The dubious ethics of 21st century political marketing: assessing the impact for the health of democracy

Abstract/Introduction

Advocates of the introduction of marketing principles and techniques to the realm of politics have suggested that as the citizen is treated more as a consumer, and so placed at the heart of the decision making processes, a stronger relationship will develop between citizens and political institutions (Lees-Marshment, 2014). The notion is thus that the citizen-consumer (Lilleker & Scullion, 2009) becomes sovereign over how policies are developed and implemented, following a neo-liberal logic within which consumers are at the heart of brand management and product development within the commercial marketplace (Olsen, 2018). While elements of marketization are more obvious than others, with political marketing communication being the most overt practice, evidence suggests a general marketization has occurred over the last two decades. Research across a range of nations suggest that: political parties are increasingly likely to use the techniques and language of branding (Speed et al, 2015); policies are likely to respond directly to public concerns and combine following and leading public attitudes (Henneberg, 2006); policy ideas and their accompanying promotion will undergo some degree of market testing (Lilleker & Negrine, 2006); campaigning will draw on techniques from across integrated marketing communication (Dann & Hughes, 2008); and institutions will focus on the integration of delivery into processes and communication (Esselment, 2012).

Despite marketization processes arguably helping build trusting relationships between representatives and the represented, the last two decades have seen a decline in trust in political institutions. While contextual factors such as the global economic crisis are factors, as well as specific national instances of corruption or scandals, the decline appears to be uniform and global. A 2017 Pew Surveyi of 36 countries showed that a median score of 52% was found for those not satisfied with their government. While the lowest rated countries, the Lebanon and Mexico, might be expected; a score of dissatisfaction above 60% was recorded in France, Italy, Spain, South Korea and Greece. Even where the average score for satisfaction is above 50%, trust remains low. People saying they have a lot of trust in government number 6% in Japan, 7% in Australia, 14% in the UK and 15% in the USA. In the case of the USA trust in government has declined the most, with a 23% drop 2017-18 and 59% stating government is the most 'broken' institution (Edeleman Trust Barometer, 2018ii). One can point to a range of national factors, and to fluctuations; however overall the findings show globally there is low trust in government. In 2017 the average was slightly higher at 42% however there are a range of countries where there is a steep decline, these include some nations we might expect such as Mexico but also the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Finland and Slovenia.

It is impossible to determine any definitive correlation between the marketization of politics and this decline as one would have to have clear figures across a range of comparable political actions, media frames, economic conditions and public attitudes across demographics while also controlling for a range of national and wider contextual factors. Hence there is not an attempt here to claim political marketing

is a direct causal factor driving declining trust. Instead this paper raises the question of whether political marketing, as practiced, has the capacity to contribute to the conditions that might lead to low trust. This paper will thus set out the theoretical context for understanding trust and well as the socio-political conditions that lead to marketization, linking them to trust factors, prior to discussing trends in political marketing that might impact on trust levels.

The dubious ethics of 21st century political marketing: assessing the impact for the health of democracy

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Introduction

Advocates of the introduction of marketing principles and techniques to the realm of politics have suggested that as the citizen is treated more as a consumer, and so placed at the heart of the decision making processes, a stronger relationship will develop between citizens and political institutions (Lees-Marshment, 2014). The notion is thus that the citizen-consumer (Lilleker & Scullion, 2009) becomes sovereign over how policies are developed and implemented, following a neo-liberal logic within which consumers are at the heart of brand management and product development within the commercial marketplace (Olsen, 2018). While elements of marketization are more obvious than others, with political marketing communication being the most overt practice, evidence suggests a general marketization has occurred over the last two decades. Research across a range of nations suggest that: political parties are increasingly likely to use the techniques and language of branding (Speed et al, 2015); policies are likely to respond directly to public concerns and combine following and leading public attitudes (Henneberg, 2006); policy ideas and their accompanying promotion will undergo some degree of market testing (Lilleker & Negrine, 2006); campaigning will draw on techniques from across integrated marketing communication (Dann & Hughes, 2008); and institutions will focus on the integration of delivery into processes and communication (Esselment, 2012).

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Trust as a psychological condition

Trust can in its simplest form be described as a relationship in which one party, the trustor, decides to take the risk of trusting another party, the trustee (van der Meer, 2017). Trust is, as this definition points to, intrinsically tied to risk: trusting any individual or institution means putting your assets, resources, future, the safety of yourself and your children in the hands of someone else. Although trust is often viewed as an interpersonal relationship, in reality it is a multidimensional, multilevel concept which can as easily refer to how citizens as trustors view the risks posed by their government, public authorities and institutions. This wider concept means that trust can be viewed as a composite of a range of economic, political and social attitudes and can be influenced by media consumption (Zmerli & van der Meer, 2017). Trust, mistrust and distrust may also be measured on different levels, with individual political actors (micro-level), organisations (meso-level) and at societal level (macro-level). The decline in trust which appears to permeate all levels of society, perhaps except for the interpersonal level, is one of significant concern. Trust in institutions is necessary for maintaining and developing stable democracies; mistrust and distrust undermines the legitimacy of the institutions of governance hence making the laws and practices that offer the conditions for social cohesion of questionable relevance and importance (Norris, 1999; 2011; Zmerli & van der Meer, 2017; Závecz, 2017). Generally, democracies rely on citizens to trust their governments (van der Meer, 2017; Norris, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1994), yet no democrat would encourage blind trust among the citizenry. Fluctuations in trust levels often occur simultaneously to political scandals and crises, yet reversion to previous levels is expected. This does not seem to be the pattern witnessed currently where despite troughs and peaks the general trajectory is downward.

The literature on trust in institutions draws a distinction between "particular trust" and "general trust" (Nilsson & Möller, 2017) and it is the latter variant that appears the most problematic. General trust means trust at a systemic level, encompassing social and political institutions (Morlino, 2011). General trust, mistrust and distrust are viewed as the result of an assessment of the combined efficacy of democratic procedures and macroeconomic indicators (van der Meer, 2017) with a strong relationship found between social and political trust (Uslaner, 2018). Low general trust has an negative effect on political participation (Verba & Nie, 1987) and may signal a democratic malaise; although this does not disavow the importance of "critical citizens" that scrutinize public institutions' performance (Norris, 2011; Torcal, 2017). However when the widespread perception is that the performance of institutions is poor, the quality of public services is low and there is an unacceptable level of corruption the conditions for democratic malaise exist (Kumlin & Haugsgjerd, 2016; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Uslaner, 2016). These, as well as economic factors, contribute to diminished social capital and low feelings of self-efficacy (Selle and Wollebæk 2015); particularly if citizens feel that the institutionalised spaces for the expression of concerns and raising of questions, such as the parliaments and the media, are inaccessible

(Braithwaite & Levi, 1998; Warren, 1999). Representational gaps not filled through media, protest groups, political parties or other institutions lead to disaffection among groups who feel disenfranchised, such as young people, and therefore their trust levels are lower (Cammaerts et al, 2014; Pilkington et al, 2018). Widespread feelings of disenfranchisement can shape a generation's "social consciousness" (Mannheim, 1952; Woodman, 2016; Bolin, 2017) turning citizens away from the institutions of democracy. All these factors are down to perceptions and feelings, trust is built upon emotional reactions and it is argued that in the current "age of anger" (Mishra, 2017) it is negative emotions that are at the fore. This anger can be directed at groups that are typically othered (Jaworski, 2007) such as ethnic minorities or immigrants; however politicians, societal elites, or a broader but non-specific elite category can all be treated as "others". The latter is at the core of populist rhetoric which is a feature of broader political discourse within this so-called age of anger (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

The latter argument places political communication as a central theme within the trust relationship. Studies of the relations between citizens, public institutions and the media have been scrutinized with reference to the credibility of sources and trustworthiness of media professionals (Schudson, 2011; Peters & Broersma, 2013). Trust in news media is generally low and widespread use of terms such as fake news can only exacerbate the situation. Similarly the appropriation of personal data to facilitate manipulation, as exposed during reporting of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, may have also led to broader concerns about how political actors use the information environment. The blurring of lines between mainstream parties, semi-autonomous campaign groups and possible foreign actors and their roles in circulating false stories while also violating privacy (Woolley & Howard, 2018) can only contribute to the downturn in trust. One can understand why a general anger towards a general system can pervade that would result in disengagement from all that is denoted as political. Most citizens rely on news and stories distributed by traditional and social media for information about the performance of social and political institutions such as the government, parties and other political actors. Many may also be exposed to other citizens' negative views in largely homogenous echo chambers, both can lead to a spiral of cynicism which can be further exploited for political means. While some scholars have emphasised the positive role of digital-mediated deliberative communications because they foster civic virtues and contribute to community-building (Dahlgren, 2007; Bennett & Segerberg, 2014), others note the existence of specific affordances in social media platforms that encourage the expression of (negative) emotions, such as anger, hate, and discrimination (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Such affordances can lead to the radicalization of groups who feel disenfranchised and increase their distrust in established democratic institutions (Dahlberg, 2007). Hence political marketing practices may employ digital participatory and deliberative platforms to support decision-making processes and digital inclusion (Gerbaudo, 2019; De Blasio, 2018a) but they may be more likely to exploit their affordances for pushing manipulative content (Aarts, Fladmoe, & Strömbäck, 2012). The latter is strongly associated what is known as the post-truth era, characterised by the development and circulation of misinformation and disinformation (Lilleker, 2018).

Trusting relationships require honesty, interaction, transparency and equality; not the factors that lead to disenfranchisement and a perception of a corrupt system which does not listen. Political marketing can bring to politics a range of new tools and concepts, however evidence suggests that it is the

dimension related to salesmanship that is emphasised (Knuckey, 2009). While focus groups may be used to learn more about citizens' concerns, they can also be used to discover the words and phrases that will have most relevance and impact (Luntz, 2007). With the plethora of further data available on how political leanings correlate with tastes in popular culture an additional layer of possibilities for manipulation are opened up to campaigners (Lilleker, 2014). These developments in data management and content development elide with an era where digital technologies allow messages to be inserted into spaces where citizens largely interact with peers for the purposes of entertainment and escapism; so largely when they are more likely to be susceptible to manipulation (Lilleker, 2018). Yet such tools need to be used responsibly, do the current practices in political marketing mean that the outcome of exploitation of the affordances of the digital information environment is to contribute to a decline in trust.

Introducing Popkin's cognitive miser

Given that persuasive and manipulative communication has a long history, with Plato railing against the Sophists in the 4ᵗʰ century BC, why are there now such concerns when multiple sources offer easily accessible information? The problem is that the average citizen does not have a tendency to be a critical citizen who is constantly keeping herself appraised of public affairs. Evidence suggests few frequently access a range of news sources, and for many social media is the main or only source of information about politics. What is less than clear, therefore, is what form of political information is accessed, from what sources, and with what impact. Of deeper concern is that there is minimal difference between the way citizens cognitively engage with their diet of political communication from social media and any other piece of communication. A picture of an amusing cat, a friend's baby, a party political meme, an unattributed claim about the threats posed by migrants, may all be cognitively processed with minimal effort. In fact the baby or cat pictures may receive much greater attention (Heylighen, 1998). Yet all the messages may be stored subconsciously and have a latent impact on attitudes; this is particularly the case if the message conforms with existing beliefs and biases. In challenging the rational voter theory, Samuel Popkin (1984) described the average citizen as a cognitive miser. Based on the fact the human brain conserves energy for essential functions, including environment scanning, only the most relevant or eye-catching messages prompt hot or active cognition. Popkin's theory chimes with the work of communication psychologists who developed dual process models of cognition. The compelling factor that the dual system model (Kahneman, 2011) and elaboration likelihood model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1988) share is that they evidence a difference between quick and often unconscious processing of information and slow deliberation. Kahneman's work argues that quick thinking leads to errors in judgement through a lack of criticality. Petty and Cacioppo argue that this is due to insufficient motivation to examine the message carefully, testing the source for credibility and the argument for logic. While these theories predate the so-called 'Internet age', arguably due to the amount of communication and plethora of ways by which an individual can be targeted with manipulative messages the problems they describe might easily be exacerbated.

In fact the idea of the average person as a cognitive miser links well to other socio-political factors which offer a need for better political marketing whilst also opening avenues for it to take a less than ethical direction. The first factor is a fairly widespread decline in political interest, with no more than a third of

citizens self-declaring a reasonable or strong interest in politics[iii] (for implications see Whiteley, 2011). Political communication thus might naturally be processed quickly and with low levels of engagement. Such patterns of behaviour privilege simplistic, eye-catching or controversial forms of communication; long-form, complex and nuanced communication will likely be skipped through or ignored due to low motivation (Towner, 2017). While measures of political knowledge tend to focus on simple facts and procedures, as opposed to policy stances for example, the high rates of failure at such tests equally suggest a citizenry with largely low levels of political engagement. Similarly party membership and partisan attachment levels suggest a limited willingness to engage with institutions (Klinghard, 2016). These and simultaneously low rates of political participation are all phenomena which result from low trust, yet may also mean that citizens are exposed further to messages and information that contribute further to depressing their social capital. Hence there are circular contributory factors at play in modern democracies.

Standing out in the cluttered media environment

The challenge for political communication, and its subordinate functions that fall under the banner of political marketing, is to reach citizens who have lower than average interest in politics, low interest and attachment to political parties within an over-populated, fragmented and always-accessible digital media environment. The system characterised as the political information cycle (Chadwick, 2011) works within a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017). 24/7 rolling news is fed by incoming streams of information from correspondents, news aggregators and social media feeds, this sets the agenda for legacy media which is further remediated through social media and back into the rolling news. Insider accounts from communication advisors record the struggle to maintain any semblance of understanding of where the focus is at any point never mind having control of the agenda (Pfeiffer, 2018). News aggregators and smartphone applications deliver tailored news direct to individuals on demand, which can mean that a selection process occurs which further blocks out political news. With few followers on Twitter and Instagram, few supporters on Facebook, a media hungry for scandal, disagreement and disaster and a mass citizenry focusing for seconds as stories drift by on their feeds there is a pressure to stand out.

While product development and brand management may be key functions in a commercial context, the latter, pursued through a strategy of getting heard, is the priority in a political context. Hence political marketing is most overtly noted in the way it draws on the expertise of the advertising and public relations professions to attract the eye of potential supporters. Due to the fragmentation of media audiences, which use a combination of legacy and mainstream media as well as social media, the challenge is to gain access to an audience (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). Thus political marketing employs a range of tactics to cut through the clutter and enter the consciousness of the citizen. One key tactic is the reductionism in political marketing communication to using short videos and images are most likely to be liked and shared by social media users (Martínez-Rolán & Piñeiro-Otero, 2016). Hence across the political cycle, election, protest and permanent campaigning, such forms of communication have quickly become a staple. A simple visual with bold text can convey a message quickly to a citizen, and is of most appeal to the cognitive miser. However such communication is likely to use bold, eye-catching statements and adhere to a style consistent with product advertising than being designed to make the

viewer think carefully (Scacco & Muddiman, 2016). As political marketers increasingly attempt to exploit the affordances offered by the ability to promote content on social media, within newsfeeds and as sidebar advertising, the message increasingly becomes more simplified.

The challenges for political marketing in the 21st Century

Trust in governments is declining globally and despite fluctuations in all but a few cases (Germany, New Zealand and Luxemburg being exemplars) more people do not trust their government than trust the institutions to be competent, have integrity, or manage public finances and services for the good of the whole nation. These data indicate a problem that could be caused by political marketing, in particular as trust is directly related to the relationship one has with institutions and the nature of interactions that occur. Institutions however face serious challenges. Media focus on the salacious, controversial, scandalous and headline grabbing; placing under the spotlight the errors made and questioning the integrity of decision making processes while seldom focusing on successes to be found in public policy. Citizens, in turn, tend to absorb political information from limited information, headlines as opposed to full stories, a limited range of media outlets and likely from social media. Low interest is correlated with low trust, as well as with minimal independent information seeking, circumstances that lead to an apathetic and cynical society. If information is used more for affirmation than information the spiral of cynicism is likely to worsen under these conditions. Only attentive citizens may actively seek to be better informed, yet even they might succumb to resorting to existing within a filter bubble and ideological echo chamber. To cut through the cluttered and fragmented media cycle political marketers must find ways to capture the attention of media and citizens, gain access to echo chambers and forge connections with citizens' pre-existing prejudices and concerns. It is the practices that occur to achieve these goals that, it is argued here, contribute to declining trust as opposed to building relationships with the citizenry.

The practice of political marketing in the 21st Century

The relationships nurtured through communicational processes are governed by the connected processes of professionalization and marketization (Lilleker, 2014). Political institutions seek to improve their communication through learning from society and business, introducing innovations in order to meet organisational goals (Tenscher et al, 2016). Put simply what they commit to communicative action are tactics that they believe will work but also that will avoid serious reputational damage through media or public censure (Lock & Harris, 1994). As Lock and Harris note, charting the differences between commercial and political marketing, there is no ethical framework that regulates political communication and so strategists are unconstrained. This can lead to parties pursuing a strategy that one scholar described as 'whatever it takes to win' (Elsheikh, 2018). In this section we unpack the tactics that might contribute most to a decline in the relationship between political institutions, in particular democratic institutions such as parties, elected representatives and governments, to examine their usage and potential impact. The second decade of the 21st Century has witnessed the rise of memetic, clickbait-esque communication which promotes simplistic and often empty slogans designed to capture the attention of the cognitive miser. Some of this form of communication may be misinformation or disinformation and often non-attributable to a specific source or registered political organization. These

forms of communication can also have a coercive character, forcing a false choice that can lead to polarization on issues. Such communication engenders negative emotions and can have the effect of leading citizens to perceive government as inefficient, incompetent, and offering false promises as the political information cycle fills with competing, contested perspectives. These factors are important as they contribute to a decline in general trust as well as reinforcing feelings of misrepresentation and the disenfranchisement of swathes of society. This argument is elaborated on using strategic examples prior to drawing the threads together to suggest why political marketing can be negative for democracy.

Memetic communication

Memetic communication is most associated with images that can be repurposed, however the roots of the term describe it as a form of cultural expression which can be easily transmitted and has a contagious quality (Dawkins, 1993). Ergo any communication designed to be eye-catching, shareable and memorable can have memetic qualities. The tweets of Donal Trump are globally renowned, one could describe them as making the inner thoughts of a president more accessible than ever before while also questioning whether the content is appropriate to maintain the credibility of the office or the cohesion of society. Taking two examples, firstly his reaction to Joe Biden announcing is candidature for 2020 on 25th April 2019; secondly on the publication of the Mueller report which found no direct collusion between Trump and Russian agents during the 2016 election.

"Welcome to the race Sleepy Joe. I only hope you have the intelligence, long in doubt, to wage a successful primary campaign. It will be nasty - you will be dealing with people who truly have some very sick & demented ideas. But if you make it, I will see you at the Starting Gate!" (https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1121388967444799488)

"….Congress has no time to legislate, they only want to continue the Witch Hunt, which I have already won. They should start looking at The Criminals who are already very well known to all. This was a Rigged System - WE WILL DRAIN THE SWAMP!" (https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1121049166615142400)

Trump has mastered the medium to deliver pithy commentary which defines his perspective of America, the political system, and his opponents. He naturally converts policy into memetic soundbites that can easily be shared and remediated. His election campaign transitioned neatly into the presidency, with his calls to 'Drain the Swamp', 'Make America Great Again', and criticism of many media outlets as 'Fake News' being frequently repeated. Trump also frequently retweets news clips from the Fox network, any relationship he builds is with a large segment of society who share his views and news diet. Trump thus positions himself as a primary definer, the one credible source that frames debates and perspectives among his audience (Anstead & Chadwick, 2018) communicating a shared righteous anger with his followers.

Yet one can find similar polarisation, through media choices, issue promotion and political attacks from many of those who are seeking the 2020 Democrat Party nomination. Elizabeth Warren accuses President Trump of "fanning the flames of hate and bigotry" (https://twitter.com/SenWarren/status/1120721556529872896), Sanders decries Trump saying "The

bigotry of the Trump administration is shameful"
(https://twitter.com/SenSanders/status/1117906632514650113). Biden in turn argues "The core values of this nation... our standing in the world... our very democracy...everything that has made America -- America --is at stake" (https://twitter.com/JoeBiden/status/1121353260231688192) in announcing his candidacy. While not as angry but equally memetic the Democrats also position themselves as primary definers. Citizens are asked whether they are for or against the Trump presidency on the terms set by the two sides, and whose perspective of the vision for America is closest to their own. There is little sense of the often lauded citizen input that political marketing was supposed to introduce to politics, rather visions are being imposed through the employment of memetic forms of communication.

Such simplistic forms of communication are not exclusive to US politics. On 26 April debates surrounding the impending (though at this point not yet certain to be held) European Parliamentary Election (EPE) in the UK surrounded racism as opposed to the Brexit issue itself. While the purpose of EPEs are to decide how a nation is represented within parliamentary debates in Brussels and Strasbourg, this has long descended into debates on the relationship with the EU or at best the state of the parties in UK public opinion. Yet on April 26 a negative atmosphere pervaded as allegations of Islamophobia within Conservative ranks, anti-Semitism on the Labour side, a range of racist and discriminatory allegations against the new Change UK candidates circulated. While parties themselves have stepped away from the melee these memes are shared via 'independent sources' which to their own audiences might also be primary definers on the nature of the contest and political institutions standing. This phenomena is new and worthy of further exploration.

Independent news – the PAC goes global

Political action committees (PACs) are a particular legal entity in America whose role in politics is protected by free speech laws. They are organizations set up specifically to provide material support to presidential candidates, usually in the form of donations but they can also actively campaign, and therefore allow citizens to combine forces to promote a specific policy. PACs range from being subsidiaries of major organisations such as the National Rifle Association's (NRA) Political Victory Fund, to trades bodies like the National Beer Wholesalers or labour bodies such as the International Association of Firefighters. Some are created for a single contest, Restore our Future was created solely to support Mitt Romney's candidature in 2012 for example; others for a single purpose. The Swift Boat Veterans for Truth were apparently created to spread false rumours that 2004 Democrat candidate John Kerry had lied about his career in the armed forces (Reyes, 2006). What the PAC system allows is for interventions into a campaign that may be supportive of the objectives of one candidate but will work independently of the control of the candidate. In 2016 the NRA spent $19.7 million attacking Clinton's patriotism and support for the 3rd amendment of the US constitution (the right to bear arms); $10.6 million was spent directly endorsing Donald Trump; these spends were double the amount spent attacking Obama in 2012 and five times the amount spent supporting Romney's challenge. The standard type of claim was Hilary Clinton would ban gun ownership with the message "Don't let Hillary leave you protected with nothing but a phone" featuring a woman fearing an intruder had entered her house. While many PACs are uncontroversial beyond questions about their influence on policy, what they offer to a candidate is an outlet for controversial or misleading statements which they can plausibly distance

themselves from. George W. Bush did not have to comment on the claims of Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, Kerry's campaign however was distracted finding the evidence to refute the claims; few PACs could be more controversial than Trump himself in 2016.

However the concept of the PAC is growing into a more global phenomenon as civil society groups and activists interject their arguments into election campaign discourse, often employing memetic communication. An example of this is the UK blogger Another Angry Voice (AAV). Thomas Clark started AAV in 2010 to critique the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition policies and subsequently the Conservative governments of David Cameron and then Theresa May. The blog openly supported Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn positioning itself as uncompromisingly left-wing, Clark claims to have spent up to 20 hours per day producing content for the 2017 general election and has been credited as playing an influential role on the voting behaviour of those exposed to his posts. Clark's posts tend to be long-form and erudite arguments using sources to evidence points made. However exposure to his posts for those with lower interest in politics is likely to be via social media where the blog title and accompanying visual circulate to attract readers. Many posts are illustrated by a satirical style image superimposed with speech bubbles. An example is an 'expose' posted 19 April 2019. The story tells how during the days of coalition current Liberal Democrat leader Vince Cable then Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills supported the sale of Royal Mail for the value of the business only and not its real estate assets: the implication is that the low valuation made it attractive to asset strippers. However the image shows then Chancellor George Osborne saying to Cable "Vince old mucker. Help me flog off £billions worth of public land at a tiny fraction of its true value so that my corporate mates can rake in the difference and in return you can have a six-figure salary, a chauffeur-driven car, and a temporary sense of self-importance for five years" (https://anotherangryvoice.blogspot.com/2019/04/the-royal-mail-property-privatisation.html). The article has no notable factual accuracies, yet casual viewers of the image may gain the impression that the deal was made for Cable to gain the ministerial role and associated privilege in return for turning a blind eye to Osborne's skullduggery. That impression has no basis in fact. What it contributes to therefore is a negative general trust in politics. There are numerous examples of similar claims across a range of independent sources operating in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Belgium and France and from all sides of the political spectrum. Many have a less factual basis than this example from AAV.

Misinformation and disinformation

In the wake of any Islamist terrorist atrocity it is easy to find memetic communication that re-emphasises the threat posed by those of the Muslim faith that live in the Western world or would settle in the US or EU nations. In the days after the 21 April 2019 attacks in Sri Lanka a familiar poster showing the refugees moving though the Balkans in 2015 was repurposed to claim 'Islamists are coming'. Such repurposing is a common trope of the meme, conflating current affairs with an image in order to build a composite that plays on fears and insecurities of those nations who have suffered or fear terrorist attacks. The Leave.EU campaign in the UK used similar tactics claiming Turkey, a country whose population was '80% Muslim', would join the EU. The image showed a red arrow, reminiscent of those used to show a military attack, from Turkey directly to the south of England. Other images showed Turkey, Syria and Iraq without clear borders with the same arrow. The implication being that remaining

a member of the EU gave free passage to large numbers of Muslims to enter the UK. The fact that Turkey has minimal chance of meeting the criteria to join the EU was inconvenient (for further analysis see https://hyperallergic.com/310631/the-visual-propaganda-of-the-brexit-leave-campaign/). When contested the decision for the audience is which side to believe and which threat is perceived most real; a point that will be returned to when we consider how communication can be coercive. Yet these forms of misinformation and disinformation, whether produced for a campaign or by a party – and this is a tactic of many far right groups – simply seek to sow dissent and apathy. They engender anger, weaken trust in those elected to protect the citizens, particularly when attacks are levelled at government or state institutions, and lead to apathy or support for more extremist alternatives.

Evidence for this can be found across countries with very different trust levels. Despite a 60% trust rating in 2018 German, far right groups are keen to attack the policies of Chancellor Merkel claiming she has failed to defend the people against criminals embedded within settling refugee groups. The debates on this issue led to an existential crisis for her administration in 2018 after a surge in support for the far right AfD (https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/06/a-battle-over-migration-is-threatening-to-topple-angela-merkel/562901/). Such claims aim to stir up polarisation in society as well as destabilising moderate regimes. The fire in Paris' Notre Dame Cathedral was used to reignite anti-Muslim feeling, InfoWars and French far-right activist Damien Rue were influential in claiming Muslims were responsible for the fire and were celebrating the damage to the ancient Christian place of worship (https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/notre-dame-fire-terrorism-conspiracies-alt-right-muslim-christian-a8871706.html). Without making any link to Muslims, Infowars also claimed Michelle Obama was sipping wine on a boat on the Seine watching the cathedral burn (https://www.infowars.com/shock-report-michelle-obama-drinks-as-notre-dame-burns/) the cruise she was on had actually been redirected so the likelihood is hers was not a ringside seat allowing her to be "enjoying the fire of Notre Dame on a Paris cruise sipping some fine champagne" as the original poster Leo Zagami claimed (https://www.infowars.com/shock-report-michelle-obama-drinks-as-notre-dame-burns/). These examples, whether from political motivated independent actors or parties on the fringes of our systems, demonstrate the prevalence of misinformation, conspiracy theories and downright lies for political gain. These all invoke the idea of 'doing anything to win', whether that be an argument, the primary defining of an issue frame or an election.

Empty sloganeering

Mis/Disinformation is part of a wider problem with the attention economy in politics and the battle to plant ideas in the subconscious of citizens to drive their political behaviour. Moving away from the highly professional environment of the US, or the hotly contested Brexit issue, we find a broader problem at the heart of modern political marketing communication: the empty slogan. The simplicity of a soundbite appeal to the cognitive miser who may read a headline only, enjoy a meme but not cognitive engage with content: it appeals to the system one thinker. On 21 April 2019 Volodymyr Zelensky, comedy actor with no political experience defeated incumbent Petro Poroshenko and with 73.22% of the votes became president of Ukraine. He was the star of hit comedy *Servant of the People* a television show which finds a relatively young high-school history teacher become president after a video of him decrying government corruption went viral. A party of the same name was created in

March 2018 with the aim of bringing "professional, decent people to power" (https://www.unian.ua/politics/2276034-yurist-zelenskogo-zareestruvav-novu-politichnu-partiyu-sluga-narodu.html) and to "change the mood and timbre of the political establishment" (https://web.archive.org/web/20190103055829/https://ua.interfax.com.ua/news/election2019/555634.html). Throughout the campaign he eschewed the established media, connecting with Ukrainian voters via social media and YouTube. His political position could be described as being an anti-Russian moderniser; he has claimed he seeks to govern with the people through referenda. Beyond broad claims about tax amnesties and an anti-corruption agenda there are no serious policies, perhaps his slogans sum up his appeal: 'No Promises; No Apologies' or 'Not Corrupt; Not a Thief'. Yet on a change ticket he has become a pivotal leader in a nation which stands as the gateway between Russia and the EU.

One might suggest that it is representative of the state of Ukraine that such slogans chime with an electorate to the extent they deliver a landslide victory to an outsider, and Zelensky may prove a competent and indeed reformist leader. Yet the slogan is becoming the platform (as the medium was claimed to be the message) and candidates can live and die by the way they embody their slogan. Qualitative research in the UK showed young voters in 2017 rejected Theresa May's 'strong and stable' monicker as not embodied while 'for the many' they could see as being lived by her rival Jeremy Corbyn a factor that might have proved pivotal in leading to a hung parliament (Lilleker & Liefbroer, 2018). The slogan 'Make America Great Again' borrowed from Reagan by Trump was embodied by his image as a ruthless and successful businessman. 'On the Move' may have similarly appealed more than 'This is our country' and led Macron to secure victory over far-right Marine Le Pen in 2016 in France. The question is whether the reduction to slogans, which are at best vague and at worst empty, contribute to democratic failure. With 'no promises' as Zelensky claims, do citizens fill that void with hope as one consumerist perspective of elections claims (Scullion, 2010), if that hope is unfulfilled how then to citizens feel next time they are asked to make a choice. Hence the prevalence of slogans, and the need to embody the simple heuristic, can be negative for the sustainability of a project which in turn can lead to declining general trust.

Coercive communication

The thorniest issue is whether political marketing communication can be coercive, is there a language of threat and force that makes one choice the only one available. Of course no political candidate puts a rhetorical gun to the head of a voter and says vote for me or else. However there are implied threats. The NRA's pro-Trump message that the young woman's only defence will be hoping for a quick police response if there is an intruder in her house and Clinton in the White House is a fear campaign. The coercive nature is be allowed to defend yourself, as Trump would allow, or potentially be raped and murdered waiting for a 911 response. The Leave.EU campaign for the EU referendum had lesser direct fears but played on xenophobia as well as the threat of Islamist extremism by invoking the refugee crisis, the distant likelihood Turkey might join the EU and their proximity to Syria and Iraq as threats of incursion into British communities. In other cases visions of a nation are offered. Biden versus Trump will be between an inclusive candidacy and one that is exclusive; Trump defining being American as white Anglo-Saxon protestant. Competing visions over France, looking back or forward; in Ukraine and many other former Soviet satellites or constituent parts with corruption being a core issue. Such choices

can have a coercive nature where the threat is felt as real, severe and personally damaging if the wrong choice is made. As the primary definers seek to polarise opinion through memetic communication there is greater likelihood people may feel coerced even if the communication in itself does not threaten personal extinction should you not elide your views with campaign objectives. The question is whether such communication is damaging as people feel coerced, make a choice for negative reasons but retain a largely negative view of the establishment. With many anti-establishment, outsider candidates stoking fears of collusion and corruption in order to gain victory politics appears to becoming an increasingly negative environment.

The dubious ethics of 21st century political marketing

The above charts a series of examples of how political marketing communication, the most overt and practised part of the political marketing mix, may have a negative impact on trust because of the dubious ethical standards met by practitioners. The basic argument here is that while commercial marketing does everything possible to maximise profits it works within an ethical framework determined by regulations, some online marketing the exception; political marketing lacks any regulation and so when attempting to maximise support and votes does not abide by an ethical framework. In order to cut through the cluttered and fragmented political information cycle there is heavy reliance on forms of communication that have a memetic quality: memorable and shareable images and slogans designed to manipulate. Much communication is largely empty sloganeering, a vague promise that invites citizens to fill the gaps with hope. Eliciting hope, as well as anger, forces citizens to make zero-sum choices; often presented via messages that have a coercive character. More problematically these forms of communication can misinform or even completely mislead (disinform) citizens, fringe parties usually on the far right seem happy to circulate such material under their name. But a range of other unattributed sources or pseudo-independent activists can produce material that does not even get the minimal scrutiny by media that party communication may warrant. Thus campaign communication environments increasingly are replete with memetic communication that sloganizes and misleads with the only barrier being the defences offered by audiences' pre-existing knowledge. However if citizens only defence is their political bias, which may be highly informed and partisan or founded out of mis/disinformation the mechanism for persuasion is likely to be confirmation bias. Citizens are drawn to accept that which they already believe, and their prejudices are reinforced.

The failures are firstly with the political institutions themselves, by communicating in ways that reinforce the biases of their core vote, promoting anger, playing on their fears and making any claim that they feel will not be heavily censured by anyone but their opponents. A fight between opposing sides simply reinforces prejudices further, contributing to polarisation on core issues. The mainstream media also fail to play their role as independent arbiters challenging misleading claims. At best challenges are the preserve of specialist political programming that the majority of citizens with low political interest do not tune in to. At worst misleading claims are exaggerated by tabloids seeking to sell their products by playing to the biases of their readership. One can debate whether social media should be viewed as a publisher or a conduit and whether regulation is required or is even possible to prevent misleading information being circulated. It is possible to block certain accounts, but freedom of speech means that either social media becomes a completely apolitical space or politics will continue to

interject into the daily diet of personal storytelling by users. The failure is also at the level of the citizen. Citizens lack the interest and knowledge to differentiate between what is true, half-true, exaggerated or completely false, and even if they can it is still possible to draw the most informed person to share false information because they in the moment see it having 'truthiness[iv]'. However it is difficult to blame citizens when this is part of a wider system failure. Education tends to eschew the teaching of politics and ensuring political or indeed media literacy, a problem long recognised but still largely not confronted adequately (Lewis & Jhally, 1998). Similarly, the communication tactics of political organisations appear designed to keep the citizenry reliant on minimal information, by promoting memetic communication while backing this with complex long-form arguments designed for those with higher commitment and expertise. Hence we return to the key argument: that the problem lies in the way political marketing communication is practiced.

Prior to the regulation of commercial promotion the dominant philosophy, as expounded by Edward Bernays, was that an irrational and desire-driven mass could, and for their own good should, easily be manipulated through the science of propaganda. Captured in his 1928 work *Propaganda*, Bernays claimed "Intelligent men must realize that propaganda is the modern instrument by which they can fight for productive ends and help to bring order out of chaos" (Bernays, 1928: 159). Regulation has restricted all but a minority of corporates to adhere to reasonably strict ethical codes, politics however does not enjoy such a framework. Bernays was rather utopian in his thinking, suggesting propaganda was mainly employed for social good (Bernays, 1927); one can make the claim that the majority of political institutions adhere to, or at least believe they adhere to, a similar principle. However the more unscrupulous activist, or the frustrated ideologue wishing to cut through the clutter, may deliberately or accidentally stray into territory beyond the line of representing the good of society. If we believe that strong society depends on strong democracy, that democracy is being undermined by the negative emotions that lead to low trust, and that political marketing communication contributes to the decline in trust then there is an impending crisis of democracy as more players in the campaign environment pursue a 'say anything to win' strategy. The above offers indications that this strategy is widespread, is damaging for democracy, and is a key part of political marketing strategy: one that lacks the necessary reflective thinking and ethical framework to adequately serve democracy.

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[i] https://www.pewglobal.org/2017/10/16/many-unhappy-with-current-political-system/
[ii] https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2018-10/Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Employee_Experience_2018_0.pdf
[iii] Pew Global Attitudes and Trends, 2018: https://www.pewglobal.org/2018/10/17/international-political-engagement/
[iv] A phrase which pre-dates the term post-truth coined by US presenter Stephen Colbert which neatly captures how prejudices determine how true a piece of communication is perceived to be (see Lilleker, 2018)