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Social media and Security:

Digital securitisation in a post-truth society

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Abstract

At 07.04 a.m. on Friday 24th June 2016, the verdict of the EU referendum became unequivocal: The United Kingdom had voted to leave the European Union. At 8 a.m. Prime Minister David Cameron ended the speech with his resignation and further deepened the magnitude of a vote that has made history as the first digital referendum and first vote in the post-truth era.

For the first time in British politics, the internet was the prioritised platform for political campaigning. Both the Remain and Leave fronts conducted an active and vigorous social media campaign through big data mining, micro-targeting and data analytics in the attempt to digitally engage with their respective audiences and convince the undecided voters. The digital battle that followed was characterised by ideological polarisation and blatant misinformation that ended up constructing a fact-free environment where the power of truth for solving society's problems was lastingly reduced. One of the key points of the Leave front was to 'Take back control' over economic and immigration policies from the European Union. Their online propaganda specifically focused on migration and a persuasive digital campaign was delivered to securitise the figure of the migrant. The Leave front message was highly emotionally charged on immigration matters and such a sentiment driven method facilitated a viral and successful spread of their ideas on the web.

The aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between social media networks and global security by understanding how the securitisation theory functions

at a digital level in the current post-truth society. The thesis of the research will support the argument that social networks have increased sentiment driven politics and dangerously simplified securitisation. The research will be further strengthened by looking at how computational propaganda fake news have lowered the quality of the political debate and challenged power structures. As a final remark, it will be hypothesised that the elite may be benefiting from the chaotic pluralism of social media and the post-truth society.

The research will be divided into four distinct chapters. *Chapter I* will explain how security is socially constructed and analyse the securitisation approach of the Copenhagen School. *Chapter II* will mark the beginning of the critical exploration: analysis will be conducted to show how digital securitisation works at a discursive and visual level. *Chapter III* will contextualise securitisation within the present post-truth society. The section will put forward the hypothesis that social networks and post-truth are strengthening the political elites. To do so, the chapter will focus on how the internet is fragmentising the public and allowing politicians to recentralise power. Finally, in *Chapter IV* the digital campaign of the Leave.EU group will be visually and discursively analysed to show how digital securitisation is practised. Tweets and Facebook posts will be examined to show how the figure of the migrant has been securitised, utilised to gain votes and win the EU referendum. The digital propaganda of the Leave.EU campaign will be critically reviewed to show how filter bubbles and echo chambers function and unveil how fake news are destabilising the character and tone of online political speech and debate. Then, the partnership between the Leave.EU and Cambridge Analytica will be included to support the hypothesis that the elite may be benefiting from digital media and post-truth politics.

Methodology

The research starts by analysing IR constructivist theoretical frameworks and the literature around the Copenhagen School's securitisation theory. The research is built upon qualitative research that was strengthened with quantitative data. Due to the nature of the paper, research will also be completed on social media platforms by monitoring certain hashtags and relevant accounts. Overall, the qualitative material provided a valid starting point to develop personal insights on the chosen topic. Thus, statistical data provided numerical evidence that were needed for the empirical

evidence of the case study. The benefit of blending qualitative research with quantitative material was that it allowed a comprehensive approach to a combined study of social media and security.

The Leave.EU group was the chosen case study because their digital engagement suited the set argument better than the Vote.Leave or any other campaign group. The decision was also motivated by other considerations. At present, the Leave.EU is the only group that is still active on Facebook and Twitter. It is still engaged in a vigorous online propaganda around migration, in tones that strengthen the validity of the proposed research.

Findings

The rise of social media platforms has challenged the modern political structures. Social media networks have created a chaotic pluralism where the different audiences are better described by chaos theory rather than by conventional social sciences. This chaotic reality may be empowering the already powerful elite as well as deteriorating the quality of the political debate. The digitisation wave has altered the social conditions under which securitisation is triggered and enacted. At present, securitisation is not simply processed through speech acts, attitudes or gestures but it is executed through a wider spectrum of practices that include filter bubbles and echo chambers. Thus, social networks have become a platform to securitise a given object, especially because the internet allows to reach a wider audience without intermediary actors.

As a matter of fact, social media have simplified political debates by encouraging sentiment driven politics and rendered the entire political process a highly emotional and interactive action between the elite and the audience. Thus, the aim of the research was to critically illustrate the role of social media in political campaigns. It explored the relation between new media and securitisation in order to unveil how securitisation is enacted at a digital level in the present post-truth society.

Overall, the paper aimed at contributing to the academic debate by shedding light on the relevance that the internet has gained in political campaign and more broadly to security studies. This investigation on the social science of the Internet brings fascinating findings regarding how the digitisation of social and political life

is disrupting democracy and put forward new debates on the volatility and instability of political life.