

## How can sociology contribute to our understanding of Brexit?

By Georgia Hanna

*'It is our task not to complain or condone but to understand'*

On the 23<sup>th</sup> June 2016, Britain voted to leave the European Union. Prime minister David Cameron had resigned, and Scotland was considering a referendum that could bring an end to the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Seemingly overnight, the inclusive and tolerant Britain animated within our school ethos seemed to fragment along with British *democracy*. This brought many people to question: Do we know our own country and society nearly as well as we would like to believe? Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that the polarisation of Britain's collective consciousness happened overnight, there must have been underlying structural factors. A redistributive consequence of globalisation is the rise in immigration in old industrial areas. This can lead to more job competition creating lower wages and pressure on houses. Within the post-factual framework of social media, people with these shared concerns were isolated and, as a result, the anti-immigration and anti-establishment resentment became quickly mobilised giving the illusion of collective support. The Leave campaign seemed to represent the 'voice of the people'; when actually, they expressed the concern of the disenfranchised minority. Trademarked with a tragic rise in xenophobia, disengagement and misinformation, the Brexit referendum elicited a complete political meltdown into identity politics. Whilst contemporary politics is no longer as binary as left and right, old and young, educated and ignorant; the vote managed to split along those lines. These splits emerge from an underlying distinction between those that embrace globalisation and those that fear it. (1) Ultimately, it was this more persuasive, emotive message of fear that seemed to correspond with the identity of most undecided voters.

### Media Saturation in the Post-modern era:

*'The medium is the message... we become what we behold'*<sup>2</sup>

Brexit, climate change, LGBTQ+, #MeToo and many more - recent social changes have been accelerated and globalised through the advancement in technology, consolidating McLuhan's phrase "the world is a global village". As shown by the table below, Britain's political, social and cultural ecosystem is rapidly changing. Postmodernists would argue that structural metanarratives are no longer relevant as most citizens do not recognise or conform by an agreed value consensus.<sup>3</sup> This is necessary in explaining the explosive nature of Brexit since it emphasises that the internet has radically altered the contexts in which people think. Multimedia platforms embody this significant global transition from the industrial age to the electronic information age. An age where the world is increasingly perceived and experienced in this virtual reality, which has the power to translate individual experience into a collective extension of one universal consciousness. Albeit, media is only able to create this through the simulation of hyperrealism which is presented as a reaction or alternative to the existing society. (5) Perhaps, Brexit represents a political paradigm shift - as a latent function of

1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcwuBo4PvEO>

<sup>2</sup> McLuhan, Michael

<sup>3</sup> OCR postmodernism topic exploration pdf

Britain's on-going cultural adaptation to an increasingly media saturated environment. Nevertheless, since people speak in many individual voices, not a single one, there are countless ephemeral communities within this framework all of which present a different reality. As McLuhan's quote above reflects, societies are shaped more by the nature of the media in which they are communicated, rather than the actual content of the communication.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, to understand the social and cultural changes Brexit was immersed in, one needs to have an understanding of the workings of the media and how this magnified the group polarisation of *Leave* and *Remain*.

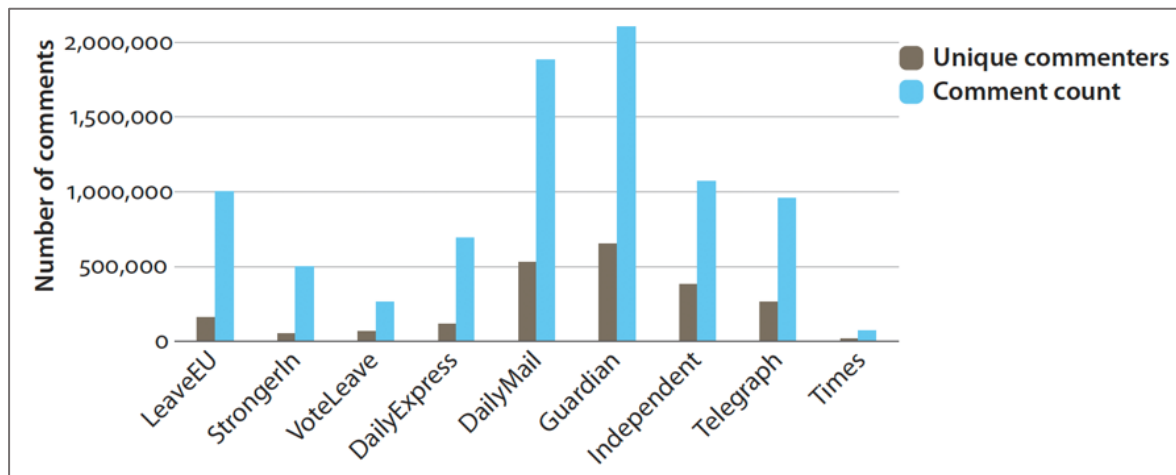
Modern society	Postmodern society
Approx. 1900-80	1980 – onwards
Fixed identity	Complex identities
Limited access to technology	Huge advances in technology
Media is less developed	Huge array of media available in a range of mediums
Greater expectation to conform to shared social expectations	Greater individualisation – more likely to act in your own interests
Social change	Rapid global social change (globalisation)
Nationality is important and stable	As globalisation increases, the spread of cultural ideas is shared which has meant national identity has become less important for some, yet very important for others.

Social media is not a new concept, it simply reified a culture of sharing that was already present. Just how our ancestors would live in small tribes and tell stories, people vote for contestants on reality shows as if to say, *I am here, I am part of this*.<sup>5</sup> At a controllable level like this, it can create a sense of group agency and collective solidarity. However, as McLuhan argues, with every extension there is a counterpart, “amputation” and too frequently people chose to ignore the amputations “at our own peril”. The digital age has heralded the post-modern era and the advent of neo-tribalism. Due to the many virtual communities found on the internet, each with a shared template of human thought, there can be a lack of diversity which can mean that people get their information from an “epistemic filter bubble”. As one of the most popular online destinations in which people spend a lot of time on, Facebook has a very significant effect on how its users consume media and view reality both online and offline. Facebook prioritizes information that is shared among its “friend” networks and “news feeds”.

London School of Economics did a survey in order to evaluate whether citizens' commenting activity around the referendum indicated a cross-pollination of opinion or conversely, a trend towards political polarisation. As shown through the table above, after sifting through 8.5 million comments from 1.9 million users from media outlets and political campaigns, they found out that a quarter of the political activity occurred on Facebook – not on the political campaigns and that there were less unique comments in each media network. Therefore, this proves that there was a lack of diversity in each virtual community surrounding the discussion of whether to leave or remain.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/media/is-the-medium-the-message-media-essay.php>

<sup>5</sup> Bercow, John. *How is the internet changing the way you think?* Edge.org 2010



It has been argued that multi-media has caused the collapse of meaning and the destruction of distinctions between media and reality. Constructionists like Burr (1995) view society in both an objective and subjective sense. He suggests that identity originated from the social world, since it mediates the objective reality of society and render it meaningful. In this way, it is internalised by individuals.<sup>6</sup> The internalisation of a common message, a medium where people with common struggles can feel connected, would be especially receptive to the working-class. The anti-immigration and anti-establishment sentiment left them feeling betrayed by the political class. Through media's tribal structure, fragmentation of information (not allowing people to get a full picture which increase misinterpretation) and sense of instance, there was a primacy of emotion over evidence.<sup>7</sup> Their concerns were quickly mobilised and became more volatile, the illusion of more comments made it seem that the "leavers" were the 99%.

However, it is important to note that cultural homogenization is not necessarily bad. In theory, this can break down cultural barriers into the assimilation of one global culture and is that not what globalisation aims to create? Metropolitan areas like London were one of the top areas to vote remain with 75.3%.<sup>8</sup> London has developed a multi-cultural identity as a result of the influx of, as Sociologist Gratton (2012) coined, 'transnationals.' It has achieved a diverse population and as a result London has a relatively booming economy and arguably more tolerant inhabitants. Brexit highlights a failure for people to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds and beliefs. If Britain has more of this cross-cultural engagement, perhaps, we can counteract the extremist effects of this neo-tribalism.

### **A Public Outcry for an Inclusive Globalisation:**

Brexit highlighted a failure in communication which became amplified as a result of Britain's highly individualistic culture and the increasing power of social media. Individualistic cultures like Britain tend to be a 'low power distance culture' and 'emotional display' norms.<sup>9</sup> This means that, in Britain self-expression is highly valued and challenging authority whilst encouraging a reduction of power differences is appreciated within our democracy; however,

<sup>6</sup> Andrews, Tom. "What is Social Constructionism?". Ground Theory Review

<http://groundedtheoryreview.com/2012/06/01/what-is-social-constructionism/>. Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2019

<sup>7</sup> D'acona, Mathew. 'I never thought I'd say it, but there could be an upside to Brexit'. Evening Standard [www.standard.co.uk/comment/comment/i-never-thought-i-d-say-it-but-there-could-be-an-upside-to-brexit-a3996066.html](http://www.standard.co.uk/comment/comment/i-never-thought-i-d-say-it-but-there-could-be-an-upside-to-brexit-a3996066.html). Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> Dec 2019

<sup>8</sup> "EU referendum: The results in maps and charts" – BBC News, Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> Dec 2019

<sup>9</sup> Wikipedia definition of individualistic culture

responses to such imbalances in power tend to be very emotional and negative - in Brexit, this is evident through Britain's inability to achieve an inclusive globalisation.

The British Social Attitudes did a survey to find out whether immigration caused widespread concern: among a sample of 3,000 British people, 73% (nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$ ) of those who were worried about immigration voted leave. Proving that the growing anti-immigration sentiment was essential to the Brexit result, however, what if the problem goes deeper than simply job security? MacKinnon et al. (2011)<sup>10</sup> found that many people in local communities perceived globalisation as an external threat to existing forms of employment and cultural identity.<sup>11</sup> Many within the traditional working class felt that they were not given a say when the EU expanded to the east, allowing low-wage countries to come into the UK. It is this feeling of devaluation that fostered the anti-establishment sentiment. The 'metropolitan elite' had undermined their desire to maintain a working-class identity in order to reap the benefits of globalisation for themselves (as seen in areas like London).

In July 2018, YouGov did a survey on over 7,000 representative British voters. The survey asked them to rank up to 13 priorities for the UK over the next five years in order of importance to them. They then used an algorithm to combine these priorities (see list below) for different political parties and the referendum vote.<sup>12</sup> As the result show above, leave voters prioritised sovereignty over economic growth and immigration which illustrates that their desire to be represented by politicians is more important than their desire to take back control of their own lives. Though, 2 years after the 2016 referendum, it highlights that their choice to leave came from a place of frustration at being disposable and underappreciated. Therefore, the problem does go deeper than job security, it was about a sense of belonging and identity. Perhaps, in order to embrace an inclusive globalisation, all British citizens needs to take on a 'verstehen' approach and transition from an individualistic culture to a collectivist culture.

1. *UK taking control of its laws and regulations*
2. *The ability for the UK to make its own trade deals*
3. *Limiting immigration only to high-skilled workers*
4. *Economic growth*
5. *Reduce the overall numbers of immigrants to the UK*

***'The internet is an amazing pollinator that transforms moans into movements exciting millions of people to action'***

To conclude, Brexit challenges Britain's adaptive capacity and individualistic culture. The redistributive effects which have left a working-class minority bitter are manifested from Britain's uniform failure to accept the collectivist spirit of globalisation. Through the virtual world, these frustrations have been magnified creating a cognitive dissonance in public opinion. Ultimately, Brexit teaches sociologists that British democracy will not survive unless it is embedded into an ecosystem of diverse and trustworthy media. In order to form an inclusive globalisation, British citizens must evolve a new vision through open cultural

<sup>10</sup> Brown, Ken (20xx). AQA Sociology.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, Ken (20xx). AQA Sociology.

<sup>12</sup> "New polling reveals shift from immigration to sovereignty as priority", The UK in a Changing Europe [ukandeu.ac.uk/new-polling-reveals-shift-from-immigration-to-sovereignty-as-the-priority/](http://ukandeu.ac.uk/new-polling-reveals-shift-from-immigration-to-sovereignty-as-the-priority/). Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> Dec 2019

negotiation on norms. It is only then can Britain embrace this beautiful transition into an inclusive and tolerant decade for everyone.

***‘Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world’<sup>13</sup>***

During the formation of this essay, I found the concept of an “epistemic bubble” especially interesting. As mentioned in my introduction, Brexit managed to split along lines of *old and young*; this is a major hinderance to Britain’s *transition*. Within Britain’s cultural homogeneity, there is a strong neophobic mindset that refuses to accept change. This is the real ideological battle that underlays people’s decision whether or not to embrace globalisation.<sup>14</sup> However, this is not mentioned in order to romanticise the neophilia and demonise the older voters. On the contrary, according to Robert Wilson, though neophilic personalities find it easier to adapt to cultural changes (which is necessary in the post-modern era), they lack tradition and enjoy accelerating change without considering the changes.<sup>15</sup> Thus, when you add the fact that in Britain today 93% of teenagers age 12-17 go online<sup>16</sup>, I wondered if my school as a middle-class institution was also in an epistemic bubble. I worried if my school’s ethos “to lead, inspire and make a difference” was encouraging a destructive neophilic mindset which was contributing to Britain’s intergenerational divide.

I utilised a combination of interviews and observations in order to gain a big picture my school climate. In order to limit the influence media had on me, throughout the process of writing my essay I deleted all social media accounts and constricted my consumption of the internet only for educational processes. This made it much easier for me to analyse the effects it had on youth objectively and really helped me be present during the interview process helping the students to open up emotionally with me.

In total I individually interviewed 25 students: 5 students from year 7, 9, 10, 12. For each person I asked:

- 
- ***Do you think the internet changes the way you think?***

My results showed that 84% of students were aware that the internet changed the way they thought, however upon more expansion on their reasoning, got confused and said “I don’t know” – 14 students had this reaction.

- 
- ***Are you politically aware? (if so) Tell me what you think about Brexit?***

2/5 of the year 10 students and 3/5 year 12 students said yes, and passionately emphasised how Brexit is “a mess”. Interviewing allowed me to analyse their non-verbal behaviour and almost all students became flustered when asked this question.

I acknowledge that this small sample doesn’t represent the entire school, however this gave me a good indication to how I can use the £500 to encourage life-long civic participation and public engagement. I will create a school podcast in order to reduce the influence of media misinformation by filling the gap with academic debate on current political and social topics. I hope this can become a medium were students can start to build respect for truth, clarity and cross-cultural communication in our liberal democracies. The path to an inclusive and tolerant society begins with us: communicate, be critical and compassionate for it is ‘our task not to complain or to condone but to understand’.

---

<sup>13</sup> Nelson Mandela

<sup>14</sup>Bercow, John. *How is the internet changing the way you think?* Edge.org 2010

<sup>15</sup> <https://medium.com/@shounakbagchi/neophilia-vs-neophobia-95f5df003abe>

<sup>16</sup> “Teen Internet Use Graphic”, Pews Research Center

[www.pewresearch.org/millennials/teen-internet-use-graphic/](http://www.pewresearch.org/millennials/teen-internet-use-graphic/). Accessed 2<sup>th</sup> January 2020