Taking the 'Citizen' out of 'Citizen Participation'?

The Discursive, Legal and Practical Challenges of Reconstructing Citizen-Driven EU Contestation in the Digital Media Sphere

Helena Seibicke and Asimina Michailidou

ARENA Working Paper 6/2021

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Helena Seibicke is Research Adviser at TIK Centre for Technology, Innovation and Culture, University of Oslo

Asimina Michailidou is Senior Researcher at ARENA Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo

ARENA Working Paper 6/2021
May 2021

ARENA Working Paper (online) | *ISSN 1890-7741*

ARENA Centre for European Studies
University of Oslo
P.O.Box 1143, Blindern
N-0318 Oslo Norway
www.arena.uio.no

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Abstract

To what extent is EU contestation on social and digital news media driven by citizens? Is political debate on social media a participatory affair, where citizens get to have a say and be exposed to other non-institutional, non-elite actor views? We address these questions as part of our BENCHMARK study of Brexit and the legitimation of an EEA-type solution in the post-Brexit referendum period of 2016–2019. Our study focuses on UK public discourse on a possible EEA solution, and reactions such discourse may have triggered in two EU associated countries, Norway and Switzerland. We thus take a broad European perspective of EU contestation that is not strictly confined within the EU public sphere(s), but which nevertheless has implications for the public legitimation of the EU polity both within its borders and externally. Further drawing on the experience of our empirical research, we contribute to the discussion about the discursive, legal and practical challenges of locating, classifying and publishing citizens' views of the EU in digital media discourse. We start with the discursive challenge of locating and identifying citizens' voices in social and news media discourse. Whose voice is heard and how do we as researchers contribute to amplifying these voices? The second set of challenges pertains to the legal regulatory framework guiding research ethics on personal data and cuts across the academic debate on what constitutes 'public' discourse in the digital public sphere. The third set of challenges is practical, but of no less consequence. Here, we bring in the issue of marketisation of the public sphere and of the digital commons, and how these processes affect the ethics, as well as the feasibility and reliability of digital public sphere analysis. Thereby, we illustrate that barriers to content analysis can make data collection practically challenging, feeding in turn dilemmas with data reliability and research ethics.

Keywords

Citizen Participation – Digital Content – EU Contestation – Methods – Research Ethics – Social Media

Introduction

The multiple discursive, legal and practical challenges media scholars are confronted with when analysing citizens' views of the EU in digital media discourse are the subject of continuous academic scrutiny, as the light-speed digital public sphere constantly changes. We examine these three distinct, yet interrelated challenges by drawing on our empirical research into Brexit contestation. News media are traditionally channels for opinion formation and as such, have also been traditionally the focus of study – particularly newspapers – of research on European Union politicisation, public legitimacy and contestation (Boomgaarden et al. 2013; De Wilde 2019; De Wilde et al. 2013; Galpin and Trenz 2019; Gattermann and De Vreese 2020; Schuck et al. 2011). In recent years, however, research into citizen's EU contestation and media discourses has increasingly pointed to the importance of social media platforms as communication spaces in which politically relevant discourses are constructed (e.g. Barisione and Michailidou 2017). While digital media have widely been hailed as potentially enhancing active citizen empowerment, this paper reflects on some of the challenges that researchers might encounter and need to be aware of when empirically analysing citizen's discourses on social media.

We define the first challenge, the discursive challenge, as related to the difficulty of locating and identifying citizens' voices in social and news media discourse. Moreover, they relate to whose voice is heard and how we as researchers contribute to amplifying these voices. In the era of 'post-truth politics', we know there are 'fake' social media and user profiles that spread fake news. We also know there are well-intentioned individuals whose claims may be distorted or that they themselves may share unverified information. When trying to understand how the legitimacy of the EU is contested in the public sphere, is it necessary to have the technical skills to distinguish claims that are fake or distorted? This is not only a technical challenge but also one that affects the essence of the EU legitimacy discourse. To what extent is the distinction between 'true' and 'fake' relevant for our analysis of EU public legitimation? Another challenge stems from the issue of representativity of online discourse. Despite their democratising promise, social media platforms have not entirely levelled the playing field between traditional opinion leaders (politicians, journalists, public intellectuals) and the average citizen. Instead, they have contributed to the amplification of these traditional public sphere voices, whereby public opinion influencers capitalise on their political or celebrity status to command the attention of millions in the digital public sphere. Where social media have arguably succeeded in broadening the range of voices heard in the public sphere, is in giving way to a new generation of public opinion influencers who have built their digital presence from scratch, and have managed to achieve hundreds of thousands or millions of followers without any prior exposure to the public sphere. However, this type of influence depends on its heavy monetisation for survival, constituting a digital version of consumer democracy (the other being the consumer-producer of news, or 'producer'; Bruns and Highfield 2012). In any case, after the optimism of the digital public sphere's early days, it is difficult to argue today that social media have brought an end to the public sphere elites. The presence of social media influencers and digital public sphere elites more broadly then creates considerable challenges of representativeness and reliability with media analysis when trying to gain an insight into the extent of citizen engagement in EU contestation in digital news media.

The second set of challenges pertains to the legal and regulatory framework surrounding research ethics issues and personal data. Here we focus specifically on the requirements for general data protection regulation (GDPR) and national guidelines for managing research data. Today's empiricists need to make specific data protection provisions to get approval for analysing digital data texts harvested from social media and newspapers. We then reflect on the implications these requirements have for our research. Can they, for example, impose limitations that could undermine the reliability of the findings? Could they even undermine to possibility of conducting this type of analysis at all? Moreover, what are the implications for tight research schedules and project budgets?

Finally, yet just as importantly, we consider the practical challenges connected to collecting data for content analysis. The marketisation of the public sphere and the digital commons has recently received more scholarly attention. In an age of increasing emphasis on free software, free culture and public domain works, as well as open data and open access to science on the one hand, and licencing and the commercial exploitation of public data on the other, digital data can be more challenging to access than one would expect. Online newspaper articles are, for example, increasingly hidden behind pay walls. While in the past a media researcher could simply access newspaper archives and download articles for text analysis, restricted accessibility requires new qualifications and technical ability for the data collection. Thus, while there is a vast amount of data 'out there', media researchers need to have the funds and skill sets to access this abundance of data.

The structure of the article is as follows. In Section 2, we review current state of the art literature on these issues. Section 3 then critically reflects our own experiences conducting mixed-method, multi-lingual empirical digital media and text analysis. We draw from our experiences gained during the Benchmark project (2018-2021). Based on our insights from the research process and findings, we finish with a discussion before we conclude.

The challenges of digital media analysis

Discursive challenge

The multiple aspects of political life – the information about it, the debate concerning it, and the channels for influencing it – are increasingly found online (Karlsson 2021: 237). The impact of information technology on citizen participation in public debates and political processes has thus received more scholarly attention, and has given rise to concepts such as 'cyberdemocracy (Poster 1997) 'digital democracy' (Asenbaum 2019), 'networked democracy' (Loader and Mercea 2011) 'online civic commons' (Gastil and Richards 2016), and 'digital public sphere' (Schäfer 2015), to name but a few.

Habermas' ideal type of the public sphere, in which private people come together as a public using reason to further critical knowledge and instigate or demand political change (1989), has generally received renewed attention with the advent of the internet of social media sites specifically. Accounts hopeful of the participatory promise of social media argue that it can potentially revitalise the public sphere by allowing citizens to 'challenge discourses, share alternative perspectives and publish their own opinions' (Loader and Mercea 2011: 760). The low cost of accessing and sharing information further facilitates citizen participation in political discourses. The increased transferal of democratic processes (e.g. voting, consultations, petitions) to the digital realm has thus been referred to as 'e-participation' (Aichholzer and Rose 2020) or 'e-governance' (Meijer 2015).

However, researchers and other observers are also wary of the potential threat digital technology can pose to democracy. There is now an increasing awareness that in reality, it is difficult to keep online conversations from 'devolving into either name-calling or blather" (Shirky 2008: 50) and social media platforms, such as Twitter, are described as 'wild public networks' rather than public spheres (Bouvier and Rosenbaum 2020). Moreover, the incivility of user interaction has resulted in more frequent self-regulation of social media use ('social media fatigue' (Bossio and Holton 2019) or 'digital detox' (Syvertsen 2020)), or the potential silencing of groups of people, such as women (Nadim and Fladmoe 2019). A study by Kruse et al. (2017) has shown that social media users often avoid political discourse online for fear of harassment, preferring interactions with those holding similar political views, or wanting to keep social media a place for positive interactions.

Another challenge relates to the hierarchical form of interaction. Elite actors, or governing elites (i.e. 'groups of people who either exercised directly or were in a position to influence very strongly the exercise of, political power' (Bottomore, 1993: 3)), are for example government officials, politicians and media professionals. As Young already pointed out almost two decades ago:

> [I]n societies with social and economic inequalities, when there is a public sphere it tends to be dominated, both in action and ideas, by more privileged groups. Even though access may be the same for all, the greater resources of wealth, power, influence, and information make access easier for some than others. The interests, opinions, and perspectives more associated with the privileged social actors, then, tend to monopolize discourse in the public sphere.
>
> (Young 2002: 171)

As de Wilde, Rasch and Bossetta (2022) discuss also in the introductory article of the Politics and Governance Special Issue on Citizens engagement with European Politics through Social Media,[1] social media platforms, such as Twitter, while undoubtedly enabling and easing citizens' access to political discourse, have also entrenched this asymmetrical power through the elite dominance and disproportionate visibility of

[1] A condensed and revised version of this Working paper will appear in the same Politics and Governance Special issue.

Tweets (Barnard 2018; Srinivasan 2017: 1). Thus, we must ask ourselves, how can (social) media researchers treat online political discourses as representative articulations of citizens' political opinions if our data is skewed?

Social media platforms have become more than just spaces for users to interact. In recent years, digital news consumption has seen a steady increase. However, concern for misinformation is high across the democratic world, with governments, journalist organisations and civil society actors driving multiple efforts – often based on transnational collaboration – to safeguard the integrity of the democratic public sphere from mis-, dis- and malinformation (see, for instance European Commission 2020; or faktisk.no, an initiative by Norwegian journalists). We return to these discursive challenges in Section 3, where we discuss the multi-text source strategy we deployed in the Benchmark project to limit the effect of these quandaries on our analysis of post-Brexit referendum debates regarding a possible EEA-like solution for the UK.

Legal challenge

Research ethics are a vital aspect of social science, and the social media research has put into sharper focus issues of ethical data collection, data storage, and user consent. Given this vast, expanding area of research, scholars need to acquire new skills to explore and analyse their findings and situate them into their appropriate contexts, but also need to be able to make appropriate ethical considerations for their research (Quan-Haase and Sloan 2017).

As argued by Baldwin et al. (2018: 2), it is imperative 'to ensure the public's data are protected and are represented in a fair and respectful manner, whereby a tweet or post is not taken out of context or used inappropriately'. While new technologies enable novel and innovative approaches to research, they also create unique challenges for the responsible use of that data. When researchers decide that new technologies can be used effectively and ethically, their adoption should coincide with careful consideration of how these technologies reshape the ethics and practice of empirical research (Hesse et al. 2019: 561).

Open data and data transparency are an essential part of modern scientific methods, enabling researchers to test the replicability and validity of published research (Hesse et al. 2019: 572). For media researchers, however, this practical aspect of digital media analysis also has a significant ethical dimension. GDPR rights apply for all persons whose data is processed throughout the course of a research project (see articles 15-21 of the GDPR). GDPR rules pose practical challenges regarding user consent. The question confronting social media researcher thus is: just because it is possible, does that make it legal, and just because it is legal, does that make it ethical?

In the early days of social media research, the openness of social media platforms might have given the impression that social media data was 'public and therefore did not require the same level of ethical scrutiny than more standard data, resulting in that published papers could include complete tweets and/ or usernames without informed user consent' (Beninger 2017). The issue of informed consent is now a common problem in contemporary ‘Big Data’ projects. GDPR rights apply for all persons whose data was processed throughout the course of a research project. GDPR rules pose practical challenges regarding user consent when there are potentially hundreds and thousands of individuals who would have to be contacted with consent forms. At the same time, users may operate in public spaces but expect respect of their privacy. In a survey, Williams et al. (2017) found that four in five social media users expect to be asked for their consent to their data being used by researchers. However, how can this practically be done with potentially thousands and in some cases millions of data points? Put simply by boyd and Crawford (2012: 672), ‘it may be unreasonable to ask researchers to obtain consent from every person who posts a tweet, but it is problematic for researchers to justify their actions as ethical simply because the data are accessible’. The ethical guidelines provided by the Association of Internet Researchers (2019: 10) point to some risk mitigation strategies available to researchers: at the stage of data collection (through first-degree informed consent), data storage (anonymisation), or at the dissemination stage (consent of a smaller selection of specific subjects).

Another challenge stems from the fact that GDPR rules apply in all EU countries, yet the guidelines can be interpreted differently not just across countries, but within countries by different research ethics bodies. When conducting research across institutional and national boundaries, which rules should be followed if they are different – the one of the institution conducting the research or of the one in which data is collected? Given these complexities surrounding legal and ethical challenges of digital media analysis, grant funders, such as the Research Council of Norway or the European Research Council and the European Commission, have improved their guidelines, requiring detailed data management protocols as part of the funding process, but also placing the responsibility of compliance with GDPR and national regulations on the leading institution of transnational projects. This provides some clarity, at least, in terms of which sets of national guidelines take precedence in multi-partner research projects, but it does not entirely resolve the complexities that arise in practical terms, as we discuss in the following sections.

Practical / technical challenge

Another set of complex challenges lie in the practical execution of gauging citizen participation through social media analysis. These are related to the detailed elements and steps of the research design, from data collection, data storage to data analysis. Despite social media analysis increasingly being used in the social sciences, it can be a struggle to find the ‘right way’ to go about it. Without a straightforward approach to follow, social media research can be a challenging experience for scholars embarking on work in this field (Baldwin et al. 2018: 2).

At the same time, the lack of a standardised methodology also provides relative freedom for researchers to explore different research designs and techniques. As with most empirical research, even the best thought out research design needs to be realisable when met with the practical and technical reality. Today, a significant obstacle to conducting digital media analysis is one of accessing the data. While it used to be straightforward to download large amounts of social media data from Twitter, or download online news articles, this is no longer possible. Most news outlet content is now behind paywalls and social media platforms like Twitter have restricted or removed access to their historical archives, implementing at the same time an often aggressive monetisation strategy of the metadata their users generate.

This brings with it the related challenge of researchers needing to be (or collaborate with someone who is) proficient in computational social science methods, such as data scraping, data preparation for analysis and data manipulation (Mayr and Weller 2016). Moreover, chosen data collection approaches must comply with data protection rules and regulations. In the case of the EU / European public sphere, the challenge of technical competence in Big Data collection and analysis is compounded by the multi-lingual environment from which researchers need to draw their data.

Multi-lingual coding through multiple coders

The coding and analysis of texts from different languages present the researcher with some challenges and require certain methodological choices. During pre-processing, most automated text analysis applications are language specific. If documents in more than one language are to be included in the same analysis, they can either be translated into one language and then analysed by one single model, or they can be analysed with separate models. The former has the advantage that one result is estimated, which holds for the whole corpus. Some semantic nuances of the texts such as emotions, however, can be lost during the translation. The latter, in contrast, suffers from the problem that the results produced by the different models may not be straightforwardly comparable (Gilardi and Wuest 2018). Opinions vary on whether machine translation is a reliable tool to work with multi-lingual corpora. Those in favour of it have argued that in recent years, machine translation performs almost as well as human/ expert translation (De Vries et al. 2018).

For scholars working with non-English data, the availability of tools for pre-processing can be more limited, and depending on the language, care should be taken when dealing with character encoding and text direction. Also, techniques like stemming can be more difficult for morphologically rich languages such as German. Thus, automatic translation tools to translate the text to English before processing (De Vries et al. 2018) have gained in popularity. However, the quality of the automatic translation tools is not yet at a point where results do not need to be validated thoroughly.

The Benchmark project

The Benchmark project is financed by the Research Council of Norway's initiative 'Europe in Transition' (EUROPA), for the period 1 November 2018 to 31 October 2021, and was a sub-project of the EU-funded EURODIV (Integration and division: Towards a segmented Europe?) project. The project involves a cross-interdisciplinary network of researchers coordinated by ARENA Centre for European Studies, at the University of Oslo (UiO). The central research question is whether Brexit affects the relationship between EU-members and non-member democracies, and if so, how? Benchmark takes a discursive approach to answer this question, which brings to bear on the empirical analysis of official documents, parliamentary and media debates, as well as Twitter posts (tweets) with the aim of tracing public claims about the implications of different EU relationships. The concepts of democracy, legitimacy and justice are at the core of this inquiry. The data, being both structured (news articles) and semi- or unstructured texts (speeches, tweets) in four languages (English, French, German and Norwegian) and collected from UK, Norwegian and Swiss sources, was analysed through quantitative and qualitative methods. Specifically, we selected the Guardian and the Daily Mail from the UK, due to their high circulation and high digital visibility in the categories of quality and tabloid press respectively. Moreover, they also represent the left-right, as well as leave-remain cleavages. The parliamentary debates were harvested from the House of Lords, the House of Commons, and Hansard websites. The UK corpus contains 58,730 articles by the Daily Mail, 24,900 by the Guardian, 24 by Hansard- House of Commons, 295 by Hansard- House of Lords, and 3,305 by parliamentary committees. This yielded a total of 87,254 texts. For Norway, our news data comes from two major national newspapers, Aftenposten and VG, the former having the largest paper circulation in the country, while the latter has the largest web presence. Both newspapers hold a centre, centre-left political outlook. In total, the corpus contains 1,060 Aftenposten articles and 691 VG articles. In addition, the Norwegian corpus consists of 103 parliamentary transcripts from the Norwegian Storting. These include plenary meetings as well as (open) committee meetings. In total, we collected 1,854 Norwegian texts. In the case of Switzerland, the multi-lingual nature of the case required data to be selected in at least two different languages, so we opted for both French and German texts. We chose the Swiss-German quality newspaper Tagesanzeiger and the tabloid 20Minuten / 20minutes which is published in both French and German. In addition, we collected parliamentary debates from the Swiss Nationalrat / Conseil du nationale, which contain both languages as well. In total, we collected 1,347 articles and transcripts from 24 parliamentary debates, in both German and French.

All collected news and parliamentary texts were uploaded and stored in an ElasticSearch database, purpose-designed for the needs of the Benchmark project by the UiO's University Center for Information Technology (USIT) team (Jarle Ebeling, Knut Waagan and Morten Erlandsen).

For the Twitter component, we used data collected in the period August 2015 to September 2016, using *hashtagify.me* to track and collect tweets marked with the hashtag #Brexit and associated hashtags. Tweets were collected through Twitter's REST API, with the parameter 'all tweets' selected to avoid data bias towards big influencers or any sampling biases/errors). The monitoring period lasted 151 days and resulted in over 5.359 million tweets, including original messages and retweets. The degree of popularity for a hashtag was determined using hashtagify.me trending statistics. Each hashtag was analysed for sentiment, visibility and impressions (calculated on the basis of retweets and mentions within the whole #Brexit network; see Hashtagify 2021).

Benchmarking EU legitimacy: The discursive challenge

As argued by Monroe and Schrodt (2008) over a decade ago, text – one of the most common mediums through which political phenomena are documented – had hitherto been underutilised in the social sciences. Since then, the field of 'text-as-data' has grown exponentially, with methods and approaches becoming increasingly sophisticated. Particularly in the field of comparative political research, scholars have made advances in the methods of data sampling (Greene et al. 2016), validation (Lowe and Benoit 2013; Denny and Spirling 2018), multi-lingual sentiment analysis (Proksch et al. 2019), as well as in developing automated content analysis with open-source text analysis libraries such as R and Python.

Despite these advances, until recently, the 'text-as-data' approach to measuring political preferences focused on a narrow set of texts such as party manifestos (e.g. Laver et al. 2003; Slapin and Proksch 2008). Recent developments in the processing of text data, the digitalisation of records, and machine-learning algorithms, have enabled researchers to shift the focus to parliamentary speeches, and the preferences of individual legislators (e.g. Lauderdale and Herzog 2016; Schwarz et al. 2017). This is an important innovation because the conventional roll-call votes-based approach to measuring ideal points does not travel well in the parliamentary context (see also Vandoren 1990; Carrubba et al. 2006; Carrubba et al. 2008; Hug 2010; Schwarz et al. 2017). In the case of the UK, the use of *speeches* to infer the ideological standpoint of legislators has two main advantages (cf. Proksch and Slapin 2015: 7). First, speeches are less subject to partisan control than voting. Defection on votes can be seen as the ultimate act of defiance. In contrast, speeches afford MPs the opportunity to express dissent in a way that is less likely to harm their own or their party's position. Second, even if such partisan control is not exercised, votes reduce an actor's preferences to one of three options – in favour, against, or abstain – whereas speeches enable MPs to express their views in a more nuanced way (Goet 2019). Recent research suggests that public spheres and media systems are increasingly disconnected and fragmented (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018; Entman and Usher 2018). This fragmentation reduces communication across political differences, with competing politicians increasingly speaking in parallel media arenas to their own partisans (Knuepfer 2018).

For the purposes of the Benchmark project, we took the approach that the inclusion of more traditional sources of public discourse in our dataset would give us a more complete picture of the content and potential impact of citizens' participation in political contestation.

We created seven code categories, each containing up to 90 words associated with the code (see table 2 for an overview of codes). An eighth, binary code (positive/negative) was also included to capture overall sentiment within each text (not of the specific claims at this stage). We generated the codebook through concept mapping of relevant texts compiled in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (SEP), as well as adjusting the semantic analysis system and tagset developed by the University of Lancaster[2].

[2] see http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/usas/

Table 2: Overview of codes

Code 1	Brexit process	Code 5	Democratic institutions
Code 2	Party politics	Code 6	Other
Code 3	Economics	Code 7	Legitimacy (positive/negative)
Code 4	Judiciary/ laws/ treaties	Code 8	Sentiment

We tested our coding scheme by first running quantitative coding on 100 randomly selected English and German texts in our database. Python 3.7.1 with its built-in regular expressions library was used. We tested three different measurements, namely:

- Total count = # occurences of each phrase ("total")
- Binary count = # occuring phrases ("binary" yes or no)
- TF-IDF is like Total, but phrases weighted by their IDF = log(# docs / (1 + doc freq)), where Document frequency = # documents in which a phrase occurs ("tfidf")

The mean TF-IDF score did not change with document size, compared to Total count and, to a lesser extent, binary count. TF-IDF score also worked better as predictor measurement for our key concepts, which we also verified through manual coding of the same test texts. We therefore opted to use TF-IDF scores for the selection of the most relevant texts for further qualitative analysis with NVivo

Occurrences of each key phrase were counted, then the counts were aggregated for each of the seven topic categories and two sentiment categories. Word and term counts were also gathered. Most searches were case independent, but certain phrases were kept case sensitive, e.g. 'Labour'. Both the title and the main text were included in the searches. The results are stored in csv files with one line for each document.

We then randomly chose 20 of these articles (1/5) to test the coding scheme qualitatively, coding them in NVivo. Here, we coded whole sentences or text fragments (half-sentences). Usually only one code applied, unless the sentence contained a positive/negative word. We compared the frequency scores of the quantitative coding with the presence (or not) of the codes in the qualitatively coded texts. A match was found in all but one case (where the quantitative coding returned a false positive for the code of legitimacy). Based on the results of the testing, we decided to use tf-idf scores for the quantitative classification of our datasets. For the Twitter component of our analysis, we worked with Knut Waagan at the USIT team to apply automated classification using Python, whereby the tweets database was filtered according to pre-determined keywords (the abstract concepts of justice and expertise, as well as EU keywords that were used as indicators of relevance to EU contestation. This cross-referencing process was necessary to ensure that our keywords list reflected the language used in public debates on justice and expertise, as well as in scholarly debates.

The keyword-based filtering resulted in a dataset of 102,042 tweets with the hashtag #Brexit explicitly referring to expertise and/or justice and /or the EU (tweets that had received fewer than 10 retweets were excluded). We highlight the point about explicit reference to our selected concepts in order to clarify that – as with all methods aiming to trace the data-generating process used to produce texts – the method used here *necessarily fails* (Grimmer and Stewart 2013: 270) to capture all the tweets that could be relevant in the original database. The keyword-based filtering that took place at this first step of analysis could not accommodate all the particularities of Twitter communication, which often comes closer to spoken language rather than written. As a result, it is possible that we left out tweets that were relevant but because they were incomplete, or used metaphors, sarcasm, analogies, audio-visual material or URL links instead of text could not be identified by our algorithm as relevant. Additionally, the automated classification process separated original tweets from retweets, leaving us with a final dataset of 3,051 original #Brexit messages, which contained reference to the EU and justice and/or expertise. The resulting data was further cleaned using the de-duplication function of the classification software DiscoverText (Texifter 2021), which helped us remove tweets with the same content but created by different users. At this final filtering stage, we were left with 518 EU-relevant tweets relevant to the concept of justice, and 197 EU-relevant tweets referring to the notion of expertise.

Reflexive qualitative analysis of news and parliamentary debates with NVivo

For the qualitative component of our analysis, we sampled the articles with the highest logtf-idf scores for legitimacy, which also had a minimum of 2 logtf-idf score for the codes: Brexit process, Party politics, Democratic institutions processes, Economy and Judiciary. We opted for a Claims-making Analysis (CA) approach within a Process Trace (PT), which breaks down statements about the legitimacy of political power into their constituent components (1. who, 2. claiming to speak on whose behalf, 3. claims what is legitimate 4. for whom/whose benefit, 5. addressing which audience) (from De Wilde et al. 2013; Koopmans and Statham 1999; Michailidou et al. 2014). CA can account for the reactions that a statement elicits (1. who, 2. accepts/rejects/amends, 3. which claims 4. on behalf of whom). Once a claim was identified, it was classified according to the following categories (Nodes):

1. Model a) one or more evaluations on [EEA; CETA; EFTA; WTO; no deal]: An evaluation assesses the worth of something specific and comprises:

– the object of legitimation (in our case, this is one of the above treaties/agreements/no agreement as a possible alternative for the UK; or for Norway, or for Switzerland);

– the verb or the adjectives that indicate a positive or a negative evaluation of worth (indicating support or rejection of the object of legitimation);

Standards

– the underlying criteria of evaluations (the different levels of worthiness, based on which the judgement/justification is given).

Actors

- A claim needs to have an actor ‘making’ it. In other words, narratives about alternative Brexit scenarios involving EEA; CETA; EFTA; Norway + type of agreements with the UK have to be ‘performed’ in the public sphere to contribute to public opinion formation. In our operationalisation, a single actor can only make one claim in any given time and space. Moreover, an actor may transmit their opinion directly by actually saying it, or indirectly if their opinion is featured by the writer of the text. The territorial level (national, EU, international, third-country) that the actor is acting upon (mainly applicable to politicians) was recorded in our coding scheme (using annotations to specify territorial level if an actor is not operating at ‘national’ level).

The purpose of the qualitative claims-making processing of our data was to provide nuanced analysis with regard to preferred public narratives on alternative scenarios for Brexit and a basis upon which to compare such narratives on the basis not only of countries and sources (comparison that could be achieved by the quantative analysis alone), but also on the basis of justifications (claims) used by different types of actors who expressed (dis)approval of Norway or Switzerland-type post-Brexit models on the basis of abstract concepts (standards).

Qualitative coding of tweets

The coding process focused in the first instance on the content of tweets only. User metadata was analysed through hashtagify.me to obtain a list of top influencers within the #Brexit Twittersphere. Regarding the profile of the tweets’ authors are the subject of ongoing analysis. The coding schedule involved four codes for justice tweets and four for expertise tweets (see table 3), which were based on the public claims structure described earlier. The code ‘Reference’ was used to classify ‘residue’ tweets that only vaguely alluded to either concept, without offering sufficient clues to allow for more specific categorisation. We used DiscoverText (Texifter LLC 2021) for the qualitative classification of the tweets.

Table 3: classification codes for justice and expertise tweets

Justice-themed tweets	Non-domination	Impartiality	Mutual recognition	Reference
Expertise-themed tweets	Expertise-positive	Expertise-negative	Soft expertise	Reference

The internal validity of the coding scheme and its application on the final dataset were controlled through a blind-coding test, whereby two coders classified the same random selection of 40 justice and 40 expertise tweets and the results were compared. For the expertise subset, we repeated the double-coding process twice, as the original coding scheme had to be modified. The results from the test coding showed over 95 per cent agreement between the two coders for the justice tweets and 97 per cent for the expertise tweets. Where discrepancies occurred, these were resolved through discussion of the coding scheme and a final agreement was reached on the application of the codes. Peer debriefing and monitoring of the coding process ensured clarity in the application of the coding scheme, as well as its applicability/relevance to the data at hand.

Deploying a team of multi-lingual, interdisciplinary coders for multi-lingual text analysis

For the Benchmark project, we were able to allocate resources for human coders, which possessed the specifically required language skills, but also a range of competences in quantitative and qualitative analysis. This allowed us, on the one hand, to override the challenge of having to machine- or manually translate the texts into English before coding. On the other hand, our interdisciplinary – particularly in terms of methods – research team combined expertise in linguistics, algorithmic analysis, discourse analysis with a theoretical/conceptual background in EU contestation and public legitimation to address the discursive and practical challenges of capturing not only the content of EU public contestation but also the meta-issues of legitimation, voice visibility and interconnectedness of diverse public spheres. In putting together an interdisciplinary team, we thus successfully tested the recommendation of the National Science Foundation that a 'a mode of research by teams or individuals that integrates information, data, techniques, tools, perspectives, concepts, and/or theories from two or more disciplines or bodies of specialized knowledge' is well placed to 'to advance fundamental understanding or to solve problems whose solutions are beyond the scope of a single discipline or area of research practice'. (National Science Foundation 2014: n.p.)

The legal challenge: GDPR and processing of personal data

To ensure compliance with the Norwegian Centre for Research Data's (NSD) guidelines and GDPR rules, and although we only collected and analysed material already publicly available, we took steps to ensure that the rights of individuals identifiable in any way in the texts we process were safeguarded. These steps were formally outlined in the project's data collection plan and approved by the NSD. In the course of our analysis, we only temporarily stored information on individuals whose names and statements appeared in the documents that we analysed. We will include this relevant piece of information in a disclaimer published on the project's webpage, where we further include a declaration that GDPR rights apply for all persons whose data we would be processing throughout the course of the project (see articles 15–21 of the GDPR). This entails that all such persons have the right to:

- Ask for access to their personal data being processed.
- Request that their personal data be deleted.
- Request that incorrect personal data is corrected/rectified.
- To receive a copy of their personal data (data portability).

A complete list of the texts by title, source and country will be uploaded on the project website at the end of the project. In few instances, we may publish analysis that may directly or indirectly identify public persons or private individuals and their opinions on Brexit. In these instances, we will provide contact details for a member of the project, should individuals who identify themselves in our work wish to raise any concerns with us regarding their GDPR rights. Equally, we provide a project contact point for individuals who identify themselves as having contributed with their opinions in any of the texts that will appear listed on the project's webpage and have any concerns about the way we have processed and stored their personal data.

Discussion

With computer-assisted content analysis, the quality of research can undoubtedly be improved in terms of reliability and validity. With automated text analysis, it is not just easier to analyse text but also to retrieve vast amounts of text initially. However, the word 'automatic' in automatic text analysis does not imply that little effort by the researchers is needed, nor does it mean that manual coding becomes superfluous. In fact, although running an off-the-shelf topic-modelling algorithm on an existing corpus can be done in minutes, it takes much effort to prepare and, especially, validate the outcome of these methods (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013). The same holds for dictionary and other rule-based analyses. Manual coding is required to create validation material, and supervised machine learning approaches also require a substantial amount of coded training examples (Van Atteveldt 2019: 2). Critics of this approach thus point out that:

> [F]or the time being, there are still major limitations with the type of content analysis that computer software can yield. They are extremely powerful in performing mechanical exercises such as providing word frequencies but far less capable of providing demanding interpretation and contextualization. This is why a fully computerized content analysis is currently a chimera.
>
> (Pashakhanlou 2017: 453)

So, while we recognise that automated content methods allow for the systematic analysis of a large corpus of text, we argue that the complexity of language means they cannot replace, but instead amplify and facilitate the careful, in-depth analysis of the claims made within the texts. We found that a mixed-method approach allows for (1) the collection and analysis of big data, (2) rigorous analysis of abstract concepts, and (3) more reliable sampling. This method, however, does require comprehensive groundwork for the creation of a reliable list of vocabulary for the quantitative component. Moreover, multi-lingual projects require extensive and time-consuming manual inputs, as there is to this point no tool available with 100 per cent linguistic coverage.

The complexities of large text corpora analysis aside, the perpetual discursive challenge persists when it comes to unpacking the dynamics of the European public sphere: Whose voice is heard and how do we as researchers contribute to amplifying these voices? How to quantitative capture abstract concepts such as EU legitimacy, justice or expertise? What became apparent in the process, is that the media debates reflected an elite discourse rather than citizen engagement. Even though the aim of Benchmark was not to analyse citizen engagement but EU contestation in the public sphere, we had hoped to find evidence that citizens' views find their way in public discourse. Regrettably, such evidence is scant. Even away from professional news platforms, top influencers of the #Brexit Twittersphere were national or international professional news organisations (e.g. the BBC, Reuters, the Guardian, the Wall Street Journal). Public intellectuals were also present, together with some *alt-right* influencers, most of whose accounts have seen been suspended or deleted. Polarisation along the Brexit /no Brexit lines and little nuancing beyond that, as well as mirroring of the 'traditional' news media sphere are thus the characteristics of the #Brexit thread, instead of pluralism of both opinions and actors.

Similarly to previous findings about diffuse Euroscepticism (De Wilde et al. 2013; Michailidou et al. 2014), the analysis of justice-relevant tweets confirms a widespread dissatisfaction with the (perceived or actual) status quo; an expression of a generalised sense of unfairness that is not further specified or qualified or even directed at a particular group or institution. These large, residual and negative in tone categories seemingly reaffirm the role of participatory / social media as platforms for those who have grievances or complaints, rather than for those who are happy with the status quo. If we take into account, however, the empirically grounded knowledge about the self-censoring and self-silencing of many for fear of attracting trolls, online abuse and threats, it would be too simplistic to assume that those who do not actively participate in social media exchanges (even by simply retweeting a message) are content with the way that the issue at hand is being handled by political actors.

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