

Centralising Citizenship for Media Reform

Local News Audiences of Brexit

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Abstract

The primary aim of this thesis is to critically examine news media as a resource for political engagement. A secondary aim is to demonstrate the importance and vitality of qualitative audience research to studies of news and democracy, alongside media reform, for the wider democratization of society. For a contextualised approach to civic engagement, local news audiences of North Wales were interviewed on their engagement with Brexit.

The thesis places importance on centralising the citizen in research. The tendency of news to centralise voices of politicians and elites on democratic issues, over societal stakes, is reflected in audiences. Translated into a news of hostility and partisanship over narrative and information, audiences critically assess the role of the news in the Brexit event. A model of a media-political debate which is elitist, ignoring and denying citizen interests, is met with critical and frustrated audiences. The representation of the political is considered and demonstrated in this thesis as a resource in engagement. Where knowledge and discursive resources were missing, engagement, narrative, decision making and debate were compromised. Elite representations of news were combined with citizens contextualised perception of inequality and corruption. News is heavily implicated in the cultural dimensions of citizenship, this representation was pervasive in many areas of civic culture.

Through discursive processes, audiences are found to both politicise and moralise issues of news in democracy, aligning with normative projects of media regulation. Audiences both adopt and resist the consumerist insinuation of media and regulatory practices, vocalising the aspects of consumerism which have eroded their civic culture, in trust, enjoyment and engagement of news and politics. Exemplified by the findings, audience research is supported as a critical method in engaging with news and democracy. Combining audiences' cognitive entitlements with the discursive use of representation, emphasizes the news as a resource and allows the citizen to become the primary object of enquiry. In bridging qualitative audience studies to the process of political engagement, citizenship is centred and becomes a resource for media reform.

Keywords: News, Audience, Media, Reform, Citizen, Discourse, Brexit, EU Referendum, Wales, UK, Citizenship, Power, Regulation, Engagement, Resource, Political Communication, Democracy

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The experience of Brexit represents a moment in British political history unique in the lives of citizens. Within this the news' role has been heightened in public discourse, particularly with the terms 'fake-news', and 'post-fact'. The specific context of this period in political lives should not be understated, as elite dissensus and fragility of the status quo present moments of 'crisis' which are likely to pose 'skepticism towards mainstream agendas' and willingness to consider alternatives (Freedman 2015, 139). This research attempts to situate a moment of crisis regarding the case of Brexit within the communicative processes of news audience engagement.

In contribution to a normative project of reform, the news is presented as a resource in political life, where citizens choose, avoid or contest, yet vitally need communicative resources in order to engage and participate politically. Exploring insights of how citizens engage with news, how they use it, and what resources they expect and feel entitled to. In understanding engagement with news and politics, qualitative audience research is bridged with studies of news, democracy and regulation. In contributing to media reform, the aim was to access subjectivity, engagement and ideas around a certain political issue. In a diffused news audience the individual and the experience provide the focus of analysis, with the ascription of news as inter-relational and influential to other practices and processes.

Audience research in this context highlights how news can be a resource for citizenship, within an argument that the way of achieving democratization, political progression and reform, lies in the understanding of engagement and identity. Processes which are increasingly shaped by mediated communication, where unmet communicative principles distort democratic societies along power axes of knowledge, debate and discursive resources. This research will argue that these distortions are present in British news media, resulting from an elite dominated and concentrated media, producing an unprecedented level of partisanship at the expense of news'

capability as a resource for citizens.

In approaching how news is a resource for political life, audiences were interviewed on their experiences of Brexit. The case of Brexit offered an opportunity of a heightened political moment to enter audiences' reflections of the news to an issue of democratic importance. How audiences feel toward their experience of Brexit as a political event, where they situate themselves and others within the discourses of media and academia; the approach was to ask them. For a contextualised approach, local news audiences of North Wales were interviewed on their engagement pre and post Brexit. The salience of news' mediated role is brought to the fore in this regional context, where news is predominantly sourced from national and mainstream media.

This research aims to critically examine how news media can be a resource for political engagement. A secondary aim is to demonstrate the contribution audience research can make in news, democracy and a project of media reform. In order to qualify these processes and contributions, this thesis sets out to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways do local audiences engage with news pre and post Brexit in North Wales?
2. How do audiences engage with news as a resource for political life?
3. How can audience research contribute to news and democracy, specifically for a project of media reform?

The thesis will begin by noting how critical media and communication research for democracy advocates the need for media regulation and its realisation in a campaign of reform which engages citizens. Then discussions of research on media power follow, engaging the need and character of media policy and audience's agency. The role of news in democracy is touched upon, following by existing research on audiences of media and news. The engagement of citizen-audiences are explored in relation to cultures and processes of citizenship. Finally discursive praxis is introduced as means of analytically bridging audience research and the

political context of media reform by offering news' role as a resource in the centralization of citizenship.

Methodological commitments to this research will be broached, the qualitative method advocated and the choice of in-depth qualitative interviews chosen. The method will be explained in its design, sampling, conducting, and processes of analysis, culminating in reflection of the method. After a short contextualisation of the region, the analysis will focus on interview data and attempt to vocalise audiences engagement with Brexit. From a preliminary resource to the event, audiences reflect on how news was a resource in informing, decision making and debate. In the aftermath of the vote, the role of the news is explored in explaining, reconfiguring and re-examining political positions. Common themes as expressed by audiences in relation to news are explored in regard to communicative separation, immigration, opinion and bias, knowledge and specialism and political mobilisation. These explorations highlight the themes which stood out in the interviews and are important in demonstrating audience's engagement. In the thesis' secondary aim, are some audience reflections and predictions of political change and its viability.

CHAPTER 2

Literature review

The elite democracy of Britain sees, what Carpentier (2006) would call, a minimalist form of participation, offering acuteness to moments of participation. The EU referendum in 2016 offered this participatory potential. The context of division is important for any progressive agenda, Freedman (2016) notes the press as not dividing the population, but its complicity in power relations makes the press incapable 'to make sense of and to articulate the divisions that exist in our society' (ibid). This complicity of elite entanglement of news was brought to the public stage during the Leveson enquiry into The News of the World's phone hacking scandal (Freedman 2015). Elite entanglement remains and despite the daily spectacle of expose in the hearings (Steel 2012), the report failed to engage 'with a broader structural and wider social analysis' (ibid, 8-12).

Media Regulation and Reform

The current character of regulation rests on a idea of pluralist structure, where democratic accountability should result from competition, yet Schlosberg (2013) attests fair competition cannot take place when resources are uneven. Legislative regulation of the media can instrumentally change the way media corporations are run and owned. Concentrated media ownership is seen as undermining public interest, where other developed nations have rules and limits in place to mitigate this (Media Reform Coalition 2012). As an institution, the British media has avoided even the minimal level of regulation needed for accountability (O'Neill 2002). Providing citizens with more representation and diversity of voice, facilitating community media and well-informed debate (Livingstone & Lunt 2011,184), funding, support and training in independent investigative journalism and institutional mechanisms of ethical standards (Coronel 2010, 22) are just some ways in which the ownership and management of media can be more democratic. The issue is not only the technical means of *if* the media can be regulated, rather, *how* can significant power be contested, not in the least since media has the resources to frame its own fate (Tambini 2017).

In imagining new ways to organise communicative industries, to challenge the media's structure as a given (Freedman 2014), is to challenge media power. A key goal of media reformers and activists is to build coalitions and campaigns which challenge media policy (Freedman 2014). While reform must engage with media and political institutions, to engage with these alone is not enough (Freedman 2009). Freedman's second mode of engagement for a successful project could be seen as a solution to the vested interests of media and elites, particularly in their power to frame the debate. This mode sees the audience for reform activists as not only politicians, and certainly not the media, but publics (Freedman 2014). An imaginative appeal to citizens is needed to shift attitudes toward media policy in order to pressure those who have the formal power to act (ibid). Within this recommendation comes the drive to not only connect to citizens at the moment of campaigning, not to *imagine* the citizen audience's positions but to empirically and directly access them.

Media Power

Neoliberal policies in Britain have ensured the financialisation and privatisation of industry; the media is no exception. Here, the value of news for democracy is undermined, ‘wherein accountability is lost and the logic of capital becomes the sole driver of commercial newspaper practice’ (Fenton 2015:84). The effects of governance by market logic with added economic pressure from new media has resulted in media ownership concentration (Fenton 2016, Freedman, 2015, Freedman 2013). An encroaching value of market-orientated industries is that of the consumer over the citizen, individualism over collectivities, a structural democratic problem, where the ‘political becomes engulfed and altered precisely by the practices and scourges of privatised consumption.’ (Dahlgren 2016:5).

Symbolic resources are never neutral, but have power in the formation of ideas; ‘through their various logics and contingencies, impact on the relationship between media user and that which is mediated.’ (Dahlgren, 2013, 22). Accepting that symbolic power has some influence in civic consciousness is necessary in media’s resource for knowledge (benign power [Corner 2011, 40]) and positive mobilisation, simply without this, the need to regulate would be absent. Through acknowledging an aspect of media to be, ‘the steady flow of knowledge of all kinds from the media and the selective and varied absorption of these flows into individual consciousness and social space’ (Corner 2011, 95), then we can perceive the media as having both a productive and destructive power in ‘democratic improvement and cultural enhancement as well as of political management and populist exploitation’ (Corner 2011, 95). Analysis of symbolic power then is relational, questions of power often ending in ‘an opaque space, social and psychological’ (Corner 2011, 42) where ‘consequences of media activity and the consequences of all the other significant factors bearing on consciousness and action are played out’ (ibid, 43). This analytic problem in the research of power has meant a long and varied history, condensed by Freedman (2014) into paradigms of power whose characteristics have bearing on conceptions of media policy.

The consensus paradigm is one adopted in the analysis of power, within which a power to mislead is assumed (Freedman 2014). When audiences can be misled to a certain direction, media policy assumes an obligation of social responsibility to offer a plurality of voices so that society is not led into complete consensus from a dominant power (Freedman 2014:17). It is this assumption of power which underpins arguments for media plurality in markets and competition, an economic liberalism which argues for the ‘freedom’ of the press (Freedman 2014:19).

The control paradigm moves focus onto a view that a dominant block of power *does* exist in society, which is conceived to control symbolic resources, at the hard end being the propaganda model of media power (ibid 22). This paradigm sees those who subscribe to the consensus paradigm, and thus pluralist policy, as failing to hold power to account (ibid 22-23). Finally the chaos paradigm of power sees a volatile and diffused system as a result of democratisation and decentralisation of society (ibid 19). Consensus and Control paradigms both assume a power over audiences, and while chaos gives audiences agency, it has a premature vision of decentralised power and democracy. The paradigm which consolidates chaos’ prematurity in decentralised power, avoiding the sometimes functionalism of control and the failed plurality of consensus, is the contradiction paradigm (ibid, 27-9).

Contradiction ‘addresses both the relational and material aspects of media power’ (Freedman 2014:25), with ‘structure and agency, contradiction and action, consensus and conflict’ (ibid 29), uneven power relations are recognised but are not fixed, where audiences and producers are both considered (ibid 29). Freedman (2014) looks to Gramsci in contradiction predicating capitalism, on the level of institutions and ideas, where common sense distilled onto citizens is at odds with the good sense that comes with struggle against it, where both can be simultaneously found in commercial media, which as a neoliberal institution offers up its own fair share of contradictions (ibid). The contradictory power that Freedman (2014) outlines sees relational power come to the fore, where at once contradiction and dissonance ensure strength for the powerful, but also allows the possibility of empowerment. The media does not ‘have’ power, but relational aspects

organise our knowledge about the world, within which access to the media as a resource is often unequal (ibid).

News and Democracy

An established function of media in a democratic society ‘assumes that individual citizens have the capacity to hold elected officials accountable’ (Curran et al. 2009:6). Accountability is undermined in elite dominance, under ever-increasing political, financial and personal elite entanglement (Freedman 2014). As ‘the means by which power is restrained and publicly monitored’ (Schlosberg 2013:1), accountability plays a central role of journalistic values, a premise of not only media holding power to democratic account but also providing ‘an arena in which dominant narratives can be contested’ (Schlosberg 2013:213). Through an analysis of media coverage, Schlosberg (2013) finds containment of reporting to mean this function is unmet, while simultaneously producing a spectacle of accountability.

Relating to Schlossberg's spectacle of accountability, a performance of plurality can be seen in the results of the BBC Trust's breadth of opinion review (Wahl-Jorgensen et al 2013), where opinions are broad but different perspectives are not given equal representation. Relating to Allan's (2004) newsworthiness in choosing what to frame, the BBC leave ‘the authority to define the framing of news events is largely in the hands of official sources – particularly politicians representing government.’ (Wahl-Jorgensen et al 2013). The lens of the news was rarely shaped through members of the public, banking elites dominated coverage of the financial crises in 2008, supporting the consistently pro-business, conservative leaning coverage despite the government in power (Wahl-Jorgensen et al 2013). Classical expressions of the journalistic role as objective, separating facts from values, the cultural environment of journalism routinising and naturalising ‘the cultural construction of news as an ‘impartial’ form of social knowledge’, naturalises inequality as ‘appropriate, legitimate or inevitable’ (Allan 2004, 71).

Framing of complex societal issues requiring civic engagement and debate, top news stories on the UK's relationship with the EU and immigration, ‘largely dealt with tensions and fights

between the main Westminster parties, rather than the broader issues associated with the societal impact of the EU and immigration' (Wahl-Jorgensen et al 2013, 64). A tendency for 'the drama of political infighting', conflict and tension over context and broader debate, was not specific to the BBC but 'representative of the institutional focus of national news provision' (Wahl-Jorgensen et al 2013, 64). This finding of favouring elite representation in public service broadcasting reflects the dominance of elite ownership in British news.

News is an important part of the citizen experience, with legacy media remaining a significant source of news (Coleman et al 2016). Sourcing of news in the UK is significantly done through the BBC, across Television, Radio, Newspapers and Online (77% of adults, Ofcom 2015). In the dominance of television as a news source in the UK, Commercial television providers ITV and Sky are the second and third highest cross-platform source (33%, 18% respectively of adults). The national newspaper environment is made up of tabloid papers and broadsheets, tabloids being the most popular on and offline. The Guardian is the only non-commercial popular source of news apart from the BBC, with 70% of the national market owned by three companies (Media Reform Coalition 2013). Though sometimes owned by the same companies, broadsheets and tabloids offer different styles of content.

News and Audiences

Audiences are implied in much research of news, to varying levels of implicitly. Some contemporary research is careful not to assume audience subjectivity, Schlosberg (2013) outlines his use of the term ideology as not falling victim to this assumption, 'which has not been substantiated by the empirical literature.' (Schlosberg 2013:215). Perhaps, and particularly, for news audiences, the term ideology should be put aside, as Corner (2011) writes of its inefficiency in analysis. It is precisely the paradoxical and contradictory characteristic of discursive power, and the varied and selective reception of symbolic power which problematizes the news audience as a focus of enquiry in political communication. Mediated discursive resources for politics are not confined to the news genre (Richardson, Parry, Corner 2013), relating to the above notions of power, cultural media, 'soft' and non-current affairs news,

assumes a different generic rendering of truth, taking on a neutrality (Allan 2004) in Corner's 'black box' of power subjectivity.

Research on news audiences is scarce, with little conducted by news organisations or academic researchers, while journalists hold weak conceptions of their publics, with skepticism to market research claims (Allan 2004, 121-3). The Newspaper audience has been *measured*, more commonly in quantitative data resembling the above figures from Ofcom, which entails all sorts of difficulties even in quantifiable measurement, for example 'circulation and readership' differing since 'between two and three people may be counted as readers per copy' (Allan 2004, 122).

News audience research may be minimal, but discourse about audiences are plenty. Revealing is the elite discourse of tabloid readers, something Steel (2012) saw as obliquely but disdainfully discussed during the Leveson trial, endemic of the historical paternalistic elite-driven framing of particular readerships in British culture, a dynamic party fulfilled by the 'quality press' (Steel 2012, 8-10). Analysis around British tabloids suggests a hegemonizing discourse of tabloid audiences as synonymous with the 'array of prejudices' appearing in the 'light and breezy news items' (Allan 2004, 129). Within the culture of British news, audiences have been shaped by both elite and socio-cultural discourses. The recognition of socio-cultural influence on audience reception has been placed as central to ethnographic studies of audiences, with Morley's (1999) work paving the way in researching the different readings between social groups. In the problematized audience-text focus of much reception studies, anthropological research moved beyond seeking how messages were received into the *context* of reception. In mass-media audiences, the study of news looked at television's role in everyday life (Allan 2004).

Richardson, Parry and Corner's (2013) research on the interrelations between a national political system and a national cultural system, looks beyond the news for discursive resources in political life. An exploration of genre is also seen in Hill's (2007) research of factual television, where news is considered by audiences within a scale of truth and authenticity, learning and knowledge.

Audience research within or bridging ‘cultural’ media has a more contextualised approach to an active audience, in a focus on the practices of individuals and publics, rather than the relationship between text and audience. This kind of research highlights the scarcity of contextualised active audiences of news, while simultaneously pointing out the arbitrary separation of news from cultural media in civic life, and in conceptualising audiences.

Livingstone (2007) describes the audience reception tradition's key focus of the ‘dynamic of interaction between text and reception, giving due emphasis also to questions of context’ (ibid, 12). Where continued research should focus on textually structured reception and the reception’s structuring by psychological and social factors, as well as the interrelation between both processes (ibid, 12). Coleman and Moss (2016) seek not whether media results in politically important outcomes, to *ask* audiences what they ‘feel entitled to gain from the debates and the extent to which these capabilities are enhanced, diminished, or unaffected’ (ibid, 19), contributing to ‘a deeper understanding of how people imagine themselves as democratic citizens and how the development of self-determined civic capabilities might impact broader patterns of civic engagement and disengagement.’ (ibid, 19).

In the under-researched area of news-audience, studies tended to focus on the television and mass audiences. In the changing role of media to social life, Abercrombie and Longhurst (2003) introduce a new paradigm of audience theory in which contemporary audiences are recognised as both simple and mass, with the introduction of the diffused audience, not in replacing, but impacting up the relations between these audience types and their content (ibid, 159). The diffused audience is one where media is embedded and thus contingent to everyday life, within a performative society where people are simultaneously performers and audience members (ibid). Within Abercrombie and Longhurst’s spectacle and performance paradigm (SPP), audience’s performative identities are placed at the analytic centre of research.

Livingstone and Lunt (2011) point out Abercrombie and Longhurst’s, (including the wider audience field’s) lack of interest in regulation, and those who research regulation’s lack of

interest in audiences (ibid, 2). The language of communications policy and regulators assumes a certain type of audience, in ‘media-savvy consumers who demand quality, choice, diversity, and value anytime, anywhere’ (Livingstone & Lunt 2011, 172). This consumer model of the audience is discursively constructed, while ‘simultaneously (and consequently) materially embodied in legal/regulatory principles and in institutional practice’ (ibid, 185). The address of an audience as consumers over citizens is not only semantics (ibid), but ‘plays a significant role in public deliberations over policy’ and ‘common sense in subtly legitimating one position or another’ (ibid, 186). If re-introducing the citizen into regulatory debates is integral, then reform activism can only be enriched by an understanding and centralization of the processes of citizen-audiences.

Engagement and the Citizen Audience

Blumer and Coleman (2015) outline the purposes of civic communication; for all citizens to surveil, in reliability, that which matters to their lives, to access the substance of *stakes* in order to make meaningful choices and to facilitate dialogue and exchange (ibid, 113-114). Citizens can feel unrepresented when their political representative is more interested in party politics than the people they represent (Coleman 2005, 204), but representation can encompass the need for the experiential, affective and symbolic processes of citizenship (ibid, 198). The need for citizen to feel represented in the media is important, yet the notion of the public is often evoked and represented by a mainstream media which tightly manages voices of the public (Coleman & Ross 2010).

The televised election debate as a service for citizen participation, is largely determined and skewed by elite interest, causing frustration to viewers (Coleman & Moss 2015). Voters have a ‘sense of what they are capable of doing in the political world’ (ibid 19) which corresponds on their behaviour within it, ‘performances of citizenship entail a relationship between what people think is expected of them and how far they perceive themselves to be potent democratic agents’ (ibid 19-20). In this way Coleman and Ross (ibid) have extended the argument for the audience’s *uses* of media, through capabilities in what citizen’s require in order to function democratically,

to the notion of *entitlements*. Through the implication of capabilities as entitlements, what the citizens-audience needs from media becomes the obligations of public authority and policy (ibid, 6). This does not mean a top-down insinuation however, and Coleman and Ross take a normative and intersubjective stance is seeking reflections and prospectations of audiences to what they feel their entitlements should be. (ibid, 6-7).

The representation of politics as a discursive resource may be problematic, where ‘media’s established practice rarely represents ‘ordinary’ citizens as active agents in political deliberation’ (Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham, 2007:17). This is combined with the British elite model of democracy ‘characterised not necessarily by a disdain for participation, but by a pessimism about its contemporary feasibility’ (Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham, 2007:9). There is a ‘narrow social representation at the heart of British government (public-school- and Oxbridge-educated, millionaire, 40-year-old, white male)’ representing a predictable (Richardson, Parry & Corner, 2013, 176) and narrow performance.

The theoretical processes and conditions of civic life are mapped by Dahlgren (2009) in a civic circuit, named such that all conditions are permeable and interdependent. *Knowledge* comes in the active appropriation of information through frames of subjective meaning (Dahlgren 2009, 108-10) where new and existing resources are used. Knowledge can entail ‘system, process, people and events’ of political life (Richardson, Parry & Corner, 2013). Resources of knowledge are not only rational, the experiential resources of emotional knowledge do not detract from actuality, and are important in balancing engagement with a degree of enjoyment (Richardson, Parry & Corner, 2013). The media’s role in knowledge is associated with the pedagogical function of learning to become a citizen (Miegel & Olsson 2013)

Closely linked to knowledge; practices circulate with experience, and are individual and collective, from voting, civic talk, research into an issue and civic networking (Dahlgren 2011:117). Practices are normative and thus open to debate. Debates such as ‘at what point do problematic practices begin to threaten the basic substantive and procedural values of

democracy? (ibid, 118), thus defining practices' are modes of understanding and values as to how political change can and should be enacted.

Sociocultural factors as preconditions of democratic life (Dahlgren 2009) have impact on much of the civic circuit. Where knowledge and practices concerned partially with education, invariably socio-cultural contexts come into play. Globalisation also can underpin democratic life, where travel expands the ways in which people can comprehend the world and themselves, of those who can (Dahlgren 2009, 27); thus experiential knowledge as a condition of civic life may also be conditional on socio-cultural factors.

Substantive and procedural democratic *values* should be debated, but both categories must be recognised for democratic functionality (ibid 110). In debating substantive values of 'equality, liberty, justice, solidarity, and tolerance', procedural values such as 'openness, reciprocity, discussion, and responsibility/accountability' become increasingly important (ibid, 110-11). Dahlgren points to Mouffe's indication that democracy will work only in recognising a general loyalty over group interests, in playing out political conflicts in agonistic debate (ibid, 111). Norms and values can dictate where and when it is 'polite' to talk about politics, where the consequence can mean an avoidance of the political (Eliasaph 2010). It is more likely that citizens will disagree with those they are familiar with, where the bonds of daily life mean disagreement does not threaten solidarity (Eliasaph 2010, 46). There is a cultural tendency to avoid disagreement, where political talk is thus struck from the polite repertoire of casual interaction (ibid).

Spaces are the context in which talk is done, they embody action and access; where mediation expands communicative spaces in chains and through time, affecting legitimacy and opportunity (Ibid:115-116). Spaces are communicative places for discussion, 'for democracy to happen, citizens must be able to encounter and talk to each other' (Dahlgren, 114), in having contact with each other, those who represent them, the discussion of decision and policy making, involves the physical and experiential proximity to people (114-5). While not having ceased, physical spaces

for civic debate have declined (ibid, 115, Mouffe 2005). Sandal (2017) outlines the importance of spaces where people from different backgrounds can gather in everyday life, not necessarily space and time carved out for political debate; using the example of a sporting event, political talk always has the potential to arise. Cultural spaces for engagement in politics is contextually dependent on age, gender, ethnicity and class (Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham, 2007). Life worlds influence communicative space, where access to networked *interspaces* involves knowledge and practices, where identity is geographically and socially dependent (ibid:116).

For Mouffe (2013), spaces of civic life are central to the communicative struggle of democracy. *Agonism* is the very aim of democratic politics, it is the consolidation of antagonism as inherent of the political, into a state and space where conflict can be played out between adversaries (ibid). An agonistic form of politics transforms public space from the public sphere's conception of a space to create consensus, to a space where conflicting views can meet (ibid, 112). The procedural values which must be carried across space (Dahlgren 2009, 111), are essential in defining spaces of conflict as agonistic and democratically productive, rather than antagonistic.

Civic identity

At the centre of Dahlgren's circuit, is *identity*, the subjective understanding of one's self within society (Dahlgren 2009,118). Empowerment and agency materialise within subjective identities when political actions are felt to be meaningful (ibid,121). Dahlgren (2009) stresses the importance of the affectual dimension for political engagement, its role in connecting identity and experience to realise a political self. Political identity is at the centre of Mouffe's conception of the political, where an agonistic model of democracy rests on 'the ever-present possibility of antagonism' (ibid, 17), an understanding and approach to democracy that begins in individual subjective processes which see discourse and identity gain meaning in difference. Within this centrality, affect has a crucial role in the constitution of political identity, where passion is a key driver in political life (ibid). This is one sense in which affect is a resource, it's performativity is also, with 'emotionality as a resource in journalistic storytelling', and 'the types of emotional response which political performance may foster in audiences' (Richardson, Parry & Corner

2013, 175). Yet it is important to note that a focus on affect broadens understandings of the political, releasing it from its overly rationalist roots, complementing, not reducing cognitive processes. Indeed Richardson, Parry & Corner (2013) found audiences holding an emotional sense of politics did not detract from ‘the capacity to draw on political knowledge, or to craft opinions based on factual information rather than rumour or misinformation’ (ibid, 175). A passionate politics need not mean an irrational populous.

Dahlgren places civic identity as one amongst a plurality of identities constituting the individual, a way of recognising the plurality in different conceptions of politics which may inform different modes of citizenship (Dahlgren 2009, 119). Mouffe also recognises this plurality, an agonistic pluralism depends on a citizen position which negotiates and recognises difference. In this way conditions are set upon citizenship, making it performative, with Dahlgren’s *procedural* values making citizenship viable, particularly in the recognition of difference adversarially.

Public orientation in regards to the media is, both ‘as much about the separation of each of us from each other, as about the separation of political elites from ordinary citizens.’ (Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham, 2007,15). Representation in the life of the citizen has as much to do with representation of the other, where media increasingly narrates affectual recognition as inward, thus so too is social responsibility (Coleman & Ross 2010). It is in this sense of civic responsibility, of connection and disconnection, to which Silverstone (2006) places importance on the role of the media. Particularly in the representation of the other, there is a responsibility to embed morality into media and discourses of regulation (ibid). Discourse and identity gain meaning in their difference (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), so in the representation of the other, the collective and individual self are articulated. Mediation is thus important for the self and the self’s relation to those beyond familiarity. Dependent on these processes is Dahlgren’s last factor in citizenship; *trust*. Optimised and directed between people and with government, thin and thick forms of trust between citizens depend on degree of separation, but are essential in cultures of citizenship (ibid,110-4).

Discursive Praxis

Media reform exists within a wider project of progressive politics and democratisation of society (Freedman, Fenton), while political practices of citizens involve imaginaries of change, where agency is a sense of meaningful impact to participation (Dahlgren). A normative project of reform thus inherently must consider democratic change in terms of communication and processes. This research seeks to understand these aspects from the view of the audience, while contextualised in the current political situation.

A point of rare agreement between Habermas and Mouffe are the dangers of antagonism; understanding the right of the other is essential to democracy and eliminating them from the debate through antagonism is unproductive (Mouffe 2013). The political spectrum has been narrowed in the UK and other western democracies, where real choice in selecting political parties is negated (ibid). Just as affective and cognitive recognition of engagement should be adopted in citizenship, so too should a broader interrogation of the political (ibid). Conflict and difference define the political (ibid), and the political must be understood on a broad level, bridging distinctions of ‘doing politics’ and ‘being political’ (Fenton 2016), making ‘personal’ issues political (Dahlgren 2009).

Difference in the political spectrum of ‘doing’ politics is negated by a central neoliberal hegemony, marginalising views into, and met with, antagonism, the results of which can be seen in the rise of the populism (Mouffe 2013). Sandal (2017) similarly argues to look beyond the economic, to the moral, political and cultural grievances have caused right-wing populism and flirtations with authoritarianism. The remedy to which is a progressive movement owing understanding and to those grievances, with a centralization of citizenship over a main strategy of protest and resistance (ibid), requiring a broad democratic discussion over issues which call into question Dahlgren’s (2009) substantive democratic values. Setting the ideal for democratic change as broader and more inclusive conversation, loses efficacy when mediated

communication is not addressed (Fenton 2016). Both in the regulation of communicative industries and in the grounded understanding of citizenship.

Praxis is what Maiguashca (2011) adopts over *strategic* actions for political strategy which aim for temporary allies and a singular mode of dissent. Maiguashca (ibid) empowers the notion of political strategy by giving a mode of *principled pragmatism*, which is to base political activism in the ethical processes of the everyday (ibid). This moves the focus of political change into a focus on everyday practices and spaces. The notion is that by engaging with audiences in their practices, the political can be analysed in way that more meaningfully contributes to reform. In relation to news, this means a consideration of audiences as active agents in citizenship, being involved in processes of transformation of media and its policy. Leaving behind strategic actions aimed at gaining temporary allies and elite action (ibid), the rationale is to include theories and motives of critical audiences into discussions of media activism and thus expanding the notion of activism and politics.

Aiding this notion of praxis is the everyday articulation of identities, and Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) recognition that emancipatory power can emerge in rejecting or transforming discourse. Pointing out contingency is a normative and analytic practice which aims at looking under the surface, which power relations determine the current arrangements, and how they could be arranged differently (Dahlgren in Dahlberg & Phelan 2011, 231). Introducing discourse analysis into the way audience's are conceived, is a contribution by Singh (2006) which connects two complementary fields in media and communication.

Articulation is the process whereby people connect discursive signs together to create meaning, a concept which highlights the processes in which reality and identity are defined (Singh 2006). Articulation is more often seen as connection, but Zienkowski (2017) sees articulation also a 'performative and interpretative practice through which we link the discursive elements of realities' (ibid, 37). Articulatory processes within a performative view of society take on a performative quality. Performance as heightened behaviour gives relations tension (Abercrombie

and Longhurst 2003:40) whether this is the relation between audience, news and context, or doing and being political, which tension defines (Mouffe 2005). It can be thus seen in the micro and meso (Carpentier 2006) moments of articulating political identity, connecting the SPP with Discourse Analysis dialectically and opening up the focal of analysis to individual and collective identities.

Simplification of political space entails the processes of organizing identities in difference and equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). This offers a symbolic power of news, offering discursive resources for the self and unknown other (Silverstone 2006). Overdetermination, the striving but ultimate impossibility to reach discursive closure is the process of the individual in appropriating different available discourses in trying to create stability, alleviating the anxiety of contingency (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

Within textual and social determinants of audiences, research should aim to seek an array of answers, not only to questions of the characteristics and conditions of reception (Livingstone 1996), but to ‘why audiences make sense of media in the ways that they have been shown to do’ (ibid). To understand *why* in relation to news, could be to offer discursive explanations to the processes of engagement with the political. By bridging audience research with news and democracy within a discursive praxis, the aim is to discursively connect politics and people with their engagement with news. Equipped with *overdetermination, articulation, difference and equivalence*, representing the (sub)conscious processes of *why* audiences make sense of the political in the way that they do.

Though an imaginary of *why* is important to understand engagement, the primary focus of this research seeks to frame the news as a *resource* in order to understand engagement from an emancipatory and discursive inflection toward reform. The notion of Coleman and Moss’s (2015) audience *entitlements* are used in the same normative function which gives an obligation to policy makers. Added to these civic entitlements is a primacy of the performative and political subject, and the consideration of symbolic media power to the citizen experience in the form of

discursive resources. Thus entitlements become *resources*, in which the representational and symbolic aspects of news are incorporated into the social and cultural contexts of engagement.

CHAPTER 3

Researching the News-audience from a Qualitative Perspective

Research with regards to political communication is overly concerned with the functionalist and quantitative approach, which negates the symbolic and discursive processes of agency in citizen performance (Coleman & Moss 2016, 19). The dynamics of citizen engagement as nuanced necessitated corresponding methodologies, Coleman and Moss (2016) advocate the use of more qualitative methods. Qualitative research enabled the study to ‘explore empirically how the media generate meaning’ for audiences, while retaining a role of the researcher as being an interpretative subject (Jensen 2013, 236). The construction of the field of enquiry thus underwent stages of planning in order to be systematic (ibid, 237). Researching and occupying the performative and interpretive social meant these steps were essential in accessing audiences broad experiences of political life. The research *strategy*, point of observation in generating evidence (ibid, 237), was to conduct in-depth interviews with audiences in gaining the cognitive perspective.

Methodological principles informed the research process, all stages were grounded in a normative view of the political as discursive, social and contextual. Part of understanding engagement in this study relies on subjective reflection of how the news has resourced audiences’ civic cultures. Combined with a Discourse Theoretical Approach (Carpentier & DeCleen 2007), objective reality is not only dismissed, but also its contextual value. Indeed, the subjective ‘mis-remembering’ or ‘mis-representation’ is more telling in processes of identity and differentiation. Furthermore, appropriate data for the perception of news is opinion; audience articulations and performance. With these processes campaigns are informed and citizens claim voice, in this vein the interviews occupied an affective and cognitive perspective, ‘social

encounters where speakers collaborate in producing retrospective (and prospective) accounts'. (Seale, Gobo & Gubrium 2004, 2).

Taking place five months prior to the main body of interviewing, audience experiences of Brexit were piloted and data collected. This data grounded the research and accompanied media and communication literature to decide the premise of this thesis. A focus of specific interest in reform and political change emerged, alongside the existing data on engagement and news audiences, an inductive and deductive approach (Jensen 2013). From the pilots, the research was focused and the interview widened. All pilot interviews were used in the overall sample as all were still relevant to the case. Two of the pilot interviewees were re-interviewed, these shorter additions extending the data to include the questions in the revised guide. In anticipating and pre-structuring interviews (Jensen 2013, 236), recruitment was anticipated to be 'central to understanding the 'outcomes' of the research' (Seale, Gobo & Gubrium 2004, 3). The key concern of recruitment was getting a breadth of views (ibid).

Sampling and Conducting interviews

The time constraints of research decided the size of the sample, with a satisfactory number of 18 interviews with 23 respondents. The interviews were conducted in person in Anglesey and Gwynedd in North Wales. The value of face-to-face to interviewing giving a sensitivity and attention to the relationship (Rubin & Rubin 2011). Locality was seen as an important context in engagement, thus with a sample of this size the same locality was chosen to alleviate regional difference. The choice of this specific locality was based on my profile and access as a researcher. Significantly recruitment, 'routinely happens on an ad-hoc and chance basis' (Seale, Gobo & Gubrium 2004, 3), and a locality with personal connections was much more likely to widen recruitment possibilities. Not only as regional difference eliminated in data analysis, but in the interview as interaction. Since 'ways of understanding, experiencing and talking about that specific interview topic are contingent' (ibid), being a 'local' presented one less barrier to understanding and interaction.

Gender, class and age reached a significant breadth for the sample size (see appendix 4) ethnicity was not a determinant in such a small sample, in an overwhelmingly white area (98.2% Anglesey, 99% Gwynedd). *Leave* and *Remain* interviews were in relative balance, but those abstained from voting were under-representative of the wider population, only 2 in 18 interviews and 23 respondents, represented the 30%* of the population who abstained.

Convenience sampling (Jensen 2013, 239) dominated, predominantly through neighbours, colleagues and acquaintances. Emails and personal messages were sent introducing the researcher and study (see appendix 1). The language of recruiting became an important factor, those responding, and those recommending friends and family, would sometimes be confined to those who were confident to talk about 'politics', seen by many as a narrow field of specialised interest, this narrowed recruiting possibilities. Thus adoption of different language style and more accurate aims were needed. Recruiting became calls for 'personal experiences' of Brexit. Where an interview had connotations of professional performance, it became a 'relaxed chat'. By conceiving the civic and political experience as a personal one, despite knowledge or confidence, it was necessary to use language which reflected this in common, rather than academic use.

The recruiting process included an aim at snowball sampling, which meant the recruitment of close families and friends. This was the case on four occasions, where the offer was placed to be interviewed separately or together at their comfort. Two interviews were conducted in groups, one a family, the other a friendship group, both three respondents each. Each group interview was recruited through the singular female respondent in the group, contributing to a higher ratio of men to women in the overall sample of respondents (see appendix 4).

Constructing the interview

The qualitative interview has few established methodological rules (Jensen 2013), rather a craft honed with experience. Intuition was a guiding principle, communicative processes applicable to

researcher as much as respondent where skills were developed with practice, the piloting processes significantly aiding in this. The study assumed a conception of the interview as a co-production, where talk and gesture is mutually monitored, a localised collaborative event, yet situated within the wider context (Seale et al 2004). In the dismissal at the possibility of neutrality, the aim was to engage in naturalistic behaviour but not assume a position of neutrality (ibid). A methodology which proved successful in gaining the aim of qualitative interviewing to ‘gather contrasting and complementary talk on the same theme or issue’ (ibid, 3).

The centrality of news to the research was not reflected as a centrality in conversation. In hopes of not over determining responses in relation to media and news’ role, Brexit was instead offered as a focus point. The aim to mitigate overstating the importance of news in experiences of political events. In analysis, the interplay of discourses of politicians and media, campaign and news, information, education and news, served itself in inseparability to underline the significant and entwined role of news and the futility to attempts of separation, thus news as accessed as a contextualised resource in the lives of citizens.

From a position that assumed personal experience was varied and subjective, questions were open to interpretation from interviewees. The more successful questions of the pilot interviews were incorporated and built upon. With a new interest in asking audiences about thoughts of prospective change, these questions were added and a the guide arranged chronologically to build upon past reflections and propel future imaginaries. The general structure of the interview can be seen in the interview guide (see appendix 3). The introductory question into current affective/cognitive state as a way of letting the respondent introduce their positioning to the event. Then the interview generally followed a combination of affective and cognitive questions aimed at encouraging a personal narrative of pre, during, and post Brexit, culminating in prospective thoughts and feelings of change.

Respondents tended to have plenty to say on their experience, but some respondents were unfamiliar with the notion of an in-depth interview and would begin with concise and factual

responses, presumably expecting many questions. Responses were drawn out and invited to be elaborated on, and in the end, the interviews were all successful in regards to the respondent's depth and breadth. Core practices were adopted in simply; asking questions, following up on specifics and allowing plenty of time for respondents to talk (Seale et al 2004). A key premise of interviewing was a political move in giving agency to audiences, while a political interaction in itself, thus listening and respect were paramount to the process.

Analysis of Data

All verbal content of the interviews were transcribed, creating the empirical data for this study. Throughout the process of coding and thematizing, the interviews were re-read and listened to immerse myself in the data, recalling the voice of interviewees as not to be lost in the analysis process, particularly salient for the emotional displays of the political. A Discourse Theoretical Approach (Carpentier & DeCleen 2007) was used in the coding and use of data, where qualitative research methodologies open and iterative procedure was used in a first stage of heuristic coding, sensitising codes from the transcripts (See appendix 5), in order to explore the experiential and social aspects of the interview data (Jensen 2013, 249).

Then codes were organised thematically in theoretical categories (Saldaña 2009) along a timeline of experience, different stages of the political event drawing different uses of the news as resource and representation. Resources and perceptions of news were collated in sequence, all of the interviewee's engagement with these analysed alongside each other in an aim to get a representative experience of news' role. The circuit of civic cultures (Dahlgren 2009) offered an analytical entry point into the contextualisation of audiences and their practices, offering a concentration on the social as a respite to discourse analysis' primacy of the political over the social (Carpentier & DeCleen 2007).

The use of Qualitative research's sensitising concepts to deepen and ground perceptions are complemented by Discourse Analysis, where sensitisation is sometimes limited to a point of

departure in analysis, a grounded focus of qualitative meaning can be built upon with Discourse Analysis's structuring of meaning (Carpentier & DeCleen 2007). This translated into the use sensitized codes and themes, where Discourse Analysis could be used to structure identities and media concepts by treating discourse as representation (ibid). Analytical and political concepts, such as hegemony, antagonism and articulation (ibid), can be used in a grounded way by this methodology, offering not only a description of audience engagement, but a theorisation of media use as a resource for citizens.

Ethical Reflections on method

The method of qualitative interview as a collaborative production, needs reflexivity and ethical guidelines. Important ethical standards for the qualitative interview are *Permission, Respect and Commitments* (Myers & Newman 2007). *Permission* was asked of interviewees in the transparency of the interaction's aims and in written consent for the recording of the interview (see appendix 2). *Commitments* to the interviewee were fulfilled in ensuring anonymity to the process, where recordings were handled only by myself and names were changed in transcripts and analysis. A dimension of power is inherent in interviews as moments structured, recorded and taken away by the researcher (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). In the study of a sensitive and ethical political topic, *respect* was key in the tone, design, and interaction of the interview.

This thesis sees political interaction as a theme through method and analysis, thus must also be a methodological reflection. A key finding in analysis and interaction was that *Brexit* was a divisive subject within pre-existing social divisions. As a Welsh citizen and as a researcher I, too am susceptible to the same divisions, with my profile leading to to the spoken or suggested assumption by interviewees to represent *Remain*. The result that *Remain* voters were generally much more critical of *Leave*, and more readily showed emotional reactions, may have been more indicative of whom respondents were talking to, not who was talking. Thus the research avoids statements of this type of qualification. My own political subjectivity was reflected upon and quite easily set aside for more normative aims of the research. Only in attempting at rapport, transparency, respect and understanding, could other's subjectivity and thus performance toward

my political identity be mitigated. The research is coloured by these processes in remaining indicative of the political issue which this research aims to contribute to, in more experiential understanding by researchers and activists of the people with whom they wish to understand and communicate.

CHAPTER 4

Local News Audience's reactions to Brexit

On announcement of the vote, and the months leading up to it, many people were trying to determine their political position, in trying to place themselves in either of the two camps. There were processes of active information seeking; where news engagement heightened in order to decide and be a part of the national debate. The method of obtaining information was predominantly through big media, including legacy press, television and radio companies, sourced on and offline.

The locality of Anglesey and Gwynedd, is the rural northernmost area of Wales, U.K. Anglesey voted to Leave the EU with 50.94%, Gwynedd was the only region in North Wales to vote Remain, with 58.91%, the counties had 73.8 and 72.3% turnouts respectively. Wales has a distinct language and culture as a nation within the UK, political identity is not as strong in Wales as its devolved counterparts in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Local elections in Wales often go uncontested, Gwynedd having the most, with 22 localities where seats are unopposed and citizens cannot vote. The assembly in Cardiff, South Wales, has been devolved from Westminster since the 2011 referendum. It is said that Wales suffers from an information deficit, where Welsh people don't encounter information about Wales or Welsh politics, leading to little knowledge of which government is responsible to specific issues (Evans 2016). Welsh citizens overwhelmingly watch and read English news, with localised BBC coverage limited in a 'roundup' style (ibid). North Wales' only daily local paper is the Daily Post, owned by Trinity Mirror, Britain's largest newspaper group, implicated in the phone hacking scandal, and offering

little coverage of politics. There is thus a lack of scrutiny for Welsh politicians, and a lack of representation of Wales in news (ibid).

BEFORE BREXIT

News as a resource in deciding

Longitudinal interest in the UK/EU relationship is found especially in older generations with strong political affiliations. For Alwyn (*Retired Architect, M, 82*) to achieve a separation from the EU as a member of UKIP was a central political tenet, outraged at UK policy perceived through his lifetime to be shaped by the EU. Michael (*Retired Schoolmaster, M, 68*), member of the Labour Party, also remembered the first Referendum in 1975, a moment from which he had ‘high hopes’, of ‘peace, harmony and wonderfulness’. Lifelong membership saw an embedded sense of politics and affiliation in identity over lifetime, to which the campaign has little decisive bearing. Party membership as a definitive factor, tended also to come with affiliation to certain newspapers in a divided press.

There was one side, everything is going fine. The other side, there wasn’t any information, there was no information even as to the actual outcomes.

Brian, 51, Senior Technology Manager

The campaign and its coverage defined *Leave* and *Remain* into two opposing camps, resembling and exasperating the binary nature of the choice. Coverage was perceived to often incite fear tactics from both directions, ‘Osbourne was saying with the Armageddon that would happen if we left the European Union, which clearly was very unlikely’ (*LLyr, 50, Musician and Teacher*). This perceived discursive polarisation was unwelcome and largely resisted, sometimes having the opposite intended impact. Barbara voted to Leave but recognising the fear mongering of the Leave campaign:

The media are the ones who publish it, broadcast it.. There's too much scaremongering going on, which to be honest did swing me the other way as well, towards staying.

Barbara, 47, F, Shop Owner

Ian, consistently in favour of Remain, was nearly swayed to reverse his political position:

'You should stay', almost in a threatening way.. So that almost turned me into sort of going 'hang on a minute, you can't threaten us'. I almost voted out, and I was very close, I was very close

Ian, 52, M, Systems Engineer

Some audiences in the study were deeply dissatisfied with the tone and level of the political debate and its coverage, resisting it and even reflecting on their own stance in voting. Audiences retained their positions but critically place themselves outside of the grasp of threatening and scaremongering news, rejecting a simplistic debate. Connected to the sense of binary positions, particularly in absence of information, was the imagined followers of the campaigns. The Jones family:

'I feel like I only had a basic understanding of it'

Helen, 52, F, Civil Servant

'I thought the people who wanted to Leave, they were being too nationalistic and i didn't want to be part of that I suppose.'

Ian, 52, M, Systems Engineer

Without a clear grasp of the issue, the Jones family all expressed, as Ian does above, a decision based primarily in opposition, articulating themselves more strongly with what they were not rather than a strong association with the campaign. Representation of the 'other' (Silverstone 2006) becomes an assumption which definitively coloured engagement.

Yeh. No it is a bit of a confession yeah.. you know, I was a default inner.

..in being a socialist, that I didn't have anything in common with the team that were representing the brexit vote.. and being associated with those people.. well I don't want to be associated with those people.

Martin 46, M, Network engineer

Not wanting to be associated with 'a bunch of racists' (*Martin*), while feeling an absence of a socialist voice backing *Leave* or addressing and contextualising his concerns of the EU. The experience presented Martin with a kind of dissonance, in not being able to identify with the narrow sort of *Leave* voter presented to him. Without a debate addressing his concerns, the process of decision making is ongoing; 'still not sure'. In not seeing himself represented (Coleman & Ross 2010) or in accessing the substance to the stakes of his decision (Blumer and Coleman 2015), Martin's process of decision making is ongoing. In othering 'those' people, he distanced himself from their 'completely different' values, suggesting binary representations. On Consumption:

I want fundamental changes so that's not what we're all focused on. And I see the EU as a massive stabilising force which inhibits radical change you know..

Martin 46, M, Network engineer

With strong reasoning and relation to the issue the vote was an expression of resistance, political position connected him to this momentary articulation of change because of a critical dissatisfaction with politics. This reflected a moment of deliberation between the issue at hand and his political identity. With a considerable amount to affirmation from his friends and family that he had made a mistake 'they just generally took the piss' (*Martin*). This mark of resistance and moment of political expression, met with a binate representation, was both jovial dismissed by others and unsettled by his own positioning.

News' role in decision making

The campaign, the coverage and the level of debate was perceived to be markedly lacking in accurate and reliable information as the base resource to make a decision. On being asked if they felt informed:

I didn't feel that informed, one way or the other to be honest. you base opinions based on what I could see happening, my nana and grandad. *Barbara, 47, F, Shop Owner*

I felt like I had a bit of information, I felt i had a good idea of the pros and cons enough make my own decision, but what I feel now, I feel that the information had not been accurate or it has been misleading. *Bryn, 25, M, Civil Engineer*

Some respondents did feel adequately informed, but not from news. Alwyn (82, M, Retired Architect) felt significant familiarity with the issue and thus felt informed; 'Very. I don't know whether Brenda told you, we're members of UKIP'. Caren (65+, F, Company Director) felt 'Reasonably informed, and a lot of it was my own thoughts.'

The news was mostly negated or negative in its role of informing. This absence increased the likelihood of falling back upon broad notions and ideas which already corresponded to political values, for example the tendency towards collectivism over nationalism (Nick, Llyr, David, Ian, Helen, Ioan), or financial fiscalism and a conservatism to immigration (Bryn, Caren, Brenda, Alwyn). Information was often seen as absent or inaccurate, through a combination of incompetence and dishonesty. In the absence of information, and with representation as binary, broad values constituting political identities were overdetermined (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). In the presence of untrustworthy news, family and friends, party values, and membership had a more pronounced role in deciding. The place of decision making blurred between private and public, thus too the inconsistency of their separation, highlighting the need for understanding how the private as shaped by culture, has bearing on the public sphere (Livingstone 2005).

Brexit was felt to be important, it's repercussions large; no matter the engagement or understanding of the individual to formal politics, there was a sense of responsibility and importance. Those who did not vote were not absentee from this responsibility. Peter (27, M, *Administrator for NHS*) felt a personal burden of attachment to making the wrong decision, one he felt unable to make of his own will in a situation where he had no understanding and felt 'drowned', the responsibility too great. Chloe (25, F, *Waitress*) had 'No idea what was going on', '...scared, confused, lack of information, to sum up!' Both felt intensely connected to the experience, where Chloe talked significantly with 'both sides', where 'it was full on, without actually voting'. While engaged, interested and deeply concerned, neither felt in a position where they knew enough about the issue to vote. Fears of declining engagement as measured by voting turnout (Markham, Livingstone & Couldry 2007), calls to be re-examined, confirming mainstream political science's inability to measure civic engagement (ibid).

Being an audience of news may have been even more acute in experiences to make a decision as these young voters had no association or political deference to anchor their opinions. Indeed most felt they didn't know enough about the issue, confusing and hostile campaigns leaving an absence of information, but without a presence of personal political narrative, a lack of news narrative meant too few resources were left to decide.

Feeling Informed

Just getting into the habit of fact checking, it can be a bit tiresome having to fact check

everything

John, 42, M, Pub Landlord

At a certain point I was very keen to see if I was missing something, what neither parties in terms of remain or exit were able to espouse anything tangible

Brian, 51, M, Senior Technology Manager

Brian and John both had broad and thorough news practices, critically assessing sources and their own positions. Brian goes on to say ‘it was hard to vote for something when there wasn’t anything to vote for’, revealing the notion that in this case there is only so far media can go in informing, when ‘was the information there in the first place?’ (*Martin, 46, M, Network engineer*). Those who did feel informed sourced their views not from news, but from experiences of work, social life and education. While news cannot occupy singular responsibility for informing the populous, it’s presence can be seen weaved into audience explanations of feeling ill-informed. Despite critical practices and a broad consumption of news from John and Brian, both remained exasperated with the process, their critical practices unmet in effort and reward. A combination of a vote ‘for nothing’ and an absence of tangible information meant even those with sufficient knowledge and the most practiced skills, felt their efforts to engage lacked a meaningful compensation.

Accountability in informing

The sense of media and politicians as colluded is a common theme, they are commonly referred to as one, rarely separated in their roles. Brian sees media concentration as a defining issue of Brexit, with ‘two people’ responsible for ‘half the sales’, this represents a notion press:

..free but ultimately it’s corrupt.. free but distorted.. free, but controlled by tax avoiding, non-dom, neoliberal areseholes.. the only saving grace is Private Eye and The Guardian.

Brian, 51, M, Senior Technology Manager

And on the representation of politics;

It’s been messed about hasn’t it? There are two large groups who seem to own everything you know Sky and Murdoch. I just keep relying on my dear British Broadcasting Corporation, and my nice lovely Guardian.

Michael, 68, M, Retired Schoolmaster

Concentrated ownership is linked directly to the corruption of political representation and a lack of accountability (Freedman 2015) by audiences. Within which the contradictory discourses (ibid) of the ‘free’ press are being ironically and critically played with. Alongside this there is a personal and affinitive attachment to ‘good’ news sources, with *The Guardian* being symbolically placed outside ‘the media’ by many of its readers, often singularly seen as informative and uncorrupt. This revealed a skepticism yet connection to news, underlying news’ value as a resource.

There was a tendency to articulate affiliation, yet less investment and more reflexivity to their partisan *source* than their partisanship. Individuals with strong political affiliations were less fervent with their long-term subscription to newspapers, by money or loyalty. Michael initially stating the *BBC* and *The Guardian*’s reporting on Brexit as ‘fair’, then going on to see a decline:

The BBC have been pretty hopeless over the left-wing Labour Party, over the last couple of years, you know. Just ready to pounce. Ready to say something people want to hear.

Michael, 68, M, Retired Schoolmaster

While some audiences have a sense of loyalty to their chosen news sources, they remain critical and reflexive about that same source. Media agenda and bias are linked directly to political influence and concentration of ownership (Fenton 2015). Some audiences recognise the direct link between political and media collusion, and thus the role of vested interest in their combined failure to inform. Others don’t state directly and overtly the role of ownership and corruption, but there is consistently a symbolic connection between media and politicians, reflecting the soft and personal connections to which they do share as elites (Freedman 2015)

Argumentative not Informative

There was a consistent perspective in the study of a biased and ‘hostile media’ (Coe et al 2008) permeably perceived in politicians and social debate, reflecting a hostile mode of politics. This was felt to block the ability to be informed, on feeling informed in the ‘silly exchange of

propaganda at the time. It was utterly pathetic on both sides' (*Michael, 68, M, Retired Schoolmaster*).

On how useful the coverage was, Barbara 'found it was too much arguing and bickering, it wasn't a nice clean debate, it got too nasty'. Emulating her perception of the government, who she sees as 'bickering' 'school children', ignorant to the needs of citizens:

It's all about one-upmanship and I don't like it. And definitely not putting the people's interest first. *Barbara, 47, F, Shop Owner*

On reflection of pre-Brexit, the wish for a more measured debate was common.

I wish there had been more.. less heat. I wish it had been a more considered. *Brenda, 65+ Retired Social Worker*

Nick (*24, M, Doctor*), somewhat jokingly likens it to a style of reporting by 'one of Putin's guys'. Whether intentionally or not, the coverage blocked information through confusion and disagreement;

'.. they create this media effect whereby nothing makes sense. It felt like that was happening with Brexit, you had so much cross-party disagreement, and disagreement within parties, that there wasn't a narrative, there was no logic.. So you couldn't form your own narrative about it.' *Nick, 24, M, Doctor*

Nick : ..it was such a quagmire of decisions, none of which seem to actually lead anywhere. So none of it made any sense and everybody just ended up going..

Chris: Gut instinct..

Nick: Yeah, Oh dear. Everybody just gets this viewpoint, you hear it so much, that I just don't bother reading the news anymore because none of it makes sense.

Nick, 24, M, Doctor

Chris, 35, M, Software Developer

There is a strong association of political and media elites, of 'personalities' and 'propaganda', overly concerned with partisan debates and united in their unclean and heated methods. Audiences easily criticise these news methods as transparent; silly and pathetic, a clear sense of disconnection and disdain for the elite who are concerned only with childish, superficial and hostile debate, disregarding public interest. The result of political infighting, produced and reproduced by news, is a state of political quagmire. Where the news' role as a resource has been abandoned to pander to political point scoring, leaving a lack of information, an uneven representation to the hostile aspects of debate, and a lack of political narrative to the issue at hand. In citizen entitlements (Coleman & Moss 2016) of news, the value of public interest and informative content is noted and lost, this state criticised, and decisions and narratives moved out of public and news based deliberation, and inward to personal narratives or 'gut instinct'.

The word *argument* often is used where 'debate' might be, and for Peter, the mode of politics seen is pure argumentation, from the representation of institutional politics..

They were having a big argument in Parliament. and I think it's quite childish the way that they shout at each other and 'eyy' 'oooyy' like, please stop it, you know, you're not five.

Peter, 27, M, Administrator for NHS

The performance of politics translates from parliament to interpersonal and online political communication. Talking about politics at work is under constant likelihood to turn to 'having arguments'(Peter). And 'arguments everywhere' on social media, resulted in deactivation of Peter's Facebook account in the run up to the vote. Political talk and discussion involves a

certain amount of dominance and conflict to which Peter just isn't prone to or comfortable with '...maybe I'm just too peaceful'. As was noted earlier, Peter and Chloe were left undecided, unguided in an absence of their own political narratives. Drowned not by an abundance of information, but a political quagmire where hostility tuned out information. Where individual political performance is embedded in the social (Rai 2015), news offers a resource of representation for the social in what to expect of political debate, the news experienced as a resource in imagining oneself as a citizen (Coleman & Moss 2016). Here the representation of political performance sees a productive and performative tension (Mouffe 2013, Abercrombie and Longhurst 2003) succeeded by a perception of antagonism.

Spaces for Political talk

A key component of democratic engagement is access to space for political talk. Within these spaces Newspapers offer a material resource for debate:

We buy a newspaper everyday for the shop, for customers to read, and somebody will read something then start talking about it

Barbara, 47, F, Shop Owner

.. every morning you see to do the shopping and I get the paper there. And if there's something on a headline which is some nonsense that the EU is inflicting on us, I say, look at that, isn't that disgraceful?

Alwyn, 82, M, Retired Architect

A supermarket and sandwich shop provide spaces of quick exchange in a consumer setting, where people experience news as a resource in initiating political talk. Civic empowerment can emerge in the domain of consumption (Dahlgren 2009), but with public spaces declined (Dahlgren 2009, Mouffe 2013) and these consumer settings embedded in the social, its emergence is essential for citizens.

The workplace and the pub were the most common situations of discussion, both with limitations;

It's not good to mix the pub and politics really... not after a few drinks.

Jack, 24, Mechanic

If you got really passionate, a really heated debate, then that could stop you from doing your work.

Peter, 27, Administrator for NHS

Theoretical reasons which in practice, Jack and Peter go on to say, were mostly ignored or rarely adhered to, the rules and conditions of political talk being loose and unpredictable, yet it is within this type of talk of connecting the personal to the political, that the political emerges (Dahlgren 2006). Nevertheless as the cultural imperatives to avoid conflict can hamper talk (Eliasaph 2010), the mode of talk becomes important, and here the implication from Jack and Peter is the possibility of conflict, which is undesirable.

Political talk at work depends on the culture of that workplace:

No, no, we actually got told not to. Yeh, we had an announcement email from higher management saying if you would like to talk about the referendum please do it in your own time.

Peter, 27, M, Administrator for NHS

Chloe's management on the other hand, a private company, emailed their staff and urged them to vote Remain, clearly not dissuading *talk* of the subject, and where there was 'Lots! So many!' (*Chloe, 25, F, Waitress*). Nick didn't receive this message and rejects the disallowing of talk in NHS hospitals, though his friend Laura is surprised:

Laura: ..obviously outside of working hours, because you're pretty pressed for time, right?

Nick: Well you just do, I remember one patient that I spent a good amount of time with, she was there every day, and we had political debates...

Laura: How did you find the time?

Nick: Well you just find the time, it's important though, that time to talk to patients.. you have human interaction, that's all it is, and so, I guess it inevitably comes up doesn't it?

Nick, 24, M, Doctor

Laura, 33, F, Teacher

Apathy to talk to delimit conflict (Eliasoph 2010) is adopted by Peter by direct institutional instruction, in the opposite of the need for institutional encouragement to debate (ibid). While Chloe's management sanctions talk introducing the issue, conflict is limited in a setting which is a 'political bubble' of *Remain* (Chloe). Peter's extends Eliasoph's learned apathetic avoidance (ibid), into the reasoning that political conflict can cease productivity in the workplace. Directly in opposition to Nick's value of political talk as essential and characteristic to social relations. Highlighting the dependency of political life to occupation, where even within the same institution, the social practices of an administrator and doctor are different.

The pub was referred to often and automatically as a place of political talk. A place for Llyr (50, *M, Musician and Teacher*) to discuss, having, 'a bit of an argument' with friends, conflict acceptable in familiarity (Eliasoph 2010). For Peter (27, *M, Administrator for NHS*), when trying to imagine a place where he could get more into political discussions; 'it does have to be a pub.. everyone's sort of a bit looser.' It represents a very local place to discussion, where back in Ireland, Alice (58, *F, Public Relations*) got the sense of local feeling when she 'was hearing it in the pub'.

John's (42, *M, Pub Landlord*) pub is 'a bit of an intellectual bubble', where predominantly pro *Remain* citizens would frequent and talk. The expectation of whom you might find at a certain pub may prevent you from doing or talking there, while not exclusively, some pubs are separated in the political and demographic persuasions of their customer. Shrinking the political space of democratic debate to those who may already have similar opinions and suggests a social divide to Brexit which can manifest physically. Social spaces as defined by Socio-cultural positioning are now imbued with a new categorization of *Leave* and *Remain*.

Mentioned Spaces of political talk were never formally dedicated to politics, highlighting the importance of everyday talk for citizenship (Dahlgren 2006, 278). Vast differences were encountered in the comfort to talk politically. As shown, everyday spaces for political talk become contingent upon cultural and social factors. These factors generally allow political talk when it, and its conflictual tendency, is seen as appropriate or not, much as Eliasoph (2010) suggests. This appropriateness is realised when a) the individual sees the political as essential to the social, and b) when conflict in political talk is seen as acceptable or manageable. An antagonistic and narrow understanding of the political (Mouffe 2013) can dissuade political talk, thus the representation of the political and of the mode of political talk is an essential cultural and social resource for audiences.

THE RESULT

The result didn't go as most in the study expected, with the vast majority being markedly shocked.

You know.. what?! I sat up, put the lights on, and listened to it.. I just thought I was wrong, I thought I was in the minority. *Caren, 65+, F, Company Director*

The shock gave Caren new confidence in her decision, while Alice (58, F, *Public Relations*) was 'absolutely incensed', I 'couldn't believe it. I actually couldn't believe it'. The shock pouring onto her social media feeds, Alice's next stop on 'that fateful morning'. The result represented a political change for most *Remainers* which they were intensely opposed to, experiences dominated by emotion and shock:

I was just black, dark, depressed. Unbelievable. *Michael, 68, Retired Schoolmaster*

Going to work and people were just so deflated.. I remember someone sitting in our foyer

and he had his head in his hand, just completely devastated.

Catrin, 41, F, Social

worker

What communicative process led to such engagement? Firstly there was a broad recognition that media and politicians had fully expected a different result. Some perceiving the result may have been different had *Leave* voters known *Leave* was a real possibility. Indeed, Catrin knows a few people who ‘protest’ voted, to which she’s ‘quite annoyed’, and Martin’s own experience was much as they describe:

Well there was a part of it that was a protest vote. I didn’t, I mean did you? I didn’t think for a minute that brexit would win. Not for a minute... I know that’s a bit reckless, but I may well have made the same decision again.. but I may not..

Martin, 46, M, Network engineer

Martin’s Protest vote lost its core function in the perception of inevitability. The protest aspect was partial, and considering how resistant he felt to be branded a *Leaver*, may have been a performative hedging. Nevertheless, Martin goes on to express that *Remain* as a safe result meant he didn’t give the vote as much attention as he ‘should have’ prior to its result. Presumed victory was a significant factor for others too, complacency leading to a regret of not engaging more with the campaign.

For Bryn (*25, M, Civil Engineer*), ‘when it sunk in that we had (left) it was a bit of a shock’, which turned to unease as he saw that ‘the majority of the things they’d said was a load of rubbish’, with Boris Johnson’s resignation as ‘absolutely shocking’ and the images of swarms of Londoners around him ‘who were devastated that we’d left’, as a *Leave* voter he ‘felt that I was responsible.’ For Bryn the disingenuity of campaigners depleted his trust and *Remain* as the status quo caused some unease through representations of devastated masses.

Caren (65+,F, *Company Director*) was surprised the ‘sort of brainwashing’ didn’t work, Brenda (65+, F, *Retired Social Worker*) was shocked that a ‘very powerful’ *Remain* ‘despite all their efforts, they were defeated’. Both as longitudinal supporters of *Leave*, their perception of *Remain* was one created and reproduced by a powerful central force. The popular reaction of shock due to perceived inevitability suggests a hegemonic representation that *Remain* would win. This dominant discourse is seen by some audiences as originating in their separate spheres of news, The Guardian telling them ‘it will all be fine’ (*Michael, 68, M, Retired Schoolmaster*), their personal spheres supporting this. For others the inevitability was due partially to authorship; those seen to back *Remain* were the powerful centre of politicians and the BBC, creating a perception for *Leave* voters that they were on the margins of public opinion.

Perceived complacency of engagement, and then shock at the result, highlight both a hegemonic (Mouffe 2013) representation of *Leave*, in narrowing and simplifying political space (ibid), as well as hegemony’s role on processes of engagement. The importance of social imaginaries for political participation, and the confirmation of mainstream media’s, particularly the BBC’s, tendency to limit framing to the dominant view (Schlosberg 2013, Allan 2004, Wahl-Jorgensen et al 2013) and limit social imaginaries.

Explaining the result

Explanations were more present in those who felt they had lost, reasons ranged from the inadequacy of the *Remain* campaign, ‘I don’t think they in any way addressed genuine concerns, so it was just.. we’ll fudge it’ (*Brian, 51, M, Senior Technology Manager*). To the intellectual capabilities of *Leavers*: ‘My son called me stupid.. he was quite disgusted that I voted to leave (*Barbara, 47, F, Shop Owner*). ‘I thought science would rule, that rationality would rule, there would be a new age of reason. And what has happened is quite depressing (*Michael, 68, M, Retired Schoolmaster*). With news reinforcing this discourse:

(BBC Radio 4) They interviewed someone from one of the poorest villages in South Wales and his reasons for voting out was because of immigration. But there was no immigration issues within that village, you know

Catrin, 41, F, Social worker

Present also in the popular story of ‘google searches about what is the EU, you know that just says it all.’ (Catrin), ‘what is the EU? was one of the top things, and I just think, holy cow, these people voted.’ (Ioan, 18, M, Cadet). Often linked to a lack of experience, education or intellect, leavers were thus seen as susceptible to being misled by media and politicians.

I’ve never had a very high opinion of the perception of the majority of the population. so i wouldn’t say Brexit has changed it, it’s reinforced it.

Mary, 59, F, Retired

Accountant

Mary’s disappointment turned to scorn confirms and sediments previous perceptions of the ‘other’. Other respondents also build on perceptions and divisions held before and during campaigning, to explain the unsettling result. The news here is implicated as a representational resource in defining the other as a way of reasoning the political climate.

Media’s power over Brexit

There was a strong discourse of *Leavers* being deceived by the media, by implication through politicians, and directly. Media’s power is perceived in many forms. Brian sees a longitudinal media influence, in bringing a topic into public imaginaries:

The media is instrumental to the whole EU obsession that’s framed in that purely British way, Rupert Murdoch, Paul Dacre, they’ve been feeding this fire for the last 20/25 years.

Brian, 51, M, Senior Technology Manager

Media moguls framing the debate and British psyches, even defining the issue as a national characteristic. Recognised through elite ownership, deception is implied in framing from elite self-interest ‘what their message, their values, that’s what goes’ (*Brian, 51, M, Senior Technology Manager*)

Ioan describes the media’s role in the rise of UKIP as ‘playing on fears. And the media abused that to get more ratings’, ‘I think media has massive parts to play in what we think (*Ioan, 18, M, Cadet*). Regional context suggests news’ power in shaping the ‘other’ (Silverstone 2006) who is beyond familiar access:

I feel like people were swayed in the wrong direction quite easily, around here especially, you know small town, everyone’s like leave, racist, immigrants, lack of knowledge, lack of understanding.

Chloe, 25, F, Waitress

John too outlines the *othering* of tabloid news’ ‘fear mongering bollocks stories’, with a role in deception, division and control:

They didn’t understand how immigration works, how the economy works, it’s a lack of information.

A bit stupid and that’s fine, but they’re a little more susceptible to being given these alternative facts..

The rhetoric, this hate and divisiveness, it’s stirring something inside of them which they don’t really understand.

John, 42, M, Pub Landlord

A common vein in the power of control of *Leave* campaigning, was the appropriation of passion; emotion as irrationality, the power of news rhetoric to mislead and control fellow citizens. There

is also a forgiveness to the imagined other, hate as routed in misinformation and incapacity, means responsibility is placed partially outside of the individual.

I can't remember where things come from they just seem to.. maybe the newspapers and stuff do work. And I, without realising it, it goes in. But then if that was true then with all those newspapers saying Leave there would have been more of a ... thing.

Jack, 24, M, Mechanic.

Along with 'propaganda' and 'brainwashing' seen previously, the dominant discourse for audiences is one where consensus and control (Freedman 2015) reign. As we heard from Jack, how can the newspapers work if the majority was so marginal? Here Jack cannot reconcile media's power to create false consciousness, without realisation of complete consensus. With the exception of Jack, most theorising of media power is done about another, not the self.

Without recognising that power can be contradictory (Freedman 2015), this discourse of media power means audiences have trouble placing themselves and others in relation to it.

Over-determining the position of the other as being *under* full control, or negating power when incomplete.. Agency and reasoning here is not only between the self and text, but the imagined relationship between other citizens and a text, expanding the ways in which media resource our representations of the other (Silverstone 2006). In theorising what is happening to others, audiences give more of an insight into their own agency in differentiation, as rebuttals and refusals of perceived media efforts to control. Agency as complete or absent, meant only the *other* is under control, combined with a notion of passion as a loss of control, produces a binary of the hateful fool and the compassionate intellectual, and that the news does or does not 'work'.

The Echo Chamber Explanation

The phenomenon of information echo chambers, or political filter bubbles, is one widely mentioned. It would seem that online, social media bubbles are not independent, but reflective, of audience's offline experiences of interaction. In a context of limited spaces for democratic

debate, sometimes social media is the space where oppositional views are more readily encountered. John (*John, 42, M, Pub Landlord*) singled out online space, along with the gym, as where most differing views are accessed. Llyr (*50, M, Musician and Teacher*) stated it as a space where debate could be found in absence of 'few and far between' face to face opportunities. Alice (*58, F, Public Relations*) saw the most debate of differing opinions in comment sections of friend's posts, where friends of friends comments widen the sphere.

Those on the periphery between the binaries of Leave and Remain, Chloe (*Chloe, 25, F, Waitress*) and Peter (*Peter, 27, M, Administrator for NHS*) who didn't vote, and Martin (*Martin, 46, M, Network engineer*), who was largely undecided, experienced this feeling of being in the middle with interaction from both 'sides'. Chloe's encounters were mirrored online, where she mentioned a great deal of interaction with 'both sides' prior to the vote and seeing her Facebook feed as divided, 'about 50/50'. Barbara sees hostility on Facebook, almost driving her to deactivation like Peter, reflecting the hostility she experienced offline, with family and friends of an equally divided state.

I don't remember having a lot of discussion with people who didn't think the same as i do, as i said we live in our echo chambers, pick our friends, listen to our own views being reinforced. I think we just thought 'oh it's not going to happen'.. and that's why it was such a shock

Mary, 59, F, Retired Accountant

With the echo chamber as a prominent theme, people used this as an explanation of their experience and the result:

I was talking to them and saying it was just really nice to partake in stuff, and then this man and his wife came in, and they were like, 'bloody hell I can't even believe we need to discuss this, I mean clearly we're better out of Europe, haha', and put their votes in the box. And I was like... fuck!.. two votes to my one.. you've given it loads of thought, you've read

articles, then people just come off the street, who you obviously haven't had that discussion with.

Nick, 24, M, Doctor

Tearing down his bubble, Nick 'assumed' that everyone just knew the 'right thing to do', then realised 'you've just been having your back rubbed by a bunch of your mates', the 'middle left is surprised' 'because they're so out of touch with what a lot of people think.' (*Nick, 24, M, Doctor*). Nick passionately narrates the moment his bubble burst, the perception he had of his thoroughly deliberated and rewarding participation, given way to a broader reality he wasn't aware of. Brexit has brought the phenomenon to the fore of public consciousness and the citizen-audience is thinking about communicative separation. In releasing the phenomenon from its online filter, talk of why and where the separations exist is prevalent, and practices are adopted in order to try and escape separation of talk.

Tension was felt in the immediate aftermath of the result, Alice (*58, F, Public Relations*) and Mary (*59, F, Retired Accountant*) both expressing anger at this stage, which prevented talk with *suspected* Leavers. After lessening, Alice at least has felt able to interact, but the tension is clearly felt on both sides, as talk is only with those who 'admitted it'. Llyr's (*50, M, Musician and Teacher*) experience prior to the vote was also one of tension, where 'if anyone had an opinion, it tended to be a strong one'. Brian recalls an encounter of heated response:

I had the misfortune of sitting in a room with a bigot, and when I raised a point his head nearly popped off and ranted about spitfires and things like that, that kind of level.

Brian, 51, M, Senior Technology Manager

John attributed anger and passions to his political other, the 'right wing', who are 'always a little bit more emotional', where 'less than one in ten are able to debate it and talk about it without getting all emotional' (*John, 42, M, Pub Landlord*). The tabloid press is directly implicated by respondents in stirring hatred, in the trouble of passion as preventing talk. The tension goes both

ways, and John sees it as a significant barrier to political talk, the cognitive and affective modes of politics out of balance, where:

People just need to step off a little bit. And realise that you know, we are all basically being lied to by these different sides.

John, 42, M, Pub Landlord

Stepping off, used to describe physically or emotionally backing down from antagonism, is used as a way of reflecting on the reality of the situation. A reality in which elites ignite anger to ensure division, misleading those who are easily led. In separate political bubbles, the other side, in this case the ‘right wing’ are compounded into a passionate and uneducated *Daily Mail* or *Sun* reader.

Caren does reiterate that she, as someone who is anti-immigration and voted to *Leave*, sometimes avoided political talk. ‘Only with people that were like minded, because people who weren't, it tended to end up as an argument.’ (*Caren, 65+, F, Company Director*) Certainly the picture is wider and Brenda is an example of an *Leaver* whom does avoid talk, but for different emotive reasons, challenging the stereotype. Brenda realised upon the prevalence of the term of echo chambers;

..that in fact I and the people with whom I agree, we talk to each other, we confirm each other’s concerns

Brenda, 65+, F Retired Social Worker

Company is shared with ‘socialist’ friends, but for ‘a long time’, politics is ‘just a part of our relationship that I never explore’, a ‘closed book’. In membership of UKIP, Brenda is ‘put in a box’, where her concerns of immigration are in relation to the depleted social services she encountered as a social worker. These concerns, rather than being discussed, ‘they will tell me i am prejudiced, racist...anti-anything-you-like, and I’m not any of those things.’ Being educated and informed, what prevents political talk outside of Brenda’s echo chamber is a painful lack of

openness from the other: ‘you see I find it.. Compassion. I respect. I feel’. Brenda sets boundaries of political talk which safeguard from attacks on her identity, previous encounters bound her political concerns to a hateful archetype. Mediated representations contribute to her feeling of being typecasted;

..talking about Leave voters as though they’re thick, as though they actually shouldn’t have the vote.. there is increasingly this big gap in between people who feel that they are the ones who know the answers, and anybody with a different opinion, has to be wrong,.. and ill intentioned and thick. *Brenda, 65+ F, Retired Social Worker*

Again for *Leave* voters, there is a sense that even after the vote, *Remain* is associated with a hegemonic (Laclau & Mouffe 1985) position, with a dominance of thought and morality. While simultaneously, a representation of *Leave* presents a simplification of political space and identities (ibid), resulting in less debate across the divide.

Separation of newspapers in a divided society

Llyr stated few opportunities prior to Brexit to discuss, and in expectation of debate with the older people he was familiar with, said:

I was afraid of what that conversation might reveal about them. Because once you get into a discussion about immigration with somebody who reads the Daily Mail everyday, then you have to listen to what the daily mail is telling them, and there again it’s just quite a painful experience really. *LLyr, 50, M, Musician and Teacher*

Where coverage still maintains a fierce partisanship, engagement can be subdued:

I think I’ve probably.. when I hear brexit now I just shut down a bit, because I think there’s still a lot of blaming going on *Catrin, 41, F, Social worker*

After his bubble bursting at the polling station, Nick has a new approach in escaping his ‘back being rubbed’:

It’s more important to understand people that you disagree with than the people you agree with.. but it’s so fucking hard to read the Daily Mail. Because you're reading it and it's just complete unchecked madness.

Nick, 24, M, Doctor

Brian (51, M, Senior Technology Manager) also reads the ‘Daily Mail, for a laugh.. sometimes it’s not that funny.’ Representing a consistent reiteration of the ‘other side’ as a group of ‘people like your daily mail readers’ (Catrin, 41, F, Social worker).

Audiences accept the newspaper ecology in the UK as deeply partisan, synonymous with division and creating separate spheres of information which have ‘been going on for centuries probably, since there was more than one newspaper’ (Chris, 35, M, Software Developer). Partisanship is also endowed with demographic and social divide; where *Leave* and *Remain*, and the separate spheres of political talk, are seen to have become manifestations of deeper societal issues, within the falsity of a ‘classless society’ (Nick, Mary). Many perceive *Leave* as resistance from below, resulting from austerity, division and a failure to engage.

I started to realise pretty soon after that we were being quite patronising to what became the Brexiteers, the white working class, in a word.

Michael, 68, M, Retired Schoolmaster

Michael points to the social and political repercussions of one, powerful, section of society’s failure to consider the other.

..we need to be a nicer place and we need a nicer government who treat the people as though they are grown-ups and stop just treating the average and above like their grown-ups.

Michael, 68, M, Retired Schoolmaster

The treatment of people in rational political talk is important to Michael, where respect and kindness are depleted, it is the fault of the 'liberal elite' and government, who have neglected their positions of power in encouraging intelligent debate and interaction. As a result 'I think they were doing two fingers to the establishment' (*Michael, 68, M, Retired Schoolmaster*).

News is placed as the route to escape echo chambers and into the minds of the other, a tactic to understand their position and the wider debate is to read 'their' newspaper. The understanding of a pluralistic news as a diversity in ideas (Freedman 2005), is invoked in this tactic. Yet just as market liberalism only diversifies providers, not quality and ideas (ibid), audiences also are limited in pluralistic tactics in a partisan press. The separation of information spheres by a partisan press on a highly divisive topic does not bode well for multilateral debate and understanding, partisanship overtaking pluralism. When partisanship and readership is also endowed with class divisions, audiences feel a moral responsibility for citizens to engage with the wider debate, thus an acuteness in the media's representational role.

Immigration

Throughout the interviews the issue of immigration is mentioned, more commonly the fear of a rise in prejudice, often representational:

We've now got the rightest wing government for a long time and you can see it through Europe, you can see this otherness, the fear of the other.

*Alice, 58, F, Public
Relations*

In a region of very low immigration personal relation to 'the immigrant' is highly likely to originate in mediated representation.

‘..the things that you read about and see, I don’t think we know half of it with Muslims, some of the things they get up to are disgusting. The numbers that are coming in, they’ll outbreed us and they say they want to kill christians, well this is our country how dare they come in and tell us the way they want to run it with Sharia law?’

Alwyn, 82, Retired Architect

‘I do know that it's quite easy to come here.. you get food, clothing, accommodation, education.. You can't do that in any other country in the world.. some don't even have papers, you don't know where they're coming from, you don't know who they are, what their background is, and they're here. No other country in the EU certainly.’

Caren, 65+, Company Director

Experiences have passed through the news into reality, where Caren negates mediation completely, in stating she ‘knows’, not ‘she’s seen’. Representation assimilating into truths in the social imaginary, an example of where news can cause tension and fear, placing the moral responsibility on news in marginalised representation (Silverstone 2006). Even the news’ role can be lost where its place in citizen-audiences lives is unnoticed, naturalised into reality and denied as source of opinion.

Naturalisation of the idea of *Leave* as strongly nationalistic has also seen to be problematic for political talk and interaction, representational issues of immigration on two fronts. The more heterogeneous picture of *Leave* voters is recognised and not everyone posits immigration as having a deciding role in the result, but still a contribution:

I imagine a great majority of people who voted *leave* are not racists and they’re not nasty people, but sadly I think that there was a large proportion of them who are nasty, racist, bigoted and full of bile, and that kind of behaviour shouldn’t be tolerated.

Brian, 51, M, Senior Technology Manager

Leave and *Remain* voters are passionate in their dismissal of the news' focus on immigration. Jack (24, M, *Mechanic*) remembers the use of refugee pictures in *Leave* campaigning: 'I think it's disgusting really', 'the media, it was all about immigration.' With the result seen to sanction racism (*Nick, Llyr, Mary*) There is a severe intolerance of intolerance, these mediated tensions summarised by John (42, M, *Pub Landlord*): 'We hate you because you hate'. News may have had an igniting effect on fear of immigration, with two in the study expressing hate speech. More commonly found is the passion with which citizens disassociate and condemn intolerance with. Setting a precedent of entitlement (Coleman & Ross 2015) to the news in less attention to and more humanity in representations of immigration.

MOVING FORWARD

Truth or opinion

In media reform, invariably there needs be an understanding of what audiences expect of news, how and information can be presented adequately in allowing its very function as a resource of information and accountability. Opinion and truth are common themes with varying approaches.

I dislike the term fake news, but I recognise its validity

Alice, 58, F, Public Relations

'Fake-news', along with post-fact, has evolved beyond the black and white of deliberate falsity and grown into a term to be used for subjectivity, and why Alice dislikes the term, to determine something fake would create other news as 'real':

..any news organisation is always influenced by the people who run that organisation, just as any truth is the truth of that person's perception. so till always to a certain degree be slanted towards it.

Alice, 58, F, Public Relations

While Alice recognises ‘truth’ has no role in news, she also recognises the need to separate news and opinion, where she condemns the latter’s use within the ‘hard news’ section. This represents the balance of allowing for subjectivity and perspective, but also valuing accuracy and accountability. Others also make this distinction, that even though politics is inherently subjective, the news has a duty of accuracy:

I know everything is political isn’t it, but it would have been nice to get some non-political figures, debating the subject.. you would think that would be someone like the BBC

Ian, 52, M, Systems Engineer

BBC as a public institution here had a responsibility to the public, a role analytically separated from commercial aims and an ideal for information to be non-partisan. Martin (46, M, Network engineer) is resigned to the news always being this way, conflating neutrality and transparency ‘there’s no neutral view to be got so you know.. that’s just politics isn’t it?’. While language is still centred around truth and neutrality, there is some reflection that the news should be more accurate and transparent, that blatant lies should be exposed. But the impression of audiences were that the media operates for its own commercial aims, its organising logic of capital (Fenton 2016) recognised.

It’s not done in logic it’s done in emotion. And of course a lot of the appeal is non intellectual, and i mean that in the patronising way that it sounds, and its frothy sentimentalism, which is not factual.

Alice, 58, F, Public Relations

The decline of news is seen by many in its fall into sensationalism, for Alice, online news and the internet’s economic pressure has resulted in the above.

There’s no need to go and scrape up dirt on people or you know.. Just the facts, forget the bickering the arguing, just the facts would have been enough.

Barbara, 47, F, Shop Owner

There is a strong wish throughout that news should leave sensationalism aside.

..the sort of discussions we should be having on a day to day basis which are a little bit more analytical, a little bit more nuanced, they just don't take place because there's all this noise all the time.

Llyr, 50, M, Musician and Teacher

Llyr here expresses Coleman's (2013) degenerative democratic result of *noise*, creating an incapacity to listen and silencing the citizen voice. Where economic pressure is widely accepted to have a detriment on content, citizens aren't satisfied, the regulatory insinuation of audiences as capable of assessing their own information needs (Coleman and Moss 2016, 18) is reflected, but the resources presented by news do not fulfil these needs. Resources are also expressed in a value of accuracy, where citizens accept the subjectivity of political life while defining a mode of transparency and accuracy that is needed for their political lives.

Subjectivity or Bias?

BBC News is a staple in all respondents lives, on Television, but mostly Online through website or mobile app; throughout age, demographic and political leaning. As wide as its audience, is its perception of bias:

Well the BBC are violently biased, they're left wing and they're also pro Europe, so i do watch it but i take everything they say with a large pinch of salt.

Alwyn, 82, M, Retired Architect

The BBC have been pretty hopeless over the left-wing Labour Party.. Just ready to pounce

Michael, 68, M, Retired Schoolmaster

Audience complaints of BBC bias don't exist in the far the *right* or *left*, but in powerful centre. Where Alwyn sees the BBC as pro-Europe, many agreed to this point, its bias for the *Remain*

campaign no secret, a campaign which followed ‘the neoliberal consensus, it’s just one-track’ (*Brian*), as the central establishment. The failure to represent the voice of the left in the debate, and the absence of air time for Jeremy Corbyn was broadly noted.

Catrin sees bias as favouring institutional power, comparing her lived reality of social care work with news representation. Catrin sees famous cases’ failure being blamed on the case worker, with little attention to court orders and changes in policy. The underfunding of the NHS, is an issue which angers many respondents, Catrin explains;

But it just annoys me, the coverage the NHS has, its at breaking point because it's underfunded, and I just wouldn't like to work in that sector, it would be completely demoralising.

Catrin, 41, F, Social worker

The central bias of the BBC as not a partisan issue, but one of institutional power. Revealing the news, in being run by elites, becomes a resource for the elite, not citizens.

Political and economic elite collusion in neoliberalism is recognised, ‘there seems to be a circle of self interest going on’, but the media ‘seem somehow complicit but I don’t understand the relationship’ (*Martin, 46, Network engineer*).

.. quite nice, decent people, they get stirred up and they get angry and defensive. That creates the power for people who are these networks of information

John, 42, Pub Landlord

Collusion of elites here includes the media, where their power exists firmly in their propensity to deceive and reproduce hate, to divide publics. It’s specifically an issue of oppression for John since those who are uneducated are more easily misled and appropriated for power. While critical discourses of truth versus opinion are varied, audiences speak in unification of elite bias

as a problematic aspect of news. Affecting accuracy and reliability, but more passionately; engaging people's disdain for the elite.

Disengagement from centres of power

Barbara describes her Brexit vote in the context of not having voted in general elections for 15 Years:

I've got no confidence in any of them, that's what changed. They promise you everything and give you nothing basically. Until things change then...

Barbara, 47, F, Shop Owner

I used to listen to Radio 4 a lot, and you know at 5 o'clock.. and erm.. it really started to get on my tits, so I stopped listening to it.. you've got this elite and they sit there and discuss this stuff and they run the country.

Martin, 46, M, Network engineer

When citizens don't feel represented in their politicians, they disengage, Barbara felt *Brexit* offered a different kind of vote. Elitism in news meant Martin switched off from BBC Radio 4, as representative of the wider political picture. The feeling of being unrepresented invariably leading to switching off, from a source or from voting.

It is in little doubt that in this rural region, the media is the lens by which many see the processes of institutional politics and debate. It is a region where council elections go largely unchallenged, canvassing and local campaigning are minimal, spatially removed from the devolved Cardiff and central Westminster governments. Representing a cultural separation, the coverage encountered of Brexit by all but one respondent, was in English, in a sample with 15 out of 23 respondents speaking Welsh, 7 of whom are first language speakers. More acutely felt than language, is the lack of representation of Wales, and particularly North Wales, in political and cultural representation:

I've never heard anything from Welsh politicians, especially for Anglesey, they are always talking about South Wales, never about the north, they forget about us.

Jack, 24, M, Mechanic

The Britishness I think is often, you know, Wales aren't included in that, in that idea of Britishness.

Catrin, 41, F, Social worker

As a poor region within Europe, North Wales receives significant funding from from the EU compared to other UK regions, and the absence of this information from coverage was felt, and caused a great deal of disappointment, particularly by Bryn who voted to *Leave*:

..the number one that really annoyed me, about how much funding the EU provides for Wales. So I wasn't aware of that, which is one of the most crucial things. *Bryn, 25, Civil Engineer*

Culturally, spatially and informatively decontextualized from the Brexit debate, the connection between policy and everyday life is lost. These central modes of power are sometimes incomprehensibly removed:

(On 'politics') You know if I understood I'd go for it, but I just can't get my head around how certain people can have power over the whole country, you know what I mean, its, to me, it's like - wow.

Peter, 27, M, Administrator for NHS

The notion that Welsh identity and politics is not represented for Welsh citizens (Evans 2016) is supported in this study. Where the absent representation of Wales' EU funding was not only lamented, but seen by Bryn as 'crucial' in his decision. Local news was never stated as a source

for Brexit, with the vast majority confirming the tendency (ibid) of English news consumption, with the funding example illustrating Wales as a devolved nation with a different political context, but without a corresponding news representation.

Knowledge and Specialism

The responsibility to engage with politics is synonymous in many audience members with the keeping up of the news, of staying in knowledge of ‘what’s going on in the world’. The route to political knowledge is often expressed this way, news watching encompasses civic engagement. The ability to engage with news is sometimes lessened by aspects covered, the mode of political talk, the performance of politics, sensationalism, bias and partisanship. Thus too news’ resourcefulness to civic life.

Repeatedly the issue is brought up by audiences that the local schools offer no education in politics and civic education. The responsibility in adulthood is placed on the self to learn more about politics, and while some urge themselves to watch more news in order to learn more, frequency is correlated with understanding. Though a lack of understanding means following the news is difficult:

But it's already in motion isn't it.. they want to get the news out but they also want to teach us, like they would have to dedicate a news channel to it or incorporate it into schools, that would be great, if they incorporated it into schools I'd go back to school. Be like, can I just take this class, please?

Peter, 27, M, Administrator for NHS

Peter expressed the news as attempting to teach and inform, failure to keep-up in inability to understand. Leading to him not engaging in political talk, where he doesn’t understand ‘the terminology’ and where he usually feels it ‘outdoes my ability to carry on’ (*Peter*). Similarly Alan doesn’t engage in political talk:

I can never bring politics up, because I don't know enough about em, to make an argument out of it, you know? It's just, it's just individual thing isn't it?

Alan, 80, M, Retired Truck Driver

The representation as politics as an interest and specialism is a common theme. The understanding, or even presence, of the notion of citizenship is limited, especially in those with the least education. Within politics as specialism, the understanding of how politics affects everyday life is limited, when politics is 'people in a room dressed in suits arguing' (*Barbara*), has no tangibility to *being* political (Fenton 2016). An elitist representation of Westminster, combined with low understanding disengages citizens, politics seen as something which is not for everyone is democratically problematic, a lack of understanding is accompanied by a lack of purpose in engaging.

The time and skills needed to access alternative sources of information are at once supported (they just switch off, they don't have time to google or fact check every single piece of information. *John, 42, Pub Landlord*), then negated; the abundance of online information as an ill-excuse to not be informed, 'in this day and age' (*John*).

Elsewhere this sentiment is reflected, being informed as dependent on personal responsibility rather than social circumstance. The balance of responsibility and choice is an interesting one, where some audiences struggle with their understanding of politics, heavily grounded in a perceived lack of education, yet a personal responsibility to frequent news in order to gain a deeper understanding and interest. Though politics is seen as a specialism, ironically there is some kind of personal duty to engage with news as a way of participating in an unnamed citizenship.

..we've left the town, we've come to the university, we've gone on holiday, we've not just stayed in a small Welsh town.

Chloe, 25, F, Waitress

Experiential knowledge (Dahlgren 2009) is recognised as a condition of political awareness, a local-global aspect conditional on socioeconomic factors. Inadequacy in this knowledge function, in a specialist or elite representation of politics, of partisanship over plurality at the expense of narrative and information, necessitates an overdetermination of practices and skills. Where formal and experiential knowledge of politics is relatively strong, audience criticism of news leads to heightened practices and skills to compensate for the critical failings of news. Where existing understanding is weak, critical skills and practices are inexperienced and the news experience is occupied with keeping up both temporally and intellectually, an overwhelming task and thus a tendency to ‘switch off’. The consumption and effort needed in understanding in this environment prevents news as a resource from being embedded in the everyday practices of everyone, to only when knowledge, agency, practices and skills are sufficient to engage.

The understanding of material and social inequality is linked to disengagement. Information and symbolic resources seem to have a discourse of equality and opportunity, a democratizing potential unfulfilled by individual choice, unique within wider recognition of an unequal and divided society. When contextualised in the lives of audiences, this personal responsibility becomes a performance of knowledge, where the possibility to interact in political talk depends on an infallibility. Unsurprising when representation of political debate is antagonistic.

Being political in the Consumer Centre and Populist Right

Political change and mobilisation, is craved, or even forecast. For Martin, whose vote was in the main vein of change, sees the need for political resistance in the form of marches and demonstrations, but fears that in being removed from population centres, the representation of protest is minimised:

I happened to be in London.. and there was a massive protest.. and there was no coverage in the press at all, so I don't know whether it's people aren't engaged and people aren't you know, mobilised, or whether it's just that the press is not covering it.

Martin, 46, M, Network engineer

Martin sees consumerism as distracting citizens from being engaged, due to 'big global companies and politicians and politics all in cahoots', undermining civic mobilisation. That neoliberalism undermines mobilisation, with the media's 'agenda' to present a narrow kind of politics, in which citizens are sedated into distraction. Michael (68, M, Retired Schoolmaster) also sees consumerism as undermining citizenship, with symbolic power as an intrinsic means by which people are transformed and distracted into consumers. Elite bias present in symbolic distraction, commodification and framing immobilised citizens. News viewed as a resource in setting a precedent, where regular representation of the political defines a social imaginary (Laclau & Mouffe 1985) of passivity.

'Terrifying' (Alice, 58, F, Public Relations) change is forecast in populist mobilisation, UKIP's Nigel Farage seen to escape the elitist mould of politicians and adopting the singularly represented 'connection with the grassroots of the UK' (Alice). Connected to the media's perceived role in the popularity of and rhetoric of his party, evaluating his success as communicative. He holds the populist method in 'the manner in which he talks' as 'open' (Ian, 52, M, Systems Engineer). A 'man of the people' (Alice) address. Though he is met with mistrust, his populist style is recognised as effective mobilisation.

You've got these people who feed the fires of bigots by pretending it doesn't happen

Brian, 51, M, Senior Technology Manager

Everybody was so terrified of having the discussion about immigration, because the minute you mentioned immigration, you became labeled as a racist, that it shut down that argument and it entrenched both sides

Alice, 58, F, Public Relations

It is this type of negation of political issues which is described to be fuel to the rise of far right populism (Mouffe 2013), the immobilisation of neoliberalism and the mobilisation of populism connected. While the *noise* (2013) of soundbite level politics detracting from constructive debate:

The slogans..taking all the energy out of where people should be putting their energy which is talking to each other and finding good, constructive positive ways forward.

LLyr, 50, Musician and Teacher

The type of coverage that audience *want* to see is encountered. Populism epitomises a form of political communication in which space and time for talk is overtaken with hostility at the expense of debate. Where an energy is needed in progressive forms of politics, valuing talk across difference in order to move forward. This value is negated when coverage draws energy to the populist right, or is left to the hegemonic centre:

.. there was nothing on the remain side that said: we recognise your concerns are legitimate, we're going to try to deal with them in a constructive way

Brian, 51, Senior Technology Manager

Entitlements (Coleman & Moss 2015) encompassed a value to widen political talk to include marginalised views and responsibility to meaningfully engage.

Responsibility to Engaging in Talk

Inserting reflexivity to your own values for more inclusive political talk is dependent on the mode of address. Re-inserting manners is seen as lacking but essential to many.

The left-wing middle class was very like; it was basically just very derogatory, just saying you know; you idiots, you're stupid you don't take part in politics.. instead of addressing the issues, which was actually that they don't feel represented.

Nick, 24, M, Doctor

Within socio-economic and representative elements, the need for better modes of political becomes a moral issue. These audiences recognition that they have more resources to participate politically is a reflexivity to power, where more recognition and responsibility on their part, as well as collective responsibility to develop a mode of talk which allows progress.

I don't feel like I have a role, I think I should be more educated, I should be able to vote.

Chloe, 25, F, Waitress

Chloe values citizenship and feels *entitled* to civic agency, but has little sense of either. Trust (Dahlgren 2009) between citizens and representatives is extremely low throughout, highlighting its only partial role (ibid) in civic life. Where trust in elites is lacking, trust in the democratic system, of *values* (ibid) maintains the value of engagement and a sense of responsibility in citizenship. It is dualistically, the understanding of politics, and the sense of responsibility to the other, which can maintain a circuit of citizenship (ibid) towards engagement. The understanding of politics through news as narrow, immobilised, specialised, a *job* only concerning elites, holds truer in absence of education and experience. Simply, if there is no individual power or agency, no knowledge of notion of citizenship, from where does civic responsibility emerge? Demonstrating the inter-reliance of the civic circuit (ibid).

The representation of both citizenship, and the responsibility to the other, become key. A media which reflects and reproduces conventions of argument, is complicit in a representation which dissuades the need for self-reflection and nuance, drowns out information, reinforces tendencies to avoid reasoned debate and falls back on partisanship. Representational resources in promoting

understanding of the other as central to political talk, unmet. This level of debate not only angers news audiences, it treats them as if they are incapable of the reasoned debate they crave.

Audience Discussions on Engagement and Change

Feeling informed was sometimes experienced, but gained through personal or professional experience, or in existing citizenship and party membership. There was little affinity with either campaign from anyone. If there was any possibility in the media bridging the information gap and the argumentative binary, that possibility was lost in elite collusion, a failure of information and accountability. The news not only reflected the perception of politics as a site of antagonism (Mouffe 2013) but reproduced it. Articulations were strongly in differentiation, a dissociation both to the 'other side' and to elites who represented a superficial and simplistic performance, the news' role in *thin* trust (Dahlgren 2009) highlighted.

The role of identity, pre-existing membership to political parties, values or newspaper, filled the informative gap in making decisions. Where these were absent or contested, voting decisions were left and remain unmade, but importance still instilled, the event giving a chaotic experience in communicative *noise* (Coleman 2013). While news offers a material and discursive tool for political talk, the representation of the political can subvert as resource. As the political hovers between work and leisure, spaces already imbued with cultural rules, political talk is acutely dependent on representation and conceptions of the political. This implicates a representation of the performance of politics into the potential of *spaces* (Dahlgren 2009) to be appropriate for political talk.

The fear of regression is a significant worry for audiences, where Brexit represents a retreat from progressive and collaborative politics. Discourses of change are coloured with the fear of the far right and increasing austerity, tension and irrational politics, decreasing the time and cognition for civic engagement. These processes are seen to be dialectical to the news, which has the power to mislead and failure to inform, igniting hate in the misrepresentation of the 'other' and tampering civic engagement in its narrow and antagonistic representation of the political.

This moment of participation for some symbolised change, voting Leave was a sanction of citizens who want to regain democratic control (Caren, Jack, Brenda, Barbara, Martin). While the vote for others represents a move in the wrong direction, the heightened political atmosphere means ‘exciting times’ (Ian). The sense is that progressive change needs to happen is met with a desire for active involvement, demonstration, mobilisation and protest (Catrin, John, Martin), with the emotional payoffs this entails (Brian). The result for some was an awakening to the divisions in society, met with a responsibility of those with power to engage the disengaged by widening political talk and prevent marginalisation (Mouffe 2013). For others the result embedded divisions and themselves further into disillusionment in the possibility or feasibility of political talk.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

In the case of local audiences' communicative experiences pre and post Brexit, this thesis has critically examined audience engagement with news as a resource for politics. The citizen is placed at the centre of research in order to argue for a civic understanding of media's role in democracy and the need for a project of media reform within a wider democratisation of society. News as a resource is argued within a discursive praxis to bridge audience research with a grounding in civic culture, news and democracy. Overall the research suggests that the BBC Trust's Review (Wahl-Jorgensen 2017) finding, that the centralising of politician's views on Immigration and the EU, rather than context and social impact of the issues, was reflected by audience experiences. This translated into an uninformed experience of Brexit, a key resource to civic life lost in the noise of hostility and partisanship. The reactions of a critical, disappointed and frustrated audience meant less engagement with news and Brexit, a blocking out or ‘switching off’, or engagement within a political quagmire. This political quagmire was perceived by audiences as an absence of narrative for political positioning as vital to participation. When informative resources were missing, there was a tendency for pre-existing political identities and affiliations to over determine political decisions. The frustration at news'

production from an elite interest (Coleman & Moss 2015), is not only present in audiences, but the model of a media-political debate as elitist is seen as ignoring and denying citizen interests. This representation is not only manifested in frustration and scepticism, it's an aspect of reception, combined with citizen's contextualised perception of inequality and corruption, is pervasive in many areas of civic culture. The following are detailed reflections on the key questions of this research:

1. In what ways do local audiences engage with news pre and post Brexit in North Wales?

Audience critically place themselves in opposition to what they perceive to be threatening and scaremongering news tactics, even when this means a reversal of their political stance. The perception of news to be highly partisan was a key factor in the loss of information and debate. Relatedly, engagement for *Remain* centred more often around distancing than affiliation, particularly in reference to imagined others. The tendency was to vote on pre-established positions of soft affiliations, private relationships or personal experiences of work and political membership, leaving a void in the news' engagement of decision making. This finding is exemplified in those who were undecided and abstained from voting, without an anchoring of information or news narrative to fill the stakes of either side, some audiences were left undecided, confused or overwhelmed.

The representation of North Wales in coverage was seen as lacking, the tendency for national over local news to be sourced for political information (Evan 2016) confirmed. Particularly in the case of Brexit, the absence of the debate and context of Wales' EU funding was perceived to be missing. A perception of hostility, partisanship and sensationalism detracted from citizen's resources. Political talk mostly occurred privately, between family and friends, private relationships and spaces would sometimes see talk between differing political opinions, sometimes talk was avoided between family and friends perceived to be on the 'other side'. The time and place of political talk depended on working cultures, as time for the political hovered between work and leisure, where individual expectations of political talk would prevent or

produce it. Leisurely political talk was commonly referenced to be in the pub, where both arguments and agreement were met, though occasionally the separation of people to different pubs would reinforce the *Leave* and *Remain* divide.

The coverage after the vote led all sides to question the accuracy of the campaigns, with a general sense that they or the other had been misled or lied to. In the tendency to assume *Remain* inevitable, audiences reflected a regret of not engaging more. Widespread shock meant both elation and devastation in the result, where opposing sides were confronted with the other. Tensions ran high in the immediate aftermath, emotive responses, a perception of blame and anger meant there was some avoidance of both talk and news. News was also heightened and broadened in use in efforts to understand the situation and the ‘other’. News was blamed as framing the longitudinal relationship with the EU, and for passionate mobilisation of *Leave*. *Echo Chambers* were seen as another reason for the result, or the shock of it and likened to societal separation. In reasoning separation, Brexit for some meant a turning point in thinking and seeking the wider perspective. For others, the realisation only confirmed what they saw as longitudinally prevalent or inherent in the social and political. And yet others perceived this separation before the vote, already with tactics in place in trying to gain the broader picture. With these new or existing practices resourced heavily by news, the tabloid press as the go-to for imagining and seeking the ‘other’ for *Remain* voters.

2. *How do audiences engage with news as a resource for political life?*

This study has found audiences consistently equate political engagement, political knowledge and news consumption. The key to agency is seen commonly to be *knowledge*, the most valued part of Dahlgren’s (2009) civic circuit. Audience articulations reveal an entitlement to be educated by news, engaged by it, even expressing an entitlement to citizenship and agency when it is felt to be absent. The knowledge aspect of citizenship is problematized culturally when the responsibility of its realization over-relies not on the individual. Within a discourse of media plurality and online abundance as democratization, the consumer-audience attribution

(Livingstone & Lunt 2011) overtakes the citizen-audience. Where frequency and diversity of news consumption equals knowledge and engagement, civic knowledge becomes meritocratic, the interrelation of other aspects of civic cultures and their reliance on socio-cultural context (Dahlgren 2009) lost. Contradictory to the recognition of experiential and formal education as uneven in this local context. Where news is entwined in circuiting the civic, a ‘perfect storm’ of agency and empowerment emerges, yet is only partially recognised, implicating the news, as a resource and discourse, as an issue of equality and access.

The perception of *Remain* as inevitable stemmed from a hegemonic authorship of the powerful centre in politics and news. Brexit presented a democratic choice, one not often encountered by publics (Mouffe 2013). The choice of *Leave* represented an opportunity of resistance to the hegemonic centre, while its realisation commonly seen to be unlikely. Assumed hegemony sometimes prevented engagement with individual and collective deliberation, leading to a sense of civic regret. Here the field of discursivity (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) was directly implicated for the processes of participation, heightened emotion at the shock of the result leading to temporary disengagement or heightened engagement with news. News was used as a resource in reasoning *why*, positioning the self in attempts to configure the situation anew.

News’ role in imagining the ‘other’ resourced citizens in multiple ways, the result resting sometimes on a homogenous idea of the *Leave* voter, an idea held, or perceived to be held, on all sides, dissuading political talk before and after the vote. The hegemonizing discourse of tabloid readers as prejudiced (Allan 2004, 129) was both present and contested. Having been displaced as a possibility of the result, *Remain* retained a moralistic dominance, where *Leave* was framed and perceived in a simplification of the political ‘other’. Its contestation also presented an alternative vein of anti-elitist discourse, where the hegemonic representation was negated and recognised as the same hegemonic processes which produced a disengaged and disillusioned *Brexit*er. Some audiences recognised in themselves and in their peers a derogatory and elitist narrative of the communicatively separated ‘other’, entailing a responsibility to seek the ‘other’ through news. These relations are perceived by some to entail a responsibility of those with

power to engage and inform marginalised groups and the difficulty of attaining skills and practices under the material pressures of austerity.

There was broad recognition of communicative separation in society, contextualised by audiences within their everyday lives. Echo chambers were a popularised phenomenon, a discourse released from media, appropriated as a term to describe communicative, material and social divisions in society. The context of narrowed space for political talk (Dahlgren 2009, Mouffe 2013), and the cultural tendency to confine disagreement to familiar relationships (Eliasoph 2010), was affirmed. Potentiality of political talk was narrowed by the perception of the political as a site of antagonism (Mouffe 2013). The news seen to reflect, produce and reproduce the political as a site of antagonism, narrowing *spaces* for talk.

The news as a resource in imagining the self as a democratic citizen (Coleman & Moss 2015) was experienced in multiple ways. As a site of elite antagonism and specialism, the news is resourced by some toward an imagination of political debate as a performance of knowledge in antagonism, narrowing access to, and reflexivity of, debate. The news was directly implicated in the political mobilisation of prejudice, through communicative appropriations of passion. This contributed to a regressive perception of society in which passion has a harmful role in the political. Austerity, consumerism and right-wing populism, as projects of an elite media, are perceived to distract attention, to take away limited time and energies from political progression.

Antagonistic politics as dangerous to democracy (Mouffe 2013) is operationalised through citizen experiences, shown as damaging to civic processes. Talk across political and social divides has been brought to the fore of public consciousness, with most recognising its absence, some valuing the need for it, an ideal of *agonism* (ibid) touched upon in imagining political progress. News representation as integral in reproducing the idea of politics as inherently antagonistic, with some disregarding the use of political talk in inevitable antagonism, an ‘orientation to the public world through media’ (Markham, Livingstone & Couldry 2007) undermined. In lacking compensation from the experience (Coleman & Moss 2015) audiences

express and highlight the wish for a different mode of political talk.

The incompatibility for a public sphere of rational consensus, the need for an agonistic democracy (Mouffe 2013), and the news' role in reproducing antagonism, can be seen in the Brexit case through audience's experiences of immigration coverage. The binary of immigration being framed in nationalism, fear and prejudice on one side, led to an antagonism toward the immigrant, while also a critical distaste for the coverage which sometimes caused reversal in political positions. The perception of the anti-immigration argument as framed in such a way meant citizens sometimes not engaging in personal deliberation and avoiding debate. The ignorance of the issue from the hegemonic centre (Mouffe 2013) meant the resources to debate the issue were seen as binary and superficial. By failing in coverage of democratic issues, the news is complicit in hegemonizing the debate, narrowing political talk, and marginalisation, discouraging the possibility of agonistic (ibid) exchange.

3. Audience contributions to news and democracy studies and a project of reform

The above findings highlight how citizens resource and equate the news with political engagement, thus the news' audience perspective is essential in offering depth to civic literature in understanding the audience's imagination of their own civic possibilities (Coleman & Moss 2015). Including the experience of audiences into news and democracy offers a more nuanced understanding of engagement and revealing a broader conception of the political, as essential in democratization (Fenton 2016). Where it is possible for audiences to be highly engaged with an issue but not vote, public apathy and disengagement cannot be meaningfully measured by quantitative data. Where news is a resource beyond the confines of the private moment of consumption, into political talk, individual and collective imaginaries, quantifiable techniques of audience measurement have little bearing on the news' role in civic life.

The idea that citizenship should be central to a progressive politics (Santal 2017), and a rejection of revolutionist rhetoric in favour of empowerment, access and opportunity (Livingstone & Lunt

2007), the citizen should be centralised in discourses of regulation and political change. News audiences take the citizen as central and news as entwined with the processes of civic culture (Dahlgren 2009). Understanding audience entitlements (Coleman & Moss 2015) to news as a resource involves audience's perceptions of why news is not fulfilling its civic role in practice and discourse. Audience perceptions to this range from expectations of truth and accuracy, to elite corruption and collusion, media concentration, and the inevitability of politics to be antagonism. In these perceptions, news-audience show one of Freedman's (2015) main strategic tenet's in making media policy *political*, is already formulating in the public consciousness, the perceptions of audiences firmly politicized.

In centralising the citizen, this thesis has shown the importance of news in mediated relations to the 'other' (Silverstone 2006) for civic life, thus the importance of this centralisation for moral media regulation (Silverstone 2002). The audience use discourses of the other to imagine the political landscape, in explaining political events, in making political decisions, in engaging or not in political talk. In revealing empirically that news is used as a resource in the imagined or realised behaviour toward the other, the news has become a moral issue. The use of localised audiences to imagine immigrants in fear sets an obvious precedent for the responsibility (Silverstone 2006) of mediated representation. News thus has a moral responsibility to equip citizens with the informative and discursive resources to debate complex democratic problems, rather than a polarised or hegemonized view. At the same time, this tendency is recognised by audiences in elite news and offers insight into the more 'measured', 'reasoned' and 'meaningful' debate to which they feel entitled.

News audience perspectives can expand the regulatory and commercial narratives of audiences, while contributing to methods of reform. Commercial incentives were broadly recognised as embedded, particularly in the appropriation of political passion for ratings and sales, a clear audience perception of the supplanting of citizen for consumer. The lack of interest from regulators and researchers of regulation into audiences (Livingstone and Lunt 2011), presents a top-down view of regulation, where audience's mode of citizenship or status as consumer is

presumed, materially embedded in institutional practices (ibid). Audiences commonly recognised the news to be a business, operating for financial gain, but do not adopt the insinuation of themselves as consumers, they rather vocalised the aspects of consumerism which have eroded their civic culture, in trust, enjoyment and engagement of news and politics. Thus the audience perspective of news should be adopted not only normatively, but pragmatically. Where regulators and news providers might continue to discursively shape the audience as consumer, qualitative research shows they cannot imagine them as satisfied consumers, particularly salient in the volatile news economy.

More importantly, research which seeks reform for a normative democratic project must take into account *who* they are working for (Livingstone & Lunt 2011), where the *subject* of democratic improvement is citizenship, the sense is to consider what audiences feel entitled to gain and how they can imagine themselves as citizens (Coleman & Moss 2015). An aim realised in centralising the citizen-audience, where this research has shown the entitlement audience feel to the resources for knowledge, narrative and debate. In Reform's need to be part of a wider progressive politics (Fenton 2016, Freedman 2015), audiences reveal these democratic resources as lacking.

In targeting the citizen for reform campaigns (Freedman 2015), the notion to study them more closely is simple, while more time consuming and complex than quantitative methods, but may be integral in determining the viability for and character of media reform within complex institutional and discursive structures. The complex and longitudinal task of reform, when centralising citizenship by consulting audiences, is then imbued with civic agency. Thus reform can take upon a praxis in which it is circular to the processes of citizenship and democracy. This can be seen with the above example of the 'echo chamber' discourse; where civic awareness to communicative problems alone can lead to new practices in overcoming them. This research has confirmed that audiences, while multiple and contradictory, and as intimately linked to news, use discourses in civic life, impacting decision-making and political participation. Discourse can thus be accessed and analysed through audience research in order to formulate an understanding of

engagement to specific political issues. A next phase of study would be to engage with a broader audience on discourses around media, civic engagement and reform, to communicatively equip media reform campaigns.

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Interviews

- ‘Chloe’, 25, F, Waitress. Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith, 16/10/16
- ‘Jack’, 24, M, Mechanic. Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith, 12/10/16
- ‘Bryn’, 25, M, Civil Engineer. Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith, 14/10/16
- ‘John’, 42, M, Pub Landlord. Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith, 2/3/17
- ‘Jones’ Family. Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith, 5/3/17
(Ian, 52, M, Systems Engineer, Helen, 52, F, Civil Servant, Ioan, 18, M, Cadet)
- ‘Mary’, 59, F, Retired Accountant. Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith. 4/3/17
- ‘Michael’, 68, M, Retired Schoolmaster. Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith. 4/3/17
- ‘Brenda’, 65+ F, Retired Social Worker. Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith. 7/3/17
- ‘Alwyn’, 82, M, Retired Architect. Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith, 7/3/17
- ‘Alan’, 80, M, Retired Truck Driver. Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith. 4/3/17
- ‘Alice’, 58, F, Public Relations. Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith. 9/3/17
- ‘Martin’, 46, M, Network engineer. Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith. 7/3/17

Friend Group, Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith, 10/3/17

(‘Nick’, 24, M, Doctor. ‘Laura’, 33, F, Teacher. & ‘Chris’, 35, M, Software Developer.)

‘Caren’, 65+, F, Company Director. Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith, 10/3/17

‘Barbara’, 47, F, Shop Owner. Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith, 14/10/3/17

‘Peter’, 27, M, Administrator for NHS. Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith, 11/8/16 & 3/10/3/17

‘Brian’, 51, M, Senior Technology Manager. Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith, 6/3/17

‘LLyr’, 50, M, Musician and Teacher. Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith, 14/3/17

‘Catrin’, 41, F, Social worker. Interviewed with I.Lopez-Smith, 11/8/16 & 7/3/17

APPENDIX

Appendix 1 - Recruitment message example

I'm coming from Lund university in Sweden and am doing some research in my native North Wales, on communication, Brexit and politics. I'm taking a particular stance that it would be so valuable to talk to people about how they feel the media and wider political society has served them during the Brexit campaign - and now in its aftermath.

I just want to have a relaxed chat with you about your experiences and see how you feel, my questions will be simple, just about your media use, thoughts and feelings about the campaign and if you like - politics in general.

Your help would be so appreciated and can be at a time and place that suits you.

Appendix 2 - Informed Consent Form

Lund University, Department of Media and Communication
Researcher: Isabella Lopez-Smith

The researcher is a master student in Media and Communication Studies at Lund University.

For a Thesis in this department, a semi-structured interview about News Media and Brexit is conducted with you.

By signing this form, you agree to participating in an interview of around 30 minutes and to being recorded.

Anonymity is ensured during the entire process. Anonymised data from the interviews will be handled confidentially and no connections to your name are possible.

Results and analysis of the research is willingly shared with you in case of interest.

Thank you for your time.

Date _____

Signature _____

Appendix 3 - Interview Guide

What are your feelings towards Brexit at this moment in time?

- Change in feelings

How did you receive information about Brexit?

- Newspapers, TV, Radio, Online
- Social Media
- Welsh news
- Local Flyers, Boards
- Street campaigners

How informed did you feel about your decision?

What were they key reasons for your decision?

Other campaign points?

- British independence
- Local context
- Economy
- Immigration

Did you discuss campaign with anyone in your life?

- People talked to
- Places talked in

Feelings toward oppositional voters?

- Opportunity to talk
- Places to talk

What would you have liked to seen differently?

Can you see a way of things being different?

- Politics
- Media role
- Discussion
- Culturally / Socially

Is there anything else you want to say?

Appendix 4 - Distribution of Sample

EU Vote ¹	Anglesey % of population	Gwynedd % of population	Sample Tally of Interviews
Leave	37.59%	30.21%	1111111
Remain	35.71%	42.59%	111111111
Abstained	26.7%	27.2%	11

	Anglesey ² % of population	Gwynedd ³ % of population	Sample Tally of People
Class			
AB	17.35%	17.74%	111111
C1	27.78%	29.07%	111111111
C2	25.80%	25.99%	1111
DE	29.07%	27.19%	111

¹ Electoralcommission.org.uk. (2017). *Electoral Commission | EU referendum results*. [online] Available at: <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/eu-referendum/electorate-and-count-information> [Accessed 13 May 2017].

² Anglesey.gov.uk. (2017). *Census | Isle of Anglesey*. [online] Available at: <http://www.anglesey.gov.uk/planning-and-waste/census-and-statistical-information/census/> [Accessed 13 May 2017].

³ Gwynedd.llyw.cymru (2017). *Census | Isle of Anglesey*. [online] Available at: <https://www.gwynedd.llyw.cymru/en/Council/Key-statistics-and-data/The-Census/2011-Census-Key-Statistics.aspx> [Accessed 13 May 2017].

Gender			
Female	51.6%	51.5	111111111
Male	48.4	48.5	1111111111111
Age			
18-24	7.5	11.5	111
25-29	5.2	5.3	111
30-44	17.3	17	1111
45-59	20.3	19.2	1111111
60-74	20.1	17.8	111
75-84	7.2	5	11
85+	2.9	2.9	-

Appendix 5 - Sensitized / Heuristic Codes

Codes	Chloe	Jack	Alwyn
Emotion	<p>‘Confused, scared, lack of information, to sum up (laugh)’</p> <p>‘It’s interesting, they do post real life stuff. They’re not afraid to hurt anybody's feelings, just look at it honestly, I love it, its probably the most honest one out there. ‘ Honest / brutal difficult.</p> <p>Political/personal = I probably wouldn't open something that was political, unless it affected humanity or. In general, I probably wouldn't open it, I don't read too much into it.</p> <p>‘ Personal / human</p>	<p>Frustration, or boredom, at lack of change ‘I don't know really, not much has happened has it?’</p> <p>‘yeh, its a really British thing isn't it to want to stick up two fingers at the, well maybe, not you, but I dunno it seems to be a British thing to want to.’</p> <p>‘Not really no. everybody just arguing about it.’</p>	<p>‘What really annoys me is that the majority of the people have voted to leave, and then you get these people with lots of money trying to slow things down’</p> <p>angry at the lack of progression and speed, links to change.</p> <p>After result ‘Delighted.’</p>

<p>Truth/ Deception</p>	<p>‘You hear about politicians living it up in their jacuzzi and we’re all like struggling to buy something to eat or, you know everyone’s different, luckily someone like me I haven’t got kids and stuff, everybody struggles, so you want your politicians to be honest open and help the country not be selfish, but then you look at other countries .. We have it bad in some respects, I think their all liars, deceiving, no one’s proved that opinion wrong.. Nobodies come out and been a hero. When you put an honest, hard working middle class, working class person into that kind of power they’re more able to understand people’s cultures and get people through and get the country in working order. So yeah, don’t trust them. ‘</p>	<p>‘I don’t know i didn’t believe most of the things that were being said on both sides, ‘ ‘Mainly newspapers and stuff, but i know most of its lies but its still kinda the same even though you know its not true. like i don’t really read the sun but you know the front pages are everywhere and stuff like that. And he BBC was corrupt, they were biased, well i think they were anyway.’ ‘maybe if they had got into power they would have done that after the event they said no and blah but, it was a lie but.. a bit pointless. ‘ ‘the EU is the establishment now isn’t it. They haven’t got as much power as we were told they did in the campaign I think.’ ‘I can’t remember where things come from they just seem to.. maybe the newspapers and stuff do work and I, without realising it, it goes in. But then if that was true then with all those newspapers saying leave there would have been more of a .. thing.’</p>	<p>‘slow things down because obviously they’ve got vested interest in trying to stay in the European Union. And i mean i would have thought that it could have been conducted much more quickly, but we’re in the hands of politicians.’ ‘He knew jolly well at the time, and documentation proved this case; that he lied to the British public. He knew that the end result was going to be a United states of Europe.’ Watching counts like a hawk, tells of someone he caught in the referendum. ‘now that was deliberate, you don’t make a mistake like that. ‘ ‘very very strong suspicions that the vote there was fiddled,’ Welsh Ref.</p>
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