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Tim Cooper and Jem Thomas

NATURE OR NURTURE: A CRISIS OF TRUST AND REASON IN THE DIGITAL AGE.

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Nature or Nurture: A Crisis of Trust and Reason in the Digital Age

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Foreword
By Sir Robert Fry

The End of History seems a distant memory now. Francis Fukuyama's 1989 essay, expanded into book form and published in 1992, saw a world approaching an end point of humanity's sociocultural development and a final, universal form of government. That humanity is not so easily corralled and government not so easily defined may not surprise us; indeed, we may be encouraged by the unpredictable vitality both continue to show, but it is remarkable that what at the time looked like a moment of epochal triumph for the West now looks so much more complex, divisive and confusing.

Neither has history stood still in the 21st Century. A financial crisis with few historical precedents and the Wars of 9/11 have completely changed the global landscape, aided and abetted by a revolution in communications that has to look back to the invention of the printing press to find anything of comparable significance. Brexit, Trump and concepts like illiberal democracy are symptoms rather than causes of a new normal in which fake news, hate speech and computational propaganda have entered the language and are the everyday currency of communications.

Taking the long view, we may be at one of those millennial moments where fundamental value is redefined. Feudal societies were defined by the ownership of land and the consequential relationship between aristocrat and peasant. In the same way, industrial societies were defined by the ownership of capital and the consequential relationship between capitalist and proletarian. Perhaps digital societies will be defined by the ownership of data and the consequential relationship between Mark Zuckerberg and the rest of us. If so, we are only at the start of a long process and the sooner we understand the new rules of the game, the better.

Commentators have tried their best to write the new rulebook. Thomas Piketty has addressed the economics in *Capital in the 21st Century;* Niall Ferguson has tried to put some shape on the societal implications in *The Square and the Tower*; Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin have looked at the politics in *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* and Douglas Murray has explored the sociology in *The Madness of Crowds.*

To this growing canon, Albany Associates has now made a short but significant contribution. Significant because it blends the experience of a company that makes its living in the toughest of communications environments with the intellectual curiosity of its two authors, Tim Cooper and Jem Thomas. At the seam of several academic disciplines and the real world of communications practice, Cooper and Thomas bring a rigorous analysis which guides us through a new normal where every prejudice has its own echo chamber and it is far easier to have pre-conception confirmed than challenged by open debate. Above all, they make the vital point that the debate is fundamentally about human response and not technological determination, and, in doing so, they remind us of the responsibility we all have to play a role in shaping our future.

London, October 2019

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Abstract

Today's digital age is beset by in an information crisis that revolves around the five giant evils of confusion, cynicism, fragmentation, irresponsibility and apathy (LSE, 2018). Media system change is an important factor that contributes to the current weakening of democratic institutions and discourse and guardianship of evidence-based, rational policymaking, as well as a crisis of trust in political elites. Such processes undermine the bedrock of liberal democracy and erode societal resilience in turbulent times.

While many rightly look towards media reform to solve these problems, for communicators and policymakers to re-engage with a cynical and confused public that now often communicates outside traditional channels, a deeper understanding of how our political beliefs and values are formed and changed is required to accurately analyse the social and psychological underpinnings of the challenges we face.

The following text aims to explore and summarise the latest research and literature in a number of disparate fields of potential relevance to the following crucial questions:

1. What factors characterise the weakening of democratic institutions and discourse? What role does media system change play in these?
2. What are the main causes of these factors, and how does today's digital media environment exacerbate them?
3. What does recent research say about potential solutions to these problems and possible roles for communication and the media?

Introduction

The problem

In the last few years, significant proportions of the electorate in established democracies have become dissatisfied with, or outright distrustful of, the entire liberal-democratic political system.[1] Trust in established political parties of any flavour and their representatives, the media and once-respected institutions such as banks and big business has fallen dramatically in recent decades (Edelman, 2019a). Populist parties and candidates in Europe and America have risen to gain significant portions of the vote or even take power (Henley, 2018). Such parties overwhelmingly cite (re-)establishing control of immigration and replacing “corrupt elites” as the main issues facing society (Team Populism Project, 2019). Increased polarisation (Tucker et al., 2018) and a harsher political discourse between populists and those opposing them have also become evident.

Analysis

Many analyses and explanations of these seemingly sudden changes to a political system that has constituted the bedrock of governance since the second world war have been proposed, but none has gained general acceptance.[2] The causes of the current situation appear to be many and difficult to analyse, but journalists, academics, politicians and analysts have regularly proposed certain factors. These include the economic and other effects of globalisation on certain sectors of society, a consequent rise in inequality, immigration and fear of terrorism, technological change, polarisation due to new media and a growing lack of trust in elites and experts following high-profile scandals. Deliberate misinformation by state and non-state actors is also cited.

Psycho-social characteristics

Any or all of the above factors may be contributing to determining the weakening of democratic institutions and discourse. But a number of other common features that accompany the phenomenon may provide clues to deeper causes of which the commonly suggested factors are merely surface manifestations.

New questions posed in a wide range of recent academic research may give a way in to a deeper understanding of the real causes. These include: Why has such a change happened now, and why do these factors appear together? How and why did it happen so quickly? Why are immigration and distrust of elites linked and seemingly so important to those advocating change? Why are populist claims so difficult to combat, even when they are demonstrably false? Why are some claims apparently immune to evidence and reason? Who are the people voting for populists? Who is not voting, and why? What has caused the collapse in institutional trust? Why is it so difficult to change political opinions? Why do some people seem to vote against their economic interests? Why has political discourse become so harsh of late?

These and many other features of the new normal appear to connect to recent research in a number of disparate fields.

Contemporary information ecology

While no one is claiming that digital media caused the current crisis, it is almost universally accepted that media, from mainstream to social, played a significant role in fostering it. In particular, technological change in media-relevant areas such as the internet, databases and social media – known as new media systems (LSE, 2018) – is playing a major role in exacerbating problems, for example by decreasing trust in elites, reducing access to unbiased information and facilitating dissemination of disinformation.

But such change may also have a role in resolving these problems, for instance by developing new types of trust, improving the democratic process and keeping elites accountable. We will summarise relevant research on the effects of new media systems and their ecology on democratic discourse.

Political communications

Fake news, disinformation, computational propaganda, targeted news feeds: these are all phenomena attached to today's psycho-social condition. Admittedly, although some of these features are not new, digital technology has enabled their influence to a degree not seen before, involving a wide spectrum of actors, from the man on the street to his political masters. We will examine the nature of modern political communications and propaganda, to assess the impact on trust in democracy.

Belief and how to change it

The final and perhaps most basic question we try to address is this: once we have looked at our political convictions and the ways that modern communication and digital technology influence them, how can we effectively change them – or at least bolster agreement on all sides that respectful, evidence-based discourse is necessary to effective politics? Our examination will look into how the mechanisms uncovered in analysing the causes of the current situation can help in returning to a changed but effective liberal democracy for the coming age.

It will thus be the principal aim of this text to provide information of potential relevance to gaining a clearer understanding of the real nature of this new lack of faith in liberal democracy among large sections of the population and present potential new ways of approaching it.

Outline of the text

The text begins by describing the most commonly evinced characteristics of the undermining of support for liberal democracy, citing many of the most recent analyses on the question. Part two examines the possible psycho-social effects of these phenomena and looks into what literature from psychology, economics, anthropology, sociology, neuroscience and political science has to say of potential relevance. A number of supposedly secondary characteristics may be evidence of deeper root causes, which shall also be investigated.

Part three looks at the positive and negative roles that new, digital media systems may play in exacerbating or suppressing these effects, followed by an examination in part four of how political communications and propaganda interact with these systems and to what effect. Finally, based on those effects, part five looks at what the research literature has to say about possible approaches that may help defend and remodel the democratic system.

Given the vast scope of the issues covered, the text cannot aim to be comprehensive. We therefore limit ourselves to describing research that proposes innovative explanations of causes of the current crisis, in the hope that this may lead to new perspectives and approaches, as it seems clear that many of the traditional solutions being proposed and implemented are not working.

It is important to note that we do not take a partisan attitude in favour of one political stance or another. But we do assume that for our democracy (or something similar) to survive, it must return to a place where all those taking part in it see those who disagree with them as opponents, but not enemies. Values, feelings and emotions all have their part to play in determining political standpoints, but when they lead to the belief that those who think differently from us have no right to their opinions, we have clearly gone too far.

Part one: The new normal

That in established democracies the political situation and political discourse in general have radically changed – and for the worse – in recent years seems undeniable. Yet despite the near-constant barrage of discussion and analysis in mainstream media, think-tanks and academia on this subject, no consensus has arisen on the factors that characterise the new situation, let alone its possible causes. This part looks at the developments most commonly presented as relevant to the decline in trust in democratic institutions and discourse.

Nationalism, globalism and inequality

One commonly cited reason for the apparently sudden collapse in trust in liberal democracy and party politics has been the supposed economic demise of the white, working-class voter in established democracies. This is often linked to the process of globalisation and the outsourcing of jobs traditionally done in developed economies to less-developed ones.

As political scientist Yascha Mounk puts it in *The People Vs. Democracy*,

> *Over the past decades, global GDP has grown rapidly. A billion people have been lifted out of poverty. Literacy rates have skyrocketed, while child mortality has fallen. Taking the world as a whole, income inequality has shrunk.* (Mounk, 2018, p. 36)

But in developed countries, where gross domestic product (GDP) has also grown hugely, it has grown only for a very small percentage of the population: the super-rich. Put another way, and as many other commentators have noted, the main beneficiaries of the rise in global GDP in past decades have been the global poor and the super-rich, rather than those who underpinned the shift to globalisation, namely workers in established democracies in developed nations.

Statistics certainly seem to back this up. Political economist William Davies, in *Nervous States*, notes that while the income of the US population overall rose by 58% between 1978 and 2015, the income of the bottom half of US society fell by 1% (Davies, 2018a, p. 76). In *The Price of Inequality*, written in 2012, Nobel prize-winner in economics Joseph Stiglitz makes a compelling case that:

- Recent US income growth occurs at the top 1% of income distribution.
- As a result, there is growing inequality.
- Those at the bottom and in the middle are worse off today than they were three decades ago.
- Inequalities in wealth are even greater than inequalities in income.
- The US has more inequality than any other advanced industrialised country, with the UK in second place (Stiglitz, 2012).

This redistribution of wealth in developed economies is now extreme. In January 2017, a report by charity Oxfam to mark the World Economic Forum, an annual meeting of political and business leaders in Davos, claimed that eight men owned the same wealth as the 3.6 billion people who made up the poorest half of humanity (Hardoon, 2017).

As economist Thomas Piketty notes in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, the major contemporary driver of inequality, which he sees as the tendency of the returns on capital to exceed the rate of economic growth, threatens to fuel extreme inequalities that undermine democratic values and provoke discontent:

> *A market economy based on private property, if left to itself, contains powerful forces of convergence, associated in particular with the diffusion of knowledge and skills; but it also contains powerful forces of divergence, which are potentially threatening to democratic societies and to the values of social justice on which they are based.* (Piketty, 2017, p. 571)

Despite this growing evidence of the negative effects of inequality on large swathes of the population in developed countries, there is as yet little sign that political parties of whatever stripe intend to do anything about it. At the 2019 meeting of the World Economic Forum, a video went viral in which a Dutch historian noted to the audience that he found it curious that taxing the rich was not on the agenda. “It’s like a conference of firefighters who never talk about water,” he said (Farrer, 2019).

Such disparity alone seems likely to have had psychological effects on the left behind, but when combined with revelations that many of the super-rich are also not paying their fair share of tax, it may lead to a pervading sense of unfairness and thus a decrease in trust. The Panama Papers, a huge leak of documents released in 2016 detailing financial information about offshore entities, showed that one legal firm alone had helped 29 of the Forbes top 500 billionaires, 12 serving or former world leaders and 140 politicians to avoid tax (Botsman, 2017, p. 39). During his US presidential election campaign in 2012, Republican nominee Mitt Romney famously and openly admitted that he paid less tax on his earnings than most American working-class taxpayers. US President Donald Trump to this day refuses to release his tax returns.

So is there a link between rising inequality and populism? The two certainly seem to be correlated. Research by the McKinsey Global Institute found that between 65% and 70% of people in 25 advanced countries saw no increase in their earnings between 2005 and 2014 (Dobbs et al., 2016). The report went on: “Those who were not advancing and not hopeful about the future were more likely than those who were advancing to support nationalist political parties such as France’s National Front or, in the United Kingdom, to support the move to leave the European Union” (2016, p. 6). McKinsey found that people who had seen no increase in their incomes “tended to be pessimistic about the future both of themselves and their children, and were likely to be more negative about removing barriers to trade or migration” (Elliott, 2016). Particularly in the US and the UK, the rise of the working poor, food banks, and zero-hours contracts might also be considered indicative of major changes for the large sections of society in developed economies who are on low wages.

Mounk asks whether the stability of liberal democracy since the second world war was brought about by conditions that are no longer in place, and if so, how the erosion of such conditions may explain what has been happening over the past decades. He provides a useful schema by which to understand the two parts of the phrase "liberal democracy". In his view:

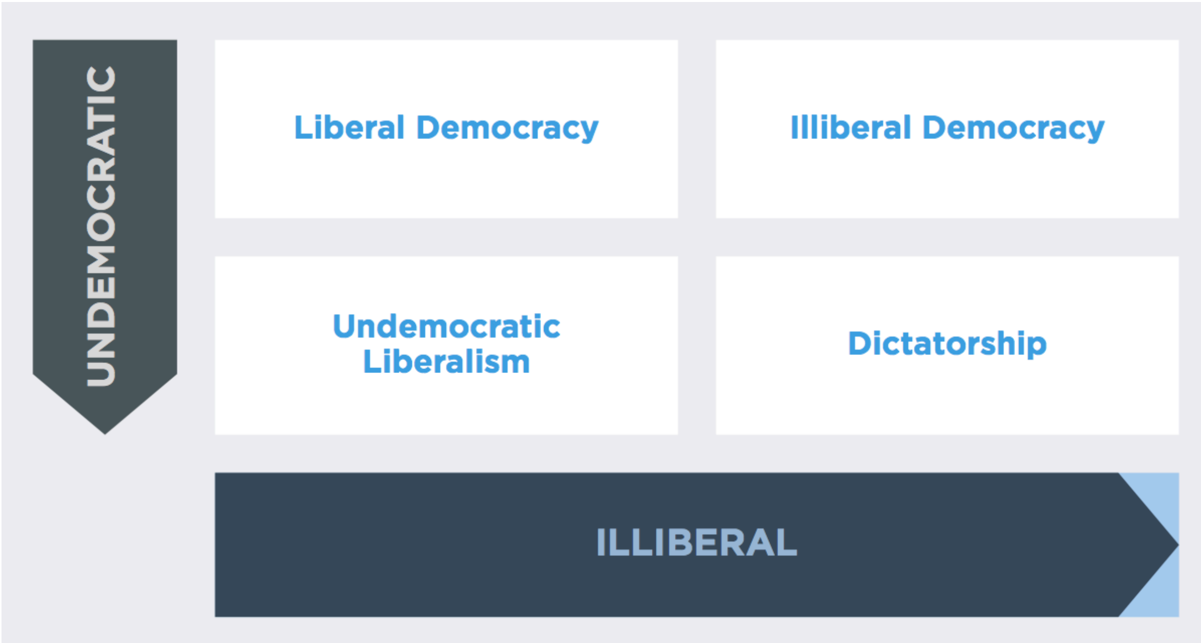
- A democracy is a set of binding electoral institutions that effectively translates popular views into public policy.
- Liberal institutions effectively protect the rule of law and guarantee individual rights such as freedom of speech, worship, press and association to all citizens, including ethnic and religious minorities.
- A liberal democracy is thus simply a political system that is both liberal and democratic – one that both protects individual rights and translates popular views into public policy (Mounk, 2018, p. 36).

With this definition, there are different flavours of democracy that can be represented graphically (see figure 1).

This graphic allows us to visualise how liberal democracies can falter in two important ways. The first is by turning into illiberal democracies – a phrase used a number of times by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to describe modern-day Hungary – in which the will of the people, suitably channelled by a charismatic leader, overrules liberal, independent institutions, for example by bridling media or universities, and the same rights for minorities and immigrants as for the people.

The other way, which has been mentioned by many in the US, the UK, France and Italy, is undemocratic liberalism, where rights continue to be guaranteed but public elections seem to have no effect – that is, the popular will, even if identified and supported by one or other party, is almost never effectively translated into policy change. This is a charge also often levelled at the EU. This nicely underlines how successful liberal democracies need to stay within the bounds of both terms – providing real expression of popular will while ensuring legal-based rights for all citizens of whatever ethnic stripe.

Figure 1: Democracy vs. liberalism



Source: Mounk, The People Vs. Democracy *(2018)*

Mounk argues that the stable phase for liberal democracies was characterised by a set of specific circumstances:

1. unprecedented economic growth and steadily improving standards of living for the majority;
2. mass communication under the control of political and financial elites; and
3. the dominance of one ethnic group in politics, or racial hierarchy.

But with the rise of inequality, new media systems and large-scale immigration in all developed countries, those conditions are starting to fail. Increasingly, large swathes of the population saw the new political orthodoxy that arose in the US and the EU from the 1990s – namely, that the economy was the principal factor on which all others depended, also known as neoliberalism – as not consonant with their experience. As Davies points out, when presidents and prime ministers stood up to tell the country that the economy was improving, over half knew it was not – at least, not for them (2018a, p. 77).

Confidence in institutions

Thus, as undemocratic liberalism spread throughout the West, the trust that large parts of the population had in their political leaders and the entire political system began to erode. That trust has truly declined over recent decades appears to be undeniable: Rachel Botsman, a leading writer on trust in the digital age, notes that in the US after the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam war, Gallup began asking people how much confidence they had in major institutions such as banks, media, religion and Congress (2017). Approximately seven out of ten Americans believed they could trust their institutions to do the right thing in most circumstances.

Forty years later, the average is 32% (Botsman, 2017, p. 41). Confidence has fallen in every major institution except small business and the military. Congress (9%), banks (27%), big business (18%) and newspapers (20%) are at all-time lows. Of millennials, according to a survey by Harvard University's Institute of Politics, 86% now distrust financial institutions, and 88% "sometimes or never" trust the media (Botsman, 2017, p. 41).

In Europe, the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey also note the decline in trust in politicians, journalists and others. The only groups to see stable or increasing levels of trust over recent years are those in uniform. But at the same time, interest in politics has risen – at least in Britain, where there has been a 7% rise over 30 years, with 36% of people now quite or very interested in politics (Young and Lee, 2013, p. 67).

Worryingly, faith in liberal democracy itself has collapsed as well – and more quickly in countries where democracy has been functioning effectively for longer. Survey results in the US and other established democracies show that particularly young people with no direct experience of war or dictatorship are inclined to be flexible about the importance of living in a democracy and support for strongman leaders or even army rule. Among those born in the 1980s, only 29% say it is important to live in a democracy. In 1995 about one in 16 Americans said they favoured army rule. In 2011 it was one in six (Foa and Mounk, 2016).

It is easy to find reasons for such a decline in trust: the inaccurate evidence of weapons of mass destruction presented to justify the second Gulf war; the consequent rise of Islamic State (IS) and a number of regional wars, including, eventually, further jihadist terrorism; the 2008 banking crisis, caused by a gigantic failure of self-regulation by the world's major banks, and the subsequent global recession; the failure to effectively punish any of the principal actors or make major legislative changes to ensure such a crisis would not be repeated; and the ensuing concentration by governments in Europe in particular – and the IMF – on austerity as a way of remedying the banks' failure, and its disproportionate effect on the poor.

Such multi-year, systemic problems set the general background against which a series of revelations about institutional and group, rather than personal, failure added insult to injury. The list is impressive and far from exhaustive:

- the British parliamentary expenses scandal, which affected members of all parties (similar had happened earlier in Italy, with the Mani Pulite investigation that led to the rise of Silvio Berlusconi as a politician);
- in sport, doping scandals in cycling and Russian Olympics and endemic corruption in football's international governing body, FIFA;
- Tesco's false profit reporting and horsemeat scandal;
- the BP *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill;
- Volkswagen's dieselgate scandal and associated revelations that global pollution standards for cars were easily manipulatable;
- major personal data breaches in several companies, including Yahoo and British Airways;

- WikiLeaks revealing evidence of war crimes by US forces at Abu Ghraib prison;
- former CIA employee Edward Snowden blowing the whistle on numerous global surveillance programmes run by the Five Eyes Intelligence Alliance, with the cooperation of telecommunication companies and European governments;
- the Panama Papers and the revelation of detailed and widespread tax avoidance by many of the world's political and business leaders;
- the LIBOR exchange-rate manipulation and Brazil's Petrobras corruption scandal;
- revelations of widespread child abuse in the Catholic church; and
- the paedophilia investigations in the UK into TV and radio personality Jimmy Savile.

We could go on, but we will always be able to construct such a list, whatever time period is chosen. The real question is whether things have actually become worse than in previous years, or whether we have just become better at uncovering what was always there. Certainly, with hindsight, the sheer regularity and extent of the issues uncovered seems greater than before, but it is also true that many of the scandals were uncovered thanks to breaches in the now-vast databases into which relevant information had been transferred and thus seem qualitatively different from what went before.

It might be said that "the main feature of the emerging regime is that truth is now assumed to reside in hidden archives of data, rather than in publicly-available facts. This is what is affirmed by scandals such as MPs' expenses and the leak of the Iraq war logs – and more recently in the #MeToo movement, which also occurred through a sudden and voluminous series of revelations, generating a crisis of trust. The truth was out there, just not in the public domain. In the age of email, social media and camera phones, it is now common sense to assume that virtually all social activity is generating raw data, which exists out there somewhere." As Davies puts it,

> *The era of "big data" is also the era of "leaks". Where traditional "sleaze" could topple a minister, several of the defining scandals of the past decade have been on a scale so vast that they exceed any individual's responsibility. The Edward Snowden revelations of 2013, the Panama Papers leak of 2015 and the HSBC files (revealing organised tax evasion) all involved the release of tens of thousands or even millions of documents. Paper-based bureaucracies never faced threats to their legitimacy on this scale.* (2018b)

Little wonder, then, that the decline of trust has been so precipitous. While perhaps we did not learn things that we did not already presume to be true, as philosopher Slavoj Žižek underlines, "it is one thing to know it in general and another to get concrete data" (2014). Many scandals were not uncovered by journalists but by whistle-blowers or hackers.

So trust, particularly in institutions, certainly seems to have seen a massive and generalised decline in the last decade. But, as always, things are not that simple. Recent data give some clues that other factors may be at play and other trends emerging.

The Edelman Trust Barometer (2019b), published in January 2019, adds some fascinating complexities to this apparently uniform picture:

1. Geographical distribution of trust: Globally, the level of trust of the general population varies widely by country. Very low levels are seen, for example, in Russia and Japan (in the 30s), but very high levels exist in China and Indonesia (in the 70s). The UK and the US are in the mid-40s.
2. There is a difference in trust levels between the informed and the general public. Edelman introduces the interesting concept of trust inequality, which has risen to record levels in recent years. There is now a 16% difference in trust levels in major institutions (government, media, NGOs and business) between the informed public (people over 25 with a university education and in the top

25% in terms of income) and the general population, with the informed more likely to trust institutions.
3. Trust in the future: A majority in the developed world are now pessimistic about the future, believing that they and their families will not be better off in five years' time. Only one in five thinks the system is working for them.
4. Correlation with increased engagement with news: There has been a significant rise recently in news engagement, either reading or reading and then sharing news, with the disengaged – people who consume news less than once a week – dropping from 49% to 28% between 2018 and 2019.
5. Traditional media are seeing a small resurgence of trust – returning to narrowly beating search engines as the most trusted sources of information, at 65%, but online only media are experiencing the biggest rise in trust from previously low levels, to 55% (Newman, 2018).

In some countries, trust in journalists is now even lower than in politicians. Immediately after the Brexit and Trump votes, the Edelman Trust Barometer of 2017 showed that the media suffered the biggest blow – distrusted in 82% of the 28 countries surveyed. As Botsman notes, "in the UK, the number of people saying they trusted the media fell from 36% in 2016 to 24% in 2017" (2017, p. 5). "People now view media as part of the elite," says Richard Edelman, president and chief executive of the survey firm. "The result is a proclivity for self-referential media and reliance on peers" (2017). Similar levels of trust in the media are apparent across Europe. In particular, there appears to be a continued dissonance between levels of trust in established media and trust in journalists and their independence, which is much lower (Edelman, 2019b, p. 42).

In the UK, as Davies notes, "the moral authority of newspapers may never have been high, but the grisly revelations that journalists hacked the phone of murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler represented a new low in the public standing of the press. The Leveson inquiry, followed soon after by the Saville revelations and Operation Yewtree, generated a sense of a media class who were adept at exposing others, but equally expert at concealing the truth of their own behaviours" (2018b).[3]

At the same time, it was newspapers and broadcasters that enabled all of this to come to light at all. The extent of phone hacking was eventually exposed by the *Guardian*, the parliamentary expenses scandal by the *Telegraph* and Jimmy Savile by ITV. The Panama Papers, WikiLeaks and others were analysed by global teams of journalists from reputable media set up for the purpose, coordinated, for example, by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.

In Davies's view, "it is hard to imagine that the net effect of so many revelations was to build trust in any publicly visible institutions. On the contrary, the discovery that 'elites' have been blocking access to a mine of incriminating data is perfect fodder for conspiracy theories" (2018b).

Journalists are not the only ones to have suffered declines in trust, particularly among certain sections of the population. In 2016, UK Justice Secretary Michael Gove famously captured the zeitgeist by declaring that "people in this country have had enough of experts" (SkyNews, 2016). In reality, experts still seem to enjoy the trust of most – 60%, according to the Edelman Trust Barometer 2019. Perhaps the point is not so much whether people have faith in experts on the subject of their expertise, but whether experts tell the whole story. It became a sort of orthodoxy from the 1990s onwards that the political debate was about economics with a smidgen of identity politics thrown in. This assumption on the part of the political establishment led to a number of surprise defeats for the big parties in many developed democracies, which the experts did not see coming. The UK government, for instance, assumed that the 2016 referendum on EU membership would be decided by which side had the most compelling economic analysis and was – together with mainstream media – genuinely shocked by the result. The same was true of Trump's election (Tetlock, 2017, p. 219).[4]

This neoliberalist assumption seems to have been what a large proportion of the electorate rebelled against. And the mainstream media were, in fact, complicit. It is perhaps difficult to remember now just how impossible it was to hear anything at all about the concerns – and moral values – of importance to those who doubted this orthodoxy on the BBC, CNN or Euronews. For those of an authoritarian disposition, reporting about immigration, religion or lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender (LBGT) rights was noticeable only by its absence. Only grumblings of "political correctness gone mad" were heard. Lack of reporting on such issues and repeated assertions still made today that GDP and employment levels are at all-time highs – without asking "Employment as what?", "GDP for whom?" – continue to fuel the view that the whole truth was and is not being told.

So while it may seem that trust is disappearing wholesale, other experts note that things are not that simple. We might have lost faith in institutions and leaders, but we need to remember that at the same time, millions of people have begun giving their credit-card details online, renting their homes to total strangers, exchanging digital currencies invented by cyber-enthusiasts or joining – and donating to – movements of people they have never met. Now, "people like me" enjoy trust levels similar to those of experts and much higher than most who play a key part in ensuring the functioning of liberal democracy. According to Botsman, we are at the tipping point of "one of the biggest social transformations in human history" (2017, p. 50).

The return of populism

The other great change of recent years has been the appearance and, lately, the triumph of populist political parties. Though these have been on the rise in Europe for 20 years, their entry into the mainstream – parliament or even government – seems to have gone hand in hand with declining income or rising inequality and falling levels of trust. As psychologists Karen Stenner and Jonathan Haidt put it,

> *Western liberal democracy seems to be in the grip of a momentary madness. … All across the West, publics … have "suddenly" been overcome by a "wave" of "far-right" fervour.*

They bristle with nationalism and anti-globalism, xenophobia, and isolationism. (2018, p. 175)

There are calls to ban immigration, to deport "'illegals' … migrants and refugees are seen as threats to national security: as terrorists in waiting or in the making … beyond their depiction as 'the enemy within', they are deemed an existential threat to culture and national identity, competitors for jobs … There is a fundamentally antidemocratic mood afoot that has lost patience, in particular, with the structures of political correctness. In these conditions, formerly reviled parties and movements that once languished on the fringes have become viable" (2018, p. 175).

But what do we mean by populism? Most modern definitions are based on that of political scientist Cas Mudde, which sees populism as an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite", and argues that politics should be an expression of the will of the people (2004, p. 562). Mudde also claims that populism is often combined with a host ideology, which can be on either the left or the right.[5]

Using this definition, the *Guardian*, as part of its New Populism project, estimates that "populist parties have more than tripled their support in Europe in the last 20 years, securing enough votes to put their leaders into government posts in 11 countries" (Lewis et al., 2018).[6] Moreover, populist discourse has been on the rise over recent years, with even leaders of established parties increasingly co-opting it (Lewis et al., 2019).

Many people are by now familiar with the appearance in European politics of parties such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP),[7] the Alternative for Germany (AfD), France's National Rally, Italy's Northern League, the Netherlands' Party for Freedom (PVV), Hungary's Fidesz and Poland's Law and Justice (PiS). Most would consider Trump a populist too.

But populism does not necessarily have to be right wing. As shown in Italy with the appearance from nowhere of the Five Star

Movement led by former comedian Beppe Grillo, in Greece with Syriza, in Spain with Podemos and, to a certain extent, in France with President Emmanuel Macron and the reaction to him (the *gilets jaunes* protests), the host ideology can also be left wing or even centrist.

Thus, when it comes to populism, automatically associating populism with the descriptor right wing can be problematic. In a useful clarification of Mudde's definition, political scientists Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (2007, p. 3) describe populism as a phenomenon that pits "a virtuous and homogenous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and choice" (Stenner and Haidt, 2018, p. 178). This has little to do with normal political discourse.

Populist discourse will often convey

> *a Manichaean vision of the world, that is, one that is moral (every issue has a strong moral dimension) and dualistic (everything is in one category or the other, "right" or "wrong," "good" or "evil") … frequent references may be made to a reified notion of "history." Although Manichaean, the discourse is still democratic, in the sense that the good is embodied in the will of the majority, which is seen as a unified whole. Thus, this good majority is romanticized, with some notion of the common man (urban or rural) seen as the embodiment of the national ideal. The evil is embodied in a minority whose specific identity will vary according to context. … It is often an economic elite, perhaps the "oligarchy," but it may also be a racial elite; crucially, the evil minority is or was recently in charge and subverted the system to its own interests, against those of the good majority or the people. Thus, systemic change is/was required, often expressed in terms such as "revolution" or "liberation" of the people from their "immiseration" or bondage.* (Team Populism Project, 2019, pp. 2–3)

New media systems, notably digital, have been manna from heaven for populists. Populist parties were traditionally and deliberately excluded from the political mainstream by systems designed to keep them out, for example 5% hurdles in parliaments or exclusion by mainstream media with the agreement of the political establishment. Thus the arrival of the internet, and the removal of barriers to communication and the search for the like-minded, was extremely important for populists. It allowed direct and immediate contact with geographically distant supporters and the sharing of information, however unsupported, that was not generally available in national media.

Moreover, for everyone – populists included – the much-trumpeted shift towards tailored news by platforms such as Facebook, and the massive increase in the number of users, led to new media technologies exacerbating both what populists see as evidence for their beliefs and their ability, with almost zero entry costs, to create news for like-minded others. This is nicely described in the case of Tommy Robinson (real name Stephen Yaxley-Lennon), the leader of the English Defence League (EDL). Author and journalist Jamie Bartlett, in *The People Vs. Tech*, recalls that

> *for several weeks during 2015-2016 I followed Tommy across Europe. Whenever I was with him, he'd regularly scan Twitter for grim stores he could share with supporters. On Tommy's Twitter feed on 17 December 2017, a day I picked at random, he shared stories about: gay men being attacked by Muslims and told they are not welcome in Walthamstow (Evening Standard); Sikhs being told to convert to Islam by Pakistani officials (Rabwah Times); an Italian town removing a Christmas tree (Voice of Europe); armed police patrolling the town centre in Luton amid a massive terror threat (Westmonster); a Somali refugee claiming benefits from the UK while living in Somalia (Mirror); a former anti-terror chief predicting a terror attack before Christmas (Daily Mail); twin suicide bombers attacking a church in Quetta Baluchistan (Reuters).* (2018, pp. 55–6)

Bartlett makes the valid point that populist activists like Robinson often make up many of their stories, creating fake news that they then spread with the deliberate intention of stirring up emotions or bolstering support. But the point about the random day's news above is that almost all of the stories were true. All of us, populists included, are increasingly able to construct a plausible and coherent outside world through the careful one-sided selection of truth. As Bartlett notes, "this is not the same as 'fake news': it is the far more profound problem of selectively omitting certain truths" (2018, p. 56) – and, we might add, the mirror-image problem of carefully selecting only certain others.

Polarisation

In such circumstances, it is not difficult to see how polarisation of political opinion has increased. What is polarisation? Here we consider it as an increase in difference of opinion, a widening of the gap between two sides on an issue.

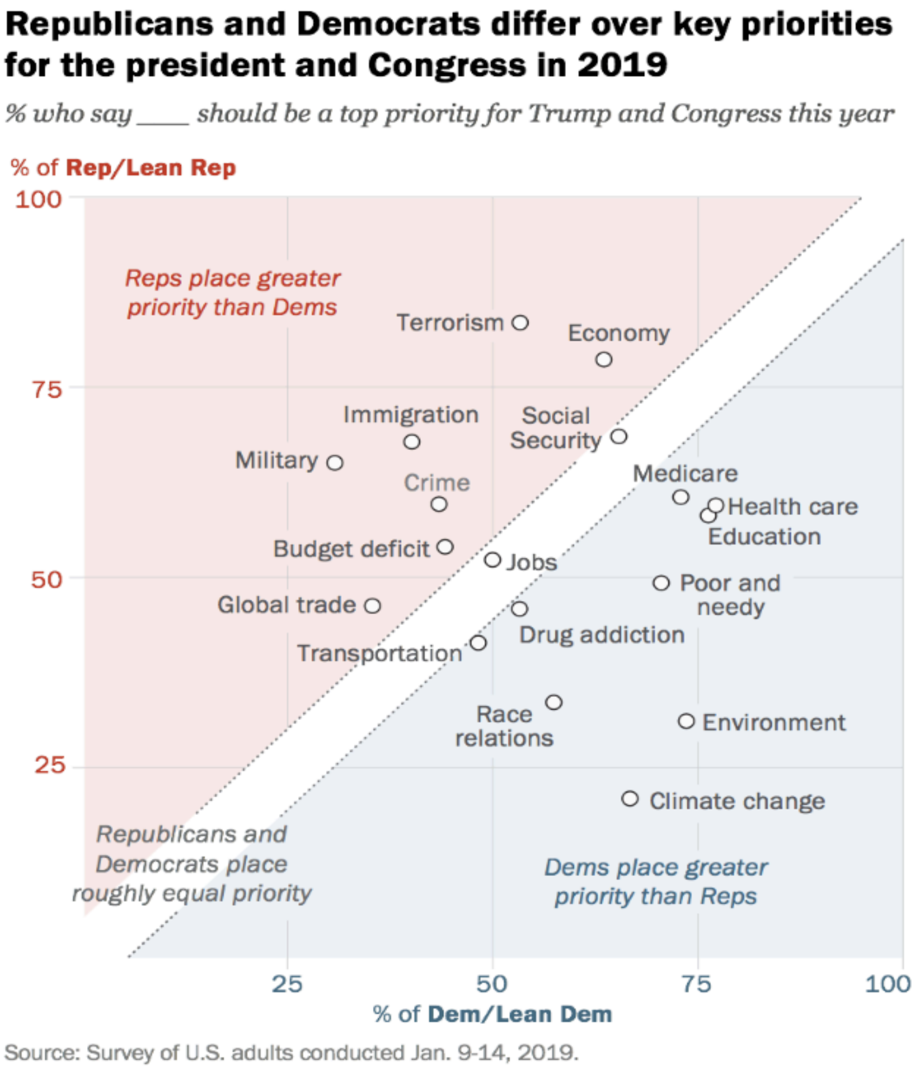
The best data on this are from the US, where it has long been recognised as a problem. A major Pew Research Center study in 2014 confirmed that Democrats and Republicans were getting more partisan (Dimock et al., 2014). In 2004, only about one in ten Americans was uniformly liberal or conservative across most values. Today, the share that is ideologically consistent has doubled: 21% express either consistently liberal or consistently conservative opinions across a range of issues (Dimock et al., 2014). In 2017, after a year of Trump's presidency, they found it had become worse:

> *The bottom line is this: Across 10 measures that Pew Research Center has tracked on the same surveys since 1994, the average partisan gap has increased from 15 percentage points to 36 points.* (Rosenbluth and Shapiro, 2018)

Perhaps even more worrying is that according to a 2019 study, party members for the first time no longer agree on what the top issues are (see figure 2).

> *Among Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents, health care costs, education, the environment, Medicare and assistance for poor and needy people top the list of priorities (all are named as top priorities by seven-in-ten or more Democrats). None of these is among the five leading top priorities for Republicans and Republican-leaning independents. The two priorities named by more than seven-in-ten Republicans – terrorism and the economy – are cited by far smaller shares of Democrats.* (B. Jones, 2019)

Figure 2: Issue priorities across the US political spectrum



Source: Pew Research Center

Almost all commentators agree that digital media and the ability to tailor one's news consumption are likely to contribute to polarisation – although the extent and effect of this phenomenon are debated. Moreover, one of the major changes that have taken place in just the last ten years is the shift from an environment of information scarcity to information overload. The importance of this change and the speed with which it happened are already hard to remember. We are now used to having answers – of varying quality – at our fingertips in an instant. There are now adult voters who have never experienced the evening television news or the front page of the *Daily Mail* as their principal or only source of news. There are adults who do not remember ever having to go to a library and use a card index to search for books of potential relevance to a question they are seeking to answer. Information on any topic is available in milliseconds at the click of a mouse; the problem is evaluating its quality.

As Bartlett notes,

> *The basis of what this is doing to politics is now fairly well-trodden stuff – the splintering of established mainstream news and a surge of misinformation allows people to personalise their sources in ways that play to their pre-existing biases. Faced with infinite connection, we find like-minded people and ideas and huddle together.* (2018, p. 45)

New, digital media systems allow us to do this more effectively – and do it automatically, whether we like it or not. In an example quoted by Botsman, Tom Steinberg, the British internet activist and mySociety founder, provided a powerful illustration of the filter-bubble problem:

> *"I am actively searching through Facebook" he said, "for people celebrating the Brexit leave victory." … The filter bubble is SO strong and extends SO far into things like Facebook's custom search that I can't find anyone who is happy despite the fact that over half the country is clearly jubilant today and despite the fact*

> *that I'm actively looking to hear what they are saying.* (2017, p. 47)

This underlines that, on social media at least, even those rare few of us who want to hear the other side's views may simply not be able to.

We will, moreover, get the impression that our side is the only one making news. A 2015 study (Eslami et al., 2015) suggested that more than 60% of Facebook users are entirely unaware of any curation on Facebook at all, believing instead that every story from their friends and followed pages appeared in their news feed (Bakshy et al., 2015). In reality, the vast majority of content any given user subscribes to will never appear in front of them. Instead, Facebook shows an algorithmic selection, based on a number of factors: most importantly, whether anyone has paid Facebook to promote the post, but also how you have interacted with similar posts in the past – by liking, commenting on or sharing them – and how much other people have done the same (Hern, 2017).

Brand-new phrases have entered the lexicon to describe all this: filter bubbles, echo chambers and fake news. And worse, according to recent work on partisanship, people with the strongest interest in and knowledge of politics are the most likely to rationalise their collection and use of information to suit their own biases, and the most likely to be made even more partisan by partisan media.[8]

The return of hate speech

With polarisation at a high and facilitated by the ease of communication with in-group members and without the need to listen to opposing arguments, is it any wonder that there has been a return of hate speech? In many cases, we have crossed the line from disagreement to hate. Populist discourse sees a Manichaean worldview come into play, where there is only one people and one truth, and those outside it are traitors. Moreover, the ease and anonymity with which we can now call out to the other group tempts even the best of us to express ourselves poorly at times.

Verbal abuse of MPs in favour of remaining in the EU accused of treason; the murder of British MP by a right-wing extremist; judges (by the *Daily Mail* in the UK) and media (by Trump in the US) labelled "enemies of the people": these episodes have all shown an important shift among the ethnic majority and even pillars of the establishment from disagreement to dehumanisation of perceived out-groups.

Here, too, the advent of social media significantly changed the ability of some to get airtime for hateful views. Internet trolls were born with the advent of social media. The immediacy and anonymity of comment has led to a gigantic rise – or rather, the unveiling of the extent of pre-existing views – in hate speech of all types, but particularly sexism (Amnesty International, 2018), homophobia and racism (Stray, 2017).

In 2004, psychologist John Suler published an article titled "The Online Disinhibition Effect", which analysed the characteristics of internet interactions (Suler, 2004). He found two main categories of behaviour: benign and toxic disinhibition. Benign disinhibition describes behaviour in which people might self-disclose more on the internet than they would in real life, or go out of their way to help someone, or show kindness. Toxic disinhibition describes behaviour that includes explicit and antagonistic language, threats and visiting sites containing pornography, crime and violence – places the person might not go to in real life. Suler found that "while online, some people self-disclose or act out more frequently or intensely than they would in person" (2004, p. 321). However, rather than thinking of disinhibition as the revealing of an underlying true self, Suler cautioned that much online behaviour, including discourse, is not something that would happen in real life.

While this may be true, online behaviour can have real-world consequences. If such a harshening of discourse has occurred among those claiming to represent the people in the ethnic majority, one can expect language and action towards more obvious out-groups to have significantly deteriorated. And so it has proven: after the Brexit vote, for example, physical attacks – let alone verbal ones, which tend not to be reported – on migrants rose significantly. Data from police forces across England and Wales showed there were almost 80,400 hate crimes recorded in the 2016–17 financial year. The figure is a 29% rise from the previous year – the largest annual increase since records began in 2013.

> *The increase over the last year is thought to reflect both a genuine rise in hate crime around the time of the EU referendum and also due to ongoing improvements in crime recording by the police … There were a number of spikes in racially or religiously aggravated offences. These were in June 2016 [EU referendum result], March 2017 [Westminster Bridge attack], May 2017 [Manchester Arena bombing] and June 2017 [London Bridge and Finsbury Park mosque attacks].* (Home Office, 2017)[9]

While defining hate speech and crime is notoriously difficult, and statistics are very difficult to come by, it seems clear that there has been a resurgence in crimes of this type in developed countries generally (FRA, 2018). Racism and discrimination across Europe showed no sign of improvement, according to the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA):

> *A considerable proportion of immigrants and minority ethnic groups face high levels of discrimination because of their ethnic or immigrant backgrounds, as well as potentially related characteristics, such as skin colour and religion. The results show little progress compared with eight years earlier.* (Infomigrants.net, 2018)

More recently, there has been a surge of anti-Semitism across Europe (FRA, 2018). This is perhaps an even starker demonstration of the problem, given the huge institutional and historical awareness of this issue since the second world war. The FRA produced a report in 2018 on the phenomenon, concluding that *people face so much antisemitic abuse that some of the incidents they experience appear trivial to them … The normalisation of antisemitism is also evidenced by the wide range of perpetrators, which spans the entire social and political spectrum.* 30/10/2019 14:40:00

In the US, the fact that the president banned citizens of certain Muslim-majority nations from travelling to the US, made almost no reaction to the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville in August 2017 and repeatedly lambasts Mexican irregular migrants indicates how normalised such speech has become.

Immigration

Much of the hate speech that was a fundamental part of populist views has been about immigration. The topic of migration is vast and cannot be summarised here. However, some relevant points regarding immigration's role in the weakening of democratic norms and discourse can be underlined.

Like lack of trust or faith in leadership, immigration is a big issue for populists. Many of the populist parties in Europe arose on the basis of fears about immigration. AfD, the National Rally, the English Defence League and the PVV are all examples of this type (Akkerman, 2018). Other populist parties founded on a different basis, such as the Northern League, Fidesz, PiS and UKIP, have soon co-opted the issue, as has Trump in the US with Muslims and Mexicans, whether the country in question was facing a large influx of migrants or not.

In the US there has been an overall fall in levels of irregular migration in recent years, despite Trump's 2019 declaration of a national emergency to fund construction of a border wall with Mexico. But in Europe there actually was a migration crisis, when more than a million asylum-seekers arrived in Europe, mostly by sea via Greece and Italy, in both 2015 and 2016 (EASO, 2017). This led to a political crisis in Europe during those years as the European Commission and European Council scrambled to deal with the problem.

Populist discourse about migration tends still to be unclear about precisely what aspect of migration is objected to. The widespread replacement theory – that there is an out-group plot to replace the dominant, white ethnic majority in developed countries – circling in extreme right-wing networks has not yet crossed over into the mainstream (Tharoor, 2019). Thus proxy claims are used instead. Despite no clear evidence that immigration has a negative economic effect, populist parties consistently claim that it does, and that immigrants are either using benefits of the resident population or taking their jobs (Migration Observatory, 2019).[10]

Public attitudes to immigration may be somewhat contradictory, with a manifest desire to control migration without clear ideas on what exactly about migration needs to be controlled (Rolfe et al., 2018). An interesting consideration is that it is not absolute levels of migration that determine propensity to view immigration unfavourably or vote for anti-immigrant parties (this has been demonstrated numerous times – areas with the highest levels of immigration are the most favourable to immigrants) but rather rates of change, which go more to the perception of the effect or threat of migration (Kaufmann, 2015).

An *Economist* analysis from 2016 found that in the UK,

> *Where foreign-born populations increased by more than 200% between 2001 and 2014, a Leave vote followed in 94% of cases. The proportion of migrants may be relatively low in Leave strongholds such as Boston, Lincolnshire, but it has soared in a short period of time. High numbers of migrants don't bother Britons; high rates of change do.* (The Economist, 2016).

Despite evidence about rates of change being more important for perceptions, Mounk still contends that absolute levels are, in the long run, important, noting that in 1980 about two-thirds of all US communities were highly homogeneous, with whites making up over

90% of all residents. By 2010, only about one-third of American communities were 90% white (2018, p. 173). Psychologist Thomas Pettigrew points out that this corresponds to the fact that “the racial and ethnic isolation of whites at the zip-code level is one of the strongest predictors of Trump support” (2017, p. 110).

Another aspect of the link between concern about immigration and propensity to vote for populists has been made clear in an interesting article by political scientists James Dennison and Andrew Geddes (2018). They make two important points:

1. The rise of new, populist parties in Europe over the past few years is often thought to be due to a rise in anti-immigration sentiment generally – and the cause or effect of those parties’ focus on immigration. But historically, attitudes to immigration, revealed in Eurobarometer surveys, has actually become more favourable over that time.
2. However, when the salience of immigration increases (it is seen as one of the top political issues by Europeans in the Eurobarometer survey), support for political parties promising to reduce or eliminate it soars in direct proportion – and often anti-immigration measures are practically the only policy being enunciated by such parties. The correlation between support for new populist parties with an anti-immigration stance and the perception of immigration as a major issue is quite stark across almost all EU countries.

Dennison and Geddes therefore conclude that the effect of the migration crisis was to activate latent concern about immigration among those already predisposed to be concerned about the issue. But, as with the issues of security and inequality, it seems likely that it is not actual levels of insecurity, poverty or immigration, but rather perceptions of it, that count. Survey responses show that irrespective of whether their country was facing large numbers of migrants or not, virtually all European citizens agreed – and still agree – that immigration is a problem. This again underlines the importance of where we get our information from and in what terms it is couched.

Terrorism

Another argument more or less clearly stated by populists is that migration is linked to increased risk of terrorism. And in the minds of the European public at least, immigration and terrorism are linked and highly important. The autumn 2018 Eurobarometer survey, a quarterly survey of European citizens (EC, 2018), notes that in response to the question "What do you think are the two most important questions facing the EU at the moment?" immigration remains the main concern at EU level for the third consecutive time, with "40% of mentions (+2 percentage points since spring 2018). It is mentioned twice as often as terrorism (20%), which remains in second position after a third consecutive decrease." This is ahead of public finances, the economy, climate change and unemployment, and despite the fact that actual levels of irregular migration have declined precipitously since 2017.

In the US, in contrast, the two main issues are the government or poor leadership and immigration. Terrorism is not linked to migration and is no longer seen as a salient political issue at all, having been chosen by 1% of respondents or less (Gallup, 2019).

While in Europe immigration seems to be synonymous with terrorism, thanks also to active mainstream political campaigns explicitly making this link in member states such as Hungary, Poland and Italy, the evidence for this is scant (Nowrasteh, 2015).[11] The Europol Terrorism report of 2018 notes that

> *jihadist attacks are committed primarily by homegrown terrorists, radicalised in their country of residence without having travelled to join a terrorist group abroad. This group of home-grown actors is highly diverse, consisting of individuals who have been born in the EU or have lived in the EU most of their lives, may have been known to the police but not for terrorist activities and often do not*

have direct links to the Islamic State (IS) or any other jihadist organisation. (2018, p. 5)

Post-truth world

Finally in our survey of the major characteristics of the new normal, we come to the question of respect for truth, evidence and rational discourse. It has been a clear and undeniable feature of recent political debate – most obviously in the US in recent times, but with many examples in Europe too – that increased polarisation has often led to a lack of common facts that both sides agree can even form the basis for political discussion. Each side of the debate is so closed in its own bubble that an objective truth that can in principle be discovered and agreed on by all humans is increasingly being challenged as a concept. It is no coincidence that "post-truth" was the Oxford Dictionaries' word of the year in 2016 – defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief".

What is now emerging is what social theorist Michel Foucault would have called a new regime of truth – a different way of organising knowledge and trust in society (1980, p. 133). After all, truth is intimately linked with trust. We cannot come to the vast majority of our knowledge – what we think we know – by ourselves, without trusting what others tell us. So our ability to at least agree on what truth looks like is the basis of all political discussion.

Examples abound:

- In a Facebook post in August 2009, former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin claimed if US President Barack Obama's affordable care proposals were enacted, bureaucratic review bodies would decide whether elderly patients or children with chronic conditions were worthy of medical care. This was a gross distortion of the bill's proposal to offer voluntary counselling to Medicare patients on living wills, end-of-life care and palliative treatment. A week later, nine out of ten Americans were aware of the issue of "death panels", and three out of ten said they believed it. By August 2012, even though the proposal had been removed, the number of Americans anxious about death panels had risen (Barrera et al., 2018, p. 65).

- The question of Obama's status as a US citizen, and therefore his eligibility to run for president, was raised by supporters of his main opponent, Hillary Clinton, in the 2008 Democratic primaries. Obama was forced to publish his short-form birth certificate in 2009, but the controversy did not go away. "Finally Obama published his long form certificate in April 2011. Before this 45% of Americans admitted to doubts about his birthplace. After publication of the certificate this figure fell to 33%. But in January 2012 it had risen again to 41%" (Barrera et al., 2018, p. 68). Trump continued to raise the issue with the occasional tweet, and controversial sheriff Joe Arpaio, who was pardoned by Trump, said as late as March 2018 he had proof that Obama was born outside the US (Neuman, 2018).
- The infamous claim that the UK leaving the EU would mean £350 million a week more for the National Health Service (NHS) was made by Leave campaigners, in particular former UK Foreign Secretary and current Prime Minister Boris Johnson. As late as October 2018 (Stone, 2018), a study by King's College London of attitudes to Brexit found that 42% of people who had heard of the claim still believed it to be true, while just 36% thought it was false and 22% were unsure. The claim was exhaustively debunked by statisticians and news outlets, and even former UKIP Leader Nigel Farage was quick to distance himself from it immediately after the referendum. In a letter to the foreign secretary, the head of the UK Statistics Authority took the unprecedented step of accusing Johnson of a "clear misuse of statistics" and repeated the explanation that the £350 million statistic related only to what the UK currently pays to the EU and does not include the money that Britain receives in return (Kentish, 2017).

These examples, let us recall, were provided by presidential or ministerial representatives and exhaustively discussed by all mainstream media. Further examples of clear falsehoods, despite being comprehensively debunked, continue to be believed by significant parts of the general population and abound in marginal or social media, where they are usually not even challenged. Climate-change deniers, anti-vaccination groups, flat-earthers and others are all extremely active outside the mainstream.

This disregard for the truth has led to consternation in the communities charged with producing it. Three months after Trump's inauguration – and the famous debate about the size of the crowd attending it, which led to the equally famous statement by White House Counsellor Kellyanne Conway that the president was merely stating "alternative facts" – the concern among the experts that the foundations of a shared reality – agreement about facts – reached a head and led to the March for Science. This was billed as "the first step of a global movement to defend the vital role science plays in our health, safety, economies, and governments" (Davies, 2018a, p. 23). Thousands marched in several US cities, including many representatives of the group being defended.

But the risk with such an event became clear pretty quickly: by turning reason and objectivity into political values like any others, they were equally open to attack. There have thus been few follow-ons from this initiative. Once truth becomes a claim, anyone else can make it. We are back to the beginning, when the first institutions like the Royal Society, founded in 1660, demanded experimental demonstration of truth on the basis of the motto *nullius in verba*: take no one's word for it.

The big picture

From the above it is clear that identifying the developments that appear to constitute the new normal – our summary term for the weakening of democratic institutions and discourse – is far from easy. Our world has clearly changed enormously in the past 20–30 years. The rise to dominance of the neo-conservative orthodoxy – nationally and, more importantly, globally – enabled by technological development has radically changed the way of life of the vast majority of the planet's population.

Some developments have clearly been positive, especially for the global poor and the super-rich. But others have – less clearly – had negative effects on important groups that had until recently been at the top of the global pyramid in terms of earnings and well-being. Reaction to these negative developments in the established democracies of the most developed economies now appears to be manifesting itself, but in unclear and not only political ways.

Political shocks such as the rise of populist parties in Europe, the election of Trump and the vote to leave the EU in Britain have led to a flurry of claims – some more empirically based than others – in mainstream and social media, as well as academia regarding both the characteristics of the new normal and their possible causes. However, no consensus has yet emerged on either. The most common attempts to list, relate and explain the characteristics of the new normal, when taken together, cover a very heterogeneous set of factors.

The ways in which such characteristics might be linked to, or caused by, each other are also very difficult to analyse. Do globalisation and a rise in income inequality correlate with the rise of populism and concern with immigration in developed economies? Is decreasing trust in institutions caused by democratic illiberalism or by increasing corruption? Is the rise in prevalence of hate speech linked to diminishing respect for evidence-based opinion? These and many other possible questions would take a great deal of research to answer and, on the face of it, are unlikely to provide a deeper understanding of how all the various factors might be linked.

Nevertheless, in recent years, major empirical research has been carried out, particularly in the psycho-social realm, on foundations of political views and the workings of the human brain that have much to say of relevance to these key questions. It is to this literature that we now turn.

Part two: The psycho-social basis

We have looked at some of the main characteristics of the new age that have been cited as important to the weakening of democratic institutions and discourse in recent years. Now we dig deeper and assess some of those claims critically, through a psycho-social lens. We aim here to present research that may elucidate underlying causes of the surface phenomena covered in part one. As far as possible, we will keep to the order in which they were presented above to aid comparison, but some of the research covered relates to more than one characteristic.

Economics or psychology?

The huge lack of progress in real income – a mere 1% increase – over the past 40 years for the working and lower-middle classes of developed economies has been touted, particularly by economists, as one of the main causes of lack of trust in the political establishment and thus votes for populists. It certainly seems difficult to imagine that the fact that established parties in Western democracies of all stripes presided over such a huge relative decline in prosperity – compared with that of the 1% and the large growth in overall GDP – did not have an effect on many voters' dissatisfaction with the entire system of undemocratic liberalism.

But there are a number of ideas to unpack in this assertion. The first is to ask whether economic situation actually determines which party a person votes for. The second is to ask if it determines whether people vote for populists. The third is to ask if populism responds instead to other factors, which established parties do not even see.

Haidt, in *The Righteous Mind*, tries to answer the first question: the paradox of why many of us vote against our economic interests, with some of the poor voting for right-wing parties that want to cut social security and some of the well-off voting for left-wing parties that want to tax them more (Haidt, 2012). His main point is that we vote not according to our interests, but according to our values. Our values come from our morals, which, Haidt maintains, are not arrived at consciously but depend to a large part on our genetic inheritance, the society we happen to grow up in and the experiences we have while doing so. In particular, he makes a compelling case for why, generally, our political world is separated into left and right wing, and why certain groups of key issues pertain to each.

The first thing to realise is that societies in developed countries and democracies are WEIRD: Western, educated, industrial, rich and democratic. The vast majority of social, and particularly psychological, research is conducted on (usually undergraduate) members of such societies, and overwhelmingly in the US and the UK (Henrich et al., 2010). But historically and geographically, such societies are extreme outliers in cultural and moral terms. It is a matter of anthropological fact that there are many moral systems other than our own, which also vary internally a fair bit.

The *I* in WEIRD might also stand for individualistic: we tend to view ourselves and the world as individual objects, whereas in other societies, particularly Eastern ones, as discovered in one of the rare cross-cultural psychology studies conducted, members tend to see themselves as a collective, with individual rights and concerns seen as far less important (Nisbett, 2011). Haidt shows that the moral domain in Western societies is peculiarly narrow, focusing mainly on the ethic of autonomy – that is, moral concerns about individuals harming, oppressing or cheating other individuals.

But other moral values exist. On the basis of a number of empirical studies, Haidt and his collaborators have found a certain number of moral foundations that we all have and that lead to particular political manifestations in terms of conservatism or lack of it.[12] In particular he identified six: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation and liberty/oppression (Haidt, 2012, p. 186).

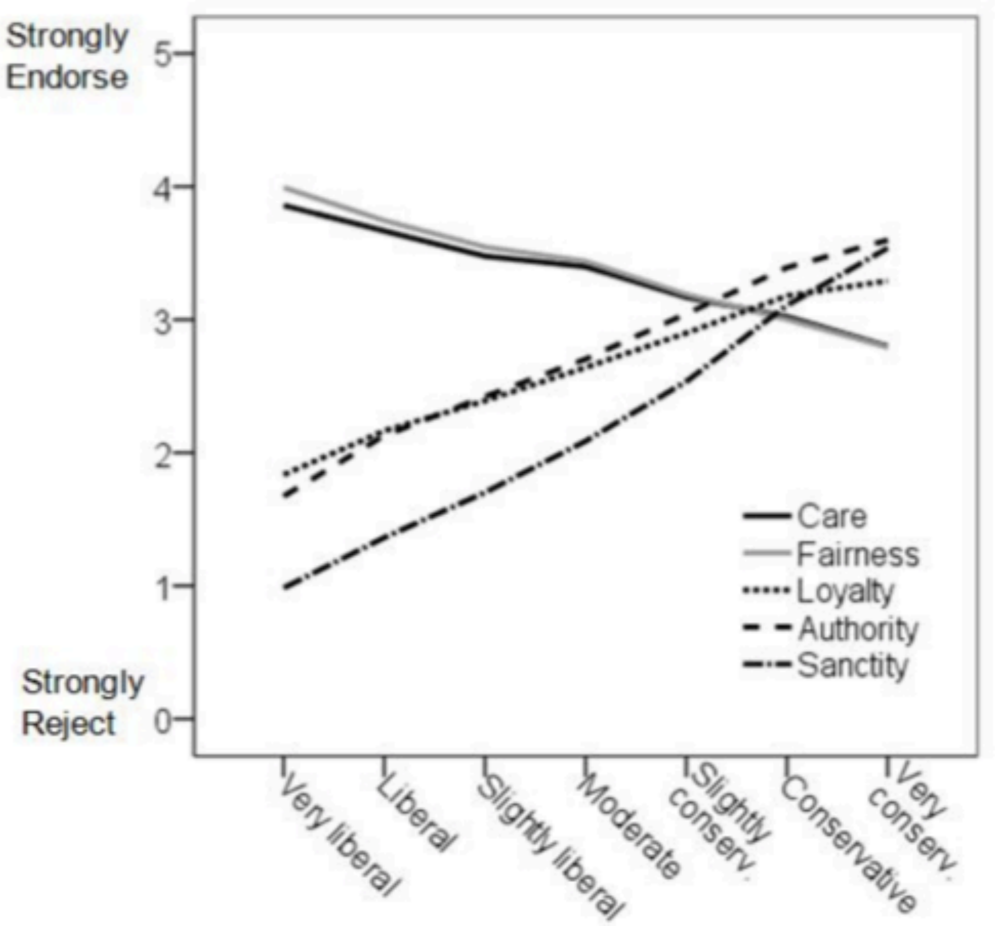
Since hitting on this idea in 2006, Haidt and his collaborators have consistently found that people's moral foundations influence their political stances (see figure 3).[13] Moreover, with our moral convictions being unconscious and immediate (a fact he has also tested empirically), he finds that we are generally unable to consciously identify why we come to one moral judgment or another, though we feel compelled to try.[14] It is thus very difficult for those in one moral matrix to understand what matters to those in another (Haidt, 2012).

Each of us will, thanks to our personalities and upbringing, be more or less sensitive to each of these factors, but on balance, Haidt asserts, left-wingers are overwhelmingly concerned with care/harm and liberty/oppression, while conservatives are concerned about all six. He describes this as conservatives having a more sensitive palate to these flavours, which gives conservatives an advantage when talking to voters, because left-wingers tend to focus only on the two of concern to them. Thus US Democrats often fail to appeal to voters who have this wider set of concerns. This, he maintains, explains why some poorer voters vote against their economic interests: they are voting for their moral interests, including authority, group belonging and sanctity (Haidt, 2012).

Something very similar is proposed by psycholinguist George Lakoff. In his *Moral Politics*, he suggests that metaphor is essential to understanding and that individuals' political stances stem from deeply held moral beliefs that are conceptually anchored in parenting models (Lakoff and Wehling, 2016). Conservatives use the metaphor of the strict-father model, whereby children are taught about the authority of the father and the sanctity of the family and religion; they are taught right from wrong, including via physical punishment, and to stand on their own two feet. The world is seen as innately dangerous and competitive.

This contrasts with the nurturant-parent model, where it is seen to be moral to show empathy, nurture and take on individual as well as social responsibility for others. Children are supported to grow into responsibility and awareness according to their characters, and physical punishment plays no part in their upbringing. The world is an open and exciting place waiting to be discovered. Here, too, there is some empirical evidence for the existence of such a frame and that "family ideals directly impact political judgement" (Feinberg and Wehling, 2018, p. 1).

Figure 3: Moral foundation scores



Source: Haidt, The Righteous Mind *(2012)*

Such metaphorical frameworks also determine what kind of issues in politics go together. Lakoff describes his realisation of this fact during the US Congressional elections of 1994, when the Republicans published a document called “Contract for America”, in which they listed all the issues of importance to the party: in effect, what they stood for. The document contained proposals opposing environmental regulation, lowering taxes and banning abortion. Lakoff recounts,

> *I wondered “What on earth does environmental regulation have to do with a flat tax and bans on abortion?”* (2016, p. 32)

We tend to confuse values with positions. The environment, public health care and social support are not values but rather positions that share a common moral basis. Lakoff recalls,

> *And then it hit me – I also didn't know what it was that held together my own progressive positions on issues such as guns, the environment, abortion and taxation.* (2016, p. 32)

Lakoff, like Haidt, thus came to the conclusion that our values matter: they are linked according to our personality traits and narratives, and they are what lead us to vote based on parties' positions on certain issues.[15]

The rational-choice model of voting, which has held sway both in many political-science departments of universities and with professional pundits, does not explain why we vote the way we do. It is assumed that thought is conscious, is literal, mirrors the world as it is and is universal, and that we all reason in the same way. Cognitive-science research, however, has shown that such assumptions are outdated. It has shown that thought is largely unconscious (Bargh and Chartrand, 1999) and depends on mental structures such as metaphors (Kahneman, 2012), and that people reason differently according to the cognitive templates they acquired due to personality and upbringing (Lakoff and Wehling, 2016, p. 74). As Haidt puts it,

> *We make our first judgements rapidly and we are dreadful at seeking out evidence that might disconfirm those initial judgements.* (2012, p. 55)

Lakoff's principal claim, for which he became famous, working directly with a number of Democratic presidential campaigns, is that the use of metaphors in discourse can directly trigger attitudes associated with the metaphor used: for example, talking of the country as a body can heighten the tendency to consider immigrants as a disease (Landau et al., 2009). Thus, by using certain frames in public discourse, we are defining what a given issue is about (Haidt, 2012).

The battle over terms can be crucial: whether "illegal immigration" wins over "illegal employment", "terrorist-surveillance programme" over "domestic-surveillance programme" or "pro-life" over "pro-abortion" is crucial to subsequent support for it. The media have a huge role to play in deciding which frame is accepted.

Lakoff asserts that conservatives have better understood the importance of speaking to voters' values. Democrats have too often assumed the rationalist fallacy: that people vote according to their interests and make up their minds based on facts and figures. In his view, this is why conservatives have better slogans and progressives need to talk less about facts and policies and more about values.

Thus, most of our supposedly rational political positions are in fact post hoc rationalisations of moral intuitions reached immediately and unconsciously. Worse, intelligence and education are no guard against this: there is good evidence that the more intelligent and educated among us suffer more from this bias than others. Political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, in their book *Democracy for Realists*, report that

> *the educated are better at … sounding like they know what they are talking about, because they have been trained in how to make an argument. Well-informed people are likely to have more elaborate and internally consistent worldviews than inattentive people, but that just reflects the fact that their rationalisations are better rehearsed.* (Runciman, 2016)

Such conclusions are based on three decades of fundamental work in social psychology, which were beautifully summarised in Daniel Kahneman's bestselling 2012 book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, which made a persuasive case for human thought functioning in two distinct ways: via an intuitive, automatic system 1 and a conscious, reflective system 2 (Kahneman, 2012). According to this dual-process view of human thought, we bring system 2 into play only when system 1 fails to find, swiftly, automatically and unconsciously, an acceptable answer to the question or situation we are facing.

Thus, these authors show that our political preferences are not rational or based on economics, but rather based on our morals and values, which depend on our personalities, our culture and our personal upbringing. In fact, both Haidt and Lakoff assess that about 30% of any WEIRD population will be conservative or adhere to the strict-parent model – whether rich or poor, though with a slight skew towards the better educated being less likely to be conservative – based on the distribution of personality traits in any population.

Both they and others also assert that the same proportion of us will be left-wing (concerned almost exclusively with harm/care and liberty/oppression), nurturant parents. Lakoff claims that 30% of us, however, will be biconceptual: able to use both metaphors depending on the subject – though he provides little in the way of evidence for this claim, and the question of personality types and biconceptualism remains under discussion (Gerlach et al., 2018).

So, if we vote according to our values, how do we explain the rise of populism, which seems to combine elements of both right and left, and in a certain sense is concerned with issues that are outside those normally dealt with by established parties. Haidt has recently collaborated with Stenner, another key intellectual. In *Authoritarianism in America* (Stenner and Haidt, 2018), they advance the thesis that our values and personalities are strongly interlinked and that authoritarianism – a latent predisposition that is triggered in times of normative threat – determines populist-type reactions (Azarian, 2017).

Frames, availability, emotion, risk and priming

There are some specific psychological peculiarities that affect what we come to believe and how likely we are to change it. Many of these can be found in Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2012). First of all, frames, as noted by Lakoff, change the very meaning of words. Consider the statements "Italy won" and "France lost" in regard to the outcome of the 2006 FIFA World Cup final. Both describe the outcome; for the purposes of logical reasoning, they contain exactly the same information. But there is another sense of meaning brought about by our brains' associative machinery, which means that each sentence evokes quite different associations.

Meaning makes a difference to the choices we make. Consider the following example: participants in a study at University College London were offered the possibility to gamble on winning £50 or nothing but could also decide to keep £20 gambling. When the choice was presented as a chance to lose £30, many more of the participants chose to gamble than when offered the chance to make £20. Keeping £20 out of £50 and losing £30 out of £50 are of course logically equivalent. Nevertheless, people were regularly fooled by the frame, but not all to the same extent. Some were highly susceptible to framing effects, and some were more resistant (Kahneman, 2012, p. 365).

So far, it might seem that such effects are rather academic. But one example shows that even experts, whose job it is to assess probabilities logically, can also get it wrong, and with real-life consequences (Kahneman, 2012, p. 367). This experiment was carried out by Amos Tversky, Kahneman's long-time collaborator and friend, at Harvard Medical School. Tversky had the doctors read statistics about the outcomes of two treatments for lung cancer: radiation therapy and surgery. Half the participants read statistics presented in terms of survival rates, while the other half read those preened as mortality rates. The two descriptions of the short-term outcomes of surgery were:

1. The one-month survival rate is 90%.
2. There is a 10% mortality rate in the first month.

When faced with these frames, 84% of physicians chose surgery in the former case and only 50% when it was described in the second way. This is somewhat worrying, to say the least. Experts too are susceptible to offering different advice depending on how the same reality is presented to them – and thus how they understand it. As Kahneman puts it, "our preferences are about framed problems, and our moral intuitions are about descriptions, not about substance" (2012, p. 370).

In the 1980s researchers made a breakthrough in the mechanism of association by discovering the related effect of priming. It was discovered that if you have recently seen or heard the word "eat", you are temporarily more likely to complete the word fragment "so_p" as "soup" rather than "soap". The opposite is the case if you were primed with "wash".

The effect is not only mental. As Lakoff notes regarding metaphors, they are embodied. In a classic study, social psychologist John Bargh asked undergraduates to assemble four-word sentences from a set of five words. Half of the students received many words associated with the elderly, such as "forgetful", "wrinkled", "grey" or "bald". Half did not. When they had completed the task, students were sent out to do another experiment in a room at the end of a hall. Bargh timed their passage, and the students primed with age words walked significantly more slowly than the others. The experiment shows not only that priming can have physical effects but also that we can be primed by factors of which we are totally unconscious (Bargh et al., 1996).

Another distortion provided by our system 1 is what Kahneman calls the availability heuristic. Heuristics are rules of thumb: short, simple rules based on experience but not necessarily logic. Simply put, this theory is about how people estimate likely states of affairs in the world using only the evidence to hand, for example the frequency of a category such as dangerous plants. Kahneman hypothesised that this would depend on the availability of information recalled from memory, judging frequency by the ease with which instances come to mind (Kahneman, 2012, p. 129).

The availability heuristic, like other heuristics of judgment, substitutes one category for another. If we wanted to know how many dangerous plants there actually are, we would have to do a lot of studying. But if all we need is a quick estimate, which in practice serves us fine most of the time, we can simply see how many examples can be called to mind – Venus fly trap, lily of the valley, hemlock, etc. – and, if there are many, assume that probably this is because there are many examples in the real world. Other heuristics could include how recent the event is, how dramatic the event is or how personally relevant the event is.

Students of risk were quick to see the sense of the findings, which gelled with what they already knew: people are much more likely to purchase insurance after a disaster. Insurers know that victims and near victims are for a while diligent in keeping up with their payments, but as time goes by, their level of worry, and thus diligence, drops. In other words, researchers dealing with public perception of risk found that people are pretty bad at estimating real probabilities. When faced with having to choose between the most likely cause of death out of a pair, Kahneman cites the following results:

- Tornadoes were seen as more frequent killers than asthma, although the latter causes 20 times more deaths.
- Death by disease is 18 times more likely than accidental death, but the two were judged about equally likely.
- Death by accidents was judged to be more than 300 times more likely than death by diabetes; the true ratio is 1:4.

We might add the case of the estimated extra 1,595 Americans who died in car accidents in the year after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, in which just under 3,000 people were killed, (Ball, 2011) as indirect victims of the tragedy because they had decided to drive instead of fly due to a faulty understanding of actual risk.

The reason for the poor showing on all of these tests was inescapable: estimates were warped by media coverage. Media are biased towards novelty and emotional impact. Thus, availability of spectacular examples leads to an inaccurate estimate of real occurrence. But it also became clear that more emotionally charged events were even easier to recall. Psychologist Paul Slovic hypothesised that an “affect heuristic” might also be at play. This is another example of substituting a difficult question (What do I know about it?) with an easier one (How do I feel about it?).

This is not as crazy as it sounds. Our memories have emotional tags for a reason: their importance to us. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, in *Descartes' Error*, effectively demonstrated that emotional tagging of unconscious processing of frequencies is in fact essential to guiding us to make good choices in life (Damasio, 2005). Brain-damaged patients whose emotion-processing was hindered while their rational processing was undamaged were found to have much worse life outcomes than less intelligent patients with no restriction to their emotion-tagging abilities.

Political opinions

So, if our reasoning is so constrained by psychological bias and the frames and primes we are given, what hope is there for political reasoning and communication? The question of how people form political preferences has been central to political science for nearly a century (Druckman et al., 2016). Initial models assumed that people base their preferences on information pulled from memory and update them with new information in an unbiased fashion. But the work of Kahneman and Bargh has challenged this idea.

Importantly, psychologists Milton Lodge and Charles Taber recently applied these findings to the political realm and, studying this experimentally, found that people do not continue to add to their store of relevant memories as they receive information over time, but rather update a sort of evaluation counter in a favourable direction and forget new information that adds little of use to the already-formed opinion. When asked for an evaluation later, the voter will provide it but without remembering specifics of why they hold that opinion. If pressed, voters will offer post hoc rationalisations of their intuitively retrieved evaluation.

This work also showed why we tend to form stable political opinions over time. What Lodge and colleagues realised is that when we encounter new information, existing attitudes "come inescapably to mind, whether consciously recognised or not and for better or worse these feelings guide subsequent thought". That is, we tend to engage in motivated reasoning about candidates in the political sphere. In their seminal studies, Lodge and Taber showed experimentally that such motivated reasoning leads to attitude polarisation, with participants developing more extreme opinions in favour of those already held, despite instruction to be as even-handed as possible (Taber and Lodge, 2006).

In their major work, the 2013 book *The Rationalizing Voter* (Lodge and Taber, 2013), they proposed a new model of political information-processing: the John Q. Public (JQP) model, which systematically overturned the Cartesian assumption that had underlain political science for the last 50 years. In this work, Lodge and Taber proposed a new model of how we come to our political convictions and process information regarding them. In particular, they fully took on board Kahneman's dual-process theory about how humans think and Bargh's contention (Bargh, 2017) that the vast majority of our thoughts are constructed automatically and unconsciously, including those about politics. They demonstrated that:

1. Most belief formation is automatic.
2. When asked to state beliefs, we make them up on the fly, engaging in hot cognition.
3. This type of cognition is based on a running tally of affect evaluation that can be affected by a number of extraneous factors present at the moment of asking (unconscious priming).
4. Affect – valence, i.e. good or bad judgments – is primary, and in making political judgments we pull biased and readily available beliefs from long-term memory to support the position we arrived at unconsciously.

This model is not only based on earlier empirical work that underpins the assumptions on which it is based. Lodge and Taber went further, creating a computerised model of JQP and successfully testing it against real-world data on political information and opinion from the National Annenberg Election Survey made during the 2000 US presidential election (Lodge and Taber, 2013).

Lodge and Taber come to the somewhat stark conclusion that very few of us actually desire to make our beliefs more accurate, but rather aim to make new information fit in with what we already believe. But how does information fit in? How do we take it on board? Recent political-science theory uses the useful concept of an attitude formula. According to this, as noted also by political scientist Diana Mutz, it is assumed that one's attitude A is composed of a set of belief considerations b multiplied by some measure of salience or importance w, the weight we give to new information because of its relevance to some goal:

$$A = bw$$

Researchers have found that this weighting occurs when the frame of the information is changed. When testing this theory experimentally, they found that people update their views in favour of a certain policy, for example an environmentally friendly approach to a building project, when information is framed in a highly environmentally supportive way. But they also found that when faced with another frame, for instance a pro-economic benefit one, people would change their opinion. This runs counter to the motivated-reasoning studies mentioned above.

With further work using different subjects, including a test of views about the US Patriot Act, and spread over a certain time period, as happens during election campaigns, political scientists Dennis Chong and James Druckman found a very interesting result: those with weak prior attitudes are highly responsive to new information "with framing effects moving their opinion potentially wildly over a two-week period" (Druckman et al., 2016, p. 13), while those with strong prior political opinions displayed characteristic signs of disconfirmation bias, dismissing contrary frames.

These studies were based on experimental designs in which participants were fed information. Druckman went further (Druckman et al., 2012) and asked what happens when people have to seek out their own information. The result was striking: "rather than provide a route to open-minded consideration of diverse information, the opportunity for information choice actually further motivated reasoning via the confirmation bias" (Druckman et al., 2012).

Psychologist Mark Lepper went further and showed that when the available information is heavily stacked in one way or another, participants still went and looked for the information that supported their view, even though it was a small percentage of what was available. Those with weaker attitudes "were responsive to the tilt of the information environment, however, updating their views accordingly" (Druckman et al., 2016, p. 15).

On balance, these findings show that motivated reasoning is ubiquitous among the section of the public that holds strong opinions. Those with weaker prior attitudes will be more open-minded but still subject to the information availability and frames used. Differences in attitude strength across people, time and issues, however, are not well understood. We are back at the question of what determines salience. Why do people think certain things are important, and what does important mean? One possible explanation is that importance is related to existential threat: survival. And when we begin to see an issue as one of survival, our desire or ability to see those with a different view on that issue as merely an opponent is severely curtailed.

Authoritarianism

The idea that authoritarianism, rather than conservatism, is essential to understanding populism was first presented by Stenner, who published an important book in 2005: *The Authoritarian Dynamic* (Stenner, 2005). This made a compelling case for overturning our understanding of right-wing populism by looking at psychological factors.

First, Stenner clarified that there is a distinction between authoritarianism and conservatism. Authoritarianism is a desire for sameness across space and is quite different from conservatism, which can be understood as the desire for sameness over time. She points out that there are three distinct profiles of people who are typically lumped together under the unhelpful descriptor of conservative: laissez-faire conservatives, or libertarians; status-quo conservatives, or classic conservatives; and authoritarians. It is only authoritarians who "show persistent antidemocratic tendencies and a willingness to support extremely illiberal measures under certain conditions" (Stenner and Haidt, 2018, p. 182).

Second, Stenner showed empirically that authoritarianism, which she describes as a group of personality traits related to order and control, is closely linked not only to a strong desire for uniformity but also to an inability to deal with complexity. It is mostly determined by a lack of openness to experience, one of the big five personality dimensions,[16] and by cognitive limitations (2005, p. 146).[17] These are, she points out, two key factors that reduce one's willingness and capacity, respectively, to tolerate complexity, diversity and difference (Stenner and Haidt, 2018, p. 183).

Stenner estimates approximately 30% of any population has this latent predisposition, and about the same percentage is strongly anti-authoritarian. Authoritarians' intolerance is triggered by a perceived threat to unity and sameness. Thus, declining trust in leadership and concern about too much complexity, including ethnic complexity, are the two main triggers for intolerant reactions. In a nutshell,

> *Authoritarians are simple-minded avoiders of complexity more than closed-minded avoiders of change.* (Stenner and Haidt, 2018, p. 193)

This distinction between authoritarianism and conservatism matters for the challenges currently confronting liberal democracy because in the event of an authoritarian revolution, authoritarians

> *may seek massive social change in pursuit of greater oneness and sameness, willingly overturning established institutions and practices that their (psychologically) conservative peers would be drawn to defend and preserve.* (Stenner and Haidt, 2018, p. 183)

Such calls are now heard all too frequently in many established democracies.

Stenner's claims about the distribution of those with largely authoritarian personalities are based on data. Using a number of public surveys done over the years, she uses people's responses to questions about child-rearing to identify authoritarians. When asked what should be encouraged in children, authoritarians prioritise obedience, good manners and good behaviour over independence, curiosity and thinking for oneself. She has shown via the World Values Survey that authoritarianism, rather than age, education, sex, income or any other major variable, is the principal determinant of general intolerance of difference around the globe (Stenner and Haidt, 2018, p. 184).

Authoritarianism is best thought of as a latent disposition that is triggered by normative threat. When authoritarians become convinced that the majority community is under serious threat from within, by corrupt or poor leadership or excessive belief difference, or from without, by immigration, they awaken to suppress difference and achieve uniformity. This worldview induces biases against different others – racial and ethnic outgroups, immigrants, radicals and dissidents, moral deviants – and political demands for constraints on their behaviour. The trigger mechanism explains the apparent suddenness of the appearance of populist voters and parties, and their willingness to embrace major change while seeking uniformity.

The force of Stenner's findings is provided by something very rare in social theories: the ability to predict. Stenner, writing in 2005, well before the economic crisis and at the beginning of the rise of modern populism, proved the phenomenon in various ways, one of which was experimentally. When interviewees who scored highly on the authoritarianism scale using the child-rearing values proxy were exposed to seemingly real news coverage about "leaders unworthy of our trust" or fractured public opinion "where no one agrees on anything anymore", their intolerance of difference rose significantly (Stenner and Haidt, 2018, p. 186).

As with the groups of political issues – abortion, taxes, criminal justice, action on climate change, social security and health care – shown to hang together only if we consider the moral values and metaphors used by certain personality types, here too, the theoretical framework of authoritarianism explains why otherwise seemingly unrelated variables can have predictive effects for other political or moral views. For example, such a model makes it easy to understand how a factor like support for the death penalty could be one of the strongest predictors of a vote in favour of Brexit (Kaufmann, 2015).

Without such a framework, the rise of populist parties and views are very difficult to explain. In December 2016, Haidt and Stenner tested the prediction of Stenner's model again precisely in relation to modern populism using data from the EuroPulse survey. They found only one statistically significant correlation: between populist voting (in the US for Trump, in the UK for Brexit and in France for Marine Le Pen) and perceptions of normative threat. The more authoritarian the person, as judged by the responses to the usual proxy question on child-rearing, the more likely they were to vote for populist candidates – but only if they perceived a normative threat, assessed by the extent of their agreement with statements about the country going in the wrong direction, the government being controlled by a rich elite and satisfaction with democracy in the country.

They also explicitly checked the hypothesis of the left behind, via questions about past or perceived future general economy and household financial situation, but found weak and inconsistent correlations with populist voting intentions. Ironically, poor personal finances had a depressing effect on likelihood of voting for populists – perhaps because at this point, authoritarians are too worried about themselves to be worried about how others behave.

Some additional key findings from Stenner's work include:

1. Authoritarianism is a latent disposition that is turned on or off by perceptions of normative threat: it does not itself become larger or smaller according to circumstance (Feldman and Stenner, 1997, p. 765).

2. Anti-authoritarians tend to become more likely to defend difference under the same conditions of normative threat. This in turn has a reinforcing effect on authoritarians' perceptions of threat.
3. Ironically, tolerance of difference in such circumstances is threatened by anti-authoritarians' refusal to recognise that many of their fellow citizens are different.
4. The influence of authoritarianism is strongest in more tolerant societies – where it receives the least societal support (Stenner, 2009, pp. 189–95).[18] Thus "intolerance is not a thing of the past, it is very much a thing of the future".
5. Stenner has repeatedly found that authoritarianism is heavily correlated with cognitive incapacity. Authoritarians' "fears are aroused and their thinking deteriorates in the face of threat to oneness and sameness" (Stenner, 2009, pp. 189–95). This negative arousal and cognitive decline then magnify authoritarian demands for limits on racial diversity, political dissent and moral deviance. Such normative threats only invite this kind of fear, cognitive unravelling and outbursts of intolerance among authoritarians, whereas in fact those same conditions that are the hallmarks of a healthy democracy – public dissention and criticism of leaders – induce only greater tranquillity, sharper cognition and more vigilant defence of tolerance among libertarians (Stenner and Haidt, 2018, p. 193).

Based on this research, there appears to be a good case for concluding that people vote not according to their economic interests, but according to their moral values. We have further seen that one particular predisposition – authoritarianism – has, when activated, a particularly strong relation to propensity to vote for populist parties and that other factors, including economic outlook or situation, do not. But are Stenner's results on the near-total lack of importance of economic measures to authoritarianism correct?

Economics and normative threat

The belief in the economic origins of populism is certainly popular. From the *Financial Times*: "It is no accident that in both rich and poor countries, people that are unable to take advantage of the benefits of the new gig economy are those that vote for populist political candidates" (Foroohar, 2017). From the *New Republic*: "To understand 2016's politics, look at the winners and losers of globalization" (Bevins, 2016). From a Brexit post mortem in the *New York Times*: "Globalization and economic liberalization have produced winners and losers and the big 'Leave' vote in economically stagnant regions of Britain suggests that many of those who have lost out are fed up" (Yardley, 2018). The idea that the economically left-behind vote for populists is tempting – but wrong.

The results of several voting surveys run counter to this conventional wisdom. The *Washington Post*, for example, did "not find any differences among those who identified as either 'poor' or 'working class' and 'middle class' among Trump voters: 18% of each group were populists (compared with 10% of those who identified as either 'upper class' or wealthy)" (Rathbun et al., 2017).

In general, research has found that in terms of explaining political attitudes, people's material circumstances or personal finances matter less than their judgments about how they think about broader social groups, or the country as a whole, is doing economically (Rathbun et al., 2017). This aligns with Stenner's assertion that authoritarians are worried more about what others are doing – their desire for oneness – than about how things are going for them.

In the US, substantial majorities of Republicans in every state have said they are "very worried" about the condition of the US economy, and these voters have been more likely to vote for Trump. But that anxiety does not necessarily reflect their personal economic circumstances, which for many Trump voters, at least in a relative sense, are reasonably good (Silver, 2016). Much attention has been given in the US to the fact that Trump voters had slightly higher incomes than Clinton voters – though Trump voters lived in poorer areas. Thus the economic situation appears to be very weakly linked with populist voting intentions in the US.

But it may be that classic simple measures of economic level, and even disparity, do not capture what is going on in the minds of voters. If voters vote according to their values, how do economic perceptions link to them? One study found that it is not economics but fairness among economic classes that counts: findings pointed to the significance of a unique form of group comparison, sociotropic fairness, with voters substantially more likely to judge the president favourably if they felt that class groups had enjoyed similar rather than dissimilar changes in economic performance (Mutz and Mondak, 1997).

If money is not the main issue, perhaps another classic economic indicator is unemployment. Once again, in general, many studies find that there is no strong link between populist voting intentions and levels of unemployment. But using regional data across Europe, a study on the implications of the recession of the early 21st century on voting for anti-establishment parties (Algan et al., 2017), as well as general trust and political attitudes, found a strong relationship between increases in unemployment and voting for non-mainstream, especially populist, parties. Moreover, the authors found that increases in unemployment go hand in hand with a decline in trust in national and political institutions. This finding seems to echo others on the rate of change in immigration being more important than absolute levels (Khazan, 2018).

Even economists are now coming around to the view that financial measures are not everything when it comes to politics. Joseph Stiglitz notes that inequality has more effects than just financial. He underlines that in the US, the lack of universal health care, very restricted unemployment benefits and a depressed property market, where the vast majority of those with some money had their investments, mean there is real uncertainty about prospects for the future (Stiglitz, 2012). Moreover, despite a lingering belief in the American Dream, there is in fact little income mobility: if you are born in one class, you are likely to stay there.

In Europe, the same seems to be true. As with the National Rally in France, the AfD's messages in Germany have resonated particularly with people whose economic outlook is pessimistic, regardless of their actual income and status (Maier-Borst and Stabe, 2017).

So rapid negative changes in unemployment levels, and secondary effects of a deteriorating economic situation or outlook, may activate authoritarians who worry about keeping the herd together – about the future of the ethnic majority even if, or perhaps because, they are not yet affected themselves. They are highly sensitive, after all, to threats to the unity of the majority. With this in mind, let us look at a number of other apparent correlations noted by commentators between populist voting patterns and geography, health and education.

The geographical distribution of populist voters is sometimes noted in popular analyses, with an urban/rural divide being frequently underlined. In the US it has been pointed out that while the coasts and cities vote Democrat, the rest – rural America – votes Trump. In fact, correlations can be stark: Clinton won 2 million votes more than Trump in the 2016 presidential election but won just 472 counties, compared with the 2,584 Trump won nationwide. The Brexit map is equally stark at first glance, with cities voting for Remain and the countryside Leave.

In other countries, too, such correlations are possible. The former East Germany votes AfD while the richer former West votes for the centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU). But we should be cautious about the difference between correlation and causation. Where people live may not cause them to vote one way or another. For example, anti-authoritarians may move to cities precisely because they are more open to experience. Living in cities also exposes people to more racial diversity, and thus to a more favourable attitude to minorities. Most also have to move to cities to gain higher education.[19]

Education's role in support for populism is similarly difficult to analyse. Some have tried to suggest it as a causal factor in resistance to populist appeal. Education is, they suggest, something that changes a person's values (Runciman, 2016). As the level of education generally increased, with university-level instruction in the UK having reached nearly 50% of all 18- to 30-year-olds, this has an effect on the political values of the population.

> *Labour's support is now split between left-leaning libertarians (broadly pro-union and anti-banks, but also pro-immigration, and often highly educated) and left-leaning authoritarians (also pro-union and anti-banks, but far tougher on immigration and very concerned about crime and community). Each grouping might gather upwards of 20% of the electorate under its wing. Together that would be enough for a parliamentary majority. But they do not fit together any more, and increasingly they neither like nor trust each other.* (Runciman, 2016)

In the US, Trump famously said after winning the 2016 Nevada primary, "I love the poorly educated." Many commentators scoffed at this assertion, assuming that this meant he was admitting that you had to be stupid to vote for him – but why? Not all – in fact, not even many – people are educated, and yet we accept that universal suffrage is right. So why look down on those with less education? Studies show that the educated are in fact no more likely than the uneducated to find solutions to problems, and even if they were, do the opinions of others not count (Conway et al., 2016; Kohut et al., 2012; Rensin, 2016; Singal, 2015)?

The dominant narrative explaining the outcome of the 2016 US presidential election has been that working-class voters rose up in opposition to being left behind economically. But "these claims were made on the basis of aggregate demographic patterns tied to voters' education levels" (Mutz, 2018, p. E4330) – hence Trump's quote. Such patterns could occur for a multitude of reasons. Again we come face to face with the causation vs. correlation question, and it seems here too that without direct evidence that something about people's lack of education causes them to vote populist, we may just be dealing with a proxy indicator of something else.

Even health is sometimes cited as a factor in the populist vote – though here, at least, not usually as a cause. A 2015 study found the startling result that there is a yet another clear divide in the health of urban and rural Americans, with the gap widening most dramatically among whites (Case and Deaton, 2017). "The statistics reveal two Americas diverging, neither as healthy as it should be but one much sicker than the other" (Washington Post, 2016a). Anne Case and Angus Deaton, both professors at Princeton, pointed out that mortality rates for white, middle-aged Americans have been increasing since the 1990s (Washington Post, 2016b). They attribute this rise to deaths of despair – a label they give to causes of death such as drug overdoses, suicides and alcohol-related liver mortality – particularly among those with only a secondary-school qualification or less.[20]

Davies, in his chapter on the body politic, makes the argument that votes for populist solutions can also have roots in – or rather, be associated with – poor health. The declining longevity of white women in the US, increases in suicides after economic crises and the advent of the opiate crisis in the US are all symptoms that lead to the need to take control of anything.

There is, Davies says,

> *Something worse than pain, and that is a total loss of control. … This desperation for control is also a political syndrome, in which disenfranchised groups might go so far as sabotaging their own prosperity, if only that grants a little more agency over their future. … Better to be a perpetrator of harm than always the victim, even if it is to harm oneself.* (2018a, p. 117)

Status threat

Thus, the evidence for economic and demographic characteristics being responsible for the rise of populism and its associated factors is inconclusive at best. Most suggested factors seem to be proxies for each other. But, as one researcher puts it, "when the people have spoken it is important to understand what they have said". And yet, surprisingly, even in US presidential elections, the most covered in the world, analysis of what happened is generally left to journalists and pundits. In a paper on what she calls status threat, Mutz used a panel study – an investigation of attitude changes using a constant set of people and comparing each person's opinions at different times – to try to eliminate most potentially spurious associations (Mutz, 2018).[21]

Her results undermined the popular belief among political scientists that campaigns do not change public opinion so much as activate or prime certain considerations over others. By looking at the views of the same panel members in 2012 and 2016, she found that people's opinions did change. In particular, levels of social dominance orientation (SDO), which has marked similarities to authoritarianism as defined by Stenner, had increased markedly over the four years between the surveys.[22] As Mutz notes, individual levels of SDO are known to increase when people feel threatened and decrease when they feel reassured.[23]

The positions of many voters had shifted, in particular with regard to issues relevant to the status of the majority: trade, which most voters see as a zero-sum game, immigration and China's threat to jobs. Mutz shows that while in 2012 the positions of the two main parties were very close on all these issues, in 2016 Trump's position was perceived as much closer to that of the average voter, as the Democrats' had remained basically unchanged since 2012. Thus, she makes a convincing case for the issue of status threat having been triggered in the minds of the average voter and that this, not economics or increased issue salience, had led to the victory of a populist – precisely on some of his main populist positions.

Status threat is closely associated with one further element worth looking at: loss of control. This is explicitly recognised by many populists. Trump wants to Make America Great Again, and supporters of Brexit want to Take Back Control. Both are avowedly messages of weakness, directly admitting that greatness and control have been lost, however they use this feeling to create strength. The feeling is similar everywhere that populists have risen: in Hungary and the other Visegrád countries (the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia), in Italy and in France. Even Russian television floods the airwaves with the message that Russia has been humiliated by the West. Russia's deliberate use of social media and the internet to sow chaos in the West is seen as a victory, but these are not the moves of powerful countries or forces.

As Davies puts it,

> *If one suffers a collapse in one's community and sense of existential significance, then authoritarianism and nationalism become more ethically and politically attractive. When an entire politic and economic system appears rotten, a flagrant liar can give voice to an underlying truth. If there is one thing more important than prosperity to people's sense of well-being, then it is self-esteem.* (2018a, p. 212)

Polarisation

On the evidence presented above, it seems at least possible that many of the otherwise apparently disparate characteristics of the new normal stem from the same cause: the triggering of intolerance in a significant portion of the population due to status and unity threats. But of course, not everyone – in fact, not even most people – reacts in this way.

What has actually changed in the past few years? On the surface, not much. GDP and employment are at record levels, while the immigration crisis and terrorism have been resolved or reduced. It is now authoritarians' intolerance itself that worries a large part of the rest of the population. The now-evident major differences in values have also revealed major differences in beliefs. According to the authoritarians, those beliefs have been there all the time but have been suppressed by liberal fascism and political correctness gone mad.[24] As a result, public polarisation is increasing, particularly in America. But what causes polarisation in the first place, and why has it been getting worse?

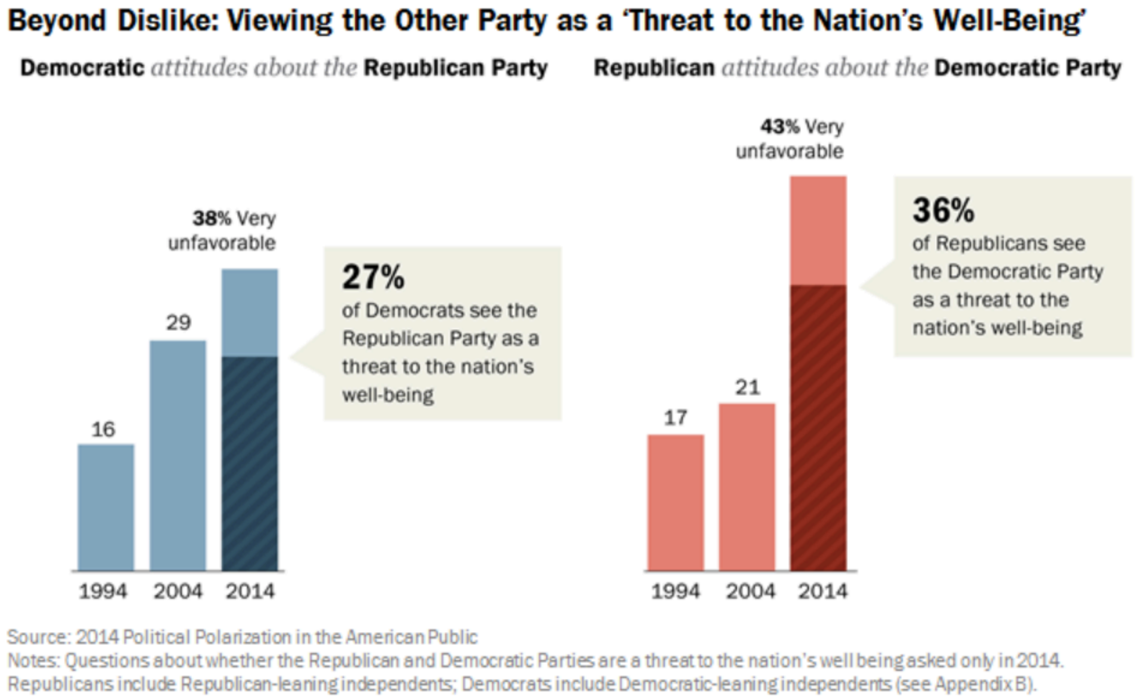
Perhaps counter-intuitively, recent research seems to agree that internet access and social-media usage are not correlated with increases in polarisation (Boxell et al., 2017), and misinformation appears to have only limited effect. Even if mass political polarisation has grown in recent times, this increase has been the largest among citizens least likely to use the internet and social media. Paradoxically, researchers have found that new technological tools that allow anyone to easily broadcast political information to large numbers of citizens can lead to a more pluralistic public debate (Tucker et al., 2018). This is because most ties in a user's personal network are weak – acquaintances, colleagues, distant relatives and so on – and thus more likely to be ideologically diverse (Bakshy et al., 2015).

The prevailing consensus in political science is that elite behaviour, rather than communication, is driving political polarisation. That being said, messages that emphasise inter-party conflict reinforce polarisation, and partisan cues can also encourage partisans to accept and propagate inaccurate information. Messages priming group cues and stereotypes can facilitate acceptance of inaccurate information about the out-group.[25] Emotions are also important: anger makes people less likely to distrust inaccurate information that supports their views, and more likely to distribute it; anxiety can have the opposite effect, prompting individuals to pursue accuracy rather than defensive goals (Tucker et al., 2018, p. 40).

Partisan cues in news coverage of politics have been found to contribute to polarisation by increasing the salience of partisan attitudes. Partisan media have been studied extensively in this regard. Political scientist Matthew Levendusky (2013) argues that by presenting politics as a struggle between irreconcilably opposed parties, partisan media make audiences' partisan identities more salient, thus contributing to both cognitive and affective polarisation.

> This latter is an important distinction: people's disagreements can grow due to absorption (or not) of new information, while they remain civil; but people can also become more affectively polarised, beginning to see those making opposing arguments as not only wrong but also dangerous. A major Pew Research Center study in 2014 found that members of one US political party increasingly see members of the other as a threat (see figure 4) (Dimock et al., 2014).

Figure 4: Perceptions of threat from the other party (US)



Source: Pew Research Center

Social media are important to increasing affective polarisation due to their often vitriolic nature. Professor of business Sheena Iyengar and others explain that partisan criticism that derogates political opponents increases affective polarisation because exposure to negative views of members of the opposing party reinforces biased views of out-partisans and increases the perceived social distance between party groups (2012). Thus some of the contradictory findings regarding the connection between social media and political polarisation are reconciled: while it may "reduce ideological polarization as a result of leading to higher cross-cutting exposure, it simultaneously may also be increasing affective polarisation because of the negative nature of these interactions" (Tucker et al., 2018, p. 20).

So while the impact of parties in politics is fairly well established, "there is no scholarly agreement on how (i.e. through what psychological mechanisms) parties matter to citizens' political reasoning and … there is a surprising lack of empirical work trying to disentangle the various explanations" (Leeper and Slothuus, 2014, p. 134).

In seeking to understand partisan reasoning, we can either use Lodge's theory of motivated reasoning, in which party membership or partisanship can be considered a sort of prior attitude, or consider (Sniderman and Stiglitz, 2012) that voters use party cues as an informational shortcut – that is, if a policy, particularly on a complex issue, is endorsed by their party, members can assume they do not need further information about it.

Testing this, political psychologists Rune Slothuus and Claes de Vreese (2010) investigated two policy issues on which the main parties either disagreed or agreed. The results clearly supported the motivated-reasoning theory, as participants used motivated reasoning only when the parties disagreed. Druckman, Erik Peterson and Slothuus (2013) found that partisans, when told parties are polarised, always evaluate frames endorsed by their own party as more effective, regardless of whether they are. The bias disappears when partisans are told that the parties are not in conflict on the issue, with respondents able to objectively evaluate the difference between a strong and a weak argument.

Psychologically, attitude or belief polarisation is a phenomenon in which a disagreement becomes more extreme as the parties consider evidence on the issue. It is one of the effects of confirmation bias: our tendency to search for and interpret evidence selectively to reinforce current beliefs or attitudes. When we encounter ambiguous evidence, this bias can potentially result in both sides interpreting it as support for their existing beliefs, thus widening rather than narrowing the gap between their positions. The effect is stronger in regard to issues that activate emotions – fortunately, for most issues new evidence does not produce the effect.

So much for explaining differences of opinion between individuals. However, psychologically, there are also group effects, known as group polarisation, which refers to the tendency for a group to make decisions that are more extreme than the initial inclination of its members. The first experiments testing how amenable we are to changing our opinions if pressured to do so by the group were made over 40 years ago (Myers and Lamm, 1975).

Other psychological effects can also influence polarisation. For example, there is even evidence that lack of education can lead the uneducated to be more sure of their positions. The Dunning-Kruger effect has become reasonably well known in mainstream media. In sum, it is a cognitive bias in which people of low ability have illusory superiority and mistakenly assess their cognitive ability as greater than it is precisely because they have low ability. It has been hypothesised to play a role in populist support (Azarian, 2018), and a study published in the journal *Political Psychology* found that the Dunning-Kruger effect not only applies to politics but also appears to be exacerbated when partisan identities are made more salient via use of language and metaphor (Anson, 2018). In other words, those who score low on political knowledge tend to overestimate their expertise even more when greater emphasis is placed on political affiliation.

Motivated reasoning

The main problem with coming to different beliefs from similar evidence is motivated reasoning. The Cartesian fallacy – that we form our opinions and beliefs by carefully weighing up each side of an argument, objectively assessing the available evidence and then coming to a decision, which we are willing to modify as new evidence comes along – is almost totally off the mark when it comes to how humans actually think. Instead, we tend to come to judgments immediately, unconsciously and according to frames and stereotypes developed on the basis of personal experience and culture.

There is now a large psychological literature demonstrating that we reason fast and slow (Kahneman, 2012). We engage in hot cognition (Lodge and Taber, 2005), and most of our conscious, language-based reasoning – the things we state when defending our beliefs, talking about politics and writing tweets or Facebook posts – are post hoc justifications of what we have already arrived at unconsciously. We thus engage, especially in areas of thought such as politics and economics, in motivated reasoning (Taber and Lodge, 2016).

Reasoning does not exist in a vacuum. Generally speaking, we reason consciously – using language – only when we have to and with some aim in mind. Reasoning is there to help us do something and thus has to do with our goals. Psychologists Nicholas Epley and Thomas Gilovich point out that the process of gathering and processing information can systematically depart from accepted rational standards because one goal – desire to persuade, agreement with a peer group, self-image, self-preservation – can commandeer attention and guide reasoning at the expense of accuracy (2016).

Moreover, thinking is influenced by our emotional state, the so-called hot-cognition theory.[26] In politics, emotion appears to be activated automatically on mere exposure to socio-political concepts and especially those with strong political attitudes, causing them to be biased information processors (Lodge and Taber, 2013). There is even neuroscientific evidence for this phenomenon: the first neuro-imaging study to look at the brains of those engaged in motivated reasoning found that the areas that lit up were not associated with neural activity in regions previously associated with cold reasoning tasks (Westen et al., 2006).

The question of how emotion can affect reasoning has become a field of study in recent years. Psychologist Isabelle Blanchette starts her book with an anecdote about herself. In the 1995 referendum in Canada on independence for Quebec, in which 50.58% voted to remain part of Canada, many at her Anglophone university, McGill, assumed that as a Francophone, she would not be able to reason objectively about the pros and cons of the vote because the topic was too emotive for her. To her credit, trying to answer this question honestly set her on a path to becoming one of the major voices studying this issue today (Blanchette, 2013).

In particular there are four ways in which emotion can affect reason:

1. Via emotion as information, long-term memories can be retrieved preferentially because they have emotional content. This is consistent with a large literature on attention and memory that demonstrates that emotionally charged information is preferentially retrieved compared with neutral information (Kensinger, 2008).
2. Emotion can affect the cognitive resources available for reasoning – resource depletion via arousal. In other words, we don't think very well when we're angry.
3. Emotion can influence the strategic choice to use analytical vs. heuristic reasoning. Positive affect and anger, for instance, lead to increases in heuristic processing.
4. One more possible effect of emotion is on motivation to reason. There is an affect-as-information literature that shows that emotional states cause reasoning – sadness indicating there is a problem to be solved, or happiness that one is proceeding towards one's goals and that habitual, stereotypical ways of reasoning can be relied on (Blanchette, 2013, p. 13).

Other scholars even suggest that the primary purpose of conscious reasoning is merely to rationalise positions we already arrived at unconsciously in front of other people. In other words, it evolved as a social tool.

> *Reasoning is generally seen as a means to improve knowledge and make better decisions. However, much evidence shows that reasoning often leads to epistemic distortions and poor decisions. … Our hypothesis is that the function of reasoning is argumentative.* It is to devise and evaluate arguments intended to persuade [authors' emphasis]. (Mercier and Sperber, 2011, p. 57)

Whatever the aim of reasoning, as a process it involves the recruitment and evaluation of evidence. Goals can distort both of these basic cognitive processes. As Epley and Gilovich put it, "most people do not reason like impartial judges", who also do not reason like impartial judges (Corbyn, 2011), "but instead try to recruit evidence like attorneys" (Epley and Gilovich, 2016, p. 136).

Consider an example of this: in one study, students were told they would be tested for an enzyme disorder that would cause pancreatic complications later in life.

> *The test consisted of depositing a small amount of saliva in a cup and then putting a piece of litmus paper into the saliva. Half the participants were told they would know they had the enzyme deficiency if the paper changed color; the other half were told they would know they had it if the paper did not change color. The paper was such that it did not change color for anyone. Participants in these two conditions reacted very differently to the same result – the unchanged litmus paper. Those who thought it reflected good news were quick to accept that verdict and did not keep the paper in the cup very long. Those who thought the unchanged color reflected bad news, in contrast, tried to recruit more evidence. They kept the paper in the cup significantly longer, even trying out (as the investigators put it) "a variety of different testing behaviors, such as placing the test strip directly on their tongue, multiple redipping of the original test strip (up to 12 times), as well as shaking, wiping, blowing on, and in general quite carefully scrutinizing the recalcitrant ... test strip." A signal that participants wanted to receive was quickly accepted; a signal they did not want to receive was subjected to more extensive testing.* (Epley and Gilovich, 2016, p. 137)

Such experiments make it clear how we also come unconsciously to arrive at above-average opinions of ourselves, aka the Lake Wobegon effect. When we attempt, sincerely, to understand how we stack up compared with our peers, our recruitment of evidence is often biased. On some traits, such as height, we cannot come to biased conclusions that we are taller than other people in general if we really are not, because the indicator is clear; on others, it is not so simple to define what the criteria are. As economist Thomas Schelling put it, "Careful drivers give weight to care, skillful drivers give weight to skill, and those who think that, whatever else they are not, at least they are polite, give weight to courtesy, and come out high on their own scale. This is the way that every child has the best dog on the block" (Epley and Gilovich, 2016, p. 135).

Importantly, "failing to recognize the biased nature of their information search leaves people feeling that their belief is firmly supported by the relevant evidence" (Epley and Gilovich, 2016, p. 136).

When it comes to evaluating evidence, there is a vast psychological literature on how people's goals affect how they evaluate information. But psychologists have been especially interested in how people are motivated to resolve inconsistencies in their beliefs. Social psychologist Leon Festinger's work on cognitive dissonance, for example, is now part of the public lexicon. When we try to gather and evaluate any evidence that can be recruited and twisted to support our belief that the new Mercedes we just took a loan on is the best car on the road, or that our partner is not having an affair, we are engaging in it. But what is less known is that this work stemmed from Festinger's earlier work on pressures to uniformity, where he – and, later, many others – showed that we will even deny the evidence of our own eyes if everyone else in the group does.

Such work explains why we clump together in like-minded communities and tend to recruit similar evidence to those who have similar goals. It also underlines why those with opposed views often cannot agree on what constitutes evidence, let alone how to evaluate it, meaning also that views on both sides are likely to be so immune to revision that to the other side, they seem illogical and wrong.

There are limits, of course: we cannot simply believe what we want to. People "do not, in general, simply arrive at the beliefs they are motivated to hold. Rather, they shift toward beliefs they want to hold through a process of sifting through evidence in a selective fashion" (Epley and Gilovich, 2016, p. 137).

As a consequence of such biased information-processing, groups with opposing values that are presented with identical evidence often end up becoming more polarised in their beliefs. Charles Lord, Lee Ross and Lepper provide an experimental demonstration of this phenomenon (Lord et al., 1979). Moreover, although one might expect people with greater scientific expertise to process information in a more unbiased fashion, research finds to the contrary that those who measure more highly in scientific knowledge and expertise are most likely to hold polarised beliefs that reflect their political and cultural affinities; it is as if they use their expertise not to reach reasoned judgments but to rationalise their biased processing of evidence (Golman et al., 2016).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, research finds that people prefer to receive information from media sources that are unlikely to challenge their existing beliefs (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2008, 2010). We have seen how easy it is to ensure this thanks to the internet, but it was happening already with mainstream media.

> *Forty-seven percent of "consistent conservatives" named* Fox News *as their main news source about government and politics, and 88 percent reported that they trust* Fox News*, whereas 50 percent of "consistent liberals" named either* NPR*, the* New York Times*,* CNN*, or* MSNBC *as their main news source.* (Golman et al., 2016, p. 175)

As hypothesised in *Republic.com 2.0* (Sunstein, 2007), although the greater diversity of information available online was touted as enabling us to expose ourselves to a wide range of diverse perspectives, the actual result is to enable people to expose themselves more selectively to perspectives that accord with, and rarely challenge, their existing views.

There is even evidence that our desire for belief coherence is so strong that major life choices like where we live and whom we date can be made on the basis of political views (Golman et al., 2016, pp. 177–8) – not so surprising if we realise that those views come from moral ones. Worryingly, the polarisation between groups is paradoxically greater for groups whose members are otherwise very similar than between those whose members are obviously different. It seems that the lack of obvious markers of difference leads to a search for any markers that will do, but since they are so easy to fake, the "discordant actions are threatening to a person's self-concept when the individuals are similar to him" (Golman et al., 2016, p. 181).

Unhealthy scepticism

The examples above of what we now know about the peculiar ways in which the brain functions and the biases we are subject to put the final nail in the Cartesian coffin. A moment's thought will make it clear how we come to develop our beliefs in the first place: building them slowly as we gain associations over the years, trusting automatically in what others tell us, slowly learning when we should make the effort to check whether a proposition is true. Given this account of belief formation, it seems likely that it will be very difficult to change people's beliefs once they have been acquired. And that is what we find in everyday life.

Often in political and scientific discourse, it is proposed to fact-check or rebut those who are spreading falsehoods or educate those who are getting it wrong. Much effort is spent on correcting what certain people believe. But we have seen above that this kind of approach is unlikely to work.

It is a clear psychological and neuroscientific result that a negative message aimed at rebutting a positive one only draws more attention to the message being rebutted. The human brain remembers only the concept, not whether it was positive or negative (Gilbert et al., 1990). A logical consequence of this finding is that it is best to have one's own narrative rather than a counter-narrative, and to try to help people work through and take on a message with the help of their own groups and via their own traditions.

Some studies even claimed to have found a backfire effect, which initially at least seemed to indicate that correcting people's beliefs actually made them more entrenched (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010). This notion was rapidly incorporated into the sceptical narrative, because it seems to confirm the perception that it is very difficult to change people's minds. As one commentator put it,

> *Once something is added to your collection of beliefs, you protect it from harm. You do it instinctively and unconsciously when confronted with attitude-inconsistent information. Just as confirmation bias shields you when you actively seek information, the backfire effect defends you when the information seeks you, when it blindsides you.* (McRaney, 2011)

However, later studies somewhat attenuated this strong conclusion, suggesting that the backfire effect may not exist or is at least rare (Wood and Porter, 2019). To be clear, people generally still engage in motivated reasoning when emotions are at stake. There is clear evidence that people filter the information they seek, notice, accept and remember. Ideology also predicts how much people will respond to factual correction.

The backfire effect, however, is very specific. It occurs when people not only reject factual correction but also create counter-arguments against the correction that move them farther in the direction of the incorrect belief (Novella, 2018). Later authors were more encouraging about the possibility of changing even entrenched political views: "By and large, citizens heed factual information, even when such information challenges their ideological commitments" (Wood and Porter, 2019, p. 135).

Trust

There has been a generalised drop in trust in institutions in developed countries over past decades, but this varies by type of institution and by country. But what does trust in institutions actually mean? What, in the end, is trust?

Trust is still something of a mystery for researchers from many fields: evolutionary psychology, economics, genetics, anthropology. Why in the end should we trust anyone? According to the theory of the selfish gene, it makes no sense to help anyone except close relatives. And yet trust is rampant, and not only in the human world. Vampire bats, for instance, show trust to unrelated others: researchers found that bats that had been unsuccessful in hunting would approach more successful colleagues and receive a donation of bloody vomit. Bats can keep track of whom they help, and when help was not reciprocated, they would refuse to help that individual again.

This behaviour is known as reciprocal altruism and is as widespread as it is mysterious. How could such behaviour have evolved and survived (Hawley, 2012, p. 23)? One response was provided by playing computer games. Over thousands of rounds, computers using three different trust strategies – always helping, always refusing to help once helped and trusting in a tit-for-tat fashion by helping and then helping again only if the first help was reciprocated – found that tit for tat came out on top. Those using this strategy ended up in a non-zero-sum game, leading them to prosper and survive more often. Thus the phrase "trust but verify" becomes a little easier to understand: I will trust you once, but then I'll check you pay me back, or all bets are off.

Therefore, trust is fundamental even in the animal world and has evolved because it is a winning strategy. In the human world, things are more complicated. Here, the concept of trust is based on commitment. We might rely on inanimate things such as our alarm clock, but we do not trust them. We trust people and, in particular, people who have committed – or whom we take to have committed – to do something for us in the future. Whether they do this determines their trustworthiness. This can be built up with repeated acts through which our trust is fulfilled and can be quickly lost when not fulfilled. This projection of commitment means that there is a distinction between distrust and absence of trust. We might not trust someone because we expect nothing from them, but we actively distrust someone or an institution we take to have commitments towards us but that we do not expect to fulfil those commitments (Hawley, 2012, p. 8).

Trust moreover requires two component evaluations to be awarded: honesty and competence. I might trust you to give me the name of a builder while doubting your competence to assess the builder's skills. Discussions on the crisis of trust, in politics or elsewhere, usually focus on doubts about honesty, or good intentions, rather than about skill or knowledge. To trust you to do something, I need to trust that, first, you are able and competent in the area of interest and, second, you will be honest and live up to your commitment to do it. Both of these aspects are fundamentally involved in the creation of another key concept: reputation.

Trust is also not generally blanket trust. We rarely trust people to be trustworthy in everything. Surveys showing that we have high trust in doctors, professors, teachers and judges, but low trust in politicians and journalists, presumably relate to these people's trustworthiness in their professional spheres. Would we trust a doctor who is a politician as highly as we would when she is prescribing medicine? Trust is given to or withheld from people or institutions in regard to specific issues and usually of considerable import – or risk (Hawley, 2012, pp. 95–7). If the issue is not important, we are usually unconcerned about assigning trust.

Trust is not blanket in another sense: some people are more trusting than others. The willingness to trust may also be a psychological trait – or caused by one – and authoritarians have less of it. Stenner recounts a curious and unexpected situation that came up independently a number of times during her research in the field. When sent to interview those with highly authoritarian personality traits, the interviewers, who were deliberately chosen white or African Americans, often found themselves in strange circumstances. In a chapter entitled "Self-interest, suspicion, and hostility toward strangers" (2005, p. 206), Stenner recounts that authoritarians were significantly more reluctant to be interviewed, more hostile and more interested in the payment they would receive than others. Moreover, she noticed several times that interviewees would claim not to have been paid for a survey carried out eight months previously. She noted,

> *The great bitterness of the complaints and the terms in which they were typically expressed suggest that they were more likely*

generated by some systematic tendency to mistrust others, and pervasive feelings of being duped or taken for granted.

The following note from an interviewer's log is typical:

He also reiterated for the twentieth time how upset he was with Duke [University] for not sending him the money for the initial questionnaire. It wasn't so much the money, (which he obviously didn't need) as it was "following through" with what you say you'll do. "It's about responsibility." (2005, p. 212)

Given that the main traits underlying authoritarianism are lack of openness and lack of ability to deal with complexity, it is fascinating to consider whether the ability or propensity to trust is not also a factor in such a trait. The trust differential between the educated and the uneducated might also link to such an idea, with those most open to experience and ability to deal with complexity generally becoming more educated and thus more trusting in general.

In a final example, surveys have found that trust is lowest among those who vote for radical change. In the run-up to the June 2016 Brexit referendum, YouGov found more than half of Leave voters trusted neither academics nor economists. And two-thirds of Leave supporters – compared with just a quarter of Remainers – said it was wrong to reply too much on experts and better to rely on ordinary people.

Irrespective of our willingness or ability to trust, we are all bound by the functioning of human reason. When considering complex questions – Does prison work? Does the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine cause autism? Is climate change real? – we tend to rely heavily on the views of alleged experts (Hawley, 2012, p. 71) because we ourselves lack the relevant expertise. Given the complexity of modern life, very few of us are expert in more than one area, usually our main occupation. In every other area, we rely on trust in people we consider to be experts – or our favourite media's choice of experts. On such complicated and scientific issues as those listed above, almost all of us admit that we cannot be experts ourselves; but on some issues – parenting, driving, judging trustworthiness – we almost all believe that we are.

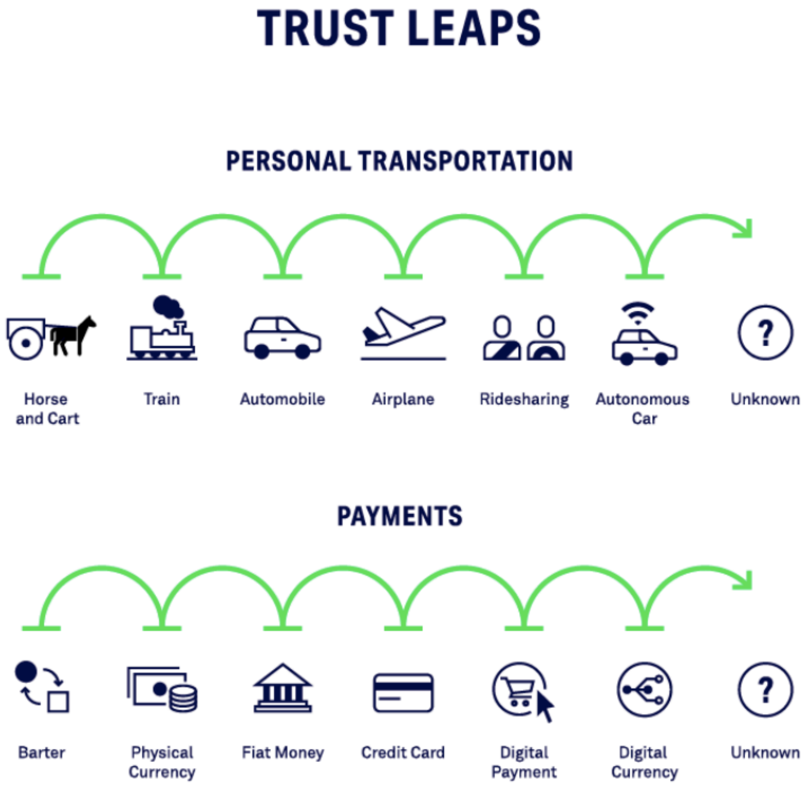
Finally, we should recall that there is also a contingent, historical aspect to forms of social trust. Botsman asserts we are in the middle of a great transition in trust. In her three-part assessment (2017, p. 7), humans started with local trust, when everyone lived within the boundaries of small communities where everyone knew everyone else. Second, they went through institutional trust, "a kind of intermediated trust that ran through a variety of contracts, courts and corporate brands, freeing commerce from local exchanges and creating the foundation necessary for an organised industrial society". The third stage, very much in its infancy, is distributed trust, "where the explosive growth of the sharing economy … and the obsessive rating of everything and everyone … creates reputation trails where one mistake or misdemeanour could potentially follow us for the rest of our lives" (2017, p. 8).

Although this assertion is breathtaking in its scope, such trust shifts have happened before: Botsman makes the point that modern humanity has made several trust leaps in the past (see figure 5) (2017, p. 25).

Looking historically, it is easier to ask ourselves some fundamental questions: Why do we all trust each other to accept money in return for goods or services? Why do we trust so much that we do not even look at what we are handing over in any great detail? Instinctively we understand that it does not matter – what matters is that we agree to assign the same worth to this token, now and in the future. But imagine what it was like to switch from bartering to using money – and then paper money. Do you remember the first time you entered your credit-card details on a website? You will certainly remember your first ride in a self-driving car.
So what is the future for institutional trust? Botsman believes that we are in for a major change:

Brexit and Trump are the first wave of acute symptoms emerging from one of the biggest trust shifts in history: Trust and influence now lie more with individuals than they do with institutions. (2017, p. 50)

Figure 5: Historical trust leaps



Source: Botsman, Who Can You Trust?

In other words, and as she shows by her investigation of new forms of trust epitomised by businesses such as Facebook, Alibaba, Amazon, Airbnb, Uber and even drug emporiums on the dark web, we are increasingly favouring people like us over institutions that once had a special claim on trust. More and more, informal and self-organised chains of trust are taking over from state-sanctioned guarantees.

Social capital

Politicians have sought to bolster trust in institutions by exhorting citizens to trust each other more too. Trust has been called into play in the idea of social capital, generally seen as the linkages, shared values and common understandings in a society that enable groups and individuals to trust each other and work together towards common goals. Thus, in our context, the discussion of social capital is bound up with that of trust.

This term has a long history, but it gained renewed popularity through the work of Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam and his article and subsequent book *Bowling Alone*, in which he claimed that social trust in the US was failing due to the demise of informal social networks (Putnam, 2001). His work aroused renewed interest in the concept of social capital: social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trust to which those networks give rise. Putnam maintained that no democracy or society can be healthy without at least a modicum of this resource. In this way, he revitalised a long-standing debate: the need for strong secondary groups, informal ties and trust to guarantee the functioning of society and political institutions during the process of modernisation.

Putnam speaks of two main components of the concept: bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding refers to the value assigned to social networks between homogeneous groups of people, and bridging refers to that of networks between socially heterogeneous groups. Typical examples are that criminal gangs create bonding social capital, while choirs and bowling clubs create bridging social capital. From the 1990s onwards, scholars and political leaders in the West became very interested by the question of how to foster the growth and improve the quality of social capital, because research in a variety of fields was demonstrating that social capital “makes citizens happier and healthier, reduces crime, makes government more responsive and honest, and improves economic productivity” (Putnam and Sander, 2010).

Intuitively, Putnam’s idea, which has roots dating back to the time of 19th-century sociologist Émile Durkheim, that the demise of social capital in a society is bad seems correct and echoes laments commonly repeated in the media about the breakdown of society. Perhaps for this reason, politicians seized on it as an explanation of, and a solution to, the ills of modern society. The idea was enthusiastically taken up in Britain, first by the Labour Party of Prime Minister Tony Blair and his Third Way, and subsequently by Prime Minister David Cameron's Conservatives and their Big Society.

But was Putnam right? More recent work has either not found evidence of the decline cited by Putnam or claimed that Putnam's whole thesis was wrong (Ferragina, 2009). In particular, political scientist Emanuele Ferragina and others claim that what counts is not social trust but equality of opportunity. While Putnam and other authors such as Francis Fukuyama give more importance to cultural values than to economic factors, income equality seems to be more correlated with economic and social development than with social capital (O'Connell, 2003). What is more, economic equality explains the evolution of dependent variables such as transparency of institutions, research and development (R&D) spending and social satisfaction more than social capital does.

For this reason, it is dangerous and incorrect to consider social capital an elixir. Even Putnam seemed to hint at this in his later paper, in which he admitted the importance of basic entry conditions – "the assurance that everyone could get on at round about the same rung of the ladder" – was the key factor underlying generalised trust and cooperation, rather than social capital. Ferragina asserted that the experiment in Britain attempting to improve social connection was at odds with the neoliberal commitment to increasing inequality: "Social capital theory became an analytical tool to avoid the debate on the effects of neoliberal policies on civic engagement" (Ferragina and Arrigoni, 2017, p. 9).

In the view of these authors, the failure of the Third Way and the Big Society was due not to a lack of willingness on the part of citizens but to the increase in inequality that was going on in the background. For governments of right or left committed to neoliberalism, it is much easier to demand more participation in associations than to work on the structural causes of social disaggregation.

Immigration, diversity and prejudice

Anti-immigrant views, while determining votes for populists fairly clearly, are based not on actual levels of immigration but on changes in levels and levels of imagined threat.

What could cause concern about immigration when actual levels are not high or changing? Certainly, the level of concern in the Visegrád countries or Estonia about immigration in places where there is basically none is striking. Here the concept of social capital has been used as well. Putnam later expanded his idea to diversity, concluding in *E Pluribus Unum* that immigration and ethnic diversity tend to reduce social solidarity and capital: residents in ethnically diverse communities tend to hunker down. "Trust (even of one's own race) is lower, altruism and community cooperation rare, friends fewer. In the long run though successful immigrant societies have overcome such fragmentation by creating new, cross cutting forms of social solidarity and more encompassing identities" (Putnam, 2007, p. 137).

In "Looking behind the culture of fear: Cross-national analysis of attitudes towards migration", political scientists Vera Messing and Bence Ságvári make a convincing case that concern with migration even in countries that have none is due to the levels of social capital in their own societies (2018). They used data from 20 European states to explore the relationship between attitudes to immigration and other social factors, and found a strong correlation between migrant levels in a country and attitudes towards them, but not the one that might be expected:

> *Countries with a* negligible *share of migrants are the* most *hostile, while countries where migrants' presence in the society is large are the most tolerant.* (Messing and Sagvari, 2018, p. 18)

But what shapes hostility is not the presence of migrants but perceptions of trust and cohesion. On the one hand, "people in countries … with a high level of general and institutional trust, low level of corruption, a stable, well-performing economy and high level of social cohesion and inclusion (including migrants) fear migration the least," they noted. On the other hand, people were most fearful in countries where "people don't trust each other or the state's institutions, and where social cohesion and solidarity are weak" (Malik, 2018).

Linked with immigration is the perception, and reality, of change. As mentioned, Putnam's work has in the last few years been subjected to intense review. As a result, and notably, sociologists Maria Abascal and Delia Baldassari consider that the instability of diverse communities, or the rapid pace of change in communities, rather than diversity itself, is a more direct factor in eroding trust. Community instability manifests itself visibly through perceptions of increased drug use, vandalism, child neglect, infant mortality, health issues and crime. Further, they consider that diversity itself is less of a factor in encouraging prejudice than who is in a diverse community, especially when considering racial differences. This may be uncomfortable reading, but research does indicate that levels of trust in diverse communities depend on what racial profiles inhabit those communities and in what percentages (2015, p. 734).

The big picture

Economic language is often imbued with a power in political discourse, treating humans as *Homo economicus*. However, we are more nuanced than that. Our judgments and decision-making processes are complex. Morality is a considerable factor in our understanding and reasoning. That reasoning is also subject to bias, through the concept of motivated reasoning. And, further, our rationality is called into question by dual-process thinking. Emotion interrupts our cognitive reasoning processes. As individuals and in groups, we are tied to a complex mosaic of psychological processes when interpreting the world around us. To paraphrase James Carville, campaign strategist for former US President Bill Clinton, "it's not necessarily the economy, stupid".

Politically, our values and personalities are often influenced less by conservatism than by authoritarianism. This is evidenced by a predilection for uniformity and avoidance of complexity. Swayed by social norms and a concept of fairness, we are more concerned about what others have, relative to us, than about what we have ourselves. As Tolstoy points out in *Anna Karenina*, "there are no conditions of life to which a man cannot accustom himself, especially if he sees that every one around him lives in the same way" (2010, p. 831).

Inequality and otherness grate against this sensitivity, especially when circumstances change rapidly. Further, an often-accompanying feeling of threat, normative or status, and a loss of control increase societal security concerns and encourage a search for simple answers.

> *Familiarity reduces insecurity, so we feel more comfortable describing and combatting the risks we think we understand: terrorists, immigrants, job loss and crime.* (Judt, 2011, pp. 218–9)

Under such circumstances, populism thrives. Elite behaviour becomes a target for those disenchanted and suffering a sense of threat. Control as a mechanism of reducing status threat, as in the slogans "Take Back Control" and "Make America Great Again", plays into populist narratives. The haves and the have nots cement polarisation in the political space.

Greater access to information, once touted as enabling diverse perspectives, does not, it seems, do any such thing. Motivated reasoning and confirmation bias move those seeking simple answers to ever more closed media silos, both via traditional mainstream media and also online. Accessed information, with naturally compromised thought processes, provides evidence for specific belief formation, encouraged by populist tropes.

Trust suffers, especially among those of an authoritarian mindset. Institutional trust is waning in an age of populism, as the individual once again becomes central to the concept. As trust becomes focused on smaller social settings – communities, groups, the like-minded – the bonds and linkages of those entities, once heralded as the building blocks of social capital, undergo change, often based on perceptions as opposed to reality, on emotion as opposed to logic. Trust is in transition.

In this, the influence of digital information is far from straightforward. Those bonds and linkages over social media are different from traditional ties, and are weaker but increasingly central to modern life in the digital age. The real world, and affective, psychologically constructed perceptions of it, obviously has profound effects on societies and politics. Digital interaction undoubtedly influences those perceptions and the trust and beliefs that are built on them.

Part three: Information ecology in the digital age

In the early 20th century, communication was a one-step process, in which the arbiters of power – predominantly governments – could, using largely radio and print, communicate directly with their constituents, albeit increasingly filtered through nascent independent media. However, during this time, the influence of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, via his nephew Edward Bernays, on the field of communication encouraged the study of individuals in this process. While the world of advertising paid more attention to the individual, or consumer, it was only in the 1940s that the effect of interpersonal relations in the communications process became of political interest.

The two-step model of communication flow was posited by social scientists Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet in *The People's Choice* in 1944 (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944) after a study of the decision-making process during a US presidential election. While the authors expected to find empirical evidence for the direct influence of mainstream media messaging on voting intentions, they discovered that informal, personal contacts were much more influential on voting behaviour than was exposure to radio or newspapers.

Thus they theorised that information from the media plays out in two distinct stages. First, opinion leaders pay close attention to the mainstream media; second, they pass on their own interpretations to others, complementing those of the media. In tandem with the corporate concept of word-of-mouth marketing, this became a cornerstone of communication theory, despite some criticisms, remaining intact through the rest of the 20th century, surviving the advent of mass television and even the early days of the world wide web.

However, social media and the roll-out of wider digital capabilities changed all that. With Facebook and the like, the idea of a cohort of opinion leaders central to this process broke down. Technology provided a way not only to directly target individuals with seductive messages tuned to each individual's wants, needs and circumstances but also to enable all individuals to effectively become opinion leaders in the information space. Initially the corporates garnered these new capabilities for marketing, developing a totally new advertising model, now known in the industry as adtech. But just as the corporate public-relations ideas of Bernays had been successfully adopted by the fascist regimes of the 1930s for political purposes, it was only a matter of time before political players also embraced the power of these new digitally enabled capabilities.

In the digital age, the two-step flow theory of Lazarsfeld et al. morphed into the multi-step flow theory of mass communication (Weimann, 2017) alongside related ideas such as the diffusion of innovation and systems theories and network approaches (Skyttner, 2005; Valente, 1995). It has also been argued that with such personalised capability provided by mass data enmeshed in digital technology, we have possibly returned to a one-step flow (Bennett and Manheim, 2006). Without getting too theoretical, suffice to say that the digital revolution has profoundly altered communication practice, in both the corporate and the political fields.

It is also worth harking back to Lazarsfeld's academic field, in which he is seen as the father of empirical sociology. It is here, sociologically, and removed from the science of communication itself, that one can attempt to understand the true nature of the challenges of communicating in today's world. This chapter seeks to comprehend the contemporary information ecology, before part four examines modern political communication and its inevitable nemesis: organised manipulation and propaganda.

Today's information ecology is typified by its networked nature (Castells, 2007), with billions of nodes, from the power-brokers of the media through to anyone with a communication capability. To examine this network, we consider its three main elements: the information-consuming human (individually or collectively), information itself and the technology through which this information passes between humans, literally the media.

Individual humans as consumers

For humans, information mutates into knowledge through a process of validation through experience. Mediated knowledge is, however, initially provisional, before going through a continual process of verification. Yet, as information multiplies, verification through experience becomes more difficult, in proportion to available information, resulting in information overload, both from socially available information and from that provided via communication technologies. As such, we are continually distracted and cannot pay due attention to more and more available information. Information may flow through our cerebral cortex but has no time to consolidate into knowledge.

Today's information environment, dominated by digital interaction, has a considerable impact on human beings. As noted in the "Ledger of Harms" by the Center of Humane Technology, such impacts affect our attention, through the loss of ability to focus without distraction; our mental health, through loneliness, depression, stress, loss of sleep and even increased risk of suicide; and our relationships, through less empathy, more confusion and misinterpretation (Center for Humane Technology, 2018).

However, the focus here is on the political implications of this information environment, so we turn to human mental faculties more directly relevant to this task. Key are cognitive biases, in which human beings analyse information and make decisions specifically in a framework aimed at seeking and processing information, opinion and analysis that confirms pre-existing beliefs. This process gives weight to experience over data and facts, relying on mental shortcuts, or heuristics, and the beliefs in accordance with social networks of like-minded individuals, to enable opinion formation and decision-making.

Despite much rhetoric about claimed changes to our mental faculties caused by social media, there is no evidence that the fundamental human capabilities in this area have changed in recent years. Evolution does not react at such a rapid pace. However, the environment in which these faculties now operate, such as changes in information ecology, societal factors and political narrative, have heightened the importance and consequence of these cognitive biases. Further, advances in psychological research now allow a fuller understanding of such consequences.

Confirmation bias, encouraging us to subscribe to prior beliefs, is a human condition hardwired into our cognitive process, manifesting itself in media sourcing through selective exposure (Stroud, 2017). Our prior beliefs are highly resistant to change, and corrective information that contradicts them has very limited effect and may even harden our attachment to them. This is known as the backfire effect (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010), although its magnitude is contested among researchers (Wood and Porter, 2019).

Alongside this is the nature of motivated reasoning, in which emotion biases our reasoning processes in a way that is most likely to lead to desired outcomes or conclusions, not necessarily to rationally based ones, especially in a political context (Slothuus and de Vreese, 2010). This hot cognition, increasingly enabled in an emotive information environment, is seen as a significant factor in political decision-making (Lodge and Taber, 2013).

Further, recent appraisal of cognitive processes has brought forth the concept of argumentative reasoning. This claims that while reasoning, as traditionally conceived, falls short of reliably delivering rational beliefs and rational decisions, we reason to devise and evaluate arguments specifically intended to persuade and argue our case (Sperber and Mercier, 2017). Ultimately, confirmation biases in an information-rich setting may contribute not only to declining agreement about facts and a blurring of the distinction between opinion and fact but also to a degradation of public discourse and increased polarisation. Such polarisation, linked with hyperpartisanship, socially or via media, can feed cognitive biases to intense effect in the political sphere.

Most recently, working in the context of fake news, information management professor Patricia Moravec and others have shown that even when subjects are presented with a warning of fake news, which may increase cognitive activity and thus consideration, there is little ultimate effect on judgment or resulting evaluation. The flagging of information as false does not influence beliefs, and the hypothesis that we are more likely to believe information that aligns with our political opinions remains strong. Information that challenges prior opinions receives little cognitive attention, indicating the real pervasiveness of confirmation bias (Moravec et al., 2018).

In the digital age, the speed of information flow has had a profound effect on the nature of our cognitive processing: our biases are triggered much more rapidly. Equally, our comprehension is subject to pressures. Although claims that human attention span has decreased significantly in the age of social media are not founded on serious research (Maybin, 2017), the cognitive effects of skimming and scanning as required by digital screens within a glut of information are becoming clearer.

Considering the use of text, many studies have shown that digital-screen use may cause a variety of negative effects on comprehension. A Norwegian study examined how high-school students comprehended the same material via different media, showing that students who read print had higher levels of comprehension and understanding than those who read screens (Mangen et al., 2013). Other studies indicate that skimming is now prevalent in screen-based interfacing, reducing the time available for deep reading and grasping complexity (Liu, 2006).

In the UK, 74% of adults and 91% of 16- to 24-year-olds now consume news mainly online, rather than through traditional radio or print. Online content aggregators, mainly Google, Facebook, Twitter and Apple News, are the main conduits for traffic to traditional news websites, which compete with other primarily digital news sources such as the *Huffington Post*, the *Independent*, Buzzfeed and *Politico*. Away from these websites, news also competes with friends' updates, advertising and other clickbait on social media (Cairncross, 2019). The content of such information, news or otherwise, consists of text, video, audio and infographics.

Ultimately, the manner in which we respond to information in a contemporary setting is affected by:

- our hedonistic mindset, driven by our biases;
- a lack of recognition of information sourcing, through incapacity and laziness; and
- the sheer volume of information, enabled by technology (Moravec et al., 2018).

These factors lead to us failing to think as critically as we should when sourcing and analysing news on social media. This is typified by the fact that research indicates that some 59% of links shared on Twitter are shared without being opened (Gabielkov et al., 2016), although bots may contribute to much of this.

Mapping patterns of information consumption among different users has a long history in the social sciences, as summarised by Eugenia Mitchelstein and Pablo Boczkowski (2010). Although the influence of online media has gathered pace in the last decade, there remains scholarly discussion over the complexity of the relationship between the complementarity of digital and traditional information sourcing and the displacement of traditional methods by digital media, which depends, to a degree, on socio-economic and temporal factors. For example, online information consumers tend to have higher levels of education and higher incomes than those who do not access information online. However, research has shown that more successful and viral internet memes are more often initiated by those in lower socio-economic bands than those in higher ones (Mazambani et al., 2015).

The way in which we respond to online information, notably news, differs depending on our mechanism of sourcing – be it via news sites directly, via search or via social media. Those with greater trust in mainstream media outlets tend to access news directly via those sites, while those with greater distrust tend to access news via social media. Those with higher levels of political interest are more likely to source news through social media as opposed to an information search.

However, the much-vaunted filter-bubble effect (Pariser, 2011) is not borne out via recent research, nor is a predisposition to extreme political ideology through use of social media conclusively proved (Möller et al., 2019). Yet, scholarly debate continues, stressing that the manner in which we come across news and what role algorithms play in this process remain pivotal concerns (Diakopoulos and Koliska, 2017).

However, the distrustful's affinity with social media does reflect the coalescing of like-minded groups around those they trust. An age-old phenomenon, this is nothing new. A perfect example is demonstrated by examining the interactions of over 1 million Facebook users with Brexit-related posts from the main news providers between January and July 2016. Via social media, a degree of trust, albeit through often weak ties, generated two distinct groups: pro-leave and pro-remain (Del Vicario et al., 2017).

Yet, it is noteworthy that the efficacy and strength of the links in these groups are subject to human dynamics, often typified by Dunbar's law, long appreciated by anthropologists. This claims that primates, including humans, can develop strong ties only with up to approximately 150 others in their group, a cognitive limit applicable regardless of how many Facebook friends they have (Gonçalves et al., 2011). Regardless of the filter-bubble effect and Dunbar's law, this clustering does have what some see as a far-reaching sociological effect. As professor of communication studies Peter Dahlgren points out,

> *Not only does the speed of social media undercut attention by encouraging distraction, it also has a societal fragmentation affecting us as a society by shuttling us into ever-smaller micro-zones of attentive engagement. Such motifs as speed dating, trailerism, brief video clips, and the compression of cultural events and products have become commonplace, but they are indicative of a longer cultural-cognitive evolution that, I would underscore, has relevance for the knowledge processes of democracy.* (2018, p. 22)

The general trend in cognitive research over the last two decades, popularly captured by Kahneman's dual-process model (Kahneman, 2012), has demoted rationality as a prime driver of decision-making in favour of intuitive cognitive biases. However, more recent research has elevated emotion as a significant element of our decision-making processes, hand in hand with morality as a major factor (Haidt, 2012).

Humans are not machines. Our consciousness enables psychological states of emotion or affect, which can have a homophilous effect in drawing us together, just as demographics such as age, race, interests and education can. This is especially noticeable on the internet, where we can very easily connect with those who display similar emotions to ourselves, creating an emotional contagion online (Kramer et al., 2014). Following Suler's disinhibition effect, several further studies have shown that anger as an emotion is particularly contagious over social media (Fan et al., 2014; Sawaoka and Monin, 2018). From this, as neatly articulated by early internet memes, the Greater Internet Fuckwad Theory[27] (Tycho, 2013) and Godwin's law[28] (Godwin, 1994), incivility flows, especially prevalent in online political discourse (Hasell and Weeks, 2016; Nithyanand et al., 2017).

Anxiety is also highly contagious and influences online political discussion. Studies of social-media engagement in a political context show that while anger is more likely to relate to partisan goals and rebuff corrected information, anxiety encourages the search for truth that reaffirms partisan identity (Weeks, 2015). And yet, in general, humans, while caught up in and contributing to emotional contagion, also find the tone of online political discourse highly fraught and stressful (Duggan and Smith, 2016). In this environment, there comes a creeping move to self-censorship among many, importantly those who may add significant value to public discourse (Zuboff, 2019).

Do we understand what our information environment is? It is largely accepted that literacy – in this case, media literacy – is a vital component in creating and maintaining a responsible and informed citizenry (Erstad and Amdam, 2013; Martinsson, 2009). There are large-scale European programmes, notably the e-Engagement Against

Violence (e-EAV) project, that examine the effects of radical-right narratives and communication strategies (Ranieri, 2016) to inform policies in education, which is a major factor in forming our political viewpoints. However, although attention is paid to populist discourses and media-education initiatives that promote critical civic engagement, there is little focus on the extent to which critical media-literacy standards influence political views.

In examining the extreme end of the spectrum, media literacy is also seen as a crucial element of countering or preventing violent extremism (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2015; Stevens and Neumann, 2009; UNESCO, 2017). However, while the value of media literacy is generally appreciated as part of civic education, sound democracy and countering propaganda, that value is rarely quantified: it is taken as read.

Individual humans as contributors

In practical terms, how are humans as news providers contributing to this environment? Anyone with a digital device is now more than a consumer: a player in the information environment, a state that has fundamentally changed since the early 2000s. As 'prosumers' (producing consumers) and 'produsers' (producing users), we create, adapt and share information – some newsworthy, some more concerned with cats, some unbeknown to us. Personal data are obviously information, but here we consider information we consciously choose to contribute. And we tend to encompass not only the public but also the mainstream media.

As a public that contributes to the information environment, we aggregate, curate, generate, adapt, comment and, most importantly, share. We collect content by aggregating – Twitter lists, Spotify playlists, personal YouTube channels – and then add our own opinion – likes, comments, ratings – to that content, for everyone or a selected cluster of people to see, and then continue the process. We may take content and adapt it for sharing, or we may just share the original content. Or we may generate original content for sharing. Whichever way, the public is a significant mover of information.

However, there are inequalities in this contribution to the information environment, or engagement. Excluding chat, a long-standing rule of thumb states that only 1% of users will actively engage and 9% engage a little, while the remaining 90% simply lurk (Nielsen, 2006). But if anything, indications are that with news stories, especially political stories, active engagement is at higher levels in Western democracies, in the range of 16–34% (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2017).

And humans do a lot more than choose to avidly seek or contribute to the truth on the internet. We encounter digital and social media through work, using virtual meeting spaces such as Zoom or Skype and social productivity software such as Yammer or Slack; through education, via e-learning in educational institutions and massive open online courses (MOOCs); and, in our spare time, through the now-mainstream internet activities of chat, social media, online shopping and streaming. Apart from these encounters, we are also heavily engaged in some pretty basic primeval activities: looking for love, watching sex and battling with each other in virtual combat.

Between 2013 and 2015, in the US, dating-app usage by 18- to 24-year-olds increased nearly threefold, and usage by 55- to 64-year-olds doubled (Smith, 2016). Seventy-five million Chinese are predicted to be using paid online-dating services by 2023, triple the number forecast for the US (Statista, 2019).

The pornography industry, now largely online, is conservatively estimated to be worth some $15 billion, bigger than Netflix, at $11.7 billion, or Hollywood, at $11.1 billion (Naughton, 2018). People spend a lot of time watching other people having sex.

Online gaming and e-sports – the watching of online games – are in a similar league for holding our online attention. By revenue, the vast majority of the top 25 apps in the App Store and Google Play are games, and the value of the global e-sports industry is predicted to exceed $1 billion in 2019 (Russ, 2019). Currently this is dwarfed by actual sports revenues brought in by the likes of the US National Football League, US National Basketball Association or UK Premier League, but in terms of event viewership the picture is somewhat different. Viewership of the 2017 League of Legends world championship peaked at over 106 million. Admittedly, the event was held in Beijing and the vast majority of viewers were in China, but the numbers are comparable to those for the US Super Bowl final.

Viewership of the 2018 Dota 2 international championship exceeded that of Wimbledon, the US Golf Open and the Tour de France (Ingraham, 2018). In terms of players, there are over 30 million gamers – people who play games on digital platforms – in the UK alone, approximately one-third of whom regularly engage in multi-platform, sophisticated interactive online games (Newzoo, 2017). The revenues of the global gaming industry are expected to exceed $150 billion in 2019 (Wijman, 2019).

Whereas dating and viewing pornography are, by nature, personal and intimate activities, serious online interactive gaming is utterly communal. This form of gaming has an especially significant but often misunderstood place in the concept of social media, in that it is about as social as one can get with today's technology, allowing for real-time playing, talking, texting and watching, all at the same time, among groups. Just as happens between and within groups on the dark web, within these gamer communities complex mechanisms of trust are built (Wirth and Guadagno, 2015). However, hardly any policymakers will have heard of the bloodbath of B-R5RB.[29]

Although many people are aware of these online activities, the numbers may be eye opening and show the scale of different activities we indulge in, as part of what the *Economist* has called the "timepass economy", derived from an Indian term meaning to kill time (The Economist, 2019a). However, there is a curious sentiment among the development community that those in the developing world – and effectively the next billion users of digital and social media – are somehow different from the media-savvy hordes of developed societies. This community, with its good intentions, has provided digital resources to offer information to improve the practical side of life for the world's relatively deprived population, working on the assumption

> *that the poor will budget scarce digital resources and limited time online for seeking this information rather than entertainment. Their attitude is fuelled by a deep-seated worldview of the poor as utility-driven beings.* (Arora, 2019, p. 1)

As this book elucidates, we are far from being utility-maximising *Homo economicus*. That applies to everyone, not just the wealthy.

In the digital space, politicians or political figures are also information producers, and the separation between media trust and political trust is no longer clear. Studies into media trust have traditionally identified three distinct categories of trust: message credibility (trust in the information itself), source credibility (trust in the person providing the information) and media credibility (trust in the medium or channel) (Fisher, 2016). On social media, the distinction between these three categories is rapidly blurring, making it more difficult to separate the information, the source and the medium.

This is particularly evident in the social-media accounts of political figures, in which they provide information, serve as sources and often use their own channels, such as websites or blogs, in which they self-edit (Enli and Rosenberg, 2018). Those political players who can, via several means, express authenticity, regardless of honesty, are honoured with the most trust, an attribute common among populist figures.

Journalists are humans too, significantly contributing information as creators, operating not only in an increasingly digital environment but also in business models driven by that environment. Those business models are increasingly designed to capture attention. This, along with the demands of digital and the downsizing of newsrooms has led to accusations of 'churnalism', which, in place of time-consuming investigative journalism, churns out hastily written news articles from press releases from public-relations (PR) firms, political spin doctors, news agencies and even rival news outlets without the facts being checked (Davies, 2011). On social media, this can spiral out of control, with journalists creating non-stories with major impact, such as the Momo Challenge (Cellan-Jones, 2019).[30]

Organised humans

While as individuals, journalists face pressures, the wider mainstream media – owners, editors, journalists – also face a considerable professional challenge in today's fervent public discourse, one that questions key factors of journalism: impartiality and balance.

In a Manichaean political arena, both sides are traditionally given time in the media space. However, this balance is hard to maintain when minority, extreme views, with little evidence for their claims, may have a significant and loud profile on social media and clamour for equal airtime or column inches to established, evidenced-based voices. And, as a brief visit to Twitter proves, failures to provide this can create a considerable backlash, as the BBC has found (Damazer, 2019).

Impartiality is a different matter and has been thrown into the spotlight during the Brexit referendum and negotiations. The partisan ownership of newspapers in the UK, often under the guidance of powerful owners of multiple print and broadcast outlets, has a considerable distorting effect on democratic politics. Broadcasters are more likely to carry news stories that have first appeared in newspapers than vice versa. As agenda-setters, print outlets with online portals have a politicised approach that permeates into broadcast, both television and radio, even dragging public-service broadcasters into a partisan print agenda (Dunleavy et al., 2018). Further, both left-wing media outlets, such as the Canary and Evolve Politics, and right-wing ones, such as politicalite.com and PoliticalUK.co.uk, run directly by political interest groups seeking to influence public debates and sway the news agenda, have rapidly gained online traction in the UK.

The market dynamics of the digital age have hit the mainstream media hard, especially in the local-media sector. In the UK, the decline in sales of local newspapers and the closure of many, alongside the relative weakness of regional and local broadcasting, are now seen as directly contributing to a democratic deficit (Ramsay and Moore, 2016). Similar findings are seen in other Western democracies. Examples of the impact of the hollowing out of local reporting were starkly demonstrated leading up to the Grenfell Tower fire in June 2017, when warnings that would have been highlighted and given prominence in the news cycle if local outlets had been available failed to make it into the public sphere, despite the ubiquity of social media.

Research by journalist Rachel Howells into local media in the UK is instructive in this regard (Harte et al., 2018). This lack of capability to reflect or report local reality not only fractures public trust in the democratic system but also has an impact on the effectiveness of government communications. But at its core, this local-media vacuum has stripped out a vital element of the public's news diet, replaced by social media, providing what the public wants but not necessarily what is needed, or by agents of the PR industry, serving corporate interests rather than the public's. Regarding the latter, in the US, reflected elsewhere in Western democracies, between 1980 and 2008 the number of journalists plummeted by a quarter while the number of PR specialists doubled (McChesney and Nichols, 2011).

Over the last decade, however, in a fragmented digital world, where anyone can be a citizen journalist, and individual bloggers and celebrities can have massive influence, the question has been regularly raised as to who can seriously influence, even control, the media agenda. In place of the old mass media – the fourth estate acting as information gatekeepers – we now have 'prosumers' and 'produsers', in various guises, capabilities, collectives and intent. They extend in a long tail amid a lawless digital landscape and have the potential to capture widespread public attention, at the expense of the traditional press barons (Anderson, 2010).

Further, online platforms exert a degree of algorithmic control that may affect the media agenda. That is how the technophile community may see it, and to a degree, gatekeeping and agenda-setting power is experiencing a transferral and transformation to a much more diffuse state than before. However, this exciting plurality of media is still subject to significant agenda-setting power of the resourced mainstream media, which maintain a hefty gravitational pull in the information environment (Schlosberg, 2016).

Other organised human efforts in the information environment are the tech giants: Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Google and the like. All adopting typical market-based business models, they value attention over accuracy. Of the social-media platforms, they also rely on other humans, their users, as the providers of information, in terms not only of lucrative personal data but also, ultimately, of content. They enable the billions of network nodes to pass information. However, the fact that the information may be bad, in several ways, shapes and forms, does pose some serious questions.

The biggest question – largely a legal one but also, to a degree, a political one – is are they publishers or platforms? To call these platforms publishers is to presume that their task is merely to produce content. As such, it is then to presume that social media should be produced, packaged and polished; that social media should be regulated; and that social media and the public's content on it should be controlled. In the face of disinformation, terrorism and psychological harm, governments are increasingly calling for regulation.

The pros and cons of this approach are complex, detailed and expansive, far beyond the scope of this book. However, we do need to understand the issue we are dealing with: not fantastically useful and ubiquitous technology, but human behaviour using that technology. Humans are responsible for the online content that is called out as threatening society, and the malicious acts of a disproportionately small number should be viewed in perspective. The owners, shareholders and engineers of the platforms are responding to these challenges themselves, in the scope of their raison d'être, as businesses, and in the face of threats of regulation. And to a degree, legislation has a role. But as digital analyst Rafael Goldzweig and others claim,

> *We see a strong regulatory approach from politicians who seem to fail to understand what they are regulating in the first place. On the proposed legislation analysed … we see attempts to*

> *address the effects of the problem, but not attacking their roots, as with the tech companies' approaches.* (2018, p. 18)

This is not to defend the tech giants, for they have considerable responsibility in ensuring moral, if not legal, norms are adhered to on their platforms. But a moral panic that calls for devolving humans and our governing systems of responsibility can be undoubtedly argued as sheer folly.

Further, while democratic governments may be contemplating regulatory approaches, not all states view the issue through the same prism and with the same urgency. As media analyst Douglas Griffin points out,

> *In jurisdictions that are unwilling to establish such laws (because of a particularly strong tradition of protecting the freedom of expression) or that would be unable to enforce them if enacted (because of technological and jurisdictional limitations, coupled with relatively smaller economic market power or less developed legal systems), they are unlikely to succeed. And in countries with weak governmental accountability or a legacy of authoritarianism, they are likely to be abused.* (2019, p. 74)

Individual humans in a micro-context

Outside the vortex of contemporary online epidemics, shenanigans and hype, the real world still exists. This raises the prospect of cognitive dissonance. While messaging, representations, narratives and data replete online may present an image of the world out there, increasingly it may be in conflict with the real world in the perceiver's actual locality. Beliefs, values and attitudes built up since birth through socialisation may be constantly under threat from information that presents conflicting viewpoints, readily accessible via social media. The ideal body, the perfect life, the glamorous style are all examples of an unreality incompatible with the real, experienced world. This could be translated into the political arena, where promises, claims and even immutable facts pronounced via the media, traditional and digital, may be justified and valid but are not reflected or transferable to experienced reality.

The innate desire to achieve cognitive congruence is a driving factor in confirmation bias and selective exposure to narratives and media content that fit pre-existing beliefs. Equally, in a true post-modernist sense, when a metanarrative meets reality and fails to meet the perceiver's expectation, conspiracy theories abound and logic is overridden by emotion. This disconnect between what is out there and what is right here, which journalist and author David Goodhart effectively analyses as between "anywheres" and "somewheres" (2017), has been exacerbated by the demise of local journalism.

Several commentators lament not only a crisis in today's media – whether local, national, traditional or online – but also humans' increased difficulty in navigating that media, such that our standards of media literacy are insufficient for the information environment. As the Knight Foundation states, "what it means to 'know what's going on in the world' has become a hotly contested issue" (Madden et al., 2017). Journalist Ilya Lozovsky captures the concern in *Foreign Policy* magazine, claiming that we are "Facebooking ourselves to death" (2016).

Information

Some 500 million tweets per day (Hootsuite, 2019), over 1.1 billion daily active users on Facebook uploading 300 million photos per day (Zephoria Inc, 2019), over 1 billion hours of video watched on YouTube each day (Youtube, n.d.), over 500 million Instagram accounts active every day (Instagram, n.d.): the numbers are almost meaningless but indicate the sheer scale of information flow in today's environment. In such an environment, attention, as opposed to information, is the scarce and therefore valuable asset. This, along with a user's cognitive ability to process information, has a direct impact on the nature of information in the digital age.

The age-old principles of marketeers – novelty, brevity, salience, zeitgeist – have remained, often predating the discoveries of behavioural economics and neuroscience. However, the drive to capture attention in a high-speed, superheated, oversaturated market has had a significant effect on information itself.

And emotion, as the advertising industry appreciates (Edell and Burke, 1987), proves to be a powerful factor in determining information's value and transmission in the digital space. Studies have shown that content that evokes either an extremely positive emotional response (astonishment or awe) or a very negative one (anger or outrage), eliciting high psychological arousal, is much more viral than content that evokes low arousal emotion (resignation or sadness) (Berger and Milkman, 2012). This is regardless of how surprising, interesting or practically useful content is or how prominently the content features. Further, it works the other way around. The more physiologically aroused one is, especially through anxiety or amusement, the more likely one is to share information (Berger, 2011). Sad people do not share as much.

Regardless of emotion, information – increasingly packaged for mobile devices – is increasingly succinct, visual and simple, designed to grab attention quickly. With the notable exception of Twitter extending its character limit from 140 to 280, generally all information packages on social media have, on average, reduced in size over the years. Several market-research studies suggest that video content has settled on an optimum of approximately two minutes or less on most platforms, the exception being LinkedIn (Vasallo, 2018). But a 2017 study by BuzzSumo of 100 million articles revealed that counter-intuitively, for blogs, long-form content gets more social shares than short-form content, and lists and infographics present particularly shareable clickbait (Kagan, 2014). Links embedded with textual content enable further information conduits and are encouraged through search-engine optimisation (SEO) algorithms.

Studies generally suggest that year after year, less than 60% of web traffic is human generated, with a significant majority of it due to bots. Equally, up to 15% of Twitter accounts are bots or fake accounts

(Varol et al., 2017). While the number of bots or false accounts may be ascertained, the veracity of information on the web is unquantifiable.

Yet, a short time on social media shows that information, as a valuable marker of fact, is vulnerable, valued more as an attention grabber. Under these conditions, it is readily falsified. Fake news is nothing new, despite its celebrity status as the Oxford Dictionaries' word of the year in 2017. Information can be highly targeted at those susceptible to its claims, and the networked nature of the information environment enables its contagion, but these are also applicable to correct factual information – although admittedly, bots tend to focus on less factual matter. Also, it has the advantage of lack of inhibition or restriction, able to use all the standard marketing mechanisms to sell its wares; but that has always been the case.

However, the effect of fakery, in news or otherwise, has been turbocharged in the digital age due to two factors. First, the low entry barriers into the media space and ubiquity of software mean that anyone can simply create and widely distribute multiple versions of falsified information, just a foretaste of wider organised manipulation of information. The use of Adobe Photoshop and similar software enables fake items to be created, and real, factual representations to be adapted with ease, producing apparently highly credible new information.

Second, audio and visual products, which once required significant resources to create and edit, can now easily be adapted by anyone using readily available software, such as Windows Movie Maker or Apple iMovie. This area is now being made even more susceptible to fakery through the development of deepfakes, in which existing factually based video, notably personal speech in video format, can be manipulated. Software that is not currently widely available can produce ever more convincing video content that is increasingly difficult to debunk, by literally putting words into others' mouths (Chesney and Citron, 2018).

The words and language of human interactivity has also adapted to the market conditions and the socio-political landscape. Increasingly emotive language in digital media is exemplified by new vocabularies, styles and genres in reshaped literacy practices. By using a communicative mode in which written text approximates speech, instant messaging and short message service (SMS) texting have introduced new words and styles that span the interactive nature of speech and the formality of writing. Digital media also allows for multimodal creativity, enabling texts that mix language with gestural, visual, aural and graphical modes (Darvin, 2016).

That language also reflects the social context in which it is used. Slang, simplicity and vernacular are increasingly used as parts of mainstream communication. This, however, is merely following a historical trend in which the more accessible and widespread communication becomes, through technology, the simpler the language that is required to gain mass appeal. Carnegie Mellon University's Language Technologies Institute has found that from a high benchmark set by Abraham Lincoln, US presidential candidates now use language simple enough for seven-year-olds to understand (Schumacher and Eskenazi, 2016). A study by Strathclyde University has shown similar trends in the UK (McDonald, 2018).

Even simpler are images, still or moving. The massive growth of imagery-sharing platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram are testament to the former. As for the latter, video has similar growth trends, with predictions that in data terms, video as an information format will take up some 82% of internet traffic by 2022 (CISCO, 2019).

Despite the upward trajectory of video, audio is enjoying an unexpected revolution, especially when it comes to podcasts. In terms of consumption, approximately one-third of respondents to the Reuters Institute 2018 Digital News Survey, across 22 countries, listened to a news-related podcast at least monthly, with significantly higher percentages in Asian countries. The most striking demographic trend is the level to which young people have embraced podcasts: just under half of under-35s are using news-related podcasts, judged to be far more than those who listen to traditional radio news (Reuters Institute, 2018).

That said, digital technology has also allowed radio to largely maintain a steady listenership globally (RAJAR, 2018), although traditional styles of listening are, like television, succumbing to on-demand digital services (OFCOM, 2017). And in terms of popularity, English-language audio books have defied all predictions (Kozlowski, 2019), with other languages following suit. As a conduit of information, audio remains highly influential.

To bring the information formats – text, video, audio, graphics – together to portray some form of cohesive influence, we turn to semiotics. In semiotics, representation is the process of recording ideas, messages or knowledge in some physical manner by way of signs to portray something perceived, sensed, imagined or experienced. Digital language and representation also foments and encourages the generation and distribution of internet memes, considered systems of signs of cultural information that are subject to repeated translation – a powerful informational mechanism (Cannizzaro, 2016). Examples are Pepe the Frog (Di Placido, 2017), Distracted Boyfriend (Barrett, 2017) and the Irish Slave Myth (Varner, 2017).

Yet, even noting the changing nature of information itself, how is today's information environment enabling the movement of that information? Specific technological platforms aside, we now exist in a highly networked world, in which humans, as nodes, are linked through differing mechanisms to many other nodes to allow information flow. Either dynamic or static, undirected or directed, with varying levels of reciprocity, weight, centrality and modularity (strong or weak ties), these links are central to information flow in networks defined by their levels of density, centralisation, group reciprocity and clusters, or communities.

In the digital age, these clusters of densely interconnected, fairly dynamic nodes in highly centralised networks, often spoked around major media outlets, characterise the information environment. The dynamic nature, in which users continuously respond to information and maintain their involvement in the network, provide the information flow. This picture represents social-network analysis of social media: a snapshot of a reality involving mainstream media, comment sections, Facebook accounts, influencers, Twitter followers, LinkedIn discussion groups, Reddit forums, 4chan boards, darknet marketplaces and bots.

This is an environment where all nodes can create, distribute, adapt, share, request and respond to information: the entry requirements are very low. It is also an environment where information can spread within closed clusters, permeate across the network as a meme, trade up the chain through initial insertion into a vulnerable news node, explode via an influencer spoke, cross-cluster and flood the network virally (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). And it is not only information on the major platforms that matters but also that which lurks in the deeper bowels of the internet, where anything goes and political incorrectness, or even downright depravity, is encouraged.

The contagion metaphor has already been mentioned, but in an information-saturated environment, users, unlike diseases, may be selective in what they share and what they do not; information competes with all other information for the attention of users, or nodes. Equally, in disease epidemics, viruses mostly spread irrespective of the presence of other viruses, and individuals exposed to many viruses are more like to succumb to others. However, research shows that in information terms, epidemics often fail because nodes inundated by an overload of messages are less likely to view, remember or pass on any of them. And in such an environment, even highly popular information dies very rapidly, losing its potency (Feng et al., 2015).

Data

Discussion of information cannot be complete without reference to data: their volume and utility. By the end of 2017, 2.5 trillion bytes of data were being created each day, with 90% of the data in the world having been generated in the previous two years (Marr, 2018). All this is commonly termed big data.

In the last few years, data and their governance and security have moved from a marginal issue to one of serious political and societal concern. Increasing instances of personal data being misused, shared, sold, lost or shared with scant, if any, involvement of the data owners have resulted in some major governmental responses, like the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of May 2018. The exponential rise in the internet of things will no doubt stress the system of data governance in the future. The dark side of data, notably in computational propaganda, is covered below, but much of today's data can be seen in a positive light as good, open and activist data.

Good data are those that may be available for worthwhile causes, such as health, research or administration, seen as a public good. The public, despite growing privacy concerns, is generally willing to make a trade-off to provide data for such causes. A UK survey conducted for Nesta in 2018 indicated that some 73% of the public would share their personal data to improve public services, provided there was a simple and secure way of doing so (NESTA, 2018).

Open data, however, have a more intriguing potential impact on the information environment, trust, politics and public decision-making. Such data have three potential impacts: public access to data, data journalism and data activism.

First, through increasing public access to government and research data, publics – the general population or specific communities – can increasingly question or directly source information, with the ability to directly hold governments to account, previously a role possible only through funded journalism of the mainstream media – an expansion of the fourth estate to include the public. So goes the theory. However, although the UK has pioneered this approach, the reality is somewhat underwhelming, across the globe. Several indicators show that despite widespread stated government commitment, public databases are still largely incomplete, unfocused, fragmented, unreadable and of low quality, for social, political and economic reasons (Romei, 2018).

Further, data portals are rarely fit for purpose, and the ability of the general public to access, interpret and analyse data is currently low, with only the tech-savvy or data activists capable of doing so (Cornford et al., 2013). Yet many claim that open data have the potential to revolutionise society, economics and politics – although some research indicates that people may approve of the idea of open data but do not necessarily participate in using it (Hedström and Hellberg, 2015).

However, open data, especially through freedom-of-information requests, are seen as a key element of democracy, through enabling an informed citizenry and building trust in the political process (Baack, 2015). The US has seen a steady increase in freedom-of-information requests to over 800,000 in 2017 (approximately one request per 400 US citizens). But in the UK, despite its pioneering role, the equivalent has had a fluctuating history and is yet to significantly exceed 50,000 (approximately one request per 1,320 UK citizens) (Office of Information Policy, 2018; UK Cabinet Offiice, 2018). It is noteworthy that considering a topic of heightened political interest on which trust in information is suffering, the highest increase in freedom-of-information requests to a UK body in 2017 was for the Department for Exiting the EU (DExEU), up fourfold. The department also presented the lowest percentage (17%) of requests granted in full, well below the 46% average (UK Cabinet Offiice, 2018). The reasons for this are unclear and may be due to the rapid establishment of DExEU but point to the possibility of a significant gap in political communication capability in a critical area.

Second, data journalism has now become a major part of news gathering and analysis. With the proliferation of data openly available, specialist journalists can make most of the rubric that there is a human story behind every data point. This style of journalism is often seen as merely innovating the way in which complex data are made accessible to the public, through data visualisation. But a further, more significant facet is that raw available data can be analysed in a manner previously done only by experienced statisticians, which now enables the legitimate questioning of government information based on raw data.

As such, the levels of interrogation and scrutiny of government have increased significantly over the last decade. Major cases have often not come from publicly available data, as typified by the Panama Papers and the Snowden files. Data journalism is a key element of fact checking but also may rely on citizen data and often crowdsources, especially during a crisis, the exemplar being the Ushahidi platform

(Ushahidi, n.d.). However, over time there has been a growing critique of lazy data journalism and its revolutionary impact on the overall field (Hammond, 2017; Loosen et al., 2017).

Third, data activism has latterly sprung up alongside the rise in civil-society organisations over the last few decades and has turbocharged the watchdog, advocacy and representation capabilities of civil-society organisations and NGOs globally, such as the Open Rights Foundation, the Open Forum Foundation and the Sunlight Foundation. Although using open data remains an option, increasingly these organisations are sourcing data themselves, through crowdsourcing, technical innovation such as geospatial data mapping and online data capture. These data, made readable, occasionally in real time, add to the information available to the public, within the mix of that normally provided by, and often via, the mainstream media and social media (Gutiérrez, 2018; Milan and Gutiérrez, 2015).

Notably, data used by these organisations have the advantage that the organisations themselves, despite several high-profile scandals, are often trusted more than others in the political space, some 10% higher than governments or media (Edelman, 2019a). The major NGOs aside, this trust is despite varying degrees of political bias and donor funding across the think-tank spectrum (Transparify, 2017).

Political communications are increasingly a matter of data, yet the focus of much discussion is on data for campaigning or marketing, forgetting that data themselves, made available to the general public, media, academia and activists, also inject a significant level of understanding and agency to those publics. As such, data are increasingly a major factor in the information space that we have yet to fully understand.

If the first wave of the internet was about the provision of information, and the second was about socially connecting that information, then the third and current wave is utterly about data. Mostly invisible, the data that humans are now generating have become, in terms of a source of political power, the new oil (Martinez, 2019). As a source of power, personal data, amassed by governments, corporate enterprises or both in partnership, have monumental consequences on democracy and the public's role in it.

Data scientists, software engineers, Silicon Valley archangels, technophiles and futurists all see data as the future of increasing efficiency in a messy, human system, applied to health care, transport, smart cities, public administration, market systems and law enforcement. There is much to admire, technically, about datafication systems such as Aadhur in India, E3A (Everyone, Everything, Everywhere, All the time) in Singapore and China's Social Credit System. Public data platforms and e-government are being considered and experimented with across the world (Moore, 2018). In the UK, similar systems, more modest in scale, are in the purview of the Government Digital Service.

Yet, these systems can be seen to have a fundamental flaw, based on the often-misunderstood fact that while nature may be neutral, technology is most certainly not. Although AI may be chipping away at the distinction, all technology is human designed, ultimately with a human application, and thus inherently contains human biases. And those with the capacity to design and deploy technology do so without a neutral perspective and automatically contain a power bias. As such, these datafied systems help accumulate political or corporate power and, in doing so, reduce individual autonomy and agency – lynchpins of democracy – and deny the import of individual critical thinking and reason. As Moore points out,

> *The datafied citizen, just like the datafied child, can be told what they can and cannot do, where they can and cannot go, what they can and cannot have. They can be nudged, prodded, incentivized and gamified … power is more centralized, more operable and more opaque.* (2018, p. 243)

By claiming that data will provide the answers to societal and political problems efficiently and precisely, with direct digital democracy enabling faultless decision-making by governments, proponents and evangelists ignore the irrational messiness of human nature and complexity and inexactitude of politics. Digital pioneers and software engineers are often ill equipped to handle such realities.

That is not to say that data systems cannot be politically and societally configured to protect human autonomy and agency. But it requires a desire to empower individual citizens not to entrap themselves in a system over which they have no control. Governance frameworks established in Taiwan and Estonia take a citizen-as-principal approach to data democracy, in which the public own their data and are enabled to use it as they wish, not as the government or private enterprise desires (Margetts and Naumann, 2017, p. 14). This is not empowerment for empowerment's sake, but considered and deliberate, with democracy and accountability at its heart.

The ramifications of data in democracies – ownership, manipulation, surveillance, organisational utility – are profound. Much talk about data concerns corporate use and abuse of it, with governments imploring the tech giants to take more responsibility for data and content issues. Yet the real danger to democracy and the public sphere comes from governments themselves, either in shirking their responsibilities or in seeking further control of data and content.

Technology

With the massive infrastructure of the world wide web taken as read, at the heart of today's information environment are algorithms and their fuel: data. These systems have made technology far from neutral. Interacting with human agency, their machinations can bring humans together increasingly efficiently and connect us to an unimaginable universe of useful, informative and inspirational content – but equally efficiently bring lies, rage and horror.

Facebook and Google are at the forefront of such technological developments, with the rest of the tech world feeding off their crumbs of innovation, and occasionally developing their own sparks of genius before most likely being bought out by one of the duopoly. Both are market driven, aiming for dominance and massively funded through advertising. Google, with its frictionless ad-exchange and tracking tools, and Facebook, with its almost instantaneous dark post A/B content testing and instant articles, have together designed and delivered humankind's digital experience, including for those in censored regimes.

However, the speed of this technological development, prioritising scale over oversight, has resulted in mechanisms of such complexity, speed and sheer size that the ability to see the whole and conceptualise its wider impact has become beyond human capability. As Eric Schmidt, once chief executive of Google, reportedly admitted in 1999, "The internet is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity doesn't understand, the largest experiment in anarchy we've ever had" (Taylor, 2010). And so it has been shown, with both Facebook and Google now facing questions about what they have created, and largely being unable to respond, as their algorithms churn on and on.

Algorithms

An algorithm is a methodological set of instructions to transform one thing – data – into another – insight. In old-fashioned terms, it is akin to a recipe, turning ingredients into a cooked meal; and in biological terms, it may be understood as the visual cortex, translating light into images. Algorithms can be expressed through Boolean programming logic, through connections and weights in an artificial neural network. Sophisticated algorithms can sift through masses of data at astonishing speed.

Social media provide a colossal amount of user-generated data, pretty much all unstructured. Algorithms enable actionable insights, such as identifying trending topics, patterns and user behaviour to be gleaned from this mass of information and then acted on, a monumental task given the sheer amount of data. In effect this means – personally, for each user – prioritising such elements as meaningful interactions, user relevance, post recency based on content engagement, behaviour, comment activity and interactivity, to name a few.

Algorithms contribute to a degree of personalisation on social media, reminiscent of computer scientist Nicholas Negroponte's Daily Me (Kristof, 2009).[31] Internet activist Eli Pariser has posited the resulting filter-bubble effect based on internet-search parameters – a highly seductive and reasonable deduction (Pariser, 2011). However, research has failed to quantify the degree to which this is a significant effect (Flaxman et al., 2016; Haim et al., 2018). This is not to say that there is no personalisation of information, but that much of the effect may be due to selective exposure, driven by conformation bias. In fact, while the filter-bubble effect may be exaggerated, it may also be that we are exposed to a much wider and diverse range of opinions than previously thought (Bakshy et al., 2015; Barberá et al., 2015).

Google employs some 10,000 human moderators trained to identify expertise and trustworthiness, as opposed to ideology. In contrast to the filter-bubble theory, the *Economist* found, through a 2019 research experiment focusing on an area of Kansas in the US, that Google's news search promoted trustworthy items which are rarely politically extreme. While there were signs of bias, it appeared in both directions. The research does not prove that Google is impartial but implies that a degree of balance between left- and right-leaning articles was evident (The Economist, 2019b).

Nevertheless, there appears to be some sort of bias effect, and internet companies are increasingly tweaking algorithms, such as Facebook's algorithmic effort to prioritise posts that spark conversations and meaningful interactions, in an attempt to create a "vicious, algorithmically delicious cycle" (Notopoulos, 2018). Facebook's algorithm assesses signals to inform predictions, such as the popularity of a post in the network of a user's close Facebook friends and the type of content that engages the user the most. Others, such as Apple News, employ human editors alongside algorithms, curating content by deciding which articles should top a user's feed and offer the most relevant stories.

The basic algorithm relies on the inputs it was designed by humans to recognise as triggers. But this is only the tip of the iceberg. Next-generation AI is based on groups of algorithms that can modify themselves and create new ones in response to learned inputs and data, effectively able to autonomously change, adapt and grow based on new data. This machine learning has a profound effect not only on the medium but also on the content of that medium.

Through machine learning, structuring the mass of data available on social media is becoming ever quicker. Much of this information is image based, which is largely difficult for non-human capabilities to analyse, categorise and act on. AI software-recognition protocols can gather actionable insights from imagery to understand trends in user patterns through millions of images posted on social media. Through machine-learnable natural-language processing, text is becoming easier for non-humans to analyse, going from mere keyword examination to sentiment and contextual comprehension. Video remains extremely problematic for analysis by AI, but developments proceed at pace. As data from a multitude of sources, or big data in various formats, accumulate at a dizzying rate, technology is – at a similar rate – becoming able to structure, analyse and act on those data.

As such, machine-learning techniques can monitor and detect not only trends but also individual personal profiles, to increasing fidelity. The practice of data mining and subsequent targeting, sometimes referred to as computational or algorithmic propaganda, has previously relied on a fair degree of a priori structured information – personal data often consciously inputted. But it is increasingly complementing that information with information structured by AI from an ever-expanding resource pool supplied by social media as well as databases and the internet of things.

Although we may live in a world dominated by surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), the claim that the internet knows more about you than you do may have been over-exaggerated – but for how long? Equally, the wild claims of the success of psychological profiling, as in the Cambridge Analytica case, may soon seem like naive child’s play in fully developed AI profiling.

The future can be seen in China, where a form of persuasive computing technology that fuses AI, big data, the internet of things and behavioural nudge techniques is being developed as a form of social control. The China Brain Project applies machine learning to Baidu, the major Chinese search engine, to collect information theoretically about user behaviour that can be ultimately translated into a citizen score. Citizens are graded according to their online and offline behaviour, influencing financial, job and visa status. The claims of social control are somewhat overblown, but the intent and capability of such a system are real (Horsley, 2018).

However, the days of surveillance, monitoring, data mining, profiling and the like are possibly numbered because of technological advances like blockchain (Cointelegraph, n.d.). The decentralised digital ledger system, a mainstay of cryptocurrencies, defies decryption by third parties and has further applications in verifying online identities and information as well as safeguarding personal data. Although there are mechanisms by which these can be done already, such as increasingly popular secure messaging apps, widespread adoption of blockchain technology may have profound implications on our use of social media. Blockchain will be an integral element of the roll-out of the internet of things, and given recent data-privacy concerns, blockchain is likely to become a mainstream technology. As such, it has significant potential to rebuild trust on the internet.

At the risk of invoking science fiction, the human element of the information ecology is also succumbing to the effect of machine learning. Social bots already provide or retransmit huge amounts of fairly basic content on social media and are relatively unengaging. But the AI technology known as machine-driven communication tools (MADCOMs) behind much more dialogical engagement is now producing chatbots of remarkable capability, presenting a future of "machines talking to humans talking to machines talking to machines" (Chessen, 2017).

The Turing test – whether a machine can exhibit intelligent behaviour indistinguishable from a human's – may arguably have been passed by Eugene Goostman, an AI machine, in 2014 (Warwick and Shah, 2016). Since then, while virtual assistants Alexa and Siri can hardly be Turing champions, chatbots have evolved significantly in their sophistication, although Microsoft's chatbot breakthrough, Tay, had to be rapidly replaced by her more politically correct sister, Zo. We are increasingly engaging with chatbots, often unknowingly and innocently, but it is only a matter of time before savvy propagandists may be able to train AI to develop chatbots to seek out and engage susceptible users in chat forums. As Lisa-Maria Neudert at Oxford University's Computational Propaganda Project warns,

> *They'll eloquently navigate conversations and analyze a user's data to deliver customized propaganda. Bots will point people toward extremist viewpoints and counter arguments in a conversational manner.* (2018)

Relatively few social-media accounts are responsible for a disproportionately large amount of misinformation. Research shows that these accounts are likely to be bots. Mostly disguising their location, they are significantly active in the amplification of such information just before it goes viral, targeting influential users through replies and mentions. Users then forward such content so that the virality profiles of misinformation are indistinguishable from those of factually based content (Shao et al., 2018).

Social-media platforms are slowly beginning to address these problems and deploy countermeasures, such as flagging, verifying articles and deleting suspect accounts (Weedon et al., 2017). But the effectiveness of such measures is hard to evaluate and has in many cases discriminated against genuine content or accounts (Tynan, 2018). There has also been a growing problem of bots pushing fake news videos, which do not come under as much scrutiny as articles, due to time constraints.

In terms of content production, or rather misrepresentation, machine learning is allowing reality to be re-created almost flawlessly. Deepfakes are possible only through machine-learning technology, with neural networked machine learning and generative adversarial networks. Audio formats are equally susceptible: concatenative speech synthesis, such as that used by Lyrebird, and voice-conversion technologies such as Alphabet’s DeepMind, allow machines to replicate anyone’s voice from samples (Singer and Brooking, 2018). If seeing and hearing is believing, reality is potentially under threat from such technology.

AI is also revolutionising immersive technology, notably virtual reality, not least in gaming. Although second-generation immersive technology has, like the first generation, failed to meet its hype, significant developments in machine learning have the potential to boost its popularity in the short to medium term.

While AI takes much of the spotlight, quantum computing is often held up as a revolutionary technology which could transform the information space, if only because theoretically qubit-based algorithms could be several magnitudes faster than existing binary-based ones. However, the field of quantum computing may yet be decades from producing truly transformative changes, despite the hype.

No discussion of technology and the information space would be complete without mentioning the dark web. Technically, the surface web consists of any data that a search engine can find, while the deep web, largely just as mundane as the surface web, is any that a search engine cannot, which accounts for the vast majority of the internet. The dark web is then defined as a small portion of the deep web that has been intentionally hidden and is inaccessible through standard web browsers. The dark web is where much illicit material may reside, for which it has been popularly known.

Mainstream outlets, such as Propublica and even Facebook, are increasingly hosting hidden service sites on the dark web (Waddell, 2016). But it is also here that political or other discussion considered too extreme for mainstream traction abounds, often seeping and migrating into social media. Frustration and resentment at being shunned by mainstream media drive many into this space, to extol and debate radical political ideologies, notably of the alt-right hue, away from prying eyes.

Mixing with ‘Gamergaters’, the transition to the dark web is seen as taking the red pill, a metaphor from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, to shake off the conventional epistemic shackles and see the vast cultural structures and norms which have imprisoned them in a false reality. Through accessing the dark web, users can ignite and nurture highly extreme views. For example, although sites like 8chan can be seen as very politically incorrect and remain on the surface web, the neo-Nazi site *Daily Stormer* is now hosted as a hidden service on the dark web after failing to find any internet service provider (ISP) willing to host it.

Data mining and profiling, at the core of computational propaganda, are widespread practices among market researchers, advertisers and political communicators. Data brokers routinely collect data about individuals for organisations to then develop detailed psychological or psychometric profiles of their target audience. Predictive algorithms can then infer additional information about the users. The more data points available, the more accurate these predictions, and social media have proved to be a treasure trove of such real-time data, recording every action the user makes: every click of a Like or Favourite button, every comment read and written, the time spent on a post, and so on. From this, highly targeted messaging can be applied to individual users, via bots, direct messaging, personalised banner advertising and hashtag hijacking. Cambridge Analytica was a prime example of a company selling such techniques, although with the added advantage of accessing data from a Facebook-related psychographic app.

The big picture

Various psychological effects – cognitive traits, confirmation bias, degrading comprehension, stress, selective sourcing, emotion, dissonance – in a turbulent, fantastically fast and anarchic digital space can have a significant and dangerous impact on our human faculties. In effect this creates an epistemic crisis in which the very nature of knowledge is called into question.

Echoing Davies, Dahlgren claims that basic social realities are now often contested: “What we see today from the right-wing surpasses traditional anti-intellectualism; it consists of aggressive attacks on basic Enlightenment premises” (2018, p. 25). As genuine experts, academics and scientists present rational thinking, counter-arguments based on little evidence are increasingly presented as subjective opinion, as with climate-change denial and the anti-vaccination movement. This state of affairs strikes at the heart of the ability to trust and severely degrades the capacity for critical thinking.

The hyperproliferation of information in the digital age era, along with exponentially increasing global data generation and storage, has manifested itself in a form of information overload which professor of media and communication Mark Andrejevic has called "Infoglut" (Andrejevic, 2013). Žižek calls this condition of information overload the decline of symbolic efficiency, in which the proliferation and accumulation of competing narratives and truth claims holds all truth up to question (Žižek, 1999, p. 195). Where power once relied on the establishment of a dominant narrative and the suppression of alternatives, the perpetual flow of competing claims to truth now seriously threatens old strategies of information control. As the Russians have realised, where the task of power-brokers was once to prevent new information from circulating that could damage their interests, this task is now to proliferate so much information that any claim to truth can be effectively questioned by mobilising enough data.

Žižek also calls up the simulacrum, a concept of post-modernist sociologist Jean Baudrillard. Not only does the sheer vastness of available information affect our ability to anchor meaning, or knowledge, through analysis of that information, but the ability for and likelihood of its falsification also leads us into a world of hyper-reality, in which we are increasingly unable to consciously distinguish reality from a simulation of reality (Baudrillard, 1994). Baudrillard's ideas of 30 years ago may, in today's information environment, have become reality.

Metaphysical concepts aside, information, as humans understand it, is increasingly a result of the fusion of psychology and algorithmic technology, or artificial intelligence. Technology is bringing into our lives opinions, visions and purported facts that are increasingly tailored to our own wants, desires and needs, and we are aiding and abetting this through our own psychological structures. The original

Habermasian notion of a public sphere is increasingly strained through the influence of AI-based media feeds. As media and communications professor Natalie Fenton claims,

> *[The] elision of pluralism with communicative competency and communicative freedom, which, it is claimed, will deliver, somewhat seamlessly, political gain, too often fails to take account of the many factors that still and increasingly delimit, constrain and undermine public spheres in an online age.* (Fenton, 2018, p. 56)

Further, digital technologies are shifting the foundations of what we understand by knowledge. Translating pretty much everything into data, applying algorithmic analysis to it and spouting it back into our world of cognition means that the nature of knowledge is effectively subject to what media theorist Lev Manovich calls software epistemology:

> *Digital code, data visualization, GIS, information retrieval, machine learning techniques, constantly increasing speed of processors and decreasing costs of storage, big data analytics technologies, social media, and other parts of the modern techno-social universe introduce new ways of acquiring knowledge, and in the process redefine what knowledge is.* (2013, p. 338)

When our concept of knowledge is changing as such, what hope is there for our ability to trust anyone or anything? And what hope is there for the future? In answer to this, a survey of over 1,000 experts conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2017, examining the potential future of the information environment, provides a perfect summary of where we are. Whether the information environment will improve or not depends on two factors: humans and technology – as it always has.

On the one hand, pessimists preach that the contemporary ecosystem, awash with fake news, misinformation and worse, preys on primal human nature, which is ill equipped to deal with the exponential pace of technological change. Humans are seen as selfish, tribal, pleasure seekers, and the powerful human organisations most capable of improving the information environment seek profit over the public good. The tumultuous nature of today's information environment is ripe for that profit; common knowledge will become harder to find as traditional gatekeepers decline, and healthy debate and trust will suffer. In a capitalist system, technology will be forged by and available to the wealthy, worsening the digital divide. Weaponised narratives will be turbocharged through advancing social media and AI; and the most effective technological solutions will conflict with privacy and free speech.

On the other hand, optimists opine that it is in human nature to collaborate and come up with solutions, which technology can provide, and we can educate ourselves to better navigate today's and tomorrow's information environment. Regulatory systems can mitigate the excesses of technological platforms, while crowdsourcing, including blockchain distributed ledgers, can be brought to bear in verifying facts and closing down propagandists. Technological solutions through adjustments to algorithmic filters, browsers and apps can help filter, label or ban misinformation and fake news. This band of optimists also tends to note that technology is not a panacea and must be supplemented by better-funded mainstream media and media-literacy education programmes.

However, there is no consensus, with opinions finely balanced, almost polarised, between the two visions of the future (Anderson and Rainie, 2017). That is apposite as we turn to political communication.

Part four: Contemporary political communication

Over the last decade, traditional politics has undergone a tumultuous period of change. This can be seen in two waves. First, as digital politics matured, notably in the form of activism, the revolutions of the Arab Spring that began in 2010 saw mainstream politics move online, with social movements taking advantage of the tools made available to them by the digital age. This swiftly became the norm of such movements in the West, as typified by Occupy, Podemos and the Zapatistas.

Second, within this wave and its undercurrents, vicious political – or rather, cultural – battles ramped up. The radicalism of social movements was mirrored in radicalism of the fringe movements, using similar mechanisms. And over the years, those fringe radicals, residing in message boards such as 4chan, were co-opted by wider mainstream movements: online politics moved back into the mainstream, but with a darker hue.

Contemporary politics in the digital age is therefore no longer in the purview only of those with traditional power but is stretched across a wide spectrum. Political power can be generated from small bases, rapidly, directly and potently interfering with traditional power structures. And communication is at the heart of this disruption: where political information faces off with quickly morphing memes; where extreme voices can directly challenge accepted wisdom; where crowdsourced action can strike viciously at societal and corporate structures; and where rational and civil political discourse of the Habermasian ideal is continuously strafed by the riotous, emotional screams of the radical fringes.

That online politics has moved back into the mainstream is proved by the digital campaigns endorsed by the mainstream – campaigns that have already made Obama’s much-heralded digital efforts of 2008 seem quaint. President Rodrigo Duterte’s win in the Philippines, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s ascendancy in India, Macron’s taking of the French presidency, the Five Star Movement’s success in Italy, Trump and Brexit: these are demonstrations not only of current public sentiment but also, and more notably, of a rapid merging of online politics into the mainstream.

The new digital political players challenge the liberal, rational pursuit of reasoned debate and consensus by instead encouraging the untouchable, using the power of ridicule, conversing in doublespeak, preying on base human instinct and playing fast and loose with the truth. This may be uncomfortable for many, but these aspects are indicative of the political in the digital age.

A perfect vignette of this digital-political nexus can be seen in the UK Brexit Party's social-media activity and success in the 2019 European Parliament elections. The party generated by far the most shares and comments on social media of all the political players, while gaining more new Facebook and Twitter followers than the others. A more detailed examination of the party's performance shows that although it produced only some 13% of posts, they accounted for 51% of all shares, showing a significant and highly active cohort of supporters on social media who were also involved in a major ground campaign through events. The ground campaign was promoted through social media over an extended period, yet in the week leading up to the vote, the Brexit Party's Facebook ad spend, at less than £20,000, was lower than that of all of the other major parties, especially the spendthrift Change UK, which spent five times as much (Ramley et al., 2019).

The Brexit Party's campaign was highly negative. In the six weeks leading up to the vote, some 48% of 118 of their Facebook ads were targeted at the Labour and Conservative parties. Notably, only a further 1% of messages were aimed at the EU. Fewer than 3% of ads could be seen as positive, for example by presenting the benefits of Brexit; the rest either lamented Britain's reputation, establishment failure and democratic deficit or were general promotion, including events. Messages were simple, binary and highly emotional, deliberately avoided specific policies or positions and were aimed at older voters, predominantly in England (Ramley et al., 2019). Nathan Gill, a Brexit Party member of the European Parliament, reported the party's lack of a manifesto to be a calculated move, in line with the simplistic approach seen across its messaging (BBC Newsnight, 2019).

However, the link between digital prowess and electoral success is not as clear cut as it initially seems. In terms of posts and shares, UKIP showed significant digital activity which did not translate into political gains, whereas the Liberal Democrats performed relatively poorly in the digital domain but still achieved significant results politically (Ramley et al., 2019). Thus, those seeking clarity in this area by looking purely at the digital space may be somewhat disappointed.

While political science grapples with this new landscape, it has yet to fully appreciate the digital influence of digital activism – and not least that of the fringe – on its field. A survey of major political science journals from 2010 to 2015 failed to identify one article addressing the impact of the darker recesses of the likes of 4chan or Anonymous on politics and political communication. Watts further notes that other social sciences, such as media studies, sociology and anthropology, are much more engaged in such an examination (2018, p. 74).

Research into online political discourse faces several methodological issues surrounding definition, sampling, measurement and causation. Such research often relies on survey-based and therefore self-reporting instruments, introducing spurious data. Sampling faces challenges in that respondents are often homophilous and measuring political views is largely subjective. Causation is muddied through the wide range of factors which can contribute to political stances.

Major factors in forming political views may be seen as psychological, or maybe more accurately psycho-social. Personal or individual psychological factors include, among others, confirmation bias (Koslowski and Maqueda, 1993) and the need for cognition (NFC) (Furnham and Thorne, 2013). Whereas confirmation bias explains the tendency to source, interpret and favour information which aligns with pre-existing beliefs, NFC reflects the extent to which individuals are inclined towards exerting effort in cognitive activities.

NFC is closely related to the five-factor model of psychology, sometimes referred to as the big five, which claims there are five key factors of personal psychological profile: extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, conscientiousness and neuroticism

(Macrae & John, 1992; Mondak, 2010). Notably, the personality test app, which is at the centre of the Facebook/Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which personal data were allegedly used for political purposes, was based on the five-factor model. Of these, extroversion and agreeableness are significant factors in political participation. Further, social value orientation and locus of control are factors associated with levels of political activism (Margetts et al., 2017).

Other factors in forming political views are concerned with socio-cultural conditions. These may include social groupings, family, social status, economics, identity, education, language and access to resources which may influence the development of beliefs, values and attitudes, and thereby political viewpoints (Jost et al., 2008; Kandler et al., 2012). Further, wider cultural psychology may also be relevant, in which such factors as tolerance of uncertainty, individuality and power relationships influence political persuasions (Haidt, 2013; Shoham et al., 2011). Similarly, social psychology may also have an effect, through the influence of peers and power-brokers, notably through social media (Giddens, 1991; Margetts, 2017).

Among these factors, or rather embedded in them, it can be argued that the informed citizenry in the digital age has more agency than previously, not only in forming political views, but also in influencing others. Through online forums, Twitter groups, blogging, community platforms, petitions, activism and social networks, the public can increasingly bypass – to a degree – the traditional gatekeepers of political information.

However, it can also be argued that this is an elitist phenomenon, with many people unengaged through digital means, and stratification is as prevalent today as ever, despite the abundance of technology among the public. Public connection with politics is a complex phenomenon that depends on many factors, and our networked world is no precursor of increased political involvement or even agency across the board (Couldry et al., 2010). The concept of the idealised public sphere of rational discourse appears to be inappropriate for today's political and digital environment (Castells, 2015; Fenton, 2018), not least due to turbocharged fake news.

Fake news

The term fake news is not new. Hitler used the word *Lügenpresse* (lying press) in the 1930s, and the origins of that term may go back to the 1848–49 German revolutions (Noack, 2016). The subject is already well known, vast and of mainstream concern (DCMS Committee, 2018). Here we restrict ourselves to delimiting the most important aspects and providing a conceptual guide to the phenomenon that links it to the issues covered above. We will thus look at three aspects:

1. **The accusation that real news is fake:** a claim often thrown about (particularly by Trump, who claims to have invented it) aimed at media presenting a view of events that differs from one's own.
2. **Real fake news:** news fabricated with deliberate intent, where untrue statements are falsely presented as real news and disseminated with the explicit aim of spreading confusion and false belief.
3. **Producers of fake news**, particularly populists and some states.

With regard to real news touted as fake, when Trump calls CNN or *Washington Post* reports fake news, he is often not accusing them of being factually incorrect. What he and others stress is that certain issues and stories are designated as news by certain media outlets. This is a much more powerful argument because it underlines the fact that editors have to decide what to present as news. While mostly they cite public interest, the public does not decide on what is covered. And editors' choices will inevitably be based on their personal and professional interests and biases. In effect, Trump is saying, "Well this might be of interest to you, but to me and my supporters it is not news" (Schulz et al., 2018).

Increasingly, those on the left and right disagree fundamentally on what the important issues in politics are. Watching CNN and then FOX News or reading different British dailies can lead to the impression that they are covering different worlds. And in a sense, they are. What people view as important, and therefore worthy of coverage as news, can often be very different.

The above is an issue with mainstream media. On the web, paradoxically, the phenomenon is less clear, because no one expects the information there to have been filtered for newsworthiness. The internet is a gigantic mass of tiny special-interest communities, all sharing and, in some cases, making information with and for the like-minded. The ease with which fake news and disinformation can be created and disseminated via the web is astounding. Western democracies have been slow to wake up to this fact, even as numbers of people using platforms like Facebook and getting more of their news from it have risen exponentially. The scale of fake-news production and the breadth of the phenomenon in the commercial and political spheres are already huge. The issue of populists and fake news is somewhat less studied, though.

Populists do not need to create fake news. A selective reading of the facts or the real news à la Tommy Robinson is sufficient. The sharing of fake news created by others, including governments and political parties and movements, is also enough to ensure that groups of the like-minded on the internet start to receive a distorted worldview. But some fake news is also produced by populists (Nardelli and Silverman, 2016). For example, in 2018 a coordinated online campaign by far-right, anti-Islam activists pressured governments to drop support for the UN Global Compact for Migration, which had been years in the making (Cerulus and Schaart, 2019). That campaign led directly to the fall of the Belgian government and to the US, Hungary, Israel, the Czech Republic and Poland withdrawing from the pact.

When we get to the deliberate creation and sharing of active falsehoods, we have moved from the realm of honest politics, where at least the intent is to spread real information in an attempt to persuade others, to the realm of propaganda, where the intent is to spread fake information to create a particular, useful belief. This brings the level of fake news to that of the state.

Deliberate misinformation by hostile states, particularly Russia, has become increasingly evident over recent years. Several investigations have strongly indicated that the Russian state has dedicated considerable resources to affecting election outcomes in developed countries, as in the US Russia investigation (Yourish and Griggs, 2018) and the UK government's claims about Russian interference in the Brexit referendum (Lee, 2017). But the phenomenon has spread far beyond Western liberal democracies and those seeking to spread confusion and alter elections. Like terrorism, the term fake news has been co-opted by authoritarian leaders to justify crackdowns on dissent. As a Freedom House report on digital authoritarianism states,

> *Some governments are using it as a pretext to consolidate their control over information. In the past year, at least 17 countries approved or proposed laws that would restrict online media in the name of fighting "fake news" and online manipulation.* (Shahbaz, 2018, p. 11)

In 2017, Freedom House found that at least 30 governments around the world were employing troll farms to spread propaganda and attack critics (Titcomb, 2017). The spread of online misinformation went far beyond Russia and China to almost half of the 65 countries studied. The report found governments including those of Mexico, Saudi Arabia and Turkey were using paid pro-government commentators to shape opinions online, often to give the impression of grassroots support for government policies. They included paid commentators, trolls, bots and fake news, which are used to harass journalists, flood social media with fabricated opinions and erode trust in other media. The report's authors warned that the techniques had become far more advanced and widespread in recent years and said fake news had been employed in an attempt to influence elections in 18 countries, including the UK (Freedom House, 2017).

Thus, the outlook for those seeking unbiased information in an effort to come to an opinion based on fact is not rosy.

On 12 March 2019, the world wide web's 30th birthday, its inventor Sir Tim Berners-Lee published an open letter reflecting on how the web had changed our world and what we must do to build a better web that serves all of humanity. As he put it, there are "three sources of dysfunction affecting today's web:

1. **Deliberate, malicious intent**, such as state-sponsored hacking and attacks, criminal behaviour, and online harassment.
2. **System design that creates perverse incentives** where user value is sacrificed, such as ad-based revenue models that commercially reward clickbait and the viral spread of misinformation.
3. **Unintended negative consequences** of benevolent design, such as the outraged and polarised tone and quality of online discourse" (2019).

Putting these genies back in the bottle will be difficult, but they are having a significant impact on our ability to effectively analyse and engage in political discourse and have any faith in that discourse.

Political knowledge, participation and trust

Academic research largely confirms that socialisation throughout the formative years, until the end of formal schooling, establishes fairly hardened static political knowledge (Barabas et al., 2014) of institutions, policies and law. However, news consumption increases surveillance knowledge of more time-sensitive changes, developments and policies – the here and now – to enable decision-making.

But despite early optimism linking digital usage to political knowledge, research is inconclusive on the degree to which the knowledge gained from social-media use has a political effect on the wider general public. A study of Twitter use during the UK's 2015 general election indicated that on balance, social-media users became more informed about politics during the campaigns but cautioned that highly partisan messages about salient issues, such as immigration, causes a polarisation effect while not significantly altering aggregate levels of knowledge (Munger et al., 2017).

Extensive Swedish research has shown that use of digital media has only limited effects on political knowledge, although the effect of political activity, or interest, is more pronounced through higher levels of digital media (Dimitrova et al., 2014). These findings concur with US-based studies (Groshek and Dimitrova, 2013; Kaufhold et al., 2010). Furthermore, some have claimed that equally, misinformation has a limited effect on widespread public political knowledge (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). We may be more politically interested and engaged through digital media but not necessarily significantly more knowledgeable.

Public trust in the media has declined mainly because of perceived bias, spin, partisan agendas and owners pushing political or business interests above those of the news consumers. However, television broadcasters are seen as less vulnerable to these charges, although there are concerns over the broadcast tendency for speed over accuracy (Newman and Fletcher, 2017). Conversely, as of 2018, trust in news on social media, despite its influence, is falling for the first time across most developed nations, with only a few exceptions, although the appetite for messaging apps continues to grow (Newman et al., 2018).

Trust in the media – traditional and online news sites – is also highly dependent on inherent political stances and the nature of the national news environment. In Western Europe, attitudes to the news media are now more divided along populist vs. centrist lines than between left and right ideologies. There are trends indicating lower levels of trust in the media farther south, but the UK is an outlier, displaying levels of trust more akin to Southern Europe than its more trusting Northern neighbours. And although a significant proportion of those in the UK tend to cite a single outlet – the BBC – as their primary news source, only 42% of those with populist views claim the BBC as their main news source, whereas some 60% of those not holding populist views do so (Matsa, 2018). And even on social media, the traditional news media outlets maintain a significant agenda-setting power.

These news media, now fully embedded in the social and digital media realms, are for the vast majority as undoubtedly partisan as ever. But the degree to which this is the case has been elevated under especially turbulent political conditions, to a level touted as hyperpartisan. Crucially, these are not just the major players, but what can be called alternative media. In the UK, for example, hyperpartisan low-cost start-ups, such as The Canary and Evolve Politics, often Facebook based, now have online reach among younger voters that, during political campaigns, can exceed that of the established mainstream media (Dunleavy et al., 2018). However, the UK's mainstream media still maintains a tight influence in social-media circles (Ma, 2017).

> *The implications of a divisive, antagonistic and hyper-partisan campaign – by the campaigners themselves as much as by many national media outlets – is likely to shape British politics for the foreseeable future.* (Moore and Ramsay, 2017, p. 3)

With this hyperpartisanship come loose interpretations of the truth, especially among the new players. In the 2016 US presidential election, BuzzFeed studied six hyperpartisan Facebook pages, three on the left (Occupy Democrats, The Other 98%, Addicting Info) and three on the right (Eagle Rising, Right Wing News, Freedom Daily). The study revealed that the right-wing sites were almost 40% more likely than the left-wing ones to post content that was either a mixture of true and false or mostly false (Persily, 2017).

Further, a comprehensive research study by the Berkman Klein Center at Harvard University confirmed the influence of right-wing media, notably led by a major primary source, Breitbart. While the overall news media landscape was focused on the centre-left, it was relatively fragmented among several outlets, whereas the other major polarity was a much more concentrated far right, notably around Fox News and Breitbart. Content sourced from the latter dominated most social media, especially concerning the most widely covered topic across the spectrum, immigration.

> *Highly partisan media—the principal incubator and disseminator of disinformation—and Facebook-empowered hyper-partisan political clickbait sites played a much greater role on the right than on the left.* (Faris et al., 2017, p. 19)

Notably, this study claims that this far-right phenomenon is much more likely to have had the dominant effect on Trump's unexpected election victory than did external sources such as potential Russian interference (Benkler et al., 2017).

However, communication technology professor Daniela Dimitrova warns that the process of political communication, knowledge, participation and the use of digital media is a complex area, which will require highly comprehensive research and analysis to fully understand:

> *Aside from the need to investigate whether the differential effects of digital media hold true in other countries and settings, one of the main challenges in future research on the effects of digital media use would be to disentangle whether the functions and properties of different digital media—that is, technological factors—or the motivations people have for using different media—that is, sociopsychological factors—matter most in the political communication process.* (2014, p. 111)

An obvious government reaction to the nature of these news media has, in the UK and elsewhere, been a process of mediatisation started under the Blair government in the late 1990s, initially reacting to 24-hour cable news, now responding without necessarily going through the prism of the media via digital and social media. This has had a profound effect on working practices, routines and management culture. Studies among civil servants in the UK, Norway and Finland have pointed out not only the challenges of operating in the contemporary media environment but also, and possibly more urgently, the "'discomfort' at the discrepancy between their ethical norms as public servants and the everyday experience of mediatized policy deliberations" (Garland et al., 2018, p. 508).

This focus on the media, however, misses the subtle shifts in political participation being brought about by social media. Political micro-contributions on a massive scale, from comments to petitions to financial support, influenced by the visibility of individual acts and social information about the participation of others, are creating new mechanisms of politics. These politics exist in a chaotic system, as opposed to a deterministic or even stochastic or quantum system as predictable as the weather. Before the internet, such chaos was dampened by limited micro-perturbations in the system. The result is less based on the public-sphere model or echo-chamber effects, and more defined, by political scientist Helen Margetts and others, as chaotic pluralism, based less on political parties and interest groups and more on grassroots, reactive, disorganised mobilisations (2017). The culture of political participation is changing, and digital technology is central to that change.

Digital culture

An understanding of widespread public interaction with media is vital to understand contemporary political communication. But the culture on which these media are increasingly based is equally crucial. This requires an examination of its dynamics and its core cultural elements, of which the meme is king.

Memes are a central engine to modern political discourse online, inherent in digital culture. Their role is to form and signify communal belonging. Highly decentralised and seemingly chaotic, internet memes coalesce around a socially cohesive grassroots network and speak to a specific, resonant group, capturing its commonly familiar worldview and attitude. Put simply, they are highly transferable and adaptable, sticky units of culture.

So much more than shares and likes, memes thrive in their interactivity with the group users, who create, adapt and promote them, online and offline. Memes thus evolve as an embedded part of a culture, contributing to the set of ideas around which communities gather and act (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). Despite their apparent simplicity or even idiocy, they are coated with layers of rich cultural material, triggering subtle but deep affective responses many times over. In 2014, professor of digital culture Limor Shifman explained that "internet memes therefore expand the range of participatory options in democracies by providing new, playful and accessible ways to express political opinion and engage in debate" (2014, p. 144).

However, while generally of a humorous, albeit occasionally dark, nature, their import in political discourse is their othering capability: their survival is utterly reliant on it, maintaining the in-group's cohesion. In deep cultural meme territory, you either get it or you're a 'normie'. There is no spectrum.

This inherent characteristic has catapulted memes from subculture lairs to mainstream political communication. Memes may be understood as a modern phenomenon, but their essence can be traced back to the time-worn pastimes of folkloric expression, merely enhanced by digital affordances (Phillips and Milner, 2018). And they are now, in the sustaining amniotic fluid of social media, naturally occurring in times of political strife or societal divisions, providing a rallying point or locator beacon for the like-minded. Ideas of memetic warfare encourage ideas of artificially injecting memes into this cultural mêlée, mostly to little effect. However, the evolution of memes can be altered, although this normally works only when the adaptation is organically created from a rival subculture familiar with the prevailing cultural tropes. They can be regenerated, by culturally sensitive co-option and spin-off of old memes. But normies will never truly understand the power of specific memes, because if they did, they would not be memes.

As political scientist Jonathan Dean points out (2018a), in terms of understanding the phenomenon, the academic study of memes faces three challenges. First, political and communication research often works with aggregate analyses of public opinion and misses the more subtle emotional aspects and impacts of visual media. Second, social media tend to be examined in terms of their direct impact on electoral outcomes as opposed to their deeper psycho-social and cultural influence. And third, political science tends to take a very rationalist approach, which can ignore or downplay the affective nature of human behaviour. In short, we tend to avoid the anthropological thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) which are at the core of human interaction with their perceived world. Further, directly applicable to the UK,

> *The dominance of the so-called "Westminster Model" of British politics scholarship means that to be a "proper" political scientist is to have an appropriate degree of reverence and respect for the central institutions of British government. Memeified politics – with its accompanying ethos of irreverence – is thus seen as inappropriate, both as an object of academic study and as a way of actually doing politics.* (Dean, 2018b)

This state of affairs, given the nature of today's information environment, must surely be altered if we are to genuinely attempt to comprehend modern political communication.

The power of culture and internet memes as political forces can be seen from the gestation and subsequent development of organised alt-right thinking from within the Gamergate storm. In the US in 2013–14, members of the online gaming community conducted a vicious internet hate campaign against liberal progressives, mostly women. Spawning many memes on both sides, the levels of threat, intimidation and sheer vitriol among internet-savvy users presented to a wider world through mainstream media attention what a full-blown online culture war could look like. Reflection and research have indicated that the drivers of many, if not most, Gamergaters, who turned out to have little to do with the gaming community, were disenfranchisement, victimhood and demand for systemic change. The charge is that these fifth columnists, although they had not sparked the war, were the early vanguard of the alt-right (Nagle, 2017).

By using 4chan, and then the wilder, extreme corners of 8chan, to plan attacks such as doxing (sourcing and releasing of personal data), rouse the support base and play with memes, Gamergate was a very disorganised and disjointed campaign. However, the anger and bile, coagulated around a single if complex issue, did have the consequence of coalescing a politically homogeneous and vitally active group across the US, ready to be co-opted by a more serious, organised force.

Many would claim that Breitbart was that force, using it to full effect in the 2016 election (Lees, 2016). This was online culture war intertwined with slick media operations, both traditional and digital, and the mainstream media, elites and most of the public did not see it coming. Nor did the left. No-platforming uncomfortable voices, both physically and cerebrally, and unresponsive to genuine rage, paraphrasing sociologist Todd Gitlin, the politically correct left marched with the mainstream while the memefied right took the White House. And with our eyes on conventional social-media narratives and the mainstream media, we did not see it coming.

The UK may be a little more restrained in its meme culture, yet subtly powerful memes are in evidence, and more apparent in mainstream social media than in darker corners of the web. Warning of conspiracy, the hashtag #usepens fired up Leaver concerns of potential vote rigging in the EU referendum (Mitchell, n.d.). "Take Back Control", a fantastically powerful message, alongside the Leave campaign's infamous red bus, converted well into meme form, both in support of and in opposition to the core message. "Brexit Still Life" was also a popular anti-Leave meme. Since the referendum, Remain-based memes appear to have the upper hand. However, the Brexit memes, like all memes, reflected a key attribute of memes as a unit of culture: they cannot be debunked by facts. The impact of many a perfectly cogent, fact-based, rigorously researched, rational argument has been destroyed in seconds by a brilliantly creative and harshly caustic meme.

In a slight reversal of fortunes compared with the US, the British left appears to be much more tuned into meme culture than the far right, which tends to latch onto the coat-tails of the US alt-right. A more fractured minority, the far right's efforts can be demonstrated by the hijacking of content for the launch of TurningPointUK, a chapter of a US right-wing youth group that suffered significant meme lampooning (New Statesman America, 2019).

This lack of effort and cultural hunger has especially been the case since the EU referendum, with far-right meme generation slowing dramatically. However, young grassroots movements, such as Labour's Momentum, have managed to propagate messages via memes with a relatively high degree of success, possibly influencing the better-than-predicted success of Labour in the 2017 UK general election (White, 2017). Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn, an anti-establishment character, not only fits the meme culture well but, like Trump, is also to a degree embracing memes that support his cause (Sullivan, 2017).

Highly controversial, but unheeded by the vast majority of internet users, has been article 13 of the EU Copyright Directive, which has earned itself the moniker of meme killer. It would require internet service providers to automatically filter copyrighted content unless the content has been specifically licensed. Legal battles continue at various levels of the EU, but any real chance of the demise of memes is far-fetched, as even EU actors are beginning to realise. Most recent changes to draft legislation appear to be watering down the approach to memes, suggesting that they may be specifically excluded from the directive. Either way, challenges would remain as to how to practically filter memes and enforce the legislation, regardless of the exact definition of what qualifies as a meme (Kleinman, 2019).

The lesson learned is that social-media campaigns cannot be effective without a sense of meme culture embedded. But conventional social media have their own dynamics and interconnectivity with mainstream media, and fringe digital clusters are of particular interest.

Dynamics in the round

How does content migrate from community to community on social media? There is a clear variation in the roles that different platforms play in the connectivity between existing communities and the generation of new ones. Although the major social-media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, may be highly effective in mobilising existing communities, image boards and forums, such as Reddit and 4chan, are more prolific in generating new, often potent communities. The former rely on users' existing networks, whereas the latter tend to develop around specific issues and thus garner and coalesce previously disparate users (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017; Ross and Rivers, 2017). By focusing on the noise of users on the big players, we miss the highly significant impact of the smaller, niche social-media platforms, on the overall dynamics.

Contagion, virus, epidemic: the field of communication often uses health metaphors. In explaining the wider dynamics of social media, the analogy is also apt. Ideas, concepts, ideologies – in the form of memes, text, imagery, graphics, video or audio – often spread from deep within the social-media ecosystem. If we consider the patient-zero outbreak as the point of germination, this often happens on image boards or dedicated specialist sites, such as 4chan, 8chan, justpaste.it or Reddit, or even in the recesses of the dark web, accessed by Tor, open-source software for enabling anonymous communication.

Those that gain traction may spread to the first point of contact, spreading through those boards via other boards, such as Gab, closed-community voice over internet protocol (VOIP) systems, such as Discord, and mobile instant messaging services (MIMS), such as WhatsApp, Viber or Telegram. Wider community infection develops through closed groups on the wider, more popular platforms, such as YouTube and Facebook. An epidemic breaks into a local state of emergency when the virus takes hold on such platforms as Twitter, wider Facebook and Instagram. A pandemic or national crisis occurs when this transfers into the mainstream media (Gonimah, 2018).

This flow from hidden depths of the social-media ecosystem to its surface is not dissimilar to how Islamic State conducted its online recruitment, by organising and planning via encrypted platforms like Telegram, or even within dark-web layers, before swarmcasting onto the major platforms via its many sympathisers and their many fake accounts. Interestingly, with the physical demise of the caliphate, Islamic State appears to possibly be venturing into a wider spectrum of MIMS and chat platforms, including Discord, designed for gamers and, as ever, a home for far-right extremists (Katz, 2019).

There may be a cacophony of voices and memes on social media, at times flooded by political campaigns. But research shows that despite opinion polls placing journalists as relatively untrustworthy, the mainstream media's input into social media still makes a significant impact. Political knowledge, necessary for trust, critical reasoning and decision-making, is still largely informed through social media by the mainstream media, although cognitive biases and misinformation do have a sway (Bossetta et al., 2018; Munger et al., 2017). However, there are complex effects, not least in selective exposure-induced echo chambers, depending on temporal effects, political standpoints and specific subjects.

Extensive US research of Twitter users during several political and nonpolitical events over 2012–14 indicated that liberals were generally more willing than conservatives to embrace a diversity of opinion and engage in cross-ideological retweeting. This research did, however, indicate that levels of polarisation varied across time periods and topics (Barberá et al., 2015). US research into Facebook, looking at ideological homophily in friend networks and the degree to which heterogeneous friends could potentially expose others to cross-ideological content, concluded that any algorithmic filter-bubble effects were far less than effects from selective exposure and sharing dynamics (Bakshy et al., 2015). Further, professors of communication Alice Marwick and Danah Boyd have shown that largely social-media users are only vaguely cognizant of exactly who their audiences are on these platforms, adjusting their tone and style, effectively self-censoring, in order not to offend anyone (Marwick and boyd, 2011).

So, differing political groupings coalesce and disperse in differing ways, depending on the context, subject and time. They also vary in their contribution to the digital space in other ways, not least in the content and the veracity of that content: the degree of fake news.

A study of US-based Twitter and Facebook users, conducted by the Oxford Internet Institute around the 2016 US presidential election and over three months in late 2017, found that Facebook pages linked to the extreme hard right were responsible for circulating more junk news – defined as extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial, masked commentary and fake news – than all the other social-media users put together. Very similar findings were found on Twitter. Though fake news content is unevenly spread across the ideological spectrum, it is weighted heavily towards far-right extremism, with Facebook being by far the preferred platform (Narayanan et al., 2018).

Similarly, just before the 2016 election, database research by economists Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow revealed 115 pro-Trump fake news stories, which had been shared 30 million times, and 41 pro-Clinton fake news stories, shared 7.6 million times (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Other similar studies confirm this right-wing influence on social media in the US, notably the centrality of Breitbart to that (Faris et al., 2017).

Echoing US research, social-media analysis around the UK's 2016 EU referendum shows that a remarkably small fraction of accounts had a disproportionate effect. A Twitter study claimed as few as 1% of accounts were generating almost one-third of the content, and were slanted towards wider Leave-focused messages – although remarkably, a tighter set of actual Remain campaign messages were tweeted more (Bastos and Mercea, 2019). In a study of Facebook during the EU referendum campaign, social-media behaviour differed depending on which side of the battle the users were on. Possibly counter-intuitively compared with the US, Remain supporters demonstrated echo-chamber behaviour and Leavers were rather more engaged in cross-ideological posting (Bossetta et al., 2018).

Much of the social-media research into political events recognises the influence of bots, the difficulty in detecting them and problems in accounting for the skew that their influence might bring into human-user-focused research. However, there are four indicators to detect bot activity. First, humans tend to be more active posters during regular workdays and during the daytime, but bots' activity is fairly even across time. Second, bots post the same content repeatedly, while humans do not. Third, bots tend to be significantly more active around specific, often political events, setting posting trends and patterns which can be detected, whereas humans, although potentially equally excitable during such events, are a lot more haphazard. Finally, bots may be repurposed from one campaign to the next, which can give them away.

The presence and activity of bots are far from inconsequential. Their most common strategy is as an entire bot network, or botnet, which can be run as a group of sock puppets, or fake accounts, aiming to amplify a specific message by aggregating and retweeting content tweeted by seed users, real humans of bots themselves, referred to as false amplification (Weedon et al., 2017). Sociologist Bence Kollyani and others indicated how easy it is to deploy bots, even for inexperienced and basic users, offered by online outfits even on a simple subscription basis; there are indications of a lucrative market for reusable political disinformation bots (2016). The latter were evident in the #MacronLeaks disinformation campaign during the 2017 French presidential election (Ferrara, 2017).

This effect has been seen several times in other political campaigns. In June 2016, the online petition for a second Brexit referendum was signed by 77,000 bots (BBC, 2016). The 2017 German federal election experienced heightened levels of automated tweeting, or bots (Neudert et al., 2017), as did the 2014 Japanese general election (Schäfer et al., 2017). Russian disinformation campaigns using bots in Ukraine have also been identified (Hegelich and Janetzko, 2016), some acting relatively autonomously via complex algorithms (Keller and Klinger, 2019).

Much has been researched and written about the effect of bots in the information space. However, while the mainstream media and grey literature often associate the phenomenon with fake-news generation, research does not necessarily agree with the extent of this. For example, when analysing bot activity during the Brexit campaign, sociologists Marco Bastos and Dan Mercea did not find "evidence of widespread fake news diffusion with political bots. Instead, we found a combination of what appears to be a Twitter botnet feeding and echoing user-curated and hyper-partisan information” (2019, p. 25). Humans were initially providing the content.

Dynamics at the edges

One might consider WhatsApp, Viber, Signal, etc. – known as mobile instant messaging services (MIMS) – to be largely platforms for casual chat. And so they are. However, although more popular social-media platforms are considered more fruitful in converting political talk into participation (Vaccari and Valeriani, 2018), the last few years have seen the unique characteristics of MIMS lend themselves to an increasing amount of political discourse. MIMS differ from the major social-media platforms in that they tend to be more closed and therefore used for conversations among smaller groups. Due to the encrypted nature of MIMS, these conversations tend to be freer, with less self-censorship.

As study of MIMS usage in the UK, Germany and Italy in 2015 revealed that of those respondents using MIMS, approximately one-quarter used the platforms to discuss politics. In the UK, admittedly with a lower take-up of MIMS than the other countries, over 30% claimed to do so, although the 2015 general election may have been a factor (Valeriani and Vaccari, 2018). Of note is the fact that the trends in this case are similar for established democracies and newer ones, but the propensity for political talk on social-media sites is stronger in established democracies than in newer ones (Vaccari and Valeriani, 2018).

The point demonstrated by the MIMS case is noteworthy. The more open or porous the network, the more self-censorship occurs and the less likely that extreme views will be put forward. The more closed the network, like MIMS and invitation-only web chatrooms, with a reduced chance that conversations or posts will leak into the public domain, the greater likelihood that more extreme political views may be expressed.

Most of today’s discussions of contemporary political communication focus on the visible, easily accessible and highly popular media: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. This focus, while valid, obstructs another decisive element of the information environment, an area central to digital culture: the fringe sites or semidark web, the image boards.

Reddit is the most well known of these sites, but crucially requires registration. Of the anonymous sites, 4chan is typical and the most popular, with 22 million visitors per month (Smith, 2017). The uniqueness of 4chan-style sites is its pretty much unmoderated content and anonymous nature. Anyone can post an image and comment anonymously on its several themed boards, but the concepts of liking, voting or retweeting are anathema: only comments are accepted after initial posts. If posts are not commented on, they quickly fade, often remaining on the site for a matter of minutes. Thus, despite the chaotic nature of the sites, they are in a way democratic. But these are not sites for the easily shocked.

Although a favourite troll haunt, 4chan itself very quickly became a meme factory, embracing the centrality of social media's attention-grabbing economy, initially of a humorous nature: for the 'lulz'. Research has shown that over the period 2003–11, all amplified memes on the internet started life on 4chan, from rickrolling to lolcats (Phillips, 2015). As innocuous as those memes sound, the 4chan community quickly developed its own political culture, based on those genuinely in and those not. Although anyone can access and use 4chan, it became understood as a sovereign space on the internet.

Further, direct political action could be coalesced and directed against anyone deemed a threat or legitimate target, through doxing, organising attack campaigns on public forums such as Twitter, to coordinating distributed denial of service (DDoS) raids. As Gamergate showed, the community developed a sense of "you are with us or against us", so much so that the hacker group Anonymous spawned on 4chan eventually largely abandoned it to pursue an alternative political stance, predominantly aimed at protecting free speech. 8chan now exists for those unhappy at the timidity of 4chan. As Gamergate also showed, there is an overwhelmingly masculine essence on the chans and similar sites, with the community attracting male supremacists, anti-feminists and incels, or involuntary celibates.

These communities are on the fringe and relatively small, but their nature, skills and culture give them significant digital power. On average, users on the fringe boards are much more actively engaged than those on the traditional public forums on social-media networks such as Twitter, Facebook or Reddit. Research by biophysicist Maryam Zamani and others found that fringe users, on what they call the semidark web, post over twice as much as those on public forums. Further, those active on dark-web forums post even more regularly, over twice as much. To a significant degree, this increased level of activity is ascribed to the political heat of discussion, encouraged by user anonymity (Zamani et al., 2019).

However, the inherent political culture of the remaining community – castigating the other and the normies, and screaming for libertarian values of freedom – was ultimately ripe for co-option by relatively more mainstream politics. Of a particular persuasion.

Alt-right internet

After 2013, the American political right mobilised online, spurred on by a powerful agent provocateur, Breitbart. Seeing politics more as a culture war than as electoral processes, Gamergate, a naturally occurring "diffuse, hydra-headed internet [phenomenon]" (Bernstein, 2014), presented the right with foot soldiers – a mass of angry, intense, mostly white males. By framing the progressive liberal elite as a force of command and control, in the face of the open, free nature of the internet and conspiring against the sovereignty of the subcultural web, Breitbart and its supporters drew the channers to their cause.

Amid this new political fervour, many user groups on chat forums and image boards, such as Gab, Voat and 4chan, courted white supremacists, neo-Nazis, incels, anti-feminists and radical nationalists by extolling the idea that the extreme right is being shut out of political discourse by mainstream media and the tech giants, which are under the sway of left-wing, cultural Marxists (Maly, 2018). Particularly 4chan's /pol/ (politically incorrect) and /b/ (random) boards rose in popularity rapidly, with their language becoming increasingly ideological but no less discriminatory. 8chan took on the overflow for the more toxic reactionary politics.

That language, often memeified and developed through dark humour or 'lulz', became powerful through its ability to pierce the mainstream discourse flow through its doublespeak nature. The language used by populists often takes on an Orwellian slant, inferring the author's claim that "political chaos is connected with the decay of language" (Orwell, 2013). Cloaking offensive ideological sentiment in a veil of humour makes it more palatable for mainstream consumption and provides a degree of defence against charges of racism. This coded rhetoric approach is found in style guides of such outlets as Stormfront and even the British National Party (Feldman, 2018).

Through coordinated trolling, doxing, hacking of opinion polls, gaming of social media, baiting of mainstream media and meme generation and distribution, the foot soldiers effectively "memed alt-right into existence", in the words of alt-right figurehead Richard Spencer (VICE News, 2016).

In her discussion of the algorithmic rise of the alt-right, sociologist Jessie Daniels states that "mostly White liberal writers, scholars, and journalists report as if racism is a 'bug' rather than a 'feature' of the system" (Daniels, 2018). The last decade of the internet and social media indicates that the structure of digital technology and the nature of openness and freedom embedded in the ethos of the internet provide particularly fertile ground for seeds born of the inherent darker side of human nature – seeds that thrive in an atmosphere of mistrust, obfuscation and chaos.

Yet, the right has not had all the action. The left has also made hay in the contemporary digital environment, notably displaying anti-capitalist and anti-corporative tendencies. Anonymous and those associated with or supportive of it, repelled by extreme activity on 4chan, diverted to more liberal, left causes such as Occupy, although still driven by its anti-censorship ethos.

However, without a powerful centrifugal force like Breitbart, the left has splintered to a degree and become much more localised in factions (Bernard, 2018). Although the left is no longer a serious disruptor, occasional DDoS raids over the last few years and noticeable hacktivist support of radical-left movements – more related to street activity, evidenced by Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece – indicate that the Anonymous ideal remains a force in digital politics but is currently overshadowed by the might of the alt-right, notably in the US.

Trust in political communication

Filter bubbles, echo chambers, fake news: many claim that these make our ability to trust political information very difficult. But when we say "our", many mean this to be other people's. Surprisingly, despite the hype, these issues and therefore trust are commonly considered other people's problems, as a comprehensive 2018 Ipsos-MORI survey of 27 countries showed (Ipsos-MORI, 2018).

Most admit to having been duped by some form of fake news at some time. But the survey indicated that although most consider that political actors and the partisan media distort the truth more today than 30 years ago, there is split as to whether this results in a significant reduction in our levels of political knowledge; in some cases, this is seen as increasing. It is in developed democracies that these levels are possibly declining, whereas in Asia the reverse is felt. Further, there is general consensus that there was never a golden age of truth-telling among the political classes and the media. In the UK, although various recent polls suggest a low level of trust in politicians, Ipsos-MORI, having tracked this metric for over 35 years, indicates that this level has remained fairly consistent over that period.

Admittedly, this survey is based on self-reporting, and therefore has inbuilt limitations, but is nevertheless enlightening. The respondents did largely admit that their perceptions of social realities – crime figures, immigration levels and economic factors – were biased, based on communication from politicians directly, the media or social media.

Trust in social media appears to have plateaued. The use of social media for news consumption, possibly in light of specific issues over Facebook, has started to drop in many countries, in favour of messaging apps, seen as more private and less confrontational media. Trust in mainstream media remains relatively constant globally (Newman et al., 2018). In the UK, despite a dip in trust in the media over the last few years, this has returned to the levels, albeit less than impressive, that were seen before the EU referendum, as has trust in experts, although trust in governments remains consistently low (Edelman, 2019a).

However, the Edelman Trust Barometer also notes that despite an ambivalence in news in 2018, there has been a significant surge in news consumption at the start of 2019, although trust in social media has sunk, notably in the US and Europe (2019a). Although news consumption has jumped, there is no proportionate rise in trust in the media. The relationship between trust in the media and trust in politics is not linear, but there is a case that whenever people distrust media, they are much more likely to revert to their partisan bunkers when assessing politics (Newton, 2017).

Yet, the news surge, along with the relative slump in trust in social media, presents a conundrum. Previously it has been held that lower levels of political trust are associated with higher levels of trust in social media, and mainstream-media consumption is positively associated with higher political trust (Ceron, 2015). The current situation appears to show that the association is only one way: that lower levels of trust in social media do not necessarily indicate higher trust in politics.

It appears that we are running out of places to trust for information. Commercially that is good: trustworthy news costs. Hence, the paywall model of many news outlets may be beginning to pay off, and similarly, donations to news outlets are on the rise, especially among the under-45s. Globally, the average number of people paying for online news has increased over the past few years, with significant increases in Scandinavia. The noticeable upswing in news subscriptions in the US, known as the Trump bump, continues. The UK is still a relative laggard in this new news economy, although the donation approach does seem to be relatively popular (Reuters Institute, 2018).

Yet, this upsurge in news consumption, paid or otherwise, perhaps breaking out of a media malaise, comes at a time when mistrust and polarisation are apparently growing among populations in the West. Many have roundly accused not only politicians but also the media and social media for these growing fissures in societies. These targeted accusations may be justified but face several challenges.

Three such challenges stand out. First, it is extremely difficult to quantify degrees of responsibility of the media – mainstream or social – for this state of affairs. “Counting fake news exposure is like counting people in a fun house. The very nature of the thing is trying to distort your perception of its importance,” states David Lazer, a researcher at Northeastern University in the US (Varghese, 2019). Likes, clicks, newspaper subscriptions, viewing figures, followers, retweets: these are tangible, but the variables in the study of this field which really count are nebulous. Variations in definitions of misinformation, disinformation, mal-information; definitions of what counts as fake news; differing natures of behaviour on different platforms; multiple factors in human decision-making; the delineation between human factors and technological ones: these can result in a wide array of research efforts producing a bewildering set of results, across several academic disciplines.

Second, when research does come to a consensus, one of the conclusions is that trust, bias and polarisation differ very much depending on the individual’s interest, knowledge and participation in politics in the first place. The contribution of media to this is not across the board. Counter-intuitively,

> *Polarized media … is much more common among an important segment of the public — the most politically active, knowledgeable, and engaged. These individuals are disproportionately visible both to the public and to observers of political trends.* (Guess et al., 2018, p. 15)

Third, moving onto social-media effects on trust, bias and polarisation, even if political polarisation has grown, this increase has been largest among publics least likely to use the internet and social media (Bakshy et al., 2015; Boxell et al., 2017). Ultimately, political communication depends on widespread public connection in an environment of interaction. As professor of media and social theory Nick Couldry and others state,

> *What will sustain mediated public connection best in the long run is a citizen's sense that if they follow the public world, that knowledge may contribute to their agency in that world, and that agency may in turn make a difference.* (2010, p. 194)

This sense is under severe strain as we seek knowledge in which we can trust. The situation is made worse by those who actively seek to confound and disrupt that sense, both in our own domestic political spheres and from outside – from those active in propaganda and information warfare.

Information warfare and propaganda

Political parties have always been ambitious and adventurous when it comes to information, in an effort to persuade voters and constituents. But organised, purposeful manipulation of information crosses generally accepted norms, directly challenging truth and trust, encompassing the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of propaganda: "information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view".

Here we have to turn to further definitions, shunning the vagueness of often-repeated fake news, which lacks definitional rigour, to examine the subject.[32] Popular discussion of fake news conflates three concepts: disinformation, misinformation and mal-information. Yet these are subtly different, depending on their nature and intent. Useful definitions have been expressed in a Council of Europe research report:

- **Disinformation:** Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country.
- **Misinformation:** Information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm.
- **Mal-information:** Information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017, p. 20).

For the purposes of brevity, here the term disinformation, under the rubric of propaganda, will encompass mal-information and fake news, but we avoid examining misinformation because of its lack of intent (Wardle, 2017).

Although disinformation is usually seen to shape perceptions and behaviours of both domestic and international audiences, communication researchers Irina Khaldarova and Mervi Pantti see its purpose as also “supporting already-constructed identity claims, rather than reporting on events” (2016, p. 893). The phenomenon plays into the hands of identity politics, but many scholars note how disinformation is co-constructed by the audience, in which “meanings are negotiated and shared” (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 148).

The advent of social media has embedded interpersonal interaction alongside mainstream media production, allowing for a two-way transfer effect between real news and fake news, where comment, opinion, fact and fabrication blur. Yet audiences are aware of this fact and increasingly choose their redlines by unfriending or blocking views unacceptable to them, often curtailing the effect of counter-disinformation initiatives. This can play into the hands of disinformation campaigns, which not only spread disinformation but can also break online social relationships. Gregory Asmolov, a researcher of digital platforms, characterises this disconnective power in light of an actual state conflict in Ukraine:

> *Disconnective power allows a state to shape users’ individual identities by diminishing the impact of horizontal connections that threaten the state’s monopoly on framing the conflict and*

challenge the state's ability to affect perceptions of the conflict's legitimacy. In this way, disinformation campaigns sabotage horizontal connections between different sides of a conflict while strengthening the state's capacity to construct an image of an external enemy. (2019, p. 74)

It could be argued that this disconnective power of disinformation occurs equally with the political realm, which is a busy one indeed. Within that realm, as communication researchers Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard observe,

With each passing election, there is a growing body of evidence that national leaders, political parties, and individual political candidates are using social media platforms to spread disinformation. Although closely related to some of the dirty tricks and negative campaigning we might expect in close races (and which have always played a part in political campaigning), what makes this phenomenon unique is the deliberate use of computational propaganda to manipulate voters and shape the outcome of elections. (Bradshaw and Howard, 2018, p. 5)

In their 2018 study of computational propaganda, Bradshaw and Howard found that in 30 of the 48 countries examined, there was evidence of political parties using propaganda via digital means in elections or referendums. In more sophisticated democracies, bots, online trolls, partisan commentators, data analytics, PR agencies and hyperpartisan media were employed or encouraged to polarise, confuse and promote distrust of mainstream parties. Direct digital manipulation, media intimidation, blatant untruths and outright ballot rigging are more prevalent in more authoritarian regimes. These practices are all symptomatic of today's information environment.

Organisationally, such campaigns can work under formal or informal arrangements, the former through communications-consulting firms, the latter through civil-society organisations, tech-savvy volunteer youth groups, fringe social movements, digital influencers, opinion leaders and even hackers (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). The actors in precipitating this often-fabricated disinformation – through rumour, conspiracy theories, hoaxes, clickbait, hyperpartisan views and satire – are detailed by computer-science researcher Savvas Zannettou and others as governments, political organisations, criminal groups, terrorists, paid posters, trolls (sponsored or otherwise), journalists, evangelists, conspiracists, income generators and useful idiots (2018).

There often appears a rush to point to grand strategies of foreign powers to use disinformation in the West's domestic political space. As an example of this perspective, worryingly, a 2018 Atlantic Council report entitled "Democratic Defense Against Disinformation" appears to attribute the issue solely to Russia, without reference to the wider complexity of disinformation and the fact that much is generated in the confines of the West's own political spaces (Fried and Polyakova, 2018). The West can push out more than enough disinformation itself, without Russia's or anyone else's help.

Without digging into data targeting or campaign funding, about which much has already been written elsewhere, notably by the *Guardian*, there are disinformation examples of official, mainstream political parties using misleading information on their official social-media accounts;[33] traditional media outlets purposefully pushing false information (Davies, 2017); unofficial attempts at voter suppression (b3ta board, n.d.; KnowYourMeme, n.d.); use of ad-transparency loopholes to mislead (Turton, 2018); claims of fictitious events (Evon, 2018); deliberate fudging of numbers (Belam, 2016); and subtle – and less subtle – memes. The common factors? Outrage and alarm, working to mesh human behaviour and the technical sharing abilities built into social media.

Those seductive sharing capabilities – born of the technophilic mantra "I share, therefore I am" – ensure that the internet public is highly culpable in the advancement of disinformation. Although a minority (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Guess et al., 2019, 2018; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2017), a highly engaged subset of the online population will not only share disinformation – either maliciously, unknowingly or, especially in the case of humorous memes, for fun – but also initiate it.

As an example, political scientist Yevgeniy Golovchenko and others conducted a study of Twitter after of the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 over Ukraine in July 2014, a tragic event that initiated a whirlwind of disinformation. The authors found that of all those involved in circulating content around the contested version of events, such as politicians, the media, state institutions and individual journalists, citizens were by far the most prolific in curating and disseminating disinformation. Golovchenko et al. concluded that

> *individual citizens are the most influential* curators *on Twitter … in spreading* both *disinformation* and *counter-disinformation among the most engaged users.* (2018, p. 993)

In the language of warfare, it appears that the public harbours a significant number of combatants in the information space. And the more combatants, the more noise of battle, the more volume of information, the more opinions, the more emotion. This environment is that of today's propaganda, in which the entire point "isn't only to misinform or push agenda. It is to exhaust your critical thinking, to annihilate truth" (Judge, 2017).

Yet, despite the seeming cacophony of disinformation and fake news in that information space, and low levels of trust in the mainstream media, websites notorious for spewing out fake news, often as satire, such as empirenews.net, politicot.com, newsthump.com and thepoke.co.uk, are nowhere near as influential as the mainstream media. However, the dissemination of such content becomes much more widespread when articles are spread via social media, and especially on Facebook, where fake-news outlets can command much more attention (Fletcher et al., 2018).

And here we are back with Facebook. Technology aside, it is this platform's sheer scale which has brought about and enabled today's environment of disinformation and fake news. Comprehensive examinations and reports into Facebook's role in disinformation have been captured elsewhere, notably, regarding the UK, by the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, which issued its final report in February 2019 (Department of Digital, Media, Culture and Sport, 2019).

Pointing the finger at Facebook, the SCL Group, Cambridge Analytica, Aggregate IQ and, to a lesser degree, Twitter, as well as foreign powers, the report does not look in detail at other platforms or the darker areas of the web, such as the chans or the dark web, the blatant fake-news websites or the mainstream media. It is almost as if it is definitely someone else's fault, not something emanating from the depths of our own political culture, chipping away at our own trust of own democratic institutions. As political scientists Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston suggest,

> *Public spheres in many nations have become divided and disrupted as growing challenges confront the democratic centring principles of (a) authoritative information, (b) emanating from social and political institutions that (c) engage trusting and credulous publics. At the core of our argument is the breakdown of trust in democratic institutions of press and politics (along with educational and civil society institutions in more advanced cases). This loss of trust is not ephemeral but grounded in the hollowing of parties and diminished electoral representation.* (2018, pp. 126–7)

Undoubtedly there appears to be an attack on democracies, manifesting itself in an online environment of disinformation. Although much can be seen as homegrown, there are those abroad who are making hay in these circumstances. They have been briefly mentioned above, but now let us look at their involvement in this trust-destroying mêlée. First, the Russians.

Russia's game

In public discourse in the West, there is a massive amount of discussion, debate, rhetoric and bluster about Russian disinformation masterminded by the Kremlin. In the public domain, there has been less – almost no – hard, tangible, irrefutable evidence of such Russian activity being engineered by Moscow. There is no real evidence that Russian disinformation has a major influence on the West's politics.

Yet it appears to be a significant issue in the online political space. The indicators are undoubtedly there: hacking operations against the US and most of Europe's governments or political parties, attributed to Russian groups; obvious false news issued by Sputnik and RT; the links of thousands of false, antagonistic and malign stories, posts, engagements emanating from the St Petersburg–based Internet Research Agency (IRA) and spread across social media; and massive troll operations such as the #ColumbianChemicals campaign, a hoax claiming an explosion had taken place at a chemical plant in Louisiana. (Giles, 2016; Helmus et al., 2018; Moore, 2018; Singer and Brooking, 2018).

More starkly, the Russian intelligence agencies and military clearly conduct information operations surrounding conflicts in which they are involved or areas where Russian influence is perceived to be under threat, not least from NATO – the flight MH17 case being an exemplar. Active measures, reflexive control, maskirovka (military deception), *dezinformatzia* (disinformation), kompromat (compromising material): these are concepts now widely discussed, and fretted over, by many in the West who observe Russia's use of hybrid warfare and, within it, the Gerasimov doctrine, apparently Russia's guide to information warfare. In 2016, Keir Giles, a senior consulting fellow at Chatham House, concluded that

> *examining Russian assessments of current events makes it clear that it considers itself to be engaged in full-scale information warfare, involving not only offensive but also defensive operations.* (Giles, 2016, p. 27)

Yet, why is it so difficult to pin down a Kremlin shaking a fistful of documents of incriminating evidence? There are two main reasons.

First, that is the point of Russia’s information warfare and disinformation campaigns in the first place. Security analyst Ben Nimmo encapsulates it neatly by defining the four Ds of Russia’s approach: dismiss the critic, distract from the main issue, distort the facts and dismay the audience (StopFake.org, 2015). It is intended to be disorienting, as opposed to necessarily influential towards any outcome apart from the disruption of information. As behavioural scientist Todd Helmus and others claim,

> *The Kremlin attempts to achieve policy paralysis by sowing confusion, stoking fears, and eroding trust in Western and democratic institutions.* (Helmus et al., 2018, p. 7)

Russian disinformation, via the proliferation of multiple false narratives, is aimed at polluting the information environment to scramble information available to policymakers or their constituents, notably vital in democratic processes, thereby eroding trust in institutions central to democracy (Giles, 2016). A fundamental facet of Soviet propaganda, retained by the Kremlin, has been reflexive control, designed to affect decision parameters and the ability to critically reason, and thereby alter a target audience’s perception of a situation, ultimately encouraging a predetermined decision (McCauley, 2016).

By adopting such a loose concept, this disinformation approach has the added advantage of flexibility of effect:

> *In Ukraine it can create complete havoc; in the Baltic states it can destabilize; in Eastern Europe, co-opt power; in Western Europe, divide and rule; in the US, distract; in the Middle East and South America, fan flames.* (Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014, p. 24)

It is so difficult to incriminate the Kremlin because the whole disinformation endeavour is aimed at creating an environment in which it is impossible to do so. In other words, it becomes harder to identify who is spiking your drinks the more you drink.

Second, there is no coherent, brilliantly planned grand disinformation strategy overseen by Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin. As sophisticated as the apparatus can seem, it is constructed of many players, from government officials and businessmen to activist groups to former members of the Committee for State Security (KGB) or current chancers in the Federal Security Service (FSB), with indistinct or opaque, sometimes even competing, connections with the Kremlin or each other.

Operating in a commercial and entrepreneurial atmosphere, where ideas are presented, sometimes sponsored, by members of the government elite, those paying patronage to Putin, and operationalised at arm's length from the Kremlin, the system mirrors the mercurial nature of Russia's governance culture of mixing business with politics. Such a capricious system is described as feeling like "an oligarchy in the morning and a democracy in the afternoon, a monarchy for dinner and a totalitarian state by bedtime" (Pomerantsev, 2017, p. 79). The line between business and politics is hazy, if there at all. The IRA is a commercial interest, allegedly funded by Yevgeny Prigozhin, an oligarch restaurateur known as the Kremlin's chef for his close relationship with Putin and resulting juicy government contracts (Chen, 2015).

As for the hallowed Gerasimov doctrine, even this idea can be seen as a product of faulty information – or at least interpretation, albeit not of Russia's doing (Hutchings, 2018). Originally the phrase was used as a vague notion, merely the title of a blog piece, to describe Russian views about modern propaganda in light of the Facebook revolutions of the Arab Spring and Euromaidan anti-government protests in Ukraine. Based on a 2013 speech by the Russian chief of the general staff, General Valery Gerasimov, the moniker gradually became a catch-all for the idea of an actual, hard-headed, strategic doctrine coursing through the bloodstream and conduct of Russia's information warfare. In a delicious irony, it became a self-fulfilling prophecy, in a way that any propagandist would gleefully applaud. Once again, it seems that we do not need the help of the Russians to confuse ourselves. As Mark Galeotti, the innocent academic who first introduced it, stated,

> *I was the first to write about Russia's infamous high-tech military strategy. One small problem: it doesn't exist.* (Galeotti, 2018)

Galeotti further highlights the lack of grand strategy by pointing to Putin's penchant for judo, in using, opportunistically, one's opponent's own force – or technology and socio-political system – to defeat them, as opposed to the more cerebral, strategic approach of a chess grandmaster (Galeotti, 2019).

To understand the Russian approach to disinformation and information warfare, we need to look at three aspects: history, society and politics.

Russia's history provides a key to how Russians see themselves and the world. The communist era relied heavily on propaganda, both internationally and domestically, which was in many cases disinformation. However, domestically it was seen for what it was and bleakly accepted, encouraging cynical pretence (The Economist, 1999). As the old Soviet joke goes, "they pretend to pay us, we pretend to work". Internationally, the Soviet Union, and subsequently Russia, has long considered itself under threat. As American diplomat and historian George Kennan wrote in a famous long telegram in 1946,

> *At bottom of the Kremlin's neurotic view of world affairs is a traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity.* (Mason, 2017)

Alongside this national instinct, the fall of communism heralded a chaotic, disorienting period, causing a head-spinning, bewildering and rapid reorganisation of societal, economic and political cultures, partly fuelled by the shock-therapy economics imposed by the international community (Person and Landry, 2016).

Propaganda, pretence, paranoia and perplexity: these ingredients can explain the postmodern environment in which contemporary Russian society exists – one in which, in the words of journalist Peter Pomerantsev, “nothing is true and everything is possible”. Amid a general sense of disillusionment and cynicism in which facts are irrelevant, trust in Russia is a rare commodity, both with institutions (The Moscow Times, 2019) and within society,[34] although the latter is showing signs of stabilising from a low base (Kuchenkova, 2017). The surreal and cerebrally dissonant environment is fuelled by the Russian media, mostly co-opted by the Kremlin, the nature of which is reflected in the comments of an unnamed Russian television presenter:

> *We all know there will be no real politics. But we still have to give our viewers the sense something is happening. Politics has to feel … like a movie!* (Pomerantsev, 2017, p. 6)

In tandem, Russian politics reflects the somewhat theatrical nature of society, even by Western standards. And the primary director of this socio-political drama can be seen as Vladislav Surkov, businessman, apparatchik, politician, mover, shaker and propagandist-in-chief, known as the grey cardinal. Surkov is a powerful political technologist, and his power, at the disposal of the Kremlin, may wax and wane. But his influence and approach to information management over the last two decades seems to be deeply embedded in the Russian political machine (Gatehouse, 2019).

In shape-shifting the political schema, backing opposing sides, engineering apparent alliances and conflicts and being transparent in doing so, the political technologists have prevented any political opposition to the Kremlin by making such opposition constantly unsettled, frustrated and off balance, a strategy that has translated easily into the international arena (Gould-Davies, 2015). Disruptive and intangible, it is not designed to necessarily promote and advocate but to confuse and divide. If it were aimed at promoting Russia, it has failed, as Russia’s reputation and image of Putin continue to suffer, despite having influence – which only proves the thrust of the Russian approach (Letterman, 2018).

So how do the Russians manage to cause so much disruption in the information space? The Kremlin has developed a complex but loose production and dissemination capability that incorporates disparate actors with varying levels of attribution to execute large-scale information operations. There are several layers to this labyrinthine mechanism. At the highest level, exploitable content is openly attributed to white outlets, notably the foreign ministry, and a wide spectrum of agencies, media and think-tanks, all overtly controlled, sponsored or censored by the Kremlin. These include Sputnik News, RT, the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK) and the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS).

The second level is comprised of less attributable grey outlets that produce and circulate content of dubious nature but support the Kremlin line or its objectives. These include conspiracy websites, extreme political websites on the far left or far right, news aggregators, and data-dump websites, which receive data dumps from outside systems and publish those data for visitors to openly review or use (Weisburd et al., 2016).

The third layer of actors is even harder to define, allowing utter deniability of connection to the Kremlin. These black outlets not only create and distribute content on user-generated media, such as YouTube, but also contribute to extreme, rabble-rousing commentary to amplify content produced by others on a wide variety of platforms. They also provide exploitable content to data-dump websites. With bots, trolls, sock puppets, honeypots and hackers, particular narratives are disseminated, malicious links solicit information, sometimes kompromat, websites are attacked and defaced, data are compromised and DDoS attacks are conducted (Helmus et al., 2018).

This intricate, tangled and multiplex capability has a disruptive capability par excellence, creating a smoke-and-mirrors environment, not only domestically but also internationally, but rarely a smoking gun.

But this disruption is only possible among the existing fissures of the international political environment and in Western democracies, and it is made exponentially worse by actors in those democracies. Laying all the blame at the Kremlin's door, as attractive as it may be, addresses a symptom, not a cause. In any case, there are others who are open to blame, spurious or not.

Chinese whispers

On one level, China's approach to international influence in the digital information age, specifically that of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), is more straightforward and traditional than Russia's, albeit with a modern edge. On another, it is far more consequential. Admittedly, China's approach to its domestic audience, and to Taiwan's, is highly controlling, but here we focus on abroad.

Eschewing disruption, the traditional mainstream media (less so social media) have become China's weapon of influence internationally, on a battlefield of data and physical information infrastructure. Further, the Chinese have always played the long game. As technology reporter David McCabe states,

> *The Chinese government certainly has the ability to pursue an online political disinformation campaign directed at foreign elections — but hasn't yet because it favors long-term thinking over Russia's scorched-earth foreign policy.* (McCabe, 2018)

Whereas Russia relies on a complex web of shady characters, communist China depends on the capitalist vice of choice, where every person has his or her price: money. The human factor may be another difference, as China researcher Peter Mattis states:

> *Perhaps the best way to describe the differences between the two approaches is that the Chinese are human- or relationship-centric while the Russians are operation- or effects-centric.* (Mattis, 2018)

China is no stranger to influence and propaganda on its domestic stage. It was only after President Jiang Zemin's rule, in the early 2000s, that China began to open up its considerable potential on the international information stage. In its quest to gain influence through domination of the media infrastructure, China continues to use a traditional strategy of borrowing the boat. In the early Jiang days, this was no more than official Chinese officials courting foreign journalists considered potentially supportive of China's political stance – in other words, borrowing foreign media talent.

This practice continues, albeit in a more sophisticated and persuasive manner, with lavishly funded journalism trips to China for foreign journalists and the net being widened to include more influential political pundits with access to their domestic media spheres. Under President Hu Jintao and subsequently, Beijing has invested in an extensive friends-of-China network across the globe: prominent figures who are frequently encouraged by Chinese media outlets to write positive articles not only for the Chinese domestic media but also for international media in support of China's soft-power initiatives.

The borrowing-the-boat mode ramped up in the mid-2000s, when Chinese-sponsored news articles increasingly began appearing in leading foreign media outlets, providing a nice little earner for the cash-strapped. Currently, the *Daily Telegraph* is reported to take some £750,000 annually to run a China Watch insert on a monthly basis. In a similar content-sharing deal, the *Daily Mail* is reported to have an arrangement with the *People's Daily* to provide the Chinese outlet with one of its staple products: pure clickbait (Lim and Bergin, 2018). Many other Western news outlets have similar arrangements. This strategy may also be more covert, such as planting content from the state-run China Radio International (CRI) on the airwaves of supposedly independent broadcasters across the globe.

More traditional cultural- or public-diplomacy initiatives are common Chinese practice, notably through China's Confucius Institutes, which set up over 500 centres across the world in 15 years. Going a step further, China offers free studies in communication and journalism to degree level. This especially applies to all-expenses-paid courses for journalists from developing countries, as part of a formal programme run by the China Public Diplomacy Association. The association has ambitious but realistic targets of training 500 Latin American and Caribbean journalists over five years, and 1,000 African journalists a year in the short term (Lim and Bergin, 2018). An underlying aspiration of such programmes is that foreign journalists learn to tell China's story well (Bandurski, 2017). In the long term, this can be seen as directly influencing the fabric of the foreign media of tomorrow, today.

In the short term, China is localising its media influence (Sautman and Hairong, 2015). While it courts today's Western journalists and cultivates tomorrow's journalists of the developing world, China is increasingly physically altering their job market and media space. The huge expansion of China Central Television (CCTV) International, now the China Global Television Network (CGTN), and of Xinhua over the last decade has led to these new foreign bureaus offering lucrative salaries to editors, journalists and technicians. This is having an impact on existing domestic media outlets: a drain on talent.

And, more buying the boat than borrowing it, China is increasingly investing in foreign local independent media. Reportedly the fastest-growing and most influential digital television media network in Africa is run by the StarTimes Group, a privately owned Chinese media organisation. As Azad Essa, a South African journalist who found himself subjected to Chinese pressure, wrote in *Foreign Policy* magazine,

> *It is private media companies that have most effectively become vehicles for forwarding the interests of the Chinese state, in cahoots with local elites.* (2018)

Yet, under President Xi Jinping, it is the approach of buying the superyacht and the sea on which it sails that is of most concern to Western democracies. Beijing has been purchasing significant shares of local media outlets and building major digital infrastructure in the developing world at an alarming rate, gradually increasing its control over local media as well as the means of digital communication. This terrifying shift is observed best in Africa, where Chinese commercial enterprises, linked to the CCP, are now dominating the switchover from analogue to digital television, developing lucrative networks of data centres and fibre-optic cables (Li, 2017). For example, in the last decade, Exim Bank, one of China's three institutional banks, has lent the governments of Nigeria, Ghana and Tanzania in the order of $350 million for national information and communication technology infrastructure projects (Gagliardone, 2019, p. 45).

In doing so, Beijing is increasing its control not only over media producers and the means of news production but also over the physical means of transmission. It is no coincidence that China's first experiment in international television was CCTV Africa. With many in Africa encouraged by China's soft-power initiatives, seeing China's economic success as a model is particularly tempting (Eszter, 2018). But wherever media-regulatory and business-ownership laws are lax and governments may welcome rapid infrastructure development, from whatever source, the conditions are ripe for Chinese exploitation.

As Sarah Cook, a senior research analyst for East Asia at Freedom House, told the *Guardian*, regarding China's grasp of digital infrastructure,

> *The real brilliance of it is not just trying to control all content – it's the element of trying to control the key nodes in the information flow. It might not be necessarily clear as a threat now, but once you've got control over the nodes of information you can use them as you want.* (Lim and Bergin, 2018)

Xi has placed digital at the heart of China's future (Segal, 2019). In 2014, he announced the CCP's new media-management strategy, claiming that it would create a new-type mainstream media in which mergers and acquisitions would be central to influencing foreign audiences, integrating both traditional and digital media into a multiplatform approach. This expansion would be funded by creating massive media conglomerates, with significant commercial freedom, enabling a lucrative environment, financially backed by the CCP to the tune of up to $10 billion annually. The new approach was to be more a business strategy than a political one, but focused on geostrategic goals (Brady, 2015).

In its control of those nodes of information in the digital age, China, especially under Xi, is becoming a cyber-superpower, and being viewed as a threat (Inkster, 2018). As leaders in fifth-generation (5G) technology, Chinese firms like Huawei and ZTE are under the microscope. Their access to Western markets is becoming curtailed as governments anguish over their potential involvement in developing networks in the West. This worry was dramatically exposed in the UK in early 2019, resulting in the dismissal of the defence secretary. In Africa and elsewhere in the developing world, however, although some have woken up to the concern, the markets remain open for business with Chinese technology giants. Notably, the narrative between Africa and China is one not of exploitation but more of collaborative partnership, with African governments maintaining a degree of agency in their relationships with China (Gagliardone, 2019).

The 2018 China Internet Report indicates how Tencent, Baidu and Alibaba are acquiring or investing in dozens of companies, both in China and abroad, covering technology sectors such as fintech, autonomous vehicles, ride-sharing apps, cryptocurrency, gaming, blockchain, education, recruitment and social media. Although these tech giants are private enterprises with profit motives, under Chinese law they are also beholden to the CCP and its strategic goals. As the report concedes, “success or failure in China’s internet landscape is contingent upon government authority” (Abacus News, 2018, p. 20). An example of China’s potential and ambitions can be seen in its facial-recognition technology, in which it has plans to capture approaching 50% of the global market by 2023 (Wang, 2018). And in this, Africa is not immune to the technological tidal wave, once again potentially as a testbed (Chutel, 2018).

Some analysts claim that the impact of the expansion of digital-media networks, such as Russia’s RT and Iran’s Press TV, has been exaggerated, including in Africa (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2018). But China’s endeavours are on a completely different scale and much more deeply embedded in the global information ecosystem. If the future of communication, political or otherwise, is grounded in access to data, the CCP's growing capability in data acquisition across the globe is worrisome.[35]

Data have had a major impact on political outcomes in the West, and although national security is cited as a key concern in protecting networks from Chinese influence, the deeper societal and political ramifications of this are profound. Not only does China increasingly influence, if not control, the digital highways, but as the West's media organisations face severe financial challenges, China also has the scope and potential to place a firm grip on global journalism and social media.

In the long term, Russia's disruptive geopolitical games in the digital space are child's play in comparison.

The other players

Others are also chipping away at public trust in today's digital environment. Although more attuned to domestic audiences, there are forays into the wider international sphere of discourse online.

No stranger to online manipulation aimed at its domestic publics (Kargar and Rauchfleisch, 2019), Iran has toyed with more extreme firewalling of its own cyberspace, a so-called splinternet, possibly even more advanced than China's in terms of its physical separation from the world wide web (Grothaus, 2018). The extent of this demonstrates a technical capability not to be ignored.

Despite this attempt to block out the world, Iran is unafraid to use its digital, and more traditional, propaganda capabilities to influence foreign audiences. Although Iranian-based English-language Press TV has been operating since 2007, more recently the Iranian government has been potentially linked to more than 70 websites promoting Iranian propaganda to at least 15 countries, visited by more than half a million visitors a month, and promoted by social-media accounts with more than 1 million followers (Stubbs and Bing, 2018). Aimed at audiences in the US, the UK, Latin America and the Middle East, they leverage a network of false-news sites across multiple social-media platforms to promote political narratives in line with Iranian interests, including anti-Israeli, anti-Saudi and pro-Palestinian themes (Tabatabai, 2018). Notably, a significant effort is focused on the Arab world (Elswah et al., 2019).

Iranian messaging, which has been a feature online since at least 2010, is fairly consistent, aimed less at disruption through multiple conflicting messages, as Russian disinformation tends to, and more at influence. However, the mechanisms employed, such as artificial amplification with bots, do mirror those of the Russians, with whom many of the Iranians' narrative themes overlap (Barojan, 2019). However, as consistent as Iranian narratives may be at a strategic level, tactically there are instances of clumsy messages failing through inconsistency and misunderstanding of the target audience, with the result that many see Iran's efforts in online propaganda as a paper tiger (Lake, 2018).

A glance at Bradshaw and Howard's report on computational propaganda shows the extent to which online propaganda is being disseminated globally, either for domestic political purposes or to influence foreign audiences, by entities including government agencies, political parties, PR agencies and citizens. Apart from those discussed above, these countries include Venezuela, Israel, the Philippines, Malaysia and Mexico (Bradshaw and Howard, 2018, p. 10). And in today's porous information environment, information aimed at domestic audiences and that directed towards foreign audiences often blur into each other.

Notably, the UK sits neatly in that matrix, alongside those we would accuse of disinformation. Food for thought.

The big picture

Modern politics has adapted to the nature of the digital environment. The number of actors in the digital political space, from the highly active to the inadvertent, accidental players, has increased significantly. No longer is the public necessarily passive. And the style of political communication has also adapted to this new digital public: fast, visual, memeified.

Culture wars, once the province of academics, students, activists and interest groups, are now fought by anyone with a desire to enter the fray, from the depths of 4chan and the dark web, on the fringes, to MIMS, Twitter and Facebook, in the mainstream. Political groups can coalesce and disperse rapidly, moving from issue to issue. With few borders, the dynamics of the net allow ideas to flow from the fringes to the mainstream and back with little friction. This has resulted in the merging of online politics into the mainstream, but there remains a divide between the vertical and horizontal nature of contemporary political interaction.

Communication theorist Jay Blumler, explaining his *Fourth Age of Political Communication*, states his concern over a two-tier ecosystem:

> *On the one hand, citizens may experience high levels of efficacy as a result of being able to communicate with each other so readily. On the other hand, they can rarely connect these discourses, feelings and proposals to institutions of governance. There's an imbalance between horizontal, peer-to-peer networks and vertical citizen-to-government communication and impact. This results in a skewed model of democracy. The consequences of such lopsided efficacy may be a hazardous chasm between two kinds of political representation – the informal self-representation of publics speaking of and to themselves and the institutional representation of publics by those speaking for but not as, or with, the citizens they claim to represent.* (2013)

Further, far from the Habermasian ideal of a public sphere of rational discourse, a cauldron of anger and hate has emerged, fuelled not only by genuine sentiment but also by trolls in it for the 'lulz', by digitally enhanced fake news and by hyperpartisan media, all embodied by its own digital culture. Into the mix are thrown bots and fake accounts.

The political establishment is, to a degree, bamboozled by the nature of this digital culture. The rise of the alt-right in the US was far from any old-school political playbook. Yet the politicos are catching on quickly, not least the populist upstarts, for whom the fast and loose nature of this digital culture is comfortable territory. The technological advances of surveillance and consumer targeting, nurtured by the corporate world, are rapidly maturing as political mechanisms.

Yet, any techno-utopianism must be caveated by the fact that many still refrain from immersing themselves into the digital space, and the greatest increases in political polarisation are among those least digitally savvy. And those polarised in the digital space tend to be already politically engaged, leaving a large majority still more interested in pictures of cats.

Technologically constrained by filter-bubble effects, and even more so by selective exposure, we appear to be running out of sources of trust on social media. Although mainstream media continue to suffer low trust levels among the public, market economics, the holy grail of monetising online news, may yet win out – assigning value to trusted information via paywalls or subscriptions.

In the meantime, trust in digital sources is further degraded by active measures of foreign powers, notably Russia. Born of Soviet thinking and nurtured through cultural and societal norms continued in the post-Soviet era, the Russian approach to media and information is supremely postmodern, even surreal. Yet, the Russian disinformation threat to the West's politics, although endorsed by the Kremlin and funded in a uniquely Russian manner, is produced in a largely haphazard fashion. Disruption, rather than influence, appears to be the result, and the publics of the Western democracies are as complicit in that as the sock puppets of St Petersburg.

Taking a longer view, China's global influence is of more concern. As a genuine cyberpower, China has secured significant influence in developing nations through a more traditional approach of literally buying up media outlets while physically building digital architecture. Whereas the former has a major soft-power effect, the latter is much more of a 21st-century hard power, availing itself of potentially significant and massively influential data – or, as social psychologist Shoshana Zuboff terms it, instrumentarian power (2019).

Western governments and publics worry about Russia, perhaps do not fully realise China's threat and often forget about their own role in disinformation. In the digital age, no one is blameless for the crisis of trust.

Part five: Proposed approaches

The new research cited above provides potentially more accurate analyses of how democratic institutions and discourse are weakening, and why, thus better defining the target of any communication strategy aimed at combating such developments. While it is outside our current scope to suggest long-term structural and political solutions, recent research exists on why traditional communication methods may not work when it comes to changing minds – particularly of those who are heavily invested in different viewpoints. It is to this literature that we now turn, in the hope that it may stimulate genuinely innovative approaches to combating populism.

In what follows, we look at some of the clearer results from the psychological and other literature that touches on how humans process information and form and alter their beliefs.

First, let us look at the lessons that can be drawn from the literature already assessed.

1. **Cartesian fallacy:** The assumption that humans are objective, rational, conscious, thinking machines that can identify and evaluate evidence in the same balanced way is wrong on many levels.
2. **The role of personality:** Over time and on the basis of a large variety of factors, by the time we become adults we are already fairly established in our personalities, which then do not generally change much over time.
3. **Personality vs. moral foundations:** The mix of our personalities and experience forms our moral positions – usually unconsciously. Take the YourMorals.org test to see how your moral views seamlessly integrate with how you are likely to vote and what issues you consider important in political terms.
4. **Salience:** What we consider important changes often and fast, and hence the issue of salience is key. We can be relatively hostile to immigration, but if the issue is of no perceived importance to our daily lives or imminent future, our views on it are not called

into play in more general political terms. Determining what will be relevant to whom, and when it changes, is so far poorly understood.

5. **Distribution of traits:** While about a third of us are authoritarians and another third are anti-authoritarians,[36] who are particularly resistant to changing our minds because of the big difference in our values, there seems to exist a middle third of the population who can see things from either side (Lakoff's biconceptuals) and may thus be relatively persuadable. Evidence for the existence and characteristics of such a group is, however, rather weak (Gerlach et al., 2018). Yet it does align with years of modern political practice in established democracies, where convincing the middle is where efforts are best directed.
6. **Trust and reputation:** Trust is also essential to our belief formation because it determines our evidence base for all evidence that we do not personally collect. Information supplied by bodies or people we do not trust will automatically be discounted and may not even form part of the reasoning process. Moreover, trust appears to be both particularly hard to restore once lost and peculiarly easy to establish in new contexts. The standard tit-for-tat heuristic is king. New actors can rapidly establish trust. This may be easier than trying to restore trust in actors who have lost it.
7. **Motivated reasoning:** Human brains have evolved to react fast to new situations and information – and fast means intuitively. We all suffer from confirmation bias in various complex ways. Our goals determine what we are reasoning for. Reasoning from evidence from a neutral or trusted source leads to the question "Can I believe this?", while evidence from an untrusted source or evidence that appears to contradict already-held views leads to the question "Must I believe this?".
8. **The role of emotion:** Emotion is used to mark the importance of certain information. It can therefore have an effect on what information is retrieved, and how it is processed – consciously or via a quick rule of thumb. Emotion can also determine what

cognitive resources are available for reasoning, and can provide the motivation to start reasoning in the first place.[37]

9. **Metaphors and frames:** These matter, because they can trigger unconscious associations, making some more salient than others. Such associations may be harmful, for example harshening attitudes.
10. **Values:** Values are essential to understanding – and voting. Values determine which political issues are connected – guns, abortion, health care – and which metaphors resonate with which audiences. Communicating on political issues without linking to values is likely to be less effective.
11. **Bubbles and echo chambers:** Apart from the new risks that come with the ability to tailor our news feed to receive only news we are likely to want to hear, humans are anyway already living in bubbles. We actively seek out confirmation of pre-existing beliefs from sources we trust, and we reject information that does not fit with what we already think to reduce dissonance. This drive is such that online, our selective exposure due to confirmation bias outstrips algorithmic filtering, the so-called filter bubble.
12. **Polarisation:** Confirmation bias leads to polarisation of our attitudes because of differentiated source use. But humans are motivated to ensure belief coherence within groups. This can lead us to suspend reason if using it would cause us to disagree with the rest of the group.
13. **Economics:** Economic levels appear to have little to do with the current crisis. Instead, inequality may be important as background to the creation of views of unfairness, threat or outlook for the future, which are essential to forward-looking evaluations of normative threat.
14. **Immigration:** Much the same can be said for immigration. Fears about, and intolerant responses to, immigration can be stoked either by lack of social capital or by rapid changes in immigration levels – not absolute levels themselves. When governments and leaders are trusted, the economy and

migration are not seen as threats. In other words, their salience is reduced.

15. **Authoritarians and education:** As Stenner notes, "we tend to imagine … that everyone can be socialised away from intolerance toward greater respect for difference, if only we have the will, the resources and the opportunity to provide the right experiences. … According to this wishful understanding of reality, the different can remain as different as they like, and the intolerant will eventually have their intolerance educated out of them. But all the available evidence indicates that exposure to difference, talking about difference, and applauding difference – the hallmarks of liberal democracy – are the surest ways to aggravate those who are innately intolerant and guarantee the increased expression of their predispositions in manifestly intolerant attitudes and behaviours" (2005, p. 330).
16. **Memes:** In digital culture, both fringe and mainstream, the meme is a powerful mechanism for the spread of ideas. The lack of understanding of this mechanism, if not the adoption of it, and the ideas that it may percolate, curtails the effectiveness of official communication campaigns in the face of memeified narratives.
17. **Data, surveillance and targeting:** While information is key to trust and decision-making, data are crucial to the provision of that information. The impact of massive data harvesting, corporate or otherwise, and its application in computational propaganda are potentially more worrisome than the information transmitted itself.
18. **Local communication networks:** The demise of local-media outlets has had a profound effect on public discourse, with local issues unable to be understood, be debated and break into wider forums. The prevalence of national political, social and economic narratives which often bear little resemblance to what is experienced locally causes cognitive dissonance and has a detrimental impact on trust in democratic institutions.

19. **Fakery:** The sophistication of fake online content is due to grow, making deep fakes much more difficult to distinguish from true representations of events. This has the potential to exacerbate distrust in any content received online through social media or otherwise.

20. **Fringes:** In contemporary digital culture, there is a sizeable online fringe community that behaves and communicates in a manner little understood by the mainstream. However, this activity bleeds into the mainstream online community, often presenting a spark which generates, or at least underpins, wider political ideologies.

21. **Algorithms:** The content readily available to the public online is ever more subjected to algorithmic manipulation, in a manner that is increasingly misunderstood by even those who create such algorithms. Continued AI development and adoption in algorithm generation, without human input and oversight, poses a growing threat to human agency in the digital information space.

22. **Media literacy:** Much of what is discussed herein is unknown to the general public. With the colossal array of media available online, informed citizens increasingly need to know how to access, create, communicate and analyse that information, to understand not only the nature of the information they consume but also how it is created.

23. **Duopoly power:** The dominance of Google and Facebook allows for easy manipulation over information across wide swathes of populations. Equally, the business models and software-engineering, as opposed to socio-political, mentality of this duopoly have a significant impact on the development of the digital future.

24. **Foreign interference:** The bogeymen of the chaotic online space, accused as purveyors of disinformation, are seen as Russia and China. To a degree, this analysis is correct. But in focusing on them, Western democracies ignore the fact that domestic

players, including the public, are most guilty of contributing to the phenomenon.

25. **Disinformation and disruption:** Russia's disinformation activities, although sponsored by the Kremlin, are largely uncoordinated and aimed at disruption rather than direct influence. However, China's longer-term strategy, especially concerning data, media industries and physical infrastructure, poses a greater threat to Western democracies and others – not least in Africa.

These are key lessons for political communicators working in a chaotic environment of disrupted public spheres. A few specific issues are worth highlighting to inform approaches.

Dual-process thinking

We have already underlined that we should resist the Cartesian fallacy of believing that humans are perfect and disinterested processors of information.

Our system 1 has developed to provide us with answers as quickly and effortlessly as possible. We are "machines for jumping to conclusions", as Kahneman says. We only reluctantly use system 2, when something unexpected occurs which system 1 is unable to deal with. This is true at the most basic level. Social psychologist Daniel Gilbert, in a classic paper, makes a compelling case that we automatically believe every statement we hear and only later, if we have compelling reasons, go back and assess whether it is true or not – for example, because it does not cohere with beliefs we already hold (Gilbert, 1991). In Kahneman's terms, believing is an operation of system 1, but disbelieving is strictly in the remit of system 2. If system 2 is busy, we will be much less likely to check the work of system 1.

The role of cognitive depletion has been noted in a range of psychological experiments. "System 1 is gullible and biased to believe. System 2 is in charge of doubting and unbelieving, but System 2 is sometimes busy, and often lazy" (Kahneman, 2012, p. 81). Examples of system 1 laziness in jumping to conclusions include the halo effect – the tendency to presume on the basis of a first-impression emotion (good or bad) that this applies to everything else about the object of consideration. If you like the president's strong jutting jaw, you will like his policies too. System 1 of course uses only what is available without effortful looking.

The bottom line: target system 1. Make something difficult for the audience, and the vast majority just will not expend energy trying to understand it.

Framing, priming, agenda-setting

These concepts used to be mainstays of traditional political communications, whereby themes of political public discourse were defined through the mainstream media. However, given the plethora of channels available to the public, the efficacy of this system is waning, as the public increasingly selects and even produces its own frames from sources outside the mainstream media.

As such, political communicators must account for the network effects on these new frames. Communication professors Sharon Meraz and Zizi Papacharissi have examined such effects in the context of Egypt's 2011 uprisings, showing "fluid, iterative processes inherent in networked framing as frames were persistently revised, rearticulated, and redispersed by both crowd and elite" (2013, p. 138). Equally, the examination by researcher Leo Stewart and others of the phenomenon in the Black Lives Matter discourse is instructional (2017).

The key here is, first, to accept that frames are no longer controlled by the traditional political power structures and, second, to ensure that frames are identified early to counter or engage in them, or to co-opt them if necessary and possible. This requires extreme vigilance in terms of media monitoring, way beyond the press-clippings approach, and consistent and sustained discourse analysis. Early identification of frames may require more focus on conversations in the deeper, fringe elements and platforms. Monitoring of mainstream media and conventional social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, may indicate such only after dominant frames have already developed.

Rebutting and debunking

Debunking has become something of a growth area in science.[38] Even meta-analyses of studies are now available. For example, in "Debunking: A Meta-Analysis of the Psychological Efficacy of Messages Countering Misinformation" (Chan et al., 2017), researchers analysed studies, published from 1994 to 2015, focusing on false social and political news accounts, including misinformation in reports of robberies; investigations of a warehouse fire and traffic accident; the supposed existence of death panels in the US 2010 Affordable Care Act; positions of US political candidates on Medicaid; and a report on whether a candidate had received donations from a convicted criminal.

The researchers made three recommendations for debunking misinformation:

1. **Reduce arguments that support misinformation:** News accounts about misinformation should not inadvertently repeat or belabour detailed thoughts in support of the misinformation.
2. **Engage audiences in scrutinising and counter-arguing information:** Educational institutions should promote a state of healthy scepticism. When trying to correct misinformation, it is beneficial to have the audience involved in generating counter-arguments.
3. **Introduce new information as part of the debunking message:** People are less likely to accept debunking when the initial message is just labelled as wrong, rather than countered with new evidence.

The authors encouraged the continued development of alerting systems for debunking misinformation, such as Snopes.com (fake news), RetractionWatch.com (scientific retractions) and FactCheck.org (political claims), as contributing to the monitoring of false information production and combating it (2017, p. 14).

To sum up, we defend our pre-existing beliefs as strongly as we can, but our ability to do so is not endless. In the end, the facts will – for most people – change what we believe.

Repetition

The above points deal more with the active discussion and challenging of others' beliefs. But if we are honest, most of us do not like to challenge our beliefs most of the time and thus do not like to engage in such discussions. In fact, we have a strong tendency to seek out information sources that are unlikely to challenge what we already know. So, let us look at how we challenge ourselves when we call to mind and monitor what we believe.

Here, too, the news is not good. We are likely to be misled by the number of times we hear things, our memory automatically adjusting to make more frequently repeated information – such as that we receive from friendly media or social-media networks – seem more accurate. The illusory-truth effect was first observed by psychologists Lynn Hasher, David Goldstein and Thomas Toppino (Hasher et al., 1977), who found that subjects rated repeated statements as more probably true than new ones.

Repetition has another effect: it leads to familiarity. Due to the effect of the availability heuristic, familiar statements will thus also be rated as more true, as long as the source of the information is not recollected, which is a conscious process (Begg et al., 1992). In another study, researchers found that repeating false claims would not only increase their availability and thus believability but might also result in the creation of false memories about the source (Polage, 2012). Professors of organisational behaviour Alison Fragale and Chip Heath showed that the more familiar the information seems, the more credible the source from which it is assumed to have originated is perceived to be (2004, p. 224).

Truth and trust

Trust is an important part of the motivated-reasoning process because the assessed truth of sources depends on trust. Thus we tend to consider as evidence only information from trusted media or other sources, such as politicians. Recall that trust depends on one's assessment of both the good intentions of the trustee and the trustee's competence in the area in which he or she is providing information.

In highly partisan environments, even when a source is clearly lying or inaccurate, supporters of the source may still trust, because the honesty and good intentions part is being upheld. Claiming you have privileged access to the truth and thus should be trusted in terms of competence is not enough. It has the opposite effect of the one you are trying to achieve, if you are not also judged to be honest.

This was shown in a remarkable paper, which has major ramifications for those looking to combat populism: "The Authentic Appeal of the Lying Demagogue: Proclaiming the Deeper Truth about Political Illegitimacy", published in the *American Sociological Review* (Hahl et al., 2018). It found that voters may recognise a candidate as insincere and inconsiderate but support him or her because of his or her perceived authenticity. The research was important because it was not based merely on a survey and analysis of Trump voters, but rather the hypothesis was tested in an entirely simulated political context. The authors noted,

> *Analyses of the [US presidential] election results have tended to focus on how various factors — cultural differences, media bubbles, partisan commitments, and gender stereotypes — could lead some voters to disregard a candidate's lies or demagoguery. But … under certain circumstances, voters appreciate a candidate precisely* because *they recognize him as a "lying demagogue" and thus perceive him to be their "authentic champion" for challenging a political establishment they regard as illegitimate.* (Eastwood, 2018)

"I need to stress that there appears to be nothing special about Trump voters," one of the authors noted. "Anyone can find a lying demagogue authentically appealing if they are feeling sufficiently aggrieved. Indeed, our experiments work regardless of whether the subjects were Trump voters or Clinton voters" (Eastwood, 2018). If one group perceives the political system as flawed or illegitimate, then the demagogue who refuses to play by its rules – one of which is claiming to possess and respect the truth – and calls it out cannot lose, as he is telling a bigger truth even if he obviously lies about everything else.

Reassuring authoritarians

As we saw from Stenner's prescient remarks about what triggers and what can reassure authoritarians, a focus on "parading, talking about, and applauding our sameness" can be effective (Stenner, 2005, p. 330). There appears to be limited research on this, but some practical experience in the political sphere would appear to support it.

For example, Operation Libero,[39] a Swiss political movement, has so far won four referendums introduced by the populist Swiss People's Party on the expulsion of foreigners who have broken the law, the provision of legal support for asylum seekers, naturalisation and the abolition of the country's public broadcasting (Kleiner, 2018). The movement's success has been not to talk about what the policy means for migrants, but to focus on what it means for the Swiss. Recent slave-law protests in Hungary are the first major challenge to Orbán and appeared only after laws affecting the majority were passed (Karasz and Kingsley, 2018).

The above research might lead us to believe that it is essential to understand the values of those you are trying to convince – and it is. But taking others' values too much on board can be counterproductive. The temptation to appease populists either by fighting on their battleground or by co-opting their agenda, as has been tried by a number of conservative parties, can be strong. The Swiss experience shows that you do not have to accept the choice of battlefield. Clinton's recent advice to the EU to deal with migration to defeat populism is misguided, mistaking an issue for a value and potentially undermining support from the majority (Wintour, 2018).

Being too open to the other side can have deleterious effects on your own. In "Perspective Taking and Self-Persuasion: Why 'Putting Yourself in Their Shoes' Reduces Openness to Attitude Change", researchers found that putting yourself in someone else's shoes reduces openness to changing your mind, because it requires recognising how different another's values are from yours (Catapano et al., 2019). However, merely inventing arguments the other side might come up with without perspective-taking helps, because it allows one side to see potentially good arguments against its own, without having to take on board values one does not possess.

The medium of the message

The gathering of information – evidence – that might contribute to changing beliefs has an essential role to play. Information about politics comes to us for the most part via news. Recent surveys, however, show online news is beginning to rival television as the principal source of information in some countries. Large percentages (60–70) of the population in Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic countries report receiving at least some news from social media (Gottfried and Shearer, 2017).

Social media may have been particularly important in leveraging minority or extreme views or mis- or disinformation during recent elections in the US, in the UK and elsewhere. Experiments in personalised news deliberately aimed at people judged to possess certain personality traits, thanks to their Facebook profiles, have been made and widely reported in the mainstream media. Several initiatives have been made to tax and regulate the main social-media platforms, Facebook and Google (LSE, 2018).

What role might new media systems play in ensuring that reliable, unbiased, timely and accurate information is made available to everyone, so that we can have an evidence-based debate on our political beliefs and the policies stemming from them? What might be done to enable a more just, informative and useful digital media space in times of political turmoil?

Go local

Political operators and government communicators are often accused of being in a bubble, such as the Westminster bubble. Claims of national progress or successes, often made in good faith and based on reality, often do not reflect the reality outside these bubbles, or are not felt to be credible by those on the ground in their localities.[40] Further, the lack of local media no longer enables a sense of empowerment for that local reality to be given a profile farther afield, or the ability to make sense of claims from the centre.

To restore a degree of engagement, without which there can be no trust, governments need to take seriously their communications at a local level, following the examples set by hyperlocal journalism (Tenor, 2017). Alongside this, investment in local media may reverse the decline of a feeling of voicelessness by local communities regularly expected to contribute to the national body politic.

Get with the programme

Equally, those at the centre of conventional politics are often unaware of culture wars happening on the fringes of digital culture, where divisive political narratives can thrive, sometimes fuelled by disruptive actors sponsored by foreign powers. And they are unable to comprehend or interact with, and therefore take seriously, meme-driven narratives, which often emanate from the fringes and gain traction in the mainstream.

It appears that those successful in modern online communication have a better grasp of, or are intuitively attuned to, those practices prevalent in today's digital culture. The mechanisms, language, tone and style of many of today's populist movements have enabled them to capture the zeitgeist of the online digital space, which has evolved remarkedly rapidly over the last decade.

While many governments have digital services, those services operate very much purely as data centres, despite many programmes touting themselves as mechanisms of digital engagement. Such engagement, like any other, requires both sides to speak the same language. Instead, the formality of government engagement jars with many of those engaged, communicating in a manner that is unnatural for digital discourse. This does not require dumbing down. Quite the opposite: it requires often dry, hard and unemotional information to be reconstructed in a way in which the audience can readily and comfortably engage, without losing its substance. This task is not easy – it is why headline writers are so valued in news organisations.

Further, although it may not be appropriate for governments to communicate through the likes of 4chan, a concerted effort must be made to listen to, analyse and understand narratives flourishing on the fringes, including on the dark web. The lessons of the rise of the American alt-right, and the failure of the establishment to understand – never mind even identify – its online crucible, are highly instructive.

Data

Despite our ability for selective exposure, our online digital sourcing is increasingly impinged upon by data-driven algorithms. The successes of data-driven campaigns, such as the Leave campaign in the UK's EU referendum and Trump's presidential campaign in the US, are seductive. While they can bring relatively short-term if highly potent political gain, the use of data to effectively target online audiences has, in itself, the capacity to be highly corrosive to democracy and trust in it. Relying on consensus, around the facts and what they mean, is the cornerstone of democracy, yet multiple interpretations of those facts, tailored to individual predilections, eventually fail to survive contact with harsh political realities. These circumstances lead to an erosion of trust in democracy.

To prevent this creeping erosion, steps must be taken to protect personal data, prevent mass harvesting and curtail data targeting, all within reasonable bounds to allow corporate business models to continue and allow the public to benefit from the positive sides of data usage – a fine balance. The UK government is looking at this seriously but is at pains to point the finger at the tech platforms, which are, after all, providing data-driven services that the public appreciates – and making a nice profit in the process. The EU's GDPR goes some way to address the data issue, but it is questionable to what extent the public is protecting itself under these regulations, or just hitting "Accept cookies" as the default.

Further, the inclusion of foreign-owned data infrastructure in domestic markets has potentially major ramifications for future control of those data and their use in manipulating the content of social-media users. Controlling information no longer requires preventing new information from circulating but rather controlling access to databases and infrastructure capable of storing, monitoring and analysing massive quantities of data.

The example of China is currently a hot topic, not least because foreign owned in this case means a degree of government control. Even extensive data systems developed by national governments for their own publics present the possibility of increased information control which, without sound democratic oversight, have the potential to degrade democratically vital public agency.

Education, education, education

Much of what has been discussed is far beyond the remit of the users of online technology and consumers of media through it. It is contested that standards of media literacy in educational establishments in Western democracies have failed to keep pace with the rapid changes of an increasingly all-encompassing digital-media environment (Kellner and Share, 2007). As has been argued, it may be proposed that the public's analysis of media texts, specifically news, has allowed misunderstanding, miscalculations and manipulation, not least in the sphere of politics, leading to political polarisation.

For citizens to be informed and thereby contribute to the democratic process, they have to understand content, know how the media industry works, understand media effects, appreciate the real world and be able to self-reflect and -critique (Potter, 2004). Serious investment in media literacy, threaded deeply in the fabric of national curriculums, is urgently required to prepare the upcoming generation to effectively use digital media, understand its nature and effectively acquire and analyse information from it, safe from manipulation and disinformation.

Introspection

It is tempting for governments to point the finger of blame at others for the parlous state of our information space and its impact on democratic trust and individual critical thinking. Notably, the tech giants and foreign powers are often referred to and treated as scapegoats.

However satisfying the displacement of blame may be, it is partly misguided. The perpetrators of disinformation and manipulation, the disseminators of falsehoods and those eager and willing to embrace them are embedded in our societies. We are quite capable of creating and inflaming the disruption of the digital space ourselves, without the help of China, Russia or other foreign powers. Likewise, we live in, accept and embrace an economic and social framework which, with the sanction of its consumers, encourages the tech giants to sustain a model that encourages disruption, quite literally, and mostly of a digital nature. Ultimately, the consumer drives the market.

A deliciously ironic example of how Western political forces can even take foreign powers' propaganda and use it for their manipulative purposes is pointed out in one of Trump's tweets:

> *China is actually placing propaganda ads in the Des Moines Register and other papers, made to look like news. That's because we are beating them on Trade, opening markets, and the farmers will make a fortune when this is over!* (2018)

Although they are in no way guilt free, the fire and fury often directed at foreign powers and tech giants would be of much better use if turned on our own social, political and economic frameworks and how they interact with digital technology. This requires a great deal of political introspection, as painful as that might be, to examine the deep roots of anger playing out and being displayed on our mobile phones, laptops and tablets.

Public-health model

Epidemiological analogies are common in discussions of social media and disinformation, and herein there is no exception. Viral content, contagion, inoculation: these are words often used in this context. However, this is perhaps more than mere analogy. Researchers are looking more closely at the similarities between the spread of disinformation, fake news and propaganda and actual health epidemics (Kucharski, 2016; Roozenbeek and van der Linden, 2018). Inoculation theory and examination of meme transfer and adaptation is particularly resonant. As media theorist Douglas Rushkoff and others claim,

> *The virus only infects us because it exploits a latent yet intrinsic gap in our cultural code. It mines for our cultural vulnerabilities in order to interpolate itself into the greater memetic matrix … The power of both biological and media viruses reveal less about themselves than they do about their hosts. A virus doesn't make us sick unless we lack an immune system capable of recognizing the shell and then neutralizing the code.* (2018, p. 6)

In this approach, as part of public-policy design focused on the internet, it is suggested that governments consider conceptually viewing the spread of malicious, fake content via social media as akin to an actual biological epidemic, and treating it as such. The development of effective epidemiologically based online mechanisms is far from being realised, but further examination of this may prove fruitful in enabling a more resilient digital public sphere.

Summary and conclusions

We began by describing what we take to be the most important characteristics of the new normal that together constitute the current weakening of democratic institutions and discourse. Globalisation, a massive increase in inequality in developed democracies, a significant decline in trust in public institutions and even democracy itself seem to go hand in hand with the rise of populism, concern with immigration, a return of hate speech, fake news, computational propaganda, disinformation and increasing polarisation between those on either side of political discourse.

In looking at recent research that might offer new insights into this change of environment, we have concentrated in particular on the work of American social psychologists who provide empirical evidence to support the view that many of the otherwise apparently disparate characteristics of the new normal stem from the same cause: the triggering of intolerance in a significant portion of the population due to status and unity threats.

In particular, the approximate one-third of any population that scores highly on personality traits associated with authoritarianism is suggested to be fundamental for understanding both the triggers of intolerance and the difference between authoritarianism and populism, on the one hand, and right-wing conservatism, on the other.

This theory has the advantage of explaining the otherwise strange grouping of characteristics, as well as making a number of counter-intuitive predictions or links that further appear to underline its use.[41] Certainly, many questions remain unanswered: particularly on the definition of terms like trait, predisposition, value and orientation,[42] where much further research is needed. But looking at the current situation in this new light leads potentially both to new explanations and understandings of what is going on and to new possibilities for countering the negative effects of increasing intolerance.

Two key points are worth highlighting. First, the more open a democracy is, the more likely authoritarians are to be triggered. Second, the less-researched but possibly equally important third of the population that has strong anti-authoritarian personality traits is more likely to welcome diversity when authoritarians try to suppress it. Together, these points underline that democracies are genuinely at risk without significant attempts to reduce polarisation.

But as we also saw from the economic, psychological, anthropological and neuroscientific research, all humans, whatever their personalities, suffer from a number of psychological biases that make the still commonly assumed figure of the rational voter a straw man. We do not gather or receive evidence in an unbiased way, we do not carefully weigh it up and consciously come to a conclusion, and we do not remain unemotional when discussing it with others. Instead we avoid consciously working for our opinions, preferring instead to engage in hot cognition, based on affective flags in our memories, seeking to confirm what we already know and avoid contrasting evidence.

Given the above, any kind of intervention aimed at correcting erroneous views to restore trust and faith in democracy will be challenging. However, recent research once again provides some clues as to innovative methods that may be more effective than current ones.

The relevant results are vast and detailed. Tactically, there are many devices that can be used to take better consideration of how the human brain functions to get messages across. But a number of clear strategic assumptions that would be necessary to any such campaign come more clearly into focus as a result of the empirical knowledge that the new research has uncovered.

If our political convictions are based on our moral values, which in turn are based to some extent on our personality traits, then simply expecting that others' views can be corrected by providing more of the right information will not be effective. If we wish to change the views of those who have different views and values from our own, we need to understand that they will not respond to (some would say even understand) narratives and arguments based on appeals to them.

What is more, the recognition that there is an out-group with different values forces us to examine our own and accept that all of us, no matter how difficult mutual understanding might be, base our convictions on moral values that we largely cannot explain. Those of us who are most interested in politics and most highly educated will be better at rationalising why we think what we think, but the fact remains that our convictions are largely arrived at unconsciously. This means that we cannot hope to make significant changes in the views of those we disagree with in any reasonable timeframe.[43] Thus, strategically, the emphasis should be on respect – on coming back to the centre ground, where the status and unity of the majority is safeguarded while the rights of all are guaranteed.

We have also considered the impact and influence of digital technology as a factor in this crisis. Yes, technology has a profound effect on the way we construct our worldviews. Yes, it is subject to all kinds of manipulation and disinformation, and harbours extreme anger and vitriol. And yes, it reacts to our inherent human nature and enables its outward manifestations more rapidly, more widely and more loudly. But at heart, it is the human being, with all its good and bad psychological traits, and behaviours based on experiences through life, that is key to the ultimate impact digital technology has on our existence. And the human being, as a species, has hardly evolved at all during the historical blink of an eye that represents the digital age.

In the short to medium term,[44] humans will continue to create, develop, use, manipulate, profit from, abuse and embrace digital technology. However, if a government's primary role is the security and protection of its citizens, then in circumstances where many have derided the future existence of the state, it is incumbent on governments to step up to that role with regard to the digital environment. If we citizens not only sanction a system based on free-market capitalism but also value our human agency, then we must accept and demand a degree of safeguarding available only from an open, transparent democratic state. And our political systems must react accordingly, providing protection for their citizens while avoiding tendencies to authoritarianism and exclusion of human agency. As a previous British ambassador urges,

> *We need a Berlin Wall moment for the internet, a digital Declaration of Independence. Not just to ensure that technology liberates our creativity and ingenuity. But to protect our individual freedom from the internet and those who control it.* (Fletcher, 2019)

Further, governments need to increasingly focus on local communication, local news capabilities and contemporary digital culture. A disconnect not only with what is happening, and being experienced, at a local level but also with the nature of informal contemporary communication, both on the fringes and in the mainstream, is resulting in a cognitive dissonance in the public psyche. An ability for government communication to resonate, understand and be understood, both locally and culturally, is vital to re-engage with an increasingly distrustful and confused public.

Yet ultimately, although a massive factor, this is less about technology and more about humans, and how we relate and react to information in a digital age. At the end of considering the causes of the current crisis, it can be easy to gain the impression that much of the blame is to be laid squarely at the door of those with authoritarian traits. But we should remember that we all have different values and are subject to self-serving prejudices – for good evolutionary reason. Pointing the finger of blame at others, domestic or foreign, falsely abrogates the need for serious introspection.

We need to remember that we are a social species that lives best in groups and communities. There is good evidence to show that humans reason and perform better in groups than alone. This is intuitively clear to all of us who have ever gone to school or worked in a team. All of us bring strengths to the table that one person alone cannot possess in the same measure. In particular, having a few group members who are slightly quicker to fear, be suspicious, flee, prize our group over that of outsiders, ensure that we remain and work as a group and establish and police our hierarchies is a long-term survival advantage.

Thus we cannot and do not want to get rid of those different perspectives in our midst. Those constantly seeking novelty, open to unknown outsiders above all else and trusting beyond measure are wonderful, creative, inspiring types – but they can also lead groups to disaster.

As always, we have to find a happy medium, where those of us who fear are reassured, and those who do not are reminded that on occasion they should. Hopefully, more knowledge about how we humans get to be the way we are can help bridge the gap of understanding that in times like these risks carrying us all away.

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Notes

[1] Many definitions of this term are possible, but we use that of political scientist Yascha Mounk, which makes a useful distinction between democracy as a system for expressing the popular will and liberalism as the system of checks and balances which constrain it and defend the rights of the individual.

[2] Commentators and established politicians were clearly shocked by phenomena such as the election of Trump and the vote for Brexit. This is probably due to the magnitude and unexpectedness of the victories – but populism has been on the rise in Europe since the 1990s.

[3] In 2011, the phone-hacking scandal put the press itself under the spotlight. It was revealed that senior figures at News International and the Metropolitan Police had long been aware of the extent of phone-hacking practices – and they had lied about how much they knew. This led to the closure of the *News of the World* and the resignation of the prime minister's press secretary, Andy Coulson.

[4] In reality there is another point. Experts are more reliable in some fields of study than in others. Political scientist Philip Tetlock, in *Expert Political Judgement: how good is it?* (2017), made a devastating analysis of the predictive powers of political pundits and found, to use Kahneman's words, that "people who spend their time, and earn their living, studying a particular topic produce poorer predictions than dart-throwing monkeys" (Kahneman, 2012, p. 219).

[5] "There are three main reasons for the sharp rise of populism in Europe," said Cas Mudde, a professor in international affairs. "The great recession, which created a few strong left populist parties in the south, the so-called refugee crisis, which was a catalyst for right populists, and finally the transformation of non-populist parties into populist parties – notably Fidesz [in Hungary] and Law and Justice [in Poland]" (Lewis et al, 2018). As we see in our analysis, this is unlikely to be correct.

[6] The Global Populism Database is the most up-to-date, comprehensive and reliable repository of populist discourse in the world. It was commissioned by the *Guardian* and built by Team Populism, a global network of scholars dedicated to the scientific study of the causes and consequences of populism.
[7] In the 2014 elections for the European Parliament, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) came top of the poll nationally, winning 24 seats of the 73 allocated to the UK – more than either the Conservatives or Labour.
[8] For examples, see (M. S. Levendusky, 2013) and (Lodge and Taber, 2013).
[9] For more examples, see (Dearden, 2017).
[10] Some evidence exists that EU migration has a small net positive effect and extra-EU migration to the UK a small negative effect.
[11] For an alternative view, see (Simcox, 2018).
[12] See also YourMorals.org, where you can take the survey and contribute to the data.
[13] The graph shows Haidt's original five aspects. Liberty/oppression was added more recently.
[14] See chapters two and three of (Haidt, 2013).
[15] Lakoff's contention is supported by an interesting study that compared the narratives used by Conservatives and Liberals about the development of their values and explicitly jointly tested Lakoff and Haidt's theories (McAdams et al., 2008).
[16] These are openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism, represented by the acronym OCEAN (Nettle, 2007).
[17] Stenner notes only that it is correlated but does not say whether limited cognitive ability causes authoritarianism or vice versa (Stenner, 2005, p. 146).
[18] In societies where the culture is already rather intolerant, authoritarians are triggered less, and if they are, have less effect on the society overall.
[19] University towns in England, for example, were strongly Remain.

[20] They do not state a reason for the increase in such deaths, but they too note the correlation with the lack of economic progress of the same group over the same time period.
[21] As Mutz claims in the title of her 2018 paper, “Status threat, not economic hardship, explains the 2016 presidential vote” (Mutz, 2018).
[22] There is confusion in the description of social dominance orientation as both a personality trait and a political opinion. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this, but more work needs to be done on the differences between terms such as predisposition, trait and personality. Some of these issues are discussed in “Above and Below Left–Right: Ideological Narratives and Moral Foundations” (Haidt et al., 2009).
[23] This raises the key problem of the level of psychological traits and their permanence over time. Stenner appears to think traits are stable and basic, with SDO (intolerant behaviour) being triggered by threat. If SDO has gone up, the trigger has been pulled.
[24] See, for example, *Slander: Liberal Lies About the American Right*, a book by conservative columnist Ann Coulter, who criticises “the left’s hegemonic control of the news media”. The book was a number-one *New York Times* bestseller in 2002, holding that spot for eight weeks (Coulter, 2002). Another term in use is cultural Marxism: a conspiracy theory based on Nazi anti-Jewish propaganda that saw promotion of liberalism and/or communism as a plot to destroy traditional and national values.
[25] For examples, see (O. Jones, 2019) and (Waterson, 2019).
[26] Originally proposed by Abelson (1963).
[27] An internet cultural notion, the Greater Internet Fuckwad Theory suggests that a normal person given anonymity and an audience tends to become a “total fuckwad”.
[28] Godwin’s law is an internet adage asserting that as an online discussion progresses, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler grows.

[29] The Bloodbath of B-R5RB was a massive-scale virtual battle fought in the game EVE Online. Involving almost 8,000 players globally over 21 hours, it is considered one of the largest player-versus-player online interactive battles ever, achieving an iconic status in the gaming community.
[30] The Momo Challenge was a 2018 internet hoax referencing a nonexistent challenge that was allegedly spread on social media. It was then reported, through mainstream media, that children and adolescents were being enticed by a user named Momo to perform dangerous tasks including violent attacks, self-harm and even suicide. However, despite the mainstream media hysteria, the number of actual complaints was relatively small, and no law-enforcement agency has claimed that anyone was harmed as a direct result of it.
[31] The Daily Me is a term popularised by MIT Media Lab founder Nicholas Negroponte to describe a virtual daily newspaper customised for an individual's tastes.
[32] Jensen identifies at least 34 attempts to define fake news (Jensen, 2018, p. 116).
[33] See https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10155436776263872. A Labour Party video attacked Theresa May's record on police cuts. In the video, the party claimed there were 4,650 police job cuts by 2011; 9,655 job cuts by 2012; 17,125 by 2015; and 20,000 by 2017. Official government data substantiate these claims. The video is confusing, however, because it at no point explains that the figures are cumulative. This could leave one to believe that 17,125 police jobs were cut in 2015 alone. See also https://medium.com/1st-draft/types-of-misinformation-during-the-uk-election-36dc00c93e58 and https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10155027173824279. The attack ad on Jeremy Corbyn by the Conservative Party, which spliced together a variety of speeches into seconds-long sound bites, suggests that he did not condemn bombings by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and called for the abolition of the army. In fact, he condemned all bombings – including those of the IRA – while his "abolish the army" quote was taken out of context. The video has had

more than 7 million views. See https://medium.com/1st-draft/types-of-misinformation-during-the-uk-election-36dc00c93e58.
[34] Of note, Russia is suffering blowback from anti-vaccination disinformation, and it is reported that the Russian Health Ministry is drafting legislation to ban fake news anti-vaccination websites. See https://gmpnews.net/2019/04/russia-is-preparing-legislative-amendments-banning-anti-vaccination-websites/.
[35] China is not the only concern here. The Snowden files also indicated the scale of access to personal data provided to both UK and US governments by internet providers.
[36] Such statements need to be considered with healthy scepticism. We are unaware of any literature that makes claims about what personality traits determine such labels, how they would be distributed in such groups and how they distribute over entire populations.
[37] Here again, we need to be careful about terms. When authors talk about emotion, they often use it interchangeably with the term affect. Lodge and Taber underline that it is valence (good or bad) which is important, and that emotion would be better dropped as a term.
[38] For a short practical guide, see *The Debunking Handbook* (Cook and Lewandowsky, 2012).
[39] For more on Operation Libero, see https://www.operation-libero.ch/de/bewegung.
[40] Despite high levels of centralised social control, even the Chinese government appreciates the value of local licence and agency (Moore, 2018, p. 238) and, contrary to popular opinion in the West, allows a degree of dissent online (King et al., 2013).
[41] For example, authoritarians seem to be generally less trusting than those with other personality traits; 94% of Brexit voters favour the death penalty; and Trump voters come from all income levels.
[42] Some of these issues are discussed in “Above and Below Left–Right: Ideological Narratives and Moral Foundations” (Haidt et al, 2009).

[43] So the progressive dream that humanity is gradually shifting from retrograde to progressive views must be seriously curtailed – though over centuries, there has been a major shift in the arena of the debate. For example, look at the increase in support for gay marriage in the same societies in which populism has gained ground in the last two decades.

[44] AI is increasingly developing algorithms autonomously, an area of concern which needs increased government oversight.

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Among its many virtues a stand out of this work is that it is not afraid to confront the nature/nuture debate and accept that we ignore the nature side of political organisation at our peril. 'Nature or Nurture' helps us to understand the emotions which are splintering our political systems.

Tim Marshall, journalist and broadcaster. Author of 'Divided - Why We're Living In An Age Of Walls' and 'Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know About Global Politics'

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