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Voters' online information behaviour and response to campaign content during the Scottish referendum on independence

Abstract

Research into the public's motivations for, and barriers to, the use of referendum campaign sites was carried out in the final weeks before the 2014 vote on Scottish independence. As a qualitative study, drawing on 54 interactive, electronically-assisted interviews, where participants were observed and questioned as they searched for and used information on the websites and social media sites of the campaign groups, the results enable more precise causal inferences to be drawn about voters' exposure to campaign sites. Results indicate participants value 'facts', what they perceive as authoritative voices, the capacity to compare campaign messages directly, infographics and concise, direct information. They are sceptical, particularly about celebrity contributions, preferring expert messages, and uncertain about their personal capacity to evaluate information they will use to make decisions. The authors set out a new model of levels of user engagement with political discourse during campaigns. Results have relevance for governments, as well as researchers in the fields of politics, communications and information management.

Keywords

Information behaviour, Referendum, Internet, Scotland

Voters' online information behaviour and response to campaign content during the Scottish referendum on independence

1   Introduction

Scotland is represented politically in the United Kingdom Parliament in London, and since 1999 has held significant devolved powers of self-governance via the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh. On 18 September 2014, the Scottish independence referendum took place, when the people of Scotland were asked the dichotomous Yes/No question, "Should Scotland be an independent country?" The polling day saw an overall turnout of 84.6% of the electorate (the highest for any election or referendum in the UK since the introduction of universal male suffrage in 1918), with 55.3% voting against independence. The referendum campaign, which began two years earlier in 2012, was dominated by two groups: the pro-independence Yes Scotland group, led by the Scottish National Party (SNP), with support from the Scottish Green and the Scottish Socialist parties; and the pro-union Better Together group, which had broad support from the Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties.

This paper presents the results of a study of voters' online information behaviour conducted a few weeks before polling day. The referendum offered a rare opportunity to explore politicians' use of the Internet and citizens' online information behaviour in a very different campaign context from that of the typical election in the UK; one where party differences could be swept aside or overcome by the coming together of political opponents to either support or oppose the independence argument (a context since replicated in the 2016 UK European Union membership referendum, or 'Brexit'). The aims of the study were to:

- identify motivations for, and barriers to, the Scottish public's use of referendum campaign sites;
- investigate the types of information, tools and technologies that prospective voters most value when accessing these sites;
- assess the likelihood of these sites being visited again in the future; and
- explore the extent to which the use of these sites might influence voting decisions.

While the high level emerging results of the study were presented very broadly at ISIC: the Information Behaviour Conference in September 2014 (Baxter & Marcella, 2014), this paper sets out a full discussion of the results.

2.   Theoretical underpinning

Since the mid-1990s, a significant body of literature has emerged internationally on the use of the Internet as an electoral tool by political actors. This literature has been dominated by "supply side" questions, where researchers have quantified the extent to which political actors have adopted online campaigning tools, or conducted content analyses of campaign websites (Gibson & Ward, 2009, p.94). Less attention has been paid to the "demand side" of

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online electioneering — studies that have explored the extent to which the electorate visit campaign sites, or the impact that exposure to these sites has on political participation and voting decisions.

There have been several large-scale, quantitative surveys, mostly in western, liberal democracies, that have explored the public's use of the Internet to obtain and exchange electoral information (e.g., Gibson, Cantijoch & Ward, 2010; Smith, 2013). Other researchers, predominantly in the US, have used multiple regression techniques to explore relationships between Internet use during elections and citizens' levels of political efficacy, knowledge, trust or engagement (e.g., Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Hansen & Pedersen, 2014). A number of more experimental, laboratory-based investigations have also taken place, again largely in the US, where participants have been exposed to candidates' online sites and their attitudes towards the candidates and political issues have then been measured using Likert-type scales (e.g., Hansen & Benoit, 2005; Towner & Dulio, 2011).

Very few studies of the users of online campaign sites have adopted qualitative approaches. Stromer-Galley and Foot (2002) and Wells and Dudash (2007) conducted focus groups with citizens and students, respectively, to explore perceptions of the participative opportunities presented by campaign websites; while Penney (2016) conducted in-depth interviews with adults who viewed an unofficial YouTube video featuring the 2012 Republican presidential candidate, Mitt Romney. In Scotland, the current authors (Baxter et al., 2013) carried out a qualitative study of voters' online information behaviour during the 2011 Scottish Parliament election campaign. Away from the campaign trail, Ferguson and Howell (2004) discussed the deliberations of a 'blog jury' who monitored political blogs in the UK; while Lynch and Hogan (2013) used focus groups of young citizens to investigate the use of social media by Irish political parties. Commentators suggest that obtaining "a better in-depth understanding of individuals' online election experiences" would assist in allowing more precise causal inferences to be drawn about voters' exposure to campaign sites (Gibson & Römmele, 2005, p.283). The largely qualitative research discussed here is therefore an important contribution to the field.

In terms of theories of users' engagement in the information search process, there has been little prior research. Oliphant (2013) found that, during searches, users were most engaged by and with mental health videos that contained personal narratives and real life experiences. Edwards (2016) argues for the utility of physiological signals in demonstrating emotions encountered during a search, including engagement and frustration. Heinstrom (2006) found that young people's level of engagement in a search was highly influential in terms of whether they conducted a superficial or deep search. Meanwhile, a number of researchers have considered the impact of user motivation as a factor in search behaviour, often in highly contextualised situations. San José-Cabezudo, Gutiérrez-Cillán and Gutiérrez-Arranz (2008), for example, used Hierarchy of Effects communications theory to study the impact of motivation on search satisfaction in advertising and found that the motivations of information seekers influenced their response, characterising participants as 'information seekers' and 'excitement seekers'. Others, such as Elsweiler and Harvey (2015, p.280), have examined the impact of motivation on search behaviours on social media, to "provide a

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more detailed and fine-grained understanding of search motivations than previously reported".

As a study of a campaign in which there was an unprecedentedly high level of engagement by the electorate, the current research enables exploration by a wider than usual range of participants in information seeking as a means of underpinning political decision making.

3.   Material and methods

In exploring citizens' information behaviour, the current authors have a long-standing philosophy of conducting their research as close as possible to the everyday lives of their research subjects. With this in mind, the study discussed here took place in three 'public' locations in the city of Aberdeen, in north-east Scotland, between 8-20 August 2014:

1) The library of the authors' host institution, in the main entrance area.

2) A Christian church ministering primarily to Commonwealth citizens, who were eligible to vote. The research took place after a service, when participants were drawn by an announcement by the Pastor.

3) A community centre, about to host a referendum debate involving prominent local politicians and public figures, contributing towards a heightened political awareness and interest among the centre's users.

The research adopted the authors' interactive, electronically-assisted interview method (Marcella, Baxter & Moore, 2003), where participants were observed and questioned as they searched for and used information on the websites and social media sites of the campaign groups, political parties and high-profile politicians involved in the Scottish independence debate. Online access was achieved with the use of a laptop computer with mobile broadband dongle, an iPad, and a smartphone. Key policy papers (e.g., the Scottish Government's White Paper on independence) were pre-loaded on the laptop.

Overall, 54 interviews were conducted across the three locations (35 in the university library, nine in the church, 10 in the community centre), with these varying in length from 13 minutes to over one hour, depending on the availability and interest of the participants. Where consent was granted, interviews were audio-recorded digitally and subsequently transcribed and analysed thematically. The interview comprised four distinct parts:

1) demographic questions exploring gender, age, education and occupation;
2) structured questions on voting patterns, past needs for election campaign information, forms and levels of political participation, and computer use;
3) a free-form period of undirected information seeking on the campaign site(s) of the participant's choice; and
4) structured, post-search questions on the ease of use of the sites visited, the relevance, comprehensibility and reliability of the information found, the likelihood

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of such sites being revisited, and the extent to which the information viewed may
have affected their voting decision.

3.1   Sample demographics
Table 1 illustrates the 54 participants' demographic profile. Older or retired people were
under-represented in the sample. The participants were largely well-educated, with 21
currently at university and a further 27 having participated in higher education. All but six
were eligible to vote in the referendum.

Table 1: Demographic profile of sample (*n*=54)	
Number of males	22
Number of females	32
Number from a minority ethnic group	12
Number ≤30 years old	20
Number 31-50 years old	29
Number >50 years old	5
Number in employment	29
Number seeking work	4
Number of full-time university students	21
Number who had participated in higher education	48
Number eligible to vote in independence referendum	48

The majority declared themselves to be regular and confident computer and Internet users.
Just three of the 54 had never previously used social media.

3.2   *Free-form period of online information seeking*
For the free-form period of information seeking, the researchers had pre-prepared links to
the websites and social media sites of Better Together, Yes Scotland, and the main political
parties in Scotland, and to referendum-specific sites created by the UK and Scottish
Governments. Participants were given the option of examining one or more of these sites,
or any other site(s) of their choosing. Table 2 indicates the pages visited most frequently by
the 54 participants.

Table 2: Sites and pages visited most frequently by participants	
Site/page	No. of participants
Yes Scotland website home page	32
Better Together website home page	30
Yes Scotland Facebook page	16
Yes Scotland website: 'The Reality: Scotland's Wealth of Opportunity' infographic	13
Better Together Facebook page	10
Scottish Government's 'Scotland's Referendum' website: 'Questions & Answers' page	9
Yes Scotland website: 'Two Futures' video	9

| Better Together website: 'The Facts' page | 7 |
| Scottish Government's 'Scotland's Referendum' website home page | 5 |

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Previous history of searching for information during a political campaign

In terms of respondents' previous search behaviour during the independence or any other campaign, there was a wide spectrum of response as might be anticipated with a very diverse group. The spectrum has been characterised as composed of five main categories, as illustrated below, using interview data to determine participants' placement on a scale indicative of their engagement in the search for information (NB: only 42 respondents provided sufficient data to enable robust categorisation therefore 12 were excluded).

Fig. 1. Searcher category distribution

The *indifferent searcher* might either not care enough about the outcome of the vote to make any effort to find out what is going on and, as one respondent phrased it, intend to vote "on a whim"; or they might have already decided and be closed to receipt of any new information. Only four respondents fell into the indifferent category.

The *reactive searcher* received information that came to them through their normal channels, predominantly television, newspapers and Facebook. However, respondents (*n*=12) tended simply to consume information to which they were inadvertently exposed: the reactive often used phrases such as "I *do* listen to the news, but I don't go out of my way to do so"**.** This group could be dissatisfied with what they received but had made no effort to overcome their deficit: "I've relied on television and newspapers. But I think it's been quite confusing – it hasn't answered my questions".

The next group (*n*=14) have been characterised as the *haphazard searcher*, who will have engaged in active searching for information but with very limited sources or poorly articulated search strategies. Some relied wholly on Facebook as their source, others were variously directed to links by their church or community centre worker or had 'Googled' it: "I just type Scottish referendum in the search box".

The *proactive searcher* (*n*=9) sought information in addition to what they were receiving, in a much more systematic way, often with a specific focus on information that was of particular situational relevance. They utilised multiple sources and were anxious about the authority of those sources. One respondent had, for example, "read the White Paper. I

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follow Better Together and Yes Scotland on Facebook". Typically, these respondents would have consulted a variety of sources and would be interested in both sides of the debate.

The authors have characterised only three respondents as **engaged searchers**, carrying out extensive searches and undertaking some personal research to find information either to help them to decide how to vote or to confirm their pre-existing stance: "I've been on the Internet. And obviously just speaking to other folk, and listening to other folks' views. Just to find out what everybody's got to say about it".

This model has congruities with previous information interchange theory evolved by the authors (Marcella & Baxter, 2005) around the significance of the different roles and objectives of information provider and information users with potentially conflicting conceptions and motivations for engagement in the information interchange process.

4.2   The need for concise and comprehensible information – "Oh my God, that is a lot of facts!"

Overall, participants expressed a need for concise and comprehensible data, with 20 individuals being discouraged from reading by lengthy documents, overly complex layout and sectioning, and too great a use of specialist terminology. One respondent's comment that, "there's an awful lot of text - you have to really go into a lot of reading, before you get any information on any of that" was echoed by many others. Respondents wanted to be clearly directed to more digestible content: "five or six clear bullet points with policies". Participants were highly reluctant to look at the White Paper (670pp) or other lengthy policy documents and preferred factsheets and brief statements. Some found the language difficult: "things need to be for the general public to be able to understand".

4.3   Preference for infographics and visual media – "a picture's worth a thousand words"

Related to the above, a significant number of interviewees (n=17) mentioned specifically the attractiveness and simplicity of infographics: "you don't have to have any knowledge about economics and you would understand itl". Others recognised the allure of the infographic but with a caveat around their content: "things like this perhaps, to me, have a little bit more power, providing there was facts to back them up". The infographics were felt to be concise and accessible, communicating messages powerfully: "like a snapshot of the whole thing".

Fig. 2: Infographic from Yes Scotland website

The response to the provision.of video content on websites elicited a divided response. Six respondents mentioned their impact and strength of messaging: "that was really touching -

it was powerful, really powerful", while five described them variously as "sensationalist", "extreme", and appealing "to a younger generation". In particular, one video (Yes Scotland's *Two Futures*) narrating the story of an embryo looking back to the lost opportunity of the referendum was felt to be overly sensationalist.

Eleven respondents commented on the use of images on websites, either positively (*n*=7) when they found the images to be of people to whom they could relate, or negatively (*n*=4) when these were perceived to be "just pictures of people" or came from an alien demographic group; indeed the latter could be significantly off-putting for some. It was clear from conducting the interviews that a number of respondents did not understand that by hovering over images they would be able to click to find further information and text. Such niceties in design might therefore be lost in translation for users: "at a glance, it's just pictures of people smiling at you, and it's not telling me anything immediately".

A number of respondents expressed cynicism about the selection and use of imagery on websites (*n*=6), frequently detecting the message underpinning selection: "it tries to move people by saying if you vote Yes it's because you love your children".

4.4 Need for facts rather than opinions – "everyone has a right to their opinion, but it won't influence me at all"

An interesting finding of the current research was the astonishing frequency with which respondents expressed a desire for facts rather than opinions unprompted throughout their searches. This is particularly interesting given the much greater awareness of the unreliable nature of 'facts' and 'fake news' post the 2014 independence referendum with the experience of Brexit and the 2016 US presidential election, highlighting the lack of factual base upon which most political campaigns are waged. However, predating these there is evidence from the current results that the electorate were being asked to make a decision upon which they felt ill-informed and frequently conscious that they were ill equipped to make a decision.

Overall, almost half of the respondents (*n*=25) mentioned specifically the need for and importance of verifiable and sound facts: "the facts should be true, but they're all quite biased". There was frustration at the lack of a sound base of information being provided on which to base a decision: "that's what's frustrated me most about the whole referendum campaign is that it seems to be an awful lot of hyperbole". As one interviewee commented: "if you're actually going to the effort of looking at somebody's website, I think I would actually want some *facts* and some information saying this is why we know this".

However, it was not always evident that respondents were making any conscious effort to determine what was a fact and what was not: "the Yes campaign have got a lot of facts, but the No campaign seems to be scaremongering". Indeed the word "scaremongering" was used in a variety of contexts to dismiss what appeared to be an unacceptable 'fact'.

Others (*n*=12), however, were very clear that all of the content was speculative, based on assumptions and subjective, and were highly uncertain about their own capacity to distinguish "whether that is actually the facts when you come down to it, or whether it's their spin on it". Some noted that many of what were claimed to be facts clearly could not be as they were disputed: "they can't *all* be facts". Even when they knew that the facts might be disputed, respondents tended to like a 'fact': "it gives a sense that people know the facts, even if it may not be a fact, which often can be the case".

Some (*n*=11) were unconvinced by over-reliance on the opinions of 'ordinary people': "I mean I don't know any of these people". And while preferring to hear from non-politicians, they expressed reservations about generalising from individual experience: "it's better that people are relating their stories, rather than it just being politicians giving their opinions - but at the same time, that one person could have a really unique view that might not be held by other people".

Interviewees conversely tended to feel reassured by 'expert' and independent sources: "linking maybe to reports produced by people outside of the campaign - which has a slightly more legitimate feel to it". In particular they valued the views of academics, business leaders and independent bodies: "this is just a personal story - whereas the No campaign had references to institutes and things like that".

A significant number (*n*=14) were concerned about the original sources of the facts presented, the authority of these sources and whether or not they were based on sound research data: "on what basis have these figures been put out and how did they make the argument?", and "there's no proof, there's no research justification. It's just somebody's assumption".

Some interviewees (*n*=7) emphasised the need to look at a number of sources to get a balanced picture of both sides of the debate: "the best thing you can do is follow Yes, No, and then some serious newspaper as well".

4.5   The use of influencers – *"Okay, I can do without the celebrities"*

Cynicism and reflections on the untrustworthiness of politicians, celebrities and others were quite common (*n*=15), in contrast to academics who tended, as discussed above, to be seen as a trusted source. In particular, celebrity endorsements elicited as much negative as positive reaction: "very nice chap, love his acting, but his vote only counts the same as mine". Indeed, on occasion, the celebrity aroused disenchantment or distaste and caused the searcher to abandon particular sites: "using someone like Piers Morgan – he has no influence, he has no political role, and he's someone that the British don't particularly like". Respondents were antipathetic in particular to non-Scottish celebrities having their say: "So they post a song by Brian Ferry, who was never Scottish … It's a very odd series of people".

Politicians, as might be expected, came in for a particularly high level of criticism and distrust (*n*=13), with references to respondents' views of their duplicity, sneakiness and manipulation: "I just feel they're all liars, on both sides". The media was not seen as exempt from bias by some, particularly amongst those voting Yes: "the media is strangling the information, and being extremely biased". Perceived bias in the BBC's coverage of the campaign was also frequently mentioned, perhaps influenced by adverse commentary in the press at the time (e.g., Gardham, 2014).

In terms of perceived gaps in information, the only topics mentioned were that of the impact of Scottish independence on currency (*n*=3) and border controls (*n*=1), largely as a result of these topics being aired very widely in the No campaign. A small number voiced a desire for a neutral site enabling easy comparison of the Yes and No campaigns, in a clear side-by-side format, perhaps in a format similar to price comparison approaches.

Scepticism was also expressed about the extent to which people highlighted, quoted and portrayed in videos on campaign sites were actually speaking in their own voices and how much of the material was scripted: "I find it hard to believe that all the ordinary people actually said these things – I think they've been scripted for them".

4.6 Social media platforms as a source of information about the referendum – "a lot of folk are posting things on Facebook about the referendum"

Thirty respondents looked at and/or spoke about social media platforms as a source of information about the referendum. Usage was dominated by Facebook and Twitter, with some reference to the value of YouTube.

Some interviewees had made a decision to follow various sites to see the arguments being made by each side of the campaign; others were using it more as a stream of information keeping them up to date with "what people are thinking". Access to the latest news was seen as an attraction. Most would not actively follow campaigns' or political social media sites but used their posts' content as a starting point to pursue stories.

Most of the interviewees who talked about social media as a source of information about the referendum reported positive use: "makes it easy to engage in conversations … it *does* make for better engagement". Other advantages mentioned included the capacity to share information and views, and to unite and build networks with fellow campaigners. One interviewee commented on the balance achievable through social media: "rather than it just being one-sided … you get to see what a variety of people's views are".

Some respondents expressed antipathy for social media generally, citing the "nastiness" of social media discourse, as well as its superficiality. Others were concerned about their own privacy and security on social media: "social media's like letting a stalker into your home".

Consultation of campaign sites might be either inadvertent, i.e. from following reposts by users' own personal connections, or result from users intentionally searching social media

for content on the referendum. Most were mutely receiving content: "I've been following this page. I haven't posted any comments - I've been passive". Meanwhile, only a small number were encouraging discourse by posting their own views and arguments: "I'm personally *enticing* debate."

Respondents tended to regard the number of followers that a Facebook or Twitter account had amassed as an indicator of the popularity of the argument or position taken, equating followers with supporters. They typically failed to appreciate that not only supporters follow a social media site: the undecided and opposition will also follow for their own purposes, in order to see all sides of the debate or to challenge views with which they do not agree.

4.7   Usefulness of search and its results – "when you have a campaign, you need websites, YouTube, Facebook"

Following the active search portion of the interview, respondents were asked to give evaluative feedback on their experience. Feedback was largely positive in terms of the overall search experience and its value:

- 49 of the 54 participants thought campaign sites a useful way of accessing information
- 49 found them easy to use
- 48 found the content interesting
- 50 found the content easy to understand

Probed further for respondents' reflections on the search experience, a number of points were made which are set out in Table 3 below. The themes emerging echo many of the points already made during the search stage of the interview. Interestingly, respondents often cited directly contradictory views of the same content, suggesting that the desire of these sites to connect with the widest possible demographic in terms of audience may ultimately always be unachievable.

Table 3: Evaluative responses on the search experience

	Positives	Negatives
Content	Access to both sides of the debate A picture of what people think New insights Perspectives on different groups Links to other sources	Content overly opinion-based Mostly propaganda/spin Poor provision of supporting evidence/research Uncertainty about accuracy of content
Style	Easy to use Approachable language Interesting/captivating (visual media) Information pops up and is seen Facilitates engagement	Too serious/not enough fun Too superficial/not enough detail Too much emotion/passion in language Figures difficult to understand Complex terminology Too text-based

	Aids understanding – e.g., infographics Feels personal, "intimate"	
Structure	Fast to access/find information User can take their time to make sense of content	Difficult to find information Busy pages/confusing Takes too long to get to the point
Audience/ medium	Costs nothing Gets to non-readers Raises awareness widely Connects with young people Connects with varying demographics	Only useful for IT literate users Aimed at the lowest common denominator

Several new themes emerge in terms of the positive feature of online campaign sites, such as low cost, the sense that the experience is an intimate one, the capacity of such sites to reach a wide audience and for users to hear from a diverse range of voices.

In one marked respect, however, respondents were very much less satisfied with the search experience and that was in terms of the reliability of the content they had found: only 20 of the 54 participants described the information as 'very' or 'quite' reliable.

Whether they thought the content reliable or not, respondents had little evidence often on which to base their assessment. Some respondents did in fact acknowledge that they were unable to determine whether or not the information was reliable: "how am I to judge that?" One respondent summed up a fairly common view: "to establish if all this stuff is correct you'd have to dig deeper. From both sides I'll take the information with a pinch of salt". The majority were apparently content that they could do so, although it was often clear to the authors that the judgement rested on fairly shaky grounds: "I think it *should* be highly reliable, as long as they're putting it on their campaign sites, then they should know what they're talking about". The citing of references and seemingly authoritative and independent expert voices tended to assure respondents, as did official looking content.

As a further evaluative test, participants were asked if in future they would access such websites or social media to inform a decision to vote. While 35 of the 54 respondents reported that they might look at campaign sites again before 18th September it was clear that this was a highly tentative 'might' for many, with many 'maybes' and 'ifs'. Some felt that such a search had most value for the undecided, or for those new to a country or community. Others might search for specific issues featuring in high profile debate. The extent to which information would "pop up" on their social media news feeds was welcomed by those who described a lifestyle where they are "always online now" - apparently creating something of a search-minded set of behaviours. Seven respondents

mentioned that they had previously been unaware that such campaign sites and social media presences existed.

While some would not visit such sites again because they had already made up their minds, others would return because they wanted more information in support of their stance. Meanwhile, the undecided were more likely to revisit such sites to assist their decision making or to make sure that they made the right decision for posterity: "I don't want my daughter asking me questions later on, saying why, why?"

In terms of their voting decision in the referendum itself, 36 of the 48 who would be eligible to vote reported that the campaign sites had no influence on their voting intentions.

5.   Conclusions

A number of conclusions have been drawn from the current research, with relevance for researchers in the fields of politics, communications and information management. They are also highly apposite to the work of the recently-announced UK Parliament Culture, Media and Sport Committee's (2017) inquiry into 'fake news'. They are equally pertinent and timely internationally, given the cataclysmic changes which have taken place as a result of recent votes on the world stage. Governments need to understand better how their electorates are interacting with the information that they and others provide in order to enhance the quality of the information available to underpin key decision making opportunities. The study results enable inferences to be drawn about how users are influenced by exposure to campaign, in line with Gibson and Römmele's (2005) recommendation.

5.1   Voters want facts

The predominant theme of the interviews was that of the search for facts, at a point in time when the paucity of reliable facts and indeed the misrepresentation of fact was far less dominant in political discourse. The independence referendum campaign may have represented a significant game-changer in the route toward a post-fact world. In a referendum campaign of this kind voters find it difficult to construe the lack of facts and that the work needed to bring about an independent Scotland had not begun and was not begun in the run up to the vote. Brexit has subsequently demonstrated that it is only by beginning the process that facts emerge. Commentators can second guess the future on a likely scenario basis, but the complexity of the negotiation of the decision making that would eventuate from a vote for change can only ever be a prediction based on assumptions. From the present findings this ambiguity is poorly understood by the majority of voters.

Those seeking to make the decision which would trigger such uncertainty were largely seeking facts. The fact that such facts did not exist was acknowledged by a minority, suggesting a greater degree of awareness of the insubstantiality of the fact than might heretofore have been accepted, but yet the elusive fact remained a desire on the part of the majority of information seekers. What these searchers needed was some measure of what

could be known and what might not be ascertainable – a route map or guide through the fog of not-knowingness.

5.2   Respect for 'authoritative' voices

Participants also expressed a desire for some easy mechanism for comparing differing viewpoints – an information product that should be achievable with our technology today and one that might be a useful output of the parliamentary committee examining fake news. There was also a clearly articulated desire for facts to be underpinned by expertise – by research, by authoritative and expert voices (not politicians or celebrities or shamans) and by clearly independent bodies. The multitude of presentations by 'ordinary people' failed to convince those looking for a more generalizable view of, for example, what young people were thinking.

This is an interesting result given the very dominant rhetoric that has existed recently decrying the academic expert in particular (e.g., Nelson, 2017). It suggests that academics and subject experts are more likely to be seen as trusted sources of information than politicians by members of the electorate, despite a discourse almost wholly predicated towards a negative take, and further research into the public's perceptions of expertise might be useful.

5.3   Followership = popularity

Participants tended to equate followership with popularity and hence with likelihood of success in the vote. There are questions around whether such simplistic analyses are undermining the sense of a need to vote or to be active politically and how followership numbers relate to genuine followers in the traditional sense of those who share similar views. Some research has been carried out into followership and social media activity; see for example Lorentzen (2014) who examined polarisation in the followers of politicians' Twitter accounts and found that "Twitter actors do interact across boundaries, but that they prefer to follow and re-tweet like-minded actors". However, there is little evidence of existing research into patterns of followership by individuals and the extent to which they will follow a range of views and whether or not their levels of political activism influences such behaviours.

5.4   Visuals have impact

The present results strongly reinforce existing beliefs regarding the power of the visual image over dense text as a medium of communication, in line with the relativity scarce research into their impact on decision making in a political sphere: c.f. Lee and Kim's (2016) conclusions "that information visualization serves the purpose of garnering more favourable evaluations from news readers, at least those who are less knowledgeable about and less involved in the focal topic".

5.5   Evaluative criteria for information sources

Librarians have long been taught how to evaluate information sources around a set of key criteria. From the current study results, it is evident that there is a real need for these criteria to be more widely recognised and used. The generally accepted criteria are: authority, accuracy, currency, relevance and objectivity, and this has remained a key aspiration of work towards heightening digital literacy (see, for example, Metzger, 2007). All of these criteria were referenced in a variety of ways by the present study's research participants and a useful experiment for future research would be to explore further how members of the public interpret these in a real search environment and how capable they are of assessing them, for the results show that user capacity for evaluation is highly limited.

A form of rating might usefully be applied to website, the closest approximate to which one might currently find is the caution that is often attached to Wikipedia entries, where content is deemed dubious. One suspects that this caution is often overlooked by users. Yet individuals often take a great deal of time before purchasing goods or booking holidays to read the reviews. Could such a rating by affixed to websites? This is another ripe field for future innovation and research.

5.6   A new model of information seeking engagement

Through analysis of the current results, the authors have mapped out a 5-point scale of engagement in the information seeking process, from the indifferent searcher through to the engaged searcher. The authors intend to test further to examine its relevance in both political and non-political search activities and with wider groups of participants. It is envisioned that the model could be used to generate metrics around information seeking engagement alongside data which reflect searchers' information literacy. Future research by the authors will explore further how this model intersects that of others and in particular how it aligns with their theory of information interchange (Marcella & Baxter, 2005).

Finally it would appear from the current research that social media messages (not necessarily from official campaign groups and parties) are more powerful than fairly static websites in dominating political discourse and reaching a wider swathe of the voting public.

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