

# The Impact of Social Media on Democracy

Tim Ewbank  
U3AC Cambridge



# *Why does this matter?*

Six crises that the U.S. faces: the virus, climate change, growing inequality, racism, America's global standing and an attack on truth and democracy

President Biden, inaugural address, January 2021

“if we do not have the capacity to distinguish what's true from what's false, then  
....by definition our democracy doesn't work”

ex-President Obama November 2020

“the business model of Facebook is fundamentally incompatible  
with social democracy”

Ian Bremner  
President of Eurasia Group

# Structure of my talk

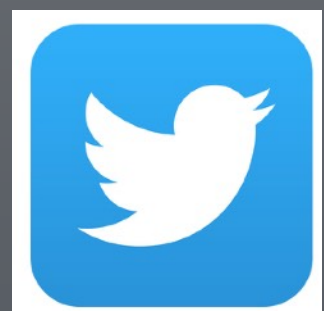
*“To know where we’re going,  
we have to know where we are.*

*To know that, we have to know where we came from  
& how we got here”*

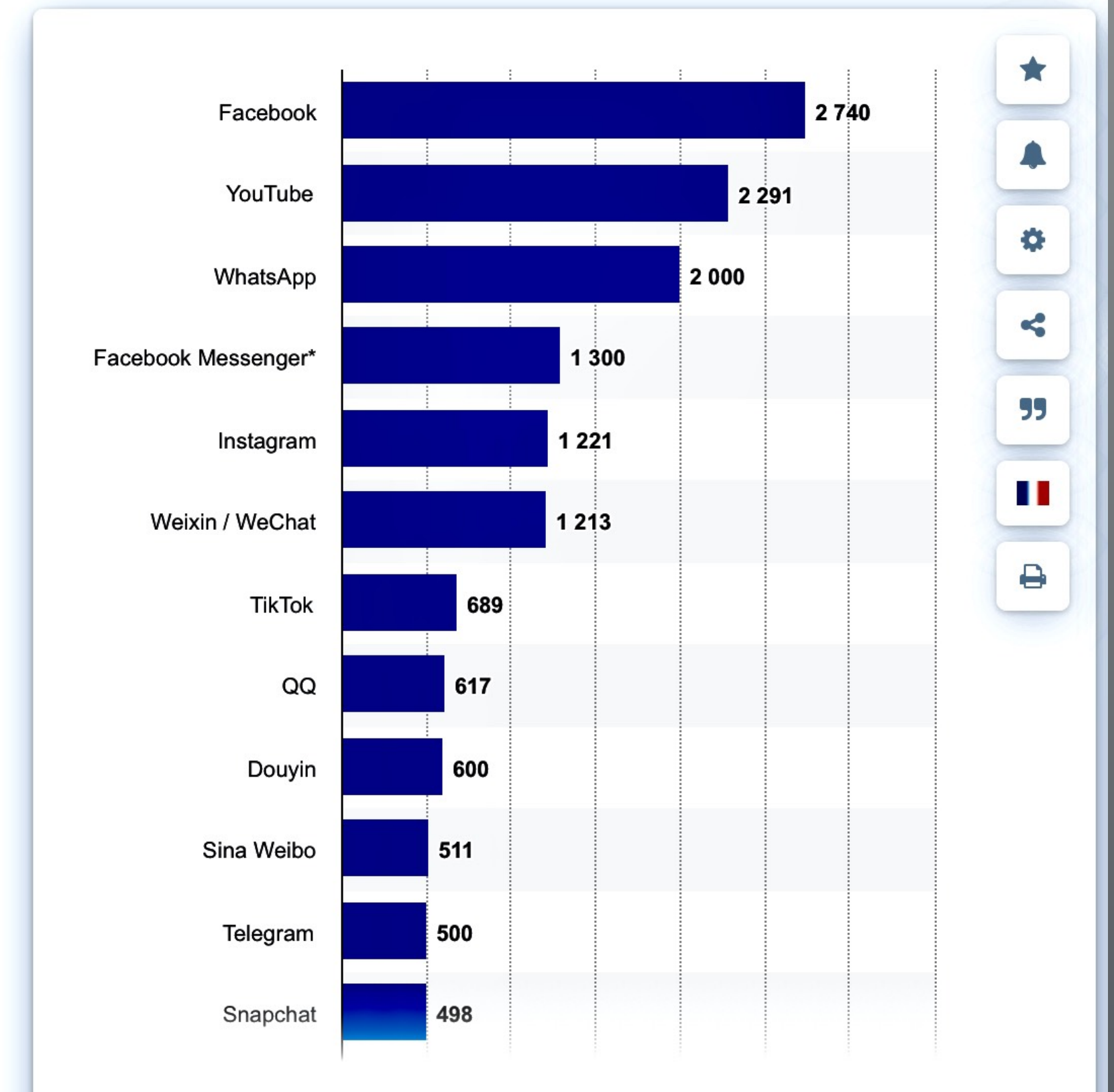
## Examples

Political campaigning - Brexit  
in warzone - Ukraine

# What do we mean by Social Media?



Most popular social networks worldwide ranked by number of active users  
*(in millions)*





Can be distinguished from  
“Big Tech”



# *Definition of political democracy*

“the belief that everyone in a country has the right to express their opinions, and that power should be held by people who are elected, or a system of government based on this belief”

Cambridge Dictionary

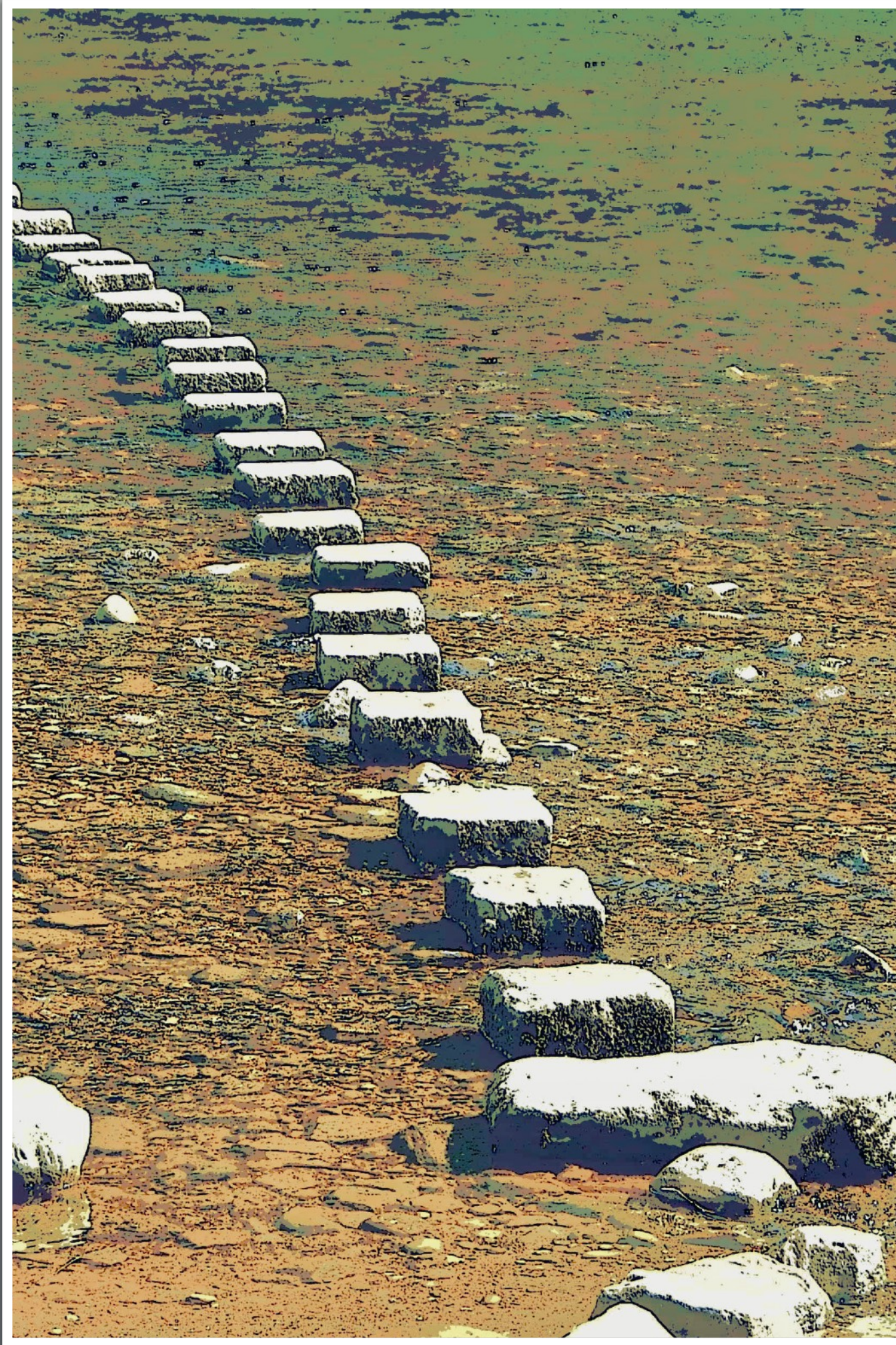
Social media directly impacts who gets heard and what everyone hears



*Where we are now*



*social media played a part in all these events*



## *How we got here*

All started so optimistically in mid-1990s

Facebook slogan

*"Be Connected. Be Discovered. Be on Facebook."*

Internet mantra

*"Information should be free & universal"*

Implicit social contract with users

*Free service exchange for "digital exhaust"*

*How did SM become the digital junk food of our age?*





# *Some milestones along the way*



Advent of internet enabled smartphones

Celebrity culture

Psychometrics Centre & Stanford Study of FB 'likes'  
Facebook "*Contagion Experiments*"

Algorithmic news feeds

Creation of "groups"

Digital influences real world behaviour



Concepts have been applied in political campaigning

# *The fundamental contradiction*

Key social media metrics are:  
“engagement” & frequency of use

Over-riding aim is to keep users on their platform  
Continual stream of prompts & suggestions based on  
Likes, reactions, shares & news feeds  
The more contentious the material the more likely it is to  
be shared

Amplifies confirmation bias & selective perception  
creates *echo chambers*

*Claims of freedom of speech* override need for balance or accuracy

# *Social media business model*

Soshana Zuboff

Private personal experience as raw material  
(from multiple data sources)

predictive models of human behaviour

“behavioural surplus”

Creates one way mirror

Users are not customers of social media

Asymmetry of power between users & customers

Have become “behaviour modification engines”

“surveillance dividend” commercial benefit of behavioural change



*“If you’re not paying for the product, then you are the product”*

# *Sources of surveillance “raw material”*

Internet browsing  
All Facebook apps  
All purchases  
YouTube history  
Phone - use of apps & location  
Household appliances  
Car telematics

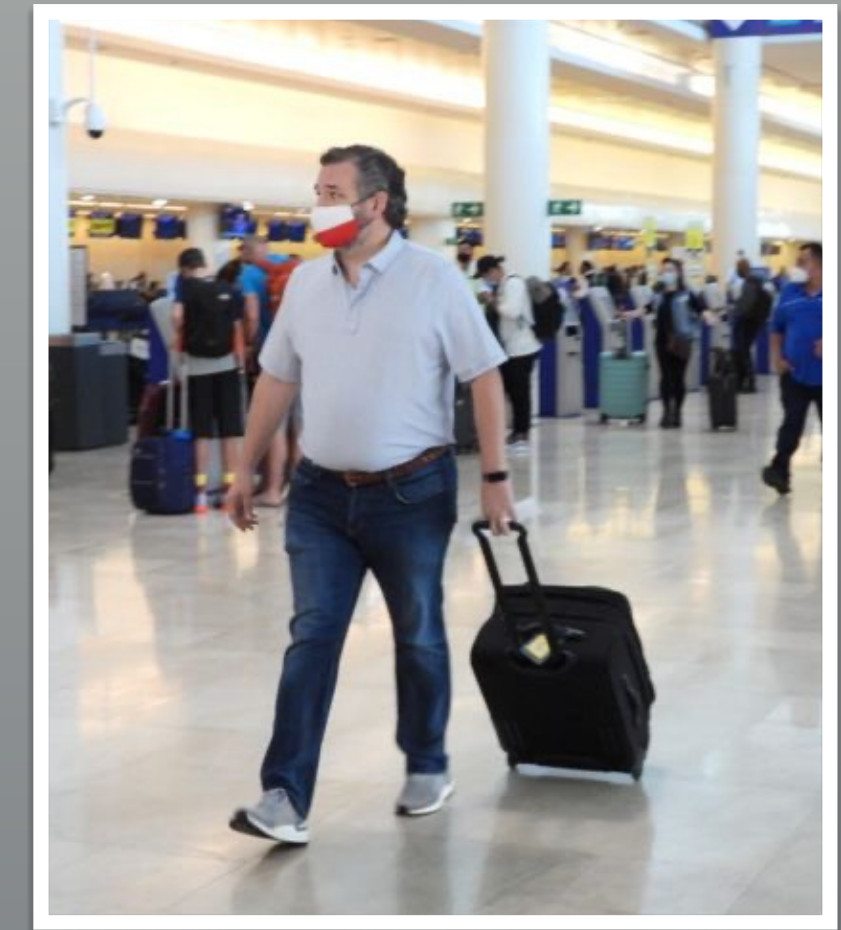
Gleaned & sold to third party agregators



# Live-streaming events



Zelensky's daily broadcasts



Ted Cruz  
Cancun airport



Murder of George Floyd  
#BLM



Christchurch Massacre

# *Impact on traditional media*

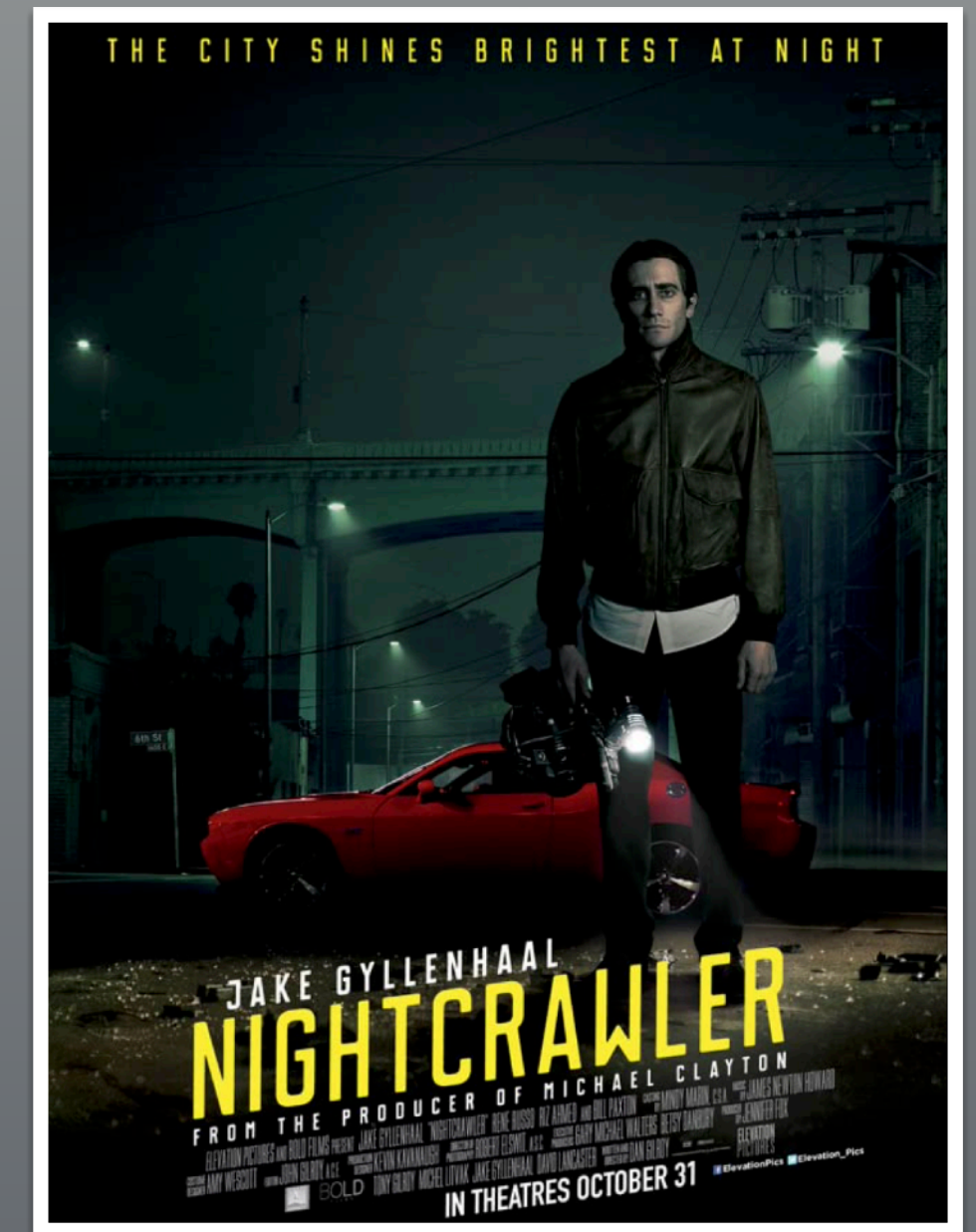
Social media has decimated print news by capturing advertising revenues

*Digital world:*

*“if it offends it trends”*

*Print & broadcast world:*

*“if it bleeds it leads”*



Fewer recognised sources of independent news

# Dis-information & Conspiracy Theories

 **The Real Facebook Oversight Board**  
@FBoversight

A Real Facebook Oversight Board analysis from 2021 Q2 data found that a majority of the “Number One posts” (most engagement on Facebook for that day) originated from just five known ‘disinformation superspreaders’.



July 28th 2021



*“A lie can go round the world, before the truth has got its boots on”*



# Limiting debate by de-platforming

US & UK

Covid anti-vaxxers

Race

Immigration



Germaine Greer

US

QAnon *et al* conspiracy theories

The Big Lie

Roe v Wade ruling



JK Rowling

UK

Transgender

# Celebrity culture influences public policy

.... and influence social policy



# Accountability of Government

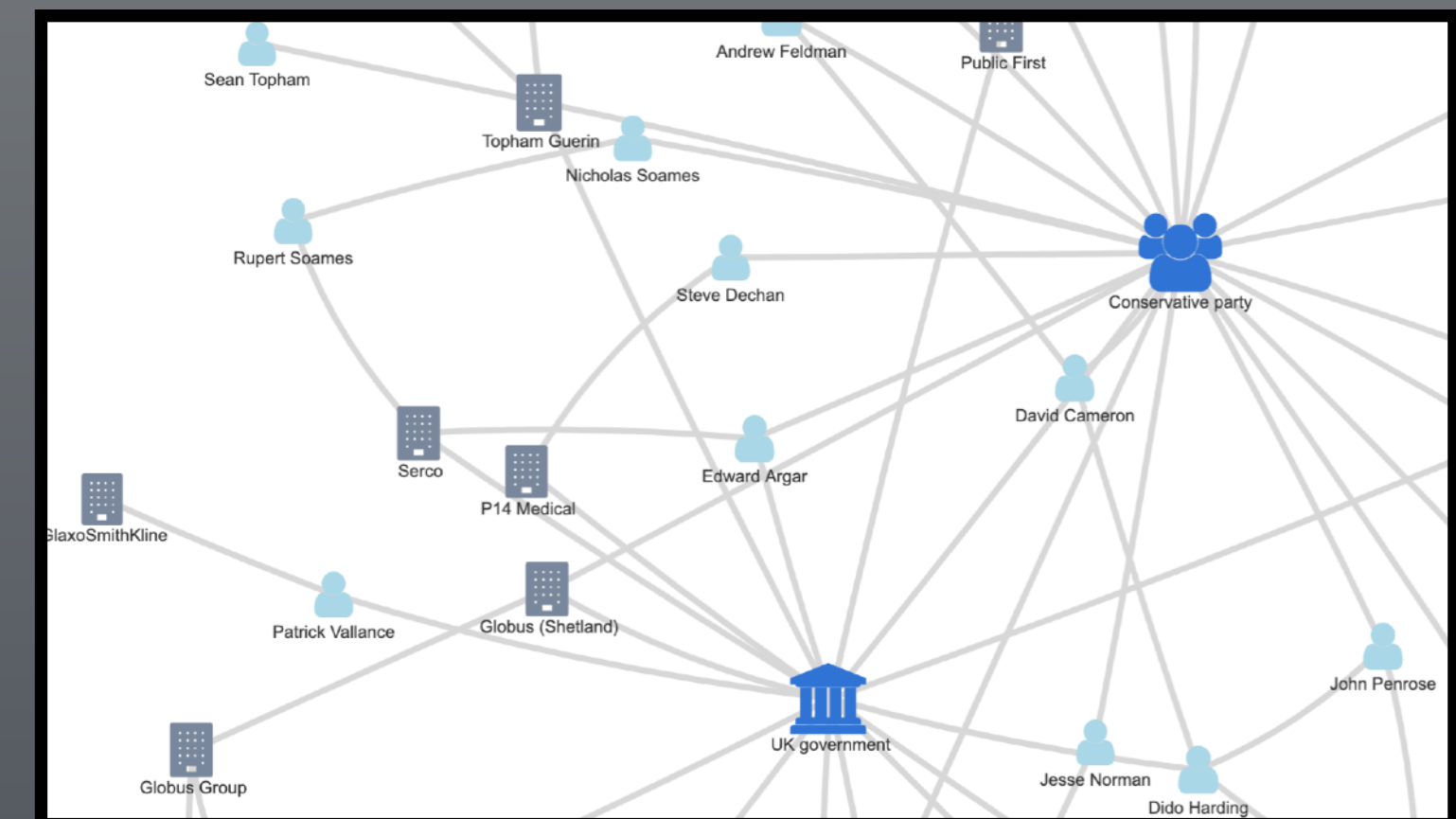
UK ministers using encrypted messaging apps  
WhatsApp & Signal for government business

Lack of transparency in procurement  
Awarding of PPE contracts without due process

Information Commissioner Office (ICO) inquiry

*My Little Crony*

Ongoing erosion of public  
confidence in the government



# *Erosion of political discourse*

Reduced to viral images and sound bites



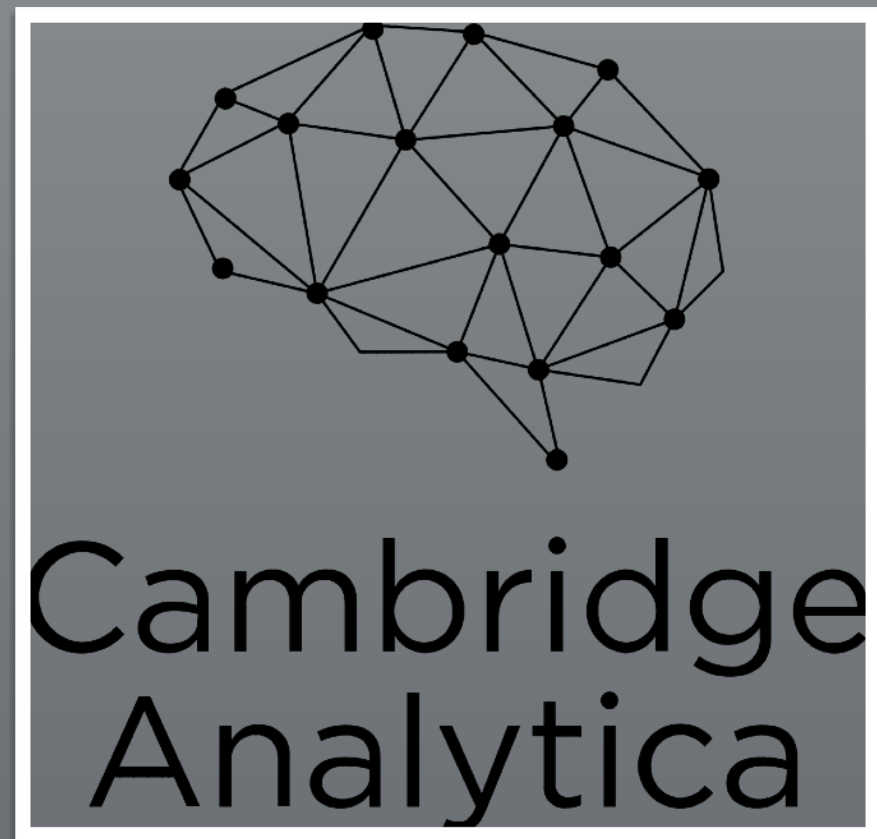
*“We took all the right decisions at the right time”*



*‘when the looting starts, the shooting starts’*

# *Political campaigning using social media*

Revealed by Cambridge Analytica expose 2018



Using data from 50+ million Americans off FB  
Segmenting the electorate  
Micro-targeting messages  
Voter suppression or encouragement  
Transient advertisements

claimed involvement in 2016 US election

*Populist leaders have learnt to utilise social media*



*consequently little incentive to reform*



Massive disinformation campaign



Adverts playing on electorates emotions, esp. fear & anger

Undisclosed sums spent in marginal areas

Enabled by no limit on online advertising

*“EU Referendum was the petridish  
for the 2016 US Election”*

Carol Cadwalladr, 2017 TED talk



# *The Russian invasion of Ukraine*



Daily broadcasts

Generated massive donations

Documenting war crimes

Used facial recognition and SM  
to inform Russian parents of deaths

Unable to control technically

Banned SM companies

Harsh legal penalties

Ukraine is making more effective use of social media



# *Where to from here?*

## *Current issues with social media companies*

Risks to internal US security

Series of data privacy breaches

Anti-competitive behaviour

Unethical behaviour

*Self-regulation being seen not to work*



# *Regulation of Social Media*

## Anti - trust

Failure of 2021 FTC anti-trust case against Facebook  
Creation of Digital Markets Authority in UK  
Online Safety Bill in UK (April 2022)

## Privacy

Weak federal legislation (Europe stronger)  
California Consumer Privacy Law 2020  
mooted Bill of Information Rights

## Neutral platform or Publisher?

S230 protection being questioned

# Frances Haugen Senate Committee testimony (4th October 2021)

Based on direct experience & FB research  
objective is to keep users on their site  
the more contentious the material the better  
aware of Instagram harm doing to teenage girls  
Foreign safety checks patchy  
“profits before safety”



Was this Facebook’s “big tobacco moment”?

# *An alternative legal route*

5th Aug 2022, conspiracy theorist, Alex Jones, lost defamation case brought by parents over claims that Sandy Hook school killings were a hoax. Instructed to pay \$49m in defamation & punitive damages



Rudi Giuliani being sued by Smartmatic over claims that ballot machines were rigged

Dominion Voting Systems files defamation lawsuit against Fox News

Parents of teenage girls damaged by Instagram?

# Senate 6th January Inquiry



Exposed the extent to which social media was used to organise the insurrection.

Alleged loss of crucial tweets by Trump associates

Without social media, would the insurrection have happened?

# Conclusions

Combination of predictive behaviour models & micro-targeting now used in all political campaigns



Companies have no commercial incentive to dial down, only popular or regulatory pressure

Regulation (& regulators) designed for the analogue age

Populist politicians are unlikely to promote regulation

Social media accelerated an existing political trends

Future direction is changing

# Future directions

Social media usage is growing & morphing

Alt-right social media channels are not gaining traction

FB & Insta users, revenues & stock price are falling

TikTok is the fastest growing

Usage is younger, more commercial and entertainment than political

Remains unclear how legislation could be changed

