

'Post-civility' and the public sphere: the Brexit debate in comments to Express online
Martin Gill (English Language and Literature)

Britain's never-ending Brexit debate has been loud and acrimonious. It has been marked by an irruption into the public sphere of worrying levels of anger, aggression, and xenophobia, apparently licensed by the 2016 referendum result. It has also prompted anxious reflection on the dislocated state of British society, and attempts to understand what has gone wrong.

In particular, the popular press has helped to foster an online environment in which extreme views can thrive. This paper will examine one such news source, the mainstream pro-Brexit tabloid Express online (<https://www.express.co.uk>), and its creation of a space in which marginal, abusive and illiberal voices are amplified and attacks on democratic processes normalized. Based on analysis of a corpus of articles and comments collected between 2014 and 2018, it hopes to shed light on the processes of normalization and their wider implications both for the rise of populism in the public sphere and the future of democracy in the digital era. The vernacular voices of the Express, it will be suggested, contribute across conventional political lines to the reinforcement of a shared sense of authenticity under siege, to be defended by the discursive performance of patriotic common sense and solidarity, against which the 'civil' discourses of reason, tolerance and compromise hold little sway.