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By Hannah Marshall and Alena Drieschova

~~Post-What?'~~ Critically evaluating the novelty of Post-Truth politics in the UK's Brexit Referendum

Forthcoming in New Perspectives

Key Words: post-truth, Brexit, Democracy, Media

Abstract

~~The term post-truth has become the 2016 Oxford dictionary word of the year, yet many scholars question whether we are truly living in a post-truth world, or whether lying has always been a part of politics and the media. Considerable discussion has surrounded the concept of post-truth and its value in explaining the UK's vote to exit the European Union. Some literatures engaging with the term question whether proclaiming of a new 'post-truth' era may be overstated. This paper seeks to contribute to this discussion by critically evaluating the extent to which the Brexit referendum, the UK's people vote to exit the European Union was based on post-truth politics. The paper develops the argument that Brexit is a key example of post-truth politics, and that two key factors ushered in this new form of politics into the UK: 1) how literatures proclaiming the advent of post-truth in the UK to explain Brexit focus on technological changes associated with social media, which lead to a situation when a significant portion of the population acquire their news online, while anybody can post anything online without that there would be any checks on the accuracy of the claims. 2) before examining the historical roots of a rising distrust in democratic institutions, political elites, expertise, and traditional media gatekeepers which lead to a situation when the population no longer trusts established expert knowledge and is willing to rely on information originating from questionable sources. in the UK that may have contributed to the way in which the vote proceeded. It concludes that this combination of a decline in trust of politicians and experts with technological advances social media reliance, has driven the public to emotionally charged, value-based decision making. Our analysis of the Brexit referendum raises the need for scholars to study the daily activities of the population, and focus on its role as an active regime shaper. This compounded with a lack in trust of media gatekeepers and easy access to unreliable information produces an unusual and unique set of circumstances that makes the question of a post-truth era far more convincing.~~

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Introduction

The Brexit campaign was distinct from other referendums or elections because of the unexpectedly high turnout from voters who do not normally vote in general elections. The voter turnout for the referendum was 72.2%.¹ This is in comparison to a 68.8% turnout in the 2017 General Election (Electoral Commission, 2016). YouGov polling (YouGov, YouGov on the day poll: Remain 52%, Leave 48%, 2016) predicted a 52% result in favour of remain with a 48% leave vote and the telegraph poll predicted a 51% remain vote to 49% leave (Dunford & Kirk, 2016). Granted these showed a remain victory by a relatively small margin, but pollsters across the country predicted a remain victory. The leave vote took everyone by surprise. Some of the explanation for pollsters' error might be due to the fact that predictions by YouGov, for example, were partially based on whether respondents had voted in the last general election. A higher turnout particularly in the North contributed to the miscalculation of the result (YouGov, Unexpectedly high turnout in Leave areas pushed the campaign to victory, 2016). Electorates who do not normally vote, voted in the EU referendum, and they voted leave. This raises the question of what motivated the high turnout. 1.2 million previously disengaged voters evidently found the leave message more convincing.

This paper develops the claim that the leave vote was motivated by post-truth politics, a politics which seeks to emit messages into the public domain which will lead to emotionally charged reactions, with the goal of having them spread widely and without concern for the accuracy of the messages provided. This form of politics has been made possible by two developments: 1) The development and widespread usage of social media for acquiring information, and 2) a growing distrust in traditional elites, and expertise. Technological changes in the nature of news and information dispersal have occurred. New technologies of communication have usurped the role of traditional gatekeepers in filtering, checking and monitoring the information which reaches the public, and ensuring a degree of accuracy. The quantity of knowledge and information combined with the lack of means for gatekeeping makes a potentially toxic environment for assessing the credibility of truth claims. The role of technological change is thus central to arguments proclaiming a post-truth era. Although information has become easier to attain and is available in unprecedented quantities, there is less capacity to determine what is reliable or factual. Secondly, at least since the war in Iraq, and following several other crises, such as the 2008 financial crisis the population has lost its respect for traditional elites and gatekeepers. As a result, emotionally charged voting has become more prevalent. Together these conditions have created a fertile ground for post-truth politics to spread. We need to acknowledge the active role the population plays in this

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new form of politics. It is primarily the population who decides to share and respond to false news messages, thus promoting their online popularity. Individual users decide to use social media for acquiring information, they decide not to verify the sources that are emitting that information, and they vote based on value-laden decisions. Scholars of politics and international relations need to pay more attention to the everyday activities of ordinary citizens and how those shape political decisions, and potentially even political regimes. Ultimately, the public need to be informed and educated about the conditions that underwrite proclamations of a post-truth era and recognise their role in their creation and here I agree with Higgins and her emphasis on awareness as the solution (Higgins, 2016). The evidence that the UK is at the tail end of a significant decline in trust should give us pause. A political crisis of trust has been developing for decades and is now well entrenched within the population. The form of democracy is clearly not satisfying the public anymore. It is this that I believe is beyond the simple ebbs and flow of a democratic society. This decline of trust is significant and has uniquely hit both governments and experts. The media gatekeepers are equally not trusted, which leaves actions based on value-based decisions, with whatever information is decided by a reader to be reliable. This compounded with technological changes is what makes this a post-truth era. Individually all of these factors are perhaps not new and definitely do not warrant the declaration of a new era. However, when you end up with a public disillusioned with the government and experts, a gatekeeper that no longer does its job and technology that makes any information easily accessible; it is then that the idea of a post-truth era can be entertained. Further consideration needs to be given into the reasons behind the public's distrust in government and politicians, to fully recognise and therefore address the challenge to democracy that we are being faced today.

The 24th June Brexit Referendum in the UK can be interpreted as a marker of a new age of post-truth politics, in which facts, expertise and merit have become less valued than they were in the past (Gaston, 2016). A range of commentators in the UK argue that the leave campaign knowingly disseminated lies into the public domain, the media perpetuated them, and echo chambers reinforced them in the minds of voters. Matthew d'Ancona (2017) sees the Brexit vote as marking a new age of politics, in which the rise of populism associated with the Leave vote has devalued claims to objective truth. The evidence he presents for this argument stems from reading the Brexit campaign, as well as that of Donald Trump, as having been rife with evident falsehoods (d'Ancona, 2017). d'Ancona argues that the problem is a lack of demand for facts and expertise in the current climate. He observes that increasingly "'experts' are vilified as an ill-intentioned cartel rather than a source of verifiable information" (d'Ancona, 2017). D'Ancona announces the age in which

~~"Rationality is threatened by emotion, diversity by nativism, liberty by a drift towards autocracy...at the heart...is a crash in the value of truth, comparable to the collapse of a currency or a stock"~~

(d'Ancona, 2017, p. 4). ~~The age of populism is marked by a condition of epistemological relativism, in~~

~~which facts are determined as true according to the value perspective from which they are viewed~~

(Lynch, 2011, p. 88). ~~In 1992 Steve Teisch in his article "The Government of Lies" described the~~

~~condition of "post-truth" as the result of a choice by the American people to live in a society that does not want to know the truth and freely sacrifices it. Teisch argued that the public's reaction to Watergate and the public's quick pardoning of Nixon meant, "We came to equate truth with bad~~

~~news and we didn't want bad news anymore, no matter how true or vital to our health as a nation.~~

~~We looked to our government to protect us from the truth" (Teisch, 1992, p. 13). He observed that~~

~~the public's reaction to the Iran-Contra affair was similarly to unquestioningly accept President~~

~~Reagan's reasoning behind the scandal, "President Reagan perceived correctly that the public really didn't want to know the truth. So he lied to us, but he didn't have to work hard at it. He sensed that~~

~~we would gladly accept his loss of memory as an alibi" (Teisch, 1992, p. 12). This appears to be the~~

~~first time a 'post-truth' era was announced, in which the people "decided that we want to live in some post-truth world" (Teisch, 1992, p. 13).~~

~~The UK has seen a wave of declarations of a new post-truth era in recent years. Gaston, writing for~~

~~Demos, argues that "the age of post-truth politics fetishizes simple, not effective, plans – and~~

~~rewards those bold enough to promise them" (Gaston, 2016). According to t~~

~~he Economist argued that "the term picks out the heart of what is new: the truth is not falsified, or contested, but of~~

~~secondary importance" (The Economist, 2016). D'Ancona announces the age in which "rationality is~~

~~threatened by emotion, diversity by nativism, liberty by a drift towards autocracy...at the heart...is a crash in the value of truth, comparable to the collapse of a currency or a stock." (d'Ancona, 2017, p.~~

~~4).~~ Although each of these declarations focuses on different elements of this so-called post-truth

era, the common thread is an epochal change in attitudes s towards truth. s ~~devaluing it's~~ role in

society s ~~is devalued, and~~ in favour of something else. The Oxford Dictionary s ~~seeks to states~~ what that

"something else" is when it defines post-truth as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief": (Oxford Dictionary, 2018). s

~~In the UK, debates around a post-truth era have circulated around the 24th June UK Brexit~~

~~Referendum, with a widespread implication that this event was a marker of this new age in which~~

~~facts, expertise and merit have become less valued than they were in the past (Gaston, 2016). A~~

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the public domain, the media perpetuated them, and echo chambers reinforced them in the minds of voters. Matthew d'Ancona (2017), sees the Brexit vote as marking a new age of politics, in which the rise of populism, associated with the Leave vote, has devalued claims to objective truth. The evidence he presents for this argument stems from reading the Brexit campaign, as well as that of Donald Trump, as having been rife with evident falsehoods (d'Ancona, 2017). d'Ancona argues that the problem is a lack of demand for facts and expertise in the current climate. He observes that, increasingly "'experts' are vilified as an ill intentioned cartel rather than a source of verifiable information. 'Dare to know' was Immanuel Kant's proposed motto for the Enlightenment. Today's counterpart is 'Dare not to'" (d'Ancona, 2017). His argument offers a comparison with the Enlightenment, in which he argued politics was motivated by an inquisitive mentality, in which ideas, concepts and aims ultimately propelled the political world forward. The age of populism is marked by a condition of epistemological relativism, in which facts are determined as true according to the value perspective from which they are viewed (Lynch, 2011, p. 88).

It is often implicit to such arguments that what sets the modern day 'post truth' condition apart from the day to day lying of politicians is the decline of traditional media gatekeepers and the unique role of social media in exacerbating this condition. In the UK, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport released an interim report on 'Disinformation and 'fake news' 'recommending the government work with experts to create credible standards for information that adapt to deal with the fast moving technological developments (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2018, p. 64). This highlights changes in the nature of news and information dispersal. Suiter (2016) argues, in this vein, that "under the older logic politicians and journalists were co-dependent for coverage and for content with journalists playing a gatekeeping role. The new Web 2.0 hybrid model, which includes social media, blogs, reality TV and so on, negates much of this. Politicians can now communicate directly with the electorate. At the same time trust in the older institutions in both politics and media is continuously declining. Scepticism of the establishment is such that many believe little the media says" (Suiter, 2016, p. 26). Ultimately, new technologies of communication have usurped the role of traditional gatekeepers in filtering, checking and monitoring the information which reaches the public. The quantity of knowledge and information combined with the lack of means for gatekeeping makes a potentially toxic environment for assessing the credibility of truth claims.

The role of technological change is thus central to arguments proclaiming a post truth era. According to an Ofcom report 64% of UK adults today use the internet to get their news and amongst 16-24 year olds that number is even higher at 82% (Ofcom, 2018, p. 2). Furthermore, social media is the

most popular type of online news, with 44% of UK adults using it (Ofcom, 2018, p. 2). Online news is more likely to contain questionable content and unreliable sources, but according to Ofcom “while lots of people are able to recall the social media site they consumed the news on, some struggle to remember the original source of the news story.” (Ofcom, 2018, p. 2)

Although information has become easier to attain and is available in unprecedented quantities, there is less capacity to determine what is reliable or factual. Furthermore, when the internet is utilised for fact checking, studies have found that once adopted, misinformation is inherently difficult to correct, particularly if it supports a viewpoint already held (Nyhan, 2007). According to a poll carried out with Oxford University over half of respondents prefer to access news through search engines, social media or news aggregators (interfaces that use ranking algorithms to select stories), rather than interfaces driven by humans (homepage, email and mobile notifications) (Newman, 2018). This is likely to be because the news accessed through these platforms tends to align with consumers existing views.

This article asks to what degree declarations of a post-truth era provides adequate readings of the contributes to these proclamations by developing an argument about the extent to which the UK's Brexit referendum to exit the European Union has been shaped by post-truth politics. The paper first develops a theoretical argument of how technological changes towards the increased use of social media for news acquisition, and an increasing distrust in political elites and scientific expertise create the conditions of possibility for post-truth politics. Second it characterises the public debate surrounding the Brexit referendum, and highlights its highly divisive nature, as well as the fact that the population primarily remembered lies issued by the Leave campaign. Third the paper argues that the Leave campaign's successful strategy was due to a focus on social media messaging. The paper then provides evidence about the public's gradual decrease in trust in traditional political elites and scientific expertise over the last decade, which was at the origin of the public's susceptibility to emotional voting. The paper's last section highlights the establishment's efforts to avert the arrival of a post-truth era. It concludes by raising some points of concern with the contemporary strategy and raises the need for scholars to study the daily activities of the population, and focus on its role as an active regime shaper. Literatures engaging with the concept of post truth in the context of the Brexit referendum tend to focus on technological change, but also to observe a generic rise in value based decision making. It considers polling and public opinion to substantiate a unique shift in voting attitude and then seeks to provide rationale for this shift. The shift in itself provides some evidence for a post truth era, this supported by other authors and studies on the use of technology in Brexit, the public mentality to distinguishing truthful information

further emphasis the possibility of a post-truth era. The following section examines the evidence that the Brexit Campaign was indeed characterised by a lack of concern for facts, and the role that technological change played, before addressing the broader evidence for rising distrust in UK democratic institutions that contextualised the value-oriented temper of the vote.

The Role of Technology and Distrust in Political Elites for Creating the Conditions of Possibility for Post-Truth Politics

The post-truth politics that have marked the Brexit referendum campaign have been made possible by two distinct conditions of possibility. First, technological innovations have resulted in new ways of disseminating information, which infringe upon the role of traditional media as gatekeepers for ensuring the accuracy of the information that gets disseminated widely. Second, a rising distrust against political elites, traditional media, and expert knowledge leads people to rely on alternative sources of information and to emotionally charged and value-laden decision-making. "Under the older logic politicians and journalists were co-dependent for coverage and for content with journalists playing a gatekeeping role. The new Web 2.0-hybrid model, which includes social media, blogs, reality TV and so on, negates much of this. Politicians can now communicate directly with the electorate. At the same time trust in the older institutions in both politics and media is continuously declining. Scepticism of the establishment is such that many believe little the media says" (Suiter, 2016, p. 26).

Firstly, the wide use of social media to acquire information infringes upon the role of traditional media such as broadcasting, TV, and newspapers as mediators, and consequently gatekeepers for the dissemination of information. Anyone can post anything on social media, whether the message disseminates widely depends on how often it gets shared, not on how accurate it is. According to an analysis of 126,000 twitter stories, tweeted by around 3 million people more than 4.5 million times false stories diffused "significantly farther, faster, deeper and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information" (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018, p. 1146). False news is more interesting and novel and hence is shared and perpetuated throughout twitter in a way that the truth is not. The news disseminated through social media reaches a large portion of the population. According to a poll carried out with Oxford University over half of respondents prefer to access news through search engines, social media or news aggregators (interfaces that use ranking algorithms to select stories), rather than interfaces driven by humans (homepage, email and mobile notifications) (Newman, 2018). Furthermore, readers might not by themselves be able to sufficiently judge the

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accuracy of the news stories they are reading on social media sites. According to a study from LSE although readers widely acknowledged that ‘traditional cues’ (data reliability, author, spelling and tone) are superior for forming an opinion on the reliability of the story, even highly educated individuals used ‘modernist cues’ (presentation, number of shares, number of similar articles, alignment with pre-existing knowledge) more widely when evaluating the accuracy of news stories (Ho, Marot-Achillas, Mortlock, & Zeng). According to Ofcom “while lots of people are able to recall the social media site they consumed the news on, some struggle to remember the original source of the news story” (Ofcom, 2018, p. 2). What compounds this issue is that the social media space functions like an echo chamber, meaning that confirmation bias occurs more easily within the online sphere. People have friends who have similar opinions as they do, and so they only ever access a proportion of the news that are trending online, the proportion that is most similar to their own views. Algorithms on platforms like Facebook and YouTube further compound the difficulties, because they create filter bubbles, as people see online content that is most similar to their previous browsing history (Vicario, Zollo, Caldarelli, & Scala, 2017, p. 8). Moreover, the confirmation bias suggests once people have adopted misinformation, it is inherently difficult to correct that misinformation, particularly if it supports a viewpoint already held (Nyhan, 2007). In sum, changes in the media environment towards an increasing role for social media have created fertile ground for the flourishing of post-truth politics.

Second, a rising lack of trust in traditional elites and expertise further compounds the difficulties and creates opportunities for a rise in post-truth politics. Trust can be defined in a political context as the “judgement of the citizenry that the system and the political incumbents are responsive and will do what is right even in the absence of constant scrutiny” (Miller & Listhaug, 1990, p. 358). In practice political elites create policies and they either receive trust from those citizens who are satisfied with the policies or cynicism from those who are not (Citrin, 1974). Trust is important for the functioning of a liberal democracy, but a healthy degree of scepticism is also vital: “scepticism stimulates political engagement and signals a willingness to judge political institutions by their own merits” (Meer, 2017). Yet when the scepticism reaches too far and transforms into distrust, “distrust, may inspire vigilance in and monitoring of a relationship, uncooperative behaviour, or the severing of a relationship” (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Instead of vigilance, apathy and uncooperative behaviour can emerge. This condition forms a fertile ground for the emergence of post-truth politics and protest votes.

In the remainder of this article we will demonstrate that the Brexit campaign took shape on the basis of these two preconditions, and post-truth politics shaped the campaign in significant ways.

The Public Debate Surrounding the Brexit Referendum

The Brexit campaign was very divisive. Both sides actively accused each other of dishonesty and scaremongering, and these discursive tactics did little to inspire trust from the public in the debate as a whole. The manner, in which politicians behaved in the referendum campaign was “divisive, antagonistic and hyper-partisan...” (Moore & Ramsay, 2017, p. 168). The public were encouraged to distrust political messaging based on constant back and forth accusations.

And yet, the three key messages the public remembered from the referendum campaign “were components of key arguments belonging to Brexiters. 1. The UK sends £350m per week to the EU, 2. Net migration to the UK had hit 333,000, 3. Turkey and other candidate countries joining the EU. These controversial topics were hugely salient in the press as well as in personal debates that took place” (Joyce, Brexit Data: Post-Truth Politics and the EU, 2017). The narrative of the Vote Leave campaign had traction with the public in a way the Vote Remain campaign did not, irrespective of the publics’ apparent distrust of most official messages.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the three key messages the public remembered are misleading at best, outright false at worst. For example, the Leave side’s widely publicised claim that “The UK sends £350 million per week to the EU is wrong...This figure does not include rebate, or discount on what the UK has to pay. In 2014 the UK would have paid £18.8 billion without the rebate but ended up paying £14.4 billion. The estimate for 2015 is £12.9 billion. This is £248 million per week, or £35 million per day” (FullFact, Vote Leave “facts” leaflet: Membership Fee, 2016). Yet, in an opinion poll 47% of respondents thought this message was accurate (whatukthinks, 2016). Further, the leave campaign argued that Turkey was going to join the EU, and Turkish workers would flood the British labour market. Yet, Turkey might at best join the EU several decades from now (Scarpetta, 2016), while 58% of respondents in an opinion poll thought it was “very likely” or “fairly likely” that Turkey was going to join the EU within the next decade (whatukthinks, 2016). The data makes it obvious that post-truth politics has shaped the UK’s Brexit debate in significant ways. In the next section, we will highlight how social media usage has contributed to this development.

Technology and the Brexit Campaign-

Whilst misinformation in election and referendum campaigns is not a new phenomenon, the ubiquity and ease with which information is distributed and found through the means of the internet

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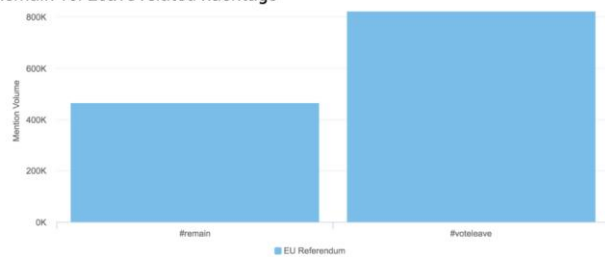
and social media multiplies the problem by an unprecedented amount. The social media strategy of the Leave campaign played an important role in driving the swing to Leave. The Leave campaign spent the majority of its resources on direct digital communication. Dominic Cummings sent “nearly a billion targeted digital adverts...and almost all our money into digital communication” (Cummings, 2016). Data from Twitter suggest that the social media marketing strategy of the leave vote was successful: According to Brandwatch over the 31 days before the referendum, twitter indicated a significant swing to the leave side based on “#voteremain” and “#voteleave” as shown in figure 1. This data also shows a total of over 1 million tweets regarding the EU referendum in the final run up to the referendum (Joyce, Brexit Data: Post-Truth Politics and the EU, 2017).

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Figure 1 - (Joyce, Brexit Data: Post-Truth Politics and the EU, 2017)

EU Referendum

Remain vs. Leave related hashtags



Social data analysis via Brandwatch | 8 May - 7 June 2016

The Leave campaign may have used political bots, which are “computer-generated programs that post, tweet, or message of their own accord” (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016, p. 1). Howard and Kollanyi (2016) found “that political bots ha[d] a small, but strategic role in the referendum conversations; (1) the family of hashtags associated with the argument for leaving the EU dominate... (3) less than 1% of sampled accounts generate almost a third of all the messages” (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016, p. 1). These political bots were typically linked to the Leave Vote. Of the top ten accounts most active on the Brexit issue “it is almost certain that 7/10 accounts are bots. One of them is a UKIP-curated account most probably with some level of automation...” (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016, p. 4). Research suggests that with respect to the dissemination of information on twitter specifically, not only was a significant proportion bot produced, but this content was unreliable and heavily weighted in favour of the vote leave campaign. ‘Leave’ bots contributed to the high level of Brexit engagement in the social media sphere. The leave campaign, through online investment may have been “able to create the perception of wide-ranging public support for their cause that acted like a self-fulfilling prophecy, attracting many more voters to back Brexit” (Polonski, 2016).

Large proportions of the UK population will have engaged with the Leave campaign on social media. According to an Ofcom report 64% of UK adults today use the internet to get their news and amongst 16-24 year olds that number is even higher at 82% (Ofcom, 2018, p. 2). Furthermore, social media is the most popular type of online news, with 44% of UK adults using it (Ofcom, 2018, p. 2). Furthermore, when the internet is utilised for fact checking, studies have found that once adopted, misinformation is inherently difficult to correct, particularly if it supports a viewpoint already held (Nyhan, 2007). According to a poll carried out with Oxford University over half of respondents prefer to access news through search engines, social media or news aggregators (interfaces that use ranking algorithms to select stories), rather than interfaces driven by humans (homepage, email and mobile notifications) (Newman, 2018). This is likely to be because the news accessed through these platforms tends to align with consumers existing views.

What set the Brexit campaign apart from other referendums or elections was the unexpected high turnout from voters who did not normally vote in general elections. The voter turnout for the referendum was 72.2% this is in comparison to a 68.8% turnout in the 2017 General Election (Electoral Commission, 2016). YouGov polling (YouGov, 2016) predicted a 52% result in favour of remain with a 48% leave vote and the telegraph poll predicted a 51% remain vote to 49% leave (Dunford & Kirk, 2016), granted these showed a remain victory by a small margin, but this reflected the opinion of pollsters across the country. Some of the explanation for pollsters error is likely due to the fact that predictions by YouGov, for example were partially based on whether respondents had voted in the last general election, so a higher turnout particularly in the North contributed to the miscalculation of the result (YouGov, 2016). Electorates who don't normally vote, voted in the EU referendum, and voted leave. This raises the question of what motivated the high turnout. 1.2 million previously disengaged voters evidently found the leave message more convincing.

An implicit assumption in the literatures above is that new technologies had a critical impact in this context. The evidence, however, is ambiguous. Fact checking websites found both sides told half-truths or outright lies over issues such as the economy and immigration during the Brexit Campaign (FullFact, 2016). For example, on the leave side the widely publicised claim that "The UK sends £350 million per week to the EU is wrong... This figure does not include rebate, or discount on what the UK has to pay. In 2014 the UK would have paid £18.8 billion without the rebate but ended up paying £14.4 billion. The estimate for 2015 is £12.9 billion. This is £248 million per week, or £35 million per day" (FullFact, 2016). However, when asked if this was true or false a majority of 47% of people said they thought it was true (whatukthinks, 2016). Further, the leave campaign promoted the suggestion that Turkey was going to join the EU. OpenEurope stated with respect to this statement;

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“the point about EU enlargement is, however, clear. Turkey is, at best, decades off joining the EU.” (Scarpetta, 2016) Once again when the public were asked ‘How likely or unlikely do you think it is that Turkey will join the EU in the next 10 years?’ and given a range of choices from ‘very likely’ to ‘very unlikely’ the majority (total 58%) said ‘very likely’ or ‘fairly likely’ (whatukthinks, 2016). These were two very key arguments for the leave campaign and are both clearly untrue.

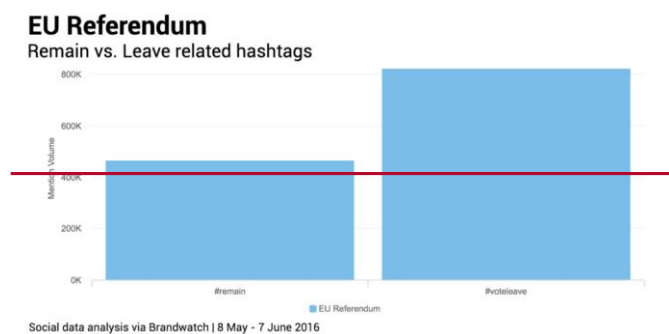
Conversely, many of the claims made by the remain campaign were also exaggerated or incorrect, for example fact checker OpenEurope stated with respect to some of the economic arguments presented by the Treasury; “Overall, it is fair to say there will be a short term shock but going much beyond that is ultimately speculation. There are also a number of particularly pessimistic assumptions in the Treasury report which do not seem entirely realistic, especially around the policy response and the impact of the transitional effect which means buying into the Treasury’s longer term predictions and basing business decisions on them” (Ruparel, 2016).

Both sides actively accused the other of dishonesty and scaremongering, and irrespective of reality, this did little to inspire trust from the public in the debate as a whole. The manner in which politicians behaved in their election campaigns was “divisive, antagonistic and hyper-partisan...and yet much of the acrimony, partiality and suspicions of dishonesty that characterised the campaign has remained.” (Moore & Ramsay, 2017, p. 168). The public were encouraged to distrust political messaging by the constant back and forth accusations and little upfront information. Drew Western wrote that voters who don’t have enough reliable information to help them decide how to vote, naturally voted by personal conviction and with emotion (Western, 2007).

This seems in part confirmed when the public were asked ‘Are politicians from both the Leave and Remain campaign mostly telling truth or lies?’ and a majority of 46% said ‘mostly telling lies’ compared to only 19% who said ‘mostly telling the truth’ (whatukthink, 2016). However, when asked ‘Whose opinions have influenced your decision on how to vote in the referendum?’ only 24% of the public said ‘Economists, academics and other experts’, with ‘Friends and Family’ taking 20% of the vote, ‘British politicians’ 15% and ‘none of these’ a majority at 45% (whatukthinks, 2016). This gives a unique insight into not only public mentality at the time, but also some of the conclusions that were made as a result. It is established that the public considered the government to be lying. Across both remain and leave campaigns and this is not a new phenomenon. What is interesting is that the reaction of the public is not to seek expert opinion or even to consider the thoughts of friends and family in a substantive way. However, it also did not result in inaction, in fact the opposite, it resulted in a higher voter turn out resulting in the leave vote.

It seems clear that the narrative of the Vote Leave campaign had traction with the public in a way the Vote Remain campaign did not, irrespective of the public's apparent distrust of most official messages. According to Brandwatch over the 31 days before the referendum, twitter indicated a significant swing to the leave side based on “#voteremain” and “#voteleave” as shown in figure 1. This data also shows a total of over 1 million tweets regarding the EU referendum on the final run up to the referendum (Joyce, 2017). This indicates a wide range of discussion surrounding the topic. As discussed by Brandwatch; “According to YouGov, the top three remembered events in the lead up to the EU Referendum were components of key arguments belonging to Brexiteers. 1. The UK sends £350m per week to the EU, 2. Net migration to the UK had hit 333,000, 3. Turkey and other candidate countries joining the EU. These controversial topics were hugely salient in the press as well as in personal debates that took place” (Joyce, 2017). It has since been proven by several fact checkers that there is no evidence for Turkey joining the EU anytime in the near future (Fullfact, 2016) and the figure of the amount the UK sends to the EU was wildly overestimated (Fullfact, 2016).

Figure 1 – (Joyce, 2017)



What fostered the reach and traction of the core messages of the Leave campaign distributed online is a point of contention in existing literatures. Whilst misinformation and campaigns are not a new phenomenon, the ubiquity and ease at which information is distributed and found through the means of the internet and other technology, multiplies the problem by an unprecedented amount. Technology is perceived to have played an unprecedented role in driving the swing to Leave. Evidence may be found in that the majority of the Leave campaign's resources were spent on Direct digital communication, with Dominic Cummings stating he sent “nearly a billion targeted digital adverts...and almost all our money into digital communication” (Cummings, 2016). A result of the

perception that social media swung the vote has been that platforms such as Facebook have since come under fire for failing to effectively manage or exercise oversight regarding the factual basis of online content, for example refusing to take down pages that deny the Holocaust (Gibbons, 2018), and cross-party MPs were recently quoted arguing tech firms like Facebook, Twitter and Google should be held legally accountable for the distribution of false content on their sites (Buchan, 2018). The problem of false or misleading content, however, applied to all sides of the referendum debate, where dubious or slanted information was disseminated.

The UK government DCMS's interim report on Disinformation and 'fake news' in July 2018 argued that the consequences can be 'devastating' if social media is used to spread rumours and 'fake news' and acknowledges that motives could include influencing political elections (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2018). What is seen to compound this issue is that the social media space functions like an echo chamber, meaning that confirmation bias occurs more easily within the online sphere. Algorithms on platforms like Facebook and YouTube facilitate the aggregation of individuals and their common ideas resulting in little debate or alternative information (Vicario, et al., 2017, p. 8). Furthermore, a study from LSE looked at the factors that resulted in readers considering a source of information reliable or unreliable. They found that even though it was widely acknowledged that 'traditional cues' (data reliability, author, spelling and tone) as a method of forming an opinion on reliability was superior; 'modernist cues' (presentation, number of shares, number of similar articles, alignment with pre-existing knowledge) were more widely used. Even by highly educated individuals. (Ho, et al., n.d.) Perhaps the most significant study was published in 2018, in which over 126,000 twitter stories, tweeted by around 3 million people more than 4.5 million times were investigated for their truth and their distribution across twitter. The research found that false stories diffused "significantly farther, faster, deeper and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information" (Vosoughi, et al., 2018, p. 1146) it was suggested that false news was more interesting and novel and hence was shared and perpetuated throughout twitter in a way that the truth wasn't.

The influence of political bots, which are "computer-generated programs that post, tweet, or message of their own accord," may have been more significant (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016, p. 1). Howard and Kollanyi (2016), found "that political bots ha[d] a small, but strategic role in the referendum conversations; (1) the family of hashtags associated with the argument for leaving the EU dominate... (2) less than 1% of sampled accounts generate almost a third of all the messages" (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016, p. 1). Howard and Kollanyi found that these political bots were often not impartial but linked to curated accounts, of the top ten accounts most active on the Brexit issue; "it is almost certain that 7/10 accounts are bots. One of them is a UKIP-curated account most probably

with some level of automation....” (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016, p. 4). Research suggests that with respect to the dissemination of information on Twitter specifically, not only was a significant proportion bot produced, but this content was unreliable and heavily weighted in favour of the vote leave campaign.

This suggests that it is possible that ‘Leave’ bots contributed to the high level of Brexit saturation in the social media sphere. However, it is worth recognising that “on the whole the top users do not generate new content, but simply retweet content from other users” (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016). Bots reinforce content already available on social media, which may or may not be impartial or factual. Furthermore, even if the majority of content on Twitter was bot created, it is still being viewed, liked and retweeted by the public. The leave campaign, through online investment may have been “able to create the perception of wide-ranging public support for their cause that acted like a self-fulfilling prophecy, attracting many more voters to back Brexit” (Polonski, 2016). But again, the implication is that Bots reinforce existing tendencies or accelerate trends online, they do not create them.

It is difficult to see how the impact of social media investment by campaigns can be managed or prevented without problematic consequences. Algorithms that seek to manage Bot activities online can make two kinds of errors. Disinformation may be incorrectly labelled as correct and bot accounts may be identified as human and vice versa (Bontcheva, 2018). The high volume of posts, on average 6,000 per second, will inevitably leave a lot of potentially incorrect information ‘in the wild’ (Bontcheva, 2018). The alternative is where a platform intervenes in a case which does not need censorship and correct or accurate information is removed from the public domain. This may result in a user having their post taken down, but on a more significant level some valuable, accurate information about an election being removed or an account being shut down (Bontcheva, 2018).

While the social media environment might have been decisive for the Brexit referendum, As Suiter notes, traditional media coverage clearly ~~also~~ contributed to the muddying of the distinction between fact and fiction, inasmuch as it emphasised ~~ds~~ balance in reporting debates: “This so-called ‘false balance’ in news reporting where journalists simply allow both sides to argue with one another without asserting the facts means truth becomes a matter of opinion or assertion not fact. This was clear in the BBC’s coverage of Brexit through the acceptance of assertions, from both sides of the argument, without evidence” (Suiter, 2016, p. 27). The RISJ/PRIME research found that in sampled national print newspapers there was a “dominant pro-Brexit bias” (Moore & Ramsay, 2017, p. 2).

The challenge, therefore, especially given an ambiguous evidence base for the role of new media technology in swinging the vote towards Leave, is that the public have the right to decide what information they read and absorb and to make their own decisions based on whatever criteria they choose, and this may be value-based. A surfeit of incorrect or misleading information, inasmuch as it may be fostered by technological developments, becomes 'dangerous' when it accompanies such an existing shift towards value-based decision making. This supports the declaration of a 'post-truth' era only inasmuch as a changing relationship between democracy and technology appears to be an inevitable consequence of communicative abundance (Keane, 2018). What provides further evidence is the public opinion, demonstrated clearly in polling. It shows a distrust in politicians, but also a move away from getting information from so-called experts. There could be many reasons for this, including separate events such as the 2008 financial crash, or the Iraq war, but these events just act as contributing factors to a change in public opinion not just towards government, but an attitude to 'truth'. This is what drove the Brexit debate.

Assessing a decline of political trust in the UK

The public opinion identified in polling further underlines that post-truth politics have driven the Brexit referendum. The data show a distrust in politicians, but also a move away from getting information from so called experts. There could be many reasons for this, including separate events such as the 2008 financial crash, or the Iraq war.

A rise in 'value-based' decision making is revealed in polling in the lead up to the EU referendum which indicated voting intentions were based not on facts or evidence but on 'heart'. When pollsters asking the public about 'the way you intended to vote, to what extent do you believe that your decision is based (on a percentage scale varying between) '100% with my heart', '50% of each' and '100% with my head'. Only 5% of the public sampled said '100% with my heart' and 17% said '100% with my head' but 35% said '50% of each' (whatukthinks, 2016). This suggests that evidence-based considerations were, for many, no more important than gut instinct and emotion. This suggests that at the heart of the debate, values were being disputed rather than facts (Gillett, 2017). For those declaring the rise of a post-truth era, this 'resurgence of emotional narrative' combined with the technology of the internet — 'the all-important primary, indispensable engine of post-truth' produces a formula for echo chambers and ultimately the indifference of the public (Crilly, 2018).

Gillett (2017) argues that the concept of a post-truth era fails to capture what is at stake in here. He argues that both the election of Trump and Brexit were symptoms of debates in which "values were being contested rather than facts." (Gillett, 2017). Gillett argues, citing Sandels, that since the crash

of 2008, public trust in government institutions and more specifically in the science of economics has fallen dramatically (Gillett, 2017). This decline in trust is what fosters the turn to value-based arguments, as the factual sources have been increasingly perceived as untrustworthy. It is this that explains why even though 9/10 economists argued for the remain campaign the public voted to leave, the economists' expertise either was ignored or did not cut through for the public. (Gillett, 2017).

A range of surveys have long suggested that trust in democratic political institutions is not only weak, but in decline. The Edelman trust barometer indicates that trust in government is low, at thirty six percent and most people do not feel their views are represented in politics today (Edelman, 2018). It is therefore notable "that recent survey data demonstrates that government in Britain is perceived as the least trustworthy public authority" (Stoneman, 2008, p. 2).

Clearly distrust is important in all democracies since it maintains accountability for democratic institutions. As such, distrust in government and politics as a whole need not suggest a 'post-truth' condition.

Trust in a political context can be defined as the "judgement of the citizenry that the system and the political incumbents are responsive and will do what is right even in the absence of constant scrutiny." (Miller & Listhaug, 1990, p. 358) In practice the political elite create policies and they either receive trust from citizens who are satisfied with them or cynicism from those who are not (Citrin, 1974). However, there is a tension between political trust and its acceptance as a pro-democratic value and the fact that "scepticism stimulates political engagement and signals a willingness to judge political institutions by their own merits." (Meer, 2017) On the other hand "distrust, may inspire vigilance in and monitoring of a relationship, uncooperative behaviour, or the severing of a relationship. (Levi & Stoker, 2000)" However, there is a point where distrust results in uncooperative behaviour or at the extreme, the ending of a relationship. It is at this point that the post-truth condition can become apparent. The post-truth condition does not inspire vigilance but apathy and encourages uncooperative behaviour. If the British public have reached a point at which there is uncooperative behaviour, then a post-truth era becomes more evident.

The decline in trust in politics in the UK may be fruitfully linked to the period during which it became a key concept in national political debates, during the 1990s. As argued by Wheatcroft, Blair "seemed not just a breath of fresh air but a true break with the past, for British politics as well as for Labour...Blair stepped forward as standard-bearer for a new candour and decency, a man who would move Labour away from dogmatic socialism while avoiding the Tories' meanspiritedness...Above all,

he was a man the British could trust" (Wheatcroft, 2004). A core element in the narrative of Blair's government was its perceived trustworthiness. Stoneman states, "throughout this period, one word seemed to dominate the political landscape: Trust" (Stoneman, 2008, p. 1). In the UK 2001 general election, Tony Blair made a speech in which he stated, "No one's support should ever be assumed. This is the strength of our democracy.... Today we have to earn that trust again.... This election is about which party can be trusted with the economy, which party will invest more in our public services, which party is capable of leading Britain into the future." (Blair, 2001). The Blair government thus marked an expectant period in UK political history.

A YouGov analysis looking at the trust of the public in politicians and journalists, notes the contrast in figures of trust before the Iraq War in 2003 and compared them to 2012 figures. The comparison which showed a fall in trust across the board. Already Even in 2012 YouGov stated "In short, something deeper is going on, that goes beyond the individual scandals involving journalism, war, government, MPs' expenses, bureaucracy, banking and the police. They seem to have combined to create a growing impression that virtually all those in positions of leadership are cynically in it for themselves, and less concerned with truth and the public good than they used to be – or we used to think" (Kellner, 2012).

The year 2003 has been chosen as the year of comparison for a reason, and it was within the following decade that trust continued to fall. The debates leading up to the Iraq war were the first instance ultimately resulting in a decrease of trust among the public. In the Chilcot Report Sir John Chilcot stated that "The actions of the government in the "September 2002 dossier overstated the firmness of the evidence about Iraq's capabilities and intentions in order to influence opinion and 'make the case' for action to disarm Iraq has produced a damaging legacy, including undermining trust and confidence in Government statements, particularly those which rely on intelligence which cannot be independently verified." (Committee of Privy Counsellors, 2016, p. 131).

During polling carried out in 2003 asked "Do you think the United States and Britain are / were right or wrong to take military action against Iraq?", the percentage of people who felt the decision to go to war against Iraq was right did not drop below 40% during 2003 and it peaked at 66% in April when US troops entered Baghdad (YouGov, 2015). This suggests there was clear support and trust in the government at this point in making a relatively controversial decision to go to war. Yet, during the general election campaign in 2005, when the people had more information at their disposal, this number swayed to 'wrong' at 53% (YouGov, 2015).

Opinion polls in the decade after the Iraq war indicate a steady decline in trust: “the major domestic legacy of the invasion of Iraq by US and UK forces in March 2003 has been a widespread and growing erosion of trust in the honesty and capacity of the politicians who triggered it. This lack of trust has been particularly significant for the Government in London elected as it was amid widespread expectation that it would bring a new and higher morality to UK politics” (Coates & Krieger, 2004, p. 5). The public felt duped, and it felt that the system that was supposed to ensure accountability broke down.

It has suggested that thisThe Iraq war constituted a historic turning point, yet, the Iraq War alone cannot hold all responsibility for the decline in trust in the UK. Several other events impacted the apparently fragile trust of the British public. The 2008 recession also had significant implications for trust in government (Liesch, 2016). People hold the government accountable to manage the economy appropriately, and major financial crises such as the 2008 crisis suggest that the alleged experts do not know what they are doing. Since the crash of 2008, public trust in government institutions and more specifically in the science of economics has fallen dramatically (Gillett, 2017). Furthermore, in 2009 the MP expenses scandal personalised the issue of trust. It was no longer the system as a whole, but individuals who did not appear trustworthy. In the aftermath of the MPs expenses scandal an Ipsos MORI poll found that the public’s views towards MPs’ motives were the worst they had ever measured, with 62% believing that MPs put their own interests first, and 76% did not trust MPs in general to tell the truth (Ipsos MORI, 2009).

As articulated by Younge, in sum, public trust in the government and experts was hit several times by key events over the past decade, such as the Iraq war, and the 2008 financial crisis, and the 2009 MPs’ expenses scandal. These events that rightly or wrongly caused the public to mistrust academics, politicians, journalists, and the system as a whole. It is natural for the public to mistrust someone who has given them incorrect information, however to then disregard all experts, forcing judgements and decisions to come from somewhere other than facts and rationality,

would appear suggest the rise of a post-truth mentality. The mistrust in traditional elites, their knowledge claims, and their expertise provided fertile ground for the spread of post-truth politics. In the context of the Brexit vote, this decline in trust was clearly a significant factor. Only 24% of respondents said expert, economist or academics influenced their decision on Brexit (whatukthinks, 2016). In the context of the Brexit vote, this decline in trust was clearly a significant factor. In the run up to the Brexit vote 46% of respondents felt that politicians across the campaign debates were “mostly telling lies.” This compares to only 19% of respondents saying they were “mostly telling the

truth" (whatukthink, 2016). Only 24% of respondents said experts, economists, or academics influenced their decision on Brexit, 20% were influenced by "Friends and Family", 15% by "British politicians," and 45% by "none of these" (whatukthinks, 2016). Although 9/10 economists argued for the remain campaign, the public voted to leave the EU. The economists' expertise was either ignored or it did not even manage to get a public hearing, because of the technological changes and the changes in the media environment discussed above (Gillett, 2017). ~~It is therefore notable "that recent survey data demonstrates that government in Britain is perceived as the least trustworthy public authority" (Stoneman, 2008, p. 2).~~

Opinion polls in the decade after the Iraq war indicate a steady decline in trust, "the major domestic legacy of the invasion of Iraq by US and UK forces in March 2003 has been a widespread and growing erosion of trust in the honesty and capacity of the politicians who triggered it. This lack of trust has been particularly significant for the Government in London elected as it was amid widespread expectation that it would bring a new and higher morality to UK politics." (Coates & Krieger, 2004, p. 5) Here the implications is the public felt duped, and felt that the system that ensures accountability broke down. Yet

, the distrust against political elites and expert knowledge did not result in inaction, quite to the contrary, it resulted in a higher voter turnout, which lead to the UK voting to leave the European Union.

The decline in trust towards traditional elites and expertise fostered the turn to value-based arguments, as the factual sources have been increasingly perceived as untrustworthy. If voters feel that they do not have enough reliable information to help them decide how to vote, they will naturally vote by personal conviction and on the basis of their emotions (Western, 2007). Clearly the Iraq War alone cannot hold all responsibility for the decline in trust in the UK. There have been several events that impacted the apparently fragile trust of the British public. Research carried out by Liesch showed that the electorate does withdraw its trust from government institution when there are problems with the economy, as such the 2008 recession is seen to have had significant implications for trust in government. (Liesch, 2016). In 2009 the MP expenses scandal personalised this issue, it was no longer the system but individuals who did not appear trustworthy. In the aftermath of the MPs expenses scandal an Ipsos MORI poll found that views towards MPs motives was the worst they had measured, with 62% believing that MPs put their own interests first, and 76% did not trust MPs in general to tell the truth (Ipsos MORI, 2009).

Gillett (2017) argues that the Brexit referendum campaign as well as the 2016 US presidential election were debates in which “values were being contested rather than facts” (Gillett, 2017). A rise in “value-based” decision making is revealed in polling in the lead up to the EU referendum which indicated voting intentions were based not on facts or evidence but on the “heart”. In opinion polls only 17% of the public sampled said they will vote “100% with [their] head”, 5% said “100% with my heart,” and 35% said “50% of each” (whatukthinks, 2016). Evidence based considerations were, for many, no more important than gut instinct and emotion. The “resurgence of emotional narrative[s]” facilitated post-truth politics (Crilley, 2018).

The result as defined by Suiter, of at this trend towards value-based voting and an increasing distrust in expertise, was the rise of the expressive voter. ~~The expressive voters are a voters;~~

“...who vote as part of their identity, who want to support the team. Emotional appeals are often key for these voters. They may justify their position in relation to some instrumental or policy related reason but this is not why they actually vote. Voters who feel ignored, let down and threatened by change can stand up for themselves and express their discontent by voting for Trump or Farage... The fact that the policies of a Trump or a Farage are unlikely to benefit this group doesn’t seem to matter. The very low chance that their individual vote will actually make a difference makes the support seem almost costless and allows the voter to put one finger up to the establishment” (Suiter, 2016, p. 26).

~~This, for Suiter is what makes distrust in government a symptom of post-truth. Not the distrust alone, but the public response. Since 2003 the public has~~ ve ~~been moving further away from trusting the government, but what and it this~~ has been replaced by with is ~~an electorate who feels~~ let down by their government. It was, and were ~~thus prone to view the referendum on UK membership of the European Union as a vote of no confidence on the entire political elite. Whether this is best interpreted as marking a new post-truth era seems debatable. The pattern of declining trust which contextualised the Brexit vote is hardly new. The turn to value-based decision making has reflected a generalised distrust of expert and official messages, and has moved away from a healthy distrust in politics, to a more dangerous one. Dangerous may be an exaggeration to those who voted for Brexit, and in a sense the actual issues of Brexit is not the proof of a post-truth era. Deciding to leave or stay are both equally valid choices and is not what is in question here. What is, and what has been clearly demonstrated is the way that the public came to the conclusions they did, is perhaps indicative of a post-truth era.~~

As Bogdanor stated, following the publicly mandated policy recommendation of Brexit, ~~was the first time~~ the House of Commons ~~had -would have-~~ to vote for something ~~despite~~ a majority of MPs personally opposed to it for the first time in its history (Bogdanor, 2018). ~~This end is what has been defined as post truth, where truth is of secondary importance to the disillusioned electorate determined to vote with what makes them feel good or following ingrained beliefs. A pattern of declining trust would appear to combine with truth becoming more difficult to identify and evaluate online, but equally the electorate do not seek it out.~~ In the context of the Brexit vote, this decline in trust was clearly a significant factor. Only 24% of respondents said expert, economist or academics influenced their decision on Brexit (whatukthinks, 2016).

Elites Fight Back

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The British government seeks to fight back against misinformation campaigns, and to hold especially the digital media sphere accountable to the same standards as broadcasting and print media. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport released an interim report on “Disinformation and ‘fake news’” - “recommending the government work with experts to create credible standards for information that adapt to deal with the fast-moving technological developments” (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2018, p. 64). The government argued in this interim report that the consequences can be “devastating” if rumours and “fake news” continue to spread on social media, and it acknowledges that motives could include influencing political elections (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2018).

Platforms such as Facebook have come under fire for failing to effectively manage or exercise oversight regarding the factual basis of online content (Gibbons, 2018). Cross-party MPs were recently quoted arguing tech firms like Facebook, Twitter and Google should be held legally accountable for the distribution of false content on their sites (Buchan, 2018). Social media companies are being forced to react with Facebook announcing an expansion of fact-checking and efforts to prevent misleading memes from going viral in advance of the US midterm elections (Facebook, 2018). Twitter has suspended 770 accounts to also crackdown on fake news (Bernal, 2018).

Yet, a high volume of posts, on average 6,000 per second, will inevitably leave a lot of potentially incorrect information “in the wild” (Bontcheva, 2018). Alternatively, a platform could intervene in cases which do not require censorship, and accurate information could get removed from the public domain. In extreme circumstances this could represent a breach of the freedom of speech. Other political actors might, in turn, instrumentalise the term “fake news,” just as Donald Trump does, and

thus strategically aim to render it meaningless. In short, there are ongoing struggles about establishing truth claims in politics, and while one referendum does not mean that we have reached a post-truth era, the Brexit referendum suggests that post-truth politics represents a serious threat to democracy as we know it. The UK government DCMS's interim report on *Disinformation and 'fake news'* in July 2018 argued that the consequences can be 'devastating' if social media is used to spread rumours and 'fake news' and acknowledges that motives could include influencing political elections (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2018).

Conclusion

The combination of a technological changes resulting in widespread social media usage and consequently a significant change in the media environment, ~~revolution~~ compounded with public distrust in traditional political and media elites, and expert knowledge, have formed the conditions of possibility for a post-truth politics to emerge, and this post-truth politics has had a significant impact on the public debate leading up to the Brexit referendum, and the UK's people vote to exit the European Union. Technologically developments have clearly played an important role, as social media remove the role of traditional media to operate as gatekeepers of accuracy in the media environment. What is more, on social media messages spread on the basis of how much novelty they generate and how much arousal they create, not on the basis of how accurate they are. Social media thus provide fertile grounds for the spread of post-truth politics. It is worth studying whether anything has changed in the current political environment in the UK, before launching requests for a second referendum. Another referendum under the same circumstances only runs the risk of accentuating the same trends. ~~clearly plays a considerable role in modern day politics and Lynch convincingly articulates the way information is spread irrespective of its reliability is an embodiment of this.~~

Political elites and the media (social media included for fear of tarnishing their reputation) have responded to the threat of post-truth politics, by establishing fact checkers, seeking to regulate social media sites, and developing algorithms which are supposed to detect fake news. These are laudable efforts, and they might provide some checks on the uninhibited spread of fake news. Yet, the evidence that the UK's political elites and experts are at the tail end of a significant decline in trust should give us pause. A political crisis of trust has been developing for more than a decade and

is now well entrenched within the population. This decline of trust is significant and has uniquely hit governments, politicians, experts, and traditional media gatekeepers. As a result, voters make emotionally charged and value-laden decisions, often based on information which has been designed to generate emotional arousal and is inaccurate. Technically preventing the spread of fake news will not be enough to restore the public's trust in societal elites.

seem to provide some, if limited, evidence for a post-truth condition. The term post-truth perhaps distracts from the underlying issues within UK politics. Contemporary discussions surrounding a second referendum, run the risk of accentuating these trends. Denying the public what they voted for would be a blow to the state of democracy and result in an even further deterioration of trust (Frayne, 2018). Claims made by journalist and commentators like d'Ancona that the internet has perpetuated a condition where truth has lost its value seem overstated as simple explanations for the Brexit vote. Technology clearly plays a considerable role in modern-day politics and Lynch convincingly articulates the way information is spread irrespective of its reliability is an embodiment of this.

The way the government and the media react to the concept of the post-truth era is important. The rise of the fact checker has been a positive outworking of the trust issues the public are making evident. Social media companies are also being forced to react with Facebook announcing an expansion of fact-checking and efforts to prevent misleading memes from going viral in advance of the US midterm elections (Facebook, 2018). Twitter has suspended 770 accounts to also crackdown on fake news (Bernal, 2018). Actions like this are encouraging in the pursuit of truth especially politically, but there is a risk. There is often a trade-off and the desire by companies to ensure they are regulating (at least in some manner) their users, could run the risk of impeding freedom of speech. At the same time, scholars of politics and international relations need to acknowledge that the population plays an active role in these developments. Ultimately, fake news spread because individual users decide to share, tweet, and respond to them. Individual users decide to use social media for acquiring information, they decide not to verify the sources that are emitting that information, and they vote based on value-laden decisions. Scholars need to pay heightened attention to the people as active shapers, not just passive recipients, of the political regimes they live in.

Ultimately, the public need to be informed and educated about the conditions that underwrite proclamations of a post-truth era and recognise their role in their creation and here I agree with Higgins and her emphasis on awareness as the solution (Higgins, 2016). The evidence that the UK is

at the tail end of a significant decline in trust should give us pause. A political crisis of trust has been developing for decades and is now well entrenched within the population. The form of democracy is clearly not satisfying the public anymore. It is this that I believe is beyond the simple ebbs and flow of a democratic society. This decline of trust is significant and has uniquely hit both governments and experts. The media gatekeepers are equally not trusted, which leaves actions based on value-based decisions, with whatever information is decided by a reader to be reliable. This compounded with technological changes is what makes this a post-truth era. Individually all of these factors are perhaps not new and definitely do not warrant the declaration of a new era. However, when you end up with a public disillusioned with the government and experts, a gatekeeper that no longer does its job and technology that makes any information easily accessible; it is then that the idea of a post-truth era can be entertained. Further consideration needs to be given into the reasons behind the public's distrust in government and politicians, to fully recognise and therefore address the challenge to democracy that we are being faced today.

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ⁱⁱ The highest post-war general election turnout was in 1950 at 83.9% but a smaller population meant that that was only 28,771,124 votes (House of Commons, 2017) (Raynsford, 2016, p. 3).