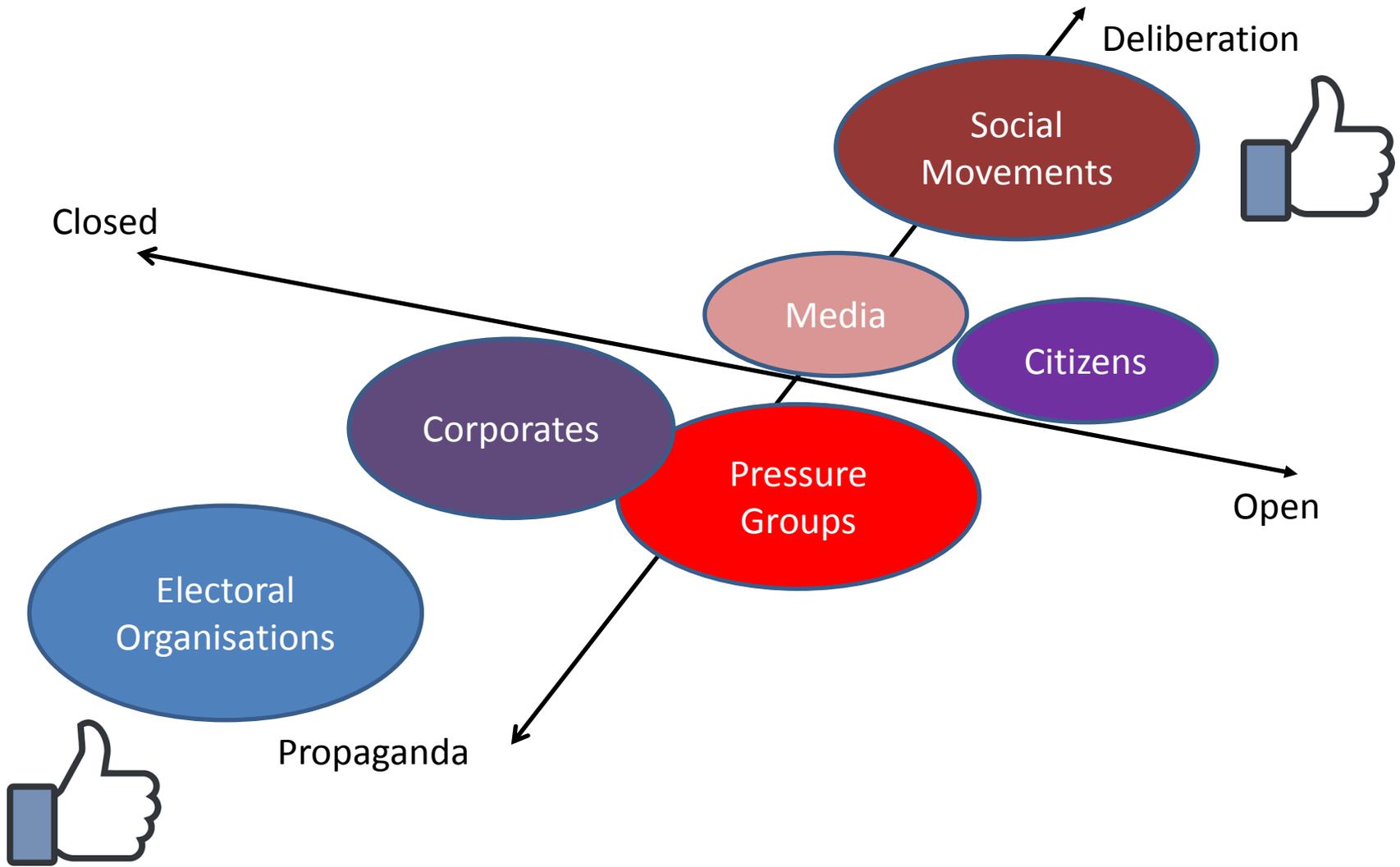


Misperceptions and missed opportunities: how Facebookers talked Brexit



Dr Darren G. Lilleker
Associate Professor in Political Communication
Centre for Politics & Media Research
Bournemouth University



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

	Groups Size	Posts per day	Likes (AVE)	Shares (AVE)	Comments (AVE)
Stronger IN	327,589	6.3	4.2k	652	2.25k
Vote LEAVE	549,230	4.5	227k	769	2.5k

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

Stronger In

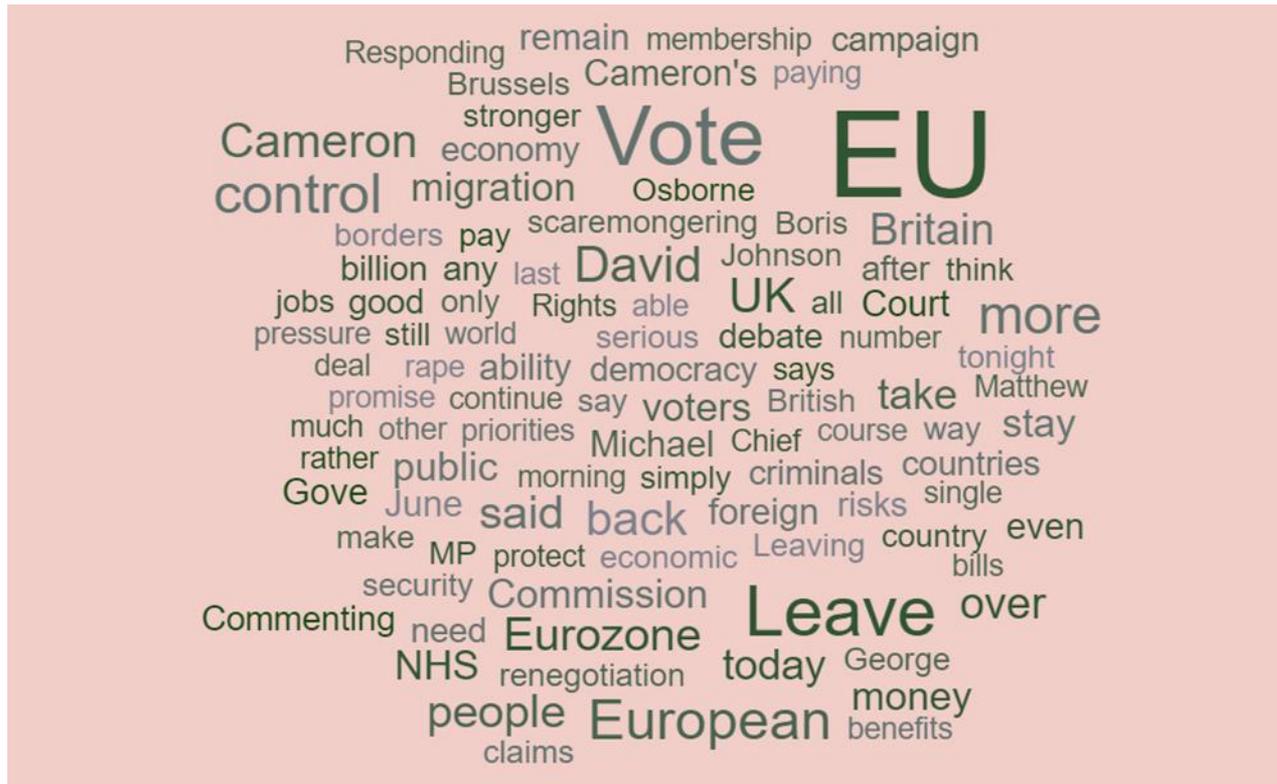
- Homogeneity high
 - Dissonance expressed as campaign heavily criticised
 - Some emotionally resonant arguments developed
- Content/Tone belligerent but confident
 - Personal attacks levelled at political leaders of the campaign
- Agenda setting by official campaign communication
 - Begrudging acceptance 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

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