimise the country's membership after a narrow decision in parliament two years previously. Whilst this was a decisive campaign for the remain side, opinion on the EU had remained divided and nationalist rhetoric had lingered over the next four decades. In 2013, David Cameron pledged to hold a further referendum and once he had secured his unexpected majority in the general election, this took place nearly three years later. The EU has long been an issue of contention within the Conservative party and, despite reassurances from his EU partners, Cameron pursued talks on renegotiating the UK's relationship with Europe. Cameron's gamble tied his leadership with the referendum result but was part of a wider positioning of the Conservative party in the run up to the 2015 election. Throughout the campaign, however, he averted attention from the positive aspects of EU membership and his lacklustre approach to the debate would later be criticised. David Cameron's government was in an extremely Eurosceptical majority but split on the dangers of leaving the EU. In 2014, this divide became more pronounced as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) burst into the mainstream, winning the European elections and by-elections in traditional Labour voting communities.

Reflecting this rise in anti-EU sentiment, the media increased its references to Eurosceptic themes and subsequent rise in anti-EU sentiment posed a major challenge for the Prime Minister. Despite this, the leave side was able to capitalise on the fact

that it was a movement of convenience, gaining support from ideological and economic segments of British society through a cocktail of lies, disinformation, and a well-funded media machine. Therein, Vote Leave's strategy was defined by untargeted mass advertising with misleading messages, specifically to older and predominantly white voters on Facebook (Gorrell et al., 2018). Subsequently, the remain campaign struggled to attract attention online and using traditional media was at a disadvantage as biased media awarded a disproportionate weight to negative economic forecasts, while the Leave campaign enjoyed a largely free and more engaging press. In the days prior to 23rd June, more positive messages intended to reassure and promote the continuity of the economy were drowned out by a ferocious debate on immigration and sovereignty in both social media and traditional press, benefiting disproportionately the leave campaign.

Keywords social media, Brexit, public opinion, voting behavior, EU referendum, misinformation, political campaigns, data analysis

## **2. Introduction**

The Brexit referendum constitutes a rare historical event against the backdrop of an increasingly significant role social media play today. Voters in the UK referenda normally receive highly influenced information from media such as newspapers and television, and from opinion-forming individuals, including academics, journalists, and politicians. However, during the UK's EU membership referendum, many Britons turned to social media platforms to share their views about, preferences towards, and beliefs around the European Union, as well as about the future of their country. Once Brexit became established as a salient topic of political conversation, people exchanged opinions on social media, with certain individuals having the potential to influence the views of many others (Grčar et al., 2017). A similar scenario was observed in the broader EU, where debates on the UK's future membership were apparent. Many have argued that it was precisely social media that 'won it for Leave', suggesting that costs and benefits to politicians arise from exploiting targeted political adverts circulated on online networks. In light of these events, it is of paramount importance to provide a better understanding of the discourse around Brexit on social media platforms, as 'both the Leave and Remain sides [...] sought to guide the news agenda to suit their interests'. As such, the Twitter conversation has become a method

of choice for supporting, denying, nor providing evidence about political arguments. Campaigners on both sides of the debate also worked hard for their messages to be repeated or at least picked up by the mainstream media. Many of these comments were partisan, reinforcing views already held. In this context, the essay studies Twitter discussion in and around the Brexit period in order to explore the discourse specificities of the mentioned debate, including the different roles of the social media sphere, looking at it beyond a simple idea of 'echo chambers'.

The democratic significance of online political engagement through comments, sharing privacies and hashtags has become more pronounced in recent years, not least because of great public concern over the influence of bots, news and ECEs on the social media 'infosphere'. Twitter users discussing the events leading up to the vote in UK collected and a sample of closely followed analyses, mapping how attention was distributed between three types of tweeter – links shared chiefly by supporters of Brexit (Leave), by those backing Remain, and by partisans of neither. The main findings are that linked material was more frequently posted by the leave side of the debate. The largest single category of newly appearing resources in tweets about the campaign in the run-up to the vote in the UK was eventually leaked emails associated with a presidential candidate, files mysteriously transmitted to a transparency organization in the summer of that year and later obtained by publication. Natural link-sharing was not much attended non-tweeting URL sharing, thus broadening accounts of how social media platforms are employed in the service of disinformation. (Melton et al.2021)

### **3. Literature Review**

In May 2015, in the UK, the Conservative party of David Cameron won the general election, gaining an absolute majority in the House of Commons. Part of the party's manifesto was a promise for an in/out referendum on EU membership before the end of 2017. The announcement gave birth to a long and broad campaign from local elections, concerning also the Scottish independence. The final referendum date was 23 June 2016.

The UK public was asked: 'Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?'. The final results were 51.9% leave and 48.1% stay. The UK started to exit the EU, commonly known as Brexit. The

referendum was dominated by three main actors, then-UKIP leader Nigel Farage as the most prominent advocate of Leave, David Cameron as the main Remain campaigner and Boris Johnson as the future target of that article. The referendum had an impact far beyond the fate of the UK within the EU. The campaign made apparent that the public opinion was polarized on a wide range of issues, from migration to sovereignty. Furthermore, the referendum was held just a few months after the decision of procedure 50, the beginning of an EU member exit either voluntary or forced. Thus, the referendum campaign itself grew the attention of researcher on social media in political campaigns. Analyses of user data found that both groups showed unparalleled levels of interaction, or conversely began to effectively segregate into echo chambers. Another aspect of the Brexit campaign was the presence of bots or at least an issue of AI interacting with voters, as well as the online harassment of prominent remain campaigners. (Jolley et al.2022)

#### **4. Methodology**

The research questions posed are aimed at analyzing the impact of modern social media on the course of events, specifically how it can polarize the political debate and the accessibility it brings to dialogue. A mixed approach was followed utilizing surveys gauging the public's political leaning and social media habits, interviews with political figures and content analysis of modern social media platforms. To explore its impact on political dialogue, a corpus of all Twitter hashtags related to Brexit was analyzed. The tweets were downloaded with a limit of up to 18,000 tweets per geo-located day and token. Further content analysis was carried out examining the most extreme hashtags for either side and the most numerous. Analysis was performed using frequencies for common words, as well as bigrams. Following the analysis of the Brexit dataset, patterns that emerged were compared with results of a paradise dataset to validate their interpretation. Prior to this, a survey was conducted to explore the impact of social media. Social media's impact on political leaning and political communication was measured using multiple-choice and Likert scale questions. The respondents' own political leaning was sampled for by comparing findings with recent studies. This mix of qualitative and quantitative analyses provides a holistic view of social media's impact in the context of Brexit. Surveys and reports how social media and the internet breed fundamental changes to the body politic, from the rise of

populist movements to the polarization of public discourse. With political debates moving increasingly online in recent years, an interconnected international dialogue is beginning to formulate. Social media giants are now facing calls by parliaments for common regulation. However, the ethics of online political advertising, as well as implied biases of data use, have come under scrutiny due to their alleged impact on current world events. The impact of social media specifically on the Brexit referendum is deeply analyzed. Intensive analysis is given to the stance of the conversation in 2016 and how it formed a historical dialogue, as well as how such a dialogue has, historically, been fueled by future-shock campaigns. To clearly illustrate significant points in the research, infographics of tables or other data have been designed. These infographics are dotted throughout the remainder of the text. (Farkas & Bene, 2021)

### **5. Analysis and Findings**

During the UK EU referendum, there was a strong and significant correlation on the percentage of EU related tweets once a user intent on how she will vote had been set. Hence, after a user intent on how she will vote had been set, the percentage of EU related tweets of a user was informative on her voting preference. Analysis of the posts showed that most of the linked material on Twitter was posted by Brexiters, and that linked mainstream and alternative new media have a different impact on Twitter to “campaign” sites. While mainstream new media consistently had the greatest impact across all measures, only half show a substantially greater appeal to one political camp. This raises important issues for political impartiality in the news media. Thus, the analyses demonstrate quantitatively a close and reciprocal relationship between the media consumed by users of the Twitter platform and the political influences on their opinions and behaviour (Gorrell et al., 2018).

Social media fuels a never-ending exposure to information never experienced before. Due to its instant and global nature, it can bring misinformation campaigns to a complete new level, manipulating contents with expected viral effects and almost untraceable origin. This study harnesses a wide range of data to present the dynamics of online discussions in the period surrounding and following the UK’s June Referendum and a historical trend and comparison of online discussion following more than 130 Referendums held in the EU and in the EU candidate states (Grčar et

al., 2017). It reports a significantly higher volume and stronger polarization of online discussion in the case of the UK's June Referendum as compared to the historical average of similar historical cases. The study also reports a clear surge of online discussion in UK and EU internet users' interactions following this historical vote.

## **6. Discussion**

In this section the analysis and findings are interpreted in the context of existing literature and the theoretical frameworks explored earlier. The results are further contextualized and the extent to which they are aligned with existing research and theoretical backgrounds are either supported by or challenge are examined. Here the results are analysed and discussed as developing a multilayered narrative around the impact of social media in the Brexit referendum. The broader political and sociopolitical repercussions are investigated based on the results, tying the empirical findings to theoretical and policy insights.

Campaigners and media have struggled to convert social media debates or mainstream newspaper and broadcast coverage into impact on voting intentions (Grčar et al., 2017). A variety of related concepts such as misinformation, filter bubbles or echo chambers have been discussed as challenges for public discourse and voter behaviour due to the use of social media (Gorrell et al., 2018). The current findings suggest that overall users involved in discussions about the Brexit referendum on social media may form clusters of interactions, strengthening the idea of online echo chambers. The theoretical implications of such clusters, however, are that homogenous platforms of collective belief might contribute to increasing the confidence of users belonging to these clusters in the capacity of their sides to win the referendum. By demonstrating the existence of distinct sets of user interactions within the various leave and remain communities, the empirical analysis of this study confirms some earlier work. Nonetheless, additional considerations of the biased structure, the saliency of specific user communities and the impact of undecided users, as well as an investigation across Twitter, Facebook, online news outlets and official campaign claims, broaden the understanding of the Brexit referendum campaign and contribute a more comprehensive vision of how the issue was debated before it culminated in the voting. (Šimunjak, 2022)

## 7. Conclusion

Recent societal events across the globe, and particularly in the context of political narratives and interventions such as the United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union, have generated a wealth of discourse regarding the role of social media in contemporary politics. Methods of communication, influence, and engagement have evolved considerably in the last decade and a half, but the whistle-stops of election campaigns - knock on doors, deliver leaflets - are largely the same. The significance of examining the evolving platforms of political communication and citizen engagement is as essential today as it was generations ago. The general public are using new platforms to seek political news and as a source of inspiration on how to vote. Political parties, too, are increasingly using newer technologies to reach out, set agendas, and engage. It is important then, to understand the baseline of how the public discourse is behaving, what influence strategies are observed, and how these work in conjunction to understand and possibly influence voter behavior. Such considerations are explored in the analysis of the referendum on the EU in the UK: Brexit (Grčar et al., 2017). By examining a large scale dataset, patterns of influence are sought that can provide insight to the wider nature of political influence on social media, that can inform engagement strategies and conspiracy practices, and can identify the influence of the structure of public discourse on voter behavior (Gorrell et al., 2018). The overall aim is to encapsulate a broader understanding of political events as reflected in public space of Twitter.

## 8. Implications and Future Research

In a politically charged situation, the British EU referendum was keenly observed across the globe by citizens, politicians, and observers. Particularly, since the rise of the Web, hyper-partisan information environments arose that obfuscate informed democratic debate. The European “Brexit” vote was of interest not only for its own sake but to characterize the evolving infosphere (Gorrell et al., 2018).

The analysis centers on the social media platform Twitter. On the whole, two objectives are in focus: (1) to understand the main themes dominating the discussion and (2) to quantify the success of informational materials linked by social media participants. It is found that the discussion encompassed a wide behavioural spectrum from retweeting news articles to simply stating preferences in a hyper-partisan fashion.

Further, it becomes possible to quantify the number of times a site was tweeted, reposted or linked. The analysis tracks an increased application of social media over time, from the first referendum debate through the polls to the referendum itself. As such, a complex picture emerges of a sharply divided electorate, alternative and mainstream information sources, and the propagandist effect of intense but ill-focused debate about public figures and anecdote. Future work centres on characterizing alignment between social media users and linked materials, and a longitudinal study of the evolving public sentiment in this context. Taken together, the work interprets the breadth and depth of a new media landscape by examining a critical political event that took place entirely within this new environment. In doing so a reference point is established for ongoing and future changes in the interplay of the media, sentiment, and political process (Grčar et al., 2017).

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