

Social death: How did millennial liberals lose history's most digital elections?

Since President Obama used social media mastery to win two elections, liberals thought they owned the digital space. But both major elections of 2016 showed things had changed. How did the liberal digital elite go wrong?

What did the right get right? And have user profiling and behavioural analysis changed the way elections are fought forever, asks Alex Connock?

Auspiciously or not, it was Friday 13th. That day in May 2016, the bosses of hit websites Facebook, BuzzFeed, The LADbible, and Twitter filed into 10 Downing Street, invited to help get the young to register to vote. There was even someone from casual dating site Tinder¹.

David Cameron was swiping left, hooking up with the millennial, digital generation – and no doubt aware that among his key, targeted Brexit psychographic, the ‘Disengaged Middle’, 70 per cent sourced their news primarily from Facebook².

Once unleashed, the viral dynamics of social media engagement would not behave, but skit like zephyrs over the social timeline. The social media battles of 2016 would then be won at the ballots by the populist right, by the glib agitprop of Brexit and Trump. And tech commentators would hypothesise the roles of paid reach in Facebook, and vote-winning armies of right-wing bots, dispatched by behavioural algorithms in support.

But as coding language entered political science, there were still more likely explanations. Maybe the right won the digital elections just by being better at the punchy output the social news cycle demands – Farage and Trump having perfected the art of saying something outrageous at the vicarage tea party. Or maybe Facebook users are just more alt right than right-on in the first place.

How many Likes have you got?

Nineteen years earlier, Tony Blair gave Noel Gallagher and the Britpop gang a glittering soiree³ at No. 10 – an Arcadian, pre-internet era where no-one checked Twitter, and everyone cared what tabloids said. The occasion, and Blair's message, was filtered by just a handful of press owners, most of whom a prime minister could have dinner with.

For similar reach in 2016, Cameron would have to feed the Glastonbury Festival. He had to seep out his message through a chaotic tented city of millions of peer-to-peer social feeds. Just 6 per cent of 18-24 year olds now got their news feed from newspapers, versus 28 per cent from social media.⁴ Cameron's meeting wasn't so much digital Cool Britannia, as an online bet on 'Europe or bust.'

The best option was to befriend the platforms. The social media elite scrupulously practised Brexit agnosticism, but was still an intravenous line into an audience that newspaper potentates could only fantasise. BuzzFeed was so big it had 168m views for a single video on its food site, Tasty⁵ – a very Europe-friendly Greek salad as it happens.

Cameron's push for voter engagement gambled the young would be pro-Europe. If that demographic registered, everyone could get on with Summer and the Euros, a future livelihood secured for 19.5m UK under 25s. And so the 2016 Bite the Ballot campaign launched a 'generation drive' on June 1, presented as Brexit-agnostic. "Politics needs rebranding – and that's where you come in," said its website: "#Turn up for the EU Ref."⁶ (Nine months later, no one had had the heart to take the site down.)

Remain weren't only into voter registration – they also plunged into social media campaigning first. In February 2016 they planned a Stronger In Europe 'Twitter war room' and a paid push for Cameron's Facebook page.⁷ Meanwhile the Leave camp started badly on social. A key funder emailed a colleague: "The website is awful, the Facebook page worse....If this is your best shot, you should be shot."⁸ With the stars aligning like this for Remain, what could go wrong?

Read the comments

What could go wrong was that the users had opinions of their own. Europe stories would generate aggressively 'anti' comments on social sites. The LADbible had not taken a Remain/Leave position but some Facebook users interpreted one anyway: "TheLADbible can you quit with the lefty political views, you're not panafuckingrama, you're here to make me laugh. Now go find me a video of a dog that has a shit catch. Or just like the government, I'll unsubscribe from you're views (sic)." For that comment: 1350 likes.

The supposed secret army of sock puppets

And then the story took a diversion into tech. Newspapers said^{9 10} the Right used arcane data modelling and psychographic profiling. Commentators theorised corporations with armies of automated 'bots'. The inventor of the world-wide web Tim Berners-Lee said (as part of a wider menu of points to improve about the web)¹¹: "The increasing sophistication of algorithms drawing upon rich pools of personal data mean that political campaigns are now building individual adverts targeted directly at users."

Targeted advertising bots do exist. But losing to international bots is also way more palatable for a professional political campaigner than losing because you haven't got enough friends on Facebook.

Paid vs earned political advertising

Facebook success comes down to engagement: how many people like and share your stuff, both of which push items up in users' news feed. The Leave side used paid advertising on social – targeting a limited budget towards people most likely to share it. In other words they did what consumer goods advertisers do every day.

The allure of Facebook's advertising model is that if you open a Stroud fishing tackle superstore, you can specifically buy views of Stroud's self-declared anglers – 'paid views.' To the extent the fishermen share the content, anyone taking the bait is an 'earned' view – which is the free stuff you want. Advertisers, and even big social channels, kickstart content with paid views to key demographics and influencers, then watch it go viral as the engagement hopefully kicks in. It's like seeding a cloud to start the rain.

So Leave spent 40 per cent of its budget on a consultancy firm, according to the Daily Telegraph¹², giving £3.5m to AggregateIQ (AIQ), a small tech company in provincial Canada – but unpack that, and it gets less weird. That AIQ is a consultancy in highly-targeted Facebook advertising is a statement of the obvious, because all Facebook advertising is by definition targeted, unless the client is spending their budget like a blind drunk grenadier with a blunderbuss. As Zack Massingham of AIQ told the Telegraph: "The reality is the vast majority of that money was for online advertising to those groups of people the campaign wanted to reach." That was about the 'paid' views, rather than (say) billboard advertising on lorries.

Meanwhile for the 'earned' component, Leave.EU's social media got modern. Campaigner Andy Wigmore reportedly perfected real-time adjustment in posts to maximise effectiveness. "Within an hour, we would change a headline on Facebook or Twitter maybe five or six times just to gauge the reaction. We were monitoring how many people looked and shared it, where it went, and reacted accordingly."¹³

In the focused, cerebral offices of major UK social media channels, doing that is about as exotic as having a Gregg's sausage roll for lunch. It happens every day.

Real news vs fake news

In the US, the context was broadly the same for the alt right as for the Brexiteers; identifying liberal bias in the mainstream media, they aggressively flanked it with social. Breitbart economics editor John Carney said at Columbia Journalism School¹⁴ in February 2017: "Do you think you're predominantly staffed by people who view Trump's point of view as not only wrong, but also evil?" And to right-wing 'populists', that perceived imbalance in the media needed redress.

So the conservative movement grew its own online news outlets. “Breitbart is now bigger than Pornhub”, said a headline¹⁵, as it briefly became 29th most trafficked site in the US, and used that traction in the election. The New Yorker said it undermined Hillary Clinton¹⁶ by tracking which stories about her got the most engagement to isolate the most potent weapons against her.

Fake news wasn’t what Breitbart did – but it did grow industrially on many other sites. In November 2016 detailed BuzzFeed analysis¹⁷ claimed top fake election stories outranked Facebook engagement on the top stories from 19 major news outlets combined. Of the top false election stories, 85 per cent were pro-Trump.

Fake news aside, was the reach of conservative sites organically driven, or manipulated? Observer journalist Carole Cadwalladr rummaged around in¹⁸ the right’s social media toolbox, exploring how analytics companies used data collection and profiling to help Trump target advertising effectively and reach people most likely to share it. The Washington Post agreed it was effective, and said after the election one leading firm in the space won new business from its success.¹⁹ But at a basic level this was still just paid and earned reach, none of which means they circulated fake news or did anything else wrong.

Indeed Mark Zuckerberg, speaking at Techonomy²⁰ after the US election said: “The idea that fake news on Facebook – of which it’s a very small amount of the content – influenced the election in any way is a pretty crazy idea.”

For one thing, fake news had massive competition – not always presented in the statistical picture. Facebook made the point²¹ that non-text stories like native video, live content and image posts from major news outlets also saw mass engagement, but weren’t measured in that BuzzFeed analysis. For instance a Guardian Facebook upload of a Jimmy Kimmel Live video of Barack Obama reading out Trump tweets reached 51m views with 498,423 shares.²² Those are big numbers.

Meanwhile the story of Breitbart beating Pornhub in site visits wasn’t what it seemed either. The Trump-sceptical New York Times was always well ahead. And by March 2017 rankings,²³ the Times was at 27, Washington Post at 42 and Breitbart back at 45; hardly the conservative media upending the news industry, or a black box of battle-winning bots.

Data is not the only information

In fact, the obvious counterpoint to the view that big-data geeks won Trump the election is that one firm who helped him also helped Ted Cruz – who got knocked out of the race.²⁴ That’s probably because before targeted advertising can work, there does have to be actual people receptive to the message in the first place to build upon. A sceptical pre-election piece in AdAge²⁵ questioned whether behavioural methodology always delivered. The New York Times²⁶ doubted that any digital ‘secret sauce’ helped Trump: “Many scoff.”

The Columbia Journalism Review of March 3, 2017 had a simpler answer to what happened in the digital elections²⁷: people just stick to what they like. If the media blamed externalities for the unanticipated victories – Russian hacking, fake news – Columbia analysis just said the Internet gave people personalised filter bubbles, so they could read ‘The Daily Me’. Breitbart developed as ‘a distinct and insulated media system, using social media as a backbone to transmit a hyper-partisan perspective to the world’. An earlier book²⁸ about conservative broadcaster Russ Limbaugh had called that ‘the echo chamber.’ On social, everyone hears more from people who agreed with them in the first place. Look at your own Twitter or Facebook feed, and see how few of them disagree with what you think.

Strange attractors

So the fact Brexit and Trump won elections does not evidence the ‘secret sauce’ of behavioural profiling by armies of bots – though their sophistication as paid-view generators of reach is something that will be key in future elections. It could equally be a question of political charisma seeping across peer networks through its sheer outlandishness, in the same way that click-bait, Photoshopped pictures of ‘mysterious sea creatures’ washed up on beaches go massively viral. Gordon Fletcher of Salford University²⁹ says: “Politicians like Farage and Trump become beacons for support or critical response, strange attractors. Engaging at all precludes ambivalence.” The resulting extreme partisanship can be digitally targeted.

At the London Ad Fest event at in March 2017 a session on classic political advertising pulled out the ‘Britain Isn’t Working’ classics, but also a brilliant Remain advert. It was a picture of IDS, Gove, Farage and Johnson, all looking like plonkers, with the slogan: ‘Do you want to be left alone on a small island with these men?’³⁰

This was effective, brutal, negative, non-ambivalent, un-nuanced, and perfect material for social sharing. Except, Remain didn’t share it.

I wish they had done, because the hard truth is Remain and the Democrats weren’t cheated by behavioural data analysis, fake news or armies of bots. They just didn’t fight anywhere near smart enough.

Notes

¹ Patrick Christys *Daily Express* (17 May 2016), Cameron ‘signs up with TINDER & the LADBIBLE in bid to get youngsters to stick with EU’ by <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/670934/David-Cameron-Prime-Minister-Tinder-LadBible-EU-referendum-Europe>

² Tim Shipman *All Out War: The Full story of how Brexit sank Britain’s Political Class*

³ Clare Rudebeck & Genevieve Atilde *Independent* (27 April 2005), *Eight years later, how the party ended for the Cool Britannia* set <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/eight-years-later-how-the-party-ended-for-the-cool-britannia-set-526457.html>

⁴ Reuters Institute, University of Oxford, *Digital News Report (2016)* http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital-News-Report-2016.pdf?utm_source=digitalnewsreport.org&utm_medium=referral

- ⁵ *Tasty* Facebook site (owned by BuzzFeed) (viewed March 2017) <https://www.facebook.com/Buzzfeedtasty/videos/1721186814800627/>
- ⁶ *Bite the Ballot* website, (viewed March 2017) <http://bitetheballot.co.uk>
- ⁷ Tim Shipman *All Out War: The Full story of how Brexit sank Britain's Political Class*
- ⁸ Quoted by Tim Shipman in *All Out War: The Full story of how Brexit sank Britain's Political Class*
- ⁹ Carole Cadwalladr, *Observer* (26 February 2017) *The Big Data Billionaire Waging War on Mainstream Media* <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/feb/26/robert-mercero-breitbart-war-on-media-steve-bannon-donald-trump-nigel-farage>
- ¹⁰ Jamie Doward and Alice Gibbs, *Observer* (4 March 2017) *Did Cambridge Analytica influence the Brexit vote and the US election?* <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/mar/04/nigel-oakes-cambridge-analytica-what-role-brexit-trump>
- ¹¹ Tim Berners-Lee *Observer* (March 12 2017) *I Invented the web. Here are three things we need to change to save it* <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/mar/11/tim-berners-lee-web-inventor-save-internet>
- ¹² Patrick Foster and Martin Evans *Telegraph* (24 Feb 2017) *How a tiny Canadian IT company helped swing the Brexit vote for Leave* <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/24/exclusive-tiny-canadian-company-helped-swing-brexit-vote-leave/>
- ¹³ Quoted by Tim Shipman *All Out War: The Full story of how Brexit sank Britain's Political Class*
- ¹⁴ David Uberti, *Columbia Journalism Review – Breitbart editor slams mainstream media in Pulitzer Hall* http://www.cjr.org/covering_trump/Breitbart-editor-columbia-stelter.php?facebook&utm_content=buffer54e8e&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer
- ¹⁵ Ben Kew, *Breitbart*, 19 February 2017. *Breitbart News 29th most trafficked site in America, overtakes Pornhub and ESPN* <http://www.Breitbart.com/big-journalism/2017/02/19/Breitbart-news-traffic-surpasses-Pornhub-espn/>
- ¹⁶ Jane Mayer, *The New Yorker*, *The Reclusive Hedge-fund Tycoon Behind the Trump Presidency* 27 March 2017 <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/27/the-reclusive-hedge-fund-tycoon-behind-the-trump-presidency>
- ¹⁷ BuzzFeed News – *This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News on Facebook* https://www.Buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook?utm_term=.xbnW5QBOW#.ajPJ0vbDJ
- ¹⁸ Carole Cadwalladr *The Observer* () *Robert Mercer: the big data billionaire waging war on mainstream media* <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/feb/26/robert-mercero-breitbart-war-on-media-steve-bannon-donald-trump-nigel-farage>
- ¹⁹ Matea Gold and Frances Stead Sellers *Washington Post*, After Working for Trump's campaign, British data firm eyes new US government contracts. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/after-working-for-trumps-campaign-british-data-firm-eyes-new-us-government-contracts/2017/02/17/a6dee3c6-f40c-11e6-8d72-263470bf0401_story.html?utm_term=.a0da7e9583e5
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- ²¹ Craig Silverman, *Buzzfeed* (November 16, 2016.) *This analysis shows how viral fake news stories outperformed real news on Facebook* https://www.Buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook?utm_term=.mpreJM6Ye#.wsGgZ5Ykg
- ²² *Guardian* Facebook video *When Donald J. Trump tweeted that Barack Obama is the worst president in the history of the United States – he probably didn't expect Obama to read it out on live television.* <https://www.facebook.com/theguardian/videos/1507085585985170/>
- ²³ Alexa rankings US March 2017 <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/US>
- ²⁴ Kate Kaye, *AdAge* (August 16, 2016) *In DC, Cambridge Analytica not exactly Toast of the Town* <http://adage.com/article/campaign-trail/cambridge-analytica-toast/305439/>
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- ²⁶ Nicholas Confessore and Danny Hakim *New York Times* (March 6 2017) *Data Firm Says 'Secret Sauce' Aided Trump: Many Scoff* <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/06/us/politics/cambridge-analytica.html?smprod=nytcore-iphone&smid=nytcore-iphone-share&r=2>
- ²⁷ Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, Hal Roberts and Ethan Zuckerman *Columbia Journalism Review* (March 3 2017) *Study: Breitbart-led right-wing media ecosystem altered broader media agenda* by <http://www.cjr.org/analysis/Breitbart-media-trump-harvard-study.php?link>
- ²⁸ Jamieson, K. and Cappella J. (2010) *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- ²⁹ Interviewed March 2017
- ³⁰ John Plunkett *Guardian* (1 July 2016) *Rejected Remain Campaign Posters Revealed by Ad Agencies* <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jul/01/rejected-remain-campaign-posters-revealed-by-ad-agencies>

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