



## Big Data, Small Data, Broken Windows and Fear Discourse: Brexit, the EU and the Majority Illusion

Michelangelo Conoscenti

### 1. Introduction

Although Brexit has been considered an unexpected event by the majority of observers, this paper claims that the *Vote Leave* campaign was able to successfully crystallize a number of issues through a narrative that resonated with the British voters' feelings transforming them into 'issues' that could be identified in a single concept: a populist and creeping xenophobic fear discourse (Wodak 2015). To document how this was built up and viralised throughout the British population one has to identify an explicit 'tipping point'. Nonetheless, a specific analysis of small data (Lindstrom 2016) could have helped the *Remain* campaigners to foresee the result and to introduce correctives<sup>1</sup>. Wodak maintains that at the time of the referendum the informative environment was already polarized<sup>2</sup>. My goal is to show, as Spohr (2017) points out, that since the social media play an increasing role in the consumption of news and information, the effects of ideological polarization in information consumption have become more apparent through the so-called filter bubbles<sup>3</sup>. This is particularly true for the 2016 EU referendum in the UK. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate, filter bubbles are also associated with the emerging phenomenon of fake news. The first alarming result is a 'self-reinforcing' social division that endangers democracy. This is possible because the *Vote Leave* campaign generated a well-segregated echo chamber<sup>4</sup> where voters

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<sup>1</sup> Judging by Cambridge Analytica work for Vote Leave, big data should have been considered, too.

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Ruth Wodak, who during a conversation pointed out that the paper should make clear that Britain was already a polarised country even before the referendum campaign. This clarification helps to better frame the aggressive communications strategy of Vote Leave. On the other hand, Jonathan Charteris-Black, while reading the final version of the paper and suggesting further improvements, made the point that it could equally be argued that it was the decision to have a referendum that created an artificial polarization. I am also grateful to Jonathan for his invaluable and thought-provoking suggestions.

<sup>3</sup> "A situation in which an Internet user encounters only information and opinions that conform to and reinforce their own beliefs, caused by algorithms that personalize an individual's online experience" (<https://www.oxforddictionaries.com>).

<sup>4</sup> "...filter bubbles and echo chambers (...) work to form groups of like-minded members and keep these groups away from meaningful interactions even among themselves. ... This like-mindedness and intensification of feelings and beliefs [encourages] little or no critical scrutiny" (Krosravinik 2017: 62-63). Krosravinik's article also discusses the Brexit vote as an example of strategic misplacement of the migration issue.

focused on one narrative while ignoring the other (Del Vicario, Zollo *et alii* 2017). Thus, in an already polarized environment, where the population is frequently divided into two almost symmetrical 50% camps<sup>5</sup>, this kind of informative strategy is paramount to secure the vote of those who have already been convinced, while trying to influence swing voters, those who represent the 2-3% that can determine the final victory.

The key issue here is that these groups, convinced of the echo that surrounds them with their own views and preconceptions, in a sense lose the inclination to proactively discuss ideas with people or groups of a different opinion. (Spohr 2017: 151)

To verify this hypothesis and to determine the lesson that the European Commission should consider in terms of communicative strategies to adopt when addressing anti-European/fear discourse<sup>6</sup>, two specific corpora were created. The first is made up of 2,309 *Facebook* posts from the *Leave.EU* page<sup>7</sup>. They were selected in the period September 2015 - July 2017. The second resulted from 367 articles from the *Daily Mail* and were selected if they contained the word *immigra\** or *migra\*8*. The time span is from December 2015 to June 2016. It consists of 122,081 tokens (running words) and 9,898 types (distinct words, i.e. its vocabulary). The corpora will thus be investigated by means of a multimodal analysis approach (Conoscenti 2017; Norris 2011; Kress 2010), supplemented by netnography techniques (Kozinet, Dolbec, Earley 2014)<sup>9</sup>. This blend will identify what the potential elements generating fear discourse are and what correctives should be applied to disempower a narrative now widespread in all the EU. Big data are discussed against the theories of small data and that of 'broken windows' (Wilson, Kelling 1982; Gladwell 2002).

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<sup>5</sup> Recent similar cases are, for example, the Italian Constitutional Referendum (December 2016) and the Dutch Referendum on Privacy Protection (March 2018).

<sup>6</sup> On this topic, the work of Nicole Dewandre (Dewandre and Gulyás forthcoming), a senior researcher at the Joint Research Centre, the so-called in-house research service of the European Commission, is of particular interest.

<sup>7</sup> This corpus was designed and collected together with MA candidate Sabrina Labile who defended her dissertation: "A Multimodal Analysis of the Brexit Campaign" in March 2018.

<sup>8</sup> It is a convention of corpus linguistics that type-words are written in *italics* with their frequency following in parenthesis, eventually. When a type-word ends with an \* it means that all the inflecting forms for that word are considered in the frequency count. This corpus was designed and collected together with BA candidate Martina Boccardo who defended her dissertation: "Immigration and the Daily Mail Campaign for Vote Leave. A corpus-based case study" in November 2017. All the corpus linguistics statistics and tables are generated by the author with the WordSmith Tools 7 package.

<sup>9</sup> "Netnography is an established approach to qualitative research, whose name draws together the terms 'Internet' and 'ethnography'. Netnography shares many of the characteristics of ethnography from which it has been adapted, in that it is a flexible approach that allows scholars to explore and explain rich, diverse, cultural worlds" (Kozinet, Dolbec, Earley 2014: 262).

## 2. The Brexit Campaign and the Tipping Point

Gladwell's concern (2002: 16) is to establish how it is that some ideas or behaviours start communicative epidemics and others don't. He maintains that change does not happen gradually but at one moment and he compares these changes to epidemics. Thus the latter can rise or fall in one dramatic moment.

It is the principle that permits the greatest insight into why modern change happens the way it does. The name given to that one dramatic moment in an epidemic when everything can change all at once is the Tipping Point. (Gladwell 2002: 3)

The first implication of this idea is that people can deliberately start and control positive and negative epidemics by themselves. The second is that the key to getting people to change their behaviour sometimes lies with the smallest details of their immediate situation. According to Gladwell the context in which the message is created makes human beings a lot more sensitive to their environment than it may seem. My point is that *Vote Leave* was able to interpret and contextualise some thematic contexts<sup>10</sup> that were present in the public debate and transformed them into a single tipping point. Nonetheless, to better understand how this happened, I maintain that one has to integrate, to amalgamate, as Lindstrom (2016: 19) affirms, and act as an observer "who pieces together small data, creating a mosaic from which I try to Small Mine a reasonable story line". Since the tipping point must satisfy a number of environmental preconditions that will allow it to gather the informative potential that makes it such a disruptive element in a communicative epidemic, small data allow identifying how the tipping point built up. Thus "the integration of online and offline data – that is to say, the marriage of big data and small data – is a crucial ingredient of marketing survival and success in the twenty-first century" (Lindstrom 2016: 22).

## 3. Conceptual Metaphors as Powerful Tools to Communicate the Tipping Point

In communicative epidemics the messenger matters since "messengers are what make the message spread" (Gladwell 2002:75) if its content has been properly engineered. In the same paragraph Gladwell also maintains that, in order to be successful, the message needs to have the quality of 'stickiness'. Is the message memorable to the point that it can spur someone to action and, consequently, create change? The answer lies in another principle of epidemic transmission, namely the 'Power of Context'. This stipulates that epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the time and place in which they occur<sup>11</sup>. Our

<sup>10</sup> Thematic contexts are used in content analysis to determine the narratives that are dealt with through regular patterns, i.e. the "themes" that are observed across data sets that are important to the description of a phenomenon and are associated to a specific research question. It is a way of dealing with data focusing on the content of communicated material.

<sup>11</sup> Charteris-Black's (2014: 86-89) model of circumstances would be the ideal one for this kind of analysis. Unfortunately, given the paper's length limitations it cannot be used here.

corpora make it possible to infer that the *Vote Leave* was able to interpret a set of small data that made it evident that the British public opinion was dissatisfied with a number of issues generated by the 2008 economic crisis. These were amplified by an increased flow of immigrants to the UK who were interpreted by the media and thus perceived by the public opinion as a 'danger'. That was possible because some popular newspapers, such as the *Daily Mail*, were, at the same time, actively engaged in a campaign that was hinting at the need to control immigration as one of the key issues to support the reasons for *Vote Leave*. The latter thus generated thematic contexts that were targeting the EU as the source of a set of problems, namely poor economic conditions, immigration and loss of national control. These fostered a concern for the security issues that could be contained in a more all-encompassing master narrative: the one of fear. Since this narrative had to be established in a specific context that could be resistant to the idea itself, campaigners understood that the Power of Context is an environmental argument in the sense that considers behaviour as a function of social context (Gladwell 2002: 121). The best way to disseminate this communicative epidemic was by means of Conceptual Metaphors (CM) and uses of language that derived from them. This was possible because, as Walter and Helmig (2008: 119) maintain:

Metaphors have a massive influence on the construction of reality. Speech acts, of which metaphors constitute an intrinsic component, are in turn embedded in discourses which can be analysed and deconstructed accordingly. But only the combined analysis of discourses and metaphors can lead to a comprehensive understanding of the social construction of reality.

Furthermore, the campaigners were also able to 'translate' into a powerful symbol a CM that is part of the target domain and of the public discourse on Europe, transforming it into a fully functional 'metaphorical scenario' (Musolff 2017: 3). Ringmar (2008) and Marks (2011) have reviewed and identified several CMs that apply to the state within the domain of domestic policies and International Relations discourse. The most important are: STATE AS A BODY<sup>12</sup>, STATE AS A FAMILY, STATE AS A BUILDING, STATE AS A CYBERNETIC DEVICE and STATE AS A MACHINE<sup>13</sup>. As previously said, the 2008 world financial and consequent economic crisis stopped the WORLD AS A MACHINE economics, to the point that a new set of CMs linked to the one of MOTION were created and enacted. Drulák (2008), while identifying and assessing metaphors on the EU reform, deems the identification of the target domain of a CM within a specific speech community as a starting point of a research since it helps to delimitate the phenomenon one has to observe. This stand also confirms Walter and Helmig's (2008: 119) idea that "combining the analysis of metaphors and discourses promises to be a worthwhile venture so as to obtain in-depth knowledge of a socially constructed reality." This approach

<sup>12</sup> It is a convention that Conceptual Metaphors are indicated in small capital letters.

<sup>13</sup> Dewandre and Guylás (forthcoming) have identified the following CM for EU discourse: SENSITIVE INVERSION, SIZE MATTERS, DEFICIT FRAMING and SPEED IS OF THE ESSENCE.

is consistent with Gladwell's Power of Context and the way ideas become viral. As a consequence, Drulák deduces several CMs from major theories of European integration and tests them against several discursive domains and communities. The most important finding is that:

The metaphor of *MOTION* is at the heart of the neofunctionalist understanding of the EU as an open-ended process. In this perspective, the EU is seen as a constantly changing entity which defies any firm boundaries and descriptions. It is at odds with the ideas of Europe as a goal-oriented project, of European borders or of European agency. (Drulák 2008: 111)

Drulák also points out that the source domain of *MOTION* is taken for granted as a model of European integration by European leaders and it is only rarely challenged<sup>14</sup>. This is in line with a point made by Messer, Schroder and Wodak while discussing the role of the mass media in the generation of people's attitudes towards immigrants.

As long as people have no direct personal experiences with minorities or immigrants, they have no concrete mental models as a basis for the formation of general attitudes. In that case, such mental models are taken from the mass media. It is in this way that prejudices are reproduced in society and not examined critically by comparing them to personal experiences or scholarly studies. (Messer, Schroder, Wodak 2012: 27)

Thus, "the identification of discursive conditions relies on the assumption that conceptual metaphors indeed structure their target domains in coherent ways which may not be the case everywhere" (Walter, Helmig 2008: 116).

Since, as Musolff (2017: 11) has observed, the *Vote Leave* campaign leveraged on a semantic and pragmatic deterioration of the slogan, and CM *BRITAIN IS THE HEART OF EUROPE*, then other CMs such as *EUROPE IS A COSTLY MACHINE* and *(IM)MIGRANTS ARE A DANGER* can be considered part of the same set of problematic issues that campaigners identified to rally British public opinion. It is evident that behind their communicative strategy there is a cognitive perspective that considered



Figure 1: The Vote Leave bus

<sup>14</sup> One might also consider the importance of the 'four freedoms' in the European Commission position on Brexit. They are: the freedom of movement of goods, people, services and capital over borders.

the role and implications of the use of CMs. Most importantly it was clear to them that, if CMs are sufficiently appropriated by a discourse community, they shape the way people think about the world. This is why one of the symbols of the *Vote Leave* campaign was so successful (figure 1).

This bus, that became the symbol of the Brexit campaign, is a powerful rendition of the CM EUROPE IS A COSTLY MACHINE as it conveys and concentrates, in a single 'metaphorical scenario', by means of the prototypical British means of transportation, several messages that have dominated the political debate<sup>15</sup>. These are the costs of the European machine, the costs of the economic crisis and the effects on welfare and the need to take back control at national level of some policies deemed vital to protect national interests<sup>16</sup>. The symbol is even more powerful given that, as Drulák (2008: 115) has observed, "it is the metaphor of MOTION which dominates presenting the EU as an ongoing process without any final goal". Furthermore, this means of transportation is easily identified as a red London bus, but also as a billboard in motion while on campaign, so it embodies a conceptual blend.

#### 4. Destructuring and Debunking Conceptual Metaphors

One could not but compliment the *Vote Leave* strategists for their brilliant ability in translating into a living visual metaphor so many CMs at a time. The point is that Matthew Elliot, Chief Executive of *Vote Leave*, during a lecture at *Election Days*, held at the University of Turin on 7 October 2016, stated that the £350 million figure was a deliberate fake and that the campaigners knew that, "but it was a very good selling point, so why not use it?" The Brexit campaigners have been criticised for their casual use of data and misleading information, but, apparently, their strategy paid very well. Another case is the number of supporters. Since the very beginning the *Facebook* page of *Leave.EU* published triumphant figures on the number of supporters. It is evident that



Figure 2: A Leave.EU Facebook post on supporters.

<sup>15</sup> It is also the evidence of what Lakoff and Johnson (2003: 157-158) have indicated as the way "people in power get to impose their metaphors. New metaphors, like conventional metaphors, can have the power to define reality. They do this through a coherent network of entailments that highlight some features of reality and hide others". Considering Khosravinik's (2017) analysis "we see the metaphorical concepts of FREEDOM, EQUALITY, SAFETY, ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE, POWER, etc., as being different ways of getting indirectly at issues of meaningful existence" (Lakoff, Johnson 2003: 236). Hence the pervasive power of this specific CM.

<sup>16</sup> Musolff has also noted that the semantic deterioration mentioned earlier had also affected the 'facts and figures' about the UK's financial contribution to the EU and immigration.



**Figure 3:** The supporters of Leave.EU in its website.

psychologically the function of publishing these figures was to exhort those who were undecided to join and to create a domino effect. On 17 January 2016 the page announced that they had reached 400,000 supporters (figure 2). The official website, last checked on 1 October 2017, declares 88,012 supporters (figure 3).

These are not the only cases where the campaign used data in a deceptive way. During the same period *Vote Leave* promised a £50m prize for those who could correctly predict who they thought would win each game of the 2016 European Football Championships that summer. Even the BBC reported<sup>17</sup> on this peculiar contest, demonstrating how unlikely it was that anyone could win the prize, since the odds of correctly forecasting all 51 games randomly were a sextillion to one. “We knew that, of course” declared Elliott in the same lecture previously reported, “that’s why we offered the prize. The point was that to enter the contest you had to give *Vote Leave* your e-mail address and we used them to generate specific mailing lists to target our communication at zero cost<sup>18</sup>”. Besides the ethical judgment one could express on the behaviour behind these actions<sup>19</sup> it is evident that the Brexit strategists were good at interpreting the environment and the moods around the referendum. They were able to synchronise and parallel the set of problematic issues about the EU together with the populist ‘tone’ and a creeping xenophobia that were present in the British media at the same time. In order to better understand the quality, the impact and the results of the campaign it is then necessary to clarify what kind of populism *Vote Leave* and its partners leveraged on.

## 5. Populism and the Informative Environment

Political science scholars have generated a rich debate on the nature of populism. Laclau (2005) considers it an innovative reformative force of the democratic system. Mudde (2017) regards populism as a political strategy to generate consensus. Jagers and Waltgrave (2007) and Esser and Pfetsch (2004) see it as a specific communication style. This latter approach is useful to identify

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36398775>, last accessed 6 October 2017.

<sup>18</sup> It is now evident how Cambridge Analytica and AggregateIQ were able to exploit these data with micro-targeted messages.

<sup>19</sup> Students present at the lecture were shocked by the speaker’s light-hearted attitude when disclosing this information.

and 'measure' the populist characteristics of several European parties. Mudde (2004: 541) defines populism as

an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.

In this sense Mudde (2004: 544) considers populism as a thin-centred ideology in opposition to thick-centred ideologies such as fascism and communism.

Leave.EU  
18 febbraio 2016 · €

Tell us how the EU affects you and your job!  
Email [research@leave.eu](mailto:research@leave.eu) with your story and we can help spread the word on why we should leave the EU!



Mi piace Commenta Condividi

1,2 mila Commenti più rilevanti

287 condivisioni

Figure 4: Leave.EU Facebook post.

and the ability to listen to the people and understand their needs. Figure 4 depicts these concepts while several other posts, like figure 2, add the message: "Join Britain's fastest growing grass roots movement".

The consequence is that thin-centred ideologies, since they are poor of specific ideological consensual values, are ideal to be used in contexts where the issues are highly debatable and, I would add, prone to manipulation. Canovan (1999) sees populism as the result of an imbalance between redemptive politics, i.e. one supposed to generate a better society, and pragmatic politics, a tool to manage and govern everyday life.

The people are the target of populist movements that fight in order to bring back the excluded into politics (Muller 2016: 17). Furthermore, they claim a grassroots origin

Leave.EU  
21 luglio alle ore 15:01 · €

READ | Responding to the news that Free Movement may continue for years after Brexit, a Leave EU spokesperson said "there will be consequences" if the Tories betray the Brexit vote:

"We were kidding ourselves if we thought a Cabinet dominated by Remainers would respect the referendum result in its entirety. The murmurs of a possible five year transitional arrangement compound our fears that the Brexit the British public voted for is in danger of being subjected to an Establis... Altro...



Mi piace Commenta Condividi

5,8 mila Commenti più rilevanti

2476 condivisioni

Figure 5: Leave.EU Facebook post.

Leave.EU  
11 luglio alle ore 8:45 · €

READ | "Project Fear is back", says Nigel Farage. With a vengeance, you might say. A year on from their defeat at the referendum the scheming liberal establishment smells a chance to scupper our independence.

Look no further than the stats compiled by News-Watch and please consider donating to our fundraising campaign: <http://leave.eu/news-watch/>  
<http://news-watch.co.uk/>



Farage hits out at Project Fear, anti-Brexit BBC  
Pro-EU establishment media agenda is there for all to see.  
WESTMONSTER.COM

Mi piace Commenta Condividi

2,3 mila Commenti più rilevanti

411 condivisioni

Figure 6: Leave.EU Facebook post.

People are, by definition, betrayed by their political representatives and they should be brought back to power, hence the exhortative ‘take back control’ in figure 1. Thus, liberal institutions and representative democracies are the places where the betrayal has taken place and figure 5 and 6 show these ideas at work. The captions mention “The Free movement “and “The scheming liberal establishment”. The *Leave.EU* corpus is rich with these statements and they are also reflected in the news of the *Daily Mail* on immigration.



Figure 7: Leave.EU Facebook post.



Figure 8: Leave.EU Facebook post.



Figure 9: Leave.EU Facebook post.



Figure 10: Leave.EU Facebook post.

<sup>20</sup> This post caption also states: “Join the people’s campaign”.

<sup>21</sup> I am not attributing xenophobia to all those who voted *Leave*. The point is that xenophobic elements are present in the populist discourse and the selected figures highlight these features.

It is not surprising that this kind of narrative is still present, after more than one year, in the Leave.EU Facebook page. They claim that people “should be freed from the exploiting élites and return to their ‘pure normality’”, i.e., common people who identify themselves with common ideas such as the nation, the race or their social class. Kitschelt (2002: 180) has pointed out the relationship between this kind of rhetoric and xenophobia and figures 7, 8<sup>20</sup>, 9 and 10 show, to varying degrees, the building up of these sentiments<sup>21</sup>.

Mudde (2017: 68) has also noted that

Given that populist politics is essentially a struggle of ‘the pure people’ against ‘the corrupt elite’, and pretends to defend popular sovereignty at any cost, it is crucial for populist leaders to present themselves as the true voice of the people.

We can thus say that three characteristics define the populist discourse: 1) élites are not trustable because they have betrayed the people; 2) the common people are under attack, thus generating an ‘Us vs Them’ attitude; 3) populism stipulates that a leader must not be a ‘constructor/creator’, but rather a ‘defender’<sup>22</sup>. Having identified these three characteristics in the *Leave.EU* corpus the next step is to check whether the *Daily Mail* corpus replicates the specific traits of this discourse and if the two corpora mirror each other.

## 6. The *Daily Mail* and the *Leave.EU* Facebook Page Corpora

The *Daily Mail* corpus, in line with the populist characteristics identified, shows a number of issues that are characterised by a common denominator, namely, that of portraying immigration as a cluster of ‘problematic’ issues, namely the ‘quantity’, the ‘danger’ and the ‘answer to the problem’. All these areas generate a thematic context whose entity implies the existence of several situations that must be perceived as dangerous and so the need for an answer is triggered. In order to be more effective and aligned with other media the problematic attitude is attributed not only to immigration, but also to the policies on migration, to the Government’s attitude towards this complex phenomenon and to the EU’s position on the problem.

Four articles show the highest frequency of *immigration* and their titles are:

1. Conman Blair’s cynical conspiracy to deceive the British people and let in 2million migrants against the rules: Explosive new biography lays ex-PM’s betrayal bare.
2. How Blair silenced debate over migrant influx and refused to acknowledge public’s doubts about open borders.
3. My friend David Cameron knows full well what remaining in the EU means for immigration - we simply can’t control it, writes former adviser STEVE HILTON.
4. EU makes it harder for us to control migration, admits Home Secretary.

<sup>22</sup> It is curious that the major populist leaders such as Farage and Trump are both clearly from their backgrounds members of the elite, but to some extent outcast ones.

The flow of immigrants towards the UK is thus identified as a conspiracy of the élites against the British people. Thus, the polarization ‘Us vs Them’ or, stated otherwise, the *betrayed* and the *migrants* is evident. One can also note the use of *simply* in the third title and the implicit need/call, simple to understand, for



Figure 11: Leave.EU Facebook post.

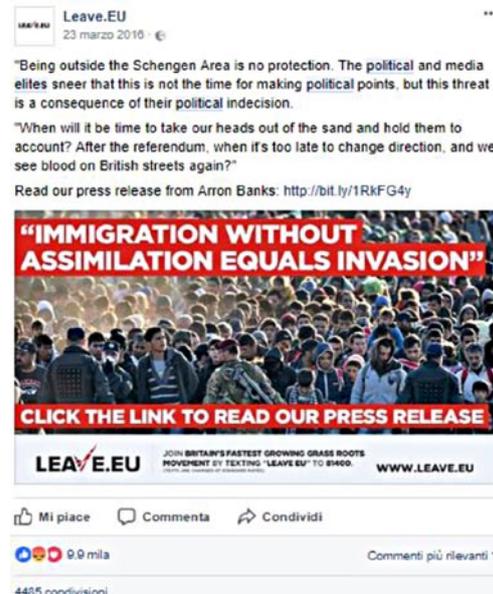


Figure 12: Leave.EU Facebook post.

The third title also indicates an important shift in the communicative strategy: while in the previous ones the impossibility of debating on the topic *immigration* was advocated, now several generic elements are offered to imply that there is no need for a debate anymore, since the situation is clear, *simply*. The Z-score<sup>23</sup> (table 1) for *immigration* reveals a typical pattern of the ideological language whose aim

Rank	Collocate	Z-Score	Texts	Total frequency
1	IMMIGRATION	173,74	331	1033
2	MASS	26,65	53	62
3	POLICY	17,16	39	52
5	LEVELS	16,05	20	25
6	FILTERED	15,57	2	4
7	ENFORCEMENT	14,66	7	13
9	SCALE	13,57	14	22
11	ANTI	12,67	21	27
13	CONTROL	12,04	34	51
15	POLICIES	10,74	12	16
17	UNCONTROLLED	10,68	11	11

Table 1: Z-score for node word immigration.

is to generate consensus, i.e. to maintain the description of the object/problem as undetermined as possible so that the reader/hearer can adjust his/her perception to the framework suggested, in this case, that of fear.

<sup>23</sup> A suitable tool to verify this aspect is the *Z-score*: a statistical index used to measure a specific relationship between a node word and the words, named collocates, which occur in its ‘neighbourhood’, i.e. a window span of five words to the left and to the right of the node word. The higher the value, the higher the likelihood two words collocate not by chance, but because of the author’s intention. Thus, types (vocabulary), tokens (frequency), collocations (the Z-score) and distribution allow us to index and realise a four-dimension matrix that maps the ways meaning is instantiated in a specific text and shapes reality.

a better control of immigration that should not be determined by the Schengen Agreement. It is interesting to note that, since there is a *cynical conspiracy to deceive*, the campaigners use deception as well, as we have already shown. The use of *admits* in the fourth title, attributed to the Home Secretary, legitimates the idea of a 'conspiracy' about something that cannot be told. Figures 11 and 12 show the same attitude and language at work.

*Mass immigration* is the most important and frequent combination with the node word, followed by *immigration policy*. This is a pattern observed in crisis communication (Conoscenti 2004: 128-153) when there is a need to generate a hysterical approach/reaction to a problem. The first step is to generate a general alarming message to induce a shift in public opinion from the concept of risk, a statistical one, to the one of fear, an emotional one. *The true scale of immigration*, representing the general strategy of reporting data that cannot be statistically counted and referred to, is present 11 times in the corpus, thus generating an alarming halo around an undetermined informative space. The second step is to offer a solution to the problem, in this case the *enforcement of an immigration policy* that, of course, is not the EU one. Furthermore, *mass* is connoted in a negative way to underline the unsustainability of the migratory



Figure 13: Leave.EU Facebook post.

flow and *policy* is bivalent. When associated to the UK it implies the actions that should/could be taken by an 'independent' UK, but that are frustrated by the EU policies. The concept, to meet the standards of a populist communication, is extended to the *policies* in general, especially the economic ones, and declined in a nostalgic, nationalistic way as in figure 13:

Another example is offered by an article entitled:

RIP this Britain: With academic objectivity, Oxford Professor and population expert DAVID COLEMAN says white Britons could be in the minority by the 2060s - or sooner.



Figure 14: Leave.EU Facebook post.



Figure 15: Leave.EU Facebook post.

The other is the endorsement of the UKIP positions after the results of the referendum. The page is still very active in reframing the current stall of the negotiations with Brussels and trying to 'mask' possible accusations of xenophobia. On the one hand they report an attempt of *independence from the rule of Sadiq Khan's bureaucratic "Mini-EU"* by the London Borough of Havering (figure 16).



Figure 16: Leave.EU Facebook post.



Figure 17: Leave.EU Facebook post.

Here the preoccupation for the current WASP Britain is sustained by an *academic objectivity* that is mitigated by the premodifications *could be*. It is then reframed in the master narrative of fear *by the 2060s - or sooner*. This also explains two other thematic contexts developed by the Leave.EU posts. One is the vicinity with the issues, policies and rhetoric of Donald Trump, witnessed by frequent posts that glorify the *special relationship* with the Trump-led US (figure 14 and 15).

On the other hand (figure 17), the posts celebrate the new “great UKIP leadership candidate David Kurten”. The fact that he is a black man, they imply, is a guarantee that the party is not xenophobic.

All the evidence collected in the corpora shows that the national identity issue plays a fundamental role in this strategic communication and that is why it is referred to, directly or indirectly, within the discourse of immigration. It is an emotional element that helps to delimit in a sharper way the boundaries of ‘Us vs Them’ reinforcing the CM STATE IS A FAMILY (figure 18). RIP, in title 4 previously quoted, declares the existence of such a national identity, otherwise it could not die, and the risk this peculiar FAMILY is facing. Other posts warn supporters of the importance of this key-concept with reassuring smiling multi-ethnic members (figure 19).



Figure 18: Leave.EU Facebook post.



Figure 19: Leave.EU Facebook post.

In this case, too, similar examples can be found in the *Daily Mail* corpus with titles like:

Vote Leave to take control of your family’s destiny, Boris tells women: Former London mayor says ‘out of control’ immigration is depriving families of access to schools, homes and health care.

It is evident that these statements contribute to reinforcing the CM IMMIGRATION IS A CRISIS. The Z-score for the node word *crisis* (table 2) shows that the crisis is attributed to *migrant* and *refugee*.

*Europe's* collocates immediately after them and is thus framed, at the same time, as the agent and the patient of the *crisis*. Once this ambivalent relationship has been established, its ideological connotation can be realised. All the collocates that follow *Europe* back the negative perception of the situation and feed the destabilizing fear discourse.

Rank	Collocate	Z-score	Texts	Total Frequency
1	CRISIS	181,66	120	279
2	MIGRANT	32,61	39	58
3	REFUGEE	27,53	26	44
4	EUROPE'S	20,68	12	14
9	ARISING	15,26	2	2
10	ENGULFING	15,26	2	2
11	THIEVES	15,26	1	2
12	HARSHEST	15,26	2	2
15	AFFECTED	14,47	3	7
18	MIGRATION	13,20	32	39
20	WORST	12,95	7	7
22	ENGULFED	12,41	2	2
23	COLOSSAL	12,41	2	2

Table 2: Z-score for node word crisis.

The previously identified

problematic issues of 'quantity' and 'danger' are constantly reinforced throughout the entire corpus so that the reader is ready to accept the 'answer to the problem'. The hinted solution is the need for a new immigration policy since the current one, imposed by the EU, has generated this *mass immigration*. Nonetheless, the only practical solutions offered within the corpus are generic *full* and *stronger border controls* against the *fragility of the European border system* and *to cut the net migration* and *to cut migration to the tens of thousands*. Given that the corpus covers the referendum campaign, it is evident that the discourse of *mass immigration*, associated with the EU policies, suggests that the only viable solution to the problem is the exit from the Union.

## 7. Conclusion. EUROPE IS A BROKEN WINDOW (?)

This paper has demonstrated the ability of the *Vote Leave* campaign to generate a fear discourse that has been realised by means of CMs and metaphoric scenarios that rely on a populist argumentation and on deliberately false information offered to ground the debate. As Musolff has demonstrated, this did not make a difference for British voters. All the examples provided support his idea that certain

figurative scenarios... which are firmly entrenched in a discourse community, provide a platform for introducing plausible frames for assessing and interpreting the facts and figures that the public uses to form their opinions on political issues. It is not the side with 'the most' or 'best' facts that wins but the one that provides the most plausible, i.e. seemingly intuitively reliable scenarios. (Musolff 2017: 12)

We have seen that *Vote Leave* has leveraged on a number of potential and unexpressed xenophobic issues already present in the British society, building on them and pushing them to the tipping point to generate an all-encompassing fear discourse. At the same time the *Remain* campaign and the EU were unable to contrast this strategy, thus leaving opponents free to act. The tipping point

has transformed EUROPE IN A BROKEN WINDOW. The broken window is a criminological theory on anti-social behaviour (Wilson, Kelling 1982) stating that maintaining and monitoring urban environments to prevent small crimes prevents more serious crimes from happening. The authors argue that crime is the inevitable result of disorder. If a window is broken and left unrepaired, passers-by will conclude that no one cares and no one is in charge. Soon, more windows will be broken, and the sense of anarchy will spread from the relative building to the street sending a signal that anything is accepted. Given the metaphor scenario that *Vote Leave* generated, it is possible to reframe this sociological theory within a discourse analysis perspective and consider fear discourse as an anti-social behaviour that must be prevented in a specific virtual environment, i.e. the social media. If not properly addressed it is the equivalent of a broken window, i.e. an invitation to more serious crimes. The merit of *Vote Leave* is that they were able to interpret the sentiments of British society and to cross big data with small data, thus generating a tipping point that made the difference. But it was based on deception. Given the context and the quantity of people involved, I consider this a social behaviour that should be compared to a crime, since false posts are like a broken window and can tip, in a very short time, a communicative epidemic. The tipping point in this epidemic was the *NHS - Take Back Control* bus. I maintain that in the case of Brexit the *Broken Windows* theory and the *Power of Context* are one and the same. The campaigners generated a 'majority illusion', i.e. "a state that is globally rare in a network [is] dramatically over-represented in the local neighbourhood of many individuals" (Lerman, Yan, Wu 2016). The false figures on the movement's members and the bus are the first steps of this process, followed by the generic figures on immigrants that made the fear discourse possible. *Vote Leave* thus generated an informative environment where the spatial local/global continuum does not exist anymore and the virtual, physical and geographical 'window' is broken in terms of narrative and specific language/lexicon generation.

Since the mechanisms of this process have been exposed and since the broken windows theory and the *Power of Context* are both based on the premise that "an epidemic can be reversed, can be tipped, by tinkering with the smallest details of the immediate environment" (Gladwell 2002: 118), a strategic communicative plan must be designed to generate a new interpretative framework of the EU and to introduce specific correctives in the discourse. These will favour effective institutional communication in the form of a counter narrative that will exploit the concept of the majority illusion, too. The discourse analysis approach will thus make sure that analysed data are reframed in a way that aligns the decoded and encoded messages with the desired target audience through a specific language engineering activity. In this way, management of the public debate on the EU can be maximised to increase awareness and empathy towards the issue so that the message production on the social media is aligned with the desired master message. The 'weaponization' of the social media themselves will thus be prevented.

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