Social Media & Brexit: The Role of Social Media in the Outcome of the UK's EU Referendum

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Abstract

On the 23rd of June 2016, the UK voted to leave the EU with Leave gaining 51.9% of the votes against 48.1% for Remain (Grčar et al., 2017). This result would spell the end of UK's 41-year association with the EU & David Cameron's reign as British Prime Minister. Theresa May would take over as Prime Minister (Abboushi, 2018). This research article will explore the use of social media sites from the Leave and Remain campaigns relation to the debate over whether the United Kingdom should remain or leave the European Union (EU). This paper will analyse the extent to which the respective groups used social media to inform, engage and influence Britons into voting for their side. There will be a look into the types of information, overall engagement and strategies used. The paper will argue how the Leave campaign's use social media impacted the outcome of the United Kingdom's European Union referendum in 2016 through their ability to incorporate more potential users to vote in favour of leaving.

Introduction

Social media has also become a popular forum for political debate, information gathering, posting & campaigning. For example, 22% of Americans engaged in Twitter for the purpose of following the 2010 mid-term elections. Users can organise groups tailored towards certain views & follow political candidates & parties (Grčar et al., 2017). The Brexit debate was another political issue heavily discussed on platforms like Twitter & Facebook throughout the campaign period (Grčar et al., 2017; Mancosu and Bobba, 2019). This paper will analyse how the

result of Britain's European Union referendum was impacted through the Leave campaign's ability to engage a wider of range of British social media users their own use of social media.

The first idea relates will relate to the Leave campaign's use of misinformation on social media. Cadwalladr (2019) will discuss how ill-informed truths about immigration from pro-Leave Facebook pages affected the polling results of a regional Welsh town with among the lowest immigration rates. The term of post-truth politics will be discussed in line with the Leave campaign on social media through certain facts they would be found to have fabricated (Marshall and Drieschova, 2018). Evolvi (2018) will provide a specific example of Islamophobia to display how misleading information was used to drive this element of the overall movement.

The next section will discuss how Leave supporters were quantitively far more engaging on Twitter and Instagram. Grčar et al. (2017) will delve into notable Leave and Remain handles to analyse the number of Tweets posted on these accounts, in addition to the number of retweets they gained. Llewellyn & Cram (2016) will highlight how the Leave campaign were able to gain an early headstart on their Remain rivals on Twitter through their engagement. Polonski (2016) will analyse user enagement into this issue between the respective campaigns on Instagram and find similar results.

Overall social media tactics from the Leave and Remain campaigns will be compared to determine which one was more effective. Emotionally-driven, diverse strategies from the Leave campaign will be arued to have helped strech out their target audience and potential voters (Mullen, 2016; Polonski, 2016; Usherwood and Wright, 2016). Logical and non-extensive policies from the Remain campaign will be arued to be relatively ineffective to Leave's strategy (Polonski, 2016). These factors put together will determine how the Leave campaign's use of social media helped achieve the result they desired for.

Discussion

Misinformation from Leave

Misinformation from the Leave campaign was spread through social media allowing Britons from all over the country. Cadwalladr (2019) outlines how misinformation from pro-Leave pages attracted users from a regional Welsh town called Ebbw Vale to vote in favour of leaving the EU. In her Ted talk, she noted how locals had issues with immigration despite the town having an immigration rate that was among the lowest. A local women also told her about how she find misinformation on Facebook regarding Turkey's plans to jon the EU. However, still to this day Turkey is not an EU member or even requesting to join. This is an example of how the Leave campaign was able to spread their lies to even the most remote of British towns through social network sites like Facebook (Cadawalladr, 2019).

Marshall & Drieschova (2018) look into the concept of post-truth politics and political distrust with the affordances of social media accelerating these notions. The authors depicted three pieces of misinformation vital to the Leave campaign which regarded how many pounds the UK sent to the EU, their migration levels and Turkey's apparent intentions to join the EU, of which was seen as threat of local jobs. With Turkey's EU links being disproven in the Ted talk from Cadwalladr (2019), they found the UK sent around £248 million to the EU per week rather than the £350 million stated by Leave pages (Marshall and Drieschova, 2018).

Another way some Leave supporters used misinformation on social media in regards to Islam. Islamophobia refers to an unjustified antagonism of Muslims (Evolvi, 2018). Evolvi (2018) suggests some sections of the Leave campaign including UKIP leader Farage, was based around a so-called "Muslim invasion" affecting so-called British identity & values (Evolvi, 2018, p4.). Farage displayed

a poster showing a procession of brown-skinned males to help run his campaign. This Islamophobic sentiment was further fuelled on Twitter by hashtags like "#IslamIsTheProblem," & searches like "Muslim terrorists" (Evolvi, 2018, p5).

Some users went as far to suggest Islam was the enemy to Western society. A tweet from the 24th of June proposed that the outcome was "a vote against Islamic immigration to the UK" (Evolvi, 2018, p8), & even questioned whether "the west will go to with Islam" (Evolvi, 2018, p8). Evolvi (2018) believes Twitter allows for this prejudice against Muslims to spread as users could spread these opinions across the platform without interference. These ill-informed sentiments were validated & passed on during & after the Brexit referendum allowing users to vote Leave based on these views (Evolvi, 2018).

Misinformation and fake news on Facebook and Twitter were spread false facts on issues like immigration, Islam and foreign policy. Their sharing of anti-immigration and/or Islam sentiments was so effective, it was able to reach regional areas of Britain with among low percentages of immigrants like Ebbw Vale (Cadawalladr, 2019; Marshall and Drieschova, 2018; Evolvi, 2018). Due to this inclusion, Britons had a source of information to make up their mind for the subsequent referendum when they may have not voted (Polonski, 2016). The next section will regard how the Leave campaign were far more proactive on social media than Remain.

Engagement Levels

Grčar et al. (2017) found the Leave camp was far more engaging than Remain. None of the top ten most impacts users were Remain accounts with @vote_leave, @Vote_LeaveMedia & at least three other distinguishable Leave accounts being identified. The authors note the relative hyperactivity of the @vote_leave account relative to the @StrongerInPress, an official Remain handle. The pro-Leave account posted 1567 tweets & gaining 256 463 retweets

while the Remain at only posted 580 tweets & gaining 1840 retweets (Grčar et al, 2017). This is a massive disprecancy between the respective accounts with the Leave handle tweeting almost three times more and gaining 139 times more retweets, hence attracting far more users and reach compared to the Remain account.

Llewellyn & Cram (2016) backed up the higher population of Leave tweets throughout the campaign. Leave supporters were also more proactive early on Twitter with clear united motivation to leave despite its internal divides. The Remain campaign only picked up momentum as referendum day drew closer with a relative lack of unity and movitation. The gradual increase in Remain tweets might have been caused by the possibility of a potential Brexit, leading to more proactiveness from this side (Llewellyn and Cram, 2016).

Despite being a more youth-orientated social media device (Anderson, 2016), Instagram also saw a far greater proportion of Leave sentiment. Polonski (2016) found there were two times more pro-Leave users than Remain accounts, with five times greater engagement for their cause than Remain. There were 26% more likes on Leave posts with 20% more comments being left (Polonski, 2016, p.94). Instagram become a political playground particularly for pro-Leave users despite not being a dominant category for post sharing (Hu, Manikonda and Kambhampti, 2014).

A greater amount of tweets were tended towards users wanting leave the European Union (Grčar et al, 2017; Llewellyn and Cram 2016). Polonski (2016) noted a substanially greater engagement from the Leave campaign on Instagram outlining their reach and online supremacy across the three out of Britain's top four most popular social networking sites (*The most popular social networks in the UK | Technology | YouGov Ratings,* 2018). In addtion to being more active, Leave pages also had better strategies on social media throughout the debate.

Social Media Strategies

In additon to being far more active on social media, Leave pages and profiles had a more effective campaigning strategy. Leave groups engaged in variety of political issues like immigration, British identity, economy and national security (Mancosu and Bobba, 2019; Usherwood and Wright, 2016). Due to the diverse range of topics, they might have been able to reach a wider audience of the British population, including the older demographics. In a study by Mancosu & Bobba (2019) also found pro-Brexit voters on Facebook were older in age on average, correlating to the UK's ageing population (Wilkoszewski, 2018).

Mullen (2016) aruges that Leave groups were substantially more prolific at targeting various social media users than Remain. This is backed up by Polanski (2016), who states how the Leave group were more friutful in their social media messaging. Leave's strategies were direct, simple and emotionally driven, with the latter driving the vast reach across social media. These mechanisms facilitated greater reach as users would have felt a great sense of devotion to a cause (Polonski, 2016).

Remain used logical arguments, rather than emotional, with little social media presence other than when #CatsAgainstBrexit began trending albeit in vain (Polonski, 2016). Their main policies regarded the specific economic issues in trade and business with domestic agendas entering the fray in the month of the referendum (Usherwood and Wright, 2016). The relative lack of policies might have meant the Remain campaigners were not able to reach enough social media users, hence allowing Leave pages to open the referendum debate to range of issues unopposed.

The Leave campaign's more potent and passionate social media strategy might have been pivotal in influcing the outcome considering the closeness of the final outcome. They might have swayed non-voters towards voting for Leave due to

their social media mechanisms. Remain's social media strategy was more rational which in turn, would have not as profound effect as the emotional-based Leave tactics (Polonski, 2016). Overall, the Leave movement was able to target more potential undecided voters on social media, potentially influencing what was a close referendum.

Conclusion

The Leave campaign's use of social media to influence people was crucial in the eventual decision. They were able to spread their messages on Facebook, albeit at times misleading, to more isolated and regional parts of the UK (Cadwalladr, 2019). The use of post-truth politics on social media was effective in running their efforts as users to engage people into believing their false facts. Their misleading truths on Immigration, Islam meant their followers had information they could use to justify their vote (Marshall and Drieschova, 2018; Cadwalladr, 2019). False anti-Islam sentiment was a notable example in how Leave voters used misinformation to promote a certain agenda which united elements of the overall Leave campaign (Evolvi, 2018).

Leave supporters were prominent across Twitter with significantly greater quantities of Tweets showing sentiments to leave the European Union (Grčar et al, 2017; Llewellyn and Cram, 2016). They were also much more proactive in the earlier stages of the debate with Remain supporters only clawing back of the some of ground as the referendum day closed (Llewellyn and Cram, 2016). Polonski (2016) noted how the Leave campaign's dominance was translated to a traditionally non-policital platform in Instagram to disperse their opinions more on the app.

Pro-Leave groups on social media also had a more effective social media campaign as they were able to target a wider range of online Britons (Mullen, 2016). Usherwood & Wright (2016) refer to how they were able to incorporate a

vast range of issues targeting Britain's main demographic structure and making them feel included in the debate (Mancosu and Bobba, 2019; Wilkoszewski, 2018), while the Remain campaign was based very few isses (Usherwood and Wright, 2016). Polonski (2016) outlined the element of emotion and how that enabled pro-Leave messages to spread across social media relative to the more rational arguments from the Remain side.

The Leave campaign was able to sway the EU referendum vote through its extensive distribution of biased agendas, hyperactive posting across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as having a plain-spoken and passionate social media campaign. These factors allowed their messages to spread online and offline across the UK to influence citizens to vote to Leave the European Union. With the outcome being as close it was, it is fair to say social media had theirs in determining the outcome.

Limitations

This paper only analyses data from a small section of overall eligible voters in the UK. The potential of Bot impact also has not been outlined, of which could have also affected the result (Marshall and Drieschova, 2018). The paper also does not cover any recent Brexit events such as the sort of deal the UK is willing to leave (Abboushi, 2018). These events are worth researching into due to new points of discussion caused from the result.

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