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Informal Learning Experiences of Young People During the Scottish Independence Referendum

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In the aftermath of the independence referendum of September 2014 we decided to conduct research on how people learned and educated themselves informally leading up to the vote. Given the range of information and issues people faced, particularly over the final six months of the process, hearing how people made sense of it all is clearly an area of interest – particularly for academics, community educators and politicians.

Through an online survey conducted in December 2014, we asked people a series of questions to ascertain, amongst other things, how and where they gained information, how they interacted with that information and how they utilised social media (if they did so). The survey makes no claims to be representative – indeed the returns are skewed towards Yes supporters but it can highlight the educative processes some groups of people engaged in. In particular we wanted to know what the most important factors were in their final decision, if they changed their voting intention and whether or not they are more politically aware post-referendum and if this has influenced their engagement in democratic life. Due to the overwhelming response we received (1345 returns) we are slowly working our way through the data. The first cohort we have analysed is young people aged 16-24 (86 fully completed returns), to try and make sense of their responses. The findings are extremely interesting.

Of these 86 returns from young people, when asked their position one year before the referendum 37 were decided Yes voters, 17 were No and 32 undecided. In relation to

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factors influencing their decision, our Yes voters prioritised political autonomy and equality, whereas No voters were more concerned about the economy and identity issues. In terms of main sources of information, unsurprisingly perhaps, young people stated that the Internet was critical. They particularly valued undertaking active Internet searches for critical information and assessing arguments, as well as that gathered from both personal and campaign groups' social media sites, as the following quotes indicate:

> I used the Internet for news stories on risks, unknowns, opportunities (on either side), as well as for technical detail such as the Barnett formula.

> I found the Internet the best as it allowed me to access and compare information from both sides on the same topic.

> I used social media, newspapers, news coverage (although it was very biased), online articles, talking to people to do my own research and decide for myself. The more I looked into it the more I changed my mind…

Reassuringly, for those who value the interpersonal and dialogical nature of political discussion, young people also stressed the importance of debate and interaction with friends and family when formulating their voting intention. This was true for both Yes and No voters. Only for female No voters did more traditional forms of media (TV & Newspapers) score particularly high and this was a very small sub-sample (12) so it would be unwise to extrapolate anything from it.

Antipathy to the traditional forms of media was palpable amongst Yes voters. The BBC and newspapers were the targets of much hostility, with many citing the necessity of the Internet as an important counterbalance to traditional media sources. For example:

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> The bias shown by some news sources has completely changed my opinion on them and damaged the credibility I used to view them with. Especially some of the larger ones such as the BBC and Sky. The newspapers were pretty damned biased so it was hard to know what to trust. I used to trust the BBC to be unbiased...Never again.

> I found that the media was very biased in their display of information and did not explain everything clearly. I therefore chose to do my own research.

We asked the cohort how highly they rated a range of social media sites and text messaging and e-mailing in terms of sharing information. Interestingly, Yes supporters were more positive about Facebook and Twitter than their No voting counterparts, who were much more ambivalent about these media. The first three quotes below highlight the deliberative sharing of information, and the last one, how social media use might be experienced negatively:

> Things are brought to light on social media and can be shared through friends. The internet allows personal up to date research. The internet and social media enabled the sharing of views, which helped me reason my choices.

> Sources and discussion on social media were the most useful as people were free to have their say and it was really interesting what you can learn from other people's opinions and experiences.

> Each side picked and chose sources or accounts they agreed with, campaigns became bubbles, leading to hostility in public when talking/being approached by the opposite side as they could not comprehend disagreement.

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The trolling of celebrities such as J.K. Rowling, after she financially backed the No campaign, led to mainstream media highlighting the negative aspect of social media during the referendum. Nevertheless, 43% the young people surveyed here felt that it had a positive impact, whereas only 27% reported it was negative. Indeed, many of the young people argued that the information gathered through digital sources helped how they discussed politics offline:

> …because that…is where a lot of people get their information from and so when it's being discussed offline people actually kind of have an idea what is being discussed.

> If anything people talk about politics face-to-face more now. I don't know if social media had anything to do with it. Maybe people felt more confident putting their ideas forward on social media which consequently put their ideas out there for others to challenge when they met in person.

> I think social media had a great impact on stimulating discussion and do not think it affected discussion on the referendum in person. If anything it increased the discussion in person. The only down side

> I think may be that it could have caused more animosity.
> People actually spoke far more about politics because of social media.

Another interesting development is perhaps the notion that young people are using their social media pages, particularly Facebook, differently post-referendum. In this respect, the impact of the referendum has been to reduce the distance between personal and political issues. Nearly 40% of respondents indicated that they are now more likely to share stories and news pertaining to politics than previously:

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> I am constantly posting articles that I have seen from newspapers etc.
>
> I now share political stories that interest me.
>
> I already posted a lot about politics! But I think I have started using the 'share' function more...

What is more, the activity of posting and commenting was deliberative and educational rather than being simply passed on. From the cohort analysed, a significant proportion stated that they had critically engaged with material from the respective campaigns and had decided to change their voting intention as a result:

> Throughout the referendum I spent a lot of time reading all the information and got a better understanding not just on that topic but political parties in general and this has meant I have become more aware of what is happening in the world. Since the referendum I still keep up to date with what is happening within different political parties and at Westminster.
>
> Having a better understanding of the country's political policies has allowed me to make better judgements. With something as big as independence it was imperative to know the facts.
>
> Nearer the time of the referendum I was interested in hearing what both campaigns had to say and this changed my mind.

It is hoped that this level of critical engagement – which sweeps across the entire youth cohort will leave a 'participative footprint', meaning that this generation will now be critically engaged with the democratic process. When asked if they felt that they were more interested in politics as a result of the referendum, 56% stated that they were, with only 7% saying they are now less interested (disgruntled yes voters,

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primarily!). As a result a number indicate they have since joined a political party, they are posting more information online and a small minority have become active in community and campaign groups. If the referendum leaves any legacy, then perhaps this is the most important a generation of politically aware, critically engaged, activated young people. This is a very welcome outcome.

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