

OXFORD IB DIPLOMA PROGRAMME



2020 EDITION

THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

COURSE COMPANION

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Marija Uzunova Dang

Marija is an international educator with experience across India, Europe, and North America. She specializes in the IBDP Core, experiential education, and critical pedagogies of place. Marija has served as TOK Coordinator and Head of Outdoor Education, with a special focus on curriculum design and community engagement programming.

Her background is in classical music and anthropology of science. She was a member of the IB curriculum development team for the 2020 Theory of Knowledge course.



Arvin Singh Uzunov-Dang

With a decade of experience as an educator, Arvin challenges students to find their agency in the narrative of global engagement, stewardship, and justice. His teaching focuses on critically examining the incentives and structures that drive power, access, policy, and the erosion of traditional ways of knowing and being. Arvin has taught economics and TOK and served on the senior leadership team at UWC Mahindra College, where he is currently Head of Advancement.

He previously managed a portfolio of transformative experiential programs spanning ecological and adventure education; citizenship and justice; and service learning and community engagement.

2 Knowledge and politics



Politics is concerned with the acquisition and application of power, in its many forms, as well as all collective decisions that are contestable. In knowledge and politics we refer not only to political systems and structures, but also the wider sense of political life, in which we gather to deliberate and make decisions, as citizens as well as members of communities.

In this chapter we consider the tensions in knowledge and politics, such as the differences between knowledge and opinion; facts and values; and reliability and neutrality. We answer the questions: why is knowledge political, and how does this affect knowledge? Despite longstanding negative connotations, politics is a way—perhaps a good way, perhaps the only way—of navigating divisive issues and stubborn problems, of attempting to change the world for the better.

Initial discussion

- Is politics the best method available to us for changing the world?
- Is being knowledgeable a prerequisite for effective and active citizenship?
- What attributes are necessary or desirable in a political leader?
- What role does, and should, politics play in the institutions where knowledge is produced and disseminated?
- How are agreement and disagreement on matters of fact dealt with within politics?
- What gives validity to a knowledge claim in politics?

I. SCOPE

Questions about knowledge intersect in powerful and complex ways with questions about politics. For example, what we know about the world, how we know it, and who can make claims about it are entangled with questions about who has the power to make and maintain order in the world. The answers to these questions form what we call a “epistemic-political system”, and vary across historical and geographic contexts. Our present system has been called a modern-liberal system, and is being challenged by various ecological, cultural, economic, spiritual and political crises of our own making.

The way out of these crises might require different answers to better questions about knowledge and politics, and even the

emergence of a new system. It is an exciting and urgent time to be coming together to overcome the divisive issues and wicked problems of the world today.

This book explores and examines the processes through which facts are arrived at, scrutinizes the people and motivations behind fact-making, and traces the implications of accepting or rejecting something as fact. We have all heard many times, “these are the facts”, but can facts speak for themselves? Matters of fact are supposedly disinterested, neutral, independent, or in other words, beyond politics. But what were the ideas in the past that shaped this way of thinking about facts?

Box 2.1: Hobbes and Boyle on knowledge, power and faith

The way we think about the relationship between knowledge and politics is still strongly influenced by a debate between Thomas Hobbes and Robert Boyle in the mid-17th century. The debate concerned what counts as knowledge, and where, how and by whom the boundaries of legitimate knowledge are drawn. Boyle and Hobbes had opposing views on this subject.

Boyle’s approach reflected the emerging experimental sciences and he argued that people, like scientists, could objectively agree on “facts”, if they followed strict processes and were disinterested in outcomes; Boyle’s “facts” related to a “nature” that existed outside of “society”. In contrast, Hobbes doubted that people could be objective or sufficiently

disinterested, and believed that all human activity was political.

“Boyle’s notion of communities organized around their own methods and rules but bounded by limited domains not only led to the creation of different scientific disciplines but, more importantly, separated science from politics and religion ... The final consequence of this would be that power, faith ... and knowledge would be separated, each with its own institutions, rules, and procedures.” (Stalder 2019)

This idea defined the modern-liberal era but now appears to be breaking down, perhaps vindicating Hobbes’ suspicions that knowledge is always political and that disinterestedness is impossible.

Grappling with the political dimensions of knowledge-making and knowledge-sharing poses an urgent challenge for us today: in being suspicious of ideology that masquerades as fact,

how do we guard against dismissing legitimate knowledge? How do we distinguish between ideology and knowledge?

For discussion

Let's agree on the facts

There has been great concern, especially in recent years, that people ignore facts and dismiss evidence when it contradicts their beliefs.

1. To what extent do you agree that this is the case?

In Chapter 1, we introduced the counterclaim that people are not ignoring “the facts”; they do not accept them as facts in the first place and choose to believe a different set of facts. Facts appear to have become a signal for identity and political solidarity.

2. Who can legitimately establish what the facts are and who can legitimately dispute them?
3. Is there any knowledge that is beyond dispute?
4. Is it important for at least some knowledge to be non-contestable?

For practice, consider and critically explore to what extent universal human rights are non-contestable. Can you think of any other “universal facts”? Aren't all facts universal?

“Before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts ... for in their opinion fact depends entirely on the power of man who can fabricate it.”
[Arendt 1951]

though: have Meatless Mondays and all-gender bathrooms been politicized, or were eating meat every day and having gender-segregated bathrooms in public spaces already political statements? What aspects of life have been depoliticized?

The boundaries of politics are difficult to draw. Many of our choices, actions and claims are based on assumptions and values that are contestable, and therefore fall within the domain of politics. Arguably, this is the case whether or not we are aware of our assumptions and whether or not our actions are intentionally political.

I.1 Is everything political?

It is often said that anything can be political. The clothes people choose to wear, the music they enjoy, the kind of language they use, the food they eat, and especially the food they do not eat, are all discussed as political acts. Consider



For reflection

Check your politics

1. Consider the politics of wearing a Che Guevara t-shirt. Does something important change if the person wearing it does not know who Che Guevara is?
2. Reflect on the politics of clothing that does not carry an explicit political message, such as buying second-hand items to minimize your ecological footprint. To what extent is this action political?
3. There is the idea that not only are our actions and words political, so too are our inaction and silence. Describe some examples of when this is the case.

Those who are cautious about the politics of everything have urged others to keep politics out of sport or science, Halloween or superhero movies, to leave it out of the classroom and away from the dinner table. This approach can come from a belief that there are spheres of life where politics does not belong, which should be protected from attempts to politicize them.

“Politicizing” means making something about politics. It is often also interpreted

as, co-opting an event for political gain, as manipulation or misrepresentation in order to score political points. It is condemned when the timing or context in which it is done is seen as inappropriate. National tragedies or disasters are usually seen as the wrong context for politics.

With recent extreme weather events in view—droughts, floods, wildfires and storms—some commentators have suggested that political silence is not a neutral stance. Maintaining silence would be a failure to hold policy-makers to account for past and current decisions that affect the impact of the disasters.

Whereas rainfall and earthquakes may not inherently have a political dimension, disaster preparedness, response and recovery do. Looking closely at the aftermath of disasters we see how vulnerability intersects with racial and class inequalities. We also see how the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events already affects communities that are on the frontlines of the climate crisis. Some therefore argue that natural disasters are not at all apolitical, but have in fact been depoliticized.

A bit of historical distance can help us gain perspective on this issue. Let's consider examples from the previous two centuries that still reverberate today.

For discussion

Unnatural disasters



In the 2001 book *Late Victorian Holocausts*, historian and political activist Mike Davis examines a series of extreme climatic events in

the last quarter of the 19th century. These were the result of a sustained rise in surface temperatures in the Pacific Ocean, a phenomenon known today as El Niño, causing droughts across the tropics. In the final decades of the 19th century, the consequent famines had death tolls in the tens of millions of people across China, India and Brazil.

The outside human cost of these droughts, Davis argues, was not a natural disaster, but one created by European empires. El Niño weather patterns were well known in those parts of the world, and over generations local ways of being and knowing, expressed through Indigenous knowledge, infrastructure

and administrative systems, had developed to cope with drought. Imperial rule actively undermined or dismantled these systems with devastating consequences. For example, the millions in India who perished in the 1877 famine did not die as a result of food shortages; in that year, Indian grain exports to Britain reached record numbers. Davis similarly shows how Chinese government administrators were skilled at alleviating food shortages in times of drought, such that few people actually starved, but that this resilience was later devastated through Victorian imperialism, leaving millions to perish in subsequent droughts.

Bad climate versus bad system

The El Niño event of 1743–44 was described as exceptional in its impact on the plains of north China. “The spring monsoon failed two years in a row, devastating winter wheat ... scorching winds withered crops and farmers dropped dead in their fields from sunstroke. Provincial grain supplies were utterly inadequate ...” (Davis 2001). Yet unlike later droughts, there was no mass starvation.

Under the skillful leadership of the Confucian administration, great stores of grain were mobilized to affected areas, using ships where necessary. The administrators brought in 85% of the relief grain from stores outside the area of drought. This sustained two million peasants for eight months until the weather normalized and agriculture resumed, an extraordinary act “no contemporary European society guaranteed subsistence as a human right to its peasantry ...” (Davis 2001) and nor did any have the capacity to do so like this. Indeed, while the Chinese peasants were saved from starvation by their administration, millions of Europeans were dying from famine and hunger-related diseases following freezing winters and summer droughts between 1740 and 1743. As Davis is careful to point out, this famine-defence was not an isolated case, and not even the most impressive. There were five other El Niño disasters and seven other flood disasters in that

century. Each time, the disaster relief was swift and extensive, unlike the responses in later years, such as 1877, 1899, and 1958–61.

“State capacity in eighteenth-century China ... was deeply impressive”, says Davis, with skilled administrators, a unique system to stabilize grain prices (overseen by the Emperor himself), large and well-managed grain stores, and “incomparable hydraulic infrastructures” and canals (Davis 2001). The fact that the Emperor was personally involved led to accuracy in reporting and more frequent innovation; disaster relief *was* politics, at least in China. Contemporary European monarchs were by comparison much less interested in the minutiae of grain prices and famine prevention.

The droughts of the next century, in 1876 and 1899, would not have caused millions of deaths if not for imperial intervention. Unlike in 1744, these administrators did not benefit from deliberately maintained budget surpluses and large reserves of grain. The difference, Davis asserts, was that the Chinese state in 1876 had been “enfeebled and demoralized”, and the disaster relief efforts reduced to cash relief and “humiliating foreign charity” (Davis 2001). The intensity of the El Niño cycle was an important factor, but so too was the dismantling of the social, institutional and technical means for coping with that risk. “India and China, in other words, did not enter modern history as the helpless ‘lands of famine’ so universally enshrined in the Western imagination” (Davis 2001). They were enfeebled by Victorian imperialism and the loss of sovereignty. To learn how, you will have to read Davis’s book.

Consider the following questions.

1. Is it possible to make politically neutral claims about the causes and consequences of huge natural disasters?
2. What types of claims about disasters can never be free of politics?
3. How is this example similar to or different from the way we speak about the climate crisis today?

It may feel strange to have the politics of disaster relief and, for example, the politics of pockets on women’s clothing on the same spectrum. Whether or not everything is political, it is still necessary to pay attention to what is being politicized, or depoliticized, by whom and for what reason.

If this all sounds too much, you may wonder: can politics be avoided? Or is the very idea that you can opt in or out of politics a question of privilege? Political decisions affect the realities of people differently based on their relative power. Consider what it means to have the ability to disengage from politics, or to be cushioned from the consequences of political decisions. Do you have a responsibility to be informed and knowledgeable about politics, including the kinds of issues that do not affect you?

This brings us on to knowledge. Politics permeates human life and so knowledge, being a human enterprise, will have a political dimension as well. This is why we grapple with issues of power and justice in the realm of knowledge. Part of what makes TOK exciting is that the answers to questions about knowledge are contestable. In comparison, there are many educational programmes and systems around the world in which knowledge is not contestable. What does that say about the politics of the TOK course and the IB Diploma Programme? Consider this question in the context of the next discussion activity.

A political lens on knowledge draws our attention to when and why we give authority to some forms of knowledge and not others. It engages us with whether, and how, we privilege some ways of knowing and not others. A political lens also makes visible the power relations at play in knowledge communities.

With this in mind, let’s consider the politics of knowledge in education, one of the main

institutions for disseminating knowledge. Think about the kind of knowledge institution that is your school, the knowledge community of IB Diploma Programme teachers and students worldwide and the knowledge system within which the IB sits.

Practising skills: Identifying assumptions and drawing implications

 Search terms: presentation history of ibo



Consider this presentation on the history of the International Baccalaureate, outlining the key influences on its educational model and approach.

1. As a result of the ideas on which the IB was founded, what are some explicit and implicit assumptions about knowledge in an IB education?
2. Given its history, what knowledge traditions are omitted or underrepresented in the IB?
3. What are the implications of exporting the IB as a “better” educational model to places around the world that have knowledge traditions that are not reflected in the IB?

As we move on, continue to reflect critically on the knowledge you are encountering at school and in the world. It is a practice that will serve you well beyond the IB Diploma Programme. No doubt there are gaps in the curriculum, as well as in this book. You are invited to notice them, understand how they might arise and consider what it would take to address them. Think about how power and politics affect which perspectives are emphasized, marginalized or absent, in your classroom and in a global, international curriculum.

I.2 Expert knowledge and governance

Throughout this book we engage with the tension caused by incoherent expertise, or what we can do when experts disagree with each other. Is there an essential tension between the ideas of expertise and democracy? This section explores issues of authority, participation and trust in the knowledge required for democratic decision-making. We take this discussion further in II.2, which explores the “post-truth” public discourse.

We make frequent decisions to trust the knowledge of experts, for example when we travel by airplane or have surgery. We trust that we are in the hands of competent, qualified professionals with certified expertise and that someone is checking that this is the case. These are personal decisions, about which we can make informed judgments as we navigate our daily lives. Governance, however, includes making judgments and decisions on behalf of other people, often on issues that require a great deal of technical expertise and in situations where there is no obvious answer. How can policy-

makers and politicians ensure that they base decisions on the best knowledge available? What are the responsibilities of experts in advising decision-makers? To what extent can citizens participate in these decisions by contributing knowledge, evaluating claims and making judgments about competing alternatives?

Regardless of where you are in the world, there is no shortage of public policy controversies or failures across the health sector, environmental protection, financial markets or other areas of governance. In some contexts, these visible failings have eroded the public’s trust in political decision-making guided by seemingly partisan expertise. But is there an alternative? Is there another model of governance that addresses the issues in knowledge and politics?

In TOK we concern ourselves not with evaluating specific policy decisions, but with questions about how claims-makers and forms of knowledge acquire legitimacy and authority, and how we can safeguard against bias and self-interest and learn from past mistakes.



Making connections

Politics in science and history

Chapter 7, section II, explores AIDS public health policy in South Africa. Chapter 9, section II, looks at the work of expert commissions between countries to resolve conflicting histories. Comparing these examples, what is the role of politics and how does it affect the credibility and authority of experts?

Take confidence in the fact that TOK is not alone in exploring issues of expertise and public knowledge. Questions about these issues are fundamental to protecting the citizen’s voice in government, and the answers take

different shapes depending on the context and the constraints. If you are curious about what this discussion looks like elsewhere, follow the link to an excellent conversation on public knowledge and the forces that shape it. Hear from Amita Baviskar, from the Institute of Economic Growth in New Delhi, and Rifka Weehuizen, from the University of Strasbourg Institute for Advanced Study. They discuss how expert and layperson knowledge can be integrated into a relationship based on democratic values and participation.

Search terms: public knowledge academic objectivity and teaching profit motivation



For discussion

Expertise and the democratization of knowledge in policy

Working independently, in pairs or a small group, identify a political issue of public relevance that you are already familiar with or curious to learn about. If you are struggling to think of an issue, follow the links to two case studies that would work well.

Search terms: Pisani sex drugs and HIV



This link takes you to a TED Talk by Elizabeth Pisani on sex, drugs and HIV.

Search terms: Leslie The sugar conspiracy



In this article for the UK newspaper the *Guardian*, (7 April 2016), Ian Leslie investigates the view that sugar in our diet, and not fat, is the greatest danger to our health.

In your investigation draw on the questions we have encountered so far and the ones below.

1. What do you know, or what can you imagine, about the experts who guide the people with most power on this issue?
2. What kinds of knowledge should the experts possess?
3. Consider which perspectives are missing or underrepresented.
 - (a) Which groups should be invited to the debate but are not currently involved?
 - (b) What does their absence tell us about which kinds of knowledge are valued?
4. What is the nature and extent of public participation in this policy decision?
5. Which groups are most affected and what kinds of knowledge and power do they possess?

II. PERSPECTIVES

Political issues are discussed by people and groups with various levels of power; they share their opinions, make claims with various degrees of confidence and make judgments about the reliability and validity of other perspectives. This characterizes the public discourse. How can you evaluate different perspectives? How aware are you of the forces that have shaped your political views? What would be sufficiently convincing to change your mind? As we proceed, recall the discussions in Chapter 1 on intellectual humility (in II.2) and thinking patterns and habits (in III.1).

II.1 The Overton window

“The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum—even encourage the more critical and dissident views. That gives people the sense that there’s free thinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate.

[Chomsky 1998]

The “Overton window” is a term used to describe the range of ideas tolerated within public discourse and, therefore, the range of socially and politically acceptable policies in democratic government. Policies outside of this range will appear too extreme—“unthinkable” or “radical”—to be supported by politicians. The window is shaped by the climate of public opinion, and so the media can play a very large role. Note that the window does not necessarily sit near the middle of the political spectrum. Skillful politicians, social commentators and activists in the public sphere can intentionally shift or expand the window through reason and rhetoric. Some may deliberately promote extreme ideas so that slightly less extreme ideas, which were previously outside the window, become more widely accepted by comparison. Think tanks, for example, need not promote particular policies but can rather focus on shifting the window of possibilities,

to make previously unacceptable policies more palatable. This tactic is often used by activist groups too.

It is worth noting that the Overton window is not necessarily a passive construct but rather an assertive and dynamic one—a tool to shape and shift political possibilities. Its point is that the “window is there for the shifting”, and thus it naturalizes ideas and policies as inherently political. Some observers lament this sort of thing, arguing for instance that climate justice and women’s rights should not be politicized, as these issues “speak for themselves”; we interrogate that perspective in I.1.

The next section explores echo chambers and filter bubbles, or how the internet may be contributing to increased polarization and reduced pluralism, by allowing individuals to engage only with content they agree with.

II.2 Is there a post-truth public sphere?

“For too many of us, it’s become safer to retreat into our own bubbles, whether in our neighborhoods or college campuses or places of worship or our social media feeds, surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions. The rise of naked partisanship, increasing economic and regional stratification, the splintering of our media into a channel for every taste—all this makes this great sorting seem natural, even inevitable. And increasingly, we become so secure in our bubbles that we accept only information, whether true or not, that fits our opinions, instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that’s out there.”

(Obama 2017)

The last decade has witnessed repeated references to a post-truth politics, in which discourse is framed by appeals to emotion instead of policy details or facts. Political figures are able to continue with talking points even when media, experts and opposing figures have provided proof that contradicts them. The internet is commonly invoked as having enabled this political culture to gather momentum, with post-truthers being said to influence political outcomes in Brazil, India, Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom. “Post-truth” was made the Oxford Dictionaries’ 2016 Word of the Year owing to its prevalence in the context of Brexit and the US Presidential election.

However, some have claimed the term is misleading. For example a *New Scientist* article stated: “a cynic might wonder if politicians are actually any more dishonest than they used to be” (*New Scientist* 2016). Others believe that it confuses the ideas of empirical and ethical judgments, whereas what is actually happening is a rejection of expert opinions in favour of values-based political signalling. Politically conservative figures have also criticized the selective use of the term by liberal commentators to attack what are matters of ideology, not fact

(Young 2016) and for selectively protecting “liberal facts” (Mantzaris 2016).

It is a great irony of our time that we do not even agree about whether we live in a post-truth world, because the political right accuses the political left of making it up. TOK exists to help us with this very dilemma. We can and should strive to know truth and navigate problems of knowledge, and resist succumbing to views such as “nothing is true and everything is possible”, which, by the way, is the title of a memoir of life in Russia under Vladimir Putin.

Of course, it cannot be claimed that large sections of organized society have suddenly given up on, or stopped caring about, truth. Post-truth refers to a civil discourse where expertise and “facts” appear to be insufficient to sway beliefs; where individuals appear to choose their experts and dismiss others as politically and ideologically biased. There is some behavioural research to suggest that facts alone do not change deeply held beliefs.

Alexios Mantzarlis, Poynter Institute’s head of fact-checking, stated the following.

“Fake news became a catch-all term to mean anything that we don’t particularly like to read.”

(Mantzaris quoted in Kestler-D’Amours 2017)



Later in this chapter we explore how news media that prioritize impartiality can understate the overwhelming scientific consensus, leaving the public with what appears to be a scientific debate

For discussion

Looking out of the Overton window

- How do we know where the Overton window is?
- Would you expect two strangers to agree about what is inside the window? Why or why not?
- Are there some ideas, policies or issues that should not be politicized? If so, how would we achieve that?
- Compare the relative power of the following stakeholders to shift the window: social media organizations, cinema, search engines, print and television media; teachers, journalists, influencers and politicians.
- Recall an example of the window shifting.
 - What was previously unacceptable, but is now policy, and vice versa?
 - What may have caused this?
- Should we suspend new or radical ideas from judgment, for a grace period, until more people have had a chance to consider them?
- To what extent do you agree that an expansion of the Overton window is a sign of progress?
- To what extent is it unethical for politicians and thought leaders to support ideas and policies that they do not believe in, with the goal of expanding or shifting the window of public discourse?
- If you had the influence, what ideas would you bring into the Overton window?
- To what extent has the internet, through social media and online discussion groups, changed the nature of public discourse and the Overton window?

as opposed to scientific fact. Robert Eshelman has argued that, beginning in the 1990s, fossil-fuel industry groups seized this opportunity and accused reporters of bias if they portrayed global warming as a settled fact, while funding research to prove it was not. The tobacco industry used similar tactics in the decades before. These industries succeeded in politicizing the issue and spawning decades of public debate though the scientific consensus had been clear. This is the problem of “false balance” implicated in many public controversies on scientific issues.

Professor Jayson Harsin has argued that a convergent set of recent developments is creating a post-truth society. These developments include the following.

- Scientifically and technologically sophisticated methods of political communication and persuasion are used (as we explore later in the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica episode) as well as strategic use of rumours and disinformation.
- An “attention economy” exists, characterized by information overload combined with a lack of society-wide trusted sources of news. User-generated content within social networks has become more influential, while at the same time there appears to be less attention for, or trust in, fact-checking websites.
- Filter bubbles curate content delivered via social media and search engines according

to what a user “likes”, as opposed to what is factual. We explore filter bubbles and echo chambers in II.4.

For reflection

A post-truth society

1. What are the significant political issues being debated in your community?
2. To what extent is your opinion about these issues influenced by:
 - (a) the news
 - (b) the opinions of friends shared on social media
 - (c) the opinions of close family and friends?
3. Have you noticed people in your network questioning the claims of experts? If so, in what context, and on what grounds?



Box 2.2: Do lies spread faster than the truth?

Two recent studies have suggested that lies can spread faster than the truth. As you read the details, though, consider the warning in Chapter 8, III.1, about sampling biases in behavioural science research.

Researchers at MIT investigated 126,000 Twitter stories, shared by 3 million people over 4.5 million times. The researchers’ conclusion was that lies spread further, faster, deeper and wider than truth in all categories

of information. Interestingly, fake political news spreads faster than fake news about natural disasters, terrorism, science or financial markets. The authors specifically found that humans, and not Twitter bots, are more likely to spread fake news. Why is this the case? The researchers speculate that false information tends to be more original than true news and that people are more likely to share surprising information (Vosoughi *et al* 2018).



Jeff Hancock, a psychologist at Stanford University, attributes the rapid spread of fake news on social networks to “emotional contagion”. In 2012, Facebook ran an experiment that showed some users more positive posts and others more negative posts. Hancock helped interpret the results and found that people exposed to less negative emotion in their news feed would write with

less negative and more positive emotion in their own posts, and vice versa. In a March 2019 interview for the BBC, Hancock explained that people seemed to respond with emotions that match those of the original post. Not only did the emotions match, Hancock stated, but the more intense the emotion, the more likely the content was to go viral.

Practising skills: Evaluating perspectives

Below are two articles, selected for their differing viewpoints. Consider to what extent the authors agree or disagree on the following issues.

1. What do the different authors say is the source of post-truth phenomenon?
2. To what extent do they consider post-truth politics to be a serious threat to knowledge?
3. How do they describe the changes in the way we acquire and share knowledge?
4. What strategies do they suggest for a way out of the post-truth crisis?

Source 1: “Post-truth? It’s Pure Nonsense” (The *Spectator*, 10 June 2017)

Search terms:
Spectator Scruton
Post-truth



For as long as there have been politicians, they have lied, fabricated and deceived. The manufacture of falsehood has changed over time, as the machinery becomes more sophisticated. Straight lies give way to sinuous spin, and open dishonesty disappears behind Newspeak and Doublethink. However, even if honesty is sometimes the best policy, politics is addressed to people’s opinions, and the manipulation of opinion is what it is all about. Plato held truth to be the goal of philosophy and the ultimate standard that disciplines the soul. But even he acknowledged that people cannot take very much of it, and that peaceful government depends on “the noble lie”.

Nevertheless, commentators are beginning to tell us that something has changed in the past few years. It is not that politicians have ceased to tell lies or to pretend that the facts are other than they are; it is rather that they have begun to speak as though there is no such distinction between facts and fabrications. We live in a post-truth world — such is the mantra ... Somehow the boundaries between true and false, sense and nonsense, opinion and reality ... have been erased, and no one really knows how to reinstate them.

That is one way in which the Brexit vote is explained by those who cannot stomach it. If there is no truth, then opinions are no longer true or false, but simply yours or mine, ours or theirs. And since the Brexit vote was about identity, “we” were bound to win over those who still thought there was something to argue about. As for the “experts”, why should we listen to them, when they were trying to phrase the argument in a language that no longer applies, as though there were

some objective “fact of the matter” that we could all agree upon?

... The concept of truth has been the victim of massive cyber-attacks in recent decades, and it has not yet recovered. The most recent attack has come from social media, which has turned the internet into one great seething cauldron of opinions, most of them anonymous, in which every kind of malice and fantasy swamps the still small voice of humanity and truth. ...

We have yet to get used to this, and to the damage social media has done to the practice of rational argument. ...

Politics is an opinion-forming and opinion-manipulating art. However much people can be influenced by slick advertising, mendacious promises and intoxicating slogans, they are influenced by these things only because the idea of truth lurks somewhere in the background of their consciousness. In the end we all respond to an inner “reality principle”, and will amend any belief when its refutation is staring us in the face. (The *Spectator* 2017)

Source 2: “India: The WhatsApp election” (*Financial Times*, 4 May 2019)

Search terms: FT India WhatsApp election



“WhatsApp is the echo chamber of all unmitigated lies, fakes and crap in India, it’s a toxic cesspool,” says Palanivel Thiagarajan, an elected official and head of the IT department of DMK, a regional party in the state of Tamil Nadu ...

Claire Wardle, a research fellow at Harvard University and co-founder of First Draft, a non-profit group addressing misinformation on social media, says WhatsApp took off with the explosion of smartphone users in countries such as Brazil, Nigeria and India, where it has become “a primary source of information”. “These questions about its role in the spread of misinformation are not just to do with elections,” she says. “It’s about WhatsApp’s role in societies, full stop.” Its encryption system ... has made it more vulnerable to misuse, especially in elections, say critics, who argue it has become a platform for spreading campaign-related misinformation.

This risk came to a head in Brazil last year, in what became known as the first “WhatsApp election”. With 120m WhatsApp users in a country of over 211m, the platform was flooded ahead of the October vote with false rumours, doctored photographs and audio hoaxes ... Researchers studying 100,000 images circulating in 347 groups found that only 8 per cent were “fully truthful”. “Misinformation was huge in Brazil. It was an election plagued with fake news that left behind a country split in half by hatred,” says Fabrício Benevenuto at the Federal University of Minas Gerais and a researcher on the impact of the social media network. “The political discussion ended up being reduced to a meme.”

WhatsApp has become the platform of choice for politicians because of its massive reach that goes beyond a party’s loyal voter base, but also because of the lack of gatekeepers. Messages forwarded through the system have no context about where they originate, but benefit from the trust of coming from a contact.

“WhatsApp groups are considered the most dangerous,” says SY Quraishi, India’s former election commissioner. “The disastrous potential of this media

is very strong; you’ve seen how rumours floating [around] can cause havoc.” Kiran Garimella, a researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who is studying misinformation in India, analysed more than 5m WhatsApp messages posted in 5,000 public groups ... covering roughly 1m people. “We have observed that it is specifically focused on image-based, subtle misinformation,” says Mr Garimella, giving an example of doctored screenshots from a reputable news channel.

WhatsApp says it bans roughly 400,000 accounts in India every month ... The biggest challenge is that, unlike Facebook, WhatsApp cannot identify the

source of a message without breaking its encryption system ... “We see many instances where the same message was sent on multiple groups, over 20 groups within a 10-second window, that means there is a person or software sending the messages,” says Mr Garimella.

WhatsApp says it has also spent about \$10m in India to run a public education campaign around the dangers of misinformation on traditional media such as television, radio and newspapers. “I think I would say without hyperbole it’s probably the largest public education campaign about misinformation ever undertaken,” says Mr Woog. (*The Financial Times* 2019)

Follow the link below to access an article offering a different viewpoint from the ones expressed in the *Spectator* and the *Financial Times*. To what extent do its authors agree or

disagree with the authors of the other two articles on the issues raised on page 33?

Search terms: Economist I’d lie to you Post-truth world



II.3 Truth, neutrality and false balance

“It is not the case that astrology is drivel because [someone] thinks so. It is drivel because it flies in the face of four centuries of evidence, from Galileo to the latest space probe. To claim, as the BBC appeared to do, that whether or not to believe in astrology is a matter of personal opinion reveals a real lack of self-confidence. At best, such a statement is foolish; at worst it is open to exploitation by cranks.

[British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) 2011]

Throughout, this book investigates the concept of truth, commonly associated with concepts of objectivity, impartiality and neutrality. Within knowledge and politics, what can we say of the relationship between truth and impartiality? Political issues are, by definition, divisive in the sense of lacking clear consensus. Does that mean that knowing “truth” in politics is futile? The practice of politics attempts to reach consensus through what has been described as “an opinion-

forming and opinion-manipulating art” (Scruton 2017). We could ask the question whether objectivity can exist in politics, but the more immediate question for us here is: what are the implications of saying it cannot?

Let’s consider the case of false balance, a cautionary example of a media bias that occurs when journalists (and, very importantly, text books) attempt to avoid bias by providing a balanced perspective on opposing viewpoints. They give equal air-time or pages of text to two sides of a debate. The phrase a “coin has two sides” might come to mind, but is misleading because it assumes equal weight of both sides. False balance occurs when arguments “from the other side” are presented out of proportion to the actual evidence. It confuses fairness—understood as giving due merit to the value of evidence—with impartiality. This may be caused by a pressure to appear “neutral” to avoid offending fee-paying advertisers and customers, and/or a lack of confidence or ability to evaluate a perspective.

Making connections**Politics and science—what gives a fact credibility?**

Chapter 7 deals with public trust in scientific expertise—what is it about a scientific fact that gives it authority, versus a claim by a politician?

To what extent should students, among other individuals, be encouraged to disregard expert opinion if it clashes with their own beliefs?



A commonly cited example of false balance is the “debate” about anthropogenic global warming, though the scientific consensus has been overwhelming for at least two decades. Follow the link to find out more.

Search terms: NASA Scientific consensus: Earth’s climate is warming



Though the vast majority of experts—over 97%—attribute global warming to human activity, the opposing 3% have been given disproportionately large platforms, in the interest of balanced journalism. This has left the public with an impression of inconclusive scientific debate even though the scientific consensus is well established (Cook *et al* 2016).

For example, coverage of global warming by leading US newspapers—the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* (a group referred to as “the prestige press”)—between 1988 and 2002 was found to overstate the case against climate change: “[t]he prestige press’s adherence to balance actually leads to biased coverage of both anthropogenic contributions to global warming, and resultant action” argued Boykoff and Boykoff (2004).

Following a review of the impartiality and accuracy of its science coverage, the BBC similarly reported the following in 2011.

The BBC review cites global warming,

“A frequent comment received during this review is that elements of the BBC—particularly in the area of news and current affairs—does not fully understand the nature of scientific discourse and, as a result, is often guilty of ‘false impartiality’; of presenting the views of tiny and unqualified minorities as if they have the same weight as the scientific consensus. That approach has for some (but not all) topics become widespread. Conflictual reporting of this kind has the ability to distort public perception. It arises in part because news and current affairs presenters, who have to think on their feet in a live interview, may have little insight into the topic being discussed and hence find it more difficult to establish balance than when dealing with politics, the media or finance.

(BBC 2011)

vaccinations and genetically modified foods as cases where impartial journalism understated the scientific evidence and consensus.

Should the journalistic profession shoulder all this blame? It is not that simple. Consider the article in Box 2.3 that reports how fossil-fuel industry groups began in the 1990s to target reporters who portrayed global warming as a settled fact: “it was the perfect line of attack, because it played into a core maxim of journalism: to be fair and balanced in presenting the contours of a debate” (Eshelman 2014). But

simultaneously, Eshelman says, the industry was funding studies to discredit the climate change thesis; and even if very few scientists endorsed them it was enough to frame the issue as a “debate” in the media. In this way, according to Eshelman, the industry succeeded in politicizing an issue and stoking decades of public debate, even though the scientific consensus had been clear.

**Box 2.3: The danger of fair and balanced**

Search terms: cjr danger of fair and balanced



Consider the extract below and discuss the following questions.

1. Do journalists approach the issue of balance differently when communicating knowledge to the public on political issues as opposed to scientific issues?
2. If all perspectives are not equally valid or valuable, is it the responsibility of journalists or the readers to decide whom to trust?
3. In knowledge, when is there a trade-off between accuracy and inclusion of different perspectives?
4. What is the difference between a fair balance and a false balance with respect to knowledge?

“On a sweltering June day in 1988, James E. Hansen, then the director of NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies, appeared before a key committee of the United States Senate. Seated before a bank of cameras and a panel of grim officials, Hansen delivered testimony that would start to swing accepted wisdom on the emerging science of climate change. The ‘greenhouse effect’, what we now know as climate change or climate disruption, was caused by human activity, mainly the

burning of fossil fuels since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, said Hansen and other scientists that day.

Even if the concept of global warming was rising, it seemed another leap of faith for most outside the scientific community to believe humans could be so profoundly transforming something as vast and seemingly permanent as the Earth’s climate—and do it in as little as one hundred years. In trying to puncture this idea, Hansen and those like McKibben based their argument simply on science and made their case through explanatory writing. They talked about the ways the greenhouse effect would cause more frequent droughts and the sea levels to rise.

They seemed to make what clearly has proven a naive assumption: that by presenting only the science, they could provoke swift, determined action to reduce their fossil fuel consumption. Politics was not much on their radar.

‘There was a lot of coverage and most of it was smart,’ he says by phone from his home in Vermont. ‘Journalists talked to scientists and just reported it. It hadn’t occurred to them that it should be treated as a political issue as opposed to a scientific one,’ McKibben says of coverage in the late 1980s.

But, he adds, 'It wasn't long before the fossil fuel industry did a good job of turning it into a political issue, a partisan thing they could exploit, when they started rolling out all the tools that we now understand as an effort to overcome the science. And their main target was the media.' The fossil fuel industry succeeded. In the ensuing years, the industry not only won over conservatives on the matter of climate change, but they also played into the media trope of balance and fairness.

... What came next was what Penn State University climate scientist Michael E. Mann calls the climate wars, and a principal line of attack was to question the work of reporters who portrayed climate change as settled fact. It was the perfect line of attack, because it played into a core maxim of journalism: to be fair and balanced in presenting the contours of a debate. Yet to do that, reporters were frequently using [fossil-fuel] industry-backed spokespeople as key sources about the actual science—not about a debate over potential policy solutions, of which industry should fairly be a part. Yet since policy solutions to climate change could severely choke profits, what better way to push back than to question the underlying science?

What McKibben considered accurate coverage of climate change in the late 1980s—reporters covering the science, not the politics—was in Gelbspan's estimation a major, structural failure on the part of journalists in the 1990s. It began with who was assigned to cover the subject. 'It was only science writers that were covering this stuff and they were not the types to follow the money,' Gelbspan says. Climate change doubters in those years were taking a page from the fight against the regulation of tobacco products, urging newspapers and radio and television networks to provide "balance" in their reporting of the science. Gelbspan was among the first to understand the folly of their claims. But journalists of

lesser mettle were easily fooled or simply too caught up in the quotidian pressures of meeting deadlines. In this way, the denialist community successfully drove a wedge between scientists and reporters.

In *Merchants of Doubt*, historians Erik M. Conway and Naomi Oreskes trace this history of industry-funded and ideologically driven deception from tobacco, acid rain, the ozone hole, and through to contemporary fights about climate change. 'Tobacco was the first big, systematic denialist campaign,' says Oreskes. 'The obvious lesson for journalists is to know that this exists, that it depends on appealing to journalistic virtues of balance and objectivity.' But, she adds, 'It leads journalists into a swamp.'

... In 2009 came a fact that would be oft-repeated—that 97 percent of scientists with expertise on climate and atmosphere believed in a link between human-generated greenhouse gases and global warming. That's a level of consensus only slightly below that of the existence of gravity and equivalent to scientific evidence linking tobacco use and cancer.

Given this level of confidence, says Oreskes, the goal of journalists should have been accuracy rather than balance. Journalists, in other words, wouldn't have provided 'balance' to a debate on gravity, giving equal time to someone asserting that it doesn't exist; why would they for climate change? As for the two or three percent of so-called skeptics, Oreskes says journalists should be evaluating the motives for their dissent, especially given the history of industry- and think tank-led disinformation campaigns.

Whatever the factors that produce it, false balance remains. *USA Today*, for example, as a matter of policy requires that an editorial on a 'controversial' topic be paired with an editorial arguing in opposition." (Eshelman 2014)

Making connections

The science, politics and language of climate change

How do denialists—or "evidence-resistant-minorities"—affect the evolution of scientific and political opinion? An article in the journal *Cognition* (Lewandowsky *et al* 2019) suggests that consensus formation can be delayed when a small group of denialists resist evidence about an issue (such as anthropogenic climate change).

It also suggests that this can cause the public to remain ambivalent about the reality of that issue. To counter such ambivalence, some advocates are using stronger language to communicate. As of May 2019, the UK newspaper the *Guardian* recommended in its style guide for journalists the terms "climate crisis" and "global heating", rather than "climate change" and "global warming". The Editor in Chief of the *Guardian*, Katharine Viner, gave the following explanation.



"We want to ensure that we are being scientifically precise, while also communicating clearly with readers on this very important issue. The phrase 'climate change', for example, sounds rather passive and gentle when what scientists are talking about is a catastrophe for humanity.

[Viner quoted in Carrington 2019].

II.4 Echo chambers and filter bubbles

"Democracy requires citizens to see things from one another's point of view, but instead we're more and more enclosed in our own bubbles. Democracy requires a reliance on shared facts; instead we're being offered parallel but separate universes.

[Pariser 2011]

An echo chamber is a metaphorical term used to describe a group in which beliefs and opinions are reinforced by repetition (echoes), while alternative or opposing beliefs and opinions are

heard less often. In such a chamber, members intentionally or unintentionally engage with information that reinforces their existing views. As social environments, echo chambers can make members feel more confident in expressing themselves, more trusting (and less critical) of the opinions discussed, but also pressured to withhold opposing views. Members may also find it difficult to leave an echo chamber because of how entangled their social, cultural and political identities are with the discourse.

The terms "echo chamber" and "epistemic bubble" are sometimes mistakenly used interchangeably, though there are important differences between the two. As Professor Nguyen explains in "Escape the Echo Chamber" (the linked article), in epistemic bubbles the opposing opinions and voices are not heard, but in echo chambers these voices are actively undermined. Further, while exposure to contrary evidence can shatter an epistemic bubble, it may have the effect of reinforcing an echo chamber.

Search terms: aeon nguyen
Escape the echo chamber



Filter bubbles are a type of epistemic bubble resulting from the filtering of online content delivered by search engines and social media, based on user information such as search history, location and past click-behaviour. For example, Facebook news feeds and Google search results are customized for users based on this information (stored in "cookies"). Eli Pariser, a political internet activist who coined the term,

has argued that internet users can become isolated in their own cultural or ideological bubbles of “likes”.

Both effects have negative implications for civic discourse, as well as for democratic outcomes such as elections, though the size of this effect is still debated. While activists such as Pariser

have worked to raise awareness about them, others such as Elizabeth Dubois of the University of Ottawa believe that the influence of “echo chambers in social media has been highly over-estimated” (Dubois quoted in Robson 2018). Still, many observers agree that political polarization has increased and that media literacy is an important skill to develop for active citizenship.

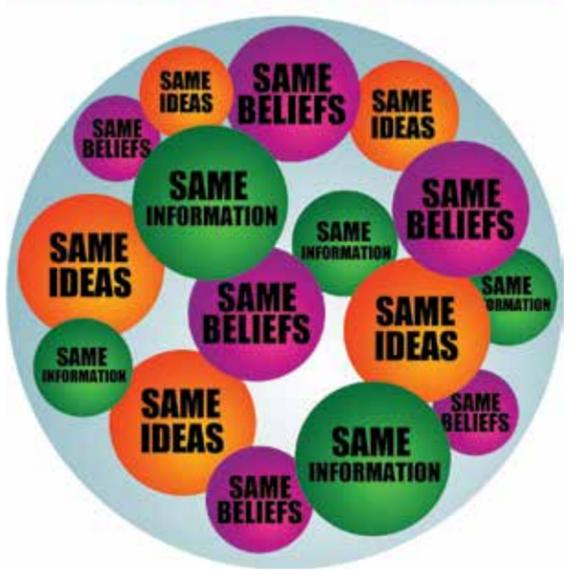
Case study

Perspectives on echo chambers and filter bubbles

“If you look at any measures of what people think about people on the other side, [they] have become vastly more hostile. [Haidt quoted in Robson 2018]”

Why might this be the case? This section has considered how echo chambers and filter bubbles contribute to an increase in political polarization and the spread of misinformation in political discourse. However, there is another side to the argument, that claims the problem is with human behaviour, not our online or offline environments but instead the friends we keep and the news we respond to.

FILTER BUBBLES



This case study considers two different perspectives. Eli Pariser warns us of the intellectual isolation and potential for polarization caused by filter bubbles. David Robson challenges this view, stating that social media will tend to increase the diversity of perspectives that an individual encounters online. The extracts below are just a snapshot and we recommend that you consider both original sources in full.

Source 1: Pariser, E. 2011. “Beware Online Filter Bubbles”.

Search terms: Pariser Online filter bubble TED Talk



“I asked a bunch of friends to Google ‘Egypt’ and to send me screenshots of what they got ... Daniel didn’t get anything about the protests in Egypt at all in his first page of Google results. Scott’s results were full of them. And this was the big story of the day at that time. That’s how different these results are becoming ... It’s not just Google and Facebook either. Yahoo News, the biggest news site on the Internet, is now personalized—different people get different things. Huffington Post, the Washington Post, the New York Times—all flirting with personalization in various ways. And this moves us very quickly toward a world in which the Internet is showing us what it thinks we want to see, but not necessarily what we need to see.”

Source 2: Robson, D. 2018. “The Myth of the Online Echo Chamber?”

Search terms: Robson BBC myth of online echo chamber



David Robson, writing for the BBC, describes studies that show that while social media users are exposed to more polarized news sources, they are also more exposed to sources with opposing viewpoints. This means that their media “diet” is more varied than that of users who regularly visit one or two internet news sites. There is also some evidence that social media users actively seek out diverse views that do not align with their existing beliefs and that the actual number of users caught up in an echo chamber is lower than commonly stated.

There is, however, some evidence that users may become more, not less, entrenched in their beliefs when presented with arguments from the opposing side of their political position.

For example, the concept of “motivated reasoning” is supported by research that shows that people are so attached to their political identities that they may unknowingly devote their thinking to dismissing evidence that disagrees with their beliefs. For example, Republicans were seen to use more emotive words in their online posts when exposed to more liberal viewpoints. This is a characteristic of echo chambers.

Robson (2018) describes the psychological concept of “self-licensing”, in which individuals may feel that they have earned the right to their prejudice because they have demonstrated open-mindedness before. Robson describes a 2008 study that found that people who had supported Barack Obama in the US Presidential election were more likely to express potentially racist views subsequently.

For discussion

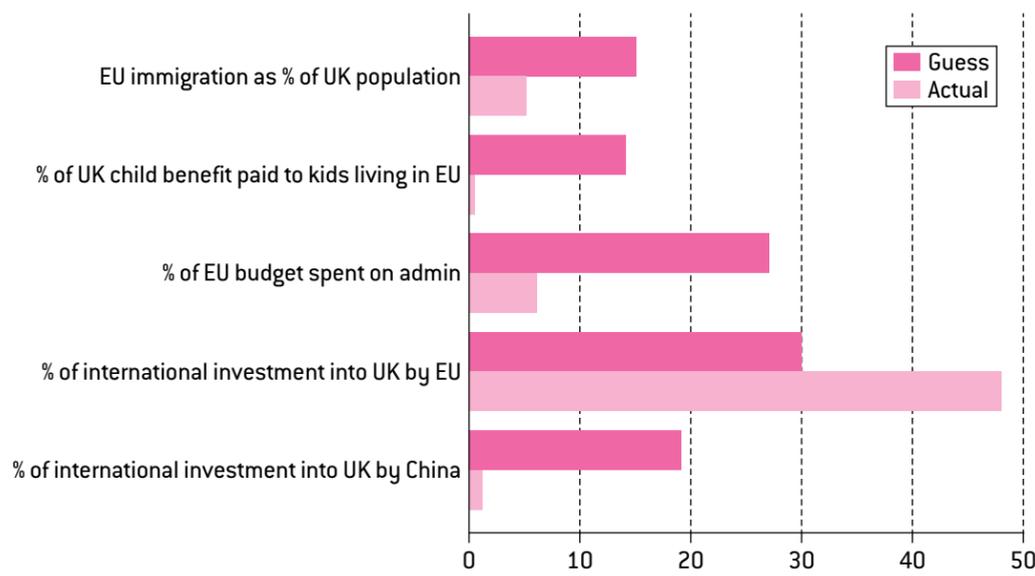
Filter bubbles and echo chambers—two views compared

- 1. To what extent is Robson’s argument consistent or divergent with Pariser’s and the other arguments we have seen so far?
2. Do Robson and Pariser make use of similar or different kinds of evidence?
3. To what extent have you observed or heard about this effect within your personal network?
4. What are the implications of online filter bubbles—positive or negative?
5. How can the negative effects of online filter bubbles be diminished?
6. Which groups of people are more vulnerable to the influence of filter bubbles and how can that be addressed?

- 7. “Policy-makers should regulate the internet so that what we see is ‘neutral’.”
(a) To what extent do you agree with this statement?
(b) What would a “neutral” view look like and who could decide on its content?
8. (a) How do the responsibilities of individuals, governments and organizations such as Google and Facebook differ in controlling the negative effects of filter bubbles?
(b) Would you expect these responsibilities and this control to be consistent around the world, and why or why not?

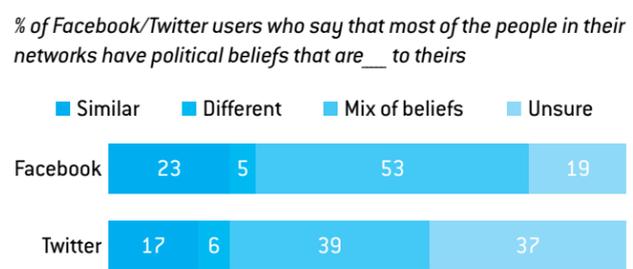
The preceding few pages have shown Eli Pariser, Barack Obama and The Economist magazine, among others, argue that echo chambers and filter bubbles have contributed to the increase

in political polarization of the past decade. They have also been implicated in the spread of misinformation in political discourse. Consider Figure 2.1.



↑ **Figure 2.1** Misperceptions among UK survey respondents about how the EU affects life in the UK. Data source: UK newspaper *The Financial Times*.

Social media users report encountering a variety of political beliefs in their online networks, at least according to a 2016 Pew Research Center survey of 4,500 people in the United States (see Figure 2.2).



↑ **Figure 2.2** Pew Research Center survey conducted 12 July–8 August 2016, “The political environment on social media”: most Facebook and Twitter users’ online networks contain a mix of people with a variety of political beliefs.

In 2016, a team of researchers from Oxford University, Stanford University and Microsoft investigated whether internet use had led to increased ideological segregation. They reported that social networks and search engines are associated with an increase in the average ideological distance between individuals (a measure of polarization). However, they also found that social networks and search engine use were “associated with an increase in an

individual’s exposure to material from his or her less preferred side of the political spectrum” (Flaxman *et al* 2016). The researchers noted that most people still access online news by directly visiting their mainstream news websites of choice, not through social media (though this may have changed since then) and that the size of the effects of social media was relatively modest.

A research team in 2018 reported that Twitter users are “to a large degree” exposed to opinions that agree with their own. They also reported that those who share political content from both sides of the political divide—“who try to bridge the echo chambers”—incur a social network cost in terms of how many followers they have and how many likes their posts receive (Garimella *et al* 2018). However, a separate study, also in 2018, concluded that “those who are interested in politics and those with diverse media diets tend to avoid echo chambers ... [and] only a small segment of the population are ever likely to find themselves in an echo chamber” (Dubois, Blank 2018).

And finally, researchers from Facebook investigated the existence of echo chambers among 10 million users and found that while news feeds tend to show people less diverse political information, this was driven more

by users’ posting behaviour than algorithmic ranking of content (Bakshy *et al* 2015). Of course, that seems a convenient conclusion for Facebook researchers, but Kartik Hosanagar, professor at

the Wharton School, believes that the study was well-designed and agrees that it is “the like-mindedness of our Facebook friends that traps us in an echo chamber”, explaining as follows.

“If we acquired our news media from a randomly selected group of Facebook users, nearly 45 percent of news seen by liberals and 40 percent seen by conservatives on Facebook would be cross-cutting. But we acquire these news stories from our friends. As a result, the researchers found that only 24 percent of news stories shared by liberals’ friends were cross-cutting and about 35 percent of stories shared by conservatives’ friends were cross-cutting. Clearly, the like-mindedness of our Facebook friends traps us in an echo chamber.

The newsfeed algorithm further selects which of the friends’ news stories to show you. This is based on your prior interaction with friends. Because we tend to engage more with like-minded friends and ideologically similar websites, the newsfeed algorithm further reduces the proportion of cross-cutting news stories to 22 percent for liberals and 34 percent for conservatives. Facebook’s algorithm worsens the echo chamber, but not by much.

Finally, the question is which of these news stories do we click on. The researchers find that the final proportion of cross-cutting news stories we click on is 21 percent for liberals and 30 percent for conservatives ... We clearly prefer news stories that are likely to reinforce our existing views rather than challenge them.

Should we believe a research study conducted by Facebook researchers that absolves the company’s algorithms and places the blame squarely on us? I think the study is well-designed. That said, I disagree with a key conclusion of the Facebook study. It is true that our friendship circles are often not diverse enough, but Facebook can easily recommend cross-cutting articles from elsewhere in its network (e.g. “what else are Facebook users reading?”). That the news being shown [in] our feeds is from our friends is ultimately a constraint that Facebook enforces.

(Hosanagar 2016)

The questions about whether our online social networks produce echo chambers and filter bubbles, and to what extent these have polarizing political effects, remain open. This problem of lack of consensus is one that shows up repeatedly in this book. Different knowledge

communities within the academic disciplines have developed processes for reaching consensus and dealing with disagreement. But what about the public?

Are the tools and methods of knowing

III. METHODS AND TOOLS

independent from the knower? Can they be politically “neutral”?

Western research institutions developed systems for “organizing, classifying, and storing new knowledge” about the world. Within the context of colonialism, this practice of gathering and storing knowledge can be viewed as part of a system of “power and domination”.

Writing in 1999 about the production of knowledge under colonialism, Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that the nature and validity of specific forms of knowledge became commodities of colonial exploitation. Smith explains how

The master's tools

Audre Lorde said you can't dismantle the master's house with the master's tools. I think about this powerful metaphor, trying to understand it.

By radicals, liberals, conservatives, and reactionaries, education in the masters' knowledge is seen as leading inevitably to consciousness of oppression and exploitation, and so to the subversive desire for equality and justice. Liberals support and reactionaries oppose universal free education, public schools, uncensored discussion at the universities for exactly the same reason.

Lorde's metaphor seems to say that education is irrelevant to social change. If nothing the master used can be useful to the slave, then education in the masters' knowledge must be abandoned. Thus an underclass must entirely reinvent society, achieve a new knowledge, in order to achieve justice. If they don't, the revolution will fail.

This is plausible. Revolutions generally fail. But I see their failure beginning when the attempt to rebuild the house

so everybody can live in it becomes an attempt to grab all the saws and hammers, barricade Ole Massa's tool-room, and keep the others out. Power not only corrupts, it addicts. Work becomes destruction. Nothing is built.

Societies change with and without violence. Reinvention is possible. Building is possible. What tools have we to build with except hammers, nails, saws—education, learning to think, learning skills?

Are there indeed tools that have not been invented, which we must invent in order to build the house we want our children to live in? Can we go on from what we know now, or does what we know now keep us from learning what we need to know? To learn what people of colour, the women, the poor, have to teach, to learn the knowledge we need, must we unlearn all the knowledge of the whites, the men, the powerful? Along with the priesthood and phallocracy, must we throw away science and democracy? Will we be left trying to build without any tools but our bare hands? The metaphor is rich and dangerous. I can't answer the questions it raises.

(Le Guin 2004)

The work of thinkers such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Ursula K. Le Guin draws our attention to how the tools and methods of producing knowledge also have politics. These tools and methods, used to describe and explain the world, can be used to liberate and empower, or to oppress and misrepresent. They are the products of the politics of their time. We explore this in depth in each chapter on the AOKs.

Edward Said draws attention to this in his book *Orientalism*. Maria Todorova, writing in the context of Western imaginations of the Balkans, offers "Balkanism". When these views are given legitimacy, they become internalized and hold power not just to describe the world, but to shape it. But can these same tools—concepts, theories, explanations—be reclaimed as tools of liberation?

For reflection

Considering knowledge

Follow the link to find out more about Maria Todorova's "Balkanism".

 Search terms: Westspaining the Balkans



Consider the following questions.

- (a)** Who has the power to legitimize knowledge, and who does not?
(b) Where does this power come from?
- (a)** What are some global currents in the politics of knowledge production?

- (b)** What are the consequences of this for creating knowledge about the Balkans?
- What steps can we take to use knowledge to further social justice and engaged citizenship?
- Perhaps the most widespread act of citizenship is voting. What kinds of knowledge are useful and necessary in performing this political act?

In the next section, we look at the issues of knowledge involved in deciding who to vote for.

Voices: Joseph Mitchell from Democracy Club



"I help run Democracy Club, a not-for-profit organisation in the UK. Our vision is of a country with the digital foundations to support everyone's participation in democratic life. We start with elections, because that's where people are most often looking for information. The best time to serve people is when they're actively looking for something. Online search data tells us that people ask perhaps surprisingly basic questions about elections: who should I vote for? Who are the candidates? Where do I vote? How do I vote?"

The state doesn't provide these answers. We worry that in the absence of easily accessible information, people will switch off democracy. So we create databases of elections, candidates, polling locations and election results. We make these open for anyone to use at no charge and we use these databases ourselves to run voter information websites: WhoCanIVoteFor.co.uk and WhereDoIVote.co.uk.

We are a non-partisan organisation. We treat all candidates and parties equally. We need to do this to gain and maintain the trust of the public. This approach means that we give candidates an equal platform, so long as they're legally nominated. Personally, I would have a problem if a candidate was advocating policies that would breach fundamental human or political rights. But that's for the users to decide. It's important that the public know what the candidates stand for.

For transparency and trust, we work openly: you can see what we're currently working on; you can critique it; contribute; or ask us questions. Those with technical knowledge can access the code that powers our databases and websites. We have thousands of volunteers who gather data on tens of

thousands of candidates: their name, website, social media, a photo and a statement. Again, none of this is provided by the authorities. Other volunteers then check the work of the first volunteers. Like Wikipedia, we record every edit by every user, to ensure quality is kept up and to track any malicious edits. Because citizens themselves produce the information and like Wikipedia, anyone can edit the database of election candidates, we hope this leads to greater trust in the information. It was made by 'people like me' not by some faceless institution.

Should the state provide information on elections? To an extent, of course. But there's a trade-off between independence from the state, which may be necessary to be trusted and non-partisan, and effectiveness/reach, which can really only be achieved with state resources. In Germany, a state institution actually runs a 'voter advice application' where you answer some questions and it suggests parties that hold similar views. This relies on Germany's high levels of trust in the state, which would be hard to match in the UK.

Is it okay to rely on volunteers? Yes, they do an amazing job. We record all edits and can roll back to an earlier version of a record if there's vandalism. We also require an email to log-in to track user edits. Mistakes are rare, vandalism is extremely rare. We see people of all parties and none adding data. It's a chance to volunteer for the good of democracy, rather than to push your own views.

People are busy: ideally information will reach them where they are. So we encourage Facebook and Google, the most used websites or applications in the UK, to present our data to their users in the run-up to an election. Both companies are cautious, but recognise they have immense power and they are currently keen to improve their public image.

Of course, democracy isn't just elections. How do you get information about all decisions that are being made that will affect your life and how do you get to have a say in them? Democracy is complex and messy. There's no digital technology solution to solve all problems. But we can ensure that data on politicians, votes, lobbying, budgets and so on, is accessible. It's the first step.

The fact I've thought it necessary to provide more information on elections seems obvious, objective and neutral to me. And the vast majority of people I meet seem to agree. But implicit in it is a value judgement that says voters should know more about their

→ candidates. Should we test people's knowledge before allowing them to participate? I'm not sure. Every person matters, but some voices are better informed than others. As a society we all benefit by increasing political knowledge. But this kind of information faces tough competition for people's attention. The advertising budgets of consumer goods companies—to sell you a pair of shoes—are vast. Modern consumer capitalism wants all your attention. This doesn't help democracy; and that's before we talk about money in politics. To give democracy a fighting chance, it's vital that a brilliant easy-to-use quick-to-understand service exists to provide this information.

Personally, I came to help set up Democracy Club because I think better political decision-making is critical to every aspect of our society. It determines if our society gets better, if we can reduce suffering and increase wellbeing, and whether we make better-evidenced decisions. In theory, democracy harnesses the 'wisdom of the crowd', i.e. together we know more than alone. With good access to information, a thriving debate, then a decision taken after a vote, it seems likely you will get better outcomes. So democracy is extrinsically useful. But there's also interesting evidence that suggests it is intrinsically important too: we literally feel better when we feel we have a say in issues that are affecting us."

For discussion

War on truth—Philippines is patient zero

 Search terms: Ressa War on truth Philippines Al Jazeera



Maria Ressa, journalist and founder of the news site Rappler, was honoured by *TIME* magazine as Person of the Year in 2018.

She has been called a "guardian in the war on truth" (Quinn/Al Jazeera 2019). In the linked video, she speaks about how social media has been weaponized by authoritarian leaders in the Philippines, and her battle against it.

1. What can we learn from cases where the same digital tools that had potential to be liberating are instead weakening democracies?

"When people don't know what is real and what is fake, when facts don't matter, then the voice with the loudest megaphone gains more power ... Free speech is being used to stifle free speech." (Ressa 2019)

2. What kinds of knowledge does Ressa suggest are required to defend truth and democracy against disinformation today?
3. How are the processes of producing and disseminating disinformation similar to or different from how knowledge is produced and shared?
4. How has the rise in the power of networks affected the influence of individuals over politics? Is it any more or less possible to create significant political change as an individual?

III.1 Knowledge at the intersection of digital subcultures and politics

It looks as if 2016 may have been the year when mainstream media finally lost the ability to shape online political dialogue and debates. It is remembered for the rise of post-truth politics, discussed in II.2. A lot has been written about how the phenomenon of fake news and its spread on social media co-produced a climate of post-truth politics where the political discourse

become increasingly disconnected from facts and evidence-based claims.

The increase in fake news is widely viewed as a threat to democracy. There has been a fast and robust response by educators towards equipping young people with the tools for intellectual self-defence on the post-truth internet. Studies have shown that younger people on average are significantly less likely to believe and repost fake news. Indeed, the single most reliable

predictor of who falls for fake news is not ideology or political affiliation, but age. As digital natives, your generation has the literacy to better navigate the online world. This section examines another phenomenon from 2016, which may have had an outsize effect on the political sensibilities of the younger generations.

Making connections

Digital literacy

Digital literacy affects the online political discourse and different people's ability to participate and contribute to it. The question of digital literacy is discussed in Chapter 3.

Case study

Pepe the Frog, Harambe and the divisive politics of digital anti-establishment subcultures

Depending on where and how old you were at the time, you may have encountered the Great Meme War of 2016. Meme culture can be profoundly baffling to the uninitiated; it was on these grounds that it was initially dismissed and underestimated by mainstream political culture. There is a growing appreciation today that political memes have transcended their obscure beginnings in digital subcultures and have a profound influence on young people's political affinities.



Memes can also shape political life more broadly. Certainly, memes can set the tone of political debate, especially for young people, as was the case with Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash Facebook group and The Donald subreddit in the lead-up to the 2016 US Presidential election.

Meme culture moves at a dizzying pace and those playing catch-up are regularly outed as normies. When Hillary Clinton learned how to dab on "The Ellen DeGeneres Show", urged voters to Pokémon GO to the polls, and took to Twitter asking followers to summarize how they feel about their student debt in three emojis or less, it backfired and was seen as exploiting youth pop culture for political gain. That an entire genre of fairly popular memes exists about how "the left can't meme" only suggests that the liberal mainstream is falling behind in this political tactic. This could matter beyond who is cool and uncool on the internet, and have material implications for the future of political discourse.

Viral user-generated content, made up of subcultural inside jokes, dominated the established online media outlets in terms of reaching the newly politicized youth. Below are the words of 26-year-old Sean Walsh, one of the two original moderators of Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash.

“This generation's memes are that generation's C-SPAN or Huffington Post ... Seriously, memes are going to be very prevalent in politics. They're going to get ideas into your head.

[Walsh quoted in Dewey 2016]

” Might those who worry that "the future of political discourse only gets shallower and less informed" (Dewey 2016) have a point? Or is this worry misplaced or overstated?

Whichever end of the political spectrum they originated from, these memes carried a signature anti-establishment sentiment and came in volumes that had no parallel among the mainstream media.

For discussion

Political memes

We have offered the example of meme culture surrounding the US Presidential election because it might be culturally and linguistically accessible to many readers of this book. But outside of US politics, and indeed the English language internets, political memes are produced in various contexts. Discuss the following questions.

1. What do political memes look like in your context?
2. What do you know about who produces them, and why? Where do they appear?
3. What would you say is their influence on the political affinities of your generation?
4. How would you explain their success and reach, or their lack of success and reach?
5. To what extent are memes an effective form of communicating knowledge about politics?
6. What are the limitations of memes in terms of communicating knowledge about politics, and how might these limitations be overcome?

Political meme subcultures are generally youth-led, subversive, grassroots and collective. In other words, they are everything that the cyberevangelists told us to be excited about in terms of the organizing and

democratizing power of the internet. These characteristics also marked progressive countercultural groups of past decades.

We may have expected political memes and those who produce them to also be politically progressive—and we may have been wrong. Angela Nagle is author of *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* and wrote the following.

“This was unlike the culture wars of the 60s or the 90s, in which a typically older age cohort of moral and cultural conservatives fought against a tide of cultural secularization and liberalism among the young.”

(Nagle 2017)

Nagle describes the online alt-right as a heterogeneous group of anti-politically-correct meme-makers, trolls and abusers, loosely unified in their suspicion of insincerity in competitive liberal virtue-signalling. In one of her more controversial claims Nagle suggests that these groups were at least partly a backlash against the moral high-grounding and self-righteousness of the organized online public shaming phenomenon. She claims it was also a reaction to the performative wokeness of identity politics, with its overzealous policing of any and all linguistic and cultural offences. Then again, it is impossible to disentangle who was reacting to whom in the feedback loops of outrage that followed.

To see how this happened, and why so many did not see it happening until it did, let’s take a closer look at the transgressive methods adopted by the digital alt-right, enabled by the same technological tools that accompanied the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Anonymous and Wikileaks.

First we have to talk about a frog. Pepe was drawn by Matt Furie in 2005 in his comic *Boy’s Club* and was turned into a meme on message boards and some not exactly family-friendly corners of the internet. Soon there was Sad Pepe, Angry Pepe, Smug Pepe and more. Pepe was tweeted into mainstream prominence by Katy Perry, followed by many others including the Russian Embassy in the UK. Pepe went from fame to infamy after being reclaimed by the digital alt-right on the /pol/ board of 4chan and /r/The_Donald on Reddit, where Pepes, including some transgressive and offensive ones, were deployed in the Great Meme War. It is difficult to say when things peaked, but the Clinton campaign releasing an explainer on Pepe the Frog on its official website might have been it. “That’s Pepe. He’s a symbol associated with white supremacy” reads the condemnation, which continues in question-and-answer style until the stand-in reader concludes, “[t]his is horrifying” (Chan 2016). Two weeks later, Pepe became an official hate symbol and Pepe memes with racist and other bigoted content were added to the Anti-Defamation League’s database. Furie tried hard to reclaim Pepe, launching the #SavePepe campaign in partnership with the Anti-Defamation League to get Pepe back from online bigots. As you can probably guess, this has not worked.

What we see reflected in the Pepe story was always political in a wider sense than presidential campaigns and elections.



↑ **Figure 2.3** In 2019–2020, Pepe was used by pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong as a symbol of their resistance against China’s central government

“When a gorilla named Harambe was shot dead at the Cincinnati Zoo that year after a child fell into his enclosure, the usual cycles of public displays of outrage online began as expected with inevitable competitive virtue signaling. At first, emotional and outraged people online blamed the child’s parents for the gorilla’s death, with some even petitioning to have the parents prosecuted for their neglect. But then a kind of giddy ironic mocking of the social media spectacle started to take over. The Harambe meme soon became the perfect parody of the sentimentality and absurd priorities of Western liberal performative politics and the online mass hysteria that often characterized it.”

(Nagle 2017)

Harambe mania exceeded any expectations of popular participation. If your digital detox coincided with the week when the Harambe meme took off, you would have returned to a very baffling internet where everyone wanted to be in on the joke. Transgression has long been a tactic for social resistance, powerfully deployed, often by young people, to undermine and destabilize stale social norms and cultural taboos. It is not difficult to mock an online world where viral content and outrage on social networks regularly drown out information about global issues of urgent importance.

So, are transgressive memes, with their cynical mockery, confronting intellectual conformity and drawing attention to the hypocrisies of online political discourse? Or is it transgression for its own sake—just “for the lulz”—without any intended political outcome? Even worse, are we reading too much into what is effectively overt bigotry?

How we answer these questions matters. Anti-establishment memes that challenge conventions, and are critical of entrenched political positions, expressed in an aesthetic and language that appeals to and sometimes is only fully grasped by young people, can be a powerful way of communicating about politics.

At the same time, though, anti-moral, irreverent, subversive, offensive, racist, sexist content regularly bursts out of the meme-factories in the dark corners of the internet and into more conventional social network spaces that influence many young people’s political identities, affinities and ideas. How you encounter these, distinguish between them, and hold yourself and others accountable in online political spaces, is part of the skill set of digital citizenship.

For reflection

How would you decide whether a post is unacceptable?

1. How much do you need to know before sharing a political video, petition or meme?
2. To what extent does it matter how many of your friends have shared it, and which ones?

On this note of personal accountability and collective responsibility for how we behave in

online political spaces, we move into a section dedicated to the ethics of knowledge in politics.

IV. ETHICS

“The last words of the Mahabharata are, ‘By no means can I attain a goal beyond my reach’. It is likely that justice, a human idea, is a goal beyond human reach. We’re good at inventing things that can’t exist.”
[Le Guin 2004]

Like LeGuin, the IBO asks, in relation to knowledge and politics, “Can we know what justice is and what it requires?”

Various forms of justice are relevant to the theme of knowledge and politics. The idea of epistemic justice, for example, is discussed in Chapter 1, IV.3. In the context of the public sphere and open dialogue, there are issues of justice regarding which perspectives have access to a platform, and are thus more widely heard. And at the intersection of politics and technology, the issue of justice shows up in social media, filter bubbles and echo chambers, which we discuss earlier in this chapter. In the next section we focus on how youth engage with ethical issues on university campuses and social media networks.

IV.1 Campus politics: Pluralism, academic freedom and no-platforming

As educational institutions with the task of preparing young people for active and productive participation in society, universities have a special and important role with regard to knowledge and politics. For example, political activism on US campuses in the 1960s played a key role in the civil rights and anti-war movements, as well as the movements for the rights of women and sexual minorities. Because of their role in producing and disseminating knowledge, universities are said to be freer than the rest of society. How does privileging the freedom of speech and scholarship affect the politics of knowledge in these special public spaces?

It is only in very specific cases that limitations on this freedom are put in place, such as when there are concerns about violence or violations of the law. In recent years, however, the tension between freedom and safety has profoundly affected the discourse on university campuses. As safe spaces, trigger warnings and politically correct

speech become more common, some observers have asked whether these come at the expense of pluralism and deep dialogue. Is the university campus shifting from being a place that is safe for political differences, to a place that is safe from political differences? The political phenomenon known as no-platforming shines a light on this.

No-platforming (or alternatively deplatforming) means limiting, restricting, denying or revoking access to a venue or an audience to certain perspectives that might be offensive or inflammatory. There have been numerous instances where a controversial guest speaker is blocked from speaking at a university campus, for example.

When—with the exception of hate speech—is it appropriate to deplatform a political view? Think about your own answer to this question, then explore the Disinvitation Database (linked below), a crowd-sourced register of events when an invited speaker has been blocked from addressing students on campus.

Search terms: Disinvitation Database FIRE 

The website’s user’s guide contains instructions on how to use the database.

For reflection

Disinvitation

1. What do you notice about the timeline of disinvitations, or the profile or profession of the disinvited speakers?
2. How have the topics brought up as reasons for disinvitation changed over time?
3. What else do you notice about the success rate of disinvitations, the types of events or the political affiliation of the speakers?

For another perspective on this issue and further investigation into the question above, follow the link to the article “Why no-platforming is sometimes a justifiable position”.

Search terms: aeon Why no platforming is sometimes a justifiable position 

Practising skills: Exploring perspectives and drawing implications

Consider the claim that “No-platforming contributes to intolerance and the polarization of political views” and the counterclaim that “No-platforming protects against the proliferation of intolerant and polarizing political views”.

Working in a pair or small group, come up with a set of arguments and examples in support of each of these claims.

Next, look at the evidence you have been able to produce in support of the claims. Which claim is more convincing? What is your conclusion?

Finally, consider the implications of your conclusion. What are the consequences for knowledge depending on whether you decide against or in favour of no-platforming?

In your explorations of the Disinvitation Database you may encounter calls for blanket bans on certain perspectives or petitions to deny someone the right to address the student public. When those are unsuccessful, a host of disruptive tactics have been used, ranging from walkouts to the “heckler’s veto”—escalating noise and disruption until the event can no longer continue.

No-platformers have faced the criticism that limiting the right to speak is a threat to freedom. And yet, some no-platformers argue that a speaker who fails to explicitly condemn injustice deserves to be directly confronted. These confrontations are often not conducted in the spirit of respectful, or even peaceful, disagreement. Consequently, no-platformers have also been criticized for their offensive language and hostile actions.

The appeal to mutual respect crops up regularly in conversations around campus politics, but this value is also central to engaging with difference in TOK and in the IB. To discuss the politics of respectability we turn to the example below.

For discussion

What is offensive?

When offence enters the picture, it can be challenging to continue a dialogue between different perspectives. But what does it mean for something to be offensive in the context of politics and justice?

Consider these two op-eds regarding an incident at a local board of education. When is "offensive" about showing disrespect, and when is it about causing harm?

Search terms: Kaleem Caire Children need to learn respect



Search terms: Respectability politics urgent challenges in madison schools



- 1. Does calling for respect reduce the power of marginalized groups to challenge the status quo?
2. Is the politics of respectability a way for those in power to maintain power and discredit the strategies of those who challenge them? Or is mutual respect necessary for effective dialogue and engaging with differences in perspective?

Chapter 3, III.2 considers the research of Michal Kosinski, David Stillwell and Thore Graepel of the Cambridge Psychometric Centre. The researchers' findings from a 2013 study suggested that a person's personality traits could be predicted using their Facebook Likes and a follow-up 2015 study by Kosinski, Stillwell and Wu Youyou suggested that an artificial intelligence (AI) could use Likes to predict an individual's personality more accurately than even close friends and family.

We are thrilled that our revolutionary approach to data-driven communication has played such an integral part in President-elect Trump's extraordinary win. (Nix quoted in Ahmed 2018)

Cambridge Analytica claimed to use personality data to analyse voters' behaviour, values and opinions, and then send them tailored advertising to nudge them in the direction of Cambridge Analytica's client. This was called microtargeting. It was not a new practice; some political observers noted that it had been used effectively in Obama's 2012 campaign.

What was new about Cambridge Analytica and SCL was how much data they had and what they claimed to be doing with it. Alexander Nix, the former CEO of Cambridge Analytica and a former director of SCL, has claimed that the data profiles of some two-hundred-and-twenty million Americans were kept by SCL, and that

each of these profiles contained thousands of data points. SCL marketing material claimed that they had developed sophisticated analytical tools in order to use these huge data sets to sway voting patterns (Mayer 2017).

Andy Wigmore, the communications director of Leave.eu—one of the two major campaign groups supporting the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (EU)—has said that Cambridge Analytica assisted his group because of the shared interests of their investors. The Leave.eu campaign used social media data and AI to target voters with highly individualized advertisements—"thousands of different versions of advertisements"—depending on their personalities, according to Cadallawar (2017). Arron Banks, founder of the organization Leave.eu, would later state that Cambridge Analytica's world-class AI won the referendum for those wishing to leave the EU (Cadwalladr 2017).

Frank Luntz, American pollster, reacting after the 2016 US Presidential election results commented as follows.

No one saw it coming. The public polls, the experts, and the pundits: just about everybody got it wrong. They were wrong-footed because they didn't understand who was going to turn out and vote. Except for Cambridge Analytica ... They figured out how to win. There are no longer any experts except Cambridge Analytica. (Luntz quoted in Wood 2016)

Several observers have since cast doubt on such claims as overstating Cambridge Analytica's success and influence. But how did Cambridge Analytica obtain all its data? For the US market, a sizeable amount came via Aleksandr Kogan, an assistant professor formerly at the Cambridge Psychometric Centre. He developed an app called This Is Your Digital Life that provided psychometric quizzes to Facebook users in exchange for their results and data, and the data of their friends. In the summer of 2014, over 200,000 people used his app, providing

over 30 million user records for Cambridge Analytica.

In an interview on BBC Radio 4 in March 2018, Kogan said that he had been used as a scapegoat, maintaining that Cambridge Analytica had approached him, written the terms of service for the app and told him his use of Facebook data was legal and appropriate. He was led to believe that thousands, if not tens of thousands, of apps were exploiting their users' data in the same way. He also claimed he had not profited from this collaboration personally and that the money he received was mostly used to pay the participants—each participant being paid between \$3 and \$4.

More generally, Kogan raised concerns about the social networking business model. Cambridge Analytica had allegedly used people's Facebook data for micro-targeting, but so were other platforms and social networks like Twitter and Instagram, whose profits mostly derive from advertising. When someone creates an account, they essentially sign an agreement to be sold to advertisers for micro-targeting in exchange for access to a desirable product that costs large amounts of time, expertise and money to run.

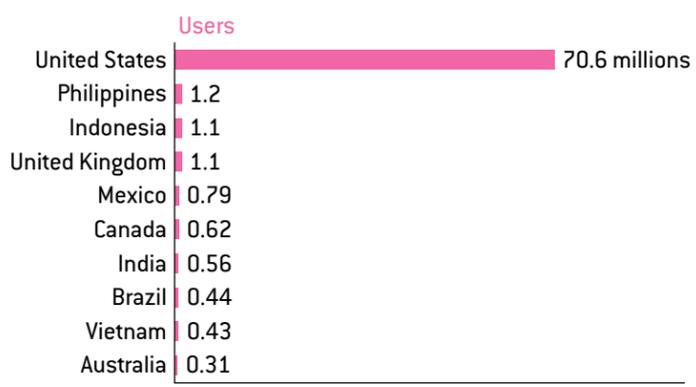


Figure 2.4 Where Cambridge Analytica improperly accessed Facebook user data, according to www.theatlant.com

Cambridge Analytica made extravagant claims about the effectiveness of its political micro-targeting, claims that fuelled a hysteria following the scandal that people were being manipulated to vote for the "wrong" outcomes in a post-truth

environment enabled by technology. Prosecuting Cambridge Analytica, or its campaign clients, was complicated because the nature of their medium meant only the people being targeted on social media could see them.

AI improved Cambridge Analytica’s messaging iteratively. If an advertisement does not get clicked on, it is automatically tweaked based on the personality profile and served again; if it is clicked on, the person is shown more such content. How much did this influence political outcomes? Without controlled experiments it is hard to know.

Jonathan Albright, assistant professor and data scientist, Elon University, believes the influence is substantial.

“This is a propaganda machine. It’s targeting people individually to recruit them to an idea. It’s a level of social engineering that I’ve never seen before. They’re capturing people and then keeping them on an emotional leash and never letting them go.” [Albright quoted in Cadwalladr 2016]

Cambridge Analytica’s data allowed campaigners to optimize candidates’ campaign movements. Cambridge Analytica claimed that they saw small openings, based on engagement with people’s Facebook posts, in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin —known as the “blue wall”, because they are traditionally democratic states—and so Trump scheduled events there. The Clinton analysts mocked him at the time, but apparently “it was the small margins in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin that won Trump the election” (Anderson, Horvath 2017).

In October 2016, Nix made the following statement.

“Today in the United States we have somewhere close to four or five thousand data points on every individual ... So we model the personality of every adult across the United States, some 230 million people.” [Nix 2016]

Propaganda has been used for centuries, but online networks may have increased the precision and efficacy of political persuasion. The beginning of this chapter explored how intense emotions and fake news spread quickly through social networks. SCL (parent company of Cambridge Analytica) described itself as “the premier election management agency”, using words such as “psychological warfare” and “influence operations” (Weinberger 2005). SCL claimed to have influenced elections and other political outcomes in Italy, Latvia, Ukraine, Albania, Afghanistan, Romania, South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Mauritius, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Taiwan, Colombia, Antigua, St Vincent and the Grenadines, St Kitts and Nevis, and Trinidad and Tobago. An article for *Politico* stated that SCL used “military disinformation campaigns to social media branding and voter targeting” (Vogel, Parti 2015). SCL is also alleged to have operated extensively in developing countries to manipulate public opinion and claimed to be able to instigate coups. It certainly sounds like something from the James Bond or *Mission Impossible* films and it did not help that SCL and Cambridge Analytica were backed by a reclusive hedge fund billionaire called Robert Mercer.

Trevor Potter, President of Campaign Legal Center, a non-profit organization that works to reduce the influence of money in politics and to support unrestricted access to voting, reacted as follows.

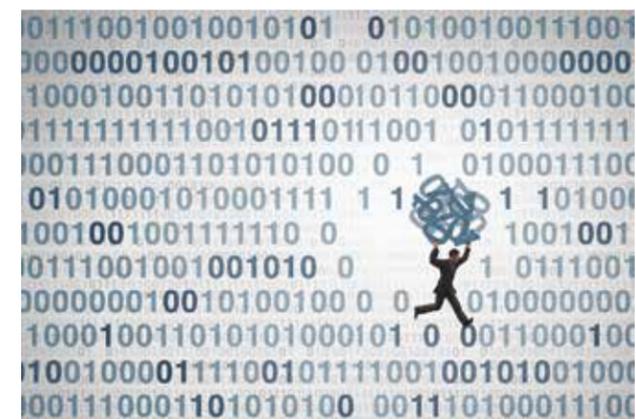
“Suddenly, a random billionaire can change politics and public policy—to sweep everything else off the table—even if they don’t speak publicly, and even if there’s almost no public awareness of his or her views.” [Potter quoted in Mayer 2017]

However, many observers, including political and academic experts, have voiced scepticism about these claims. It is a big leap to go from understanding personalities to influencing voting decisions. Could behavioural microtargeting really be powerful enough to sway elections and referendums? There is some evidence to suggest that its influence has been grossly exaggerated.

Eitan Hersh, professor of political science at Tufts University and author of *Hacking the Electorate* gave the following view.

“The idea that some additional piece of information in this overwhelming wave of data going into people’s heads is going to trick them ... It doesn’t give people enough credit.” [Hersh quoted in Chen, Potenza 2018]

Recall Nix’s exclamation at the beginning of this section: “we are thrilled that our revolutionary approach” helped Trump win. What Nix failed to mention was how surprised his team was of the result: “[a] day earlier, Cambridge Analytica executives told reporters they thought Trump’s likelihood of winning was at 20 per cent” (Ahmed 2018).



Kogan himself, when interviewed on BBC Radio 4 in March 2018, said that the accuracy of the data he harvested had been extremely exaggerated. He estimated that, in practice, he and his team were six times more likely to get inaccurate information about a person’s personality and likes and dislikes as they were to get accurate information. In conclusion, Kogan thought that microtargeting was not necessarily the most effective way to use such data sets

There are a few good reasons to be sceptical. First, data harvested from social media, even personality data, does not necessarily provide additional actionable information or insight. Many other publicly available data points can suggest a person’s political stance, including

their address. Hersh states that while personality traits are correlated with political values, the correlation is generally weak; and that people who wrongly receive advertisements (such as those intended for a different demographic) really do not like them. For example, when he attempted to create a microtargeting model that identified people interested in climate change, he found the best proxy is simply party affiliation; if you don’t know that, everything is very difficult, and if you do, everything else doesn’t really matter. Hersh argues that what is effective is mobilizing voters through behavioural targeting, rather than persuading them to vote differently.

The second limitation is that almost all psychographic data is self-reported, which leaves it vulnerable to individuals’ blind spots and inaccurate sense of self: people who repeat a personality test often do not return the same result. Additionally, their tastes and opinions—and what they like on Facebook—may change, but they do not often go back to unlike things, so this sort of behavioural data needs to be fresh. Finally, and most fundamentally, what does it mean to say one can “infer” political values from a set of personality traits? Can we assume that personalities align with politics?

Even if the personality data were accurate, it would still be difficult for microtargeting to compete with other information sources in the cluttered and fast-moving online environment. The total amount of political content online is so large that it dwarfs the output of manipulators. A team of researchers in 2018 released results of an investigation into the influence of infamous “Russian bots” on Twitter, with the following conclusion.

“When looking at their ability of spreading news content and making it viral ... we find that their effect on social platforms was minor.” [Zannettou et al 2018]

In a 2018 article for the *New York Times*, Brendan Nyhan, Professor of Public Policy at the University of Michigan, argues that the number of times fake news items are liked and shared or retweeted may seem impressive until you look at the complete picture of how much information is available online. In 2018, Twitter reported that 2.1 million election-related tweets were posted by Russian bots during the

2016 US Presidential election campaign, but in fact these represented just 1% of all election-related tweets. In a separate study with other researchers, Nyhan also found that: “fake news consumption was heavily concentrated among a small group — almost 6 in 10 visits to fake news websites came from the 10% of people with the most conservative online information diets” (Guess *et al* 2018).

Box 2.4: The impact of behavioural microtargeting in politics

Referring to examples from this section and below, discuss the following questions.

1. What are the implications of microtargeting for political knowledge?
2. How might microtargeting for political knowledge be different from microtargeting that affects consumer purchase decisions?
3. Why do observers and experts disagree about the impact of behavioural microtargeting in politics?

Source 1: Wakefield, J. 2018. “Cambridge Analytica: Can Targeted Online Ads Really Change a Voter’s Behaviour?” (BBC News online)

Search terms: Wakefield BBC Cambridge Analytica targeted online ads



The powerful influence of emotional advertising is well known; however, the, regulation that currently exists for product marketing does not, as yet, cover online political campaigns. Chris Sumner, Research Director at the Online Privacy Foundation, has pointed out the significant issues that arise.

Sumner’s team simulated a campaign to test whether they could identify, target and influence voters on the EU referendum. For example, they used language of fear to target “neurotic personalities” (Wakefield 2018) and more energetic messaging for audiences that were identified as being motivated by anger.

“We found that people behaved as we predicted they would. If you get the

messages right they can be very powerful indeed. Messaging works and is really effective—and can nudge people one way or the other.” (Sumner quoted in Wakefield 2018)

Source 2: Cadwalladr, C. 2016. “Google, Democracy and the Truth About Internet Search” (the *Guardian*)

Search terms: Guardian Google democracy truth



Carole Cadwalladr, writing in the UK newspaper the *Guardian*, argues that whether or not microtargeted propaganda influenced the 2016 Brexit referendum or the US Presidential elections, the problem remains the lack of transparency and regulation about how voters’ personal data is being mined and used to influence them.

Source 3: Brown, E.N. 2018. “Cambridge Analytica Was Doing Marketing, Not Black Magic” (Reason.com)

Search terms: reason Cambridge Analytica doing marketing



Elizabeth Nolan Brown argues that too much is being made of both the power and novelty of behavioural microtargeting. People have worried about devious political actors influencing voters throughout the history of politics, including political advertisements via television and robocalls when they were first introduced.

Understanding why claims of political influence are exaggerated can reveal truths about how we comprehend political processes. Let’s consider why the media and public opinion may have overstated the efficacy of political microtargeting in particular, and big data in general. Perhaps the outrage at invasions of privacy combined with fears stoked by Cambridge Analytica’s claims provided fertile ground for sensationalizing the company’s impact. Others, including some technology experts, appear to have been genuinely impressed.

For discussion

Fears of mass media

Historian Heidi Tworek wrote an article on the following topic: “Did ‘sinister’ emotional manipulation by the data analytics company, Cambridge Analytica, decide the U.S. election? History suggests otherwise.” (Tworek 2018)

Search terms: Tworek Cambridge Analytica Trump and the new old fear



Follow the link to read the arguments Tworek proposes, then answer the following questions.

It may be that we have an instinctive apprehension towards new media technology, as we have seen throughout modern history, for example with the invention of the printing press and later in the 19th century with mass newspaper distribution.

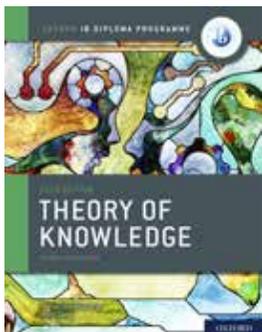
Without being a data scientist, statistician or social network expert, to what extent can one judge the impact of behavioural microtargeting? Perhaps history can provide some guides on whether this time is different.

1. What arguments does Tworek make about the exaggeration of political microtargeting in general, and of Cambridge Analytica in particular?
2. To what extent is psychometric manipulation different from previous crowd-reflecting and crowd-influencing technologies?
3. What criteria could we use to discern whether psychometric manipulation and political microtargeting have influenced political outcomes in recent years?

It is often said that technology disrupts industries, businesses and markets for the consumer’s benefit. In what ways is technological disruption in politics similar and different? Is there something about politics that

makes it more or less vulnerable to negative disruptions as compared to other domains? And finally, what will it take to guard against negative disruptions?

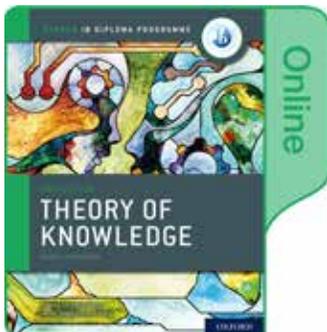
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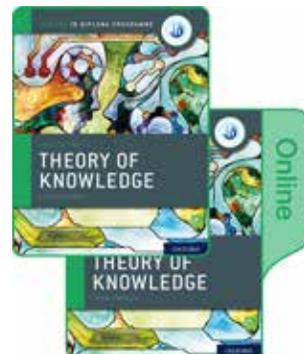
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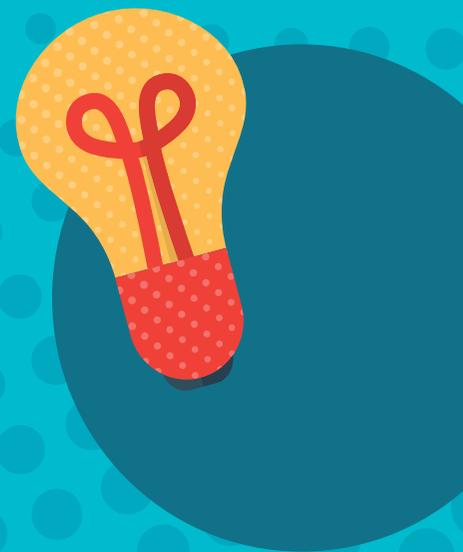
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