

*3rd European Conference on Argumentation*

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# A Paroxysm of Dissent: Partisan Political Advertising During the Brexit Campaign

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# Introduction

- ❖ Started as an argument analysis activity
  - ❖ What kinds of arguments did the leave campaigns choose to use?
- ❖ However: The wider story, the context in which these arguments were deployed became just as, if not more, interesting
  - ❖ Demonstrating the power that partisan political messaging (in the form of adverts) can have & how this power can be multiplied by the addition of digital technologies.

# The Referendum

- ❖ 23rd June 2016 - EU referendum held
- ❖ Aim: to advise the UK government of the opinion of the electorate in relation to the future relationship between the UK & the EU
- ❖ Result:
  - ❖ Leave (51.89%)
  - ❖ Remain (48.11%)
  - ❖ Turnout (72.21%)

Referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union	
Vote only once by putting a cross <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> in the box next to your choice	
Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?	
Remain a member of the European Union	<input type="checkbox"/>
Leave the European Union	<input type="checkbox"/>

# Debate Prior to the Referendum

- ❖ Robust, vigorous, disharmonious, polarising, & contentious
- ❖ Poor standards of debate & communication from the outset (even amongst political leaders)
- ❖ Poor standards of debate even now (3 years and 4 days later)
  - ❖ The same arguments rehearsed by the same politicians, online commentators, &c.

# Two Instances of Messaging

- ❖ From the leave side of the argument
- ❖ Selected to illustrate the tone & tenor of the pre-referendum national debate (& arguably still relevant to the current post-referendum / pre-something-actually-happening debate )

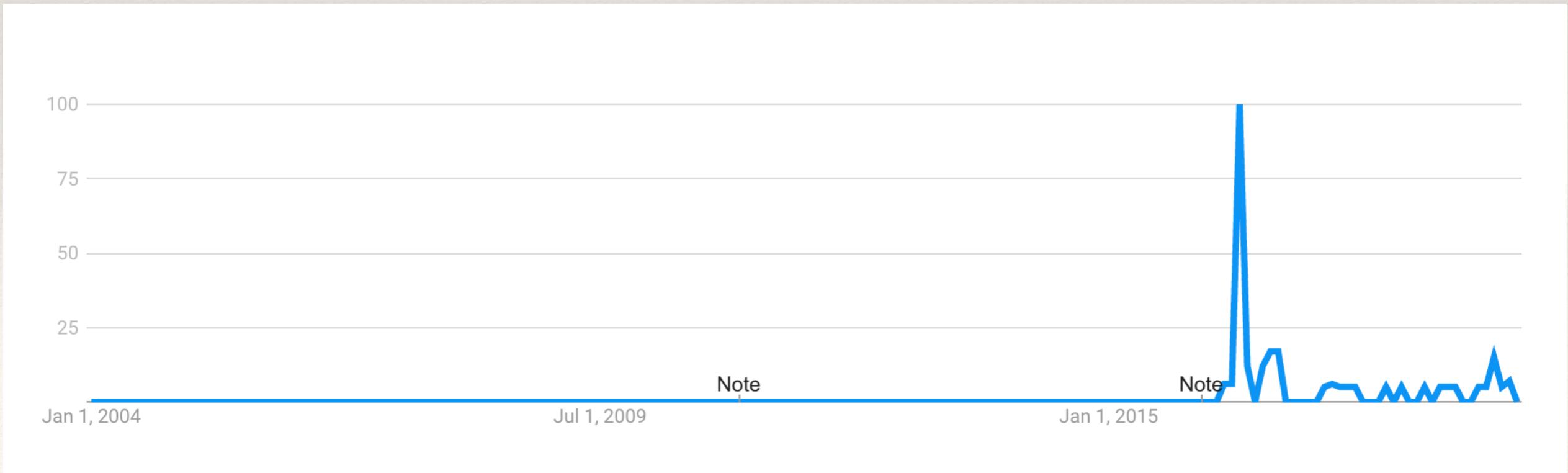
1.The Vote Leave Bus

2.Britain at Breaking Point Mobile Advert



# “£350 million a week”

- ❖ UK statistics authority identified that this was “potentially misleading” in April 2016
- ❖ This figure is still used both by politicians, public commentators, & private citizens
- ❖ This figure (along with the £50M/day figure crop up frequently)
- ❖ A simple message that delivers a key point can be very effective in occupying a voters decision process





UKIP Poster (June 2016)

# “Breaking Point”

- Accused of stoking anti-immigrant feeling through the use of racist tropes
- Caused the official leave campaign to distance itself from UKIP

- ❖ “I think there is a difference between addressing those concerns [about immigration] in a reasonable way and whipping up concerns, whipping up division, making baseless assertions that millions of people are going to come into the country in the next couple of years from Turkey, or saying that dead bodies are going to wash up on the beaches of Kent – or, indeed, putting up that disgusting and vile poster that Nigel Farage did which had echoes of literature used in the 1930s.”

— George Osborne

*(then British Chancellor of the Exchequer)*



parasites, undermining  
their host countries,

# Subsequent Investigations

- ❖ Doubt has been cast on the veracity of the referendum result
- ❖ Not that votes were directly manipulated
  - ❖ But that collusion between leave campaigns breached regulations (particularly associated with spending limits)
  - ❖ & that campaigns shared information (contrary to data protection regulations) in order to target their campaigns
- ❖ Investigations by
  - ❖ Electoral Commission - Independent body that regulates party and election finance, and defines the standards for elections and referenda
    - ❖ Twice found against groups supporting the leave campaign
  - ❖ House of Commons Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Select Committee (the remit of this was more focussed on “disinformation & fake news”)
    - ❖ The interim report raises a possible Russian Connection
    - ❖ The interesting part was the submission of advertising data from Facebook & the wider context of information gathering & iterative refinement of adverts to targeted individuals.

# Facebook Dataset

- ❖ Instances of paid advertisements (alongside metadata)
- ❖ Used by leave-supporting campaign groups seeking to persuade targeted Facebook users to vote to leave
- ❖ Multiple groups operated beneath the wider umbrella of the Leave campaign:
  - ❖ BrexitCentral/BeLeave, Vote Leave, and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Northern Ireland,
  - ❖ All used paid adverts on social media to target specific groups of UK voters via FaceBook in order to influence their vote.

# Goals

- ❖ To analyse the arguments used in the leave campaign adverts.
  - ❖ This is not itself meant to be partisan so I have made the most charitable interpretation of the original arguments when necessary.
- ❖ To understand the strategies that appear to have been increase the effect of the adverts.
- ❖ Use this dataset as a naturally defined collection - there are so many sources of information on this topic that trying to analyses even just all of the adverts or “official” communications would be problematic (compounded by trying to incorporate ancillary information)

# Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

- ❖ If it is in the select committee submission then it is eligible to be part of the core dataset
- ❖ No additional sources have been added to the core dataset
- ❖ No instances have been excluded from the dataset
- ❖ However there are multiple overlaps between messages used by different campaigns

# Analysis

- ❖ Argument Mapping using the MonkeyPuzzle software:
  - ❖ [Software] <http://arg.napier.ac.uk/monkeypuzzle/>
  - ❖ [Project] <http://arg.napier.ac.uk/page/project/monkeypuzzle/>
- ❖ Experimental software to explore method for integrating multiple interpretations of sources within a domain [Wells & Douglas (2017)]

# The Dataset

- ❖ Stored in a Git repository (timestamping, cryptographic integrity, version control)
- ❖ Will be publicised alongside the paper
- ❖ Constructed using the methodology & guidelines proposed in Wells & Pangbourne (2016)



# Advert #2877



- ❖ "Did you know that inside the EU over 60% of our laws are made from unelected foreign officials. Are they focused on their priorities or ours? Let's vote to leave the EU on 23 June so we can make our own decisions moving forward. BeLeave in Britain! BeLeave"



# Advert #2878



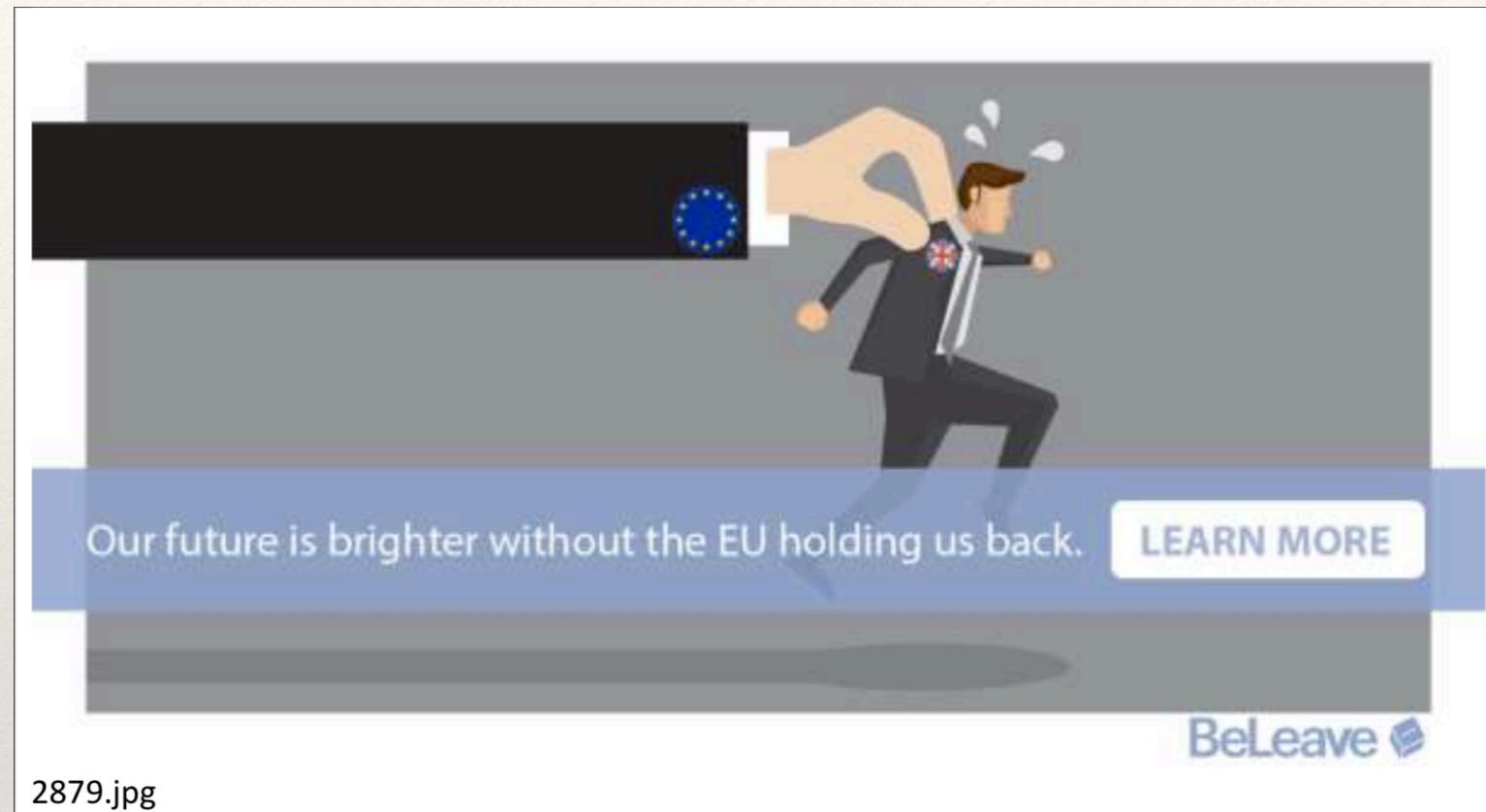
We need an immigration system that ensures British young people more jobs.

I AGREE

BeLeave 

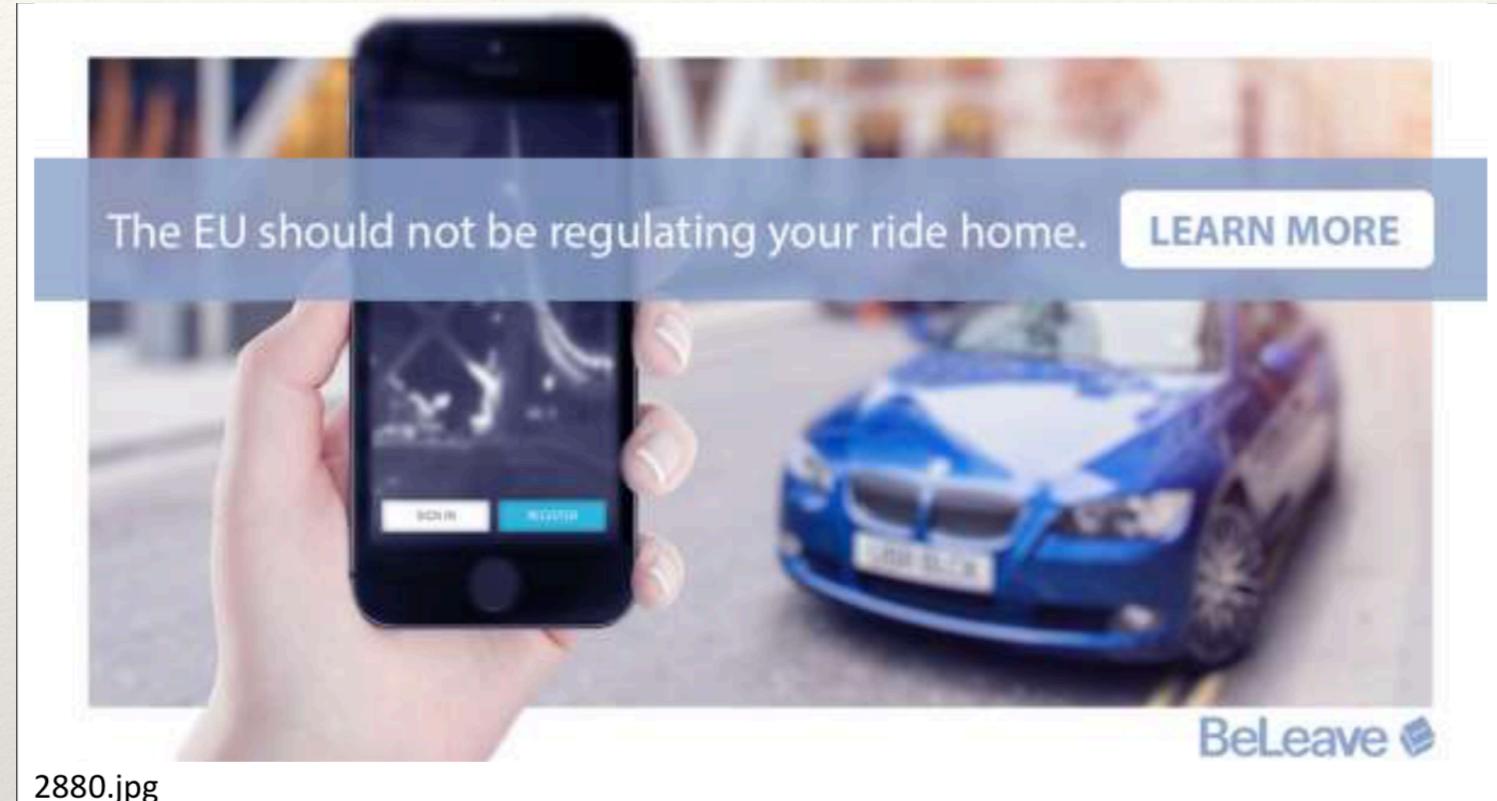
- ❖ "Under EU laws we are unable to create a fair immigration system that helps younger people get jobs in a competitive market. Let's vote to leave the EU on 23 June so we can make our own decisions moving forward. BeLeave in Britain! BeLeave"

# Advert #2879



- ❖ "Inside the EU our future is in controlled by unelected officials that have no idea what is important to us! Let's vote to leave the EU on 23 June so we can make our own decisions moving forward. BeLeave in Britain! BeLeave"

# Advert #2880



- ❖ "Did you know that the EU controls over 60% of our regulations? Why do we let them do this? Let's vote to leave the EU on 23 June so that we can take back control of our regulations! BeLeave in Britain! BeLeave"

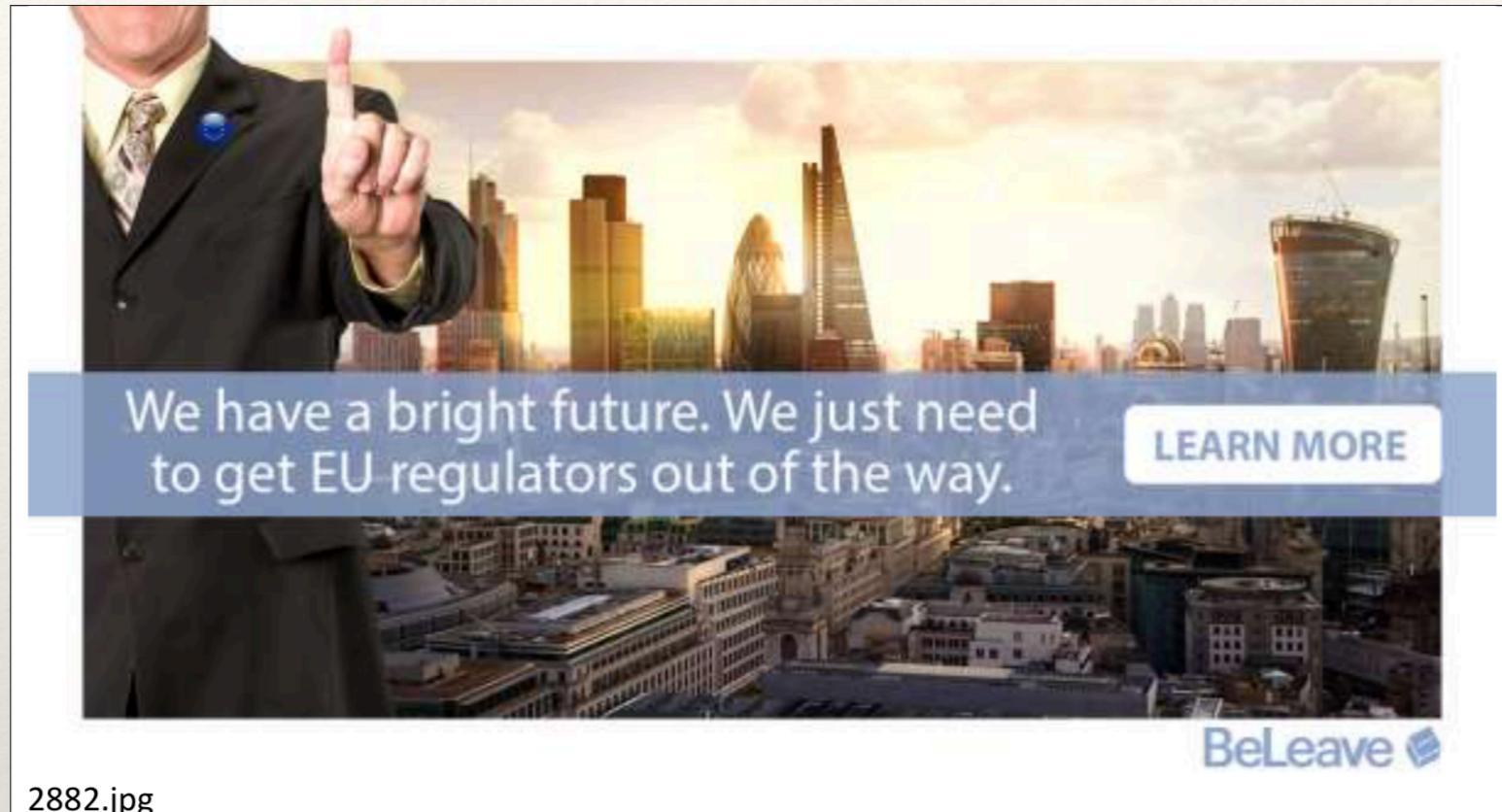


# Advert #2881



- ❖ "Inside the EU, we are powerless to control our nation's future. Isn't it time we chart our own destiny and chase the opportunities we know will make Britain successful? Let's vote to leave the EU on 23 June so we can have a clear and prosperous future! BeLeave in Britain! BeLeave"

# Advert #2882



- ❖ "Outside of the EU we will become a prosperous and competitive nation that is equipped to lead on a global stage. Let's stop EU regulators from controlling our great nation! Let's vote to leave the EU on 23 June so we can make our own decisions moving forward. BeLeave in Britain! BeLeave"



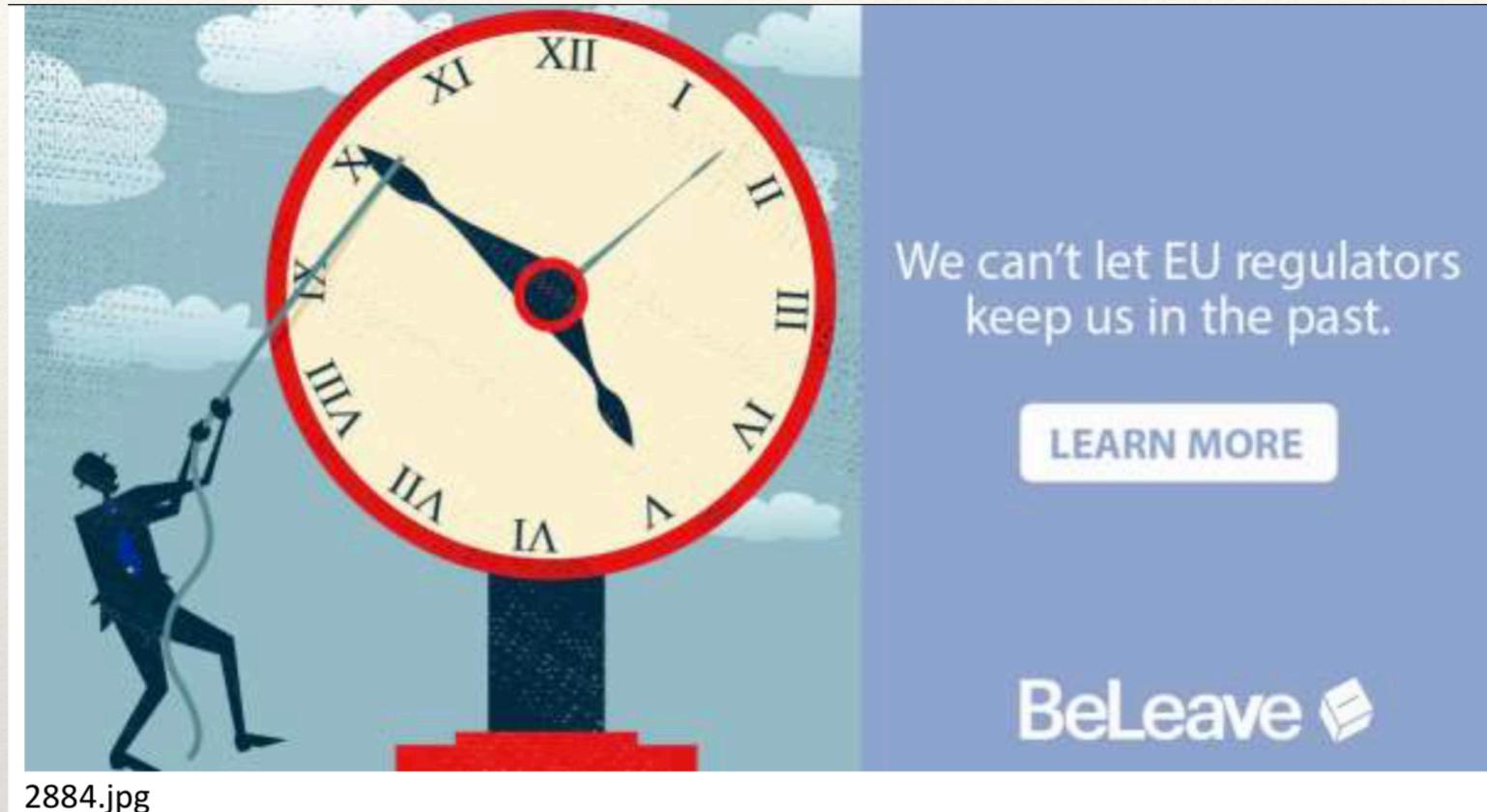
# Advert #2883



- ❖ "Inside the EU our future is controlled by unelected officials that have no idea what is important to us! Shouldn't we be in control of our future? Let's vote to leave the EU on 23 June so we can have a clear and prosperous future! BeLeave in Britain! BeLeave"

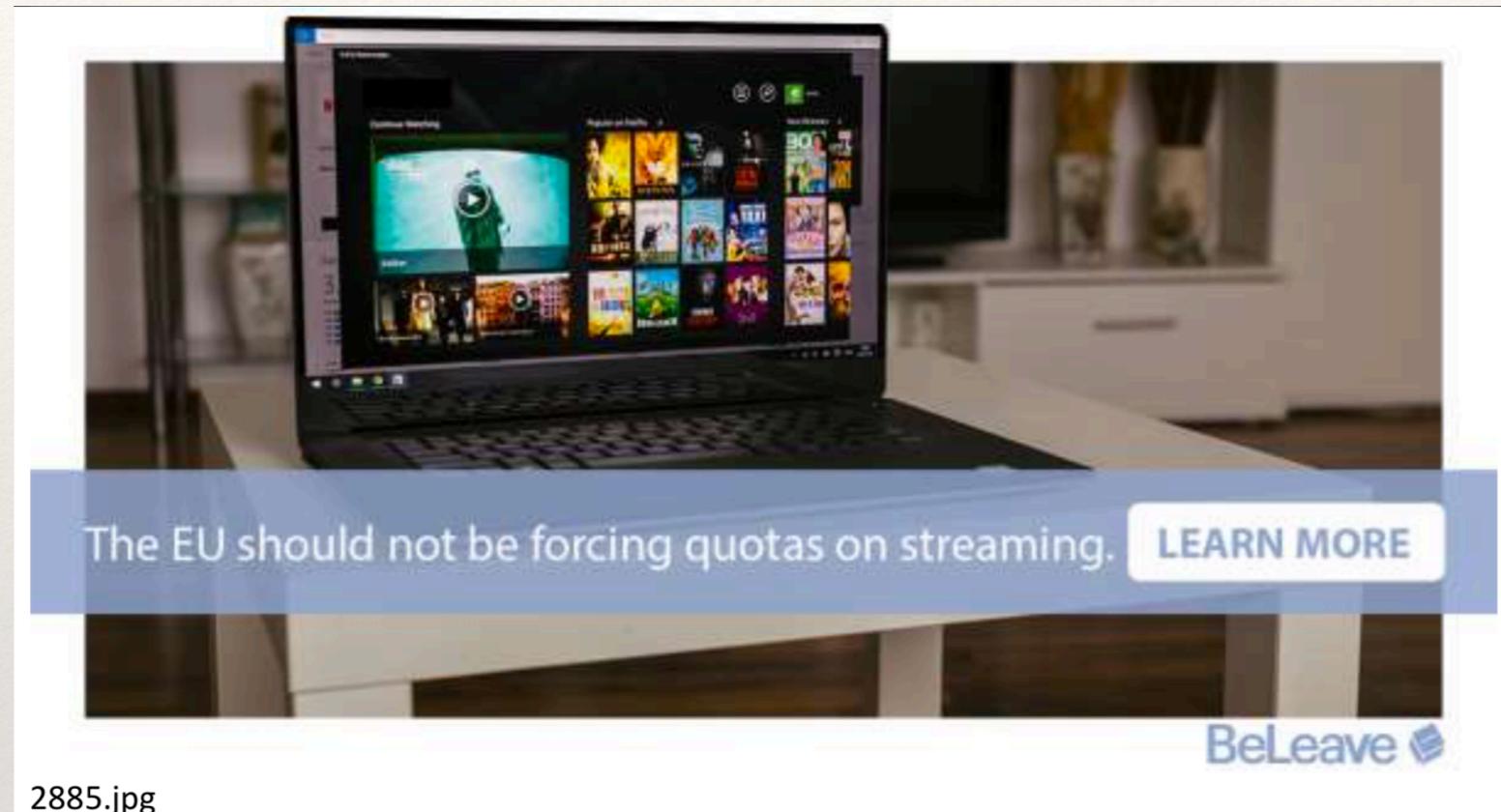


# Advert #2884



- ❖ "Under EU regulations we are unable to pave a prosperous path for our nation's future. Isn't it time we became an independent power again and reclaim our national sovereignty? Let's vote to leave the EU on 23 June so we can have a clear and prosperous future! BeLeave in a Brighter Future BeLeave"

# Advert #2885



- ❖ "The EU should not be able to tax and force quotas on our streaming services! It is time to Brexit and chill. Let's vote to leave the EU on 23 June so we can have a clear and prosperous future! BeLeave in a Brighter Future BeLeave"

# Advert #2886



- ❖ "Being under EU rule is severely restricting our ability to grow and reach our full potential as a great nation. It is time we take a stand for Britain. Let's vote to leave the EU on 23 June so we can have a clear and prosperous future! BeLeave in Britain! BeLeave"



# Advert #2887



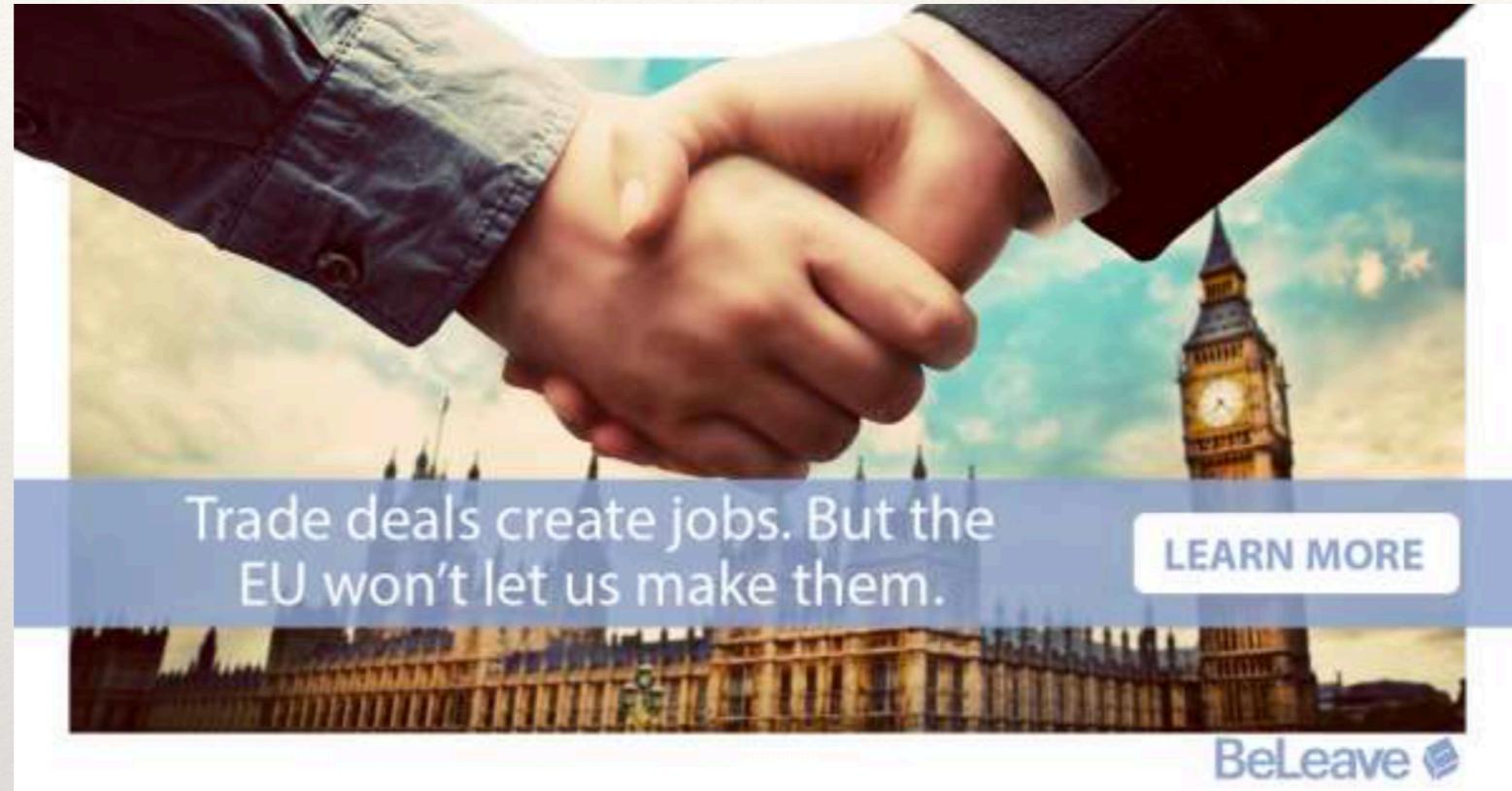
We need a fair immigration system that doesn't discriminate.

I AGREE

BeLeave 

- ❖ "With a fairer immigration system under our control we can bring in talent from all over the globe - without discrimination - while ensuring British young people more jobs and opportunities! Let's vote to leave the EU so we can have a clear and prosperous future! BeLeave in Britain! BeLeave"

# Advert #2888



- ❖ "EU protectionism has prevented our generation from benefiting from key trade deals. It is time we break free to give our country the freedom to be a prosperous and competitive nation! Let's vote to leave the EU on 23 June so we can chart our own destiny and chase the opportunities we know will make Britain successful. BeLeave in Britain! BeLeave"

# Advert #2889



- ❖ "EU protectionism has prevented our generation from benefiting from key global trade deals. It is time we unite to give our country the freedom to be a prosperous and competitive nation! Let's vote to leave the EU on 23 June so we can chart our own destiny and chase the opportunities we know will make Britain successful. BeLeave in Britain! BeLeave"

# Advert #2890



- ❖ "Pledge to vote on 23 June to bring in a fairer, points based immigration system so we can bring in talent from all over the globe - without discrimination - while ensuring British young people more jobs and opportunities! Let's vote to leave the EU on 23 June so we can make our own decisions moving forward. BeLeave In Britain! BeLeave"

# Advert #2891



- ❖ Pledge to vote on 23 June to build a bright and prosperous future for the NHS outside of the European Union Let's vote to leave the EU on 23 June so we can make our own decisions moving forward. BeLeave In Britain! BeLeave"

# Advert #2892



- ❖ "Pledge to vote on 23 June and join a movement of young people working to build a bright and prosperous future for Britain outside the European Union. Let's vote to leave the EU on 23 June so we can make our own decisions moving forward. BeLeave In Britain! BeLeave"

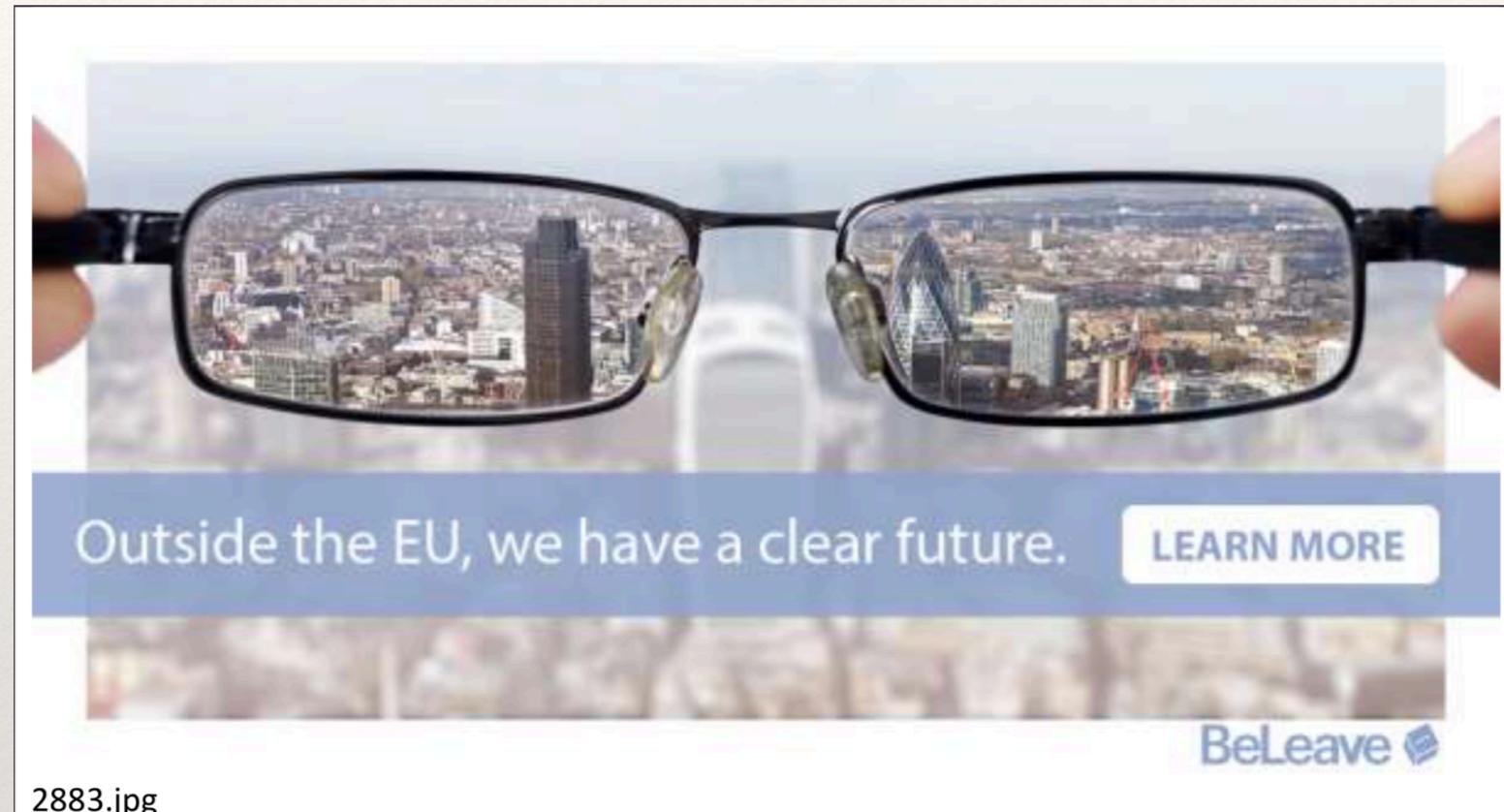


# Advert #2893



- ❖ "Let's vote to leave the EU on 23 June so we can make our own decisions moving forward."

# Advert #2895



- ❖ "Which do you prefer - our country controlled by unelected EU officials, or our country run by elected and accountable officials? This Thursday 23 June is our chance to take back control of our own country! Let's vote to leave the EU on 23 June so we can have a clear and prosperous future! BeLeave in a Brighter Future BeLeave"



# Advert #2900



- ❖ "Let's spend our money on our priorities. Pledge to vote on 23 June and join a movement of young people working to build a bright and prosperous future for Britain outside the European Union. Let's vote to leave the EU on 23 June so we can make our own decisions moving forward. BeLeave In Britain! BeLeave"

# Advert #2901



- ❖ "Let's spend our money on our priorities. Pledge to vote today and join a movement of young people working to build a bright and prosperous future for Britain outside the European Union. Let's vote to leave the EU today, 23 June, so we can have a clear and prosperous future! BeLeave In Britain! BeLeave"

# Argumentative Themes

- ❖ Binary/Polar arguments - identifies us versus them (classical notion of othering) & establishes/reinforces the idea of the UK never having been a part of the EU & always subservient (powerless)
- ❖ Negative Themes - EU associated with:
  - ❖ laws/regulations/control, unelected foreign officials/bureaucrats, out of touch/holding back/powerless, restricting ability to grow/innovate, protectionism, immigration (lack of control)
- ❖ Positive - The UK's future outside the EU:
  - ❖ Elected and accountable, Brighter/clearer futures, Chart own destiny, Chase opportunities, Prosperous, Competitive, Global, Sovereignty, (fulfilling own) potential, (setting own) priorities, Youthful , NHS
  - ❖ “Vote to be free” (2893)
  - ❖ Regulating ride sharing (2880) - ECJ ruling: Uber is a transport company & subject to local transport regulation
  - ❖ Streaming services (2885) - Content quota. 30% of catalogue in EU countries from EU producers

# £50 Million Competition

- ❖ Predict the outcome of each game in the European Championships
- ❖ Most successful will win £50,000 if nobody wins the full prize
- ❖ Why £50 Million? - Because no-one would insure a £350 Million prize
- ❖ Free to enter





# Voter Intention Collection System

- ❖ The price was personal data (integrated with electoral roll data)
- ❖ Part of the entry requirements involved personal contact details (log in via Facebook)
- ❖ Indication of how you will vote in the referendum (leave, stay, undecided)
- ❖ Integrated with traditional campaign information:
  - ❖ canvassing, social-media, online advertising, websites, mobile apps, direct mail, polls, online fundraising, activist feedback



# Models & Prediction?

- ❖ Data supplied to computational models to predict targets for canvassing efforts
- ❖ Online this equated to 1 Billion targets digital adverts mostly via Facebook weighted towards postal voting period and final 10 days of the campaign.
- ❖ Iterative process: Try lots of versions of the adverts, drop the least effective, reinforce the most effective.
  - ❖ Aim to have the most effective message reach the right person (& don't waste time targeting those who have already decided)

# Elements of Captology/Digital Persuasion

- ❖ The use of digital technology to effect behaviour change
- ❖ Usually deployed within an ethical framework to support elective behaviour change/habit formation
- ❖ Operates on the basis of informed consent
- ❖ Increasingly explored in healthcare, lifestyle, well-being, & sustainable behaviour contexts
- ❖ Dominant behaviour change techniques:
  - ❖ **Segmentation, Personalisation, Messaging, Rewards, Feedback, Gamification**



# Targeted Arguments

- ❖ Correctly targeting your audience has been a tactic within rhetoric going back to antiquity
- ❖ Similarly in advertising - newspapers, magazines, billboards, TV & radio time-slots: these are not randomly selected (but might be limited by budget).
  - ❖ Advertisers choose exactly where to locate their adverts & target specific sections of communities.
- ❖ The adverts were not deployed *ad hoc* to all social media users but to targeted voters via Facebook (at sc

# The Power of Simplicity

- ❖ The arguments were simple
- ❖ Those who used these arguments were successful
- ❖ Therefore it is reasonable to assume that these arguments had some role in the outcome
  - ❖ NB. It is difficult to gauge how much of a role
  - ❖ Countering simple arguments can require mental effort that many are unwilling to expend (or don't have the time or critical skills)
  - ❖ Often, those willing to engage had already formed positions so targeting those who were wavering or unsure was a low-effort tactic to bring folk to one side or the other
  - ❖ The leave side targeted these people effectively



# Preach to the Choir

- ❖ For many people, if an argument conforms with their world view then it has innate power
  - ❖ Perhaps you might not be as critical in examining it as otherwise?
  - ❖ You now have a reason to associate your prevailing world view & your voting intention

# Arguing for Change

- ❖ There is a seductive power to arguing for change & against the status quo
  - ❖ Especially when the targeted population has sustained multiple years of declining living / working / health / service standards (against a backdrop of austerity)



# Giving People Reason(s) to Dissent?

- ❖ Emergence of a strategy?
- ❖ Multiple tactics appear to lead towards success:
  - ❖ Target those who are unsure, and be effective in getting your argument before them
  - ❖ Formulate simple messages (Deliver, Refine & Repeat)
  - ❖ Formulate a diversity of messages (you don't need consistency - just one message that gives the target a "catalyst reason" for deciding)

# Reflection

- ❖ This might have been a one-off, lucky win for the leave campaign.
- ❖ With increased data protection laws & improved legislation to protect democratic processes in the computer age, perhaps by focussing on this loss we commit the sin of fighting the last war?
- ❖ That said, new techniques for digital influence will be developed, so the question becomes:
  - ❖ How do we defend against these approaches? How do we prepare people for engaging online when, to paraphrase Dale Hample “social media seems designed to inhibit critical thinking” (ISSA 2018 keynote)
  - ❖ People are being conditioned through daily, habitual interactions to respond quickly, angrily, and shallowly.

# Conclusions

- ❖ There are likely as many reasons why people voted as they did as there are voters
- ❖ Some of these voters admittedly voted leave as a protest vote - not expecting the outcome (sometimes you get what you ask for)
- ❖ Others voted in order to fulfil their own political agenda
- ❖ Taking advantage of social media, digital technology, and simple, direct argumentative messaging could be (& probably was) enough to narrowly swing the vote

# References

- ❖ S. Wells and K. Pangbourne (2016) Using argumentation within sustainable transport communication. In Argumentation and Reasoned Action, Proceedings of the 1st European Conference on Argumentation, Lisbon 2015, volume 1, Studies in Logic and Argumentation 62, chapter 34, pages 781–801. College Publications.
- ❖ S. Wells & J. Douglas (2017) "Monkeypuzzle: Towards Next Generation, Free & Open-Source, Argument Analysis Tools" Proceedings of the 17th International Workshop on Computational Models of Natural Argument(CMNA17), pp. 50-53, London, U.K.