

THE BATTLE FOR BRITAIN
A SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS
OF BREXIT SENTIMENT

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**ALL AT TWITTER
ABOUT BREXIT**
LESSONS FOR THE
ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

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ALL ATWITTER ABOUT BREXIT LESSONS FOR THE ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

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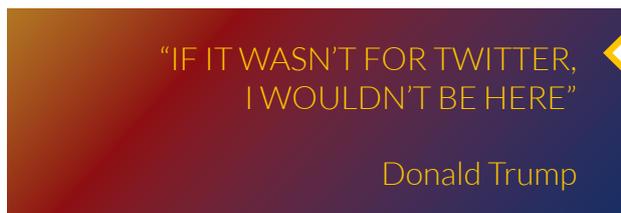
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1.. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Brexit will be a defining issue of the upcoming UK election. How are the different parties and the different candidates to handle this issue in their campaigns?

To answer this question, this study examines the social media activity around Brexit as measured by the interaction between news and Twitter activity between November 30th, 2016 and April 16th, 2017. We examined a total volume of over ten million Brexit-related tweets among over 1.2 million social media users and correlated social media activity with over 600,000 pieces of news.

- *Pro-Brexit users are significantly more energized – and therefore considerably more active on social media – than anti-Brexit users*

The Pro-Brexit population accounts for the majority of users around the Brexit debate

Pro-Brexit users also show a higher intensity of social media use, generally generating twice as much activity as anti-Brexit users

As a result, pro-Brexit activity accounted for two and a half times as much as anti-Brexit activity and represented 66% of all Brexit-related social media activity over the period

- *The last few weeks have shown an increase in intensity by the anti-Brexit population. As a result, over the period examined, anti-Brexit activity is on a steep rising trend while pro-Brexit activity shows a slow decline*

- *Pro-Brexit users tend to use more emotive, attention-grabbing messages while the anti-Brexit community tends to use more bland language focused on the rational rather than the emotive*

This pattern seems to reproduce the Brexit referendum campaigns where the successful Leave campaign appealed mainly to people's deep-seated emotions while the failed Remain campaign focused on facts and figures

As a result, the pro-Brexit population seems more galvanized and more engaged than the anti-Brexit population

- *The pro-Brexit community have clear leadership while the anti-Brexit population lacks a clear and convincing leader*

Of public figures, Nigel Farage (@Nigel_Farage) remains the most influential pro-Brexit leader on social media

No clear, single anti-Brexit leader emerges on social media

Jeremy Corbyn, Liberal Democrats with three active accounts (@libdems, @timfarron, @Nick_Clegg) and Nicola Sturgeon all achieve traction. However, Nigel Farage on his own manages to generate more activity than all five of them combined

Among private individuals, David Jones (@DavidJo52951945) has the greatest amount of social media influence among the pro-Brexit population

For the anti-Brexit population Harry Leslie Smith (@harrylaststand) and James Melville (@JamesMelville) have the greatest influence

David Jones generates nearly three times as much social media activity as the two anti-Brexit leaders combined

- *The political leaders gaining a degree of social media traction around the anti-Brexit movement suffer from:*
 - being uncoordinated and lacking a single cohesive narrative that is emotionally compelling*
 - having lower social media presence and intensity*
 - risking being perceived as either not fully committed (eg. Jeremy Corbyn) or being largely self-serving for narrow political interests (eg. Scottish Independence) rather than being relevant to the broader Brexit debate*
- *Over the period examined, there have been periods of movement of individuals between the pro- and anti-Brexit populations. Social media activity does seem to be able to shift views in response to appropriate activity*
- *The news items that most energized anti-Brexit users and caused a shift of activity in their direction were:*
 - images of Theresa May isolated and 'friendless' at an EU summit*
 - an announcement by HSBC and UBS that they would likely each move 1,000 staff from London to another EU capital*
 - Tony Blair's Bloomberg speech*
- *There is no significant difference in the geographical spread of pro- versus anti-Brexit social media activity except for a somewhat greater intensity for anti-Brexit activity in the North East of England*

CONCLUSIONS

The importance of social media in contemporary politics is beyond doubt. President Trump has shown the power of social media in electoral campaigning.

We found significant differences in the pattern and effectiveness of social media activity for the pro- versus anti-Brexit users. Pro-Brexit users have dominated the social media over the period examined. However, over the past few weeks, there has been a surge in anti-Brexit energy which has put the anti-Brexit community on a strong upward trend.

Besides having a greater intensity of use, the pro-Brexit camp have compelling leaders that use emotive messaging around a cohesive narrative that galvanizes supporters. The anti-Brexit camp remains diffuse. There is no single leadership focus and the lack of a consistent, cohesive narrative that is capable of appealing to the emotional rather than the rational. As a result, the anti-Brexit movement has tended to fall rather flat while the pro-Brexit camp is energized.

Overall, the pro-Brexit camp seems to have mastered the art of social media much more successfully than the anti-Brexit movement.

The general pattern observed is that the pro-Brexit social media leaders seem to be continuing the success of the Leave campaign with language that appeals to people's deeper values (and prejudices) and that is emotive and visceral. The anti-Brexit camp seems to be largely persevering with the language and messaging that characterized the failed Remain campaign with some added messages that risk being seen as self-serving.

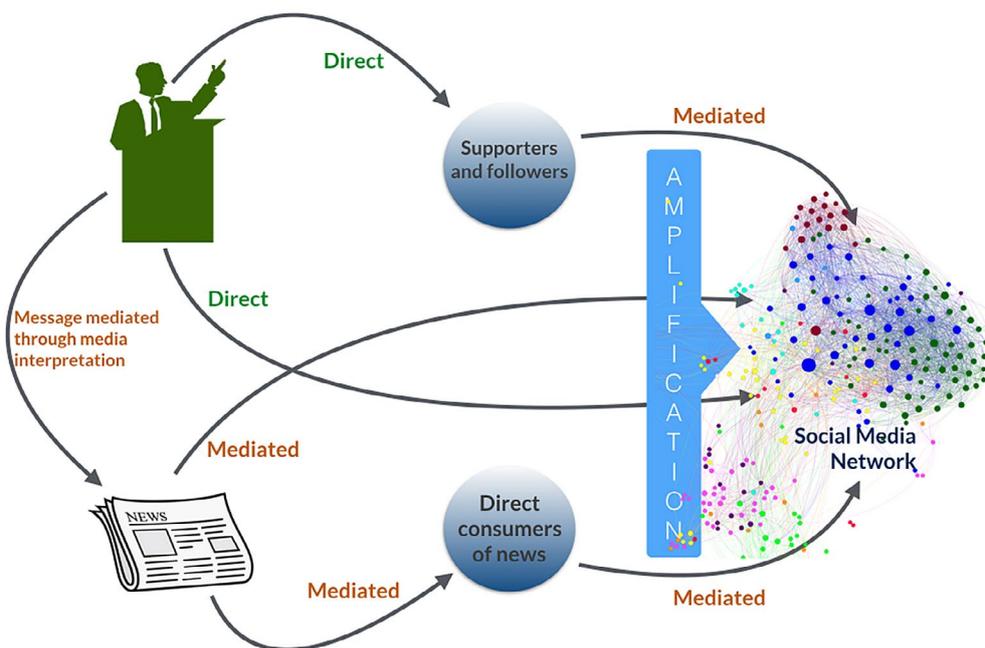
In the context of the current election campaigns, pro-Brexit advocates seem to have a head start. However, there is opportunity for the anti-Brexit camp to win over hearts and minds. Since November, they have only managed to achieve that sporadically but the last few weeks have shown increased anti-Brexit intensity putting the anti-Brexit camp on a strong rising trend.

It remains to be seen whether those that are set to fight the election campaign on a pro-EU platform will be able to develop the skills and the mindset necessary to energise their constituencies. But it is highly possible and there is all still to play for.

2. WHY SOCIAL MEDIA?

"Technology has been as disruptive in politics as in every other sphere of life" according to Jim Pickard in the Financial Times ¹. From the Arab Spring to the election of Donald Trump, the power of social media has been instrumental in galvanising support, getting people out on to the streets, and changing the course of elections or throwing out unpopular leaders. As a result, digital campaigning and the use of social media are having an increasing effect on political views and election outcomes.

Politicians and political parties see advantages to the use of social media since it provides both an amplifier of their campaigns and a direct route to reaching voters without mediation and interpretation of their messages through media outlets. Of course, news outlets are themselves amplified through social media networks – and usually in selective ways as social media users tend to share mainly those news items and interpretations that best match their own pre-conceived notions.



To understand the multiplicative power of networks, consider this. A network of three people all communicating with each other once in each direction (eg. one question plus one response from each to each) generates eighteen communications. However, consider that each of these individuals had just 10 unique friends all of whom became fully connected to the network. We now have 33 people in the network. If each of these people were to communicate with everyone else within the network only once and each then responded to everyone else in the network, we would generate nearly 35,000 bits of communication. In a social media network, not everyone constantly communicates with everyone else but this simple calculation serves to illustrate the power that is available to those who can effectively utilise the dense networks of the social media world.

The effects of social media on political engagement, participation and the formation of political views is still evolving. Most UK political parties are still relatively unsophisticated in their use of social media. However, there is little doubt that there is an effect – and that it is becoming more significant. In Italy, the Five Star Movement has, in a few short years, become the most popular political party largely through its use of social media and online engagement – and a sophisticated messaging strategy that is appropriate for a social media age. In the UK, More United, a new movement mediated by social media, has accumulated over 75,000 members in a few short months. Donald Trump would probably not be President of the United States but for his extensive use of Twitter and, through that, his ability to excite passionate responses – both for and against.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS CULTURE CHANGE

Neither should we see social media as simply a new channel of communication. The new interconnected digital world is changing cultural norms and expectations. Individuals feel newly empowered, traditional sources of authority are losing their influence and the relationship between geography and politics is starting to change.

While these developments have many positive elements – particularly with regard to the opportunity for broader political participation – they have also sowed confusion and anger. Some have argued that they are driving a new ‘post-truth’ world where everyone has an opinion, every opinion is seen as equally valid and ‘facts’ become playthings to be used or discarded as is convenient. This criticism may simply represent a total misunderstanding of the basis on which people make their political decisions. It assumes that people make their decisions based on ‘facts’. Many among the educated elite may believe that, but it is probably untrue. People largely base their decisions on **trust** – both their level of trust in who they are voting for and their level of trust in the individual or group presenting ‘the facts’ since most of us have no way of checking whether the ‘facts’ presented are true or false – or whether they are not facts at all but rather a mix of facts, opinion, forecast and speculation.

Passion also tends to run high in social media outlets with the potential for ever-increasing polarization of views and a decreasing ability to compromise. That may just be the price to be paid for increased political engagement.

Whatever we may personally feel about these developments, they are here to stay. A Pew research poll found that 20% of people claimed that their political views had been changed by social media ². In most elections and referendums, that kind of shift would undoubtedly determine the outcome.

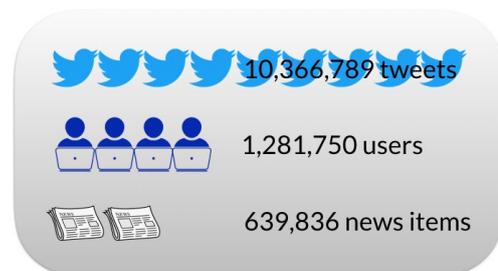
2.1 WHAT WE HAVE DONE

The aim of our work was to examine the mood and sentiment on Twitter conversations surrounding the evolving Brexit process and thereby provide some clues as to what might be successful messaging around the defining issue of the upcoming election - Brexit.

We analysed over 10 million Brexit-related tweets by 1.3 million users between November 30th, 2016 and April 9th, 2017.

We correlated these tweets with news items and examined the extent to which individuals (politicians and private individuals) were effective at spreading their messages through their influence networks.

This process allowed us to categorise the social media population into pro- and anti-Brexit users, examine the level of engagement of each group, which news items and political messages had the most resonance among these groups and whether there was any evidence of individuals switching between pro- and anti-Brexit positions.



2.2 SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS IS NOT A POLL

In interpreting our findings, it is important to bear in mind that social media analysis is not opinion polling. There are significant differences.

THE ECHO CHAMBER

Social media users are probably not representative of the whole population. They are a self-selecting group rather than being specifically selected to be representative. It is also argued that social media is simply an echo chamber for committed activists. The base of users is also not constant as users come in and out of social media debate. These points are all valid. Yet what happens on social media has a more widespread effect as changed views get further diffused through conversations with friends, etc.

Suffice it to say here that for all the sophisticated polling and statistical analysis done prior to the last US presidential election, it was only social media analysis that predicted a Trump victory.³

SELF-EXPRESSION VERSUS FORCED RATIONALITY

Social media is self-expression. Unlike polling responders, users are not guided by specific questions. They are simply expressing what’s on their mind and getting into the debates and discussions that engage them. As a result, social media analysis is a better indicator of sentiment than it is of opinion. Sentiment tends to reveal what people *feel* about an issue or event. Polling, on the other hand, being a formal, externally imposed and structured process, tends to get at people’s opinions – ie what they *think* – or how they are willing to express what they think to a pollster. Polling tends to shift people to rational mode whereas social media is more reflective of expressed emotions. *“Polls fail to evaluate the emotional context of voting decisions. What people feel today affects what they do tomorrow, and traditional polling simply cannot capture this.”*⁴

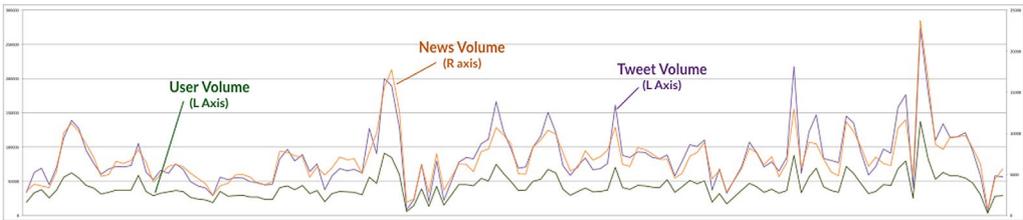
By correlating social media activity with ‘events’ it is also possible to get an understanding of which events and which political messages tend to have the greatest resonance – an important element for those crafting messages and campaigns.

All in all, the relative roles of polling and social media analysis in political enquiry is still evolving. They tend to provide different windows into the political world and are therefore complementary.

2.3 EVENT DRIVEN ENGAGEMENT

The chart below shows social media activity mapped on to Brexit-related news events. It is clear that social media activity rises and falls in direct response to news and specific events rather than being self-generating. That is why parties and politicians who wish to use the power of social media need constantly to generate news-related content that is engaging and capable of generating a reaction. Donald Trump generates an average of five tweets a day with content that yields a 78% audience attentiveness score among over 27 million followers and their wider network. This does not compare badly with the world’s No 1 tweeter – Katie Perry (four tweets a day; 77% audience attentiveness score; 97 million followers).⁵

Activity Mirrors Flow Of News



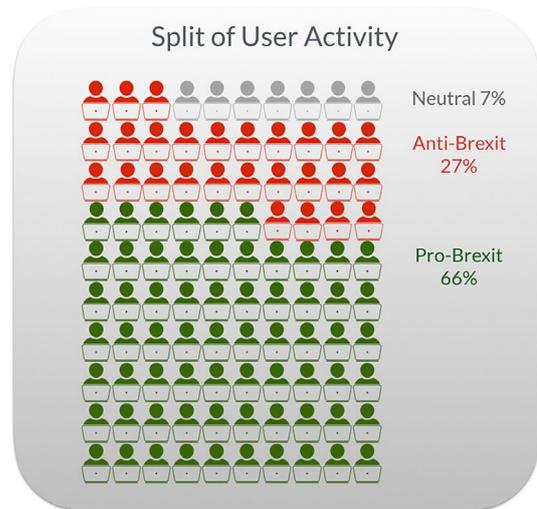
3. THE PRO-BREXIT POPULATION IS MORE ENGAGED

3.1 THE PRO-BREXIT COMMUNITY HAS BEEN MORE ENGAGED

As described earlier, success on social media is driven by quality of content rather than just volume – ‘quality’ being defined as the ability of tweets to generate audience engagement.

In the Brexit debate, the pro-Brexit population is much more highly engaged than the anti-Brexit population. Users expressing generally pro-Brexit sentiment account for 67% of the active social media activity compared with 27% for the anti-Brexit camp.

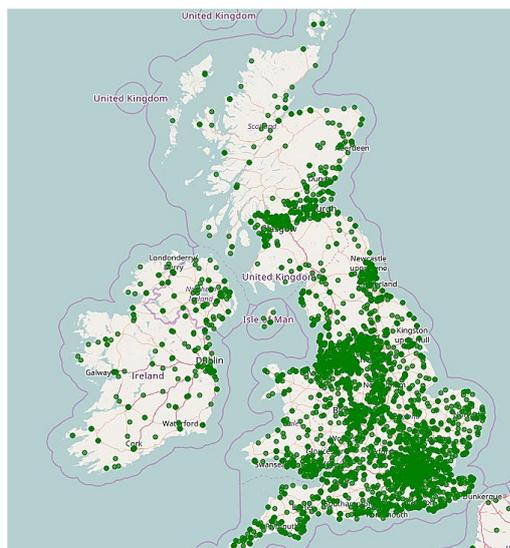
Anti-Brexit users tend, on average, to generate one and a half times to twice the weekly activity per user. The net result is that, over the period examined, pro-Brexit user activity generated a total of nearly 7 million tweets compared to nearly 3 million for the anti-Brexit camp.



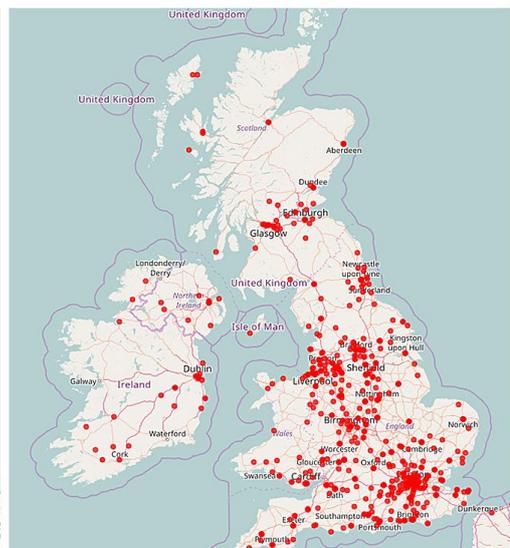
3.2 THERE IS LITTLE GEOGRAPHICAL DIFFERENCE

Maybe surprisingly, there is little difference in the geographical spread between pro- and anti-Brexit activity. Accounting for the differences in intensity between the two groups, the only noticeable difference is a slightly greater level of activity for the pro-Brexit population in the North East of England. Apart from that, the general pattern is similar across the UK.

There is no major difference in the pattern of distribution between pro- and anti-Brexit users after accounting for the differences in density of activity



pro-Brexit user distribution



anti-Brexit user distribution

3.3 WHY ARE THE BREXITEERS MORE SUCCESSFUL?

The pro-Brexit success on social media seems overwhelming. Why?

Our study suggests three main reasons:

- *Pro-Brexit social media content is much more emotionally engaging*
- *The pro-Brexit camp is singularly focused on the Brexit debate*
- *The anti-Brexit community lacks clear leadership*

EMOTIONALLY ENGAGING CONTENT

Examination of the flow of social media conversation shows that the pattern established during the Brexit referendum seems to have continued during the current phase of the Brexit debate.

During the referendum campaign, **“Take back control”** was the killer phrase. It was memorable, it was shrill, and it appealed to the visceral. All other aspects of the campaign fit neatly, and reinforced, that killer slogan. From controlling immigration, to reasserting national sovereignty, to deciding for ourselves how we spend our own money (£350 million a week for the NHS). They were all elements that could be neatly encapsulated under the umbrella of the killer slogan – a slogan that played to deep seated emotions of national (and personal) pride and self-determination.

The Remain campaign, on the other hand, appealed to the rational and to people’s pockets. There was no overarching message except that we would all be worse off outside the EU – a claim backed by complex, and maybe largely unintelligible, numbers and arguments of logic. None of it was framed in a way that appealed to the visceral.

This pattern seems to be continuing in the ongoing Brexit debate. Pro-Brexit social media activity is noticeably more visceral and emotionally appealing. It continues to focus on just a few big issues such as the notions of ‘control’ and ‘sovereignty’ and on immigration. The narrative is both focused and consistent.

Anti-Brexit social media activity, on the other hand, remains focused on the economics and on technical issues such as the single market and the customs union. Most activity appeals to what could be termed rational economic self-interest. This may make people think but it fails to excite passion and engagement.

There is also no cohesive, overarching narrative. Sometimes the debate is about trade and economic self-interest. Next day it’s about preserving the social model. The day after it’s about Scotland and a hard Irish border. And the day after that it’s about the difficulties of retiring to Spain. The only message that seems to emerge is *“Isn’t it just all too much trouble?”* Hardly energizing.

Below is one comparison of the style of language used by each side of the argument.

 **David Jones** @DavidJo52951945 · 11m
We cannot let EU judges continue to rule our lives-EU want to maintain control of UK laws & courts we can't let them



We cannot let EU judges continue to rule our lives, says Ross Clark
SO now we know, courtesy of leaked documents, the vision of Brexit as seen by EU officials.
express.co.uk

 **James Melville** @JamesMelville · Apr 2
We go into the Brexit negotiations knowing that the best possible deal will still be much worse than the one we are walking away from.

↩ 30 ↻ 476 ❤ 762

SINGLE ISSUE FOCUS

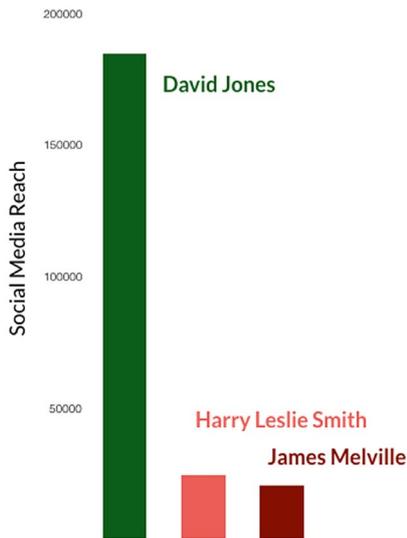
One further difference. The pro-Brexit camp seems to be singularly focused on Brexit as their issue. It dominates all their social media activity. Anti-Brexiters, on the other hand, have broader interests and their social media activity addresses Brexit as one of many different issues. This is a contributor to the intensity of involvement that is generated around the Brexit issue by either side.

CLEAR LEADERSHIP

Unlike mainstream media, leadership in social networks can come from anywhere. One does not have to be a public figure to build a following and influence large numbers of people. We have therefore examined where leadership lies in the pro- and anti-Brexit camps in social media. And we have looked at both political leaders and private individuals.

In both the pro- and anti-Brexit camps, much of the leadership comes from private individuals rather than political leaders. These individuals re-package news events, often with their own comments added, and release these dogs of war onto the network where they multiply.

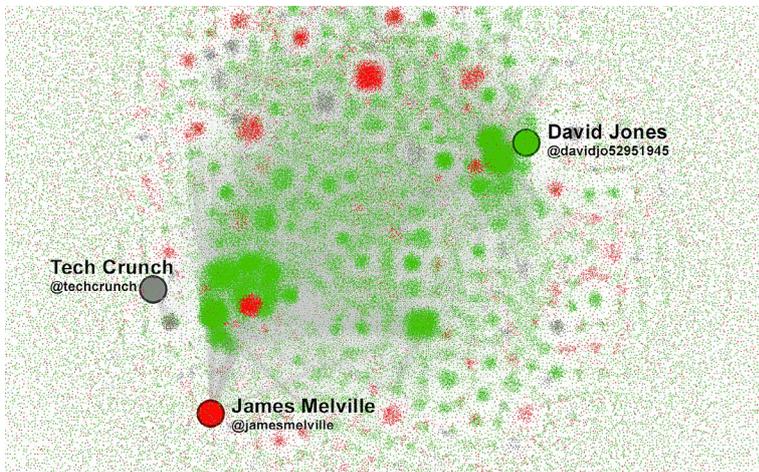
David Jones far outstrips all anti-Brexit users



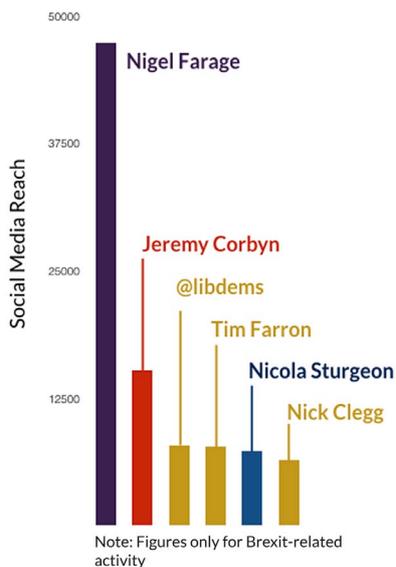
In the pro-Brexit camp, David Jones (@DavidJo52951945) is by far the most influential on social media. In the anti-Brexit camp, Harry Leslie Smith (@harrylaststand) and James Melville (@JamesMelville) have the greatest influence.

Emphasising the different reach of the two camps, David Jones has nearly three times as much reach as the two anti-Brexit leaders combined.

The difference in intensity of reach across the network is further illustrated by the network chart below.



Nigel Farage generates more activity than all other political leaders combined



Among political leaders, Nigel Farage remains highly effective in galvanizing the pro-Brexit community. No political leader emerges as consistently effective among the anti-Brexit community.

Farage's success in achieving reach is based on simple, consistent, emotive messaging. The anti-Brexit group of leaders, on the other hand, suffers from unclear messaging (is Corbyn pro- or anti-Brexit?), mixed agendas (Brexit vs Scottish independence), multiple messages that can be confusing (are they trying to stop Brexit or mitigate it?) and technical rather than emotive content (single market, customs union, etc).

Messages of threatened economic damage through Brexit (a continuation of the failed Project Fear) are blunted by the continued resilience of the British economy and the perceived economic competence of Theresa May and Philip Hammond.

Pro-Brexit messaging, on the other hand, is simple, emotive and consistent: taking back control of our own affairs and reducing immigration.

The performance of the two camps is summarized in the table below.

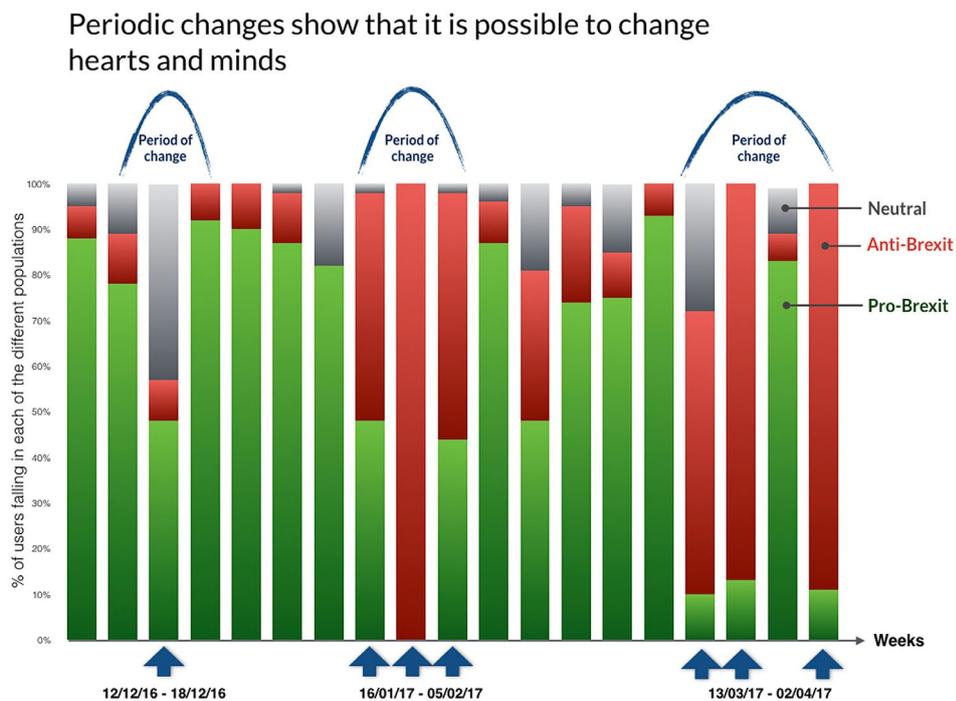
Pro-Brexit Community	Anti-Brexit Community
Two clear leaders	No clear leadership
Leaders are always present	Discontinuous presence
High intensity of activity	Low intensity activity
Singularly Brexit focused	Multiple agendas
Strong, expressive, consistent messaging	Light, un-emotive, inconsistent messaging

4. CHANGING HEARTS AND MINDS

4.1 IT IS POSSIBLE TO CHANGE PEOPLE'S VIEWS

The social media world has been criticized for being an echo chamber. It is argued that conversations only spread within networks of like-minded people. They serve only to reinforce existing views and beliefs rather than to change hearts and minds.

To examine this proposition we examined whether individuals participating in the Brexit debate changed either their levels of engagement or their position between pro- and anti-Brexit expression, or both, over the period of the study. The figure below shows the camp in which the engaged population fell over the period examined – pro-Brexit, anti-Brexit or neutral.



While, over the whole period, the overwhelming presence on social media of the pro-Brexit community is clear, it is also clear that it is possible to energise the anti-Brexit community. The issue for the anti-Brexit promoters is that such periods of energy among their community seem to be transient rather than sustained. The energy of the anti-Brexiters seems latent and is not being consistently released.

That said, the energy among anti-Brexiters seems to show a rising trend in the last few weeks. We will come back to that in our conclusions.

4.2 WHAT DRIVES A CHANGE OF HEART?

In order to understand whether these changes were simply a change in activity levels among populations that are fixed in their views or whether events and social media activity can actually drive a change of heart, we examined how individuals flowed between pro-, anti-, and neutral positions and what events and messages were spread through the social media network to generate the shifts.

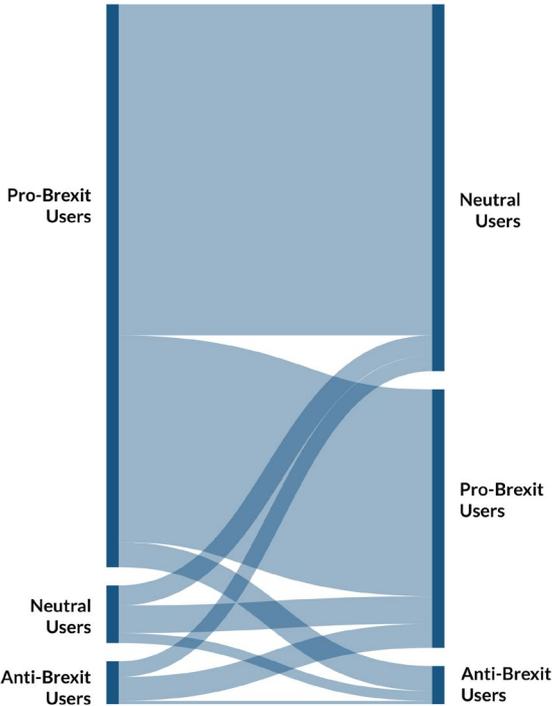
WEEK OF DECEMBER 12TH

The first major shift of individuals between groups occurred around the week of the 12th of December where a number of previously pro-Brexit users shifted to adopting a more neutral position.

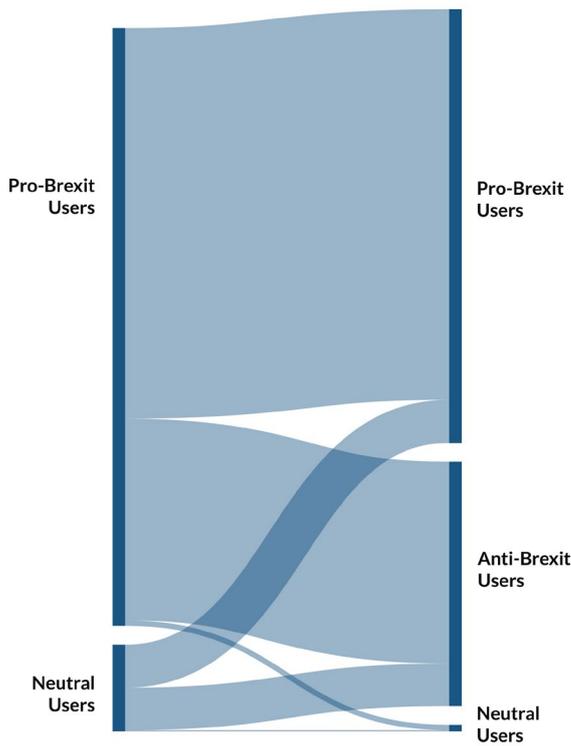
The major event that led to this change was the spectacle of Theresa May isolated and friendless at an EU summit. The video of a lone prime minister smiling vacuously while nobody would talk to her gained wide social media distribution. It was a humiliating moment for Britain on the world stage and it changed hearts and minds.

Again, this episode talks to the power of emotive events (national humiliation) over technical arguments in moving people's views.

Week Starting 12 Dec 2016
Flows From Previous Week



Week Starting 16 Jan 2017
Flows From Previous Week



WEEKS OF JANUARY 16TH

This period saw movement of previously neutral and pro-Brexit supporters to an anti-Brexit stance. This was accompanied by a small amount of movement in an opposite direction with some previously neutral voters moving towards a pro-Brexit stance.

The most successful conversation during this period was initiated by English actor Sir Patrick Stewart (2.7 million followers). Once again, his tweet focused on British embarrassment in the face of Brexit – a comment that garnered 5,700 retweets and 19,000 likes.

That same week saw the announcement by HSBC and UBS that they would each likely move 1,000 jobs out of the UK post-Brexit – maybe acting as confirmation that the economic damage from Brexit was real.



Patrick Stewart @SirPatStew

Jan 18

First time back in continental Europe since Brexit. I was once so proud to be part of the Union. Now embarrassed to be British.

5,678 retweets 19K likes

Brexit: Boris Johnson warns against 'punishment beatings'

18 January 2017 | UK Politics



Boris Johnson has warned EU leaders not to give the UK "punishment beatings" for Brexit "in the manner of some World War Two movie".

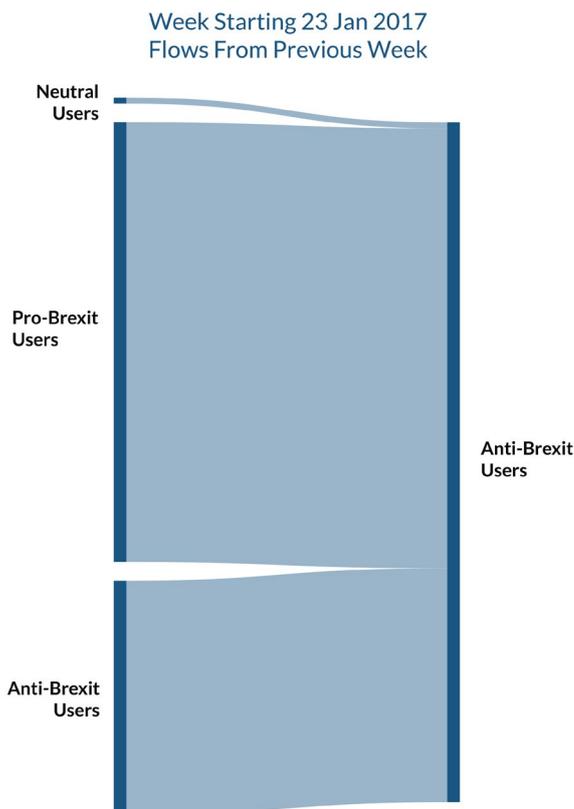
A further bit of news that garnered social media attention was Boris Johnson's warning (or was it a plea) that the EU should not administer 'punishment beatings' to the UK for leaving. This event seemed to have the opposite effect than that desired – it drove anti-Brexit sentiment. Maybe because it simply ended up highlighting the fact that the EU was, actually, in a position to administer such beatings. Or maybe because people are getting somewhat tired of Mr Johnson's constant harking back to WWII.

WEEK OF 23RD JANUARY

This period saw one of the biggest shifts of pro-Brexit or neutral individuals towards the anti-Brexit camp with a smaller shift of individuals from the anti-Brexit camp to adopting a neutral position. These were the weeks when the anti-Brexit community was most active on social media, totally drowning out the pro-Brexit camp.

The driving force for this was Theresa May's meeting with Donald Trump. Trump (who is largely unpopular in the UK) backed Brexit. The narrative that achieved most traction on social media was that, for the sake of Brexit, the Prime Minister was prepared to abandon all British values and to force the UK to get into bed with anyone and any country, however despicable the British people might find them, provided that a trade deal was available. Trade for values and character.

A visceral tweet by Labour candidate Mathew Hexter (not a prolific tweeter) was one of the most widely networked.



 **Matthew Hexter**
@hexter101

#TheresaTheAppeaser shows just how desperate the position for the UK is post Brexit. Willing to accept openly fascist policy for trade

 **Jeremy Corbyn MP**
@jeremycorbyn

We cannot let @Theresa_May use Brexit to turn Britain into a tax haven on the edge of Europe and create a bargain basement economy. #Brexit

536 Retweets 794 Likes

The power of a simple appeal to deep-seated values as opposed to the use of technical, 'rational' language can be shown by the different levels of impact of two tweets by Jeremy Corbyn. The tweets are almost identical. Yet the first uses 'tax haven' (what's that and why is it bad is the most likely reaction). The second, while still using the 'bargain basement' phrase (probably also unintelligible to many) works because it appeals directly and simply to British values.

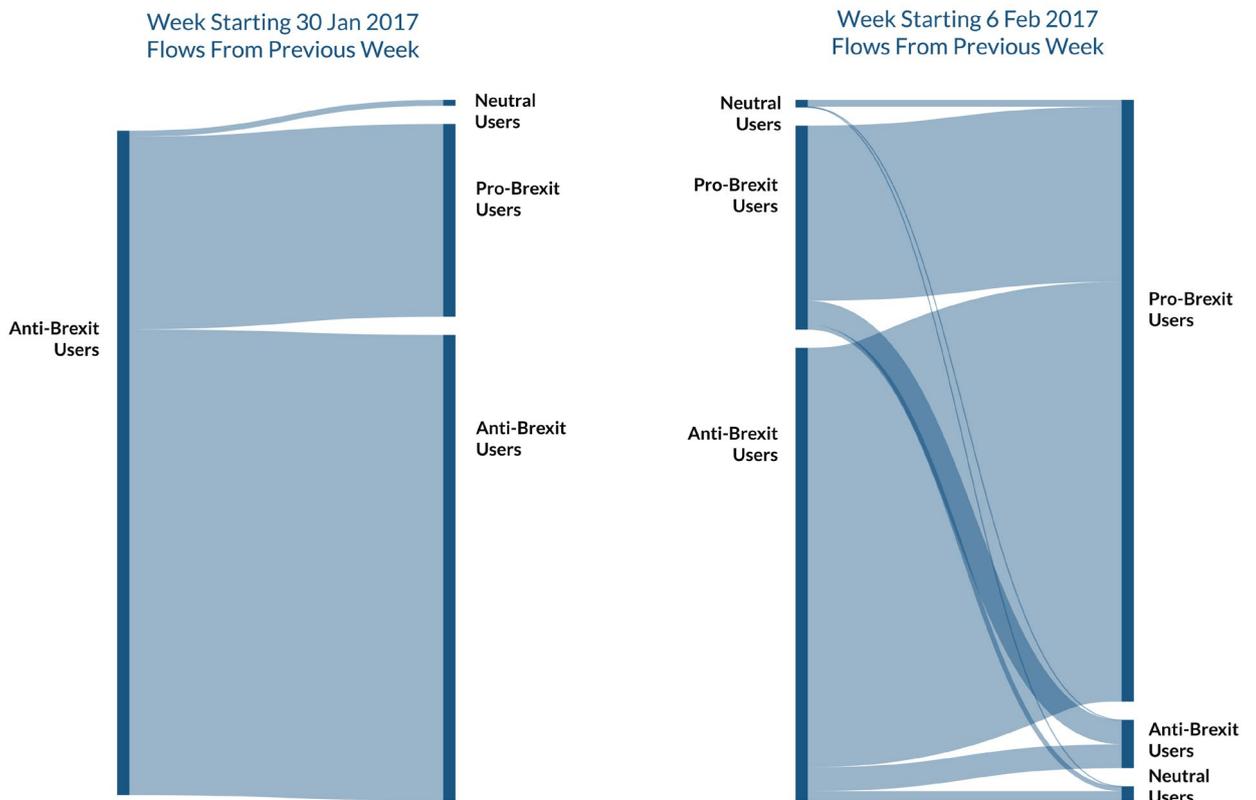
 **Jeremy Corbyn MP**
@jeremycorbyn

Theresa May failed to challenge Trump & stand up for our values today - she prefers a US corporate trade deal for a bargain basement Brexit

1,883 Retweets 3,469 Likes

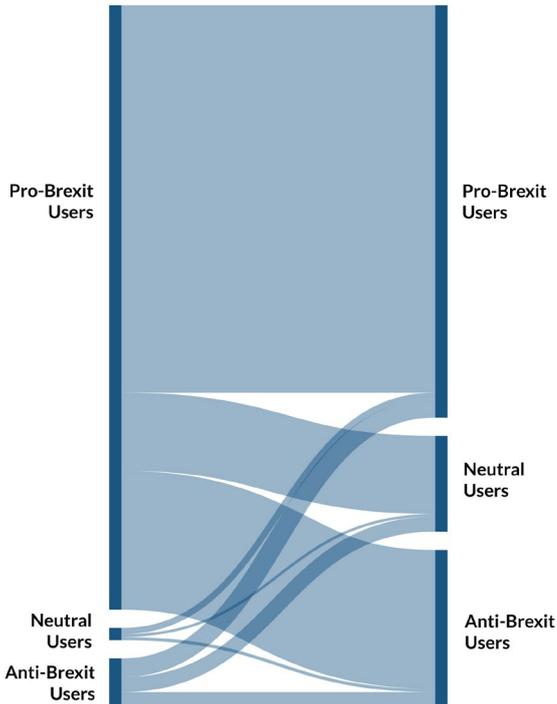
WEEKS OF 30TH JANUARY AND 6TH FEBRUARY

These weeks saw a return of the pro-Brexit dominance of social media activity after the surge in anti-Brexit activity seen the previous weeks.



Various events drove these shifts. These included the Copeland and Stoke-on-Trent by-elections that raised the profile of the Brexit debate, and, after a number of legal and political challenges, the passage through parliament, of the government's un-amended motion to allow the triggering of Article 50. This all triggered energy among the pro-Brexit population. It may also have started to induce a sense of fatalism among anti-Brexit users - Brexit was now going to happen and there's nothing to be done.

Week Starting 13 Feb 2017
Flows From Previous Week



WEEK OF 13TH FEBRUARY

This week again saw movement from the pro- to the anti-Brexit camp.

Two events drove this shift.

The first and by far the most impactful was Tony Blair's Bloomberg speech.

Although Blair himself is not a user of social media, news reports of his speech were widely circulated and had an impact. At the time of the event, many pro-Brexiters described Blair as damaged goods with no credibility among the public. Social media activity suggests that this is a gross mis-judgment. Blair's speech was one of the events that had the greatest impact on galvanizing anti-Brexit activity on social media.

Blair certainly seems to be a divisive figure. His speech generated much passion with many taking to social media to criticize his record as Prime Minister. These were reduced to ad hominem attacks rather than criticism of what he had to say (*"The mad messiah should be in jail for war crimes"* and *"Tony Blair was the worst ever prime minister of the UK"* were typical comments.). However, overall, the effect of his speech was to generate significant engagement among the anti-Brexit community. It shifted hearts and minds.

This suggests that Blair still retains leadership quality and an ability to excite passions. Since success in social media activity is dependent on emotional engagement, it is inevitable that anyone who is successful will excite passion both for and against – as we have seen with Donald Trump. Politicians whose social media presence is constrained by a reluctance to cause outrage are less likely to be successful on social media.

The second impactful event was the announcement of a Daily Mirror poll that suggested that, if repeated, the referendum result would be overturned. The suggestion that the tide was moving in their direction energized anti-Brexit users generating a flurry of activity on social media. The Mirror online article generated over 12,000 shares on social media.



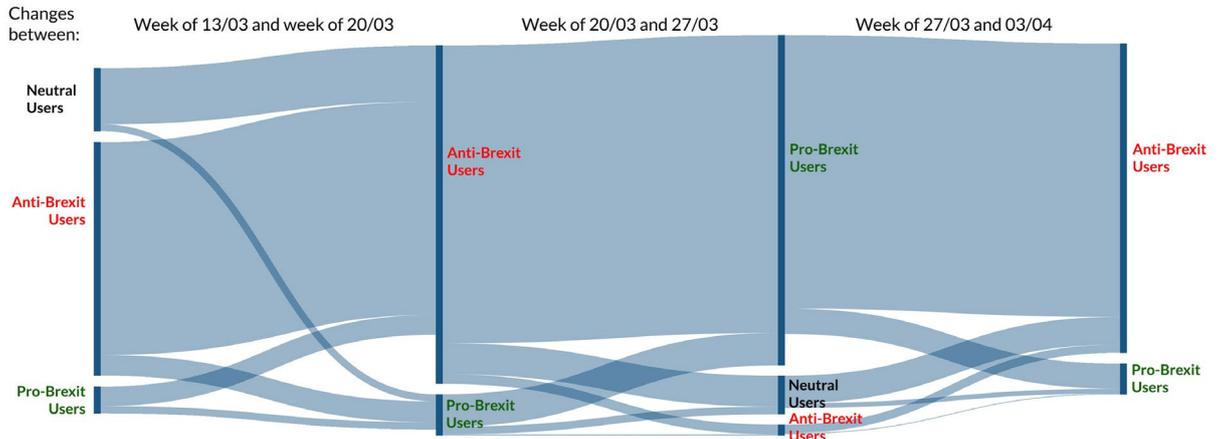
Tony Blair has said it is his "mission" to persuade Britons to "rise up" and change their minds on Brexit.



13TH MARCH TO 9TH APRIL

The last few weeks showed significant volatility in pro- and anti-Brexit sentiment. The same users switched frequently between pro- and anti-Brexit positions.

Significant movements in the final weeks suggest that sentiment remains volatile and subject to effective influence



Events that stimulated a strong anti-Brexit response included:

- Announcement of the triggering of Article 50
- David Davis’s performance at the House of Commons Select Committee for Exiting the EU where it became clear that the government had not evaluated the impact of exiting without a deal
- Negative reactions to Sir Michael Caine’s comments that Brexit was about freedom rather than immigration or economics. “I’d rather be a poor master than a rich servant.” A message from a wealthy individual that probably didn’t resonate much with the less wealthy.
- Evidence of ‘wasted’ expenditures as a result of Brexit



The main event that energized the pro-Brexit camp over the period was the actual triggering of Article 50 and Theresa May’s statement in the Commons that pulled the trigger. Brexit had finally started and the Brexiteers were jubilant.

4.3 WHICH EVENTS AND MESSAGES ENERGISE?

It is clear from our analysis that, although the volume of social media activity is driven by events, it is not necessarily the events themselves that drive sentiment. Rather it is the way that those events are interpreted and mediated by the social media leaders and the extent to which they can be communicated in a way that has resonance.

Of all news outlets, the BBC emerges as the most frequently used source of news. However, the same events and the same news items are used by both pro- and anti-Brexit to bolster their case. It is the way that such news items are disseminated that has the biggest impact.

In general, we find that:

- *Messages that play to the emotional rather than rational have a significantly greater impact. The greater level of social media activity among the pro-Brexit community is largely due to the high degree of emotional engagement in that community compared to the anti-Brexit community*
- *Messages that contain imagery, video or other moving images are much more effective than plain text messaging*
- *Among the pro-Brexit community, simple messages around control of our own destiny and a reduction in immigration continue to form the basis of social media activity and have high effectiveness*
- *The anti-Brexit community responds well to specific events but is not united by a strong, simple, emotive narrative*
- *Events that energise the anti-Brexit community are:*
 - perceptions of government incompetence or unpreparedness*
 - actual evidence of economic harm (as opposed to speculation and forecasts about future harm)*
 - messages that show British humiliation on the international stage or the abandonment of British values (again, only actual events rather than rhetoric about future harms)*

5. WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR THE ELECTION CAMPAIGNS?

To what extent will sentiment around Brexit play a significant role in the election campaign?

This is largely unknown. The different campaigns – both by different parties and in different constituencies – will focus on a number of domestic issues as well as on Britain's relationship with the EU. In so much as the Brexit debate will play a role – maybe even a defining role – what approaches are likely to be most effective for each of the two sides?

5.1 THE PRO-BREXIT CAMP

The pro-Brexit camp seems to have a head start in that it has a community that is much more energized and emotionally committed. The twin messages of taking back control and controlling immigration are emotionally powerful, simple to communicate and easy to empathise with. They will likely form the backbone of the Conservative and UKIP campaigns with warnings that these objectives will be either diluted or destroyed should the anti-Brexiters gain significant political power.

To that extent, the pro-Brexit camp has the easier task. It is further bolstered by the perception of competence that Theresa May and Philip Hammond have generated. A recent poll puts confidence in May and Hammond higher than that in Cameron and Osborne prior to the last election ⁶ “Brexit Britain is safe in our hands” will be a powerful message, diluted only by the perceived incompetence of Boris Johnson and his frequent gaffes. These last are able to energise anti-Brexiters as well as deflate pro-Brexiters.

5.2 THE ANTI-BREXIT CAMP

The anti-Brexit camp has the more difficult task. It is bedeviled by unclear messaging, the lack of a clear and credible single leader, and a fondness for the rational over the emotive.

There is also the risk of growing apathy among anti-Brexit voters. A YouGov poll ⁷ suggests that many are developing a fatalistic outlook – Brexit is now happening and we better make the best of it. Should this sentiment take hold widely, Brexit will be emasculated as an electoral issue. There seems to be little appetite for a second referendum though it is not clear whether that would remain the case if the anti-Brexit camp were able to energise Remain voters.

The practical – and visible – impact of Brexit on lives, jobs and Britain's international standing will, however, likely remain important. Here the challenge for the anti-Brexit camp is to persuade the public that it is dangerous to leave the negotiation exclusively in the hands of a Prime Minister who will have a totally free hand in the event of an overwhelming parliamentary majority.

If they are to turn the Brexit debate into an advantage during the campaign, our work suggests that the following will have to be achieved:

- *Clear and credible leadership*
- *Being “anti-Brexit” is no longer a sufficient message. Simple, consistent and emotively framed messaging will need to be developed to answer these questions:*

What are you trying to achieve?

How do you plan to achieve it?

- *Answers to the above questions are important to overcome the risk of growing fatalism among anti-Brexit voters and to re-energise them for a fight (provided it is clear what one is fighting for)*

- Messaging that undermines the perceived competence of the government to handle Brexit are effective when supported by clear evidence and events. They are ineffective as broad statements
- Actual evidence of economic harm driven by Brexit is effective in changing sentiment. Forecasts of future economic harm are not.
- Technical arguments focused on the single market, customs union and so forth have little or no emotional resonance. They are much more effective when framed through their practical implications
- Appeals to British values, pride and effectiveness on the international stage all move voters when underpinned by actual events rather than when stated in the abstract

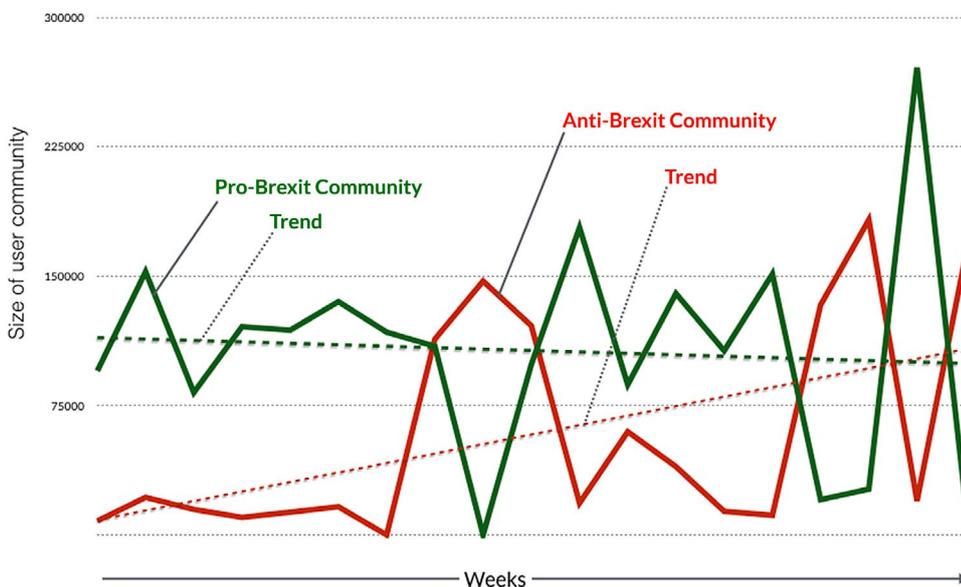
Given all of the above, it might seem that the battle is largely over. The pro-Brexiters have prevailed and the anti-Brexit camp has an insurmountable mountain to climb. That would be a misreading of the situation.

Anti-Brexit voters still have a huge amount of latent energy waiting to be released. If anything, the evidence suggests that this energy has started to be released more effectively in the last few weeks. As the figure below shows, anti-Brexit activity is on a rising trend whereas pro-Brexit activity shows a marginally declining trend. While much of this is driven by the last few weeks and it is not yet clear whether it is sustainable, it would be wrong to conclude that the Battle for Britain is over. Where it will end up – and how it will effect the outcome of the election – will be down to the skill and intensity of each side during the campaign.

The pro-Brexit camp has largely won the air war. But as the ground campaign starts, there is still much to play for. To be successful in their battle, campaigners who choose Brexit as a key electoral issue will need to take a leaf out of Sir Lynton Crosby's playbook: "focusing a campaign on a small number of sharp messages to be hammered at the electorate until voters' ears bleed."⁸ As long as they are the right messages.

All To Play For

Last weeks put anti-Brexit community on a strong rising trend



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