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DEMOCRACY DISRUPTED—FOR WHOM?

A Study on Political Micro-Targeting and its
Potential for Revitalizing Political Articulation.

Author: Jonas Axel Abrahamsson

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Supervisor:	Jan Bachmann
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Abstract

This thesis is a conceptual contribution to the discussion about the political aspects of contemporary Political Micro-Targeting (PMT). In its normative dimensions, it aims at unearthing the potential of PMT in revitalizing political articulation in contemporary institutional democracies. The thesis deals with this general topic by zooming in on the political significance of a recent shift in the UK data protection approach towards controversial PMT practices—a shift initiated by the British Data Protection Authority, the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO). Its findings allow for the suggestion that a new understanding of the political significance of this shift is needed.

Thus, this thesis provides an analysis of recent shifts in data protection approach towards PMT in the UK, which is informed by two equally important building blocks: **1)** the political theory of Ernesto Laclau, and **2)** empirical data collected through interviews and document analysis in order to illustrate that an actual *shift* in the ICO’s approach towards PMT has occurred and that it stands out in an EU context. In order to conclude the latter, the Swedish Data Protection Authority (Datainspektionen) has been used as a point of reference throughout this thesis. The interviews have been conducted with communication sector representatives of political parties belonging to the party family of Social Democracy—i.e. the UK Labour party and the Swedish Social Democratic party—since both have evidentially used PMT in previous political campaigns, and is thereby affected in practice by DPAs’ approaches towards PMT.

Keywords: The Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO), Political Micro-Targeting (PMT), Data Protection Authority (DPA), UK EU membership referendum, political articulation, political theory, Ernesto Laclau, Laclauian theory, institutional totality, equivalential chain, empty signifier

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

DCMS	Digital, Culture, Media & Sport	MP(s)	Member(s) of Parliament
DPA	Data Protection Authority	NHS	National Health Service
EU	European Union	PMT	Political Micro-Targeting
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation	NHS	National Health Service
ICO	Information Commissioner’s Office	UK	United Kingdom

“You campaign in poetry; you govern in prose”

- Mario Cuomo, former governor of New York, US.

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1. Introduction

In 2015, Andrew Cooper from *the Guardian* stated that the 2015 UK general election was “all prose and no poetry”, referring to the aforementioned quote of Mario Cuomo (The Guardian 2015). According to Cooper, the digitalization of political campaigning had resulted in campaigns becoming “boring” and “quiet”, due to the fact that campaign promises were being made on social media platforms, tailored towards specific voters without the public being able to watch (ibid.). However, just a year afterwards in 2016, it seemed like political campaigns became “poetic” again, with catchy slogans flourishing such as *Take Back Control* and *Make America Great Again*—among the most influential examples.

This thesis’s ambition is to explore how digitized campaigning tools condition a (re)vitalization of *political articulation*, i.e., the possibility for politicians to **1)** treating the electorate as a collective whole, rather than a mosaic of individuals perceived to possess a wide variation of different interests, and **2)** articulating campaign promises that unify and mobilize voters on a *political basis*, and moreover create possibilities for them to solidarize with each other and their community as a whole.¹

So far, scholars have argued that certain characteristics—similar to what this thesis refers to as political articulation—have been absent throughout recent political campaigns. Rather, segmentation of the electorate and exposure of individuals to digital voter surveillance have occurred (Gorton 2016:62, Bennett 2015:379). In favor of these scholars’ arguments, almost everyone in today’s society has experience of being targeted online, in one way or another. Internet cookies, Facebook pixels and constantly connected devices, such as WiFi-connected body weight scales, refrigerators etc., have made it considerably easier to trace the digital footprint of citizens. Recently, it furthermore became known to the wider public that individuals are being targeted for *political purposes*, as mentioned above (Hazenberget al. 2018:13). And according to Bartlett et al. (2018), the precision of such targeting will become increasingly sophisticated in a not too distant future (2018:28).

Hence, voters may need to ask themselves: What happens when data brokers harvest so-called “Big Data” on individuals, in order to construct segmented groups that *politicians* and *political campaigners* can exploit for targeted messages? What happens when commercial Micro-Targeting, previously used to sell products to individual customers, turns into *Political Micro-Targeting* (PMT), in order for political actors to attract voters based on the same logic?

¹ The concept of the political will be more carefully reviewed below (section 3.1.1).

These questions have led to scholars arguing that contemporary democracy needs to be re-conceptualized, as voters nowadays are exposed to an *individualization of politics*—becoming detached from their social communities (Gorton 2016:60-65). Consequently, these voters are being treated more as customers who should be persuaded with “relevant” information, or, more accurately, “relevant” according to digital strategists who base this presumed relevance on the data that can be traced back to the voters in question (ibid.).

With these aforementioned concerns in mind, it becomes reasonable to suggest that the craft of political communication is currently in motion between two different logics: **1)** a *logic of plurality*, where the right conditions for sustainable political articulation occur—i.e., where voters are treated as a part of a political demos, and where voices of such social communities are paid attention to—and **2)** a *logic of singularity*, where voters’ interests are being met separately/individually to ensure the satisfaction of single individuals.

This theory-driven thesis has a normative ambition² to employ political theory in order to broaden the discussion about the potential of PMT in revitalizing *political articulation* in today’s institutional democracies.³ That is, the findings in this thesis suggest that PMT could possibly create the conditions for political communication to operate within a logic of plurality again. Moreover, this thesis zooms in on recent steps taken by Data Protection Authorities (DPAs). A narrowing of this general research aim into a more specific topic of study creates the possibility to analyze/problematize why some PMT practices have been depicted as tools disrupting democracy, while others have not. Thus, this thesis seeks to develop a new understanding of one particular phenomenon, the political significance of the ICO’s shift in approach towards PMT, in order to facilitate a broadening of future discussions on the potential of PMT in revitalizing political articulation within institutional democracies on a general basis.

To assure the reader that the ICO’s approach towards PMT is not conditioned by the UK implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation legislation (GDPR), it has been considered appropriate to show that the ICO approach stands out in an EU context. For this reason, the Swedish DPA’s approach towards PMT has also been evaluated in the beginning of the analysis and has served as a point of reference of the ICO. The respective approaches of

² For additional reading on theory-driven research equally dependent on empirical data, see section 4.1. For additional reading on embracing normativity and research bias through Social Science research, see section 4.5.

³ This thesis uses the term institutional democracy when referring to the principle of democracy developed by Montesquieu (2011). His idea of democratic governance is based on a *separation of powers* into three branches of equal importance and legitimacy: the legislative, the executive and the judiciary branches. Such separation of powers is nowadays often referred to as *checks and balances*. For additional reading: Vile (1998).

these two DPAs have been analyzed mainly by interviewing communications team representatives of parties belonging to the Social Democratic party family, whose campaigns have shown to be conditioned by DPA data protection approaches towards PMT. Before introducing the topic of study in greater detail, the research problem and aim will be presented below.

1.1 Research Problem & Aim

In recent years, the ICO has shared its concerns regarding how digital political campaigns bolster PMT irregularities, which, in turn, could lead to threats against democracy (ICO 2018b). At the same time, some scholars argue that today's political parties *need these digital campaigns*; i.e., a digital space of representation, to maintain their relevance, to succeed in articulating the interests of *different* groups within society rather than merely chant political messages to be received by "the collective mean" of the voter base (Bjereld, Demker et al. 2018:18 & 195).

The development over the last decades, characterized by falling membership in political parties, has resulted in the art of political articulation becoming increasingly challenging. In the 1960s, parties agreed on and adopted their ideological strategy at party congresses and political conventions where the voices of party members were heard (Bjereld, Demker et al. 2018:15, Bennett 2013). Some decades later, party membership had fallen dramatically. Consequently, politicians throughout Europe have lost important ties with the people they used to represent; hence, new methods to attract voters are needed.

In recent decades, the methods used to attract these former party members—and the electorate as a whole—seem to have been based on a logic of singularity; that is, according to Bjereld, Demker et al., political parties/campaigners today rely on polling rates, run by statistical pundits, in order to understand the opinions and interests of citizens (2018:19). This development has resulted in parties/campaigners giving priority to *individual opinions* at the expense of constructing a *social base*, as polling rates only show the aspirations of individuals, not the will of social groups (2018:21). Hence, the efforts of political parties/campaigners to manage the complex task of revitalizing political articulation, or what Bjereld, Demker et al. refer to as *interest articulation* (2018:17-18), were seemingly in vain; rather, they resulted in solely evaluating individual opinions. This has led to individual interests being satisfied instead of the mobilization of a political movement; i.e., such interest articulation appears to have lost its *political* dimension.

In order to reverse this trend, political parties/campaigners have recently been encouraged to collaborate with PR strategists and political communication agencies, for the purpose of making political campaigns more *data-driven* and formulating *relevant* material targeted towards *specific* segments of the voter base (Bjereld, Demker et al. 2018:70 & 194).

However, this advice to political actors about how to use new digital campaign tools—i.e., PMT—could instead inflate the individualization of politics *even more* and further undermine the possibilities to revitalize political articulation, according to other scholars (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. 2018, Gorton 2016). At its best, following these scholars' reasoning, PMT could facilitate an increase in *interest* articulation, but such interests would presumably only concern individuals, based on a logic of singularity, since PMT creates the impression among targeted individuals that *their interest is the core value of the party* in question (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. 2018:87-89). This arguably leads to a decrease in solidarity among voters, which creates obstacles to fostering the political narrative of common concerns (Gorton 2016:70-74). Following Gorton's arguments, PMT undermines the possibilities to (re)construct a *social base*; the same base that Bjereld, Demker et al. wish to regain (Gorton 2016:70). Accordingly, due to PMT, the logic behind business marketing has entered the political field. Therefore, Gorton suggests that there are nowadays more similarities than differences between a customer who chooses a certain product over another, as a result of well planned and executed commercial advertising, and a voter who asks himself: "Why did I vote for Bush [and not for Gore]? I don't know". Thus, voters of today have lost their political reasoning behind choosing party representatives or political candidates, because the "psycho-social science" of commercial advertising has been adapted to political campaign strategies (2016:62 & 74).

Apparently, the future for successful political campaigning is painted with somewhat contradictory brush strokes. Political actors are recommended to adapt to contemporary digitalization in order to stay relevant to their voters. They are also advised to perceive/treat voters as a part of a social base (i.e., adapting to a logic of plurality) rather than as mere individuals (i.e., refraining from a logic of singularity) in order to improve the conditions for successful articulation. However, the tools inherent in the digitalization that political actors have embraced seem to result in political campaigners *reaching out to individuals based on this unwanted logic of singularity, not to the preferred social base in question*. In summary, if this line of reasoning holds true, sustainable political articulation appears to be a lost cause, regardless of whether political actors choose to adapt to digitalization or not.

At the same time, in 2018, the ICO urged all political campaigners in the UK to take an ethical break in relation to PMT (ICO 2018b:3) and pointed out that PMT irregularities had occurred since the 2016 UK referendum on EU membership, thereby threatening core democratic principles. This initiative of the ICO is interesting, since the 2016 referendum is one of the few recent historical events (in the UK and elsewhere) where PMT was used successfully by political campaigners, while *simultaneously perceiving/treating voters as part of a social base*. Hence, the way in which the 2016 referendum campaigns engaged in political communication could be seen as a (seemingly unique) way of using PMT while simultaneously succeeding in mobilizing voters through revitalizing the political articulation in today's institutional democracies. So why did the ICO condemn/delegitimize these campaigns' use of PMT, arguing that they contributed to a disruption of democracy? (2018b:47). Tellingly enough, the ICO decided to call its first report on the matter "Democracy Disrupted?", and this title has contributed to the puzzle that this thesis sets out to explore; what *kind* of democracy has been disrupted according to the ICO, and for *whom* is it disruptive?

1.2 Research Question

The research aim of this thesis is to broaden the discussion about the political aspects of PMT with regard to its potential for revitalizing political articulation. In order to do so, the political significance of the ICO's shift in its data protection approach towards PMT has been analyzed specifically. In order to trace this political significance, the main research question in this thesis is accompanied by two sub-questions (SQ1 and SQ2). The questions are presented below, as follows:

RQ: What is the political significance of the recent shift in UK data protection approach towards Political Micro-Targeting (PMT)?

SQ1: What makes it become reasonable to assert that such a *shift* in the ICO's approach towards PMT has occurred since the 2016 UK referendum on EU membership?

SQ2: What factors indicate that the ICO's shift in approach towards PMT stands out in an EU context?

1.3 Operationalization

Suggesting answers to the main RQ

The premise for providing substantial arguments and assertions concerning the main research

question of this thesis is based on two supplementary sub-questions, because 1) without being reassured about the circumstances concerning SQ1, it could have been assumed that the ICO *always* has perceived British PMT as a worrisome practice, and 2) without the findings relating to SQ2, it would be difficult to dismiss entirely the argument that the ICO shift in approach towards PMT should primarily be related to the recently implemented GDPR across the EU member states. However, by using another EU member state's DPA as a point of reference, it becomes more reasonable to claim that the ICO's shift in approach stands out in an EU context, and that it does not mainly concern the implementation of the GDPR in the UK.

The theoretical framework for this thesis, Ernesto Laclau's theory on political articulation (2005), is applied to the last part of the analysis. By using Laclauian theory, it becomes possible to trace new aspects of the empirical findings, and from there on suggest answers to the main research question; i.e., Laclauian theory, merged with the empirical data of this thesis, creates the conditions for a new understanding of the political significance of the ICO's shift in approach towards PMT.

Suggesting answers to SQ1

In order to suggest answers to SQ1, relevant previous literature on PMT has been merged with the main parts of the collected empirical data that relate to the ICO's data protection approach to PMT before, during and after the 2016 UK EU membership referendum. By doing so, it becomes reasonable to assert that a shift in the ICO approach occurred after the UK referendum, since the empiry of this thesis indicates that the ICO has chosen to combat PMT irregularities since 2016 while disregarding irregularities occurring before 2016.

Suggesting answers to SQ2

In-person interviews have been conducted with communications team representatives of parties in Sweden and the UK belonging to the Social Democratic party family, in order to suggest answers to SQ2. The findings from these interviews, together with supplementary empirical data mentioned below (section 4.2.1), have made it possible to analyze the ICO in relation to the Swedish DPA. Thus, factors have been identified that show how the ICO's shift in approach stands out in an EU context.

This thesis uses party communications teams as proxies to understand DPA practices fully, since these communications teams have been clearly affected by the policies of the DPAs

towards PMT.⁴ Exploring how the political parties/campaigners' use of PMT is affected by DPA policy makes it easier to understand how DPA policies have been implemented in practice in the respective countries, which appears to be a more fruitful approach than to rely solely on policy reports or statements from the legal services of the DPAs. Another argument in favor of this prioritization concerns the fact that many European DPAs have not managed to provide policies where their attitudes towards PMT have been clearly articulated or presented (Bennett 2016:262). Choosing the communications teams belonging to the Social Democratic party family, rather than other political parties, turned out to be of relevance to this thesis, as argued below (section 4.3.2).

Before unpacking the literature review of this thesis, where a few contributions have already been mentioned above to some extent, the reader needs to be introduced to key concepts, as well as the historical context surrounding PMT.

1.4 Key Concepts & Context

In order to understand the political significance of the approaches of the DPAs to PMT, further clarifications are needed regarding what PMT actually involves, as well as the process that PMT practices entail. PMT, in combination with Big Data mining and Segmented Audience Profiling, may be new/unexplored phenomena to many readers. Key concepts and context are therefore introduced below.

The Strategic Triad

Bruce I. Newman uses the term *strategic triad* to highlight the importance of **1) Big Data**, **2) social media**, and **3) Micro-Targeting** in contemporary digital political campaigning (2016:784). Figure 1 below is inspired by his model, presented as a three-step process. Firstly, political campaigners need to mine Big Data (or gain access to it through others, e.g., Facebook, Google, data brokers such as Experian, Acxiom etc.⁵). Secondly, data need to be profiled into different digital focus groups, or “target audiences”, as it is referred to among digital marketing strategists⁶ (using digital marketing tools such as the Facebook Ads Manager, Google AdWords, or similar). Thirdly, PMT comes into play for targeting these segmented audiences with messages that consist of relevant content for the respective group.

⁴ An assertion supported by previous research (Dobber et al. 2017:6).

⁵ Stated to be data brokers by the Vermont Office of the Attorney General (Act 171 of 2018): <https://www.insideprivacy.com/data-privacy/vermont-publishes-new-guidance-on-law-regulating-data-brokers/> (Retrieved 2019-05-06)

⁶ For additional reading: <https://www.thebalancesmb.com/what-is-a-target-audience-2295567> (Retrieved: 2019-02-08)

The reader needs to understand the PMT dependency on the other two practices in order to avoid confusion later on, as examples of PMT usage to mobilize voters on *a logic of plurality* are presented throughout parts of the analysis below. The reader might ask where the *micro* is to be found in such ways of using Political *Micro*-Targeting. How could this be referred to as PMT, when millions of voters are targeted with the same messages, for the purpose of unifying voters into political communities/movements? By clarifying that the *micro* starts early on in the process, before the voters in question are targeted, it will hopefully be easier to understand the answer to that question. Through the process of Big Data mining and Segmented Audience Profiling, the data of *single individuals* are harvested, and *single individuals* are sorted into different “audiences”.

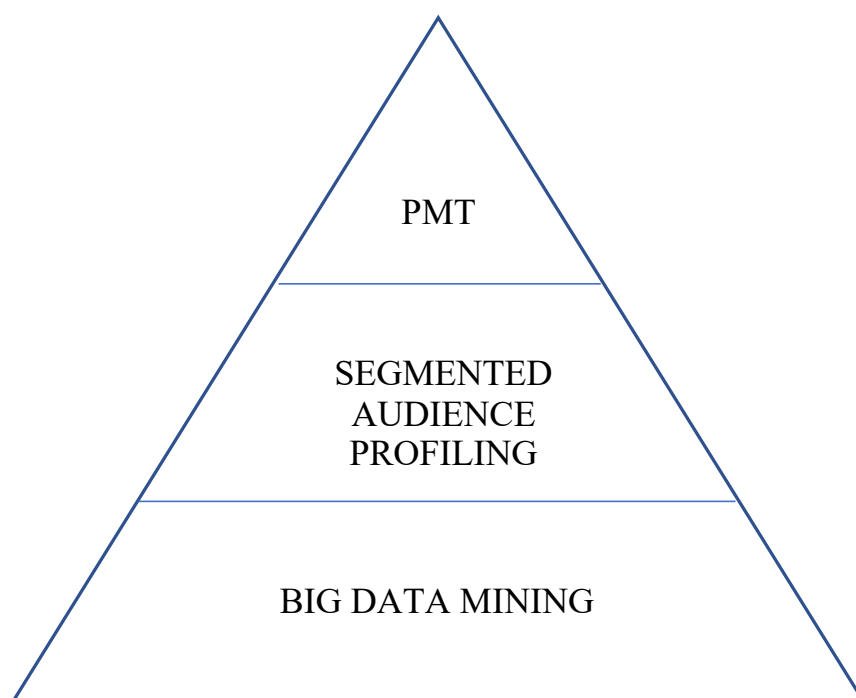


Figure 1: The Pyramid of Digital Political Communication Strategy

Accordingly, when studying PMT, it is crucial to take the inevitable foregoing processes of Segmented Audience Profiling and Big Data mining into account:

Big Data Mining put in Context

The process of Big Data mining constitutes the main basis of the strategic triad. In order to engage in the other two practices, Segmented Audience Profiling and PMT, Big Data must be collected and stored (Acxiom 2016).

The price tag of demographic personal data may be considered low at first sight (i.e., data on family, age, locality, and sex cost only 0.0007 dollars per individual⁷), but when the data get *big*, and concern people who are going through stages in life where changes in habits are inevitable, appreciated, or both (individuals who have become parents, undergone serious diseases, divorces, etc.), the value of the data increases dramatically.

An example where personal data became big and very valuable due to efficient Big Data mining concerns the company Emma's Diary, an internet "resource for mums-to-be and new parents".⁸ One of the ICO's investigations concerns the large amount of data that the Labour Party bought from the data broker Experian in 2017, data belonging to approximately one million UK citizens, which they in turn had bought from Emma's Diary. In short, Labour collected personal data for one million new parents, in order to send out targeted messages to voters with small children (BBC 2018, Business Insider 2018). The ICO decided to fine Emma's Diary GBP 140,000 for this data breach (ICO 2018d:11).

Segmented Audience Profiling

One of the most (in)famous examples of Segmented Audience Profiling is the psychographic segmentation that Cambridge Analytica initiated between 2014 and 2016, described below in Figure 2. Having the company's segmentation of voters into different social and psychological categories in mind, it is reasonable to doubt that accurate distinctions are always made between privacy violations and "marketing profiling", based on anonymized profiles provided, e.g. by Facebook. Hence, journalists have recently asked what the meaning of privacy is, if companies and data brokers are able to trace almost everything about the personal life of an individual, except the ability to link all those data together with the name of the individual in question (Wired 2014).

Political Micro-Targeting (PMT)

PMT has been an important ingredient in political campaigning for almost two decades, at least in the US (Bennett 2015:374). However, it was barely known to the wider public before the Cambridge Analytica disclosure, highlighted by whistleblower Christopher Wylie in March 2018 (Hazenberg et al. 2018:13). As explained above, PMT is used to direct "relevant"

⁷ For additional reading:

https://techcrunch.com/2015/10/13/whatsthevalueofyourdata/?guccounter=1&guce_referrer_us=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_cs=8wWAOUpDYB0sfekh3XUS9Q (Retrieved: 2019-03-13)

⁸ For additional reading: <https://www.facebook.com/TheEmmasDiary/> (Retrieved: 2019-03-13)

information to specific groups and/or individuals.⁹ Below, an example of where PMT gave rise to considerable controversy in Canada is outlined:

“In 2011, about 10,000 people signed a petition addressed to Jason Kenney and his ministry, Citizenship and Immigration, demanding that a young Nicaraguan gay artist who was facing deportation, be allowed to stay in Canada. Kenney later sent out an e-mail message to those who had signed the petition, extolling what the government of Canada has been doing to promote “gay and lesbian refugee protection” and startling many in the gay community that a federal minister had their contact information at his disposal.”
(Bennett 2013).

At this point, it ought to be clarified that PMT does not necessarily need to be an unlawful practice. For example, Facebook advertising is still considered to be a legitimate way of using PMT. The

GDPR suggests that individuals provide their consent by “ticking a box” while giving their email addresses to political parties when registering membership¹⁰ or visiting a party website that has inserted Facebook pixels¹¹, as long as the purpose of processing these individuals’ personal data is explicitly reviewed and stated to them (GDPR 2016:6). However, scholars have recently stressed that political parties/campaigners use *Facebook Lookalike Audiences* tools *without the individuals’ consent* in order to increase the number of reachable potential voters (Chester & Montgomery 2017:5). Yet, in accordance with GDPR (2016:5), harvesting *anonymized* personal data does not necessarily mean violating privacy. Hence, PMT used

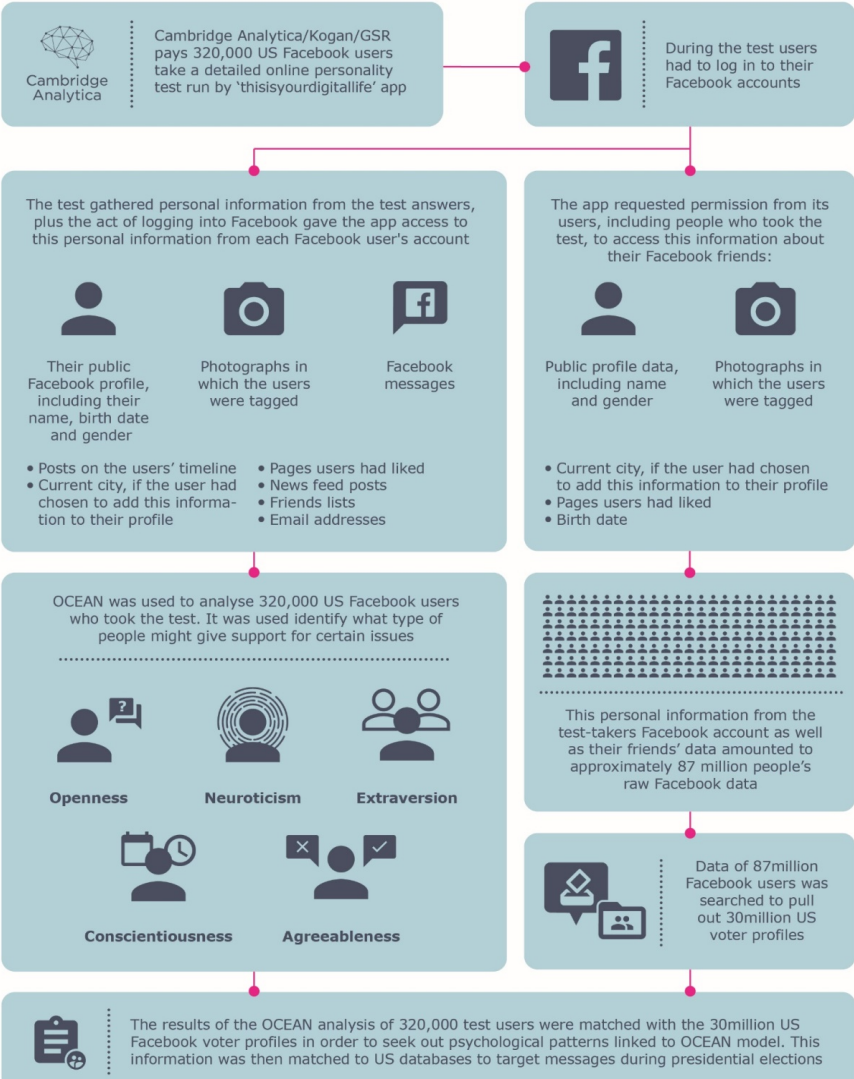


Figure 2: Data Harvesting of the Facebook Data (ICO 2018c:17)

⁹ Single individuals have been proven able to track by using Segmented Audience Profiling and PMT (Hazenberg et al. 2018:21)
¹⁰ Addresses which later on could be stored and brought into Custom Audiences using Facebook Ads Manager (Kevan 2016, Chester & Montgomery 2017:5).
¹¹ Additional reading on Facebook pixels: Kevan (2016:37)

through the aforementioned Lookalike modelling could also be seen as lawful, provided that personal Facebook data have been successfully anonymized, which is currently debated, as seen above (Wired 2014).

During the nearly two decades of PMT occurrence, research into PMT has grown exponentially. A literature review on previous PMT research is presented in the following, where it is shown that the research field consists of an ensemble of scholars who have different perceptions on PMT with regard to its communicative effectiveness, effect on voter turnout, persuasion impact and its implications for contemporary democracy.

2. Literature Review

According to Randolph (2009), the aim of many literature reviews is to explicate lines of arguments within a field, which also summarizes the aim of this literature review fairly accurately (2009:3). A selection process is therefore presented below, where a research bias has been revealed since some arguments have had to be excluded. Such research bias is commonly acknowledged in a qualitative research tradition (2009:4). One might assume that the selection process would not be all that time-consuming since PMT is a somewhat new phenomenon; however, as mentioned above, the scientific contributions on PMT have increased exponentially since its incipient stage.

2.1 The Selection Process

Even if PMT has been used in the US since George Bush in 2004 (Bennett 2015:374), articles and books on PMT that were published before 2012 have been excluded, since the use of contemporary PMT is quite different from the way in which it was used only a decade ago, thanks to the constant progress as a result of the technological development (ICO 2018b:19).

As explained above, the research aim of this thesis concerns the political significance of the ICO's data protection approach towards PMT. Relevant research touches upon: **1)** how DPAs—as well as political campaigners conditioned by them—relate to PMT, **2)** how PMT drives an ongoing *individualization of politics*, **3)** how PMT creates the conditions for persuasive messages to evolve, which is alleged to threaten a healthy public sphere, **4)** how PMT could reach potentially new voters, who previously have been excluded from the political (public) debate, and **5)** how the PMT persuasion impact has been overplayed/exaggerated by academic scholars as well as politicians/political campaigners, and

how current concerns on PMT should rather be understood as concerns about (contemporary) democracy as such.

As a consequence, some alternative scientific aspects on PMT have been down-prioritized; for example, **1)** how campaign tools used today could pose a threat to national security, due to the occurrence of surreptitious digital ads with political content, which create the conditions for foreign actors to disinform voters without the awareness of the public (Jamieson 2018, Hazenberg et al. 2018:42-45), and **2)** how political advertising is not judged by the same standards as business and commercial advertising (Bodó et al. 2017:7-8).

2.2 Previous Literature on Political Micro-Targeting (PMT)

DPAs, Political Campaigners & Their Relation to PMT

Wring & Ward, Roper and Anstead assert that an Americanized campaign strategy logic could be discerned during the 2015 UK general election (Wring & Ward 2015:234, Roper 2016:7, Anstead 2017:15-16). According to Anstead, this resulted in political campaigners reaching out to individuals rather than voters, especially among the Conservatives (ibid.). Both Wring & Ward and Roper explain in detail how PMT turned out to be a game changer in 2015 UK political campaigning, mainly due to innovative campaigning of digital strategists affiliated with the UK Conservative party (Roper 2016:2 & 10). Together with Bennett (2015; 2016), these findings claim that the UK political campaigns of 2015 were characterized by features of persuasion (Roper 2016), occasionally of manipulative character (Wring & Ward 2015:234).

Bennett's research touches on DPA approaches to PMT, where primarily the approach of the ICO has been evaluated (Bennett 2016). Bennett has shared his concerns on how the political campaigners of the largest UK parties were storing data back in 2015, and, moreover, how the ICO chose not to take appropriate measures at the time (2016:268). He argues that European DPAs in general face major challenges, since no democratic society will be completely immune to the digital tools that are used today in American elections, despite more robust data protection legislation in the EU (2016:274).

Furthermore, the scientific contribution of Dobber et al. is relevant to the first part of the analysis (section 5.1), as it touches upon the uncertainty of political parties/campaigners on how to behave in election campaigns, due to lack of party expertise as well as legal guidelines from the relevant authorities (2017:6). Their research shows how several European political parties/campaigners have taken an approach of "over-compliance", thereby safeguarding their

reputation by avoiding potential PMT irregularities (ibid.).¹² Research on the 2015 UK general election has shown how these campaigners/parties felt disadvantaged, since other political actors instead chose an approach of “under-compliance” without facing indictments from DPAs or other competent relevant authorities (ibid.).

The Individualization of Politics

Both Gorton (2016) and Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. (2018) have contributed with research on how PMT is used to attract voters in similar ways as business advertising attracts individual customers. Gorton is concerned about how the use of behavioral science by political campaigns leads to manipulation of the public opinion, together with an individualization and isolation of citizens within today’s liberal societies (Gorton 2016:63). Additionally, by using PMT practices, political campaigners can portray their party as a different “one-issue party” to different voters (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. 2018:87-89). The scientific contribution of Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. reflects upon how such profiling affects democracy. Individuals might think that one issue, presented to them by PMT messages, is of primary importance to the party in question, whereas the truth could in fact be the opposite (ibid.).

Echo Chambers, Persuasiveness & the Distortion of a Healthy Public Sphere

Some scholars have investigated the correlation between PMT and the emergence of “echo chambers” and segmented “filter bubbles”, characterized by fake news and disinformation, and suggest that PMT could threaten a healthy public sphere (Gibson 2015:186), resulting in an escalating polarization of society (Hazenberg et al. 2018:19-35).

The ICO itself has published a large number of reports on their concerns regarding PMT (2018b; 2018c; 2018d), together with articles published in collaboration with social scientists (Bartlett et al. 2018). Its main focus has been steered towards how PMT threatens the privacy of the British citizen. However, in spite of the ICO claiming that its purpose is not to evaluate the persuasion impact of PMT messages, some of its publications include, somewhat inconsistently, concerns about the degree of persuasiveness embedded within PMT (2018b:18-26). This is interesting, since the ICO has acknowledged that contemporary research queries the perceived coherence between PMT and a persuasion impact (2018b:19).

PMT, False Expectations & Perceptions on Voter Response

Both Hersh (2015; 2018) and Kreiss (2017) share a different understanding than the previously cited research on what kind of problem that is embedded in PMT usage. Hersh is

¹² Although, Dobber et al. refers to PMT as Political *Behavioral*-Targeting, which should be understood as the same thing.

worried about an emerging arrogance of the elite in their perception of an easily manipulated population. His overall conclusion is that PMT does not work the way strategists think it will (Hersh 2015:584), an argument that is shared by Kreiss, who also asserts that the PMT persuasion impact is overrated (2017:2). A more obvious problem refers instead to the *perceptions about their voters* of politicians/political campaigners, potentially increasing the distance between political institutions and the population (ibid., Hersh 2015:573, Hersh & Schaffner 2013:522-523).

These arguments are implicitly put forward by Hersh quoting a Democratic political strategist from a southern US state: “You’ve got to approach the black vote surgically” (Hersh 2015:370). If this “surgery” turns out to be operated in a bad way, people might start to feel overlooked, which affects the credibility of the political message in question (Hersh & Schaffner 2013:523).¹³ Hersh (together with Schaffner) suggests that targeted messages, regardless of whether they are correctly targeted or “mistargeted”, lead to increased distrust in political institutions (ibid.). Inspired by Hersh’s arguments to some degree, Kreiss concludes that a similar chasm—between academics and the voters they study—derives from a misleading perception in most democracies of today; that citizens are *rational* rather than *political* in their nature (Kreiss 2017:2-3).

2.3 A Pathway to the Political Theory of Ernesto Laclau

Conventional reading—based on already existing research¹⁴—would suggest that the political significance of the ICO’s shift in its approach towards PMT regards either **1)** the ICO combatting PMT in order to prevent an ongoing individualization of politics, where a political logic of plurality has turned into a logic of singularity, or **2)** the ICO combatting PMT in order to prevent a development of voter persuasion through manipulative messaging during UK general elections and referendums.

As suggested above, parts of the ICO reports (2018b:18-26) indicate that the political significance in question regards the latter. However, this thesis suggests that a *third* understanding of the political significance of the ICO’s shift in approach towards PMT is needed, since other research contributions have shown that **1)** elections *also before* the 2016 UK referendum on EU membership contained manipulative features in order to persuade voters (Bennett 2015;2016, Anstead 2017, Wring & Ward 2015, Roper 2016), and **2)** the

¹³ The Canadian PMT scenario mentioned by Bennett (section 1.4) illustrates this process in a seemingly accurate way.

¹⁴ Having Gorton (2016) & Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. (2018) specifically in mind, together with publications of the ICO with collaborating researchers (Bartlett et al. 2018).

persuasion impact of PMT tools is arguably not as successful as claimed (Hersh 2015, Kreiss 2017), a scientific finding furthermore acknowledged by the ICO in question (2018b:19). Consequently, this thesis seeks to develop a *new* understanding of the political significance of the ICO shift in its approach towards PMT.

Throughout the analysis, the previous research on PMT as well as the collected empirical data have been merged with the chosen theoretical framework (Laclau [2005]). By doing so, it becomes possible to suggest that the political significance of the ICO's shift in approach towards PMT regards its potential to turn the formerly separated/individualized interests of voters into community-based collective demands. Consequently, PMT has made it possible for political articulation to (re)emerge, creating opportunities for political communities to challenge status quo—in this case, the hegemony of the British (neo)liberal societal order.

3. Theoretical Framework

Ernesto Laclau's political theory is used as the theoretical framework of this thesis, in order to increase an alternative understanding of the political significance of the ICO's shift in its data protection approach towards PMT. A comprehensive introduction to Laclauian terminology is needed, as Laclau's concepts are frequently used as analytical categories throughout the analysis, applied to contemporary events in the UK.

3.1 Ernesto Laclau

The title of Laclau's book, *On populist reason* (2005), may give rise to misinterpretation. His purpose is not solely to understand left-wing/right-wing anti-establishment movements, but instead to illustrate a *political logic* behind the phenomenon that people often refer to when using the term *populism* (2005:117). Here, it should be stated that Laclau has a different understanding of the notion of populism itself, concluding that: "There is no political intervention that is not populist to some extent" (2005:154). Hence, according to Laclau, populism and political articulation are the same thing. However, in order not to cause possible misunderstanding, the (so far somewhat arbitrarily used) term "populism" will be avoided throughout this thesis.

3.1.1 Laclauian Institutional Totality & Equivalential Chains

Laclau has managed to put together a comprehensive toolkit in order to illustrate two different stages inherent in societal orders: **1)** an era based on governance made up of mere administration; i.e., what Laclau refers to as an *institutional totality* (2005:77), and **2)** an era

emerging as a result of successful political articulation, where the former totality has ceased to exist and been replaced by different antagonistic camps; i.e., *equivalential chains* (2005:140). According to Laclau, during the first era, the institutional totality manages to mute *the political*¹⁵ by dealing with demands of its population on an individual basis, as simple *individual requests*. However, Laclauian theory also tells us that this era of *social homogeneity*, characterized by an *administrative/apolitical field of discursivity*, is destined to be replaced sooner or later by an era of *social heterogeneity*, characterized by a *political order of discourse*, where social/political forces suture onto these equivalential chains, described in detail below (section 3.1.2).¹⁶

According to Laclau, an event where an apolitical administrative apparatus is met by political mobilization is predestined to take place, regardless of the institutional totality's administrative quality of governance in question, due to the impossible task of this totality *to satisfy all individual requests at once*. Therefore, the era of social heterogeneity, characterized by an emerging political order of discourse, is predestined to evolve, where the institutional totality has to *reinvent itself* by forming an equivalential chain in order to defend its hegemony (2005:121).

3.1.2 The Equivalential Chain & its Empty Signifier

A considerable part of Laclau's political theory from 2005 concerns the *equivalential chain* and its *empty signifier*. As shown throughout the last part of the analysis, these two Laclauian phenomena are of vital importance to developing an alternative understanding of the political significance of the ICO's shift in its data protection approach towards PMT. According to Laclau, in order for a vivid political discourse to challenge the aforementioned institutional totality, it needs to succeed at forming an equivalential chain that separates itself from that totality. It is *the space between* that institutional totality (i.e., "the power") and the equivalential chain (e.g., "the people"), a space that Laclau refers to as the *political frontier*, which creates the conditions for political articulation to emerge and be sustained (2005:130). Furthermore, in order for political articulation to become successful at mobilizing and

¹⁵ (2005:18). Laclau's notion of the political shares similarities with the *concept of the political* of Schmitt (2007). According to Schmittian logic, societies are characterized by different registers with certain *antipodes*, e.g. **1**) economy = profitable ↔ unprofitable **2**) morality = good ↔ evil and **3**) esthetics = beautiful ↔ ugly. Moreover, *the political* possesses a certain register of its own, characterized by the friend ↔ foe antipode (2007:25-27). The aim inherent in liberalism is to eradicate the political register; depicting political issues as matters of morality or economy (2007:69-80). Thus, according to Laclauian reasoning, it becomes relevant to talk about the concept of the political when a space of representation occurs where there is "a stark dichotomy" between two antipodes (Laclau 2005:18.)

¹⁶ Here, distinctions need to be drawn between the terms *field of discursivity* and *order of discourse*. Inspired by Jørgensen & Philips, this thesis refers to a field of discursivity as an unchallenged hegemonic discourse. Hence, when a contra-hegemonic discourse emerges, this field is replaced by an order of discourse, consisting of *several* different/opposing discourses within the same discursive terrain (2002:55-57).

unifying its community, the equivalential chain needs to be attached to an *empty signifier* (2005:104-105). This empty signifier has a pretty difficult task; before the specific occasion when it turned into an empty signifier, its identity was based on unfulfilled requests, due to interests being unmet/ignored by the governing institutional totality. In order to *become empty*, this signifier needs to rid itself of its own interests and invite others to take on its political project, linking all the other unfulfilled individual requests together and thereby turning them into *social demands* with the ambition to challenge the hegemony of the institutional totality (2007:39). This task is difficult, as one benefit of the institutional totality is thereby lost.

As mentioned above, the institutional totality governs during an era of social homogeneity—i.e., an administrative/apolitical field of discursivity—where *particularity* is being respected, which results in a societal order characterized by social cohesion. Throughout this stage, institutions acknowledge the differences among individuals (read: particularity) and perceive their interests as *particular* interests that should be met separately/individually (2005:107). Due to this acknowledgment, all institutions develop a homogenous language that every individual understands and (more or less) trust (ibid.). When (*not if*: this is seemingly a matter of time) this order is challenged by unfulfilled individual requests that have turned into social demands, society enters a stage characterized by the *opposite logic*: i.e., an era of social heterogeneity where a political order of discourse emerges. Throughout this stage, *equivalence* is instead being prioritized, since solid support has to be shown for one of the emerging antagonistic camps; that is, the language of institutions is not universal anymore, as they operate within a societal order where an opposing entity, the equivalential chain, gains more trust, and thereby a greater potential for hegemony. This opposing equivalential chain, unified thanks to its empty signifier, develops an alternative discursive language. From that moment on, being *particular* or *different* is therefore not desirable, but rather demonstrates affiliation with the other antagonistic camp(s).

Thus, at this stage of social heterogeneity, equivalence (read: unity) is acknowledged at the expense of difference/particularity. Either you are with *us* (the people), or you are with *them* (the antagonistic other, i.e., the power, the elite, etc.). It is necessary to take sides, simply because the logic of difference has gradually diminished. Laclau concludes that the difficult (almost impossible) task of the political project (read: the empty signifier) is to take advantage of this need for equivalence, while still (paradoxically) encourage the *particularity* of every separate link attached to the equivalential chain in question, in order to sustain it (2005:130-131). Thus, a political movement needs a common political opponent in order to be united.

However, in order to maintain its unification, solidarity between particular different needs and interests among its members needs to be achieved and maintained simultaneously.

In order for the era of social heterogeneity to evolve, the equivalential chain must take shape, as concluded above, and, furthermore, it has to be large enough. It must consist of *large numbers* of social demands *linked together*, in order to become a *political* alternative to the institutional totality (2005:79). Historical examples of successful equivalential chains show that *naming* the political articulation, that is, shaping the narrative that constitutes the chain, is vital. Laclau mentions different alternatives of equivalential chains throughout history, referred to as *the people*, the *plebs*, the *working class*, as well as *ethnic/religious minorities*, among others (2005:224-225).

Accordingly: the *empty signifier* will not be able to perform as a solid ground based on self-interests; rather, it needs to become a *horizon*, a visionary (utopian) project that others can embrace (2005:71). However, yet another challenge for the empty signifier is not to enlarge its equivalential chain *excessively*, to avoid a situation where the chain sooner or later falls apart; i.e., where the political discourse loses its meaning. Simply put, the empty signifier, acting as a politically constructed horizon, needs to maintain its important *emptiness*, in order to be perceived through a slightly dreamlike haze. At the same time, there is the added challenge of having to avoid getting *too blurred*, or the empty signifier may lose its popular attraction.

It is important to grasp the complexity behind this political process, in order to fully understand the arguments put forward in the last part of the analysis: where it is suggested that the ICO acts differently in response to PMT practices, depending on whether they are used by the former institutional totality or by a rising equivalential chain. Thanks to a combination of Laclauian theory and empirical data, it becomes reasonable to assert that the ICO did not choose to combat PMT practices until it was used to **1)** reach out to voters with a *unifying* message; i.e., an empty signifier, with the ambition to **2)** create an equivalential chain; i.e., turning former, allegedly rational, voters into a community/movement mobilized through revitalization of political articulation. Before developing these arguments further, the methodology and research design needs to be introduced to the reader.

4. Methodology & Research Design

4.1 Methodology & Design

The research method used for this thesis is presented in this section, together with a motivation for the combination of the chosen research method and the theoretical framework.

4.1.1 The Abductive Approach as Research Method

The abductive approach developed by Peirce (1934) was chosen as the research method for this thesis. According to Peirce, the abductive approach consists both of “studying facts and devising a theory to explain them” (1934:90), which rhymes well with the ambition of this thesis, since its research design consists of **1**) studying facts by conducting interviews and reading reports and articles, and **2**) devising a theory (Laclau [2005]) in order to understand the empirical data in question.

Despite the fundamental role that the theoretical prerequisites play for this thesis, it is reasonable to acknowledge the equally important role of empirical findings when using an abductive research approach (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 1994:55-56). In this regard, abduction is different from **1**) induction, where scientists explore unknown territory without drawing too many assumptions/conclusions on what they discover, and **2**) deduction, where, instead, the outcomes of a *pure*, somewhat *mechanical* hypothesis are presented (ibid., Peirce 1934:105-106). Hence, according to Peirce, “[abduction] is the only logical operation that introduces a *new idea*” (1934:105-106).¹⁷

Arguably, it would not have been possible to achieve the results of this thesis without allowing this dialectic process between applicable theory and empirical data.¹⁸ Since Laclau & Mouffe’s theory on discourse analysis and signifiers derives from the mid-80s, with Laclau’s additions in 2005, Laclau did not have the possibility to test his theory on contemporary phenomena such as PMT before he passed away in 2014. Therefore, the empirical data have to become a building block that is as important as the theory, as it has the potential to add insights to Laclauian reasoning, thereby creating further conditions for his analytical concepts to prevail throughout an era of digital political communication.

Consequently, abduction has made it possible to observe empirical findings in a new light by adopting Laclauian theory, but *moreover*, it has created the prerequisites for providing an

¹⁷ Authors’ emphasis.

¹⁸ Additional reading on the centrality of dialectics within abduction: Danermark et al. (2002:95).

understanding of new dimensions within Laclauian theory, thanks to the collected empirical data in question (Danermark et al. 2002:95).¹⁹ Thus, by using an abductive research approach, it is possible to let the empirical data and the theory talk to each other dialectically, or, as Peirce concludes: “[one becomes successful in] observing a fact and then professing to say what idea it was that gave rise to that fact” (Peirce 1934:420-421).²⁰ In that sense, even if abduction were to be acknowledged as a research method in its own right (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1994:55), it still shares similarities with **1**) induction, since no conclusion is logically given beforehand by following abductive reasoning (Danermark et al. 2002:90), *together with* **2**) deduction, since the ambition behind abductive reasoning is to start with describing a general pattern (ibid.).

4.2 Methods

At this stage, the sources of the empirical material are presented, as well as how the data were collected from a more technical point of view. Case selection is thereafter reviewed, which touches upon the reasons why certain countries, party communications teams and DPAs have become the empirical building blocks of this thesis.

4.2.1 Empirical Data

As argued by King et al. (1994), formulating, and thereby improving a theoretical framework, requires data of good quality, collected from different environments and contexts (1994:23-24). In order to meet the standards recommended by King et al., semi-structured interviews have been conducted in person, supplemented by structured/written interviews by phone and email. Text material on PMT from a wide range of sources has also been studied; for example, **1**) media articles and blog posts published by PMT pundits, **2**) Tech Trends reports and digital marketing manuals from tech giants and data brokers such as Facebook Ads Manager (Kevan 2016), Experian (2019), and Acxiom (2016), and **3**) relevant reports from the respective countries’ DPAs together with cooperative authorities, such as the DCMS Committee (2019) and The Electoral Commission (2018). The process behind generating the empirical data has been documented by the author of this thesis—as recommended by previous research—in order to prevent biased inference (King et al. 1994:23-24).

To be able to show how the shift of the ICO approach towards PMT stands out in an EU context, interviews have been conducted with **1**) communications teams representatives of the

¹⁹ Additional reading on abduction and *increased understanding*: Alvesson & Sköldberg (1994:55).

²⁰ Additional reading on Peirce’s thoughts on dialectic knowledge production, in relation to his critique of the Cartesian method: Peirce (1934:248-252)

UK Labour Party and the Swedish Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna), in order to glean their experience of how the respective DPAs have evaluated and conditioned their campaign activities in recent years, and **2)** the DPAs of the respective countries, to achieve greater clarity on specific issues/questions that appeared after the interviews were held with the party communication representatives, and **3)** several different campaign strategists, as well as sympathizers of the British Vote Leave campaign.²¹ The interviews are anonymized and categorized in numbers from #1 to #12, attached in Appendix 1 (section 8.1). Dominic Cummings, the chief strategist behind the Vote Leave campaign in question, was also contacted. Unfortunately, his reply was not informative enough to be included in this research, but his email is attached to Appendix 2 (section 8.2).

4.2.2 Interviews

Positivist researchers often prioritize interview data deriving from standardized surveys, hence, large number of respondents are appreciated when following a positivist research tradition (Silverman 2014:196). This thesis instead holds the position that in-depth interviews, in this case, have led to more fruitful results. Thus, its methodological viewpoint differs from a positivist research tradition regarding this matter, arguing that increasing the number of respondents does not necessarily increase research quality, rather, it could even have the opposite effect. This is a viewpoint furthermore supported by previous literature (ibid., King et al. 1994:4-5).

Since the in-person interviews conducted in this thesis are semi-structured, it has been important for the interviewer to raise his awareness that he also contributes to shaping the discourse while interviewing (King et al. 1994:185, Brinkmann & Kvale 2015:21). Consequently, this thesis's in-person interviews should not be seen as merely conversation. Rather, an effort of maintaining stringency has been prioritized in order for the researcher to prevent his spontaneous reactions and affirmations to distort the interview material, an effort encouraged by previous research (ibid., Silverman 2014:168).

None of the interviews conducted in this thesis were recorded, based on the conviction that the interviews would become more participatory, and thus more accurate, if the respondents could speak freely without being disturbed by a recording device. Instead, notes were taken during the interviews, and approximately one or two hours were spent on

²¹ Although, some interviews (interview #4, #6, #11 and #12) had to be excluded from this thesis due to lack of space.

improving/supplementing the notes afterwards, in order not to lose any important details from the interviews.

Despite the fruitful combination of theory and empiry when abductively collecting and analyzing data, one aim has been to separate a theory-driven pre-understanding from the data collection process, at least during the interviews. By doing so, the intention has been for the author of this thesis to facilitate a scenario where the respondents describe *their own* perceptions of relevant topics, without the researcher contributing with his own presumptions and interpretations, which could possibly distort the collected empirical data (Rapley 2001:311).

4.3 Case Selection

As mentioned above, the main focus of this thesis is on the British DPA (the ICO) in order to answer SQ1 and hence the main research question. Throughout the first part of the analysis, however, the ICO is being evaluated in relation to the Swedish DPA, in order to suggest answers for SQ2. In this regard, conducting interviews with communications team representatives has resulted in further insights on how the DPAs of the respective countries condition political parties/campaigners during elections and referendums *in practice*. Furthermore, it has arguably been more beneficial to conduct interviews with party communications team representatives rather than DPAs only, as many European DPAs have not been able to provide substantial policies regarding their approach towards PMT (Bennett 2016:262). In the following, more thorough reasoning regarding case selection is presented.

4.3.1 Using the Swedish DPA as a Point of Reference

It is interesting to compare the UK and Sweden for many reasons. Both countries are currently under the same legislative umbrella, the GDPR, although at this stage, the two DPAs have different approaches towards PMT during political campaigns. Having the Swedish DPA (Datainspektionen) as a point of reference creates opportunities to trace factors indicating that the ICO's approach towards PMT stands out in an EU context, since previous research has made it reasonable to conclude that Sweden has a similar DPA approach as other EU member states (Bennett 2016:262). If Datainspektionen was not used as a point of reference in relation to the ICO, it could have been asserted that increased DPA scrutiny has characterized the UK due to more robust legislation policies *all across the EU* after the implementation of the GDPR; assertions that may have threatened the validity of this thesis if not being met with counter-arguments.

4.3.2 Choosing the Social Democratic Party Family

Interviews have been conducted with communications team representatives of British and Swedish parties belonging to the Social Democratic party family, in order to gain information on the DPA data protection approaches of the respective countries. These parties are relevant for this topic of study, as it has been shown that both have been engaged in PMT throughout recent political campaigns (ICO 2018b, Fokus 2014, Bjereld, Demker et al. 2018:71).

Both the UK Labour party and the Swedish Social Democrats are furthermore considered to be a part of what current scholars label the “catch-all party” family, driven by an ambition to represent as many voters as possible (Grusell & Nord 2016:1) in order to “appeal to ever wider audiences” (Bennett 2013). According to Bennett, catch-all parties are to be found anywhere across the political spectrum, regardless of ideology and/or political doctrine (ibid.). It therefore becomes necessary to justify why Social Democratic parties were chosen, while other potential catch-all parties of the UK and Sweden were excluded.

4.3.3 Selection Thinning

Selecting Some Catch-all Parties Instead of Others

It might have been reasonable to interview communications team representatives of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), with the Sweden Democrat (Sverigedemokraterna) communications team as its Swedish counterpart, as both parties have been engaged in PMT and arguably could be referred to as catch-all parties, given that they consider themselves to be movements that represent a *majority of the people* and therefore strive to gain the sympathy of a much larger number of voters. This type of analysis was avoided mainly because UKIP has shown unwillingness to cooperate with the ICO (ICO 2018d:25).

Therefore, their relation to the ICO does not share enough similarities with Sverigedemokraterna’s relation to Datainspektionen.

It could also be interesting to conduct interviews with representatives of the British Conservative party’s communications team, with the communications team of the Swedish conservative party (Moderaterna) as its Swedish counterpart, as a “catch-all-ness” appears to be inherent in both of them. It is postulated here that the results would have been similar if these parties had been chosen. However, due to restrictions and limitations of this master thesis (lack of time and space), together with the fact that convenient sources on the PMT usage of both the Labour Party and Socialdemokraterna were known to the author of this

thesis beforehand, it was decided to choose catch-all parties belonging to the Social Democratic party family.

Finally, the research of Grusell & Nord and Bjereld, Demker et al. made it reasonable to exclude all the other parties in the two parliaments from the analysis, as the use of PMT by these parties share important differences from that of the catch-all parties (Grusell & Nord 2016:18, Bjereld, Demker et al. 2018:194-195).

Choosing the Swedish DPA Among Others

Finally, it could be argued that the results would have been the same if the British ICO's approach towards PMT was evaluated in relation to, for example, the approach of the Latvian DPA. The Swedish DPA was chosen mainly because the author of this thesis has considerable knowledge about the Swedish political context, which has been shown to improve the quality of the research (Kvale 2007:39).

4.4 Generalizability

The focus of this thesis is mainly the British ICO; however, the findings are also relevant to the rest of the EU, since previous research has shown that the British political context shares more similarities than differences with its EU counterparts (Anstead 2017:3),²² one reason being that all EU member states have to comply with the GDPR. Accordingly, it is reasonable to claim that the results of this thesis could be understood in relation to the DPAs' approaches towards PMT practices in EU member states in general. This assertion is supported by previous research, which argues that PMT, in general, has been approached in the same way by all EU DPAs, regardless of nationality (Bennett 2016:262).

However, arguments of other scholars—which do not speak in favor of a possible generalizability of the findings of this thesis—depict the UK as a potentially extreme case in relation to other EU member states with regard to the use of PMT (Bennett 2016:268, Gibson 2015:188), given that the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system of the US and the UK stands out in an EU context; a system which, according to these scholars, increases PMT impact. (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. 2018:89-91, Dobber et al. 2017:6).

Regardless of the above arguments, it is difficult to conclude with certainty which EU member state currently faces the most intense PMT practices during political campaigns. Scientific research has shown that more data on PMT practices, regardless of national context,

²² With the UK still being a member of the union at the time of thesis publication.

are needed: nobody knows exactly to what extent PMT practices are used where, when and by whom (Hersh 2018:6-7). For this reason, labeling some member states as *extreme cases* in an EU context may turn out to be an argument of a more speculative nature.

Even if stricter data protection regulation has been adopted throughout the EU, particularly the GDPR, PMT practices will remain a matter for future research as well. Accordingly, it should not be perceived as a research topic that is isolated in time and thus non-generalizable. Even in the UK, where the ICO, as mentioned above, has ruled out an ethical pause to prevent the use of PMT practices, research suggests that PMT will increase during the years to come (Bartlett et al. 2018:28 & 40).

Some scholars have recently argued that despite the GDPR encouraging harmonization among the EU member states (2016:2), its implementation is partly conditioned by the national context (Holtz 2018:246-247, Hazenberg et al. 2018:17-18 & 33). Thus, it could be argued that the ICO's approach towards PMT could differ from other EU member states' DPAs due to a lack of a harmonized implementation of GDPR across the EU, which would affect the generalizability of this thesis. However, such line of reasoning does not hold true, since the findings below assert that DPAs' approaches towards PMT are not conditioned by GDPR implementation at this current stage.

Finally, Jones (2018) argues that the EU will face a near-distant future characterized by GDPR legislation loopholes before legal consistency among member states is achieved. However, since this thesis suggests that GDPR implementation does not have a major impact on the ICO's shift in approach towards PMT, it is hereby suggested that the findings below are applicable to all EU member states and elsewhere as well, regardless of whether GDPR loopholes become evidential or not.

4.5 Reliability, Validity & Ethics

This thesis is a theory-driven qualitative research study. It could therefore be argued that discrepancies occur when using methodological measurements such as reliability, generalizability and validity, as these measurements are more commonly used in quantitative studies. However, the author claims that the importance of reliability, generalizability and validity also concern qualitative research designs, in accordance with the reasoning of King et al. (1994:3-7) and Brinkmann & Kvale (2015:281).

4.5.1 Questions on Reliability Regarding Normativity & Theory

Normativity & Reliability

It could be argued that the results would not be the same if the author instead aspired to exploring how PMT *reduces* the possibilities for political articulation to (re)emerge, as already argued by some of the previous research (Gorton 2016). Nevertheless, recent academic contributions on Social Science research methods emphasize the benefits of revealing initial biases instead of “[m]aintaining the façade of neutrality”, since Social Science research is “seldom, if ever, really value neutral”, following a qualitative post-positivist methodological reasoning (Berg 2009:200-202). By acknowledging the occurrence of a research bias, the researcher is able to prevent, i.a., potential distortion of collected empirical material by avoiding the inclusion of his/her own (pre)understanding, for example, when conducting interviews (Rapley 2001:311).

Theory and its Reliability & Generalizability

The research contribution of Laclau (2005) is constituted by a comprehensive and useful analytical toolkit, which has been used by previous researchers to analyze the conditions for political articulation in different democratic (as well as non-democratic) contexts all over the world.²³ Hence, Laclauian theory should be considered a generalizable theory that contains both theoretical width and depth. This combination of generalizability and qualitative precision is important, because without the theoretical framework being able to provide *precise* arguments to the reader, the theory becomes less valid (King et al. 1994:19). Furthermore, if theory cannot be used to draw more general conclusions outside the purpose of a single research project, reliability, and thus validity, decreases as well (ibid.).

It could further be argued that Laclauian terms are used as if the author behind this thesis has taken Laclau’s political theory at face value. Rather, this thesis acknowledges the critique/blind spots of Laclauian theory but prioritizes to demonstrate its utility/added value. Emphasizing the critique against Laclau would draw too much attention from the process of applying his framework to the collected empirical data on PMT (a process that may be complicated enough for the reader as it is). Anyhow, if the reader remains curious, critique on Laclauian theory has been leveled by different scholars:

Among the critics on Laclauian reasoning is Žižek, who argues that a reading of Laclau results in cynical abdication among leftist movements, since an *absolute* subversion of the

²³ de Vos (2003) and Mouffe (2005) are to be found among many examples.

hegemonic discourse becomes impossible by adopting a Laclauian mindset. Žižek moreover claims that all social antagonism, according to Laclauian reasoning, is conditioned by its surrounding discourse; i.e., liberal democratic standards. That is, the rules conducted by the status quo become the only possible rules to follow (Žižek 2000a:95). Hence, Laclau's illustration of an antagonistic force, the Laclauian equivalential chain, is not *antagonistic in its true sense* and thus not a valid instrument for evaluating political articulation (2000b:316-326).

Somewhat contrary to Žižek's reasoning, Jørgensen & Philips argue that Laclau *overestimates* the subversive potential of his equivalential chain, refraining from taking asymmetrical (economic) power relations into account when illustrating opportunities for social change (Jørgensen & Philips 2002:34-38). Jørgensen & Philips depict the Laclauian analytical concepts, for example, *discourse*, as being somewhat vague and undefinable, since, according to Laclauian reasoning, *both* the hegemonic order and antagonistic forces are characterized by this all-encompassing discourse. Hence, social change is just around the corner, realized if the antagonistic force manages to change or enlarge its discursive constitution (ibid.). Thus, Jørgensen & Philips suggest that subverting hegemonic societal orders is a more difficult task than Laclau acknowledges (2002:54-55).

Butler's critique differs from that of both Žižek and Jørgensen & Philips, as she argues that Laclauian concepts are rather *too distinct* and therefore contribute to a simplification of reality in general and representativeness in particular. According to Butler, Laclau's ambition to illustrate a distinction/division between the particularity of individual requests and the universality of social demands becomes impossible in practice. Manifesting her argument, she asks rhetorically; who has the ontological mandate to decide when articulation is based on particularity or universality? (Butler et al. 2000:30-35).

Accordingly, Laclauian theory could be understood/perceived differently depending on ideological background, academic context, etc. The author of this thesis has attempted to balance his own understanding on Laclauian theory (2005) with previous relevant readings on Laclau. By doing so, the application of Laclauian political reasoning throughout the analysis have arguably improved, since the possibility of criticizing a theory is decisive in order to improve its reliability (King et al. 1994:19).

4.5.2 Validity & Ethics

At first sight, it could feel reasonable to question the validity of this thesis to some extent, taking into account that attempts to prevent PMT irregularities have recently occurred in both France and Germany (Bennett 2016:269-272, DCMS Committee 2019:12-13).²⁴ However, **1)** the French DPA's counter-PMT endeavors are not of the same scope as the ICO and have furthermore been ongoing at low-intensity since 2012 (Bennett 2016:271). Hence, the French DPA's approach should not be seen as conditioned by the GDPR legislation, neither understood mainly as synchronized with/conditioned by the work of the ICO. **2)** Germany has mainly focused on combatting hate speech with regard to PMT during political campaigns (DCMS Committee 2019). Hence, it is hereby argued that the case of Germany shares more differences than similarities with the UK. Therefore, the French and German initiatives do not seem to affect the validity of this thesis.

Conducting interviews with only one British representative of the Labour Party communications team could be seen as a shortcoming of this thesis. Following the arguments of Lilleker et al. (2003), interviewing one communications team representative might cause problems of validity, since the interviewee may downplay or exaggerate his/her role or position within the party (2003:208). Several attempts were made to interview colleagues of the communications team representative in question; however, without success.

The interviewees have been anonymized, since the topics of this thesis are of a sensitive character, and since the intention behind writing this thesis has not been to publicly defame certain communications team representatives, legal practitioners, etc.

5. Analysis & Results

This analysis sets out to answer SQ1 and SQ2 by analyzing collected empirical data, in order to illustrate that an actual *shift* in the ICO's approach towards PMT has occurred; i.e., that PMT was being used during political campaigning also before the 2016 UK EU membership referendum but then ignored by the ICO, and that this shift stands out in an EU context. The theoretical framework (Laclau 2005) is applied throughout the last part of the analysis, illustrating a seemingly new understanding of the political significance of the ICO's shift in

²⁴ DCMS Committee: an abbreviation for the British Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, consisting of parliamentarians from the SNP, Labour and the Conservative party, with a mission similar to the one of the ICO when it comes to investigating recent PMT irregularities. Their latest report (2019) touches upon same findings and conclusions as the ICO although more explicitly announced.

its approach towards PMT; i.e., the driving force of the British (neo)liberal societal order to sustain itself.

5.1 The British DPA in Relation to the Swedish DPA

Bennett (2016) points out that DPAs in EU member states generally have one thing in common; they are not sufficiently engaged in the preventive work needed to safeguard privacy and personal data (2016:262). Since Bennett released his article on the subject, the ICO has developed a more rigorous data protection approach. In July 2018, it delivered a report with the alarming title “Democracy Disrupted?”, which paved the way for intensified scrutiny of PMT in the UK.

5.1.1 The ICO—“A Sheriff in the Wild West of the Internet”

Contrary to its European counterparts, the ICO has intensified its struggle against PMT in order to safeguard privacy and develop ethical guidelines with clear limits, which becomes obvious when using the Swedish DPA as a point of reference. In July 2018, it called for an “ethical pause”, in order for political parties/campaigners to “reflect upon their responsibilities” in relation to PMT irregularities²⁵ (ICO 2018b:3), and to urge government and legal entities to assume responsibility and take action themselves, instead of relying on the doubtful accountability of tech giants such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, etc. (2018d:5). The ICO initiatives have been greatly acclaimed by several UK parliamentarians, who encourage the ICO to act even more as a “sheriff in the Wild West of the Internet” (DCMS Committee 2019:18). In recent years, 102 additional staff members have been hired by the ICO (ICO 2016; 2017; 2018a), which resulted in 700 terabytes (52 billion pages) of analyzed political campaign-related data during the years 2016-2018 (2018d:5). Hence, a seemingly clear signal has been sent to parties/campaigners involved in political campaigning during British elections and referendums: if it turns out that a political party/campaigner is, or recently has been, engaged in activities that the ICO have deemed unlawful, they will be prosecuted.

²⁵ Moreover, the ICO has decided to engage in a series of cooperative inquiries together with the Irish and Canadian DPAs, in order to punish foreign corporations for their engagement in PMT irregularities in UK general election and referendum campaigns (since 2016). One example is Aggregate IQ, a Canadian political consultancy and technology company that collaborated with the Vote Leave campaign during the 2016 UK EU membership referendum (ICO 2018d:52).

Today, the ICO can impose very large fines for a number of reasons. According to the GDPR, a company/political party that fails to comply with the GDPR could be fined up to 20 million euros, or four per cent of its global annual turnover (Datainspektionen 2019a).

When discussing the scope of such financial sanctions with the Labour communications team representative, it was stated that “the money is irrelevant, the reputation of the party is at stake” (interview #3). An Emma’s Diary data breach, which was mentioned above (section 1.4), would cause massive damage to the party’s reputation due to today’s situation, where the population of the UK has become “paranoid about their personal data” (ibid.). According to interviewee #3, this paranoia should be seen in relation to today’s public awareness of the seriousness behind violating data privacy. “It all has changed [...] before, everything was a free-for-all battlefield with ad hoc policies, kind of. [And nowadays] our hands are really tied” (ibid.).

Between 2017-2018, the ICO identified 172 organizations which they considered relevant to investigate regarding misuse of PMT during political campaigns (2018d:13). These numbers should be put in relation to Sweden, where Datainspektionen has decided not to investigate any political actors since 2014 (interview #9). Moreover, if any of these organizations choose not to collaborate with the ICO or comply with its rules, the ICO has shown that it is prepared to launch search warrants on headquarters, which, among other things, has resulted in, the confiscation of servers in order to collect evidence regarding unlawful PMT activities (ICO 2018c:8). Several media disclosures, where confidential emails have been made public, have primarily been based on ICO confiscations (Open Democracy UK 2018a; 2018b). In Sweden, investigative journalists are instead seemingly left in the dark.²⁶

Among these 172 organizations, UKIP was the only political party that decided not to collaborate/comply with the ICO rules. The ICO raids on the Cambridge Analytica premises, which resulted in evidence on collaboration between the company and the UKIP-affiliated political campaign financier Arron Banks, appear to have inflated the accusations of the ICO being a politicized institution working in favor of a “*deep state*” (The Register 2017). In the ICO’s defense, its inquiries also concern **1)** unlawful activities during the Remain campaigns, as well as **2)** PMT irregularities among *ten* other political parties since 2016 (ICO 2018d:10-

²⁶ In 2018, Swedish investigative journalists tried to find out if political campaigners from Sverigedemokraterna (SD) were involved in unlawful activities on social media, i.e., these journalists suspected that SD campaigners were spreading polarizing messages on Facebook forums maneuvered by themselves, without explicitly telling the public that SD representatives were the ones publishing the info in the first place. These investigations have not resulted in legal actions, due to lack of evidence. For further reading (in Swedish): <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/politik/sa-tog-hogerpopulistiska-sidor-over-valrorelsen-pa-facebook-med-hjalp-av-sd/> (Retrieved: 2019-03-17)

11). More about these inquiries below but, first, the ICO approach towards PMT will be compared with the approach of the Swedish DPA (Datainspektionen).

5.1.2 The Swedish DPA & the Gut Feeling

Compared with the efforts made by the ICO, Datainspektionen has been flagrantly passive when it comes to scrutinizing the misuse of PMT in Swedish political campaigns. The claim that DPAs “have been reluctant to provide guidance to parties and candidates, and even less to regulate their activities,” accurately illustrates today’s reality in Sweden (Bennett 2016:275).

As concluded above, Datainspektionen has not investigated political misuse of data since 2014 (interview #9). At that time, they only leveled criticism against how the Swedish Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna) stored data and did not focus on potential Segmented Audience Profiling or PMT.²⁷ In contrast to recent efforts made by the British ICO, Datainspektionen has apparently failed to provide clear enough guidelines to political parties/campaigners regarding how to engage in sound digital campaign activities. Results from the interviews with Socialdemokraterna and Datainspektionen (interview #1.1; #1.2, interview #2), suggest that Swedish data protection scrutiny has remained more or less unchanged despite the implementation of the GDPR in 2018. The interviews conducted with communications team representatives of Socialdemokraterna indicated that they did not consider the passivity of Datainspektionen a significant problem. Instead, their concerns regarded the lack of accountability by tech giants such as Facebook, without referring to Datainspektionen as an important watchdog to prevent PMT irregularities from occurring on the digital platforms of such tech giants (interview #1.2, interview #5).

The findings of this thesis suggest that the role of the Swedish DPA is more indistinct than its British counterpart. A communications team representative of Socialdemokraterna concluded that their team staff members did an excellent job, since they always “followed their gut feeling”, which is extremely important when campaigning digitally:

“I remember [a colleague] being really concerned at one point in the election campaign, saying that it did not feel right to upload party members’ email addresses on Facebook. [His/her] gut feeling said no. And I remember saying ‘I am so happy that you rely on that ethical compass of yours, I do not think that we should do it either!’ Strategy partners and consultants that we have been working with since then have said: ‘Why don’t you do that,

²⁷ In an email conversation with a lawyer at Datainspektionen, even older investigations into political campaigns were referred to, arguing that their behavior had not changed dramatically since Datainspektionen’s last investigation in 2012 (interview #9). The 2012 report referred to only concerns Socialdemokraterna; however, reports mentioning other parties in Parliament were released during the same period. None of them refer to PMT. For further reading: Datainspektionen (2012).

you are missing a great opportunity to reach out to a potential audience'. But yeah, we don't really feel comfortable doing that." (interview #1.1).

Against the background of the intensified PMT scrutiny of the ICO, this comment by interviewee #1 is interesting, since—in an ideal scenario—political campaigners should not have to rely on their gut feeling when engaging in PMT during elections and referendums. The communication people of the largest party in the country seem to be left without ethical guidelines; left with only the option to follow their gut feeling. What about scenarios where political actors with more authoritarian aspirations manipulate personal data and engage in PMT based on a completely *different gut feeling*? After a brief discussion on the ICO's approach to PMT, interviewee #1 concluded that:

"I would greatly appreciate more initiatives and clearer incentives from Datainspektionen. Right now, we want to take full responsibility and prove ourselves to be a role model for how digital campaigning should be done.

But not every Swedish party is interested in being such a role model." (interview #1.1).²⁸

When the British Labour Party communications team representative was informed about the Swedish context, where party communications teams rely on their gut feeling when campaigning, the interviewee started giggling. "To us, gut feeling is irrelevant, we have such strict rules to follow these days, and if we do not comply with those rules, our party would face big consequences" (interview #3). "We have had GDPR consultants hired at our offices in order to inform us about these regulations, making the rules easy to understand and comprehend" (ibid.).²⁹

The findings presented above suggest that the British DPA's data protection approach towards PMT differs from the Swedish DPA's approach. The ICO turns out to be very rigorous, whereas the actions of Datainspektionen are more equivocal. In the following, the aim of this thesis is to confirm that a *shift* in the ICO approach to PMT has occurred. This is necessary, since once this has been confirmed, it is reasonable to assert that the ICO has prioritized combatting some PMT practices (from 2016 and onwards) while disregarding others (e.g., during the 2015 UK general election).

²⁸ This answer should be seen in relation to Dobber et al.'s research (2017) mentioned in the literature review (section 2.2).

²⁹ The fact that the Privacy Policy section of the Labour Party's website consists of more than 20 pages of information, while the equivalent section of Socialdemokraterna's website (Integritetspolicy) consists of 5 pages, is another example of the willingness to inform about the fight against potential privacy violations that characterizes the Labour Party nowadays (Labour 2019a; 2019b, Socialdemokraterna 2018a).

5.2 The ICO Course Alteration

According to the British Labour Party communications team representative, “everything changed after Brexit” (interview #3), which seems to be an accurate observation and not a particularly controversial one. When discussing the UK history of data protection with Socialdemokraterna’s communications team, the representatives stated that the “Brexit outcome”, together with Donald Trump’s election victory in the US, led to an increased awareness of data protection issues across Europe (interview #5).

However, research by Bennett (2013; 2015; 2016) and Anstead (2017) clearly suggests that 2016 is not to be considered the year when PMT all of a sudden began to flourish across the UK. Bennett has, in fact, shown that the British Conservatives as well as Labour have been mining Big Data on its population, stored through *decades* of canvassing. Such voter data were being stored digitally *more than ten years ago* (2016:268). Moreover, these researchers suggest that UK elections *even before 2016* contained manipulative features, such as attempts at persuasion (Bennett 2016:271, Anstead 2017).

In addition, the research contribution of Wring & Ward (2015) and Roper (2016) is highly relevant on this matter. Roper argues that the 2015 UK general election was characterized by the Conservatives using PMT in order to persuade British citizens to vote Conservative, avoiding the “political chaos” caused by a coalition (minority) government consisting of Labour and the Scottish National Party (SNP) (2016:52). After the Conservative victory, political campaigners told Roper that the threat of a Labour-SNP coalition was “overplayed” (2016:47). In fact, such a coalition was never discussed among Labour and SNP MPs; it was solely a strategic move by the Conservatives, carried out by (micro)targeting Liberal Democrat voters in South West England in order to persuade them through scaremongering about the influence of the SNP on British politics and *Scottish nationalism* in UK politics (Wring & Ward 2015: 234 & 238-240).

As mentioned above, the ICO released its report “Democracy Disrupted?” in July 2018, which paved the way for its shift in approach towards PMT irregularities. What is significant is that *zero* ICO inquiries discussed the PMT persuasion efforts during the 2015 UK general election campaign reviewed above. Instead, readers of recent ICO reports are left with the impression that PMT practices emerged out of nowhere during the 2016 referendum campaigns. However, a report from 2014 shows that the ICO was fully aware of the risks of potential PMT irregularities at the time. In that 2014 report in question, the ICO warned

political parties/campaigners that PMT irregularities could lead to criminal indictments and that the ICO could “issue fines of up to GBP 500,000” for each individual non-compliance (ICO 2014:21). Still, the ICO decided not to investigate possible PMT irregularities at that time, a decision questioned by Bennett (2016:268). Moreover, another aspect, of which the ICO was also aware, was the spreading of arguments among scholars that claimed that the persuasion impact of PMT is non-existent, or at least overrated (Kreiss 2017:2). This fact makes the ICO’s decision even more puzzling.

In summary: why did the ICO suggest that British democracy was now under threat of disruption, keeping in mind that **1)** persuasive messages had been disseminated also before the 2016 UK EU membership referendum, and **2)** the ICO itself acknowledged that the persuasion impact of PMT is currently highly contested by influential PMT researchers? (Hersh 2015; 2018, Kreiss 2017).

How does this make any sense?

By using the Swedish DPA as a point of reference, it has been suggested in this thesis that the ICO’s data protection approach stands out in an EU context. Moreover, it has been ascertained that a *shift* in the ICO approach towards PMT has occurred. The shift regards the outcome of the 2016 UK EU membership referendum, known as *the Brexit outcome*.

The following analysis explores possible answers to the main research question behind this thesis, thereby *developing an alternative understanding* on the political significance of the ICO’s shift in its approach towards PMT. To achieve this, Laclauian theory; i.e., the theoretical framework of this thesis, is applied.

5.3 Ernesto Laclau & the Search for the Political Significance

“That [the passivity of the Swedish DPA] makes me think that every country seems to need its own Brexit in order to understand what is at stake here.” (interview #3).

This statement of the British Labour communications team representative turns out to be important for this analysis, keeping in mind the aforementioned findings that elections *before* the 2016 UK EU membership referendum were also characterized by PMT irregularities (Bennett 2013; 2015; 2016, Anstead 2017, Wring & Ward 2015, Roper 2016). Thus, it is crucial to understand fully what interviewee #3 is associating to when referring to the “*Brexit outcome*”. Does the interviewee share the concerns indicated in the ICO reports, arguing that

the Brexit outcome proves that persuasive/manipulative PMT messages have disrupted British democracy? Such arguments have proven not to be waterproof, since **1)** previous research by Bennett, Anstead, Wring & Ward and Roper conclude that persuasive and manipulative messages were used in British elections also before 2016, and **2)** Hersh (2015; 2018) and Kreiss (2017) have concluded that the persuasion impact of PMT is highly contested, a scientific argument also acknowledged by the ICO itself (ICO 2018b:19).

Does interviewee #3 instead relate to the Brexit outcome as a scenario where the individualization of politics started to escalate? Most likely not, since some of the EU membership referendum campaigns, with the official Brexit campaign (Vote Leave) being one of the most important and relevant examples, avoided using individualized messages tailored to particular voters (Cummings 2017a). Rather, everyone who was considered to belong (or potentially belong) to the Vote Leave voter base was targeted with the *same messages*, with content claiming that the NHS was drained of resources due to the UK's EU membership fee, and how people should vote leave in order to "take back control" (ibid.).

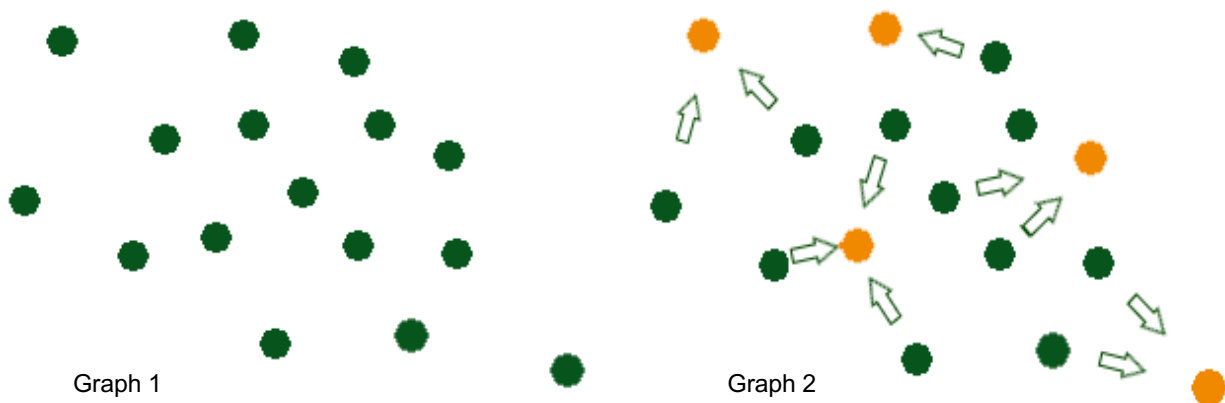
This being said, what does interviewee #3 refer to when mentioning the Brexit outcome? What does it symbolize? Does interviewee #3 mean that it is correct to use PMT, as long as the *right people* use it? During the same interview, it was stated that, "[PMT] tools can be really effective. Still, we really need these rules [laid down by the ICO], because some people really don't know how to use them; they cross the line" (interview #3). Here, something of significant importance is being touched upon: the ICO has confirmed that the UKIP and Vote Leave are not the only political actors who have "cross[ed] the line"; all other political parties/campaigners under investigation (as well as the Remain campaign) have been engaged in unlawful PMT in one way or another (ICO 2018d:10-11).

Thus, the interviews conducted during this research process, together with the timing of the publication of reports and investigations of the ICO, implicitly (or even explicitly) indicate that there are some people who "may" engage in PMT, while others may not. Hence, the reader is left with the claim that some manipulative/persuasive tendencies in elections do not disrupt democracy, or put it at stake, while others do. Should today's institutional democracies be understood as systems where the legitimacy of election outcomes differs, depending on *who* the manipulative political actor is? This is arguably a conclusion that is far from satisfying. However, in the light of Laclauian political theory, such a statement makes sense, as will be shown in the following.

5.3.1 Institutional Totality

Using Laclauian theory in general, and Laclau's analytical concepts in particular, makes it possible to illustrate two different ways of using PMT: to **1) maintain the institutional totality**, or **2) create equivalential chains**, attached to an *empty signifier*. Thus, by contemplating the so far reviewed empirical data of this thesis on the basis of Laclauian theory (2005), seemingly *new* answers are proposed to why the manipulative tendencies of some elections are perceived to disrupt democracy more than others.

In order to make this part of the analysis clearer to the readers, two different ways of using PMT are presented in four graphs, distinguished by following Laclauian political reasoning. These graphs are followed by discussions on how PMT is used by **1) representatives of the institutional totality**, in order to satisfy unfulfilled *individual requests* (Graph 1 & Graph 2), and **2) an equivalential chain**, attached to an *empty signifier*, in order to turn the unfulfilled individual requests into *social demands*, challenging the institutional totality in question (Graph 3 & Graph 4).



Above, a society is depicted with the *institutional totality* as its current status quo (Graph 1 & Graph 2). According to Laclau, Graph 1 shows a scenario where all *individual requests* of its inhabitants are fulfilled. This is an unsustainable utopian construct, simply because a society cannot satisfy the needs of everyone at the same time, regardless of whether that society is **1) a welfare state** or **2) a neoliberal night-watchman state** (2005:78).³⁰ From here on, it is suggested that the case of the British neoliberal societal order³¹ before the 2016 UK EU membership referendum—an order that had undergone almost four decades of hegemonic

³⁰ de Vos (2003) points out that according to Laclauian political reasoning, empowerment of the working class, achieved by beneficial social reforms and letting the working class become *middle class*, leads to unexpected/unsolicited outcomes. This will give rise to new demands in society, making the (in de Vos's case, socialist-oriented) institutional totality prioritize new interests (i.e., the demands of the new dominant middle class) at the expense of other interests (e.g., the poor, the ones left behind, unable climb the ladder of class hierarchies) (2003:170).

³¹ The British societal order is hereinafter referred to as neoliberal since, following a Laclauian reasoning, a neoliberal logic reigns when private entrepreneurship and management is expected to govern the public realm and society at large (2005:79).

constancy since Margaret Thatcher came into power in 1979³²—comes close to what Laclau refers to as an institutional totality.

Following Laclauian logic, politicians and institutions representing the British neoliberal societal order during this historical period of hegemony managed to satisfy, or at least isolate, the aforementioned unfulfilled individual requests; i.e., individuals with unsatisfied interests, before they began showing solidarity with each other and become receptive to mobilization through political articulation. The green arrows in Graph 2 symbolize the ambition of the representatives of (neo)liberal societal orders all across the EU to formulate specific/relevant messages for specific individuals, a strategy somewhat encouraged by Bjereld, Demker et al. (2018:194) (section 1.1). Due to the loss of direct contacts with voters (as a result of falling numbers of party members), these political actors have used consultancy firms for decades³³, which have advised them in recent years to use PMT to persuade voters.³⁴

Hence, representatives of the British institutional democracy have directed different/hidden campaign promises to different voter segments. Following the reasoning of Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. (2018) & Gorton (2016), such strategies lead to an individualization of politics, where voters are perceived more as individual targets/customers. Despite the alleged fragmentation of the important *social base* of society, which is arguably a result of such PMT usage (Gorton 2016:70), this is apparently not the dangerous PMT usage that the ICO refers to when depicting a future threatened by a disrupted democracy.

On the contrary, the empirical material of this thesis suggests that politicians and institutions representing (neo)liberal societal orders perceive the PMT practices *portrayed above*—digital tools to reach out to individuals with “relevant material” (the green arrows in Graph 2)—as

³² Mouffe (2005) supports this assertion, arguing that neither a Conservative nor a Labour government challenged this neoliberal hegemony in a true sense during this period (2005:56-64). Critics of such a description of British political history could instead argue that this era was characterized by social anti-establishment mobilization: the 1984 miners’ strike, the anti-Iraqi war protests (2003), and the London riots (2011) among many examples. However, the fact that Thatcher, Major, Blair and Brown were able to stay in power makes it reasonable to assert that these protests failed to turn into *social demands* attaching themselves to a rising *empty signifier*, which is necessary in order to become truly political, following Laclauian logic. Rather, these events of social rupture should be seen as expressions of merely *unfulfilled individual requests* expressed by *particular content* (Laclau 2007:43) According to Laclau, in order to become *political*, a group has to become something more than the very concept of that group. The fact that mineworkers went on strike is just a way of conceptualizing a fact. Instead, Laclau emphasizes the significance of *naming* rather than conceptualizing (2005:70-71 & 102-117). If, instead, the *people* were protesting, its equivalential chain could become large enough to become *politically* relevant. In short; the 1984 miners’ strike was a *small* equivalential chain, at its best. For additional reading on how neoliberal politics, mainly orchestrated by Thatcher in the late 70s, managed to pave the way for a “marketization of politics”, see Savigny & Wring (2009). Moreover, according to Mouffe, Tony Blair did not challenge neoliberal Thatcherism enough to overthrow it. He was elected with a campaign promise to introduce the so-called “third way politics” into British society, inspired by arguments developed by the sociologist Anthony Giddens. As a consequence, the neoliberal hegemonic discourse managed to prevail also under a Labour government (Mouffe 2005:56-64 & 69-72).

³³ Saatchi & Saatchi is one example (Savigny & Wring 2009:256, Independent 2007, Campaign 2017).

³⁴ For example, Blue State Digital (BSD) (Hazenberget al. 2018:19, Dobber et al. 2017:14) and Experian (ICO 2018d:60).

morally correct. By doing so, Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. (2018) argue, as mentioned above, that these political party campaigners can present their parties as *different* one-issue parties to each individual voter group (2018:87).³⁵ The collected data of this thesis shows that Labour Party campaign workers and, interestingly enough, also their Swedish counterparts Socialdemokraterna, have used PMT practices in this manner in recent elections.³⁶ In doing so, according to Laclauian political reasoning, these political campaigners have aimed at *extinguishing isolated fires before they turn into social/political firestorms*, hence “individualizing, isolating, and distorting political information” (Gorton 2016:63).³⁷

As explained above, there are other ways of using PMT than to maintain status quo, i.e., the Laclauian institutional totality. In order to explore other PMT practices, a scenario is described below, where an institutional totality fails to extinguish/isolate the fires of unfulfilled individual requests. What Graph 2 implicitly shows is that if the isolated fires become too numerous and the institutional totality representatives fail to extinguish/isolate them, an era based on *social homogeneity* slowly shifts towards an era of *social heterogeneity*.

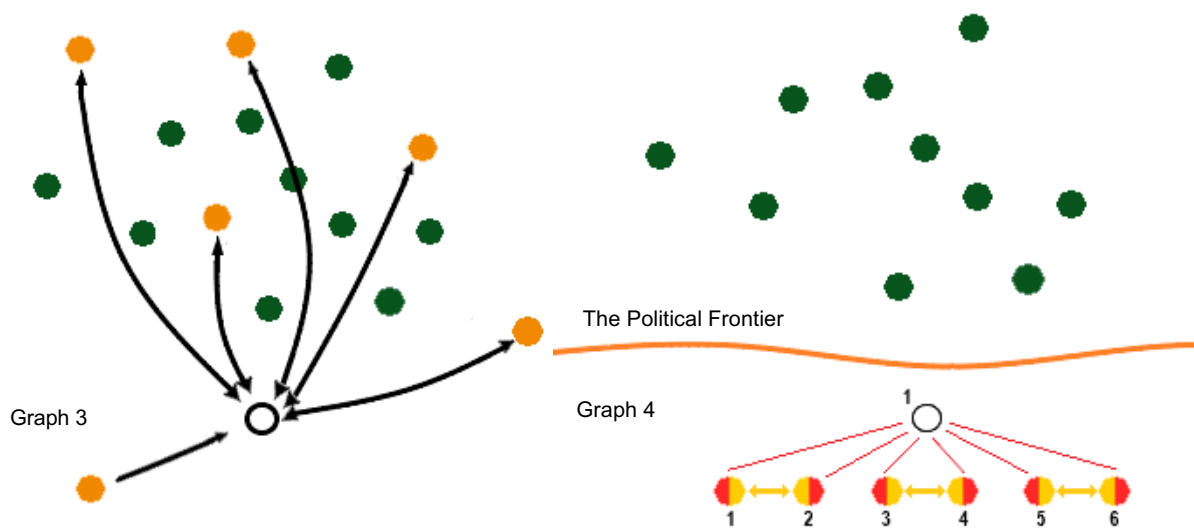
5.3.2 The Rise of the Equivalential Chain

According to Laclau, during an era of *social homogeneity*; i.e., when the hegemony of an institutional totality prevails, it becomes irrelevant to talk about *the people*, because individuals have no need to find such equivalence between one another: there is no *antagonistic other* that can be dichotomized in order to mobilize; i.e., create a notion of, “the people” in question (Laclau 2005:78). Although, when one of the unfulfilled requests has managed to turn itself into an *empty signifier*, and to attract several other unfulfilled individual requests, turning them into *social demands* (Graph 3), an era of *social heterogeneity* emerges (2005:121).

³⁵ For additional reading on how this has been done in practice during political campaigns: Hersh (2015:593-94).

³⁶ **1)** The British case of Labour: “We find it effective, for example, to send out specific material [regarding economy and fairness] to people who live in social housing” (interview #3). **2)** The Swedish case of Socialdemokraterna: **2.1)** “We wanted campaign promises on free working clothes to reach nurses [and did so by using Facebook, targeting] midlife women employed within the health service sector. It became viral!” (interview #1.1). And **2.2)** “One of our main campaign promises, *Familjeveckan* [“the family week”, one extra week of paid vacation for families with children aged 4-16 years], was targeted towards parents with small children” (interview #5).

³⁷ Presuming that PMT is all about reaching out to separate groups with messages about their most prioritized issues, it becomes relevant to talk about the danger inherent in *mistargeting* voters, as Hersh & Schaffner do (2013:521-523). Hersh concludes that “messages intended for a religious group, a racial group, or an issue group like gun owners do not come over very well when they are presented to people who are not in those segments of the population” (2018:5). His conclusion indicates that targeting people with messages that concern *another* group should be seen as a “mistarget” rather than a potential act of encouraging solidarity. Tellingly enough, European Social Democratic parties have been somewhat concerned about “mistargeting” voters, concluding that, e.g., messages about child benefits should not be targeted towards individuals without children (Vetandets Värld 2018). According to such reasoning, targeting the *wrong* individuals should be avoided, as requests/interests would not become fulfilled. Hence, the danger of “mistargeting” is a concern that makes sense when using PMT during the Laclauian era of institutional totality hegemony.



According to Laclauian reasoning, the emergence of such an era proves, **1)** that the former institutional totality—in this case, the representatives of the British neoliberal societal order—failed to prevent *individual requests* from becoming *social demands*. This means that the interests of *individual voters* went unnoticed/unmet long enough for these individuals to become receptive towards *political* articulation striving for *social change*, and **2)** that an *empty signifier* has successfully managed to create an equivalential chain, attached thanks to the *emptiness* of the empty signifier in question (section 3.1.2). The findings of this thesis make it reasonable to suggest that the campaign slogan of Vote Leave: *Take back control*, developed by its chief strategist Dominic Cummings, comes close to what Laclau refers to as the empty signifier. Moreover, the attractiveness of this slogan seemingly refers to its ability to empty itself sufficiently to become a symbol of *both the particularity and the equivalence* of each individual link *simultaneously* (Graph 4) (2005:130-131). How has this been possible?

To illustrate accurately this process to the reader, it is necessary to apply Laclauian theory to this specific topic of study even further, since the 2016 UK EU membership referendum consists of characteristics/components that apparently would be interesting to delve deeper into while having Laclauian analytical concepts in mind. Thus, the institutional totality referred to in this thesis—representatives of the British neoliberal societal order—is put in relation to its *antagonistic* counterpart, i.e., its opposing equivalential chain: *The Vote Leave campaign*, orchestrated by its chief strategist Cummings.

As mentioned above, in order for an equivalential chain—in this case, the Vote Leave campaign—to become successful at its political articulation, Laclau points out that its empty signifier needs to emphasize the *equivalence* of its links (the red semicircle in Graph 4), while simultaneously embracing and acknowledging the *particularity* of each individual link (the yellow semicircle in Graph 4) (2005:130-131). Thus, it is hereby argued that the political strength of the Vote Leave campaign during the EU membership referendum was that it

managed to sustain itself, due to **1)** a strong bond of solidarity/recognition between its *particularity*; i.e., for instance, farmers' need for state subsidies, pensioners' need for a well-functioning NHS, etc.), attached to **2)** its *equivalence*; i.e., its unified goal to overthrow *the antagonistic other*, for example, the representatives of the ruling elite at Westminster, which, from that moment onwards, became separated from Vote Leavers by *the political frontier* (the orange line in Graph 4). Hence, the former homogeneous and *solely administrative/apolitical* field of discursivity is, according to Laclauian political theory, replaced by a heterogeneous *political* order of discourse. Homogeneity is from then on unimaginable, since individuals have to choose to which camp they belong (2005:117-118).

Consequently, following Laclau's reasoning (2005:140), voters were indirectly instructed to choose between two different *antagonistic camps* during the EU membership referendum: **1)** the representatives of the neoliberal societal order, the *remainers*, the urban cosmopolitan citizens, or **2)** the self-appointed (common) *people*, those opposing the elite and striving to overthrow this societal order, the Vote Leavers.³⁸ Thus, a chasm opened up in British society, where it became reasonable for some individuals to reclaim their identity as part of a people, or *the real people*, opposing the *antagonistic other*; i.e.; the representatives of status quo.

By claiming that the Vote Leavers could be seen as a potential example of a Laclauian equivalential chain, depictions of these sympathizers as the misled "sheeple" harmed by persuasive/manipulative PMT—as portrayed by British politicians and British (as well as international) newspapers—becomes somewhat unpalatable.³⁹ Instead of simple (algorithmic) *voter manipulation*, the Vote Leave campaign actually appeared to attract their sympathizers by using unifying messages and slogans based on equivalence; the aim to overthrow the Westminster elite that wanted to remain in the EU. Arguably, the current challenge for this

³⁸ Whereas it is reasonable to illustrate the 2016 UK EU membership referendum as an era of social heterogeneity, consisting of these two antagonistic camps, it could also be argued that this depiction is a major simplification. Too many British voters identified themselves with something *else*, being *different both* from the representatives of the neoliberal societal order and the Vote Leavers. These individuals desired a *third* alternative (a *third* antagonistic camp, using Laclauian terminology). Laclau refers to these individuals as *the floating signifiers*. For additional reading on Laclauian reasoning on the political impact of these floating signifiers, see Laclau (2005:129-156).

³⁹ The DCMS Committee (2019) has concluded that Facebook is currently run by "digital gangsters" who have developed a business model based on polarization and voter manipulation, which is one important reason behind the emergence of populism across the world (2019:42). The committee has also encouraged the British population to charge their cell phones far away from their living room at night during elections and referendums, as human beings are more receptive to manipulative messages when using social media apps in bed, before going to sleep (2019:86-87). Cummings has accused Westminster representatives of portraying the people who voted to leave as a group of easily manipulated *sheep* (hence, the term *sheeple*) in the population who could not hold their own against targeted ads characterized by disinformation and outright lies (Cummings 2018a). Here, Cummings's arguments imply that representatives of the British neoliberal societal order have not acknowledged the people who voted to leave the EU as *political beings*. Instead, they stick to their conviction that society consists of *rational individuals*, whose rationality has been lost due to manipulative PMT. Moreover, the DCMS Committee has referred to the 2016 UK EU membership referendum campaigns as *machine-driven*, urging British stakeholders to make sure that "people stay in charge of the machines" in future elections and referendums (DCMS Committee 2019:6). Cummings's arguments share similarities with Kreiss (2017), regarding how stakeholders presume that voters' choices are based on rational and morally correct *common sense*, rather than *political* characteristics (2017:2).

equivalential chain, the Vote Leave sympathizers, is to maintain its *particularity*; i.e., to acknowledge the differences between each individual link. To embrace the fishermen and their need for fair fish quotas in the English Channel, to stand up for pensioners' need for a functioning NHS, to endorse farmers' rights to sustainable farming, etc.

It has been indicated above that the Vote Leave campaign shares characteristics with the Laclauian notion of an equivalential chain on the rise, opposing an institutional totality (in this case, the British neoliberal societal order). It is suggested in the following that the ICO changed its approach towards PMT as soon as PMT was used successfully by the Vote Leave campaign to mobilize voters through political articulation.

5.4 The Political Significance Unraveled

The findings of this research process call for the following interpretation: that the political significance of the ICO shift in approach towards PMT derives from the driving force of the British neoliberal societal order to sustain itself.⁴⁰ The ability of the Vote Leave campaign to use PMT for mobilizing voters through political articulation is the main reason why this shift had to take place.

However, a counter-argument against this assertion is the ICO's conclusion that not only the Vote Leave campaign engaged in unlawful PMT activities during the 2016 UK EU membership referendum. The Remain campaign also had its flaws, and moreover, the ICO noticed that the 2017 UK general election also involved many PMT irregularities (ICO 2018d:60). However, this argument does not appear to withstand scrutiny, as it then becomes relevant to ask the following questions: If *all* political actors were guilty of PMT irregularities and published scientific articles have shown that PMT was also used *before* 2016—a fact that the ICO was aware of (as concluded by reading Bennett 2016, ICO 2014; 2015)—why did the ICO choose not to investigate elections held before 2016 as well? Why has the ICO decided to combat some PMT practices, whereas others have been disregarded?

It could be speculated that the ICO must have found *more extreme* irregularities in the Vote Leave campaign, in particular. However, after reading relevant ICO reports on this matter, together with previous research revealing PMT irregularities in the UK before 2016, it can be concluded that no convincing evidence has been presented to prove such an assertion. This being said, we do not know in detail what PMT irregularities will be found in the Vote Leave

⁴⁰ According to Laclauian reasoning, the ICO is a part of the British neoliberal status quo, since it is an institution within the institutional totality, conditioned under its *hegemonic operation* (Laclau 2005:106).

campaign, due to the fact that its main collaboration partner, the political consultancy and technology company Aggregate IQ, has decided to appeal lawsuits brought against them by the ICO.⁴¹ Hence, relevant ICO investigations on the matter are shrouded by legal confidentiality at the time of writing this thesis (The Register 2018).⁴²

According to Aggregate IQ, the ICO's allegation that Aggregate IQ possessed "personal data of individuals in the UK as a result of work it did on behalf of [Vote Leave]"⁴³, is unfounded. However, Aggregate IQ's appeal could equally well turn out to be unfounded, as the aforementioned collaboration between Aggregate IQ and Vote Leave may have resulted in PMT irregularities reasonably defined as *serious data breaches*. Regardless of the eventual outcome of this legal process, the findings of the ICO (2018b; 2018c; 2018d) suggest the aforementioned Emma's Diary data breach of the Labour Party to be the most serious breach discovered so far (section 1.4), together with PMT irregularities of the UKIP-affiliated Leave.EU campaign, where personal data on voters were being merged with data from campaign financier Arron Banks's insurance company (ICO 2018b:34-35; 2018c:44-48, Open Democracy 2018a). This gives rise to the same question again: why has the ICO chosen *not* to investigate elections and referendums before 2016, since both the Labour Party and UKIP participated in the 2015 UK general election as well?

Regardless of how Aggregate IQ managed to get hold of its voter data, one important finding of this thesis concerns the fact that *manipulative features* of PMT, managed by isolating *relevant* messages targeted towards *relevant* individuals, were seemingly absent in the Vote Leave campaign. On the contrary, Vote Leave sent out apparently *identical* messages to between 3-9 million people who were considered to be out of reach of politicians and, thus, politics as such (Cummings 2016). Taking this into account, it could instead be argued—to some extent following the reasoning suggested by Hazenberg et al. (2018:20), on how PMT could potentially attract new (politically detached) voters—that the Vote Leave campaign resulted in a *revitalization of core democratic principles*, since these voters had apparently stopped executing their democratic rights many generations ago.⁴⁴ This finding, together with

⁴¹ The ICO Enforcement Notice on Aggregate IQ (2018): <https://ico.org.uk/media/action-weve-taken/enforcement-notice/2260123/aggregate-iq-en-20181024.pdf> (Retrieved 2019-03-11).

⁴² Cummings has been contacted several times, in order to achieve clarity on this topic. He has written back with only one sentence, where he referred to his blog for understanding his thoughts on PMT and the 2016 UK EU membership referendum (section 8.2).

⁴³ ICO (2018d:52).

⁴⁴ Different sources report different numbers, but most pundits agree that Aggregate IQ managed to mine Big Data on 3-9 million individuals who had most likely *never voted* in previous British general elections or referendums. Since this is a judiciary matter at the moment, no comments should be trusted with 100% certainty. A fiction movie, produced and distributed by HBO, has suggested 3 million voters (<https://se.hbonordic.com/movies/brexit-the-uncivil-war/1f10ced-0100f31b3d4> [Retrieved: 2019-03-11]) This blog suggests 6 million: <https://verfassungsblog.de/if-vote-leave-broke-the-law->

an apparent lack of clear evidence of *extreme* PMT irregularities of the Vote Leave campaign, further supports the argument of this thesis; that the political significance of the ICO's shift in its data protection approach towards PMT is related to the driving force of the British neoliberal societal order to sustain itself.

As mentioned in section 3, Laclau concludes that no society can persist in eternity without facing the rise of an empty signifier (Laclau 2005:58-63). A *political* awakening within society is therefore always potentially present (2005:76-78). However, as Graph 2 above has shown us (section 5.3.1), Laclauian institutional totalities strive to prevent such empty signifiers and their equivalential chains from developing, by isolating individual requests before they turn into social demands. Thus, as section 5.3.1 indicates, the British institutional totality; i.e., the parties and institutions that have governed since the Thatcher era in the late 70s, did their best to **1)** satisfy the interests of its population, or **2)** treat them as if they were *isolated from one another*, based on the logic of singularity inherent in the individualization of politics. This was done in recent years through the application of PMT. However, some interests of UK citizens apparently remained unmet/ignored during this era, which finally resulted in their turning into *social demands*, i.e., the citizens became receptive to political articulation.⁴⁵ As explained above, the Vote Leave campaign—by fostering the political narrative of common concerns to mobilize voters—paved the way for the emergence of a *political order of discourse*, based on an era of *social heterogeneity*. It became successful in doing so thanks to its empty signifier, the campaign slogan, *Take back control*. In other words, when representatives of the British neoliberal societal order failed to prevent individual fires from turning into social/political firestorms, an era of *social homogeneity*—an *administrative/apolitical field of discursivity*—was lost; that is, these politicians and institutions ceased to speak the same language as the people they used to represent.

While indicating that the ICO changed its approach towards PMT after the Vote Leave campaign started to challenge the British neoliberal societal order, this thesis *does not* argue that the ICO had *a direct intention to do this*. It needs to be clarified that this thesis does not suggest that the high representatives of the ICO actively pulled some strings in order for a technocratic *deep state* to take appropriate measures. Instead, one needs to understand, following Laclauian reasoning, that a hegemonic operation is not only a matter of government, but “is also sedimented in practices and institutions” (Laclau 2005:106). Thus,

[could-brex-it-be-void/](#) (Retrieved 2019-03-11). According to Cummings himself, 9 million voters were targeted (Cummings 2017b).

⁴⁵ An argument supported by Mouffe (2005:69-72).

the ICO should rather be understood as an institution operating within the same hegemonic discourse as the institutional totality. Thus, the ICO represents the British neoliberal societal order; an order which a large part of the British population has apparently begun to distrust.

Laclauian reasoning makes it possible to state that the aforementioned shift of the ICO is inefficacious. The “real” people may already have started to listen to new protagonists. Arguments delivered by Hersh (2018) become relevant here; suggesting that the problem that democracy is facing today is not the *supply* of so-called fake news and decisive messages, characterized by simplified aggregations based on a more complex truth. Instead, the current problem is the *demand* for it (2018:2). By encouraging current political actors to focus on the demand side of these issues, Hersh seemingly urges the public to ask itself: Why do individuals long for alternative truths in today’s society? Such *alternative truths* could be seen as strong messages and seductive political narratives; important components in order to sustain a political articulation once the political order of discourse has made its entrance. And, as Hersh argues, it has been shown to be irrelevant whether such news turn out to be “fake” or not—it feels good to share anyhow (2018:7). His reasoning has similarities with Laclauian theory, quoting Gustave Le Bon:

“The masses have never thirsted after truth. They turn aside from evidence that is not to their taste, preferring to deify error, if error seduces them.” (Laclau 2005:24).

Kreiss touches upon Hersh’s (and indirectly Laclau’s) argument, arguing that pundits in contemporary democracies ought to change their perception of voters as *rational individuals*. What has happened recently, in many election outcomes across the world, is that voters have turned *political*, mobilized through political articulation and attached to a “political struggle” (Kreiss 2017:2 & 8). Here, Kreiss follows Laclauian reasoning to some extent, since Laclau points out that it is impossible for the institutional totality to act in the same administrative manner as before, once this *chasm* has opened up between the equivalential chain and former representatives associated with the institutional totality (Laclau 2005:86).

In short, this chasm makes it impossible to act as if the order of discourse is still homogeneous/administrative, as if everybody still speaks the same discursive language. The amount of published ICO/DCMS Committee reports and media news articles on the alarming cascade of PMT irregularities/fake news during the political campaigns of the 2016 UK EU membership referendum are irrelevant when a large part of the population perceives these

actors as speaking the same language as the former institutional totality.⁴⁶ Social homogeneity has thereby been replaced by social heterogeneity, where “alternative facts” actually have a logical function. They are *discursively alternative*, since they belong to a discourse/language that gives true meaning (and, moreover, fuel) to the opposing side, representing the other *antagonistic camp* within the emerging political order of discourse.

6. Concluding Remarks & Discussion

The results of this thesis suggest the conclusion that there has been a *shift* in the ICO approach to PMT; namely, because the ICO chose not to act as long as British political parties/campaigners used PMT to attract voters individually (Graph 2, section 5.3.1), despite the ICO being aware of the high probability of PMT irregularities at the time (as concluded by reading Bennett 2016, ICO 2014; 2015). Moreover, the ICO’s shift in approach stands out in an EU context. For this reason, its approach should not primarily be evaluated in relation to the implementation of the GDPR by the EU member states in general.

More importantly, based on the political theory of Ernesto Laclau, together with collected empirical data, this thesis offers an alternative interpretation on how the British ICO addresses PMT. It has been suggested that the ICO’s data protection approach towards PMT shifted in order for the British neoliberal societal order to be able to sustain itself and to tackle the major challenges that resulted from the Vote Leave campaign’s efficient revitalization of political articulation through PMT during the 2016 UK EU membership referendum. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the Vote Leave campaign’s use of PMT constituted a threat against this neoliberal societal order *for the very reason* that the Vote Leave campaign chose *not* to engage in PMT with the aim to isolate individuals and portray itself as a different political project, depending on the voters’ individual requests. Thereby, Vote Leave did *not* extinguish the above-mentioned individual fires (section 5.3.1). Rather, the *subversive potential* of this campaign was contingent upon its aim to reach out to relevant voters with a *unifying* message, its empty signifier: Take back control, in order to *turn these previously isolated individuals into a community of mobilized voters thanks to political articulation*, thereby challenging the British neoliberal societal order. Simply put, the Vote Leave campaign created social/political firestorms. Moreover, it created the conditions for *the political* to (re)emerge in a society

⁴⁶ That is, once this chasm has occurred, these actors – often portrayed as the *mainstream media* – is thereafter seen as in alliance with the enemy of *the true people*, following a Laclauian reasoning [2005:98-99]).

previously constituted by merely administrative institutions—where, using Laclauian language, the “death of politics” occurred (2005:155).

The findings of this thesis should not be seen as solid prophecies, claimed and proven with unquestioned certainty. Rather, they are presented as suggestions for new and alternative interpretations of today’s development, in order to increase the understanding of the challenges of PMT practices, used by often subversive contra-hegemonic movements (sometimes even characterized by authoritarianism) in all institutional democracies today.

Before discussing potential future endeavors and suggestions for future research, it needs to be clearly stated that this thesis has not been written with the intention to encourage sympathy for theories suggesting that contemporary institutions are trapped within technocratic governance run by the so-called *deep state*. One intention behind this thesis has instead been to understand (*not defend*) social movements that even lean towards authoritarian tendencies. Hence, using Laclau as the theoretical framework has arguably been beneficial, since Laclau shares this ambition:

“We can only begin to understand [authoritarianism] if we see it as one of the internal possibilities inherent to contemporary societies, not as something beyond any rational explanation.” (Laclau 2005:250).

So, what steps should be taken after processing these conclusions? Suggestions on how to approach PMT practices are presented below. These suggestions could, in this particular case, be considered to be as close as they can get to what policy documents often refer to as *policy implications*. It is often easier to identify what should not be done, than point to constructive future endeavors. However, an attempt at both is made in the following section.

6.1 Proposals for Future Research & Endeavors

This thesis contains an appeal to future responsible stakeholders *not* to describe the political movements of our time as *morally defective*, whether or not they are characterized by authoritarian traits. It is suggested here that this is not an issue of morality; rather, *the realm of the political* has entered the stage. Thus, relevant stakeholders should act in a political manner rather than condemn politicians/political campaigners—or voters, for that matter—on moral grounds, accusing them of being either manipulative or manipulated by PMT, referring

to the PMT persuasion impact; of which recently has been questioned by an influential group of PMT researchers.⁴⁷

Concerned stakeholders are hereby encouraged, using Kreiss's arguments, to stop perceiving voters as rational individuals and instead treat them as political beings wishing to embark upon political journeys, rather than receive even more isolating PMT messages that spur on the potential individualization of politics even further, as voters are simply treated as individual customers (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. 2018, Gorton 2016). As suggested above, the British neoliberal societal order is shaken to its core, which actually creates opportunities for its shattered remains to reassemble and construct a new political community/movement; i.e., *a second* opposing equivalential chain—using Laclauian language—in order to challenge the first equivalential chain, the Vote Leavers. This new community/movement could potentially unite voters around alternative ideas for a sustainable community thanks to yet *another* empty signifier.

According to the findings of this paper, by using new digital campaign tools in more appropriate ways, political actors could reach out to voters that they have never talked to before. They could analyze voter behavior and find that the interests of these voters have been ignored in recent years. Thus, political parties/campaigners could use PMT to persuade voters with *one* strong and unifying message. Persuade, in this context, refers to *revitalizing political articulation*; i.e., present narratives that are sufficiently “empty” to turn individuals (with former separate interests) into mobilized voters, embarking upon a *political* journey based on solidarity with their community. Interestingly enough, as indicated by interviewing the British communications team representative, the Labour party has apparently tried to adapt to this political logic (interview #3).⁴⁸ Their present slogan: *For the many, not the few*, may turn out to be a prominent empty signifier; i.e., a good start for contemporary political articulation, in order to challenge current political movements with a new (and, perhaps, better?) one.

⁴⁷ Kreiss (2017), Hersh (2015; 2018) and Hersh & Schaffner (2013), among several examples. Moreover, political campaigners themselves have started to perceive PMT as something else than “Jedi mind-bending superpowers”, using Cumming’s own words. The US-based political communication consultant referred to PMT during an interview as “*snake oil*”: “Well, PMT is obviously snake oil. But if snake oil is used in despicably large amounts, it can for sure turn into poison” (interview #8). Another person who refers to PMT as snake oil is the Vote Leave chief strategist Cummings himself (Cummings 2018b). He moreover argues that the above-mentioned whistleblower Wylie (section 1.4), in order to bolster his own career, has described PMT practices as magic weapons of decisive importance for election outcomes (ibid.). However, regardless of this skepticism of PMT, what it seems to be able to do is to attract potential voters who have shunned politics for decades.

⁴⁸ A statement moreover supported by this news article on Labour’s political strategy: <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/elections/2017/07/how-labour-activists-are-already-building-digital-strategy-win-next>

As mentioned above, what many British representatives of the neoliberal societal order have failed to understand so far is the *political* dimension of the outcome of the 2016 UK EU membership referendum; instead, they tend to focus on its moral character. As the Swedish political communication consultant pointed out when interviewed: Talking about the *manipulative dimensions* of PMT should be a closed chapter, keeping in mind that Cambridge Analytica was *more* engaged in the Ted Cruz campaign than the Donald Trump campaign and who was elected president? (interview #7).

Using Laclauian language, Cruz's signifier was not empty enough. Trump's *Make America Great Again* slogan attracted voters to his political journey in large enough numbers to challenge the status quo in the US. This was done by immense "spamming" campaigns, targeting huge numbers of US voters through 85 million dollars' worth of advertising on Facebook—the most expensive digital political campaign the world has witnessed so far (interview #8, House of Commons 2019:40). Trump apparently reached out to almost *every single* US citizen who was entitled to vote, in order to find voters willing to embrace his political narrative. When interviewed, the US-based political communication consultant pointed out that even single women in their 30s, "obviously Democrats, living in Manhattan", were targeted with Trump's messages (interview #8). Hence, it was apparently only after identifying his core voters; i.e., the links in his Laclauian equivalential chain, that Trump began to use PMT by targeting these voters with additional messages, often known as fake news, to stabilize his chain of equivalence.

Thus, instead of publishing another article accusing technology of morally degenerating the masses, future research should examine the current efforts by representatives of (neo)liberal societal orders across the world to construct new Laclauian equivalential chains, attached to yet another empty signifier. The Labour Party's slogan may be a good example, as mentioned above. It may also be interesting to analyze the current actions taken by the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO), using Laclau as the theoretical framework. The LO has seemingly begun to detach itself from its role as a representative of the Swedish societal order, creating its own political journey with a familiar slogan: *Take back control* (Ta tillbaka kontrollen).⁴⁹ With Laclauian reasoning in mind, interviewing Johan Ulvenlöv, the campaign strategist behind that slogan, could turn out to be an interesting research contribution for the future.

⁴⁹ For additional reading:
https://www.lo.se/start/material/ta_tillbaka_kontrollen_los_valplattform_infor_europaparlamentet_2019 (Retrieved: 2019-03-16)

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8. Appendices

8.1 Appendix (1): List of Conducted Interviews

Interviewee #1

#1.1). Communication sector representative of the Swedish Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna).

Interview conducted in person: 2019-01-22

#1.2). Communication sector representative of the Swedish Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna).

Interview conducted in person: 2019-02-26

Interviewee #2

#2). Legal practitioner at the Swedish Data Protection Authority (Datainspektionen).

Interview conducted by phone: 2019-02-08

Interviewee #3

#3). Communication sector representative of the British Labour Party.

Interview conducted in person: 2019-02-13

Interviewee #4

#4). British member of the Vote Leave campaign.

Interview conducted in person: 2019-02-13

Interviewee #5

#5). Communication sector representative of the Swedish Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna).

Interview conducted in person: 2019-02-26

Interviewee #6

#6). Legal Practitioner at The Swedish Social Insurance Office (Försäkringskassan).

Interview written by email: 2019-02-27

Interviewee #7

#7). Swedish political communication consultant.

Interview conducted in person: 2019-03-01

Interviewee #8

#8). US-based political communication consultant.

Interview conducted in person: 2019-03-06

Interviewee #9

#9). Legal practitioner at the Swedish Data Protection Authority (Datainspektionen).

Interview written by email: 2019-04-02

Interviewee #10

#10). Legal practitioner at the British Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).

Interview written by email: 2019-04-12

Interviewee #11

#11). Legal practitioner at the UK Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).

Interview written by email: 2019-05-13

Interviewee #12

#12). Legal practitioner at the UK Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).

Interview conducted by phone: 2019-05-20

8.2 Appendix (2): Print Screen of Dominic Cummings's e-mail

Dear Dominic,

I have spent some months doing research on Political Micro-Targeting (PMT) and political campaigning - and of course I have touched upon your Vote Leave campaign work throughout the EU Referendum of 2016. It strikes me that your way of understanding political discourse is, arguably, very similar to the Argentinian post-marxist theorist Ernesto Laclau. I do not know if you consider yourself being a post-marxist at the end of the day, but still.

I have flown over from Sweden to the UK in order to discuss the future of PMT practices (in the aftermath of ICO and its intense inquiries) with the British Labour Party communication team. I will meet some team representatives this Wednesday.

By increasing my understanding of their (to me a bit equivocal) political (and digital) strategy, one of my aims with my research is to raise questions on whether it makes any sense engaging in PMT practices at all if you do not have a strong and unifying *political* narrative in a broader sense; a message that truly talks to *the people* (what Laclau calls *the empty signifier*).

I wonder if you are in London during the next couple of days? It would be interesting to discuss my recent findings, and to hear your thoughts about it.

Looking forward to hearing from you

All the best

...

Jonas Abrahamsson
University of Gothenburg, Sweden



Dominic Cummings <dmc2.cummings@gmail.com>

Tue, Feb 12, 6:10 PM



to me ▾

sorry no but if you look at my blog there is some stuff on micro targeting

...

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