Public Opinion
&
Political Engagement

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Outline

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- ▶ How many of you would be confident in listing some of the most important political issues discussed in government right now?
- ▶ How well do you think your parents would do if I asked them the same question?
- ▶ How about people in your neighbourhood?
- ▶ How about people in your state?
- ▶ How about the general public?
- ▶ How much does the public know about current and political affairs?

What is Public Opinion?

- ▶ Public opinion is how society collectively views political and current affairs, policy issues and political leaders.
- ▶ Public opinion has a significant but somewhat unpredictable impact on politicians, politics and policy.
- ▶ Public opinion matters! - at least for democratic systems

Key Questions

- ▶ Do people have an opinion?
- ▶ Is there a collective opinion on political matters? And if so, how many?
- ▶ What if people don't know what they want?
  Either due to ignorance, lack of interest, or indecisiveness.
- ▶ Can people express their opinion?
- ▶ How do people express their opinion?
- ▶ Does / How does / Should - the government respond to public opinions?

Allocating Power

- Long lasting history of political leaders, scholars, etc being
  sceptical of the people's ability to make decisions on
  political matters (e.g. Socrates and Plato)

Allocating Power

Walter Lippman

in "Public Opinion" (1922), Walter Lippman suggests that the public's limited access to complex information might hinder their ability to make sound political judgments.

Joseph Schumpeter

in "Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy" (1942) argues that the public's role in decision-making is largely reduced to choosing between competing elites, rather than direct involvement in policy formulation.

Plato's Ship of State (Plato, 1982)

Imagine the governance of a state as the command of a ship.
Question: who is fit to be captain of the ship? and thus
command the ship?

- ▶ People = strong but near-sighted shipowner, who lack
  knowledge of seafaring and navigation
- ▶ Politicians and representatives = a group of arguing sailors,
  fighting for the title of captain, but also completely lacking
  knowledge of navigation
- ▶ Philosopher-king = navigator, stargazer, true captain

Plato's Ship of State (Plato, 1982)

► Is it irresponsible to let people vote without prior knowledge and training?

America – ratification of Constitution (1787-1788)

Federalists
Strict supporters of the Constitution and a stronger national republic

Anti-Federalists
Those in favour of small, localised government

Allocating Power

The key issue is the distribution of power — to political leaders or to the people.

▶ If the majority of people are ignorant or unable to be fully trusted with the work of governing — Strong national republic seems better (Federalists)

▶ To protect liberty and freedom of the people, smaller localised governments are better with more participation of the masses. (Anti-Federalist)

Which argument seems justified?

- ▶ Can we ask every citizen to decide on every political decision?
- ▶ Do citizens have the time, money, and knowledge to make such decisions?
- ▶ Which decisions should be left to citizens? What kind of decisions should be made by the "experts"?
- ▶ Should some people get more votes than others?
- ▶ Who should get more votes than others?
- ▶ Is electing a representative just handing over your votes to that person? how is that different from giving unequal numbers of votes to people?

These are questions we will return to at the end of this lecture...

Attention, Knowledge, Ignorance

Public sphere (Habermas, 1989)

Public sphere is an accessible social space open to public debate,
where general concerns and opinions are the subject of
discussion and exchange.

Where does Public Opinion come from?

Where does Public Opinion come from?

- ▶ Social Network
- ▶ Mass Media
- ▶ Public figures (politicians, influencers)
- ▶ Education
- ▶ Socialisation
- ▶ Social/Cultural/Political Identity
- ▶ Economy
- ▶ Cognition Emotions
- ▶ Current Affairs
- ▶ Political Issues
- ▶ etc.

Mass Media

- ▶ Media landscape is changing, with Online media rising
- ▶ Internet facilitates a high-choice media environment (Van Aelst et al., 2017)
- ▶ Some academics express worry regarding the rising ideological segregation among the public, attributed to novel technological shifts in the consumption of online media (Anderson, 2006; Adamic and Glance, 2005; Bozdag and Hoven, 2015; Conover et al., 2011; Sunstein, 2007).
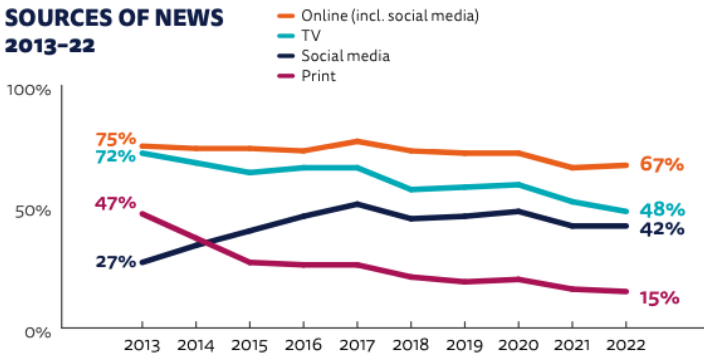
Sources of News in the UK

Figure: Newman et al., 2017
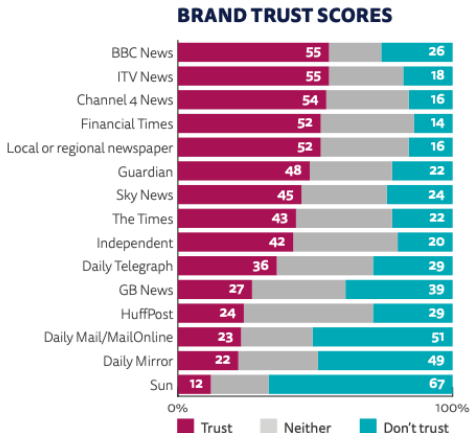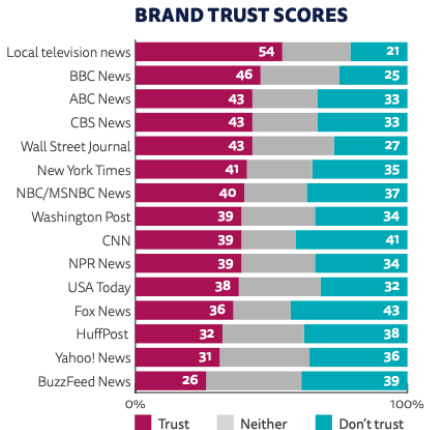
Sources of News in the US

Figure: Newman et al., 2017

Trust in News in UK

BRAND TRUST SCORES

Trust = % scored 6–10 on 10-point scale, Don't trust = 0–4, Neither = 5. Those who haven't heard of each brand were excluded. Only the above brands were included in the survey so should not be treated as a list of the most trusted brands.

Trust in News in US

BRAND TRUST SCORES

Brand	Trust	Neither	Don't trust
Local television news	54		21
BBC News	46		25
ABC News	43		33
CBS News	43		33
Wall Street Journal	43		27
New York Times	41		35
NBC/MSNBC News	40		37
Washington Post	39		34
CNN	39		41
NPR News	39		34
USA Today	38		32
Fox News	36		43
HuffPost	32		38
Yahoo! News	31		36
BuzzFeed News	26		39

0%   100%

■ Trust   ■ Neither   ■ Don't trust

Trust = % scored 6-10 on 10-point scale. Don't trust = 0-4, Neither = 5.
Those that haven't heard of each brand were excluded. Only the above brands were
included in the survey so should not be treated as a list of the most trusted brands.

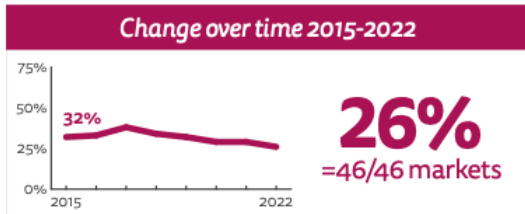Figure: Newman et al., 2017

OVERALL TRUST SCORE

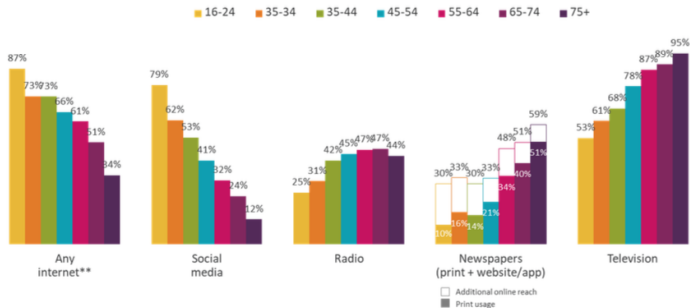Figure: Newman et al., 2017

Media Consumption and Age in UK

Younger age groups are more likely to use the internet and social media for news. Reach of newspapers doubles for groups aged 16-44 when online newspapers are included

Figure 2.5

Use of main platforms for news nowadays 2022* – by age
All adults 16+

Legend: 16-24, 35-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65-74, 75+

Categories: Any internet**, Social media, Radio, Newspapers (print + website/app), Television

Newspapers legend: Additional online reach, Print usage

Source: Ofcom News Consumption Survey 2022 – COMBINED F2F & ONLINE sample
Question: C1. Which of the following platforms do you use for news nowadays?
Base: All Adults 16+ 2022 W2* – Aged 16-24=442, 25-34=385, 35-44=520, 45-54=463, 55-64=412, 65-74=346, 75+=223
*2022 W1 data not shown because face-to-face fieldwork was not possible during Covid-19 pandemic
**Internet figures include use of social media, podcasts and all other websites/apps accessed via any device

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Online Media Consumption and Brexit

- ► How polarised was online media consumption in the UK during the Brexit referendum campaign?
- ► This is my current area of research. Let me show you some of my findings...

Clicks on Brexit News Online

Table 2: Negative Binomial Model

	Dependent variable:	
	Nr. of Clicks	
	(1) Full Sample	(2) Super-Readers Excluded
Remain (ref. = Leave)	−0.382**	0.035
	(0.179)	(0.142)
Undecided	−1.394***	−0.688***
	(0.292)	(0.231)
Constant	2.610***	1.904***
	(0.137)	(0.110)
Observations	202	197
Log Likelihood	−664.194	−570.801
θ	0.772*** (0.073)	1.434*** (0.168)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,334.389	1,147.602
Note:		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Figure: Jarnach, forthcoming

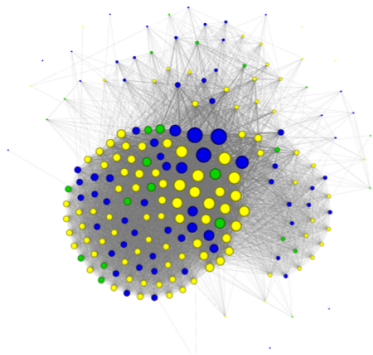# Online Audience Network of Brexit News

Jarnach (forthcoming)

Figure 14 Audience Network – Two-Mode
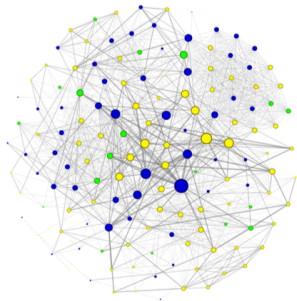Nodes = 277 (i.e. Individuals = 202; Domains = 75) Layout: Forced Atlas
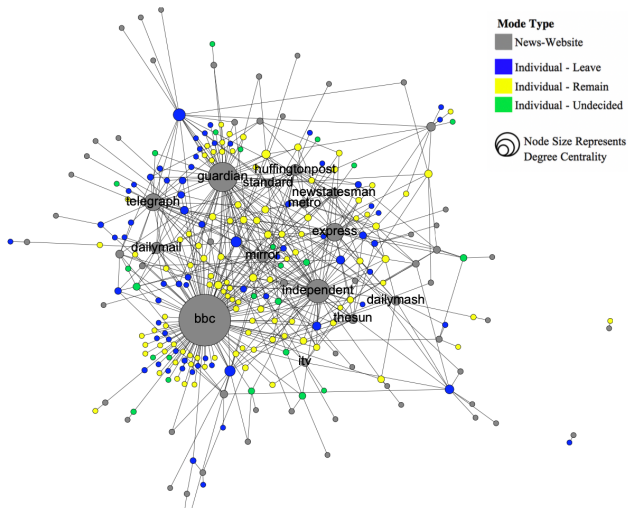
Online Audience Network of Brexit News

Jarnach (forthcoming)

(a) Co-Individual Simple Projection (SP)

(e) Pruned Projection using Marginal Likelihood Filter (MLF), the top 15% of the edges are retained; Giant Component; 56 isolates are not presented

Consumption of political news is low
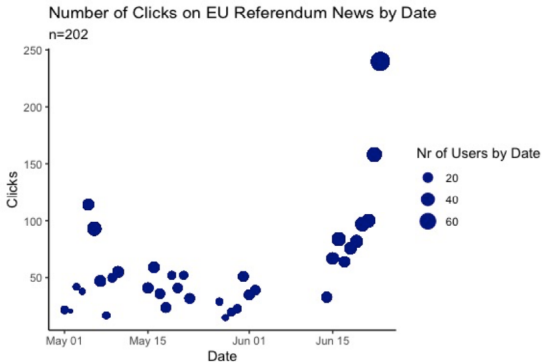
Jarnach (forthcoming)

Figure 3   Number of Clicks on EU Referendum News by Date.
Note: The clickstream collection period starting on 1 May to 23 June has gaps in the data from the 11 to 14 May, 23 to 26 May, and 3 to 13 June.

But does it matter? Yes

- ▶ Research by Andersen et al. (2002) concludes that political knowledge of the electorate matters, as individuals with higher knowledge are more likely to match their issue preferences to party platforms.

- ▶ Those generally more interested and engaged in politics are more likely to form an opinion and be internally coherent in their political attitudes and beliefs (e.g. Berelson et al., 1966; Lazarsfeld, et al., 1948; Baldassarri Gelman, 2008).

But does it matter? No

- ► Rational ignorance (Downs, 1957) refers to a situation where individuals deliberately choose not to acquire certain information or knowledge because the cost of obtaining that information exceeds the potential benefits they would gain from it.

- ► Political ignorance may not matter because individuals with limited knowledge can still make sound decisions by relying on informational cues (e.g. Page and Shapiro 1992; Wittman 1995; Lupia and McCubbins 1998).

- ► If voter ignorance is random and unbiased, it might not have a significant impact on election outcomes because uninformed voters' preferences would effectively cancel each other out. (Wittman, 1995)

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Discussion

- ▶ Is it irresponsible to let people vote without prior knowledge and training?
- ▶ Can we ask every citizen to decide on every political decision?
- ▶ Do citizens have the time, money, and knowledge to make such decisions?
- ▶ What decisions should be down to the citizens? which decisions should be made by the "professionals"?
- ▶ Should some people get more votes than others?
- ▶ Who should get more votes than others?
- ▶ Is electing a representative just handing over your votes to that person? how is that different from giving unequal numbers of votes to people?
- ▶ Is online News bad for Democracy?

Contact

Thank you!

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