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RIGHT-WING POPULISM,
VISUAL DISINFORMATION,
AND BREXIT

From the UKIP ‘Breaking Point’ poster to the aftermath of the London Westminster bridge attack

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**Introduction**

The United Kingdom (UK) experienced significant political turmoil over its relationship with Europe between early 2016 and 2017. This period opened on 22 February 2016, with then–Prime Minister David Cameron calling for a European Union (EU) membership referendum and came to some degree of resolution when the subsequent prime minister Theresa May triggered Article 50 (the first step to start the so-called Brexit process) on 29 March 2017. The EU referendum itself was held on 23 June 2016, in which British citizens were asked to answer the following question: ‘should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?’ The referendum resulted in a narrow majority vote to leave the EU. The successful Leave campaign involved a number of organisations. The official campaign, as defined by the electoral commission, was Vote Leave, while their rival organisation was Leave. EU. The latter had links to the longer-standing Eurosceptic UK Independence Party (UKIP), which also ran a campaign. The Leave.EU and UKIP campaigns were both overtly focused on the issue of immigration and mobilised a racialised politics of fear consistent with broader European and international right-wing populist ideas concerning race and nationhood. Our chapter involves two case studies that each analyse a photojournalistic image that gained significant visibility in mainstream and social media during this period. The first image was distributed a week before the EU referendum was held and on the same day that a right-wing extremist murdered British Labour MP Jo Cox (apparently for her pro-EU position and sympathy for migrants). The second was distributed a week before the triggering of Article 50. These images were chosen because they offer rich opportunities to explore the ways in which media manipulation in the UK context has been – in these instances – strongly shaped by populist, racist, anti-immigration, and Islamophobic sentiments.

The first case study examines UKIP’s so-called ‘Breaking Point’ poster, which used a photojournalistic image deriving from the ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015. This poster was made public on 16 June 2016 at a press conference featuring UKIP leader Nigel Farage, outside the European
Commission’s London base in Westminster, as part of the party’s campaign for a Leave vote. The poster was also distributed via UKIP’s social media accounts and published in a different version in the *Daily Express* newspaper. Photographs and video of the press conference, showing Farage in front of the poster displayed on a mobile billboard, were widely distributed through mainstream and social media (Figure 19.1).

The second case study relates to a terrorist attack that occurred on Westminster Bridge in London on 22 March 2017. This attack involved a single attacker, British Muslim Khalid Masood, who drove a car onto the pavement on Westminster Bridge with the aim of killing pedestrians and then fatally stabbed an unarmed police officer in the grounds of the Palace of Westminster before being shot dead. The attack resulted in the deaths of five other people and the injury of fifty. The case study focuses on how a specific photograph taken of the aftermath of the attack (Figure 19.2) was moved from the mainstream media to social media and then reported as news itself in the mainstream media. It is this journey taken by the image and the multiple reframings and interpretations that took place that are of particular interest here.

The role of news images and images more generally, as a way to better understand mis- and disinformation, has not received the attention it deserves, given how much social media content as well as manipulated content is visual. More than that, when images and photographs are considered, this is often through a journalistic lens, with a focus on verification practices that are essentially aimed at establishing if an image is ‘true’ or ‘false’. Within academic research, work on such images tends to rely on content analysis in order to identify key themes. Our concerns in this chapter go beyond both the verification of photographic images and the identification of themes in order to consider how the examination of socio-political context is fundamental to

![Figure 19.1](image-url)  
*UK Independence Party Leader (UKIP) Nigel Farage addresses the media during a national poster launch campaign ahead of the EU referendum in London on 16 June 2016.*  
*Source: Daniel Leal-Olivas/AFP via Getty Images.*
understanding how images are used for mis- and disinformation purposes. This is particularly true for those images that receive significant coverage and play a key role in shaping public opinion. Thinking about context is particularly important when images are used in ways that reproduce or innovate racial ideas. Examples of mis- and disinformation that mobilise such ideas can be approached through practices of verification, but in the end the racist beliefs that inform such representations cannot be understood in terms of simplistic notions of ‘true’ or ‘false’. Rather, they need to be examined in terms of their ideological content and effects. The overarching goal of this chapter is to help shape this agenda for scholars who are interested in studying these topics and particularly where they intersect. We use these two case studies to start to show how this can be done and why it matters. The focus of the chapter is disinformation. Recognising that there are many competing definitions of disinformation, we define it as follows: ‘combinations of images and texts, drawing on elements of truthful representations, used to spread misleading, inaccurate or false information designed to cause harm’. In the following sections, we review the existing literature relevant to our subject before discussing the case studies in more detail.

**Reviewing the existing literature**

Communication on social media is overwhelmingly visual (Faulkner et al. 2018), but this key way in which online disinformation is spread has been overlooked in the emerging research (Wardle & Derakhshan 2017). The lack of focus on images is also a wider issue within social media research (Thelwall et al. 2015; Faulkner et al. 2018). Researchers instead lean towards
Populism, visual disinformation, Brexit

‘the text-only aspects of online communication’, in part because images are considered more complicated to understand and analyse (Highfield & Leaver 2016, 48). This knowledge gap has also been highlighted by Tucker et al. (2018), who identify ‘disinformation spread through images and video’ (7) as a key gap in research where understanding is ‘urgently needed’ (61). They note that most disinformation research ‘focuses on the textual rather than the visual and audiovisual component of these messages’ (47). These sentiments are echoed by other scholars; Fallis (2015) argues that misleading images ‘might easily be more epistemically dangerous than misleading words’ because images (especially lens-based images) have greater evidentiary value (417). Innes (2020) argues that images are a key component of disinformation and that they are used ‘to try and persuade their audiences about the ultimate “truth” of their knowledge claims’. He adds that ‘Photographs and videos possess an almost inherent persuasive potency’ (13).

More specifically, recontextualised images, in which the original context for the image has been removed and replaced with a falsified context, are identified by several scholars as particularly pervasive. Tucker et al. (2018) explicitly highlight that ‘we know very little about’ recontextualised images (48). Tandoc et al. (2018) note that ‘misappropriated’ images are an increasingly widespread practice for spreading disinformation (145). Taken together, these studies suggest that image-based disinformation is potentially more harmful, particularly when involving images taken out of their original context and placed in a false context ‘to support a concocted narrative’ (Tandoc et al. 2018,145).

A core element of disinformation as pushed by right-wing populists (including the so-called alt-right) is the reshaping of truth and who can be trusted to provide this. Hameleers (2020) has explored common themes of populist disinformation, identifying that crime and immigration are key topics, both intrinsically linked to race. He notes that, from a European right-wing populist perspective, ‘Islam is the greatest threat to the Western world’, and the mainstream media’s supposed ‘omittance’ of this shows that the media work to protect these ‘“dangerous” others’ (111). This message is further underpinned by a strong rationale of ‘us’ versus ‘them’. A significant consequence of sharing such divisive disinformation is that it may work to strengthen existing societal divisions and antagonisms; those who align with populist discourse become further entrenched within it, and those who reject it become stronger in their resistance (Hameleers 2020). In a European context Heiss and Matthes (2020) examined populist content on Facebook in Germany and Austria, which was dominated by angry anti-elitist and anti-immigration discourse. The latter ‘emerged as the most distinguishing factor’ of right-wing populist ‘communication on Facebook . . . the unique selling point of right-wing populism’ (317). Krzyżanowski’s (2020) study of populist rhetoric in Poland since 2015 highlights how pervasive this content is and also that it is not simply limited to social media. This study points out how normalised these discourses have become, resulting in a shift towards more explicit right-wing populist themes in the mainstream media and specifically towards immigration; immigrants, predominantly Muslims, are presented as a dangerous invasion and a threat to European culture and values. These claims are often underpinned by disinformation. This situation allows for the creation of ungrounded arguments, in which disinformation and ‘fake news’ are accepted as truth ‘due to their civil appearance which effectively normalises them in political and media discourse and in both traditional and online public spheres’ (25). Overall, however, the research on the content of populist/alt-right disinformation online is still limited, as observed by Panizo-Lledot et al. (2019). Yet even with the limited research into this topic to date, it is evident that anti-immigration and racist rhetoric is a key component of right-wing populist online disinformation.

Discussions about visual disinformation and how to address it continue to be significant within journalism. These discourses around verification practices have also shaped academic
thinking on this issue. For journalists, the crux of image verification has focused on establishing if the image is actually what they think it is or others claim it to be. Whilst this continues to be a vital method, the techniques and strategies frequently deployed in mis- and disinformation, across a range of forms of media manipulation, mean it is also key to consider how images are used, how they are shared and by whom, and ultimately what meanings and effects they produce.

In our research we have gone beyond standard forms of journalistic image verification by combining methods from art history with questions designed specifically for mis- and disinformation content (Vis et al. 2020). Our framework, 20 Questions for Interrogating Social Media Images,1 is an additional tool journalists and others can use when investigating images. It consists of 20 questions for social media images (still image, video, gif, etc.), with an additional 14 questions aimed at different aspects of mis- and disinformation. The questions do not appear in a set order, but these five are central: What is it? What does it show? Who made it? What did it mean? What does it mean? Whilst these questions significantly take us beyond the standard approaches to verification, especially where they address meaning, it is also important to show how expansive such an exploration into the wider meanings and contexts of an image can be. This chapter aims to do just that. We now turn to our two case studies to explore in more detail examples of image-based right-wing populist disinformation that relate to the wider context of Brexit and themes of immigration and racism.

**UKIP’s ‘Breaking Point’ poster, 2016**

The UKIP billboard poster (Figure 19.1) that is the focus of our first case study used a cropped version of a photograph taken by the photojournalist Jeff Mitchell (a staff photographer for the picture agency Getty Images) in October 2015. This photograph depicted a large group of predominantly adult male Syrian and Afghan refugees being escorted by Slovenian police from the border between Croatia and Slovenia to the Brezice refugee camp. UKIP purchased a commercial license to use the photograph from Getty Images. The photographic image fills the entire billboard and shows the refugees following a path between fields, from the upper left of the image down to its central foreground, producing a powerful impression of relentless human movement. Over the photographic image were superimposed the slogans ‘BREAKING POINT’ (in large red block capitals) and ‘The EU has failed us all’ and ‘We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders’ (in smaller white font). This combination of image and text displaced the meaning of the photograph from being about the movement of a specific group of refugees in Slovenia (as described in its caption on the Getty Images website)2 to being about the purported effect of EU border policies on immigration into the UK. This shift in meaning also involved a shift in the function of the image from being a standard example of photojournalism (and therefore primarily valued for its documentary content) to a political concern to use the image to emphasise connotations of racialised otherness in relation to immigration.

A similar shift in the meaning of Mitchell’s photograph also occurred when the right-wing populist Hungarian Fidesz party used the same image for a later anti-immigration poster during the 2018 Hungarian parliamentary elections (Matamoros 2018). This poster presented the photograph with a large red English language stop sign over it. Fidesz and UKIP both used the non-white faces of the refugees depicted in Mitchell’s photograph to visually embody their racialised conceptions of immigration. This use of the photograph meant that there was no need to explicitly articulate the racism that underpinned their political viewpoints. Rather, the photographic image did this work for them.3 This meant that both Fidesz and UKIP could get
across their racially charged message while also allowing them a degree of deniability about their populist racist views.

Yet there are also differences between these two posters that are useful to draw out. If the Hungarian poster was not verbally explicit about its racialisation of immigration, it still made its opposition to non-white immigration into Hungary very clear through the use of a simple stop sign over an image of Syrian and Afghan refugees. In contrast to this, the message of UKIP’s poster is not so direct, nor is it so univocal. The slogan ‘BREAKING POINT’ is clearly meant to relate to the refugees shown in Mitchell’s photograph in that it frames them as a human force that has brought something to the ‘breaking point’. However, it is not exactly clear what is about to break. Is it the EU Schengen border or the UK border that is meant to be breaking? Nigel Farage seemed to answer this question in a radio interview given a number of days after the unveiling of the poster, when he stated that the poster ‘was not about Britain’. Rather, ‘it was about Schengen, about the fact Schengen is breaking’ (quoted in Woodcock 2016). This suggests that UKIP intended the slogan ‘BREAKING POINT’ to refer to the EU border and for Mitchell’s photograph to epitomise the breaking of this border. However, it is apparent that UKIP also intended the poster to be about the UK. This is indicated by the poster’s other slogans, in which the people of the UK are referred to as an ‘us’ who have been ‘failed’ by the EU and a ‘we’ who must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders. Consequently, it can be suggested that UKIP intended there to be a duality to the meaning of the slogan ‘BREAKING POINT’ and to their poster overall. The poster represented the EU border breaking under the weight of non-white immigration, but at the same time, it encouraged a sense of slippage between this framing of the EU border as a border out of control and the UK border. Crucial to this slippage between the EU and UK border was also the visual impact of the poster, in that the refugees it showed were intended to be perceived as moving roughly in the direction of the spectator and thus towards the UK.4

This leads us on to thinking more directly about the function of UKIP’s poster as disinformation. That the UKIP poster was partly intended to suggest that the refugees it showed were on their way to or even at the UK border means that the poster was disingenuous in its use of a photograph that actually showed refugees in Slovenia, who probably hoped to eventually reach Germany. It was this disingenuousness and the intention to misinform it entailed that Buzzfeed pointed to through their headline: ‘These Refugees in UKIP’s Anti-EU Poster Are Actually in Slovenia’ (Waterson 2016). But this kind of observation should not be the only outcome of a critical analysis of UKIP’s poster as disinformation. As emphasised earlier in the chapter, there is also a need to contextualise the poster as an example of disinformation in terms of the racial meanings that it mobilised and was dependent on to have its intended effect. In this sense, the role of the analyst is not that of a journalist simply seeking to verify the ‘truthfulness’ or ‘false-ness’ of an image they want to publish, but rather of someone who seeks to understand why a particular example of disinformation was produced and had harmful effects under specific socio-political conditions that are, in this instance, significantly defined by racialised notions of nationhood.

Of particular significance when thinking about the ideological context for UKIP’s poster is the way that right-wing populist discourses define national belonging. As Wodak notes, populist nationalism in Europe often involves ‘a nativist notion of belonging’, which is ‘linked to a chauvinist and racialized concept of “the people” and “the nation”’ (Wodak 2015, 47). Belonging to the nation necessarily means being ‘native’ and by implication white. This also means that those defined as ‘non-natives’ are automatically excluded from and constructed as a threat to the national community (Wodak 2015, 66). In line with these ideas, UKIP developed a political position that emphasised immigration as an EU-driven threat to the ‘native’ population of the
UK in terms of both the free movement of citizens from EU member states and also the supposed openness of EU borders to non-white immigration from beyond Europe. In other words, UKIP understood ‘free movement’ in the EU as both ‘an internal expanse where Eastern and Southern Europeans are alleged to be enjoying excessive access to Britain’s economic and social goods’ and also ‘as a conduit for dark-skinned refugees to march across uninhibited to the sweet fields of England’ (Valluvan & Kalva, 2019, 2394). This construction of ‘dark-skinned refugees’ as a racialised threat to the UK originating from the EU is what UKIP’s poster was intended to mobilise and reinforce by giving it a powerful visual form. UKIP did this by using a photograph without concern for what this image depicted in documentary terms. More important for UKIP was what the non-white faces, gender, and number of refugees shown in the photograph could be made to imply within the context of a broader ‘Leave’ campaign that was ‘overdetermined by racism’ (Virdee & McGeever 2018, 1804).

Westminster Bridge attack, 2017

Our second case study focuses on a single photograph taken by freelance photojournalist Jamie Lorriman in the aftermath of the Westminster Bridge attack. This photograph shows a Muslim woman wearing hijab walking past a group of people gathered around an injured person on Westminster Bridge. The woman holds her left hand to her face while looking at a mobile phone held in her other hand (Figure 19.2). This photograph was one of a series uploaded by Lorriman to the picture agency Rex Features, which then supplied it to the New York Daily News to illustrate its report on the attack. From here the photograph was appropriated for circulation on social media. The case study is specifically concerned with the uploading of this photograph to Twitter by the user @SouthLoneStar, along with the accompanying message: ‘Muslim woman pays no mind to the terror attack, casually walks by a dying man while checking phone #PrayForLondon#Westminster#BanIslam’. This tweet was retweeted thousands of times and widely reported in the UK press. This press coverage reported on the negative responses of other social media users to the Islamophobia of @SouthLoneStar’s tweeting of Lorriman’s photograph. This coverage was underpinned by the assumption that @SouthLoneStar was the account of an actual North American holding overtly right-wing and Islamophobic views. This assumption was reasonable at the time, given that @SouthLoneStar’s profile photograph depicted a young white man wearing a Stetson hat, with an accompanying profile description that stated ‘Proud TEXAN and AMERICAN patriot’. However, this matter was complicated in November 2017, when it was revealed that @SouthLoneStar was a fictitious user operated by Russia’s Internet Research Agency (IRA) for the purpose of spreading disinformation to Russia’s international benefit. This further development in the story of @SouthLoneStar’s tweet was itself widely reported in the UK press.

Taken at face value, @SouthLoneStar’s tweet of Lorriman’s photograph appears to be a straightforward example of racist disinformation. The tweet explicitly directs the viewer to interpret the photograph as showing a Muslim woman’s indifference to the violent aftermath of a terrorist attack and to understand that the woman is indifferent because she is a Muslim. @SouthLoneStar’s tweet is also easy to identify as intentionally misleading. Lorriman’s photographs of the Muslim woman walking past the group of people around a victim on Westminster Bridge on the Rex Features website are all captioned ‘Sequence frame showing a woman visibly distressed passing the scene of the terrorist incident on Westminster Bridge, London’. This reveals a clear disjunction between what Lorriman himself presumably wrote about his photograph and what @SouthLoneStar asserts that it shows. However, as with the ‘Breaking Point’ poster, analysis of @SouthLoneStar’s tweet as an example of disinformation should not
stop here. There is a need not only to examine how @SouthLoneStar’s tweet misrepresented Lorriman’s photograph and how this misrepresentation was informed by Islamophobic ideas but also to contextualise the tweet in terms of IRA disinformation practices.

The IRA has operated on Twitter since at least 2012 (Farkas & Bastos 2018), enabling them to develop a sophisticated framework for sowing disinformation, which involves both automated and human-operated accounts (Dawson & Innes 2019). These accounts align with highly partisan beliefs and engage both with genuine users and with each other, simulating fabricated conflict to generate artificial divisions. The IRA targeted the UK especially heavily in 2017 (Howard et al. 2018), with its disinformation campaigns being focused on the series of terrorist attacks that occurred that year, starting with the Westminster Bridge attack. Innes (2020) has observed that IRA accounts specifically targeted the immediate aftermaths of these attacks with ‘right-wing, anti-Islam’ sentiments with the aim of sowing ‘antagonism and anxiety’ (12). In relation to this context, Innes also specifically discusses @SouthLoneStar, noting that this account and several others were ‘constructed around overtly politically right-wing, Southern state, President Trump supporting’ personas (12).

The point about these personas is that they were manufactured out of already-existing right-wing identities and existing chauvinistic and racist discourses. @SouthLoneStar’s tweet of Lorriman’s photograph in particular tapped into long-standing media tropes about Muslim women that frame them in terms of fundamentalism and terror (Ahmed & Matthes 2017; Bullock & Jafri 2000; Werbner 2007) and identify female Muslim practices of head covering and ‘veiling’ as forms of ‘Islamic aggression’ (Perry 2014, 83). The latter is significant because it was the presence of the woman’s headscarf in Lorriman’s photograph that enabled the image to be reframed in Islamophobic terms. Coming from an IRA-operated account, @SouthLoneStar’s tweets were not sincere expressions of an authentic right-wing populist identity. Nevertheless, these tweets mobilised sentiments shared with actual right-wing populists, meaning that they involved a kind of fabricated sincerity that is difficult to distinguish from genuine expressions of a right-wing subjectivity. This fabricated sincerity was essential to the function of @SouthLoneStar’s tweet as disinformation and for the IRA’s objective of sowing political division. It was this tapping into existing Islamophobic constructions of racial difference and the political antagonisms to which they relate that enabled @SouthLoneStar’s tweet to become highly visible on social media and, from there, to gain extensive mainstream media coverage, significantly increasing its reach. It is also important to note the @SouthLoneStar’s framing of Lorriman’s photograph, and thus the event that it represents, also continues to be highly visible in search engines. It is these multiple refractions and complex online and offline journeys of the image across various mediums that complicate any analysis but are crucial to emphasise before this chapter concludes.

Conclusion

This chapter started by arguing for the need to examine images as a stand-alone type of content in relation to disinformation, given that so much manipulated content is visual. It thus sought to build on the emerging literature in this area with a specific focus on examples of visual disinformation relating to the UK that were informed by racist, anti-immigration, and Islamophobic sentiments. In doing so it has offered a way to analyse visual disinformation that moves beyond verification strategies, originating in journalism, that are underpinned by the ultimate aim of labelling an image as ‘true’ or ‘false’. This approach also goes beyond academic strategies that are overly focused on identifying themes across sets of images, primarily using content analysis. Our approach advocates for research that recognises the significant roles highly visible images – such as the ‘Breaking Point’ poster and Lorriman’s photograph of the
aftermath of the Westminster Bridge attack – play within formations of right-wing populism in the UK and beyond. In order to better understand relationships between populism and disinformation, it is crucial to take more seriously the importance of such prominent images as it is clear that their value is recognised by those who hold right-wing populist views. Our case studies highlight the need to address the complexities and nuances of the multiple journeys of these images. This chapter has therefore sought to advocate not simply taking more seriously the role of the visual in disinformation research, but also this multi-layered complexity of how images are used and by whom, how they travel across platforms and mediums, and what effects they have on- and offline. Taking these things seriously necessarily involves exploring the contexts within which visual mis- and disinformation is produced and consumed. In relation to the specific discussion in this chapter, this necessitates examining how examples of visual disinformation connect to well-established right-wing populist ideas in the UK and Europe more widely. The approach laid out in this chapter will contribute to the further development of a research agenda that more closely embraces the study of images as crucial elements of contemporary racist and right-wing populist discourse, specifically focusing on highly visible images that significantly shape public discourse. This approach also adopts a more critical approach to the agents and distributors of manipulated content, including mainstream politicians and parties (in our chapter, Nigel Farage and UKIP) as well as the mainstream media, rather than simply pointing to social media (or indeed foreign interference) as the most significant problem.

Notes
1 The framework can be found here: https://bit.ly/20QuestionsFramework.
2 Getty describes the content of the photograph as follows: ‘Migrants are escorted through fields by police as they are walked from the village of Rigonce to Brezice refugee camp on October 23, 2015 in Rigonce, Slovenia’. www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/migrants-are-escorted-through-fields-by-police-as-they-are-news-photo/493896788 (accessed 6 June 2020).
3 The version of UKIP’s poster published in The Daily Express involved more text than the billboard version, but even here, UKIP avoided explicitly identifying what they intended to communicate as the threat of non-white immigration to the UK. This version of the poster states that ‘Net immigration in the UK stands at over 330,000 people a year’. Continuing: ‘Just under half of these people are from the EU’. The poster says nothing about who the other non-EU immigrants are, leaving the spectator to surmise this from the appearance of the people in Mitchell’s photograph (Farage, 2016).
4 This kind of use of a photograph of a large group of refugees/migrants has precedents in the UK. For example, on 8 May 2003, The Daily Express used a similar image of migrants running across a French rail yard towards the camera on its front page, with the headline ‘WE CAN’T KEEP THEM OUT’ (Faulkner 2003).

References


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