

# ‘We’re out, so wtf do we do now?’: Brexit and rural identity in the era of online agricultural communities

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## Abstract

This article explores online interactions between members of the UK farming community in the context of Brexit, a moment of great friction within British agriculture. A ‘netnography’ was conducted of the [farmingforum.co.uk](http://farmingforum.co.uk), a British-based discussion group with a large membership, covering a range of aspects from farming practices to trade and relationships. Findings reveal how the online space challenges and connects notions of rural space and place. A displaced identity, unmoored from traditional farming attributes such as land and locality, becomes both a driving force for participation and a tool for political control. The article sheds light on the under-appreciated political power of such online groups enabled through under-researched digital technologies. The farmer-owned forum represents the ‘other voice’ within corporate-led agricultural innovation; however, the onset of Brexit became a catalyst for extreme politics, facilitating a populist swing towards the Leave campaign and revealing a visceral distrust for institutions.

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**KEYWORDS**

digital agriculture, netnography, online forum, populism, rural identity

## INTRODUCTION

Online spaces for the agricultural community have received little academic attention. With the rise of mobile platforms and 4G, access to the internet has become widespread in ‘developed’ nations (Roberts & Townsend, 2016). A vast spectrum of once disconnected groups uses the internet to create networks that transcend physical boundaries, forging new communities and, in so doing, exchanging knowledge and engaging in political discussion. Many have foreseen this as an emerging democratisation of agriculture, allowing ‘social capital, community participation, indigenous and tacit knowledge’ to flourish (Carolan, 2017, p. 135). Recent political developments, however, speak to the contrary, demonstrating how the politically marginalised have gathered to form powerful and contentious bodies (Bail, 2021).

This study takes one of these groups, participants of online agricultural fora concentrated within the UK, and analyses the way in which they approached the 2016 UK-EU referendum (Brexit). The focal point of research is The Farming Forum (TFF) ([www.thefarmingforum.co.uk](http://www.thefarmingforum.co.uk)), a British-based discussion group with a large membership, covering a range of topics from trade to relationships. The contribution to literature interceding rural identity and ‘digital agriculture’ is made by questioning how the online challenges and connects notions of rural space and place. TFF presents unprecedented access to a widely understudied group (Klerkx et al., 2019), who are notoriously suspicious of outsiders (Chiswell & Wheeler, 2016). Evidence suggests, however, that when projected into this space, users are displaced from their offline context, transcending the geographical limitations of rural places and the material foundation of their identities.

As such, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do members of the online agricultural social network TFF transcend traditional conceptions of space and place?
2. How do they function and maintain themselves as a community, and what can be said about how they deal with moments of severe epistemological antagonism as in the Brexit debate?

Brexit continues to be a moment of great friction within British agriculture. By studying this group and its online presence during the lead-up to and following the referendum (23 June 2016), much can be learnt regarding how the online community functions. Reflecting much of the research around social media and ‘netnography’ (Kozinets, 2015), identity becomes both a driving force for participation in online spaces and a tool for political control, overwhelming discourse with inflammatory and partisan content (Bail, 2021). The remaining sections of this article follow this line of argument, shedding light on the under-appreciated political power of such online groups enabled through under-researched digital technologies within agriculture.

The next section is a background of digital agriculture, which highlights the research problem the article seeks to address. This is followed by the methodology, findings and discussion, which explicate the sample and netnographic process, the evidence collected and how these reflect the current position of rural politics. Finally, some conclusions summarise the work and offer some tentative thoughts on ways forward. These include reflections on how the online space leads to a contested rural identity, which when fueled with the rhetoric of Brexit, facilitated a dangerous

populist political arena. As such, TFF provides a window into the popularity of the Leave political project in rural areas of the UK and is demonstrative of the need to forge progressive spaces for rural politics.

## BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

The prevailing trend in literature on ‘digital agriculture’ is towards linking big data with precision technology systems to boost productivity, backed and controlled by corporate interests (Bronson, 2018, 2019; Mann, 2018; Rotz et al., 2019; Weersink et al., 2018). Bronson and Knezevic (2019) argue that digital innovations tend to aggravate existing inequalities, marginalising social sustainability for environmental and economic concerns (Rose et al., 2021). The organisation of agricultural labour is fixated with increasing profit from the production of food through ever more efficient processes (McCarthy et al., 2021). As such, Barrett and Rose (2020) have reported concern among UK farmers of becoming deskilled and eventually obsolete. Lindblom et al. (2017) have shown that technologies designed to maximize profit are often expensive, inaccessible and lack the fundamental understanding to be useful to farmers. Advances of this nature have led towards the standardisation of farm systems, to the benefit of homogenised large farms and the exclusion of smallholders.

Technological determinism in agriculture is criticised for envisioning farmers as purely rational, economically driven subjects and the uptake and use of technologies is as a profit and loss decision (Glover et al., 2019). Carolan (2017) has posited how precision agriculture is leading to a transformation of farmer identity. So-called ‘good farmers’ do not act on their intuition but on the instructions of data, and to remain competitive, they are forced to comply with said innovations. This data-predilection is drawing attention away from cultivating other forms of relationality that farmers believe are essential for healthy rural communities. Hardy (2019) writes how notions of scalability and growth across space are working in aversion to rural realities. There is a growing body of research that suggests this lacks the necessary social dimension to make innovation truly sustainable (Mann, 2018) and that superior gains can be made through engaging with and fostering existing biocultural relations (Ludwig & Macnaghten, 2020).

The use of social media among farmers across the world is a rapidly growing phenomenon (Trendov et al., 2019). *The Guardian* claims that the use of Instagram hashtags has been instrumental in gathering support for a fairer milk price in 2012 and quelling much of the anger around the badger cull debate in the UK (Gray, 2014). Farmers have little free time to have a critical debate, and therefore politics takes place during small hours of recreation or through mobile phones on social media platforms (TFF has a significant running thread on this topic). The agricultural community is evidently going ‘online’, and TFF poses an interesting lens to observe contemporary agricultural politics.

Krämer (2017) argues that online fora have been instrumental in producing waves of populism; the culture of media consumption has allowed extreme politics to foster unabated and at great speed. This has come to be known as an era of ‘post truth’; a time in which expert knowledge is constantly under scrutiny and the factual basis for knowledge more generally is of secondary importance to emotive sentiment (Andrejevic, 2013; Hopkin & Rosamond, 2017). In such instances, the ‘politics’ is of less concern, compared to the ‘political’ discussion at hand. One must account for the ephemeral antagonistic style of debate to understand this visceral and emotional political dimension (Stage & Knudsen, 2015).

For rural-farming communities, issues of belonging and tradition are significant in the formation of identity, and their marginalisation and consequent failure to mobilise these attributes for progressive change has been well documented (Brooks, 2019; Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020;

Reed, 2004; Vayro et al., 2020). They are rarely appreciated for their cultural and social capital, often excluded from infrastructural resources and thought of as backward (Hardy et al., 2019). They regularly fall victim to ‘agri-bashing’ (van der Ploeg, 2020). The online therefore, presents a potent environment for these communities to respond by way of dissent and disruption of epistemic-norms.

Winter (1996) outlines a political history of farming in the UK, with key themes arising from the repopulation of the countryside and shifting priorities from farming to leisure, the increasing role of sustainability in agricultural policy and a commitment to free market policy. Marsh and Smith (2000) describe how entering the EU expanded agricultural policy networks from farmer groups and national governments alone and became permeable to the interests of consumers, environmentalists and food retailers, resulting in further politicisation, less consensus and a perceived loss of control within the traditional agricultural community. This was exacerbated by multiple ‘food scares’, which in the case of the foot-and-mouth epidemic and the decision of the National Farmers Union (NFU) to support widespread culling, led to a break in trust with farmers (Wilkinson et al., 2010).

This break from cultural and social norms is being translated into online, creating novel forms of connection within the agricultural community. Considering the current political tensions and the culture of online discussion, the disconnect from space and place as pillars of politics and identity is cause for concern.

The Brexit debate revealed deep divisions around actions to mitigate the effects of climate change, the development and diffusion of innovations and the management of labour and resources (Whitfield & Marshall, 2017). These frustrations boiled over in a widespread rejection of expert-led knowledge (Finlayson, 2017). Despite the best advice of leading agricultural institutions and the knowledge that over 55% of UK farm income depends on EU subsidies (Gosden, 2016), an overwhelming majority of farmers would choose to reject EU membership (31% Remain, 58% Leave; Whitfield & Marshall, 2017). It is anticipated that fora such as TFF, having evolved in aversion to the dominant narrative of agricultural politics, have played a role in facilitating this populist turn.

In the context of a coming fourth agricultural revolution, with the increasing prevalence of corporate-led ‘smart-farming’, a deficit in political representation and the impending ecological crisis (Rose & Chilvers, 2018), the urgency to overcome such antagonisms within the farming community and the chance to utilise TFF as a topical, influential and accessible platform is evident (Hardy et al., 2019). Following Li (2014), TFF is a ‘device’ for organising agricultural politics and resources, allowing users to re-appropriate agency through the online forum, empowering them to express their self-perceived identity. Building on the work of Lubell et al. (2014), who have established the potential for appreciating agrarian knowledge sharing through existing social networks, this study accounts for the ‘other voice’, examining how Brexit was debated in a farmer-owned and operated space, free from the influence of outsiders (Nettle et al., 2018). Thus, this warrants an exploration of online spaces, to unpack the interplay between how they challenge rural space and place and their role in community identity, especially during moments of tension.

## METHODOLOGY

Netnography is a relatively new methodology, specifically collecting data from online sources, approaching internet fora through participant observation, content analysis and online interviews (Svensson, 2013). Netnography has given access to the unique forms of interaction and community building found in online spaces, bringing a new perspective to how the social is manifested. As recommended by Klerkx et al. (2019), netnography presents a novel opportunity to explore the

wealth of new data sources yielded by advances in digital agriculture. This study drew inspiration from several authors who observe communication and politics in online fora, revealing opportunities for civic empowerment, to dissect and understand participant identities and culture and to conduct research in a highly polarised environment (Gilchrist & Ravenscroft, 2011; Jackson et al., 2013; Svensson, 2012, 2014).

Research was undertaken between October 2017 and March 2018, a period of great uncertainty and contention in the Brexit debate. At the time, TFF had over 20,000 followers on Twitter and 27,000 active members (in December 2020, this had risen to over 47,000), representing 5.8% of the total UK agricultural workforce (DEFRA, 2016). The TFF site is primarily used for trade and exchange of information but often descends into a debate. Research began with the observation of existing conversation threads (46, March 2018) in the Brexit subsection, entitled '*We're out, so wtf do we do now?*' chosen based on their political aptitude, then drawing away to get a feel for the entire TFF community. Various forms of data were collected, both visual and textual, including debate, memes, gifs, external links, even font and background colour (Kozinets, 2015).

Thirty prominent site users, identified with snowball sampling, were interviewed via the TFF direct messaging service. Semi-structured questioning involved the length of membership, motivation, personal aspects (profile alias, picture, status–tools they used to present themselves), their position on Brexit (EU, subsidies, environmental schemes, farm business tenancies) and what they expect for the future of British agriculture. This information was extrapolated in the form of screenshots, downloading word threads and a daily log. These data were then processed and coded using Atlas.ti.

Following England (1994), it is essential to acknowledge the positionality of the researcher in relation to the participant, particularly when dealing with marginalised communities. The internet is a platform where such actors can connect, enhance social capital, debate, engage and be heard (Jackson et al., 2013; Svensson, 2013). In such instances, identity is key and is inherently linked to territoriality. The researcher must consider the potentially exclusionary elements and their own background before embedding themselves within a given community. TFF members range from landowners to migrant labourers; however, the use of the internet raises questions of access, whether perpetuating mechanisms are favouring voices within the online space.

Where available, these data are presented in the following pages in their original form. All use of language remains intact, complete with spelling mistakes, both intentional and not (Kozinets, 2015). Data are presented in the form of three vignettes and written in third person to centralise the experiences and knowledge of forum members. It is intended that vignettes capture the emotional dimension of TFF, embodied in both conversations (Liu & Maitlis, 2012) and events (Jarzabkowski et al., 2014), combining dialogue and reflexive storytelling to critically engage the various sociopolitical perspectives within (Glover & Touboulic, 2020). They were chosen and have been written as such to describe the history of the forum, the key elements that hold it together and what can be said about how these communities react in moments of tension, the context, the actors and the event.

## FINDINGS

### A displaced community

TFF represents what Scoones et al. (2018, p. 12) term the 'recasting of rural social space', significantly transcending the local with national and even global connections (Hardy et al., 2019). This is problematic, drawing farmers away from their connection with land and locality (Brooks, 2019;

Burton & Wilson, 2006) and is reflected in how TFF operates as a community. The forum takes on a paradoxical role; whilst on the surface, TFF is socially cohesive, based on openness, difference and trust; the history of the forum demonstrates a space built upon the freedom to express political opinions, dislocated from notions of place, leading to the intensification of tensions between groups.

The first incarnation of a popular online forum aimed at British agriculturalists was as part of the Farmers Weekly Interactive (FWi), a national British magazine that provides 'farming and agricultural industry news, pictures, videos, blogs and forums. According to TFF members, FWi forum popularity peaked *'between 10 and 15 years ago'* (2002–2007).

The FWi was once a rich and thriving platform but ceased after membership dwindled. In their closing statements, the administrator writes, *'I've been involved with them for a few years, have met many interesting and lovely people and learnt a huge amount here, so it's not without sadness that we've taken this decision'*. FWi was a platform that reached beyond the realm of 'online' to create real emotional connections between its members; users did not simply collide in cyberspace, they 'met', befriended one another and freely shared information to those who outside of this arena would be their rivals.

This departure can be attributed to a number of factors according to TFF interviewees. Difficulties with 'logging in', and other technical deficiencies suggest that FWi was lagging in an era of much web design progress, and a more sophisticated, younger sibling was waiting in the wings: the British Farming Forum (BFF). Material limitations put the shift in motion, whilst a far more controversial sentiment propelled it forwards:

It was highly moderated, couldn't say NFU (National Farmers Union) = No Fudging Use or anything like expressing an opinion. Hopeless so we all gradually moved to BFF.

Participant 18, (event) 7 January 2018, (recorded) 25 January 2018

The FWi, being a privately owned company with ambitions and sponsors outside of the interest of forum participants, could not afford to facilitate the controversy and dissension necessary to maintain a 'farmer's forum'.

The BFF was similarly lacking in sophisticated technology and heavily moderated. The *Off-Topic* section was shut down (where the Brexit & Politics section is located on TFF) because of personal attacks and inappropriate language that *'took the soul out of the place'*. Multiple interviewees even mentioned threats of legal action between companies and posters. Although no one was held legally responsible, this led to more severe censorship. The BFF seems to have been functioning much like FWi, limiting the arena within which the community needed to thrive.

The BFF went offline for over a week, and during its absence, two members launched TFF. The forum users were floating in cyberspace without purpose, frustrated and angry and were *'rejoicing in Happy Valley'* when *'landing'* once again in a free space. TFF became a new, celebrated home in which administrators participated in the discussion alongside members, disconnected from the rest of society where farmers could be farmers. This egalitarian platform allowed interactive feedback and continued reflexivity between members and administrators, each of whom had a common interest: to keep TFF and the community alive. This gave a shared sense of ownership, maturing it into the established and diverse group it is today.

There are now subsections in marginal, unorthodox areas such as 'Holistic Agriculture', subjects that steer broadly away from the common vision of British farming. There are sections for dating, for lonely farmers and those for just friends. There is even a space to discuss medical issues,

in confidence, with respect and due care of others. Users from across the globe, from various backgrounds, are welcomed without prejudice.

I bought a landrover in the 90s from [other member] and my wife worked for [other member’s] dad. [Other member] comes out here and has visited twice.

Participant 18, 7 January 2018, 25 January 2018

My dad was on here so put me onto it and then I just liked being party of a community really..... Yep, I have met quite a few members since being on here. A few of which I would consider myself to actively be friends with. It’s really a brilliant place to be here... I use it for everything from entertainment to advice to mental Help to a degree (not that I’m mental), but some days when you’re feeling a bit blue there are people here for you.

Participant 11, 23 November 2017, 4 December 2017

The first quote demonstrates how the interviewee has made connections with other users that transcend the online arena. He describes how TFF has supplied him with resources, his wife with employment and a close friend that twice came to visit his farm after he emigrated abroad. The second shows how offline relationships promote the use of TFF as a resource, which translates into new friendships, based on mutual support and understanding. Within a male-dominated community, which is notoriously solitary and noncommunicative, TFF is a space separate from the rest of society. A once disconnected group can create bonds of trust and a shared understanding of their struggles, transcending the geographical isolation of rural space.

An equally important sentiment is reflected by a female member who openly discusses her background as a foreign national, working in the city of London, a single mother and a prospective farmer searching online for information on how she will be accepted within rural England. Due to her background, she expects to be excluded; however, in this realm, detached from the conventional boundaries of rural space, her experiences have proven rewarding (Chiswell & Wheeler, 2016).

Dislocated from notions of place, however, political tensions between farmer groups are revealed, bounded by notions of practice rather than locality and a more violent side emerges as illustrated by this thread on ‘hard facts’;

**Member 1:** *Without subsidies or a devalued pound, the beef and lamb that I and the overwhelming majority of upland and hill farmer produce would no longer be economically viable to farm.*

**Member 2:** *TTIP will make sure it’s even cheaper. The estimate here is at least a 10% reduction in beef prices.*

**Member 3:** *The subs are here for at least 4 more years if we stay in*

**Member 4:** *When did you think otherwise? The issue is Brussels making a load of laws up, then telling our civil service to perform the end outcome by whatever means necessary.*

**Member 5:** *The subsidy is not related to producing lamb, its AREA based, but if your daft enough to subsidise sheep then rock on but you won't last as the sub is going anyway slowly but surely.*

**Member 1:** *No, no, I capitulate, you're entirely correct. I really should not be concerned with the threat to my livelihood, or that of neighbours, or for the future of my children. I really ought to agree with all the rhetoric and opinion spouted repeatedly, and vote to leave. It would mean far less aggressive bullying from all the right-wing campaigners on here for a start! Errrr, no, until there are HARD FACTS that my life and livelihood won't cease to exist, do you really think I and all the other thousands of farmers in my position should follow your propaganda and wear the brown shirt? Come on, hard facts!*

29 February 2016, 18 October 2017

Member 1 recognises that Brexit is going to have unequal repercussions for farmers across space. Rather than supporting this call, his peers demonstrate how this is without hope, that all options will likely result in the same fate. Others take the opposite approach, smoothing across notions of local space with the assertion that all their problems are located in 'Brussels'. This becomes even more convoluted as members argue whether their place should be 'in' or 'out'. Member 1 finally retorts by revealing that discussion surrounding politics within the forum is constructed in aversion to the local networks within which farmers are embedded and in favour of a single displaced 'British farmer' identity, which he compares to a Nazi propaganda campaign. The theme of political expression and the notions of space and place have become confused within the online world of TFF, harbouring a support community for farmers but also an uprooted political identity.

## British farmer identity

The website is buttressed by a simplified conception of 'British farmer' identity. Membership is inextricable from a need to create and embed a rural identity, even if it is inconsistent with the offline self (Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012; Roberts & Townsend, 2016). Identity becomes a source of conflict within the forum (Nettle et al., 2018); the illusive and controversial status is dominated and controlled by TFFs most prolific members, who employ and manipulate their online persona to curry favour and prominence while those with more moderate views are silenced (Bail, 2021).

This 'British farmer' identity is fulfilled by a series of simplified 'tropes'; ignorance (posters will intentionally misspell words in order to imitate a typical, west-country accent), territoriality ('Get off my land' or 'not in my back yard' are sentiments closely held to rurality) or parochialism (stating 'I'm just a lad with some chickens' disavowing their sociopolitical relevance). Points of connection within TFF, that differentiate themselves from outsiders, revolve around already inflammatory, exclusive and self-sabotaging political positions.

It is widely acknowledged that, through the history of the site, there has always been a core membership that is most profoundly involved in the debate, most of whom migrated to the site in early 2013 (Table 1). This hierarchy seems to be determined by the embodiment of a 'British farmer' identity, through language and the creation of an online persona, complete with a scoreboard of posts, reaction score (likes) and points (awarded based on previous metrics).



TABLE 1 Participant metrics

Name	Posts (rank)	Points	Reaction SCORE (rank)	Year joined
Participant 1	12,094	162	17,574	June 2014
Participant 2	47,432 (1st)	187	60,504 (4th)	January 2013
Participant 3	1703	147	5635	December 2014
Participant 4	16,049	158	38,341 (16th)	April 2013
Participant 5	1595	150	3184	November 2013
Participant 6	7738	143	7071	February 2014
Participant 7	4651	186	4770	June 2014
Participant 9	8429	147	6348	February 2013
Participant 11	8049	147	7952	May 2013
Participant 13	18,839	172	15,162	February 2013
Participant 14	1645	87	909	January 2014
Participant 15	1097	146	1904	February 2013
Participant 17	10,864	193	24,952	February 2013
Participant 18	7331	186	7015	January 2013
Participant 19	37,401 (4th)	201 (12th)	37,519 (17th)	February 2013
Participant 20	2264	147	4906	January 2013
Participant 21	17,877	162	20,749	March 2013
Participant 22	22,437 (20th)	187	74,010 (1st)	January 2017
Participant 23	13,337	162	45,837 (10th)	June 2017
Participant 24	16,006	201	41,440 (15th)	December 2015
Participant 25	312	90	1061	June 2016
Participant 26	4056	186	4777	February 2013
Participant 27	29,900 (13th)	201	56,624 (5th)	January 2013
Participant 28	2709	181	5454	February 2013

Note: Metrics as of May 2021, Participants 8, 10, 12, 16, 29 and 30 were no longer traceable due to deleted accounts, change of name or retracted from the study.

A large segment of those interviewed, however, were not in their offline lives British farmers. Instead, they were retired, farmers’ sons, prospective landowners or offshore enthusiasts. One member spoke of his friend, the contractor (a machine operator for hire), who makes no money from farming as such (the sale of crops, livestock), yet is considered a very good farmer for all the money he extracts from the industry. The farmer identity is evidently somewhat confused, redefining the traditional perception of the productive land custodian to something more ambiguous (Gibbard & Ravenscroft, 1997). On the one hand, this shifts the identity away from its origins and its deep connection with the land, but on the other hand, it provides leeway for those living on the edge of this rural sub-culture to pursue relevance (Bail, 2021).

These factors combined give certain members enhanced power and influence within the forum, resulting in a controversial political environment:

**Member 1:** *If the redoubtable EU bans glyphosate it will cause untold problems for countless farmers but will it have more or less impact than Brexit?*

**Member 2:** *If you mean here in the UK, none. We will be able to legislate for its use once out.*

**Member 3:** *Farmers were farming for thousands of years without Monsanto's help. They only made roundup affordable to use on a field scale once the patent had run out, c 30 odd years ago. How is it possible "farmers" could be dependent on it? I would argue that those who are dependent are not what I would call 'farmers'. I couldn't give a fig if it was finished and I am mixed farming rotating grass and cropping cereals.*

**Member 4:** *So what? Life ain't all about a few farmers. I'm the only one who could be described a farmer in my direct family of 19 persons and I think more of their well being than my own. Even then. I'm happier to describe myself as a smallholder who does other stuff as well. Although. Being a BPS recipient for the while. I must be a farmer. But. As I don't use glyphosates..... I can't be.*

27 November 2017, 9 December 2017

The above thread on 'glyphosate versus Brexit' begins with a subject that is inextricable from both Brexit and agriculture. It concerns the access and control of a resource, viewed through the lens of identity politics. Glyphosate is a herbicide, commonly known as Roundup used ubiquitously on British and EU farms. At the time of research, the EU parliament was considering a continent-wide ban. There was hope within the forum that withdrawal may save the chemical in Britain (European Commission, 2017). Member 3 challenges rural identity, seemingly asserting that those who use glyphosate as part of their practice, a legitimate concern for most if not all conventional farmers, cannot call themselves a farmer. The discussion cannot return from this into a rational conversation regarding the use of the chemical for fear of contradicting the farmer identity. Few of the other members have the confidence to challenge this assertion and risk being called upon to validate themselves. The thread ends, not challenging as such, but making aware the futility of this kind of hostility. It disavows the point for making the argument in the first place discrediting the initial political statement further.

Whilst members have reacted to a level of moderation born out of Brexit and previous fora, having a reminder not to call names above the main message board and developing a series of non-offensive curse words (fudging, bar-steward), the tools with which core TFF members use to assert dominance over others within the forum make questionable the possibility of a true discussion. Rather than allow the difference in politics, those ideals that represent the conservative, isolated, rural world of the British farmer are celebrated and flourish. Paradoxically, while in every other regard the site appears to be a socially cohesive community, when a discussion becomes political, it becomes a competition of identity, and cohesion melts away. There is a contention between the online space and traditional rural identity that has led to an inflexible political environment and a breeding ground for hostility.

## **Brexit: The political catalyst**

Brexit and the leveraging of identity enables a political performance in which violent and affective language dominate, propagating a populist 'game' of politics rather than a praxis for democracy (Stage & Knudsen, 2015). EU governance is framed as a hegemon threatening British sovereignty:

an outside power, forcing blanket reform, innovation and regulation on farmers without respect to locality or context. This reveals the extent to which farmers are disillusioned from mainstream governance and how online spaces have facilitated a powerful opposing body.

Identity plays a key role in how Brexit is discussed and how the political debate is performed. A whole new vocabulary emerges, deeming ‘Brexiters’ as a wave of scapegoating fascists, and ‘Remoaners’ as a conspiracy of fear-mongering naysayers.

**Member 1:** *How do you guys sleep at night with so many enemies around you? Media, Brussels, Merkel, Corbyn, 28 odd million Remoaners, .....*

**Member 2:** *That comment may be valid for this thread, but it is not a valid reply to me.*

*I was not criticising the media but asking a question. If the media had always fully engaged with EU politics maybe we wouldn’t be leaving?*

*I have every respect for Merkel and Corbyn.*

*I don’t define anyone as a [R]emoaner, but I do lose respect for anyone who can’t have a discussion without resorting to insults. Too many attack the individual rather than make any valid points, I would like to think I’ve never done this.*

**Member 3:** *Well, at least you (Member 1) are on our side, we know that because you’ve told us, twice... Back in the real world, where does the number 28 ‘odd’ million come from?...*

**Member 4:** *Somebody been reading Goebbels diaries?*

6 November 2017, 13 December 2017

In this discussion on fascism, Member 1 attacks the pro-Brexit camp for paranoia and superstition. Member 2, who is seeking to better understand the relationship between the media and politics, attempts to bring this back to a civil discussion. This does not occur, however, as he is undermined by another Brexiteer who accuses Member 1 of both being a confessed Brexit supporter himself and being delusional in his accusation. The thread continues as such until, eventually, it ends with another condemnation of Nazism. Brexit becomes an extension of farmer identity, and therefore the same partisanship prevents true debate.

*I don’t care nor listen to the doom-sayers any longer.*

*Thread on For All the Brexit Doom and Gloomers, 18 November 2017, 28 November 2017*

The pro-Brexit actors accuse remain voters of cowardice, foreseeing catastrophic doom in a Britain free of the EU. The damage of this kind of politics is revealed as this user proudly announces in the opening of a thread that he has shut off to the opposition and will no longer engage with them.

*Put simply for 99% of UK residents see Brussels as a faceless monolith.*

Participant 17, 5 December 2017, 11 December 2017

**TABLE 2** A selection of significant threads analysed

Number	Thread name	Date started	Posts
1	Brexit has been cancelled	6 December 2017	115
2	EU in or out–TFF vote added	21 February 2016	448
3	A sense of unease...	15 December 2017	22
4	Any sheep farmers voting to leave?	14 June 2016	301
5	Brexit Means Remain (We All Lost, Get Over It)	8 December 2017	28
6	Britain First–any support on here? (incl poll. 20% Yes)	29 November 2017	97
7	A selection of CAP [Common Agricultural Policy] payments	26 June 2016	3
8	Capital Sentences...	7 November 2017	58
9	Dairy blockades vote	2 December 2017	21
10	Democracy	26 June 2017	5
11	Farmers & Greens should be natural Allies	18 November 2017	24
12	Farmers anti-union sentiment	19 November 2017	6
13	Fascism	26 October 2017	98
14	For all the brexit doom mongers	18 November 2017	119
15	Glyphosate Ban Vs Brexit.....	27 November 2017	51
16	‘Green Brexit’	11 December 2017	21
17	How Hungary Cut Illegal Immigration By Over 99%	22 November 2017	76
18	Information Exchange	24 November 2017	38
19	Milk price drop!	6 December 2017	110
20	Neutrality	13 December 2017	20
21	Nigel £££££	4 December 2017	109
22	Pay Me My Money Down (NHS [National Health Service])	8 November 2017	8
23	Protectionism	2 January 2018	132
24	The Conviction Politician	19 November 2017	38
25	The Toddlers	17 November 2017	11
26	‘This is a win for UK agriculture’	24 June 2016	21
27	Trickle down	27 October 2017	40

Abbreviation: TFF, The Farming Forum.

Participant 17 firmly embodies the rhetoric of the Brexit campaign, generalising the British population as conforming to his views on the EU parliament. His statement reflects the populist sentiment of ‘the people’, revealing how Brexit, politics and truth interact.

By sidestepping verifiable truth for emotion, contributors to the forum overcome ideological boundaries and material limitations. The forum creates connections that secede from previously held objections to create a non-discriminative collective. The two parties have a vested interest in having a debate with the prospect of achieving a valuable outcome. This does not occur in the political subsection of TFF, however, as rather than being divided by material categories or bound by local circumstances, they are absorbed into the Remain–Leave dualism, where Brexit rhetoric takes precedence. Table 2 shows how a thread on subsidy recipients can only garner three replies,

whereas a discussion on ‘Britain first’ and the reinstatement of capital punishment following Brexit receives 97 and 58, respectively.

While they seem incompatible, there is an argument that runs true on both sides, to emphasise the role of space and place.

*I have 250 sheep and some arable. I import 20 tonnes of nitrate per annum, I don't import or export muck. At a glance, it is obvious I don't exceed any limit for loading the environment with nitrate or nitrous oxides, or ammonia yet soon they won't [be] satisfied till I have analysed and weighed every load of muck spread on out of the lambing pens and a host of other recording requirements that I already have to do which add nothing at all to nitrate management.*

Entre thread, 12 October 2017, 20 October 2017

*Let each farm business run its affairs as it pleases.*

Participant 4, 27 October 2017, 8 November 2017

In the first quote, a low-input extensive farming system is subjected to the same nitrate-level regulation and bureaucracy as a highly environmentally degrading farming operation. This amount of paperwork is reported to outweigh the workload of farmers, taking more time to complete than physical activities. This not only threatens the affordability and stress associated with their business, it subverts their self-perception from land custodian to office manager. There is a bipartisan rejection of environmental regulation to be cognizant of farm system, locality and ecology rather than exhaustively holding all farmers to the same rules.

Evidence in the forum suggests this is likely a key factor in the Leave victory; however, there is little confidence among Remain voters for the Brexit rhetoric to alleviate this pressure. While Brexit was able to capture the discourse associated with the rural and excluded, their anti-climate agenda has little standing within the national conversation. Members assert this was a tactic of the populists to scapegoat the EU.

The second quote is a plea for farms to gain freedom from overbearing bureaucracy and environmental legislation, to become, at least to some degree, autonomous from institutional interference. As has been a running theme throughout Brexit, established institutions were ignorant of the demands of those they claim to serve. There are many who believe their businesses are strong enough to survive the removal of EU subsidies, and then once the ‘swamp has been drained’, that only the *best* farmers will emerge into a new era of farming free of red tape.

The core voices appear apart from the rest of the community, their loud and virulent discourse drowning out the silent majority as they relentlessly pursue status. As shown in Table 1, however, these voices gain huge amounts of support, they are projected onto a scoreboard and their achievements are celebrated. In the lead-up to the referendum, the NFU predicted 52% of farmers would vote in favour of Remain (Brooks, 2019). Meanwhile, within a TFF preliminary poll, 71% of members voted for Leave, a result far higher and closer to the truth. These figures suggest that Brexit has been a political catalyst within TFF and is facilitating a right of centre and even populist agricultural politics. Since beginning this research, the politics section has moved from a subsection to the main message board alongside ‘Agricultural matters’ and ‘the weather’. This dangerous sentiment reinforces the urgency to act to produce an agricultural policy that is

inclusive of rural perspectives and identities, particularly in environmental governance, and does not lead to the disintegration of a large portion of the farming industry.

## DISCUSSION

### Notions of online space and rural identity

TFF is a space created based on the principle of free political expression. Politics has proven significant in driving the forum and galvanising the members. To function, the administrators must allow that members express themselves politically. Following the definition of Mouffe (1993), it is this antagonistic dimension of the 'political' that must be allowed to succeed in order to preserve the 'soul' of TFF. Forum members are aware of this; their support is integral to the maintenance of the site and that, if they so wish, they have the power to shift its path.

Through this political engagement has emerged a solid, tight-knit community of members who have participated in discussions, some for as long as 18 years. Their fluid movement from one platform to another suggests that it is not the arena but the community that is the most important. The use of 'us' and 'we' shows that they self-identify as a collective and wish to remain a whole.

Joining these two elements is the shared simplified conception of the 'British farmer' identity. Identity is a 'powerful organising presence', it is what allows us to be 'socially recognizable' (Leve, 2011, p. 513). It is a 'reflexive construct or experiential modality through which one knows oneself' (Leve, 2011, p. 613). It 'is never one thing, it is both contextual and complex' (Weedon, 2011, p. 217). It is a tool with which human actors address one another's and one's own relevance to a given community. Hirvonen and Pennanen (2018, p. 3) claim it is the recognition of said identity that 'holds the key to determining what is just in a society and what a good society is... society as a whole can be seen as a system of recognition'. Thus, identity is not only a unifying force, it is also the basis for creating a shared morality and sense of judgement.

Online community members will create a virtual personality based on a desired, romanticised performance of themselves, even when they claim transparency (Bail, 2021; Boellstorff, 2015). Svensson (2012) critically recognises that due to the lack of physical and bodily interaction within online mediated spaces, the process of creating this identity is a fundamental act of socialisation. To address one's own place within the network, it is essential to create (truthful or not) an online persona. These attributes makeup and express self-hood, distinguishing one individual from another, while simultaneously bringing them together, finding commonality within interests, groups, follows and likes (Svensson, 2012). The pursuit for identity, community creation and political expression are very closely linked within online networks, if not inextricable one from another (Velasquez & Rojas, 2017). This is problematic as many of the strongest and most accessible indicators of said identity are derogatory.

The embodiment of identity, however, becomes highly contested in debate. Farmer identity is rooted in productivism; in a study in Bedfordshire, England, farmers were found to be judged within the community based on their gains and productivity (Burton & Wilson, 2006). They also found, however, that the idealised notion of 'British farmer' within the UK is a powerful and enveloping force; actors even with the most peripheral connection to farming maintained this identity with great conviction.

TFF provides an opportunity for those who wish to pursue this identity to easily hide behind the anonymity of online personality but which is also displaced from the real-world political context. Other authors have demonstrated that identities constructed from stereotypes (Xie, 2020)

often lead to the contestation of how these characteristics are performed. In response to questions, members would deny their relevance as if none of them wanted to step out of the normative structure or put their own reputation as a forum member at risk by speaking against the others (Hirvonen & Pennanen, 2018). They would repetitively discredit themselves so as not to damage the linguistic wedge between lived identity and political criticism. This disavowal reveals much about the insecurity and incomprehensibility in this online identity.

Core members who dominate conversation develop what Jones and Rafaeli (1999) call a community of 'social loafers', one in which many view the posts of a few. The significance of this is that 50 core members determine most of the content that the other 45,000 (July 2020) active members view. These inner members have enormous potential to shape the discussion within the forum and influence those who simply read it. Politically this is a profoundly powerful population; the views expressed by these few posters have the network capacity to alter political discourse on a national electoral scale. By maintaining this dominant position, there are two evident repercussions. First, as Jones and Rafaeli (1999) argue, this leads to information overload in observing members; the high level of traffic from the inner circle dissuades them from contributing as there is too much data to conceive without a large amount of invested time. Prospective posters see little value in their own contribution in comparison to the evident presence of the core (Bail, 2021). Hence, core members maintain their status, asserting their power and reducing possible competitors to social loafers.

Second, once in possession of that status, core members can manipulate their highly impressionable conception of identity to their political advantage. In this sense, TFF transcends traditional conceptions of space and place for rural people. Knowledge and information that was once occasionally exchanged over a farm gate between friends and relatives are re-imagined through the lens of online identity politics, in which speaking outside of the party line will instigate a challenge to identity (Burns, 2020). Further, it operates and demands user attention and opinion, at speed, 24 h a day (certain members even attributed much of the disruptive behaviour to others posting having returned from the pub; Andrejevic, 2013). Participants relentlessly engage in vitriolic online debates to pursue and maintain status (Bail, 2021).

Jørgensen et al. (2020, p. 1) demonstrate how declining rural communities necessitate a network of interlocking and interdependent relations between human actors to remain: 'interaction is embedded in local traditions and social order is produced locally'. Identity is formed around those narratives and is the basis for collective action. In TFF, similarities can be drawn as to how users form a community; however, place is a notion disconnected from the local, stretched across an entire nation and beyond. Instead, the TFF identity has been formed through a political narrative that thrives on freedom of expression. It is this disconnect from a local place that grasps British farmer stereotypes and, therefore, a conflicting identity.

This socially disenfranchised community leads to a fractured environment where authoritarian politics can thrive (Scoones et al., 2018). Under these circumstances, baseless assertions can be made without consequence, and the infamous 'shouty voices' can dominate freely. On the one hand, the notion of online space creates a place that transcends the spatial limitations of the traditionally disconnected community, allowing their disruptive voices out. On the other, rural identity is distorted through the subsuming 'British farmer' stereotype and the shield of anonymity, allowing powerful voices to dominate, further marginalising the community rather than leading to a true form of agency.

## Brexit, politics and truth

The simplification of debate over Brexit brought affective transmission forward as the defining motif of political dialogue. Patricia Clough (Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012, p. 23) describes affect as a 'bodily readiness, a trigger to action, including the action of feeling an emotion'. It is the emotional experience that moves through bodies and minds to induce certain actions. It stems not from the individual but simply treats an actor as a vector as it moves through the collective (Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012).

Affect has the potential to increase political capacity through 'amplified' connection (Clough, 2012). Christoffer Kølvrå writes, 'the impact of affect on a political space is... the elimination of the option to remain indifferent' (Stage & Knudsen, 2015, p. 195). In TFF, this brought debate further away from a content-focused discussion to a form of one-upmanship, prioritising emotive sentiment above truth.

Clough, cited by Andrejevic (2013, p. 98), writes that in an era of online political discourse 'affective modulation and individuation displace subject formation and ideological interpellation as central to the relation of governance and economy'. The means of transferring and manifesting emotive action, as seen in the debate on glyphosate, and the act of identity creation in online spaces have overwhelmed the traditional means for political interaction. The act of existing within such online fora forces an actor to fabricate and adopt an identity. That identity must be somehow connected or disconnected to the others within the forum to have any impact or for that individual to be recognised as a distinctive person.

Müller (2016, p. 101) states that it is populists 'who break off the chain of claim making by asserting that the people can now be firmly and conclusively identified'. He posits that struggles to assert specific identities are akin to populism's efforts to address 'the people', to create a fictive idea that all those who appeal to the populist cause are of the same identity, bonded against a common enemy, in most instances 'the establishment' and those that support it. In effect, this smooths over ideological gaps, ignoring individual political agendas in favour of more superficial and trivial forms of commonality.

This form of affective politics is maintained by ritual in entertainment. As Christoffer Kølvrå suggests, unity among communities of excessive affect are not bound by logical articulations of selfhood, but a shared notion of 'play' that displaces the need for truth (Stage & Knudsen, 2015). An online identity is a resonance of approval, an acknowledgement of shared emotive sentiment. Andrejevic (2013, p. 87) refers to this as the 'shift from comprehension to correlation'. Instead of rationally aligning oneself with a chosen political party, members rally behind their affective team leader, Leave or Remain. The connection of identity and community in online space is, therefore, the affective pursuit of belonging to, partaking and, in a sense, playing politics. While some members will attribute this to 'a bit of fun' or 'letting off steam', the exclusionary repercussions are clear. It is naive to assume that online spaces are innately inclusive of the 'other voice'. In this arena, built-in aversion to corporate interference, members of the rural community perform similar mechanisms of control.

Finlayson (2017) writes that identity is the goal of the Brexit campaign as it 'has given... ["the people"]... political goals and a sense not only of where they have come from but also of how they might continue into the future'. Brooks (2019, p. 9) has shown how in national discourse, farmers are considered 'heartless and driven by profit' due to their perceived aversion to progressive causes such as animal welfare and environmentalism. The UK Independence Party was able to capitalise on ideologies around climate scepticism and political correctness and capture the rural



imagination for Brexit. This divided rural politics, breaking from the traditional relationship with the Conservative Party and the NFU, laying the foundations for the dissent seen today.

Across Europe, populist parties have reframed rural identity and environmental concerns in terms of nationalism, encompassing specific needs into the needs of 'the people' (Alarcón Ferrari, 2020; Brooks, 2019; Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020). This has, in effect, excluded the locals by smoothing over different regional sociopolitical interests (Alarcón Ferrari, 2020; Niven, 2019). TFF, having already developed an online community that transcends locality, forming a contested identity based on stereotypical notions of the rural, was able to weaponise the language of Brexit.

The two pillars of Brexit, Remain and Leave, polarise each debate and embolden core members with the language necessary for the site to become a dangerous political entity. This reimagining of rural politics online, dislocated from locality, conventional forms of socialisation and traditional political representation, has not only undermined epistemic norms within UK agriculture, but it has also facilitated a wholesale rejection of authority. TFF represents a rejection of the depoliticising effect of agricultural innovation and the constraints of institutional arrangements (FWI, NFU). The online space is a means for 'disruption and resistance... to promote and preserve their interests and identity' (Feindt et al., 2020); however, this has reached a stage of polarisation where consensus-building becomes impossible. The culmination of Brexit, politics and truth, projected through the great reach of the platform, has had the effect of further side-lining farmer voices.

While this swing even further towards parochialism, suspicion and distrust of outsiders might be considered typical of rural areas; as the historic centre for regressive politics, several authors contend that they can equally breed emancipatory discourse (Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020; Scoones et al., 2018). It is the strength of networks, as Jørgensen et al. (2020) describe, which can lead to lasting change in rural life. TFF presents this on a national scale, 'reconnecting rural communities to the wider socio-political environment and enhancing their capacity to act in the future through improved power relations and social capital' (Vercher et al., 2020, p. 2). TFF as a support network for farmers intimate lives reveals how the forum subverts traditional farmer identity, demonstrating the transformative capacity of the online structure (Vayro et al., 2020).

The novelty of the digital environment, however, is unlikely to reverse the polarising influence of Brexit and the diverse nature of online discourse is well documented. The question becomes how and where can the political for farmers occur, and TFF provides a window into how to move forward. The aforementioned plea to improve environmental legislation demonstrates a genuine democratic cry, apart from the populist trajectory, to localize efforts to reduce ecological damage with respect to space and place (Alarcón Ferrari, 2020). It represents a need to re-establish the rural politics of difference as a release from the current political deadlock. It is only in the absence of proper support and representation that Brexit and 'taking back control' became a viable option (Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020). The forum represents a common goal for a group to emphasise their relationship to space and place via an arena that takes them out of it.

Hardy et al. (2019) have proposed 'designing from the rural, not for the rural'. Rather than ignoring the political motivations and embedded knowledge of farmers, galvanising resentment both for science and government, there is a necessity for mutual engagement. This may reverse the alienating effect of 'silver-bullet' style technological innovation in farming and introduce a 'social justice' mechanism to make future developments inclusive and cognizant of unique contexts. Hardy et al. (2019, p. 39) have shown that 'by acknowledging our biases, we may avoid parachuting, dehistoricizing, and imposing upon rural communities with technological change they don't want or need'.

By recognising the role of the forum to facilitate diverse local forms of politics, showing how the online can potentially hold important discussions that seemingly cannot occur offline, these

two worlds may be seen to complement each other rather than to further alienate and detach them. Considering the current incarnation of TFF, however, the debate only seems to further limit farmer agency. The forum excludes local identity, silenced by populist voices, further marginalising them from the political scene. Arguably the grand political project emerging as part of Brexit fostered around the narrative of ‘taking back control’, which was embodied in the forum discussions taking place on TFF. TFF as a political arena was developed, and accordingly the Brexit victory, to put farmers back in control, and this has failed. As new national agricultural policy is released, there is no sign of increased farmer agency (DEFRA, 2021). This demonstrates a necessity for spaces for agricultural politics and relatedly farming voices on the political agenda, as well as for policy being co-created with the rural.

## CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated how TFF, an internet forum, can reshape traditional notions of the rural. The online space has facilitated a tight-knit community, built on freedom of political expression, apart from corporate interference or control. This community, however, transforms local places, connecting users with both national and international peers, 24 hours a day. Regional identity is overcome by a shared perception of ‘British farmer’. Members would adopt certain characteristics to fulfil said identity, including ignorance, territorialism and parochialism. Those members who could best personify this sentiment in a debate, garnered the greatest amount of support and then denied opponents their identity.

The emergence of Brexit rhetoric, in combination with the existing political culture, galvanised identity as the defining political motif within TFF. Supporters of Brexit and Remain equally flexed identity to suit their ambition in debate. Affective transmission appeared ahead of truth, both sides refusing to believe the other in favour of supporting their political side. Under these circumstances, TFF facilitated a populist swing towards Brexit, revealing a visceral distrust for existing institutions.

TFF presents an insight into the farming community, unforeseen by any agricultural representative body prior to the referendum. The magnitude of online fora has as yet been underappreciated within farming. This study has demonstrated that their membership has a powerful bond and a strong capacity for articulating and performing politics in times of tension.

There are two emergent goals for future research, to engage with and turn the populist, disinformation occurring within online fora and to appreciate and involve rural politics in national and international discourse. Where other digital technologies have resulted in farmers’ disempowerment, replacing them with increasingly more productive machinery, online fora such as TFF enable farmers to express their voice. In practice, however, Brexit has dominated the political debate and distorted rural identities, further alienating farmers. There is a need to develop new spaces for progressive rural politics through which farmers may embed their local identities into bottom-up policy.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Much of the data that support the findings of this study are openly available at [thefarmingforum.co.uk](http://thefarmingforum.co.uk). Interviews, however, are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organisation or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethics has been approved by the research ethics review board at the School of Computer Science of the University of Nottingham.

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