Misperceptions and missed opportunities: how Facebookers talked Brexit

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Creating everyday audiences
Theoretical Assumptions

• Social media can perform the functions of a public sphere and leverage political influence (Shirky, 2011)

• Limited abilities for selective exposure processes and weak social boundaries lead to exposure to heterogeneous political attitudes (Brundidge, 2011)
Empirical realities

- Myriad public spheres can be found (Castells; Klinger; Shirky)
- Accidental exposure can occur (De Zuniga; Shah)
- Bounded ideological communities exist (Sunstein; Lilleker)
- Homogeneity predominates in national politics (Conover; Housholder; Kwak)
Research Context & Questions

• UK’s EU Membership Referendum, June 2016
• Discourse on Facebook
  – Evidence of homogeneity of argumentation
  – Key features (content/tone) of the argument
  – Agenda setting by official campaign communication
• Can we view this discourse as a sphere of opinions that reflect broader society?
## Stronger in v Vote Leave

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Groups Size</th>
<th>Posts per day</th>
<th>Likes (AVE)</th>
<th>Shares (AVE)</th>
<th>Comments (AVE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stronger IN</td>
<td>327,589</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>4.2k</td>
<td>652</td>
<td>2.25k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote LEAVE</td>
<td>549,230</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>227k</td>
<td>769</td>
<td>2.5k</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Stronger IN a smaller less supportive but equally vibrant community
- Vote LEAVE highly energised, willing to extend the campaign’s reach
Stronger In

• Homogeneity high
  – Dissonance expressed as campaign heavily criticised
  – Some emotionally resonant arguments developed

• Content/Tone belligerent but confident
  – Personal attacks levelled at political leaders of the campaign

• Agenda setting by official campaign communication
  – Begrudging acceptance of ‘project fear’
  – Wanted better arguments – expressed own in echo chamber
Vote Leave

• Homogeneity very high
  – entirely supportive of the campaign
  – contributors frequently mocked the Stronger In position.

• Content/Tone emotionally charged
  – emotionally resonant language supported Brexit
  – extolled the ‘honesty’ of leading Brexiteers
  – Personal attacks regularly levelled against Cameron/Osborne
  – ‘Remainers’ were seen as their dupes and foils

• Agenda setting by official campaign communication
  – Very high – echo chamber for any supportive message
Campaigning Online: Stronger IN
Campaigning Online: Vote Leave
Deliberating Online: Stronger IN
Deliberating Online: Vote Leave
Key findings

• Facebook a highly polarised environment
• High engagement with the central arguments of the campaigns
• Truth highly perceptual (post-truth) and misperceptions dominated
• Demonstrations of strength of commitment
• Facebook communities as societal microcosms.
• Stronger In campaign missed opportunities to better engage.
• Vote Leave enjoyed an open door – right message + strong support