

THE
NETWORKED
AGE_

A NETWORKED AGE GUIDE TO COMMUNICATING IN A POLARISED WORLD

#NetworkedAge

 MHP Group

THE NEW RULES OF INFLUENCE

THE
NETWORKED
AGE_

Three principles for navigating The Networked Age.

RULE ONE

Who you are is as important
as what you do.

RULE TWO

Passions and influencers
spread ideas.

RULE THREE

Arguments are never won.
Outcomes are.



FOREWORD

US AND THEM

Left vs Right. North vs South. Maskers vs Anti-Maskers. United vs City. Mac vs PC. Nike vs Adidas. Cardi B vs Nicki Minaj.

Group rivalries shape our world. They are the basis for political debate, they underpin brand loyalty and they spur action. Rivals can cooperate or they can fight.

The first chapter in our **Guide to The Networked Age (2018)** focused on people's tendency to sort themselves into digital tribes – and how these groups respond to messages and messengers.

This next chapter examines what happens when groups become adversarial: How do communicators achieve healthy competition rather than toxic conflict?

We believe that rising polarisation makes answering this question the most urgent challenge communicators face today.

This is the beginning of our journey, but we hope you find the answers in this Guide helpful.

WITH THANKS TO OUR PARTNERS

ABOUT THE DEPOLARIZATION PROJECT

We exist to help people listen, learn and lead. We do this through researching what works (and what doesn't), providing training courses to businesses, students and community groups and encouraging leaders to open up to changing their own mind.

ABOUT INFLUENCE AT WORK

Our award-winning behavioural research and insights have been rated as 'Breakthrough Ideas for Business' by the Harvard Business Review, are taught on executive programmes in Business Schools around the world and have attracted the interest of world leaders, policy makers, senior executives and business professionals.

ABOUT CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY'S POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY LAB

The Political Psychology Lab is a research team based at the University of Cambridge. The team applies insights from psychology to understand real world political decision making, using computational approaches and rigorous experimental methods. The Principal Investigator is Dr Lee de-Wit, Political Psychologist, Cognitive Neuroscientist, and Author of What's Your Bias? The Surprising Science of Why We Vote the Way We Do.

ABOUT MORE IN COMMON

More in Common's mission is to understand the forces driving us apart, to find common ground and help to bring people together to tackle our shared challenges. We draw from ground-breaking research to test and find solutions, working with partners that have the capacity to make a real difference at scale.

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INTRODUCTION

FROM TRIBALISM TO POLARISATION



NICK BARRON
DEPUTY CEO, ENGINE MHP

As the world becomes more connected through digital technology, the rules of communication change.

Networks enable innovation and collective action – they also encourage herd mentalities, making people more resistant to reason and more likely to form mobs. Networked minds form tribes based on shared values and gravitate towards the most passionate voices, resulting in political and cultural polarisation.

In 2018, we worked with leading neuroscientist Dr Tali Sharot and her research team at **UCL's Affective Brain Lab** to understand how digital technology was amplifying human beings' natural tendency towards group-think and to design a new set of rules for communicators. The results of this work were summarised in our first **Guide to The Networked Age**.

In 2019, we warned that if these trends continued, they would result in a Culture War that would consume politics, business and our institutions.



“IN 2019 WE SAW THE NETWORKED AGE IN ACTION: VOLATILE, POLARISED AND ACTIVIST. IN 2020, THIS WILL ESCALATE INTO A FULL-BLOWN CULTURE WAR, SPANNING OUR INSTITUTIONS, THE MEDIA AND THE WORKPLACE.”

ENGINE MHP'S 2020 PREDICTION FOR PR WEEK NOVEMBER 2019

By 2020, a socially distanced population had become more reliant than ever on digital networks to make sense of the world and polarisation had produced a bitter Culture War that spanned everything from public health and education to Spotify and the Royal Family. In the US, Democrats and Republicans could not agree which Presidential candidate had fairly won the election.

Today, polarisation has become an urgent challenge for the communications industry.

Communicators can harness polarisation's powerful effects (for good and bad) to drive behaviour change and increase engagement – or navigate polarisation's crosswinds to avoid being caught in a storm of outrage.

Most importantly, we can reduce polarisation's harmful effects. But only if we understand how polarisation works. That's why we have partnered with leading think tank **The Depolarization Project** to study the causes and effects of polarisation.

This Guide blends the latest academic research with proprietary audience data to help communicators work more effectively in this new chapter of The Networked Age.

First, we will examine why polarisation matters for communicators. Then, we'll explain the causes of polarisation and explore what our data says about the state of polarisation in Britain. Finally, we'll hear from experts about the effects of polarisation on their work and use the Rules of Influence to help navigate a polarised environment.



PART ONE

A NETWORKED AGE GUIDE TO



THE POWER OF POLARISATION



WHAT IS POLARISATION?

Polarisation refers to people's division into two or more groups who strongly dislike and distrust each other and can have strongly differing perspectives. There are two types of polarisation:

ISSUE POLARISATION

People's opinions on a particular issue diverge into observable camps, such as a right-left or liberal-authoritarian axis.

AFFECTIVE POLARISATION

People identify with an in-group, based on shared beliefs and values and at the same time, creating out-groups, who start to think they are all the same.

This phenomenon results in people increasingly perceiving, interpreting and describing the world around them in terms of 'us and them', as they hold onto their views more firmly.

These divisions go beyond rational cost/benefit analysis. Often, social factors play a powerful role in shaping our views. For example, our own views are influenced by the views of other people we like and dislike.

The Networked Age feeds both kinds of polarisation by creating powerful social feedback effects and making it easier for people to find and surround themselves with like-minded people. In this report, we will focus on affective polarisation between groups.

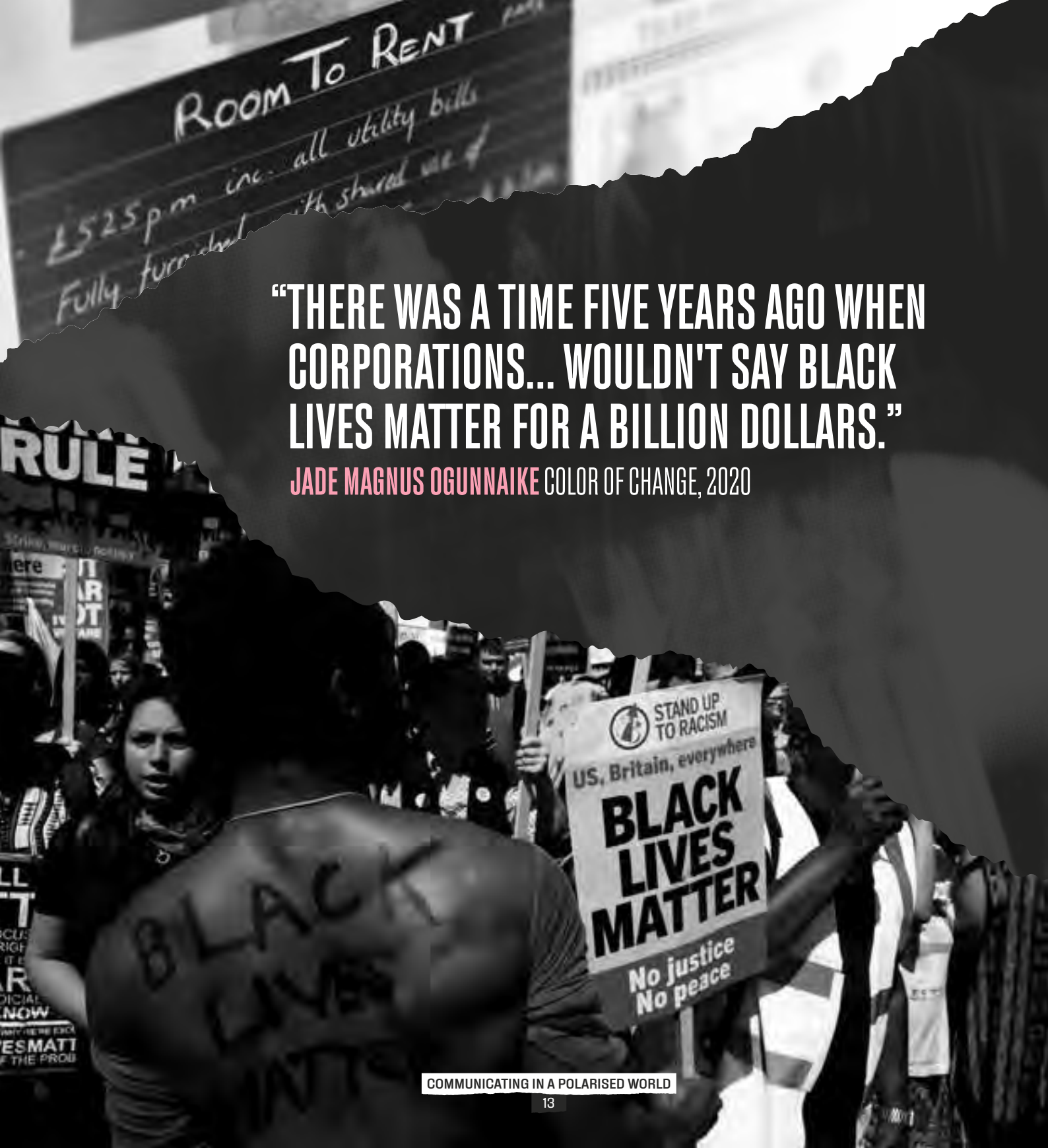
THE EFFECTS OF POLARISATION

Polarisation can lead to extremism, but its effects are felt much more broadly than that – influencing the people we listen to, the brands we choose, the decisions we make and the actions we take every day. For example:

- + Brexit identities affected our opinions on who should be Director General of the BBC, and who we'd be happy to have as a lodger in our home
- + Discrimination in recruitment can be greater on the grounds of politics than race
- + Parents are more likely to vaccinate a child if someone they support is elected
- + People prioritise political similarity over cleanliness when choosing housemates
- + As American sport embraced political protest in 2020, Americans' net approval of the industry **fell 30 percentage points in one year**, to a net rating of -10%

In part three of this Guide, we examine the state of polarisation in the UK: How divided are we? What divides us? And what impact does it have on who we listen to?





“THERE WAS A TIME FIVE YEARS AGO WHEN CORPORATIONS... WOULDN'T SAY BLACK LIVES MATTER FOR A BILLION DOLLARS.”

JADE MAGNUS OGUNNAIKE COLOR OF CHANGE, 2020

WHY DOES POLARISATION MATTER?

Polarisation produces a wide range of powerful effects in terms of how people think and behave. In a more polarised world:

PEOPLE CARE MORE ABOUT ISSUES - AND ARE MORE LIKELY TO ACT

Polarisation injects passion into debates, which makes it more likely that people will engage with a topic (on one side or another) and they can be more easily mobilised to support a cause or change their behaviour. For example, polarisation can produce higher voter turnout.

The opposite of polarisation is consensus, which can result in apathy, complacency and inertia.

“IF THE DOCTORS TELL US THAT WE SHOULD TAKE THE VACCINE, I WILL BE THE FIRST IN LINE TO TAKE IT. BUT IF DONALD TRUMP TELLS US TO TAKE IT, I’M NOT TAKING IT.”

**KAMALA HARRIS
OCTOBER 2020**



PEOPLE ARE LESS LIKELY TO LISTEN TO PEOPLE THEY DISAGREE WITH

Polarisation creates an 'us and them' dynamic, which in turn makes it more likely that we will listen only to people on 'my side' and dismiss contradictory viewpoints or voices.

This makes people more resistant to outside expertise, new ideas and recommendations, which can fuel groupthink and conspiracism.

PEOPLE CREATE A 'REALITY GAP' WHERE TWO SIDES CANNOT AGREE ON FACTS

Polarisation increases the desire to 'beat the other side', which makes us more likely to employ 'motivated reasoning', meaning we ignore or explain away facts that don't conform to our world view.

In extremely polarised debates, this can mean that neither side accepts the other's starting premise, regardless of the evidence provided – and a reality gap opens up between the two sides, which becomes extremely difficult to bridge through conversation. Examples of reality gaps that exist in polarised debates include:

- + **The Tampon Tax** – could it have been abolished in the EU or not? There is a factual answer, but Remainers and Leavers cannot agree.
- + **Scotland's Finances** – does Scotland receive more money from central government than it contributes? The official figures provide the answer, but are often ignored.
- + **The Brexit Referendum** – did Russian interference tip the vote for Leave? The investigations have concluded, but many ignore their findings.

WHY DOES POLARISATION MATTER?

FAKE NEWS BECOMES MORE EFFECTIVE

Fake news and misinformation that feeds people's suspicions of the 'other side' is more likely to take root in a polarised society. Threats only need to be perceived, rather than real, in order to trigger our group identities.

PEOPLE ARE MORE LIKELY TO PUNISH OTHERS

Polarisation makes people more likely to frame issues in absolutist and moral terms. Complex issues become matters of 'right and wrong' or 'good and evil' – ideological battles that must be won at any cost.

Therefore, in a polarised environment, the social penalties for expressing a dissenting view or standing apart from a tribe are higher, as people are more likely to punish their opponents. Cancellation and censorship are the result of polarised debates.

PEOPLE BECOME MORE LIKELY TO HIDE THEIR TRUE FEELINGS

If people are more likely to pay a social price for dissent, they are less likely to say what they really believe. For example, the 'Shy Trumper' phenomenon, which threw off many polling models in the 2016 and 2020 elections, was the result of Trump voters fearing social stigma or other repercussions if they admitted their true voting intentions.

People who believe themselves to be 'victims' of another group are also more likely to justify lying, in order to correct a perceived injustice.

ORGANISATIONS ARE LESS LIKELY TO MAKE GOOD DECISIONS

Viewpoint diversity improves decision making (McKinsey, 2015) and encourages innovation. Polarisation can damage viewpoint diversity within an organisation and make it more likely that minority views will not be listened to or even expressed.

Organisations can become more resistant to listening to critical feedback – instead treating dissenting views as a challenge to their authority.

POLARISATION AFFECTS US ALL

None of us is immune to the effects of polarisation, nor to the biases that feed it.

If you think that it's only 'the other side' that suffers from polarisation, you're polarised.

WHY DOES POLARISATION MATTER? HOW POLARISATION CREATED A CULTURE WAR

Polarisation can also lead to the outbreak of Culture Wars. The Culture War is 'the politicisation of everything', which forces people to 'pick a side', based on competing values and identities. As people tend to assume that those in 'out-groups' are all similar, it reinforces perceptions that those in a different camp will be pitted against us.

Polarisation means that we understand others less well, spend less time talking to people unlike ourselves and rely more on stereotypes, which often damage trust.

The concept of a Culture War was popularised by US academic James Davison Hunter in the 1990s. It describes a battle of values between different tribes, in which social issues play a heightened role in political debate and, in turn, politics seeps into every aspect of daily lives, from the workplace to the high street.

The Culture War is the result of rising levels of political polarisation, which has created fertile ground for the proposition that 'the personal is political' to take hold.

“SHARING THE INTERNET WITH AMERICA IS LIKE SHARING YOUR LIVING ROOM WITH A RHINOCEROS. IT’S HUGE, IT’S RIGHT THERE, AND WHATEVER IT’S DOING NOW, YOU SURE AS HELL KNOW ABOUT IT.”

HELEN LEWIS THE ATLANTIC

The Culture War is fought on the communicator’s turf: The expression of ideas is now a perilous process, subject to escalating scrutiny. Pick the wrong face for your campaign or choose the wrong way to express yourself and your brand faces cancellation.

This battle manifests in everything from campaigns to defund the BBC or de-platform authors. Leaders have lost their jobs, brands have alienated their customers or been forced to pull out of the UK, and organisations have triggered large-scale protests among their own employees.

And while the USA is not the most polarised society in the democratic world (Spain, Portugal and Greece have all registered higher) it plays an outsized role in shaping the terms on which Western Culture War is fought.

American-born movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter transposed themselves to the UK within days of their delivery (**Networked Age** Rule 2: Passions and Influencers Spread Ideas). As British commentator Tomiwa Owolade wrote in October 2020:

“Over the past couple of months, many Britons have imported American discourse on race wholesale. When asked to analyse the experiences of black people in the United Kingdom, we now talk with an American accent.”

To understand where Britain’s Culture War is heading next, communicators have to look to the US – and in particular, internet culture – for clues.

HOW THE CULTURE WAR AND POLITICS INTERACT

Political strategists (and others) find it useful to leverage Culture War divisions through wedge campaigns at times. Wedge issues create a 'clear choice' between parties and the binary nature of the questions creates 'with us or against us' group dynamics.

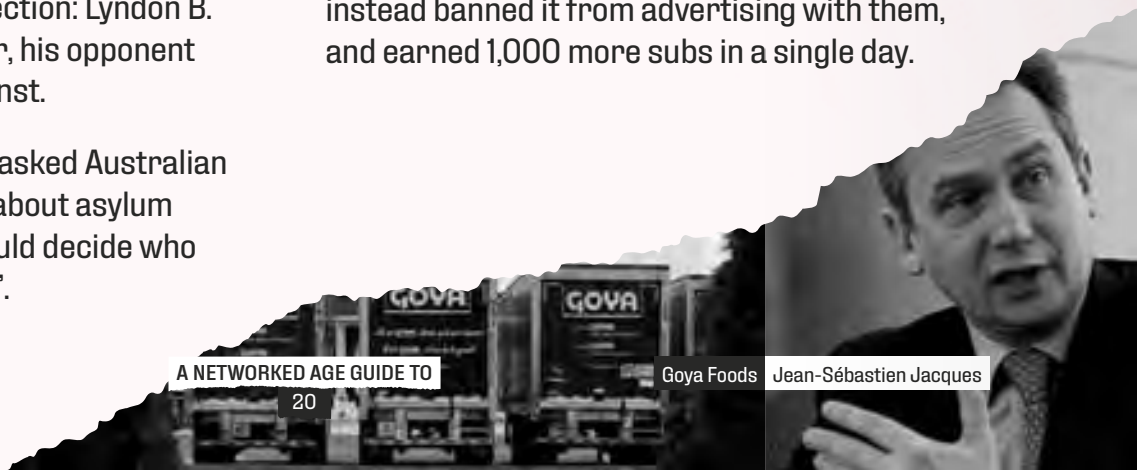
Research conducted in over 20 countries, including the UK, shows these Culture War issues play into our partisan identities in ways that economic discussions do not – a discussion on tax levels inevitably has shades of grey.

- + School desegregation played a similar role in the 1964 US election: Lyndon B. Johnson was in favour, his opponent Barry Goldwater against.
- + In 2001 John Howard asked Australian voters to think solely about asylum seekers and 'who should decide who comes to this country'.

- + During the 2019 UK General Election, the Conservatives' promise to 'Get Brexit Done' forced voters to pick a side – and promised an end to the political battles that many voters were weary of.

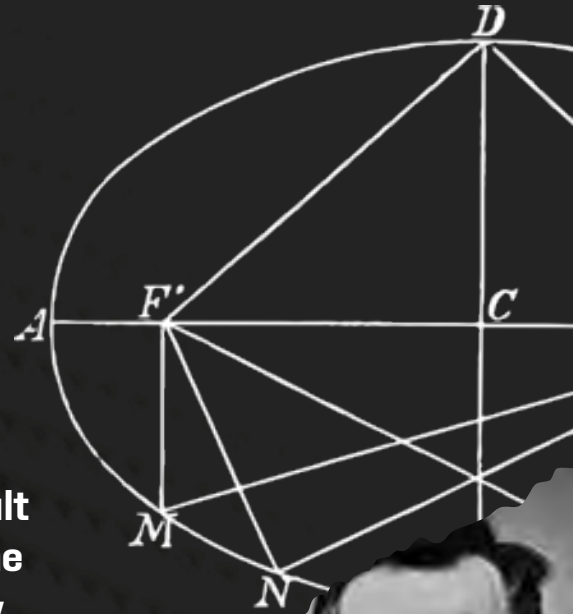
The media also leverages Culture War issues to boost the effectiveness of clickbait content and rewards more polarising figures. Culture War headlines trigger strong emotional responses in our brains, making us more likely to share stories.

In the UK, LBC's approach steered it towards strong opinions based upon the news and listener numbers have grown from 1.2m to 2.6m a week. Meanwhile, when the Co-Op threatened to boycott The Spectator over its coverage of trans issues, the magazine instead banned it from advertising with them, and earned 1,000 more subs in a single day.



THE ROLL CALL OF THE CANCELLED

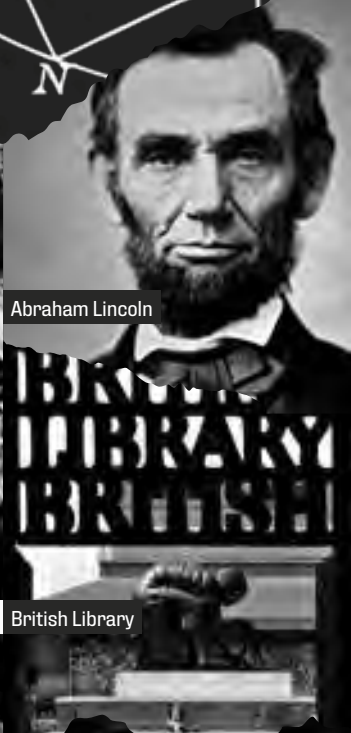
The list of leaders, creators, brands and influencers who have been cancelled as a result of the Culture War grows every day, making the dynamics of polarisation something that every communicator needs to understand.



Fawcett Towers JK Rowling



Bob Dylan British Library



Abraham Lincoln



Edward Colston Gina Carano



Chick Fil-A Joe Rogan



IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD, POLARISATION FEEDS OUR NEED TO BELONG



ALISON GOLDSWORTHY
FOUNDER, THE DEPOLARIZATION PROJECT

Our tendency to coalesce in groups is an age old phenomenon. Humans, like many other species, find it brings benefits and it makes us feel safer. Belonging is an innate human need.

Over time, the physical threat we face has thankfully receded. But our prehistoric brains continue to be wired to seek out and reward this sense of belonging. Indeed, it is this that is at the root of polarisation – how our brains interact with groups and the wider environment – each relationship has the potential to reinforce our groupish tendencies, often subconsciously.

From a young age we start to recognise our own groups. Newborns can identify the voices they hear regularly, typically their mum and dad – who represent safety. As we get older we start to look for more signs of groups we belong to. What they wear, the accent they have, where they shop or work.



In recent years in the UK and many other countries we have seen this groupishness manifest in politics. Leave or Remain, Nationalist or Unionist, Labour or Conservative. The conflict between these identities has extended into every aspect of our life. Who we live and work with, who we trust, who we fall in love with. As we coalesce around political labels it causes societies to fracture and divides to deepen. What are the common bonds that hold us together? If we get less practice at spending time with those who are different to us, will it become harder still to bridge divides?

The pandemic is unfortunately only likely to amplify this trend. Uncertainty makes us cling to our groups, and almost inevitably become more wary of an out-group. The pandemic and inevitable economic fallout have been linked to polarisation. You can see this in the rising levels of online engagement highlighted in MHP's research. More people are signing petitions and writing to politicians as they have sought out others in their group.

Freelancers who have fallen through the support net, fathers desperate to be at the birth of their child.

This shows polarisation is not all bad. Some is good, healthy and essential. It can bring about change and lead to better government. Amorphous blobs are boring, engender poor scrutiny and stifle innovation. But when we segregate, the signs are ominous.

There are crumbs of hope though. Societies have polarised and depolarised before; it does not have to lead to scenes such as those in the Capitol building in Washington DC this January. We can influence this process, and as communicators, leaders and change makers we hold a special role. The environment that can trigger that groupish behaviour in individuals, we are better able to help shape it.



PART TWO

THE DRIVERS OF POLARISATION



COMMUNICATING IN A POLARISED WORLD

WHAT CAUSES POLARISATION IN THE UK?

We are living through a perfect storm of polarisation, which is driven by five long-term factors that all converged in 2020 and will have a lasting impact on the way we think and feel:

1. INFORMATION ABUNDANCE ENCOURAGES GROUPTHINK

When we are overwhelmed by information we tend to look to our tribe to help us make sense of the world. We use our in-group's beliefs, policies and values as shortcuts to guide our own thinking.

It's a low effort strategy that saves precious thinking time. When people don't have enough knowledge or time to evaluate a message they rely more on cues such as the source of the messenger. Unsurprisingly, political arguments from in-group sources are generally more persuasive than messages from out-groups. This leads to groupthink.

The Networked Age has produced a bewildering abundance of information. The volume of data produced worldwide has grown from 2 zetabytes in 2010 to 59 zetabytes in 2020.

We check our phones every 12 minutes and reach for it over 2,000 times a day. Each day we craft 500 million tweets, send 294 billion emails, 4 petabytes of data are created on Facebook, 65 billion messages are sent on WhatsApp and 5 billion searches are made.

As the debate about how to manage the Covid-19 pandemic has shown, more information doesn't always improve understanding.



“IF YOU’RE WORRIED
THAT YOU’RE GOING TO
MISS FOUR AND A HALF
YEARS OF INTERMINABLE
DEBATE ABOUT BRITAIN’S
RELATIONSHIP WITH
EUROPE, THEN I HAVE
GREAT NEWS ABOUT
THE NEXT 40 YEARS.”

JAMES O’MALLEY JOURNALIST
DECEMBER 2020

Conflicting reports, data visualisations and expert views allow people to cherry pick the facts that conform to their pre-existing beliefs and make people more susceptible to propaganda. For example, researchers at Harvard have shown that the Chinese government posts 448m social media comments a year, the aim of which is not to engage but to distract.

2. DIGITAL TRIBALISM MAKES PEOPLE GRAVITATE TOWARDS STRONG VOICES

As our first **Networked Age Guide** showed, digital networks have an inherently polarising effect, as they make it easier for people to form groups of like-minded people and, within these groups, they are drawn to those with the most strident voices.

This effect, known as ‘hyperpolarisation in groups’, is a naturally occurring phenomenon, which doesn’t require social media algorithms to induce it. Facebook, Twitter and Google now all have teams dedicated to reducing polarisation on their platforms – but the existence of a team is very different to making changes to a product that can reduce profits.

WHAT CAUSES POLARISATION IN THE UK?

The polarising effect of digital tribes is not due to contradictory content being filtered out – people are on average exposed to a greater variety of news sources online – instead, it is the act of discussing content within a group of like-minded people that can lead to polarisation. Context matters, but stories that contradict the tribe’s pre-existing views are criticised, challenged or dismissed within the group, which serves to inoculate group members against these arguments.

Bail et al found that exposure to different viewpoints increased polarisation by making people cling on to their original political identity more closely.

3. UNCERTAINTY MAKES US MORE LIKELY TO IDENTIFY WITH GROUPS AND PEOPLE LIKE OURSELVES


Uncertainty makes us feel threatened and reduces our sense of personal control. People seek to reduce uncertainty by drawing on a group – and a group identity – for protection. This is known as ‘uncertainty-identity theory’.

The more that a group (such as a political party or a fandom) seems like ‘a strongly-defined and a distinctive group’, the more that uncertain people are drawn to them. When uncertain, fans of one group will be more likely to see others as being against them.



COVID-19
KEEP
YOUR
DISTANCE





When we are uncertain, we are also more drawn to dominant leaders and influencers – forming stronger parasocial relationships – especially with those who appear ‘prototypical’ of our group norms. These leaders are often ill-suited to the task of depolarisation.

The rapid pace of economic and social change that has characterised The Networked Age produced record-high levels of global uncertainty by 2019, according to the IMF’s Uncertainty Index.

In Britain, public uncertainty has been compounded by Brexit and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns, such that, by October 2020, nearly 80% of British people told Ipsos MORI that they “feel like things in my country are out of control right now”.

4. IDENTITY POLITICS MAKES US LESS SYMPATHETIC AND MORE EXTREME

An increased focus on identity politics increases polarisation, as it encourages people to identify more strongly with their in-group and become more hostile to the out-group.

Narratives which focus on ‘harm’ and ‘victimhood’ also increases people’s fear of death (‘mortality salience’), which causes people to harden their opinions and adapt their behaviour.

Our relative status matters. A drop in status tends to lead to people clinging more tightly to their group and being less sympathetic to others.

WHAT CAUSES POLARISATION IN THE UK?

5. ACTIVISM CREATES AN 'US AND THEM' MENTALITY

The Networked Age has produced potent incentives for leaders, brands and the media to lean in to polarisation, and – in doing so – encourage further polarisation. This needs to be balanced against protest being a legitimate and effective way to bring about change.

Standing against the out-group is a powerful way of signalling your own values and boosting loyalty. From Boris Johnson and Nicola Sturgeon to Sadiq Khan and Andy Burnham, 'us and them' narratives have helped to secure voter approval.

It can also pay off for the media, businesses, activist groups who can generate clicks, and money, through advertising or donations, through strident positions. For example, when Wetherspoons came out strongly in favour of the Leave campaign they saw sales rise 6.9% in the 10 weeks to 7 July and the share price leap 45p to 145p.

In October 2019, a global study of media owners, advertisers and media agencies by the World Media Group found that a consistent theme is the opportunity for brands to align themselves with key issues and trends, to demonstrate a brand's commitment to societal and environmental challenges, suggesting that 'brand activism' or 'content activism' is set to grow.

In Part Three of this report, we measure uncertainty, group identification, digital tribalism and support for activism among the British public.



COMMUNICATIONS AND POLARISATION

Polarisation changes the game for communicators, but we are not powerless. Communications can also polarise and depolarise people. Whichever audiences we are talking to, the following principles apply:

1. NARRATIVES HELP FORGE BONDS BETWEEN THE STORYTELLER AND THE AUDIENCE

We create narratives to fill in the gaps in our understanding and to make us feel 'safer'. We relish narratives with easily identifiable villains and heroes.

Studies by US neuroscientist Paul Zak have shown that emotional stories trigger release of the hormone oxytocin, the same hormone released by mothers to facilitate bonding with their child. When we tell stories to each other, it helps us form bonds.

As screenwriting guru Robert McKee has noted, "Our appetite for story is a reflection of the profound human need to grasp the patterns of living".



In 1944, psychologists Heider and Simmel created a short animation for their subjects to watch. It featured a box, two triangles and a circle moving around on a screen. They asked their students to describe what happened. All but one attributed thoughts, feelings and emotions to the most inanimate of objects.

Heider and Simmel's work also found that research subjects turned the images of circles, rectangles and triangles into a 104 second story in which there was a hero and a villain.

Internal data from Facebook demonstrates that you can increase the engagement on a post by 2-3 times by using touching personal stories or creating provocative, passionate debates.

Communicators and influencers can use storytelling to establish themselves as part of an in-group, and deploy stories of good vs evil to heighten engagement.

2. PEOPLE LOVE 'THEIR SIDE' TO WIN

People don't just enjoy being part of a tribe – they love their tribe to win.

Social Identity Theory shows that members of the same group feel a positive, common identity with each other and negativity towards others.

This explains the emotional significance of our groupishness, which matters in polarisation because it relates to group-based feelings and self-esteem and not facts. Conservative or Labour. Bitcoin or Gold. Playstation or Xbox. Potterhead or Twihard.

COMMUNICATIONS AND POLARISATION

Seeing people as a group rather than as individuals triggers a whole set of new feelings about members and non-members of the group. We all follow a common, generally subconscious process:

- + **Categorise.** We ask where the person we are listening to is coming from. We like to make clear distinctions between groups to help make this process easier – hence our liking for binary distinctions.
- + **Identity adoption.** Taking on board the norms and the identity of a group. Such as adopting an accent or regional dialect. At this point our self-esteem becomes tied to the identity.
- + **Comparison.** If we are part of one group and it is tied to our feelings, we try to preserve that by comparing it to others, typically favourably to us.

Groups do not need to be formal or established for these feelings to kick in. Differences can be small and arbitrary. People favour their in-group, and discriminate against an out-group. Forming an in-group therefore means creating an out-group rivalry.

Communicators can foster team loyalty, yet they must be careful that the rivalries they foster are not harmful.

3. BAD NEWS LASTS LONGER IN OUR MINDS

Negative information tends to have more lasting effects than positive information. Negative emotions and memories are used by our brains to protect us from threats.

A study by Ledgerwood and Boydstun (2013) found that once someone has conceptualised something as a loss or gain it is difficult for them to change their mind. In particular, they found that it is harder for people to think about 'losses' as 'wins' than it is for them to reframe 'wins' as 'losses'.

This has two important implications for communicators: Firstly, we need to engage early on an issue, before people have made up their mind that something is a 'loss' and even if we have framed something as a 'win', we need to keep communicating, since positive associations aren't as 'sticky' in people's minds.

But that doesn't mean negativity always works – hope can, in the right circumstances, be a powerful emotion that can create shared visions. Unusual coalitions of advocates can be a powerful way to bring about change.

Reward and pleasure are more effective for motivating people to act. 'Hope to Spur, Fear to Deter.'



THE ROLE OF MESSENGERS



STEVE MARTIN

CEO, INFLUENCE AT WORK & FACULTY DIRECTOR OF
BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE, COLUMBIA BUSINESS SCHOOL

A received wisdom exists that, to make a communication compelling and credible, time and care needs be taken to ensure the content of that communication is correct. Consequently, strong evidence and sound reasoning, coupled with clear and relevant examples, should carry sway.

This seems sensible because the merit, surely, is the message.

However, some researchers argue that other parts of the communication process are just as important. Arguably the most famous is the assertion of Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, who proposed that because the channel through which information is delivered is itself a form of consequential messaging, it too can impact an audience reaction.

McLuhan's point is that 'the medium is the message'.

There is now compelling evidence – mined from decades of behavioural science research – that a third factor is crucial. It concerns not what is said, or how it is delivered, but rather who is saying it.

Many, including those in the communications industry, might find it easy to dismiss this insight as an obvious and instinctive fact of life. After all, we all know the persuasive pull a celebrity endorsement or image of an attractive model on a product or brand can have on others (although less on ourselves!). But the messenger concept goes much deeper.



When a messenger delivers a message something intriguing happens. They become connected to the content of that message in an audience's mind. Importantly their influence doesn't come about because of the merits or facts of their case – as we have frequently become accustomed to of late. Instead, the messenger's influence comes about as a result of a trait or feature that an audience perceives the messenger to possess. This commonly overlooked insight is frequently missed by audiences and explicates a fundamental feature of The Networked Age.

“THE MESSENGER HAS BECOME THE MESSAGE. NEVER MORE SO THAN IN A POLARISED CLIMATE.”

My colleague Joseph Marks, a doctoral researcher at University College London (and the designer of the ENGINE MHP Polarisation Tracker), and I have studied the factors that reliably lead to a messenger being listened to – irrespective of the truth or wisdom of their message. We find messengers can be broadly categorised in two ways.

Hard Messengers achieve acceptance of their message because audiences perceive them to possess superior Status. Soft Messengers, in contrast, gain message acceptance because they are perceived to possess a Connectedness with their audience. Within these hard and soft categories lie eight fundamental traits, four hard-related and four soft-related, which reliably impact whether or not a messenger will be listened to.

Not all of the findings in our study of Messenger effects were surprising. But many were. People routinely confuse trust with truth. Telling lies is OK, as long as the lies told are those an audience wants to hear. Competence is increasingly evaluated in a matter of milliseconds. And much more.

The implication for communicators working in an increasingly polarised world is clear. All of us need to become increasingly adept, not just determining what to say and how to say it, but also to understand, identify and deploy the most effective messenger to represent our case.

Encouragingly, a science now exists that can help.



PART THREE





THE STATE OF POLARISATION

MEASURING POLARISATION

To understand how polarisation shapes Britain, we have worked with expert partners to conduct two pieces of research that together provide a unique and comprehensive picture.

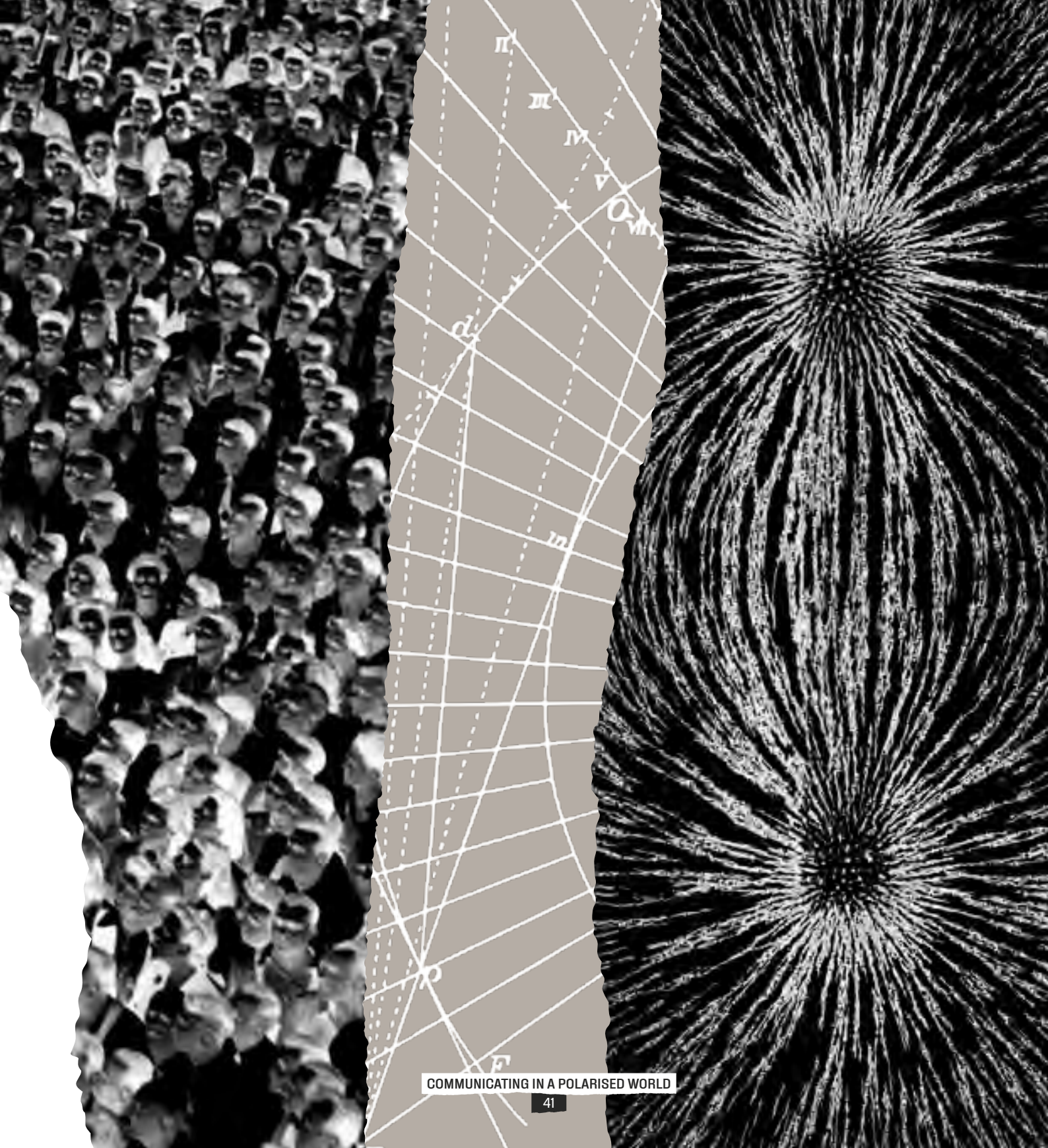
THE ENGINE MHP POLARISATION REPORT

Working with **The Depolarization Project**, we have developed a survey of British public attitudes. The survey, conducted by YouGov plc, examines how engaged the public is with Culture War issues (see Part One of this report) and what factors are driving polarisation (see Part Two).

We built our research on the model created by international non-profit **More in Common**, which segmented UK adults according to their values and identified seven distinct groups in its pioneering report 'Britain's Choice'. Our survey data is mapped to these seven groups, so we can see how polarisation is affecting them differently.

Total sample size was 2,107 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 21 December 2020 - 4 January 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).





WHAT THE POLARISATION REPORT TELLS US



NICK BARRON
DEPUTY CEO, ENGINE MHP

Our survey shows that the UK is at a low-ebb, with public confidence in the future subdued following the devastating effects of Covid-19, and a protracted argument over Brexit.

This uncertainty, coupled with low levels of trust in the system, has created the perfect conditions for tribalism, manifesting in a large trust gap between ‘news in general’ and ‘my favourite news source’.

The poll also produced strongly polarised results in terms of people’s core values, sense of national identity, attitudes towards campaign groups and beliefs about Britain’s future.

This polarisation has created an oppressive environment in which only 37% of people say they feel comfortable expressing their political beliefs at work and where 62% of people say that journalism has become ‘too political’.



The results also reveal three important divides that communicators need to understand:

- + Between younger and older people, who disagree strongly about core values and Britain's place in the world
- + Between women and men, who feel very differently about whether British culture reflects them and their values
- + Between two modern tribes – Progressive Activists and Backbone Conservatives – who clash over Cancel Culture

However, it is important to note that it is not politics or our innate characteristics that contribute most to our sense of identity, but our hobbies, fandoms, friends and family. And while relatively few Britons say they believe in Britain, they draw strength from the communities in which they live.

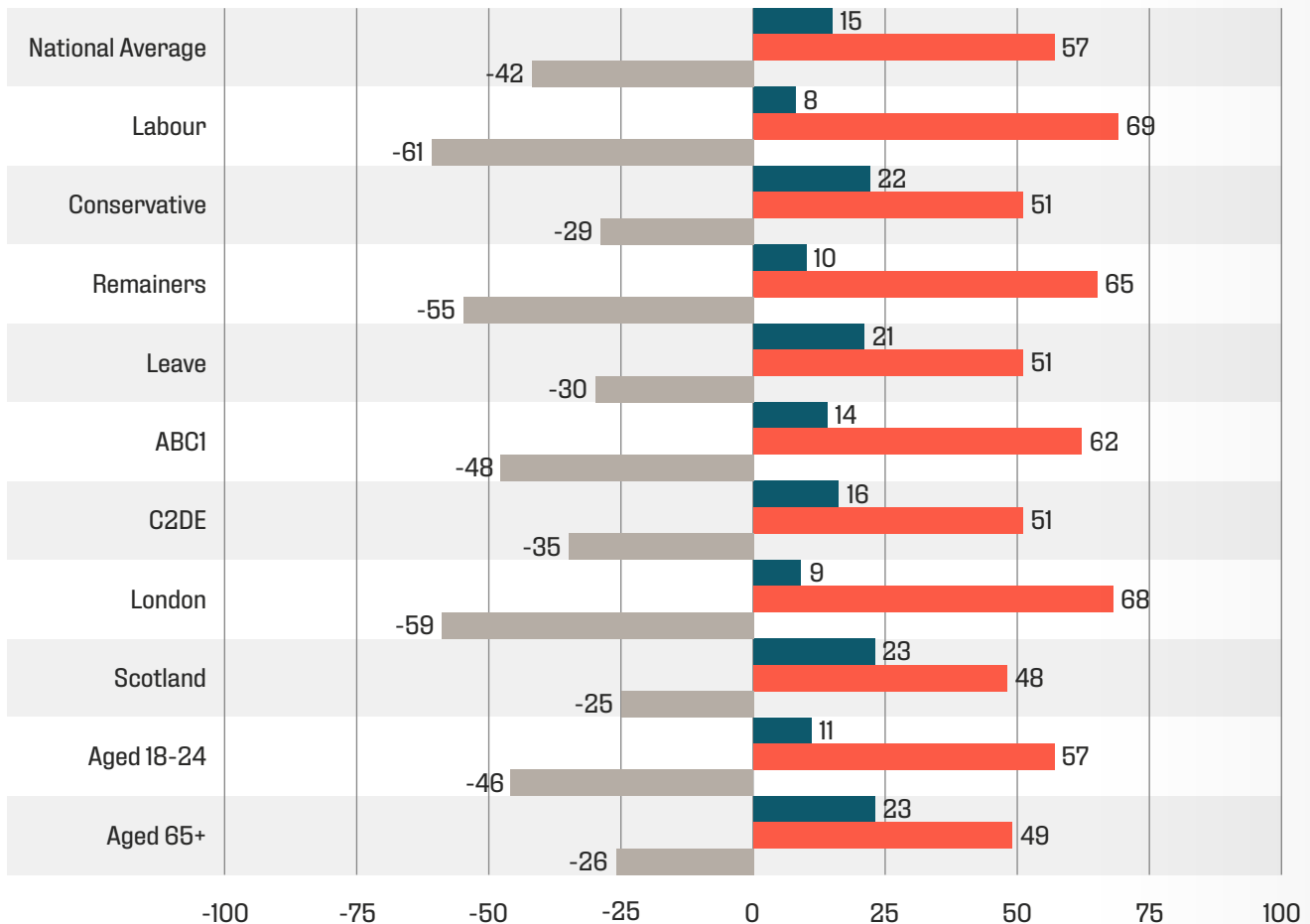
It seems that the best strategy for depolarising Britain is to celebrate our shared culture and work from the ground up, reminding people that, in contrast to the warring political tribes that dominate their screens, the world around them is full of people who want to support one another.



A PESSIMISTIC AND DIVERGENT VIEW OF THE FUTURE

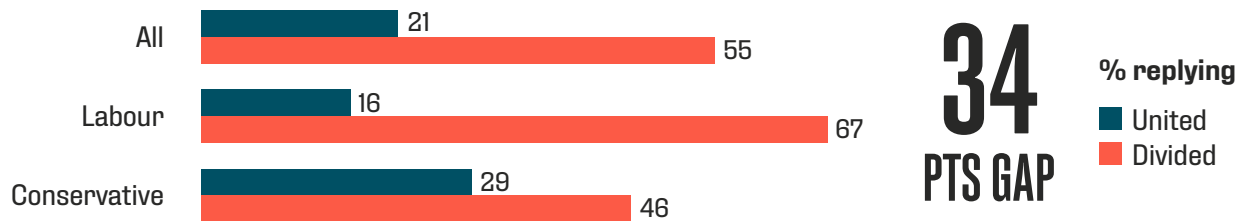
In general, do you think young people today will be better or worse off than their parents, or will there be no difference?

% replying
■ Better off
■ Worse off
■ Net confidence



LOW LEVELS OF CONFIDENCE IN THE SYSTEM

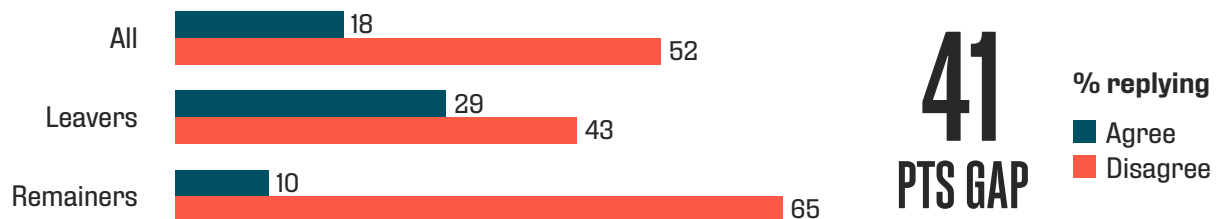
How united or divided does the UK feel to you these days?



Thinking about how experts have responded to the Coronavirus pandemic, would you say this has made you more or less likely to listen to experts in the future, or has there been no change?



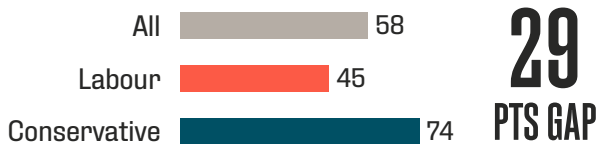
“To solve the country’s problems we need a leader willing to break the rules.”



DIVIDED BY CORE VALUES, SPLIT ON ACTIVISM, UNITED BY THE THINGS WE LOVE

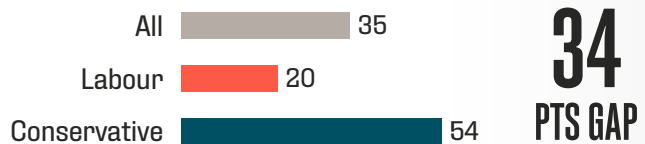
How important, if at all, do you think the nuclear family unit is to a healthy society?

% replying – Important



In general, to what extent do you have a favourable or unfavourable opinion of capitalism?

% replying – Favourable



Over the last 12 months, this group has been a force for good

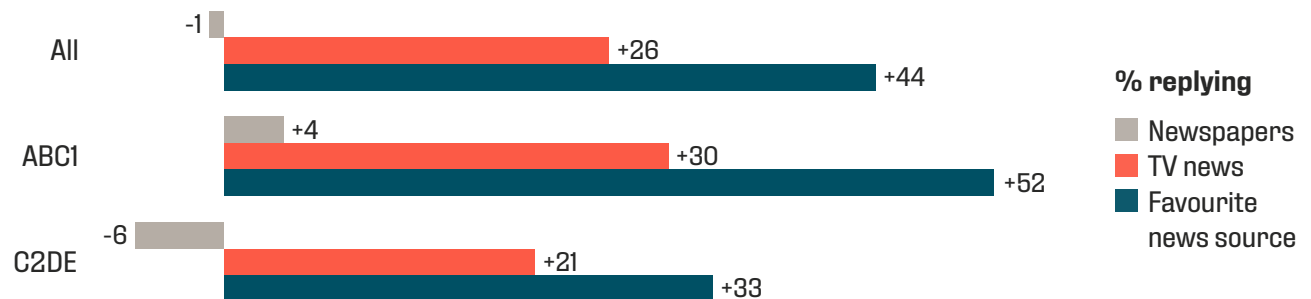
	National Average	Labour	Conservative	Approval gap	Remain	Leave	Approval gap
Black Lives Matter	+12%	+59%	-33%	92pts	+47%	-31%	78pts
MeToo	+26%	+57%	0%	57pts	+49%	-1%	50pts
Pride	+44%	+64%	+29%	35pts	+66%	+25%	41pts
Extinction Rebellion	-18%	+19%	-52%	71pts	+4%	-45%	49pts

“This is somewhat or very important to my identity”:

Religion	Politics	Race	Work	Sexuality	Gender	Nationality	Sports, music, films, books and hobbies	Family and friends
19%	28%	31%	34%	36%	46%	49%	55%	87%

STRONG IN-GROUP PREFERENCES

If I learn something from this source I am likely to believe it



“I share the same political views as my close friends on the majority of things.”

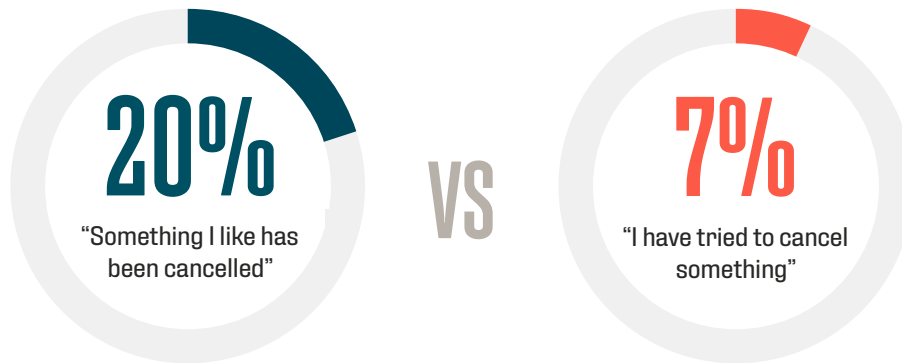
Labour	Conservative	Remain	Leave	ABC1	C2DE	London	Rest of South	Aged 18-24	Aged 25-49
33%	13%	26%	14%	22%	16%	28%	19%	35%	20%

Which words describe someone with strongly different political views?

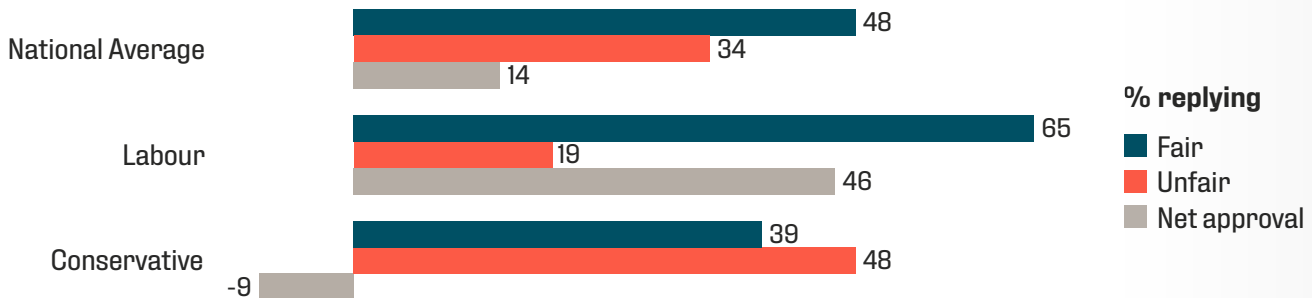
(Choose three options from a list of nine)

	Labour	Conservative	Remain	Leave	Aged 18-24	Aged 25-49
Intelligent	6%	9%	7%	9%	5%	6%
Open-minded	13%	24%	13%	24%	12%	16%
Closed-minded	28%	15%	22%	14%	29%	18%
Honest	23%	39%	24%	39%	15%	24%
Hypocritical	13%	8%	10%	8%	13%	10%
Selfish	20%	3%	14%	4%	23%	11%

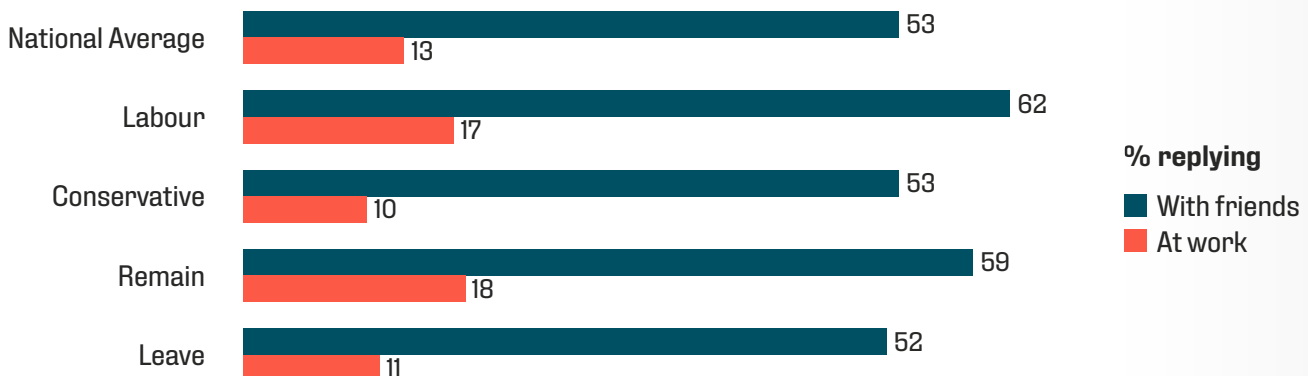
CANCEL CULTURE CONCERN



Do you think it is fair or unfair for people who say grossly offensive things to be at risk of losing their livelihoods?



"I feel comfortable expressing my political views..."



REALITY GAPS

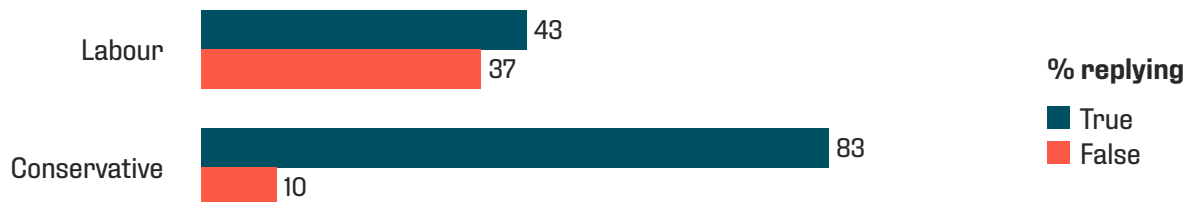
“Russian interference in the Brexit referendum was a major reason why the UK voted Leave”



“Wearing masks helps stop the spread of Covid-19”

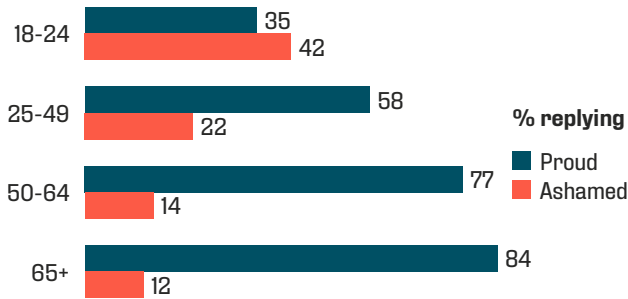


“In 2020, thousands of illegal immigrants arrived in the UK via boats crossing the English Channel”

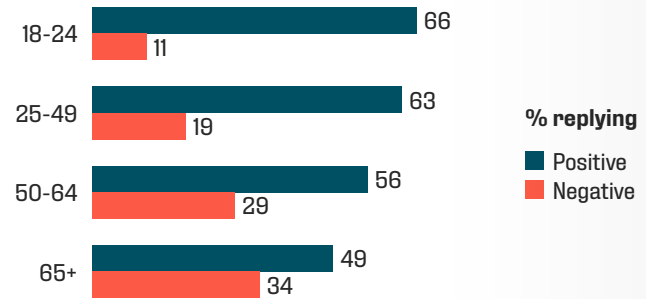


POLARISATION BETWEEN THE GENERATIONS

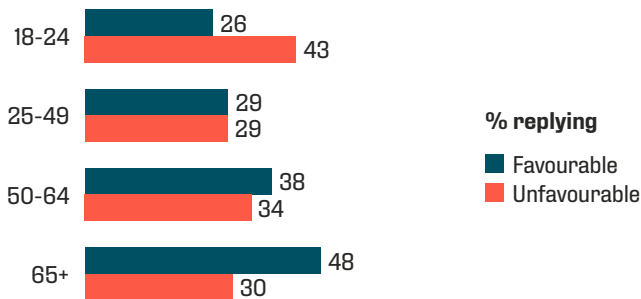
In general, to what extent do you think Britain's history is something to be proud or ashamed of?



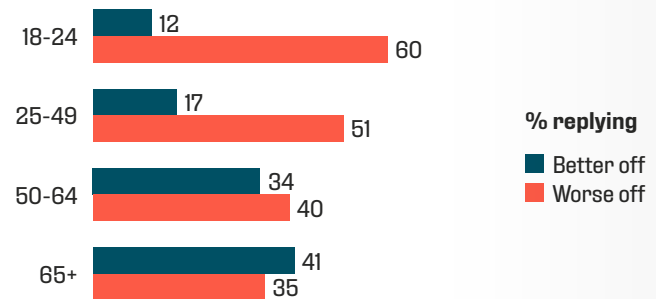
How positive or negative an impact do you think diversity has had on Britain?



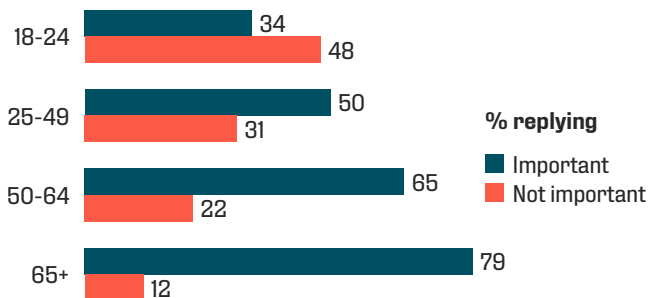
In general, to what extent do you have a favourable or unfavourable opinion of capitalism?



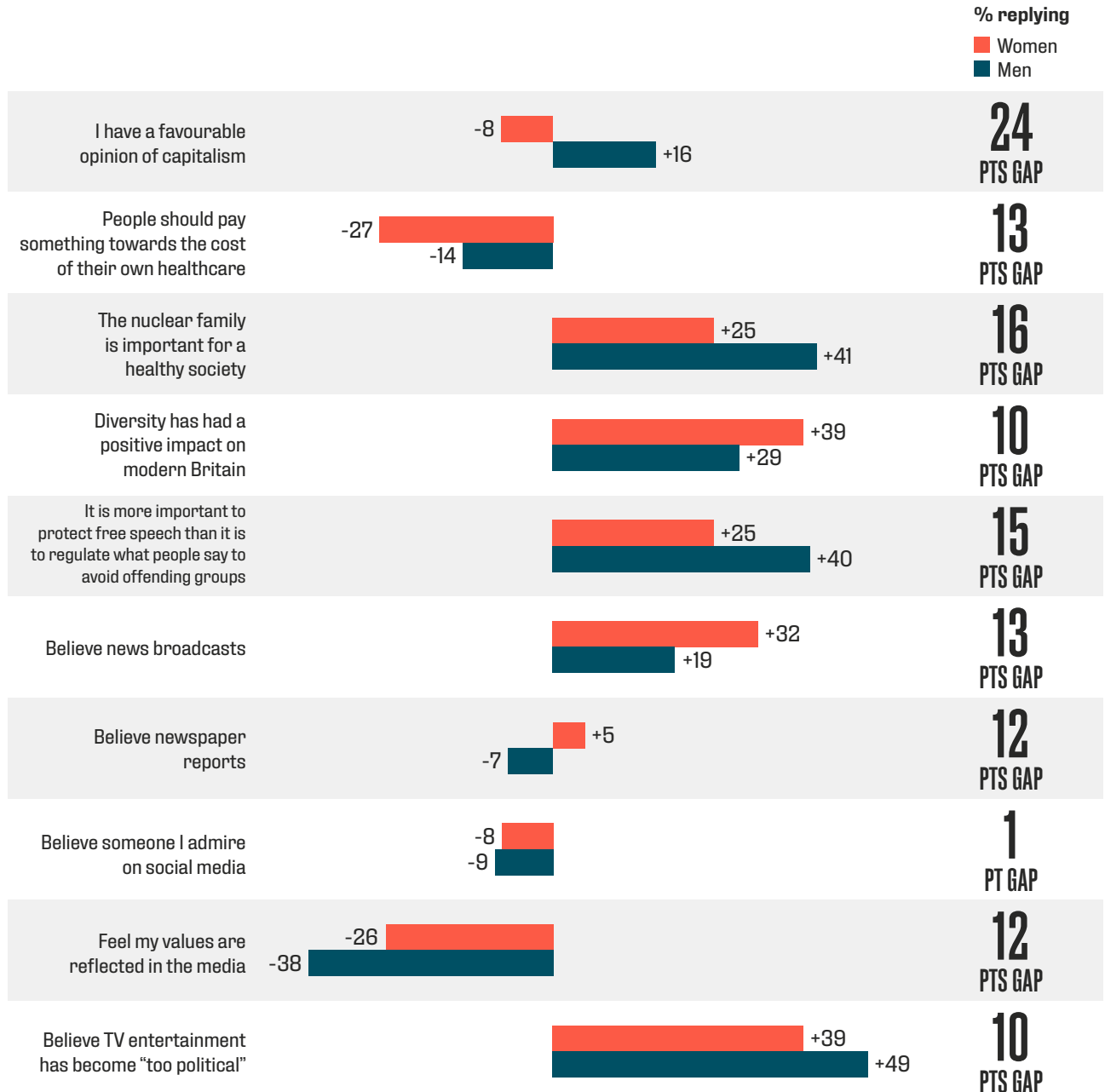
Do you think Brexit will leave Britain better or worse off?



How important do you think the nuclear family is to a healthy society?



POLARISATION BETWEEN THE SEXES



BRITAIN'S TRIBES

More in Common and YouGov identified the seven values-based tribes that comprise the British public. We overlaid our polarisation data on their model to understand which tribes were furthest apart and on what issues. Britain's Culture War is primarily being fought between three groups, who are far-apart on almost every question.

MEET THE PROGRESSIVE ACTIVIST 13% POPULATION



“A powerful and vocal group for whom politics is at the core of their identity. Seek to correct the historic marginalisation of groups. Politically engaged, critical, opinionated, frustrated, cosmopolitan and environmentally conscious.”

Most likely to believe...

- + UK is divided (87% vs 55% national average)
- + Nationality is not at all important to identity (36% vs 15% national average)
- + What their favourite news source reports (77% vs 62% national average)
- + They can express their opinions among friends (90% vs 70% national average) and at work (51% vs 37% national average)
- + Their friends have the same views as them (44% vs 19% national average)
- + Journalism has not become too political (37% vs 62% national average)
- + BLM (89% vs 46% national average) and XR (72% vs 22% national average) have been a force for good in the last 12 months
- + Diversity has been good for Britain (93% vs 58% national average)
- + Scotland should be an independent country (60% vs 33% national average)

They are most likely to have shared political content online (58% vs 22% national average) and to have tried to get something banned (16% vs 7% national average)

BRITAIN'S TRIBES

MEET THE ESTABLISHED LIBERAL 12% POPULATION

“They have done well and mean well towards others, but also see a lot of good in the status quo. Comfortable, privileged, cosmopolitan, trusting, confident, and pro-market.”

- + Most likely to see the UK as united (29% vs 21% national average)
- + Least worried about Covid-19 risks to their health (48% vs 63% national average)
- + Most likely to expect things to get better for themselves in the next three years (40% vs 32% national average)
- + Most likely to believe people have more in common than what divides them (80% vs 67% national average)

- + Most likely to believe people in their area can solve their own problems (80% vs 68% national average)
- + Most likely to believe that the news reflects the views of people like themselves (27% vs 21% national average)
- + Most likely to have a favourable view of capitalism (58% vs 35% national average)

MEET THE BACKBONE CONSERVATIVE 15% POPULATION



“Proud of their country, optimistic about Britain’s future outside the EU, and follow the news, keenly. Nostalgic, patriotic, stalwart, proud, secure, confident, and politically engaged.”

Most likely to believe...

- + Britain has a history to be proud of (91% vs 66% national average)
- + Brexit will leave Britain better off (47% vs 27% national average)
- + The nuclear family is important for a healthy society (77% vs 58% national average)
- + Young people will be better off than their parents (24% vs 15% national average)
- + People should have to pay something towards their healthcare (47% vs 31% national average)
- + Something they like has been cancelled in the last few years (29% vs 20% national average)
- + Free speech is more important than preventing offence (66% vs 54% national average)

For more data from our polarisation studies, including analysis of all seven British tribes, visit mhpc.com/networked-age

BRITAIN'S CHOICE: US-VERSUS-THEM, OR A BIGGER 'US'?



TIM DIXON
CO-FOUNDER, MORE IN COMMON

One in two people in Britain say that the country is more divided than at any point in their lifetime. Like other societies, strong forces are driving us apart – from the ‘filter bubbles’ of social media that isolate us from people with different beliefs, to the powerful forces of economic, cultural and generational change.

But alongside those ‘centrifugal’ forces driving us apart, we should not neglect the ‘centripetal’ forces holding us together. Recent research from **More in Common** – the ‘state of the nation’ **Britain’s Choice** project, and the seven-country **New Normal** study tracking the impact of Covid-19 on society – shows that the United Kingdom ranks ahead of other western countries on many issues. Compared to other countries, people in the UK feel more cared for and supported by others, they feel society as a whole has become more caring, and they are more likely to volunteer to help others.

The new insights from Engine MHP’s research, undertaken in partnership with **More in Common**, show a continuation of many trends we have tracked over the past year. Despite exhaustion with lockdowns and the toll of the pandemic, community sentiment is still strengthening.



63% say that they feel part of a community of people who ‘understand, care for, and help each other’ – up from 49% before the pandemic, and 57% in the summer. And while the past year has been extraordinarily difficult for many people, the percentage who see the country as divided has fallen from 67% in early 2020 to 55% in early 2021.

How do we make sense of these apparent contradictions?

The Britain’s Choice project provides some answers. This in-depth project brings together the lens of social psychology and a large national sample of 10,000 people to better understand the fault lines in our society. A key conclusion is that there is no inevitability that Britain follows the trajectory of the United States towards more profound polarisation. We have been going down a path towards deeper social fractures, but we have a choice to turn back.

And we have a surprising amount of common ground on which to build – more so than other countries.

We found that Britons do not divide into two camps, but rather seven groups. ‘The British Seven’ is a typology in understanding how Britons divide, based on their core beliefs and psychological traits, not demographics and political identity. By using this framework, we see that Britons cluster together in different formations depending on the issue. Our divisions look less like two opposing sides, and more like a kaleidoscope. Just as the glass fragments change their formations as the kaleidoscope rotates, so too the seven groups line up differently from one issue to the next. For example, Loyal Nationals generally align with Backbone Conservatives and Disengaged Traditionalists on identity,

BRITAIN'S CHOICE: US-VERSUS-THEM, OR A BIGGER 'US'?

immigration, and social values, but when it comes to tackling Britain's inequality they cluster with Progressive Activists, Civic Pragmatists and Disengaged Battlers.

People in Britain are experiencing growing forces of division, but they are not polarised like Americans. In **More in Common's Hidden Tribes** studies of polarisation in the United States, we have consistently found two ideological wings intensely opposed to one another, with an 'exhausted majority' in the middle. The **Perception Gap** and **American Fabric** studies highlight the extent to which each side sees the other in the most negative terms. In contrast, fewer people in Britain attribute bad motives to those with whom they disagree. Engine MHP's new research finds that almost a third of people in Britain actually recognise others who strongly disagree with them as being 'honest' in their views.

The value of the new findings in this report is that they underscore the fact that there are both unifying and dividing forces now at play.

The years of divisions over Brexit leave society more fractured, and throw a spotlight on many of our fault lines. But Covid-19 has also highlighted that despite many things going wrong in the UK's pandemic response, there are strong forces that bind our society together. Almost a year into the pandemic, 68% of us now feel that we can make things better in our local communities when we choose to – compared to just 47% before Covid-19. Surprisingly, the largest positive shift has taken place among the Disengaged Battlers, a group that is younger, on a lower income and from more racially diverse backgrounds – and which has been finding the pandemic especially tough.

The path to an 'us-versus-them' society, or to a 'bigger 'us' society is the choice that lies ahead as we navigate the difficult terrain of economic recovery, 'levelling up' and the future of the Union. Alongside the political debates, we all need to be reminded that we have the capacity to make a difference, and to build upon our nation's common ground.

MEASURING POLARISATION

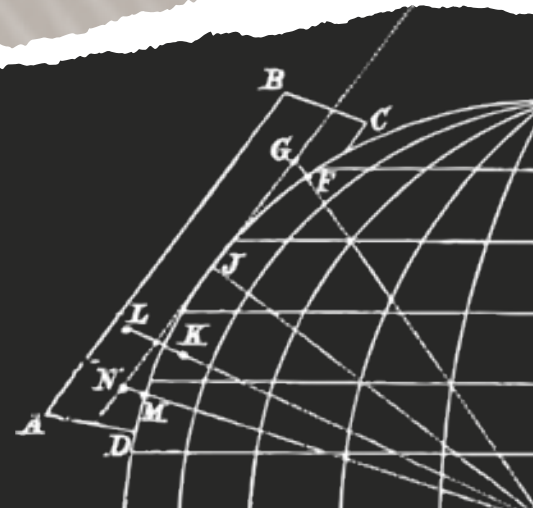
THE ENGINE MHP POLARISATION TRACKER

Working with our Senior Analyst, the psychologist Joseph Marks, and his colleagues at **Cambridge University**, we have developed the Polarisation Tracker, a longitudinal panel study which explores how polarisation on different axes and topics evolve over time in the same set of British survey respondents.

The Tracker study, which will be repeated in Summer and Winter 2021, has helped us to understand what issues divide the nation.

This proprietary data allows us to advise our clients on how to engage in potentially risky debates and manage emerging reputational challenges. In this section, we summarise the findings from each of the studies.

Note: 1,000 GB adults aged 18+ completed this study online between 17 December – 20 December 2020. Participants were recruited through Prolific Academic based on their: voting behaviour in the 2019 general election and 2016 EU referendum, country of residence, age, gender, ethnicity and education. The final sample was then statistically weighted to the national profile of all adults aged 18+ on these characteristics, with target weights derived from 1) The results of the 2019 general election and 2016 EU referendum 2) Official ONS population estimates 3) Large scale surveys such as the YouGov and Ipsos MORI post-election surveys and the British Election Study.



WHAT THE TRACKER TELLS US



JOSEPH MARKS
SENIOR ANALYST, ENGINE MHP

The results of the first wave of our Tracker are fascinating and offer both grounds for concern and optimism. There are four key findings.

Firstly, Brexit is still the most politically divisive issue in Britain. Even after a year of rows over the government's response to COVID-19, Brexit remains the most polarising issue in British politics.

Secondly, the Brexit debate has produced tribal rivalry. Our data shows that people who express strong opinions on the issue of Brexit show a greater preference for people who lean the same way as them ideologically.

Thirdly, Labour supporters favour censorship more than Conservative voters. Although both groups of voters show a preference for freedom of speech over censorship, there is a statistically significant difference between them on this measure. This is consistent with a recent paper published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, which suggests that people may become more permissive of censorship as polarisation increases.

Finally, in contrast to the US, where surveys suggest that 65% of Republicans report 'hardly any' confidence in the media, more than half (54%) of UK Conservative voters said that they trust information from mainstream news sources. Trust in the media is less of a left-right issue than an engaged-disengaged one in Britain.

This is good news for anyone who fears that the UK is on the same polarised path as the US, but suggests British society has an entirely different challenge to address.

IDEOLOGICAL POLARISATION

LEFT-RIGHT DIVISION STILL DOMINATES

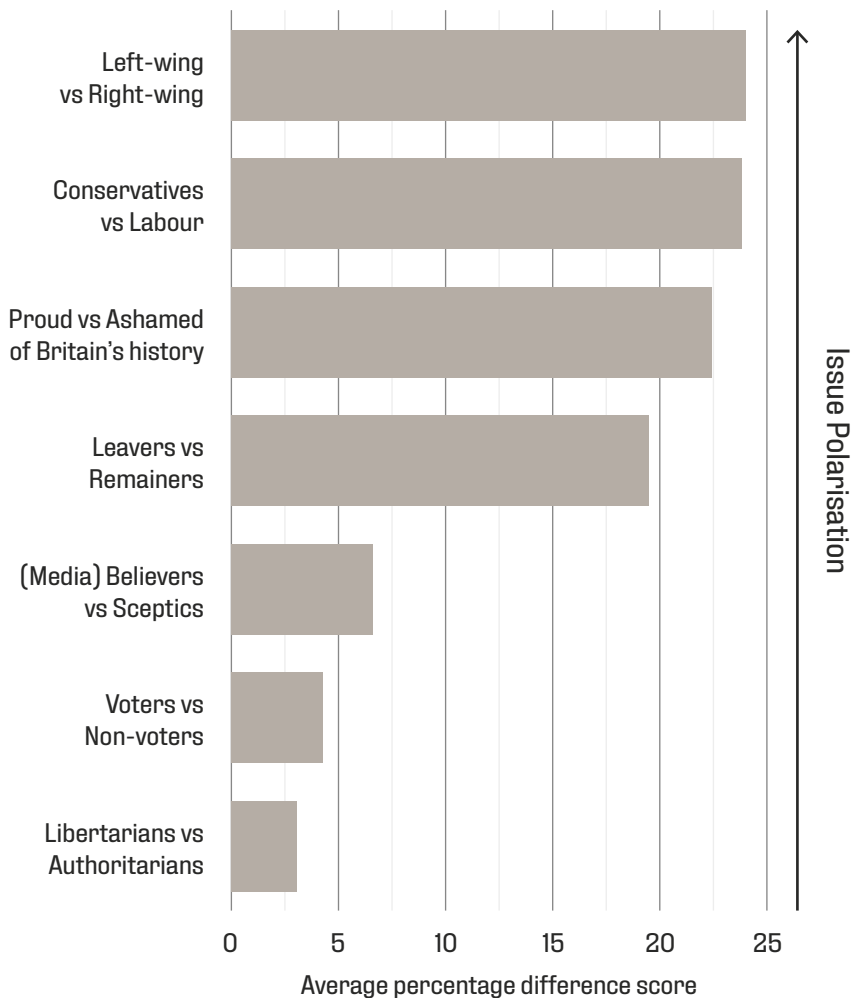
The results from our first Tracker confirm that polarisation is rife in Britain.

Respondents were asked to indicate their position on 17 different topics, to understand which of seven political worldviews are the most divisive.

The most polarised ideological divide in Britain remains the left-right axis.

ISSUE POLARISATION

How polarised different groups are over current affairs



ISSUE POLARISATION

BREXIT IS BRITAIN'S MOST DIVISIVE ISSUE

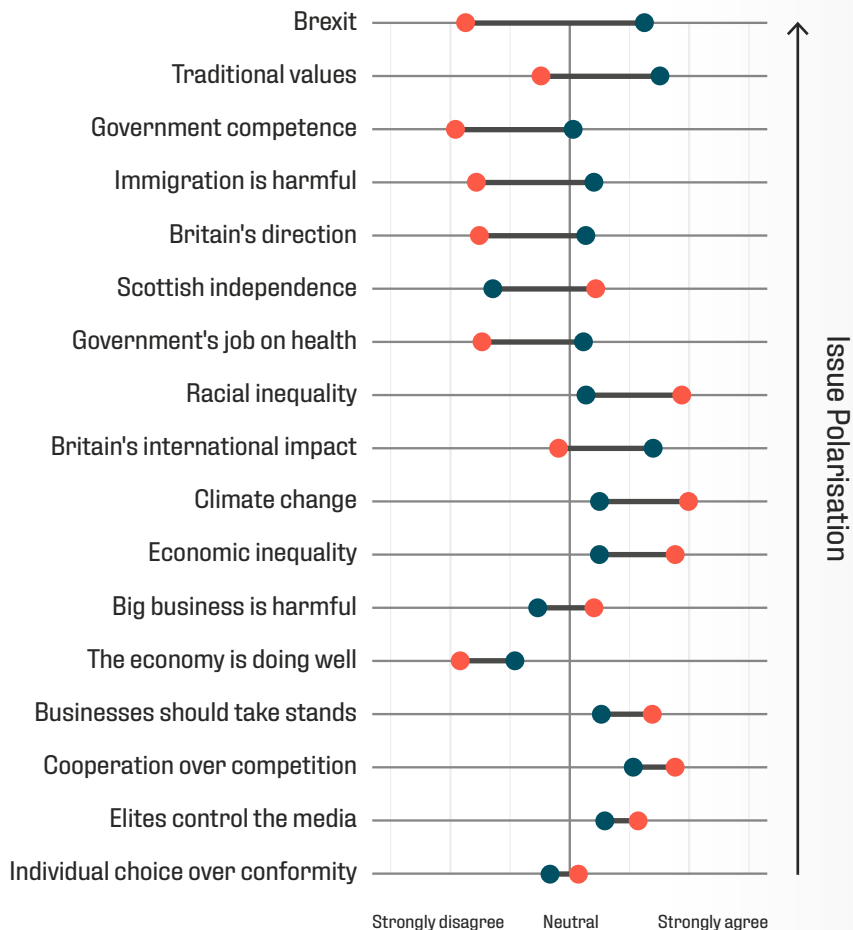
We asked people whether they agreed or disagreed with a range of political questions.

The most polarising political issue between left and right in Britain is Brexit, followed by attitudes towards 'traditional values' and how competent people believe the government is.

- Left
- Right

DIFFERENCES IN OPINION BETWEEN THOSE ON THE POLITICAL RIGHT AND LEFT ON PARTICULAR ISSUES

Note: Responses were on 7-point scales, from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree'



AFFECTIVE POLARISATION

BREXIT HAS EXACERBATED POLITICAL HOSTILITY

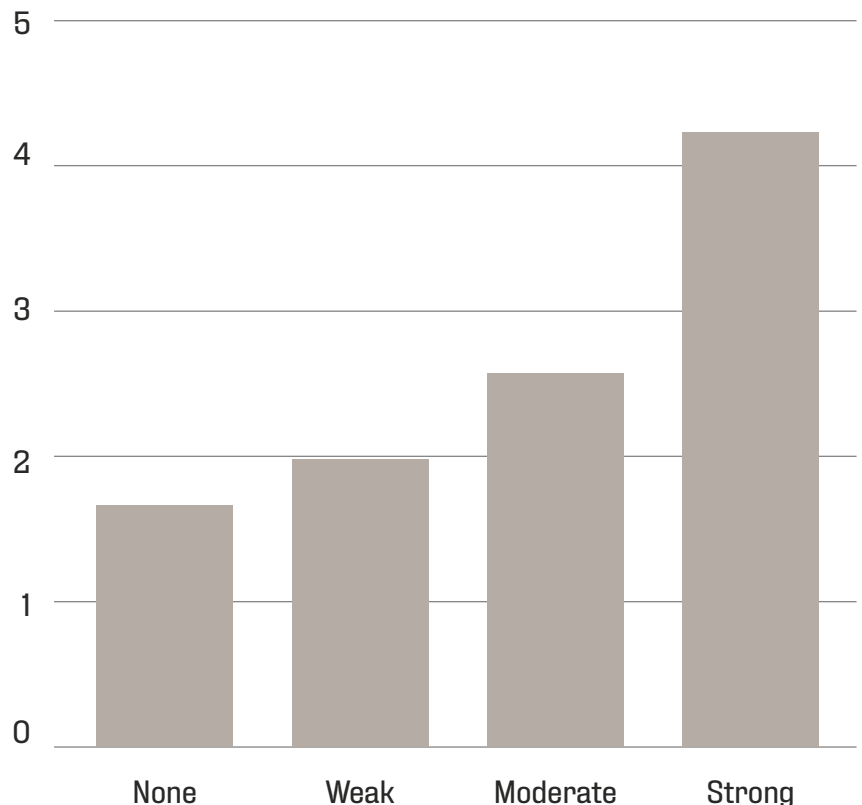
People who express strong opinions on the issue of Brexit, in one direction or the other, show a greater preference for people who lean the same way as them ideologically.

In other words, the stronger your views on Brexit, the stronger your feelings about people who share your political views and those who don't.

This pattern is evident in people on both sides, however overall left-wing respondents displayed more animosity towards those on the right than vice-versa.

AFFECTIVE POLARISATION IN LEFT-WING AND RIGHT-WING RESPONDENTS IS MODERATED BY OPINION STRENGTH ON THE ISSUE OF BREXIT

Note: Affective polarisation is the difference between how much those on the left-wing and right-wing of the political spectrum like Britons who share their political views and those who don't



AFFECTIVE POLARISATION

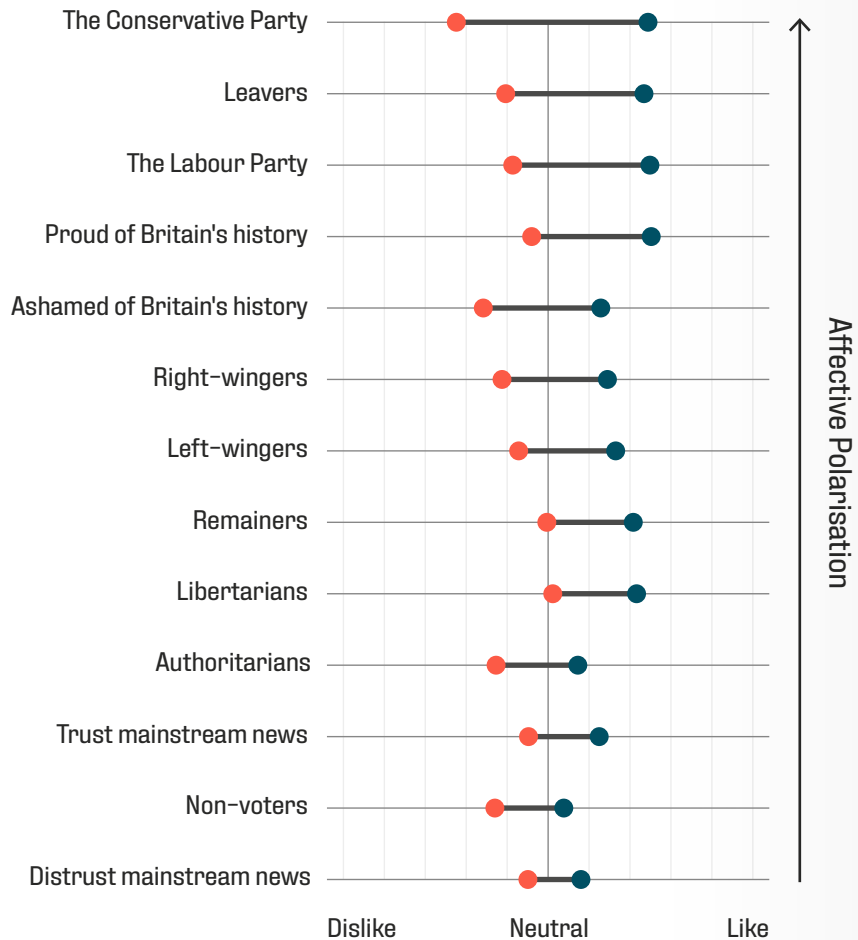
CONSERVATIVES MOST DISLIKED

We asked people to rate their feelings towards other groups.

The political group that polarises opinion most is the Conservative Party. People who are 'proud' or 'ashamed' of Britain's history also generate strong feelings.

- Everyone else
- In-group

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HOW MUCH GROUP MEMBERS AND NON-GROUP MEMBERS LIKE THE GROUP



PERCEPTION POLARISATION

NON-VOTERS JUDGED MOST HARSHLY

We asked voters and non-voters to rate other groups in terms of key traits.

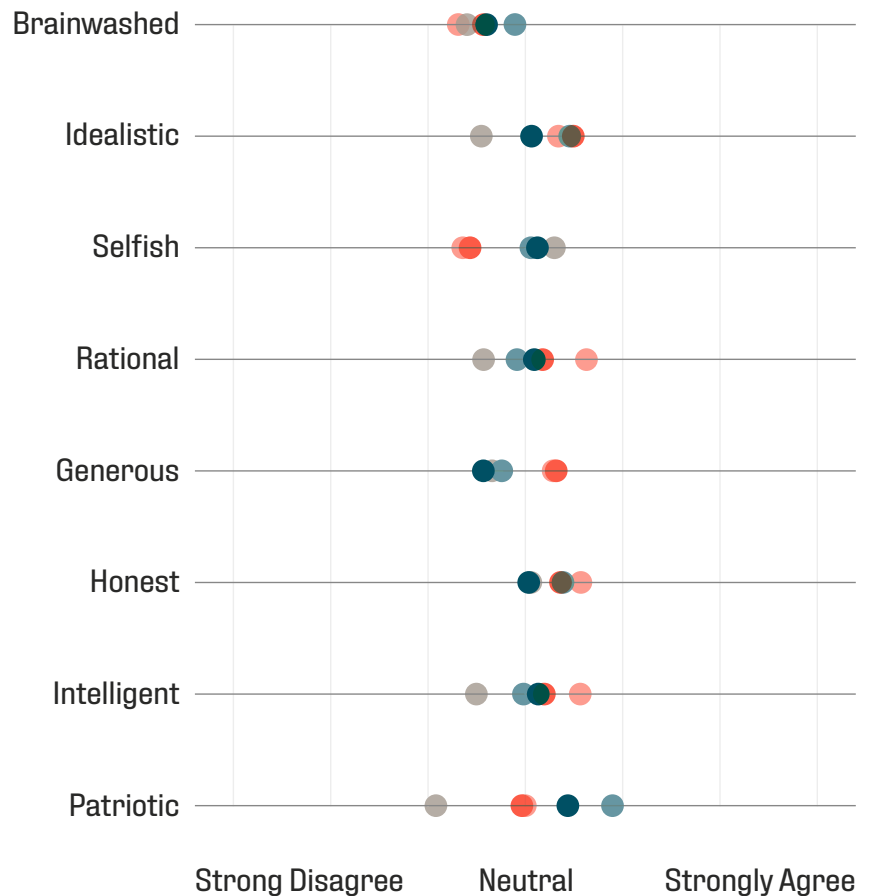
The greatest differences in terms of how groups stereotype one another relate to the traits 'Brainwashed' and 'Rational', suggesting that groups differentiate themselves most in terms of their susceptibility to flawed thinking.

Non-voters are judged relatively harshly. They are seen as the least idealistic, patriotic and intelligent, and the most selfish.

- Conservatives
- Labour
- Leavers
- Remainers
- Non-voters

TRAIT RATINGS: AVERAGES

How the British public see different groups of voters, overall



VOTING POLARISATION

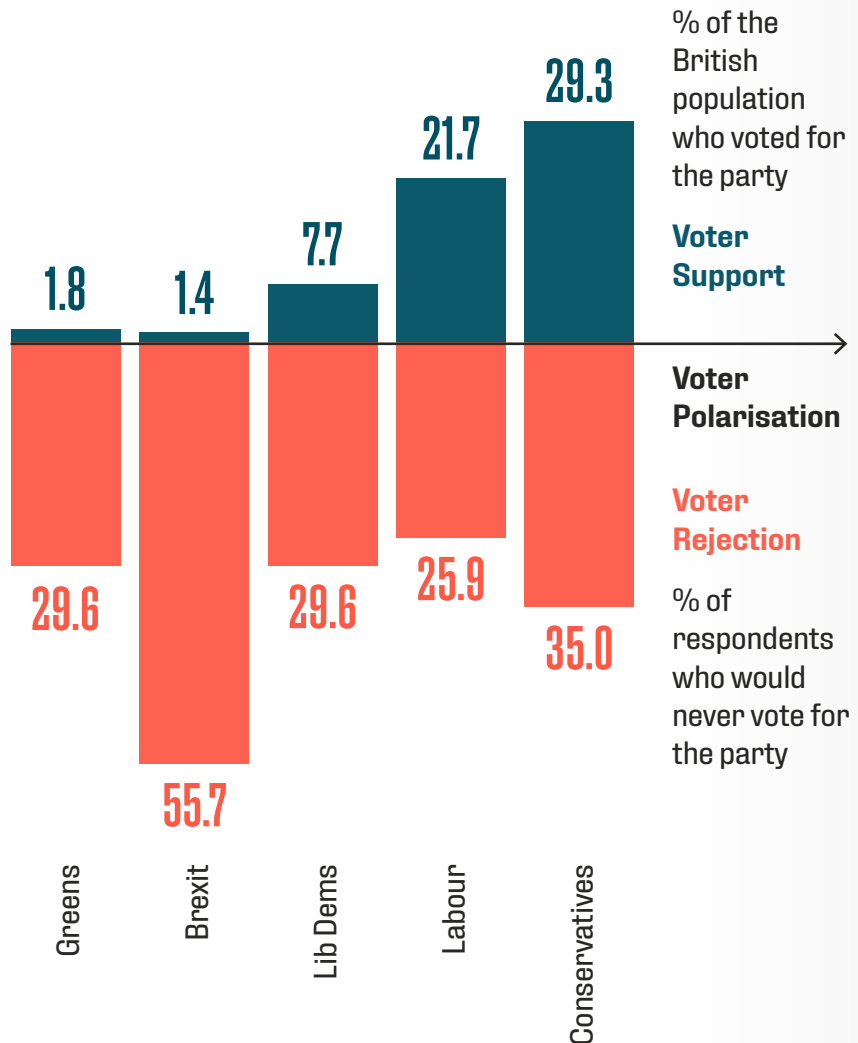
LABOUR HAS THE BIGGEST POOL OF POTENTIAL VOTERS

We asked people who they voted for and who they would never vote for.

The parties with the most vote share are the most polarised on this measure, though fewer people said that they would never vote for the Labour Party than any of the other main national parties.

PARTISAN POLARISATION

Voter support and rejection



MEDIA POLARISATION

THE UK IS NOT THE USA

Trust in the media is polarised in the UK but political party preference is not the biggest divide.

In contrast to the US, where surveys suggest that 65% of Republicans report 'hardly any' confidence in the media, more than half (54%) of UK Conservative voters said that they trust information from mainstream news sources, while only 40% of Labour voters said the same.

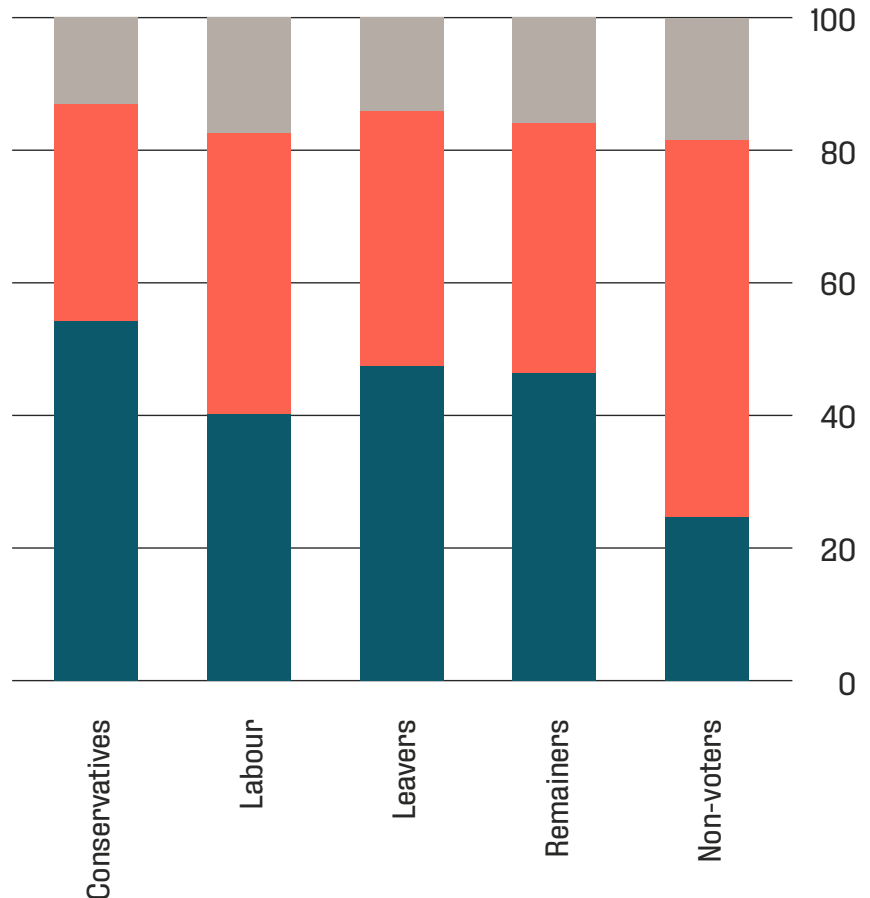
The starkest difference is between voters and non-voters: The politically engaged feel relatively well-served by the UK media, but the disengaged are distrustful.

TRUST IN MAINSTREAM AND OFFICIAL NEWS SOURCES

Note: 'Slightly', 'Moderately' and 'Extremely' response options have been aggregated

% replying

- Trusting
- Distrusting
- Neither trusting nor distrusting



SECOND WAVE COMING



PART FOUR



WINNING IN A POLARISED WORLD



POLARISATION AND POLITICS



MATTHEW ELLIOTT
ADVISOR, ENGINE MHP

Polarisation increases public engagement with political issues. Few people understand this phenomenon better than ENGINE MHP Advisor Matthew Elliott, founder of pressure groups the TaxPayers' Alliance and Big Brother Watch, Campaign Director of NOtoAV and CEO of Vote Leave.

But while many believe Brexit has irrevocably fractured the UK, Elliott believes British politics may have turned a corner, returning to a period of relative consensus. He spoke with our Deputy CEO, Nick Barron:

NB: Has the UK political landscape become more polarised in recent years and if so, does that make life more difficult for a political campaigner?

ME: Let's take a step back for a second. We had a post-war consensus, broken by Thatcherism and the new right in the 1970s and 80s.

Then Blair came along and said 'we need a third way', which was essentially a return to consensus in the 90s. Then there was another divergence in the mid-2010s, focused on the Brexit referendum, but with its origins in the aftermath of the financial crisis. Now, it's too early to say, but I suspect we are moving back to consensus again.

People are fundamentally rational. They have limited time and when there aren't huge issues at stake, they don't get involved. Turnout drops. Activism drops. But when you have really divergent debates and big issues, politics matters and people become involved.

The Brexit debate was not just about the EU. As a result of the 2008 crash and the austerity that followed, many felt that they had been left behind. Politics had higher stakes again and people reengaged.

Build Back Better and the Green agenda represent a return to consensus politics – at least on the economic front. It will be interesting to see how the Culture Wars play out, but I suspect 'London Mayor Boris' will want to avoid the most polarising elements of this as he resets his Government.

BORIS THE UNIFIER?

NB: OK, so if the public wants a more harmonious type of politics, can Boris Johnson be a unifying figure, given everything that's happened since 2016? Pre-Iraq Blair was a unifier, but post-Iraq Blair polarised opinion. Can Boris reinvent himself again, given his baggage?

ME: It won't be easy, but his bouncy optimism lends itself to a unifying approach. As a salesman, he's far better than Starmer. He also needs to restore the Conservative Party's reputation for competence.

He needs to pick up where he left off after the 2019 election before Covid reared its ugly head and disrupted the whole of 2020. He needs to set out his vision. Get Brexit Done wasn't a vision, it was a short-term imperative. Levelling Up and Build Back Better don't yet mean enough to people. People are struggling to see what he's in power to do. He needs to spell out his vision for the 2020s and show he has the team in place to deliver it.



“POLARISATION
IS A FAILURE
OF VISION AND
LEADERSHIP”



POLARISATION AND POLITICS

2016 AND ITS AFTERMATH

NB: How did EU membership, which had rarely been high up the pollsters' lists of issues that mattered to the UK public, become such a fault line? Did the referendum campaign drive polarisation or was that division there already?

ME: Before the referendum, the EU rarely troubled the MORI tracker poll of issues that mattered most to the electorate, but issues associated with our EU membership such as immigration were in the top 3 issues.

Specifically on migration, it wasn't so much migration per se that concerned people, it was the lack of control by UK politicians. The public felt lied to by Blair, Brown and Cameron about the effect of the eastern expansion of the EU. They believed the establishment was failing to represent their concerns – that their leaders had become detached – which is why they wanted to Take Back Control. This divergent view about the benefits of EU membership and the downsides of giving up control is where the roots of polarisation lay.

NB: Is it fair to say that this same emotional energy had a big effect on the last two US Presidential elections?

After all, one 2016 study showed Trump's vote increased as a result of negative coverage, while a 2020 study found that Twitter censorship of stories about voter fraud made Republicans more likely to believe fraud took place. Trump's support is in part due to that same belief that the establishment is detached from the people.

ME: Yes, the rise of what some people call populism is essentially a rejection of the establishment. You can see it too with Covid. Once the public began to believe that the people in charge were not acting fairly or with due concern for their needs or – even worse – were ignoring the rules themselves, the debate around lockdown became politically polarised.

NB: So after Brexit and lockdown, what are the issues that will polarise Britain in future?

ME: I sense that the vast majority of people now want the country to come back together. They are tired of division, they're sick of arguing about Brexit. They don't want politicians to use campaigns like Black Lives Matter to divide them.

But the next big issue on the horizon – the drive for Scottish independence – will test the togetherness of the UK. If the Unionist campaign tries Project Fear again, it will not work. Nor will

breaking out the Union Jacks. They will need to convince Scottish people that their progressive internationalist instincts are shared by the rest of the UK and can be delivered by an independent Britain.

NB: Can I ask you about the ‘Reality Gaps’ that emerge in polarised debates? For example, in the Scottish independence debate, many nationalists refuse to acknowledge that Scotland is a net fiscal beneficiary of UK fiscal transfers, despite the Scottish government’s own figures showing this. How can communicators reach across a divide, when the other side’s starting point is a very different version of reality?

ME: I think it’s very difficult to do. Better to have a different conversation altogether. Focus on areas where common ground can be found. Above all, common ground can be found in the future tense. That’s why vision is so important. Unionists will persuade few Scottish voters by arguing over the money. They need to focus on what the vision for the United Kingdom is, where the country is headed and how we’re better off continuing to take that journey together.

THE ROLE OF THE MESSENGER

NB: And in general, how important is the messenger in political communications, compared to the message?

ME: It’s hugely important. During the Brexit campaign, we focused heavily on the messenger. Giving Boris Johnson and Gisela Stuart top billing was crucial because it showed voters that they weren’t voting for Nigel Farage by voting Leave.

In terms of bridging divides, it’s important to have a messenger who’s not seen as partisan. Boris’s career before politics and his time as Mayor demonstrated his independent credentials. Gisela’s solid Blairite credentials and German heritage was also helpful.

NB: Is picking a fight with your own side an effective way of earning non-partisan credentials and reaching out to the other side?

ME: It certainly gets cut-through. Doing something painful demonstrates that you’re willing to put country above partisan issues. But you can’t fake it. Michael Howard was always looking for a fight to have with his own side, but couldn’t find anything authentic.

POLARISATION AND POLITICS

EARNING SALIENCE

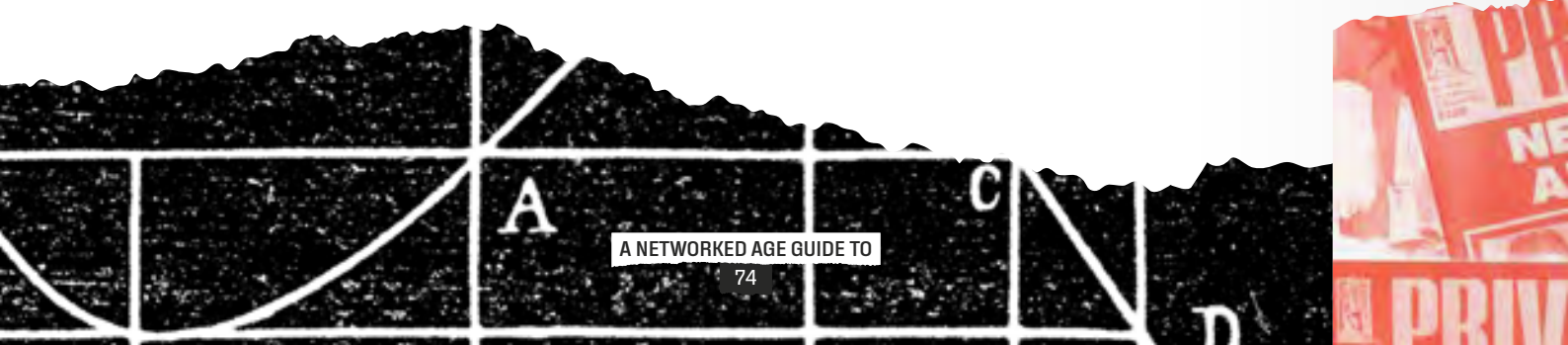
NB: Your work with the TaxPayers' Alliance has involved taking issues that people were unaware of and making them care about it. What's your approach to getting cut-through?

ME: It's ultimately about salience. People will not invest time and energy in an issue if they don't believe it is important or if they don't think their support will make a difference. By becoming an informal waste watchdog, the TPA communicates their concerns about government spending effectively and their track record of success demonstrates that it is worthwhile to get involved.

VISION AND LEADERSHIP

NB: The data from More in Common's 'Britain's Choice' study supports your view that the majority of the public are exhausted by ideological warfare. But I'm not sure that the media are. They still seem to be in the battle mode they have been in since 2016. Case in point: The glee with which many journalists leapt on the rumour that Biden rang Macron before Johnson, as a snub to Brexit Britain. Will the UK media let us get back to consensus politics?

ME: This is where I think leadership comes in. If an organisation isn't given a clear lead, factions within the organisation pull it in different directions. And if a government bases their plans on what the opinion polls say, that creates factionalism within government and a political incentive for the media to be more activist. Spelling out a clear vision and building a coalition of support – including in the media – reduces factionalism and polarisation.



NB: So is vision and leadership the solution for overcoming polarisation? In the absence of strong leadership, a vacuum forms, and tribalism rushes in to fill it?

ME: Yes. Covid is a good example. Without clarity and a plan for the future, people begin to squabble.

NB: That's interesting, because one of the psychological drivers of polarisation is uncertainty. When people are more uncertain of the world and their place within it, they become more attracted to strongly held and expressed views. People latch on to strength in uncertain times. And tribal groups offer strength and certainty.

ME: A crucial point about strong leadership is that it is not the same as pretending to have all the answers.

In times of crisis, you can admit mistakes and failures and you can be open about the trade-offs involved with every choice. Overclaiming by leaders can be incredibly damaging to public confidence.

NB: And should a strong leader speak directly to the public through their digital channels to cut through a polarised media landscape, or does cutting out intermediaries simply fuel polarisation?

ME: The danger of doing everything directly is that when the media inevitably cover the story, they are left with nothing to say rather than offer their opinion on the story. If you speak to them first then their reports have to begin with what you have to say. A good leader has to work with, rather than against, the media. Even Donald Trump needed Fox News.



POLARISATION AND ACTIVISM



KAJAL ODEDRA

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CHANGE.ORG UK

COVID-19 has put people power on steroids. It's ushered in a new era of digital activism.

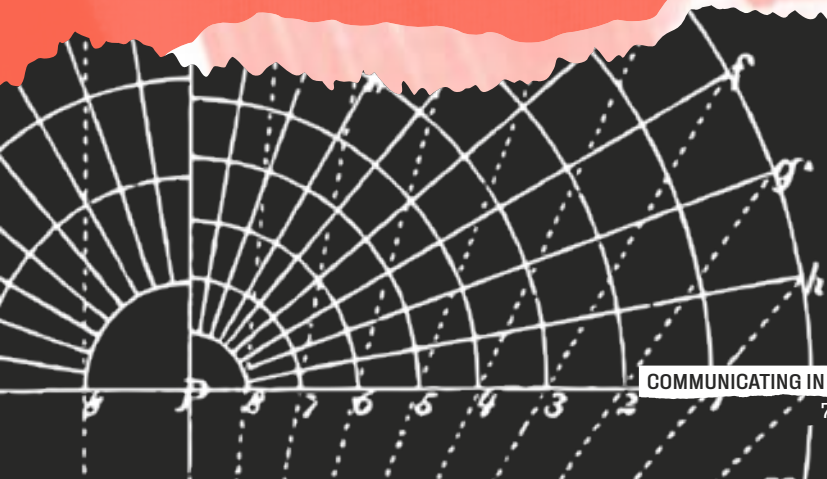
Change.org is used around the world, but an analysis of the top 25 countries – including the UK – showed the number of people signing petitions between January–July 2020 represented an 81% increase in the same time period in 2019. Our platform also allows people to start petitions on issues that matter to them. That too had seen a stratospheric increase – nearly 80% more petitions were started. Nor was this just our existing users engaging more strongly. The number of people turning to change.org to grow support and influence increased by over a third.

At the heart of this growth, and our most successful campaigns, has been a focus on allowing people to tell their stories to change hearts and minds. Platforms like change.org enable people to highlight this. In the pandemic, this came into its own allowing people to find others in a similar situation to them and movements to build. Government policies, introduced at speed and sometimes poorly thought through, were having unintended effects. It left parents of **perilously sick babies** unable to sit by their bedside. Transport workers pleading for PPE. Or **A-level students** like Curtis in an utter mess as an algorithm delivered grades that were unrecognisable to them. By telling their stories people were able to connect with others – your identity and familiar lived experience are an intrinsic part of that. That's a good thing, it enables them to bring about much needed change.



What these campaigners have in common is they were speaking up because their community was getting missed. This coalescing of groups who have the same story to tell can firmly push people into camps. And daily Government briefings addressing and attempting to support certain groups through the pandemic can exacerbate that. A potent reminder when you are missed out, fermenting feelings of being desperately unheard. A side effect is it ends up reinforcing divides between communities, who group together around their profession, gender, race or more to advocate for their rights. I worry that there is not enough attention going into how to prevent this polarisation happening or how we can bridge the divides it is fuelling.

Making people uncomfortable is often an essential part of what we do – it can be essential to bringing about change. Sometimes that means it is polarising, and I make no apology for that. Indeed providing a platform and support for less powerful groups is a large part of why change.org exists. This polarisation can shift people's views – as MHP's research shows – gay marriage now has broad support. But recent history shows us that rampant homophobia and discrimination meant for a long time that was not the case. While homophobia continues to exist, polarisation and protest has also ultimately induced changes in attitudes and legislation. Over time people have changed their mind. This example charts a way that people power and polarisation can make us uncomfortable, and bring us back together.



POLARISATION AND THE MEDIA



RICHARD SAMBROOK

CENTRE FOR JOURNALISM, CARDIFF UNIVERSITY

MHP Senior Director Keith Gladdis worked as a journalist for more than 20 years. Here he speaks to Director of the Centre for Journalism at Cardiff University and former Director of BBC News, Richard Sambrook, about the role journalism plays in today's polarised society and whether it is the role of reporters to drive change.

KG: Division, conflict and debate have been the foundation of good journalism for generations. Anyone can report what happened, but a good journalist investigates why it happened, who disagrees with it and who wants to put a stop to it.

In The Networked Age something has gone wrong. Journalism no longer breaks down barriers, it's reinforcing them. In some cases, rather than simply reporting conflict and division, journalists are creating it – and shutting down dissenting voices. High-profile commentators like Bari Weiss (New York Times), Andrew Sullivan (New York Magazine), Glenn Greenwald (The Intercept) and Suzanne Moore (Guardian) have resigned, blaming bullying and censorship from their colleagues.

However, journalists now have a greater number of platforms to communicate directly with their audience. It means the old 'command and control' model of an editor dictating the kind of stories and opinions a title carries are coming to an end.

“WE NEED TO FIGHT HARDER FOR NEWS VALUES.”

Journalism has always been adaptable but in the last decade the business models of news organisations, especially newspapers, has changed dramatically. How much has the new economics of journalism contributed to polarisation?

RS: The impact has been dramatic, the 'middle market for the news' has disappeared almost completely. You're either fighting it out in the commoditised instant news space or you're doing slower in-depth niche stuff behind a paywall. Short, thoughtful features don't have a market anymore.

KG: **One of the biggest changes we've seen is in local and regional media. How much of an impact has the commercial decline of local media had on society?**

RS: The decline of traditional news has opened-up space for new players and not all of them are benign. In the US, Nieman Lab has found hyper-partisan publishers are replacing local news. In the UK local councils are publishing propaganda dressed up as local news. More positively, independent hyper-local is becoming an identifiable and sustainable sector.

The decline of big regional media means that we're over-reliant on the London media to represent people's views. This is exacerbating the lack of viewpoint diversity in journalism. Those communities don't feel they have a voice that speaks for them.

KG: **Yes, but hasn't that always been a problem? Growing up in Manchester I would see the 'North of England correspondent' on the BBC News and that was alienating. Today, it's very unusual to hear a northern accent in a newsroom.**

RS: The decline of big regional newspapers has certainly made the problem worse. The Northern Echo or the Liverpool Post are not the big voices that they once were. It means the career paths into national newsrooms no longer exist. There is a big issue about diversity in newsrooms including economic and regional diversity. Communities outside of London don't feel they have a voice in the national debate.

POLARISATION AND THE MEDIA

TODAY'S JOURNALIST

KG: You are now Professor Richard Sambrook at Cardiff University, which has one of the most prestigious schools of journalism in the country. What kind of students are you seeing come through today?

RS: They are highly motivated but there is an increase in activism. Ask a journalism student today what 'fairness' means to them and they might say 'social justice.' Some want an illustrious career, but most want to earn enough money to pay the rent, have some fun and pursue what they see as social justice. Some of them are very motivated by causes.

Aspiring young journalists don't have job security, they can't see when they will own a house, they have no certainties. All they've got to rest upon are their own values and their peer group.

DECLINING POWER OF THE EDITOR

KG: One of the most striking changes I've seen in newspapers is that editors have a lot less control over their journalists than they did in the past.

RS: In the old model – a world of little choice for consumers – the proprietor and the editor would say "this is what I want to tell people and what people will hear". The new model needs to be more open and responsive.

Newsrooms haven't necessarily become more politicised, but the digital environment surfaces a lot of tensions and disagreements between journalists, which used to be hidden from the public.

And in newsrooms that debate has also become very lively. There is a growing phenomenon of the star writer, whose social media following is bigger than the masthead. Newspapers are vying to attract them to bring their audience with them.

THE 'GOLDEN AGE' OF JOURNALISM

KG: Don't we need to be careful not to hark back to a mythical golden age of journalism and recognise the limitations of the past? Look at a newspaper from 30 years ago and the quality of journalism doesn't compare to the best of what's available today.

RS: I agree. There is great work being done by this generation of journalists. What we do have is a problem with media literacy, which has driven polarisation. We have a huge problem with media literacy where people can't tell the difference between the New York Times and Breitbart because it all looks the same on their Facebook feed.

My generation of editors didn't do enough to articulate what lies behind good quality, grounded journalism. The great growth of the 1980s and 1990s was taken for granted, people stopped articulating the democratic value of news, stopped articulating what distinguished high quality news from low quality news and therefore lost the public.

The public stopped understanding what news was about. Then the internet opened the floodgates and people are only just now catching up when it comes to media literacy. But people are beginning to catch up. In the long-term, this problem can be fixed.

THE ROLE OF THE BBC

KG: In some ways, things haven't changed – some journalists have always encouraged tribalism. When I was at the Liverpool Echo in the 1990s, we played into polarisation. It was Liverpool against the world. Us versus them. However, now the tribalism has moved from local readership to the diaspora online. Does the BBC need to stand against this approach and play a bigger role in depolarisation?

RS: The BBC is an organisation with a constitution that explicitly promotes social cohesion but how does it fulfil that remit when no one wants to play that game? For private commercial media that is not their responsibility. For example, the way LBC manages impartiality is by having a range of incredibly opinionated partial voices.

POLARISATION AND THE MEDIA

There's a risk programmes like Question Time on the BBC now follow that LBC strategy. It isn't about trying to unpack policy any longer. Now, it's about getting opinionated viral moments that it can push on social media. They will point to the large audience they are earning online, but what they are doing is driving social anger and I don't think they should. The BBC should provide a firm foundation of verified factual information on which the public can make choices and form views.

JOURNALISTS AND DEPOLARISATION

KG: Is it the job of journalists to depolarise? I'm not sure. I do think they have a duty to challenge their readers, however. People hate-read articles they disagree with from a brand they disagree with, but they are more likely to listen to their preferred media brand if it tells them something that confounds their beliefs.

RS: Viewpoint diversity is not a magic bullet. Talk radio stations manage impartiality with a range of opinionated and partial voices, that's not about trying to reconcile people.

News organisations need to start doing their job better. That means proper scrutiny and holding people to account whichever side of the political divide they happen to be on. We are in an environment now where politicians simply avoid being held to account by the media. Boris says I'm not going to be interviewed in the election campaign like every other politician, he shrugs it off and gets an 80-seat majority.

WHAT NEXT FOR THE INDUSTRY?

KG: It's possible that we look back in ten years' time and see this as something of a golden age – where new challengers were innovating and established incumbents could still fund investigative journalism. What do you think the future will look like for journalism?

RS: One thing you learn is that new players who arrive with lots of fanfare and VC investment can make a lot of noise but once the money runs down or the investors want a return it becomes a lot harder than people think.

There will be some new players but perhaps not as many as we once thought. Even 18 months ago you would have said VICE was a big new player and now BuzzFeed has been hollowed out and is disappearing from news.

KG: Given the challenges news organisations face in The Networked Age, how will they survive?

RS: They have got to figure out how they will deliver a depth of value to rapidly changing audiences. An audience that rapidly changes the way it consumes news and information, an audience whose demographics and values are changing.

For example, climate change has been a secondary topic for some time, but boy is it going to come back and hit soon. The organisations that innovate will succeed. There are things to be positive about: The public is catching up when it comes to media literacy and there is a lot of research that shows that people who are on social media are exposed to and read a lot more sources than those that are offline. That's somewhat counterintuitive.

There needs to be a whole reengineering of newsroom practices from being 'command and control' to being receptive to what the audience wants. It's about being more open and thinking really hard about offering value. The New York Times is one example. A great growth in digital products, investing in the product and good journalism and then thinking 'how do we get it to the people in a form they want to consume it?' It's really hard work and takes money and investment.

What will it look like? It will be primarily online and digital. Whether that's broadcast or print. Some big brands will make it through, some will fall by the wayside and there will also be a plethora of small niche services too.

People need high quality information as much or more than ever. And they need news organisations to help filter and curate the information they need. Technology has transformed how that can happen – and we are all still catching up with its capabilities and new ways of offering news. But if the need is there, business can follow.

POLARISATION AND BRANDS



LEE PRICE

HEAD OF PR & MISCHIEF, PADDY POWER

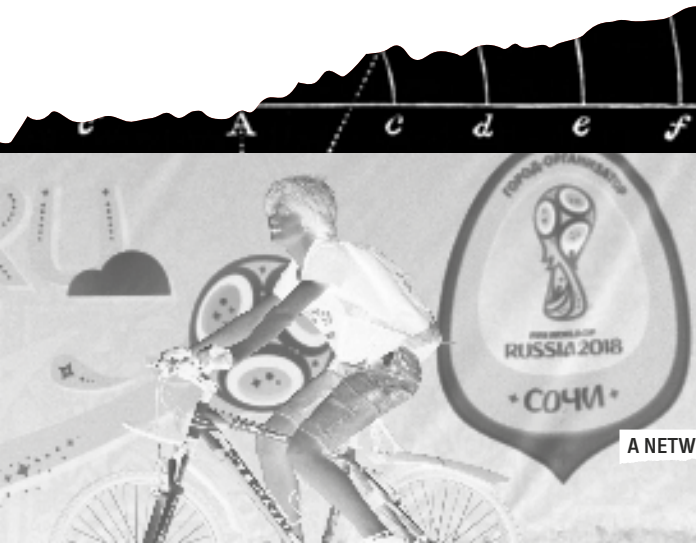
In 2018, gaming brand Paddy Power took a stand against homophobia in football. They pledged to donate £10,000 to an LGBT+ charity for every goal host nation Russia scored at the World Cup, where the problem had marred the build-up to the tournament. Influencers ranging from Christopher Biggins to Caitlyn Jenner became Russia fans for the duration of the tournament.

For brands, venturing into a conversation about identity carries big risks. So how did Paddy Power get it right and what are the lessons they learned along the way? Nick Barron spoke to Lee Price, Head of PR & Mischief for Paddy Power, about the experience.

NB: Why did you choose to make tackling homophobia such a big part of your World Cup marketing strategy?

LP: The idea was right. It was as simple as that. We don't believe in 'cause-related' marketing, we believe in embedding causes into our marketing. We wanted a big, bold, earned-first idea that would help us 'own' the World Cup. We decided this was it.

We had some previous experience of engaging with the issue. Our 2013 'Rainbow Laces' campaign helped to raise awareness of the problem of homophobia in football, encouraging professional players to show solidarity with the LGBT+ community.



Through this work, we had built strong friendships with LGBT+ groups and learned a lot about language and tone. Our earlier campaigns were too coarse and relied too much on shock value. By 2018, the landscape had changed and we had grown up as a brand.

RISK AND REWARD

NB: What were the risks that you anticipated and how did you mitigate them?

LP: We didn't feel we were being brave at the time, but it was a more high-risk approach than we initially thought. Not least, Russia scored a lot more goals than our trading team had predicted was likely. They won their opening game 5-0 and we ended up donating about twice as much as we expected over the course of the tournament!

The risk we were most concerned about was inflaming tensions in Russia. We worked closely with a UK charity partner [the Attitude Magazine Foundation] to get the story right and ensure that we didn't make life harder for the country's LGBT+ citizens.



“IF WE HAVE
SOMETHING
CREDIBLE TO SAY,
WE’LL GO FOR IT.”

POLARISATION AND BRANDS

We were also concerned about upsetting the LGBT+ community in the UK by striking the wrong tone or trivialising the issue. We looked to our partners to help us get the creative right.

NB: What did the campaign do for your brand?

LP: The content performed well across all channels and LGBT+ advocacy groups really supported it, which improved social sharing and engagement rates.

We think long-term about the brand rather than trying to measure the impact of a single spike, but overall, consideration scores

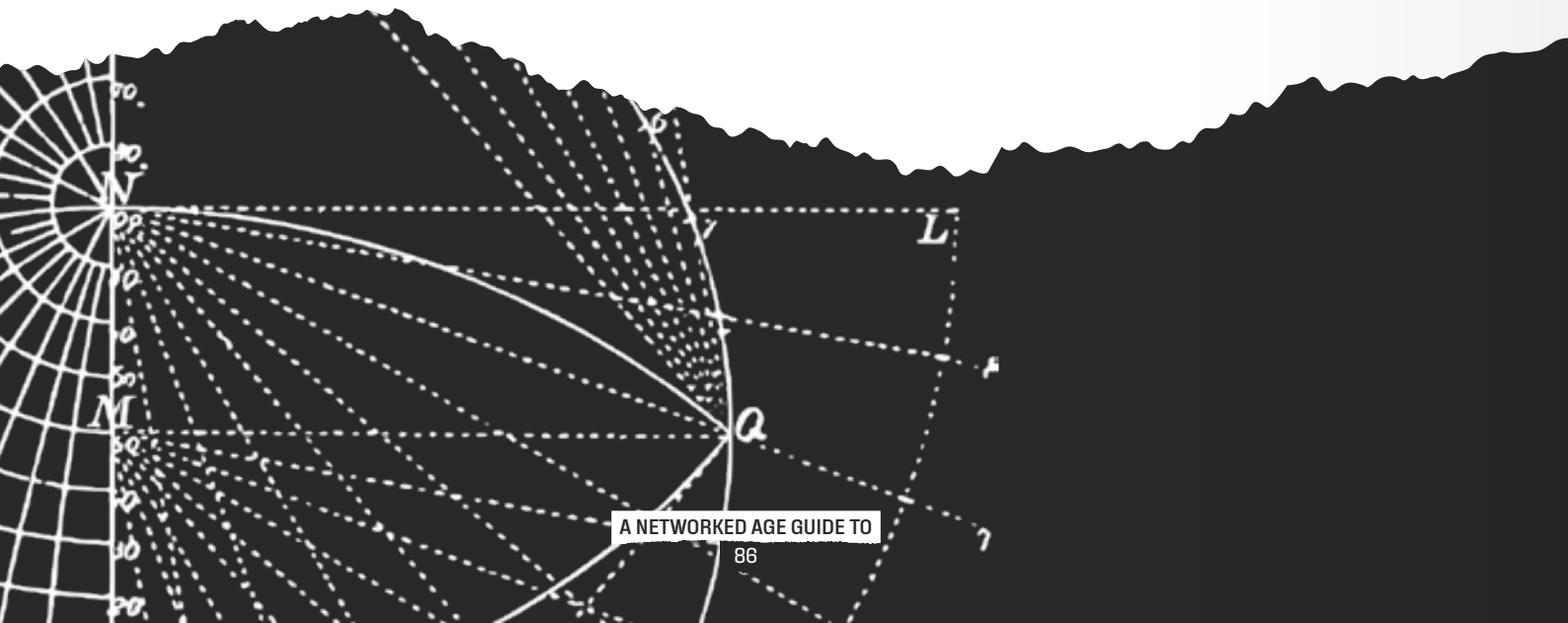
have improved. There have been other benefits too – the work has featured everywhere from our recruitment campaigns to internal communications and our parent company's ESG report.

We lost almost zero customers as a result of the campaign.

RAISING THE BAR

NB: Did taking such a strong stance on this issue raise the bar in terms of expectations of Paddy Power as a brand?

LP: Yes, and we were happy to be held accountable.



We know we're not perfect, but we believe it's right to say: "This is where we're at. We're working to be better." If we come up short, we see it as an opportunity to improve, not a threat.

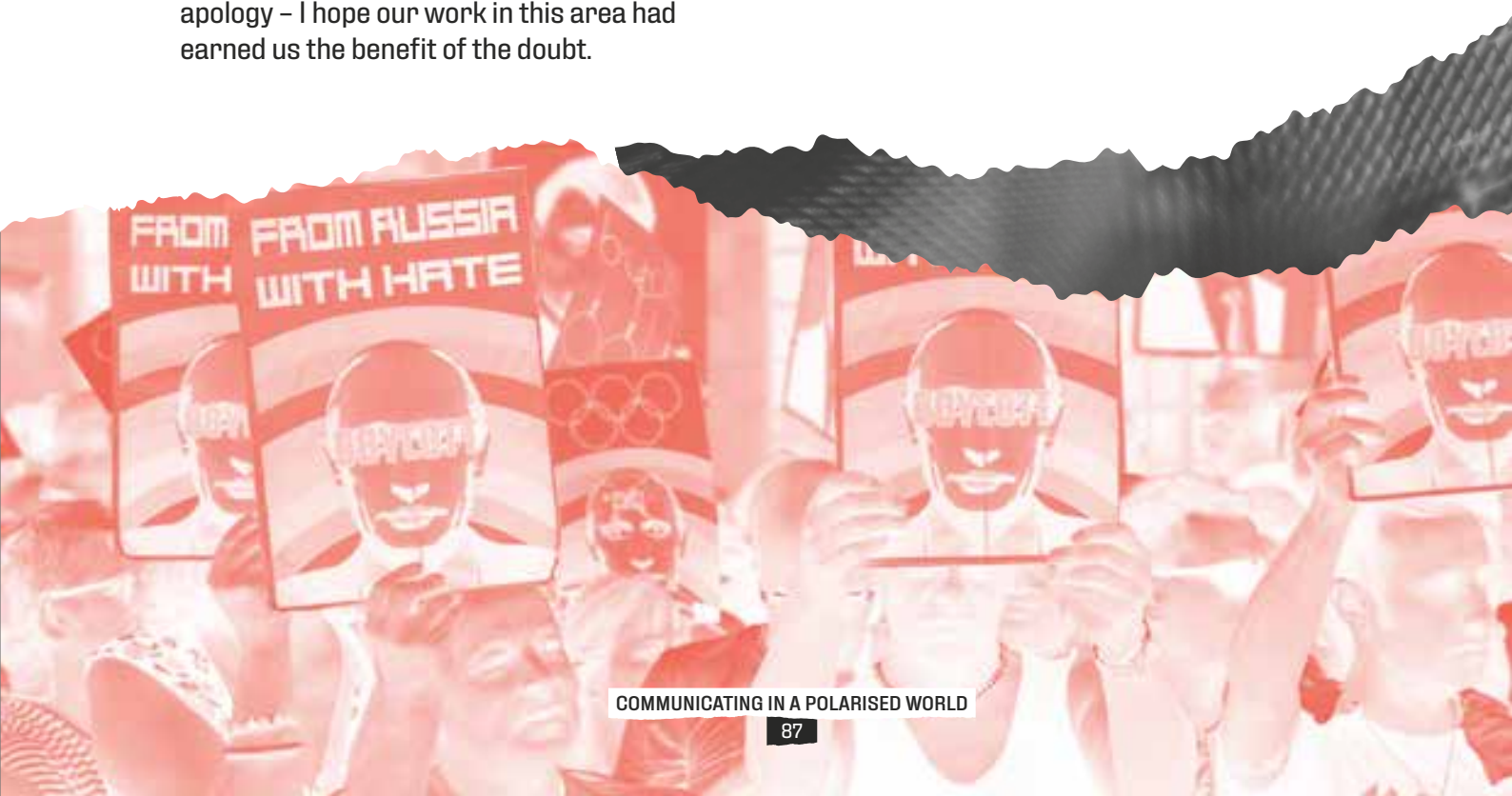
We made a mistake last year, when some of the fan content we promoted included a homophobic slur. We didn't spot it before we shared it, and we were immediately called out for it by our own customers and employees, as well as LGBT+ activists. We took the offending content down immediately and issued an apology – I hope our work in this area had earned us the benefit of the doubt.

I think it has also raised the bar among our own customers – I see much more self-policing within our social media communities now.

NB: What about other social justice issues – do you now feel under pressure to promote other causes?

LP: If we have something credible and interesting to say, we'll go for it. If we don't, we won't. It would dilute the power of our campaigning work if we chased after every issue.

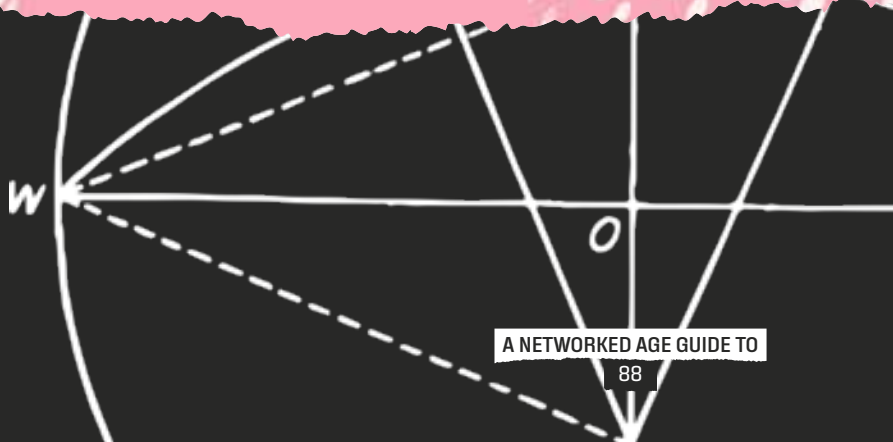
We are always driven by the idea.



TOGETHER

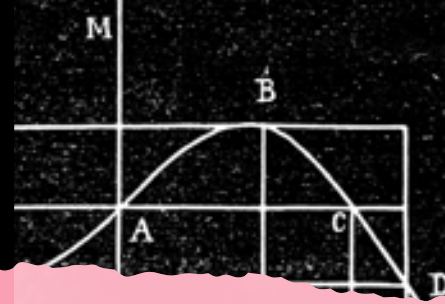
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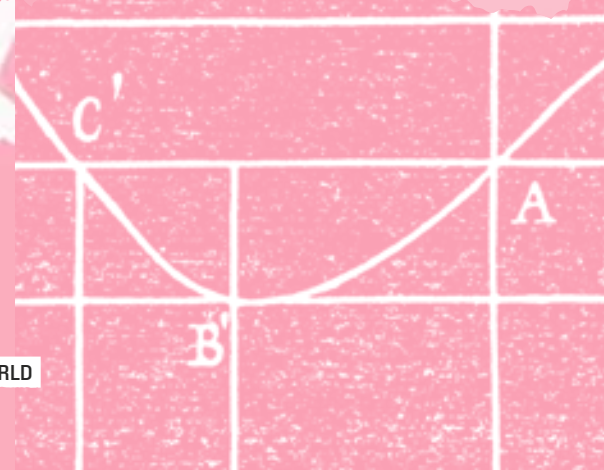


A NETWORKED AGE GUIDE TO





RULES FOR A POLARISED WORLD



THE RULES OF INFLUENCE APPLIED

As part of our Networked Age programme, we worked with Dr Tali Sharot and her team at UCL's Affective Brain Lab to develop three rules for communicators that are tailored for a digitally connected world and which guide all of our thinking.

These three rules now sit at the heart of all our work and inform our response to the challenge of polarisation.



RULE ONE

WHO YOU ARE IS AS IMPORTANT AS WHAT YOU DO

- + Audiences are tribal and united around shared narratives and values. Brands and organisations must show they (and the people who run them) share the same values as their audiences
- + Uncertainty is driving polarisation. Overcome and reduce polarisation by offering leadership and vision that offers security
- + Viewpoint diversity helps protect against groupthink and improves your understanding of audiences, so actively encourage it within your teams
- + In a polarised debate, allow the group you want to reach to project their values onto you. Offer a consistent narrative but avoid specifics. Focus on values, not policy
- + Create competition between tribes. To build a movement for change or strengthen brand loyalty, develop narratives that compare the in-group favourably to the out-group, but do not criticise on the basis of protected characteristics, only harmful behaviours



Joe Biden - Dogs For Biden

DON'T BUY THIS JACKET

Patagonia - Don't Buy This Jacket



THE RULES OF INFLUENCE APPLIED

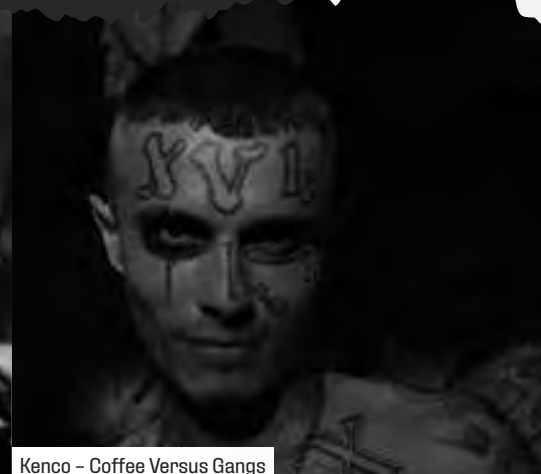
RULE TWO

PASSIONS AND INFLUENCERS SPREAD IDEAS

Networks are not egalitarian – conversation is dominated by a few voices and emotional stories.

- + In a polarised world, the messenger is the message. Expertise, warmth and similarity to your audience is typically the most powerful combination
- + Communicators can connect by working with authentic ‘in-group influencers’ or they can use Mischief’s Seven Second Storytelling approach to cut through with emotional, personal and surprising content
- + Tell stories with heroes and villains. But don’t stereotype

AstraZeneca – United Against Flu National Trust + Lego – Young Explorer



Kenco – Coffee Versus Gangs

RULE THREE

ARGUMENTS ARE NEVER WON, OUTCOMES ARE

People will reject challenging arguments, even if they are supported by facts. To persuade, don't tell people they're wrong – and when you're talking to 'your team', avoid accidentally antagonising the other side.

+ Zero-sum arguments are more polarising, so develop narratives that focus on growth and opportunity to overcome opposition

+ Communications strategies rarely invest time examining non-target audiences and what the impact of messaging may be on them, in terms of provoking a backlash. Develop success metrics that reward depolarisation

+ Communicate early because once established negative views can be hard to shift. Communicate often, because positive views are more easily changed



Boris Johnson – Get Brexit Done



Paddy Power – From Russia with Equal Love

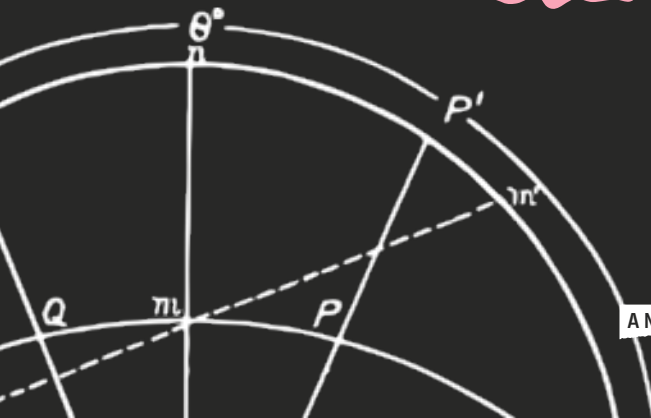
THE POLARISATION PARADOX

Most of us say we want to depolarise, but we are only willing to do so on our terms – and our actions keep making things worse. If communicators want to depolarise, they need to avoid:

- + **Censorship** – fuels suspicion of the system
- + **Dismissal** – makes people seek out marginal voices
- + **Provocation** – increases hostility to change
- + **Shaming** – encourages people to seek solace among their tribe
- + **Manufacturing threats** – increases fear of the other side

These things do not change minds. They are designed to make 'our side' feel good.

Remember Rule Three of The Networked Age. Listen to 'the other side' and find common ground.





OUR COMMITMENT

Polarisation is a powerful force. As a leading communications consultancy, we believe it is our duty to reduce the socially harmful effects of polarisation and combat the fake news that often feeds it. We will do this in three ways in 2021:

1. UNDERSTANDING

We will continue to study polarisation and track its effects in the UK, working with a research team from **Cambridge University** to measure polarisation every six months, identifying the underlying drivers and sharing this data with the public.

2. INCENTIVISING

We will create a new award category in our journalism awards, '30 to Watch', to recognise and celebrate journalism that aids mutual understanding and builds bridges between communities.

3. ADVOCATING

We will develop a new code of conduct, which will prevent us from doing any work that encourages animosity between groups. We will share this code with our industry body partners and work to develop it as an industry-wide pledge.

GETHER





THE NETWORKED AGE

#NetworkedAge



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ABOUT

We are a team of 200, who help clients navigate the volatile, activist and tribal landscape we call The Networked Age. Our specialisms include brand strategy, capital markets, corporate reputation, consumer marketing, crisis and issues management, health, public affairs and financial services. We are one of the most-awarded teams in the industry and our work for the NHS is PR Week's 'Campaign of the Decade'.