



Degree Program in Policies and Governance in Europe

Course of POLICY EVALUATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

How Disinformation on Digital Platforms Fuels Right-Wing Populism in the West: A Comparative Analysis of Facebook's Role in the Brexit Referendum and the January 6th Insurrection

Prof. Emiliana De Blasio

SUPERVISOR

Prof. Mark Thatcher

CO-SUPERVISOR

ID. 651782

CANDIDATE

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Summary

Dis-and-misinformation's unprecedented dissemination through social media, is at times enabled by Platform's internal architecture itself. This is a phenomenon that has been taken advantage of by a myriad of actors, both in the private and public sector, which subscribe to a populist wave washing over the West, and which ultimately affects the well-being of the socio-political environments in Democracies on both sides of the Atlantic. The Brexit referendum, and the January 6th Insurrection were able to materialize, in part, because of the disinformation that proliferated on Facebook in the lead-up to these events. This thesis explores the intersection between Facebook, populism, and the respective cases, analyzing the dynamic of disinformation. It does so by employing qualitative methods namely case study research, and relying on both primary and secondary research utilizing Facebook political ads, government investigations, leaked internal Facebook documents, and reports by relevant actors. The main finding was that both cases indeed benefitted from disinformation proliferated via Facebook, however, they were able to do so in different *environments* on Facebook, indicative of the need for more robust and stringent regulation. This thesis found that ultimately, these cases are indicative of a pattern, where false information and clickbait content take primacy over fact, and rather than aiding, Facebook is fueling a fire that has the potential to contribute to burning election integrity, healthy political discourse online, and democracy at large.

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List of Acronyms

UK= United Kingdom

USA=United States of America

EU= European Union

AIQ= Aggregate IQ

DCMS=Department of Culture, Media and Sport

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Chapter I.

I. Introduction

In order for democracy to function properly, society has to agree upon and accept the reality within which it exists. There has to be trust in facts, institutions, electoral accountability, and democratic agency among citizens. Social media and digital platforms, owned by Big Tech companies, have now transcended simple connectivity spaces, and have begun to have serious socio-political impact. As such, Big Tech companies cannot prioritize profit over the societal impact they possess. Populism in the West has been on the rise since the mid-2000's¹. Although perhaps not obvious, the aforementioned are all intertwined. There is growing evidence that suggests that the rise of dis-and-misinformation, fake news, and clickbait content, which is fostered by social media, is intimately intertwined with, and is a salient factor with respect to this rise in populism, ultimately creating lasting impacts on democracy at large. As such, studying cases where dis-and-misinformation on Facebook led to the materialization of populism in the West is imperative. Furthermore, the implications of this dynamic are imperative for democracy because without trust in democratic institutions, the ability for voters to possess democratic agency without being subject to manipulation, election integrity, and acceptance of objective reality, the very foundation upon which democracy stands begins to decay. Previous research has argued that indeed there exists an elective affinity, as described by Gerbaudo², between social media and populism, as the former provides an avenue that complements the particularities of the latter. Beyond this research has suggested that dis-and-misinformation also flourishes via social media, namely, Facebook as the platform creates an apt environment for the planting, and dissemination of this type of content. Far less attention has been attributed to the marriage of the aforementioned relationships. Additionally, to date, minimal attention has been attributed within the relevant literature, to comparative analysis of cases embodying the *intersection* of the aforementioned relationship.

This thesis work aims to contribute to this growing area of research by exploring the following research question: "How has dis-and-misinformation on Facebook fueled populism in the West?: Analyzing the cases of Brexit and the January 6th Insurrection". As such this thesis

¹Kyle, Jordan, and Brett Meyer. "High Tide? Populism in Power, 1990-2020." *TONY BLAIR INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL CHANGE*, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, (2020), <https://www.institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/high-tide-populism-power-1990-2020>.

² Gerbaudo, Paolo. "Social media and populism: an elective affinity?." *Media, culture & society* 40.5 (2018): 745-753.

work will examine the way in which disinformation on Facebook has interacted with these two events. This thesis work, focuses on Facebook specifically as opposed to Twitter, or other social media platforms because it has been identified by scholars as a platform that is the most widely used by the population in the United States, with similar percentages of Republicans and Democrats on the platform³. Furthermore, in the UK Facebook has been identified as more representative of individuals likely to vote for Brexit, whereas Twitter is most commonly used by younger, more educated individuals⁴. This project's main hypothesis is that disinformation on Facebook did indeed contribute to the respective events, through its mass proliferation aided by internal mechanisms, and lack of platform regulation. By employing qualitative modes of inquiry, both primary and secondary research, and analyzing *mainly* relevant government reports, internal Facebook reports, and third-party studies, this thesis attempts to illuminate the internal dynamics and lack of platform regulation aiding in the proliferation of disinformation, which consequently contributed to the materialization of the selected cases. This thesis will begin by explaining relevant terms for the foregoing project. It will then go to the literature review wherein, it will explore populism's connection to social media, impacts of internal mechanisms of Facebook, disinformation, and misinformation. Following, it will discuss the relevant case studies, introduce them, look at how one can interpret them as populist events, and briefly describe the relevant literature on them. Next comparability of the two cases will be explored, before moving on to discuss the theoretical framework and methodology of this project work. The following section will delve into the empirics of each case, while also providing an analysis. It will first examine and analyze Brexit, looking at two environments on Facebook, political ads, and private groups. Next, the January 6th Insurrection will be discussed, looking at the environment of public groups, analyzing content, safety mechanisms on the platform, and nefarious activity on behalf of the platform which led to further proliferation of disinformation. After this, a second environment, ads, will be very briefly touched on. The following chapter will be a discussion of each case, analyzing key takeaways, and implications and finally comparing them. Finally, the project will end with a brief conclusion.

³ Gramlich, John. "10 Facts about Americans and Facebook." *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, (2 June 2021), www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/06/01/facts-about-americans-and-facebook/#:~:text=There%20are%20partisan%20differences%20in,of%20Republicans%20and%20GOP%20learners.

⁴Prosser, Chris, Jon Mellon, and Jane Green. "What mattered most to you when deciding how to vote in the EU referendum." *British Election Study* 11 (2016).

II. Terms

Prior to delving into the relevant academic literature it is necessary to establish and define the terms which are integral to this thesis work.

A. Misinformation and Disinformation

Misinformation is false or inaccurate information. Examples include rumors and insults. Whereas, disinformation is deliberate and intentional, including malicious content, such as, conspiracy and propaganda⁵.

B. Populism

Populism has been dubbed a thin ideology in the relevant scholarship⁶. This can be understood as an ideology “that, like mainstream ones, has an identifiable morphology but, unlike mainstream ones, a restricted one”⁷. Although this is an understanding dominant amongst populist scholars, it has recently been challenged⁸. The proliferation of the term “populism” is evidentiary of interest in the topic both by the general public and academic community, however, it is a term that is highly contested and as such studying it can at times be evasive⁹. While the term and elements constituting it are ambiguous, there is relative consensus on a couple of rudimentary factors which are necessary qualifications. Subscribing to a discursive approach, the factors include being; 1). People-focused, this focus serves as the center-point around which other terms in the ecosystem both deriving from, and antithetical to this focus, manifest; 2). Anti-Elitism, is a binary illustrative of the socio-political divide created between the masses —we the people or the in-group—, and the other —or outgroup— comprised of the elite, both

⁵American Psychological Association “Misinformation and Disinformation.” *American Psychological* (2022).

⁶ Abts, Koen, and Stefan Rummens. "Populism versus democracy." *Political studies* 55.2 (2007): 405-424; Elchardus, Mark, and Bram Spruyt. "Populism, persistent republicanism and declinism: An empirical analysis of populism as a thin ideology." *Government and Opposition* 51.1 (2016): 111-133.; Mudde, Cas. "An ideational approach." *The Oxford handbook of populism* (2017): 27-47.; Stanley, Ben. "The thin ideology of populism." *Journal of political ideologies* 13.1 (2008): 95-110.

⁷Freedden M. (1996) *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁸ This has been recently challenged, by for example Schroeder (2020) and Aslanidis (2016). Where the former suggests that dubbing populism a thick or thin ideology ought to be based on context. The latter suggests that the ideological implications of this theory lack both conceptually, methodologically, among other issues hinder the expansion of the field. As such Aslanidis suggests conceiving populism merely as a discursive frame.

⁹ Gandesha, Samir. "Understanding right and left populism." *Critical theory and authoritarian populism* 9 (2018): 49-70.

governmental via establishments and institutions and private citizens via 1% elite¹⁰. Beyond the aforementioned, the latter distinction of ingroup and outgroup, is also indicative of the separation between right and left-wing populism, where the former seeks to exclude immigrants, for example, from the in group, whereas the latter, seeks to protect worker's rights for example, which are *arguably* under economic threat, as a result of globalization¹¹. Beyond the aforementioned aims of populism, the scope is also relevant. Populism pervades the conglomerate of political parties and specters¹². For this reason, compounded by the fact that digital platforms serve as invaluable arrows in the quiver of right-wing populism, among other factors, this thesis work will focus specifically on right-wing populism.

C. Right-Wing Populism

Right-populism, also called national populism¹³, generally combines the political ideology of the right wing with populist sentiments and pillars. While populism conforms to national contexts, a common thread that unites this branch of populism is opposition to liberal globalization, mass immigration, and mainstream politics¹⁴. Four main factors can be identified¹⁵, firstly, distrust of political elites and bitterness over sensed exclusion from bodies of liberal democracy, secondly, deprivation in a context of rising economic inequalities, struggling labor markets, and declining welfare provisions¹⁶. Beyond the aforementioned, there is the notion of destruction, either tangible or perceived, of hegemonic national socio-cultural norms, taking the form of traditions, value systems, structures, etc. Finally, the dealignment of citizens as voters from societal and political groupings in the form of political parties and socio-economic class structures aligned with said parties¹⁷. The aforementioned descriptions are the conceptualization of populism, which will be adopted and deployed within this thesis.

¹⁰ Stavrakakis, Yannis. "Populism, anti-populism and democracy." *Political insight* 9.3 (2018): 33-35.

¹¹ Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

¹² In the EU for example, the range constitutes left-wing parties like SYRIZA in Greece, and Podemos in Spain, to right-wing parties such as The Brexit Party of the UK, France's National Front, the Alternative for Germany party in Germany. Mirroring this trend in the US are politicians ranging from far left, such as Alexandria-Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders to the far right such as Donald Trump. Due to the vast nature of parties, and actors all of which subscribe to the term populist, it is hard to link and properly study the entire range. (Rooduijn, et al., 2019; Flew et al., 2020).

¹³ European Center for Populism Studies. "Populism." *ECPS*, 28 Dec. 2020, www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/populism/.

¹⁴ Eatwell, Roger, and Matthew Goodwin. *National populism: The revolt against liberal democracy*. Penguin UK, 2018.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Eichhorst, Werner, Paul Marx, and Caroline Wehner. "Labor market reforms in Europe: towards more flexicure labor markets?." *Journal for labor market research* 51 (2017): 1-17.; OECD. "Trade Union Dataset - OECD Statistics." OECD.org, 2020.

<https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TUD>.

¹⁷ See footnote 14

D. Facebook

Facebook is a social networking site that is composed of a multitude of elements and interfaces, for example, data centers, content delivery network, algorithm, software architecture, machine-learning infrastructure, etc¹⁸. The Platform's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, describes the platform as a tool to "connect every person in the world,"¹⁹. As of 2023, there are roughly 2.989 billion monthly active users²⁰.

III. Review of Literature

This thesis work is mainly concerned with studying the intersection between Facebook, populism, and the respective case studies, and *specifically* the dynamic of dis-and-misinformation. It is infeasible for this literature review to cover all the intricacies of the aforementioned relationship. As such it will instead act as a funnel beginning with broader elements, and narrowing its focus, touching on the most crucial nodes of the relationship as it progresses.

A. Social Media and Populism

Gerbaudo has argued that an 'elective affinity' exists between social media and populism²¹. They highlight that the mass networking capabilities of social media provide a suitable channel for mass politics and appeal to the individual's "characteristic" of populism. Importantly, this mechanism has not merely served as a tool for top-down communication by political actors — despite much of the relevant literature focusing on this aspect²² — but also as

¹⁸ Helmond, Anne, David B. Nieborg, and Fernando N. van der Vlist. "Facebook's evolution: Development of a platform-as-infrastructure." *Internet Histories* 3.2 (2019): 123-146.

¹⁹ Wu, Andy. "The Facebook Trap." *Harvard Business Review*, 19 Oct. 2021, hbr.org/2021/10/the-facebook-trap.

²⁰ Data Reportal "Facebook Users, Stats, Data, Trends" *DataReportal*, May 2023, datareportal.com/essential-facebook-stats.

²¹ See footnote 2.

²² Much of the relevant scholarship has focused on the way in which single populist politicians or actors wield social media in order to spread their message. While it is not the focus of this work and therefore will not be analyzed extensively within the literature review, it is worth noting that indeed social media serves as a useful tool for populist actors. They do so in part by "triggering emotional appeals, such as anger, fear, and resentment", and Facebook has the optimal internal infrastructure to allow for just that (Jacobs et al., 2020). The aforementioned exploitation of emotional triggers by populist actors via social media is a phenomenon well studied (Krämer, 2017; Bobba, 2019; Corbu et al., 2020; Gerbaudo et al., 2023).

an instrument for citizens to organize, and mobilize, consequently challenging status-quo politics. Hence, according to Gerbaudo, we are witnessing “...what could be tentatively described as an ‘elective affinity’ between social media and populism: social media has favored populist against establishment movements by providing the former a suitable channel to invoke the support of ordinary people against the latter”²³. The aforementioned notion will be a cornerstone of this thesis work. Hopster describes how social media offers a particularly attractive opportunity for populism as it allows for four main affordances²⁴, “1). Social media allows citizens and politicians to circumvent editorial filters; 2). Social media algorithms allow sensational claims to spread comparatively easily; 3). The low-level affordances of social media invite a ‘populist style’ of communication; 4). Social media allows for the real-time expression – and measurement – of the ‘general will’ of the people”²⁵.

B. Internal Mechanisms of Platforms

With respect to the technological elements of how social media interacts with populism, and politics at large, the literature is ambiguous. This ambiguity is a result of contradictions within theoretical narratives and empirical work. The theoretical narrative suggests that indeed echo chambers and filter bubbles do exist on social media platforms, ultimately instigating political polarization²⁶. Beyond the aforementioned this narrative maintains that facets of social media, such as the ability to harvest data and thus create microtargeted ads, further lead to political polarization, ultimately creating a more polarized society with less trust in public officials and institutions²⁷. Despite this, a number of empirical studies disprove, or otherwise challenge these notions²⁸. A number of studies have found that social media allows for exposure

²³ Gerbaudo, Paolo. "Social media and populism: an elective affinity?." *Media, culture & society* 40.5 (2018): 746

²⁴ Hopster, Jeroen. "Mutual affordances: the dynamics between social media and populism." *Media, culture & society* 43.3 (2021): 551-560.

²⁵ *Ibid*

²⁶ Pariser, E. "The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You. London. Penguin. (2011). ; Del Vicario, Michela, et al. "Echo chambers in the age of misinformation." *arXiv preprint arXiv:1509.00189* (2015).; Del Vicario, Michela, et al. "Echo chambers: Emotional contagion and group polarization on facebook." *Scientific reports* 6.1 (2016): 37825; Zollo, Fabiana. "Dealing with digital misinformation: a polarized context of narratives and tribes." *EFSA Journal* 17 (2019): e170720.; Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. "Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics. Oxford University Press. Oxford (2018).; Sunstein, Cass. # *Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton university press, 2018.; Barberá, Pablo. "Social media, echo chambers, and political polarization." *Social media and democracy: The state of the field, prospects for reform* 34 (2020).; Baumann, Fabian, et al. "Modeling echo chambers and polarization dynamics in social networks." *Physical Review Letters* 124.4 (2020): 048301.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

²⁸ Gil de Zúñiga, Homero, Nakwon Jung, and Sebastián Valenzuela. "Social media use for news and individuals' social capital, civic engagement and political participation." *Journal of computer-mediated communication* 17.3 (2012): 319-336.; Barnidge, M. "Exposure to Political disagreement in Social Media Versus Face-to-face Anonymous Online Settings". *Political Communication*. 34(2), (2017): 302-221; Silver et al., "In Emerging Economies Smartphone and Social Media Users Have Broader Social Networks". *Pew Research Center*. (2019); Barberá, Pablo, et

to eclectic news sources compared to conventional types of media, leading to political modernization as opposed to polarization²⁹. Bakshy et al., found that for example, “Compared with algorithmic ranking, individuals’ choices played a stronger role in limiting exposure to cross-cutting content.”³⁰, which while not exempting the algorithm, portrays a more nuanced story of political polarization on social media. Other studies found that “ranking algorithms” had a limited effect on the ideological distribution of news consumption on Facebook and Google³¹. While it has been found that political polarization has experienced an increase in growth, Boxell et al.,³² found that this increase was largest amongst individuals least engaged with social media, and therefore social media’s connection with political polarization is much less established than theory suggests. What has been defined thus far is a rather confounding image. Ultimately, however, what is *clear* is that more research is needed in this area in order to produce some clarity on the matter, or if nothing else, to explain the apparent enigma that exists.

C. Disinformation, and Misinformation

It is a well-studied phenomenon that social media allows for the unprecedented spread of dis-and-misinformation³³. While there is consensus that these phenomena are rampant on social media, whether this phenomenon necessarily leads to a certain political outcome, such as levels of political knowledge, trust in democratic institutions, or party polarization, is debatable³⁴. Some

al. "Tweeting from left to right: Is online political communication more than an echo chamber?." *Psychological science* 26.10 (2015): 1531-1542.; Barberá, Pablo. "Social media, echo chambers, and political polarization." *Social media and democracy: The state of the field, prospects for reform* 34 (2020).; Boulianne, Shelley, Karolina Koc-Michalska, and Bruce Bimber. "Right-wing populism, social media and echo chambers in Western democracies." *New media & society* 22.4 (2020): 683-699

²⁹ *Ibid*

³⁰ Bakshy, Eytan, Solomon Messing, and Lada A. Adamic. "Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook." *Science* 348.6239 (2015): 1130-1132.

³¹ Bakshy, Eytan, Solomon Messing, and Lada A. Adamic. "Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook." *Science* 348.6239 (2015): 1130-1132.; Haim, Mario, Andreas Graefe, and Hans-Bernd Brosius. "Burst of the filter bubble? Effects of personalization on the diversity of Google News." *Digital journalism* 6.3 (2018): 330-343.

³² Boxell, Levi, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro. "A note on internet use and the 2016 US presidential election outcome." *Plos one* 13.7 (2018): e0199571.

³³ Bradshaw, Samantha, and Philip N. Howard. "The global organization of social media disinformation campaigns." *Journal of International Affairs* 71.1.5 (2018): 23-32.; Valenzuela, Sebastián, et al. "The paradox of participation versus misinformation: Social media, political engagement, and the spread of misinformation." *Digital Journalism* 7.6 (2019): 802-823.; Zhuravskaya, Ekaterina, Maria Petrova, and Ruben Enikolopov. "Political effects of the internet and social media." *Annual review of economics* 12 (2020): 415-438.; Shu, Kai, et al. "Combating disinformation in a social media age." *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Data Mining and Knowledge Discovery* 10.6 (2020): e1385.; Barela, Steven J., and Jerome Duberry. "Understanding Disinformation Operations in the 21st Century." *Defending Democracies: Combating Foreign Election Interference in a Digital Age* (Duncan B. Hollis & Jens David Ohlin, eds., OUP) (2021).;

³⁴ Tucker, Joshua A., et al. "Social media, political polarization, and political disinformation: A review of the scientific literature." *Political polarization, and political disinformation: a review of the scientific literature* (March 19, 2018) (2018).

scholars suggest that political and economic motivations have led to actors exploiting digital freedoms granted by social media, leading to a global increase in the spread of online disinformation, ultimately exacerbating the growth of populist sentiments³⁵.

This phenomenon is especially exploited by right-wing populism, which through disinformation creates a binary between the “good” people, and the “corrupt” elite. Applying the aforementioned discussion, it is interesting to note that it is a widely accepted belief that *online dis-and-misinformation* is fueled by partisan communities of like-minded individuals, as in these environments this type of information goes unquestioned and unchallenged, as a result of ranking algorithms that filter out voices of objection³⁶. Sunstein³⁷ goes as far as to dub these environments as threats to democracy, as they are cess pools for lies and conspiracy theories. A study conducted by Bennet et al.,³⁸ on fake and real news during the US presidential election in 2016 found that the top 20 “fake news” stories generated more attention compared to top real news stories, a finding which has been reiterated by similar studies³⁹. Despite this, other scholars found that even though the proliferation of fake news, namely during the 2016 US presidential election, was rampant, the average American was only exposed to a very small number of these stories⁴⁰, demonstrating yet another apparent paradox. Upon critically analyzing the consistently ambiguous relevant literature and seeking out answers to this ambiguity, this thesis work came upon an interesting potential explanation. This is that both the theoretical narrative and the empirical evidence can co-exist. They are indeed an enigma, a truth that contains its opposite. Placing the debate on echo chambers and filter bubbles aside, this can be attributed to the power of micro-targeting, which makes it such that certain individuals are more likely to be exposed to certain types of content, which *can be* for example, conspiracy theories, fake news, misleading content⁴¹. Whether this is *exacerbated*, however, by filter bubbles and echo chambers is an

³⁵ Iosifidis, Petros, and Nicholas Nicoli. "The battle to end fake news: A qualitative content analysis of Facebook announcements on how it combats disinformation." *International Communication Gazette* 82.1 (2020): 60-81.

³⁶ See footnote 26.

³⁷ Sunstein, Cass. # *Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton university press, 2018.

³⁸ Bennett, W. Lance, and Steven Livingston. "The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions." *European journal of communication* 33.2 (2018): 122-139.

³⁹ Silverman, Craig. 2016. "This Analysis Shows how Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News on Facebook." BuzzFeed News, November 16.; Faris, Robert, et al. "Partisanship, propaganda, and disinformation: Online media and the 2016 US presidential election." *Berkman Klein Center Research Publication* 6 (2017).; Guo, Lei, and Chris Vargo. "'Fake news' and emerging online media ecosystem: An integrated intermedia agenda-setting analysis of the 2016 US presidential election." *Communication Research* 47.2 (2020): 178-200.; Carlson, Matt. "Fake news as an informational moral panic: The symbolic deviance of social media during the 2016 US presidential election." *Information, Communication & Society* 23.3 (2020): 374-388.; Timberg, Craig. "Russian operatives used Twitter and Facebook to target veterans and military personnel, study says." *Washington Post* (2017).; Berghel, Hal. "Lies, damn lies, and fake news." *Computer* 50.2 (2017): 80-85.

⁴⁰ Allcott, Hunt, and Matthew Gentzkow. "Social media and fake news in the 2016 election." *Journal of economic perspectives* 31.2 (2017): 211-236.

⁴¹ Barocas, Solon. "The price of precision: Voter microtargeting and its potential harms the democratic process". *PLEAD: Proceedings of the first edition workshop on politics, elections and data*, (2012). p.31–36. doi:10.1145/2389661.2389671; Tenove, Chris, et al. "Digital threats to

unresolved debate. Certain studies illustrate for example, that certain individuals are less likely to engage in cross-cutting political material online⁴². This is to say that just because not all users are exposed to this dis-and-misinformation, doesn't mean it doesn't exist, however, it also does not *confirm* the existence of echo chambers and filter bubbles. While it is not the purpose of this thesis work to dissect the intricacies of the aforementioned mechanisms, it is worth noting them, as they affect the relevant case studies, in *some* capacity. This thesis work will explore the aforementioned further, and also the fact that Facebook algorithms encourage engagement with harmful content, which isn't always necessarily true but *can often be misleading*, polarizing, dis-and-misinformation, or harmful.

IV. Case selection

A. Brexit

While this thesis work does not have the capacity, due to time constraints, to provide an in-depth historical and political account of Brexit, a brief description of the event will be provided. Brexit refers to Britain's exit from the European Union. This was finalized in 2020, following the 2016 referendum which resulted from the "leave side" winning a majority with 51.9% of votes, compared to their opposition, the "remain side", which mustered 48.1%. There are a plethora of historical and political factors that led to the decision to divorce from the European Union, however, in its most concise form, the main influencing factors included "the European debt crisis, immigration, terrorism, and the perceived drag of Brussels' bureaucracy on the U.K. economy"⁴³. A number of these topics, namely, concerns related to UK sovereignty and fears on immigration will be key dynamics explored in the forthcoming thesis.

democratic elections: how foreign actors use digital techniques to undermine democracy." (2018).; Ward, Ken. "Social networks, the 2016 US presidential election, and Kantian ethics: applying the categorical imperative to Cambridge Analytica's behavioral microtargeting." *Journal of media ethics* 33.3 (2018): p. 133-148.; Borgesius, Frederik Zuiderveen, Möller, Judith, Kruikemeier, Sanne, Fathaigh, Ronan, Irion, Kristina, Dobber, Tom, Bodo, Balazs, & de Vreese, Claes. "Online political microtargeting: Promises and threats for democracy". *Utrecht Law Review*, (2018). 14(1), 82–96.; Endres, Kyle, & Kelly, Kirsten. "Does microtargeting matter? Campaign contact strategies and young voters". *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*. (2018), 28(1), p. 1–18.; Ghosh, Dipayan. "What is micro-targeting and what is it doing in our politics?" *Internet Citizen*. (2018, October 4). URL: <https://blog.mozilla.org/internetcitizen/2018/10/04/microtargeting-dipayan-ghosh/>.; Vaidhyanathan, Sira. "Anti-Social Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy". Oxford, UK: *Oxford University Press*. (2018).; Wylie, Chris. "Mindf*ck: Cambridge Analytica and the plot to break America". New York, NY: *Random House*. (2019).

⁴² Bail, C. A., Argyle, L. P., Brown, T. W. Et al. , "Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization". *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115 (17), (2018): 91216-9221.; Barberá, Pablo. "Social media, echo chambers, and political polarization." *Social media and democracy: The state of the field, prospects for reform* 34 (2020).

⁴³ Hayes, Adam. "Brexit Meaning and Impact: The Truth about the U.K. Leaving the EU." *Investopedia*, Investopedia, June 2023, www.investopedia.com/terms/b/brexit.asp.

Next, it is relevant to discuss literature framing the Brexit referendum as a populist movement. It is necessary to clarify that although there were non-populist narratives and sentiments in the referendum, namely from the “remain side”, the victory of the “leave side”, allows this thesis to conceptualize the referendum as a populist event. An abundance of literature has been produced framing Brexit as a populist event, and more specifically aligning it with right-wing populism. This literature describes the connection between Brexit the fear of immigration and more broadly xenophobia⁴⁴. Some scholars, however, challenge this notion.⁴⁵ Bypassing the aforementioned anomaly, another body of literature extends this notion further and dubs this anti-immigration sentiment as being a part of a broader overtly populist, sentiment which *also* encompasses nativist narratives and anti-elitist notions⁴⁶. Indeed, a subsection of this literature explicitly links Brexit to Trump’s initial election in 2016 with a wider pattern of a rise of populism in the West⁴⁷.

The relationship between Brexit and social media is complex and makes up an extensive literature. The literature thus far which focuses on social media’s relationship with Brexit has largely focused on Twitter, perhaps because the archive is more easily accessed, and thus easier to study⁴⁸. This prevalence of studies on Twitter, as compared to Facebook, is problematic as the latter is the more appropriate environment to analyze, due to how and who used it during Brexit⁴⁹. The Cambridge Analytica Scandal⁵⁰ prompted the beginnings of research into Facebook’s relationship with the referendum, which has been overwhelmingly quantitative in

⁴⁴ Hobolt, Sara B. "The Brexit vote: a divided nation, a divided continent." *Journal of European public policy* 23.9 (2016): 1259-1277.; Bachmann, Veit, and James D. Sidaway. "Brexit geopolitics." *Geoforum* 77 (2016): 47-50.; Goodwin, Matthew, and Caitlin Milazzo. "Taking back control? Investigating the role of immigration in the 2016 vote for Brexit." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19.3 (2017): 450-464.; Viskanic, Max. "Fear and loathing on the campaign trail: did immigration cause Brexit?." *Available at SSRN 2941611* (2017).; Arnorsson, August, and Gylfi Zoega. "On the causes of Brexit." *European Journal of Political Economy* 55 (2018): 301-323.

⁴⁵ Schwartz, Cassilde, et al. "A populist paradox? How Brexit softened anti-immigrant attitudes." *British Journal of Political Science* 51.3 (2021): 1160-1180.

⁴⁶ Yakhnis, Evgeniia, et al. "Populist referendum: Was ‘Brexit An expression of nativism and anti-elitist sentiment?." *Research & Politics* 5.2 (2018): 2053168018773964.; Calhoun, Craig. "Populism, nationalism and Brexit." *Brexit: Sociological Responses* (2017): 57-76.; Clarke, John, and Janet Newman. "'People in this country have had enough of experts': Brexit and the paradoxes of populism." *Critical Policy Studies* 11.1 (2017): 101-116.; Freeden, Michael. "After the Brexit referendum: revisiting populism as an ideology." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 22.1 (2017): 1-11.; Browning, Christopher S. "Brexit populism and fantasies of fulfillment." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32.3 (2019): 222-244.

⁴⁷ Cox, Michael. "The rise of populism and the crisis of globalization: Brexit, Trump and beyond." *The Post Cold War World*. Routledge, (2018). 239-247.; Obschonka, Martin, et al. "Fear, populism, and the geopolitical landscape: The “sleeping effect” of neurotic personality traits on regional voting behavior in the 2016 Brexit and Trump elections." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 9.3 (2018): 285-298.; Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge University Press, (2019).; Joppke, Christian. "Immigration in the populist crucible: comparing Brexit and Trump." *Comparative Migration Studies* 8.1 (2020): 1-18.; Mondon, Aurelien, and Aaron Winter. *Reactionary democracy: How racism and the populist far right became mainstream*. Verso Books, 2020.

⁴⁸ Hall, Natalie-Anne. "Understanding Brexit on Facebook: Developing close-up, qualitative methodologies for social media research." *Sociological Research Online* 27.3 (2022): 707-723.

⁴⁹ See Facebook under “terms” for more information.

⁵⁰ The Cambridge Analytica scandal was the event where the personal data of millions of Facebook users was collected without their consent by British consulting firm Cambridge Analytica, via Facebook, mainly to be used for political advertising. Investigation by the The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee Office in the UK found that the company *was not ultimately* involved in the Brexit referendum, despite mainly claims of this (DCMS, 2019).

nature. Major themes have been the relationship between engagement with political news and Facebook, and engagement with political campaign posts⁵¹. Similarly, Del Vicario et al.,⁵² produced a quantitative analysis of users' information consumption patterns via Facebook as it relates to Brexit. With respect to the previous discussion on the ambiguity as to the existence of echo chambers, Zollo⁵³, through his analysis of Facebook users' interactions with news stories around Brexit, was able to conclude that indeed echo chambers and polarization were prevalent on Facebook. With respect to environments on Facebook, political ads on the platform have been studied extensively, exploring their nature in order to illustrate how and why microtargeting manifests⁵⁴. Substantial attention has also been devoted to the mobilization and organizational factors Facebook facilitated during the referendum, by and large showing the unprecedented capacity Facebook had in this regard⁵⁵. While substantially smaller, a niche within the literature has adopted qualitative approaches, although is mainly restricted to discourse analysis⁵⁶. Hall⁵⁷ has diverted from this trend, qualitatively looking at reasons for social media usage during Brexit, illustrating the perceived democratic agency Facebook affords in allowing individuals to "have a voice" with respect to politics. Far fewer studies have been done specifically on the dynamic of disinformation⁵⁸. Furthermore, while a number of studies have compared the 2016 US election to the Brexit referendum⁵⁹, practically none of them transcended this to analyze the

⁵¹ Bossetta, Michael, Anamaria Dutceac Segesten, and Hans-Jörg Trenz. "Political participation on Facebook during Brexit: Does user engagement on media pages stimulate engagement with campaigns?." *Journal of Language and Politics* 17.2 (2018): 173-194.

⁵² Del Vicario, Michela, et al. "Mapping social dynamics on Facebook: The Brexit debate." *Social Networks* 50 (2017): 6-16.

⁵³ Zollo, Fabiana. "Dealing with digital misinformation: a polarized context of narratives and tribes." *EFSA Journal* 17 (2019): e170720.

⁵⁴ Risso, Linda. "Harvesting your soul? Cambridge Analytica and Brexit." *Brexit Means Brexit* 2018 (2018): 75-90.; Kreiss, Daniel, and Bridget Barrett. "Democratic tradeoffs: Platforms and political advertising." *Ohio St. Tech. LJ* 16 (2020): 493.; Méndez Egea, Blanca. "Data's use and abuse in political communication. Cambridge Analytica and the Brexit campaign, a case study." (2021).; Mehta, Somya, and Kristofer Erickson. "Can online political targeting be rendered transparent? Prospects for campaign oversight using the Facebook Ad Library." *Internet Policy Review* 11.1 (2022): 1-31.; Capozzi, Arthur, et al. "The Thin Ideology of Populist Advertising on Facebook during the 2019 EU Elections." *Proceedings of the ACM Web Conference 2023*. (2023).

⁵⁵ (Mancosu, Moreno, and Giuliano Bobba. "Using deep-learning algorithms to derive basic characteristics of social media users: The Brexit campaign as a case study." *Plos one* 14.1 (2019): e0211013.; Jacobs, Kristof, Linn Sandberg, and Niels Spierings. "Twitter and Facebook: Populists' double-barreled gun?." *New Media & Society* 22.4 (2020): 611-633.; Gerbaudo, Paolo, et al. "Angry Posts Mobilize: Emotional Communication and Online Mobilization in the Facebook Pages of Western European Right-Wing Populist Leaders." *Social Media On Society* 9.1 (2023): 20563051231163327.;

⁵⁶ Lilleker, Darren G., and Duje Bonacci. "The structure of political e-expression: What the Brexit campaign can teach us about political talk on Facebook." *International Journal of Digital Television* 8.3 (2017): 335-350.; Bonacchi, Chiara, Mark Altaweel, and Marta Krzyzanska. "The heritage of Brexit: Roles of the past in the construction of political identities through social media." *Journal of Social Archaeology* 18.2 (2018): 174-192.; Fuchs, Christian. "Nationalism 2.0: The making of Brexit on social media." (2018).; Spring, Marianna, and Lucy Webster. "European elections: How disinformation spreads in Facebook groups." *BBC News* 30 (2019).

⁵⁷ Hall, Natalie-Anne. "Understanding Brexit on Facebook: Developing close-up, qualitative methodologies for social media research." *Sociological Research Online* 27.3 (2022): 707-723.; Hall, Natalie-Anne. "Trajectories towards political engagement on Facebook around Brexit: Beyond affordances for understanding racist and right-wing populist mobilisations online." *Sociology* 57.3 (2023): 569-585.

⁵⁸ Bennett, W. Lance, and Steven Livingston. "The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions." *European journal of communication* 33.2 (2018): 122-139.; Loos, Eugène, and Jordy Nijenhuis. "Consuming Fake News: A Matter of Age? The perception of political fake news stories in Facebook ads." *Human Aspects of IT for the Aged Population. Technology and Society: 6th International Conference, ITAP 2020, Held as Part of the 22nd HCI International Conference, HCII 2020, Copenhagen, Denmark, July 19-24, 2020, Proceedings, Part III* 22. Springer International Publishing, 2020.; Sousa, Sonia, and Neil Bates. "Factors influencing content credibility in Facebook's news feed: Inside view on the United Kingdom (UK) Post-Brexit." *Human-Intelligent Systems Integration* 3 (2021): 69-78.

⁵⁹ See footnote 47

aftermath of events like these, such as the January 6th insurrection, in a comparative context with Brexit.

B. The January 6th Insurrection

On January 6th, 2021, fueled by the lies of then President Donald Trump, a mob of supporters his supporters stormed the U.S. capitol in an attempt to violently stop the certification of electoral votes from the 2020 presidential election⁶⁰. Crothers⁶¹ eloquently describes how The Insurrection can be conceptualized as a “populist insurrection”. They explain that the insurrectionists were fueled with the *sentiment* that for years the “elite”, be it political, social and, or economic, up until the 2020 election, had manipulated the socio-political order to conform to their personal benefit, rather than to that of “real Americans”, which they say themselves as Trump supporters as being a part of. Those who were seen as the outgroup were, for example, the political elite, among other groups, infamously excluded from Trump supporter’s “group”, which are also commonly excluded from the ingroup in right-wing populism. According to the insurrectionists the elite politicians— who were meant to uphold law and order— were themselves corrupt and “traitors”, and as such empowered fraud, rather than opposing it, as doing so benefitted them. Based on these *perceived* realities, insurrectionists felt it was their duty as “the people” to save the country from the corrupt elite who sought to uphold their malevolent agenda and keep power out of the hands of “the people’s” champion, who they saw as Donald Trump. This narrative of the “blue collared billionaire”, is rather ironic in that irrespective of whatever money Trump made in his lifetime, he was born into a multimillion dollar real estate empire, the benefits of which he reaped made him a billionaire at the mere age of eight⁶². This is a crucial point to harp on as it is indicative of one of the *many* narratives Donald Trump has been able to spin. In this context the pervasive narrative that minimizes the fact that Trump is a billionaire born into millions of dollars of wealth, and rather emphasizes the idea of Trump as a self-made man, who in some ways may subscribe to the elite, but is ultimately, different than corrupt politicians, as he “represents and speaks for the common man consequently, making him a populist champion”.

⁶⁰ BBC, “US Capitol Riots: What Happened and Who Has Been Punished?” *BBC News*, (19 Dec. 2022), www.bbc.com/news/world-60265900.

⁶¹ Crothers, Lane, and Grace Burgener. “Insurrectionary Populism? Assessing the January 6 Attack on the US Capitol.” *Populism* 4.2 (2021): 129-145.

⁶² Willis, J. “The myth of Trump's self-made Fortune is the most American thing about him”, (2018) *GQ*.

As this event was rather recent, it lacks extensive academic literature relevant to this project. As such this thesis relies heavily on non-academic reports and studies conducted by third-party organizations, news, and media sources, as well as leaked internal Facebook documents. With respect to the academic literature relevant to this project which does exist, a number of studies focus broadly on social media in general as opposed to Facebook⁶³, some specifically calling for more robust regulation of social media platforms⁶⁴ as a response *in part* to this event. Another niche within the literature is understanding the dynamics of the group involved, and more specifically analyzing the individuals involved in The Insurrection⁶⁵. Another group of studies connects disinformation and conspiracy to participation in, and mobilization of The Insurrection⁶⁶. Few studies have looked specifically at Facebook environment's which allowed for the proliferation of dis-and-misinformation, aiding in the materialization of this event. Hardly any have done so in a comparative context with other populist events. Evidently, due to the novelty of the issue, and the number of relevant dynamics to study, more in-depth research on the various dynamics is needed. As such this thesis aims to contribute to this gap.

C. Comparability

This thesis work acknowledges the many differences between these two cases, including different time periods, countries, different contexts, one being a referendum, one being an

⁶³ Sung, Alex, and David Douglas Klein. "January 6th and President Trump: A study of social media in today's America." *STUDIES* (2021).; Lee, Claire Seung Eun, et al. "Storm the capitol: linking offline political speech and online Twitter extra-representational participation on QAnon and the January 6 insurrection." *Frontiers in Sociology* 7 (2022): 876070.

⁶⁴ Owen, Taylor. "The case for platform governance." (2019).; Cusumano, Michael A., Annabelle Gawer, and David B. Yoffie. "Social media companies should self-regulate. Now." *Harvard Business Review* 15 (2021).

⁶⁵ Schake, Kori, and Michael Robinson. "Assessing civil-military relations and the January 6th capitol insurrection." *Orbis* 65.3 (2021): 532-544.; Jackson, Jay W., and Verlin B. Hinsz. "Group dynamics and the US Capitol insurrection: An introduction to the special issue." *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice* 26.3 (2022): 169.; Wang, Jian. *The US Capitol Riot: Examining the Rioters, Social Media, and Disinformation*. Diss. Harvard University, (2022).; Challacombe, Darin J., and Carol L. Patrick. "The January 6th insurrection at the US capitol: What the TRAP-18 can tell us about the participants." *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* (2022).

⁶⁶ Meserole, Chris. "How Misinformation Spreads on Social Media-and What to Do about It." *Brookings*, Brookings, (9 May. 2018); Rash, Wayne. "Disinformation Propelled by Social Media and Conspiracy Theories Led to Insurrection." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, (19 Jan, 2021); Nichols, Chris. "Can You Handle the Truth?: How Misinformation Fueled the January 6 Capitol Insurrection." *CapRadio*, NPR, (9 July, 2021).; Baum, Matthew, et al. "What I saw on the road to insurrection: Internal political efficacy, conspiracy beliefs and the effect of depression on support for the January 6th storming of the capitol." (2021).; Hawkman, Andrea M., and Sarah Diem. "The Big Lie (s): Situating the January 6th coup attempt within white supremacist lies." *Cultural Studies↔ Critical Methodologies* (2022): 15327086221094883.; Hook, Kristina, and Ernesto Verdeja. "Social Media Misinformation and the Prevention of Political Instability and Mass Atrocities • Stimson Center." *Stimson Center*, (21 Nov. 2022); Jeppesen, Sandra, et al. *The Capitol Riots: Digital Media, Disinformation, and Democracy Under Attack*. Routledge, (2022).; Moskalenko, Sophia, and Ekaterina Romanova. "Deadly Disinformation: Viral Conspiracy Theories as a Radicalization Mechanism." *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare* 5.2 (2022): 129-153.; Napoli, Philip M., et Fabienne Graf. "Social media platforms as public trustees: an approach to the disinformation problem." *Artificial Intelligence and the Media*. Edward Elgar Publishing, (2022).; Ng, Lynette Hui Xian, Iain J. Cruickshank, and Kathleen M. Carley. "Cross-platform information spread during the January 6th capitol riots." *Social Network Analysis and Mining* 12.1 (2022): 1-16; Prathap, Gowri, et al. "A System to Study Anti-American Misinformation and Disinformation Efforts on Social Media." *2022 Systems and Information Engineering Design Symposium (SIEDS)*. IEEE, (2022).; The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, King's College London. *Academic and Practical Research Working Group White Paper: Extremism Research Horizon*. Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (Jan. 2021).

insurrection, the fact that Facebook policies evolved over different periods, and different political systems, among other things. This thesis, however, holds that the threads which *connect* these cases are powerful, and thus worthy of comparison. These threads include, the right-wing populist sentiments of both of these events, which situates them broadly in the populist wave present across the West⁶⁷. Secondly, both of these events had as a cornerstone the proliferation of disinformation, misinformation, and misleading content. Finally, both of these events had substantial activity on social media, namely Facebook, which allowed them to spread narratives, and ultimately, mobilize. It is these dynamics and nodes which will be analyzed and compared, rather than comparing the vastly different elements initially mentioned. As such patterns will be able to be drawn, and even the differences as it relates to the identified “comparability” nodes, will ultimately reveal important notions about the role of social media in these types of events.

V. Theory

This thesis work adopts the main tenets of Gaber and Fisher’s⁶⁸ theory on “strategic lying”, while incorporating its own particularities, to ultimately create a customized theoretical framework. Gaber and Fisher describe “strategic lying” as advancing misleading narratives, and their intentional strategic use in the context of political campaigns. They explain, that one of the rudimentary aims of “strategic lying” is to “set the agenda and prime the issue, achieved firstly by the attention-grabbing lie itself, and secondly by the rebuttal which ensures that the lie is widely disseminated and its salience amplified by social media users and the mainstream media”⁶⁹. The scholars explain that indeed the outlandish nature of the initial lies often works in favor of those creating and disseminating it, as it garners the greatest amounts of attention. In this respect, the “strategic lie” allows politicians to prime and set agendas in their favor. Dissimilar to other scholars in the field of political communications in this “post-truth” era, Gaber and Fisher explain that their theorization of “strategic lying” is not an abandonment of the conventional idea of political spin⁷⁰, but rather an extension of it⁷¹.

⁶⁷ (See footnote 1)

⁶⁸ Gaber, Ivor, and Caroline Fisher. “Strategic lying”: The case of Brexit and the 2019 UK election." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 27.2 (2022): 460-477.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*

⁷⁰ Political spin is the idea of embellishing truths, while simultaneously downplaying negative or inconvenient truths, in order to ultimately screw the perception of reality, without blatantly lying (*Ibid*).

⁷¹ The scholars further describe that the closest understanding of their conceptualization is the notion of “wicked content”, which describes identifiably problematic online content, which is circulated “despite the fact that it cannot be verified because it is

The scholars go on to explain that while traditional media are still important mechanisms of campaigning, social media offers an unprecedented channel for “strategic lying” as a campaign tactic. This is due to a few key reasons, firstly, the strategic lies proliferate widely via social media. Secondly, social media content is harder to police than that of traditional media. This is a consequence of the amount of information proliferating on social media, making it nearly impossible to adequately police⁷² all of this information⁷³. The final element identified is that of repetition, as individuals tend to more easily accept information they have already seen as opposed to processing entirely new information⁷⁴.

Kalpokas⁷⁵ identifies this pattern as being linked with the rise in populism. This occurs because there is a belief that populist leaders speak for *the people* allowing them to conceal their disregard for the people and a related lack of concern for telling the truth⁷⁶. This manifests through demonolatry, the notion of the blind acceptance of a populist leader, because individuals are so faithful in their support of them, consequently meaning that lies can much more easily be accepted⁷⁷ and spread by the faithful⁷⁸.

This thesis adds its own nuance to this theory. Insofar as it accepts the notion that political actors are the main proponents of the “strategic lie” for the purposes of campaigning, however, for the purposes of this work will *not* focus on politicians as the main actors, and will extend the context beyond campaigns to the aftermath of this pattern, to accommodate the

inaccurate fabricated misleading, or unsupported” (Jack, 2019: 435). Similarly, they differentiate their theory from that of “fake news”, as the former often parrots traditional media, however with the purpose of deception (Waisbord, 2018). Strategic lying however again is an evolution of political spin, and indeed has where the intention to deceive takes primacy over the appearance of truthfulness.

⁷² See footnote 57

⁷³ Indeed, Nyhan et al., (2019) for example, found that correcting inaccurate statements online in real time, by either journalists or a fact-checking organization, has little impact on the way people vote. Garret and Weeks (2013) further explain that “Those sympathetic to the original message reject the correction, discounting it as coming from a partisan source, or they barely notice it in the first place”. Beyond this research has demonstrated that even after these types of lies have been corrected, people often do not retain the correction but the original lie (Throson, 2016; Swire et al, 2017). This occurred as the lies often reinforced individuals' political views, and allowed them not to face cognitive dissonance, or the circumstance when an individual must face information which contradicts their existing beliefs (Taddickon and Wolff, 2020). This in turn has the potential to lead to confirmation bias, or seeking out information that seeks out one's preconceived beliefs of positions (Nickerson, 1998). For more on this see (Daskalopoulos et al. , 2021)

⁷⁴ Begg, Ian Maynard, Ann Anas, and Suzanne Farinacci. "Dissociation of processes in belief: Source recollection, statement familiarity, and the illusion of truth." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 121.4 (1992): 446.; Taraborelli, Dario. "How the Web is changing the way we trust." *Current issues in computing and philosophy* (2008): 194-204.

⁷⁵ Kalpokas, Ignas. *A political theory of post-truth*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2019.

⁷⁶ Dragoman, Dragos. "Could speaking for the people often mean lying to the people? Populism and the problem of truth." *SEE Youth-AS EUROPEAN JOURNAL* 7.2 (2007): 101.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*

⁷⁸ Indeed a great deal of literature has focused on the fact that social media also allows for the circumvention of mainstream media, producing a more direct communication which increased resonance of the narratives championed by these actors (Alonso-Muños & Casero-Ripollés, 2018; Ersnt et al., 2017)

January 6th insurrection⁷⁹. Indeed relevant scholars state that an evolution has occurred in the digital age, and as such agenda setting is “no longer conceived of as only a top-down process from mainstream print and broadcast media to audiences”⁸⁰. Rather, intermedia agenda setting is a result of intertwining and interactive information transcending between a number of media forms, which crucially enables the amplification of narratives across platforms by *different actors*, ranging from politicians to citizens⁸¹. This thesis will focus on the latter notion, that although the strategic lie may *originally* spawn from political actors, social media allows for a myriad of actors to further create, disseminate, and champion strategic lies, particularly as they relate to populist narratives. Both the “leave side” of the Brexit referendum, and the January 6th insurrection embody the aforementioned notion.

Chapter II. Methodology.

To answer the research questions and test the hypothesis this thesis employs qualitative modes of inquiry, namely case study research, with one element of quantitative research, relying upon both primary and secondary research. In doing so it attempts to analyze mechanisms and nuances, both internal and external, which aided in the proliferation of dis-and-misinformation, and misleading content, which ultimately contributed to the materialization of the selected cases.

I. Primary

Primary research is deployed in two ways with respect to Brexit and to a smaller extent the January 6th Insurrection. For this element of research as it relates to Brexit the thesis accessed a collection of 201 ads produced by the Canadian political consultancy company, Aggregate IQ, on behalf of the “Vote Leave” party. These ads were sent to the Department for

⁷⁹ The creators of this theory indeed, suggest that, “While the impact of political disinformation generally on voting behavior is unresolved (Karpf, 2019), we contend recent events in the UK and US demand examination of the phenomenon of “strategic lying” and its impact on democratic engagement” (Gaber & Fisher, 2021).

⁸⁰Groshek, Jacob, and Megan Clough Groshek. "Agenda trending: Reciprocity and the predictive capacity of social network sites in intermedia agenda setting across issues over time." *Available at SSRN 2199144* (2013).; Kim, Yeojin, et al. "First and second levels of intermedia agenda setting: Political advertising, newspapers, and Twitter during the 2012 US presidential election." *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 20.

⁸¹ See footnote 57. Additionally, even the leaked internal Facebook documents, used in the forthcoming thesis work, reiterate this notion (see footnote 83).

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport by Facebook as evidence for their committee’s inquiry into Fake News during Brexit. These ads are available to the public and can be [accessed](#) along with ads created by BeLeave and DUP Vote Leave ads. The latter two sets of ads were not studied in this thesis as there were far fewer, and Vote Leave was the most substantial contributor⁸². As such and in accordance with the time constraints of this project, the selected group of political ads were felt to be most beneficial for study. Upon collection of these 201 ads, they were hand-coded and separated into five thematic groups. Anti-EU or sovereignty promoting, mobilizing messages, a data collection ploy based on winning a £50 million competition, miscellaneous, and misleading. For the purposes of this thesis however, only the misleading ads will be discussed, examples of which will also be found in the appendix. This was done namely, as the author of this thesis does not possess the technical knowledge to digitally code the material, and furthermore, because of the relatively small quantity, this was a feasible task. This method is beneficial in that it allows for the author’s own unique contribution to the empirical evidence, and furthermore, demonstrates how disinformation dominated the political ads analyzed. Next, the Brexit empirics also relied on primary research, and had one quantitative element. Through accessing Eurostat statistics regarding levels of first-time asylum seekers into the EU during 2015 and 2016 respectively, this project calculated the total number of first-time asylum seekers during those two years. Then based on levels of asylum seekers in each country was able to calculate the total share in percentage by each country, in order to ultimately show that the UK was not a destination country of priority. This method was important as it allowed the thesis to add more nuance to the argument, in order to ultimately prove that political ads were warping reality to create a misplaced fear toward immigrants entering the UK. Finally, with respect to the January 6th Insurrection this thesis analyzed and relied on a leaked internal document⁸³, “Facebook Misled Investors and the Public about Its Role Perpetuating Misinformation and Violent Extremism Relating to the 2020 Election and January 6th Insurrection”, provided by WhistleBlower Aid. The document condemned Facebook as indirectly complicit in The Insurrection by acting as a vehicle of festering, and disseminating hate, dis-and-misinformation, fear, conspiracy, and harmful activity. Although redacted, for

⁸² Indeed the “Vote Leave” Scandal was a result of these groups sharing content, and entities, and ultimately overspending on the election campaign budget (Cadwalladr, 2019).

⁸³ ANONYMOUS WHISTLEBLOWER DISCLOSURE. “REDACTED-2020 ELECTION-Facebook Misled Investors and the Public about Its Role Perpetuating Misinformation and Violent Extremism Relating to the 2020 Election and January 6th Insurrection”. *Whistleblower Aid*, (2021), pp. 1–54.

Congress this leaked internal document, as well as others were available from a number of sources, such as BuzzFeed, CNN, and Gizmodo, however, some have since been taken offline, and been replaced with *versions* of the reports. Thankfully the author of this thesis downloaded the report and as such was able to utilize its materials in the foregoing empirics chapter. This method was useful as it aided in making the argument that Facebook acted negligently in the lead-up to The Insurrection.

II. Secondary

With respect to secondary evidence, the majority of the empirics rely on two main types of secondary evidence. Firstly, there is a reliance on official government reports. These include for example, investigations by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport into the lead-up of Brexit. Secondly, reports and studies conducted by third parties were heavily relied on. These include, but are not limited, to investigations by prominent news and mainstream media, such as ProPublica and the Washington Post with respect to The Insurrection, and BBC Newsnight with respect to Brexit. Both the former and the latter were accessible without restriction online, and as such studying them in order to create patterns and study phenomena was successful.⁸⁴

III. Limitations

Limitations of the chosen methodology include, the heavy reliance on secondary material, with minimal primary research. This firstly, has the *potential* to affect the originality of the thesis work. Secondly, as a result of the time-consuming and intensive research that was required, the project had to select the most useful secondary empirical evidence, in order to accommodate the constraints of this thesis work. In doing so there is the risk of the author selecting research that confirms their initial hypothesis, as opposed to collecting a wide range of material, which perhaps disapproves their initial understanding. In order to avoid this the author

⁸⁴ It is worth noting that with respect to the January 6th Insurrection, the United States Government the government created a special committee to investigate and create a report on the Insurrection, and surprisingly social media's role was very sparse within the report, with the report mostly condemning Trump as the main perpetrator and instigator, along with the actual individuals who participated in the insurrection as responsible for that fateful day (GPO-J6 Report, 2022). An article from NPR however, reveals that after extensive interviews with relevant contributors to the aforementioned report, according to them, the role of social media was *intentionally* downplayed. This was allegedly because of fear of backlash from technology companies, and furthermore because highlighting social media would shed not just a negative light on far-right factions, but also on the Republican Party itself and its complicity in tolerating Trumps, and other individuals pushing harmful negatives. As a result the report focused principally on Trump, and other elements were downplayed (Davies, 2023).. Due to time constraints and the reasons described, these pieces of empirical evidence will not be further explored.

dedicated a great deal of time to proper investigation and analysis of relevant empirics, and attempted to synthesize this labor-intensive work into the following chapter. Indeed, while no evidence directly challenged their initial understanding, much of it added nuance to the original hypothesis. In this way, the author was able to remain open-minded and limit their own biases in collecting and analyzing research. With respect to originality, this project has added much of its own nuance to this project work, for example in the additions to the theoretical framework, in order to produce unique reflections and contributions. Ultimately, this thesis adopts a mixture of both primary and secondary research allowing for a more well-rounded range of empirics to provide the most holistic understanding of Facebook's involvement within each case, while also respecting the space constraints of this thesis.

Chapter III. Empirics and Analysis.

This chapter will both present and analyze relevant empirical evidence, in order to address the main research question. It will begin with Brexit, and then will cover the January 6th Insurrection.

I. Brexit

A. Vote Leave and Aggregate IQ Facebook Misleading Ads

Canadian digital advertising firm Aggregate IQ created political ads for Facebook regarding Brexit on behalf of the "Vote Leave" group, which "outstrips all other Facebook pages posting about Brexit"⁸⁵, the latter of which allegedly spent £3.5 million on the former's services⁸⁶. A collection of 201 ads⁸⁷ were sent to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport by Facebook as evidence for the department committee's inquiry into Fake News during

⁸⁵ Skopeliti, Clea. "How Leave.EU Dominates the Brexit Conversation on Facebook." *First Draft*, (20 Nov. 2019).

⁸⁶ When one thinks of Facebook's relationship to Brexit the two scandals which are bound to enter one's mind are Cambridge Analytica, and the "Leave.EU/Vote Leave scandal". Where the former relates to harvesting millions of Facebook user's data, creating "psychographics" and then microtargeting the same individuals via Facebook, and the latter relating to breaching electoral spending, and cross-entity sharing of resources. After intensive research into the matter, despite the questionable circumstances, ultimately there was no "foul play" regarding Cambridge Analytica. With respect to the Leave.EU/Vote leave scandal, the foregoing chapter will focus on the tangible evidence with respect to Vote Leave and Aggregate IQ's work on the Brexit referendum, as opposed to the circumstances of the overspending, and cross-entity sharing between pro-Brexit groups. The evidence in the foregoing essay is more than satisfactory in shedding light on the role of disinformation in Brexit facilitated by Facebook. For this reason more time was not allotted to this discussion within the thesis work.

⁸⁷ Aggregate IQ, "Vote Leave 50 Million Ads" (2018).

Brexit. The DCMS, and the head of Vote Leave confirmed that data on UK voters was given to AIQ by Vote Leave, and was used to micro-target voters through a series of political ads, with the DCMS even saying it was used for the purposes of manipulating voters in the UK⁸⁸. In addition to their questionable content, and data collection practices, these ads had an impressive reach, calculated to have been seen more than 169 million times overall⁸⁹. For the purpose of this thesis work, only the misleading ads will be discussed. The misleading group of ads made up the largest portion of the 201 ads analyzed, with 118 ads or 58.7%. There were three main subthemes, immigration, the EU's alleged frivolous spending, and the general depiction of the EU as negative.

B. Misleading on Immigration

The subtheme concerning immigration, made up 59 of the 118 misleading posts, or 47.3%. Examples of posts in this subtheme include that the EU was allowing a series of countries to join, such as Albania, Turkey, Serbia, and Montenegro. This is an example of disinformation, as it is a deliberate and intentional misstatement of facts. Another example depicted a map of Turkey and Iraq with the text, "TURKEY HAS A 219 MILE BORDER WITH IRAQ " followed by the text, "TURKEY JOINING THE EU. GOOD IDEA?"⁹⁰. *See image one in Appendix One.* This bipartite nature is a part of many of these ads. Not only did these ads contain untruths—that Turkey would be joining the EU—but they also contained misleading information by implicitly suggesting that Iraqis and Turks would be flooding to the UK. This bipartite nature is one that is worthy and necessary of special focus, as it sheds light on the nuance of the misinformation within these political ads, which adopt multiple strategies of perpetuating false or otherwise misleading information. It furthermore, confirms the relevance of the chosen theoretical framework of this thesis work and contextualizes it in real-world examples, which will be explored in more detail further on.

⁸⁸ Canadian digital advertising firm Aggregate IQ created Facebook political ads regarding Brexit on behalf of the "Vote Leave" group. This includes, ads for a £50 million prediction competition, for soccer fans if they could guess the outcome of the Euro championship in soccer were run by the company and group via Facebook. The DCMS collected proof that AIQ processed all the data from this competition which included Facebook Ids, and emails. This was also corroborated by the head of the Vote Leave campaign, Dominic Cummings. This while not illegally, certainly raises initial questions of ethics. Another mechanism that has been proven to have been utilized by Vote Leave and Aggregate IQ are Facebook pixels. This is a piece of code located on a website, which can be used to register when and how often Facebook users visit the respective site. Facebook then uses the information it gathered through the Pixel to enable advertisers to target Facebook users who visit the respective site (DCMS, 2022).

⁸⁹ Chakelian, Anoosh. "Facebook Releases Brexit Campaign Ads for the Fake News Inquiry – but What's Wrong with Them?" *New Statesman*, New Statesman, (9 June 2021).

⁹⁰ See footnote 87

While this thesis work does not have the ability to explore how and why *each* of these ads is misleading, it will attempt to do so with respect to the broader theme of this group of ads. This thesis work gathered and analyzed some statistics on the levels of immigration of asylum seekers to the EU during 2015 and 2016. Using data provided by the Eurostat⁹¹ calculations were made about the share of total asylum seekers in the EU by percentage over the period of 2015-2016. They revealed that the countries with the highest share of first-time asylum seekers by percentage were; Germany with 47.3%, Italy with 8.3%, Hungary with 8.2%, and Sweden with 7.2%. The UK over the course of the two-year period was responsible for hosting 3.1% of the total influx of first-time asylum seekers⁹². Therefore, it becomes apparent that this fear of immigration, and more specifically the fear that being a part of the EU exacerbates the chances of asylum seekers fleeing to the UK, are exaggerated if not misplaced, as the UK was not a “priority country” for first-time asylum seekers. *See image two in Appendix One.*

C. Misleading on Frivolous EU

The second subtheme was criticizing the EU’s spending habits. The major punchline of these ads was that the UK was paying the EU £350 million per week. For example, an image of a flooded road with the sign “Road Closed”, and the text “Whose priorities should we spend £350 million per week on every week?” with the option to select a “Theirs” or “Ours” button⁹³. Other ads, with a similar tone, ask individuals to imagine if the UK were able to keep maternity clinics, and schools open, or prioritize the NHS, by keeping the £350 million and delegating it toward UK priorities, as opposed to sending it to the EU each week. Overall there was a major theme of the EU’s frivolous nature. *See images, three, four, five, six, and seven in appendix one.* These posts are further examples of “strategic lying”, the claims of which have been condemned and disproved by the UK Statistics Authority, who have stated:

- “As we have made clear, the UK’s contribution to the EU is paid after the application of the rebate. We have also pointed out that there are payments received by the UK public and private sectors that are relevant here. The

⁹¹ Bourgeais, Vincent. “1.2 million first time asylum seekers registered in 2016”, *European Commission, Eurostat*. (Mar. 2017).

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ See footnote 87

continued use of a gross figure in contexts that imply it is a net figure is misleading and undermines trust in official statistics”⁹⁴.

D. Misleading Narratives of the Negative EU

Next, there was the subtheme portraying the EU negatively. Posts included, for example, an image of polar bears, a cub with their mother, and the text “The EU blocks our ability to speak out and PROTECT polar bears!”⁹⁵ Animal abuse at the hands of the EU was a common theme in this sub-group of posts. These ads are misleading and arguably inaccurate as indeed the European Union has some of the most stringent and robust environmental and animal welfare legislation in the entire world⁹⁶. *See image eight in Appendix One.*

E. Populist Sentiments

Finally, it is worth noting that many of the posts within the entire misleading group, as well as an entire other group of posts, which could not be discussed due to space constraints, had subtle or overt populist narratives. This can be identified explicitly for example in posts related to the de-prioritization of UK needs at the behest of the EU. This embodied an anti-elite sentiment, compounded with the notion of returning power and agency to the “people”, which are at the heart of populism. Specific right-wing narratives or beliefs such as anti-immigration narratives were also overwhelmingly present. *See image nine in Appendix One.*

F. The “Strategic Lie”

As it relates to the Brexit referendum the two main lies proliferated were; that the UK sent £350 million to the EU each week, and that Turkey would be joining the EU. While both of these claims were false, they achieved the goal of priming and agenda setting as it allowed for political conversation to lean more toward the conservative agenda. Note that the strategic lie was engaged with and circulated by a number of actors, both in the private and public sectors, not just a politician. Furthermore, it was known that even after these lies were corrected, the false

⁹⁴ Halls, Suzanne. “UK Statistics Authority Statement on the Use of Official Statistics on Contributions to the European Union.” *UK Statistics Authority*, (2016).

⁹⁵ See footnote 87

⁹⁶European Parliament, “Animal Welfare and Protection: News: European Parliament.” *Animal Welfare and Protection | News | European Parliament*, (24 Jan. 2022),

claims were able to hook people's attention, and furthermore the false claims were more likely to stick with them as opposed to the correction⁹⁷. Prosser et al.,⁹⁸ explained that “Polling after the Brexit referendum showed that two major reasons people gave for voting to leave the EU, were concerns about sovereignty –underpinned by the notion of 350 million figure– and immigration—which was underpinned by the prominence of the Turkey threat–”. These two main concerns are also indicative and align with right-wing populist sentiments. While explicit causation cannot be drawn, there is a very plausible correlation, which was fostered by Facebook.

G. Private Groups on Facebook

Other than these political ads, it is relevant to examine where else disinformation spreads most aptly. The BBC Newsnight conducted a report⁹⁹ 30 of the largest private pro and anti-Brexit Facebook groups and found private pro-Brexit groups experienced more amounts of disinformation compared to the opposition. The report explained that as a result of new Facebook legislation, prompted by the company being complicit in election interference globally, public Facebook pages were made more transparent regarding the creators of the pages, and who advertises them. They go on to explain that this is in comparison to private groups, which are less inclined to be policed for rule violations, consequently making them exemplary hubs of spawning, and disseminating disinformation. The report found that the largest group “Brexit Party Supporters”, which had no official link to the party and had undergone many name changes, was ultimately linked with California-based “Red Pill Factory”, an infamous website known for “extreme bias, consistent promotion of propaganda/conspiracies, poor or no sourcing to credible information, a complete lack of transparency and/or is fake news”¹⁰⁰. This is importantly reveals that dissimilar to the previously discussed political ads created by AIQ, hired by official pro-Brexit groups, here individuals who were not associated with the official parties also created, disseminated, and ultimately had an effect on the spread of disinformation regarding Brexit. This reveals that there are multiple actors and avenues for the spread of disinformation,

⁹⁷ See footnote 61

⁹⁸ Prosser Chris, Mellon Jon, Green Jane. “What Mattered Most to you when Deciding how to Vote in the EU Referendum?” *British Election Study*. (2016).

⁹⁹ Spring, Marianna, and Lucy Webster. “European Elections: How Misinformation Spread in Facebook Groups.” *BBC News*, BBC, (30 May 2019).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

spanning from top-bottom but also bottom-up channels, reiterating the applicability of this thesis work's iteration of Gaber and Fisher's "strategic lying" theory.

II. The January 6th Insurrection

A. Disinformation

A coalition of reporters from ProPublica and the Washington Post, produced seminal work on Facebook's role in The Insurrection¹⁰¹, using a unique dataset on Facebook groups compiled by Counteraction—a firm that studies online disinformation. Members of the aforementioned journalistic team found that between the day of the Election in 2020, and the day of the Capitol insurrection on January 6th, 2021, Facebook groups were plagued with at least 650,000 misinformation posts challenging the legitimacy of the election results. Importantly the posts within this dataset did not include posts from private Facebook groups or individual profiles, and furthermore, the researchers did not study comments, likes, shares, etc. As such the number represented is almost certainly an underestimate¹⁰².

B. Content

According to the investigation by ProPublica and the Washington Post, a majority of the posts portrayed Biden's election as a consequence of fraud, which demanded near revolutionary action, in order to "save the nation from falling into the hands of corrupt elite traitors". Examples of posts included framing the election as fraudulent and stolen, calls to mobilize, and generally painting politicians as corrupt "traitors". *See a sample of texts of posts in Appendix Two.*

¹⁰¹ Silverman, Craig, Craig Timberg, et al. "Facebook Hosted Surge of Misinformation and Insurrection Threats in Months Leading up to Jan. 6 Attack, Records Show." *ProPublica*, ProPublica and The Washington Post, (4 Jan. 2022); Silverman, Craig, et al. "Facebook Groups Topped 10,000 Daily Attacks on Election before Jan. 6, Analysis Shows." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, (4 Jan. 2022).

¹⁰² The ability to access and calculate all the data can only be done by Facebook itself, and it never revealed the number publically.

This sample of posts—to be found in appendix two— are exemplary of a few things, firstly, they contain strategic lying in that they continue to champion the lie that the 2020 US Presidential Election was fraudulent and thus stolen. Beyond this, they are examples, albeit extreme ones, of the consequences of strategic lying. This can be seen for example, in the calls to mobilize and “take back the country from the perceived corrupt, elite politicians”, who these individuals view as traitors. Furthermore, these posts and the intensive research conducted for this thesis work, have made it overwhelmingly clear that Facebook mainly acted, not just, as a hub for disinformation, but for the organization and mobilization of The Insurrection. The latter of which, unfortunately, due to the constraints of this thesis cannot be further discussed. Although, this is another extremely salient dynamic that further illustrates the multi-faceted role Facebook played in the event. Finally, this sample of posts are micro examples of the larger macro populist sentiment, that the corrupt elite betrayed the country, and that it was the duty of “the people” to act— even turn violent— in order to “save” the nation.

C. The “Strategic Lie”

The notorious strategic lie, championed by Donald Trump that the election was stolen and fraudulent, began even before The Insurrection. Trump advanced narratives of fraudulent election machines, namely as it relates to mail-in voting, and by continuously and publicly calling out the Democratic party as attempting to win with nefarious means. As such when the results came out, his supporters were already primed with the narrative that the election was fraudulent. Note that *particularly* as it relates to this case study, the strategic lie, continued to be engaged with and perpetuated by a number of actors, namely, *citizens*, and not only Donald Trump. Despite the plethora of reliable sources, including Trump's attorney and campaign manager who disproved his lie¹⁰³, Trump continued to champion the strategic lie, in part due to ineffective platform regulation, which prompted others to follow and ultimately fueled the attack on the Capitol¹⁰⁴. Furthermore, its disapproval only made it a topic of further conversation in mainstream and social media, the latter of which allowed for its mass dissemination.

¹⁰³ Further discussion “debunking” of Trump’s lie will not be allotted as it was so blatantly false, and a plethora of relevant sources proved it to be such. This is in comparison to the “strategic lies” in the Brexit case, while as outlandish they were in their own right, were arguably potentially more believable and as such more time was allotted to “debunking” them. Furthermore the author could relatively easily provide discussion debunking the Brexit “strategic lies” within the constraints of this thesis, whereas to do the same for the January 6th Insurrection, would be beyond the bounds of this project work.

¹⁰⁴ Scott, Mark. “How Trump’s Bogus Election Day Claims Broke through Facebook and Twitter Bans.” *POLITICO*, (2022).

D. Civic Integrity Group

Beyond the type, and breadth of content, ProPublica and Washington Post researchers also found that there was an increase in the rate with which Facebook removed groups from the platform just prior to the election, with a distinct “drop-off” after the election, and a second substantial increase around the time of The Insurrection. This drop-off ought to be attributed to the hard work of the internal Facebook civic integrity group which was disbanded shortly after the election, and was then reinstated during The Insurrection¹⁰⁵. These safety mechanisms have been proven by internal Facebook research to be successful in greatly decreasing amounts of disinformation and harmful content¹⁰⁶. Ultimately, the civic integrity group removed nearly 400 groups whose posts had been seen around 1 billion times prior to the Election. Despite this, members of the civic integrity group shared with the coalition of investigators that the sheer existence of such a group illustrated the Platform’s failure to regulate groups as a part of its established proceedings¹⁰⁷. *See images of graphs one and two in Appendix Two.*

What can therefore be deduced is that Facebook has the ability to effectively remove disinformation, harmful content, and groups when it wants. One then questions if these mechanisms had proven successful in limiting disinformation and harmful activity *and* if Facebook had the means to implement these mechanisms, why were they disbanded? It may be because, according to Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen¹⁰⁸, who claimed that the company puts growth and profit¹⁰⁹ above people’s safety¹¹⁰. This notion will be further discussed in the following section.

E. Facebook’s Intentional Negligence

¹⁰⁵See footnote 101

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁰⁸ Frances Haugen ex-Facebook employee who in 2022 leaked internal facebook documents illustrating the companies role and knowledge of said role in the capitol riots, amongst other revelations, creating one of the biggest scandals since Cambridge Analytica (Zubrow et al., 2021). Facebook responded to the leaked documents saying they were a misrepresentation of the company (*Ibid*).

¹⁰⁹ Facebook disputes that and says it maintained necessary safeguards, adding in a statement that it has "expressly disclosed to investors" the risk of misinformation and extremism occurring on the platform remains (Van Cleave, News, 2021).

¹¹⁰ Pelley, Scott. *Facebook Whistleblower Frances Haugen: The 60 Minutes Interview*, CBS News, New York City, NY, (4 Oct. 2021).

The internal Facebook report¹¹¹ which was leaked by whistleblower Frances Haugen, are perhaps the most insightful of any piece of evidence studied in this thesis work. Haugen filed at least eight whistleblower complaints with the Securities and Exchange Commission. Together with regulators and the Wall Street Journal, a multi-part investigation was done with a number of invaluable findings. The internal document, “Facebook Misled Investors and the Public about Its Role Perpetuating Misinformation and Violent Extremism Relating to the 2020 Election and January 6th Insurrection” produced a number of invaluable findings. Firstly, it claimed that Facebook is aware of the impact that harmful activity, such as hate speech and disinformation is having on society and that its “core product mechanics, such as virality recommendations and optimizing for engagement, are a significant part of why these types of speech flourish”¹¹². *See image three in Appendix Two*. Similarly, it revealed that Facebook’s algorithm and internal mechanisms rewards posts on subjects like election fraud, conspiracy theory, etc., with likes and shares, and that indeed these mechanisms aid in this type of content's success. *See image three in Appendix Two*. The internal document even illustrated that rather than combatting election disinformation, the platform amplifies this content, as it garners the most engagement¹¹³. *See image three in Appendix Two*. This is because in 2018 Facebook changed its algorithm to encourage engagement, disregarding the warning from internal reporters of this change’s inherently problematic nature¹¹⁴. Finally, the internal documents also explain that the Platform will, “Be actively (if not necessarily consciously) promoting these types of activities. The mechanics of our platform are not neutral”¹¹⁵. *See image three in Appendix Two*.

Another example is the internal Facebook research project “Carol’s Journey to QAnon”¹¹⁶, which constituted the creation of a fake profile of a conservative mother in North Carolina, in order to study the platform’s recommendation algorithms' effect on a user's

¹¹¹ ANONYMOUS WHISTLEBLOWER DISCLOSURE. “REDACTED-2020 ELECTION-Facebook Misled Investors and the Public about Its Role Perpetuating Misinformation and Violent Extremism Relating to the 2020 Election and January 6th Insurrection”. *Whistleblower Aid*, (2021), pp. 18

¹¹² *Ibid*.

¹¹³ Indeed other leaked internal documents reveal that there is preferential treatment to noteworthy figures was confirmed by revealing the “whitelists”, which is the exemption of high profile or privileged users who circumvent the XCheck or Cross-Check system, “over the years many XChecked pages, profiles and entities have been exempted from enforcement”. An example of this is exemplified by a Facebook employees statement, “Never forget the day Trump rode down the escalator in 2015, called for a ban on Muslims entering the US, [and] we determined that it violated our policies, and yet we explicitly overrode the policy and didn’t take the video down” (See footnote 83)

¹¹⁴ Hagey, Keach, and Jeff Horwitz. “Facebook Tried to Make Its Platform a Healthier Place. It Got Angrier Instead.” *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, (15 Sept. 202).

¹¹⁵ See footnote 111

¹¹⁶ Zadrozny, Brandy. “‘Carol’s Journey’: What Facebook Knew about How It Radicalized Users.” *NBCNews.Com*, NBCUniversal News Group, (23 Oct. 2021).

newsfeed. The report concluded that rapid polarization was a keystone of the platform's operations. This can be identified in the notion that it took merely five days for the first QAnon page to land in the fake user feed. Despite this knowledge, Facebook still allowed QAnon to operate on the platform, mostly unchecked up until just prior to the presidential election¹¹⁷.

Alarming, the internal documents also reveal that Facebook disabled some changes which were proven to reduce dis-and-misinformation, namely as it related to “groups”, because they also reduced the platform’s growth, giving substance to Haugen’s claim that the platform is more interested in growth than in people’s safety¹¹⁸. *See image four in Appendix Two*. Finally, despite the narrative amongst Facebook executives that they did all they could to prepare for election dis-and-misinformation, contain violence and hate, and disband worrisome groups¹¹⁹, the internal document reveals that officials of the platform stated, “We were willing to act only after things had spiraled into a dire state”¹²⁰. *See image five in Appendix Two*.

F. Facebook Inaction as Perpetuating Factor of Disinformation

Avaaz’s anti-disinformation team conducted research¹²¹ illustrating that, if the platform had undertaken action suggested by relevant actors, and proactively addressed the algorithm as opposed to acting reactively, it could have prevented 10.1 billion estimated views from top-performing pages that continually shared dis-and-misinformation. This failure to act manifested such that these misinformation pages, were afforded the opportunity to nearly triple their monthly interactions, from 97 million interactions in October 2019, to 277.9 million interactions in October 2020, which placed them almost at the same level as the top 100 US media pages, such as CNN, MSNBC, Fox news¹²². *See image six in Appendix Two*. Beyond the scale of dis-and-misinformation, Facebook also failed to prevent violence-glorifying pages and

¹¹⁷ See footnote 101

¹¹⁸ ANONYMOUS WHISTLEBLOWER DISCLOSURE. “REDACTED-2020 ELECTION-Facebook Misled Investors and the Public about Its Role Perpetuating Misinformation and Violent Extremism Relating to the 2020 Election and January 6th Insurrection”. *Whistleblower Aid*, (2021), pp. 29

¹¹⁹ Sherly Sandberg, Facebook COO said that The Insurrection was largely organized on other social media platforms, and that Facebook did a good job of protecting the integrity of the election, and monitoring concerning activity in this regard. Facebook executives also attempted to pin blame solely on those involved in The Insurrection and those involved in spreading the initial lie that the election was stolen (O’Sullivan, 2021). While this is certainly necessary, it is reckless for Facebook executives not to take responsibility for the role they played on that fateful day.

¹²⁰ ANONYMOUS WHISTLEBLOWER DISCLOSURE. “REDACTED-2020 ELECTION-Facebook Misled Investors and the Public about Its Role Perpetuating Misinformation and Violent Extremism Relating to the 2020 Election and January 6th Insurrection”. *Whistleblower Aid*, (2021), pp. 34

¹²¹ Avaaz. “Facebook: From Election to Insurrection.” *Avaaz*, (18 Mar. 2021).

¹²² *Ibid*

groups from growing exponentially¹²³, both of which were well-known environments for the proliferation of disinformation¹²⁴. Avvaz identified 267 pages and groups— in addition to the original Stop the Steal groups— with a combined network of 32 million followers, and of these groups, 68.7% had Boogaloo, QAnon, or militia-aligned names and shared content promoting conspiracy, dis-and-misinformation, recruiting, and organizing the events of January 6th.

G. Reach of dis-and-misinformation

While other research thus far has illuminated the reach of disinformation via Facebook, Wang¹²⁵ in their seminal work found that there was in fact, a strong positive connection between disinformation on social media and *participation* in The Insurrection. As 96% of the 663 participants of her study¹²⁶, were nearly all active on social media platforms, including Facebook, wherein they both shared and received misinformation regarding the 2020 US presidential election. Furthermore, a poll conducted in October 2020 found that approximately 91 million registered voters, or 44%, reported seeing misinformation about mail-in voter fraud on Facebook, and more alarmingly 35% of registered voters believed these false claims¹²⁷. These numbers are statistically significant in that they illustrate that these falsehoods were not just restricted to fringe Facebook groups, and furthermore, they weren't accepted only by a radical faction of society, but by over one-third of registered voters. Indeed research from New York University found that between August 2020 and January 2021, news publishers famed for spreading misinformation received *six times* the amount of likes, shares, and interactions on Facebook compared to trustworthy news sources like CNN or the World Health Organization¹²⁸.

H. Ads and aftermath:

¹²³ Research shows that even when Facebook acted to disband public groups, the platform was still used to assemble and organize, largely using private groups where members must request and are vetted by administrators (TPP, 2021). BuzzFeed reiterates this notion by explaining that even after Facebook disbanded the original Stop the Steal Facebook group— infamous for its spreading of disinformation—this action “had the effect of cutting off the head of a hydra as copycat and offshoot groups sprung in its place” (Silverman et al., 2021).

¹²⁴ A sentiment which Facebook employees themselves knew and warned about according to internal FB reports.

¹²⁵ Wang, Jian. “The US Capitol Riot: Examining the Rioters, Social Media, and Disinformation”. Diss. *Harvard University*, (2022).

¹²⁶ Wang’s study included the individuals found and convicted by the FBI as being involved in the insurrection, found in the Capitol Breach Cases list provided by the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Columbia.

¹²⁷ See footnote 125

¹²⁸ Edelson, Laura, and Damon McCoy. “Misinformation on Facebook Got Six Times More Clicks than Factual News during the 2020 Election, Study Says.” *NYU Tandon School of Engineering - Polytechnic Institute*, NYU Tandon, 3 Sept. 2021, engineering.nyu.edu/news/misinformation-facebook-got-six-times-more-clicks-factual-news-during-2020-election-study-says.

Dissimilar to the section on Brexit, this section did not focus on political ads. This is due to the fact that political ads were disbanded from the United States during the period prior to the election, well into March of the following year. Despite this, a number of relevant sources such as the Tech Transparency Project found that Facebook had been running ads for the military equipment, targeting individuals who followed extremist content, next to content that was promoting election dis-and-misinformation¹²⁹, and news regarding the attempted coup on the US Capitol, disregarding internal warnings from employees¹³⁰.

Chapter IV. Discussion.

The previous chapter both presented and analyzed relevant empirical evidence. This chapter further expands upon the preceding analysis, and in doing so, summarizes the main findings, discusses how these findings can be interpreted, draws upon comparisons between the two case studies, and discusses the importance of the aforementioned.

I. Main findings

A. Brexit

The main findings either supported or added more nuance to this thesis' original hypothesis. The main findings as it relates to Brexit are that, firstly, **the majority of the “Vote Leave” ads analyzed were misleading, either overtly or implicitly.** Beyond this, these ads were used for microtargeting, based on data given to AIQ by “Vote Leave”. The reach of these ads wherein millions of people were exposed, compounded by, identified voting patterns, listing sovereignty and immigration as key points, were also interesting findings. A BBC report **found that private Facebook groups were breeding grounds for disinformation, with connections**

¹²⁹ Tech Transparency Project. “TTP - Capitol Attack Was Months in the Making on Facebook.” *Tech Transparency Project- Holding Big Tech Accountable*, TTP, (19 Jan. 2021).

¹³⁰ While appropriate discussion cannot be attributed, another invaluable phenomenon is that of the extensive Facebook data relating to posts about The insurrection, which was stored on Facebook’s crowdtangle, an archive tool used by researchers in order to study Facebook data, which *accidentally* deleted troves of data after The Insurrection (Scott, 2021). Furthermore, the phenomenon of spinning the narrative of what happened on The 6th, proliferated via Facebook, claiming that it was not an insurrection but rather a protest. This is crucial as any platform that is complicit in this warping of reality, is guilty of erasing the *real* events of that day. As such Facebook has a responsibility not only to better store and monitor data via CrowdTangle for example, but also to not allow for lies and false narratives about The Insurrection to disseminate via its Platform.

to notorious conspiracy theory-promoting pages, exemplifying the myriad of actors and environments involved in spreading this type of information on the platform. This, it was explained, could very well be the result of the fact that Facebook cracked down on *public* pages and groups, making it such that transparency about administration and other involvement be made clear. As this is not the case for *private* groups, however, compounded by the fact that private groups are less likely to be flagged by Facebook monitors, they were perfect breeding grounds for disinformation.

B. The January 6th Insurrection

The findings supported the initial hypothesis of this thesis. While there was a great deal of findings uncovered as it relates to disinformation, perhaps the most salient was that **Facebook was negligent in combating dis-and-misinformation.** They implemented anti-disinformation mechanisms during crucial periods, which yielded impressive results— namely that disinformation, hate speech, and violence-glorifying content drastically decreased— but were ultimately removed after the 2020 Election, as these protections stifled the growth of the platform. Beyond the removal of the aforementioned mechanisms, **Facebook largely ignored or otherwise chose not to act, despite seeing chaos unfold, until the situation became dire,** as revealed by the company’s own internal report. Finally, the reach of the disinformation was extraordinary, with 96% of participants, in a study on the individuals involved in The Insurrection, claiming to have used Facebook in some capacity regarding The Insurrection prior to its execution¹³¹. In this same vein, New York University found that between August 2020 and the election, sources infamous for spreading fake news received six times the views on Facebook, as compared to their vetted, fact-checked, and credible counterpart media sources. The reach of this information was incredibly widespread, with millions of voters having seen fake news stories, and many insurrectionists having been active in engaging with such content on Facebook¹³². Finally, **research demonstrated that a salient environment for the spread of disinformation was public Facebook groups.** This is in comparison to Brexit which saw dissemination in private Facebook groups and also through political ads. As discussed

¹³¹ See footnote 125

¹³² See footnote 125 and 128

previously, this can be attributed to the fact that Facebook disabled political ads before the 2020 US presidential election.

II. Interpretations and implications

A. Brexit

My initial hypothesis was proven correct in that Facebook was indeed a breeding ground for dis-and-misinformation. The nuance which was added in the course of my research was related to the environment wherein this took place. Looking through the lens of the theoretical framework of this thesis, it becomes apparent that “strategic lying” was deployed in the creation of the political ads, containing outlandish mistruths, their dissemination via social media, and the repetition of them. The ads either overtly shared dis-and-misinformation or implicitly manipulated reality, in order to ultimately sway votes. The reach of the ads and the voting patterns, while not illustrative of causality, certainly allude to correlation. Identifiable patterns were that disinformation and “strategic lies”, with respect to this case study, were most prominent in private groups, and political ads. This is relevant as it had the effect of being harder to detect as it took place in private groups. Other observable patterns were that content that invoked emotions, namely fear at the threat of immigration, or loss of sovereignty, was an integral as it elicited the most amount of engagement.

B. The January 6th Insurrection

While my research supported my initial hypothesis, it revealed much more. The author of this work was unaware of the platform's negligence in appropriately quelling the spawning, and dissemination of this type of activity. In this respect, a pattern that was identified that added further nuance to the initial hypotheses regarding disinformation, was the notion that the environments and content that were most harmful often produced the most profit for the Platform. This can be identified for example removal of safety mechanisms around “groups” that were proven to reduce harmful activity, yet simultaneously stifled growth and thus profit for the Platform. This leaves one with the plausible impression that the platform may indeed place growth over the safety of users, as claimed by whistleblower Haugen. Similar to the previous

case study, the reach of this disinformation, and the identification of many insurrectionists engaging with this content on Facebook, while not indicative of causation, imply some level of correlation. Furthermore, while empirics from third parties illustrated the extent and breadth of disinformation, it was only the leaked internal Facebook documents that proved Facebook's *intentional* negligence. This leads one to ponder if this information would have ever made it to the public, if not for the leak, especially given that Facebook executives repeatedly publicly championed narratives diametrically opposed to what the internal documents revealed.

III. Comparison

In previous chapters, this thesis work explored how and on which basis these two cases would be compared. As such rather than reiterating those points, this thesis work will now discuss overall points of comparison and contention revealed through the empirics. Important findings as it relates to both findings, are, firstly, how disinformation was proliferated via Facebook with respect to each case. Furthermore, it was often the most harmful content that spread the most, and produced the greatest amounts of growth and profit, regardless of the content's veracity. This is to say, the content was not necessarily, but often, either overt disinformation or implicitly misleading. This notion also proves the relevance of the theoretical framework of this thesis as it applies to both cases. It did so by demonstrating that in both cases, the "strategic lie" was able to garner initial attention, and was proliferated successfully via Facebook. This project's own addition to the theoretical framework, demonstrated how in both cases a multitude of actors were involved in spreading and engaging with the "strategic lie", both companies, in the case of Brexit, but also citizens with respect to both cases. It furthermore, demonstrated how this theory applies to context beyond that of campaigns, through discussion of The Insurrection. Similarly, both cases embodied populist sentiments, namely right-wing populism, with overwhelming narratives of "we the people" vs. the corrupt elite, among other right-wing populist tenants. Both cases also suggest some level of correlation between disinformation on Facebook and the materialization and mobilization of the respective case studies, indicating that indeed Facebook is a *potentially* salient tool in socio-political dynamics and democracy at large. As such proper regulation and policy on both sides of the Atlantic are

imperative. In both cases, Facebook's lack of regulations and policing led to and aided in the perpetuation of dis-and-misinformation. Other points of connection were of course Facebook being instrumental in both cases, however in different *environments*. The main difference is that while Brexit witnessed disinformation in both public political ads and private Facebook groups, January 6th saw this phenomenon more in public groups. This is because Facebook had much less robust legislation on ads during the time of Brexit, and beyond bolstering legislation on this front, they also intentionally disabled ads during the election period in the US and well into March of the following year. While some may view this as a point of great contention, thus dubbing the events too different, as internal policy is arguably not comparable, the fact that disinformation was still able to proliferate so successfully via *public & private environments*, not only creates comparability, but also reveals important things about regulation on behalf of Facebook. Especially since Facebook allegedly made changes to public Facebook groups, to make them more transparent, however, the evidence from the case of The Insurrection, demonstrated these changes were obsolete in quelling the spread of dis-and-misinformation. This is important because in both cases election integrity was at the forefront of the cases— with Brexit directly being affected, and The Insurrection being related, in so far it was the aftermath of an election—and in both cases, disinformation greatly tainted this ideal. These cases represent a pattern that Facebook cannot deploy proper self-regulation. As such serious discussions of external, and co-governance of the platform need to take place, and this is a topic suitable for future research in this field. Beyond this expanding the scope to more cases, both in terms of populist events, but also a wider range of platforms is necessary to further establish a pattern.

This thesis has contributed a number of important points to the wider scholarship on how dis-and-misinformation on Facebook fuels right-wing populism. The implications of this thesis are salient, not just for those interested in platform governance, the respective cases, populism, election integrity, and how social media interacts with politics, but for democracy at large. The lack of proper regulation around election integrity in the digital sphere creates great vulnerability for disinformation, misinformation, etc., which has been continuously exploited by individuals, companies, and right-wing populist movements as a whole. The comparison of these two cases is crucial for the reasons described above and also because it is representative of a pattern. That we are engulfed in an era dominated by post-truth politics, where fact and reality are sidelined by click bait, dis-and-misinformation, and where public opinion has the potential to be manipulated

by Big Tech, and social media. These are not one-off cases, they have been, and will continue to be, able to flourish because of the lack of accountability on the part of digital platforms and social media, the lack of robust regulation, and the need to prioritize election integrity, and transparent, healthy, political discourse in the digital sphere. The contributions of this thesis work are even more salient, as we approach the 2024 US Presidential Election, and the next General Elections in the UK.

Chapter V. Conclusion.

This thesis work argued that dis-and-misinformation on Facebook did indeed contribute to the respective events, through its mass proliferation aided by internal mechanisms, and lack of platform regulation. It did so by employing mainly qualitative modes of inquiry, analyzing a plethora of relevant empirical primary and secondary evidence. It began by introducing the topic, and setting the bound of this project work. Next, it introduced key terms, and provided a literature review beginning with relevant relationships, and ending with the respective case studies. Next, it discussed the theoretical framework and methodology. The following chapter both presented and analyzed relevant empirical evidence beginning with Brexit and ending with The Insurrection. After this, the discussion chapter followed wherein the main takeaways, implications, and final comparison of the cases were provided.

Ultimately, this thesis work contributes to the wider literature on social media's impact on society by analyzing Facebook's relationship with disinformation and populism, marrying the two, and furthermore placing this intersection in the context of two relevant case studies. With upcoming elections in the US and UK, proactively addressing the material uncovered within this project work is imperative, not just for the West but for global democracy at large.

Appendix 1. Brexit

Images:

Image one is a screenshot taken from the Aggregate IQ/Vote Leave ads sent to the DCMS (2018)



Image two is a screenshot taken from EUROSTAT. "Total Population in the European Union Is Expected to Increase ..." *Eurostat*, Eurostat, (Mar. 2017). The image depicts total numbers of first time asylum applicants in the EU Member States.

First time asylum applicants in the EU Member States

	Number of first time applicants			Share in EU total (%)	Number of applicants per million inhabitants*
	2015	2016	Change (in %)	2016	2016
EU	1 257 030	1 204 280	-4%	100.0%	2 360
Belgium	38 990	14 250	-63%	1.2%	1 260
Bulgaria	20 165	18 990	-6%	1.6%	2 655
Czech Republic	1 235	1 200	-3%	0.1%	114
Denmark	20 825	6 055	-71%	0.5%	1 061
Germany	441 800	722 265	+63%	60.0%	8 789
Estonia	225	150	-34%	0.0%	114
Ireland	3 270	2 235	-32%	0.2%	473
Greece	11 370	49 875	+339%	4.1%	4 625
Spain	14 600	15 570	+7%	1.3%	335
France	70 570	75 990	+8%	6.3%	1 138
Croatia	140	2 150	+1413%	0.2%	513
Italy	83 245	121 185	+46%	10.1%	1 998
Cyprus	2 105	2 840	+35%	0.2%	3 350
Latvia	330	345	+5%	0.0%	175
Lithuania	275	410	+51%	0.0%	142
Luxembourg	2 360	2 065	-13%	0.2%	3 582
Hungary	174 435	28 215	-84%	2.3%	2 870
Malta	1 695	1 735	+2%	0.1%	3 989
Netherlands	43 035	19 285	-55%	1.6%	1 136
Austria	85 505	39 860	-53%	3.3%	4 587
Poland	10 255	9 780	-5%	0.8%	258
Portugal	870	710	-18%	0.1%	69
Romania	1 225	1 855	+51%	0.2%	94
Slovenia	260	1 265	+389%	0.1%	613
Slovakia	270	100	-63%	0.0%	18
Finland	32 150	5 275	-84%	0.4%	961
Sweden	156 110	22 330	-86%	1.9%	2 267
United Kingdom	39 720	38 290	-4%	3.2%	586
Iceland	:	1 105	:	-	3 320
Liechtenstein	:	75	:	-	2 047
Norway	30 470	3 240	-89%	-	622
Switzerland	38 060	25 820	-32%	-	3 101

Image three-seven are screenshots taken of the Aggregate IQ/Vote Leave ads sent to the DCMS (2018), exemplary of types of political ads, describing the EU as “frivolous”.





IMAGINE IF WE COULD KEEP OUR MATERNITY UNITS OPEN BECAUSE WE WEREN'T SENDING £350 MILLION TO THE EU EVERY WEEK!

SAVE MATERNITY UNITS

2978.jpg



IMAGINE IF WE WERE ABLE TO KEEP OUR SCHOOLS OPEN BECAUSE WE WEREN'T SENDING £350 MILLION TO THE EU EVERY WEEK!

SAVE OUR SCHOOLS

2982.jpg



IMAGINE IF WE WERE ABLE TO KEEP OUR HOSPITALS OPEN BECAUSE WE WEREN'T SENDING £350 MILLION TO THE EU EVERY WEEK!

SAVE OUR NHS

2986.jpg

**EU OFFICIALS
WASTED NEARLY
€3000
On Luxury Cruises
With Unlimited Alcohol**

[Learn More →](#)

3048.idr

Image eight is a screenshot taken of the Aggregate IQ/Vote Leave ads sent to the DCMS (2018), an example of types of political ads, painting a negative narrative of the EU, namely, as it relates to animal welfare.



Image nine is a screenshot taken of the Aggregate IQ/Vote Leave ads sent to the DCMS (2018), exemplary of types of political ads, depicting populist sentiments, namely placing primacy on UK priorities, and not the EU, which are viewed as the elites.



The full list of political ads can be accessed [here](#)

Appendix 2. The January 6th Insurrection

Text posts:

Posts collected by ProPublica and Washington Post (images were not provided, as such the following is text recreation):

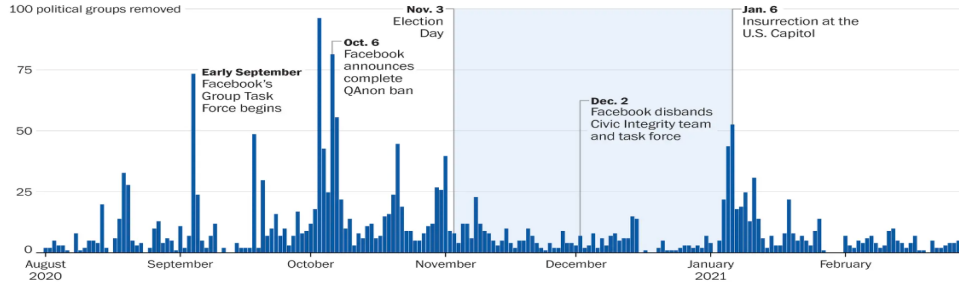
- “LOOKS LIKE CIVIL WAR IS BECOMING INEVITABLE !!!” read a post a month before the Capitol assault. “WE CANNOT ALLOW FRAUDULENT ELECTIONS TO STAND ! SILENT NO MORE MAJORITY MUST RISE UP NOW AND DEMAND BATTLEGROUND STATES NOT TO CERTIFY FRAUDULENT ELECTIONS NOW!”
- “So what do we do if after all the fighting they can prove that there was fraud in this election and they still go ahead and swear in this buffoon as the next president what should we do. I say ‘rise-up and take back our country from these corrupt politicians by any means’. -Posted in “American Pro Trump” Group
- Another popular post depicted a cartoon of Trump chasing a masked Biden, who carried a bag labeled “election theft” with swing states inside the bag. This was posted more than 350 times within the political groups analyzed by the investigatory coalition, and gathered over 2,500 likes.
- One post from December of 2020 read, “Everyone needs to make a show of FORCE in DC on the 6th and any congress who doesn't follow the constitution or who doesn't stand up for our president (Pence included) needs to be 'corrected' by WE the PEOPLE - on the front steps of the state house - for all the world to see!!! THIS IS HOW THE US DEALS WITH HER TRAITORS!!!”
- Another example was the Florida-based administrator of a Facebook militia group called “Eagle Team 1 LLC”, frequently posted calling to take down the government stating that “The politicians in Washington DC are the biggest threat to our country and democracy than any foreign standing army,”. Members replied with slogans like “locked and loaded,” implying a willingness to turn to violence.

Images:

The following images one and two are screenshots of graphs, and were sourced from the investigation by ProPublica and The Washington Post (Silverman et al., 4 Jan. 2022). The first image depicts the decrease in removal of political Facebook groups between election day and The Insurrection, which coincides with the disbanding of the civic integrity group. The next image depicts Facebook’s ability to police effectively when it desires. The image depicts an intensive “crackdown” of QAnon—a prolific American right-wing conspiracy theory and ideology— groups prior to the election.

Fewer Political Groups Were Removed From Facebook Between Election Day and Jan. 6

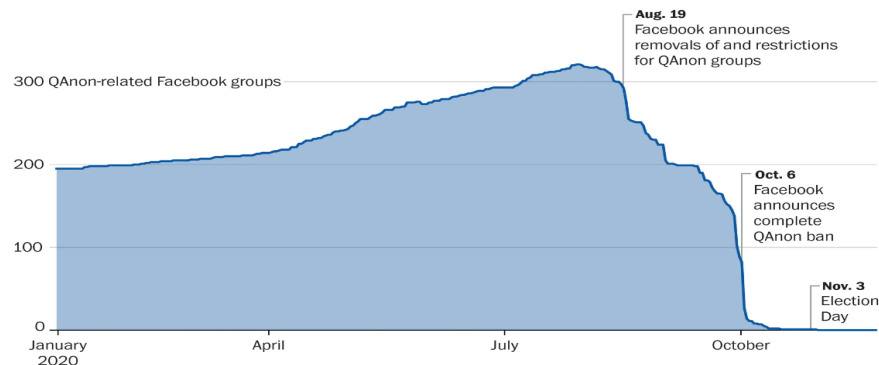
Removal dates for about 2,000 public U.S. political groups between August 2020 and March 2021



Note: Political Facebook groups were identified out of a sample of roughly 100,000. Removal dates for each group are estimates. Only groups with 10 or more posts are shown. Source: A ProPublica-Washington Post analysis of public Facebook group data collected by CounterAction. Chris Alcantara and Kate Rabinowitz/The Washington Post

Facebook Can Be Effective When It Chooses

The number of U.S. QAnon groups on Facebook increased in 2020, before the company cracked down



Note: QAnon-related Facebook groups were identified out of a sample of roughly 100,000. Only groups with 10 or more posts are shown. Source: A ProPublica-Washington Post analysis of public Facebook group data collected by CounterAction. Chris Alcantara and Kate Rabinowitz/The Washington Post

Image three is a screenshot of internal leaked Facebook documents, the internal document is titled “REDACTED-2020 ELECTION-Facebook Mised Investors and the Public about Its Role Perpetuating Misinformation and Violent Extremism Relating to the 2020 Election and January 6th Insurrection”, and was sourced from Whistleblower Aid. The image depicts negligence on the part of Facebook, as well as problematic internal structures of the platform.



- REDACTED FOR CONGRESS -

Report government and corporate lawbreaking. Without breaking the law.

[November 2020] “Not only do we not do something about combustible election misinformation in comments, we amplify them and give them broader distribution.”¹⁰³

“We have evidence from a variety of sources that hate speech, divisive political speech, and misinformation on Facebook and the family of apps are affecting societies around the world. We also have compelling evidence that our core product mechanics, such as virality, recommendations, and optimizing for engagement, are a significant part of why these types of speech flourish on the platform . . . the net result is that Facebook, taken as a whole, will be actively (if not necessarily consciously) promoting these types of activities. The mechanics of our platform are not neutral.”¹⁰⁴

“Facebook’s algorithms have coaxed many Americans into sharing extreme views on the platform -- rewarding them with likes and shares for posts on subjects like election fraud conspiracies . . .”¹⁰⁵

Image four is a screenshot of internal leaked Facebook documents, the internal document is titled “REDACTED-2020 ELECTION-Facebook Misled Investors and the Public about Its Role Perpetuating Misinformation and Violent Extremism Relating to the 2020 Election and January 6th Insurrection”, and was sourced from Whistleblower Aid. The image depicts negligence on the part of Facebook, with respect to placing primacy on growth as opposed to safety.

27. Facebook has avoided or rolled back interventions for “groups” and “narrow subpopulations” that it knew reduced misinformation, violence and incitement, because those interventions reduced the platform’s growth:

“Harmful communities have been seen to grow via using our platform affordances . . . the QAnon community relied on minimally-connected bulk group invites . . . One member sent over 377,000 group invites in less than 5 months! . . . The civic integrity team explored a variety of changes to the way civic content was ranked during US 2020 and identified several features which promoted a more healthy ecosystem . . .”⁴⁵

⁴³ [REDACTED] “Quantifying the Concentration of Reshares and their VPVs Among Users” p. 1.
⁴⁴ [REDACTED] Demotions in practice, p. 5, 9-10.
⁴⁵ [REDACTED] Harmful Non-Violating Narratives, p. 8, 10, 15, 19, 20.

— ANONYMOUS WHISTLEBLOWER DISCLOSURE —

15

- REDACTED FOR CONGRESS -

**WHISTLEBLOWER
AID**
Report government and corporate lawbreaking.
Without breaking the law.

[However:] “We have rolled back the pre-election rate limit of 100 Group invites/day due to it having significant regression on Group growth . . . [which was implemented in October 2020 to reduce] joins to sensitive groups or groups that became sensitive.”⁴⁶

Image five is a screenshot of internal leaked Facebook documents, the internal document is titled “REDACTED-2020 ELECTION-Facebook Misled Investors and the Public about Its Role Perpetuating Misinformation and Violent Extremism Relating to the 2020 Election and January 6th Insurrection”, and was sourced from Whistleblower Aid. The image depicts negligence on the part of Facebook to properly address harmful and problematic activity, which ultimately aided in materialization of The Insurrection.

for over a year now that our recommendation systems can very quickly lead users down the path to conspiracy theories and groups. [] While the Recommendations Integrity team has made impressive strides in cleaning up our recs, **FB [Facebook] has been hesitant to outright ban/filter conspiracy groups like QAnon until just last week.** [] In the meantime, this fringe group/set of beliefs has grown to national prominence with QAnon congressional candidates and QAnon hashtags and groups trending in the mainstream. **We were willing to act only "after" things had spiraled into a dire state.**⁴⁵

30. Thus, Facebook allowed misinformation and harmful content to persist.

"Through most of 2020, we saw non-violating content promoting QAnon spreading through our platforms. Belief in the QAnon conspiracy took hold in multiple communities, and we saw multiple cases in which such belief motivated people to kill or conspire to kill perceived enemies. . . . Policies don't fully cover harms [] We implement policies for many of these areas that limit our ability to act . . . high-profile entities were able to serially spread . . . claims without crossing our falsifiable misinformation based lines for enforcement. . . we've often taken minimal action initially due to a combination [of] policy and product limitations making it extremely challenging to design, get approval for, and roll out new interventions quickly. Afterward, we've often been prompted by societal outcry at the resulting harms to implement entity takedowns. For instance, we've enacted this pattern with both QAnon and delegitimization, wherein we **initially took limited or no action**, and later decided to take down Groups, Pages, and even Users supporting these movements. . . . Bringing problematic content prevalence [conspiracies about COVID and vaccine discouragement] in the top 2% of communities in line with average communities could reduce the size of the overall problem by up to ~80%. Based on our experiences with US 2020 election delegitimization, QAnon, and Dangerous Orgs, there are at least three conceptual roles we need to address . . ."⁴⁶

Image six is a screenshot sourced from Avaaz (2021), illustrating the growth of fake news sites in comparison to real news prior to the 2020 US presidential election.

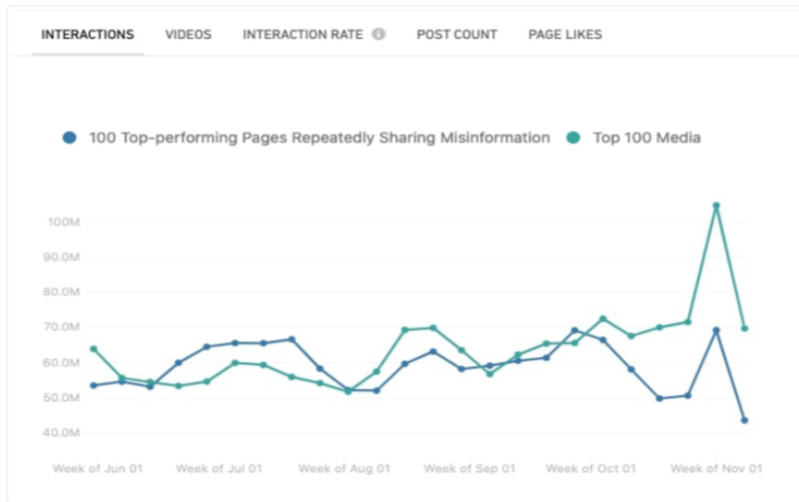


Figure 1: June, 2020 to November, 2020 (Decline in monthly interactions of most prominent pages that had shared misinformation)

Graph generated using CrowdTangle[®]. The graph shows the comparative interactions of the top-performing pages that repeatedly shared misinformation and the Top 100 Media pages in our study over a period of five and a half months. The clear decline in engagement takes effect on the week of October 10. The high peak on the week of November 1 to November 8 is an outlier of interactions on a few posts confirming the winner of the elections on November 7.

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