

## MSC 529-0: Power in Organizations

### Post-Truth Power Assignment

**Prompt:** What can we learn from “Brexit: The Uncivil War” about how technology is changing communication?

The Brexit film gives a wealth of applicable real-life examples in terms of how technology has changed communications. By tapping into cutting-edge technology companies such as AggregateIQ and Cambridge Analytica, the Leave campaign achieved an incredible edge over their competition by identifying previously unknown potential voters, collecting data, and micro-targeting advertisements that could be updated in real-time as more information became available. Their early adopter status and ability to keep the Remain campaign in the dark about their methods allowed them to keep this tremendous advantage exclusive to their side throughout the campaign. In addition, they were able to tap into psychological concepts that are common among internet users, such as loneliness, confirmation bias, and the online disinhibition effect. As Cummings aptly states in the film, “Conventional wisdom is a disease that the British are peculiarly susceptible to, and [the Remain campaign] certainly hasn’t been inoculated” (*Brexit: The Uncivil War*). The Remain campaign focused on tried-and-true methods and outdated assumptions, while the Leave campaign embraced and implemented every new technology available to them and relied exclusively on empirical data. Ultimately, the Remain campaign was playing checkers while the Leave campaign was playing chess, allowing them to predict the opposition’s next several moves and adeptly plan accordingly.

Cummings achieved a significant advantage against the Remain campaign by using technology to identify an enormous group of people—three million—who the other side did not even know existed. The Remain side was using a government database, which only identified individuals who had already been voting. Cummings discovered an entirely new, previously unknown voting base by partnering with Zach Massingham’s company AggregateIQ. These non-

voting individuals had never been spoken to by a political campaign, nor had they felt their needs were heard. According to Smith and Alheneidi, “documented internet use patterns suggest that the internet increases loneliness,” meaning the fact that these people were spending significant time on the internet likely made them feel even less connected and heard. This allowed Cummings to tap into their “anti-establishment” and “angry” feelings and simply direct them in a way that was beneficial to his campaign (*Brexit: The Uncivil War*). By adding millions more people to the conversation, one key learning to consider is that success, whether the focus is politics or product marketing, is a numbers game. If you create an advertisement that typically has a 25% conversion rate, for example, and you can target that ad toward one million more people than your competitor, you’ve just converted 250,000 new customers or voters. We can’t just be thinking about marketing to our own Instagram followers or newsletter subscribers. We must think outside of the box on ways to find those who have not heard of or considered our product yet and reach out to them.

Not only did Cummings identify a new group of people to target, but he used data to learn as much as possible about them. As Massingham states in the film, “These social media platforms know what questions we’re asking, what keeps us awake at night, when we sleep, where we go, who we go there with. Therefore, the system can make predictions, and it does. Embarrassingly accurate ones” (*Brexit: The Uncivil War*). This knowledge is invaluable for identifying their targeted voters’ interests, strengths, and weaknesses, and worlds beyond the quaint method of data-gathering via focus groups employed by the Remain campaign. Furthermore, the Leave campaign was not solely relying on online data, but also combining it with electoral roll, canvassing, and polling data for as much of a comprehensive picture of the voter as possible. This resulted in voters being more receptive to the Leave campaign’s

advertisements which appeared to be speaking to their specific wants, needs, and frustrations. As we think about how to craft persuasive messages in the future, it is critical to use the information at hand to do so, rather than throwing things at the wall to see what sticks. Ignoring the information — or not doing our due diligence to track it down — and simply trying to come up with something clever will put us at risk of missing the mark.

Cummings and Massingham took the information they gathered one step further by micro-targeting individuals. Massingham was able to present voters with a variety of different advertisements that tapped into knowledge acquired about each of them. Additionally, Massingham's software could "test how effective certain ads are to certain people, in terms of liking, clicking, sharing, and then learn how to adapt them, to improve them, in real-time" (*Brexit: The Uncivil War*). We can learn a lot about the power of personalization from their success. According to Boston Consulting Group, "Leaders in personalization grow revenue 10 percentage points faster annually than laggards and enjoy higher customer satisfaction scores." Moreover, a study claims that "Well-executed personalization can deliver five to eight times the return on investment on marketing spend and lift sales by ten percent or more" (Deloitte). With limited funds, squeezing the most out of marketing budgets is as important as it ever has been. Consumers are constantly inundated with advertising which can grow annoying, so breaking through that clutter with messages that tap into their specific interests and needs may be a winning formula.

Another benefit that micro-targeting provided specifically in the political context was the power of concealing the Leave campaign's full range of messages and advertising from the other side as well as journalists. The Remain campaign struggled to develop an effective counterstrategy simply because they had no idea what anyone besides themselves were seeing.

Had they known, they might have been able to counteract some of the more tenuous arguments employed by the Leave campaign through a media blitz pointing out their falsehoods. Instead, the Remain campaign struggled through in-person data collection without having the full picture of which messages were influencing these voters' attitudes and opinions. This also put the Remain campaign in the position of putting out fires. They might become aware of one message and try to correct the falsehoods one week, only to be hit with another issue the next week due to the ever-changing nature of the Leave campaign's algorithms. This put them in a constant defensive position and made them unable to focus on the positive aspects of staying in the E.U. This shows us the immense power of being able to churn out new and constantly improving messages with ease while keeping your competitors in the dark. It is hardly a competition when those on the other side are missing critical information. To use an American football metaphor, this is like having full access to the other team's playbook while the competitor's coach can't even see what is happening on the field during the game.

Had both sides of the referendum had access to the same technology, this might have been a fair fight. But, by being an early adopter of AggregateIQ's system, the Leave campaign had a monumental head start. Despite an extreme lack of understanding within his own campaign, as evidenced by the comment by Euroskeptic Conservative MP Bill Cash "You mean the Facebook and things," as well as a high amount of skepticism displayed by Euroskeptic Conservative MP Bernard Jenkin's preference of old school methods over "new fangled tech stuff," Cummings held firm in his belief in new technology (*Brexit: The Uncivil War*). "We have to hack the political system, like a cyberhack" he stated. "Go in through the back door. Reprogram the system so it starts working for us. You're talking about posters and flyers, I'm talking about ordering the matrix of politics" (*Brexit: The Uncivil War*). By keeping

Massingham's presence in the Leave campaign's office quiet — even going so far as to have him tell people he was a "junior intern" — Cummings ensured that they kept their advantage by preventing the other side from even thinking about trying to match their technology. Meanwhile, the Remain campaign was driven by "conventional wisdom" that they simply couldn't seem to break out of, even when the writing was on the wall and their focus groups indicated they were in bad shape for the referendum. The Leave campaign is just one example of early adopters of a technology, concept, or service providing a significant competitive advantage. Consider the example of Blockbuster rejecting a bid to purchase Netflix due to its failure to see its considerable potential or Apple's market domination that continues after being first to market with a smartphone.

Another notable concept we can glean about technology is its ability to bring us together, but also to tear us apart. The film recognizes the divisive nature of a referendum, pitting people against each other in an us versus them debate. But, in real life, we see many personal examples of how social media can deepen political divides. According to Wike et al., "Just 34% of U.S. adults think social media has been good for democracy, while 64% say it has had a bad impact." With unlimited information at our fingertips, we can become overwhelmed and unable to look at every piece of data presented to us. This can lead to confirmation bias, the practice of seeking out information that supports our preconceived notions, and rejecting information that disputes it (Casad and Luebering). We see this quite often in debates about vaccines: individuals opposed to vaccines may do what they consider to be research on the internet, but mainly seek out those who support their own perceptions, regardless of their credibility. In addition, the anonymity of the internet provides ample opportunity for individuals to treat each other in a way that they never would in real life. According to the Center for Technology and Society, "Concerns about the role

of online anonymity in crime, dis- and misinformation, and toxic behavior from insults to cyberharassment are common—and not without good reason.” Even when online users are not anonymous, they may fall prey to the online disinhibition effect (Varghese), in which psychological barriers that would prevent certain behaviors in person are missing from online interactions, allowing users to treat people differently than they would in real life. Our online presence can, however, result in real consequences. This is important to note not only for our future careers in communication but also for our personal lives. Professionally, we must always remember to use tact on social media, as anyone can take a screenshot and share it with our employers, making it impossible to deny our statements.

In conclusion, there are many important takeaways on how technology is changing communication that we can apply to our future careers. One is to utilize the power of technology to identify new audiences. We no longer have to wait until customers come to us and opt-in to our communications. We can share our messages with them on practically any site they are already using, giving us a direct line to potential buyers, clients, or voters. Another important lesson is to listen to the data. Cummings’ comment “The software will tell us what to push and what not to push to win” (*Brexit: The Uncivil War*) can be applied to a variety of situations. While we are unlikely to have access to Massingham’s sophisticated tools anytime soon, we can still analyze data such as website browsing behavior or email open rates to hear what our potential customers are telling us and adjust accordingly. We should also embrace the power of targeting. Seeing the same ad content over and over is losing its effectiveness. Targeting allows us to personalize and deliver the right message to the right person at the right time. Another important lesson is the incredible benefits we can reap as early adopters. While others convince themselves that new technology will never catch on, we can act quickly to be at the forefront and

gain a huge head start. With these many lessons, however, we should also use caution when interacting online. An abundance of information does not necessarily mean an abundance of *quality* information, and we must take care to evaluate the sources that we use. The internet can also deepen divisions and cause us to act in ways that are not typical of our real-world behavior. With technology playing a major role in our everyday lives, the Leave campaign exposes our willingness to not only trust technology but rely on it to achieve our desired outcomes.

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