

DEMOCRACY/EXPLAIN/
CONNECT/ DISCOURSE/
INTERNET/MESSAGES/
NATURE OR NURTURE:
A CRISIS OF TRUST/MEDIA/
AND REASON IN/VALUES/
THE DIGITAL AGE./TRUST/
JUDGEMENT/ACCURACY/
REASONING/FAKE NEWS/
EDUCATION/EXPRESSION/
FOCUS/OBJECTIVITY

Background

In October last year the UK's newly appointed Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, delivered a speech at Policy Exchange about Britain's role in the world after Brexit. In so doing he quoted the American scholar Larry Diamond by suggesting that the world may be suffering "a democratic recession". Supporting this assertion, he also referenced Freedom House's 2017 assessment that 71 countries had suffered "net declines in political rights and civil liberties" and that by 2030 the world's largest economy (China) would no longer be a democracy.

Mr Hunt is by no means the first to highlight this trend and many others have speculated as to its cause. Opinions vary with some citing globalisation and a reactionary rise in nationalism and populism, while others look to an erosion of trust, the resultant weakening of democratic institutions and an increasingly polarised discourse. Overlaying all of this is the role of new media systems, fake news and the influence of disinformation, in some cases sponsored and encouraged by state actors.

To look for some answers to these questions Albany Associates commissioned a paper and literature review of academic research of potential relevance to the problem. This resulted in a large piece of work containing

a series of surprising and innovative analyses of the problem as well as several new avenues of potential action in terms of political communication. The full paper will be available on www.albanyassociates.com in the autumn of 2019, and we will be using it as a basis for action and further research in the years to come. However, to highlight some of its most interesting and relevant results and conclusions we have decided to present this abridged version ahead of the FCO conference on media freedom. We hope that by raising awareness of the issues it highlights among key stakeholders it will contribute to a broader understanding of the problem for both policy makers and practitioners alike.

Overview

Our paper *“Nature or Nurture: A Crisis of Trust and Reason in the Digital Age”* is divided into five sections. In part one, we identify the main characteristics of the current weakening of democratic institutions and discourse, and enumerate the most common analyses usually provided by journalists, politicians and academics as to their causes. In part two, we review select recent academic literature that suggests deeper explanations to connect and explain some of the apparently disparate features of the new normal.

In part three, we survey the main features of the new information ecology that has appeared with the rise of the internet, and in part four we look in particular at how it is used (and misused) for the purposes of political communication. In part five, we survey further research, which looks more generally at how humans seek, process, recall and disseminate information when forming their beliefs, in an effort to identify possible new communication approaches that may be more effective at changing people’s (political) opinions or, at the very least, ensuring that the ones they hold are better founded.

Headline conclusions and recommendations

- 1. Humans generally come to judgment quickly,** unconsciously and according to frames and stereotypes based on personal experience, values and culture. Information that challenges these often comes up against emotional labelling that makes reasoning more difficult. Triggering a frame of anxiety or desire for accuracy by understanding ‘which buttons to push’ or offering incentives can enable more objective evaluation.
- 2. There is a distinct distribution of values in any human population.** Approximately one third of people will have an authoritarian pre-disposition, one-third anti-authoritarian and one-third will be amenable to the values of both. Populism is a symptom of the triggering of the authoritarians in our midst. Any communication strategy aimed at combatting populism needs to establish trust (probably via new actors) and deliver simple messages.
- 3. Trust is essential to human understanding and reasoning,** and only information from trusted sources will be considered, if at all, in the reasoning process. How political messages are framed, timed and made salient is crucial to their acceptance.
- 4. The most trusted sources are often those that are closest to the grassroots** or the ‘in-group’ of influencers. Governments and practitioners should focus at the community level and encourage high-quality independent, professional and accurate local media and local storytelling, that reflect local audiences, tropes and narratives.
- 5. To combat fake news and disinformation, governments and regulatory authorities should continually examine the efficacy of regulating online platforms,** particularly those that dominate the discourse like Google and Facebook, and be cognisant of the need to uphold media independence and freedom of expression.
- 6. Governments, educational institutions and media platforms should apply a greater focus on education and media, information and data literacy.** This needs to consider the emotional as well as cognitive domains.

Part one: The new normal

GLOBALISATION AND INEQUALITY

One of the major changes in our world over the past 20–30 years has been the spread of Western, free-market capitalism to most of the rest of the planet. This has led to the outsourcing of much of the first world's industrial production to countries where wages are lower, as well as a rise in the percentage of developed economies' output devoted to services. This is generally termed globalisation. It has also led to a huge rise in global gross domestic product (GDP), one billion people lifted out of poverty, a rise in literacy and a fall in child mortality, and the rise of global corporations taking full advantage of their multinational nature to minimise their costs.

This process has had major advantages for some groups, in particular the global poor and the super-rich, but detrimental effects on the working and middle classes of many of the world's developed economies.

Many economists have noted that while GDP in major Western economies has grown overall, income growth has been mainly at the top 1% of income distribution, resulting in huge inequality. Those at the bottom and in the middle of income distribution are worse off today than they were three or even four decades ago, and inequalities in wealth are even greater than inequalities in income. The United States (US) has more inequality than any other advanced industrialised country in the world, with the United Kingdom (UK) in second place.

Recent political shocks, such as the election of US President Donald Trump or the vote in the UK to leave the European Union (EU), have been attributed to the economic effects of globalisation on groups that had enjoyed decent wages and status since the Second World War (white, working-class men), and to claims that the political establishment has left behind significant sections of the population, who felt their views had no effect on policy.

DECLINE IN TRUST

This rise in inequality and globalisation has been accompanied by a decline in trust in developed economies such as the EU and the US. In the US in the 1970s, after the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam war, Gallup found that seven out of ten Americans still believed they could trust their institutions to do the right thing in most circumstances. Forty years later, the average is 32%.

Confidence has fallen in every major institution except small business and the military. Congress (9%), banks (27%), big business (18%) and newspapers (20%) are at all-time lows. Of millennials, according to a survey by Harvard University's Institute of Politics, 86% now distrust financial institutions, and 88% "only sometimes or never" trust the media (Botsman, 2017, p. 41). In Europe, the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey also note the decline in trust in politicians, journalists and other institutions traditionally considered important to functioning democracies. The only groups to see stable or increasing levels of trust over recent years are those in uniform.

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

POPULISM AND NATIONALISM

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

‘Western liberal democracy seems to be in the grip of a momentary madness. ... All across the West, publics ... have “suddenly” been overcome by a “wave” of “far-right” fervour. They bristle with nationalism and anti-globalism, xenophobia, and isolationism. There are calls to ban immigration, to deport “illegals” ... migrants and refugees are seen as threats to national security: as terrorists in waiting or in the making ... beyond their depiction as “the enemy within”, they are deemed an existential threat to culture and national identity, competitors for jobs. There is a fundamentally antidemocratic mood afoot that has lost patience, in particular, with the strictures of political correctness. In these conditions, formerly reviled parties and movements that once languished on the fringes have become viable.’ (2018, p. 175)

Many people are by now familiar with the appearance in European politics of parties such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP), the Alternative for Germany (AfD), France’s National Rally, Italy’s Northern League, the Netherlands’ Party for Freedom (PVV), Hungary’s Fidesz and Poland’s Law and Justice (PiS). Most would consider Trump a populist too. But populism does not necessarily have to be right wing. As shown in Italy by the appearance from nowhere of the Five Star Movement led by former comedian Beppe Grillo, by Syriza in Greece, by Podemos in Spain and, to a certain extent, by French President Emmanuel Macron and the reaction to him (the gilets jaunes protests), the host ideology can also be left wing or even centrist.

Part one: The new normal continued

IMMIGRATION AND TERRORISM

Like the claim that corrupt elites are obstructing the will of the people, immigration is a big issue for populists. Many of the populist parties in Europe arose on the basis of fears about immigration. AfD, the National Rally, the English Defence League and the PVV are all examples of this type. Other populist parties founded on a different basis soon co-opted the issue, such as the Northern League, Fidesz, PiS and UKIP, as well as Trump in the US with Muslims and Mexicans, whether the country in question was facing a large influx of migrants or not.

An Economist analysis from 2016 found that in the UK that

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

Other authors note that the rise of new, populist parties in Europe over the past few years is often thought to be due to a rise in anti-immigration sentiment generally – and the cause or effect of those parties’ focus on immigration. But historically, attitudes to immigration, revealed in Eurobarometer surveys, have actually become more favourable over that time.

It is only when the salience of immigration increases – it is seen as one of the top political issues – that support for political parties promising to reduce or eliminate it soars in direct proportion. And often, anti-immigration measures are practically the only policy enunciated by such parties. The correlation between support for new populist parties with an anti-immigration stance and the perception of immigration as a major issue is quite stark across almost all EU countries.

Another argument more or less clearly stated by populists is that migration is linked to an increased risk of terrorism. And indeed, in the minds of the European public at least, immigration and terrorism are linked and of high importance. The latest Eurobarometer survey, for autumn 2018, notes that in response to the question “What do you think are the two most important questions facing the EU at the moment?” for the third consecutive time, immigration remains the main concern at the EU level, with 40% of mentions, whilst terrorism comes in at second place with 20%. This is ahead of public finances, the economy, climate change and unemployment, despite the fact that actual levels of irregular migration have declined precipitously since 2017 (EC, 2018).

POLARISATION AND PARTISANSHIP

In such circumstances, it is easy to see how polarisation of political opinion has increased. The best data on this is from the US, where it has long been recognised as a problem. A major Pew Research Center study in 2014 confirmed that Democrats and Republicans were becoming more partisan: in 2004, only about one in ten Americans was uniformly liberal or conservative across most values. In 2017, after a year of Trump's presidency, they found it had worsened:

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

Perhaps even more worrying is that according to a 2019 study, party members for the first time no longer agree on what the top issues are:

Among Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents, health care costs, education, the environment, Medicare and assistance for poor and needy people top the list of priorities (all are named as top priorities by seven-in-ten or more Democrats). None of these is among the five leading top priorities for Republicans and Republican-leaning independents. The two priorities named by more than seven-in-ten Republicans – terrorism and the economy – are cited by far smaller shares of Democrats.¹ (Jones, 2019)

Almost all commentators agree that new media and the ability to tailor one's news consumption are likely to contribute to such polarisation.

HATE SPEECH, POST-TRUTH POLITICS AND FAKE NEWS

With polarisation at a high, “facilitated by the ease of communication with in-group members and without the need to listen to opposing arguments, is it any wonder that there has been a return of hate speech?” In many cases we have crossed the line from disagreement to hate.

Populist discourse is based on a Manichean worldview where there is only one people and one truth, and those outside it are seen as traitors. Moreover, the ease and anonymity with which we can now call out to the other group on social media tempts even the best of us to express ourselves poorly at times.

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

1. The partisan gap is particularly wide for a handful of issues. For instance, two-thirds of Democrats and Democratic leaners identify global climate change as a top priority, while just 21% of Republicans and Republican leaners say the same. Similarly, although only 31% of Democrats say that strengthening the military should be a top priority, 65% of Republicans hold this view (Jones, 2019)

Part one: The new normal continued

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

Hate speech often displays another important characteristic: a lack of respect for truth, evidence and rational discourse. It has been a clear and undeniable feature of recent political debate (most obviously in the US recently, but with many examples in Europe too) that increased polarisation has led to a state of affairs in which there is often no agreed set of common facts that can even form the basis for political discussion. Each side of the debate is so closed in its own bubble that we increasingly see that an objective truth, which can in principle be discovered and agreed on by all humans, is being challenged as a concept.

It is no coincidence that “post-truth” was the Oxford Dictionary’s Word of the Year in 2016, defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”.

Finally, the advent of fake news is a related phenomenon, which is important in two senses:

1. The accusation that real news is fake: a claim often thrown about, particularly by Trump, who claims to have invented it, aimed at media presenting a view of events – or more correctly, a choice of events as news – that differ from one’s own.
2. Real fake news: news fabricated with deliberate intent, where untrue statements are falsely presented as real news and disseminated with the explicit aim of spreading confusion and false belief. This phenomenon has arisen with, and depends on, social media.

FINDINGS

- Globalisation and rising wealth and income inequality, lack of trust in elites, the rise of populism, concern with immigration and terrorism, hate speech, polarisation and post-truth politics appear to be key factors in the weakening of democratic institutions and discourse.
- It is unclear, however, whether these characteristics are causally linked, and if so, by what.

Part two: Causes of the new normal

In looking at the main factors that appear to characterise the recent weakening of democratic institutions and discourse, it seems clear that the frustration of voters with the political system in general, commonly called liberal democracy, is of key importance.

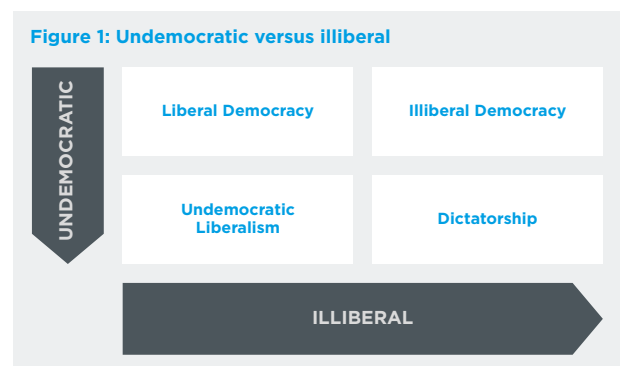
SAVING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

But what is liberal democracy? Political scientist Yascha Mounk provides a useful schema by which to understand the two parts of the phrase. In his view:

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

With this definition, there are different flavours of democracy that can be represented graphically.

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



Part two: Causes of the new normal continued

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

It certainly seems difficult to imagine that the fact that established parties in Western democracies of all stripes presided over such a huge relative decline in prosperity, compared with that of the 1% and the large growth in overall GDP, did not have an effect on many voters' dissatisfaction with the entire system of undemocratic liberalism.

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

IT'S NOT THE ECONOMY, STUPID

One of the main assumptions in the political sphere over the past 30 years has been that voters vote on the basis of the likely economic effects on them of the policies enunciated by candidates. This assumption has also underlain much of the difficulty experienced by politicians and pundits alike in analysing why large sections of the population voted for parties or candidates who are clearly not going to make them better off, or even enunciate no economic policy at all.

Reports abound that

“it is no accident that in both rich and poor countries, people that are unable to take advantage of the benefits of the new gig economy are those that vote for populist political candidates” (Feroz, 2017), that “to understand 2016’s politics, look at the winners and losers of globalization” (Bevins, 2016) or that “globalization and economic liberalization have produced winners and losers and the big ‘Leave’ vote in economically stagnant regions of Britain suggests that many of those who have lost out are fed up” (Yardley, 2018).

The idea that the economically left behind are those who vote for populists is tempting – but wrong.

In general, research has found that in terms of explaining political attitudes, people's material circumstances or personal finances matter far less than their judgments about how they think about how broader social groups, or the country as a whole, are doing economically. The results of several voting surveys back this up. The Washington Post, for example, did not find any differences among those who identified as either "poor" or "working class" and "middle class" among Trump voters: 18% of each group were populists, compared with 10% of those who identified as either "upper class" or wealthy (Rathbun et al., 2017). Several other empirical reports note that those who vote for populists are often better off than those voting for traditional left-wing parties.

VALUES, NOT MONEY

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, in *The Righteous Mind* (2012), tries to understand the paradox of why many of us vote against our economic interests, with some of the poor voting for right-wing parties that want to cut social security and some of the well-off voting for left-wing parties that want to tax them more. His main finding is that we vote not according to our interests, but according to our values. Our values come from our morals, which,

Haidt maintains, are not arrived at consciously and depend to a large part on our genetic inheritance, the society we happen to grow up in and the experiences we have while doing so. In particular, he makes a compelling case for why, generally, our political world is separated into left and right wing, and why certain groups of key issues pertain to each.

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

Figure 2: Scores on the Moral Foundation Questionnaire (MFQ) from subjects in 2011

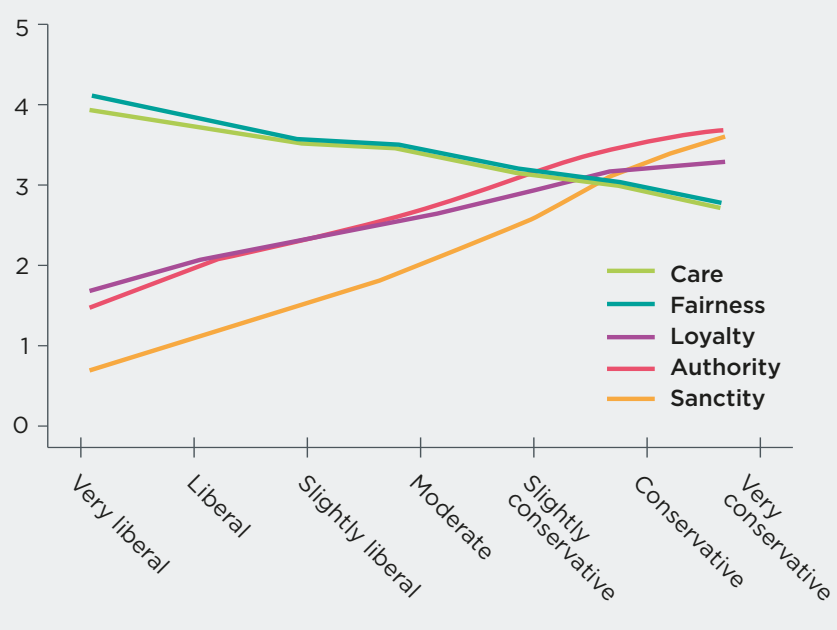


Figure 2 reproduced with kind permission of Professor Jonathan Haidt

Part two: Causes of the new normal continued

The graph on the previous page shows how one's support for certain values, which we develop almost always in an unconscious way, determine our general political position and link together certain political issues (Haidt, 2012, p. 187). According to Haidt, most of our supposedly rational political positions are in fact post hoc rationalisations of moral intuitions reached immediately and unconsciously. Worse, intelligence and education are no guard against this: indeed, there is good evidence that the more intelligent and educated among us actually suffer more from this bias than others.

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

These authors show that our political preferences are not rational or based on economics, but rather based on our morals and values, which depend on our personalities, our culture and our personal upbringing.

RIGHT WING OR AUTHORITARIAN?

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

The idea that authoritarianism, rather than conservatism, is essential to understanding populism was first presented by Stenner in 2005 in *The Authoritarian Dynamic* (2005). This made a compelling case, and well before recent developments, for overturning our understanding of right-wing populism by looking at psychological factors. First of all, Stenner clarified that there is a distinction between authoritarianism and conservatism. Authoritarianism is a desire for sameness across space and is quite different from conservatism, which can be understood as the desire for sameness over time.

Second, Stenner showed empirically that authoritarianism, which she describes as a group of personality traits related to order and control, is closely linked to a strong desire for uniformity but also an inability to deal with complexity. It is mostly determined by lack of openness to experience – one of the Big Five personality dimensions – and by cognitive limitations. These are, she points out, two key factors that reduce one's willingness and capacity, respectively, to tolerate complexity, diversity and difference.

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

Without such a framework, the rise of populist parties and views are very difficult to explain. In December 2016, Haidt and Stenner tested the prediction of Stenner's model once again precisely in relation to modern populism using the data from the EuroPulse survey. They found only one statistically significant correlation: between populist voting (in the US for Trump, in the UK for Brexit and in France for Marine Le Pen) and perceptions of normative threat. The more authoritarian the person, as judged by the responses to proxy

questions on child-rearing, the more likely they were to vote for populist candidates – but only if they perceived a normative threat, assessed by the extent of their agreement with statements about their country going in the wrong direction, the government being controlled by a rich elite and satisfaction with democracy in their country. The authors also explicitly checked the hypothesis of the left-behind via questions about past or perceived future general economy and household financial situation but found weak and inconsistent correlations with populist voting intentions. Ironically, poor personal finances actually had a depressing effect on the likelihood of voting for populists, perhaps because at this point authoritarians were too worried about themselves to be worried about how others behave (2018).

Such work is largely in line with similar findings in the US. Dana Mutz makes a convincing case for the issue of status threat having been triggered in the minds of the average voter and that this, not economics or increased issue salience, led to the victory of a populist – precisely on some of his main populist positions: being duped by China on trade and jobs, and the need to massively curtail immigration (2018).

Part two: Causes of the new normal continued

Status threat is closely associated with one further element worth looking at: loss of control. This is explicitly recognised by many populists. Trump wants to *Make America Great Again*, and supporters of Brexit want to *Take Back Control*; but both are avowedly messages of weakness, directly admitting that greatness and control have already been lost, however they use this feeling to create strength.

The feeling is similar everywhere where populists have risen: in Hungary and the other Visegrád countries, in Italy and in France. Russian television floods the airwaves with the message that Russia has been humiliated by the West.

As Davies puts it,

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

MOTIVATED REASONING

So there appears to be good evidence that our political convictions and, in particular, the propensity to vote for those promising radical change in certain circumstances is based on personality traits (and thus predispositions) that we may largely be unaware of.

But even if that were not the case, and our political choices were made on the basis of a rational evaluation, recent research on the functioning of the human brain has shown that all humans find it very challenging to reason logically, and that this ideal may anyway be impossible. The main problem with coming to different beliefs from similar evidence is this: motivated reasoning. The Cartesian fallacy – that we form our opinions and beliefs by carefully weighing up each side of an argument, objectively assessing the available evidence and then coming to a decision, which we are then perfectly willing to modify as new evidence comes along – is almost totally off the mark when it comes to how humans actually think.

Instead, we tend to come to our judgments immediately, unconsciously and according to frames and stereotypes developed on the basis of personal experience and culture. There is now a large psychological literature demonstrating that we reason fast and slow. We engage in hot cognition and most of our conscious, language-based reasoning – the things we state when defending our beliefs, talk about politics, or write tweets or Facebook posts – are actually post hoc justifications of what we have already arrived at unconsciously. We thus engage, especially in areas of thought such as politics (but also economics), in motivated reasoning.

We reason consciously (using language), generally speaking, only when we have to and with some aim in mind. Reasoning is there to help us do something and thus has to do with our goals. Epley and Gilovich point out that the process of gathering and processing information can systematically depart from accepted rational standards because one goal – the desire to persuade, agreement with a peer group, self-image, self-preservation – can commandeer attention and guide reasoning at the expense of accuracy (2016). Moreover, thinking is influenced by our emotional state, the so-called hot cognition theory. In politics, emotion appears to be activated automatically on mere exposure to socio-political concepts and especially those

with strong political attitudes, causing them to be biased information processors. There is even neuroscientific evidence for this phenomenon, with the first neuro-imaging study to look at the brains of those engaged in motivated reasoning finding that the areas that lit up when discussing politics were not associated with neural activity in regions previously associated with cold reasoning tasks. In other words, we use a different part of our brain when talking about politics.

FINDINGS

- Undemocratic liberalism has led to frustration with the liberal democracy as a system.
- Economic factors are less important in determining voting patterns than values, which are largely unconsciously arrived at.
- Authoritarianism is triggered when status threats of majorities become salient, leading to populism.
- Authoritarianism is not the same as right-wing conservatism and populists, and authoritarians are not necessarily right wing.
- All humans engage in motivated reasoning based on selective use of evidence. Reasoning about certain issues, including politics, involves emotion.

Part three: The new information ecology

THE FIFTH ESTATE?

The traditional role of the media acting as the fourth estate of a vibrant liberal democracy has suffered massively as a result of technological development, and particularly the rise of the internet in the last 20 years. Social media and the rollout of wider digital capabilities have overturned the classical Western democratic model based on a marketplace of ideas. With the rise to dominance of Facebook and other platforms, the idea of a cohort of recognised opinion leaders and power-checkers central to the political process is breaking down.

Technology has provided a way not only to directly target individuals with seductive messages tuned to each individual's wants, needs and circumstances, but also to enable all individuals to effectively become opinion leaders in the information space. Initially, corporations garnered these new capabilities for marketing, developing a totally new advertising model, now known by the industry as adtech. But just as the corporate public-relations ideas of Bernays had been successfully adopted by the fascist regimes of the 1930s for political purposes, political players also embraced the power of these new digitally enabled capabilities. In the digital age, rather than a simple up-and-down model between politics and the public, multi-step flow and network effects have become the basis of mass communication.

In the UK, 74% of adults and 91% of 16- to 24-year-olds now consume news mainly online, rather than through traditional radio or print (Newman et al, 2018). Online content aggregators, mainly Google, Facebook, Twitter and Apple News, are the main conduits for traffic to traditional news websites, which compete with other primarily digital news sources such as the *Huffington Post*, the *Independent*, *Buzzfeed* and *Politico*. Away from these websites, news also competes with friends' updates, advertising and other clickbait on social media (Cairncross, 2019).

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

MEDIA LITERACY

The manner in which we respond to information in this age is affected by our hedonistic mindset, driven by our biases; a lack of recognition of information sourcing, through incapacity and laziness; and the sheer volume of information, enabled by technology. These factors lead to us failing to think as critically as we should when sourcing and analysing news on social media. This is typified by the fact that research indicates that some 59% of links shared on Twitter are shared without being opened, although bots may contribute to much of this (Gabiello et al., 2016).

With such information overload, do we understand what our information environment is, and do we know whom to trust? It is largely accepted that media literacy is a vital component in creating and maintaining a responsible and informed citizenry, but all of us have experience with the difficulty in recognising trustworthy sources of information.

Studies into media trust have traditionally identified three distinct categories of trust: message credibility (trust in the information itself), source credibility (trust in the individual providing the information) and media credibility (trust in the medium or channel). On social media, the distinction between these three categories is rapidly blurring, making it more difficult to separate the

information, the source and the medium. This is particularly evident in the social-media accounts of political figures, in which they provide information, serve as sources and often use their own channels, such as websites or blogs, in which they self-edit. Those political players who can, via several means, express authenticity, regardless of honesty, are honoured with the most trust – an attribute common among populist figures. How should voters react to the constant and unfiltered tweeting of government leaders such as Trump or Italy's Matteo Salvini?

MAINSTREAM BALANCE

While as individuals, journalists face pressures, the wider mainstream media – owners, editors, journalists – are also facing a considerable professional challenge in today's fervent public discourse, one that questions key factors of journalism: impartiality and balance. In a Manichaean political arena, both sides are traditionally given time in the media space. However, this balance is hard to maintain when minority, extreme views, with little evidence for their claims, may have a significant and loud profile on social media and clamour for equal airtime or print copy with established, evidence-based voices. And, as a brief visit to Twitter proves, failures to provide such can create considerable backlash, as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has found.

Part three: The new information ecology continued

The market dynamics of the digital age have hit the mainstream media hard, especially in the local media sector. In the UK, the decline in sales of local newspapers and the closure of many, alongside the relative weakness of regional and local broadcasting, are now seen as directly contributing to a democratic deficit. Similar findings are seen in other Western democracies.

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

ALGORITHMS AND AGGREGATORS

Further, the online platforms themselves exert a degree of algorithmic control which may impact the media agenda. Other organised human efforts in the information environment are the tech giants, or FAANGs (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Google) and the like.

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

GOOD DATA

Away from social media, through the increasing access that the public has to government and research data, publics, be they the general population or specific communities, can increasingly question or directly source information with the ability to directly hold governments to account. However, although the UK has pioneered an approach of providing the public with sound open data, the reality has proved somewhat underwhelming, here and across the globe. Several indicators show that, despite widespread stated government commitment, for social, political and economic reasons, public databases are still largely incomplete, unfocussed, fragmented, unreadable and of

low quality. Further, data portals are rarely fit for purpose and the abilities of the general public to access, interpret and analyse data is currently poor, with only the technically-savvy or 'data activists' capable of doing so.

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

FINDINGS

- The fourth-estate model of the role of mainstream media is breaking down as new media systems arise.

- Increasing proportions of the population receive their news from the internet and social media, while the public's media literacy has not increased.

- Mainstream media are increasingly challenged, financially, by the rise of social-media platforms and news aggregators, leading to loss of local media and disappearance of professional journalistic standards.

- A lack of media standards and the regulation of new media systems lead to a proliferation of fake news.

- Algorithms and bots increasingly tailor information availability in unseen and uncontrolled ways.

- Open data initiatives are falling behind the high standards initially required of them.

- The focus on grabbing attention via any means has led to a glut of uncontrolled and unverified information that is difficult to distinguish from evidence-based content.

Part four: Contemporary political communication

OUT OF CONTROL: THE RISE OF THE FRINGE

Over the last decade, traditional politics has undergone a tumultuous period of change. This can be seen in two waves. As digital politics matured, notably in the form of activism, the revolutions of the Arab Spring saw politics move online, away from tightly controlled traditional media, with social movements taking advantage of the tools made available to them by the digital age. This swiftly became the norm of such movements in the West, as typified by Occupy, Podemos, the Zapatistas and others. But in this wave and its undercurrents, vicious political – or rather, cultural – battles ramped up. The radicalism of social movements was mirrored in radicalism of the fringe movements, using similar mechanisms.

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

PSYCHOLOGY AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The question of how people form political preferences has been central to political science for nearly a century. Initial models assumed that people base them on information pulled from memory and update them with new information in an unbiased fashion. But the work of Kahneman and others has challenged this idea. Importantly, Milton Lodge and Charles Taber recently applied these findings to the political realm and, studying this experimentally, found that people do not continue to add to their store of relevant memories as they receive information over time, but rather update a sort of evaluation counter in a favourable direction and forget new information that adds little of use to the already-formed opinion. When asked for an evaluation later, the voter will provide it but without remembering specifics of why they hold that opinion. If pressed, voters will offer post hoc rationalisations of their intuitively retrieved evaluation (2013).

Humans are not Cartesian machines. Our consciousness consists of psychological states of emotion, which can have a homophilous effect in drawing us together, just as demographics such as age, race, interests and education can. This is especially noticeable on the internet, where we can very easily connect with those displaying similar emotions as ourselves, creating an emotional contagion online. Following on from Suler's

“disinhibition effect” (2004), several further studies have shown that anger as an emotion is particularly contagious over social media. From this, as neatly articulated by early internet memes, the “Greater Internet Fuckwad” theory (Tycho, 2013) and Godwin’s law (Godwin, 1994), incivility flows, especially prevalent in online political discourse.

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

EMOTION VS. TRUTH

With hyperpartisanship comes loose interpretations of the truth, especially among the new players. In the 2016 US presidential election campaign, BuzzFeed studied six highly hyperpartisan Facebook pages, three on the left (Occupy Democrats, The Other 98% and Addicting Info) and three on the right (Eagle Rising, Right Wing News and Freedom Daily). The study revealed that

right-wing sites were almost 40% more likely to post content that was either a mixture of true and false or mostly false than those of the left (Persily, 2017).

The creating and spreading of fake news may have multiple aims:

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

Whatever the aim and whoever the author, the idea that fake news produced with relatively little investment, and having swift and far-reaching effects has become clear: in 2018 a coordinated online campaign by far-right, anti-Islam activists pressured governments to drop support for the UN Global Compact for Migration, which had been years in the making (Cerulus and Schaart, 2019). It led directly to the fall of the Belgian government and to the US, Hungary, Israel, the Czech Republic and Poland withdrawing from the pact, while 12 others abstained, including Austria, Switzerland and Italy.

Part four: Contemporary political communication continued

It is extremely difficult to quantify degrees of responsibility of the media, mainstream or social, for this state of affairs. Counting fake-news exposure is almost impossible. Likes, clicks, newspaper subscriptions, viewing figures, followers and retweets are tangible but difficult-to-quantify indicators of the spread of fake content. Variations in definitions of misinformation, disinformation, mal-information; definitions of what actually counts as fake news; the differing nature of behaviour on different platforms; multiple factors in human decision-making; the delineation between human factors and technological ones: all can result in a wide array of research efforts producing a bewildering set of results, across several different academic disciplines.

POLARISATION AND MEDIA

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

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

Perhaps surprisingly, in terms of social-media effects on trust, bias and polarisation, even if political polarisation has grown overall, this increase has been largest among publics least likely to use the internet and social media (Bakshy et al., 2015; Boxell et al., 2017).

Further, a comprehensive research study by the Berkman Klein Center at Harvard University confirmed the influence of right-wing media, notably led by a major primary source, Breitbart. While the overall news media landscape was focused on the centre-left, it was relatively fragmented between several outlets, whereas the other major polarity was a much more concentrated far right, notably around Fox News and Breitbart. Content sourced from the latter dominated most social media, especially concerning the most widely covered topic across the spectrum: immigration (Faris et al., 2017).

TROLLS AND BANKERS

Governments, as well as motivated individuals and groups, have been quick to catch on to the power of new communication methods. In 2017, Freedom House found that at least 30 governments around the world were already employing troll farms to spread propaganda and attack critics. The spread of online misinformation went far beyond Russia and China to almost half of the 65 countries studied in the report. It found governments including Mexico, Saudi Arabia and Turkey were using "paid pro-government commentators" to shape opinions online,

often to give the impression of grassroots support for government policies. They include “paid commentators, trolls, bots and fake news”, which are used to harass journalists, flood social media with fabricated opinions and erode trust in other media. The report’s authors warned that the techniques had become far more advanced and widespread in recent years and said fake news had been employed in an attempt to influence elections in 18 countries, including the UK (Freedom House, 2017).

Russia, unsurprisingly, appears on the list; an exemplar of fake news disinformation. *Nimmo* encapsulates disinformation practice neatly by defining the four Ds of Russia’s approach:

‘dismiss the critic, distract from the main issue, distort the facts and dismay the audience’ (StopFake.org, 2015).

It is intended to be disorienting, as opposed to necessarily influential towards any outcome apart from the disruption of information.

Compared with Russia, China’s, specifically the Chinese Communist Party’s, approach to international influence in the digital information age is, on one level, more straightforward and traditional, albeit with a modern edge, and, on the other, far more consequential. And in the short term, China is going further, through what is known as localising its media influence. While it courts today’s Western journalists and cultivates tomorrow’s journalists of the developing world, China is also increasingly physically altering their job market and media space.

The huge expansion of CCTV International, now CGTN, and Xinhua over the last decade, the latter doubling its overseas bureaus to some 200 in ten years, has led to these new foreign bureaus offering lucrative salaries to editors, journalists and technicians, and is having an impact on existing domestic media outlets: a drain on talent (Lim and Bergin, 2018). More buying the boat than borrowing it, China is increasingly investing in foreign local independent media. Reportedly one of the fastest growing and most influential digital TV media networks in Africa is run by the StarTimes Group, which is a privately owned Chinese media organisation.

FINDINGS

- New media systems allow any private individual or group, no matter how small, to effectively reach large audiences and create or divert policy debates.
- Confirmation bias and emotional evaluation of evidence mean that rational consideration of politically relevant information is almost impossible.
- Social media stokes emotional political content, but polarisation is caused more by traditional media than social, which exposes users to a wider diversity of views.
- Illiberal governments are increasingly using social media to bolster support for themselves and their policies.
- Undemocratic governments, particularly Russia and China, are seeking to disrupt or control liberal democratic discourse across the globe using new media systems.

Part five: Results and new approaches

The scientific literature considered in the full paper is vast and constantly changing. Here we try to give an overview of work which is potentially relevant to the functioning of democracy in the digital age. We strongly recommend that interested readers consult the larger paper for a more rigorous and extensively referenced treatment of the literature.

Below, we provide a very partial list of results of potential relevance for any action that might be planned in support of countering the weakening of democratic institutions and discourse.

- **The rational choice model of voting, which has held sway both in many political-science departments of universities and with professional pundits, does not explain why we vote the way we do.** It is assumed that thought is conscious, is literal, mirrors the world as it is and is universal, and that we all reason in the same way. Cognitive science research, however, has shown that such assumptions are outdated. It has shown that thought is largely unconscious and depends on mental structures such as frames and metaphors, and that people reason differently according to the cognitive templates they acquired due to personality and upbringing.
- **Over time and on the basis of a large variety of factors, by the time we become adults we are already fairly established in our personalities,** which then do not generally change much over time. The mix of our personalities and experience will form our values, usually unconsciously. Values are essential to understanding and voting. Values determine which political issues are connected (guns, abortion, healthcare and so on) and which metaphors resonate with which audience. Communicating on political issues without linking to values is likely to be less effective.
- **What we consider important changes often and fast,** hence the issue of salience is key. We can be relatively hostile to immigration, but if the issue is of no perceived importance to our daily lives or imminent future, then our views on it are not called into play in more general political terms. Determining what will be relevant to whom and when it changes is so far poorly understood.
- **While about a third of us are authoritarians and another third are anti-authoritarians,** who are going to be particularly resistant to changing our minds because of the big difference in our values, there seems to exist a whole middle section of the population who can see things from either side and may thus be relatively persuadable. Evidence for the existence and characteristics of such a group is, however, so far rather weak. It does, however, align with years of modern political practice in established democracies, where convincing the middle is where efforts are best directed.

- **Authoritarian is not synonymous with right wing or conservative.** Authoritarians, when triggered by status threat, seek to reduce complexity by reducing difference – often via radical solutions. Populism is a symptom of the triggering of those with authoritarian predispositions and focuses overwhelmingly on resolving perceived in-group difference (corrupt elites) and out-group threat (immigration, non-majority populations).
- **Trust is essential** to our belief formation because it determines our evidence base for all evidence that we do not personally collect. Information supplied by bodies or persons we do not trust will automatically be discounted and may not even form part of the reasoning process. Moreover, trust would appear to be both particularly hard to restore once lost and peculiarly easy to establish in new contexts. New actors can rapidly establish trust. This may be easier than trying to restore trust in actors who have lost it.
- **Human brains have evolved to react fast to new situations and information, and fast means intuitively.** We all suffer from confirmation bias in various complex ways. Our goals will determine what we are reasoning for. Reasoning from evidence from a neutral or trusted source will lead to the question “Can I believe this?”, while evidence from a non-trusted source or evidence that appears to contradict already held views will lead to the question “Must I believe this?”
- **Emotion is used to mark the importance of certain information.** It can therefore have an effect on what information is retrieved, affect how it is processed (consciously or via a quick rule of thumb), determine what cognitive resources are available for reasoning and provide the motivation to start reasoning in the first place.
- **Metaphors and frames matter.** They can trigger unconscious associations (making some more salient than others) that may be harmful, harshening attitudes, for example.
- **Bubbles and echo chambers.** Apart from the new risks that come with the ability to tailor our news feed to receive only news we are likely to want to hear, humans are anyway already living in bubbles. We actively seek out confirmation of pre-existing beliefs from sources we trust and information that does not fit with what we already think is rejected to reduce dissonance. This drive is such that online, our selective exposure due to confirmation bias outstrips algorithmic filtering, the so-called filter bubble.
- **Polarisation.** Confirmation bias leads to polarisation of our attitudes because of differentiated source use. But humans are motivated to ensure belief coherence within groups. This can lead us to suspend reason if to use it would cause us to disagree with the rest of the group.

Part five: Results and new approaches continued

- **Economics has little to do with the current crisis.** Inequality may be important as background to the creation of views of unfairness (comparative disparity of groups), threat (rapid changes in economic level or unemployment) or outlook for the future (pessimism), which are essential to forward-looking evaluations of normative threat.
- **Much the same can be said about immigration.** Fears about, and intolerant responses to, immigration can be stoked by either lack of social capital or by rapid changes in immigration levels – not absolute levels themselves. When government and leadership are trusted, the economy and migration are not seen as threats. Their salience, in other words, is reduced.
- **Authoritarians and education.** We tend to imagine that it is possible to socialise people away from intolerance towards greater respect for difference, if only we have the will, resources and opportunity to provide the right experiences. All available evidence indicates that exposure to difference, talking about difference, and applauding difference are the surest ways to aggravate those who are innately intolerant. We can limit intolerance of difference by focusing on and applauding our sameness.
- **Data, surveillance and targeting.** While information is key to trust and decision-making, data is crucial to the provision of that information. The impact of massive data harvesting, corporate or otherwise, and its application in computational propaganda is potentially more worrisome than the information transmitted itself. Further, the provision of open data, to provide the public with official information, although once lauded, appears to have somewhat stalled or at the very least slowed down.
- **Local communication networks.** The demise of local media outlets has had a profound effect on public discourse, with local issues unable to be understood, debated and break into wider forums. Further, the prevalence of national political, social and economic narratives which often bear little resemblance to what is actually experienced locally causes cognitive dissonance and thus has a detrimental impact on trust in democratic institutions.
- **The sophistication of fake online content** is due to grow, making deep fakes much more difficult to distinguish from true representations of events. This has the potential to exacerbate distrust in any content received online through social media or otherwise.

- **Algorithms.** The content readily available to the public online is ever more subject to algorithmic manipulation, in a manner that is increasingly misunderstood by even those who create such algorithms. Continued artificial intelligence (AI) development and adoption within algorithm generation, without human input and oversight, poses a growing threat to human agency in the digital information space.
- **Media literacy.** Much of what is discussed in this paper is utterly unknown to the general public. With the colossal array of media available online, the informed citizen increasingly needs to know how to access, create, communicate and analyse that information, to understand not only the nature of the information they consume but also how it is created.
- **Duopoly power.** The dominance of Google and Facebook allows for easy manipulation over information across wide swathes of populations. Equally, the business models and software engineering mentality, as opposed to socio-political, of this duopoly has significant impact on the development of the 21st century's digital future. The enormous profits made from news aggregation by such actors, with no payment made for content, has rightly led to urgent calls for regulation.
- **Disinformation and disruption.** The disinformation activities of Russia are largely uncoordinated, though sponsored by the Kremlin, aimed at disruption rather than direct influence. However, the longer-term strategy of China, especially concerning data, media industries and physical infrastructure, pose a greater threat to democratic systems more widely, especially in the developing world. Regulatory action and increased media literacy are urgently needed to counter such moves.
- **Voter choice in a digital age.** Election regulation in all countries is woefully inadequate to deal with the challenges listed here. Laws that take account of the ability for new actors via new media systems to negatively impact the democratic process and seek to prevent or punish them accordingly are urgently needed.

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For further details contact:

info@albanyassociates.com

Albany Associates Ltd

Tintagel House
92 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7TY
+44 (0)208 996 5199
+44 (0)208 996 5072
www.albanyassociates.com