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Impacts of disinformation and 'fake news' related to the immigration debate, disseminated through social media platforms by the leave side in the 2016 European Union referendum in the United Kingdom.

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Abstract

The intentional and widespread distribution of disinformation on social media networks is undermining democratic processes. Jurisdictions around the world are playing catch-up with this emerging and evolving form of targeted mass communication. The 2016 United Kingdom (UK) Referendum on membership of the European Union (EU) was no exception. The outcome of the advisory referendum was very close - 52% for the Leave side and 48% for Remain. This paper aims to assess some of the factors which led to a narrow victory for the Leave side and discuss if social media channels facilitated dark forces, foreign governments and their proxies to use these platforms to sew 'fake news'; manipulating the electorate to vote leave and thus affecting the political and economic trajectory of the United Kingdom.

Introduction

The term 'fake news' has been widely used in political discourse since the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016. It is highly contentious, politically loaded and has been used to discredit journalists and news organisations who express often valid, well-researched opinions (McGonagle, 2017, p. 203). Disinformation about topics such as immigration, shared widely through online communities on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were widespread in the lead up and during the 2016 UK referendum on EU membership which has led to the process widely known as Brexit. There is a compelling body of evidence that 'fake news' distributed on social media targeted voters in an attempt to manipulate citizens to vote in a certain way.

An infographic titled "Beyond 'Fake news' – 10 types of misleading news" has been created by the European Association for Viewers Interests (EAVI). The infographic is multifaceted and identifies ten categories of misleading news. It analyses motivations behind each category and likely impacts on viewers and listeners. In addition, motivations are listed as money, politics/power, humour/fun, passion and the aim to (mis)inform. Impacts are measured from neutral, low, medium and high (McGonagle, 2017, p. 204). According to the EAVI the 10 types of misleading news are:

1. Propaganda
2. Clickbait
3. Sponsored content
4. Satire and hoax
5. Error
6. Partisan content
7. Conspiracy theory
8. Pseudoscience
9. Misinformation
10. Bogus content

The EAVI provides a useful paradigm to assess the 2016 UK Referendum on European Union membership ("Beyond Fake News - 10 types of misleading news," 2017).

Damien Collins is a British Conservative Member of Parliament (MP). He also chairs the cross-party Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee. On the 18th February 2019 the committee published a 108-page report titled "Disinformation and Fake News". Collins was forthright in his appraisal of the current threat to democracy in the UK:

> "Democracy is at risk from malicious and relentless targeting of citizens with disinformation and personalised 'dark adverts' from unidentifiable sources, delivered through the major social media platforms we use every day. Much of this is directed from agencies working in foreign countries, including Russia" (Collins, 2019 pp. 5).

The report concluded that democracy in Britain is 'under attack' by perpetrators using social media networks to try and influence voters. Companies such as Facebook and Twitter are either unable or unwilling to prevent their platforms being used by third parties, foreign agents (or their proxies) to influence voters. Disinformation or 'fake news' is not a new phenomenon, especially when it comes to the immigration debate, but the way it is being used on social media networks is a growing concern. In 2010, the year which coincided with a Conservative led coalition government there was a sharp increase in the volume of immigration related articles in the press and discourse about the ability to control it (given Britain's treaty obligations as a member of the European Union). The contentious issue of immigration has been something that has been fostered by certain elements of the press and newspaper owners in the UK for many years.

The official Vote Leave campaign and unofficial campaign led by Leave.EU used a full range of traditional and online marketing to communicate with the electorate before and during the referendum campaign. One of the more infamous advertising stunts was the *"We send the EU £350m a week, lets fund our NHS instead"* emblazoned on the side of a big red bus. This advertisement was quickly fact checked and reported as inaccurate. The "£350m" figure used was deemed misleading by the UK Statistics Authority (Dilnot, 2016 pp. 1). This scrutiny and fact checking of partisan political campaigns is welcomed and necessary part of the democratic process. However, the targeted and clandestine adverts on

social media platforms, paid for by organisations such as Leave.EU, were seen by hundreds of thousands of people and yet because this activity was online and focused within selected online communities it was out of site of the main stream public gaze and was left unscrutinised. In addition, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter amplify posts and opinions which using the EAVI infographic could be seen to be "partisan", "misinformed" and "bogus" ("Beyond Fake News - 10 types of misleading news," 2017). This is especially the case around the topic of immigration.

The highly divisive topic of immigration was one of the central campaign elements for the Leave side. This was exasperated by emotive headlines and the manner in which the immigration debate was being framed by media outlets such as the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* and *the Sun*. "The language used to describe EU migration tended to emphasise quantity and scale using words such as mass, vast, large scale" (Penncheva, 2019 pp. 7). Further research about this topic is examined in a report by the University of Oxford's Migration Observatory that highlights the increase in media stories related to EU migration from 2012 onwards and shows the media's increased obsession with the scale and volume of EU migrants (Allen, 2016, p. 19).

The poisonous aspect of the immigration debate led to one of the most defining political events in the lead up to the referendum. Just one week out from the UK's vote on EU Membership, Labour MP, Jo Cox was assassinated by a far-right extremist. Cox was an advocate for the remain campaign. The murder immediately shone a spotlight on the tactics of the leave side ("Jo Cox MP," 2016 pp. 3, 7, 11). Her murder coincided with the launch of one of the most controversial images of campaign. Earlier that morning a leading campaigner backed by Leave.EU, Nigel Farage was photographed standing in front of a billboard. It showed a long line of impoverished refugees – with a red headline using deliberate tabloid media speak *"Breaking Point"*. The subheading read *"The EU has failed us all – We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders"* (Farage, 2016). The highly partisan message of the billboard evoked the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis – still fresh in the minds of many voters. This poster targeted concerns about mass immigration which the leave side implied Britain was unable to control as an EU member. The fact that

Britain was able to control migration and its borders – it has an opt-out of the Schengen Treaty which covers open borders between 26 European countries – was never discussed.

In the immediate aftermath of the death of Jo Cox and as a mark of respect, both sides in the referendum campaign suspended activities. Evidence has now emerged that this was not the case. Leave.EU – which was financially backed by millionaire businessman Arron Banks continued online campaigning through targeted Facebook advertisements or as the EAVI defines it "sponsored content". Indeed, on hearing the news to suspend campaigning, Banks is reported to have told staff to continue and to "push harder", believing that his ads would gain more traction given competitor ads were no longer active (Caesar, 2019 pp. 51). Banks knew his online ads were being seen and influencing a clearly defined target audience. The decline in other referendum themed ads (during the campaign suspension) would give Leave.EU the opportunity to reach more voters and influence their decision and thus affect the outcome of this tightly contested referendum.

According to Molz, "Individuals are empowered in the dissemination of information and the evolution of connectivity through social networking tools like Twitter's RT (the ability to 're-tweet' a posting) and Facebook's 'likes' and comments. These mechanisms have a social effect" (Molz, 2013 pp. 37). Content created online can be sponsored and funded by organisations or groups who have an interest in advancing their own political objectives and ideologies. These groups target individuals whose data has been harvested with messages and click bait which are eye catching and drive revenue for social media companies. Social media platforms are not sustained by factual content, but rather ads and posts "…whose algorithms prefer virality to veracity, where lies are spread faster than facts" (Freeland, 2019 pp. 21). This meant misleading posts around emotional topics such as immigration were far more likely to spread within loosely connected online communities than arguments related to for example the European Common Agricultural Policy.

The UK Digital, Cultural, Media and Sport Committee has published the ads placed by some of the leave campaigns, including those organised by Banks. 45% of Vote Leave Facebook ads were about immigration. One of the ads published showed a map of Europe

with a big red arrow pointing from Turkey to Britain. The ad headline was "clickbait" and read *"Turkey has a Population of 76 million"* with a subheading *"Turkey is joining the EU, Good idea???"* It suggested that Britain would have no choice on Turkish membership of the EU. The likelihood of Turkey joining the EU is remote. And as an EU member state – Britain (as well as the other 27 members) would have the right to veto. (Gibbon, 2018 pp. 3).

Bank's aim was to cut through the technocratic subject of EU membership. In contrast the remain side focused on benefits of EU membership such as the single market, trade policy, integrated food and medical supply chains – topics which some voters felt had no relevance to them. The Leave side focused on communities who felt ignored and used arguments related to immigration and "being swamped". Accuracy of the information was unimportant to Leave.EU - it was about emotion. The UK electoral commission has requested the National Crime Agency investigate Banks. They were concerned that funding he used as part of the Leave.EU campaign was channelled through him from overseas interests. Under British law it is illegal to use money in electoral campaigns from non-British citizens. "A number of criminal offences may have been committed," the commission declared. (Caesar, 2019 pp. 8).

The critical difference between traditional offline advertising methods and social media is the precise microtargeting of ads which leads to the amplification of 'news' stories within online communities. Stories which have no basis in fact are shared and become viral. By the time they can be fact checked or debunked, it is too late. It is perhaps no surprise that in the year of the UK Brexit referendum, Oxford Dictionaries announced "post-truth" as the word of the year for 2016. It is defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Freeland, 2019 pp. 3).

Facebook was not the only platform which played a role in the dissemination of inaccurate news and targeted advertising. The role of other social media platforms such as Twitter has also been under the spotlight. The use of the hashtag in the Brexit referendum debate,

especially on Twitter allowed for the spread of information to occur rapidly between loosely connected communities (Huberman, Romero, & Wu, 2009 pp. 1) "…computer programmer Chris Messina propagated the use of the hashtag (#) to label intrinsic topics". (Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011, p. 1301). Hashtags such as #EURef and #Leave created connected community networks which disseminated news to other users.

The right leaning British broadsheet *Daily Telegraph* reported "Russia mobilised an army of trolls". This included 3,800 accounts which tweeted out 1,102 posts using the hashtag #ReasonstoLeaveEU. The article goes on to say that "…data from Twitter showed Russian and Iranian internet trolls sent more than 10 million tweets in an attempt to spread disinformation and discord… including a day-long blitz in the day of the Brexit vote." (Field & Wright, 2018 pp. 2). While there were also pro-remain tweets, pro-leave activity was more visible and more likely to influence online conversation. Their stories were often more emotional and controversial. The pro-leave community on twitter was dominated by a handful of non-authoritative news sources and a significant number of non-UK accounts (Sattler, 2019 pp. 37). Whilst twitter does not have the same mass appeal as Facebook, it is an important means to connect online communities. These troll factories were creating content for other users to share within their own networks and across other social platforms.

Today, very few countries have managed to effectively legislate social media platforms to take responsibility for their output. Indeed, it has caused a debate between advocates of freedom of speech and those who seek more government oversight. Many nations look to actions taken by Germany. It has introduced legislation to prevent the spread of hate speech and 'fake news'. This is perhaps because of its painful past which has meant that opinions like holocaust denial can result in imprisonment. The *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz* or Network Enforcement Act (also known as NetzDG) law came into force in January 2018. As a result, large social media platforms with more than two million users have 24 hours to act and remove content once notified. Failure to remove "obviously illegal" content (including hate speech and 'fake news') could mean fines of up to €20 million. According to a British government report, one in six of all Facebook content moderators are now based

in Germany. The report goes on to say that this is "…practical evidence that legislation can work" (Collins, 2019, p. 13)

The debate surrounding social media platforms being responsible for content on their sites is arguably one of the most important issues we face. Aguiton and Cardon suggested that Web 2.0 services as being "…a small step towards the democratisation of the use of weak ties, traditionally limited to the ruling class and the elites" (Aguiton & Cardon, 2007, p. 62). It speaks of almost a liberation and freedom to create and publish content which is now, thanks to technology, available to almost anyone. While this democratisation has brought many benefits to society, there are also risks and social media platforms have been reluctant to self-regulate. In March 2019, *the Guardian* published a story titled *Ukip 2.0: young, angry, digital and extreme.* The article highlight that UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) backed Unity News Network and their activity in distribution of clickbait and conspiracy theory to support the party's hard line agenda, all from a small flat on the outskirts of Glasgow (Halliday & Walker, 2019 pp. 1).

The micro targeting of social media audiences traditionally used by advertisers to compel consumers to purchase goods and services – is now being used to deliver disinformation, in its many forms including extreme ideologies. Social media technology "has made it easy for a wide range of actors to create content, including 'fake news', in a variety of formats…" (McGonagle, 2017, p. 206). In the United States the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Russian troll factories used social media networks to influence American voters in the 2016 Presidential Election (Volz, 2018 pp. 1). In Australia, a recent *Sydney Morning Herald* article voiced concerns that the 2019 Federal election could see Facebook's advertising tools being used to target Australians interested in "opposition to immigration" and "nationalism" (McDuling & Duke, 2019 pp. 2).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign is just one instance of social media networks being used effectively to peddle disinformation and fake news to influence

political outcomes. The argument of national sovereignty and 'taking back control' was a mantra for the Leave campaign. Ironically, what is becoming evident from the referendum campaign and the subsequent aftermath of the vote is about how democratic 'control' has been ceded to those who have the means to infiltrate our lives; through highly targeted content on social media platforms we use on a daily basis. These platforms which were founded on the basis of bringing people together are now having far reaching, unintended consequences. Without legislation similar to what has been enacted in Germany, it is unlikely social media networks will self-regulate to prevent the mass manipulation of populations. If robust legislation is not forthcoming democracy as we know it will end.

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