

The role of social media in the EU Referendum

By Bethan Tolley, Communications Officer at the Centre for Brexit Studies

Following on from Channel 4's 'Brexit: The Uncivil War' programme this week, which our team wrote all about [here](#), the role that social media plays when it comes to our democratic right to vote has been playing on my mind. The programme specifically focused on Dominic Cummings, who joined forces with Canadian tech firm Aggregate AIQ. The firm offered the Vote Leave camp the opportunity to target voters – online.

It wasn't until recently that I thought about just how different the EU Referendum was in comparison to previous general elections and other voting opportunities. Did you see any stickers in kitchen windows or in cars? Huge signs on people's front gardens? I remember the 1997 general election. I may have been young, but I remember my street being full of Tony Blair posters and signs on almost every house. Even until fairly recently, there would be constant knocks on the door when leading up to a general election from every political party in the area. Back then, it was the only way to reach voters.

There was only one huge sign set up on a front garden directly opposite my house in June 2016. It was a Leave sign, I remember it had a huge United Kingdom flag on it and it clearly stated 'Take Back Control'. The rest of the street, well, there was nothing. No way of knowing who was voting which way, what the area was more in favour of. The man across the road kept his sign up for at least two months after the vote; maybe he didn't quite believe the result was true either. Or, maybe he wanted to prove that his sign (which was so big, it blocked his downstairs windows) made a difference.

It's different now, of course, with social media. But it's so much more than just sending out a tweet. Targeted advertising on social media is now so clever that it can reach even those who want to keep a low profile. I have worked in Facebook Advertising throughout my career so far, so I am fortunate enough to have a good understanding of how

targeting works, and I'm sure Aggregate AIQ used everything they could to reach the 'leave' voters, but I do wonder what key words and phrases they chose to target them?

I ask this, because I don't recall any advertising appearing on my feed around leaving the EU. However, neither did I see anything from the Remain camp. Was I not targeted because of the pages I follow on Facebook? Did sponsored posts not pop up on my Twitter feed because of tweets I had previously sent out? By looking at my Instagram feed, can you tell which way I'd vote?

Is that why, back in June 2016, those who voted Remain were in so much shock at the result? Did those who voted leave see this coming months before? It makes me intrigued about those who didn't see sponsored posts or advertisements on their social media feeds, how did they think the vote was going to go? Did us lot, whatever percentage it is, get all our information from the news, or through colleagues and friends. At what point did we get targeted, or were we forgotten about?

It's safe to say that the Remain camp could have done a considerable amount more to prove their points, especially on social media. It seems that they assumed that there was no way that the UK would vote to leave. But we did, and social media was at the heart of it all.

I am mid-twenties, so as you can imagine, everything sponsored that pops up on my feed is around my future, as a woman. So it tends to be advertisements for engagement rings, wedding venues, pregnancy tests; I personally find it comical. But, I wonder how I would feel if I was targeted by a political party, or saw constant posts around which way to vote. I say this because many times, when the 'typical woman' posts pop up on my feeds, it does make me question my future. It does make me think, hold on a minute, I'm not engaged or pregnant, what does this mean! Am I being left behind?! So, if I was constantly targeted by political ads, I could be very easily influenced by them.

Of course, social media targeting started way back during the 2008 Presidential Election. Facebook was a fairly new thing; and everyone wanted to be Obama's friend. He made himself known across social media. Being on social media made him look cool and trendy, and so it's no wonder why the younger generation warmed towards him. This

was long before sponsored posts and advertising on social media, but I'm sure Obama's team knew what they were doing, just like those in the Leave camp. It fascinates me that if I had been targeted by the Leave campaign, would I have been able to see where the vote was heading towards much sooner?

It'll be interesting to see how social media plays a role in future elections, and with so much conversation at the moment around what is and isn't legal when it comes to social media advertising, I wonder if the future of sponsored ads on Facebook and its counterparts will appear more balanced, or if people will see the success of the Leave campaign, and target harder than ever.