

# **Fact-checking false claims and propaganda in the age of post-truth politics: the Brexit referendum**

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## **Abstract**

This chapter examines the claims that the current age is one of post-truth politics, where politicians not only lie, but do not suffer at the ballot box from being caught out in a lie by the news media. Donald Trump is the paradigmatic case, as a leader who has lied prolifically and with an unprecedented disregard for the truth, whilst retaining a fervently supportive base, but the pro-‘Brexit’ campaign prior to the British referendum on membership of the European Union (EU) has been raised as a parallel British example. This chapter examines the evidence in support of this characterisation, through a secondary analysis of the literature alongside a small purposive sample of relevant fact-checking articles.

The chapter reviews the key factual disputes, misinformation and misrepresentations in the campaign as identified in fact-checking and investigative journalism, and the evidence from polling data that voters were swayed by these claims. It then assesses the extent to which these conclusions made their way into the mainstream reporting, and the role that journalism played in amplifying or attenuating the problematic aspects of the debate.

It concludes firstly that misleading claims were made on both sides, but all were more defensible in relation to evidence than Trump’s ‘bullshitting’, and do not represent a departure from established ‘spin’. Secondly, there is little evidence that the problematic

claims were decisive for voters. Finally, the dominant news framing exacerbated the more propagandistic aspects of the campaigns and marginalised nuanced argument.

## Introduction

The notion that we are living in an age of ‘post-truth politics’ exploded into public consciousness in 2016, following the US presidential election and the British referendum on membership of the European Union (EU) that year. In much of the handwringing about the state of contemporary democracy that followed the ‘Brexit’ vote, there was a sense that the Leave campaigners did not so much win the EU referendum as the Remain camp lost it. This is partly because the polls indicated that Remain started out ahead, but often also seems to assume that the Remain case was objectively stronger because it had more official, authoritative and expert voices lined up behind it, and so the outcome was intrinsically problematic.

Much like the 2016 US presidential election, the Brexit vote reflected a wider resurgence in nationalist populism in Western democracies, which is in turn attributed to dissatisfaction with globalisation, especially in terms of the mobility of labour. Like Trump’s totemic pledge to build a border wall, claims about immigration by the Leave campaign and their tabloid press supporters were highly propagandistic, but in very familiar ways (for example, see Briant et al., 2013). News coverage featured sweeping, unsubstantiated claims about the social and economic impact of immigration, associating migrants with crime, and using apocalyptic metaphors such as swarming, flooding, invading (Moore and Ramsay, 2017). This rhetoric goes beyond mere stylistic sophistry – by playing to negative, divisive emotions of fear of ‘the other’ and dehumanising migrants, the Leave propagandists aimed to manipulate people into a defensive position against international cooperation. However, ‘post-truth’ anxiety centred on the perception that the Leave campaign had illegitimately undermined the more rational case to remain in the EU, despite the availability of news reporting and

fact-checking conveying the ‘facts’ about the economic cost of leaving. This interpretation blames both the political campaigners and the voters for the rancorous and uninformative debate, but does not recognise any lessons for journalists.

This chapter therefore examines whether the Brexit campaigns and the response of referendum voters supports these popular assertions about post-truth politics, and in particular, the role of journalism in parsing the former to inform the latter.

The next section examines the emergence of concern over the truthfulness of political communication and voters being swayed by instinctive beliefs, values and emotions rather than ‘facts’. The following section explores challenges to journalists’ distinction of ‘objective’ newswork from these subjective and emotional discourses that they claim to eschew as propagandistic. The EU referendum debate is then examined via a secondary analysis of research on the campaigns, news reporting and corresponding shifts in public opinion, in order to evaluate the characterisation of British political culture as ‘post-truth’. Here, I consider the extent to which mainstream media reporting did effectively convey all the relevant claims and counterclaims in the debate on leaving or remaining in the EU, with a focus on two opposing economic claims that are used to exemplify post-truth politics in the UK. Finally, I assess the contribution of fact-checking journalism to the debate and the implications for the future of journalism.

### **From truth to truthiness?**

Although ‘post-truth’ was word of the year in 2016, the associated concerns about the ‘truth’, as a neglected and even maligned concept, had been bubbling under the surface

for at least a decade. Michael Schudson (2009) identifies the 2003 invasion of Iraq on false premises as the key moment when politicians embraced a relativist conception of truth and gave academics pause in an essay that is one of three in Barbie Zelizer's collection *The Changing Faces of Journalism* under the section heading 'On Truthiness'. The term 'truthiness' itself dates back to 2005, when it was coined by satirist Stephen Colbert (Schudson, 2009) to capture the Bush administration's perceived lack of concern with interpretations of reality. Others (Stauber and Rampton, 2003, Miller, 2003), however, understood this as a return to propaganda in American foreign policy after a period of post-Cold War uncertainty, when the media became briefly influential in what was dubbed 'the CNN effect' (Robinson, 2005), rather than a novel political embrace of postmodern relativism.

Trump brought a new meaning to 'truthiness', asserting claims that he *felt* to be true and that some supporters apparently also instinctively believed, regardless of whether the checkable, 'factual' support he offered was disputed or proven false. There is evidence that Trump's loyal supporters tended to believe his claims, but were no less supportive of him after accepting that the claim was untrue (Swire et al., 2017, Nyhan et al., 2019). Swire et al (2017) conclude that people 'do not necessarily insist on veracity as a prerequisite for supporting political candidates,' but the data only supports the conclusion that *Trump supporters* do not. Moreover, if voters are given the impression from news reporting of political campaigning that all candidates are economical with the truth in some way, or in a (falsely) equivalent way (Birks, 2019b), then they may conclude that they are not in a position to demand veracity via the choice they have been given.

Misleading or erroneous truth claims is not a new phenomenon in political communication, and nor is negative campaigning and political journalism that focuses disproportionately on politicians' gaffes and untruths (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995). However, what is distinctive about Trump is not only that he lies so prolifically, but in that, as psychologist Bella DePaulo (2017) observed, 'he doesn't seem to be thinking about how he can lie in ways that can be defended as truthful.' Perhaps this kind of lying – not slyly twisting the statistics, not engaging in sophistry, but just straight-up bullshitting (i.e. having a disregard for the truth) – is regarded as less hypocritical.

Discussing fact-checkers being driven 'to distraction' by Trump's erroneous claims, Selena Zito argued that 'When he makes claims like this, the press takes him literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally' (Zito, 2016). In other words, supporters perceive that Trump sees the world the way that they do, rather than fixating on the specific claims he uses to elaborate on that worldview as journalists do.

This is the nub of what is meant by 'post-truth politics' and it suggests that journalists cannot tackle political disinformation of this kind, either through the traditional conventions of objective journalism or the more recent genre of fact-checking journalism (Ball, 2017, d'Ancona, 2017, Davis, 2017). Vos and Thomas (2018) argue that following the 2016 US presidential election, journalists used the discourse of post-truth 'to diffuse the blame—this was not a crisis of journalistic authority, but authority in general,' since 'journalists had done their democratic duty and yet the public did not act as expected' (Vos and Thomas, 2018).

The fact-checking movement emerged in parallel with the development of concerns that political communication was become detached from objective reality. However, unlike those who identify the problem as a 'post-truth' culture and society, fact-checking was substantially inspired by journalists' perception of their *own* profession's failings in the wake of 9/11 – in particular, their credulity at the case for the invasion of Iraq (Dobbs, 2012).

The movement began in 2003 with the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania launching *Factcheck.org* as 'a nonpartisan, non-profit "consumer advocate" for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics' through 'the best practices of both journalism and scholarship' (Factcheck.org, 2020). In the UK, Channel 4 News piloted their *FactCheck* service for the 2005 general election, and brought it back permanently in the run up to the following election in 2010. Other well-known fact-checking organizations in the US include the *Washington Post Fact Checker*, and the *Tampa Bay Times'* widely syndicated *Politifacts*, both of which launched in 2007, and in the UK the *BBC News* service *Reality Check* and independent non-profit *Full Fact* have both operated since 2010.

In the US, fact-checkers have diligently recorded Trump not only stating falsehoods extravagantly often, but repeating the same factually untrue statements despite fact-checkers' corrections – in July 2020 when he breached the 20,000 mark in the Washington Post Factchecker database, there were almost 500 untruths that he had repeated at least three times, and 40 false claims that he had repeated at least 20 times (Kessler et al., 2020), and this only escalated during the US presidential election campaign five months later (Kessler, 2020). That Trump lost that election is no more a

repudiation of the post-truth thesis than his victory in 2016 was a repudiation of fact-checking, given that in both cases there were many other factors at work (including wild conspiracy theories and 'fake news' on the one hand, and very visible mishandling of the covid-19 pandemic on the other). The Trump era did mark a departure from politics as usual. However, it's not clear that it represented a wider shift in the political climate in and beyond the US, and in particular, to the EU Referendum debate in the UK.

### **Brexit – propaganda in a post-truth political climate?**

The campaign for Brexit is frequently mentioned alongside Trump's presidency as evidence of post-truth political communication, as based on emotional appeals and misinformation. Prominent Leave campaigners have fed this narrative. The second most prominent pro-Brexit group after the official Vote Leave campaign, Leave.EU, acknowledged aspiring to Trump-style tactics. Co-founder Arron Banks, otherwise best known at the time as the main donor to the UK Independence Party (UKIP), was reported to have said, after the vote, 'The Remain campaign featured fact, fact, fact, fact, fact. It doesn't work. You've got to connect with people emotionally. It's the Trump success' (Deacon, 2016). At the same time, however, the official pro-Brexit campaign, Vote Leave, characterised the Remain campaign's central messaging – warnings of dire economic consequences to leaving the EU – as 'Project Fear', and not as factual but based on forecasting methods with a poor track record of accuracy.

Both sides, then, were accused of propagandistic disinformation and emotional manipulation. Nonetheless, the following section will argue that there were no



mainstream British politicians on either side of the debate who displayed anything like Trump's disregard for empirical facts in their campaigning, and that voters were not demonstrably misinformed by the problematic claims. The emotional narratives were more problematic, but here the tabloid press were more culpable than the political campaigns.

A notable contrast with the US is that the UK has a very highly partisan press, which has long peddled a Eurosceptic framing of the EU. This was established and reinforced by decades of euro-myths peddled in jokey stories about 'bonkers' EU regulations on how bendy a banana could be, or placing size limits on condoms (Wring, 2016). These entirely false stories were promoted by anti-EU newspapers, including many written by chief Brexiteer and now Prime Minister, Boris Johnson whilst EU correspondent for the Telegraph. Unsurprisingly, then, the most problematically propagandistic campaign claims were not attenuated but exacerbated by sensationalist reporting that drowned out the more sober and nuanced arguments.

In the following sections I will explore the more dubious, misleading and manipulative claims made in the referendum campaigns, the ways in which they were reported and fact-checked, and the evidence for audience reception of these claims extrapolated from polling. Finally, I will discuss the overall role of the news media in the EU referendum debate, whether it is another authoritative voice that has been rejected by a post-truth public, or more complicit in amplifying the more problematic aspects of political communication.

### ***The campaigns' contested and misleading empirical claims***

Whilst not on the same scale as Trump's presidential bid and term in office, the EU referendum debate was not entirely untainted by false claims. An investigation by Channel 4 News (2019) found that a video produced by Leave.EU that had 'gone viral' on social media had been faked. It purported to show how easy it was to smuggle migrants into the UK, but satellite data obtained by Channel 4 News showed that the shots of the 'migrants' – actually British soldiers – disembarking in Folkestone unopposed, were actually shot first, before the boat had left British waters. The boat then went from Dover to France and back again, without making the drop-offs that the video presenter suggested should arouse suspicion.

Nonetheless, this was not the kind of self-aggrandising, belittling or 'bullshitting' lies that Trump made throughout his political career. The video sought to make its claims defensible with reference to 'evidence' that people could see with their own eyes. It was an old-fashioned propaganda stunt, albeit more clumsily executed than we are accustomed to seeing from professional PR and 'spin', more comparable perhaps with a sensationalist tabloid 'investigation'.

Moreover, there was the notorious claim on the side of the Vote Leave bus that has become a synecdoche for post-truth politics in the UK (Ball, 2017, d'Ancona, 2017, Davis, 2017, Rose, 2017). All three of the main British fact-checkers pointed out that it was misleading to claim that the UK sends £350million to the EU every week, much less to suggest this amount of money would be available to the NHS on departure from the EU. Apart from the rebate granted to the UK, the country benefitted from farming subsidies, research grants for universities and funding for infrastructure projects. Whilst the Remain campaign decided that it wasn't worth feeding the story by criticising

the figure, since there was no one figure all could agree was the most correct or representative, but mostly because the alternatives also sounded like a lot of money.<sup>1</sup> FactCheck (Worrall, 2016) chose to present it as a per annum cost *per person*, which arguably gives the difference in numbers that are more comprehensible – from £252 to £89 – but could also be interpreted as making it sound more reasonable.

It is important, therefore, to note that Vote Leave's claim was *defensible* – it was transparently based in credible published data – and that the selection of the most relevant figures and their most appropriately contextualised presentation is by no means self-evident, but rather contestable. Moreover, the alternative ways of expressing the same statistic in fact-checking journalism need to be justified as more representative and relevant to the overall argument (see Birks, 2019a for a more detailed discussion of this point) to inform the audience's own subjective judgement of whether the cost is reasonable or not, rather than to direct them toward a particular assessment.

On the other side of the debate, the official Remain campaign, Britain Stronger in Europe, despite the choice of name, focused on the weaknesses of Britain alone. The central argument was the projected economic cost of leaving, rather than the benefits of remaining in the EU. Furthermore, the Remainers' attempt to bring this cost closer to home was also somewhat misleading. The key claim, published in a Treasury report

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Channel 4 FactCheck (Worrall 2016) reported calculations from the Institute for Fiscal Studies that put it at £14.4bn per annum or £277m per week net after the rebate; £9.8bn or £188m per week after subsidies distributed via government; and £5.7bn or £110m per week after other funding grants. The lowest figure is most representative of what membership costs the UK – though of course there are trade advantages in return that are more difficult to quantify – but the net figure is arguably the most relevant if talking about having control over how the money was spent, yet by proposing to spend it all on the NHS they should make clear that farmers, universities, business etc would necessarily lose out.

launched by Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne, was that leaving the EU would cost UK households £4,300 per annum by 2030. The calculation appears to be an attempt to contextualise the forecast damage to GDP and suggest that this was not just a cost bourn by big business and wealthy individuals who had benefitted economically from globalisation, but would be felt by everyone in the country. However, there are many flaws to that argument, as laid out in the fact-checks on the claim (e.g. Reuben, 2016). Average GDP per household is not the same as *household income* which is what is inferred here. The comparator is also not made clear in the claim, leaving people to assume that they would be worse off than they are now, rather than worse off than they would have been with the higher economic growth the country would have enjoyed in the EU. The difference between slower growth and recession is significant – voters might be more prepared to give up a notional gain in the future in return for national pride or defence of traditional culture, than to lose what they have.

So there were misleading claims on both sides, but all of the most prominent claims (other than the staged ‘evidence’ of how easy it is for migrants to cross the channel undetected) were based on legitimate statistics. The selective presentation of statistics is as commonplace in political PR and spin, as it is in corporate PR and marketing. The problem with these claims is not that they aren’t ‘true’, but that they are used as premises in bad arguments and manipulative strategic communication.

### ***The campaigns’ wider arguments***

The Remain campaign’s economic claims appealed to instrumental interests that had apparently proven successful in the No campaign in the run up to the Scottish Independence Referendum. In both cases their opponents were nationalists, but of very

different kinds. In Scotland, independence is a *civic* nationalist cause that seeks sovereignty to make more progressive laws; it is not exceptionalist or isolationist, and indeed the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) campaigned passionately to remain in the EU, and Scots voted 62% Remain. In contrast, the Vote Leave campaign sought sovereignty principally to limit immigration, implicitly invoking divisive *ethnic* nationalism. Whilst the official campaign framed this in various pragmatic ways, in terms of pressure on schools, housing and the health service, the Leave.EU campaign used a photograph of largely non-white migrants and refugees queuing to cross a border to illustrate their urge to 'take back control of our borders'. Whilst Vote Leave campaigners criticised the poster, it arguably simply makes explicit the 'dog whistle politics' of the official slogan 'Take Back Control', that is, to signal recognition to nationalist and even racist supporters in a way that was also publicly deniable.

Bryant (1995) argues that civic nationalism is based on civility, which is a cool and detached sentiment in contrast with the warm 'fraternity' of communal association that characterises ethnic nationalism. The Leave campaigns embraced the latter by promoting a sense of Britishness that was not dissimilar to the Trump presidential campaign – a vision of recapturing past glories, a sense of grandeur based in competitiveness and a desire to 'win' rather than to cooperate for mutual gain. The arguments that countered the Remainers' dire economic warnings were arguably based more in this instinctive nationalistic self-importance than in cold hard fact, given that, contrary to the aggrandising boasts of Leave campaigners, the UK has not struck the 'easiest deal in human history' with the EU as Brexiteer Liam Fox claimed (Sommerlad, 2019), nor with other countries. It was this note of optimism, the hope that can motivate people to risk change that allowed the Leave campaigns to label the Remain

campaign 'Project Fear,' despite their own ethnic nationalism being based substantially in fear of the 'other' in our midst.

Unsurprisingly, the remain campaigners did not risk challenging inflated national pride, nor point out the vulnerabilities or weaknesses of the UK, but pointed to the bottom line – the economic losses that were likely to result, without any sense of *why* the economy would lose out. This was an argument that had to be taken on trust: it was based in the cognitive authority granted to economists in prominent national think tanks such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), business lobby group the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), and powerful international organisations in finance and trade such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Organisation for Economic Co-ordination and Development (OECD). Critics' disproportionate focus on Vote Leave's battle bus slogan is perhaps because the message was so straightforward, namely the literal cost of EU membership. By contrast the cost of leaving was abstract and theoretical, and no one in the remain campaign troubled the voters with an explanation as to how it had been arrived at, or the contributory factors that fed into the forecasting models.

However, the emotional charge of ethnic nationalism is based more in the negative feelings that motivate exclusion of the 'other', than in love of the country or the fellow national. This, too, was expressed with erroneous and dubious claims, such as the claim of pressure on public services and wages from immigration from the EU. However, these assertions were only occasionally backed up by research, in particular selective and erroneous use of a Bank of England report that found a small impact on wages of unskilled workers, only where there was a very high proportion of foreign-born labour

in the workplace (Birks, 2019b). The problem for fact-checking journalists was that the most problematic arguments left the discretely checkable empirical premises unspoken. However, the greater problem was that those arguments appeared more in the tabloid press than in the campaigns themselves.

### ***News reporting***

The most contested assertion from the Leave campaign, that the UK sent the EU £360million a week, was only the eighth most commonly raised economic argument in the news during the campaign (appearing in just 147 of the sampled 14,779 articles) according to Moore and Ramsay's (2017) research. They found that it received considerably less attention than the combined coverage of forecasts and reports (437 articles) from what Leave campaigner Michael Gove dismissed as 'organisations with acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong': the IMF (which alone appeared in 214 articles), IFS (184), OECD and CBI, albeit much less critically (Zelizer, 2018).

The same study found that the most commonly reported economic argument from the leave campaign was, in fact, the claim that migration placed pressure on public services (234 articles), which 'was frequently repeated in the editorials of some news outlets without being subject to the skeptical or forensic analysis applied to Remain's economic arguments across the whole range of publications'. Far from acknowledging the limitations of the Leave campaign's arguments, the tabloid press sought out their own, including connecting immigration with the other long-established tabloid folk devil of the 'benefit cheat', taking welfare payments to which they are not entitled (Gavin, 2018).

Zelizer (2018) argues that broadcast news was still less critical, despite broadcasters' adherence to the dominant conventions of due impartiality, in contrast to the openly partisan press. The 'balancing' of conflicting truth claims was at best conveyed as 'statistical tit-for-tats' (Cushion and Lewis, 2017) that illuminated nothing beyond presenting both sides as contested and 'facts' as scarce.

This is where fact-checkers should step in, but the two broadcaster-run services were marginalised online and their findings did not make it into their parent organisations news bulletins. Here they functioned as little-read footnotes to the news, which journalists could point to as proof of their public service without risking flak for deigning to taking sides between information and disinformation (Dobbs, 2012), or boring the audience with detail (Chadwick, 2017).

Another challenge for journalists was that Leave claims were less specific and 'costed' so less criticised or fact-checked than the economic forecasts that formed the central planks of the Remain campaign (Moore and Ramsay, 2017). The 2017 snap general election also demonstrated the limitations of fact-checkers' focus on politicians' overt claims and especially those that are in some way quantified (Birks, 2019a). This allows the more implicit or vague claims to go unchallenged, even if they are a key premise in the overall argument being advanced. One such omission was the implied premise that the UK is in a stronger negotiating position with non-EU countries alone than as part of the EU trading block. This means that politicians are able to leave premises unstated specifically and strategically to avoid being held to account for them.



Conversely, the economic forecasting behind Remain's main argument was heavily contested in the pro-Brexit press. Moore and Ramsay (2017) found that it was described as 'scaremongering' 737 times, and characterised as 'Project Fear' in 38 headlines, 30 of which appeared in the Daily Express and The Sun. Those two newspapers were also identified in the research as frequently pressing 'the fury button':

A prominent and persistent characteristic of this Leave approach was to focus on the 'outrage' or 'fury' that greeted a Remain claim, or on the 'attack' or 'backlash' it was said to have provoked. (Moore and Ramsay, 2017)

This is a form of ventriloquizing often employed by journalists to attribute the newspaper's editorial position and associated subjective judgements to a source and in doing so to assert for the reader the appropriate emotional response. Zelizer (2018) argued that broadcast news also "normalized a sense of outrage and then capitulated as it intensified."

It is absurd, therefore, for journalists to suggest that they did their best to hold dissembling politicians to account but were disregarded by voters who are culturally resistant to facts (Davis, 2017). Ball acknowledges that mainstream media reporting didn't pick up fact-checkers' findings because they rely on details that are too dry and wonkish to be newsworthy, other than to 'make it a fight' in which the original claim gets repeated (Ball, 2017), but sees this as a failure of the audience, rather than of journalists' low assessments of them. Zelizer (2009) accordingly recommends to journalists 'getting rid of condescension or understanding that anger at elites includes them'.

Nonetheless, we cannot assume that Brexit voters accepted the Leave campaign and tabloid claims on the cost of EU membership or disbelieved Stronger in Europe campaign claims about the costs to the economy of leaving. It could be that they accepted the risk of economic costs but voted on other priorities, not least on migration, which was reported in a universally negative manner across the press, and in a highly alarmist and fearmongering tone in the pro-Brexit press.

### ***Audience / voters***

A huge quantity of public opinion polling on the EU and the referendum have been collated on the website [whatukthinks.org/eu](http://whatukthinks.org/eu) by the National Centre for Social Research. Surveys from various sources found that more people expected leaving the EU to damage the economy than thought the country would be better off, but because a substantial proportion thought it would make no difference, the Remainers' case was still a minority position. Furthermore, those who voted to remain in the EU were far more convinced that leaving would damage the economy, whilst those who voted to leave were more confident that it would benefit the economy. The UK's most prominent psephologist, John Curtice (2016) argued that this high correspondence was peculiar to the economic argument and indicated that the economy was an important factor determining the direction of votes. But of course, correlation does not mean causation, and this could be post-facto rationalisation of a choice made on other grounds.

If the campaign *was* decisive in persuading voters that leaving the EU would not be economically damaging, we would expect to see a trend in longitudinal polling toward that belief. According to YouGov polling (What UK Thinks: EU, 2016), in late 2015

following the launch of Vote Leave and its report that concluded the EU had a net cost there was a slight decline in the proportion of people who believed that the UK would be economically worse off if it left the EU. This reached a low of 31% in early 2016, but actually *grew* slightly to 40% between the May 2016 launch of the bus and its contentious £350million per week slogan and the time of the vote (see figure 1).

So there is little evidence in the polling to support the supposition that the controversial bus slogan in itself was decisive, or even persuasive. Additionally, slightly fewer people thought that that they *themselves* would be worse off than thought the economy would be badly affected (see figure 2), which could reflect the ‘left behind’ thinking that they were kicking big business who were benefiting from globalisation. Finally, even though there was a striking correspondence on views on the economy and direction of vote, that doesn’t necessarily prove that this was the primary issue *on which people decided* how to vote.

In 2015, the year before the referendum, some people did tell pollsters (What UK Thinks: EU, 2015a) that saving the UK money would be the strongest argument to vote leave (12% in July 2015, 18% in December 2015), but twice as many chose border or immigration control as the most persuasive (24% in July rising to 38% in December). In contrast, respondents were split on the most persuasive argument to remain in the EU (What UK Thinks: EU, 2015b) – there was no one killer argument – though the potential loss of 3 million jobs was the most popular it was only chosen by fewer than one in five people (17%, 18%).

### **A post-truth campaign?**

What we can conclude from the evidence reviewed above is that it is not tenable to conclude that the slim majority in favour of leaving the EU is, *in itself*, evidence of post-truth politics, simply because there were some questionable tactics and statistical manipulations on the side that won and somewhat less so on the side that lost – the picture is much more complex than that. Furthermore, we must also recognise that the emotive narrative that connects the issue to voters' personal political values is not established overnight by a clever but transparent lie or two, but over a much longer period of incidental messaging from stories whose persuasive intent is much less apparent.

It is fair to say that elements of the pro-Brexit campaigns attempted to import the 'culture wars' from the US, but their nationalist populist propaganda was more conventional and recognisable as 'spin' than is contended in the 'post-truth politics' thesis. Indeed the most baseless fabrications date back decades and were created by the tabloid press, who are still responsible for most fake news circulating in the UK (Chadwick et al., 2018). Imke Henkel (2018) argues that the reason that Euro-myths endured for years and decades after being debunked was that they appealed to a wider narrative, or myth of the 'irreverent, laughing Briton' who battled ludicrous bureaucracy with ridicule (and in the case of the condom size Euro-myth flattered willy-waving British men that their penises were literally bigger).

It is equally likely that, to the extent that the more dubious claims of the campaigns *were* accepted by the audience, it was because they supported a worldview they already held: that it's easy for migrants to reach the UK undetected; that the EU spends our money without being accountable to citizens (a notion promoted without irony by UKIP MEPs

whose *own jobs* were to represent the country in the European Parliament); that 'Eurocrats' are obsessed with creating new regulations or 'red tape'. Similarly, a majority of people already thought that immigration was too high and that leaving the EU was the only way that immigration could be reduced, so it is likely that the campaign raised the salience of immigration as an issue, and potentially gave social license to anti-immigrant sentiment, with an increase in hostility and racist incidents after the result.

On the economy, the Leave campaigns were on the defensive (Moore and Ramsay, 2017), and there is little evidence in the exhaustive polling on the issue to support the assertion that the counter-argument that pointed to the high cost of membership of the EU. However, the 'Project Fear' soundbite may well have been their strongest counter-attack line, not because it undermined the credibility of the economic warnings, but because it reflected a negative valence to the Remain campaign that has also been observed in content analysis of the way it was reported (Levy et al., 2016).

It is impossible to say whether the EU referendum campaigns were any more or less manipulative or deceptive than past campaigns for either referenda or elections, but Moore and Ramsay (2017) argued that there was an unusual amount of *accusations* of lying, compared to the previous referenda on Scottish Independence (2015) and adopting an Alternative Voting system (2011). Negative campaigning and reporting can lead voters to curse both their houses and disengage altogether, however the turnout (78%) was higher than any general election in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, in the overbearing atmosphere of negativity that clouded the referendum campaigns, the comparatively hopeful and optimistic messaging of the Leave campaign and its tabloid

cheerleaders, coupled with dissatisfaction with the status quo, may have swung it for the Brexiteers.

Referendum campaigning was fought not on the basis of narrow factual (or counter-factual) truth claims, but on the wider argument in which those claims were not the only premises. It is not true to say that the Remain campaign appealed to voters' reason – the Leave characterisation of the economic warnings as 'Project Fear' was not unfounded, but ironic, given that the Leave campaign was fought primarily on the ground of immigration, was based on fear of the 'other'. However, Leave could at least leaven this with a sense of hope for something better, which may have had more appeal than a sense of threat to the status quo for those who felt they had nothing to lose.

Proponents of the post-truth characterisation of the contemporary political landscape see this as evidence of irrationality, but in fact it simply reflects the fact that voting preference has never been based on a cost-benefit analysis but on a wider set of personal and political values (Schwartz et al., 2010, Enke, 2020). These values are not irrelevant to political decision-making, nor evidence of an irrational electorate – they are legitimate premises in political argumentation (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012, Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 2003, Walton, 2006).

Emotion too is politically relevant, as it is what animates those values, such as outrage at injustice and hope for change (Castells, 2015, Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). However, emotional appeals can be persuasive in problematic ways that we might recognise as propagandistic (Welch, 2013). There is a fine line, perhaps, between anger at injustice and more popular resentment towards those perceived as being unfairly favoured.

Theories that explain Trump's success in terms of emotional populism, and especially 'angry populism', contend that Trump voters were either (or perhaps both) those left behind by globalised capitalism or those who had lost social and cultural privilege through socially progressive shifts (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). This would seem to characterise the success of Brexiteers' appeal to the northern post-industrial towns.

Most of all, however, the discourses of angry populism were articulated in the right-wing tabloid press. Moore and Ramsay (2017) found fury at immigration and at the claims made by the Remain campaign.

### **Fact-checking in argumentative context**

To some extent it is fair to say that the discourse of post-truth politics was used by journalists to pass the blame for audiences' credulity and acceptance of misleadingly propagandistic claims, though it also overstates that credulity. If journalists have lost credibility with their audience, it is more likely to be for their own role in amplifying the narrow and not illuminating shouting match of contemporary campaigning, rather than because the audience have lost interest in knowing what is true.

So what can journalists do to earn back the cognitive authority they and other institutional sources have lost in recent years and decades?

- *Step outside the political campaign agenda* – there were positive arguments to be made for the benefits of EU membership, and even immigration, that would have been informative, even if the campaign strategists neglected them as insufficiently persuasive.

- *Point out weak argumentation* – although massaged statistics can be defended as technically true, they are used in selective and misrepresentative ways. However, it can be counter-productive to press ‘the fury button’ without explaining *how and why* the argument is flawed.
- *Show, don’t tell* – journalists can avoid expecting the audience to take a claim on trust on the basis of authority, expertise or other heuristics of credibility. Under-estimating the intelligence of the audience, or their interest in the details, only risks giving the impression that something is being suppressed and send them looking for answers down the rabbit hole of conspiracy theory pattern-finding.
- *Acknowledge caveats more routinely* – especially on forecasts and predictions. Gove’s notorious ‘had enough of experts’ line was actually a specific attack on economists’ poor record on modelling economic outcomes. This can be a reasonable critical question, but when ambiguity is avoided in fear of confusing the audience, credibility too easily becomes a binary judgement.

Of course, there are some newspapers that have cornered a market in reactionary outrage that will continue to plow that profitable furrow, but fact-checking journalism could indicate a more proactively anti-propagandistic direction for mainstream news.

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