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As you will be aware, a week ago the voters of the United Kingdom committed perhaps the greatest act of madness in our country's long history.

In the week that followed the vote

- the value of the pound fell to its lowest level for thirty years
- the UK has lost its triple-A credit rating
- the Prime Minister has resigned
- the leader of the Brexit campaign has resigned
- the leader of the Opposition party is under irresistible pressure to resign
- Scotland, the majority of whose population voted differently from England, is preparing for a new referendum to leave the United Kingdom
- there has been a 57% increase in reported hate crimes
- and most economic experts forecast that the UK will now face a period of economic turbulence, perhaps lasting for the next twenty years
- Apart from that, everything's going really well ...

It is not my purpose today to discuss the merits or demerits of Brexit, much as it saddens me greatly that this Little Englander mentality has prevailed in accordance with similar turns to parochial nationalism in other parts of our continent.

As a communication scholar, my objective today is to explain how this vote was part of a trend that enervates the normative foundations of democracy.

Everything I have to say today is based upon one assumption: **that our current system of political communication is in conflict with the normative foundations of democracy. Until this tension is resolved, the shock waves that have thrown up Trump in the United States, the Front National in France, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and Brexit in Britain should not be regarded as sinister aberrations, but increasingly as 'politics as normal'.**

In the limited time that I have available I want to do three things:

- i) outline the key features of this tension between democracy and our current system of political communication;
- ii) show briefly how that tension played out during the Brexit campaign;
- iii) conclude by setting out some thoughts about how political communication could more effectively serve democracy

Democracy arises from an instinct that the exercise of power should be accountable to those who are affected by it; that arbitrary authority is inherently suspect and the exercise of public voice never an unwelcome transgression.

The foundational principle of democracy is that the interests and values of society should be collectively, self-consciously and autonomously determined by citizens rather than ordained by elites.

At this moment in the early twenty-first century, while democracy continues to have great purchase as a rhetorical trope, there is a growing unease that substantive social power resides beyond the control of the demos, wielded by unaccountable global forces and elusive domestic elites.

The conduct of politics appears to be a Machiavellian contest for power: a game of thrones; a contest for commanding influence. Winning political battles seems to be mainly a matter of calculated endeavour and subtle cunning on the part of elites and their often cynical strategists.

To act 'politically' has come to mean operating with an eye to manipulative advantage; to sacrifice veracity for plausibility.

Let me outline four tensions that are destroying public confidence in democratic politics.

1. There is a widespread belief that the demos is marginalised by political elites who neither understand nor respect them.

While the promise of democratic politics is that all members of society, regardless of their socio-economic status, are free to address and remedy problems that affect them, there is a widespread perception that policies are constructed and decisions made over the heads of the public.

People acknowledge that they have the right to vote for their chosen representatives and preferred policies (and that this is certainly more democratic than the denial of such an opportunity), and yet they feel that the really important decisions that affect their lives are not only made without their involvement, but are often made in ways that leave them feeling like beguiled and confused onlookers.

Much policy formation and decision-making takes place within unaccountable institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the European Commission, multinational corporations and the amorphous and all-powerful 'markets'.

Policy agendas are either hard to fathom (especially through the claims and counter-claims of rival politicians) or too narrowly conceived, failing to include some of the more intuitively sensible options that are ruled out as being 'unrealistic'.

Choices between policy X and policy Z turn into contests for the least awful option. Political democracy begins to feel like shopping in a very bad supermarket where the daily choice is between what's not available and what you don't really want.

We should keep in mind Axel Honneth's important observation that *'the moral quality of social relations cannot be measured solely in terms of the fair or just distribution of material goods; rather, our notion of justice is also linked very closely to how, and as what, subjects mutually recognize each other'*.

Contemporary democratic politics suffers from what I want to refer to as a crisis of misrecognition and disrespect.

2. There is a conspicuous deficit of trust, resulting in deep and widespread epistemic uncertainty about what constitutes political reality.

When people are presented with 'facts', 'narratives' and 'advice' by governments, political leaders and other centres of authority, they do not know whether to believe them. In an earlier, deferential political culture, such acceptance was automatic. Now, scepticism has become almost a default setting.

Confronted with the challenge of working out whether we are being told the truth by political leaders, citizens must become expert decoders.

And this work of deciding what to believe is corrupted by the relentless suspicion and malice of the mass media – notably the press in Britain – which exists as a daily conspiracy to stir up public anger against anything that opposes its own neoliberal agenda.

3. The quality of public debate is entirely inadequate from a normative democratic perspective.

It is easy to be confused or discouraged by the sheer complexity of the political agenda, and yet opportunities to arrive at a considered judgement through discussion with others are few and far between.

The aim of market-oriented political communication is to sell the brand (be it a candidate, party or policy) rather than to invite people to compare the pros and cons of competing positions.

As political talk becomes more strident and uncivil, scope for finding common ground, making sense of radically opposing values and being open to perspectives emanating from quite different life experiences diminishes.

What commonly passes for political debate takes place in TV and radio studios where a narrow cast of skilled tacticians seem to limbo-dance under the questions posed to them while doing their best to ignore, put down or interrupt their opponents. People who do not follow this sort of bizarre point-scoring as a hobby are inclined to switch off and tune out.

Most people know that a political system in which everyone has the right to vote, but nobody has time or space to reflect on their own opinions or listen to others, is a rather hollow version of democracy.

The missing element of contemporary political democracy is deliberation: the opportunity to share, compare, argue and resolve views with others.

For deliberation to be effective it must be socially cross-cutting, bringing together diverse individuals, communities and perspectives into a respectful public dialogue.

The absence of spaces in contemporary society to engage in this kind of meaningful deliberation leaves political judgement prone to sinister manipulation and the tyranny of the facile claim.

4. Votes might be counted equally, but voices are not heard equally.

There is a prevalent sense that the loudest and most powerful voices in political parties, campaigns and media debates reflect certain social groups more than others.

Those who are richer, more educationally qualified and more culturally confident are significantly more likely to join political parties, vote in elections, participate in government consultations, and enjoy success in lobbying for their own interests and opposing decisions not in line with their interests or values.

In Britain, the likelihood to vote of an individual under the age of 35, earning less than £10,000 a year is just 34 per cent, whereas the probability of voting of someone who is over 55 with an income of at least £40,000 a year is 79 per cent.

In a study of government responsiveness to voter preferences in twelve west European democracies between 1973 and 2002, researchers concluded that '... parties display no tendency to respond positively to the vast majority of the public, namely the constituency of rank-and-file citizens who do not engage regularly in political discussion and persuasion.

By contrast parties appear highly responsive to the viewpoints of opinion leaders, i.e., the relatively small subconstituency of citizens that habitually discuss politics and who attempt to persuade others on political issues'.

In a study of US senators' responsiveness to voters' policy preferences, it was found that 'senators are vastly more responsive to the views of affluent constituents than to constituents of modest means' and notes in passing that 'the fact that senators are themselves affluent, and in many cases extremely wealthy, hardly seems irrelevant to understanding the strong empirical connection between their voting behavior and the preferences of their affluent constituents'.

Without being political scientists, citizens have a sense of how these inequalities operate. According to UK polling research in April 2015, only one in four British voters in the lowest social-economic group (DE) believed

that democracy addressed their interests well, half as many compared to those in the highest social-economic group (AB).

Almost two thirds of voters in the lowest social-economic group said that democracy serves their interests badly, while less than one in ten believed that politicians understood the lives of people like themselves.

In the same year a Pew Research Center poll found that 39% of US voters agreed with the statement that 'voting by people like me doesn't really affect how government runs things' and nearly half (47%) stated that 'there's not much ordinary citizens can do to influence the government'.

Politics reproduces inequalities and those most in need of government help are the least likely to contribute to the policy agenda, vote in elections or be listened to by elected representatives.

Faced with such political inefficacy, where do they turn?

They turn to populist leaders who confuse mass malleability for informed consent.

Engaging in facile talk of walls to keep out foreigners; promises to eradicate the effects of globalisation while remaining part of the global market; invocations of medieval dogma as a retreat from the complexities of modernity; the toxic drip of scapegoating propaganda, populist politicians pander vulgar to the latent delusions of the socially injured.

This is precisely what happened in the UK Referendum on its membership of the European Union, just as it is happening in the grotesque Trump campaign in the United States.

The Brexit populists won for four reasons:

Firstly, they dismissed any obligation to adhere to norms of factual rationality and indulged in what has been called post-truth politics.

For example, they persisted throughout the campaign in their claim that Turkey was about to join the EU and tens of millions of Turkish people were planning to come to Britain. Opponents of Brexit repeatedly repudiated this lie.

The Prime Minister, David Cameron, went on television to say that the Brexit campaigners were acting irresponsibly and should be required to provide evidence for what they were saying.

But the key principle of propaganda is that you don't need any evidence and if you repeat a lie often enough some people will believe it.

Secondly, the populist politicians were supported by newspapers that had no commitment whatsoever to providing balanced or credible information.

The University of Bournemouth in the UK has already published an excellent collection of articles about the Referendum campaign and I advise you to

read the studies that describe how the British tabloid press sold Brexit to their readers by constructing a narrative of migrant invasion that bore no relationship to the truth.

This was not news. It wasn't even advocacy. It was pure propaganda.

Thirdly, the populists benefited from a public-service broadcasting system – the BBC – which, in the name of impartiality, believed it had a duty to give equal time to both sides of the argument, even when one side was manifestly lacking in serious evidence.

The BBC is currently engaged in some serious thinking about the way it covered the referendum campaign. Some of their leading political journalists are asking whether, rather than being obsessed about balancing both sides, they have a duty to be forensic about exposing myths and prejudices.

Fourthly, the post-industrial working class felt so alienated by all politicians – including Labour politicians – that they resisted any advice from them. Told that the consequences of Brexit would probably be economically catastrophic, they responded 'Our lives are economically catastrophic already; at least this way we can give the elites a good kicking'.

Populism won the day and – as I have suggested – this was not an aberration, but a firm trend; not a singular moment of madness, but the new normal.

So, what can be done about this descent into the crude fantasies of populism?

In my book, *How Voters Feel*, I argue that democracy is essentially a cultural process whereby dispersed beings come together to be called by one name: the electorate; the people; us.

In a strong democracy, people possess the confidence, structures and resources required to set out clear demands about who they are and on what terms they are prepared to be represented.

In a weak and decaying democracy, people give up on speaking for themselves.

They allow demagogues and media moguls to tell them who they really are; what they really want and value.

They descend into the politics of fantasy through which a new crisis of trust emerges – not a failure of people to trust political institutions, but a gullible readiness to invest excessive trust in leaders who serve as projections for their repressed aspirations.

Donald Trump embodies this phenomenon. Speaking at a rally in the lead-up to the New Hampshire Republican primary, he told the crowd what he thought of politicians:

These people – I'd like to use really foul language. I won't do it. I was going to say they're really full of shit. I won't say that. No, it's true. It's true. I won't say it. I won't say it. But they are.

He is telling them what they know to be true. They trust him in the same way that they are seduced by their own shadow. That is why Trump's speech-making never sounds like oratory, but an inner conversation. He is seeking to convince his echo to stay faithful to the original rant.

In declaring of politicians that 'they're really full of shit', he uses the pronoun 'they' to distance both himself and his followers from the smell.

They are politicians. *He* is a man who happened to stumble on to the stage of history.

If we are to reverse this awful trend, new structures and resources that nourish public confidence will need to be nurtured.

Although I see considerable potential for digital platforms and tools playing an important part in the reinvigoration of democracy – and my next book, *Can The Internet Strengthen Democracy?*, explores that potential -, I don't want to suggest that any one medium, platform or genre will solve democracy's problems.

Instead, I want to propose three features of political mediation that can and should be strengthened.

Firstly, there is a need to create trusted spaces for consequential civic deliberation.

Jay Blumler and I have long argued the case for an online civic commons in which both peer-to-peer and citizen-to-representative dialogue can take place within a trusted, independent space. But that is only one model – and we should now be experimenting with the construction of a real-world deliberative architecture.

Secondly, there is a need to develop a clear argument for communication as a public good rather than a commodity to be merchandised.

We need a new case to be made for public-service media as a democratic alternative to the market failure of commercialised journalism.

Thirdly, we need to think about democracy as amounting to more than occasional plebiscites.

The democratic theorist, John Keane, has written about the growth of what he calls monitory democracy – and he's right: democracy should not be thought of in narrowly fetishistic electoral terms. Democracy is not just about counting heads – it is about opening eyes.

As media and communication scholars, we have a part to play in helping to develop and evaluate innovative modes of democratic mediation. I hope that during the course of this conference we can work together towards that goal.

