

Dr Charlotte Galpin, University of Birmingham—written evidence (FON0027)

House of Lords Communications and Digital Select Committee inquiry: The future of news: impartiality, trust, and technology

I welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on Communication and Digital inquiry on the Future of the News. I am an Associate Professor in German and European Politics in the Department of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Birmingham. My research sits at the intersection of political science, sociology, and media and communication studies, with a particular focus on the European public sphere, media representation and the impact of social media. The following evidence draws on findings from three research projects: 1) 'Europe and New Global Challenges', funded by the University of Copenhagen's 2016 Excellence Programme for Interdisciplinary Research; 2) 'Postsocialist Britain? Memory, Representation and Political Identity amongst German, Polish and Ukrainian Immigrants in the UK', funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC); and 3) the Jean Monnet Network on 'Post-Truth Politics, Nationalism and the (De)Legitimation of European Integration', funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union. These studies involved content and discourse analysis of newspaper articles and associated Facebook posts and comments from different time periods between 2016 and 2019 as well as interviews with German and Polish migrants in the UK in 2021-22.

In the following submission, I respond to the following questions set out by the inquiry's call for evidence:

- *Trends over the next 12 months and 5 years* (questions 1 & 4)
 - *Evaluation* (questions 2 & 5)
1. In response to question 1 (trends), I draw on a co-authored study of Remain and Leave campaign mobilisation on Facebook after the referendum.¹ Social media platforms such as Facebook have contributed to polarization and politicization around major political events. Social media platforms standardise how people can engage with the news through their architecture. Mainstream newspapers have their own social media pages and accounts that connect newspapers directly with users. Through this, already highly partisan users can shape their own 'echo chambers',² in which they remain in ideologically segregated online communities. Through these communities, news readership is narrowed,

¹ Brändle, V. K., Galpin, C., & Trenz, H.-J. (2022). Brexit as 'politics of division': social media campaigning after the referendum. *Social Movement Studies*, 21(1-2), 234-253, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14742837.2021.1928484> (Open Access)

² Flaxman, S., Goel, S., & Rao, J. (2016). Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 80, 298; <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/echo-chambers-filter-bubbles-and-polarisation-literature-review>

limiting the diversity of information and opinion to which they are exposed.

- Mainstream newspapers played a role in the development of polarized campaign communities on Facebook during post-referendum Brexit debates. Around a third of both anti- and pro-Brexit campaign content in our sample was legacy news content, showing how news media are used to mobilise users through informal Facebook campaign pages. UK newspapers contributed to shaping pro- and anti-Brexit 'echo chambers', with generally left-leaning and pro-Remain newspapers such as The Guardian shared by Remain campaigns, and right-leaning and pro-Leave newspapers such as the Daily Express and The Telegraph shared by pro-Brexit pages, as can be seen in the figure below.³ Through this, newspapers became part of the persuasive communication of social movement campaigns, thus having impacts beyond the 'informational' function of news.

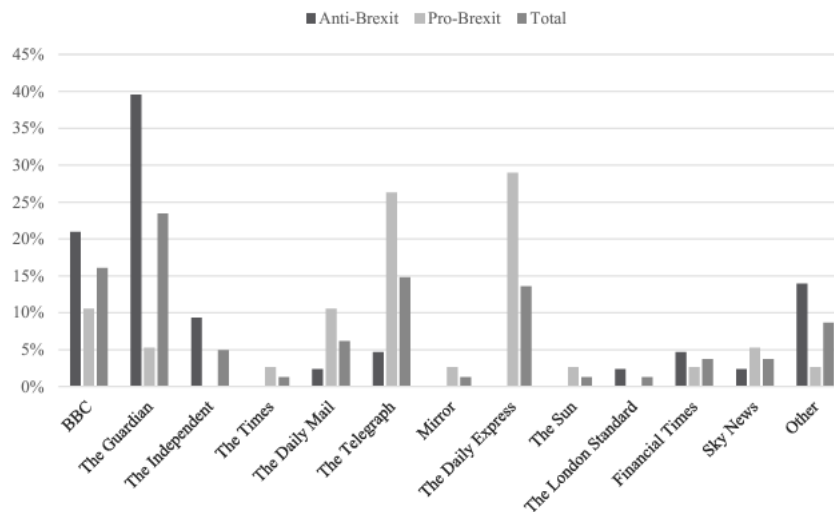


Figure 3. Legacy media content shared on anti- and pro-Brexit pages.

- We also found that pro-Brexit sites shared content from 'alternative media' websites more than twice as much as anti-Brexit sites, as can be seen in the table⁴ below. This finding should also be read in the context of the significantly higher levels of likes and engagement these pages received compared to pro-Remain campaign pages.

Table 2. Platform types from which shared content originated.

	Anti-Brexit	Pro-Brexit	Total
Institutional	38.3%	33.3%	35.9%
Alternative media & civil society	11.2%	23.5%	17.2%
Social media	44.9%	37.3%	41.1%
Other	2.8%	1.0%	1.9%
None	2.8%	4.9%	3.8%
Grand Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

³ Brändle, V. K., Galpin, C., & Trenz, H.-J. (2022), p. 244

⁴ Brändle, V. K., Galpin, C., & Trenz, H.-J. (2022), p. 242

4. These alternative media sources included content from and links to websites and blogs presented as 'news' or 'grassroots' blogs that in some cases appear to have links to well-funded political campaigns. These included sites that are no longer active such as *brexitcentral.com* – edited by Matthew Elliott, formerly Chief Executive of the Vote Leave Campaign and founder and former Director of the TaxPayers' Alliance, and Jonathan Isaby,⁵ also former Director of the TaxPayers Alliance – and *Westmonster.com* – funded by Arron Banks and co-owned by Nigel Farage's former press secretary, Michael Heaver.⁶ This finding demonstrates the way in which social media platforms enable interest groups to present themselves as 'news' or grassroots citizen journalism, while actually having wealthy funders or backing by major political campaigns⁷ That these specific sites have not been active or online since 2020, when the UK formally left the EU, further suggests that their existence was intended to serve a particular campaign rather than to function as sources of information. Our finding, while specific to the Brexit campaigns of 2016 and 2017, raises questions about interest groups shaping social media debates about the upcoming general election by presenting themselves as news, the role of social media platforms in the distribution of alternative media content that promotes distrust in mainstream legacy news and politics, and the role of 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers' that impede the information to which users are exposed.
5. In response to question 4 (trends), I draw here on ongoing research that has been conducted as part of the AHRC-funded project *Postsocialist Britain?* led by Professor Sara Jones at the University of Birmingham. As part of the media strand of the project conducted by myself and Dr Maren Rohe, we have analysed stereotypes of Polish and German migrants and narratives of Polish and German history in UK newspapers. As part of the project's narratives strand, interviews with Polish and German migrants living in the UK were also conducted. While this research has not yet been published, a public report on the media findings is in preparation and will be published in spring 2024 on the project's website.⁸
6. We find that Polish, along with other Central and Eastern European migrants, are generally portrayed negatively, and stereotyped as manual or low-skilled workers and/or as taking undue advantage of a 'generous' British welfare state and thus causing a burden to 'UK taxpayers'. They also tend to be portrayed as an ethnic minority that is poorly integrated or speaking poor English. Such findings demonstrate how Central and Eastern European migrants are subject to racializing stereotypes of being 'not quite white' or 'not quite European'.⁹

⁵ <https://brexitcentral.com/team/>

⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-38650596>;

⁷ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/anti-establishment-blues-2017-uk-election-alicia-wanless/>

Bennett, W. L., & Livingston, S. (2018). The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. *European Journal of Communication*, 33(2), 122-139.

⁸ <https://postsocialistbritain.bham.ac.uk/>

⁹ Kalmar, I. D. (2023). Race, racialisation, and the East of the European Union: an introduction. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(6),

7. We found that German migrants appeared much less often than Polish migrants in UK news stories, with the exception of the referendum period. During this time, they were typically portrayed as highly skilled and a benefit to the UK economy. While they are represented in instrumental terms to Britain rather than as individuals carrying their own personal and collective histories and cultures, this finding nevertheless demonstrates how the press creates hierarchies between different European migrant groups. There were, however, many press stories about German politics that tended to portray Germany as a country continually associated with Nazism. Many articles focus on far-right movements, parties and far-right violence and are used to tell a story of a country that has not adequately dealt with the Nazi past.
8. Polish and German interviewees reported that they have felt more like outsiders since the EU referendum, partly due to anti-migrant sentiment and national stereotypes being prevalent in the press. One Polish-German interviewee attributed this sentiment, and the hate crimes they had experienced after the referendum, as in part due to a lack of international news in the UK press leading to lack of knowledge of other countries. The observation that the UK press reports international or European news less often than press in other countries is also supported by own research amongst others.¹⁰
9. Our interviews also suggest there is a link between political disengagement and news consumption. One German participant appeared disillusioned with the press and perceived anti-migrant stories to be supporting an economic agenda in favour of the wealthy. Another German participant stated that they 'watch less news than I used to' because they had limited opportunities to influence politics. Another recounted their concern at the social media manipulation of messages that people receive particularly during and after the referendum and their perception that news outlets, even the BBC, were not neutral, which was when they stopped watching.
10. Some interviewees described a process of reading the news across languages and countries as one strategy to address a lack of trust in the media generally, and the UK press in particular. Several Polish participants explained that after first reading UK news, they then turn to Polish outlets, and some cases other countries' news outlets to gain broader perspectives and context. One explained that while they read both UK and Polish news, they tend to only read about things that affect them closely due to their distrust and scepticism towards media and governments, while another stated that needing to check multiple sources to verify the information they receive means that they do not engage much with news at all. It is worth noting that this strategy to read news in multiple languages in order to find trusted information is not one open to the majority of British people who have been found to have limited second language proficiency.¹¹

¹⁰ Galpin, C., & Trenz, H.-J. (2019). Converging towards Euroscepticism? Negativity in news coverage during the 2014 European Parliament elections in Germany and the UK. *European Politics and Society*, 20(3), 260-276.

11. In the context of continuing press attention to immigration, particularly around asylum and the 'Rwanda Bill', as well as the ongoing war in Ukraine, the pattern of stereotyping of different migrant groups is expected to continue.
12. To address potentially discriminatory and negative portrayals of migrant groups, I recommend that Clause 12 of the IPSO Editors' Code of Practice covers not only individuals but also addresses discriminatory remarks towards minority groups. This has so far been rejected by editors¹² but has been long called for by charities such as the Media Diversity Institute.¹³
13. In relation to question 2 (evaluation), I draw here another recently published co-authored study.¹⁴ We found that right-wing UK newspapers contribute to a climate of distrust and anxiety around 'truth' and legitimate knowledge in the contemporary media landscape. One way in which they do this is through stoking distrust in academic and expert knowledge through social media comments. Such patterns inhibit the function of the news to improve public knowledge and raise questions about trust in public debates in the run up to the 2024 general election.
14. We found that newspapers stoked distrust in academics and other professionals in the context of Brexit debates through the staging of abusive social media comments on their organisations' Facebook pages. Articles that discussed the views of academics/experts in sensationalist ways generated angry and abusive comments threads.
15. In our study, articles about male academics and academics as a general group resulted in online commentary that generally dismissed the kinds of knowledge they produce, using populist language to describe academics as an elite class lacking common sense and 'out of touch' with 'the people'. Accusations of corruption and collaboration with 'external enemies' such as the EU, or more specifically Germany, were common.
16. Some comments used ideas about 'perverse sexuality' to describe academics as 'grooming students' while also questioning their mental capacity. Nevertheless, comments about academic men and academics as a general group largely focused on what they are doing or saying as academics rather than who they are.
17. Articles about women, racialised and LGBTQ+ people, however, resulted in social media comments that not only contested their contributions in line with the above, but also focused on who they *are*, dismissing their

¹¹ <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/foreign-languages-skills-in-the-workforce/>

¹² <https://pressgazette.co.uk/media-law/group-discrimination-press-editors-code-ipso/>;
<https://getthetrollsout.org/campaign/changing-ipso>

¹³ <https://www.media-diversity.org/plus-ca-change-plus-cest-la-meme-chose-discrimination-and-the-editors-code/>

¹⁴ Galpin, C., & Vernon, P. (2023). Post-Truth Politics as Discursive Violence: Online Abuse, the Public Sphere, and the Figure of 'The Expert'. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, (OnlineFirst), available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/13691481231202641> (Open Access)

very legitimacy as academics or experts and their presence in the public sphere. Their position as academics or professionals was presented as illegitimate or impossible.

18. Comments about the women academics in our study included misogynistic slurs and references to their intelligence, denied their right to their PhD or their position as employed academics at their universities, accused them of needing psychiatric help or called for them to be sectioned, or used racist and xenophobic language. In the case of one woman academic, comments involved a torrent of highly sexualised, degrading, and dehumanising comments about her body. Such comments have the effect of delegitimising their contributions as academics by bringing attention to their bodies.
19. Our study did not find articles centred on academics of colour or those framed as representing the LGBTQ+ community, which we interpret as reflective of the under-representation of these groups within academia as well as within Brexit debates in the media. To capture how such groups might be represented in comments, we analysed comments under articles about Gina Miller and the High and Supreme Court judges who ruled Parliament had to invoke Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty.
20. We found a prevalence of ageist and homophobic commentary directed at the judges alongside similar tropes to the above about being 'out of touch' or 'corrupt'. Abusive comments were most intense when directed at Gina Miller, who was not only subject to sexist and misogynistic comments of being, for example, a 'spoiled brat' but also comments with strong antisemitic undertones of being 'controlled' by 'wealthy puppet masters'. She was also subject to other racist tropes that denied her British citizenship. Most concerning were extreme comments that dehumanised her or sanctioned violence against her.
21. We view these comments, staged by newspapers under articles shared on their own Facebook pages, as forms of violence that symbolically remove minoritised people from the public sphere, portraying them as 'illegitimate' sources of knowledge.
22. We explain these findings within the context of the digital media economy in which news outlets can no longer rely solely on their newspaper brand to ensure readership. In order to generate clicks for advertising revenue, news organisations must compose individual stories according to social and platform logics that determine social media visibility. This means that there is an incentive to write sensationalist or controversial headings, often to whip up anger or outrage that encourages engagement through likes, shares, comments.¹⁵ This is what Alison Phipps describes as the 'outrage economy' of the contemporary media landscape.¹⁶

¹⁵ Welbers, K., & Opgenhaffen, M. (2019). Presenting News on Social Media. *Digital Journalism*, 7(1), 45-62.

¹⁶ Phipps, A. (2020). *Me, not you: The trouble with mainstream feminism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Journalists/editors then decide what to post directly on social media to facilitate emotional engagement with the news.¹⁷

23. In relation to the above, news outlets during this year's general election in particular are likely to ramp up sensationalist stories about academics and universities as well as minority groups through culture war stories as a way to influence voter behaviour in the election. Recent articles about 'woke universities' can be read in this context.¹⁸
24. The Online Safety Act included special duties on service providers to protect 'content of democratic importance', defined as news publisher and regulated user-generated content, and content that is intended to contribute to political debate in the UK.¹⁹ I recommend keeping under review how these duties are applied under the remit of the Act, which may risk abusive and violent posts and comments being protected from removal as 'content of democratic importance' or 'journalistic content'.
25. I further recommend that editors' codes of practice should address the potential for facilitating and monetizing abuse via social media platforms and promoting distrust in academic expertise in ways that can damage democracy.
26. In response to question 5b (evaluation), I recommend incorporating online abuse into working definitions of disinformation and what has become known as 'post-truth politics'. We see online abuse as not just 'slurs' or individualised insults but as forming threads that constitute important forms of post-truth communication. Such threads, often staged by news media, serve to delegitimise academic knowledge in ways that are targeted particularly at minoritised academics, professionals, and experts. This kind of media abuse thus has the effect of fostering distrust in particular forms and bodies of expertise and limiting what groups or people are trusted as experts. Yet, existing definitions of 'disinformation' as the intentional distribution of factual inaccuracies or 'fake news' cannot capture this pattern of delegitimising knowledge.
27. I also recommend expanding commonly used definitions of post-truth politics and/or disinformation in this way, for example, in future reviews of the Online Safety Act, its implementation via Ofcom, and the role of the Advisory committee on misinformation and disinformation, to incorporate the issue of gendered, sexualised, and racialized online abuse of experts as harmful online content.

¹⁷ Park, C. S., & Kaye, B. K. (2023). Applying news values theory to liking, commenting and sharing mainstream news articles on Facebook. *Journalism*, 24(3), 633-653.

¹⁸ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11638389/Half-universities-peddle-woke-agenda-students.html>; <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/01/29/university-donors-oxford-pitt-rivers-go-woke-go-broke/>; <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12268387/Woke-universities-using-insidious-censorship-stifle-free-speech-education-minister-warns.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.taylorwessing.com/en/interface/2023/the-uks-online-safety-act/the-online-safety-acts-approach-to-protecting-freedom-of-expression>; <https://www.osborneclarke.com/insights/uk-online-safety-act-top-10-takeaways-online-service-providers>

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