AMBIENT AFFILIATION AND #BREXIT

Negotiating values about experts through censure and ridicule

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Introduction

Brexit has been described as “the leading edge of an ongoing anti-expert revolution” (Fuller, 2017, p. 575). Controversy regarding the role of experts has spawned debate in countless Twitter interactions where social media users negotiate values about the status of experts in society. Discourses devaluing the legitimacy of expertise refract “questions of both class (antipathy to ruling elites, the very architects of austerity) and nation (expertise symbolised ‘elsewhere’; international institutions, EU bureaucrats and those seeking to protect global free trade)” (Clarke & Newman, 2017, p. 110). In the aftermath of both the Brexit decision and the 2016 US Presidential election, commentators have begun worrying about whether we are entering a ‘post-truth’ era in which facts and experts are undermined in favour of emotional reactions to events. Some have claimed that the public have become more tolerant of politicians who lie or ignore expert knowledge (e.g. scientific consensus about climate change) due to what has been termed an emergent ‘post-truth’ ethos where a lack of interest in facts “has become a political stance” (Higgins, 2016). What is at stake is the extent to which truth, and the expert knowledge that is associated with determining truth, is valued and how challenges to truth become a “mechanism for asserting political dominance” (McIntyre, 2018, p. xiv). Which views achieve dominance depends in part on how they are taken up in online public discourses, particularly on social media platforms.

Within social media environments, the nature of the ambient ‘bonding’ that occurs will impact which kinds of views are able to achieve prominence and also which views are considered to have veracity within a certain group or community of users. We know from research into gossip that criticising someone can be a highly aligning activity (Eggins & Slade, 1997/2005; Dunbar, 2004; Bosson et al., 2006), and that it is closely related to the establishment of in-group/out-group boundaries (Tajfel, 1970; Gagnon & Bourhis, 1996; Wert & Salovey,
Terms such as ‘media bubbles’, ‘silos’ and ‘echo chambers’ (Jasny et al., 2015; Berghel, 2017) have been used to describe how particular social media communities tend to exclude outside viewpoints that are seen as incommensurable, and this kind of characterisation may also explain how experts tend to be seen as part of an ‘elite’ out-group (Speed & Mannion, 2017). For instance, political hashtag communities often adopt homogenous hashtagging practices and link to similar media, rarely straying outside the dominant viewpoint of their political discourse community (Bouma et al., 2017).

In tandem with these practices eroding the status of experts are ongoing discourses seeking to destabilise the status of ‘facts’, as well as counter-discourses ridiculing both of these tendencies (Zappavigna, 2017). For example, frequent hashtags, visible in agnate discourses at the time of the Brexit debate, include #FakeNews and #AlternativeFacts. These references co-occur with a debate in the United States about the relative significance of facts and opinions. The proliferation of these tags may be viewed as symptomatic of an ongoing decline in public trust of expert judgement, fuelled by social media platforms where displays of public affect are prominent (Keane & Razir, 2014). This perhaps contributes to an increasing gap that has already been identified between expert advice and public attitudes more generally (Spicer, 2016).

To date there have been few language-focused studies of Brexit discourses that have addressed discourses about expertise in particular. For example, there has been some preliminary work on the role of metaphor in influencing whether facts are determined by the public to be plausible (Musolff, 2017; Đurović & Silaški, 2018). Most linguistic work on Brexit, however, has been concerned with particular issues such as immigration and the discursive construction of fear and othering (Cap, 2016; Chapter 5 this volume). Alternatively, researchers have been interested in political language, such as the evaluative language used in the Remain campaign (Buckledee, 2018), or on the linguistic formation of stance more generally, for example in blogging (Simaki et al., 2017). This chapter approaches discourse about experts from the perspective of affiliation, considering how microbloggers, users of platforms such as Twitter that afford publishing of character-constrained social media posts, align with (or de-align from) particular political values about expertise.

**Background: ‘had enough of experts’**

An important contextual moment in the ongoing discourse about experts that occurred before the Brexit referendum was UK politician Michael Gove’s statement during a Sky News interview with Faisal Islam in June 2016, in which he claimed that people had ‘had enough of experts’ (shown in italics below):

*Michael Gove:* The people who are arguing that we should get out are concerned to ensure that the working people of this country at last get a fair deal. I think the people of this country have had enough of experts with organisations from acronyms saying, saying that . . .
Interviewer: The people of this country have had enough of experts, what do you mean by that?

Michael Gove: with the, with the help from organisations with acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong because these people . . .

Interviewer: The people of this country have had enough of experts?

Michael Gove: because these people are the same ones who have got consistently wrong what’s [been] happening.

Gove’s phrasing ‘had enough of experts’ was heavily quoted on social media platforms. Its prevalence was seen in a previous corpus-based study by the author of the types of voices involved in Brexit discourse about experts (Zappavigna, 2017). The corpus in this present study was created by querying the Twitter API for posts containing one or more of the words ‘expert’, ‘experts’ and ‘expertise’ together with the hashtag ‘#brexit’ from 2 July 2016 to 23 October 2017, resulting in a dataset of 35,020 tweets. The most common 3-gram in this corpus was ‘had enough of’, found in posts referencing Gove’s original phrasing ‘had enough of experts’, for example:

(1) @guardian #Brexit Why should we worry? Britain has had enough of experts.
(2) #MichaelGove #idiotnation @Bertie_Waster Well there were no facts in the #Brexit campaign because ‘we’ve all had enough of experts’.
(3) @BorisJohnson it’ll all be fine eh? @michaelgove so the public have had enough of experts?
(4) @User we’ve all had enough of experts telling us facts. #brexit
(5) @User1 @User2 @FT he’s just an expert and the #Brexit campaign taught us ‘we’ve had enough of experts’ Too late now.
(6) @User1 it’s post #brexit now Pete we’ve had enough of experts! #r4today

The ‘had enough of experts’ phrasing appeared to crystallise the anti-intellectual sentiment of the Leave campaign before the referendum and its tendency to pathologise ‘elites’ and ‘so-called experts’. Gove’s statement spawned a phrasal template meme, with social media users producing large volumes of posts referencing the phrase via various forms of quotation. Many of these posts humorously mocked the ‘had enough of experts’ viewpoint (Zappavigna, 2017), for example:

(7) So Gove has had enough of experts. I’d love to be his Doctor, “Mr Gove this is Dave, he’s a builder, he’ll be doing your prostate exam today”.
(8) Had enough of experts, next time I go to hospital I will insist on having my operation performed by a chef. He’s good with a knife after all.

The phrase was also often used interactively as a retort in exchanges debating political points about Brexit; for example, in the following extract from a longer exchange:
(9) User A: The beauty of the crushing defeat of the left is they still do not see the real reasons. I love EU.
(10) User B: You sound like an expert. People have had enough of experts.

This chapter seeks to build on Zappavigna’s (2017) study of quoted voices in order to understand how the values that these voices reference are interactively negotiated in the process of affiliation.

**Dataset**

Since the aim of this study was to explore how values regarding experts were negotiated, instances of user interaction needed to be sampled. Given the prevalence of the ‘had enough of’ 3-gram in the corpus, described in the previous section, this seemed like an important discursive site. The frequency of the phrase further prompted a search of Gove’s Twitter stream for the word ‘expert’ to determine whether he had produced more discourse about the status of experts and whether members of the public had interacted with him regarding his views. The search returned the following three posts, two of which are directed at Jo Maugham QC, a British barrister (see also Figure 4.1):

**Post 1**

An expert writes . . .

Jo Maugham QC @JolyonMaugham:

Labour can’t make headway – even when the Government is in utter meltdown. It really must re-evaluate its strategy and leadership. [URL]

**Post 2**

An expert in English language teaching replies [URL]

[Deleted tweet by unknown user]

**Post 3**

A distinguished expert in tax law provides a winning self-portrait

Jo Maugham QC @JolyonMaugham:

Replying to @user1 @user2

It’s not that you guys are so consistently wrong. It’s that you’re so consistently staggeringly mediocre.

Amusingly, all of these posts were instances where Gove cited people as experts (in what appeared a genuine rather than sarcastic manner). In each post the ‘expert’ was referenced in a projecting clause:
An expert writes

An expert . . . replies

A distinguished expert . . . provides . . .

Each post multimodally embedded the ‘expert’ user’s post as a form of quotation via the resource of ‘meta-vocalisation’ (Zappavigna, 2017, p. 329), where a quoted source is instantiated via modal affordances specific to a social media platform e.g. via an @mention, retweet or hashtag (Figure 4.1). For example, the first tweet in Figure 4.1 embeds a post by Jo Maugham QC that, in turn, embeds another post presenting figures from a poll about Brexit: “Do you think that Theresa May has done a good job or a bad job at handling Britain’s exit from the European Union?” All replies to these three posts by Gove were collected resulting in a specialised dataset of 138 replies (117 replies to Post 1, 9 replies to Post 2, and 12 replies to Post 3). Unsurprisingly, as we will see, the replies in this set mostly ridicule Gove and his apparent hypocrisy.

Rather than representing simple dialogue, these conversational interactions are perhaps best thought of as ‘multilogues’ since they often involve multiple

![Twitter posts](image-url)

**FIGURE 4.1** All uses of ‘expert’ in Gove’s Twitter stream³
participants and overlapping exchanges, rather than orderly dialogic exchanges (Zappavigna & Martin, 2017). These can be approached from either a synoptic perspective, in which Gove’s initial post is seen as the nucleus to which all replies are related (Figure 4.2), or from a dynamic perspective, in which a user may enter the ‘conversation’ at any point and at any time (right-hand side Figure 4.3).

An example of the kind of interaction that Gove’s post engendered is the conversation-like fragment in Figure 4.4. The initiating post in this exchange is
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Gove’s tweet, which is directly replied to by User 1. The next user then replies to User 2 and their reply is also presented by Twitter as including Gove, thus seeming to inherit the address in the previous exchange even though the post appears to be talking about Gove rather than to him (though @mentions have been noted to have the dual function of acting as a reference and as a vocative [Zappavigna, 2012, p. 34]). Without directly inspecting the output of the Twitter API, and consulting only how the tweet appears to the user via the Twitter web interface, it is ambiguous whether or not the original user (in this case Gove) has been manually addressed by the user, or has been automatically added to the thread by the system. This is part of the way that the affordances of the platform are linked with the dynamics of the interaction and with what is and is not possible in terms of structure. Theoretically the interaction is never complete as another user may enter and reply to any of the posts at any point in the unfolding exchange.

The subsequent sections explore affiliation (social bonding) in the 139 replies to Gove’s expert tweets.

Method

The replies to Gove’s expert tweets were analysed using the framework for exploring affiliation that will be explained below, together with a system network for considering the dialogic dimension of affiliation (Figure 4.5). However, in order to understand the main unit of analysis used in modelling affiliation, it is first necessary to explain the concept of ‘coupling’. This is the fundamental concept used to explore how values are instantiated in discourse as the fusion of experience with evaluation (i.e. ideation with attitude), and as such, ‘coupling’ is the key ‘ingredient’ needed to understand how people align or de-align around values in their interactions.
Construing values as couplings

Clearly expressing support for, or criticising, particular values is central to political discourse. Therefore, in order to understand the role these values play in social bonding, we need to understand how they are realised in discourse. According to a social semiotic perspective, values are visible in discourse as combinations or ‘couplings’ of meanings involved in the creation of attitudinal stances. At the most abstract level, coupling refers to coordinated discursive choices occurring across semiotic dimensions (Martin, 2008, p. 39). This means that there is a recurrent coordination of linguistic variables across a text, for instance selections in interpersonal and experiential meanings, as associations of ideation and attitude (e.g. the co-selection of negative evaluation and experts in the ‘had enough of experts’ tweets mentioned earlier). In essence this concerns a “relation of ‘with’: variable x comes with variable y” (Zhao, 2011, p. 144). This co-selection may occur across any dimension of language, and also across modalities (e.g. gesturing co-occurring with speech).

One of the most studied forms of coupling is ideation-attitude coupling, theorised to have a key role in how values are ‘tabled’, i.e. how they are offered interactively as potential bonds in discourse (Zappavigna, 2018). This form of coupling has been explored across communicative domains such as casual conversation (Knight, 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2013), academic discourse (Hao & Humphrey, 2009; Hood, 2010), business writing (Szenes, 2016), legal proceedings (Zappavigna et al., 2008; Martin et al., 2013) and social media discourse (Zappavigna & Martin, 2017; Zappavigna, 2018).

The method used to annotate the attitude component of the couplings explored in this chapter is derived from the appraisal framework (Martin & White, 2005). This framework has been used in a number of social media studies, including studies of affiliation (Zappavigna, 2011, 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015; Martin et al., 2013; Page et al., 2014), solidarity building (Drasovean & Tagg, 2015), identity construction (Vásquez, 2014), narrative (Page, 2012) and social tagging (Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015; Zappavigna, 2015). Appraisal postulates three discursive regions of attitudinal meaning: affect (expressing emotion, e.g. ‘love’, ‘disgust’, ‘fear’, etc.), judgement (assessing behaviour, e.g. ‘evil’, ‘ethical’, ‘trustworthy’, etc.) and appreciation (estimating value, e.g. ‘beautiful’, ‘treasured’, ‘noteworthy’, etc.) (Figure 4.5). Each system may be approached at ever-increasing levels of delicacy depending on the analytical task at hand, although it has to be acknowledged that some appraisal subcategories can be fuzzy and ambiguous. Nevertheless, affect, for example, may be specified as dis/inclination, for instance:

(11) If at least one or two expert types could say something vaguely reassuring that would be great. Bit scared right now. #Brexit #EUref

It may be also be categorised as un/happiness, for instance:
(12) It’s more about the EU laws that generates money but I am no expert either just sad about. #Brexit

In addition affect may be realised as in/security:

(13) Every fuckers an expert on politics today. #Brexit #Worried

Finally, affect may be specified as dis/satisfaction:

(14) #Brexit: “We’ve had enough of experts” – UK MP Michael Gove. America then says “We’ve had enough of expert politicians.” #ElectionNight

The more delicate categorisations of judgement and appreciation are indicated on the network in Figure 4.5 as a series of probe questions that can assist in establishing the meaning to be annotated.

Appraisal also acknowledges that much evaluative meaning is not realised directly in evaluative lexis but may be implied in various ways through ‘invoked’

![Attitude Network](image-url)

**FIGURE 4.5** The system of attitude

*Source: Based on Martin and White (2005).*
appraisal (Hood & Martin, 2005). The framework distinguishes between three systems of invoked evaluation:

- **Provoke**, where attitude is invoked by lexical metaphor, for example the post below negatively evaluates the capacity of ‘experts’ via the fortune teller metaphor:

(15) The Bank of England and other *experts are not fortune tellers* – they can’t predict the future with a high degree of accuracy. Complaining that it’s bad, but not as bad as they said it would be, doesn’t mean that #Brexit is good. It’s a calamity and it must be stopped.

- **Flag**, where attitude is signalled by intensification or counter-expectancy; for example the upscaled graduation ‘too much’ in the following post negatively evaluates the amount of communication from experts in a quote:

(16) I recall the pro-Brexit types telling us ‘we’ve heard *too much* from experts’.

- **Afford**, where attitude is activated by ideational tokens that trigger particular cultural values, for example ‘investment banker’ in the post below is not explicitly evaluative but triggers negative associations (e.g. corporate greed) that reinforces the negative inscribed judgement of ‘vested interest’ in the final clause:

(17) Also I’m pretty sure her *investment banker* husband has capital interest in EU markets. She has a vested interest in messing up Brexit.

Accounting for invoked meaning is particularly important for interpreting Brexit discourse due to the way that political discourse tends to involve calling upon different kinds of cultural meanings that are negatively or positively evaluated depending on the particular political orientation being construed. It is also important due to the role that humour and innuendo tend to play in political tweeting.

Gove’s ‘had enough of experts’ phrase can be annotated as an ideation-attitude coupling, using square brackets to indicate the scope of the coupling and forward slash to signify the fusion of ideation and attitude:

[ideation: experts (trigger)/attitude: token of affect (negative satisfaction)]

There were some variations of the same coupling pattern with different ideational triggers, for example some posts inserted Gove himself:

(18) People in this country have *had enough of Michael Gove*. #ToryLeadership #Brexit #Gove2016

(19) To paraphrase, “I think the people of this country have *had enough of Michael Gove . . .*” The Experts #Brexit #MichaelGove #Tory #TheresaMay

[ideation: Michael Gove (trigger)/attitude: token of affect (negative satisfaction)]
Modifying the original coupling in this way functions as a form of humorous ridicule. Negotiating couplings interactively is the discursive mechanism for forging (or breaking) social bonds, a concept to which we now turn.

**Bonding by negotiating couplings**

Social semiotic research into affiliation (the forging of social connections) is largely based on Knight’s (2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2013) research into bonding in casual conversation. This work explored how social bonds are realised interactively in dialogic communication. It focused on how interpersonal meanings function in conversational humour between friends chatting about their everyday experiences. In contrast to face-to-face conversation, social media exchanges incorporate dimensions of both interactive dialogue and ambient ‘multilogue’, as described earlier. This also means that the bonding that is possible in social media communication can incorporate both dialogic affiliation, where participants negotiate couplings in particular exchanges, and communing affiliation, where participants ‘commune around’ a coupling without necessarily engaging in a direct encounter with another user (for instance by engaging in a hashtagging practice) (Zappavigna & Martin 2017, p. 4; Zappavigna 2018, p. 201). In other words, affiliation can occur both when people interact directly (dialogic affiliation) and when people commune around something but do not interact directly (communing affiliation).

This chapter is focused on the dialogic dimension of affiliation in microblogging. Figure 4.6 is a system network for the different choices a language user may make when interactively negotiating a coupling. The most essential choice is between whether to respond to a coupling that has been tabled in an initiating move or to disengage and ignore it entirely.

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**FIGURE 4.6** Affiliation strategies for negotiating couplings
If a responding move is made, it may manage the coupling in various ways. The first choice is between supporting or rejecting the coupling. Support can be realised by warranting the coupling. For example, in the following tweet User 1 tables three couplings as annotated below, the final one of which judges Gove in terms of negative capacity:

(20) User 1: Michael Gove says he is ‘radically skeptical’ and doesn’t value ‘expert opinion’ – what an idiot! #Brexit #UKIP

[ideation: Gove/attitude: positive capacity]
[ideation: expert opinion/attitude: negative valuation]
[ideation: Gove/attitude: negative capacity]

This final coupling is then replayed in User 2’s response as a supporting move rallying around the same coupling of Gove with negative capacity. After this, another coupling is used in a different supporting choice (adjusting): this coupling selects a different attitude from the same system (propriety rather than capacity), hence it is coded as an adjusting choice rather than a rallying choice:

(21) User 2: he’s an idiot. How could he? @username

support: warrant: rally

[ideation: Gove/attitude: negative capacity]

support: warrant: adjust

[ideation: Gove’s behaviour: attitude negative propriety (afforded)]

Alternatively, a coupling may be deferred if it creates what Knight (2010b) refers to as a ‘wrinkle’ with another bond that the interactants already share. By ‘wrinkle’, Knight is referring to a coupling that interrupts the bonding process, creating social tension because it realises “a potential bond that cannot be shared by the conversational participants and which contrasts in a laughable way with an implicated bond that they share together” (Knight, 2010a, p. 208). In face-to-face interaction, deferral of a bond is typically achieved, according to Knight, by ‘laughing off’ the coupling. It, however, is not a choice that appears to be regularly made within the Brexit discourse about experts on Twitter. An example from a more personal domain (similar to the ‘diet talk’ example used in Knight’s research) is the following interaction where users appear to be laughing off an overeating bond:

(22) User 1: I think I ate way too much haha.

[ideation: User’s eating/attitude: negative judgement (flagged)]
User 2: Lol me too I had Mexican for lunch lol!!!

support: defer

[ideation: User 2's behaviour/attitude: negative judgement (flagged)]

In the above, the negative judgement is invoked by being ‘flagged’ via the graduation (‘way too much’), in other words, invoking a meaning of eating beyond reasonable limits. This kind of discourse can be very difficult to interpret without sufficient knowledge of the context of the interaction and the existing bonds that interactants share.

Returning to the system network, the clear alternative to supporting a tabled coupling is rejecting it. This may be achieved simply by dismissing it in a way that does not engage with the coupling at all, for instance using an eyeroll emoji or an expression such as ‘yawn’ or ‘whatever’ that closes down the interaction. For example there was one reply to Gove that consisted simply of a frowning eye-roll emoji:

(24) 😞

If, on the other hand, the interactant chooses to engage with the tabled coupling, they may actively reject it by opposing it through either censure or ridicule. These are the two dominant patterns in the responses to Gove’s ‘an expert writes/replies/provides’ tweets, which we will now explore in detail.

**Analysis: affiliation through censure and ridicule**

The choice between censure and ridicule is essentially a choice between criticising a stance or imitating it, although imitation is likely not the only means of realising ridicule. Censure involves critiquing a position, typically through some form of negative attitude, often negative judgement. On the other hand, ridicule mocks a persona or stance, usually by some form of imitation incorporating a replaying or reconstrual of a tabled coupling. Rhetorical strategies that are typically associated with ridicule, such as irony, mockery and sarcasm, are notoriously difficult to analyse, since the meanings at stake often rely on implicating rather than explicating interpersonal meanings. These strategies also tend to draw on the semiotic dexterity of language to simultaneously construe incongruous or contradictory meanings without losing, and indeed often fuelling, communicative power. Teasing, insulting, taunting and forms of jocular mockery have been the subject of much attention in linguistics (Haugh, 2010), informed by work on the bonding role of joking more generally (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997; Norrick, 2003). It has been suggested that ‘biting’ forms of joking, such as sarcasm and mockery “can express both aggression and solidarity – aggression in the message, attacking others for their foibles and errors, and solidarity in the metamessage, including others in a
playful relationship with increased involvement” (Norrick, 1994, p. 423). Martin (2000, p. 164) has suggested that sarcasm might be thought of as involving “dis-cordant couplings – either between appraisal selections and what is being appraised, or among the appraisal variables themselves”.

Returning to the network of affiliation strategies, censure is the choice to oppose a tabled coupling by challenging it attitudinally. This was frequently observed in replies to Gove’s ‘An expert writes’ tweet (Figure 4.1). Gove’s tweet tables a coupling that positively appreciates the verbiage of the embedded tweet through presenting the other user as an ‘expert’. Depending on one’s political stance, positive capacity is usually infused in the subject position of an expert. In other words, experts have been historically associated with positive intellectual capacity and social authority, but this association now appears to be dependent on whether positively evaluating experts conforms to the particular political worldview held by a microblogger.

(25)  **Gove: An expert writes . . . [[embedded tweet]]**

   [ideation: quoted tweet/attitude: positive appreciation]

   Of course it does not take long for the apparent hypocrisy of this projecting clause to be noted by ambient observers who censure Gove by negatively appreciating his discourse:

(26)  **User 1: have you twigged yet what you’ve said?**

   manage: reject: oppose: censure

   [ideation: Gove’s tweet/attitude: negative appreciation (afforded)]

   This censure opens up a semiotic space for another user to offer their support for this negative assessment. User 2 provides a modified coupling that shifts the negative appreciation of Gove’s verbiage to negative judgement of Gove’s capacity:

(27)  **User 2: He won’t have, he has a genetic flaw that means he’s incapable of understanding irony.**

   manage: support: warrant: adjust

   [ideation: Gove/attitude: negative capacity]

   [ideation: Gove/attitude: negative capacity]

   The initial respondent then rallies around this adjusted coupling:

(28)  **User 1: What’s the betting when the penny drops he’ll be back tracking with inverted commas or a so-called!**
Many of the censuring replies criticise Gove’s framing of Maugham’s tweet, for example:

(29) User 7: That’s a very selective endorsement of Maugham’s tweets Michael.

Some replies instead target a coupling inside the embedded tweet, pointing out that it is incommensurate with Gove’s generally pro-government stance. These posts challenge Gove by appearing, on first pass, to support him but by, in fact, invoking a sarcastic tone to realise a form of censure:

(30) User 5: Glad to see that you are *honest* enough to agree that the ‘Government is in utter meltdown’ though. 2/2.

Due to the affordances of Twitter, which enables theoretically infinite replies, any move is always available for a potential reply. For instance the post above received the following censuring reply questioning the veracity of User 5’s post:

(31) User 6: Where does he say that User 5?

In the above, while no attitude is inscribed, the interrogative implies or affords negative judgement (veracity), appearing to question the truthfulness of User 5’s claim. A very frequent pattern in the replies was ridicule rather than explicit censure. This is in keeping with the patterning of the ‘had enough of experts’ discourse explored by Zappavigna (2017) and briefly introduced in the background to this chapter. For example, there were many posts that sarcastically invert Gove’s apparent stance on experts in the manner of the following:
User 7: Oh how you love experts.

manage: reject: oppose: ridicule

[ideation: experts/attitude: positive affect]

The modal affordances of Twitter mean that these kinds of ridiculing replies are not restricted to verbiage and can also be realised as images or videos. For example, one reply employed embedded video of a snippet of Gove’s Sky News interview (at the point where he makes the ‘had enough of experts’ comment) as a responding move. Rather than ridicule employing imitation, this is ridicule where a recorded voice (rather than a quoted voice) is replayed as a form of mockery aimed at highlighting hypocrisy.

An example where a responding move is realised as an image was a cartoon together with the hashtag #StopBrexit. This visual reply appears to mock a generalised voice acting as an exemplar of the anti-expert viewpoint. The cartoon represented an exchange between two people, with Person 1 holding a newspaper featuring an image of three judges on the front page and the headline ‘enemies of the people’:

Person 1: Bloody experts – economists, lawyers, academics – are ruining our country! It’s time we were governed by ignoramuses . . .

[ideation: experts/attitude: negative propriety]

[ideation: government/attitude: negative capacity]

Person 2: I think we are . . .

support: warrant: rally

[ideation: government/attitude: negative capacity]

All of the couplings sampled in this section appear to act in the service of a ‘legitimate expert’ bond, where what is at stake is the legitimacy of the expert voice as a source of information and influence. In terms of the affiliation strategies employed to negotiate these couplings, 40 per cent of the replies to Gove’s posts employed censure and 60 per cent employed ridicule. While it is difficult to quantify, almost all of the censure had humorous undertones, for example the following post, which questions Gove’s capacity:

Indeed. Unlike you, Michael, he actually is an expert. Whereas you merely disparage the superior intellectual abilities of others.

The above post may be interpreted as somewhat humorous since it is using Gove’s own choice of words as a jibe. This is different, however, to the humour engendered through ridicule (the more common choice in the replies), where Gove’s phrase in the Sky News interview is deliberately imitated in order to mock him:
(36) He is one expert we have definitely all had enough of.
(37) I thought you’d had enough of experts, Michael?
(38) Aren’t we fed up with experts?

This tendency toward humour as a response to the online discourse of politicians has also been documented in work on responses to tweets by Donald Trump around the same time as the Brexit discourse reported on here (Zappavigna, 2018). Tweets about Brexit and Trump have demonstrated some discursive ‘cross-pollination’ due to the temporal adjacency, but also due to the similar questioning of the status of so-called expert ‘elites’ in both arenas of public discourse (Zappavigna, 2017, 2018), for instance many posts featured both hashtags:

(39) #brexit: #trump:

“I think we’ve all had enough of experts, don’t you?”

Welcome to the post-factual age of the idiot. Protect yourselves.

Discourse about Trump displays a similar concern over the social status of experts and sources of legitimacy. Rather than debate about particular policies or issues, what is being negotiated is attitude about experts, which is perhaps the diversionary rhetorical motive of calling into question the nature of expertise in the first place.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored censure and ridicule as affiliation strategies in replies to tweets by Michael Gove, where he quotes ‘experts’ despite having previously been virally lampooned on social media for his use of the phrase ‘had enough of experts’ during a Sky News interview. It has detailed a framework for exploring how values are interactively negotiated in dialogic affiliation and applied to this set of replies. The analysis found that ridicule was the preferred option in the replies, which is unsurprising since users were drawing a connection between Gove’s ‘had enough of experts’ phrase and his choice to use the ‘expert’ label in an attempt to legitimate his own political views. Thus the ridicule was aimed at exposing apparent hypocrisy.

In accord with previous research on the aligning function of criticism via gossip, humorous or witty negative evaluation appears to augment affiliation, and this may be the reason for the frequency of humour in the texts analysed. In cases where the humour involves a bond that the participants cannot share, it creates what Knight (2010b, p. 46) refers to as a semiotic ‘wrinkle’ that allows meanings that are too controversial to be laughed off. When the humour involves a bond that is targeted in direct opposition to something (‘laughing at’ rather than ‘laughing off’) it assists the interactants in their rallying around negative attitude, as we saw in the case of posts ‘laughing at’ Gove’s apparent hypocrisy in his use of the term ‘expert’.
Pro and anti-expert Brexit discourse might be thought of as indicative of the tendency of political support to be polarised, with each side rallying around the values that characterise their ‘team’ (and perhaps stifling discussion of actual issues). Adopting the perspective on coupling presented in this chapter, we might see these teams or communities as ‘coupling chambers’, where an initial coupling in a phrase such as ‘had enough of experts’ is re-instantiated many times over. It remains to be seen whether ‘post-truth’ is the optimal term for accounting for the kind of coupling patterns prevalent in the #Brexit era, where ideation is being used as a prop for sharing attitude (e.g. by introducing labels such as ‘elites’) and sharing attitude appears to be taking prominence over debating policy.

Notes

1 Brexit functions as a “complex nominal” (Fontaine, 2017) that condenses various contextual meanings about Britain leaving the European Union.
2 The italics in the numbered examples in this chapter are ours.
3 The content of the embedded tweet in the second post had been deleted from Twitter at the time of writing. This is part of the affordances of the semiotic mode and presents a challenge to analysts since exchanges between users may be viewed as ongoing processes, with ongoing meaning potential that need not be resolved in a particular time frame.
4 This representation is based on the ‘Treeverse’ visualisation (https://github.com/paulgb/Treeverse/blob/master/README.md). The ellipsis “….” is used to indicate that the diagram is abridged (since space and cognitive constraints prevent representing the full set of replies).
5 Martin (2000, p. 164) first introduced the notion of coupling to explain humour “as involving discordant couplings – either between appraisal selections and what is being appraised, or among the appraisal variables themselves”.
6 Systemic functional linguistics differentiates lexical metaphor, realised via lexis, from grammatical metaphor, realised via grammatical choices (see Taverniers, 2006).
7 Instances of inscribed attitude are shown in italics in the examples throughout this section.
8 The cartoon incorporates the front page of the Daily Mail on 4 November 2016.
9 Note that I have coded posts that are replies of support to an initial post containing ridicule as ridicule themselves, since in the context of the entire exchange they are contributing to the mockery of Gove’s original post.

References


