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Can journalism still change people's minds? I hope so

On the morning of that day – shall we call it Black Friday? – when we woke to find ourselves heading out of Europe, there was a tiny shaft of joy.

My 17-year-old daughter was rightly indignant about the result, and unsparing in her criticism of the older generation that had contributed to it.

In among that outburst was a phrase that gently gladdened my otherwise temporarily broken heart.

“The pound has gone through the floor,” she reported.

The strength or otherwise of our national currency and the impact of this on our complex international trading relationships had thus far been a conversational closed book in our house.

So this was most definitely progress.

There's no doubt that the EU debate grabbed the imagination of millions of teenagers and 20somethings in a way that other political issues have not.

But was it a flash in the pan, and how will the deep disappointment and disenchantment that followed affect young people's fragile engagement with public affairs?

As I said a couple of weeks ago, [this is one of the most crucial issues of our time](#) – and not just because in a few years' time, young people might be able to outvote older generations on Europe.

I think my biggest worry is that, as a society, we risk growing away from a sense of community, and of taking less and less interest in the world around us.

That fear – and the idea that young people are at the very heart of that drift – has been [well articulated by former Mirror editor and journalism professor Roy Greenslade](#) who argues that a new generation treats politics and traditional news sources as more or less irrelevant.

It's a topic that got a very decent and interesting airing at last week's summer conference of [the Broadcast Journalism Training Council](#), where speakers from two very different arms of the BBC and from Sky talked about the need to adjust to this new reality.

One of this country's experts on youth engagement with politics is [Dr James Sloam, of Royal Holloway at the University of London](#), who argues that young people really do care about their community's future, but feel let down by austerity cuts and by this country's electoral systems. Many have turned their backs on party politics and even voting, to express their views through petitions and protests.

There's little doubt that those views will have been shaped by social media.

I [wrote recently about the accentuated echo chamber effect of Facebook's latest algorithm change](#), which prioritises posts by friends and family over those from media publishers.

That's a point well made by my [fellow lecturer and blogger Richard Horsman in a piece](#) which bemoans the black or white, binary nature of what he calls 'anti-social media'.

Digital media expert Emily Bell has also weighed in, [with serious worries about post-truth politics and the appetite of the public](#) to do their own research on the big issues facing us all.

But the very best thing I have come across on the Facebook changes and their possible effect on community engagement is [this American TV debate on charlierose.com](#).

It's 25 minutes long, but it packs an awful lot of fascinating stuff in, including discussion of the information overload facing us all from a hydra-headed media.

The most sobering comment comes from media guru Jay Rosen:



If we're going to have public engagement with news, it will be because people have intentionally chosen it

In other words, the opportunities for publishers – new and traditional media alike – to creep up on people with challenging ideas and countervailing coverage, to disrupt settled views and prejudices, are going to be very limited in future.

For the moment, the best means of travel for interesting content is going to be on the back of shares by individual readers.

In some senses that could be a very good thing. We need to get better at giving people what they want. It's a simple business truth. Thinking like a reader is always a good use of time.

But do we really want our journalism to be entirely driven by a combination of a business superpower's digital engineering and an enslavement to the cold truth and limited content menu of web analytics?

If there is no room for powerful words to change minds, our profession will be in a sorry state indeed.