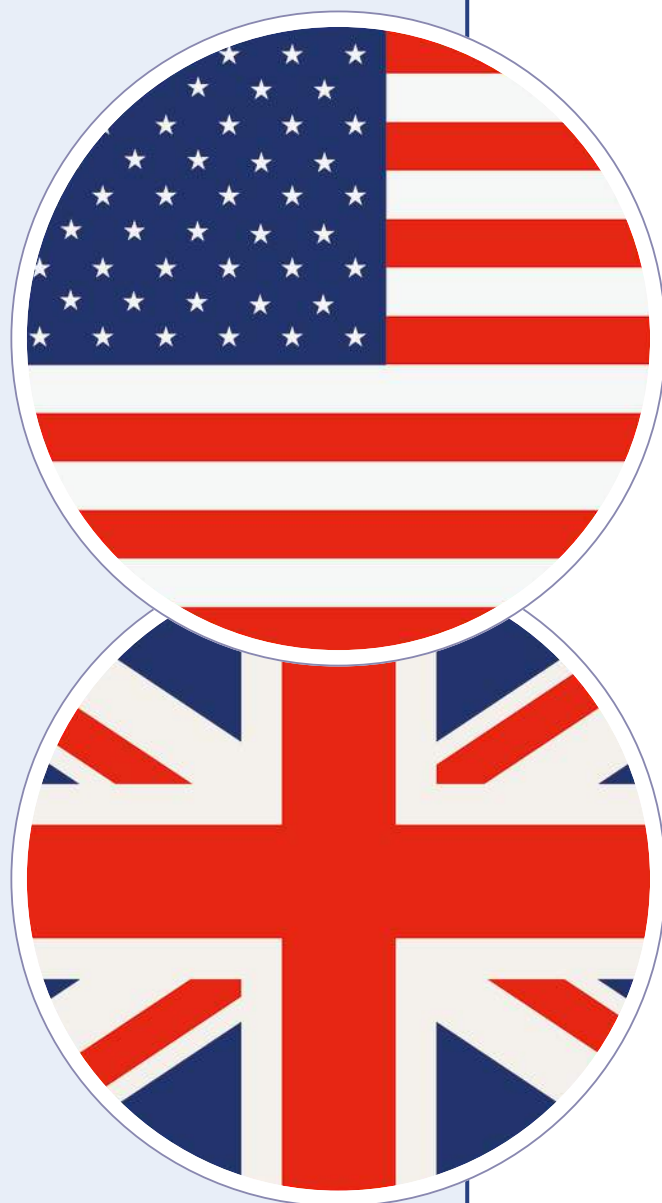


Englisch betrifft uns

# EBU on the Web 2020/1

Topical texts in  
English lessons

- *Comprehension*
- *Analysis*
- *Creative writing*
- *Background information*



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### The Topic

#### *Facebook's Role in Brexit and the Threat to Democracy – a Video Clip*

Not only the case of Brexit but also the last American election campaign show that social media such as Facebook or Twitter are a means for politicians as well as for grass-roots campaigners to reach and influence audiences directly and bypass the filters of media journalism. An analysis of Twitter communication during the Brexit referendum campaign found out that users supporting the "Leave" campaign were more active than "Remain" users. The general conclusion can be drawn that social media are without doubt the media of choice for activist groups and individuals challenging the mainstream. This particularly refers to populist movements and campaigns.

The video clip that is dealt with in the following is part of the TED series. TED is a non-profit platform devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks and covering almost all global issues in more than 100 languages. TED.com presents experts and inspired thinkers from all over the world. In this video clip Carole Cadwalladr, a British author, investigative journalist and features writer for *The Observer*, deals with the impact of social media in general and of Facebook in particular. She exposes the *Facebook–Cambridge Analytica* data scandal, which attracted worldwide attention in 2018.

### Ties to obligatory topics

The impact of social media on a society; political issues in Britain, issues related to Brexit and its consequences

### Background information – further links

<https://www.referendumanalysis.eu/eu-referendum-analysis-2016/section-7-social-media/impact-of-social-media-on-the-outcome-of-the-eu-referendum/>

Vyacheslav Polonski is a network scientist at the University of Oxford. His research focuses on the dynamics of social influence, social networks and the emergence of collective behaviours online. His article „Impact of social media on the outcome of the EU Referendum“ presents facts and figures on the EU referendum in June 2016.

<https://blog.lboro.ac.uk/crcc/eu-referendum/sun-no-longer-hedging-bets-brexit/>

Experts in Loughborough University's Centre for Research in Communications and Culture analysed press and broadcast coverage of the EU Referendum between 6 May and 14 June 2016. The analysis of 1127 media cuttings suggested that newspaper coverage of "Leave" or "Remain" is an evaluation that takes circulation and strength of partisanship into consideration and shows 82% circulation advantage in favour of Brexit. The *Sun* provided one of the most balanced or neutral discussions of the campaign (4<sup>th</sup> position behind the *Guardian*, *The Times* and *Financial Times*), The *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail* were the least balanced.

### The Link (URL)

[https://www.ted.com/talks/carole\\_cadwalladr\\_facebook\\_s\\_role\\_in\\_brexit\\_and\\_the\\_threat\\_to\\_democracy](https://www.ted.com/talks/carole_cadwalladr_facebook_s_role_in_brexit_and_the_threat_to_democracy)

### Assignments

#### Pre-watching activity

Before the Brexit referendum in June 2016 the “Leave” and “Remain” sides tried, of course, to explain their positions and to influence the voters. Can you imagine how they did that? Consider the possibilities of traditional as well as new/social media.

#### While-watching activities

1. Describe the South Wales Valleys at the time when Carole Cadwalladr grew up there. What does [the area](#) look like today?
2. Why did the journalist have “this sort of weird sense of unreality” when she was walking around Ebbw Vale?
3. According to Carole Cadwalladr, how did the people in Ebbw Vale get the information on which their “Leave” votes in the referendum were based?
4. What did the journalist find out about the information about the referendum posted on Facebook?
5. How have the social media such as Facebook changed political campaigns in Britain, e.g. before an election or a referendum?
6. How did, according to the journalist, groups such “Vote Leave” and “Leave.EU” make use of social media before the referendum?
7. What did Carole Cadwalladr find out about the company “Cambridge Analytica”?
8. According to the journalist, what effect does Facebook have on our democratic society?
9. What is the journalist’s final appeal not only to the audience but to all citizens?

#### Post-watching activity

Imagine the following situation: you, as a German pupil who uses social media in general and Facebook in particular, have watched the video clip and you are shocked by what Carole Cadwalladr has revealed about the role of Facebook in the Brexit referendum. The next day at school you inform the classmates of your politics course about the journalist’s revelations. Write down what you might say and what questions they may interrupt you with.

## Suggested Solutions

1. The town called Ebbw Vale is in the South Wales Valleys. The last time the journalist went there she perceived the town as a quite special place: a rich, working-class culture, famous for its Welsh male voice choirs and rugby and its coal; the coal mines and the steelworks closed, and the entire area was devastated; in the Brexit referendum it had one of the highest "Leave" votes in the country; sixty-two percent of the people there voted to leave the European Union. Today you find there: a new £33-million-college of further education, a new sports centre that's at the middle of a £350-million-regeneration project, a new £77-million-road-improvement scheme, a new train line, a new railway station. All these projects were mostly funded by the European Union.
2. When talking to local people the journalist was informed that they had voted in favour of leaving the EU because it has done nothing for them. They were fed up with immigrants and refugees and wanted to take back control. When walking around the town she was surprised because she did not see any immigrants or refugees, apart from one Polish woman. She checked some figures and found out that Ebbw Vale has one of the lowest rates of immigration in the country. She wondered where the residents got their information from.
3. A woman told the journalist that she had seen the information on Facebook, e.g. "all this quite scary stuff about immigration" and about Turkey joining the EU.
4. She tried to find the information about the referendum but did not succeed. There is no archive of ads that people had seen or what had been pushed into their news feeds; there was no trace of anything. The entire referendum had taken place in darkness.
5. In Britain the amount of money that you can spend in an election campaign is limited by the law because in the 19th century people would "walk around with literally wheelbarrows of cash" and just buy voters. 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". It is impossible to research anything. 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.
6. 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 the British electoral commission has ruled was illegal, and which has in the meantime been referred to the police. With this illegal cash, "Vote Leave" published a lot of disinformation. The other group, "Leave.EU", led by Nigel Farage, also broke the British electoral laws and British data laws.
7. "Cambridge Analytica" worked for both Trump and Brexit. They had profiled people politically in order to understand their individual fears, to better target them with Facebook ads. They had done this by illicitly harvesting the profiles of 87 million people from Facebook. The company is owned by Robert Mercer, the billionaire who provided funds for Trump. He threatened to sue the *Observer* several times to stop them from publishing. They got another legal threat, not from Cambridge Analytica but from Facebook, which told them that if they published, they would sue them. They did it anyway.
8. Carole Cadwalladr is convinced that "our democracy is broken, our laws don't work anymore", which was confirmed by a report by the British parliament. The new technology, i.e. the social media, was once "amazing" but has developed to a "a crime scene". For a democratic society it is crucial to know the truth. In the journalist's eyes the Brexit vote demonstrates that liberal democracy is being disastrously undermined. She blames Facebook for spreading lies in darkness, paid for with illegal cash. She also regrets that the British parliament tried to hold Facebook to account but that it failed because Facebook is literally beyond the reach of British law. Carole Cadwalladr draws the conclusion that the problem 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.
9. The journalist appeals to everybody not to let Facebook get away with it, and not to sit back and play with their phones. According to her, democracy is not guaranteed, and it is not inevitable. People have to fight and they cannot let these tech companies have the unchecked power. She appeals to everybody to take back control.