



EMERALD POINTS

THE BREXIT REFERENDUM ON TWITTER

A Mixed-Method,
Computational Analysis

JINGRONG TONG
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INTRODUCTION

As part of an academic effort to understand social media communication, this book offers an insight into how Twitter works in shaping political discourse through a case study of the United Kingdom's (UK's) European Union (EU) referendum in 2016. On 23 June 2016, the UK voted to leave the EU by 52–48%. With the departure of the UK from the EU on 31 January 2020, its 47 years of EU membership ended, hopefully along with the four-year post-Brexit vote chaos, shaping the geopolitical order of the European region and of the world. Scholars have tried to figure out what happened at the time of the Brexit vote. Given the growing popularity of social media among populations and its increasing significance in the public communication sphere, one of the questions scholars want to answer is about the role played by social media in the referendum. Particularly, what, and how, was the political discourse about the referendum formed on social media?

To answer this question, the research reported in this book examines three aspects of Twitter communication about the referendum: (1) social representations of the referendum, (2) the tweeting practices of key British politicians and news media, and (3) ordinary users' responses to David Cameron (@David_Cameron), the Prime Minister at the time of the referendum, and Nigel Farage (@Nigel_Farage), the then leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP). This study contributes to the existing literature about social media communication as well as Brexit studies (see, for example, Agarwal, Singh, & Toshniwal., 2018; Grčar, Cherepnalkoski, Mozetič, & Novak, 2017).

In this study, the mixed-method, computational analysis of over 12 million of tweets reveals a dual role played by Twitter in the referendum: (1) clarifying and contrasting public opinion between Leave and Remain supporters; and (2) legitimising, mainstreaming and spreading the ideology of populism. The research identifies the importance of the tweeting practices of users – including

British politicians, the news media and ordinary users – in shaping the political discourse about the referendum. This study reveals that, as a result of their tweeting practices, divided opinion was explicitly expressed on Twitter, mirroring divergent collective understandings of the UK's EU membership and suggesting the existence of ideological confrontation between Leave and Remain supporters in Twitter communication. Twitter showed its capacity to facilitate political manipulation and spread the ideology of populism through articulating and mainstreaming populist claims into the political debate about the referendum. The social media strategies of populist politicians and Brexit supporters demonstrated their well-developed understanding of how Twitter works in shaping political discourse, which, however, appeared to have been misunderstood by the Remain camp. The influence of populist politicians, who fluently, tactically and actively used the social site to promulgate their populist ideas, was amplified.

This Introduction chapter will explore the critical issues related to the Brexit referendum and the social dynamics behind the referendum outcome in the first part and then review the existing studies on social media and Brexit. Afterwards, it will introduce the methodology of this research, such as data collection, the pipeline of data analysis and research methods and procedures. It will conclude with a reflection on the limitations of this study.

THE BREXIT REFERENDUM, EURO-SCEPTICISM AND POPULISM

The Brexit vote confirms the existence of a profound divide in public opinion between Remain and Leave supporters– this divide was palpable ahead of the referendum (Bonikowski, 2017; Freedon, 2017; Gusterson, 2017; Habermas, 2016).¹ While the Remain vote was in favour of European integration and globalisation, right-wing Euro-sceptic populism and English nationalism were underlying the Leave vote (Corbett, 2016). The sharp polarisation in the vote was coherent with the context of gradually increasing Euro-scepticism and populism.

Before the referendum, Britain saw a surging tide of Euro-scepticism, referring to scepticism towards the benefits of European integration and the UK's EU membership (Boomgaarden, Schuck, Elenbaas, & Vreese, 2011; Eichenberg & Dalton, 1993). Euro-scepticism started to get stronger from the

1 <https://whatukthinks.org/eu/> (Accessed on June 12, 2018).

mid-1980s when the press and social actors began to stress British ‘differentness’ (Spiering, 2004, p. 127). Especially in the past decade, domestic and international factors deepened the British population’s scepticism towards the EU. Some of the most prominent factors were the UK’s social and economic inequalities, the crisis in the National Health Service (NHS), the global financial crisis, the Euro-zone crisis, the exodus of refugees fleeing from the war zones in the Middle East and Africa to Europe since 2014 and an increase in the number of terror attacks in the West. In 2015, more than a quarter of Britons viewed that ‘European unification has already gone too far’, with only some 28% of respondents thinking positively about British ‘unification should be pushed further’ (Vasilopoulou, 2016, p. 219). Against this backdrop, in the 2015 UK General Election, David Cameron promised to hold a referendum on the UK’s EU membership.

As suggested by the polls, before the Brexit referendum, public opinion was divided between Remain and Leave.² The Leave and Remain camps – mainly comprising politicians, political campaigns, the news media, banks, companies and other elite members such as economists and entrepreneurs – advocated their own arguments and foci. The Leave camp pushed to establish a new relationship between the UK and the EU, while the Remain camp promoted maintaining the current connection. The primary concerns of the former were immigration (freedom of movement) and the financial costs of the UK’s EU membership. The arguments of the latter focused on the economy (free market), the global leadership of the UK and national security that the UK could gain by staying within the EU (Vasilopoulou, 2016). In particular, the theme of immigration was the Leave camp’s ‘powerful campaign frame’ (Vasilopoulou, 2016, p. 222; Hobolt, 2016). The economy – the worry over the economic ramifications of the Brexit vote – was the real emphasis of the Remain camp (Hobolt, 2016).

Before the referendum, the division between Leave and Remain cut across political parties. Such a division existed within (rather than between) mainstream political parties and among party leaders and members of parliament (MPs). While the Conservative Party declared to stay neutral, David Cameron and George Osborne sided with Remain, and Brexiteer politicians, such as Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, supported Leave. Within the Labour Party that pledged to support Remain, Jeremy Corbyn, adopting a Remain stance, clashed with Euro-sceptic Labour MPs who led the (unofficial) Labour Leave campaign. The Green Party and the Liberal Democrats were split between Remain and Leave.

2 <https://whatukthinks.org/eu/> (Accessed on June 12, 2018).

Likewise, before the referendum, news media outlets officially declared their support for Remain or Leave (Hobolt, 2016). With *The Sun*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sunday Times* and the *Daily Mail* supporting Leave, *The Guardian*, the *Independent*, *The Times*, the *Financial Times* and the *Daily Mirror* were in favour of Remain (Loughborough University, 2016). These divisions reflect that the nation was divided by ideologies and demographics – in particular, ‘the divide between winners and losers of globalisation’ (Hobolt, 2016, p. 1259).

The arguments of the Leave camp mirror the values of nationalist populism, which has surged in Western democratic societies, such as the UK, the US, France and Italy. While acknowledging there are different perspectives of, and contextual variations in, the concept of populism, this book uses the term as an anti-establishment ideology that juxtaposes the interests of ‘the people’ against those of the ‘elites’ and ‘others’ (Bonikowski, 2017; Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel., 2017; Gusterson, 2017; Inglehart & Norris, 2016). The critical elements of the populist ideology include ‘emphasising the sovereignty of the people’, ‘advocating for the people’, ‘attacking the elites’, ‘ostracising others’ and ‘invoking the heartland’ (Engesser et al., 2017). However, populism can also be a type of ‘discursive strategy selectively employed by political outsiders’ to try to change the political status quo (Bonikowski, 2016).

In the UK, populism was marginal compared to the (once-)dominant ideologies of globalisation and European integration. For many years, the majority of the British population favoured EU membership. In the 1975 UK European Communities (EC) membership referendum, more than two-thirds of voters voted to continue EC membership.³ Recently, however, populism rose amid the emergence of Euro-scepticism and the anti-globalisation movement (Taggart, 2004). As discussed above, global issues, such as the EU migration crisis, fuelled the rise of populism.

The surge of populism in the UK and Europe was evident in the recent electoral successes of populist political parties, such as the UKIP and the French National Front. In Italy, for example, in 2018, voters supported populist parties – the Five Star Movement and the League – to lead the next government. In the wake of these electoral victories of populist parties, populism has increasingly entered mainstream politics and become a mainstream political discourse (Akkerman, Lange, & Rooduijn, 2016; Curran, 2004; Mondon, 2013). Such populism presents the features of nationalist populism, expressing hostility towards immigrants (Gusterson, 2017) and

³ The European Communities (EC) were ‘fashioned’ into the European Union from 1993 (Von Bogdandy & Nettesheim, 1996).

stressing the sovereignty of the nation-state. It defends the interests of those who have been economically disadvantaged under the influence of globalisation and neoliberalism. Such populism is seen by Bonikowski as a conflation of nationalism and populism (2017).

The arguments of nationalist populism were embodied in those of the Leave camp, who stressed the necessity to protect national interests and the interests of locals. They opposed the dominant neo-liberal political values that embrace globalisation and internationalism. Fervently, right-wing political actors, such as Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson, called to 'take back control' and curb immigration. Their strident advocacy was ardently supported by right-wing news outlets like *The Sun* and *The Daily Telegraph*. However, the publicity of particular political values like populist claims in news coverage is still subject to the gate-keeping of news practitioners.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE BREXIT REFERENDUM

The traditional news media used to be one of the primary platforms for political communication, where public opinion and interests were represented, and where the public was informed. Proliferating rapidly, social media sites, such as Twitter, have shown an increasing importance in the political communication landscape, providing alternative platforms for channelling or reflecting public opinion (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2015; Sobkowicz, Kaschsky, & Bouchard, 2012). Users use the technological affordances of social media to gather, to express their views, and to be heard on these social sites (Gerbaudo, 2018b).

Most of the existing studies examining Twitter communication explore the capacity of Twitter to motivate and enable participation in politics. Different aspects of Twitter communication have been studied, such as interactions and network structures (Al-garadi, Varathan, & Ravana, 2016; Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014; Gunnarsson Lorentzen, 2014; Himelboim, Hansen, & Bowser, 2013; Horan, 2013; Lindgren & Cocq, 2017; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013), political sentiments (Baviera, Peris, & Cano-Orón, 2019; Ceron, Curini, Iacus, & Porro, 2014; Dang-Xuan, Stieglitz, Wladarsch, & Neuberger, 2013), topics and discourses (Evans & Evans, 2016; Evolvi, 2019; Horan, 2013; Pond & Lewis, 2019), the use of Twitter (Bode & Dalrymple, 2016b; Bruns & Highfield, 2013; Coesemans & Cock, 2017; Ellison & Hardey, 2013; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, & Haar, 2013; Graham, Jackson, & Broersma, 2016; Klinger, 2013; Lachlan & Levy, 2016; Larsson &

Ihlen, 2015; Larsson & Moe, 2014), and the impact of Twitter (Baviera et al., 2019; Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016). Some of these studies have recognised the potential of Twitter to reflect public opinion among users and to enhance political participation (Graham et al., 2016; Ifukor, 2010; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013).

In their efforts to understand the role played by social media in the Brexit referendum, scholars have examined the Twitter use, campaign strategies and opinions of Leave and Remain groups (see, for example, Fanoulis & Guerra, 2017; Gorodnichenko, Pham, & Talavera, 2018; Llewellyn & Cram., 2016; Usherwood & Wright, 2017). Not surprisingly, they have found the polarisation between the Leave and Remain users in social media communication about the Brexit referendum (see, for example, Del Vicario, Zollo, Caldarelli, Scala, & Quattrociochi, 2017; Hall, Tinati, & Jennings, 2018). They have also identified the correlation between users' political interests and their social media participation during the event (Bossetta, Segesten, & Trenz, 2018). Social media sites have been thought to play a crucial role in facilitating the rise of nationalist populism and in misleading the British electorate (Sunstein, 2018). Scholars (see, for example, Lopez, Cesar, Collignon-Delma, Benoit, & Matsuo, 2017) even regard that analysing public opinion expressed on Twitter can predict the Brexit vote. Joining other research exploring public opinion on social media (see, for example, Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2015; Elmer, 2013; Franch, 2013; Sobkowicz et al., 2012; Bogen, Millman, Huntington, & Orchowski, 2018; Hong & Kim, 2016; Öztürk & Ayvaz, 2018), these studies about the Brexit referendum and social media can advance our understanding of what public opinion was formed on social media about the referendum.

However, the existing studies on social media and the Brexit referendum have not discussed how social media worked in shaping public opinion on their sites during this event. In particular, if the public opinion expressed on Twitter was polarised and populism was spread on social media as argued by the scholars cited above, how did this polarisation and the spread of populism happen on social sites? Answering this question can offer an insight into the role played by social media in shaping the political discourse about the referendum, in particular, and, in general, political communication in the social media era. To fulfil this aim, the research reported in this book examined three aspects of Twitter communication about the referendum: (1) how and what public understanding of the EU membership was conveyed in Twitter communication about the referendum; (2) whether, and how, the tweeting practices of key politicians and news media helped to mainstream populism; and (3) how ordinary users responded to David Cameron and Nigel Farage on Twitter.

METHODOLOGY NOTES

With a focus on Twitter communication, the research adopted mixed methods, including computational thematic analysis, topic modelling, social network analysis and traditional content analysis involving manual coding of the tweets. Methodologically, the book offers an example of, and a reflection on, how to combine mixed methods – not only quantitative and qualitative methods but also human (manual) coding and computational methods – in social media research.

Twitter, a social media platform, has been successful in attracting users since its launch in 2016. It had 15.8 millions of users in the UK in 2016 and 0.2 billion daily active users in the first quarter of 2020 (The Economist, 2020).⁴ In addition to its popularity, Twitter has become one of the primary venues through which information is produced, consumed and disseminated (Brena et al., 2019). Therefore, it is pertinent to the topic under discussion in this study.

We collected and archived 12,644,199 relevant tweets published in the English language in real time one month before (including) 23 June 2016 (the date of the referendum) by using the Twitter streaming Application Programming Interface (API).^{5,6} Twitter allows and provides ‘companies, developers, and users with programmatic access to Twitter data’ through their APIs. It defines Twitter data as reflecting ‘information that users choose to share publicly’, and their ‘API platform provides broad access to public Twitter data that users have chosen to share with the world’.⁷

We only collected the tweets that were publicly accessible and contained any of the seven hashtags: ‘#Referendum’, ‘#VoteLeave’, ‘#VoteIn’, ‘#EUref’, ‘#VoteOut’, ‘#VoteStay’ and ‘#Brexit’. Hashtags suggest the meaning of tweets (Zappavigna, 2015). The use of these hashtags indicates users’ intention to link their tweets to the topic of the referendum. The trend over time of tweets (Fig. 1.1) shows that the tweeting activity of users significantly increased when approaching the referendum day. Although these tweets collected were

4 Accessed on December 6, 2018, at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/271350/twitter-users-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>.

5 We have analysed and discussed part of the data set in other publications such as Tong & Zuo, 2018 and Tong & Zuo, 2017.

6 The API is a common way of collecting Twitter data. See the documentation and discussion of the Twitter API, at <https://developer.twitter.com/en/docs/tweets/timelines/FAQ> (Accessed on July 7, 2020).

7 <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-api> (Accessed on July 7, 2020).

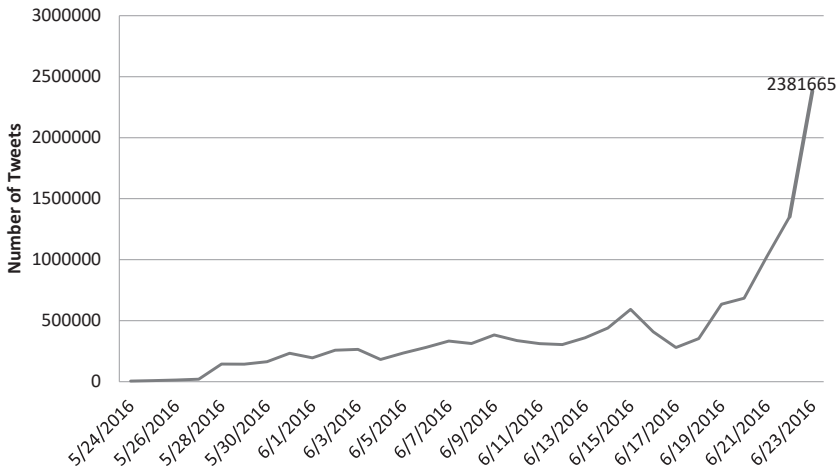


Fig. 1.1. Trend Over Time of Referendum Tweets One Month Leading to the Referendum Day.

publicly accessible, in order to protect users, we have anonymised users and their tweets if they are not public figures.

The choice of the hashtags used for data collection was made based on our two-step observation of the use of hashtags on Twitter conducted at the start of data collection. We first collected and analysed a small sample of tweets to obtain an initial understanding of the use of hashtags by users. Meanwhile, we also read related tweets in real time to understand how hashtags were used on Twitter. Informed by the observation of how Twitter users used hashtags, we decided which hashtags were the most relevant and thus should be used to collect data. Judgement and decision-making are necessary for social science research. Judgement is ‘central to understanding human action’ and social science research inevitably involves judgement in research process such as design and analysis (Huberty, 2000; Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 4).

We combined computational and qualitative methods in our analysis and took on a ‘hybrid’ and ‘computational approach to qualitative analysis’ of our large-scale data (Evans, 2014; Lewis, Zamith, & Hermida, 2013). We used computational analysis to capture the overall patterns in the data and to identify small-scale (but most relevant) data from the whole dataset for detailed analysis next steps. Besides, the results of the computational study of tweets were also used to support the qualitative analysis of the identified small-scale data. After analysing the trend over time of the tweets collected and having an initial exploration of the data, we used different methods and procedures to investigate the three aspects of Twitter communication. Fig. 1.2 shows the