

## Facebook's role in Brexit — and the threat to democracy

So, on the day after the Brexit vote, in June 2016, when Britain woke up to the shock of discovering that we're leaving the European Union, my editor at the "Observer" newspaper in the UK asked me to go back to South Wales, where I grew up, and to write a report. And so I went to a town called Ebbw Vale.

Here it is. It's in the South Wales Valleys, which is this quite special place. So it's always had this very, sort of rich, working-class culture, and it's famous for its Welsh male voice choirs and rugby and its coal. But when I was a teenager, the coal mines and the steelworks closed, and the entire area was devastated. And I went there because it had one of the highest "Leave" votes in the country. Sixty-two percent of the people here voted to leave the European Union. And I wanted to know why.

When I got there, I was just **a bit taken aback**, because the last time I went to Ebbw Vale, it looked like this. And now, it looks like this. This is a new 33-million-pound college of further education that was mostly funded by the European Union. And this is the new sports center that's at the middle of 350-million-pound regeneration project that's being funded by the European Union. And this is the new 77-million-pound road-improvement scheme, and there's a new train line, a new railway station, and they're all being funded by the European Union. And it's not as if any of this is a secret, because there's big signs like this everywhere. [EU Funds: Investing in Wales]

I had this sort of **weird** sense of unreality, walking around the town. And **it came to a head** when I met this young man in front of the sports center. And he told me that he had voted to leave, because the European Union had done nothing for him. He was fed up with it. And all around town, people told me the same thing. They said that they wanted to take back control, which was one of the **slogans** in the campaign. And they told me that they were most fed up with the immigrants and with the refugees. They'd had enough.

Which was odd. Because walking around, I didn't meet any immigrants or refugees. I met one Polish woman who told me she was practically the only foreigner in town. And when I checked the **figures**, I discovered that Ebbw Vale actually has one of the lowest rates of immigration in the country. And so, I was just **a bit baffled**, because I couldn't really understand where people were getting their information from. Because it was the right-wing tabloid newspapers which printed all these stories about immigration. And this is a very much left-wing Labour **stronghold**.

But then after the article came out, this woman got in touch with me. And she was from Ebbw Vale, and she told me about all this stuff that she'd seen on Facebook. I was like, "What stuff?" And she said it was all this quite scary stuff about immigration, and especially about Turkey. So, I tried to find it. But there was nothing there. Because there's no archive of ads that people had seen or what had been pushed into their news feeds. No trace of anything, gone completely dark. And this referendum that will have this profound effect forever on Britain - it's already had a profound effect: the Japanese car manufacturers that came to Wales and the north east to replace the mining jobs -- they are already going because of Brexit.

And his entire referendum took place in darkness, because it took place on Facebook. And what happens on Facebook stays on Facebook, because only you see your news feed, and then it vanishes, so it's impossible to research anything. So we have no idea who saw what ads or what impact they had, or what data was used to target these people. Or even who placed the ads, or how much money was spent, or even what nationality they were.

But Facebook does. Facebook has these answers, and it's refused to give them to us. Our parliament has asked Mark Zuckerberg multiple times to come to Britain and to give us these answers. And every single time, he's refused. And you have to wonder why. Because what I and other journalists have uncovered is that multiple crimes took place during the referendum. And they **took place** on Facebook.

It's because in Britain, we limit the amount of money that you can spend in an election. And it's because in the 19th century, people would walk around with literally **wheelbarrows** of cash and just buy voters. So we passed these strict laws to stop that from happening. But those laws don't work anymore. This referendum took place almost entirely online. And you can spend any amount of money on Facebook or on Google or on YouTube ads and nobody will know, because they're black boxes. And this is what happened.

We've actually got no idea of **the full extent** of it. But we do know that in the last days before the Brexit vote, the official "Vote Leave" campaign **laundered** nearly three quarters of a million pounds through another campaign **entity** that our electoral commission has ruled was illegal, and it's referred it to the police. And with this illegal cash, "Vote Leave" **unleashed** a fire hose of disinformation. Ads like this. [Turkey's 76m people joining the EU]

This is a lie, it's a total lie. Turkey is not joining the European Union. There's not even any discussions of it joining the European Union. And most of us, we never saw these ads, because we were not the target of them. "Vote Leave" identified **a**

**tiny sliver of people** who it identified as persuadable, and they saw them. And the only reason we are seeing these now is because parliament forced Facebook **to hand them over**.

And maybe you think, "Well, it was just a bit of **overspending**. It's a few lies." But this was the biggest **electoral fraud** in Britain for 100 years. In a once-in-a-generation vote that **hinged upon** just one percent of the electorate. And it was just one of the crimes that took place in the referendum.

There was another group, which was headed by this man, Nigel Farage, the one to the right of Trump. And his group, "Leave.EU" - it also broke the law. It broke British electoral laws and British data laws, and it's also being referred to the police. And this man, Arron Banks, he funded this campaign. And in a completely separate case, he's being referred to our National Crime Agency, our equivalent of the FBI, because our electoral commission has concluded they don't know where his money came from. Or if it was even British. And I'm not even going to go into the lies that Arron Banks has told about his **covert relationship** with the Russian government. Or the weird timing of Nigel Farage's meetings with Julian Assange and with Trump's **buddy**, Roger Stone, now indicted, immediately before two massive WikiLeaks dumps, both of which happened to benefit Donald Trump. But I will tell you that Brexit and Trump were intimately **entwined**. This man told me that Brexit was the petri dish for Trump. And we know it's the same people, the same companies, the same data, the same techniques, the same use of hate and fear. This is what they were posting on Facebook. And I don't even want to call this a lie, because it feels more like a hate crime to me. [Immigration without assimilation equals invasion]

I don't have to tell you that hate and fear are being sown online all across the world. Not just in Britain and America, but in France and in Hungary and Brazil and Myanmar and New Zealand. And we know there is this **dark undertow** which is connecting us all globally. And it is flowing via the technology platforms. But we only see a tiny amount of what's going on on the surface.

And I only found out anything about this **dark underbelly** because I started looking into Trump's relationship to Farage, into a company called Cambridge Analytica. And I spent months **tracking down** an ex-employee, Christopher Wiley. And he told me how this company, that worked for both Trump and Brexit, had profiled people politically in order to understand their individual fears, to better target them with Facebook ads. And it did this by illicitly harvesting the profiles of 87 million people from Facebook. It took an entire year's work to get Christopher on the record. And I had to turn myself from a feature writer into an investigative reporter to do it. And he was extraordinarily brave, because the company is owned by Robert Mercer, the billionaire who **bankrolled** Trump, and he threatened **to sue** us multiple times, to stop us from publishing.

**But we finally got there**, and we were one day ahead of publication. We got another legal threat. Not from Cambridge Analytica this time, but from Facebook. It told us that if we publish, they would sue us. We did it anyway. Facebook, you were on the wrong side of history in that. And you were on the wrong side of history in this - in refusing to give us the answers that we need. And that is why I am here. To address you directly, the gods of Silicon Valley.

Mark Zuckerberg ... and Sheryl Sandberg and Larry Page and Sergey Brin and Jack Dorsey, and your employees and your investors, too. Because 100 years ago, the biggest danger in the South Wales coal mines was gas. Silent and deadly and invisible. It's why they sent the canaries down first to check the air. And in this massive, global, online experiment that we are all living through, we in Britain are the canary. We are what happens to a western democracy when a hundred years of electoral laws are disrupted by technology. Our democracy is broken, our laws don't work anymore, and it's not me saying this, it's our parliament published a report saying this. This technology that you have invented has been amazing. But now, it's a crime scene. And you have the evidence. And it is not enough to say that you will do better in the future. Because to have any hope of stopping this from happening again, we have to know the truth. And maybe you think, "Well, it was just a few ads. And people are smarter than that, right?" To which I would say, "Good luck with that." Because what the Brexit vote demonstrates is that liberal democracy is broken. And you broke it. This is not democracy - spreading lies in darkness, paid for with illegal cash, from God knows where. It's subversion, and you are accessories to it.

Our parliament has been the first in the world to try to hold you to account, and it's failed. You are literally beyond the reach of British law - not just British laws, this is nine parliaments, nine countries are represented here, who Mark Zuckerberg refused to come and give evidence to. And what you don't seem to understand is that this is bigger than you. And it's bigger than any of us. And it is not about left or right or "Leave" or "Remain" or Trump or not. It's about whether it's actually possible to have a free and fair election ever again. Because **as it stands**, I don't think it is.

And so my question to you is, is this what you want? Is this how you want history to remember you: as the handmaidens to authoritarianism that is on the rise all across the world? Because you set out to connect people. And you are refusing to acknowledge that the same technology is now **driving us apart**. And my question to everybody else is, is this what we want: **to let them get away with it**, and to sit back and play with our phones, as this darkness falls? The history of the South Wales Valleys is of a fight for rights. And this is not a drill - it's a point of inflection. Democracy is not guaranteed, and it is not inevitable, and we have to fight, and we have to win, and we cannot let these tech companies have this unchecked power. It's up to us - you, me and all of us. We are the ones who have to take back control.