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TitleTweeting for Brexit: how social media influenced the referendum

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Tweeting for Brexit: How social media shaped the Referendum campaign

Eurosceptic Twitter users outnumbered and out-tweeted pro-Europeans in the EU Referendum campaign, but were more confined into their own echo-chambers than Remainers. Max Hänska and Stefan Bauchowitz analysed 7.5m tweets and found the predominance of Euroscepticism on social media mirrored its dominance in the press.

Since the EU Referendum in June 2016, and even more so since Trump's election victory in November, pundits have not tired of asserting the supposedly wide-reaching influence of social media on our politics. It has been commonplace to speculate social media was a key conduit for misinformation, or 'fake news' more generally, that it confined citizens to echo chambers, that it may have been decisive in shaping the outcomes of the Referendum, and, indeed, the election of Donald Trump in the United States. There is no doubt social media have transformed our communication, how we access, and engage with information. It is also clear the mediated relationship between politicians, citizens, and journalists, how these groups communicate, engage with and relate to each other, has changed.

Consider the evidence on the increasing importance of social media as an information source. The Reuters Institute's Digital News Report found that in 2016 social media's rise as a news source pulled even with print's decline, both serving as a source of information for around 35 per cent of the UK's public. After dedicated news sites, social media is the second most important place people discover news online (Newman et al 2016). A 2015 Ofcom report found 43 per cent of those who get news online, receive it through social media. The figure rises to 61 per cent among 16-24 year olds, 16 per cent of whom rely exclusively on social media for news (Ofcom 2017). Across the Reuters report's 26 country sample, social media served as a news source for 51 per cent of its respondents, and as a main news source for 28 per cent of 18-24 year olds. But of course social media is not merely a channel for delivering news to audiences. Users share, post and comment on news, and can engage directly with politicians and journalists.

It is hardly surprising news organisations increasingly use social media to reach audiences, and engage them. Journalists are fond of Twitter for sharing updates, particularly on ongoing stories. General research is also a staple Twitter use, allowing journalists to follow sources, and sometimes to crowd-source information. Those who are very active users also tend to be more audience-oriented than their less social media-active peers. And just as audiences can engage with journalists, given the multi-directional interactivity Twitter affords, journalists have also begun to seize social media as an opportunity to engage with audiences, to offer behind-the-scenes views, gauge reactions, and build relationships. Some journalists also use Twitter to build a strong personal news brand, by displaying their professional values and practices, their ability to network and cultivate a community of followers (Hedman 2015). In doing so journalists are building direct relationships with their readers.

Twitter is also particularly popular among politicians. 87 per cent of British MPs have Twitter accounts. Of course Donald Trump's use of Twitter as a primary means of reaching his followers is now notorious. But this is hardly surprising. As ever more citizens use social media, and as it becomes a more important source of information, it also becomes an obvious channel through which to reach them. To some extent politicians, like journalists, are cutting out intermediaries and reaching their audience directly.

Why does social media matter?

Evidently Twitter is an important part of the changing news ecosystem, through which politicians, journalists and citizens communicate and compete for eyeballs. Users are able to customise their informational environment, by selecting who they follow or engage with, a tendency amplified by social media algorithms which optimise users' social feeds with content they may find congenial. However, on Twitter algorithms play only a small role, meaning partisan filtering of news is mostly down to the network of followers users create. Consequently, the social feed of an avid Eurosceptic would likely have been filled with stories about how inimical the EU was to British democracy, with confident assertions millions of pounds would be saved by leaving the EU, the NHS would benefit, and Remainers were scaremongering.

Perhaps most important, as noted above, social media disintermediates the diffusion of news and information, so traditional information intermediaries have seen their gate-keeping capacity diluted. In the past politicians and commentators needed to rely on news media to relay their messages to the general public. Now Farage's or Trump's tweets can reach millions directly, unadulterated by pesky journalists fact-checking and contextualising their message on the evening news. The increasing importance of social media as a source of news and information, its popularity with journalists and politicians, and the ways in which it changes the

ecosystem through which news is shared and accessed, make it crucial for us to understand its role in the UK's EU Referendum.

How leave won Twitter

To map Twitter's info-sphere, and examine how Eurosceptic (Leave) and pro-European (Remain) activity compare on Twitter in the run-up to the referendum, we collected more than 7.5 million Brexit-related tweets in the month preceding the Referendum. We ask whether there was a relationship between Twitter activity and the actual vote, what kind of information was shared on Twitter, and whether Leavers and Remainers were confined to echo chambers which kept feeding them information congenial to their views, or whether the two sides engaged openly with one another.

It is clear from our analysis Twitter users who supported leaving the EU were more numerous, and Eurosceptic users in general were more active (they tweeted more frequently) than Remain users. We estimate Leave users were more numerous and more active on Twitter by a factor of 1.75-2.3. Other researchers examining Google search trends, Instagram posts and Facebook found similar patterns of Eurosceptic views being communicated with greater intensity by a greater number of users on those platforms (Herrman 2016, Polonski 2016).

We also found local authority districts with a greater share of Twitter users supporting Leave tended to vote for leaving the EU, so Twitter activity correlated with voting in the Referendum. This is not to say an analysis of Twitter activity could have predicted the Referendum. It is not clear how the Leave margin on Twitter should have been interpreted prior to the Referendum, even with such a robust observation of more pronounced Eurosceptic activity. After all, the factor by which Leavers outnumbered and out-tweeted Remainers on Twitter was much larger than the margin with which Leave won the vote.

We also analysed the nature of openness and homophily on Twitter, which crucially affords users the ability to interact and engage with each other. To do so we examined the extent to which users who supported Leave and Remain interacted with each other, that is, for instance, whether a user who supported leaving the EU replied, quoted or retweeted a user who supported remaining in the EU. We found Leave users tended to be less open, and mostly engage with other Leave supporters, indicating important hallmarks of an echo-chamber. In contrast Remain supporters were much more open. Specifically, 83 per cent of interactions initiated by Leave supporters were with other Leave supporters. For Remain supporters this figure drops to 46 per cent. Remainers replied to, retweeted or quoted Leavers 49, 39 and 50 per cent of the time, respectively. Contrast this with Leavers who replied to, retweeted or quoted Remainers only 19, 8 and 11 per cent of the time, respectively.

This tendency to interact only with the like-minded is also reflected in the URLs shared. Leave users tended to share Eurosceptic domains, including The Express,

the Daily Mail, and Breitbart. But Leave users also linked more frequently to Bloomberg and Reuters than Remainers. Remain users tended to share links to The Guardian, BBC, The Independent, and less frequently The Mirror, The Financial Times, and The Economist. Overall, the most frequently linked domains were The Guardian, YouTube, BBC, and The Express. The prominence of The Express over the Daily Mail was somewhat surprising, given the latter is well known for running a hugely successful website which attracts around 29m monthly readers from the UK alone.

YouTube was the second most prominent domain linked, indicating the importance of video as a way of distributing information about the campaign. The single most shared video was to a clip of John Oliver's comedy-news show Last Week Tonight which was supportive of remaining in the EU. Eurosceptic videos were numerous, but no single one rivalled the reach of John Oliver's clip. Prominent Eurosceptic videos included 'Brexit the Movie' and other clips featuring, among others Toby Young, and Joseph Watson, who attempted to debunk 'Project Fear' and characterised the EU as a dictatorship by the bureaucratic gravy train.

Overall, Twitter users who supported leaving the EU were much more active and motivated in advancing their cause, than Remainers were in advocating continued EU membership. One possible explanation of the dominance Leavers achieved on Twitter may be that slogans such as 'vote Leave', 'take control', or even 'Brexit' were more suited to simple, soundbite messaging than the Remain campaign's slogans and arguments (which is particularly useful given the character constraints of a tweet). Press coverage of the Referendum also favoured leaving the EU. Weighted for circulation, 82 per cent of newspaper articles in the lead-up to the Referendum supported leaving the EU, as other contributors to this book have noted (Deacon 2016). The balance of Eurosceptic information, views and opinion on Twitter thus appear to be leaning in the same direction as the balance of information in the press, meaning both online and offline citizens were more likely to encounter Eurosceptic voices.

As social media changes the ways news and information is distributed, accessed and engaged with, we are forced to consider its implications for both journalism's role in shaping public discourse, but also for the way media conveys information back-and-forth between citizens and the political system. How can people's desire to engage and participate in the creation and distribution of information be reconciled with journalism's role in making judgements about the importance and veracity of competing pieces of information? As the linear and hierarchical gate-keeping structures which define the broadcast age have ever-less purchase on our evolving news and information ecosystems, the messy, multi-directional, bottom-up practices of diffusing and absorbing information will play an ever-greater role in processes of public opinion formation.

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